

Disabling Dreams

The first night, Lindsey dreamed that she'd run into the back of the fat woman's heels with a grocery cart. Not hard enough to get any more than a glare from the biddy. The same woman who'd cut her in the check out line yesterday: agile enough to waddle-run her way to the front of the line, yet handicapped enough to bear the sticker that dangled from her rusty sedan's rearview mirror. Lindsey had watched her stuff her corpulence in between steering wheel and cracked vinyl bench seat before backing away from the \$250 penalty signpost.

Odd. Lindsey considered herself compassionate; she volunteered weekly at the VA hospital, gave to Greenpeace and Save the Children. She harbored no animosity toward the disabled. But when did fat become a disability? When did the consequences of gluttony and sloth require legal accommodation?

Perhaps this woman represented an amalgam of society's burgeoning victim mentality. Lindsey had recently acknowledged her annoyance, a thinly suppressed irritation, with certain members of the plus-sized population. This was especially true when she traveled (one seat meant one seat, not half of hers, too), but also when she shopped. They blocked entire aisles, their vibrating flab overflowing like fleshy lava atop motorized mountains.

They wanted equal access and opportunity. But they had disabled—more accurately *burdened*—themselves and her with their choices. Life was simply a matter of choice, action and consequence.

Each Wednesday evening at the VA she tried to help substance abusers own this simple truth. Those who refused to take responsibility would never recover. Because they'd paid for others' freedom, they believed they should now be free to get high or drunk, to live in a dream.

Too many people indulged in what they wanted when they wanted it. Lindsey knew the choice-action-consequence model accommodated no exceptions, no entitlements. Cake, crack or Colt 45...the substance was irrelevant. A diet of unrestricted access and opportunity could turn anyone into an oblivious abuser.

The second night, Lindsey strapped a sheathed six-inch hunting knife around her thigh, donned a black ski mask and grabbed a Red Bull. Three hours before dawn, she parked a block away from Natalie's condo, found the NURDREAM tag and carefully punctured all four tires on the black BMW M6 convertible. She sprinkled nails in front of and behind the car.

The next morning her boss was chatty, uncharacteristic of *Nattilla the Hun* and unsettling given Lindsey's dream. Despite a bad headache, Lindsey was happy to hear Natalie share credit with her for a recently acquired account. Instead of the same old Natalie Show at K+O Marketing, her boss told the group, "The clients said we cinched it after they saw Lindsey's boards."

For almost five years, Natalie hadn't recognized Lindsey publicly or privately. Lindsey's recent performance review was skipped. Then, forgotten. In prior years, Lindsey had to fill out her own form, usually advised to readjust her ratings of "fully meets expectations" to a combination of "mostly meets expectations" and a few "sometimes meets

expectations.” There was no rationale or discussion. The salary adjustments were all the same: 2.5%. No one complained; no one complimented. Lindsey accepted.

The third night, Brian snuck into her bed. “What the...? Where the hell did you come from?”

“I know, baby,” he said, his stale smoky breath laced with scotch, “but I needed to get my head straight.”

“For eight months?” she felt his hand between her legs. She pushed it away.

“Please Linds, please. I need you.”

The next thing she knew, she was pouring whiskey in a glass, “To help you relax,” she offered sweetly. Once he passed out, she placed a cigarette between her lips, lit it and laid it on the pillow beside his pretty face. Once the bed was ablaze, she sprinkled the whiskey, intensifying the pyre.

She sat up, sweat trickling down her muscular chest and back. What the hell was happening? Her heart and mind sprinted uncontrollably. Perspiration poured from her skin. She couldn’t stay in bed; the urge was silly, but she had to see her face in the mirror. Besides the furrow between her brows, everything seemed all right. She didn’t even know what she was looking for.

What had she eaten last night? For the last three nights? Her head throbbed with excruciating pain. Had she used a new lotion? Taken a different over-the-counter med? An allergy? Did she need an exorcism?

Violence wasn’t her thing. Not even in dreams. Her mother had been a shrink so Lindsey knew all about theoretical camps. Everything from repressed identity and desire to her mother’s position: Dreams are bullshit.

When her mom died, Lindsey had five months to finish a double major in graphic design and marketing at Northwestern. Despite her department head's offer, she didn't want an extra semester. She got inside her work and refocused on her goals. *Choice, action, consequence*. Her mother's last words became motivational fuel: Lindsey was here to make the world better. Every day.

Lindsey took the tea she had steeped in between wide-eyed blinks, shallow breaths, and shaky hands. She crawled into the overstuffed chair in the living room. Her damp skin now invited shivers. Once the afghan covered her from neck to toes, she closed her eyes and slept, dreamless.

She awoke to her Blackberry buzzing from the bedroom. Regretting she'd forgotten to turn it off, she unwrapped herself to retrieve it. A text message from K+O: Natalie's condo had burned down last night. Natalie was inside. *Was inside. Burned down...* Lindsey caught her breath. She remembered Natalie's inane tagline: "Let me get my head around it." She'd utter it while appearing to meditate, fondling blonde locks with perfectly sculpted, lacquered nails. No doubt she was strategizing how to spin a minus into a plus – how to attach + N (or better yet, N +) to K+O. Natalie was about two things: making partner and Natalie. Now, neither was possible. Lindsey tried to get her head around a single question: *What did my dream have to do with it?*

Lindsey could call in sick. But she didn't want to be alone. She could go to work. But she would be agitated and possibly difficult. She hated difficult, being an obstacle. She needed to talk to someone. God, the thought of contacting Brian... could she? He was, or she thought he'd been, her best friend. But how could a best friend cut her out of his life? His last words were, "I know you want what's best for me and I have to go to LA. I'll let you

know what's going on after I get settled." She had said, "No need," without tears and in an even voice. It was better that way.

On her way to the office, a rusted out Buick prevented her from going more than 22 miles an hour. Suddenly the rotund shape of the woman driver registered. Instantaneously, it seemed, the woman's right rear tire blew out. Lindsey instinctively braked, stopping within inches from the clunker's bumper.

Tempted to back up and go around her, Lindsey chose to park and walked up to the driver's side. "Are you okay?" she offered. The woman was bent over her wheel, hands shaking. "I don't know what happened," she looked completely confused as if the rapture had come and left her behind.

"Would you like me to call someone for you?" The woman had no response, but looked squarely into Lindsey's eyes, adding extra discomfort to Lindsey's discombobulated thoughts. "Okay," Lindsey said, noting her patronizing tone.

As she stepped back from the Buick, Lindsey noticed the woman's other tires. The two on the drivers' side were punctured with nails. She felt her heartbeats quicken. She walked around the back of the car. Rear right, completely blown. Front right, more nails.

She walked in front of the woman's car, back around to her window. "Where have you been, with all these nails in your tires?"

The woman seemed to regain her wits, "Why are you questioning me? Are you a policeman?" Lindsey realized she should call 911. She returned to her car. The woman glowered at her in the rearview mirror. Twelve minutes later, EMS pulled up, followed shortly by a squad car. She could hear the woman grumble at one of the responders: "I'm

not paying for this!! If that girl hadn't called you... what are you doing? I'm not paying for any of it!"

An attractive officer took Lindsey's information before telling her she was free to leave. That inconvenience had lasted 37 minutes. Great. Now the real fun of rush hour traffic could begin. But it didn't. Before Lindsey heard the click of her seat belt, her phone rang. An unfamiliar number. "Hey, Lindsey, It's me."

Her heart pounded again. Was she losing her mind? God, please, if she was losing her mind, let it be altogether and relatively painless, not like this. She wanted to hang up, but given what had happened so far, she had to know. "What is it, Brian?"

"Well, that's not the greeting I'd expected," his voice attempted a lilt. She stayed silent.

"I'm in town for a couple days and was wondering if you'd meet me for dinner."

"I don't think so."

"I have some explaining to do and I won't ask for anything else, just dinner."

"Really?" her sarcastic tone surprised her.

"Please. How about 6:30, tonight. I'll pick you up."

"I'm working out until 7:15, just like always." He was silent. "I'll meet you for racquetball; that's the best I can offer."

"I would, but I have an injury." Lindsey's fingers turned cold around the phone. "Yeah, my Achilles. Someone rammed a cart..." she didn't hear the rest because she hung up. She sat another minute trying not to shake, then she turned the car around towards home.

Lindsey wasn't even sure what to research. Was it clairvoyance? Premonitions? Prophecy? Premonitions had to do with emotions. What she experienced was closer to precognition. Her sightings, albeit through dreams and inaccurate in terms of who was involved, had happened. And, just as important, in all these precognitions, she was the perpetrator. Why?

She was determined to pursue this logically: the same three people; identical fates but for different ones. The obese woman represented all the people who blame others for their self-inflicted woes. Natalie was the narcissistic, superficial authority figure. And Brian. Brian was the one she thought wouldn't let her down. Not like he had.

She took a bath to relax. The humidity seemed to soothe the pounding in her head. She remembered their lovemaking in this tub; she'd connected with Brian on a level that she would have thought impossible before they met. Memories of that connection conjured tears. She wiped them away, then recomposed. Lindsey had to abstain from emotion and rely on some scale of justice.

She could take care of herself. And she did, twice, while the water was still warm. After she napped, she saw that Brian had called again. The voicemail was empty but Natalie's boss, Mr. Krueger, expressed his "personal condolences" in a group text message, followed by arrangements for Natalie's service the next day.

"A memorial service doesn't show charred body parts," Brian told her at dinner. She looked at him incredulously, as if he actually thought she didn't know or that she might have worried about such a possibility. Instead of irritation, she found herself amused and easily endeared to him. He was a brain with the social skills of a surfer dude.

“Duh,” she said.

“Just trying to keep stress on the down-low for you. Before we ordered, didn’t you say you dreamed about a fire last night? That’s Twilight Zone shit. Tell me about it.”

Lindsey swallowed a half-masticated mouthful of bread. She wasn’t sure why she was at dinner, except she wanted to know more about his ankle without giving him the impression that she cared—like a girlfriend.

“Look, Brian. I didn’t like Natalie very much but I am sorry she died and it was just another crazy coincidence.” She tried to shift gears quickly. “I came out with you tonight because I want to know about your ankle.”

“What do you mean *another crazy coincidence*?”

She’d forgotten how transparent she was with him, even when she was trying her best to hold something back. “I’ve had several dreams where things, uh, sort of come to pass.”

“Like my ankle? Did you dream about my ankle?”

God, he was still adorable. “No, not your ankle. Someone else’s but the same injury.”

“Who was it?”

“Just someone I saw in a grocery store.”

“Another guy?” Was he jealous?

“No. It doesn’t matter. It wasn’t you. And then I had a dream that I slashed Natalie’s tires, but two days later someone else’s tire blew out in front of me and all four of her tires were punctured. You see? But in my dream, I’d done it.”

She suddenly wanted to leave.

“What about the fire? Did you do that, too?”

She was stuck. "I set it outside. I don't know whose place it was or who, if anyone, was inside."

"In your dream, you mean," he looked so serious.

"Of course! But you see, these three things *happened* but to different people."

"How do you know that it wasn't Natalie in the fire dream? You just said you didn't know whose place it was or who was inside." She felt nauseated.

"So *I* was the motivation for your arson dream?"

Lindsey hated how quickly he was putting things together. But what did she expect? She hadn't thought any of this through. Not the dinner, certainly not the conversation. Or the feelings that she still had for him. "Okay. Yes. But it disturbed me so much I couldn't sleep."

"That's a comfort."

She looked down at the spot where her food would soon be placed. The tablecloth reminded her of oilcloth, only flimsier. Everything seemed to imitate the past but was cheaper. Less real. *How much of what we remember is real?* She quickly chose to disassociate from this thought.

"Hey, Linds," he put his elbow on the table and extended his hand. She looked at him, grateful for the disruption, and began to put her right hand in his. His right palm bore a raised pink scar. Lindsey gasped, "Where in the world...?" and then stopped midsentence as if she'd forgotten something important, like her name.

Brian didn't answer. He stared at her, his face expectant. After a few seconds, he looked away.

The server waited until Lindsey lowered her hand into her lap before placing mandarin chicken salad in front of her. Brian got his rare steak and eggs. They ate in relative quiet with his occasional LA blurb-like punctuation. Brian's sister's three-year quest for stardom and how she almost made it – final callbacks – onto a CSI episode, which could have, probably would have, launched her career. His impromptu chat at a sushi bar with Quentin Tarantino. "Isn't that funny? You always said you didn't like him. He was too violent."

He was good at dark humor. Lindsey felt better. She had eaten. Brian was here to talk to, even though he was giving her shit. But that made her feel better, too.

After dinner, she offered him a bed on her couch. Over a glass of wine at her place, he told her why he was back: "I want you to forgive me. I left and was irresponsible about it. I hurt you. I'm sorry."

His authenticity, those sincere brown eyes made her want to change her mind about sleeping arrangements. But before she could fully imagine the happy ending, he took it away: "I want to put the past behind us. I want to forgive and be forgiven. More than anything, I want to be friends."

As long as nothing showed on the outside, Lindsey would be okay. The immediate heaviness of her heart reminded her how it had been weightless for the last two hours. How happy and stable she had felt since dinner.

"Of course," she said, not trusting herself to ask what he had promised months ago to tell her, the *why* he had left in the first place. Not comprehending his audacity to want to forgive. To forgive *her*? If she said one more thing, she would break open, like slashed rubber.

Instead she maintained a pleasant face, went to her room and crawled into bed. Although she longed for diversion, even a violent dream, she remained dreamless.

At Natalie's service, Brian tried to hold her hand. But she kept both of them in her lap. The service was short. At least Natalie had not pretended to be religious. Lindsey tried to feel sympathy for her former boss's parents, but even they did not show much emotion.

As she and Brian walked to her car, a police officer, the cutie who'd taken her information at the tire blowout scene, asked Lindsey if she had a few moments to talk with him. Her head began to throb, but she didn't want to appear uncooperative. "May I go home first or...?"

The officer was curt: "Someone said they saw you at Natalie Nelson's apartment around 2 a.m. the night before last. If that's so, I need your help in a standard arson investigation."

She tried to remember something about Miranda rights. Didn't he have to tell her about a choice to stay silent or an attorney? Her confusion no doubt showed.

"You're not being taken in for questioning. If you were there, I just want to know what you know." Was he smiling? What did he know? What did *she* know?

"I wasn't there!" She protested too loudly.

"I see. I'm sorry to have bothered you." He nodded and got into his car.

Lindsey's car was quiet. Brian could help her into bed. Maybe he could hook her up with a muscle relaxer. He still had lots of friends in town.

She didn't want to think about anything. Just sleep. And if it were possible, awaken to her once routine, dreamless life. Brian helped her out of her coat and poured her a glass of water, in his hand a generic looking tablet that he said was a mild sedative.

She dropped into another dream, this time lucid. As if she had floated above her body and was able to see Brian scour every drawer, cupboard, and closet of her townhouse. She watched him collect half a box of construction nails, a black ski mask, a six-inch hunting knife, five cans of Red Bull, an almost full pack of Camels, a half-empty Johnny Walker bottle and a newly-cut door key.

He opened her laptop. She hadn't changed her password. The receipt for last week's LA trip was still in her inbox. He showed no surprise. She didn't think he'd seen her ram the luggage cart into his calves, the bent lip of protruding metal slicing the back of his ankles. She thought she'd escaped with perfect timing into LAX's perpetual throng. A few moments later, she'd spied his new girlfriend guiding him to a bench. Then he'd hobbled out to a taxi, holding on to the woman the same way Lindsey had wanted him to hold on to her.

He wiped the e-ticket from her laptop along with hardware store receipts. When he appeared satisfied that he'd combed all her files, he placed the nails and mask, bottle, cigarettes, key, knife and cans in a grocery bag and tucked it under his arm.

She watched him carefully open her bedroom door. He walked to her bedside. Maybe he was thinking that she was beautiful and that she would soon be well. He began to bend toward her, to kiss her perhaps, then he paused and stood up straight. He pivoted and walked toward the bureau. His hand groped along its surface. When he felt the ivory handle, he grasped it and brought it close to his eyes. He put the dull blade's tip to his palm,

tracing the raised mark it had left... *who had left...*? He reopened the bag and dropped the letter opener inside, clanking against its contents.

Instantly, she glimpsed a deeper, older dream. A wound reopening, the short, deep gash of memory now inescapable: her thrashing arm, his hands raised to protect his chest and face. The contrast of generous red warmth spilling onto the hard bony handle and onto her hand.

She yearned for oblivion but could not stop her loud sobs. She had no choice but to feel the wracking pain of grief against her ribs with each uncontrollable bellow. Yet her face remained expressionless, her mouth silent, her body supine.

He walked back to her bedside: "Goodbye, Linds. This is all I can do. If I could make you well, I would."

She awoke the next morning without an alarm and in plenty of time to get ready for work. She would make sure that Brian would return. Her former boss's job was vacant: a new goal. She brushed her teeth, spit and as she lifted her head from the sink, she smiled at the mirror. This was a new day full of choice, action and consequence. If she ever forgot this, as good dreams are sometimes lost upon waking, she only needed to remember her mother's last words: She was here to make the world better. Every day.