

A LOAF OF WHISKY

“Other people’s dreams are boring,” she said.

They were in a bar and they were on a blind date.

He shook his head.

“You don’t agree?” she asked. She was a good person, but inclined to saying things that would have sounded better if she’d had a cigarette holder in her hand.

“I’m not sure,” he said. She didn’t know if he was a good person or not, because so far almost everything he’d said had been “I’m not sure” or “I don’t know.” He was, she was possibly deciding, hard work.

“I just meant listening to people describe their dreams,” she said. “You know, because there’s no way for you to share the experience. All you can do is describe your own dreams back at them. Dream tennis.”

She was hoping he’d laugh at that, but he didn’t. Maybe he didn’t get her sense of humour: a lot of men didn’t. Or maybe he was just tired. He did look tired, now she thought of it. Tired, and distracted, like he wanted to be somewhere, or was somewhere else.

“Right,” he said, like someone suddenly getting a joke. “Other people describing their dreams.”

“What did you think I meant?” she asked, sounding curious rather than annoyed, which was a thing she was good at and also part of why people liked her.

“I thought you meant –”

“What?”

He sat up straighter.

“I thought you meant it literally. Like other people’s dreams would be boring if you were in them.”

She nodded and said:

“If someone was dreaming about me, you mean?”

“No, that’s not it,” he said.

“Oh.” The conversation was not going anywhere she had expected. Which was fine: she was bored so often these days. “What is it then?”

“I mean literally if you were in someone’s dream, that would be interesting.”

“Well, obviously,” she said. “If you were –”

She stopped, interrupting herself.

“*Have* you ever been in someone else’s dream?”

He frowned.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But it’s definitely one explanation.”

“One explanation for what?” she asked. She realised she was confused, which was rare for her, but also interested, which was even rarer.

He put his hand up to order more drinks.

“This could take a while,” he said.

The drinks came, and he took a sip from his. She stirred hers with a toothpick and waited.

“When you dream,” he asked her, “are you always in your dream?”

“Yes,” she said, then corrected herself. “Wait, not always - I mean, sometimes I’m something else, like a bird or a cat.”

“But in your dreams, you’re always the – the main character. The protagonist.”

“Yes,” she said again. “Isn’t everyone?”

He shook his head.

“Not me,” he said. “I’m never in my dreams.”

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“Never?” she asked.

“Nope.”

He said ‘nope’, she thought. Normally that would be a disqualifying offence, but for some reason she let it go.

She thought for a while. He didn’t take her silence as a cue to start talking again but sat there and let her think.

“Is that,” she eventually asked, “I mean. Isn’t that quite unusual?”

“I guess,” he said. “Most people when I ask them say they have dreams that they’re not in, but in the end all they mean is they’re – like you said – a bird or a cat. But they’re still -”

He waved his hand.

“The protagonist,” she said.

“And even the people, the *very few* people, who are absent from their own dreams, they don’t have those dreams often. In fact, almost never. Whereas -”

He said ‘whereas’, she thought. She didn’t know where she stood on ‘whereas’.

“Whereas you do,” she heard herself say.

“Yeah. In fact, I don’t have any other kinds of dreams. Just ones I’m not in.”

More drinks came. She wasn’t sure who ordered them.

“Tell me,” she said. “Tell me some of the dreams.”

“All right,” he said. “OK. There was one dream, it was -”

He seemed to find something funny.

“It was set in a factory,” he said.

“What kind of factory?” she asked.

“A book factory.”

“Like a factory where they make books?”

She realised it was a stupid question. He just nodded, though.

“What kind of books?”

“Big ones,” he said. “Atlases and encyclopaedias. Architecture books. Those kinds of books. Coffee table books.”

“And what were you -”

She stopped herself.

“What was happening in the dream?”

“I told you. They were making books.”

She nodded, a bit impatient.

"I'm not asking the right questions," she told him.

"That's OK," he said. "This is hard for me too." He didn't say why.

"What else was going on?" she asked. "I mean, were you just watching books being made?"

"I wasn't *watching* anything," he said. "I wasn't there."

This was harder than she thought. It was like a word game where you couldn't say certain words.

She hated word games.

"OK. Sorry. Was there anyone else – I mean, were there any people in the dream? And if so, what were they doing? Like was it just books being made or was there a narrative?"

"Yes," he said. "There was."

He finished his drink. She looked down and saw she'd finished hers.

"There was an argument going on. In the back office. You could see it from the floor but you couldn't hear anything."

"You mean you couldn't hear anything?"

He gave her a look.

"You weren't there, right. Sorry. Who was arguing?"

He shook his head.

"No-one I knew. An old guy and a young guy. They looked like father and son, maybe. The old guy was waving a book."

"What book?"

He shook his head. "Just a book. A small book."

She frowned.

"I thought you said this place made big books."

"Yeah, I did," he said.

"Maybe," she said slowly. "Maybe he was the owner and he was telling his son that this factory has always made big books and only big books, and what the hell is this, a small book doing here? And the son is saying, we have to move with the times."

“Maybe,” he said. “It’s hard to know. Like I say –”

“You weren’t there.”

“I wasn’t there,” he agreed.

They finished drinks she didn’t remember starting.

“Tell me another,” she said.

“No.”

“One more.”

She let a finger walk onto his thigh. He looked at it like it was a butterfly.

“OK,” he said, with a sigh. “This one - I don’t know. It’s more like a gag than a dream.”

“I love gags,” she said.

“We zoom in on a liquor store –” he began. She interrupted.

“Sorry – zoom in?”

“That’s how it felt. Like a camera, zooming in.”

“OK. Sorry.”

More drinks came. They ignored them.

“We zoom in on a liquor store,” he said again. “Inside there’s all the usual, you know, wine and beer, and behind the counter, spirits – whisky and brandy and rum and all of that. There’s an old guy behind the counter and there’s a customer, a young guy.”

“Are these the same -”

“No. Different old guy and different young guy. Anyway, the old guy is bagging up the young guy’s purchases -.”

She laughed.

“What?” he said. He sounded annoyed.

“Sorry. Sorry,” she said. She sounded drunk to herself. “It’s just – you’re right, it does sound like a gag.”

“I warned you,” he said.

“I’m really sorry,” she said. “I apologise.”

She took his hand.

“Finish it,” she said.

He breathed in.

“The old man,” he said, “bags up the young man’s purchases and says, ‘Is that all?’ and the young man is about to say yes when suddenly he remembers something. He says, ‘Actually, there is one more thing. Can you get me a loaf of whisky?’”

She raised her hand. “Wait,” she said. “Sorry, I thought you said ‘a loaf of whisky.’”

“I did. That’s what he asked for.”

“A loaf of whisky?”

“That’s right.”

She shook her head.

“How do you even -”

“I know.”

“I mean, it’s whisky. It’s a liquid.”

“Yeah.”

“I guess you could freeze it. And then afterwards, slice it.”

He shook his head.

“I thought about that. You’d need a very strong knife.”

“A chainsaw even. Imagine.”

She mimed pulling a chainsaw. He laughed, and she joined him. It had been a while since she’d laughed at anything.

“What did you say?” she asked. “Sorry, I was laughing and didn’t hear you.”

“I said, can I see you again?” he said.

She was still high from laughing.

“You’re seeing me now,” she said.

“I don’t mean like this. In a bar, on a blind date, and afterwards we go to yours, or mine.”

“Oh,” she said. She felt disappointed. He shook his head.

“I mean, let’s have dinner. A coffee. We can talk. You can tell me about yourself. If you want.”

“Yes,” she said. “I would like that.”

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