

Making the Most of the Morning

Simon sat up in bed and thought about what he was going to do with the time left in the day.

He guessed that it was around ten, meaning that if he stayed up until midnight he would have fourteen more hours. Yet no ideas came to mind. The day stretched out before him like a blank canvas, all the more intimidating because the canvas was indeed blank. There was nothing on the canvas to start with, no ongoing inspiration to draw upon and pull him through the remaining hours. He was free to do whatever he liked but could not find any reason to spend his time one way and not another.

Simon, as he was prone to do when feeling indecisive, let his mind go as he lay back down in the bed. The apprehension about beginning the day dissipated into a slow, lazy thinking. His mind went somewhere else- in one moment he felt the intense concentration about what to do with the day, in the next moment he was lying back down; he had lost control, there was no telling where his mind was about to go. It was usually better, he concluded, to let his mind do what it pleased- to watch it work its way through the world he lived in: process it, fantasize about it, and see what happened.

A few years earlier, Simon had read an article in a magazine about a tribe in the Amazon, (or perhaps it was Southeast Asia?), of natives who shared their dreams with each other every day at breakfast. The dream sharing was an important part of everyone's

day and an event not to be missed. Attendance was mandatory, and every member of the tribe attached significance to all the events which took place in their dreams. The tribe was notable, from the point of view of the anthropologist who was writing about them, for their agreeable nature and lack of conflict with other tribes.

In each home of the tribe, a patriarch would sit at the front of their breakfast table, which Simon imagined as being old and oak with the ability to seat up to twenty people. The patriarch had obvious authority over the situation, all of his words and glances held deep significance. The other tribe members listened when he spoke and would not speak unless directed to do so.

Simon felt himself moving increasingly deeper inside of his vision. He was still awake, his eyes were still open, but they were completely out of focus. If someone had entered the room and moved into his vision he very well may not have been able to tell that they had arrived. Simon's picture in his head became his vision of the moment- his room; his mess; his life; all put on hold.

At the large oak table a boy is motioned to speak. The boy stands up deliberately and without hesitation. Simon notes that he looks a little like he did as a child, yet holds himself with a confidence Simon doesn't know. The boy is ten years old. He is barefoot. He is skinny and athletic, with a belly button that is exceptionally deep. The boy takes a deep breath, looks toward the patriarch without looking him in the eye, and begins to tell his dream:

"I was walking. It was cold, and I was tired, but I continued to walk. My bare feet felt the cold ground and I wanted to stop walking but found that I could not. My feet moved

without my desire for them to do so. I felt alert and attentive, my senses sharpened by the cold coming through my feet. All this time I was afraid and very anxious. My head jerked back and forth for no reason, like I was expecting something to jump out at me at any moment, even though I knew in my heart that nothing was there that wanted to harm me. All of the plants and all of the animals scared me, and even though I knew all of them by name, I could not remember their names: the whole jungle that I was familiar with felt new and strange, and I would walk faster to try and get away. But the forest seemed to extend forever, there was no light at the end of the path, and I did not know where I was going.”

The room is silent. The patriarch at the end of the table is not eating like everyone else but instead silently meditating on what the young boy had said. He motions for the boy to sit down and the boy sits. Simon imagines the young boy’s heart racing and desperately wonders, just as the boy must wonder, what the patriarch is going to say in response to the dream: he feels his own heart racing as he lies in the bed, counts the beats with the seconds and notices that yes, his blood is flowing fast, it feels like he just spoke in front of a crowd of people.

“Tonight, dream the same dream,” the Patriarch replies. “Don’t keep walking when you get scared. Recognize when you are afraid; stop, feel the fear, and use all of your energy to figure out what you are afraid of. When you are no longer scared, go up to the plants and animals one by one and say their name to them, because these names will come back to you when you are no longer afraid, and tell them you are not scared, and have never had any reason to be.”

Simon returns to his body, noticed his room again, found his body inside of his

room, and stretched out his legs and hands. What is remarkable, he considered, is that they can control what they dream every night. That this boy, who is so young, can somehow decide to dream the same dream, to find himself in the same situation, and then do the same thing he did the night before, except differently.

It was as if the tribe believed their dreaming self to occupy a concrete space, a fixed place, somewhere you could draw on a map. They could walk around in this dream world, like a city, and decide where to go and when to dream some things and not others. Simon entertained the idea of not getting high tonight to see what effect it would have on his dreams. But first he would need to make it through the day.

Simon arrived in the kitchen and opened the refrigerator looking for something to eat. The refrigerator was divided into shelves, with each member of the house having a shelf of their own to put food. Simon's shelf was one of the middle ones. Droopy lettuce from the shelf above crowded the top of his shelf. The smell from the fridge itself overwhelmed his nostrils as he continued to hold open the door.

Simon, like all the other members of the house, was only responsible for keeping his shelf clean. But no matter how clean he would happen to keep his shelf, (which, for the record, is not very clean at all), there was no way to escape the smell. It existed in the same shared space. Simon took another moment, continued to scan the fridge over in an attempt to find something appealing. But it wasn't any use. He was no longer hungry.

After a few moments, Simon cautiously reopened the fridge to examine his shelf and attempt to ascertain if that shelf was indeed his own, or whether someone else was also using it. There was food on it he certainly didn't recognize and never used. Still,

thought Simon, it could conceivably be mine. Simon picked up one of the strange items.

Dijon mustard.

It was entirely possible that at some point he had purchased Dijon mustard. Hell, he liked Dijon mustard. But only on a select number of things. It obviously would not be appropriate for daily use. Simon checked to see how much was left in the jar.

$\frac{3}{4}$ full.

The Dijon mustard by itself was not evidence enough that someone else might be using the shelf.

And suddenly everything in the fridge did not appear to be owned or not owned by him, and all the foods were equally as probable to be his or not be his. Simon's entire diet appeared to him as a random assortment of foods, eaten at random times in a random order, with no apparent scheme or intention. Obviously healthy foods, vegetables, juices, rotting along with chips and cheese, all thrown together in the blender of his stomach. A hulking brownish, greenish mash of empty calories. Simon felt nauseous when it dawned on him that all the energy he had, the energy to move his arms and his legs and power his brain, his ability to speak and to be understood, all came from within this fridge and was all cooked within this kitchen. Simon, already far removed from having any appetite for breakfast, silently resolved himself to never eat anything ever again.

By now it was 11am, which Simon usually found to be the perfect time of the morning, with the sun clearly in the sky and the morning dew beginning to steam off the leaves. Unused to being sober at this juncture of the day, and briefly experiencing some

satisfaction with being so, he felt enough energy and enthusiasm to actually consider doing something. The day now stretched before Simon resembling something like opportunity. Eleven would become noon would become one and then an entire afternoon and evening. But on closer inspection, Simon realized the feeling he was experiencing was not giddy optimism at the options before him but a nervous tension with the knowledge that the day had to be filled by something. He felt the urgent need, before becoming crippled by indecision or passivity, to decide what that something was going to be.

Simon took this fear into his heart like a small animal and began to be afraid of the space he was in. Perhaps it was the space and not himself that made it so challenging to get anything done. A couch, in the living room off the kitchen, covered in stains and someone's clothes. Pairs of shoes in a line leading to the front door. Walls, bare and dirty. Everything that had seemed full of opportunity a short time ago no longer held that promise. Instead of seeing a home, Simon saw a problem.

And he thought: This is no way to start the day.

But what is a good way to start the day?, Simon continued, and how does everyone else start their days? What do all of the other people in this neighborhood do, whose names and jobs I don't know, when they wake up in the morning? Perhaps they start it with alarm clocks and coffee and screaming babies. Maybe they have breakfast together every morning as a family. Maybe they eat the same thing every day in the same way and before going to work they kiss their wives and they kiss their kids and they tell them they love them and then they go. They live the same routine everyday and it never changes and then they die. It's as simple as that.

To Simon this all sounded absolutely fantastic. He felt he would give anything in that moment to be the man who lived down the road from him, who drove by his house every morning while he was still sleeping. But the fear Simon felt most acutely in his life- the deep fear that lived behind the fear that was the man at the desk- was that if he were to have those things, a job to go to and a wife and kids who he kissed goodbye, that the fear and anxiety he carried presently, and the grief he felt daily that life was never going to get any better than it already was, would exist just as fully in his new married, family life as well. Simon feared the man he would be in the future, no matter how great any of the external circumstances appeared to be, would at heart be the same miserable man he was now.

Simon imagined a very thin cloth that covered himself and everything he touched. This cloth was, for lack of a better term, hopeless pessimism. And Simon feared, or rather felt that he knew, that this hopeless pessimism would be there always; it would never disappear, and had the possibility of infecting his future wife and children. Perhaps unhappiness was genetic, or like an STD, and he wanted nothing less than to pass it on.

Yet even if they did not inherit it, his future family would be too close for him to be able to hide his unhappiness. And when future Simon would go to kiss his children goodbye, he would have the same sinking feeling in his gut he had now, it would be no different, and Simon's kids would feel his unhappiness, and so would his wife, and secretly they might blame him for his unhappiness behind his back. Worse still they might take it personally and believe it was their fault he was unhappy, and there would be nothing he could do about it. How would Simon be able to explain to them that he had always felt like this? How would he explain that he tried, that he was trying, and that he did not know what

to do anymore? That life was something he desperately wanted to be in love with but it just felt like things were moving too fast or too slow and that he had never figured out the pace and been able to set his feet.

Simon stood up from the couch and looked out the living room window. A man and a woman walked their dog. A squirrel scampered up a tree. And he knew he needed a better way to start the day. Yes, he was unhappy. But dwelling on it wasn't doing anything. He needed a change.

Methodically, Simon began to unravel his day, which parts of it irked him, and which parts gave him joy. No matter the configuration, no matter how he rearranged the puzzle of his life in his mind, the solution to the problem, and a potential underlying reason for all of his unhappiness, lay in the refrigerator. Simon felt like a priest with an exorcism to perform. Whatever demons dwelled inside that space needed to be expunged.

Because if we are what we eat, thought Simon, than it is no coincidence I'm not doing very well.

Every item in the refrigerator, regardless of how likely it was to be the main perpetrator of the awful smell, now became Simon's enemy. There was no room for compassion in the operation. The objective here was simple: he needed to clear out all of the unwelcome scum and restore order to his fridge, the home for his food.

On the top shelf, two beers. Unopened, harmless, but garbage all the same.

A rotten tomato. Clearly garbage.

An unopened jar of mayo. Garbage as well.

A container of yogurt, an entire ecosystem of red, blue and purple mold inside. A

very satisfying piece of garbage.

In the motions of throwing away all the items in the refrigerator, Simon felt like a king, a royal dictator, strong willed and iron fisted. How dare they, these unloyal subjects, seek to defile his kingdom! Simon sat on a throne, a beautiful golden seat, high above the rest of his throne room. Items from the fridge were brought before him trembling, fearing for their lives, having already watched the execution of those who had come before them. Other items waited, surrounded by guards, lined up against the far wall waiting for their turn to be called forward. Everyone kept one eye on what they were doing and another eye always on their King, anxiously awaiting his decision. Simon felt overwhelmed by his power and control over the situation. Simon spoke, there was a boom to his voice but it was also sharp, and before he was even aware of what he had said the item had been dragged off to the gallows, (which in all reality was merely the trash can), a shocked murmur went through the chamber, and the next item was escorted up by guards dressed in bright red.

It took some time for Simon to be able to figure out the relationship between the fantasy world of the courtroom and the life he was actually living in his own kitchen. By the time he had done so, all of the food in the fridge was gone. Nothing had been spared his wrath. The trash can was overflowing. Simon, feeling slightly odd but with little remorse, took out the various shelves and drawers of the fridge and brought them out to the back porch for cleaning.

It was the first time he had stepped out into the light of the day. The feeling of being productive was unfamiliar and oddly pleasant. Yet cleaning out the fridge was not going to sustain him through the whole day. There was only so long, even in daydream mode, that

this task could possibly take. Simon felt the fear, and the need to keep going. His undistracted self was creeping on him.

His first thought was to smash one glass sheet from the fridge and then another until they were all smashed. He wanted to throw the plastic shelving into the woods beyond the house. Then he would take the broken glass, a sharp and long shard, and drag it across his stomach, below his belly button from left to right in a deep gash, then drag it across his wrists, with the blood flowing into thick puddles.

And all of the thoughts about the items in the fridge appeared to him now as a fantasy of control, the fantasy itself being an over correction of the lack of control he felt in the rest of his life; a neurological stab in the dark to bring some kind of meaning and order. And Simon, now deep inside of this new fantasy, as his fantasy self lay bloody on the ground, related to all of the people who had ever done awful things just because they could, and he understood them and felt sorry for them and for himself. Simon recognized, fully, the helplessness of doing anything. Distraction wasn't working.

In that moment, Simon wanted nothing more than to be out of the vision of himself taking his life. It had become too vivid, and he recognized a lack of trust in himself to distinguish fully between what was fantasy, something completely unreal, and what was reality, an action he would never be able to take back. Simon struggled to look at the railings of his real porch, to feel the sponge in his hand which he had intended to use to clean the shelves with, and return to the task he was set upon doing. But the daydream was still there, it played on like a movie inside of Simon's head, and regardless of his desire for it to go away it stayed, and he found himself watching, unable not to watch, curious to see

how it all ended.

Simon looked down to the gashes on his stomach. New gashes had formed on his wrists and the puddle of blood was growing quickly. And in his mind he reached for an unbroken glass shelf, and placing it next to the blood pool, dipped his finger in the blood intending to write a message. But Simon was at a loss as to what his dying, fantasy self would write. How was he possibly going to sum up the whole of this experience to the fantasy people who would no doubt be arriving soon and discovering his dead fantasy body? The hopelessness he felt and the lack of control? The deep understanding of why people are attracted to power and why it is so awful, and his sense that life for everyone everywhere was intolerable and never going to get any better? What unifying final sentence could there be that would give some meaning to it all?

There was no message, and his fantasy self lost too much blood and died, one finger covered in blood ready to write on the shelf of the fridge but with no words written.

Well, that may be a little dramatic, thought Simon.

He even laughed to himself, recognized the vision had gone too far, and felt the relief that it was over.

Simon returned to the task of cleaning the fridge with the intention, of being able to show the house that he did indeed have a plan and was not just randomly throwing out the house's food for lack of something better to do. Simon took each shelf and scrubbed off the muck from the decomposing vegetables. A couple of drawers had stains that were too thick to be scrubbed for the time being and were left in the sink to soak. He lost himself in his work, able to forget briefly about the mental state that had led him to begin cleaning the

fridge in the first place, and finished the job with the enthusiasm and creativity of an artist.

“This fridge is a masterpiece!” said Simon out loud to himself. And after what for Simon was a full day of work, but in reality was a few hours of a relatively simple chore, Simon rewarded himself with a much needed afternoon nap.

Simon’s mind, usually knee-deep in THC by this point in the day, was very clear, and desperately in need of sober sleep. Simon slept harder and deeper than he had in some time. And he dreamed.

In Simon’s dream, it was Christmas. A gigantic decorated tree was in the middle of a large room surrounded by gifts. The space Simon was in appeared to be his grandparent’s home, a place he had celebrated Christmas for as long as he could remember, except that the room, instead of being inside a house, extended as far as he could see in all directions. Couches, coffee tables and rugs lay everywhere, set up in arrangements for small groups to sit. At each small couch circle there was his family, all of his family, immediate and extended, engaged in conversation. Simon found himself in the center of the room with a circle of family members but he could not make out what any of them were saying. Even though he understood many of the individual words it was impossible for him to put them together in a sentence that made sense.

Simon’s uncle, a well meaning man with a large beard in his mid-fifties, was going on about something and had attracted the attention of everyone in the circle.

“Family yesterday, meanings of together, in euphoria grandson day way,” he began, “but Thursday, tons of fun, author of love, hope, distinction and myself.”

And everyone began to laugh.

“Uncle, I don’t know what you’re saying,” said Simon, in a voice that sounded very unlike his own. “Would you say it again, but maybe differently?” Simon added.

The woman next to Simon faced him. It was his mother, except she was a child. Simon recognized his mother as a child from pictures he had seen.

“Center stage, keep refrigerated, sponge the fire, Simon!” his mother said. “Complex and romantic, self-assured, scale of lightning.”

Everyone else in the circle nodded in affirmation.

Simon nodded at his mother, afraid to do otherwise, and she nodded back. He had the fear that if he did not go along with what they were saying then they might feel he didn’t belong and would proceed to angrily throw him out of the whole gathering. Simon pointed in a direction outside of the circle and excused himself. The others nodded. They seemed to understand he was leaving and accepted it.

Simon scanned the room and looked at the other circles of people chatting, hoping to find one he might fit into better, and where he might be able to understand the conversation. On closer inspection, he noticed that not only were all the other circles of family speaking similar nonsense, but that every family member he saw had multiple copies of themselves at this gathering from different ages. He was able to see five different versions of his mother, none of them the same age as she was now. Simon could even see younger and older versions of himself mingling throughout the Christmas party.

From the sky, which had no shape, texture or color, and which Simon was also surprised to see because he thought they were indoors, rain began to fall on the party in a

steady pour. Nobody seemed to notice or call any attention to it. Conversations and attitudes didn't change. Water dripped down people's faces and their hair and clothes began to mat and stick to skin. Simon felt cold and wet and began to shiver. The rain, and the fact that he was the only one who appeared to notice it, increased his anxiety. Simon felt conspicuously alone, surrounded by the people he loved.

And then an arrow from nowhere struck a younger version of his grandmother in the chest.

"Oh my God!" said Simon aloud. He quickly took in the whole crowd, trying to look for a bow, scanning the direction he thought the arrow might have come from.

"Did anyone see that?" Simon yelled.

Simon's younger grandma crumpled to the ground looking pained, (at least, he thought, she appears to have noticed she was shot), yet the other family members in the circle she'd been in kept talking, an older version of his dad laughed loud and strong as an older version of his cousin appeared to be telling a joke. Next to them, Simon's grandma coughed and spit blood on to the carpet.

Simon ran over to his grandma and put one arm across her back and held her hand with the other.

"Grandma, are you OK?" he asked. "I'm here to help you. We've got to get this arrow out. That's the only thing I know to do right now."

Simon's grandma nodded. He felt the deep relief of being acknowledged and understood and felt his grandma understood the words he was saying, or at the very least knew that he was here to help her.

“Grandma, it’s going to be fine. You’ve got to hang in. There are a lot of people here, our whole family is here. We are all going to help you.”

Another arrow, again appearing to come from nowhere, hit an elderly version of his sister in the leg. Simon’s cousin, from across the room, clutched the back of his head and pulled out an arrow. Blood spurted out of his head to the rhythm of his heart beats.

Simon stayed with his grandma, knowing that the rest of his family was being hit too, that people were dying from all sides. He could hear the arrows whizzing over his head, but there was nothing that could be done about it. For his part he had no fear of being hit himself, and had begun to realize, the longer he had been at the party, that he was not truly a part of whatever it was that was going on.

Simon’s younger grandmother sat up and put both hands to her chest where the arrow was lodged. He noticed, for the first time, that his grandmother had once been a very beautiful woman. He had never before thought of her as having been any younger, of having been his age. And when Simon looked at his own skin on the hand that was holding his grandmother’s he saw that it was deeply veined and wrinkled, and that he was an old man. And Simon realized he had never truly accepted the fact he was going to age.

Blood stained both Simon and his grandmother’s clothes, and both of their hands were covered in blood. His grandmother pulled on the leg of his pants, calling his attention to her face, and she looked still younger. Her face was middle aged, then a young woman’s, a teenager’s, then a small girl’s. Simon felt her hand get smaller in his own and more fragile as her age decreased. She must have been around six now.

Simon’s young girl grandmother pulled on his pant leg again, tugged with the rapid

impatience of a child. He kept his eyes on her face. He knew she was going to die soon, that this was the end, and he wanted her to know that she was not alone, and that she had his full attention.

Simon's grandmother opened her mouth, her very small mouth, and said, "Collected inspired, transcribed to a tree, spoiled churches and small spaces."

Simon couldn't take in her words. He had been waiting for her to speak, had believed they were connecting, and thought that when she did speak something it would be something he would know and understand. He quickly lost interest in his grandmother, and felt she had no connection to his reality and possibly never had.

Simon stood up slowly on his creaky old man knees, and when he looked around he saw there was no one standing anymore. Everyone was on the ground, moaning, speaking nonsense, and spurting blood.

Simon fell to his knees, unable to look at the devastation of his family, and began to cry. Beyond his sorrow he felt something else, a release, a feeling that overshadowed everything. There was a relief in his head that had replaced a tension he had not even known was there. The room and his mind were both silent and he loved it.