

Dreamer

"Things won't be easy for you, child." A man's voice, burdened by time. Lines beneath his eyes, his half lidded gaze, whisper of endless trials long since undertaken.

He sits on a wooden floor, arms at his sides, back against a wall. His gaze directs it's intent to the shadows on the floorboards. In an otherwise dark room, light slips through a window to his left. The sunbeam misses him entirely, yet lands on the young girl that sits cross legged before him.

Pulling air between his teeth, broad shoulders raise beneath an imperceptible weight. His expression sours, his back arches. Pops and creaks slip from the spaces between his bones. He holds for a moment, before his breath crawls from his lips. Clean air was pulled in and pushed through whatever tar stained mechanism grinds away between his ribs, and out came smoke. His shoulders slump. He fights against the force keeping his gaze to the floor, and looks his daughter in the eyes. With a hand nearly the size of her head, he reaches out. Callouses peak his knuckles like great mountains. His giant hand cuts between the sunbeam, hides the girl beneath his shadow. She recoils, out of pure instinct. Yet gently, he pats her head. "Your life will likely be short, and there's no guarantee it will be happy." Still beating in his chest desperately so, his heart pounds. Each pulse driving home a deep rooted ache. A sickness slick with bile turns in his stomach, creeps up the back of his throat. His head is muddled, his eyes sting. He turns his gaze away, simply unable. "58 years child, and I never found a reason for it all." Behind his eyes cinders struggle to stay alight. Where once there was a raging inferno hot enough to burn the cruel hands of fate, to fight back, there lies only a bitter warmth. "Don't look for the truth. Don't trick yourself in to thinking there's some sense to it, some moral or conclusion. There's no pattern, no purpose. You live and then you die."

A memory flickers through my head. Shades white and black dancing about on a dusty

screen. As my recall fades, the film catches an abrupt end. My mind is filled with the sound of a reel click clacking, on and on after the last second of footage has come and gone. Within myself, I sit in an old wooden room. Light, dim and hushed, from the projector playing an end until eternity. Shadows populate the screen, as motes of dust migrate about the room. No windows, no door. I look about to find I've no company to keep but my own. Alone as ever. The sound of the reel's chattering twists its shape, tending towards urgency.

I blink.

Laying in bed, my eyes open. Unfocused, the world suddenly *is* around me. My gaze wanders across the white plaster ceiling.

Squinting, I arch my back, pull in air through my teeth as I twist and turn away from the needlepoint pains squirming their way through my spine. Letting my breath away, I fall back in to bed. Distaste colors my first impression of the day.

A grating buzz crawls deep in to my ears and begins gnawing at me. Flat on my back, I turn to glare at my nightstand, and my phone which rests atop. Rattling away on the wooden surface, my alarm goes on and on, pulling me inch by inch from my coffin, this shelter that protects me from all the thinking I'm prone to. At first I only glare, it's all I can manage. A couple grunts vocalize my displeasure. Yet with each repetition of the chorus, a piece of me is carved out of slumbers embrace.

First comes a torrential rain of cognition. Gifted by myriad negativities, my mind somehow manages to linger on each one, yet simultaneously address something new and sour every second.

Yet again I awake alone.

My whole room stinks. I stink. Haven't showered in a handful of days.

Though precision eludes me, certainty tells me the time is well past noon.

I've wasted another day, living on the money provided by my late father.

I hear a voice in the back of my head, whispering so, not unlike an itch.

What exactly came second, is harder to call. In the interest of fairness, I shall call it a tie.

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Buried in the center of my chest, I feel an emptiness. Void, but not quite. Dark, without light, I breathe and breathe, yet I can't possibly hope to ever fill that emptiness. At its bottom, I feel frigid water. A cold so absolute it crawls up the sides of the wall, prickling my heart. I take a breath, and call it my

"Anxiety." I label it, pin it down. I see you.

In that same breath, I call the name of my other affliction as it ails me. Silence that siphons away my energy, like some spectre clinging to my shadow, constantly looming over me unseen. Colors fade away, if ever they truly were more than nothing at all. Silver linings blend perfectly in to the storm clouds, and all things seem impossible. Pointless. The simplest acts such as making a phone call, going on a walk, become undoable.

"Depression." I see you.

I hold my glare to my phone, as it continues to incessantly buzz away on my nightstand. Then all at once, the raucous ceases. The alarm had timed out, which meant that it had been ringing for a good thirty minutes.

A beam of light that carefully thread itself through the blinds, rests atop my phone. Narrowing my eyes, I purse my lips. Suddenly, thoughts lurch in to motion from full stop. I didn't beckon the machine to life, nor can I do much to stop the wheels. It takes but a second, for the in and out of the equation.

Judging by the angle at which the light is coming through the blinds, and its intensity, it is safe to say the time is well past three in the afternoon.

I shut my eyes, a sigh slips from my lips. I had already insinuated something of essentially the same calibre, and had experienced regret and loathing in abundance. However, my mind did not hesitate to salt the wound. My hand emerges from under the blankets, much like a creature from its cave. Slow. Clumsy. Should I say I grabbed the phone, I would be lying Witnessed, the act would be pitiable. Resting my hand atop the device, I slide it across the nightstand and over the edge, sending

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it tumbling on to the bed. I flinch, expecting the phone to bounce and hit me in the face. I'm spared this morning.

Pressing a small button on the phones side, it's screen lights up and I'm instantly assaulted by a digital clock.

"4:13" It says. Pulling my hand away from the phone, I glare at it. My jaw clenches, I feel the grit on my teeth. Disgust weaves itself through my expression. After a moment, the screen dims then fades to black. I consider

What point is there even, to getting up at this hour?

Hunger pulls at the walls of my stomach, reminding me of the unfortunate necessities of my form. Once more, I sigh. My body urges me out of bed, and I cripple under it's demands.

I remove myself from bed in a manner reminiscent cold syrup. First I start with my legs, I slide them out from under the covers and off the edge of the mattress, the rest of my body is dragged along. I pool at the foot of my bed, cross legged. Sitting there, hunched, I begin grappling with my waking state. From my new vantage point, I survey the floor upon which I sit. Littered with crumbs from food long since eaten, specks of dust and gravel that hitched a ride on the bottoms of my shoe. Heaps of clothing pushed together without any heed for organization, dividing the room like great mountains. Stacks of boxes I've yet to unpack, some haphazardly torn open to expose their innards. Hiding away here and there, the white heads of balled up tissues pepper the landscape. I blink.

Glancing over at my closed door, my mind remembers the windows to the world beyond and tells me it would be uncouth to walk naked in to the spotlight. To my left is a pile of clothing, some dirty some not, all unfolded and uncared for, hastily pushed in to the gap between my bed and nightstand. Reaching in I begin to shove everything aside. One in particular I want to wear, though all the others I cast off would work perfectly well, this shirt I yearn for. I could not explain *why* if asked. At best I would probably stumble over my words, and end up deciding on something like

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because. Having pushed aside the whole pile to no avail, frustration slips off the tip of my tongue,

"Fuck." Forcing myself to my feet, I set about carefully stepping around the room, avoiding lamp wires, a humidifier, a bottle of beer, and other debris.

After searching through a pile of pants, and a separate cluttering of shirts, I find the one I'm looking for. Pulling it over my head, it's hem comes to an end just below my knees. Without knowing, I had been holding my breath. I let it away. With one hand I pick up my phone, a notebook and a pen. My other begins picking at the collar of my shirt. I open the door to my room and begin my day.

Breakfast consists of a single piece of toast dressed in globs of peanut butter and ornamented with strings of honey. Reaching in to the fridge, I pull out a cup of coffee I made the day prior. I bow my head in thanks to the me of yesterday. Had I not had this coffee here and ready this morning, my day would have had an even slower start.

I migrate over to my usual spot. Stepping from the kitchen, my bare feet pick up dust and grime from the hard wood floor, I pay it no heed and drag on to the recliner in the hall. Something I had gotten for free, from a neighbor who was moving. They helped me move it up the stairs leading to my apartment, and push it in to this corner. I've never had the energy to try and move it in to my room. Before it made the move, I would have to clean my hovel. The task weighs so much it always drifts to the bottom of my to do list.

I shake my head, glancing at the window by the chair. I'm reminded I still need to buy blinds for it, but again the task weighs more than I wish to carry.

Nuzzling up to the chair is a small end table, I entrust it with everything I'm carrying save for my coffee. Crawling in to the recliner, mug in hand, I lean back. Tucking my legs close, I pull my shirt over my knees. I take a breath and sip my caffeine. As my gaze wanders out the window, I shake my head.

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My apartment finds itself on a rather busy street amidst an otherwise quiet town. A main highway runs straight through the center of this little village. Towering semis and lumbering construction vehicles, screaming ferraris and trundling SUVs are filtered from the busy cities, down along this otherwise quiet path, and out in to the world.

Not but twenty paces to the right of my front door, is one of the few stoplights in this town. This light in my opinion, favors red far more than it's other colors. Demanding that all cars sit still for absurd periods of time. Pedestrians as well, the cross walks rarely ever give the go ahead, content in all sides remaining where they are.

So I take advantage of this fact, sitting by this window, I spy the endless bouquet of life. From those people patient and happy, waiting all the while wearing a smile. Happily drumming away on their steering wheel while some unheard song serenades them.

To those impatient and angry, honking and throwing their hands about at the people who don't kiss the speed limit the very second the light greens.

I sip my coffee, the cool drink slowly working a shiver, a buzz across my fingers. Like each nerve is coming alive.

Having spent so much time looking out this window, I've seen the same faces many a time before. I know not their names, but their mannerisms. Though I'm somewhat loathe to admit this, as I can't help but think it strange, I've my favorites of the bunch. Some people are simply more entertaining than others. They hold a charm about them, charisma. As though the words that paint their existence are brighter and more beautiful than the other shadows that look so much like them. People such as these are my favorite because selfishly, I yearn for what they have. I've seen the blank page staring back at me from my reflection. I had mirrors in my home once.

Taking a breath and shaking my head, I turn from the window for a moment. Right now things are slow, everyone is either at work or at home, the streets are barren.

My gaze wanders to the cup in my hand, and the drink within. Black as a night absent any

stars, still as a lake on a windless day. Like a dark mirror, my reflection looks back at me. I avert my gaze the second our eyes meet. I'm both unwilling and unable to truly look in to myself. So much time already, do I spend stuck in this mind of mine. Looking in to my own eyes provokes a deeper sort of contemplation, that I would truly rather avoid.

Instead, my eyes wander about the hall, while my mind tip toes across inconsequential. Idle thoughts unimportant, yearnings that will go unfulfilled. Such thoughts, with so little weight, I find the easiest to fit in to this life of mine.

Color catches in the corner of my eye, brilliant red dancing like flame. The wind rattles my windows. Instinctively, my gaze shifts to catch the sound, my mind snaps in to focus. Looking down on the world below, I see a figure. One of my favorites. *The Favorite*. A young woman, around my age. Tall, big feet, slender hands. Calm face, framed by swirling hair crimson. Red. Vermillion. The words do her no justice. An inkling tells me the color is natural, yet it's so definite that I've trouble believing. Her eyes, green like emeralds cut and polished, and just as sharp. She wears a band around her wrist. Simple beads and string, it's tied loosely, and jangles about when she walks. Her expression is impeccable. A smile nearly silent, a whisper amidst a typhoon of emotion. People often try so hard, put so much effort in to feeling, yet...Her smile, simple. Her lips don't even part, just a tiny curl to the edges of her mouth. Yet that's what makes it stand, to such an extreme. Her expression contains no effort, yet it's return is exquisite. I envy—no, Envy is incorrect. I *yearn* for that smile. Ache for it.

For me, exhibiting such an expression, requires a conscious twisting of muscle and careful consideration of my facial structure. Certainly, I can smile, but a smile one needs to construct bears no worth. Emotion and context should cause such a thing to bubble up from your core, your heart beating and fluttering. Natural. Organic. An artificial smile is an insult, yet it is almost all I seem capable of. While she...She is just beautiful.

She stands on the other side of the street, stretching her arms above her head. She takes a

breath, and pulls a phone from her pocket. Glancing at the time, she looks at the sign post just a couple steps ahead of her. My mind spits out an answer, as I see the question.

*She's waiting for the bus. Which means she doesn't own a car, or that her car is presently out of commission. It also means that she does not own a bike, or that the distance she must travel is great, or that there are time constraints, or—*I shake my head, and keep watching. Her brow furrows, and in one fluid motion she brings her lithe pointer finger to the bridge of her nose, and looks skyward. After a couple taps, she nods, hand falling to her side. Her expression eases and she begins her stride.

Just as her right foot makes ground, she halts and turns her gaze. Her eyes pierce through my window, and lock with mine. Breath catches in my chest, as though she cradles my lungs in her hands. Intensity chisels her expression for half a split second, brow furrowed, eyes alert. Though I could not see it, I could feel her muscles coil like so many steel cords carefully wrought. I could *sense* her sudden unwavering intent. Then all at once it eases away, like watercolors under the rain.

Though silent, her lips part for just a moment, her shoulders rise. I catch a glimpse of serenity. Her smile, still basking in beauty, gains a shade of knowing.

She waves.

Immediately, I shirk from the spotlight, I pull back from the window and bury myself in the chair. Shame needles my skin, picking sweat from my pores.

Have I done something wrong? Surely, I must have? How did she see me? Was I trying to hide? Such speculation twist about my skull, my heart beats heavy and loud, preventing the lighter thoughts from ever settling down.

*Should I be ashamed? Certainly, I should after all I was—*I shake my head, setting my coffee down on the end table. I run both hands through my hair, combing away unnecessary thoughts.

"I was just looking out the window!" A sweep of my hand emphasizes the point. I take a

breath and slowly, lean forward. My mind splits seconds, analyzing each in overtime. All at once I recognize the scene, scanning it for onlookers. For the woman.

Olden buildings built in times long since gone by, renovated and repainted. Sidewalks with grass and weeds growing between the cracks. Cement roads recently repaved. Sign posts telling passersby of bus schedules and where not to park. Cars trundling on.

Then for the second time, my eyes lock with hers. Her smile doubles, an earnest one. Her frame shakes, I see a silent laugh. She tilts her head just so and lifts her hand to her cheek, placing thumb by her ear and pinky by her mouth. She gestures to herself, then holds up her pointer finger. Then all fingers on her right hand, and three on her left. Then four on her right. My eyes widen and my body is kicked in to gear. I scramble, spilling my coffee, grabbing the notebook and pen off the end table. I mumble to myself what she's shown me already.

"1-845..." Scratching away my usually unreadable writing takes an especially crooked form today.

Once she finishes, she makes the phone gesture once more. She smiles her quiet, contented smile, and waves. Her stride begins, and she walks along the street and out of sight.

I sit there, eyes wide. Heart pounding away at my ears as though it were a taiko drum. Sweat lathering a sheen across my skin. Staring at the number of this...unreal existence.

Leaning forward in my chair, I look the street up and down to see if I can catch where she wandered off to. Second, I look about to see if someone else perhaps witnessed the scene. Others litter the street, but I see no evidence of turned heads or otherwise. I fall back, holding the paper with both hands, my gaze tracing the numbers over and over. Sensation waltzes through my mind bright oranges and blues, and of course burning red. My heart skips and dances, butterflies prance about my stomach. Suddenly, the world seems brighter, a glimmering star amidst an otherwise gray night. But of course, I blink, and the light begins to fade. Suddenly I'm reminded of my natural tendencies. My thoughts turn

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What reason does she have to give me her number? Water spills in to my boat. Desperately I try to scoop out what I can, yet the ocean invades.

Maybe she's curious about what kind of person I am?

And why would she ever want to know the disgusting stranger who spies on her from a second story window. This probably isn't even her real number. Don't recognize the area code. She probably thought it would be a fun prank to play.

I shake my head, grit my teeth. Pulling my legs close, I grip my head tight. Through my teeth, I speak.

"Not today. You don't get to win every day." I force blood to my head, push air from my nose. I'll crush these gray thoughts, force their carcasses from my body. I'm not going to lose every time. Festering in my chest, I feel the pool deepen. Fear clucks it's tongue, telling me that it's my job to lose. My whole purpose in existence. Sub par, less than average. Just below the line of mediocrity. Not so far that it's worth lamenting, yet not so close that I'll ever amount to anything.

"FUCK!" I scream, the word rips from my throat. I focus on the sound of my voice, fill that dark pool with fury. Taking my left hand, I bite deep in to the skin on my pointer finger.

Focus.

Focus.

Focus.

Through the pain I carve myself a quiet little place, in my world of gray. Red is a powerful color. I pull my hand away, and look at my finger. I didn't quite break skin. I came close. I lock on the color that paints the bite mark. Forcing my mind down my own path. I take a deep breath and hold it for no reason other than to show my body I'm the one at the wheel. I feel my lungs push against my ribs. All at once, I force it away.

Not today. You may claim me all other days, but not right now. This moment is *mine*. My window exists, the hand of chance has reached in to this world of pitch. You won't stop me from

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grabbing it. I visualise the scene in my mind. Darkness abound, roiling twisting and turning like the coils of a serpent with no end. The world constricts around me, yet above a sliver of color bleeds in to the void.

My mind races, I have to separate, move, re-order. Pushing myself from my chair, I grab my notebook and phone. I glance at the door to my room. My eyes narrow, I pull the door shut. My footsteps carry me across the puddle of coffee and to the kitchen with renewed speed. First step in, I catch sight of how messy and disgusting it all is. I haven't cleaned, haven't had the energy, have had an abundance of excuses. My gait ends next to the small dining table. Not enough space to think, I push everything in to a pile and off and away. I hear crinkling, crunching, and scraping. No heed is given, my mind tunnels, focusing on a single thing. Quickly, I brush away what few crumbs remain. I set everything down on the counter. My hands grip the edge of the table, I plant my feet. Pulling air through my teeth, I glare at the numbers I hastily scratched down on the pad.

My right hand slips across the surface of my phone, unlocking the device. With but two gentle taps, the surface of the phone displays a dial pad. I blink. The muscles in my jaw, tighten, then relax. Thoughts trundle and spin.

Should I call so soon? My eyes narrow.

Should I call? I bite my lip, my pointer finger moves. The screen on the phone dims, and I'm given pause. Shaking my head, I venture forth. Nervous tendencies drive me to bite at my thumb. I mumble the numbers as they appear on the screen. Somehow cementing them, making them more real than they truly are. Through these thoughts I build myself a rope and anchor myself to the action, once started I can't stop.

With each tap, comes a new number. Weight imagined, grips my body. The last number lights up the screen and I stand there. Staring it down. I look at the large green button near the bottom of the screen. One more tap, and the call is made. I blink

What then, though? What do I say? What's she going to say to me?

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Shaking my head, my usual mantra to dispel my thoughts, proves useless. It all continues.

Do I deserve to say anything to her? What's her voice sound like? What if she's furious at me? Should I call? What's going to happen if I call? Maybe I should wait?

I take a breath. The phone lays flat on the table. My finger lingers, but a twitch away from casting me down a foreign path. I stare at the number. Trace it's shape. Ambient sound becomes apparent. Wind from the walls beyond, cars and the sounds of life. The water heater gurgling away and the sound of creaking wood. The tick tocking of a clock in the hallway.

My throat dries, swallowing conjures the sensation of sand scraping it's way across my tongue. Vertigo chases my balance in circles, I feel the room starting it's first spin cycle. Warmth pools behind my eyes and a shiver slips it's hand in to my core. I hate myself for how hard the simplest of things often becomes.

I clamp my vision tight and grit my teeth. Electric, comes the charge. I chase the sensation from the core of my brain, sending it barking down my neck, screaming through my shoulder and down my arm. With force just short of cracking glass, my finger pounds the screen. An ache wriggles beneath my nail as I withdraw my hand. Prying one eye open with a crowbar called curiosity, I behold the face of the phone. It's dark.

My mouth hangs open, my shoulders sink. I'm cast in to the frigid pool in my center. Existence seems to crumble around me, my will bleeds away and I fall to my knees. Resting my head against the edge of the table, my mind is stained with disbelief, with loathing, negative and dark, deep enveloping hungry emotions. Then, something catches. A small tug on my anchor, a sound that did not count itself present earlier. I look up, tilt my head. A quiet click nips at my ears. Staring at my phone, I narrow my eyes, raise an eyebrow. A voice, far off, nearly inaudible responds in kind.

"Calling so soon?"