

Lucid

In the darkness of the meagerly equipped control room, Dr. Brent Wallace watched the sharp spikes on the computer screen. The really strong ones shot up through a spectrum of green and yellow to a brilliant red, warning the patient's brain activity was well above normal for a sleeping person. Wallace turned to the closed-circuit monitor to see if Jonathan DeBardo, the patient and the one grad student grudgingly allocated to his research, showed any corresponding physical activity. Jonathan twitched slightly and displayed the tell-tale rapid eye movement of deep sleep but displayed nothing on par with his brain's frenzy. Pulse and breathing rates, however, climbed to levels consistent with a marathon runner.

Dr. Wallace grabbed the microphone, "Jonathan! Wake up!" There was no response from Jonathan. "Jonathan!"

Wallace hurried out of the control room to the sleep room a few doors down along the basement corridor. "Jonathan! Wake up!" He shook his patient.

Jonathan stirred. Wallace shook him again. Confused and unfocused Jonathan lifted his face towards his tormentor, "Doc. Okay. Jeez! Why'd you wake me?"

"Your brain looked like it was having a meltdown."

"Meltdown? I was having the best dream of my life! I was flying... more like floating. I could go in any direction I wanted. It was the greatest sensation I've ever had!" Jonathan rubbed his face and sat up to orient himself to the reality of his surroundings.

Wallace measured Jonathan's pulse and found it falling sharply off its hyper levels from a few moments earlier. "You're settling down to a normal heart rate. You were really racing. Feel alright?"

"I feel great but I'm starving!"

"No doubt. You probably burned up a boatload of calories."

"It takes a lot calories to fly, Doc."

"Let's go grab some breakfast. My treat. You can tell me more about your flight of fancy."

The student union's early morning breakfast crowd was more faculty and staff than students. Not many students stirred at seven. The few unfortunates with eight o'clock classes usually slumbered until the last possible moment before scurrying off to class— or not.

Dr. Wallace peeled a banana and sipped his decaf coffee as he stared at Jonathan's two platters loaded with breakfast items. "You will never hear the words 'My treat' come out of my mouth again."

Jonathan grinned sheepishly, "Sorry Doc. I'm famished. Besides, the stipend you give me is barely enough to keep a cat alive."

"Your stipend. My salary. Barely enough for two cats. I'm afraid your boat has landed in the backwater of medical research. I warned you about Cognitive Psychology," Wallace said.

"You did and I have nobody to blame but myself. It's just that I have always been fascinated by the ethereal nature of dreams. Freud said dreams were the realization of wishes."

Wallace looked at his young protégé a moment. "Big Pharma can't figure out a way to make a pill for them and clinicians can't figure out how to quantify them so they're relegated to the realm of mystics," he concluded with a shrug.

"I know. I get it. But if they could experience what I felt this morning that would all change," Jonathan replied with a bulging cheek of toast and egg.

"I'll admit, your ability to direct your dreams is remarkable. So, what did you wish for and realize?"

"Like I said, I could float anywhere I wanted to go. I wasn't that high— just treetop. Just willing myself in a certain direction got me there."

"Where'd you go?"

Jonathan blushed, pausing to answer, "Over a neighborhood. A bunch of houses and yards."

Wallace caught the hesitation, "Any particular neighborhood?"

A longer pause. "Julie's"

Wallace exhaled loudly, "Jeez, Jonathan. Look, I know I'm supposed to maintain a professional relationship here and not get into your personal life but you've got to let her go! Move on. Now you're stalking her in your sleep? That's not good. It's kind of creepy."

Jonathan stiffened, "Doc, you're right. It is my personal life and outside your purview."

Wallace raised his hands as if to surrender, "Okay. Just hate to see you torment yourself this way."

"Doc, I appreciate what you're saying and why. I'm just not ready to let it go."

The two sat in silence, eating, for a while. Dr. Wallace finally broke the truce, "Would you be willing to submit to an imaging study of your brain activity during sleep?"

Jonathan considered the request for a moment, "Isn't that what I've been doing? What'd you have in mind?"

"Perhaps a functionality MRI. Or a PET scan. A SPECT scan would be best. Getting Radiology to grant access would be the real hurdle."

"What's a SPECT scan?" Jonathan asked.

"Single Photon Emission Computed Tomography. Uses a longer lasting isotope."

"Isotope? You want to make me glow in the dark?"

"It's not harmful," Dr. Wallace assured.

Jonathan grinned, "I know. Just kidding. So, what do you think you'll get out of this the EEG didn't show?"

"Specificity. The EEG showed a lot of activity. Just not where. An imaging study will show us where in the brain the activity is occurring. Your ability for lucid dreaming can be mapped. That information may help us better train people how to control their dreams."

"I understand all of that but I'm asking where will this research lead? Will some kind of therapy come from this? Will lives be improved?"

"I can see a potential for psychotherapies. Perhaps certain behavioral corrections. Extended space travel." Wallace pondered the question a little more. "I can even see a potential for recreational purposes."

"Recreation?"

"Sure. You could have the adventure of a lifetime and never leave the safety and comfort of your own bed."

Jonathan finished the last of his breakfast. "Virtual reality on steroids."

"You could say that," Wallace agreed.

"When do we do this?"

"I gotta ingratiate myself to Radiology somehow and get access. Donating one kidney should be enough recompense."

A couple of days later, Wallace sent a text to Jonathan: "*Have use of SPECT this weekend. R U available?*"

"Yes," Jonathan texted back.

"U R last patient Fri. Be there by 2 to prep."

Dr. Wallace emerged from somewhere in the interior of the huge wing just as Jonathan walked into the Radiology waiting room.

"Jonathan! Right on time. I just talked to Dr. Michaels. Someone will be out momentarily to prep you."

"I stayed awake last night so I'd be able to fall asleep easier. I even did a longer run this morning. You don't suppose there's a nice, comfy bed in there."

"They can give you something to help fall asleep," Wallace said.

"I'd rather not take any type of sedative. I'm afraid it'll interfere with my lucidity. I'd hate to go through all this trouble and sleep like a rock through the whole thing."

"Trouble is right. You wouldn't believe how much of my budget is going into this one weekend. Had to cough up double time just for the technician."

Jonathan yawned widely, "I'll try to give you a good show."

A technician came out and escorted Jonathan back to one of the prep stations for him to change into a split-back hospital gown and finish his prep. Dr. Wallace followed. Jonathan flinched when the technician inserted the IV needle in his arm. Wallace watched the milky contrasting agent flow down the tube.

"That really feels weird. It's cold," Jonathan said.

Later, after the agent had circulated throughout Jonathan's body, a different technician came and led him to the scanning room. The technician positioned Jonathan on the table facing up.

"We'll have to place these foam wedges around you to keep you from moving too much. Hope you don't toss and turn too much in your sleep," the technician explained.

"Shouldn't be a problem," Jonathan answered, wanting only to sleep.

"You good to go?" asked Dr. Wallace.

Jonathan answered with a thumbs up.

The technician followed Dr. Wallace into the control room. He remotely positioned the equipment arm over Jonathan's head. The vitals panel showed a declining heart rate and blood pressure.

The technician chuckled, "He's already falling asleep. That must be some kind of record."

Dr. Wallace focused on the monitor showing Jonathan's brain. A palette of colors appeared and began organizing themselves into blues and greens— the colors of least activity. Wallace imagined the waters of the sea calming themselves.

While Jonathan was slipping beneath the tide of sleep, the technician munched on an Italian sub and Dr. Wallace reviewed a journal article. About an hour later a slight but perceptible increase of beeps on the heart rate monitor roused both men from their inertial states. Bands of yellows and oranges rippled through various regions of Jonathan's brain. It was like watching an approaching summer storm on radar. A sweep of angry reds then a pause of blue-green calm.

Over the course of the next hour the screen pulsed with more and more red. From a baseline of sixty beats a minute Jonathan's heart rate climbed to one hundred and forty.

"Dr. Wallace. We need to wake him up. His pulse is headed to one fifty!"

"A few more minutes."

The technician relented until the rate shot up to one sixty and showed no sign of subsiding. "That's it. I'm waking him up."

He spoke into the microphone, "Mr. DeBardo! Mr. DeBardo! You need to wake up! Mr. DeBardo!"

Jonathan showed no sign of waking. The monitor flashed one seventy-five. Dr. Wallace jumped up and headed towards the scan room.

"Don't go in there! Let me shut the scanner off."

The scan monitor froze on the last image of a nearly solid red brain when the machine ceased operating. Wallace rushed in with the technician on his heels. Shaking Jonathan did not rouse him. Wallace slapped him. Still nothing. The heart monitor climbed above two hundred.

The technician picked up the phone and dialed 4-4-4-4. "We need the crash cart in Radiology. Room L106. Now!"

Jonathan's heart rate leveled off just above two hundred. Dr. Wallace saw the hint of a smile cross Jonathan's face.

In less than three minutes the Crash Team charged through the door demanding information on the patient. They injected an antiarrhythmia into Jonathan's IV port. Almost immediately his heart rate fell to a moderate level.

Everyone watched as the team leader tried to goad Jonathan into consciousness. Finally, he pinched Jonathan's nose close and held his hand over Jonathan's mouth. Jonathan struggled like a drowning man against his assailant. The team leader released him and Jonathan gulped air frantically.

"Ahh! I can't breathe!" exclaimed Jonathan, fully awake.

The Crash Team examined Jonathan and determined his vitals were all within normal ranges. The room cleared, leaving Dr. Wallace alone with Jonathan.

"You were with Julie again, weren't you?" It wasn't a question.

Jonathan nodded and smiled.

Dr. Wallace thought to say something but held it. "That's enough for tonight. Too bad I paid for the whole night."

Dr. Wallace waited for Jonathan to change and the two walked out. "You gave us all quite a scare tonight, Jonathan. We're not doing research on comas."

"Don't worry about me. I was in my happy place."

"Flying again?"

"No. Just with..."

"With Julie." Dr. Wallace held back from saying something about Jonathan's obsession before concluding, "Wish I had thought to get a blood sample to check your dopamine levels. It'd be interesting to see just how happy you were."

The following night Dr. Wallace fumbled for the incessantly ringing phone beside his bed, "Hello?"

"Security? What time is it?"

"Who's calling this late?" Wallace's wife mumbled from the opposite side of the bed.

"Emergency Room? I'll meet you there, Sergeant. Give me half an hour or so to get there."

"Who was that?"

"Campus Security. Some sort of break in at my lab. I need to go. Go back to sleep. I'll tell you all about it tomorrow morning."

Dr. Wallace walked through the early morning cool from the visitor's lot to the emergency room lobby. Sergeant Daniels stood waiting for him by the door. They both headed towards the examination area.

"Sorry to call you at three in the morning, Doc. Thought you'd want to know as soon as possible."

"Yes. Yes. Of course. So, what's happened?"

"My guy was doing a routine security check in your building and found an unlocked door in your lab. He went to investigate and found that guy layin' on the table." Daniels pointed to one of the curtained examination bays.

"Officer Collins thought he was asleep but couldn't wake him. So he called for the EMT's. They brought him here. He's alive. They just can't wake him up."

Wallace jerked the curtain back to see who was on the gurney. "Oh, no."

"You know him?"

Dr. Wallace sighed heavily, "He's my grad student. Jonathan DeBardo." Looking at Jonathan, he could see that same, slight smile as before.

"Does he have a drug problem? Anything like that?"

"No. Not at all. He, uh, recently broke up with a girl. He was a little depressed. That's all."

"Suicide?"

"No! He wasn't trying to kill himself." Dr. Wallace snapped back.

"We found a note." The sergeant held up a clear plastic evidence bag. "Maybe you can shed some light on this. All it says is: '*Don't try bringing me back. I'm where I want to be. Jonathan.*' Do you know what he's talking about, Doc?"

"Yes. He's in a reality of his own choosing."

THE END