



My true story of how leaving home—and growing up—can take a lifetime

Here I Go Again on My Own

BY MIJI CAMPBELL

FROM SEPARATION ANXIETY: A COMING OF MIDDLE AGE STORY

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MIJI CAMPBELL

THREE MONTHS BEFORE I was born, my mother was putting linens away in the back bedroom closet. Standing tiptoe on a wooden stool, she stretched her pregnant frame to stack the sheets on the highest shelf. Suddenly, the stool tipped. She fell, twisting to avoid landing belly side down, wrenching her knee, ripping ligaments.

My mother spent the rest of her pregnancy with her leg in a plaster cast from waist to ankle, worrying about this baby that seldom moved.

On the day I was born, the nurse had to ask the doctor what to do first: birth the baby or remove the cast. They cut the cast away, and I arrived shortly after. My mother waited for surgery that would leave a scar in the shape of a cross on her knee.

This became the working model for our relationship: my mother would protect me from all bumps and falls, with considerable contortion, pain and self-sacrifice, and I would never, really, leave the womb.

MY FOOTSTEPS ECHO as I run through the dimly lit underground parkade to my car. In darkness pierced by headlights and street lights, I drive the 20 blocks to my parents' place.

Sanctuary.

I am 24 years old. It is 1984, and I am teaching English at the Calgary high school I'd attended six years earlier.

One month previously, I had left home. My two older sisters had moved out, in their turn, and now it was my time to go.

When I saw the apartment, I knew it was the place for me. This is independence, I thought, as I signed my cheques for the damage deposit and first month's rent. I was going to love this life.

The first night, I snuggled under my new sheets and waited for my first sleep as an independent adult. I turned from one side to the other, flipped my pillow to its cool underside. Took a sip of water. Glanced at the clock. Why couldn't I fall asleep?

The next night, same thing. And the night after that.

2:35 A.M.

In just four hours, the alarm will wake me up. That is, if I ever get to sleep in the first place.

The familiar anxiousness begins. Hot prickles reach across my scalp and down my forehead and cheeks. Breath comes in shallow scoops. My heart races. My stomach lurches.

After a string of sleepless nights, I mention my problem to some colleagues. They give stock remedies: hot bath, warm milk, good book.

Finally, I confess to my mother. "Just come home to sleep," she says.

It's a strange double life. Each night, I give sleep a try. After a couple hours, I drive to my parents' house.

I unlock the back door, tiptoe down the hallway, crawl into my childhood bed and instantly fall asleep. Each morning, I rush back to my apartment to shower, get dressed and go to work.

My father is mystified by my boomerang home. "What are you afraid of? Bears?"

I try to explain that I'm not afraid of anything. I just can't sleep.



I TAKE ONE
TINY WHITE PILL THAT
NIGHT. STILL NO
SLEEP. I DON'T GO TO
WORK THE NEXT DAY.
I CALL THE DOCTOR.

Eventually, it becomes clear that this not sleeping thing isn't going to pass. I go to our family doctor. He gives me sleeping pills for 10 days to break the cycle. When the prescription runs out, sleeplessness returns.

I go to see a new doctor and tell her about my insomnia issues. She assures me everything looks fine, physically. She asks about family, relationships, work in general.

"Have you always wanted to teach?"

That is a tricky one to answer. I've always wanted to be a writer, but that sounds flaky. Teaching is my reasonable, responsible career choice.

"Are you enjoying your job?" the doctor asks.

"Absolutely! It's great. It's fun, but quite busy. The first year can be a little intense."

She nods and smiles. Then she launches into a lecture about personality types. Type As are ambitious, goal-oriented, competitive and self-critical. Type Bs are relaxed, non-competitive and tend to go with the flow.

"Would you say you're more of a Type A?"

"I guess," I answer hesitantly. Where is she going with this?

"I'm wondering if you might be depressed."

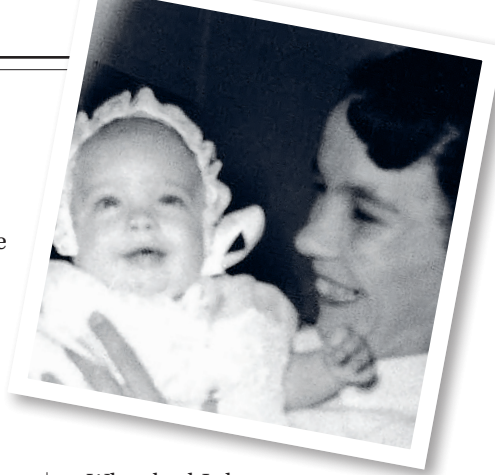
Depressed? Depressed is Charlie Brown talking to Linus. A person might say "I'm depressed" after a tough week, a sad breakup, a bad haircut. Being depressed all the time is for people with horrible hardships or sad childhoods.

"I'm not depressed. I just can't sleep in my apartment."

Patiently, the doctor explains how lack of sleep, over time, can lead to depression. She prescribes an antidepressant that will restore my brain's chemical balance.

Dutifully, I take the prescription and drive to the drugstore. The plastic vial is tagged with stickers about alcohol, drowsiness and heavy machinery. The pharmacist dispenses even more warnings, which I

The author with her mother, Pat Campbell, in 1960.



miss in my rush to get out of the store. To appear normal.

I take one tiny white pill that night. Still no sleep. I don't go to work the next day because I feel spaced out on top of the usual tiredness. I call the doctor. She increases the dosage.

I return to my parents' house to be "sick"—I'm waiting for the antidepressant to work.

Mom doesn't like the way our private pact around not sleeping is compromising my day job. Insomnia can be beaten, she believes, if you deny it's a problem. This approach has kept her from sleeping soundly for years.

I can't wait three weeks to get to the other side of "mood improvement" if it means wandering, zombie-like, through every day. I flush the pills down the toilet. I am not depressed. There is nothing wrong with my brain.

I take a multivitamin instead.

After five consecutive sick-leave days, I go back to work and pour all of my energy into teaching. Nightly, I return to my beloved apartment, make supper and plan my lessons for the next day. Macbeth's grief over his own lost sleep has never seemed so poignant.

"Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care...."

What had I done to murder my sleep?

Bedtime. Time for my high-wire act. I stand on the platform, close my eyes and take a step. Within a few brave strides, I falter, lose my balance and fall to the net below.

"Just come home to sleep."

I'M SITTING IN MY car in front of a three-storey home. It's a warm, blue-sky afternoon in June. I have rushed from school to get here on time.

This is the first time I am seeing a psychologist.

I try hard to sound like I don't need one. I speak quickly, using bigger words than usual. My life sounds perfectly normal when I lay it out. Terrific job, excellent parents, nice friends, new apartment. A bit of a sleeping problem.

She wants to know more about this, so I fill her in, shoving my night fears under this rational daylight. I condense six months of



The Campbell family (and dog Haggis) in 1966 at their home in the Calgary suburb of Kingsland.

frustration and shame into a breezy comic monologue:

“So there I am, past midnight, pajamas tucked into my sweat-pants, speeding in my green Renault Le Car to sneak into my parents’ house.”

The psychologist looks thoughtful and asks a few more questions. “How would you describe your relationship with your parents?”

“My mom and I are really close. We’re a lot alike. Everyone says so. We like talking, meeting new people, teaching, shopping.”

I pause. I know she is waiting for the rest of the answer.

“I’ve never been close to my dad.” She nods and makes a few notes.

“Has moving into your own apartment made you feel homesick?”

“No. I really wanted to move out on my own.”

“But you’ve never been able to sleep in your apartment?”

“No.”

Exposed, embarrassed, I decide to tell her. “I’ve always had trouble sleeping away from home. Even when my mom went out for the evening, I wouldn’t be able to sleep until she came home and kissed me good night. But that was when I was just a kid.” A pause. “Am I ever going to be able to sleep in my apartment?”

The psychologist doesn’t answer right away. She shows me some breathing and relaxation techniques.

She wants to see me again in a week. I swallow my disappointment. She hasn’t cured me. She gives one directive as I leave: “Do not go back to your mother’s house to sleep.”

“IF YOU STILL CAN’T get to sleep,” says the psychologist at our next session, “you might as well use the time productively.”

The night shift begins. I set up the ironing board with the laundry basket beside it. I thread a needle, ready to sew buttons and stitch hems. I stack essays that need to be graded.

I try to sleep for 45 minutes. No luck. I get up, snap on the light, do push-ups and sit-ups and scrawl in my journal.

I proceed to the chores. I hear birds as morning light slants into my

apartment. My head aches. I lie down and drift into a half sleep. Soon it will be time to leave for work.

Two hard weeks go by. I’m driving back to my apartment late one night. It’s pouring rain and I’m crying. I’m tired of trying to solve this on my own. Tired of being tired.

I turn off the road leading into my parents’ neighbourhood.

Sanctuary.

THE HOUSE IS STILL. Rain beats on the roof. I stare at the ceiling as I lie in my childhood bed. My mother sits beside me, yawning, waiting for me to fall asleep.

I remember all the nights we have spent like this, like when I was afraid of the dark behind the heavy closet doors. Afraid of my sister Robin’s noisy breathing. Afraid of being the last one to fall asleep.

The rain subsides. I hear the sporadic plunk of drops on the eaves.

I’m still awake. Wide awake. Irrevocably awake. I get out of bed and make my way back to my apartment, curiously relieved.

THE INSOMNIA PERSISTS through the summer holidays, its jagged edges smoothed by late-night wine and mornings where I know I can stay in bed, dozing.

“If you still can’t sleep,” says the psychologist at our next session, “you should increase your physical

activity.” I take up aerobics and swimming, but nothing changes.

With the first of the back-to-school flyers, I begin to worry about my return to classes. If I can’t sleep, then I can’t teach. On a Sunday night in late August, my oldest sister, Kim, phones. This is rare—she and I aren’t in the habit of staying in touch.

Kim had trouble sleeping, too.

Like me, she relied on Mom’s bedside vigil as a child. Our mother in flannelette pajamas, hair in curlers, moving from room to room, giving a benediction for our sleep through a sacrifice of hers.

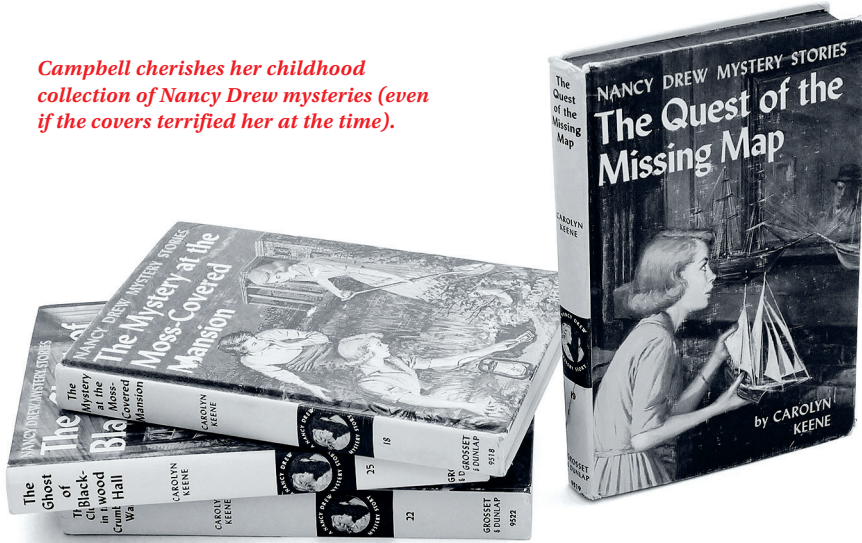
“I know why you’re not sleeping,” my sister says.



AFTER ALMOST TWO DECADES, INSOMNIA RETURNS, DRAGGING WITH IT EVERY PIECE OF MY DREAD-FILLED BAGGAGE.

KIM TELLS ME ABOUT the night, many years earlier, when I’d heard her, then 12, crying in her room. She had just told Mom that she’d decided not to go to boarding school—which she’d been excited to attend—after all. I never knew my sister’s side of the story.

Campbell cherishes her childhood collection of Nancy Drew mysteries (even if the covers terrified her at the time).



"I cried myself to sleep, but I promised myself that someday I would be brave enough to leave."

Distanced by time and place and choice, my sister gives me absolution. "It's all right to leave Mom."

That night I fall gently, effortlessly asleep. Next night, same thing. And the night after that. The insomnia has released me.

AFTER ALMOST TWO DECADES—during which I got married, had two sons, started writing professionally and, most recently, got divorced—insomnia moves back in, dragging with it every piece of my dread-filled baggage. I had almost forgotten about those long-ago

months of exhaustion. They'd become a blip in my memory, a tale for *Ripley's Believe It or Not*, like someone who'd had hiccups for a year.

I consider my options. I think about ringing Kim or calling Mom. Of just picking up the phone and admitting it. I need to come home to sleep.

I snap on the light, grab my pen. If I can't sleep, I might as well use the time productively.

The night shift begins. I write about things I don't want to write about.

"I am a woman who is afraid to be alone."

I hate writing this personal stuff.

COURTESY OF JENNIFER GRIFFITHS

Write.

This is not the kind of writing that counts. I should be working on magazine articles like "Six Survival Skills for Stressed Single Parents" or "Risky Business: Why Rebound Relationships Fail."



I WRITE ABOUT HOW I HAVE BEEN AFRAID, ALWAYS. AFRAID OF NIGHTTIME. AFRAID OF BEING THE LAST ONE TO FALL ASLEEP.

Write.

"I am a 40-year-old woman who is afraid to be alone."

This is useless navel-gazing.

Write.

I write about how I have always been afraid. Afraid of nighttime in my bedroom. Afraid of being the last one to fall asleep. Afraid of my Nancy Drew books, with their yellow spines and scary covers.

But Nancy Drew was not afraid of anything.

Suddenly, I feel myself smiling. *She hears a knock on the side window, opens her eyes. A young woman is standing beside her Jeep. Slim and attractive, the teen has blue eyes and blondish-brownish-reddish hair one might almost call—titian.*

Flustered, the driver rolls down the window.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Nancy Drew says, "I saw that you pulled over rather suddenly. Do you require some assistance?"

I keep writing.



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COMEDIANS RAISE A GLASS TO ST. PATRICK

NyQuil on the rocks, for when you're feeling sick but sociable.

MITCH HEDBERG

I'm making wine at home, but I'm making it out of raisins so it will be aged automatically.

STEVEN WRIGHT

One martini is all right, two is too many, three is not enough.

JAMES THURBER