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IN REAL LIFE

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MUSIC CENTER
OVERNIGHT
(after night, after night)

By Meri Nana-Ama Danquah

When I was younger, I used to think that change happened overnight. I used to think that it was possible to go to sleep and wake up in the morning, different. Not necessarily a new person, just a little bit different than before—changed. Even the adults around me affirmed this notion. “A good night’s sleep,” my grandmother used to say, “can change just about anything.” Based on the limited scope of my girl-child vision, I knew that to be the gospel truth. I knew, for instance, that one night could change illness to wellness. Which was, after all, the reason doctors usually advised their patients to “take two aspirin and call me in the morning.” I knew that one night could change shortness...
into height because of the way my relatives
would always say, “Girl, look how tall you’ve got-
ten. You must have grown at least a foot
overnight.” I knew, also, that one night could
carry you right over the threshold of one year, be
that an age-year or a calendar-year.

Obviously, there was something magical about
night-time hours, something magical about sleep
and what it inspired—dreams, those mystical
journeys of the subconscious mind. In dream life
there were no rules, only a limitless imagination.
The entire world was transparent. Content was
as significant, or as meaningless, as context.
Truths relied on emotion and instinct. They were
personal, complex, permeable; they were not
simply the bareness of bones or the hardness of
facts. What mattered most was the moment, be
it in fantasy or in memory. Time was a tool,
tended only to unite. Just as gravity was a
myth for those who feared the freedom of
weightlessness. Nothing was impossible.

That, however, was not the case in real life. In
real life, events seemed to follow a certain law of
logic. Only the tangible was visible, and only
facts were interpreted as truths. Time was linear;
it marched forward, not to the rhythm of your
desires, but to the tick and the tock of its own
predictable agenda. Gravity was inescapable:
what went up had to come back down. And what
down would most likely never have the
opportunity to soar.

What I could never figure out as a child was
exactly how the transformations took place, how
the world of the dream managed to seep its way
into the world of reality to create change. And it
would take many years before I would finally
begin to make some sense of it all. In fact, I was
well into my 20s when I came to understand that
change is not something that often — if ever —
happens overnight. Regardless of its appearance
of immediacy, change is a process, a gradual
movement whose effects can only be fully seen
and appreciated in hindsight.

Are we living yet? You bet. You bet. We’re
living now. Okay.

Okay. For a moment I don’t hear it.
The boogie-woogie rumble
of a dream deferred. My heart beats out the
boogie-woogie rumble
of a dream deferred.

— In Real Life by Charlayne Woodard.

You see, I had moved to Los Angeles to write
literature — poetry, fiction and creative nonfic-
tion. I had moved to Los Angeles to try my hand
at success, but what I became was knee-deep in
poverty. For eight years, I had hoped and strug-
gled. A few of my writings had been published
here and there. For the most part, it was never
anything truly major or career-defining. But by
then, it was too late. For as long as I could
remember, every time I had entered that dream
world, I had carried a small piece of it back with
me into my waking world. Year by year, piece by
piece, until eventually I found myself, in my wak-
ing hours, being guided by that patchwork, that
dream which dares to stand strong against the
harshness of daylight. Hoping that if I followed it
for long enough and believed in it hard enough,
it could be realized, it could become my real life.
That’s what happened to me. That’s what, I think,
happens to most people who chase after what,
at first glance, might seem like the unattainable.
And I was too far in to turn back. This was a
path I wanted to pave.

For a while, I still held faith in the powers of the
dream life and how they shaped the depth and
direction of the so-called real life. But by the
time my utilities had been shut off and I was
being threatened with eviction, I was broke
and beat-down. I had sacrificed and given up
so much, that faith was about all I had left.
Then, quite suddenly, things turned around.
Just like that. One thing after the other. First the
agent, then the book proposal, then an auction,
then a deal and the largest check I had ever
received in my life.

“Wow,” a friend said to me. “It’s all happening
so fast. Everything in your life is changing.
You’re going to be like this totally major
overnight literary sensation.” Overnight?
Overnight, I thought. How many times had I
heard that? Read that? Said that? As if there is
no point of separation between the dream and
the achievement. As if the bridge between those
two things, those weeks and months and years
of yearning and trying and needing to hold on;
as if that period of transition, of transformation
is not the very thing that heals us, repairs the
wreckage of our lives, grows us up and makes
us whole.

“No,” I told my friend. “Change doesn’t happen
overnight and neither do dreams. At least not in
real life they don’t.”

Meri Nana-Ama Danquah, a native of Ghana, is the
author of Willow Weep for Me: A Black Woman’s Journey
Through Depression (Norton/Ballantine) and the editor of
Becoming American: Personal Essays by First Generation
Immigrant Women (Hyperion). She is presently writing a book
which will be published by Riverhead.