

## Tell Me You're Not Dreaming

One morning, I awoke and realized that I had dreamt someone else's dreams. It was not a sudden revelation. Instead, it was a gradual discovery, like the recognition of guilt that sometimes dawns on us in adulthood when we recall a long repressed transgression committed as a child—perhaps the stirrings of shame associated with sexual play with a cousin or the theft of mother's money from a bedroom drawer.

The first sign that something was amiss was that the face in the dream was not my own. As I reconstructed the images from the prior night over my morning coffee, I had the distinct impression of a young woman sitting by a lake. This in itself was not extraordinary. My dreams are often peopled by all kinds of acquaintances and strangers. But what made this woman unusual was that *she* was experiencing the dream lake with its little park and its sparkling waters, not me. Unlike some dreams, where I might be viewing the world through the eyes of an older self or a dog self, my eyes were not in the dream at all. I was entirely outside, watching the scene as a voyeur might observe a couple making love through a parted curtain.

As she dreamed about her lake, I knew that I was intruding on a very private world, but it was not in my power to break off the vision. Despite the pleasant setting, she was crying, her tears falling as sapphires into the clear water. She dreamed that she reached into the lake to retrieve the gems, but a large fish swam up from the depths and took up the sapphires in its gaping, carp-like mouth.

This bizarre detail sparked my second revelation: I was also privileged to her emotions. I felt her indignation rising, since she intended to give the jewels to someone named Robert. As she struggled to gather the sapphire tears before the fish could swallow them, she slipped on the muddy bank and plunged head first into the waters. Then I was filled with her terror as her sodden clothes pulled her down into the grasping tendrils of eel-like reeds which held her fast to the bottom.

Then she awoke, apparently, because the dream ended, but I continued sleeping undisturbed until daylight. I only recalled the images later because a chance view of the waving aquatic grass in my fish tank triggered an association with the green tentacles in the dream.

I tried to pass it off as an odd anomaly in my sleep patterns, but the following night, her dreams disturbed my rest again. This time, I saw the woman more clearly. She was at her lake again, rowing a green boat across its placid surface. She was young and pretty, and she wore a white skirt with a purple blouse. Her nose was a little large, but without detracting from her beauty, and she had a pear-shaped birthmark on her left temple.

As she rowed out to the center of the lake, the huge carp from the night before followed her. She seemed not to be disturbed by it, and even trailed her hand in the water in an effort to stroke it from time to time.

When she had rowed a good distance from the shore, she pulled in the oars and stretched out the length of the boat as if to take a nap. But this was merely a ruse. She was trying to entice the fish to leap in the boat with her. This I knew in the way one experiences hunger—as visceral knowledge that is felt rather than understood in any rational way.

Eventually, there was a wet slap of fins against the side of the boat, and then, with a great splashing, the fish was upon her and she was embracing it as a lover. Her wet dress clung to her legs and she let the fish slide between her thighs. Throughout this scene I remained strangely unmoved, while the dreamer was passionately aroused. Then, before her appetite was sated, the great fish wriggled free and flipped itself back into the water. Distraught, the woman lurched after it, capsizing the boat and sending herself headlong into the lake. The dream ended as before, with the reeds reaching up from the murky depths to hold her fast in their tendrils.

A third night of voyeuristic dreams followed, and then another. By the fifth night, I was immensely tired, and I realized that in being a spectator of someone else's dreams, I had forfeited my own. And without dreams, sleep is but the death of time, devoid of the rejuvenating effects of that daily resurrection we call waking. Nearing a state of emotional exhaustion, I drank heavily before bedtime, trying to sedate myself to the point of suppressing the visions. That night I had the most disturbing vision of all.

As I slept, the woman dreamed that she was held fast at the bottom of the lake by the muscular reeds. She struggled to get free, but the more she writhed, the more the grass entangled her. Her lungs burned for air, and panic set her heart to racing. Then a man with the body of a fish appeared through the murky waters, cheeks puffed with air. He approached her, lips pursed, intent upon exhaling into her mouth, but she was terrified and turned her face away. Then the man-fish became enraged and pressed his cold, scaly lips over her own. She opened her mouth to scream, and he forced a jet of bitter fluid down her throat, expanding her lungs until they exploded like a balloon, filling the water with her blood and his pearly breath.

This time I awoke with a start and, to my surprise, I had stained my sheets. Ragged and spent, I stumbled through my day, never entirely freeing myself of the vestiges of fear and violation engendered by the dream. By the late afternoon, I realized that I must find a way out of her dreams or risk sinking forever into a state of debilitating anxiety.

Needing space to think, I left my cramped little room for a walk about town. My legs carried me with a will of their own while my fatigued brain struggled to find a way to exorcise the woman.

Eventually, I found myself at the edge of the village where houses begin to give way to little farms and copses of willow and alder. Fatigued, I sat down against a tree and nodded in and out of wakefulness.

Through the trees I notice for the first time (for I have walked this lane before) that the leaves screen the viewer from a farm pond in the distance. This is nothing remarkable, since there are many little lakes in the area, so I am about to make my way home when something catches my eye. A small green rowboat is adrift on the surface.

I am alone on the lane, and a small footpath cuts across a pasture and enters the wood. Stepping on the path, I follow it through the field and into the shady grove. From behind a poplar, I observe on the other side of the pond a wide swath of manicured lawn that slopes down to the water. A woman has spread a blanket in the sun, and she lies sleeping, her eyes shielded under her left arm. To my astonishment, I see that she is wearing a white skirt and purple top. My heart begins to race and my hands go cold.

I am on the point of leaving, of rejecting this intrusion of the dream world on my reality, when it occurs to me that I may never sleep again unless I wake her. I step out of

the shadows and walk around the edge of the pond until I come to within feet of her blanket. She hasn't stirred, and I stand there for a moment, observing the intruder, wondering if she feels the least twinge of shame for forcing herself into my bed each night. The wind toys with her hair a little and brushes the skirt above her knee. I realize that a quiet urge first kindled by her fish dream has been growing in me, and I want to stroke her leg. I feel entitled to do so, considering the intimate nature of my knowledge of her.

Taking a step forward, a twig snaps beneath me feet and she jumps with a start. A breathless "oh!" escapes her lips, and she stares at me with frightened eyes. The pear birthmark flushes a little on her temple to the color of her aureole, which I can see darkly through her shirt. But she does not retreat. She does not scream. I can almost believe that she is expecting me. Slowly, quietly, as if to avoid frightening off a timid animal, I ease myself down on the blanket beside her.

It is the man who had forced himself into my dreams. The same denim shirt, the same unshaven face. He was not Robert. This is what surprises me the most. If any man were to disturb my sleep, it should have been my dead husband, but here I am—yet again—watching the dream of a total stranger.

His dream is different this time. For the first time he acknowledges me, even touches me. Or is it a real caress? After five sleepless nights, the thin membrane between waking and sleeping is so porous that I slip viscously between the two. Maybe he is actually here on this blanket, under the sun. If so, his powers of intrusion are greater than I imagined. I left my bed and escaped the house to be rid of him. And he's followed me here to my afternoon nap by the pond.

In prior dreams, he never took any notice of me. It was more like I was watching some masochistic rite of self-flagellation in which he forced himself to relive, again and again, the precise moment when he betrayed the woman he loved. I am troubled to discover that the sad longing with which he regarded that woman is now being directed towards me.

"Do I know you?" I ask.

"We've never met," he says. "But I've seen your face before."

"You're familiar to me," I admit, "but not because our paths have ever crossed."

"You saw me here," he asserts, looking out towards the water. "Watching you from those trees."

"No. It was not here," I object. "I saw you and a woman in a depressing little room. A place I've never been before with a fishbowl, a cot, and chair by a window."

"That's my apartment," he said, turning pale.

"Why did you think we had met here? I come to the pond daily, but I haven't seen anyone here for months."

"I saw you in that rowboat," he said, pointing. "And there was a man. You were crying about something, and the tears were for him. For Robert," he nods, as it comes back to him.

A rush of insight washes over me.

“I’ve been dreaming your dreams,” I say to the woman on the blanket beside me. She sits up and stares at me with a kind of vague recognition that suggests she has intuited this revelation.

“And I have dreamt yours,” she replied, finishing my thought. There was a dark foreboding in her eyes and for a moment she was lost in recollection. She averts her face to prevent me from divining in her pained expression the outcome of my own nightmare.

“Tell me,” I say, half afraid. “I must know.”

“It could be . . . dangerous,” she says. “Our dreams abandoned us to sleep with other dreamers. How else can you explain it?”

I shake my head, even as I sense the logic of what she says. “You were not meant to see these things,” I say. “They are my fears. My desires.”

“How could you do that to her?” she demanded. “She loved you.”

“What did you see?” I ask.

“How could you?” She is crying. Drops like gems roll down her cheeks.

“Tell me.”

There is a man whose dreams have interrupted my sleep for five nights, she says wiping her eyes. His face is yours, but it may not be you.

Up until now, his dreams always involved the same young woman and the same smothering apartment. The first night, nothing much happened. He dreamed he was sleeping and the woman came to the door. He rose and opened it for her without her needing to knock. It seemed as if they had been fighting, because her eyes were red and swollen. She came in, handed him a child wrapped tightly in a blanket, but he let it drop. Just before the baby hit the floor, it turned into a blue swallow and flew out the window.

On the second night, the woman came to the apartment again, but this time he dreamed that she placed the child on the chair and went to the cot. Lying down, she opened her robe, and letters spilled out over her naked body, some tumbling onto the floor before turning into birds and flitting off. Then she opened her arms and he fell into her embrace, pressing himself between her legs.

This is when I became certain that these were not my dreams. I could feel his desperate thrusting with a body that was not mine. Her breath was warm in his ear and she enfolded him in an embrace that became a tangle of ropy sheets. Soon a sad sigh escaped her lips and she realizes that, her attention diverted, the child had flown away. She rose and stepped out of the window after it, flying off as a swallow. He was left pressing himself impotently into the sagging cot.

Last night he had a nightmare, and now all I want to do is be free of him and his terrible visions. He dreamed of the little room again, and of the woman and child. But this time, she came and sat on the cot with a bundle in her arms while he turned away and looked out the window. The woman began pulling back the folds of the blanket in order to expose the child’s face, but the bundle contained only letters, all signed in his hand. Desperate to find the child, the woman began frantically ripping open the letters. In the first envelope was a black beetle that scrambled out on her hand. Each successive envelope she opened contained a slick, black beetle, and soon the cot was boiling with them.

The man, who had been maintaining a stubborn vigil at the window, is forced from his indifference by the clicking of a thousand scuttling legs. Overcome with horror and disgust, he pushed the woman away from the cot and began crushing the bugs with

his fists. Crying out in dismay, the woman threw herself over the oily insects. Angered by her concern for such vermin, the man dreamt that he reached down to pull her up by the robe, but as he tugged, the clothing fell away, revealing only hair and hide—the rest having been consumed by the ravenous beetles.

Then a dark shadow fell over the room. The man looked to the window and noticed that the sun had been blotted out by a flock of swallows which burst through the window in a squawking mob. Staggering back, he watched helplessly as the birds devoured the beetles in seconds before flying out the open door. Crushed by loneliness and guilt, the man returned to the cot and stretched out upon the leathery skin of his lover.

The man in the denim shirt stares off over the pond for a while in silence. He is shaken, but purged—like one who embraces his guilt when judged, happy that he can finally begin serving his sentence.

“Now, what about my dreams?” I ask. “What did you see? What have I been dreaming?”

“I won’t tell you,” he says, rising to go. “I’ll never tell you.”

“But you must!” I cry. “I must know.”

“If I tell you, you will go. Just like her.”

“That’s not for you to say. They’re my dreams!”

“They’re mine now,” he says resentfully, as if punishing me for humiliating him. “You are mine.” He is walking back to the woods.

“Give me my dreams!” I scream. “My dreams!”

But he never does. I no longer exist now. Not as myself anyway. I exist only as the dreamer in my jealous lover’s dream. And if he should awaken, two lives go dark in the blink of an eye.