

The Dream

The disruption began with an almost imperceptible jerk of the left arm. But in a matter of seconds, the jerk progressed until all four limbs were twitching simultaneously, as though dancing to some bizarre internal rhythm, a marionette on invisible strings, silent and intense.

It was John's loud snorting and babbling that finally caused Janet to open her eyes and look over at her bed partner. Since this was the first time they had slept together that they actually slept, she was both surprised and concerned. She was no expert on medicine or how to make a diagnosis, but as a high school science teacher, she did have a rudimentary layperson's knowledge of sleep disorders, including sleep apnea. Did John have some kind of serious medical condition that perhaps he was unaware of? It was a good question, and it made her wonder exactly how much she really knew about the man with whom she was sharing her bed.

For several minutes, she lay awake in the quiet darkness of her bedroom and watched him sleep. She noted that the jerking and the murmuring would cease and return, cease and return. But at least he never actually stopped breathing. It wasn't until his entire body stiffened and he shouted, "No...no..." that she decided she had seen and heard enough.

Janet reached over and gently touched his arm. "John...John..." she whispered.

He stirred and all the erratic motion ceased; he didn't open his eyes.

She stroked the side of his bearded face, a face that she had admired for the better part of fifteen years. "John...wake up." Her voice, now more frantic and more shrill, cut through the still air like a scythe.

John stirred again, rolled toward the voice, snorted once, and slowly opened his eyes. "What the..." he stammered as if emerging from a powerful trance. His gaze seemed to drift

before settling upon her face, only a dim outline, a hole in the darkness. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

She propped herself up on a thick pillow against the wicker headboard. She didn’t turn on the light. “I don’t know,” she said. “You woke me up. You were thrashing and talking in your sleep. I thought maybe something was wrong with you.”

He managed an embarrassed little smile. “Oh...really? I’m sorry.”

Janet gently touched his face again. She had worked with John Carlson at Buchanan High School for twenty years; she had been in love with him for more than fifteen of those years. She didn’t know why or even how it happened. Sometimes love just sprouts and blossoms when or where you least expect it, like a flower in the crack of a busy city sidewalk.

She had done nothing to nurture the flower. She had tried to ignore it. She had even tried to kill it when it first emerged. However, the flower wouldn’t die; rather it just continued to grow stronger and more lush. So now, she thought she knew John as well as she had known any man, including her ex-husband. But at this moment as she lay in the cool cover of night, she wasn’t as confident as she had been a few hours before when they were making love like a couple of teenagers high on hormones and not caring about anything except the moment’s pleasure. “Are you all right?”

His long lean body, to which age had been kind, relaxed into the blue satin sheets. “Oh, yes,” he said. “It was just...” He stopped.

“It was just what?” she asked. “A bad dream?”

He nodded half-heartedly. “Probably.”

“Can you tell me about it?”

John's eyes drifted aimlessly as he considered the question. "Well..." He hesitated and his eyes shifted to the ceiling and stayed there as if examining the swirls of white paint. "I don't know that I remember much...only fragments."

Now she was concerned again and even a little annoyed, the hesitation, the uncertainty in his voice. He was holding something back, something perhaps she didn't really want to know but somehow needed to.

Janet had waited in the wings more than thirteen years for him to become available. Then she respectfully waited another year after his wife's death before she even invited him for dinner. She would not wait any longer. "Please, John," she said a little more assertively. "Tell me what you were dreaming, at least what you remember."

Once again, he hesitated for a moment, allowing his eyes to dart around the room with its mostly feminine decor, all a dusky gray in the near darkness. "Are you sure? Like I said, I really don't remember very much of it."

She nodded. She knew as she gazed at him that she wouldn't be able to go back to sleep or even relax until she learned what had provoked such a violent reaction in her lover. "At least tell me what you do remember."

John took a deep breath of resignation and rolled onto his back. "I...I don't remember how the dream began," he started, his expression suggesting that each word was painful to say. "But it was summer and I was in—I think—Miami or some other port city." He paused and glanced over at Janet. She was still staring at him, imploring him with her eyes. He sighed. "There were these cruise ships moored," he continued. "I was standing on the dock watching the passengers go on board. I didn't have a ticket and I have no idea why I was at the dock."

Something had drawn me there, I guess.” He slumped and turned away, allowing the satin to envelop him.

Janet brushed his arm with the slender and ringless fingers of her left hand. “Please...tell me what happened next.”

“Uh...like I said, I was standing there watching people board the ships. Then, the one closest to me finished loading and began to cast off. However, as it was pulling away from the dock, I thought I heard my name. At first, I thought I was just hearing things because there was so much noise and confusion as the other ships were still loading. But I heard it again, plainer this time, unmistakable. I looked around and realized that it was coming from the ship that was pulling away.” He stopped once again; his eyes were half closed.

Janet stroked his cheek. “Did you see where the voice was coming from on the ship?” she asked, now drawn into the dream as though it was some kind of highly compelling mystery novel that she just couldn’t put down until she reached the ending and discovered the true identity of the killer, usually the one no one suspected.

John cleared his eyes and wiped a bead of sweat from a forehead that was still smooth and supple at age fifty-five. “I heard my name again and again while I scanned the ship. Then, finally I saw where it was coming from. I saw...Do you still want to hear this?”

Janet stopped the stroking. She nodded, nearly breathless with ambivalent anticipation. This had gone too far to stop without the closure: Who was calling her lover’s name?

Once more, he sighed with resignation. “It was Marilyn...She was leaning against the rail on one of the upper decks. She looked like she used to...before she got sick. She was wearing a white sundress. And she was waving and calling. I...” His voice faltered; a stray tear trickled from his right eye.

Unconsciously, Janet pulled back her arm and coiled her hand on her naked abdomen. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear any more of this dream that could very well be her own nightmare. But she had started it; she had insisted that he continue, even after his not-so-subtle warning. Now it was too late to take it back, to unhear it.

He took another deep breath to settle himself. "I'm sorry, Janet," he said softly. "I'm sorry."

She tried to smile reassuringly, as though what he had just described didn't really matter either to her or to *them*. But she just couldn't make her lips curl up. "John...did you want to go with her?" She didn't want to ask the question, but she knew somehow that she had to, that the rest of her life might very well center around the answer he gave her.

John shook his head sadly. "I...don't know," he said. "I really don't think so...I mean, I know she's dead...but... maybe in the dream...I don't know."

"John..." she persisted, "just before I woke you up, you were shouting, 'no, no.' What did you mean?"

"I don't remember that part," he answered quickly.

A little too quickly, she thought. But she didn't need for him to elaborate, not really; she had heard as much as she needed to. She leaned back against the pillow and felt the soft satin sheet beneath her bare bottom. She had invested hours shopping for the sheets, had bought them specifically for those precious evenings they spent together. The sheets were her gift to herself, a metaphor for the happiness she felt when she was in his arms after all the painful years of waiting, sacrificing other potential—but certainly less satisfying—relationships.

For fifteen years she had dreamed of this night, dreamed of the first time she could wake up and find him still lying next to her, could cook him breakfast in the morning wearing nothing

but his shirt. Fifteen years of waiting while he remained committed to someone else, someone she knew he had loved and who had loved him. She had never told him how she felt, how she had waited and sacrificed. Even after they started making love and seemed to be melding into a couple, she never told him. At first, it had seemed like some unspoken breach of etiquette. Then, later, it just didn't seem important anymore. They were together now, and that was all that mattered to her, the everything that she believed made her otherwise drab and loveless life worth living.

For what seemed like an eternity but was only a few anxious minutes, she remained where she was, afraid to look at her lover, afraid to confront the long shadow that was passing between them, all the while praying that it was only a shadow, only a small dark cloud on an otherwise sunny day.

Finally, she rolled toward him and kissed him on the cheek. Then, without waiting for a response, she eased out of bed and stood up, allowing him to see as much of her supple naked body—not bad for a forty-seven-year-old, she thought—as he could in the dim anemic light.

For at least thirty agonizing seconds, she remained stationary as though she was a statue bolted to a pedestal. Then she walked toward the bathroom without looking back.