

Tom, Thanks for Sleepless in Seattle

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SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE (1993)

Directed by Nora Ephron

Written by Jeff Arch & Nora Ephron

Starring Meg Ryan, Bill Pullman, Ross Malinger, & Tom Hanks as Sam Baldwin

My friends got married on a farm in June. They exchanged vows on a patio by the lake, then were carried off on a fairytale carriage, pulled by a resident horse. Afterward, we all met for a stunningly rustic farm-house dinner before changing into sweats and adjourning to an enormous campfire. The groom often said beforehand that we wouldn't be going to bed that night, so I knew I had to try my hardest. I felt especially committed to this challenge because of my reputation, among our friends, for certain insomnia. It started in high school; at the time, my record for not falling asleep exceeded 48 consecutive hours. Of course, that's not to say I was awake for all that time - there's a big difference. I was awake all night for my friends' wedding because I was desperate not to fall asleep, lest I miss even a minute of joy. You can only stay awake when you're happy, but you can be sad and sleepless, I've learned, for much longer.

It's haunted me on and off for my entire adult life, and what I've found is that insomnia begets insomnia. Who knows why I might have a bad night once; the bad nights that follow are bad because of the fear of bad nights. You'd think unrest earns rest, but it doesn't seem to work that way. To date, my worst spell was in the Summer of 2016, when I would chase evasive sleep from bed to bed, between my parents' house and my own. One night, I remember my mother regularly checking on me (her adult son) to see if I'd finally drifted off. She eventually drove me home at 5AM, just to see if the change of walls would make a difference. It didn't, and I had a panic attack that day while live on the radio. No, a nation of nocturnal road-farers didn't reach out, their hearts over-spilling with empathy. No, my weariness didn't translate to tragic enchantment. Most people will never hear the struggle in your voice or see the pain in your eyes. If compassion were so ideally transactional, we wouldn't need movies.

1993's *Sleepless in Seattle* is neither an insomnia movie nor a radio movie, but both are evident in the title, and create, for me in particular, a certain curiosity. Oh, and Tom Hanks is in it. He plays Sam Baldwin, the recently widowed (widowed?) single father of 8 year-old Jonah, who's beginning to worry. On Christmas Eve, Jonah calls a late-night advice show, on which Sam is then coerced into spilling his guts to the droves of vulnerable holiday travellers across the USA. Annie Reed (Meg Ryan) is among many listeners smitten and fascinated by Sam's heartache, but it's a great source of shame, because she's only just gotten engaged to the decent-if-dull Walter (Bill Pullman). She spends most of the film attempting to suppress her instincts and, in fact, doesn't even speak to TH's character until the final scene. That factor's definitely a neat deconstruction of the traditional romantic comedy. Usually there's an arc between meeting and riding off into the sunset. In this film, the two run together.

For my gittiest musings on the writing of Nora Ephron, see my previous blog on *You've Got Mail*, the natural spiritual sister-film of *Sleepless in Seattle*. In fact, the tone of this movie is notably darker, which could be a result of Ephron having cowritten the film with someone else. It still boasts charm and levity, but features heavy themes, such as death and betrayal, and is ultimately about moving on; in Sam's case, moving on because you have to, and in Annie's case, moving on because you can. But the reason it falls in line with the warmth of Ephron classics like *YGM* and *WHMS* is that it proudly owns the fact that it's a fantastically unrealistic romance. With the reluctant guidance of a lovelorn friend (Rosie O'Donnell), Annie launches a private investigation into learning Sam's surname and address, and then flies to Seattle to stalk him and his child. Meanwhile, she has a fiance (Bill Pullman) who's only crime is that he's allergic to a lot of stuff. A quick edit could turn this flick into *Fatal Attraction*, and as Sam Baldwin says about that movie, "it scared the shit out of every man in America." But it's all okay because we trust Nora, who's indirectly justifying every crazy thing we've ever done for love, every Facebook lurk, every misguided grand gesture, every ferris wheel climbed, every mix tape gifted. And we trust TH, because how could we not?

If there's any doubt *Sleepless* is aware of its own romantic idealism, it bares mentioning Annie's on-going source-text for navigating love is her worn-out VHS of *An Affair to Remember*. Sam's version of the same naivete is his

clumsiness in re-entering the new-world dating scene. Both characters are guided by archaic, unrealistic expectations of romance, and we the audience can relate because... we're watching *Sleepless in Seattle*.

The film opens on Sam and Jonah standing above the grave of their recently deceased wife/mother. After the funeral, Sam's friends (including TH's real wife, Rita Wilson) deal him the standard platitudes of reassurance about the passing of grief. Sam responds with the thesis of his entire character: "It doesn't happen twice." What follows is an exercise in proving how wrong this is. What's challenging is coming to terms with the fact that, like a good night's sleep, love is out of your control. Enduring heartache will not earn a person their happily ever after, but it can still happen, and it will, with patience and a release of the reins. I find it's rather pointless to audit love stories for how unrealistic or contrived they may seem; all love is unrealistic, and yet it happens. And when it does, you might as well charter a horse on a fairytale carriage, and curl up in the back for a snooze.

Thx!