

Meet the Aspiring Filmmaker Transforming Insomniacs' Confessions Into Art

By Paige Towers • July 27, 2016 at 11:19am

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He sounds like just some regular guy, like he could be your coworker, your friend, your neighbor. Except instead of saying, “I’m fine” when you ask him how he is, he takes a deep breath and proceeds to be his most authentic and vulnerable self.

“I can’t sleep because my rhythms are all off,” he says. “I spent far too many nights watching far too much TV on far

too many

different streaming websites.” As he speaks, carefully chosen clips from 1950s and '60s' footage play — a flash of an old black and white television here, a vapidseeming housewife in a dress clicking through channels there. The caller expresses that, yes, while he really wants to adopt new, healthier habits, he’s suspicious that nothing will change, that he’ll just end up back in this state again: wide awake, alone and “[...] not feeling happy despite all the reasons you could be happy.” The corresponding image for those final words is a goldfish, trapped in its tiny bowlsized world.

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The video is part of @SleeplessTheSeries

, an anonymous project on Instagram. The idea behind it is this: there's a phone number that anyone can call and leave a voicemail when they can't sleep. There are no instructions given — no limitations or guidelines to what you can or cannot talk about. The only thing that must be understood is that by leaving a voicemail, you're consenting to letting your message be turned into a short film. And what started as a simple art project is evolving into a safe space where many sleepless can find what they seek: a forum to discuss the deep thoughts that plague them in the middle of the night.

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The auteur behind @sleeplesstheseries is an aspiring documentary filmmaker. (They would like to remain
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anonymous, so I'll refer to them from here on as "Sleepless".) And, as one might think, they do have a rather complicated relationship with shuteye. In fact, Sleepless started the project out of their own nocturnal struggles: they had just gone through a few major life changes (a breakup, for one) and were struggling to fall asleep at night.

"There was one night when I was up, going through a lot of stuff in my head, and I just felt really alone," Sleepless said. "But then I just had this thought — there must be at least 20 people on my block, probably one other person in my building and millions of people in the state who are up and they don't want to be and they're just thinking and kind of torturing of themselves and feeling the same way."

"I was just rambling about my feelings, but when I hung up, I felt so much better."

Once a voicemail is received, Sleepless listens to it to decide whether they have an emotional connection with the content. If so, Sleepless works to bring it to life in the form of a mini film, which takes around five hours on average. Some of those minifilms come together organically; others, "have been truly torturous."

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"I'll just spend days of looking through so much archival footage and feel like giving up." True to form, Sleepless' best work hours for the films are at night: the magic hour seems to be 1am.

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When Sleepless first set up the voicemail, they felt like the callers were doing them

a huge favor — not realizing it could actually be a favor for the caller. But Sleepless decided to test out the service by leaving a message and thus realized its immense therapeutic value.

"I talked about my breakup. I talked about how I was sad because I had imagined this future that didn't belong to me

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anymore,” Sleepless said. “I was just rambling about my feelings, but when I hung up, I felt so much better.”

"I want the person who leaves the message to feel like all these difficult feelings that were keeping them up at night have been turned into something beautiful."

To be be awake in the middle of the night is a lonely state, one in which obsessive, swirling thoughts often form. Sometimes you need to voice these thoughts in order to make sense of them or get rid of them. Sleepless understood that need. In fact, they wish to remain unknown because they “don’t want people to have an idea of who they’re calling.” If you don’t know who’s listening to that voicemail of your late nightrambings, their theory goes, then you’re more likely to say what’s really keeping you up at night. Therapeutic value aside, Sleepless said the account serves as a means to obtaining an authentic voice.

“When [people] call in the middle of the night, they’re so tired. It’s like their defenses are already down,” Sleepless said.

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“You’re just lying in bed, you’re exhausted and there’s no one on the other line.”

One video that seems particularly organic is from July 8, 2016 at 2:26am. As with the first voicemail, the caller is eloquent, lifeaffirming and honest.

“I can’t sleep because I’m feeling this lump in my throat that might be signalling some sort of blooming cold and I’m trying to fight it,” the voicemail begins. An antique film clip of a yellow flower opening unfolds on the screen. When the caller begins to start rambling about what’s bothering her — issues far beyond her physical state — a spiral spins on the screen.

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Sleepless says a lot of the imagery unfolds naturally based on the caller's word choice.

“A lot of the people have used language that is already pretty visual,” Sleepless said. “If they say even two or three things that bring to mind a really strong image, it makes it so much easier to make something.”

Some nights, Sleepless doesn't get any calls; other nights three or four voicemails appear. They hope more people dial the line in the future, but even if the number of calls increase, Sleepless wonders whether there will be a cutoff date for the project. At some point, will these voicemails cease to say anything new or different? If we all share the same reasons for not being able to sleep at night, will there be a time when there's no new subject material — and thus no new images to arrange?

That may be. But for now, Sleepless not only wishes to create short pieces of art that speak to a larger audience, but also hopes that the videos also serve as a small gift for the person who leaves the message, to let them know that their words are not falling on deaf ears.

“Ideally, I want the person who leaves the message to feel like all these difficult feelings that were keeping them up at night have been turned into something beautiful.”

Having trouble dozing and want to leave a 'sleepless' voicemail? Dial 917.426.2642.