Why I write at night

One lamp, one table, and a habit that started with a notebook from a drugstore.

A few of you asked why all of these are written so late. Like, why every entry has something about 3am in it. Fair question. I figured I'd answer it properly.

The short version is I don't sleep very well. I never really have. The long version is this whole post, I guess.

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It's not a big tragic thing. I want to say that first. I'm not up all night staring at the wall feeling terrible. My brain just doesn't shut off when it's supposed to. I lie down around midnight, I'm tired, my body is tired, and then my head goes, okay, so, let's think about everything you said in 2014. And that's it. I'm awake.

I've tried most of the stuff. Tea. No screens. Magnesium. A white noise app that's supposed to sound like rain on a tent and actually sounds like someone frying bacon. My mom sent me a lavender pillow spray, which I use, and which makes my bed smell like her bathroom. It doesn't help me sleep but it's kind of nice.

So at some point I stopped fighting it. If I'm awake at two, I get up. I go to the kitchen table. I turn on one lamp. And I write.

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The table is nothing special. It's this old wood thing I found on the curb on North 6th the week I moved in, with one leg a little shorter than the others, so there's a folded-up matchbook under it. It's been there for two years. I'm scared to move it.

The lamp is a brass desk lamp from the thrift store on Bedford. Green glass shade, the kind you see in old libraries. It was twelve dollars and the switch is a little chain you pull. I like the chain. There's something about that tiny click in a quiet apartment.

I only turn that one on. Not the big overhead lights. The loft has these huge factory windows, so at night the streetlight comes in from outside, kind of orange, and then there's just my little circle of green light on the table. Everything outside that circle disappears. It feels like the only place in the world that's awake.

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The sounds are part of it too. At 2am Brooklyn isn't quiet, it's just quieter. The radiator clanks when it's cold. A truck goes by on Kent and the windows hum a little. Sometimes there's a guy who walks past singing the same two lines of a song, I think he works a late shift somewhere, I've never seen his face. Around four the bakery on the corner gets its delivery and I can hear the metal gate going up. That's usually when I know I should stop.

I write on a laptop now mostly. But I still have notebooks. A stack of them on the shelf by the window, all the same black cover, all with the year written on the spine in white pen.

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The first one was from a CVS. Junior year of high school.

That year was just kind of a bad year. Nothing huge happened. My best friend moved to Ohio in the summer, and I broke my wrist in September skateboarding, so I couldn't play baseball, which was kind

of the only thing I had going on. So I went from having a friend and a team to having a cast and a lot of time. I was sixteen and I didn't really know how to talk about any of it. I didn't think there was anything to talk about.

I wasn't sleeping then either. And one night I was at the CVS with my mom picking up something, and there was this rack of cheap notebooks by the register, and I just grabbed one. Black cover, ninety-nine cents. She didn't ask. She just paid for it.

I wrote in it that night with my left hand, because my right one was in a cast. You can still see it. The first like ten pages are almost unreadable. Huge, shaky letters, like a little kid wrote them. Mostly it's just lists. What I ate. What the weather was. Stuff people said at school. One page just says "I miss Danny" and then a drawing of a car, very badly done, also left-handed.

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I didn't write anything good in that notebook. That wasn't the point. The point was it was two in the morning and I had somewhere to put things. Like emptying your pockets at the end of the day. The thoughts were still there, but they were on the table now instead of in my head, and I could finally lie down.

By the time the cast came off I'd filled it. So I bought another one. Same rack, same CVS. I've been doing it ever since. Ten years, kind of on and off. Some years I wrote every night. Some years I wrote twice.

Danny and I still talk, by the way. He lives in Columbus, he has a kid now. I told him once that he was in the first page of my first notebook. He said "was it nice?" I said it was mostly about a car. He

said "that tracks."

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Posting this stuff online is newer. Like, only this year. Before that nobody read any of it, which was kind of the point. It still makes me nervous. I write something at three in the morning that feels really honest and then I read it again at noon and want to throw my laptop in the East River.

But some of you write back. Which I didn't expect. People telling me they're up too. A nurse in Ohio who reads these on her break at four. A guy in London who said my posts come in right when he's having breakfast, so we're kind of up at the same time from opposite ends. I like that a lot. It makes the circle of light feel a little bigger.

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So that's why. I'm awake anyway. I might as well be at the table.

It's 3:20 right now. The radiator just did the clank. Somebody's walking a bike past the window, I can hear the click of the wheel. I'm going to make tea I won't finish, and in about forty minutes the bakery gate is going to go up, and then I'll probably try to sleep.

Goodnight, or good morning. Whichever one you're in.

— Shay

Thanks for reading. There are more of these on my site, one every couple of weeks.