

## **In Dreams, Awake**

"Our truest selves are when we are in dreams, awake."

-Henry David Thoreau

My wife is gravely ill.

I am a pragmatic man and can say the words and understand their import without giving in to fear or despair. At the risk of sounding dispassionate or even callous, I can honestly say that I have accepted the situation and am prepared to deal with every eventuality, no matter how dire. In my defense, I hasten to add that this holds true even when my thoughts turn to my own well-being.

For to my mind I have contracted some of the symptoms that marked the initial onslaught of my wife's "disease". I use that word advisedly because despite the battery of tests she has been subjected to, her affliction remains an enigma to all involved.

Including the many specialists who have been brought in, at no small expense, and who have proven to be, to a man, arrogant louts, idiot savants, not one of them able to come up with any kind of a reasonable diagnosis. It is their frustration, I assume, that causes them to make the ridiculous assertion that since all other possibilities have been considered, assessed and

discounted, her condition *must* be psychosomatic in origin. Though I protest that my wife's family are a hardy breed, teutonic in health and temperament, one by one they pore over the thick sheafs of test results, scratch their learned heads and individually and collectively advise me to retain the services of a good psychiatrist.

And then they have the unmitigated gall to express surprise at the vehemence of my response...

I am appalled when I discover that I have nodded off during the weekly planning committee meeting. As my colleagues titter, the firm's CEO fixes his baleful gaze on me and though I apologize profusely, his stern, forbidding countenance makes it abundantly clear that my transgression has been duly noted and appended to my permanent record.

Once the meeting has adjourned, I call to make a late afternoon appointment to see Dr. Albert Galbraith, our "family physician"; the term is moot since I have resolved that my wife and I will remain childless as long as I have any say in the matter.

At 4:30, sharp, Galbraith greets me and ushers me into his office which is small, stale and personable--words that could also be used to describe the general disposition of its occupant. An unkind thought perhaps, but in light of my present circumstances I think that my churlishness is understandable and appropriate.

Once seated I tell him that I am experiencing periods of profound lethargy and on occasion have fallen victim to sudden, fugue-like states... reminding him that my wife came to him with similar complaints not so long ago. When I finish, he dons his stethoscope and taps and pokes and prods but after this cursory examination just shakes his head.

"As far as I can tell, there's nothing wrong with you," he says, and when I grimace adds quickly, "of course, you may not find that entirely reassuring since I told your wife the same thing." He slides forward on his chair and clasps his hands on the desktop. "Robert, I ask you again to at least *consider* the possibility that the root of your wife's illness is, in fact, *mental* and not--"

"No." I will have none of that kind of talk and have made that clear to him in no uncertain terms. "My wife is a strong woman, doctor." I avoid the easy familiarity he likes to employ in discussions with patients often, I feel, at the expense of professionalism. "She's not the type of person who *manufactures* an illness. Nor am I, for that matter." He attempts to interject one of his bland, offhand remarks but I will not be mollified. "I find it inconceivable that you can look at her, see how she's wasting away and then tell me that in the opinion of you and all of your *experts* there's nothing that can be done for her. She's practically an *invalid*, for Christ's sake, and if you think she's just having us all on--" My outrage is getting the better of me; I compose myself while he waits, evincing sympathy. "There just has to be something, something you haven't considered yet, behind all of this."

"Well," he grunts, sitting back in his chair, "I have to confess, I'm at wit's end." His face is drawn and he has been rubbing at his eyes throughout our conversation.

"You look tired, doctor."

"I *am* tired," he snaps, but quickly recovers. "We're all under a lot of strain. What we really need is a vacation, a couple of weeks on some tropical beach with white sand, palm trees..." It so happens that there is a travel poster tacked to the wall beside his desk that depicts a scene much like the one he is describing. Its cropped perfection captures his gaze and holds it; I

have to clear my throat to dispel his reverie. "You're looking pretty bushed yourself," he observes, unctuous facade in place once more, "why don't you let me prescribe something that'll help you get a good night's sleep. I can adjust the dosage so it won't impair your performance at work--"

I snort at the suggestion. "Thank you, doctor, but as I've just told you, sleep is the very *least* of my worries. Besides, we already have enough of your pills and potions at home to start our own pharmacy as it is--I'm sure if there's anything I need we probably have it."

He shrugs and I start to rise, anticipating our usual, perfunctory handshake; but his eyes have gone back to that poster and it quickly becomes clear from his rapt expression that his thoughts reside elsewhere, in a place where such amenities are, apparently, superfluous.

During the drive home my concentration wanders all over the place, the streets unravelling before me monotonously. It takes a near accident at a busy intersection to finally bring me around. Had it not been for the attentiveness of other motorists someone might have been killed.

I am badly shaken by the incident and when I reach the house decide that a sedative might not be such a bad idea after all. I am in the process of uncapping a pill bottle when I hear my wife call out to me. I pour a glass of water from the pitcher in the refrigerator and take it into the bedroom with me.

"I heard you come in," she says, favoring me with a wan smile. She is framed by the pillows propped behind her, a stark chiaroscuro of red hair and pale flesh receding into a

background of ruffled white. I set the glass on the nightstand beside the bed, drag a chair over and ease into it.

"I hope I didn't wake you."

"No, I was waiting for you."

"You're looking very well today," I tell her, although that is certainly not the case.

"I feel fine. Well, not fine." She looks away. "*Silly* is more like it. I mean, I can't help thinking there's nothing really wrong with me and-- I--I'll try to get up and move around...and then it just *hits* me and here I am, flat on my back again." She reaches out and takes my hand. "You know, last night I had the most wonderful dream." Her face is averted, her voice soft. "I can't recall the details but it was like I was floating. I had this sense of incredible space all around me but I wasn't frightened. It was so...soothing. It--it was hard to wake up and know I had to face all...*this* again."

"Well," I say, searching for the right words, "I'm sure there will be some kind of improvement. And soon." But it is yet another lie and neither of us believes it for a moment.

"I hope so. I'm getting terribly bored with--" She yawns and looks apologetic. "Sorry."

"That's all right."

"No, it isn't." She frowns and in the next instant snatches her hand away and pounds it on the coverlet. "I feel so stupid, laying here day after day and not being able to do anything and you're so good, looking after me and--and--" Her voice cracks, splintered by emotion.

"I know. It must be dreadfully difficult for you."

Her outburst exhausts her. She slumps back, her eyes already closed and distant, not acknowledging the water glass when I offer it to her.

I creep out and close the door behind me. As I start back down the hallway I am *overcome*, that's the only way I can describe it. I have to brace myself against the wall for support, my head lolling, my vision dazzled. I barely make it to the couch, sprawling onto it like a casualty, my senses scattering to the four corners of the room. And then I am falling, twisting and writhing through a vast *empty*, screaming in my mind as I plunge down, down, into a darkness that is unending and inviolate--

The next thing I am aware of is my wife's face hovering over me and then I feel the pressure of her hands on my shoulders.

"Robert? Robert? Are you all right?" I make a sound of complaint and she relaxes her painful grip.

"Sorry," I murmur, "I guess I was..." I lose my train of thought and squint up at her in puzzlement.

"I thought I heard you moaning so I came out to see what was the matter. At first I didn't want to wake you. I know how exhausted you've been lately and I know it's *my* fault, it's all because of *me*--" She sags against me and I take her arm and help her back to her room.

I have to call in sick for the first time in years.

I start to explain my situation, about how I'm feeling rundown and out of sorts but my department head, in his characteristically brusque manner, interrupts.

"Half the office is down with the same thing. Must be a flu going around or something." Even the telephone can't disguise his yawn. "I'm not feeling so hot myself--maybe I should head

home early too. Can't get much accomplished here anyway." I commiserate with him briefly, insincerely, and once I replace the receiver put him out of my mind.

Since my wife is still sleeping and I am feeling somewhat refreshed, I decide to take this opportunity to pick up a few groceries at a nearby convenience store. But when I pull up in front of the building I am surprised to find it closed. I thump the wheel in frustration, cursing its Korean proprietors for choosing this particular day to shirk their responsibilities. Shutting up shop without advance notice to customers hardly constitutes sound business practice and I make a mental note to mention this to them upon their reopening.

Gritting my teeth, I set off once again, knowing full well what my next destination has to be.

I loathe supermarkets. Cavernous, overlit and antiseptic, they possess all the aesthetic characteristics and charm of a barn. Always crowded, always noisy, their aisles clogged by preternatural morons who reduce the checkout lines to behavioral sink-holes as they browse through the tabloids and gossip shamelessly, oblivious to the howling of their distempered brats.

So I am understandably elated to find the parking lot adjacent the nearest mall practically deserted and when its automatic doors whisk me inside doubly pleased to note only a scattering of shoppers as I make my way to the grocery store.

I take full advantage of my good fortune, quickly acquiring all the items on my list and then rolling my cart up to the front where it appears there is only one cashier on duty.

The girl stationed at the check-out--identified as "Kate O." by the nametag pinned to her blouse--takes no notice of me as she rings in my purchases. Her eyes are red-rimmed and downcast and she performs her duties with the smooth, practiced economy of an automaton. She

never speaks, accepting my bank card without so much as a word of thanks. I find it all somewhat unsettling and after collecting my goods, hurry toward the exit. I cast one last look back when I reach the door and watch her, standing at her post, frozen and unblinking, a *tableau vivant* that sends me scurrying outside.

I feel another "spell" coming on as I load the groceries into the trunk and it takes an enormous act of willpower to resist the urge to crawl into the backseat for a restorative nap.

Later that night, while my wife picks and dithers over a dish that I took special pains to prepare, I give her my account of what happened at the supermarket, my narrative liberally sprinkled with adjectives like "bizarre" and "surreal". Her reaction is one of indifference; she is practically falling asleep between nibbles. I gather up her tray and leave her to her rest.

In the days that follow my energy and stamina completely desert me...to the point that my wife, now totally bedridden, comments on my appearance, telling me--not unkindly, I think--that I look "haggard".

I find myself in the grips of a lassitude so acute that it is all I can do to see to her basic needs and then grope my way over to the sofa, often falling asleep so quickly that I am barely cognizant of having done so. Upon awakening I have absolutely no conception of how much time has passed. Were it not for having to minister to my wife, I doubt that I could find it within me to rouse myself from my makeshift bed and accomplish what little I can on her behalf.

Normal household duties have become a thing of the past. I confess, to my chagrin, that I have taken to eating from cans--out of necessity. The very notion of remaining on my feet long enough to wait for food to warm on the stove--well, it is too much. To her credit, my wife does

not complain when I offer her this poor fare. Like me, she does not have much of an appetite; a few teaspoons of cold, watery soup is enough to satisfy her.

It has become obvious to me that in my present state I am no longer capable of providing her with the level of care she requires...and may soon lack the wherewithal to look after myself.

I am unable, however, to reach Galbraith to inform him of this latest development; his answering service is apparently out of order and his home phone number is unlisted. I am similarly frustrated in my efforts to contact my office in order to secure an indefinite leave of absence.

And then, to my considerable distress, my wife lapses into a deep and seemingly untroubled sleep. Despite all the methods I employ in my attempts to revive her--some, by necessity, quite painful--she does not respond and I cannot help but fear the worst.

My own condition deteriorates daily. Perhaps by the hour.

A trip to the bathroom becomes an ordeal, to be embarked upon only as a last, desperate resort. More than once I wake to discover that I have soiled myself and despite my deep and ingrained stoicism, I have to weep at the indignity of it all.

At some point--again, any attempt at imposing a chronology would be useless--I realize that the phone has not rung, the door chimes not sounded in...how long has it been? Days? Weeks?

One night regular television programming is interrupted for a special news bulletin but the newsreader dozes off in mid-sentence. Soon afterward all the stations, local and network, go off the air.

But none of that matters anymore. It's all quite irrelevant now. Because what has happened is that my overweening pride has finally been stripped away and I am ready to accept whatever is going to happen next, ready, even, to embrace obsolescence.

For it has become apparent that a new paradigm has presented itself; the old world has been superseded, and whether its destruction was brought about by man-made devices or an act of a sullen God or infernal machinations, the results are the same.

*The human race, as they say, is run.*

It is done.

*Fait accompli.*

Yes. My wife is dead, expiring in her sleep, slipping away while I dozed, insensate, in the next room. I stand at the foot of the bed, trying to take it all in: the utter stillness, her stark and bloodless face turned slightly toward the wall, eyes closed, her skin already taking on a waxy, pallid patina.

I should go around to the side of the bed and cover her face. I should call someone and let them know.

But I am just...so...*tired*. Too tired to do anything more than turn away and make my way back to the living room, my feet shuffling along, apparently of their own accord. I feel no grief, only emptiness, a swelling, depthless immensity inside me that, I sense, will be denied no longer.

Consciousness flickers and fades and, finally, is extinguished. At the last possible moment it occurs to me that I am *afraid* but by then it is too late, much too late--

*I fall.*

And have been falling, it seems to me, for a long, long time.

End

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