

A Victim of High Aspirations

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I wake in the small hours, the clock ticking loudly and my mind running in circles. It replays the day the way it always does: what I finished, what I didn't, where I should've pushed harder. It edits the paragraphs I could have polished, generates comebacks I couldn't come up with in the moment. I get lost in conversations I wish I could forget and the worst possible outcomes of decisions I haven't made yet. I toss and turn and flip my pillow, but the more you want sleep, the less likely it is to find you.

As I lie there, staring at the ceiling, I vaguely recall my father telling me that we have an ancestor somewhere along our family tree who suffered from insomnia. "Suffered so much, in fact, that it led to something of a nervous breakdown that ended her life," he'd told me. I had always been a little nervous to learn any more about her; it felt like water too dark to dive into. But suddenly, her existence feels important and insistent, and I need to know more. I reach for my phone and go searching in old newspaper archives for my last name + insomnia.

Finding her is almost too easy. Belle Donaldson, University of Michigan graduate and high school Latin teacher, died in 1907 from insomnia and melancholia. Most of the articles are obituary-like, but there's one that stands out, its biting words so cold that I shudder.

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There is another lesson in the untimely death of Belle Donaldson, Latin teacher in the high school, which it is well to emphasize when it is likely to make the strongest impression.

Until the beginning of the final breakdown, Miss Donaldson was a magnificent specimen of womanhood. Morally, mentally and physically, she seemed the wholesome embodiment of strength, vigor and earnestness. Her ideals were the highest and she made them the inspiration of her purposes.

In her laudable endeavor she went even beyond her rare gifts; called upon them with the utmost confidence, and even after they began to yield persisted in doing the work that overtaxed them when at their best.

No doubt she worried that it became harder to achieve, gave the hours for sleep to troubled thoughts and anxious thinking, exaggerated her vexations and stimulated the causes which led to the final breakdown.

The plain moral is to conserve one's natural powers, however great they may be, instead of drawing upon them too lavishly even in loyalty to the noblest aspirations.

I read it twice, noting how the article measures her in absolutes—strength, vigor, earnestness—then counts the ways she fell short of them. “Gave the hours for sleep to troubled thoughts,” it says, as if sleep were a negotiation, as if the hours she could not hold were evidence of moral weakness. I feel my jaw tighten. A woman’s death, turned into a warning, a ledger of ambition gone too far. A “specimen of womanhood” whose downfall proves the peril of wanting too much. Reach too high, and the body will exact its toll.

I give up on sleep and trudge to my kitchen to make a cup of coffee. As I fetch a mug and heat the water, I imagine Belle rising from her bed. She makes tea and sits at the kitchen table. She tells herself she will only grade one more translation, revise one more lesson plan, until her mind quiets down. But the tea cools in her cup as the hours tick by.

The image shifts, and suddenly it is me at the kitchen table. I'm back in high school, studying until midnight, unable to close my eyes until I'm certain that the valedictorian medal will be mine. I copy equations, flip through highlighted pages, rearrange flashcards. My eyes sting and my shoulders are tight, but I know that going to bed now would be fruitless. There's still too much to do.

The scene morphs again. I'm in a dorm room now, textbooks sprawled across my lofted twin bed. My face is illuminated by the glow of my laptop, tilted away from my roommate, who has long been asleep. I promise myself that this is temporary, that once I have my degree, I will rest.

But here I am, in an apartment of my own, still sitting at the kitchen table in the middle of the night. Emails to answer. Spreadsheets to update. The work changes, but the lamp is never turned off. Belle's ideals, the article says, were "the highest," her pursuit of them noble. My own feel smaller, yet I sense the same machinery at work: the inventory of tasks, the mental arithmetic of energy, the secret dread that slowing down is failure.

I set my mug down and go back into my room, pulling a box down from the top shelf of my closet. The valedictorian medal I spent so many hours chasing is shoved inside, coated in dust. Sometime between having it placed around my neck and now, I decided that being proud of the accomplishment was gauche. I blow gently on the medal and hang it on my bedroom door, wondering if both the ambition and the insomnia are from her—a double helix inheritance. And yet, in the margins, in the space between her story and mine, I don't feel bound by it. I feel alive within it.

I am striving.

I am awake.