

The End of the Dream

One

He woke into enough light to know he could still safely ignore wakefulness for a while. He had to pee, but not bad enough to force any action on his part. He could descend into darkness again, and it wouldn't cost him much. His heart was beating harder than it had a right to, but that was becoming the new normal. Time and genetics had not been kind in that regard. Still, more sleep did await, if he chose it.

The only thing that held onto him was the fading dream. Most of it was lost already, emotional impressions now rather than pictures, ready to color his day with a sense of something rather than a thing he could point to.

But there was a little left, hanging there on the cusp. He could view it if he put his mind to it.

If he did though, he would likely lose the opportunity to descend again. Today would start before he wanted it to, as each today seemed to do now, early or late.

Sometimes, the dream chose for itself, though.

His wife and three grown children stood in a line, facing away from him. His kids held signs above their heads, but reversed so he could see. There were markings on them, but he didn't know what they meant. His wife held no sign up.

There was more, but he couldn't hold onto any more of it than that as he reluctantly opened his eyes in the pre-dawn.

His wife snored softly on her back an arms-length away. He reached over and put a hand on her breast, shrouded by the coverlet. He remembered the joy and desire he'd felt making its acquaintance.

She turned away onto her side, breaking the contact without any change in her breathing.

He still held the last bit of the dream picture in his head.

She'd had no sign. Nothing to say.

Two

His phone rang later that day, and the instant dread he felt diminished as he saw that the call was not from a potentially angry customer who'd been deferred one too many times, but his oldest child. A child no more, he thought to remind himself. He answered, knowing that circumstance pointed to a not-dissimilar outcome between this call, and the one he dreaded as a matter of course. Love could only soften so much.

"Hey, you."

"Hi, dad. Checking in. How are you?"

"Same, same. You?"

She opined, and he listened. They did not see the world in the same way, and he wondered whether he was doing her a kindness by listening, or a disservice. He appreciated her convictions, but thought that maybe speaking those things that he had against them would be like the sign she'd held up in his dream. Maybe it would be something for *her* to not understand.

"Yeah, I'll give that some thought."

“Will you?”

He could hear her disappointment, as always. It was the dissatisfaction of the convinced, when the unconvinced remained so, despite the “truth” served up to them on a plate. Even with a side of “I love you.”

He did remember what it was like to believe like that. He’d call it dogma, now, but back then it had been commitment. He didn’t think he had matched his daughter in her fervor, his then against hers now, but close enough to see in retrospect.

Time had blunted him. Like a rock in a stream-bed, sharp edges had smoothed, and the water now flowed past with little resistance.

It was convictions versus reality. That was the gulf to bridge.

“I do hear you, you know. I admire you. I’m just old.”

She sighed, the pin in every conversation between them that pointed to no real resolution.

“I know, dad. Sermon over. I’ll call you later.”

Three

The dream was different this time, as he awoke in distress and most of it drained away. Once again, he was only left with the possibility of the end of it. It was a final sequence that he had to grasp after to see, and it carried him out of the promise of more sleep. It was less of a choice this time, and seemed to come with more consequences. He didn’t know why that might be true, though.

His kids each held onto his left arm, daughter and two sons keeping him from being dragged out into the current of a fast-moving river. The water pulling at him was terribly cold. He wanted to try to stand, but couldn’t find the bottom with his feet.

His wife was looking at their children from the river-bank as they stood in the shallows, and was instructing them in a language he didn’t know. She paid no attention to him, just them.

His youngest let go first, then their middle child, and finally his daughter.

He tried to scream, but couldn’t as he was swept away.

He did not reach for his wife this time as he came awake. He turned away, and desperately tried to call out to sleep once more.

It did not answer.

Four

It was several days later, and they sat hip-to-hip on barstools in the kitchen. It was an echo of nearly a decade of Saturday mornings, the children grown and gone, and the silence in the house a constant companion to both he and his wife now in their absence.

He stared at his phone, not really seeing it, and she stared at hers, scrolling *ad infinitum*. His thoughts were far away, until she set her phone down, and turned to him.

“Tom, I think it’s time to call it.”

He instantly knew what she meant, and waited for fear and hurt to rush in, to overwhelm him and crush him.

It did, but not to the horizon like he thought it might. The end of it stayed within sight, and he could still function. That was almost more of an affront than the rest of it. His question felt perfunctory, even to him.

“Why?”

She sighed, and it was exactly the same sound their daughter had made. He knew whatever answer she made now wouldn’t solve anything between them, so he let what she said mean nothing, as if it was said in another language. Like in a dream.

Five

He stood in a tiny room, three walls of concrete-block, and the fourth a pane of glass. He faced this transparent portal that opened onto another small room.

This one was paneled in mirrors, and his three grown children sat in the center of it around a chrome and vinyl dinette table and chairs. They were arguing, their movements aggressive and confrontational. His wife was nowhere to be seen.

He couldn’t hear anything, but he could see that the disagreement was escalating, and the reflections on three sides made them into a symphony of discord.

His daughter leapt to her feet, and drew a knife from a sheath on her hip. In a single motion, she drove the tip into the middle of the table, her face red and her mouth twisted in anger. His two sons stood in unison, and turned away from her.

He slapped the glass in front of him, screaming their names, but the tableau before him froze, and he woke up.

The dream became wakefulness, and his heart loped unevenly this time, instead of charging forward. It made its own rhythm these days as it chose when he woke in this new bed, alone. He knew no more sleep was available.

But being awake now was so much harder, and he wondered how many heart-beats he had left. And did it matter? There were other options.

Six

It was mid-morning, and he’d seen the notifications on his phone. It was mostly clients that had waited, and waited, and then become bitter about waiting. And then *more* bitter about no response to their inquiries.

But all he could think about was the voice-mail from his daughter in the queue. It held the same possibility as the other ones, just a different level of impact. He couldn’t imagine anything positive, so it came down to his willingness to read the transcription, if there was one. Words on the screen would be less emotionally charged than hearing her voice. One was reading an editorial, and the other was witness testimony at a trial. His trial.

Because he’d failed. He’d failed at it all. He realized that now. His family was scattered and broken, and his business was dying.

He thought again about the 1911 in the small safe in the kitchen cupboard.

It was a safe that had once held multiple birth certificates, social security cards, passports, important mementos, and plenty of cash.

There had been enough money in it for pizza deliveries, nights out, kids' dates, and all the other things that spoke to a happy family and a happy life, if you happened to define it that way.

But now, the rest had gone, even his stuff, lost to time and tide.

It currently held an expired passport, a gun, and 300 rounds, which was 299 more than necessary, of course, if he chose that.

He didn't *think* he would, but he'd never imagined he'd end up here, either.

After a few minutes of thought, he turned off the ringer on his phone, put it in the desk drawer without looking at it, and continued to sweep sand in his personal desert.

It was the devil he knew, and he could call it by name. He did believe that a name had power, so maybe that was something.

But it probably wasn't.

Seven

A sere wind swept dust across the platform he stood on. It had probably been a gallows at one time, but the timbers holding the noose had long collapsed, and their desiccated skeletons lying prostrate across it offered no evidence of rope.

He was thirsty, but knew in the way of dreams that there would be no water here, while he waited.

He could see four figures on the horizon, backlit by the sun and casting long shadows. With the heat shimmer, he couldn't tell if they were walking towards him, or away. But they were important. They were the most important thing.

Also in the way of dreams, there was enough here to tell him what he could choose. He could give chase. He could run to greet.

Or he could stay here in this place of death, do nothing, and the figures would evaporate as the sun behind them dropped down into the world. Smoke before the eclipse.

He woke, and for once, his heart was in a perfect sinus rhythm.

He knew what he would do.