The Lost Day

Stephen Gendin pulls a Proust and goes searching for lost time. He hopes he doesn't find dementia lurking in a budding grove.

July 1, 2000 By Stephen Gendin

I lost a day last week. It's gone, erased from memory, completely wiped away—and I'm terrified. I can reconstruct parts of it from reports from other people and clues in my apartment, but none of this evidence makes me feel any better. The most likely cause is too many sleeping pills. Although I don't remember taking so many, I found some spilled across my bureau and a half-empty bottle in my pants pocket. Is this some fluke event? Or the beginning of a fall into HIV-related dementia? I've worked hard to make sure that I'll always be financially independent, well insured, taken care of. This event makes all of that seem like a facade. Everything can slip away in a moment.

The day before was normal—long and tiring—so, late in the afternoon, I took a Ritalin (a stimulant prescribed by my doctor that I use about once a month). After work, I had dinner with a friend who gave me some paperwork I needed to fill out to help him viaticate a life-insurance policy. Around 10 p.m., I had a sex date, and that went, not too successfully, until a little after midnight. When it was time for bed, I was still hyped up from the Ritalin, so I took a Restoril (a sleeping pill) and a Xanax (.25 mg, the lowest strength, an anti-anxiety med I've been taking since I started getting scared about not being able to sleep). I've taken these drugs together dozens of times before with no problems. Then I lay me down to sleep…

And—bang!—it was 36 hours later. I woke up in bed alert and refreshed, but my body felt all achy. Low and behold, I had bad scrapes on my hip, both my knees, my foot and my back— severe friction burns, all shades of purple with a texture like cracked, dried-out leather; their placement indicated they couldn't have come from just one fall. There was stuff overturned in the living room; pictures on the walls hung crooked. My bottle of mouthwash was mysteriously full of water, not the antiseptic it held the day before. Looking around my apartment and at my body, I felt like a detective frantically trying to solve a crime, to unearth enough clues to solve a mystery before more disaster struck—all the time becoming more horrified as he discovers additional evidence.

I had a few memories: changing the outgoing message on my answering machine, making a phone call, my friend who was viaticating the life insurance policy coming by to pick up the paperwork. But that was it.

Things turned weirder when I got to the office. People were giving me concerned looks. Apparently

I had come in to work the day before and had acted very strangely, conducting one meeting while sitting underneath my desk and sending out a few incoherent e-mails. But I had done other things successfully: My reservations from my travel agent for my summer vacation were on my desk, all squared away. I'm not sure why no one confronted me, sent me home or called my doctor. Sure, I can be unconventional, but still… Maybe no one wanted to challenge the boss.

I remember none of it. Did I take more sleeping pills sometime in the night? Restoril isn't known to cause amnesia, but at high enough doses, any sleeping pill can have that effect. I've always considered my use of them on the mild side, very strategic. I don't feel like an addict. And now I have no urge to take them again. Still, I feel like I've crossed some line, entered a zone where I'm not in control of my actions and my judgment is fundamentally flawed.

I'm not embarrassed by my actions, whatever they were during that lost day, but I now feel like a different person, unpredictable, uncentered. I can't stop imagining doom and gloom, a descent deeper into disease and disrepair, my body snatched from my control and wracked in pain. Over the years, I've learned to keep these thoughts locked away; there's no point in worrying about what will in all likelihood be my fate. Now with the fears racing through my mind, I'm overwhelmed and unprepared.

My doctor's reaction made me feel better. He reported that he too had once lost a day because of sleeping pills, and that since I wasn't suicidal or psychotic, I should just chalk it up as a fluke. I know—I hope—that this will get better; my strange lost day will slowly become just another (non) memory, maybe even a funny one. It had better. Because ever since it happened, there's been this chill in my body that I can't escape, even on these sunny spring days.

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