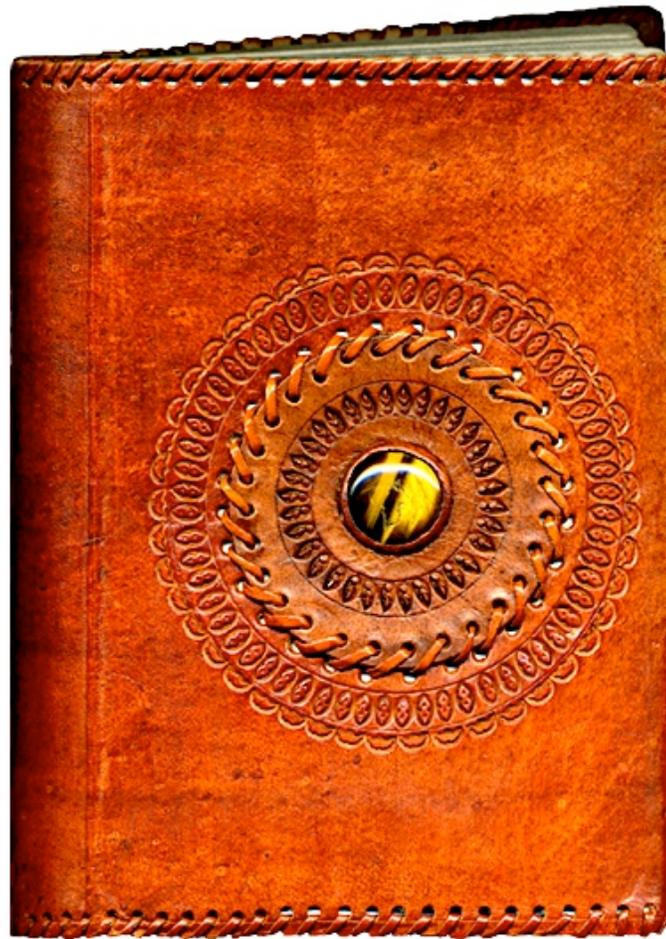


Book of Dreams - Part 3



A M E M O I R

THE BOOK OF DREAMS - PART THREE

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Part III

M O R E Q U O T A T I O N S

**I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.**

- William Butler Yeats

**I think we dream so we don't have to be apart so long.
If we're in each other's dreams, we can play together all night.**

- Bill Watterson, *Calvin & Hobbes*

All the things one has forgotten scream for help in dreams.

- Elias Canetti

Like all dreamers I confuse disenchantment with truth.

- Jean-Paul Sartre

Dreams are true while they last, and do we not live in dreams?

- Alfred, Lord Tennyson

**I've dreamt in my life dreams that have stayed with me ever after,
and changed my ideas: they've gone through and through me, like wine
through water, and altered the color of my mind.**

- Emily Bronte

Our truest life is when we are in our dreams awake.

- Henry David Thoreau

8. FOUR DREAMS OF CHILDREN

1

Anton and I are in spy mode, slinking through the backyards, the thrill of espionage and THE GREAT ESCAPE making our eyes wider than wide. The yard feels like a combination of Bartlein Court* and my not-very-accurate memories of Uncle Oreaan's Van Nuys patio** (from which his insane oldest son, then 10 years old, whipped a cat around by its tail and tossed it as far as he could), except this yard has a high cement wall around it, like a prison. A maze of shorter walls just beyond appears strangely inviting. There is a Stalag 13 type tower in the northeast corner.

Anton and I crouch behind a line of honeysuckles, unseen, strategizing. There is an air of confidence, like when we would decide what the next play *should* be during a Packer game. Or when programming the little bug people in the old CAPTURE THE FLAG computer game we used to play on my first Mac SE/30, just before the program runs and all hell breaks loose.



There is also an air of mortal urgency. This is no game. The reason we are here is murky, half made up (like Real Life?). We care more about surviving, defending each other. The reason for combat will be made clear once we can get into the maze and battle our way forward, or so we imagine.

Anton is a grown man, his actual age. He's wearing a t-shirt and jeans. They hang on him as if he's recently lost weight, too much weight. He sprints out of our concealed safety before I can take the lead. His athletic power belies his lightweight frame.

We're so close to the watchtower that they can't see us below. We have automatic rifles; our adversaries have mounted machine guns and who knows what else. Faceless grey men smoke and play cards on a patio somewhere just around the corner. We'll need to fight through them (even though we still don't know *why*, which makes our effort all the more *heroic*).

* Menasha, WI, the first house I owned, in a small development of starter homes.

** Van Nuys, CA, just outside L.A., where, I also recall, I paged through a coffee table picture book of "Freaks." It gave me nightmares. I was 5 years old.

At some point, it is night; at another, it is day. Random, depending on mood.

Right now, as we skim along the ground, timing our bursts of speed in tandem, it's dusk. The sky is as grey as the men we will soon encounter.

Gun fire erupts from the tower overhead. We hit the grass, then come up firing. I aim at tree limbs, making them fall on the heads of the gunmen, and then the legs of the tower itself, hoping to topple it. Anton fires at the men, then wheels and begins firing at the guys who'd been playing poker but were now aiming guns at us over the short walls of the maze.

We're trapped in the crossfire.

Not very smart planning. (Definitely like Real Life.)

Slinking below the maze wall, we look at each other and smile wryly. This is exactly the sort of pickle we'd hoped to get in. Now we can get out of it, which is the point of these sorts of moments. *Right?*

Soldiers begin making their way toward us in the maze. It's narrow enough to force them to come at us one at a time. Anton and I fight *LAST OF THE MOHICANS* style: while one of us grapples with an oncomer, the other shoots or stabs them from the side... until both of us are engaged and need to fend for ourselves. Luckily, the gunners in the towers are terrible shots and blast most of their compatriots in the back.

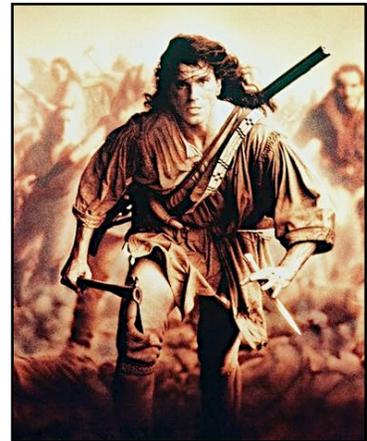
We catch our breath during a sudden lull, wondering when more guys will come storming around the corner. We decide to do the storming ourselves. But when Anton reaches to pull himself up, a bullet screeches through his forearm, leaving a gaping hole. He clenches his jaw and puts his hand over the wound, blood seeping between his fingers.*

I pull him back onto the grass. I tear off most of my shirt (a light blue long sleeve button-down) and wrap his arm. Tourniquet tight.

It gives us both extra powers.

In a blur of Theseus finesse, we outmaneuver everyone in the maze and find ourselves on the prized patio, intact and alone. We barricade the opening of the maze with a sturdy picnic table, slide into a sitting position with our back to machine gun fire from the tower, and plan our next step.

That's when I see my father through the sliding glass doors. He's in a wheel chair. (It's the first time he's been in my dreams as his end-of-life self: an old man fallen into severe dementia, slumped, his body half immobile, a stroke victim. Before this, he'd always appeared without any health or mental issues, his old self.) In his mind, I know he's waving to me, from the dining room on the other side of the glass.



* This dream occurred after Anton had electrocuted his right arm in a kitchen accident. Reaching behind his toaster oven to re-plug in the power cord, he accidentally touched his finger to one of the prongs and electricity shot up his arm, to his shoulder. His hand was limp for weeks. The initial grim prognosis was that he might be able to hold a spoon in 4-6 months, that he'd never play bass (professionally) again. He quit his band, *M-Lab*, in which he was the bassist and backing vocalist. With aggressive experimental therapy, he ended up regaining full motion, but strength remains elusive. Indeed, he won't ever play professionally again, but he is currently in a prog rock band as lead singer/lyricist and as well as fronting other bands, having a great time, a better time. This dream happened while he was still in the throws of his post-accident depression.

“I’ll hold them off,” my son says, standing and firing a hail of bullets up at the tower.

I duck and run to my father but cannot open the sliding door. Its locked. Any delay could mean we all get killed.

Dad is smiling, so very comforted now that he can see me just on the other side of the glass, knowing I’m near. Ready to go out to lunch. Oblivious to the threat.



I wake up, feeling very far away.



*The poster for the film **The Fountain**, released during the summer of 2006, depicting the Sphere of Life*

Life is a struggle to some. Struggles are seen ordinary and everyday to others. To some, illusions. A different sort of glasses, not exactly rose-colored, but nonetheless tinted, are used by my son, through which he sees his own life. He thinks these glasses were gifted to him, an inheritance, but this is not correct. The glass through which we peer is not shared. Cannot be passed on. Anton sidesteps struggles, especially those of his own making, and I have no idea what sort of maze this will eventually lead him through. I worry. And I love. And I get older as I watch. What I need to do, more simply, is appreciate the joy. No matter how thick, or thin, the glass might become. In our minds, we are always waving to each other, are we not?

2

Willie is playing the drums. Jazz. He's about 11 years old. It may be the *North Shore Country Club*, Mom's after-death "Celebration of Life" event (*see next page*). The music is fabulous, Bird and Dizzy swirling around Max Roach rhythms. (I imagine that it's one of my arrangements, since I arranged most of his jazz combo's tunes, but I don't recognize this one.) Willie is glowing; not just the gleam of his chrome drum kit and golden cymbals, but Willie himself, as if an internal spotlight is making the very air around him fluoresce.

Watching, I realize it's not him glowing, but the shimmering of a beautifully translucent force field. Like Glinda's bubble, protecting him from harm. Protecting his *elfin innocence*.

It's so fragile, his happiness, his youth, his earnestness, his unself-conscious exuberance. So timeless. So in the moment. I'm pulled from my fatherly pride, sucked back into one of the corners of the room, awkwardly stuck against ceiling and wall. Invisible. No one notices.

Slowly, everything outside Will's bubble begins to fade, like that part in *THE NEVERENDING STORY* when *The Nothing* overtakes everything but one last astroid. Like the *Sphere of Life* Hugh Jackman lives in beyond time itself in *THE FOUNTAIN*. (*See previous page.*)



He's so engrossed in this playing, in the music, Will doesn't notice that the world has crumbled around him into celestial rubble. I try to think of a way to shield him from his sudden isolation, broadcasting clarion lead trumpet from my corner high up on the wall. (It wasn't until afterwards that I realized I must have transformed into a stereo speaker system.) I try desperately to stay ahead of the music, pouring out solos so that he'll play along, not look too carefully around himself, not realize that the universe has fallen away.

When he finally looks up, he continues keeping time, but his rhythms are no longer inventive, no longer vintage Bebop. It isn't fear, exactly, that registers, more like bewilderment. On an older face, it might have registered as betrayal.

I stop making music. He keeps time, nonetheless.

Then he begins one of the coolest, low key, sad yet thrilling drum solos I have ever heard.

I woke up before he was finished. A sense of improvisational joy lingered. I needn't worry. Although it is difficult to shake the paternal embrace I still carry from when I took care of Willie the infant, Willie the toddler, Willie the magical child-elf, I no longer have to protect. My years of being the main caregiver and househusband are centered with the memory of



Music Floss by Martin Murphy



Willie in a front pack, me typing. Willie staggering like Godzilla as he knocks over the elaborate city Anton and I have constructed for him to demolish on the kitchen floor. Willie's look of complete trust. A trust shattered by post-pubescent distractions. By long trips and months away. By divorce and a permanent move to New York. By evolutionary necessity. By time.

Replaced by a new music.



Will on drums
Woody on sax
Sarah in red dress
Chris on piano
Peter on bass

Joan Mueller's *Celebration of Life* dinner at North Shore
Summer 1998, 6 months after her death

3

Woody stands at poolside in American flag swim trunks. His softly bowed back makes it appear as if he has a mushroom doughboy tummy. He's about 10 years old. He's as thin as a gecko. He has on swimming goggles, only these are larger than usual, the kind Brainy Smurf might wear if he were to join the Hanna-Barbara Swim Club. Woody's already large eyes look animé huge. His unique goggles are half filled with blue liquid. When he cocks his head, the stuff swishes gently around inside the goggles like two front load washers.



He stands silently, staying loose between races.
 Until the goosebumps set in.
 "Hey, Dad, can you find my sweatshirt?"
 I love the way he says *Dad*.

I find the sweatshirt but am afraid of slipping on the wet tile, so I wad it up and toss it like a basketball his way, hoping it doesn't fall short into a chlorine puddle. He opens his arms as the sweatshirt uncoils. It unfolds perfectly so that he can slip right into it without effort, magically, in one motion. I feel my shoulders vicariously lending support, giving it mid-air English.

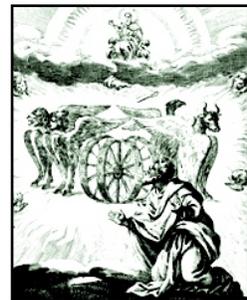
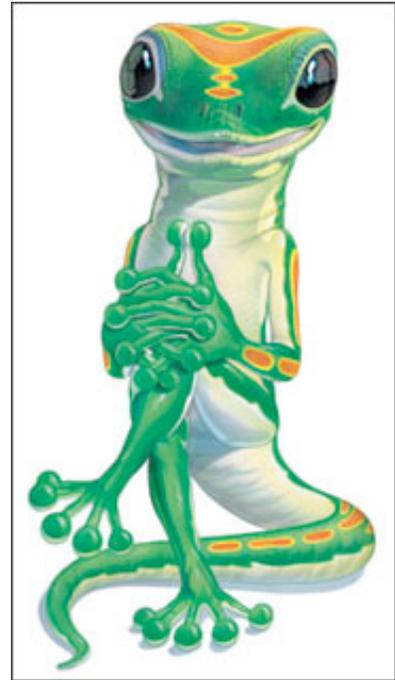
The sweatshirt doesn't just slide over him, *it becomes him*. Or, more precisely, **Woody becomes the sweatshirt**. A deep green University of Hawaii sweatshirt. It hovers, the hood opened like a shadow monk. I hurry over, mindful not to slip, careful of each footfall. I catch the empty sweatshirt just before it falls onto the wet tile.

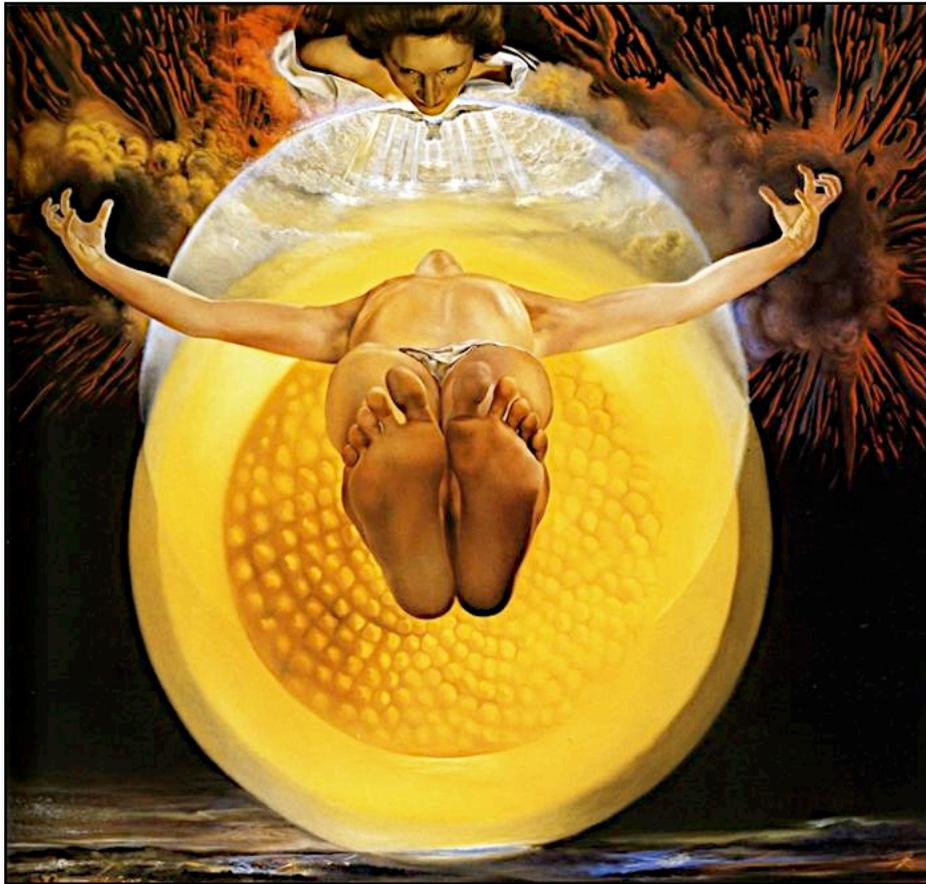
Instantly, I am wearing it. I feel the hood over my head, muffling the sounds of the indoor pool, the sharp voices of the other kids. The lining is cottony, thick, making my neck hot. My underarms begin to moisten.

Then the entire world alters.

Everything is illuminated, hazy, like mists around a street lamp. People have halos, spirit objects spin like Ezekiel's wheel. The roof becomes a prism of color.

While wearing Woody as a sweatshirt, I ascend through a rainbow of color into cooler, non-chlorinated air. Before I awake, I feel a breeze, and can finally relax. (Indoor swimming pools always make me claustrophobic and over-heated.)





Ascension
Salvadore Dali

I don't actually wake up. Once the relief of that cooling breeze calms me, I slip into another, unrelated dream.

But I retain a sense of both embrace and release, and am happily oblivious to the paradox.

There is a comfort knowing the gap between child and parent, formed during the teenage years, often diminishes as the child grows into adulthood. Like an old sweatshirt, shared time becomes relaxed when judgments, identity and pride are no longer impediments.

This is the most perplexing dream of the entire collection. Woody is my most inscrutable son, so it figures. But when he says "Dad," everything is right in the world. All loss falls away. Funny, what gifts children can still give, even when they are unaware.

I taught him how to play Civilization when he was 6. We built worlds together. He built many more on his own. Perhaps, in this dream, boundaries crumbled, beyond the game.



4

Sarah is on my lap. She can't be more than two and a half years old. We're in the antique wooden rocking chair. I'm looking through a scrapbook, crying. I need to find a hanky.

When I stand up, I realize I have a cast on my left leg, all the way to the hip.* I'm unable to walk and hold Sarah at the same time. Even though she's old enough to stand, she clings to me and won't let me put her down. If I try to hop across the room, I will undoubtedly jostle her head and neck to the breaking point, if I don't simply stumbled and toss her across the floor first. I raise my chin to keep the snot from dripping. The tickle in my nose is barbaric, arachnophobic (the fear of spiders nesting in sinuses and other scary places). I sit back down and snuff violently (in place of sighing pitifully).

When I sit back down, there is a *change of perspective: I'm an infant held in the arms*



*of my sister, Toni.** She's four years old, the age she'd be when I was an infant, yet she's the size of an adult; I'm infant size, yet in my adult form. But I'm not really me. To the Dream Eye

* In my dreams with Sarah, when she's very young, I often have a cast on my leg. In *Real Life*, I tore my achilles tendon when she was a few months old and had a very difficult time caring for her, since I was a stay-at-home dad and was the one who was taking care of her all day. We ended up using a daycare service 3-4 days a week. In dreams, I've had a cast on my leg even when she's been as old as 8.

* The frame around this photo was purchased by Sarah when she was a little girl. She picked the frame out herself, with its silver stars and velvet surface, and placed in it a photo of us sitting in a rocking chair. It was the first gift she sent me after my divorce from her mother. Just before I received it, I'd unearthed a long lost photo of my sister holding me - the one you see above - and had been searching for a frame. I loved this frame and replaced the photo of me holding Sarah with the photo of Toni holding me... after a great deal of emotional struggle. (I still am more than ambivalent over this action.) I placed the initial photo Sarah had chosen in an album. Although I asked her permission and she said okay; she was only 10 years old, what else could she have said?

that is watching from above, I'm Sarah. I can't really focus on myself, literally, and so it's hard to tell. But the feeling is undeniable.

We're in the rocking chair by the piano. Toni sets 'me' on the piano bench and I begin to play. Tiny fingers fly flawlessly over perfectly responsive keys. The music is excellent.

As the music fills me, *Toni is no longer present*, although there is a photo of her on the wall just to the side of the piano. Like a miniature cabaret singer, *Sarah is sitting on top of the spinet*, legs dangling like Shirley Temple, feet tapping the air in time to the music. There is a mirror over the piano - I can see Sarah from more than one angle. She seems to be wearing different clothes in her reflection, but I'm not quite sure.

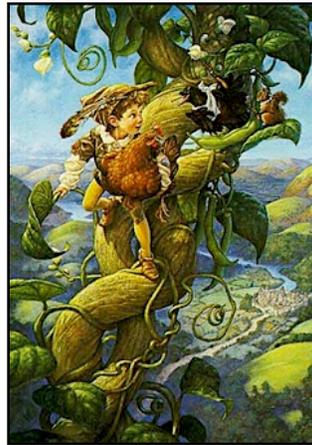
She wants to ask me questions. I don't stop playing. She wants to jump off but is up too high. I think she wants to get back into the rocking chair, into the position where we started of the dream. I stop playing and slide off the bench, no longer encumbered by a cast, still a miniature version of myself.

She makes ready to jump from her piano perch, coiling into a squat. I stand under her with my arms raised, ready to catch her. But she's twice my size.

She jumps. My eyes grow as large as the room. Either I will be crushed or Sarah will break her leg, or we'll both be knocked unconscious...

I wake up before she reaches my outstretched hands.

I'm filled with chagrin at myself, at my fear, my inability to catch her, at being unable to stop a tragic accident, at being unable to finish the story. But disappointment never fully registers. Instead, as always, I feel like Sarah has saved me from hurting myself, somehow, and that everything must've turned out alright. Or I would've known.



This dream came back to way. It was during the last weeks ingénue, the muse I was afraid to had moved to New York City, she I replied, "Yes, but I'll never leave my daughter, Sarah." The implication was, I suppose, that I'd never get a divorce, even though that isn't what I'd meant.

I believe, in retrospect, this afforded Stephanie cover: she could continue an open-ended romance without fear of messy home-wrecking implications. But after I moved to Manhattan, everything changed. The romance became more complicated than mere home-wrecking. The effects on me, after the initial euphoria, were more akin to soul-crushing self-immolation. (Too dramatic?) One afternoon, Stephanie said, "I thought you'd never leave Sarah," as if it was

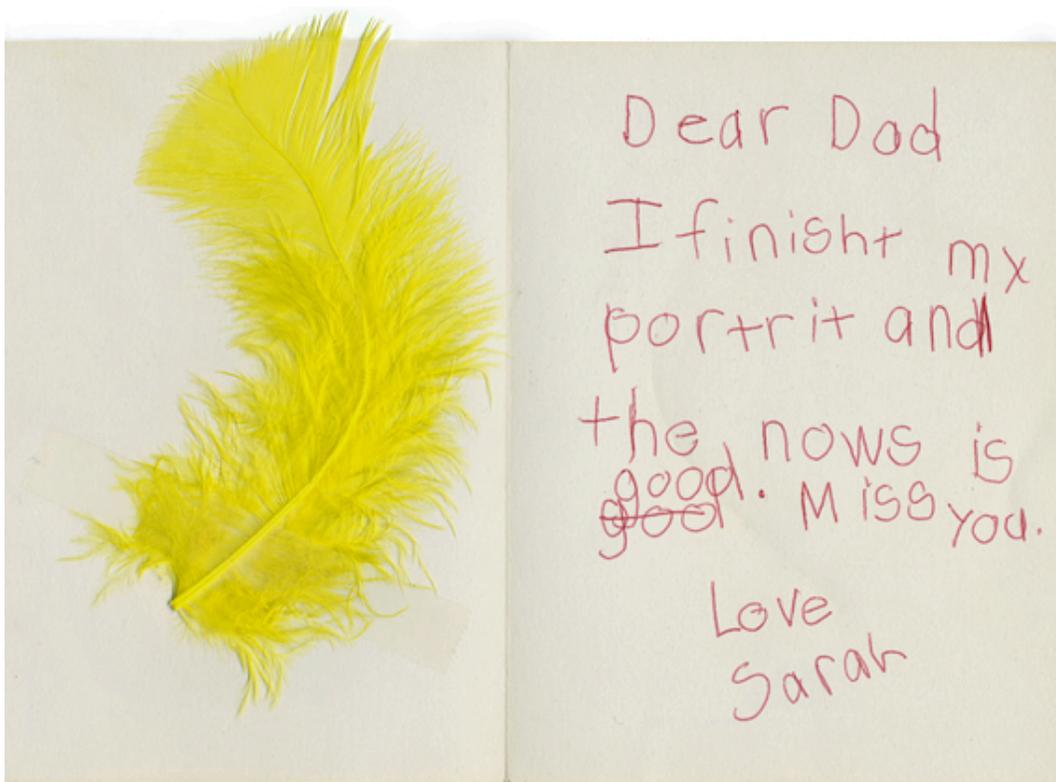
haunt me once in a very instructive of my affair with Stephanie, the imagine a future without. Before I asked me if I'd ever leave my wife.

somehow all my fault. Had I lied to her about never leaving my wife? I told Stephanie I loved her (as any self-respecting lover should; plus, it was the truth), but I also explained how Sarah, as an adult, will understand what has happened, will find strength in my quest for a joyful life, for fulfillment, for a new start. What I really felt, however, was exhausted remorse. I'd betrayed my daughter...for *this*? And yet, I knew no other way forward, no other path than digging deeper until I could find my way to the other side. I only hoped that once I'd built a new life, some day, Sarah would be proud. Of me. Proud that I had had the courage to step into this hole from which I knew it would be so difficult to escape, because I thought it would be worth it, because it seemed right and true, and that, at least, for me, it was what I had to do. As it turned out, Stephanie had not been a destination; rather, she became a catalyst. She helped me climb down the beanstalk into a fertile new valley, inadvertently.

I hoped that someday my journey might give Sarah courage, when she needed to defeat her own sense of vertigo.

Later that night, waiting next to Stephanie as she listened, in headphones, to my latest song demo, I thought of Sarah teetering on the top of that dream piano, wanting to jump. I recalled how, in the dream, I had been afraid of her crushing me, since I was so small. But we cannot crush each other with the weight of our dreams, our loves, our journeys, our desire to jump. By embracing this weight, we are bestowed an infinite lightness of being. A sense of meaningfulness. (Written into the cliff: **YOU SHALL KNOW OUR VELOCITY.**)

After Stephanie took off the headphones, she chose her words of critique and grinned in a way that displayed an adolescent kind of self-centered carelessness. In an instant, I knew our relationship would never be what I had hoped. She had no ghosts on her back, no weight in her arms. The wrong kind of courage. She framed no moments of endless love, unlike my daughter.



9. SUZANNE'S RECURRING CHILDHOOD DREAM

This is a dream Suzanne related to me, her most frequently recurring childhood dream. Although she has not had this dream in 35 years, she remembers it with precise and vivid detail.

"I am trying to catch up with my father and brother. They're walking down the hill, down Hunt Street, past Witch Lane. They're walking rather fast, too fast. I hurry to the corner of Steepletop, wanting to run but I'm only able to walk quickly... and it's not quick enough. When I finally turn the corner, I've lost them. They're out of sight.

"I climb Steepletop, a very hilly, curved, narrow road that forms a crest along the backside of the Rowayton Church property. Looming houses up along the ridge form a kind of cliff along the right side of the street. At one of the houses, a door opens. I approach. Maybe the old woman who appears knows which way Father and Gregory have gone. She looks remarkably like my Hungarian grandmother. But... scarier."

In real life, Suzanne was not afraid of her Hungarian grandmother who, incidentally, lived directly across the street (on Hunt Street). But she wasn't entirely comfortable with her, either. The small yet powerful personality did not speak a word of English, kept chickens (which ran hither and yon and often needed catching), and rarely ventured beyond the boundaries of her yard. A few years before Suzanne was born, Grandma Lukacs (pronounced LOO-cosh) gave the property where Suzanne and I now live as a wedding gift to Mary and Lambert DelTufo, her daughter and son-in-law. Although Grandma Lukacs never once stepped foot in her daughter's home (young people need their privacy, after all), her granddaughter Suzanne often visited from across the street, usually to do chores. But because of the language barrier and a hereditary reticence to pry (or even appear overly curious), Suzanne never really got to know the woman.

Unlike her grandmother, with whom Suzanne was familiar yet awkwardly nervous, the *old woman* in her dream was *terrifying*.

"I rush back home, relieved that I can now actually run but worried that I won't be able to run fast enough. The old woman is walking slowly, like an old woman (stiffly, deliberately), yet each of her strides are three of my steps. I'm running as fast as I can yet she is still gaining on me. Her eyes are glowing like two night lights, ominous and silent.

"I get to the house first, run up the driveway and around back, so that she can't see me enter, and dash in through the back door, locking it behind me. It's always the same, every time I have the dream. Each scene, each movement, each emotion.

"I hide under the Harvest Table (a long wooden dining room table made of blonde pine, long enough to seat 8 people; sturdy early American design). From under the table, I can hear outside. She is stronger now, in my mind. I know the old woman will be able to break through the locked door.

“Just as she rips open the door (with the strength of King Kong) - and as I watch, paralyzed, cowering under the table - a little *Martian flying saucer* crashes through the ceiling. Continuing down, it crashes straight through the Harvest Table and lands right next to me. *Out come little green Martian men with little tiny ray guns.* I have no fear of them. I know they haven’t come to hurt me.

“There are half a dozen, maybe more. They pore out of the ship. They’re about three inches tall, like toy soldiers. ‘Don’t worry,’ they say to me, referring to the Old Woman, ‘we’ll take care of it.’

“The old woman is already inside but she doesn’t know where I am yet. Her eyes are glowing stronger than ever. She now has the strength of a dozen men, superpower strength.

“The little Martians zap her with their little ray guns. They obliterate her. She lights up like a ferris wheel in the fog and disintegrates. Vanishes. Killed, leaving nothing.

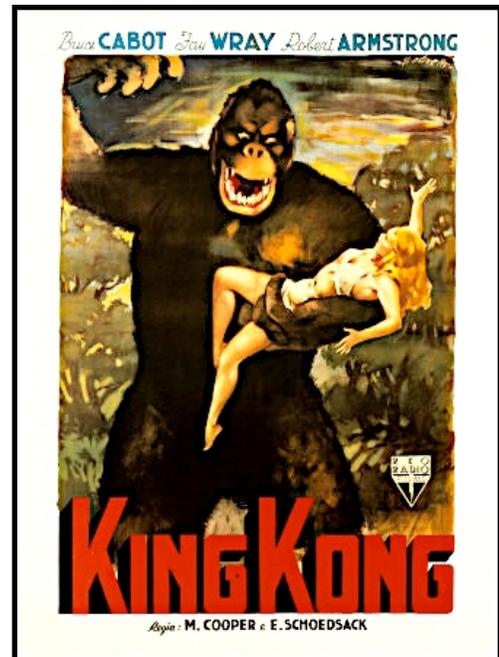
“I’m stunned. I consider saying *thank you.*

“They are happy little people, happy little green men. They don’t really need my gratitude.

“The Martians pile back into their ship faster than they piled out. Their ship rises up through the broken Table, up through the ceiling. As it rises, *everything is put back right*, mended, like a tape running in reverse. I look at the back door and it, too, is the way it always was: no damage, no old woman. A sunny day just beyond. As if none of this has happened.

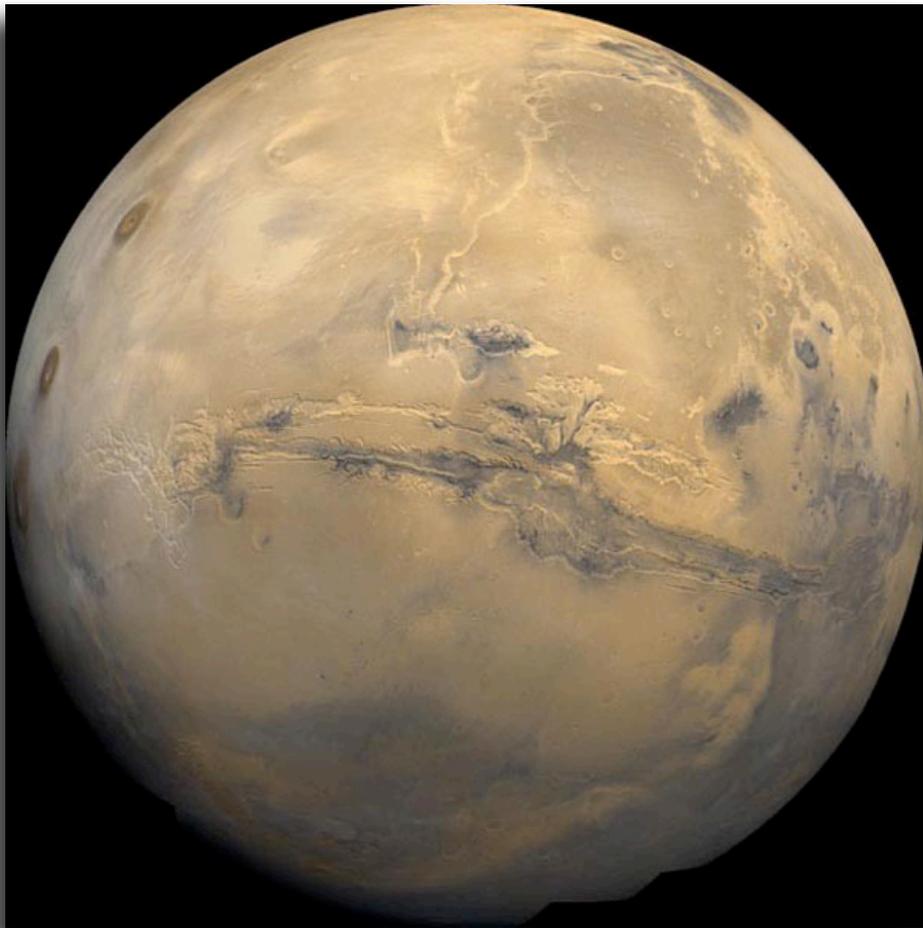
“And I wake up.

“If I had this dream once, I had it a thousand times.”



I ask Suzanne if, like in a few of my recurring dreams, she had a memory of what was about to happen while dreaming, a *dream déjà vu* that enabled her to alter anything in subsequent versions.

She told me that everything in the dream always happened exactly the same. The only change, after she'd dreamt the same thing at least 50 times, was that once she got to her hiding place under the Harvest Table, she came to *know* something was going to happen that would save her. Not in the "this has happened before" sort of way, but as a *certainty* that something was about to happen because it was *supposed* to happen. So she would wait, no longer terrified, in almost gleeful anticipation, not knowing it would be Martians, but knowing it would be *something good*. And afterwards, when she'd wake up and remember that she'd had this dream so many times before, she would love those happy little green men all the more, those adorable sci-fi cavalry guys who'd scrambled out of their miniature flying saucer, telling her, "Don't worry. We'll take care of everything."



10. TOBIN'S RECURRING CHILDHOOD DREAMS

(Spaceships, Revolution, and a Yellow Bullwinkle Head chasing Father from the room)

It's said that we have about 25,000 dreams during our childhood. Most are recurring nightmares.

Dreaming begins in the womb. Fetal monitoring of REM sleep suggests that vivid dreams are frequent. One wonders what fetal dreams are like.

Newborns no longer float in amniotic fluid. But they spend most of their first days (if not months) swimming in dreams. Fifty percent of sleep in full-term newborns and up to 80% of sleep in premature infants is devoted to REM dreaming. Older children dream around 25% of



their sleep time. For the average adult, sleep time spent in dreams lowers to 20%. Dreams come in short bursts, usually lasting no more than 6 minutes, often much less, even though we may feel like we've been dreaming for hours on end.

Average adults remember very few of their childhood dreams. Perhaps this is because their parents disparaged their importance as a way of diminishing their emotional impact. ("Calm down, dear, it was just a dream.") Perhaps it's because of a deeper and more personal fear we have of dreams themselves, of the creative chaos, the unrepressed world wherein dreams are born.

My mother refused to let any of us discuss dreams, especially at the breakfast table (which would have been the best place to share them). Dreams made her very uncomfortable,

even happy dreams. “They confuse me,” she would say, averting her eyes. “I don’t like the way I act in my dreams. They have no connection to the real world.”

What sort of dark world lived inside of this otherwise sweet, humble, unassuming lady?

My father stated unequivocally, “I never dream.” And that was that. If dreaming had been of any importance, my father would have surely dreamed. Since he didn’t, well, they certainly were not worthy of table discussion.

“Everyone dreams,” I ventured one morning, repeating an assertion I’d heard, one I believed wholeheartedly.

“Not I,” Dad replied. Then, after some thought (we always had to wait to make sure Dad was finished speaking, as to not be caught interrupting him, which, at the dinner table, was sometimes quite a tricky estimate) and another sip of coffee, he continued, “Or, if I do, I never remember them.”

“Just as well,” Mom said, nearly blushing.

“I had a really interesting one last night,” I ventured, hoping to sway them with sheer enthusiasm.

“Don’t tell me any dreams,” Mom intervened, covering her ears. “Dreams make me feel...” she could never find the proper word for negative emotions, “I just don’t like the way they make me feel.”

And then she would shudder.

And then Dad would wind up a timer with ominous deliberateness to precisely 3 minutes and place it in front of me, letting me know how much time I had left to finish my soft boiled eggs before I had to catch the bus.

To this day I can barely swallow soft boiled eggs.

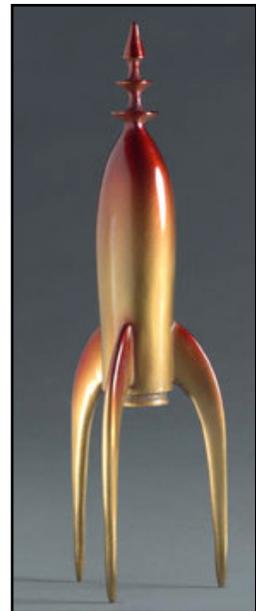


The first dream I remember having (I was 4 or 5 years old) involved 3 spaceships, the old 1950s kind that stand on end, always ready to launch. The image was probably derived from my brother Tim’s comic books that littered our shared bedroom in colorful and alluring fashion. (He always seemed to revel in living like a bachelor. I recall this when I stayed with him for a weekend at his college 10 years later.)

One of the ships, the one in the middle, is particularly impressive. Taller, more ornate. Streaks of silver and red against a deep purple metallic glow. Beautifully curved mauve fins (wings) form an elegant tripod. *The scene is always night, deep night*, past-bedtime night. *I’m somewhere just off the launching pad, crouched, hiding*, trying to figure out how to make my way onboard undetected.

Steam vents. Spotlights slide across the patterned launch pad to the cliffs just beyond. A slight vibration animates everything.

There is unimaginable anxiety built into the mood of the dream: *if I don’t get on board, something tragic will occur*. I can’t ask anyone for help. I have no idea who is on the wrong side, who might betray me. I must remain unseen until safely aboard. Luckily, it’s late and only a few



of the milling guards and fellow scientists are paying attention.

I have to decide to make a run for it, risking getting caught or becoming engulfed in flames as the engines ignite. For most of the dream, I remain peering out from behind a line of 55-gallon drums.

I was to have this dream many more times. The tall rocket ships were always waiting on a brightly lighted launch pad. But the rest was never exactly the same, not your classic recurring dream. Sometimes I would make it to the ship, climb the long metal ladder, only to find the hatch door locked or too difficult for me to open. Sometimes I would open the hatch and the warm yellow light that would pour out gave me away as the shouts from alerted guards woke me up, ending the adventure. I loved the times I would make it inside. All the sounds would change. The echoes and sharp clanging, the whistles of venting steam and the gruff voices of workmen would fall away, replaced by soft, dead-space ambience. A womb-like cockpit. Calm. Isolation. A technological oasis. By the time I stood in front of the impressive windshield, able to view the frantic scene below, I'd feel beyond safe: in unapproachable control.

The first time I have the dream, however, *I don't make it all the way to the cockpit.* But they don't catch me, either! I serpentine my way past the guards with fabulous bursts of speed and skulking dexterity. Able to hide among the shadows, *I make my way into the cliffs beyond.* Presumably, I start a **revolution**, or intend to... one that will most certainly end in taking over (liberating?) those three beautiful space crafts, as well as the entire scientific project that created them.

An interesting first dream for a little kid, heh? (A revolutionary from birth?)

This evolving rocket ship adventure may be the earliest dream I can recall, but it's not the one that made the biggest impression. It did, however, set a pattern for the majority of my childhood dreams: **espionage**.

(On a related note, my favorite childhood TV show was THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. ...until STAR TREK, that is.)



I had a recurring nightmare that had far more impact on me than the Spaceship Dream. I only had it about 3 or 4 times, but its unsettling residue lasted years:

I am about five years old, maybe four. I am sitting on the couch in our Ashland (WI) home, my feet buried cozily under a blanket (as if I am staying home from school because I'm sick, even though I'm not sick in the dream and may even be younger than school age). I might be wearing pajamas.

My father is home, even though I'm almost certain it is a work day. He sits across the room reading the newspaper, as if he is alone.

Mom is busy cleaning a row of large windows that face the back yard. After cleaning each window, instead of closing it, she leaves it open, wanting to air out the room. This is uncharacteristic of her, since she never liked drafts, fans, or even air conditioning. I want to complain, to suggest that bees might get in the house, or flies, or mosquitoes, but either no one hears me or my mouth doesn't actually move.

Just then a large yellow *Bullwinkle the Moose* head floats in through an opened window, frightening me as if it were a giant attack bumble bee. I pull the blanket up to my neck. (It doesn't occur to me to run.)

I glance desperately toward Dad, expecting him to come to the rescue, but he is *more frightened than I!*



He screams, runs around the room holding his newspaper over his head and flees out the front door.

The *head* floats very slowly, not changing its expression, like a moose size Macy's Day Parade balloon. Inscrutable. All the more frightening.

Mom comes to the rescue!

Grabbing the broom, she chases it, corrals it, herds it back toward the open windows, batting it with utter confidence. A complete contrast to my terrified, cowardly Dad.

Once she beats the floating moose head back out the window, she turns to me, smiling solicitously, as if I was never in any danger. (!) She shuts the windows and begins dusting the mantelpiece.

I exhale, innocently believing that she'll never leave the windows open again.

This was the worst recurring nightmare I can recall.

One day, after my mother remarked (embarrassedly) that last night she'd had a dream she would *never be able to share with anyone*, she drew a deep breath and asked if I ever had dreams that stuck for long periods. I told her my YELLOW BULLWINKLE MOOSEHEAD DREAM, including all the parts about Dad. I think I was about 9 or 10 when I told her. She chortled, exclaiming, "Your father would *never* run from the room! That's so funny. I wonder why you reversed our roles like that?" (I merely smiled broadly in response, since the dream was too haunting to laugh about.) She carefully added, "Maybe you shouldn't share this with your father." And after more thought, "That's why I don't talk about my dreams..."

Dreams can seem so scary when you're having them yet so ridiculous when explained to others.

When I told Suzanne the dream, she thought it made perfect sense.

"Your mother was always the one who protected you, listened to you, knew what you needed."

She's right.

As I look back, what had been a nightmare about Dad running from the room as I hid under a blanket, turned into a testimony to my mother's heroic love.

"She'd do anything for you," Suzanne concluded.

Yes. That, I always knew.

Although Mom missed the chance to make me feel proud of my creative powers as they pertained to the whimsy and originality of my dreams, she made up for that later by becoming my NUMBER ONE FAN.

Her reluctance to divulge the secrets of her dreams gave them mystery. The private life of her subconscious was a fascination. Dreams, I imagined, were (at the very least) unpredictable, explosive in their implications, temptations beyond rational defense. Puzzles to solve. Taboos to scrutinize within the fathomless caves of the mind, caves that were deeper than either of my parents cared to explore.



11. THE DREAM IN WHICH IT IS RAINING WORDS

It is fairly rare nowadays for me to dream of myself as a kid. I no longer dream I arrive at school having forgotten to study for the Big Test. Or that as student counsel president I decree Wednesdays *No Shirts for Girls Day*. Or that my father is taking me goose hunting and all I have in my hand is a fishing pole. (I've dreamed all those things.) However, in early 2008...

While my 85 year old Dad was struggling with (against?) his tracheal breathing device in the IUC, I hovered at his side every day, interpreting every panicked look, every gesture of his swollen hands and mottled forehead, every mute twitch of his parched lips. I was connected with an evolved type of ESP: *Extreme Son Perceptivity*. He couldn't talk because his windpipe had been rerouted into a machine. It plunged deep into his body at the base of his neck, leaving his mouth free yet silent. He'd stopped breathing earlier, exhausted from the weight of severe pneumonia and other post-surgical traumas. The machine was giving him time to recover. Drugs kept him from fighting too hard. They didn't keep him from being terrified. That was my job.

Later that evening, after finally falling asleep at my father's house (before returning to the hospital as early as I could), I found myself in a child's body:



I stand like The Little Prince on a billowy cliff as words rain down all around me. The words glow with magical beauty, multi-colored against an almost black computer screen sky. Some have tails like comets. Most have soft edges. Many interlock as in a crossword puzzle. Their fluorescence is enough to cast shadows, a brilliant and literate *aurora borealis*.

I put my hands out over the cliff. **Words** fall into my palms, glyph-flakes melting, soaking my skin. My hands flicker ever so slightly from the residue.

Across the wide space before me is another cliff. Another person stands on it, older than I but not adult, either. He's trying to lasso the words with a rope woven from dried grass. He's failing miserably. After expending a great deal of energy, he gives up. He refuses to look my way even though I am ready to wave (cheerfully) if he does.

Although the words falling through the sky are beautifully silent, I hear **voices** in my head and imagine them speaking as a result of what is all around me:

If the Word is God, speak and you will know.

Actually, what I hear is "*Glux vrxthrona mbrantiu vronkanh...*" Gibberish. But my mind magically **translates** (if I'm able to relax enough to let it).

I expect the words to coalesce into shapes, perhaps a mythic Rosetta Stone or a numbered tablet, but they remain only a collection of letters.

Art will be our Ark

This is spoken in my head as if from a happy domesticated animal, perhaps a dog. Other animals speak other words, most of which I can't quite grasp. Perhaps I am the ark (full of voices, two by two) and all the world is an ocean of symbols yet unspoken.

A symphony of animal yelps and purrs and other natural sounds envelope me. Some long forgotten language? My mind interprets, but I doubt whether it is a faithful translation, and, thus, my thoughts are lost. The words themselves, the physical things streaming down all around me, are alive, independent, **living spirits**. I lift my chin and let the letters fall onto my tongue.

Isolation is the artist's best friend

says a voice like an otter, confident, playful. A fragment I'm able to catch. Am I remembering lines from books I've read? Everything *seems* so original, pristine, honest. (All this felt much more profound while it was happening. So it goes.)

Then, from across the chasm, from the far cliff,

*Everyone stands empty.
That is the genius of creation.*

A voice like an elder, full of echoes.

I wonder if I'm supposed to call back into the chasm, wait for a reply.

But I have no need to call out, no impetus, no compulsion. As if I am already known. (You know how artists have a need to express? To be known, inside out? This is what I no longer felt.)

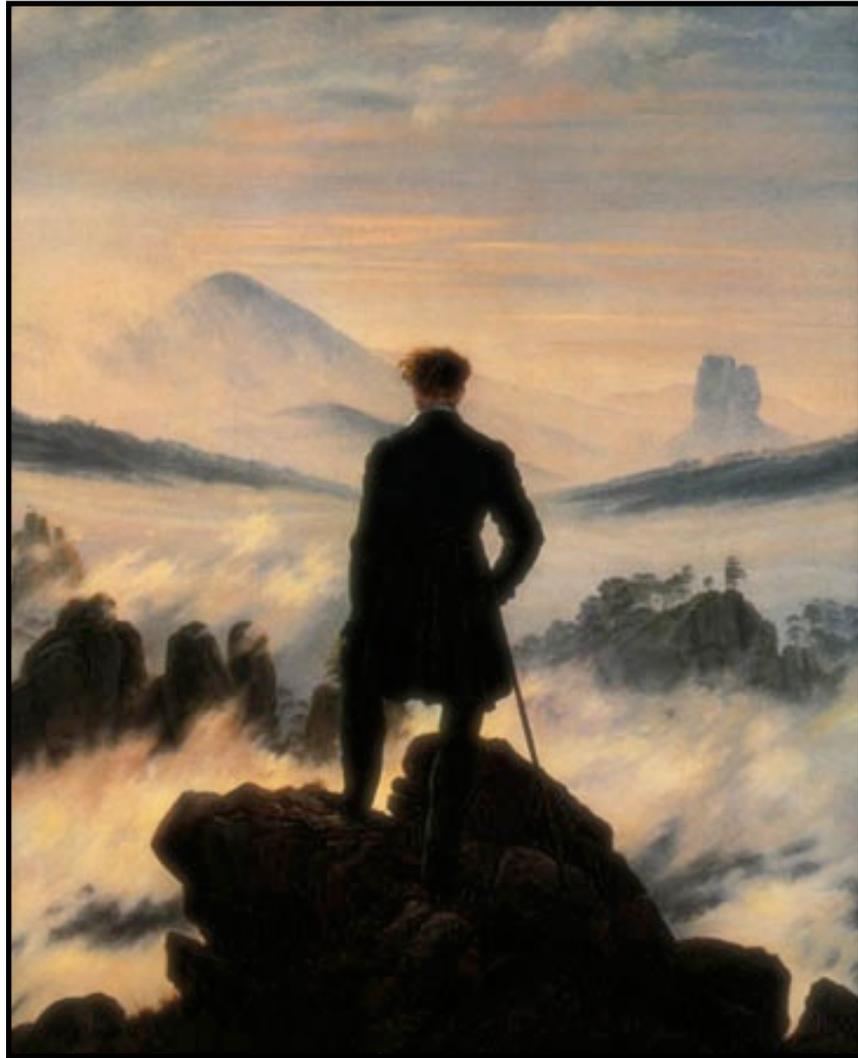
My lack of need (perhaps of ambition?) dawns on me. It's a bit like growing up in one startling, revelatory moment. I see my father holding my face in his hands, feel his kiss, his apology. Being held as an equal. There is no chasm, not in this new world of partners. I could walk out from the cliff and simply cross to the other side... My feet would find the invisible bridge and I would not fall.



If there is an echo, the elder's words hang motionless like a reflection on water, a rippling projection that stands steady (as long as I stand steady). Only my thoughts look back at me.



Thinking on it, I have no idea which was me and which was the other shape atop that other cliff.



The Wanderer Above The Mists
Caspar David Friedrich

12. THE DREAM AFTER MY FATHER DIED

I am in a dark room in an older house. A complex of Picasso blues define an angled hallway that opens up into a high ceiling foyer. The pale moonlight that arcs in from long narrow windows is hard to distinguish from the wood frame around the doorway or the hand carved moldings that bracket the walls. It is very still.

I am aware of others sleeping near me, on a couch and perhaps behind the two chairs facing one another on the oriental rug. My brothers, Greg and Tim, rest there, although I can't see them. Their wives and kids nestle in multiple bedrooms beyond the periphery.

I'm slumped into a high-backed recliner, very tired but happy to be awake, enjoying the stillness, the near silence, the sense of being alone with my thoughts in a room that had a short while ago seemed over-crowded. From the feel of the place, I can't tell whether it's supposed to be my house, Dad's, one of my brother's, or a crowded waiting room in a nursing home.

The house reminds me of the large home in which I lived while going to school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a converted Victorian mansion on Pinckney Street. (Four of us rented the ground floor. It was not unusual to wake up in the morning to guests asleep on the sofa or under the kitchen table. That old home could never seem crowded, never over-burdened by the temporary nature of mere college waifs. It had too much history, too many remembered souls of greater importance.)

My father is the only one with a proper bed. A shaft of brighter moonlight illuminates one portion of his stark white sheets, the only section of the bed visible to me from where I'm sitting. Dad's head is beyond the archway that leads to the porch. Perhaps he's nearly pushed out of the house because there are so many guests. I can't see him, but I can hear him, and that's how I keep my vigil. Not by his normal bone-rattling snores, but a more fragile throat click, something he just began doing these last few evenings. To hear his labored breathing is a worry; to hear nothing is an even greater worry.

My back aches. I refuse to recline the chair, wanting to stay awake. The wood slats making up the chair's back (dark cherry like polished agate) push against me, making me aware of what little exercise I've gotten recently. The pain catches my own breathing.

As I begin to examine which muscles hurt the most, a *woman and child* walk in from the foyer. (I hadn't heard the front door. Perhaps Dad's bed is propping it open?)

They walk in single file with focused expressions and economy of purpose. I get the feeling they've done this before (when other strangers filled the room) and will do it again in the future. They pay me no attention whatsoever.

As they approach the far wall, a secret door opens (presumably by magic - or molecular affinity). A child's door, tiny, delicate. Light spills out, silhouetting them, casting a golden hue, unlike anything else in the silver blue-grey room. The *woman* passes through the doorway, becoming smaller than the child as she does so. The *child* follows, shutting the door with one unseen peak over his shoulder.

No one else has noticed.

The room is even quieter than before.

Too quiet.

As I get up (feeling every muscle in my hips and lower back), I already know that Dad is paralyzed, perhaps dying.

As if a **SILENT ALARM** has awakened everyone, my brothers stream past me, out the front door, panicked and flustered and bleary-eyed. They need to get to the hospital. I hear them search for keys under a parked car, hail a taxi, give conflicting orders. I imagine a stream of clowns piling into a PT Cruiser, as fast and disorganized as Keystone cops. Car doors slam and tires screech. By the time I get to the porch, everyone is gone.

Except Dad. He is lying in a fetal position on the porch. In their rush, my brothers forgot him. Too weak to speak, perhaps too weak to open his eyes, he's shivering with cold. While we wait for the ambulance (that never comes), I lay across him, cuddling his back, one arm and one leg draped over his exposed body, careful not to add too much weight to his laboring lungs.

The cold from his body seeps into me. He calms and warms up a bit.

Dad is so small in my arms. So much weight lost, so much of everything.

As we lie there on the porch, I noticed the *woman and child* walk past again, leaving the old house, pale and otherworldly. They have to step over us to get to the steps. They levitate as they walk, effortlessly. She is heavy, like a farm wife, dressed in a flowered dress, thick coarse hair in a bun, face inscrutable and alien. The boy is more human, like Jackie Coogan in THE KID (which, interestingly, came out in 1921, the year my father was born). I can tell he finds it very hard not to look at me, not to be swayed by his surroundings. There is something about him that is very much like myself (or, like my father as a youth). These are not figments, not dreamed representations, not unsleeping ghosts. They are real beings with full lives; they must get back to them.

When they reach the street, a slit opens in the air, like the opening of a large envelope, a passage to another dimension (I presume). A flat navy blue is exposed within, soft and infinite. As they pass through, a lightning white flash blinds, some sort of energy beyond my comprehension. Then the envelope closes.

I can feel a slight breeze. I imagine crickets. Only I have seen their passing, these *beings*. Nothing else in the night has been a witness.

Something in the dream shifts:

I'm sitting up, perhaps on a porch chair. It's no longer the middle of the night. I get the feeling it is sometime earlier, although I haven't forgotten anything by traveling backward in time. Nothing is going to be relived, not even that which is repeated.

I reach into my pocket and take out a slip of paper. It's folded once. (We'd been playing a game. The slip of paper is something from the game we'd been playing.)

[In Real Life, this game had been played a year earlier, when my father was living with Suzanne and me, recovering (as much as he could) from dementia and post-heart surgery trauma. It was a guessing game, in which everyone would be asked a question, and then we'd write down our answers, secretly, on a slip of paper, hand them in, and as one person read them aloud, we'd

guess who gave each answer. Whoever guessed correctly most often, won. Some of the questions were whimsical (“If you could have one super power, what would it be?”) Some were rather difficult (“What one purchase do you regret more than any other?”) Some took quite a bit of thought (“If you could invite one person to dinner, living or dead, who would it be?”) We used the game as a catalyst for conversation and often never bothered keeping score.

One time, the question was: What was your greatest creation, the best thing you ever made?

I remember writing *Creature* on my slip of paper. “That was my most complex musical,” I explained, “the music I’m most proud of.” “I would’ve said ‘Runners In A Dream,’” Suzanne told me later, referring to my Holocaust musical. “So personal. So honest and real. Full of magic. Such a different way of telling that story.” Had I written down the wrong thing?

Suzanne had written: *The purple outfit I made for myself for my 8th grade talent show.* “I sang ‘Bill’ by the Fifth Dimension and looked great in that outfit,” she told us. “I made the whole thing by myself.”

I can’t recall what anyone else answered, except Dad...

His slip of paper framed one word:

Tobin

His greatest creation was *me*.

When his answer was read aloud, he offered no explanation. He simply smiled.

Everyone in the room knew who’d written it.]

When I unfold the slip of paper (in my dream pocket), I recall playing the game earlier, and how ordinary and vain my answer had sounded in comparison to Dad’s. I’m glad for this second chance at answering. Through the dim light (it’s earlier morning now, everything is peach-tinged, red-golden, warm and alive), I show everyone what is my *real* greatest creation:

Dad

It’s not that I made my father. It’s not even that I re-made my father. But I did give him years of life he never would have had. And so much joy. It felt like something made, like certain special days feel “made,” not mere occurrences or collections of occurrences. My father’s life was a *made* life. And part of it, part of him, was me. This I know.

Also: I love him so much, shared so many things... who he is, *in my eyes*, is something completely different than who he is anywhere else. And this difference, it is something I helped make happen. This is not mere perspective, I believe, but a proprietary sense of shared transcendence (no matter how oxymoronic that sounds).

From how his eyes look back at me, I know he feels the same.

There is something about the way parents look at you that is unlike anything else. They are the only people who, no matter what your age, see you as infants, without blemish. Innocent,

a manifestation of limitless potential, an embodiment of hope. When they look at you like that, the burden of years falls away. All the baggage of regret disappears. Or, at least, we gain a sense of redemption. When those mirror eyes are no longer there to cleanse, it's hard to feel the same about who we are. Hard to find a similar kind of baptism.

Folding up the paper, I look at the spot Dad had been lying, the empty porch. There's nothing lonely about the emptiness. Only a sense of rightness. Of layers. Of magic.

I don't know who that woman and boy were, walking through my dream. I don't know what they represented, what they signified, what they were trying to tell me. (Or if I mattered to them at all.) It's interesting how the appearance of characters or events beyond intellectual understanding make a dream more compelling.

Meaning is an emotional expression, especially when it comes to dreams. I have grown comfortable with that. If something in my dream summons me to listen, to watch more closely, to remember more intently, then that is what I do.

