

Seven Dreams about a Red Coat

1) You are standing near the front railing on the upper deck of the ferry. The city rises behind you in the morning mist, mysterious, almost threatening. There are people wandering about; I notice the same ones reappearing every few minutes wearing the same gray raincoats, the same downturned hats dripping with moisture, repeating their conversations word for word, their gestures growing more listless with each cycle. They exist, however, only in your background, and you are apparently oblivious to their swirl of motion, its duplicate quality. There are some birds flying about over the dark water, occasionally swooping down over the ferry, in search of food. Light drizzle is falling, as it often does in this region.

This dream is based on a photograph I took several years ago, but it departs from it in significant ways. In the picture it was cold but sunny, and the skyline was not menacing, but glowing in a rich afternoon light. The sun was behind me as I took the picture, thus, my shadow can just be seen in the lower right corner of the photograph. I also recall that I surprised you with the picture, calling your name and snapping it in the same instant. Though your face is partly in shadow as you turn towards me, your expression of consternation and annoyance can clearly be seen.

But in the dream you are not annoyed, you are laughing. Also, your coat is not the black one I remember you wearing on cold winter days. It is, rather, a coat of a deep but vibrant shade of red, similar in cut to the photographed one, but of a richer design. The

collar is particularly luxurious, made of thick, expensive looking fur, and the buttons are larger. Your hair is red as well, and shorter. The modest brown suitcase I bought you for your birthday is no longer at your feet, but has been replaced by a larger one of expensive leather.

As I dream, I suddenly understand the scene I am witnessing. You are famous, probably an actress, though I am unsure of this. It is a photo shoot, and you are the star. The wandering crowd is extras, hired to provide a backdrop. Their gray coats and down turned hats is meant as a contrast to your laughter, your rich clothing. They accentuate your dynamism, your expansive passion.

Two other important differences between the photo and the dream: When you laugh in the dream, you throw your head back, to the point of exposing your teeth. In waking life, I have never seen you laugh in this manner. Also, in the dream, we will never meet. I am and will always be, non-existent in your life, an invisible spectator without even a shadow on a photograph to mark my passing.

2) We are in the midst of an argument, in a large car at night, on our way somewhere. As usual, I have started the argument by laboriously picking apart some random comment you've made, dressing my aggression in a reasoned but sullen recitation of facts. Mostly you stare out the window as I drive and talk, though you occasionally interject with a pithy but ill-timed insult.

I am having a difficult time driving the car; everything is too big. The steering wheel is an enormous ring of plastic, awkward to handle and cold to the touch. I must stretch my body out to reach the petals and I can barely see the dimly lit road in front of me as I

crane my neck upwards. I am also angry because you had said that a.) The car would be easy to drive, and b.) This is certainly the right road to our destination. Neither of these statements is true. The car is ridiculous, and we should not be hurtling down a rocky mountainside to get to the Safeway to find you cold medicine and me cigarettes.

I recall that we argue about the radio. You keep turning it off, while I immediately turn it back on, insisting that it is helping to keep me awake. The sound of the radio is mostly white noise, a low unpleasant screech, though the occasional snatch of a familiar tune can be heard. The interior lighting of the car is equally unpleasant, a dull greenish glow emanating from the dash that washes your skin in a sickly pallor.

As our speed increases on a particularly dangerous section of road, I comment that the red coat you are wearing is frayed at the collar, and seems to be in the process of disintegrating. I state that the coat does not compliment you. I try to sound matter of fact as I speak, but my voice is clearly tinged with aggression. I wonder aloud why you chose to wear this coat, rather than the black one I have always liked. You do not respond. Finally, I ask where you got the coat, as it is unfamiliar to me.

For a moment you are silent as tree branches slap against the window shield. Then you suddenly reach over with both hands and give the steering wheel a hard lurch to the right. The landscape tilts and plummets as the car falls from the road. I scream as we plunge headlong over a cliff. I believe that the car inexplicably catches on fire at some point in our downward descent. You are, of course, laughing.

3) It's fiesta time in this dream, but with a dark twist. We are sitting at a table on a beach in some foreign land. I am annoyed by the marimba music playing in the

background; the notes are shrill and cacophonous. Dogs wander by, sniffing for food, while beach hawkers interrupt us every few minutes, displaying jewelry, shirts, and little flags. You are on your third rum and coke, which is not your usual drink, while I'm nervously gulping Nescafe on ice, heavy with sugar and cream. I must continually shift my chair around the table to avoid the sun, which beats relentlessly on my thinning scalp. To add insult to an already irritating situation, you are blatantly flirting with the young waiter, who wears his shirt open and lingeringly touches your hand and shoulder when he brings you your drinks.

In the dream, I have something urgent I need to explain to you, but I cannot be heard over the music. You gaze at me disinterestedly as I yell and wave my arms about in a futile attempt to pantomime my feelings. I am in the process of drawing a meticulously detailed chart, complete with footnotes and color coding, when you suddenly rise and walk away towards the shore. I am about to follow when a man sits down opposite from me.

I now realize I am sitting in a room. The walls are pale and windowless and the table has become a desk. There is a calendar next to a clock on the wall, and a dying potted plant in the corner. The man, who I now know to be an official of some sort, gives me a stern look, then reaching behind his chair, brings up a large cardboard box which he drops in front of me on the desk. The writing on the lid is in a language I don't understand.

Her effects, he says shortly, and begins pulling items from the box.

I see your shoes, your stockings. There is the bracelet I gave you three Christmas'

ago. Your passport with the picture you didn't like. Finally he pulls out your red coat and places it carefully on the desk. It is wet and smells of the sea. There is a thin layer of salt around the collar.

It weighed her down, he says. There is a reprimand in his voice. You insisted she wear it. It was the wrong time. He sighs and shakes his head. Anyway, you are a fool. He pushes the coat towards me but I am hesitant to touch it. As I finally reach to pick up the coat, it seems to move in my hands. Panicked, I back away from it as the reproachful eyes of the man behind the desk bore into me.

4) I am running, faster than I ever could in waking life. It's as if I've never smoked or spent long years sitting in cafes, waiting for something to happen. I have been running like this for a long while, easily, without effort.

I am in a dense forest. I run through shadow and sudden shafts of light, I jump over logs and stones as nimbly as a deer. I ford rivers and streams, I scurry up embankments, I leap through dense undergrowth.

As I run, I remember a time of waiting in darkness, then a flurry of lights shining in my face. I recall being lifted, carried somewhere. I remember you, standing in the rain, by the side of a busy road. You were weeping.

But the waiting, the darkness, the road, is all behind me now, far down the path.

I come around a corner and stop near a small glade. There, hanging on a branch in front of me, illuminated like a medieval manuscript by a shaft of light, is a red coat. I look at it, knowing it to be something familiar, but unable to place it in any context. I approach it cautiously, circling around it like an animal. I reach a hesitant hand out to

touch it, feeling the worn and frayed fabric, the hard buttons, smooth and bone-like.

I see that there are other objects in this glade, equally strange yet evocative. A pair of eyeglasses, with the right lens shattered, lies mutely on a nearby log. A journal, bound in leather, lies open on a patch of moss. I understand that the thin cramped handwriting is my own. It is a letter to you, a mixture of rancorous complaints and effusive compliments, some awkwardly erotic. I turn away, embarrassed by the clumsy sentiment, the hint of desperation in the words.

Nearby there is a collection of items, neatly placed, as if on display. There is a watch, which I suspect is mine. The cover is shattered, and the wristband is ripped apart. Next to it is a cell phone with a blank screen. There is a pen, a cigarette lighter, a small Swiss army knife. There is currency and coin, placed neatly in a plastic bag. Finally, there is a wallet, carefully unfolded, its contents meticulously arrayed. I see your picture there, next to my drivers license, my bankcard, a video rental card, and a business card from a distant motel we stayed in years ago

I realize as I stand there in the quiet forest, that these momentos still have a power over me, a magnetic pull that I am helpless to resist. I wish to keep running, to abandon these relics of a failed life, to forever leave the red coat hanging on the oak branch in the glade. But sadly, I understand, there is no escape. My running has been a vain dream, a hopeless flight from a rain-soaked pavement, a weeping woman whose coat has been thrown over me, and the steady glancing illuminations in blue and red of an ambulance light.

5) After many years of absence, I have returned to the small town of my childhood. I

arrive in the early morning, stepping down from an antique train to the platform outside a dilapidated station. I peer inside it through a dirty window, but the room is empty, the counters covered in dust, the tiled mosaic floor broken and dirty. I turn away, aware of the hard stares of people milling about on the platform.

The dream shifts, as dreams will, and I am walking down a country lane en route to the town, which rises in the distance, shimmering against a flat horizon. There are cornfields on either side of the dusty road, long wilted strands of green and yellow punctuated by rusted silos and the occasional scarecrows, grim crosses against the metallic blue sky. Your brown suitcase has reappeared; I grip it determinedly in my hand, I struggle with its weight.

I have arrived at the local café. I sit at the counter, waiting for my order to be taken. As I glance around, I see that this place has seen its better days come and go. The room is filled with people, but there is a listless quality in their movements, a hopelessness in the way they shrug and stare out the window. The farmers overalls are ripped and stained with dirt, the waitresses never smile as they toss the plates onto the chipped Formica tabletops, then turn away indifferently. The floor is unswept, and even the food seems stale and lifeless. What little conversation I hear is muted, but with a dull hint of violence.

As I wait, hunched on the uncomfortable stool, I begin to regret my decision to return here. The town of my childhood is a fiction, a happy dream I've carried for years, an anecdote to life's disappointments, but not real. The weight of disillusion hangs about me as the waitress finally hands me a tepid coffee. I am not surprised to see the cream curdle

when I pour it in. I gaze at the countertop, feeling the rising anger in the room, hearing a breaking cup, the clatter of knives and forks, a chair being kicked.

I am not aware of you until you brush against me as you rise to leave. I am surprised that you have been sitting close by the whole time; I now wish that I had spoken to you. I look at your face as you walk past, confused by a faint thrill of recognition. You look back at me and smile. I am both charmed and disappointed. Charmed, for your hopeful look seems so out of place in this tired and angry room; disappointed, for I see that we are indeed strangers. I wish to say something, but I can only attempt to smile back, a gesture that feels forced on my usually grim countenance. Then you are gone, out the door, lost in a shuffling crowd in the dim light of an approaching storm. I begin studying the countertop in front of me again, when I realize that you have left your coat on the chair next to me. It is a deep but vibrant red, leaping out against its pallid surroundings.

I gaze at the coat, then slowly, I pick it up, gently holding it like something of rare value. I am entranced by the coat. Without thinking, I gently stroke the fur-lined collar. I pass my fingers slowly over the buttons, cold and smooth as bone, over the clean lines of the hems, the buttonholes, all the delicate stitching. I run my palms down the arms, I rub my head inside the cool inner lining. Finally, I slowly push my hands inside the deep warm pockets. I am indifferent to the hard gazes of the farmers in their booths, their Adam's apples bobbing in outrage, their whispered comments to one another. I bring the coat to my face and smell the faint trace of perfume there, mixed with talc and soap.

I understand now that my sad and pointless journey can still be redeemed, but only in one way. I must return the coat to you. I jump off the stool, holding the red coat carefully

in both hands, pushing at the café door with my back, oblivious to the rising voices of the townspeople. Outside, the dusty road is ominous and empty; there is no trace of you. I stand in the middle of the street as the red coat flaps in the rising wind; I hold it close to me. I am resolved to begin my quest to find you, wondering which direction to go, when through the gathering dust storm, I see that the townspeople are lining up along the sidewalks and beginning to encircle me. They all carry weapons; swing blades and pitchforks, scrimshaws and pickaxes. They walk stolidly forward, an unbreakable line of gnarled hands and overalls, their faces earnest and murderous.

Against such an array, a red coat is of little use.

6) We are at a party somewhere, in an oddly angled house of many rooms. I roam through noisy halls seeking you, two drinks in hand. I barely note that the revelers I pass are not real, but crudely rendered cutouts, or that some rooms end abruptly, dissolving into blackness. They are all merely ideas, meant to convey my passage among strangers in an unfamiliar place.

I finally find you standing near a half-imagined table, engaged in a heated exchange with a man in a dark suit. I see that he, unlike the other partygoers, is real. I am also surprised, for you are clearly angry at this man, though usually you are reticent about public displays of emotion. Your voice is raised and you jab at his chest. The man you are arguing with says nothing, but merely looks at you with a hateful sneer. I approach and attempt to calm you. I offer you a drink. I ask who this man is, but you are oblivious to my presence. The man leans his head down towards you and mutters something inaudible in your ear. Without warning, you begin slapping him, hard, across the face and

shoulders. You grab the drink from my hand and throw it at him, but he ducks away with a brittle mirthless laugh. I reach for you, but your eyes are vacant, dangerous.

I pull you away; we stumble through rooms with dark bundles in the middle of the floors, rooms of cobwebs over shattered plaster and leaking rusted pipes, rooms with low growls and moist dripping sounds, rising from shadowy corners. Mercifully, the house fades away around us.

We are rushing down a cracked and glass strewn sidewalk. The street lamps are out; I am shining a flashlight, but it only illuminates a few steps in front of us. We turn a corner, and suddenly my light catches the glint from a pair of shiny black shoes. I raise the light in alarm; in its pale luminescence, I see it is the sneering man. He lunges at you, grabbing at your coat. I drop the flashlight and feel the cold butt of a gun pressed into my hand. The man presses his fingers around your neck as I pull the trigger repeatedly. He screams and falls away from you, collapsing to the sidewalk.

We are carrying his body to a lake. The moon shines down through leafless spectral branches. We are both panting from the heaviness of the dead man. In the pale light, I can see his shirtfront is soaked in blood, his face already settling into a sneering rictus. You are whispering something, but I can not understand you; the look on your face is curiously avid, almost erotic. We arrive at the lakeshore. You take off your red coat, and quickly begin filling its pockets with stones, gesturing at me to help you. I dutifully do so, then we drape the coat over the corpse, fastening the cold buttons and shoving its stiffening arms into the sleeves. Finally, with a last savage kick, you push the corpse into the still lake water. The body quickly sinks away out of sight.

7) In this dream, I am writing a book. It is entitled “The Red Coat,” and despite my rationalizations to the contrary, it is clear that the novel’s heroine is based on you. The character, however, is a grotesque exaggeration of your vices, with none of your virtues; she is greedy, indifferent, and possessed of an almost hysterical vanity. The image of the red coat is meant to convey the character’s selfishness, her capacity for deceit, her random betrayals of trust, but the metaphor is awkward and clumsily rendered. I have long since wearied of the book, with its shrill and accusatory tone, and its threadbare plot, filled with obvious contrivances. Also, I am filled with remorse at the caricature I have made of you, made all the more painful by your eagerness to read the work, your happy and supportive tone when you anticipate its reception. I have, however, no choice in the matter; I am rooted to my chair, at the desk in the corner of our apartment, my hands enslaved to type one cliched sentence after another.

Days pass in the dream; the manuscript’s bulk becomes grotesque, stacks of paper reaching to the high ceiling, spilling onto the floor, threatening to engulf our tiny room. We barely speak, indeed, there is a gap in time when I am unaware of your presence at all. When you return to the dream, I am dismayed to find you undergoing a bizarre transformation. Your manner, usually pleasant and reasonable, becomes harsher with each passing day. You become irritated when I am slow to answer a question, you sneer when I offer my opinion, or turn away disinterestedly when I speak. Your habits change as well; you begin arriving home long after midnight, drunk, with the smell of cigarettes and cologne in your hair. You talk conspiratorially on the phone for hours, your once musical voice is now harsh and derisive, your formerly melodious laugh a mean spirited

cackle. Alarmed as I am by these changes, I do nothing to confront them; I must finish my novel, hateful as that task now seems. I return to my writing as the days flicker by, dream calendar pages ironically tossed through the air. But before long, a dull suspicion begins to grow in me. The insults you rattle off during your drunken rages seem strangely familiar, the way you stand, hands on hips, as you sway back and forth, evoke a disturbing recognition. I dig into my pile of papers, which shudder and crash to the floor as I pull out sheets from the novels beginning. I read: your insults begin on page eight, your betrayals accumulate in chapter seventeen, and your brittle derisive laugh becomes prominent by the four hundredth page. I scan through the endless pages and toss them away, finding our argument of a week ago, your angry screams in the hall of a day before, your slamming the door just hours previous. My novel has caught up with me; I understand that this ugly and ill-conceived version of our life is coming to its inevitable end. I read the last line I have written, and so, I am not surprised when you enter the room wearing a loud and gaudy red coat. I fall back into a pile of papers, looking up at you as you stand glaring at me, your mouth twisted by hate. I am mesmerized as you lift a foot and prepare to bring a sharp stiletto heel down upon my upturned face.

Time slows. I am looking past you now, at a print on the far wall; a house in a field of grass. The room is frozen in place like a snapshot. It fades away, blurs together, disappears in translucence.

I am in a different place, alone.

I sit at a small kitchen table covered with a checkerboard cloth, smiling in anticipation. My mug of tea is cooling; I watch the steam slowly rise from it. There is

honey and butter on the table. I am waiting for the cornbread to be ready.

You taught me how to make cornbread, long ago.

It is a small house on the prairie somewhere, in the midst of rolling hills and farmland. It is a beautiful fall afternoon; a crisp wind stirs the leaves outside the screen door. A few high clouds hurry across the sky, as tall grass waves in the distance.

I pull the cornbread out of the oven. I spread the butter and honey on it and begin eating it, slowly. I enjoy sitting in the kitchen, it provides the best view of the fields and the highway running north to the distant mountains.

I am waiting for you to return. The house is clean and dusted, the floor swept, the quilt turned down on the four poster bed. I wait as the long afternoon settles into twilight. When you return, we will sit at the checkerboard table and talk. I will ask you about your journey. Perhaps I will tell you some of my dreams of late, and you will laugh and say they're only dreams, and take my hand across the table.

I wait as the breeze stirs the grass, swirls the leaves about. I look out the screen door at the yard, where a clothesline is hung between two poplar trees. Your red coat hangs there, as it has for a very long time. I watch it gently rise and fall, as the light fails.

