

Butterfly Dreams

Panic coursed through me. My heart slammed against my ribs and I both felt and heard the corroborative baby sonogram-like whooshes that pulsed in my ears. Despite what had been foretold and what I subsequently feared over the last three sleepless days, the throbbing blood pressure that continued to pound through me was proof I was alive. Or was it? Trying to gain a foothold on my panic, I assessed my surroundings.

I focused first on the living room chair next to the couch on which I was sitting, then to the brass floor lamp and finally on the entertainment center. Each object that I saw was a soldier helping to establish a beachhead on my fear. The familiarity my apartment and finding these things just as they had been moments ago helped to pull in the reins on my heart which slowed to a felt-footed trot. Taking a deep breath, I read the digital display on the DVD player. 12:17 PM.

“Only 2 minutes,” I said aloud. Hearing my voice not only helped confirm that I was still very much alive, but it also cleaved doubt into my belief into what the stranger had warned.

“Fall asleep and you’ll cease to exist.”

Although I was beginning to doubt that very clear warning, I didn’t want to risk falling back to sleep and test the theory again. Not that I had intended to fall asleep, even for two minutes, but exhaustion wrapped itself around me like a warm blanket on a cold winter night.

I stood up, walked toward the kitchen and continued to reflect on what the stranger had warned verse what had just transpired. Perhaps I could leverage this fracture

of belief and split it completely in two.

Stopping in front of the refrigerator, I absent-mindedly gazed at the quilt-like patchwork of work schedules, pizza delivery magnets, and miscellaneous photos. I focused on a North County Transit Authority bus schedule pinned to the right-hand side door by two magnetic Corona bottle caps. Looking at the schedule, I couldn't help remembering it was there, at the bus stop, when this stranger had merged into my life.

"Before that, everything had been fine." I mumbled aloud as the memories of that fateful day, only three days old, came into focus. "Before meeting that, that, that stranger, I'd been an ordinary man walking among an ordinary world full of ordinary people who were going about their ordinary business."

There are events, I reflected, that happen in everybody's life that serve as pivot points; Life before cancer, divorce, or going to war and life after these events. I'd thus far escaped the scourge of cancer, had never been married, and I'd never even gone hunting much less gone off to war. My was life could now be measured before and after meeting the stranger. I could easily differentiate how my life had been as smooth and placid as a meandering river without the slightest ripple of malcontent to disrupt its smooth sheen of normalcy to the ripples and eddies that churned and tumbled over the bottom of my soul. He had, in the course of a 10 minute conversation, effortlessly thrown boulders of uncertainty concerning the nature of reality and the veracity of existence which now caused the turbulent river that had become my life.

Trying to rid myself of these negative thoughts, I flung open the door to the fridge and reached for the last can of Red Bull in the four-pack I'd bought yesterday as a means to boost my depleted system back to overload while I brewed another pot of coffee. Red Bull and coffee; these had become my chemical weapons of choice to combat the enemy

of sleep. Deep down I knew I couldn't win the internal war against the Blitzkrieg of sleep, but I focused on the small battle that had gone in my favor. Perhaps the tide of the war had swung.

“Just maybe?” I mumbled.

Lifting the small aluminum tab, I opened the Red Bull and reaffirmed my conviction to battle on.

I filled the Mr. Coffee carafe with cold tap water, poured it into the reservoir, scooped a one-to-one ratio of coffee grounds into a filter and pressed the start button. Listening to the groans and hisses of the coffee beginning to brew I looked back, as I had hundreds of times, hoping to recall a different version of the events that transpired. Perhaps now with the fissure of doubt I would see something new that would lead me to conclude it hadn't actually happened or at the very least would turn out to be less true.

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Standing at the bus stop after work had not been my ordinary routine but having my transmission crap out had not been routine either. Until it was repaired I was forced to take the bus to and from work. It was there that the stranger approached and in retrospect he seemed he'd appeared out of nowhere. The stop was located in a relatively open area with clear sight lines in all directions and yet as hard as I tried, I couldn't recall seeing him approach. When I did spot him he had appeared to be just another ordinary guy sauntering to his bus stop after an ordinary day of work, heading to his ordinary home, his ordinary wife and ordinary kids. There was nothing that stood out as being peculiar or atypical.

“Fine weather today,” the stranger commented when he was within ear shot.

“Not bad.” I replied hoping this ordinary guy didn't want to make ordinary

conversation. It was too out of the ordinary.

“Heading home?”

“Yep, car’s in the shop.” I didn’t offer any more details hoping he wouldn’t ask for it.

“What’s wrong with it?”

Damn it.

“Transmission went out.” To drive home the point I wasn’t interested in continuing the back and forth dialogue, I looked straight ahead deliberately avoiding any eye contact.

“Funny things...transmissions,” the stranger said cryptically, “Funny things indeed.”

I looked at my watch hoping that time had somehow warped ahead and the bus would come rolling up ending this conversation before it continued.

“What kind of car?”

Seriously? “Excuse me,” I asked pretending I hadn’t heard and not doing anything to hide the irritation that laced my voice.

“What kind of car?”

“1989 Honda Accord.”

“An oldie but goodie. That would mean that it rolled off the assembly line with the G-4 transmission. How many miles are on the car?”

“What’s that?” I asked mildly intrigued he knew the name and type of the transmission. Then again, how would I know any different?

“How. Many. Miles. On the car?” He asked enunciating each word slowly.

“I don’t know exactly, something in the neighborhood of 189,000.”

“Ah, that would explain it. The G-4 is a great transmission. One of the best ever

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built by Honda. However, it was the JZ-987 transmission that Carroll Shelby dropped into his 1967 Super Cobra 427 that was the mother of all transmissions. Never saw one like it before and I'll likely never see one like it again."

Despite myself, I broke my straight ahead gaze and turned to give this not so ordinary stranger more than just an ordinary glance. He looked to be only slightly older than myself but clearly he was too young to have been around in 1967.

"Did your dad restore an old Cobra?"

"Naw."

"How old are you?"

The stranger turned to face me and I got my first good look at his countenance. He was clean shaven, with a full head of jet black hair and possessed a sleek, somewhat hawkish face with high cheek bones and unnaturally jade green eyes. He met my gaze without blinking. Solidly peering into my eyes as if he were trying to read my thoughts.

"How old am I?" he asked regurgitating my question. "I'm as old as the memory of time itself." His words seemed to slither from his mouth as hot and arid as a desert wind, devoid of any moisture to slake its thirst. I staggered backward unconsciously gasping for cool, clean air. This stranger just stood and watched, almost pleased with my reaction. "Funny things, transmissions." He repeated.

Every fiber of my being screamed at me to run, but I intuited that this stranger would find me. No matter how hard or how fast I ran, there simply was no escaping. I felt like a coward at wanting to run, yet foolish for standing rooted to the ground. The choice was mine: coward or fool?

“What, what is it you want from me?” I managed to stammer out. Fool.

“Just your time.”

Suddenly aware of the background, I watched as the ordinary world whizzed by full of ordinary people returning to their ordinary lives. The world behind him was a world in constant motion, full of activity without surcease, while in the foreground stood this not so ordinary man who seemed to make the time around him stop altogether.

“You regard the world around you as ordinary,” he said as a statement. “What is it you find so ordinary?”

I felt as though an unseen hand had gripped my ankle and I could feel the invisible tug of a sinister undertow pulling me away from the banks of reality.

“It’s, it’s, it’s ordinary because it’s what I’ve known,” I stuttered trying to stay rooted to the bank. “Everything is just as it should be. People are returning home after a day’s work. The sun is setting in the west after traveling across the sky. My heart is beating in my chest the same as it has since birth. There are a thousand reasons why it’s ordinary.” Although everything I said was true, I felt in the pit of my stomach this was somehow wrong. The logic was there, but I didn’t believe in my own words with as much fervor as I would have before this conversation.

“Not bad answers, but ultimately, incorrect.” The stranger smugly quipped. “The truth is, you perceive all of this as ordinary because this is all a figment of a dream. My dream. My very ordinary, yet very necessary dream. At this very moment, in true reality, I’m asleep.”

Feeling the undertow slowly pulling me further into the center of this frightening

river of knowledge, I felt my feeble grip on the shoreline being to slip.

“I can see by the look on your face that you’re having a difficult time understanding. First of all, I’m from here, from Earth.”

I stood unable to do anything but stare in disbelief. What did he mean, *from* Earth?

“So,” the stranger continued in a disconcertingly bored, matter of fact voice, “at the end of last century, which was 2499, it became necessary to leave the Earth. All the natural resources had either been exhausted or had been contaminated to the point of rendering the atmosphere, the soil, and the waters poisonous. Over-population, disease, pollution, war, crime, poverty, all of it had become too much. Entire ecosystems failed. The cumulative effects of all the harmful processes that man had inflicted upon the planet simply became too much and there was no rebounding from it.”

I was dumbfounded. “So you’re from the future? Is that what I’m to understand here? What happened?”

“No and yes,” the Stranger answered patiently. “No, I’m not from the future. Everybody knows that time travel is physically impossible. As to what happened,” he paused and seemed to gather his thoughts for a moment, “Think of Noah’s Ark, but on a global scale. Instead of a giant boat with animals, think interplanetary space craft with people. However, no matter how advanced our technology, it was impossible to take everything off world. To maximize precious cargo space and cut down on unnecessary weight, all non essentials to maintain life were left behind. Things like art, literature, and historical artifacts were left behind. However, in order to preserve those things, they

were encoded as memory data and implanted in the neural networks of people like me. Before leaving earth, everybody had some type of memory encoding performed. Some people were encoded with art, some history while others preserve music and literature. I was encoded with the history of the late twentieth century, or what we could piece together from all available data sources. You and everything you see is simply a designed memory created by neural engineers which was then subsequently encoded and implanted into me. When I sleep and by proxy, dream, you and everything you 'experience' is merely the method by which the memory remains preserved. It's what we refer to as a memory refresh."

I could barely grasp at what this stranger was saying much less accept it as truth. Undeterred he continued on. "It really is quite simple. When I sleep I dream of the old world, of Earth as it was before all had gone wrong. When I sleep, all that has been encoded bubbles forth from the neural implants and you, the 'world' with everybody in it is 'created'. What you perceive as your ordinary world is in reality an encoded memory of what was. When I wake up, or conversely, when you sleep, you'll simply cease to exist.

I felt lost, alone, set adrift hardly knowing where I was much less what I was thinking or who I was.

"If everything you're saying is true, what is the point of telling me? What good does it serve? Why have I not had this 'experience' before? By telling me, aren't you infecting the memory and therefore the world that was? How can you interact with a memory during a dream?"

“Although I’ll awake in the morning,” he continued as soon as I had finished launching my salvo of questions, “I don’t have much longer to live. Our life spans are much longer than they were in the late twentieth century, but we have as yet mastered death. Therefore, the memories that were encoded into me need to be passed on to the next carrier who has been synced to my REM sleep pattern and has been recording everything that’s transpired thus far. This interaction between host and character models is necessary from time to time. In addition to simple information related to time, place, weather, and other details, it’s also imperative to have several interactions with character models, like you, so that the details of behavior, attitudes and thought processes can also be preserved. You happen to be one of those trivial interactions.”

Stupefied, my knees almost buckled under the weight of what the stranger said.

“Don’t worry. Since you don’t really exist, you don’t really have any real memories. When this dream happens again, by the new carrier, you will go back to your ordinary day just like before without the slightest notion this conversation ever took place. You will be oblivious to the true nature of reality.”

The hissing of air brakes snapped me out of my state of disbelief as the bus came to a halt. The doors opened and without any further explanation, he turned, climbed up the stairs, deposited his coinage into the hopper then turned back to me and waved.

“Sleep well.”

The driver of the bus stared at me with a look of ‘are you going to board’ on his face, but I remained solidly rooted to the ground.

With a dismissive shrug, the driver closed the doors and as he released the brakes

and started off, I saw the stranger looking at me through the window as he sat down and started talking to another ordinary man, on his way home from an ordinary day at work, to his ordinary wife and ordinary kids. Or so he thought.

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The chime from the Mr. Coffee alerted me that the brew cycle was complete. I looked around to reorient myself. “Gotta stop thinking about that stuff. Gotta get rid of those memories.”

Grabbing a mug from a hook affixed to the underside of the cabinet, I poured the steaming brew into it, turned around to get some creamer from the fridge and there stood the stranger. Startled, I dropped the mug barely hearing it shatter on the hard tiled floor.

The stranger looked at me with a look of sorrow and held out his hand palm up.

“It’s time to go, Travis. It’s time for me to wake up and time for you to sleep.”

“No.” I said weakly. I wanted to run, was determined to run, but was trapped by the geography of the cabinets and counters.

“This always happens during a transition.” The stranger said focusing his attention behind me. I turned my head and saw another person, another stranger. The new stranger had thin blondish red hair, was short, fair-skinned and freckled.

“My name is Edward,” the new stranger said. “I’m going to be your new host. You’ll be a part of me now.”

Suddenly I felt the exhaustion I’d been holding back wash over me. I swayed drunkenly and felt my eyes begin to slide closed. Edward slowly walked toward me and despite my muted instinct to run; I stood and watched as Edward now held out his hand.

“Come now, Travis. All will be well soon. You’re so tired. Just close your eyes.”

I looked down and saw not the familiar floor of my kitchen tile but an unknown steel grating of some unknown fabrication. I realized it was the floor of one of the ships the stranger had spoken of, one of the great arks of the cosmos. Releasing my grip on the shore of my former reality, I felt myself becoming one with the river of eternal sleep and in that final flickering moment of consciousness, I felt the old reality dissolve, peacefully, into the new.

The End