

K.W.

BY: Michael Lange

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Ornamental prose, deliberately pedantic sentence structure and dispassionate voice give this story within a dreamscape something of the spectral allure and sibylline mystery of exotic mathematics—the rarified world the narrator’s mind inhabits. The action presents itself as taking place in a suspended hyper-dimension that rises before us like an apparition. Gothic colourations refine; enigmatic characters entrance. A gorgeously written dark star of a story by an author who up until now has never been published. Quote: ‘Snaking out from among the countless jagged mountainous teeth set in circles a league in diameter was a nigh interminable length of fleshy, throbbing crimson.’ And, most beautiful of all...’I awoke. For several minutes I fancied I was drowning in a swift flowing river and when at last I came to my senses, I was twisted on the floor amidst a chaos of bedsheets.’*

I have spent the greatest part of my life asleep. From birth I have wandered in a solitary stupor. There is but one time of exception. In the summer of my eighteenth year, some unknown awakening force called me into the company of my species, and so for the early months of my nineteenth I communed affably with other humans. For a time, I even loved. But in the subsequent fall, as I entered the twentieth, I was removed to university from the town of my birth and summoned back to my wonted realm of half-formed dreams.

My life at university was, as near all my life, friendless. Rarely did I even collaborate with my fellow students. Socialization was a world away. Perhaps one hundred words a day I spoke to my roommate, and no more than that to another. My coursework was in no way helped by my isolation -- about this I had no illusions. I was and am a student of mathematics, a field in which the free exchange of ideas is essential to both individual and collective progress. But I did not choose mathematics in hopes of

success. I had two reasons quite apart. First, of all the offerings before me, this inveterate misanthrope, mathematics seemed the very least human. Second, and related: in mathematics, particularly in the subfield of topology, I saw my only acknowledged hope of sublimity. The rigorous study of higher dimensions seemed to promise a knowledge indescribably beyond humanity, that so arbitrarily three-dimensional race. I was determined to pursue this bounty quite alone.

But almost no self-respecting mathematician speaks or acts in absolutes, and so even to this there was an exception. This exception had a name. She called herself Katerina Wells. I met her early in my third term at university. On the campus I attended, there is a long, wide, central footpath that runs between the majority of the classholding facilities. At various intervals along this path, there are groups of benches usually shaded by a cluster of trees. They are aimed to encourage study in the outdoor air. I preferred libraries and did not understand the university's evident preoccupation with greenery and sunlight. Such things bore in my mind no relation to the Klein bottle or Mobius strip. Hence, they were irrelevant.

So it was as if to spite me that the sun shone so brightly and the foliage so exuberantly flaunted its myriad colors on the day I first spotted that all-to-relevant figure seated on a lone pathside bench. Overwhelming in my memory of her is the color grey. It steeped her dress, informed her pallor, gazed out knowingly from unknowable eyes. Only her hair was striking, jet black. It hung long and unadorned down a back held erect. And I know not whether it was the dominant grey or the protestant black that called to me, but one of the two sank some hooked feeler into a point deep within my chest and drew me forward. It was the second, and thus far last time I have felt such a thing.

With no sensation of choosing, I strode to the bench and sat beside the girl. I did not address her. She turned slowly toward me with a faintest smile and introduced herself by the elusive name that has ever since echoed in my memory.

She was a student of literature -- a thing in which I have an amateur interest. But on hearing my own field of study, she professed herself a hobbyist mathematician as well. Thence the mysteries of Pythagoras and Hilbert occupied near all our conversation. Her familiarity with higher mathematics, a

thing little studied beyond the classrooms and offices such as I haunted, astounded me. From the start it was evident that in many regards she surpassed me, who regarded himself boastlessly as a talented mathematician among his colleagues. She, with those ancient grey eyes, had peered further into the substructure of space and shape than any I had yet known.

Since that meeting, we convened daily at the same bench, she never moving from that seat in which I first saw her. I always departed first and so never saw her rise.

As our acquaintanceship drew on, patterns in our dialogue emerged. We almost never spoke of ourselves -- only of our mathematical ideas and discoveries. In this, she -- supposedly the amateur -- came to dominate, leaving me in rapture to listen as she led the way into ever obscurer depths. I grew to suspect that I was audience to an entirely original genius, one whose insights were novel to me not for my lack of education but for their total concealment from any mind yet to explore in Euclid's wake.

Her technical skill was roughly on par with mine -- her wonder lay in an uncanny intuition, an almost experiential understanding of things which no human may experience. Her insights, she said, came to her in dreams. In these she wandered scapes possessed not only of length, breadth, and depth, but of a fourth and rarely even a fifth spatial quality which it is impossible to describe or recall in waking. Mathematics, she said, was the only language capable of expressing the merest fragment of her nocturnal travels.

When we strayed from true theory into more speculative grounds, a favorite notion of hers was that time is, to some perspective, a fourth spatial dimension. Our perception of it as something fundamentally other than the first three is no more than a mere biological accident, the chance evolution of our perceptual faculties. It was abstractly possible, to her mind, that some intelligent being might perceive our "time" as merely another aspect of space, and that some higher fifth dimension, wholly unknown to humankind, would function as this being's "time."

For such insights and more, I came to revere this grey woman as something semi-divine. In favor of her I began to skip classes which could not afford me such precious instruction. It was slightly past the middle of the semester that Katerina began to appear in my dreams. Always it was the same scene. In a

river so wide that the shores vanished in fog we swam, she ever ahead of me, and I striving not to lose sight of her. From time to time would she look back and beckon me onward, but never did she slow. We set course perpendicular to the current, and while I could not see what awaited us on the shore, I was convinced beyond doubt that it was something other, something *beyond human*.

I never spoke of this dream which grew more vivid with each passing night -- my swimming more panicked, my limbs more spent, the girl further and further away toward shore. Growing all the while was a sense of dread for what awaited at the river's end. Over what apocalyptic fall might I plunge I knew not, but fear drove me the more desperately shoreward.

Even as her presence in my dreams grew stronger, she came to consume my waking existence. As semester end approached, I neglected exam preparations the more fully to indulge my obsession. She could be found at the bench at almost any time of day and never tired of conversing. I was too much in awe at her uncanny stamina to question it.

But even to her loquacity there was an exception. It came on what would be my last day with her. When I sat down alongside, I waited in vain for her to start the dialogue, as was her custom. After several minutes of silence, I assayed to initiate. But though she was attentive, I earned no further response than a gentle nod to the ideas which I knew must now seem mundane. Finally, I quit, and we spent I know not how long in silence, a thing to which we were not unaccustomed; only its duration was novel.

At last she spoke the words that still haunt my nightmares:

“You’re in love with me, aren’t you?”

Astonished is insufficient a word. I doubted her very reality. But as I stared shamefaced at the ground, gaze forced upon what I could not truthfully deny, I felt her lukewarm hand come to rest atop mine. And so we sat for a short eternity, in which I awoke again and experienced such a torrent of variegated emotion as I never expected a lifetime to encompass.

She rose, and with an effort made possible only by sheer compulsion, I lifted my eyes and met hers. A sad smile she gave me. To this day, when I hear my fellow creatures speak the word “beauty,” it is this image alone which comes to mind.

Then she turned and left, and I knew without reason that she would never reappear.

That night, my dream became a nightmare. I watched from the furthest distance as Katerina, a merest speck, pulled herself from the water and stood erect on what must be the shore. I fancied I saw her wave to me at the last, but my attention was too quickly drawn to what lay downstream. Headlong, powerless I rushed toward a roaring cataract. Before I could gather the wind to scream, I was plummeting through endless space, limbs thrashing in and out of the shower about me. So I fell for many minutes before I dared open my eyes and look down. I can only wish I had not.

Far, far beneath me gaped such a horror as the waking mind cannot fathom. In failing words I might call it the maw, vaster than any moon crater, of some unnamable monstrosity, whose unholy, impossible bulk stretched infinitely downward into the abyss below. Snaking out from among countless jagged, mountainous teeth set in circles a league in diameter was a nigh interminable length of fleshy, throbbing crimson. To glimpse its end, I must crane my neck upward as toward the peak of a distant mountain. And there, suspended in space miles away, I beheld the tips of that bifurcated tongue, each bearing a single gargantuan eye, which stared like twin omnivident moons through my infinitesimal being.

I shut my eyes in terror. The roar of the fall began gradually to be supplanted by a sourceless, all-pervading ringing. It grew and grew beyond bound, until it seemed to consume all my very existence. Then, at the moment when my last, cornered fragment of consciousness knew without reason that it was passing through that horrid orifice -- the ring dropped to silence. I awoke. For several moments I fancied I was drowning in a swift-flowing river, and when at last I came to my senses, I was twisted on the floor amidst a chaos of bedsheets.

I visited the bench many times in subsequent days, though I believed not in the least that I would find her. Still my search expanded. I inquired of every literature professor who would hear me as to the

status, location, even the mere existence of one Katerina Wells. Those who did not turn me away informed me that they knew of no such person at all. And though I tried certain administrative persons at the university, they refused to answer me for reasons of “privacy.”

But with my senses tuned anew to the world around me, grasping for any sign of my lost muse, I went not unrewarded. My straining ear picked up the mutterings of fellow students; my eye caught their furtive glances in my direction. A rumor I pieced together: once, but no longer, a strange young man had sat on the bench midway down campus’ main avenue and conducted lively discourse with thin air.

I feared the implications not. The notion that I might occupy a starkly different reality from the rest of humanity was neither unfamiliar nor unpleasing. In part I relished the notion that all Katerina’s wisdom had been in fact my own, merely projected onto a construction of my imagination. But there remained in me a deep sense that she had been real, so I vacillated for years between the possibilities.

My dreams, she never quite left. I still swim that river at night. Her form is gone from the vision, but her voice remains, ever repeating the last words she spoke to me. Always they seem sinister -- describing my vain, twisted hope of reaching the impossible shore, or explaining the very reason why I never shall.

Thus has been my only contact with her, until this day. Until this day, I have half doubted the existence of that woman, but no more. Just hours ago, I paid a visit to that campus of many years since. I walked down the central avenue, and the bench was still there. As I stood before it in a senseless reverie, a careless biker came speeding down the path. Some animal instinct drew my head about at the last second, but too late-- I glimpsed only the grey blur of the bike and a helmetlessly flying trail of black hair, then she collided with me and sent us both hurtling into and over the bench, toppling it as we went. Before I fully gathered my senses, I heard her hastily right the bike, mount it, and depart without so much as an apology. Still too stunned to be irritated, I rose and stared blankly at the bench as a low ache spread over my right side, where she had hit me. I stepped around to the other side and made to right it. As I knelt and reached to grasp, something on its underside caught my eye. There, carefully graven in the wood under her side of the bench, were two initials I knew all too well.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Surprise, surprise -- the narrator is inspired by yours truly. I exaggerated the social isolation a fair bit, but the sensation of having slept through most of my life is an honest one. Katerina Wells is a character, more of an image really, that I've had floating around in my head for a while. I don't remember exactly where she originated, but months ago I started and discarded several attempts at a story about meeting a quiet, grey girl at the back of my topology class (topology being my favorite branch of mathematics). I realized I finally had enough to write a story about her when a few more elements clicked: the idea of making her a (possible) hallucination came from a recent fascination with psychosis and other blurrings of the lines between perception and reality. The dialogue about higher dimensions was done in imitation of the esoteric journeyings of certain Lovecraft characters. The dream component is there because dream scenes are my favorite thing to write (so liberating!), and the nightmare creature was born from some idle, Lovecraft-inspired doodlings (I've been reading a lot of Lovecraft lately). I think whatever I wrote about Katerina Wells was always supposed to be about a life-changing encounter with an unusual individual and the communion of two habitually isolated minds. But I tried to give it a dark twist, so that even the narrator's lone social pursuit is perverted by his desire to transcend humanity. There are a lot of authors I love, but to name a few that I feel have influenced me: Lovecraft, Vonnegut, Bradbury, Melville, and Faulkner.*

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