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Dreamers Awake

They said there would be no dreams. They were wrong.

We dreamed, oh, how we dreamed, all across that unthinkable distance and that hideous, inhuman span of years.

Six thousand twenty-two canisters were prepared, each containing a unique assemblage of flesh and memory. Six thousand twenty-two human beings were packed away and loaded aboard the transport known to some as the Ark, to others as the Hand of Vishnu. The Project technicians, less metaphysically inclined, called it the Meat Locker. Designed to carry the seed of humanity across interstellar space, it was said to be the greatest achievement of all our science and technology. Our bodily functions, they said, would be held in suspension for the time of our passage. We would be as nearly dead as living men, women, and children could be.

Their estimate was that eight to ten per cent of us would not survive the journey, would never awaken from our supposedly dreamless sleep. They were wrong.

When the canisters opened, one hundred eighty-four of us crawled out into the ruddy light of our new world. Five thousand eight hundred thirty-eight canisters closed again, still occupied. Five thousand eight hundred thirty-eight had died in transit.

We may never know what went wrong. Those who might have been able to tell us were among those we lost. Most of the living were children, strange children who had scarcely known wakefulness before they were plunged into ages of unforeseen dreamtime. We do not know how many years we lay dreaming, not quite as dead as we probably should have been. Those who could have told us were lost.

The survivors lived among the dead for a while, on board the transport. I was one of the first among the adults to move out. Most of my fellow passengers had been specialists of one sort or another, and possessed severely limited skills. I had never had a specialty back on old Earth, just a sporadic series of odd jobs, so it was not too difficult for me to build a shelter with some scavenged tools and materials. I took a case labeled "Cakes 'n' Sausage" from the transport. There was enough food on board to feed six thousand for three years.

A few days later Katz moved in, and I did not ask her toleave. Although her field was probability and statistics, she

knew how to plant a garden, and she did. She brought seed and tools and a case of food marked "Beans 'n' Burger." Sometimes she goes for a walk and stays away for days.

The Mouse lives in the space under the floor, but comes in to be fed and have his belly rubbed. By New Home standards, the three of us are a regular little family.

They said there would be no dreams. We were supposed to be turned off, shut down, blank behind the eyelids all the way. The only potential problem, as they saw it, was the impulse to the brain stem that would jump start us back to life again. Maybe they got their signals crossed. Maybe they made fifty-eight hundred mistakes instead of the six hundred they anticipated. I don't think so. I think it was the dreaming that killed them. I think they just couldn't take it and shut themselves down the rest of the way, completely, forever.

Most of us have been pretty quiet since we got here, but Lal is a talker. A good deal of what he says makes very little sense, since he has trouble separating dreams from reality. Many of us may have that problem. He finds me in the garden, or patching up the roof, or staring at the side of the mountain, trying to locate the eyes I often feel among the rocks. "Most of them," he says, "are too difficult to talk to. Trapped in their dreams, you know, and nothing to be done for them, I'm afraid. Now you and your lovely wife are such a comfort to me, such a pleasure to converse with you. Just as soon as my Anjou arrives

we'll have you to dinner, and that's a promise. She won't be long now, that's for sure, and we'll be able to have proper meals again, not just those pellets and powders, you know. A very determined woman, my dear Anjou, and as good a wife as a man could ever hope to fly. To rub. Ahh, no, but you understand, of course, it has been quite difficult, but a proper meal will make the world of difference."

Anjou, of course, has been dead now for at least a thousand years if she ever lived at all. Nevertheless, I continue to scan the mountainside for careless reflections off glass or steel, the eyes of the stranger piercing me with needles of invisible light.

Sometimes Katz and I test our realities by comparing perceptions, comparing memories. Sometimes they match, sometimes they do not. She says this is only to be expected, and would have been the case even back on old Earth. She cites statistical studies, coefficients of correlation, the arcane lore of her profession. She asserts with confidence that all assertions are suspect. Lal, a psychologist, agrees.

Katz see glints on the mountainside, but does not feel the eyes. Lal senses a watcher, but sees only rock. The Mouse leans backwards across my lap so I can rub his belly, and says nothing.

I am in the back of a truck, returning home from some kind of menial contract labor. Others are packed in around me. The truck is going dangerously fast. I realize there is no driver. I

turn to the others to voice my dismay, and discover that they are not human, but some kind of mannequin or scarecrow. The truck drops away, and I am tumbling head over heels, falling across space and time, alone.

There are plants growing now, not only in our garden, but sprouting in patches all over the valley. When we arrived here, there was nothing but the red soil eroded from the red rock of the surrounding mountains. Now it is evident that our transport has successfully infected our new world with certain forms of life. The plants that grow from airborne seeds were the first to make an appearance, having been dispersed through automatic mechanisms as soon as we landed. The dandelions especially have found a home here, growing to great size in the absence of competitors or predators.

Other seeds are dispersed in human excreta. Bred or treated to pass through our digestive systems unharmed, they were incorporated in our food supply. Use the toilets provided, we were instructed back on old Earth. When the tanks are full, empty them outside the settlement. Each tank will result in an island of plant life, fertilized organically.

We never unpacked the toilets. We squat wherever we please, adults next to a rock or over some small fissure, children in whatever place they happen to be when they feel the need. The holding tanks are unnecessary. Plants grow.

A man named Kelling has gathered up a dozen or so adolescent boys and girls and formed an army. We see them jogging along in formation, chanting unintelligibly.

Many of the younger children still run in packs and sleep in piles, although increasing numbers are attaching themselves to adults. They depend on us for food. For some reason, none will go near the transport. There is a woman called Granna who wheels a cart of food from the transport to a place near the pond, twice every day. She enjoys the way the children flock around her chair, darting forward to take meal packs from her hand, then ducking away to eat.

Sometimes I see the Mouse among his fellows, splashing in the pond or rolling in a heap of wrestlers, but he always comes back to the shack to eat and sleep. He seems to be about nine or ten, discounting time in transit. Lal thinks he could talk if he had something he wanted to say.

"Naturally," she said, "we didn't select you for your quite unimpressive assortment of underdeveloped skills or the amalgam of misconceptions and random fragments of fact you think of as your knowledge."

I had to be impressed by the way she made it appear that she was reading her insulting remarks straight from my file. She was obviously a master bureaucrat.

"Your only outstanding quality," she continued, "is an unusually high sperm count and a proven inclination to scatter your seed indiscriminately. The colony's population has to grow

quickly, especially the segment needed to perform semi-skilled labor. We can't put too many of your sort aboard if we're to have room for all those with important contributions to make, so you'll have to breed rapidly. You will have other jobs to do, of course, but you must never forget that your main function is to make babies. Have I made myself perfectly clear?"

Lal has been suffering some unusual symptoms, among them a sensation he describes as a pulling in his head. "Where," Katz wants to know, "is it pulling you?"

"That," Lal replies, "is precisely what I have to find out."

We accompany Lal to the transport, now almost deserted. One who remains is Cray. Once a systems analyst, she is now our self appointed librarian. "The library," she announces, "is closed."

Lal protests. His problem, he insists, is far too serious to admit delay.

Cray shakes her head. "No help for it here, I'm afraid. Cataloguing problem. It can't seem to discriminate dreams from reality. I've been working on it, but it takes time."

Lal says he must have access to the library, no matter what. He has a pulling in his head.

According to Cray, so does the library.

Katz and I leave them there at the library console, taking the opportunity to pick up some food and, perhaps, a useful tool or two. When we return, Lal is ready to leave.

"It's the parabrachial region," Lal advises us, "the REM-on cells. Impulses travel up to the lateral geniculate body, which stimulates higher brain function. Our cortices cannot help but sort out the bursts of impulses by pushing them into pre-existing pigeonholes. We always called it dreaming. Then the dorsal raphe and locus coeruleus grow restive, wakefulness takes over, and the aminergic system dominates the cholinergic. Bursts of sensory impulses get pushed into the same pigeonholes, but the dreams are still there. Especially our dreams. Yes, especially ours."

"That's why you've got pulling in your head?" I ask.

"Yes, that's why," he replies.

Katz returns from one of her three-day walks, and the Mouse darts out to welcome her. She lurches through the door, falls on her pile of blankets, and sleeps clear through to the next day. She wakes up and tells me she is pregnant, and that the child is mine. I remember making love to her, but it feels like the memory of a dream.

I look out over the valley, now almost entirely carpeted with green. The transport has incubated and released its store of insects. In time, there may be birds. Off on the side of the mountain, I see a brief glint of blue-violet light.

She left me in early winter, just as it was getting cold. I came in off the truck, more than half frozen from riding out under the flat grey sky, and she was packing. She didn't want to

talk it over or think it over, she just wanted to pack her things and go, and that was exactly what she did. She left me in that little room of yellow paint, bright yellow that she said would keep us cheerful all through the long cold winter, two together in that little room. She wanted a baby, but we had no money, no steady work, and just that little yellow room.

Sometimes I wonder how one room can be too large to be alone in while a whole world is too small. If I had not come here on the transport, I might have arrived on my own. There was nothing holding me to old Earth. How many, I wonder, were like me?

Katz is harvesting beans and peas, her belly swolen with dreams. I sit on a crate with Granna as she feeds the children. She coos to them. They giggle back at her. Off in the distance I see Kelling's army jogging out across the desert. Granna speaks, possibly for the first time since emerging from her canister. "The jewel," she observes, "is most certainly in the lotus."

Later I relate her observation to Lal. "Ah, yes, but I was telling you that, was I not? The cholinergic system codominant with the aminergic, dreaming and waking as one, a higher state of consciousness. Our ancestors sought it through austerities, meditation, even drugs, and here we have it as our natural condition. What a marvelous world, and my dear Anjou arriving any day now. Oh, won't she be pleased!"

I think, once again, about the no relationships rule. The new society envisioned by the planners was not to be fragmented

by pre-existing attitudes, alliances, or animosities. None of us could have any prior relationship with any other. No families, friends, lovers, or even casual acquaintances need apply.

I think of Lal and his devotion to Anjou. What prompted him to apply to the Project? Was she already gone, disappeared or dead? Was he only too glad to be quit of her, his current devotion just a by-product of dreamtime? Was she always a dream, gaining verity only through a protracted suspension of disbelief?

I think of the children, some as young as six or seven when we set out. A few had been wards of the state, but most had been freely offered by their parents. It is true, as I recall, that times were hard on old Earth. The Project's goal was less to broaden the range of our species than to give it some greater hope of survival. On the other hand, no particular disaster was immanent, and unexpectedly large numbers were willing to relegate their young to the depths of space. Perhaps disaster was closer than we ever suspected.

Two more children have moved in under the floor with the Mouse. We think the smaller one is a girl, but she still keeps her distance so we can't be sure. The other is a boy who calls himself Yekki. Unlike the Mouse, he speaks, if only to himself.

Cray says Katz's baby will be a girl. The library saw it in a dream. Cray has difficulty discriminating the library's dreams from reality. Lal says such discriminations are a waste of time, and that I should follow the pulling in my head. There is no

reason, he says, to insist that one flurry of brain activity is inherantly more valid than another.

I look back through these notes and wonder what prompted me to write them. Am I recording history? Is this just another obsessive reality check? Because I acquired the skill of writing back in my former life, am I compelled to add words to this almost empty world?

As soon as I found the pen and notebook, buried in my firstcase of processed food, I realized that writing was unavoidable. Just the same, I avoid it as much as I can. I leave out almost everything.

The notebook came with a message already inscribed on one leaf, and that message is the next thing that appears in these pages. I cannot attest to its veracity.

> Once upon a time there was a man named Cosimo D'Avila who packed a case of Cakes 'n' Sausage. He was the husband of a good woman and the father of one healthy child.

Despite her increasing size, Katz has been out walking. She had wondered about the way some plants had been growing, ranked in perfectly straight rows, especially out on the fringes of our makeshift settlement. Now she is back with an explanation.

She tells me of wandering at the edge of the valley, where the ground begins to slope upwards into the mountainside, and of seeing Kelling's army a short

distance away. They trot along in their accustomed single file until Kelling calls them to a halt. They squat, defecate all together in a row, then rise as one and head back towards the settlement.

I think of Katz, silent and swollen, exposed to the mountain and its malevolent eyes. I imagine muffled footsteps as vague shadows move towards her, from stone to tumbled stone. I am not paying much attention to her talk of quartz crystals and iron pyrites and the way they catch the sun.

Yekki speaks: "We gonna go the doctor get a shot I don't like it. I just don't. Like it. Don't worry honey it's okay just a little pinch and then you'll sleep and have a pretty dream Mooie do you want to go the pond? Yekki catch a fish ain't no fish go the doctor get a shot and have a pretty dream come on Mooie let's go. You wanna go the mountain saw a man there got these flowers growing on his head he's funny let's go play."

Each day I spend time building, constructing. The shack becomes a cabin, a bungalow, a house. Each day I make it more solid, more substantial, more real. The children have come out from under the floor and built a nest in the room I call my solarium, even though Sol

is just another pinhole in the night sky. The little one, indeed, is a girl. We call her Minnow.

Katz and I, recumbent on a knoll thick with wild-flowers, stroke the more pronounced hill that is her belly. She says it was I who broadcast the seed now flowering, but it feels like the memory of a dream.

Katz catalogues the blossoms: "Gilias, pinks, dutchman's breeches, gentian, jewelweed, blue-eyed grass. Baby likes the blue-eyed grass. She says her eyes are blue and we could call her Blue-eyed Grass sometimes, even though that's not her name."

I want my child to be a brown-eyed boy. Lal says my problem is discriminating reality from truth.

Night is dark here. There is a tiny moon that slips swiftly and furtively across the sky. I see a light on the side of the mountain. It appears and dis-appears, perhaps alternately revealed and concealed by some solid body. "That funny flowerman," says Yekki, "let's go play."

I am the father of a baby girl, born blue-eyed and laughing. We live in a house of substance, heavy and hard, remorselessly real. My house is not hard enough, not heavy enough to resist this pulling in my head. I think it may be time to climb up on the side of the mountain.

The Mouse is tugging at my finger. "Yes," he says, "it's time."

My little notebook is almost full. When I have written this last note I will be done with writing.

We left Katz and the little ones sleeping. The Mouse pulled me along by one finger as Yekki danced ahead. Faultlessly straight rows of vegetation pointed unerringly at the light on the mountainside. We met Lal where the ground began to slopeupward. "I knew you might be late," he remarked, "but I waited."

Halfway to the top, a small lantern sat burning on a rock. Tiny glints of light were captured and reflected back by bits of quartz and iron pyrites and by two green eyes as liquid and as luminescent as a cat's. The cats on this world, so far, exist only in dreams. "Flower man," Yekki proclaimed.

She stepped out of the shadows, a small, chubby woman wearing a wreath of flowers in her shining black hair. Beside me, I heard Lal catch his breath. "Anjou," he cried, "you've come at last!"

"Lal, my Lal," she replied, "you're so thin. What have you been eating?"