

## **Insomnia remedies: how Woody Allen helps at least one sleepy kid**

a memoir-story by Lola Morgan

**5/09/2013 1:30PM**

I'm walking up Amsterdam Avenue thinking about boys I've met in New York. Boy ten years older who brought me home then backed off when he learned I was just eighteen. Boy who talked about politics and atheism and dead philosophers. Boy who talked about the science of kissing each time we made out. Boy from the Bronx who took me to a jazz gig then frisked me in an alleyway. Ex-marine boy who invited me to a military ball on the deck of a ship. Boy who took me to a boxing match. Boy with the same taste in movies who promised to help me be a film director, until I yelled at him for ignoring my film-related texts. And then he kept ignoring me—forever.

No matter how many boys I meet, it never amounts to anything. Probably because I'm too picky. Probably because I pester the boys I actually like. That last boy's rejection was hard; he was a man-muse to me. Now I really feel like a loner, especially when it comes to making films—like, *why even bother?*

By now I've reached a restaurant on 123rd and Amsterdam, where I've arranged to meet a novelist named Sharone for lunch. I met her working a shift at my work-study job behind a library desk. We had a long conversation about documentaries. After that, Sharone said she might be able to “hook me up with an internship” with one of her lesbian exes, a filmmaker who was famous in the seventies. I peer into the window of the restaurant for Sharone but can't find her. If she were there I'd probably be able to spot her right away; she's Hawaiian with black cropped hair and a face so free of wrinkles that it's mystical.

Around 1:46 she arrives, wearing a red Eddie Bauer flannel and jeans. She gives me a nice hug which makes up for her lateness. Then she asks for a booth. I see some kids from my literature class and I suspect they're watching. She asks if I know them as we take our seats. I tell her, “yes.”

“They're probably thinking, what's she doing with that big brown-skinned woman!?”

“*Nawww*,” I react.

The waiter arrives and asks me and Sharone for our orders (soup and lasagna, respectively). As soon as he departs, Sharone launches into a turbulent account of her life from her early twenties onward—as long as she's lived in New York.

“For a while I worked as a male impersonator in the village nightlife circuit. And then as a set designer. You know Michael Mayer? Yeah, I worked for him. You know Reza Abdoh? ... Doesn't matter. I worked for him too. I was even in a Spike Lee film. At the audition there were a bunch of skinny black girls. They ordered pizza for us but nobody ate it. So I took a whole box, carried it into the audition room, finished a slice in front of them, and tossed the box on the ground. Spike's casting agent loved me. ‘Well, Sharone—you sure are something!’ That's what she told me. I got the job. A bit part, but still ... When I was doing all these things, deep down I always knew, it wasn't really *it*. I mean I'm glad I did it all cause it's great

material. But I believe that some of us are meant to *make* certain things in our lifetimes. So a few years ago I stopped with the theater, and started writing my first book.”

“A novel?”

“Yep. You ever tried writing fiction?”

“I’m not sure that—“

“Speak up.”

“Sorry. I’m not sure that I’m any good at fiction.” I can’t maintain eye contact without feeling nervous. So I stare at my hands.

“Right, you’re a filmmaker. I googled you and watched your film. The one about being gay in high school.”

“Oh. I made that to get into college,” I murmur. “And I’m not gay.”

“Listen, kid.” says Sharone. “The minute I met you I knew that you were queer.”

“What.”

“It doesn’t have to do with what kind of genitalia you like. It’s a kind of sensibility. And you’ve got it.”

Now I notice my hands are trembling a bit. *It’s just a caffeine buzz!*—I assure myself. But I’ve only had one cup of coffee all day. In my gut I feel a dim agitation which I recognize from childhood as the feeling that I’ve been emotionally molested.

Either that or indigestion. “I think I have to go to the bathroom,” I tell Sharone.

“Go for it.”

In the women’s room, I assess my outfit in the mirror: I’m wearing a white sleeveless blouse and tan slacks. Hair down. Not much make-up. I wish, now, that I’d opted for a skirt instead of slacks. Then maybe I’d look less unfeminine—or less queer, *whatever the hell that means*. I think back on every close relationship with a girl I’ve had since I got my period at age fourteen. (This seems like a good gage for the onset of puberty.) The female friendship that stands out as the most dangerously “homoerotic” is my close bond with a Jewish girl named Cece, who I spent a lot of time with in my first two years of high school. We used to spend sleepless nights in the basement of her house. We never did anything down there—just assassinated computer-animated Nazi men in multiplayer games of *Call of Duty*.

**5/10/2013 2:50 PM**

In a classroom at Columbia, I'm taking an exam, reading an excerpt from *To the Lighthouse* and thinking about lesbian anxiety, when I rip out a page of my blue book and scrawl the first few lines of a manic rant in black ballpoint pen. I know I've done of the test to get an A, so I leave early and walk back to my dorm, where I sit on my mattress and compose two-page monologue like an electric pianist on analeptics. It's been a hormonal school year, and for months my self-esteem has been morbid, yet as I conclude what I'm writing I feel intoxicated with a reckless grandiosity. Everything terrible that's ever happened on planet earth—from the birth of Satan to the Holocaust—suddenly strikes me as ridiculous.

*I am trying out a new sort of implied mode of speaking (or whatever it is), and I have never been the most articulate (you should see me try to talk in person), so please bear with me for just a moment. I really don't intend for this to be another hokey fan letter that you can smile down on knowingly. I hope you sense what I'm going for, or I'm mistaken in writing this in the first place, and have probably lost my measly teenage mind.*

*I would have introduced myself by saying "I can recite your monologue at the start of Manhattan by memory!" (I can't, by the way, I haven't watched it in too long - I've spent too much time hunkered down in the library, doing homework by myself, I'm sorry) or something primed to schmooze you off your feet. But sometimes I don't think that's necessary.*

*I have had a lousy 19 years figuring things out, and the past year as a freshman at Columbia was the absolute shits. This is not some youthful slang term for "awesome!" But I hope that the from-now-on phase is less lousy, though I am worried it's a matter of time before my life topples over into its awkward former incarnation.*

*I've breathed just under two hours worth of blissful city air after taking my final exam in my freshman literature course at Columbia. (I can't even stand how pretentious/corny this sounds.) I had to write an essay about art and discovery, usually some intellectual gobbledygook, but I took it my own way... I hope I didn't sell the magic to people who overtheorize it. I read all the books for the course, and liked "something" about them (just like I loved "something" about your films).*

*I think the book that gave me a wink of faith was *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf (still, trying hard not to be pretentious). I am glad it was not a religious text, and that it was by a woman. Some aggressive older woman tried to convince me that my connection to it meant that I was a lesbian, but that wasn't it, I really don't think.*

*How do you live in these moments, if you do? It's like I'm in a transcendent state where everything on earth feels ironic. I feel so profoundly alone right now. You must know what success feels like. I know that Virginia Woolf drowned herself in a river - is that the other extreme? Or maybe this is a Jewish thing?*

*Is this some sort of joke?*

*Please, send a little wisdom. I resemble a 19-year-old Anne Frank with some modern verve, I swear I am really not completely ugly I don't think, I can make it in the world, as a filmmaker I hope. But right now I*

*am signed up to do an internship at a nonprofit documentary company this summer and ... maybe it will be great, but I don't know if my B.S. filter has another cycle left in it.*

As fast as it came, my manic high collapses; I fall back on my mattress, suddenly exhausted, taunted by the thought that I just went insane. Cradling my closed Macbook like a teddybear, I curl up on the top of my bed and fall into a deep and dreamless sleep. I haven't slept this soundly since the womb.

## **10:00PM**

In the main studio of the campus radio station, I'm all by myself, staring at a television monitor slung from the ceiling. It provides a limited glimpse of what's taking place on the corner of Broadway and West 114th. The purpose of the camera is keep me from buzzing in imposters from the street. But tonight the mundane passage of strangers feels as interesting, onscreen, as any old drama or sitcom or reality program on TV. I'm still groggy from a long nap; you can hear it in my voice as I pause the broadcast to croon into the microphone: "And now we'll hear the first chapter of the audiobook for *Without Feathers*, read aloud by Woody Allen himself. Enjoy the rest of the show."

The office phone rings. I answer it.

"Boy do you sound exhausted!" rasps a woman with an East Coast accent who sounds past her prime. I imagine her with thick round glasses, holding the receiver of a landline with a rotating dial and using the other hand to dab a cigarette in an ashtray. "Everything all right?"

"Me?... I'm fine. Thanks for asking though."

"Well I also wanted to say thanks, dear. Cause listen. My brother and I ordered blintzes, and somehow we was badly overcharged. And we don't got a great deal of cash to spare, so it put a crimp on our night... But then we turned on the radio, and you know what we hear?... Woody Allen reading his book! And we was laughing so hard, we was able to save some of the blintzes for later. Tomorrow, and the next night, and maybe the night after that."

"That's awfully resourceful."

"And my brother! Wow, you should have seen how he laughed! He was cracking up so hard I was worried he might fall over dead, right there. Just like in Woody's book, when he joked about his mother tripping on a meat loaf and rupturing her spleen. But that's how we all go, ain't it?"

"How?" I ask.

"Maybe not so glamorous as we'd have hoped."

"Not always," I say.

The woman coughs once into the phone. It hangs up.

5/13/2013 10:00AM

In a lecture hall at Barnard, I'm holding a cold water bottle to my forehead, trying to prep my brain for another few hours of intense focus. *Should I be worried about this test?*—I wonder dully as I stare around the room. I find that all the others are still caught in the tides of school-related stress, sifting through highlighted notes, pulling out pencils and setting small portable clocks on the corner of their wooden lap trays. A Barnard professor who looks like a witch (black boots, big earrings, bleached fangs) passes out the exam.

By around 11:25 AM I'm working my way through an essay about a scene from *Lolita*. The passage on the exam features the famous creep-protagonist, Humbert Humbert, swimming with his wife Valeria (mother of Lolita) and resisting a strong urge to drown her.

*She swam beside me, a trustful and clumsy seal, and all the logic of passion screamed in my ear: Now is the time! And folks, I just couldn't! In silence I turned shoreward and gravely, dutifully, she also turned, and still hell screamed its counsel, and still I could not make myself drown the poor, slippery big-bodied creature.*

Instead of attacking her physically, Humbert attacks her verbally, with a dehumanizing physical description veiled in flowery language—which I guess is harmless. *Or is it?* As I try to come up with a thesis, I recall our professor mentioning something in lecture about the whole novel being an allegorical love tale between Old World and New. That said, there's something inherently pretentious about Western Culture which causes Humbert to consider himself better than both Valeria and Lolita. Does this reflect Nabokov's (the author's) own attitude toward America? (Perhaps; he was notoriously arrogant.) If so, does that make Humbert Humbert a surrogate for Nabokov himself?

In lecture my professor made a point that Nabokov did *not* want to be associated with this particular protagonist. Maybe this is why he condemns Humbert Humbert at the end of the book. Lolita grows up, gets pregnant, loses her looks. Only then does Humbert realize that he viewed her less as human than object *to be looked at* (also: *to be had sex with* and *written about*). Only then does he realize that he loved Lolita, deeply, no matter how she looked. It occurs to me that the use of language to control the presentation of females, verbally, is just another version of the male gaze in film. How many novels can you think of by "literary geniuses" [male] that are constructed so that our sympathies only remain with female characters if they are 1) beautiful; 2) innocent; 3) passive? (To toss out a few old favorites: Goethe, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Poe all seem to have an affinity for delicate young women who find themselves wracked by guilt. Either that, or dead.) Yet Nabokov is perhaps the first to show us the dark kinks in this tradition. Lolita never really yields to Humbert's gaze. She ages ungracefully before his eyes, in a way that's actually painful to "watch" as readers. She snaps back at Humbert, mocking his attempts to woo her with ostentatious words. By the end, we as readers are aware of how acutely damaging the relationship was for Lolita—perhaps even more aware than Lolita herself. Humbert's covetous attitude toward language is not unlike his covetous relationship to Lolita as a physical being—but in the end, his attempts to control her backfire. No matter how talented a writer Humbert considers himself, he ends up destroying Lolita in the flesh. I realize at this moment that *Lolita* is the first book I've read that attempts to reverse the male gaze, in literature, by revealing its truly violent potential. Nabokov is no creep. In my view, he's a revolutionary.

Outside the building at Barnard, where I just finished my last exam of the year, I pass a crabapple tree busting with pink flower blossoms. Girls my age sit under the tree and laugh and eat fruit from white paper plates. Near the big open lawn on Barnard's campus, a celebratory meal is being served to students done with finals: plastic folding tables have been set-up and stocked with elaborate arrangements of fruit, plus hot dogs and hamburgers and the assorted condiments. I see a girl carrying a tray of food across the lawn to friends located under the flowery pink tree; she accidentally drops the whole tray, so it makes a huge mess on the grass. The girl screams. From their seats under the crabapple tree, her friends burst out laughing. She starts laughing too. I stare at the spillage with an open mouth and wide eyes (like "oh nooo")—the girls under the tree notice me do this, and laugh even louder. I plod onward past the folding tables of food, along a red stone pathway lined with street-lamps, all the way through the open gates of Barnard. Then I cross the street to Columbia's campus. On the lawn at Columbia, shirtless boys toss around footballs. One boy glimpses me staring at him with an open mouth and wide eyes (like "damn")—he responds with a smug look. Then he throws the football. It's a great throw.

I stare down at the ground and keep walking, back home, to my single room in campus housing.

In my dorm room, I lie supine on my mattress. On the ceiling above me, a moth flaps its wings around a fluorescent light. I close my eyes but just feel anxious. So I sit up and open my laptop, thinking I'll watch some TV on the internet. Before that, I check my e-mail, and find a surprising new message in my inbox.

*Read your note but it was not clear. Heart felt but muddled - which means I probably got it. If you have any clearly stated concrete questions that I can be of any help with I would certainly try to answer them if you like. I am leaving the country to film in a couple of weeks so you either have to make it fast or take your time, clarify your questions and write again sometime in the fall.*

*Best,  
Woody Allen*

"Huh," I think to myself. "So he got the letter I sent." (I forwarded it to a famous film professor, who in turn forwarded it to Woody Allen's assistant, who showed it to Woody.) After a few deep sighs of pride and relief, I lean back in bed and lapse into a comatose slumber.

**5/27/2013 2:30 PM**

On a still afternoon with a lucid blueness about it, I'm speed-walking through Central Park North, from West Side to East. When I finally reach Fifth Avenue, I wish I would have stayed in Morningside Heights. All the Upper East Side women look *so sleek*—sleek enough that I feel Body Dysmorphia sink its teeth (which are whiter than mine) into my bare-naked psyche. Suddenly I have the surreal sense that I've stepped into a science fiction horror flick, in which the antagonists are slender zombies hyped up on a high enough dose of Adderall to curb their hunger for brains. I wonder what it would be like to live in their skin for a while; I decide it would be really hard. All these ladies are probably on their way to therapy, where they'll lie down on a chaise and start crying about some deep inner turmoil to an old Jewish analyst with glasses who lacks empathy. I walk past the Carlyle Hotel on Madison Avenue, and think of a book I read in high school that takes place in the hotel's famous bar and lounge. I keep walking down

Madison until I reach the Whitney, where I see a horde of lady-zombies emerging from the entrance. Before they reach the sidewalk, I turn around and head North for a short ways. On E 73st Street, I spin on my heel and speed-walk South until I reach E 66th, where I walk into an air-conditioned corner store for a momentary cool-down. I really need to consider where I'm headed.

At the corner store, I purchase a small can of Red Bull. Sipping from the turquoise container as if it's a little tin jet-pack, I leave the store and cruise northwards, all the way back to the Carlyle Hotel. This time, I go in.

A man named Jorge, the coatman, asks if he can help me.

"Do you know if Woody Allen plays here tonight? I know it's Memorial Day... so maybe the band has the night off, I'm not sure, I guess that's what I wanna know."

"No night off," says Jorge. "Show must go on!"

Without my asking, Jorge carries a chair from another room and sets it next to the entrance to the club, then gestures for me to sit down. I tell him, "thank you," and arrange my ass comfortably on the chair's velvet cushion. According to a poster on the wall, the doors won't open for another three and a half hours. Good thing I have headphones in my black leather knapsack: if I'm listening to music I can stay idle for hours (as long as no one's bothering me). On my iPhone, I log into an online banking app to double-check that I have enough money to afford the cover. Then I use iTunes to create a playlist called *Holden a Seat*, and fill it with lounge music by Mancini and jazz charts by Gershwin and some other great musicians who might add some lively rhythm to my bluesy mood.

By 5:00 PM, a long line has gathered in the lobby and out the door. A British girl near my age, wearing a blue-and-white polka dot dress, stands behind me. She begins to talk loudly about how she flew across the Atlantic just to get Woody Allen to sign her first-edition of *Without Feathers*. Apparently this girl has watched his movies so many times that she knows certain scenes by heart: for example, Diane Keaton's "Hi, Bye" monologue from *Annie Hall*. She decides to perform it for a grinning family of tan French tourists. I want to tell the British girl to please shut up. I turn up the volume on my headphones; they're too cheap to block out her shrill falsetto variation on one of my all-time favorite film scenes. So I stare at her, hoping that the materiality of my stern gaze will cause her to choke and stop talking—or maybe just hint to the girl that her monologue has caused some serious suffering. It doesn't work. Just when I'm about to use the cord of headphones as a noose to choke *myself* to death instead of the girl, the doors to the café are propped open to the public.

Hurriedly I swoop into the bar and perch on one of the barstools: the corner seat, since I don't want to be bothered by any more talkative chicks. There's a minimum drink charge in addition to the cover, so I order a drink. The bartender says I should order food too. "That's how it works," he says. "People eat and then the band plays."

"Can I just order drinks please?" I ask, hoping to save the cash.

The bartender laughs the way men do when they think a girl is acting “cute” (code word: adorably unintelligent)—a laugh that’s slightly derisive but veiled in friendly banter, like something you’d hear come from the mouth of a hot older man teaching a class on Shakespeare. I order a couple of sides of broccoli and butternut squash. Both sides are gone in five minutes; I scarf them down like I’m near death by starvation, even though I’m far from that. The bartender repeats his near-derisive laugh as he buses my plates. I turn away from him, and take a good look at my surroundings.

Not a single woman in the restaurant has swagger as far as outfits go. Or maybe I’m just the only person in the world who has a certain taste in clothes. (This is true.) In any case it looks like they shop at cheap departments stores, which to me seems sinful, because it costs so much to get a damn seat at this place—like, *you can afford better!* (*No excuses, ladies.*) Meanwhile all the men I see are geriatric. Like, ancient. Especially the waiters; I wouldn’t be surprised if some of them have been working at this establishment since the year it opened. (1930.) In fact, the whole restaurant seems eerily displaced from the present. Even the walls look to me like cave paintings done by a former incarnation of Henri Matisse. In the opposite corner, an old dude in a suit (probably a Senator or Lawyer) glares at me suggestively. *Where the hell is Woody Allen?* I wonder, as I spin around in my barstool so I can rest my weary gaze on shelves of expensive wines and hard liquors.

From my corner seat, I hear the British girl start up again about memorizing the movies; I roll my eyes dramatically and take a long sip of gin-and-tonic. Someone nearby giggles when I do this. I realize that I am now vulnerable prey for an unsolicited chat with whomever found this funny. I feel someone tap my right shoulder, and turn to see a woman dressed in all-black linen with emerald earrings, sitting in the barstool next to me.

“You’re not much like her.”

“What?” I ask.

The woman nods once in the direction of the British girl.

“Oh. She’s fine,” I mumble. Suddenly I feel guilty about the mean glances.

“Are you a writer?” the woman asks.

I nod. “Are you.”

For a few minutes she describes her first novel. “Now I’ve been working on it for five years, and I think it’s come together quite beautifully. My editor and I have a terrific exchange. No fights. My editor is also my agent. *He* certainly believes in me, and he’s going to help me let go of this project and release it into the world. It’s a terrific dynamic, what we have. Much better than any of my marriages. Just lovely.”

“That sounds like a good thing,” I say. The woman nods in agreement. Then she sighs through her nostrils and lifts her chin; the energy coming off her strikes me as somehow reptilian and gives me chills. She continues to speak with her chin up, as if she’s rehearsed what she’s about to say.

“I know what you’re feeling. I can see it in your face. You’re hurting. You watch these movies and you think the rest of the world doesn’t get it. You think you’re alone. Well, it’s good you came out here tonight. You can see, you’re not alone. You’re just feeling the same way we all feel sometimes. Well, maybe not *her*.” (She nods toward the British girl.) “But you and I are not that different. Believe me, I know. And the bad feelings go away... Are you gonna be alright, god you do look in such pain...”

She waits for me to respond. I stare at the ice in my near-empty gin glass. What I’m thinking is: *you don’t know me*. Even if I explain all my feelings to this woman, she probably won’t get it. The worst part is, she’ll think she gets it. She’ll totally believe that she gets it. Maybe she’ll sort of get it, but not well enough that I feel willing to speak. So I stay silent.

I think back on Sharone. I’m tired of adults who act like they know me, when they’ve just met me and notice me acting shy and tense. It makes me feel scared to go out in public. It makes me feel violated.

Through a curtain in the back Woody emerges with his clarinet case. He begins assembling the instrument at a table, across from an older Italian man with a crooked smile and gray mustache, who looks like he could have pulled off being a successful mobster but instead chose the path of a white-collar boss and/or family-man. He and Woody are chatting like old pals, though it seems to me like Woody’s putting on airs. He seems really nervous—more nervous than in his movies, I think. At the moment, his hair seems to perk up like feathers on a fluffy white birdie: the way a performer’s hair gets when he attracts the attention of a full room. He looks in better health than most 77-year-old men I’ve seen up close. Also, short and delicate. Almost unmanly.

Woody takes the stage with the rest of his band. The music starts: a bouncy New Orleans jazz tune, brisk and spunky and rehearsed to a T, but lukewarm in terms of soulfulness. This is what the band continues to play all night (plus a few heartfelt love ballads at a slower tempo). Woody keeps his eyes veiled, literally, with his hand throughout the whole show—to *avoid getting eye contact with these people*, I think. But he needn’t be scared. It would be tough to get eye contact with anyone, since they’re all recording videos on their iPhones.

In the process of trying to imagine what it would be like to be Woody Allen right now, I have a *deja vu* moment. I remember being left in daycare as a four-year-old kid. The teachers use to force us to take naps that lasted an hour. Just about every other kid in the classroom would be fast asleep by the end of nap-time. But I could never manage to pass out. I’d lie wide awake, and sense the early throes of depression lurking in dark corners. For all of nap-time, I’d feel a strong temptation to crawl around the room and rouse other kids from sleep, just because I felt so alone and tortured by boredom. Once in a lucky while, I’d glimpse a fellow insomniac searching the room with wide eyes, yearning for release from the rote and lonesome practice of counting sheep—and for the rest of the nap I’d feel less lonely. Well, this is how I feel with Woody Allen right now. Like he’s the only other kid in the room who’s awake. He probably doesn’t know I’m there, but still, I feel less lonely. And I feel like walking across town and waiting in line and putting up with unpleasant conversations was somehow all worth it for this moment. Just a moment of feeling less alone—kind of like when I watch Woody’s movies. Movies which are both loved and loathed by lots of people. Movies which, if anything, save me from feeling emotionally molested by poser artists who want to tell me why I feel like such a loner in a crowd.

Even if every person in the Carlyle Club tonight looks up to Woody Allen like I do, there's something about his movies that maybe, just maybe, makes sense to me in a way that feels oddly special—like it might not happen to all people. Not to the woman with emerald earrings. Not to the British girl. Not to the friend with the mustache. (These all seem like supporting characters to me, not stars. But how can I tell they're not thinking the exact same thing?) I look around once more at the restaurant full of folks on their cell phones. God knows their Instagram videos of Woody Allen playing clarinet won't leave a dent on the face of film history. But there's no reason I should feel more special than anyone in this room.

*Heart felt but muddled - which means I probably got it.*

And then it hits me: a calming epiphany. Why I've got to go on making movies. (Even if it makes another man-muse reject me.) To help the next lunatic insomniac outsider—and not some poser—feel a little less alone at nap-time. So by the time the kid reaches adulthood, she or he doesn't have to go around tapping the shoulders of sleeping kids who don't want to be woken.

Woody probably knows what I mean.

He helps with his movies. That's how Woody Allen helps kids like me, who have such a hard time with nap-time. (It feels scary, being the only kid awake among the sleeping members of a full classroom, with all the lights out and no permission to leave.) Now that I'm older, when I end up in a really dark place, I go to his movies. And for a moment I feel less alone. It doesn't last long—that moment. But sometimes in that moment, I get to fall asleep.