

# STILL DREAMING

*by Brantly Hutchison*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We love the innovative circularity of this existentialist urban-angst drama where repetitious variations on the same conversation and variations on the same actions and settings are played over and over from different POV's—including the use of both first and third person singular. The issues discussed by the characters are never resolved and their pointlessness introduces a claustrophobic nihilism that is greatly enhanced by the intentional mechanical voice of the narrator. Deliberate variations in spacing reinforce a visual feeling of isolation. A technical tour de force by an author in full control of his considerable gifts. Quote: 'A rock standing tall as a man and shivering, the gray mute waters breaking and passing around him. He fancied trying to stem them altogether but every position he took, they overtook. He shifted to the left, they went right, he stretched out his arms, they went under, he laid down, they walked over. He gave up and returned to work, not a minute early. This time both his co-workers were in, they echoed each other, where one arm reached, so there were two.'*

“Lets talk about things.”

“Things?”

“Important ones!”

“Okay.”

“Okay!”

“And what are they?”

“Who knows?” She giggles, standing from the couch. She's in the middle of the room now. Under the light, the chain to turn it off is a few centimeters away from her hair. She breathes in deep and twirls around. Her back is to me, shadowed heavily. “Who really knows?”

She's in my face now, close, I can feel her breath against my skin, hot, not unpleasant. Suddenly full of shame I move away, I'm sitting on the edge of the couch. It's uncomfortable, I can feel the springs and wood supporting the cushions, which are faded, stained, and no longer serving much of a purpose. She giggles again, I turn my head.

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The alarm sounded surely, as it always did, at six am. He woke up, never one to sleep through an alarm, he was sweating again. He breathed out deeply, rubbed his eyes, and laid back down. A few minutes later and he was up, washing, readying and leaving.

His route was short. Through the parking lot, down the alley, descend into the pathway by the river and follow it a few more blocks to work. The trees were barren, the sun hidden. His shoes echoed on the path way. These were old, the sole was peeling off of the left foot, it flapped up and down, clicked, as he walked. Distant were the sounds of cars, people, murmurs, and down below the river

softly bubbled. He emerged from the river pathway onto the street, cars passed by driven by people he couldn't see. Other people occupied the side walk, they too had their own rhythmic clapping as they walked. They were colorless and did not speak.

He turned suddenly and opened a door, the glass reflected a shadow that was vaguely himself. He went behind the counter into the back room, no one else was present. He peeled off his jacket and hung it on a rack near the employee washrooms, he took a hat from the closet and put it on. He walked back out into the front of the store.

Refrigerators hummed and an analogue clock ticked slowly and surely. It announced every second. He realized he was not alone. Behind the register was a co-worker, the opener. She looked in his direction and gave him a nod, he did the same. Customers didn't start to enter the store for another hour or so with any regularity, he had a lot of time for nothing. He'd pretend to clean, to see to issues that needed mending, like he was checking the isles for stock and making a mental note of what to bring out, but he wasn't doing any of that. He was waiting. She was waiting too. The customer who came in waited as well, bought something, and left to wait somewhere else. Everybody was waiting-for something.

Hours passed. His shift was over, he retraced his steps. Down into the riverside pathway, up into the street and the alley, across the parking lot. To the left of the dirty pale blue building, in through the security door, the frosted glass of which was cracked, up the stairs, once more to the left, and into his apartment. He peeled off his jacket again and flung it to the floor. He sat in front of the television but did not turn it on. He yawned, looked at the clock, and tried to think of something to do.

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“Have you figured it out?”

“Hmm?”

“What's important?”

“No. You said no one knew. I didn't think about it.”

“I thought you'd be the one to figure it out, you have to be the one to figure it out.”

“I'll try.”

“Good!” She said. The room is different, not in structure but in decorum. The posters on the wall had changed, the light now attached to a ceiling fan. The couch remained the same. “If we can't talk about important things, what should we talk about?” She sits down on the couch and it bounces a little, her head is turned to me expectantly. I feel smoke in the air, but there is none.

“I'm not sure.”

She grows tense, her mouth flickers, she breaks out into a grin and starts to laugh. “You never are!” She points a finger. I feel accused. “That's okay though. Who is? Right? Right?” She nudges me.

“Some people, I think.”

“They're wrong.”

“Are you sure?”

“You're a funny one.”

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He woke with a stiff neck. He had fallen asleep on the sofa, it was still dark out. The light from the street lamps seeped in through his covered windows. He raised his head from where it had fallen on the arm rest and stretched it back and forth. He checked the microwave for the time and decided to have breakfast, he opened his grimy fridge and selected one of two items inside, he turned on his stove and fried one egg. He went into the other room and laid down on his bed, he set his alarm before going back to sleep. She did not appear this time. She didn't always.

His morning routine was concluded ten minutes earlier thanks to his thinking ahead and premature breakfast. He could have been at work ten minutes earlier too, but he dawdled, sitting on a bench along the river side pathway, staring down into the churning gray cold water as it bubbled over rocks and forced it's way forward. His co-worker was already there by the time he arrived, which one he couldn't say, she looked like the other one, if she wasn't already the other one. He manned the tills for

the majority of the day, “Thank you.” Click. “Thank you.” Click. Exhaustion set in, the hours drudged on and by the time he was cleared to leave, he felt already in his coffin. He returned home, stopping at a different convenience store for simple amenities before sitting back down on his couch and thinking. He turned on the television, a lady in a dull suit spoke in a monotone about money, about an important man, and about the rising need for doctors in certain municipalities. He didn't pay attention, by the time it was ten pm he was ready for sleep.

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“That will be all for today.”

Everyone starts to stand up, there's a general buzz, notebooks are closed, laptops shut, everyone heads to one of two exits and files out. I stand up and do the same, under my shoulder is a portable computer, my clothes are nice. I feel like I'm nice. I suddenly sense that something is missing. I have forgotten something at my seat, I look down, I look around on the floor. There is nothing there, I get confused, and then I look up and I see her.

“Hello!” She chimes.

“Hi.”

All around her things are slow, my fellow students, the ones still inside, they hardly move an inch a second. It would take them a year just to finish leaving the room at this pace. I don't find that strange. I think that they don't either.

“I know what we should talk about!”

“You do?”

“Yes!”

“What?”

“You!”

“What about me?”

“You're the subject of course!”

“I'm not that interesting.”

“True.”

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He woke much later in the day. It was his day off, he was free to do as he pleased, provided he

returned on the morrow. He didn't do much, he went grocery shopping, he needed food to live. His fridge was empty, his cupboards were empty. When he returned home, spending frugally, as he must meet rent on the first, he cooked himself a meal. Nothing fancy, primarily prepared by boiling water. He ate, and then sat on his couch. He wondered what he should do, and ultimately, he did nothing. He stayed up late simply because he could, and when he went to sleep it was with heavy eyelids.

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“I'm starting to feel sorry for you.”

“You shouldn't.”

“You do, don't you? Feel sorry for yourself.”

“Doesn't everyone?”

“I guess that's true.”

I'm back in the room. I know we are above ground, in an attic. The couch is gone. I'm sitting on a chair. There are no posters, there are no features aside from the wood paneling, and the shag carpet.

“You know...” She's speaking softly, her cheerfulness is gone. I feel cheated.

“I know?”

“Nothing. Nothing, never mind.”

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The alarm once more summoned him from his sleep. He did not work until ten, and thus, had ample time to wash and ready. He left around nine and endeavored to take at least forty five minutes walking his normal fifteen minute route. He counted seconds for every step, he was not going to show for work early, he was not going to waste his time. He stopped all together when he noted the time on his wrist and that he was going to be early if he continued. Other pedestrians passed him with out notice, hardly changing course until the last possible second, he was like a rock in a stream. A rock standing tall as a man and shivering, the gray mute waters breaking and passing around him. He fancied trying to stem them all together, but every position he took, they overtook. He shifted to the left, they went right, he stretched out his arms, they went under, he laid down, they walked over. He gave up and returned to work, not a minute early. This time both his co-workers were in, they echoed each other, where one arm reached, so there were two.

“Thank you. Thank You.” they echoed.

He grit his teeth.

He worked, he went home, he slept.

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There are bags beneath her eyes. She looks at me, "I'm tired," she says.

"I know."

"You're tired too."

"Yes."

"You should sleep."

"Am I not?"

"That's true. Then maybe you should wake, aren't you tired of sleeping?"

His chest rose and fell, he broke out in a cold sweat. He looked at the clock, it was the early hours. He felt exhausted, drained, thoroughly empty. His eyes weighed down on his cheeks, he felt they'd pull his entire head down, through the bed, under the carpet, past the bedroom of the unit one floor lower than his, into the basement, with the washing machines, and still further yet, until he resurfaced in his bed, some years later.

He went back to sleep, and he did not wake for two days. On his answering machine there was a

message he could not hear. It barked and cracked, he had missed work. He was sorry. He needed money. He went into work again, and nothing had changed for his absence, the merchandise, lined up neatly along the isles, had not moved, if something was bought, it was restocked, there was always more stock. The convenience store was too convenient to run out of supplies, more would be made if all was exhausted. The refuse of which, buried, buried, until it encompassed all of the ground, could then be picked up and used again. He would always be needed to ensure that others could buy, to stock the shelves that would always have supply. Or if not he, then some other.

She stopped coming around.

Nothing else changed.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I have an unfortunate propensity to view the world in grey scale. You know, "Woe is me," and "What's the point of all this?" and "Why can't I love?" and other tired bullshit. 'Still Dreaming' no doubt came from such a place. A pervasive sense of frustration. I can't say if I wrote it with the intention to depict a bit of lower-class ennui (having written it years ago and dug it out of my hard drive as yet untitled) but on reading it now that's what it appears to be. My strongest literary influence comes by way of Vonnegut, with Murakami making pasta somewhere in the background.*

**BIO:** I grew up in various apartments and trailers in rural Northern Ontario. In elementary school a kindly teacher of mine read a short story I wrote in front of the class and thereby consigned me to a truly miserable life of day-dreaming and praying that said day-dreams might somehow materialize into self-worth and maybe a little monetary compensation. Is there an honest love for the craft somewhere in there? I sure hope so.