

# An Ode to Naps

*By James Parker, Atlantic Magazine, December 2020*

With the nap, it can go either way.

It can succeed, which is to say it can perform its function of refreshment and revival. Twenty minutes or so of light, untroubled sleep, just when you need it. After lunch, perhaps; nature gently makes the suggestion. So you settle; you sink. But not too far. A delicious shallowness. You open your eyes. You're awake again—in a state of lamblike innocence, blinking limpidly and contentedly. The prickle of health is on your skin. Ah, it feels so good. What a great idea that was, to take a nap.

Or it can fail. You go down, you get swallowed. Sweating, fidgeting, moaning. After a slow-motion, deep-sea struggle, you flounder to wakefulness. You're up, sort of. But you've spent too long in the shaggy embrace of Morpheus; now his stagnant chemicals are in your blood. You've aged, visibly. Your face looks like a sat-on bagel. Your last five meals are burning black smoke in your system. You blunder into the kitchen, craving sugar. The afternoon ahead of you is gray with torpor. Consciousness is a trial. Taking a nap was the worst idea in the world.

And you never know; that's the thing. Certain biological variables may apply—your booze intake, how much of a sleep overdraft you happen to be running, your hormones, your glands, your general neurological-emotional tone—but basically it's a mystery. The good nap alights upon you like the grace of God: weightless, unmerited, spirit-altering. The bad nap, the sad nap, lies in wait like Wile E. Coyote with an anvil.

Sleep experts will tell you that a too-heavy afternoon nap can interfere with what Bertie Wooster called "my usual nine hours of the dreamless." It jangles the biorhythms, they say. But what do they know? After the year we just had, after whatever happened this morning, all sleep data are moot. The sleep studies: Start them over. We're different animals now. If you have space for oblivion in your day, a sleep pocket, jump into it, by God; seize the nap. Mix yourself recklessly with insensibility.

You may come to grief on the shoals of the underworld, but I don't think you will. The underworld, after all—sour, dangerous, roiled by obscure forces—is pretty much where we've been living.

Sleep is merciful. Chances are, you'll wake up and you'll return to yourself, feeling like the poet Edward Thomas hearing the silver horn of morning: "Up with the light, / To the old wars; / Arise, arise!"