

The Epidemic of Weariness

by Amy Halloran

All of us are tired. For months we yawned and shrugged it off, but when mini-vans and sedans jack-knifed on the highway, and people sleepwalked into moving vehicles and stock-still buildings, the dead reached a certain number, and the government realized it had to intervene.

"Life cannot continue at a breakneck pace, because it is breaking too many necks," the Health Czar told the President.

"What do you recommend?" asked the charming and beloved president.

The Health Czar was never without her stethoscope. When she was thinking, she liked to put the cool metal circle on someone's chest, and she did that now.

"Shush," said the Chief of Staff, holding his finger up to his lips. The president's men and women watched the Health Czar listen to our leader's heart. The room grew cozy and filled with yawns. A man and a woman lay down on the carpet, spooning each other. Soon they were snoring.

"People need to sleep more than they work," the Health Czar declared, lifting her head from the president's chest. The fracture of this intimate embrace made everyone sigh.

"What are you saying?" the president asked. He spoke his words the way a gardener snipped shrubs, and though they came from his mouth quick and clipped, no one ever thought he was impatient.

"Cut work schedules in two," she said, nodding decisively.

"How could we manage such a slowdown?" cried the Economy Czar, breaking a yawn.

"I will ask the very rich to shoulder the cost," said the president.

Gasps replaced yawns.

"They won't pay for the general public!" chided the Paperwork Czar.

"Who else possibly could?" asked the president.

"We could increase our national debt," the Economy Czar suggested.

The president smiled and shook his head.

"This sleepiness is happening to everyone," he said, "but it is not anyone's fault. We have to help our people, not hurt them. The rich can most afford to be hurt. Once they are hurt, they will be like everyone else, bruised and faking."

The Czars and staff accepted his logic. If anyone could convince people of their responsibilities, it was the president.

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"This won't be forever," the president told the three richest people in the nation at a game of golf. It was the president's turn, and he boagied. "Or, maybe it will."

"Is there nothing else to be done? You know, let them eat Twinkies, and all that?" said one of the rich men. He held his nine iron up in the air, a jokey threat.

"We can't have so many deaths," the president said, "or else there won't be any of us left."

"Is that such a bad thing?" the second rich man said, giggling.

"The fewer people there are, the less wealthy you will seem," the president told the men.

"He does have a point," the third rich man said. The rich men nodded, looking up at the sky, as if there they could see this unfortunate future: a landscape unpopulated by people who envied them. Clouds gathered.

"Okay, you've twisted our arms," the first rich man said. "We'll help."

"Good," the president said.

"Well," said the first rich man. The sky was getting dark.

"Well, well," the second man said. "Let us know what you need."

"I know now," said the president.

"Tell us inside. It looks like rain," said the third rich man.

The men hopped in golf carts and zoomed up to the clubhouse. Boys trotted after the men, clubs jiggling in their bags.

"Give these men some whiskey because they are going to save the world. Or at least our part of it," the president told the bartender.

The bartender poured shots and the men threw them down their throats. They looked like geese, gullets up and exposed.

"Now," said the first rich man. "Tell us what you need."

"You have to pay everyone's utilities, health care and housing costs," the president said.

"All of it!?" protested the rich men.

"No, just half. The Health Czar says people have to stop working so much, so we need you to cover the burden of that adjustment."

"That's a lot of money," the third rich man said, shaking his head.

"You said you would help," the president reminded.

"We didn't know how much you meant," the first man argued.

"If you don't pay, we will have to ask you to leave the country."

This was the only solution he could find. The Psychology Czar had predicted that the country's richest people, despite being worldly, had a strong sense of patriotic obligation and would cough up the cash rather than risk losing citizenship.

"Oh all right," the men agreed, one by one. Each held their little cup to the bartender for refills.

"Deal?" the president asked.

"Deal," the men said.

"When do you need the money?" the second rich man wondered.

"Right now would be fine," the president said.

The Economy Czar and his staff rushed in with dishpans. The rich men stuck their fingers down their throats and gagged up their assets. Everything cleaned up nicely in the kitchen while the rich

men and the president napped upstairs, in the manager's nookie room.

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There were glitches in the application of funds: with the reduced work force, the wheels of bureaucracy took forever to turn. Still, no one went cold or hungry because the Czar of Reasonableness talked the heads of privately owned companies into holding their horses.

"You are to work half-time, and the rich people will pay half of your bills," the president said on the news.

The citizens who were awake clapped and whistled. Most of them were lying on their sofas, and were too tired to stand up and cheer, even though the idea of less work and more security was so exciting.

"If you would like to thank the rich, please write them at the White House, and we will forward your mail," the president told his public. He held his papers up to his mouth, trying to cover a yawn, but everyone knew what he was doing.

