

Chasing a Dream

The small fire in Carlton's stone fireplace provided warmth but no inspiration. Neither did the melancholy strains of the Adagio to Mahler's Symphony Number Ten (among us only Carlton truly appreciated Mahler). The slanted rays of late afternoon sunlight suffusing through the window, casting lengthening shadows across the room, might have inspired younger, more poetic scholars, but not we three. The peach brandy we shared was good and may have loosened us a little but was not, in itself, enough to inspire us to the higher levels of erudition to which we aspired.

But taken as a whole, maybe it was the overall atmosphere, a stereotypical scene copied directly from James Hilton (or was it Henry James?). Three college professors nearing the end of undistinguished careers gathered, like ancient mariners, on a Friday afternoon in February, gathered as we were every Friday to imbibe and debate—among other things—the meaning of life, as though we could truly provide some fresh insight into the old and tired Philosophy 101 essay question.

Mickelson sat across from us, contributing little to the discussion (as was his custom), a nearly full snifter of brandy in his hand. He was a scholar's scholar, listening in a disengaged sort of way and speaking only when he had something to share that he somehow knew we would truly want to hear.

But Carlton, always the self-satisfied and loquacious professor, was in rare form, his fiery classroom persona fully emerged. "I don't care what Kant or any of the others say about free will, it is only illusion, philosophical smoke and mirrors," he declared at the end of a long and rather

serpentine lecture to which we only half listened. He looked directly at Mickelson. "What do you say about it, Robbie?"

At first, Mickelson made no response whatsoever, as though he hadn't even heard the question or had no interest in it. Then his fingers seemed to tighten ever so slightly around his glass. He leaned forward in his chair and shrugged. "We foolishly believe we can know all things," he said in his characteristically soft voice. "But God only gave us the hunger for knowledge and the ability to pursue it, to shake the apple tree and see what falls. But there is no edible fruit on that tree. And in the final analysis, all we really have is faith and the faint hope that faith is enough." He leaned back in his chair and allowed his eyelids to droop over his eyes, effectively ending this abbreviated and decidedly obtuse monologue.

The room fell silent. Even the music stopped, the unfinished symphony, like the life of its composer, ending prematurely. The still air was heavy with expectation and little else.

But Mickelson wasn't finished; he was only forging his thoughts, sharpening them into a single spear-like point. That was his genius and what we admired most about him. He took a deep breath, almost a sigh, and looked at the fire. "Have you ever chased a dream?" he asked suddenly.

Although the question was unexpected and seemingly out of context, Carlton and I both knew and understood that it was, above all, mostly rhetorical, so neither of us attempted a reply. Rather, we sat back and waited, indulging him with our silence and imploring him with our eyes.

Accepting the unspoken invitation we were offering, Mickelson took a sip of the brandy and smiled a whimsical, enigmatic sort of smile, a smile that promised nothing and everything at the same time. "Perhaps this little narrative would be better told in a quiet bar late at night

after a few rounds of drinks, eh?" He paused and looked away. And once again the room fell silent.

Now he had us in his grip. Now, more than ever, we wanted to hear the narrative, the story he was holding back. But how do you make someone open up to you, tell you what you have become so primed to hear? I am only a professor of English literature. I know precious little about how the brain works to drive motivation. Whatever psychology or physiology or whatever I may have learned at one time, I sacrificed long ago upon the altar of my discipline.

"When I was younger, a poor but ambitious grad student fully caught up in the academic life," he began, measuring his words without being obvious, "Before Karen and the intrusion of that real world we have worked so hard to repudiate, I would have a recurrent dream. Call it quixotic or Arthurian or even sexist, if you prefer. I dreamed that I would encounter a young woman who was in some kind of distress—the precise nature of the distress would vary, of course, from one dream to another—and charge in to the rescue. And, quite predictably, in the dream, I was always successful; I always won the day...and the young woman was always appropriately grateful." He paused and chuckled as though this last point about the precise nature of a woman's gratitude for having been rescued by a gallant knight was obvious and simply understood among men, setting aside, of course, the blatantly sexist implications. It was, after all, only a dream. Or perhaps a stupid male fantasy.

"Still, these were only dreams," Mickelson began again abruptly. "But, you know, it is actually quite simple for a dream to become a fantasy that progresses to obsession, if we let it. Now, I won't say that I was obsessed with rescuing the proverbial damsel in distress, but the fantasy was always there dwelling among the other untended baggage in my psyche, even after

Karen and I became a couple. In fact, I guess, without her ever knowing it, almost from the start, she became for me my Dulcinea...and you know how that turned out.

“Still, we live part of our lives in what we think of as the real world and part of our lives in our dreams, and the two worlds very seldom, if ever, overlap. And this is, no doubt, a very good protective mechanism, because some dreams are decidedly dangerous.” He paused again, closed his eyes, and rubbed his forehead.

Carlton and I sat silent. We knew that some memories are painful and that our friend and colleague would make his point in due time. As always, our patience—aided by the brandy—was rewarded

“I had one of those moments once,” he said softly, opening his eyes. “One of those moments when you come face to face with your dream. This happened, as I recall, about twenty-five years ago, a time when Karen and I were experiencing some difficulties in our relationship...what the common folk might refer to as a rough patch. Looking back, I don’t remember the cause of all these problems, but it was probably mostly my fault. It usually is the man’s, you know. You recall we were caught up in the mad pursuit of tenure at that time: working our way through the relevant literature, teaching to the great unwashed student horde, writing as much drivel as we could churn out just to become known in our disciplines. It all seems so silly, even empty, when you think about it now. But we were young and much more self-assured then, so convinced we could change the world...or at least our little piece of it, and that it was our destiny, even our sacred duty, to do so.

“It was late March, I believe; the air was just beginning to warm. I was on my way home with my head in the clouds, as usual, no doubt consumed by one of those career-altering treatises that has long since turned to dust. And like the stereotypical professor, I was not paying much

attention to the outside world, except to note that traffic was irritatingly heavy. And yet, when I was stopped at the light on the corner of Benton and Main—you know that intersection—I just happened to look over at the car next to me, instinct, I suppose. I glanced long enough to note that the driver of that car was a young woman, rather attractive as I recall, but that's not what caught my attention. No, what caught my attention was that she was crying, and not just crying, but weeping, sobbing. Even from a distance I could see her chest heaving through her light jacket and the tears streaming down her face.

“Have you ever seen such a thing? I hadn't, not before and not since. And in that instant, I saw my dream. Here was a young woman truly in distress. Now, obviously, I didn't know, couldn't know, what the distress was, but it was there, next to me, visible, tangible, almost palpable. A dream becoming real life.”

Mickelson stopped, sighed heavily, and took another sip of his brandy.

Carlton and I remained silent, knowing better than to dare any response that might interrupt or divert the narrative.

Mickelson sighed again and turned to the fire. “This all happened within a few seconds, you realize, producing a maelstrom of emotions, the indecision that comes with unexpected conflict...or opportunity. The light turned green and cars began to move, but she didn't. Only when the driver in the car behind her honked his horn did she seem to become aware of her surroundings. She started to move, and I moved with her, paralleling her, stuck in my line of traffic until we reached the next light. I watched her so closely that I very nearly rear-ended the car in front of me. What an ironic twist that would have been. Then, her line began to move faster than mine so that now I could no longer see her but only her taillights.

“When she got to Mission Street, she shifted into the left turn lane, and I knew I had to make a quick but momentous decision: try to follow her or let the dream remain a dream. With no real time to think about it, I made the decision. Now, it wasn’t easy, but I somehow managed to work my way through the traffic to the far left lane in time to watch her turn four cars ahead of me. Then, like an errant knight mindlessly accepting the challenge in spite of the danger, I sped up and turned just as the light flashed red.

“Fortunately, Mission, as you will recall, is four lanes and she was barely doing the speed limit, so I was able to catch up with her after a couple of blocks. When I paralleled her again I could see that she was still crying, tears cascading down her face in ugly rivulets. Now, all outside thought left me, academic responsibilities and treatises, bodily functions, even Karen, who I knew was waiting for me at home. Nothing mattered but the young woman in distress that I had to rescue. But how and from what? The fact that I had no answers to these questions was completely irrelevant. I was a hero on a mission, chasing a dream, and neither dragons nor windmills nor common sense was going to get in my way.

“I slipped in behind her and followed until we got to the light at Akers Road. There she abruptly turned right and, because I wasn’t expecting it, I missed the turn and went straight ahead. I cursed out loud as I watched her proceed on Akers, her car growing smaller by the second.

“I sped up, and when I reached the BP station at the next block, I quickly pulled in. Then, again ignoring the danger, I turned left onto Mission, a fraction of a second ahead of two lines of cars. Fortunately, the light at Akers was green and I was able to turn left without risking anyone’s life or limb. Disregarding completely the twenty-five mile per hour speed limit, I practically raced down the road, looking on both sides for her car. I had only gone four blocks

when I saw her ahead. She had her right turn signal on. From a distance, I watched her turn into the church there on the corner of Akers and Pine. It was a Catholic church, St. Timothy, as I recall.

“I slowed down and took a deep breath. I remember noting that I was sweating rather profusely. When I reached the entrance to the parking lot, I pulled in. I spotted her just as she was entering the church. This sobered me a little. I mean, how does a hero knight compete with a church? But still, I was curious and determined. She was a young woman in distress, and I just knew I was fully prepared to rescue her if the church couldn’t.

“I parked my car, turned off the engine, and waited, my eyes fixed on the entrance. At one point, I was tempted to go in myself, but in those days, I had a very tenuous relationship with religion. I was a scholar; I was...enlightened. You know how that goes. How truly profound is our ignorance and our arrogance sometimes.

“When she emerged, some thirty minutes later, the sun was setting. But even in the early twilight that surrounded us, I could see that she was no longer crying, that, in fact, she was smiling, her face now a picture of absolute radiant joy, a joy I, up to that point in my adult life, had never known. Clearly, she was no longer a young woman in distress. And clearly, she no longer needed a hero knight to rescue her. My dream had ended without a single joust and certainly no spontaneous display of appropriate female gratitude.

“Without even a glance in my direction, she got into her car, started the engine, and drove off, while I remained where I was, left to ponder the significance—or insignificance—of what I had just experienced. And I did ponder it. I sat there in that quiet parking lot until the last streaks of sunlight faded in the western sky.

“There is a good reason why dreams should not become reality, why they should forever remain as dreams. I thought about the transformation I had just witnessed and where it had occurred. I thought about my own place in this complex world and then, as the last link in this chain of self-realization I was creating, I thought about Karen, real and beautiful and waiting for me to decide who I really was, who I really wanted to be, she herself perhaps needing to be rescued by a hero knight. Then, for the first time in, I don’t know, weeks, maybe months, I smiled. The fog that had obscured my life for so long was lifting...right there in the parking lot of that Catholic church.

“When I arrived home, when I saw Karen’s face, flushed with both anger and concern, I didn’t apologize, I didn’t try to explain where I had been or even lie about where I had been. No, I simply took her in my arms and kissed her...kissed her effusively, as if she were the only being on Earth that mattered. And at that moment, she was. This was no dream, but real life, my life, our life, and I was going to embrace it and never let it go.

“Without exchanging a word, I led her to the bedroom and we made love for the first time in...I can’t remember how long. After that night, we never stopped being lovers. You know how close we were. And we never talked about that day, about what had prompted this rather dramatic and sudden change in me. If Karen was curious, she never said anything or asked any questions. But I don’t think she was curious, not really. Rather, she relished this love, this intimacy, as did I ...all the way to the last moment.”

Mickelson stopped again, and I could now see the tears in his eyes. We had never seen him cry for Karen before, not even at the funeral. I had to bite down on my lower lip to keep it from quivering, I who had never experienced a love that strong or that pure.

Abruptly, he took another sip of brandy, dabbed the tears from his eyes, and faced us. “And that, my dear colleagues, with apologies to all the academic philosophers who make a living studying and debating such things, is the meaning of life, such as it is.” He sighed, put down his glass, and turned toward the fire.

Once again, silence filled the empty room. Nothing but silence and memories and the distance in between.