

The Idol Metamorphosis

If you want your dreams to come true, don't sleep.

Yiddish Proverb

ONE MORNING, when Gregory Samson woke, he felt differently from how he had felt on any other day of his thirty-one years. From the moment he opened his eyes he experienced renewed vigor in his legs, wildheartedness in his chest, but most of all, clarity in his mind. Gregory took note of the electrodes stuck to various parts of his body. He had applied them himself, first rubbing gel into his skin before pressing the little rubber patches to his hairy legs, torso, neck and finally his head. Now he detached them carefully one by one, wrapping the wires into small spools and placing them on the end table next to his smartphone. Instantly, he sensed that his experiment may have been a success.

Gregory rose and marched to the bathroom, stared into the mirror looking at a creature he had never before seen. It was not so much that he had a different face, but the visage that stared back exuded an unusual self-confidence for such a shy and unassuming man. This Gregory had movie star presence, a swagger that came with a sense that he had a talent over and above those of the ordinary man. "Fa-la-la-la-la," Gregory intoned cautiously at the man in the mirror, in a manner that both cleared his throat and tested his vocal cords. Then he sang out loudly "Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away." He laughed at the irony and, beaming a bright smile, went about the usual morning chores of shaving, showering, and dressing for the day.

Finally reaching the kitchen to fix breakfast, Gregory edged past his sister to get to the refrigerator. She gave him a strange look and said "So who was that on the radio you had up so loud?"

"What radio?" he replied.

"Singing that old Beatles' song," she continued, "I know it is like the most covered song in music history, but I didn't recognize the singer."

Gregory, his newfound self-assurance bringing forth a glint in his eye said "Well of course that was the soon to be famous Gregory Samson."

His sister just groaned "Yeah right," and took her first bite of cereal.

Gregory and his sister were once again roommates in their 30's, since both were single, wanted company and needed someone with whom to share expenses. Greta treated Gregory poorly, just as she had when they were growing up, but his ego was such that her approval was not meaningful.

"So did you know that two nights from now are the auditions for US Idol Search?" he quizzed his sister.

"Sure, you have been obsessing about it for weeks," she replied.

"Well you will be proud to know that your one and only brother Gregory has the 13th audition spot and plans to win!" he boasted.

"Yeah right," she repeated in the same tone as earlier. What had come over him, she thought, after her dismissive phrase left her tongue. This computer nerd who has almost no normal friends,

whose social life revolves around some violent video game, thinks he is going to sing in front of those three nasty judges and a couple of hundred wannabes? She tried to decide if she would want to go see the spectacle, just for grins, like wanting to see a train wreck.

"Tonight there is Karaoke at McDonough's just for people who are planning to audition on the show on Thursday. I signed up for that also, would you like to come along?" Gregory asked. This time, instead of "yeah right" Greta gave her brother a curious half smile. She considered the question and said she might go.

Gregory decided to spend this day "working" from home as he sometimes did when he had no meetings scheduled. His job as a software developer did not require that he actually appear in the office and his employer knew he was a dependable producer, although to his employer what Gregory was working on at any one time was usually a mystery. This latest venture involved developing a smartphone application or "app" that would work while the user was sleeping. Electrodes were attached to the phone via wires and the user would program the desired effect. The idea was to fulfill the dreams of the imagination of the user. People sometimes had fantasies in which they desire, for just one day, to be able to run like an Olympic track star, shoot the basketball like Michael Jordan, dance the ballet brilliantly, or sing like Pavarotti. Gregory's program was designed to help the user make those dreams come true. The app would target a stimulation of the muscles in the desired locations and would subliminally stimulate the brain to help the newly stimulated muscles react. The first test of the new app was intended to make Gregory into a star singing sensation for a day. Based upon the early tests of his voice and delivery, he knew he had a success on his hands.

In Gregory's manner of thinking, "work" today was going to consist of reviewing the music and lyrics of the song he planned to sing tonight at McDonough's, so he sat before his computer on lyric and music websites, choosing songs and then trying them out in front of his bedroom mirror. Greta had left for work so he had the luxury of privacy in which to test his new talents. The more he sang, the more confident he felt about testing the waters in front of an audience. His employer could not complain. He was not slacking off, but rather conducting extensive testing on their new product.

THAT EVENING, McDonough's was packed with prospective US Idol Search contestants, friends and family. Gregory and Greta found a comfortable spot near the back of the bar and watched the parade of performers who took the stage with varying levels of success. Most were younger than Gregory, made a hipper fashion statement and seemed to have some prior performance experience. Normally, seeing these performers sing before him would have put Gregory into a funk of insecurity and depression, but tonight was different. He retained his air of self-confidence, yapping in Greta's ear, impressing her with his critical analysis of the highlights and lowlights of the evening's entertainment. She had never seen or heard him so animated and confident.

When his turn came, Gregory boldly strode to the stage, asked the DJ to put on Journey's "Don't Stop Believing," grabbed the mike, started dancing to the beat of the intro and made eye contact with almost the entire audience at once. Most of these kids did not know the song by heart, as it was a hit before their time, but it was at least familiar, and, whoever this guy was, he could sing it with voice, gusto and feeling that brought them goose bumps. Greta watched and remembered him back in high school when he learned to play the ukulele and would sing Israel Kamakawiwo'ole's "Over the Rainbow" medley. She recalled that he could sing the song well but was so insecure that he would only do so in the privacy of his bedroom. She would overhear the haunting overtones of his voice and the instrument through the walls between their rooms while she studied geometry. But the guy up on stage did not in any way resemble the brother she had known for 30 years. Gregory had not shared with her the secret of his app that gave him the ability to perform at this new impressive level.

It took several minutes for the audience to finish its vigorous applause after Gregory's performance and each person he passed offered a pat on the back or a handslap as he made his way back to Greta. He winked, then held up his hand like a stop sign to stifle the stream of questions he expected from her. He had no intention of telling her his secret, and, in fact, telling her about it would have been a violation of the confidentiality provisions of his employment contract. He knew co-workers who had been fired, even sued for that breach.

Gregory raced home with Greta, avoiding any discussion of the night's events, looking at his watch all the while like he was Cinderella trying to get home before midnight. Once home, Gregory wished his sister a good night, said he was tired and went to bed. He looked at his smartphone and the wires and electrodes on his nightstand but kept to his plan to avoid the app stimulus tonight. A part of the test of the app was that it was designed to work only for the one day following the treatment overnight.

WEDNESDAY MORNING, Gregory awoke feeling quite normal. He was not amped up to sing like a rock star, but rather felt that his normal shy and quiet persona had taken over. His app had performed as programmed, giving him just one dreamy day of musical heroics. He went to work, had the usual boring meetings, and played some video games in the evening in contests against internet friends he would probably never meet. The critical event for the day would occur just before bedtime when he would once again ask his new app to perform a modern day miracle. Gregory carefully, almost religiously, assembled the maze of wires into their respective places, some to electrodes in the prescribed locations of his body, one to the electrical outlet and one to the smartphone dock. Having satisfied himself that the device was correctly applied, he checked the settings for the app on the smartphone and fell asleep, looking forward to the next day and his US Idol Search debut.

THURSDAY MORNING, Gregory was startled awake, but not by the usual buzzer on his alarm clock. Somehow he sensed that he had overslept. As he strained his eyes to see the time, he experienced a feeling of shock at the blinking numbers on the clock. There had been a power failure overnight. He fumbled with the smartphone, unlocked the front screen and saw that the app was not on. The power failure had caused the app to quit and the smartphone to go into sleep-mode. He carefully peeled off the various electrodes on his body, but he could tell that the rock star setting on the app had not worked. His legs felt like narrow spindles, his chest was heavy and his back was hard and brittle like the shell of a beetle. He struggled to his feet, looking down to see how many feet were there today, since nothing seemed normal. Gregory stumbled to the mirror and saw, not the self-confident man from two days ago, but the bedheaded bug-eyed boy that the high school bullies had nicknamed "the fly" so many years ago. He slunk back into bed, head under the covers, knowing that his dreams of being the next US Idol had been dashed by a stroke of bad luck.

When Gregory failed to appear for breakfast, Greta went to his room and called to him through the door. He would not answer so she tried the knob, but the door was locked. She was used to his moody ways but somehow expected a different Gregory today. However, since the show was not until 7pm that evening, she left Gregory alone and went to work.

Gregory lay in bed all day, never even calling or logging in at work. His smartphone rang a few times during the day, all but one time being the office wondering where he was. Caller ID said it was an unknown caller and thereafter he saw that he had a voice mail message. The message was from US Idol Search, confirming that he would audition as contestant #13 tonight and reminding him to be at the theater no later than 7pm. Fat chance of that, he thought. I'll still be under these covers.

AT 5PM Greta returned from work, surprised to see no sign of her brother. There was no evidence that he had even been in the kitchen or in his home office all day. She once again went to his room and this time banged forcefully on the door. No answer. Finally she said "Gregory, I know you must be in there. If you don't answer or open the door I will have to call the police to break it down to see if you are alive!" With that, Gregory opened the door, still in his pajamas, with the covers draped around his shoulders. "When do you have to be at the theater?" Greta inquired. He remained silent until she asked a third time in increasingly loud and insistent tones.

"Seven pm" was his mumbled reply.

"Well, you get yourself together, I'll fix us a quick dinner and we'll leave at 6:30. I saw a rock star the other night and I'm going to see him again tonight." Greta replied, turning on her heels and heading to the kitchen, her demeanor providing no real opening for debate or dissent.

Gregory reluctantly shaved, showered and dressed, grudgingly putting on the clothes he had chosen to sing in at the audition. The two siblings ate dinner in strained silence, and then gathered themselves together to leave. Just before locking the door, Greta was struck by a thought and re-entered the house. She raced to her brother's room, found his old ukulele and put it in the large tote she carried as a purse, thinking to herself "for luck."

The scene at the theater was one of organized chaos. Each act had a cadre of fans in the audience boisterously cheering on their contestant, or booing when one of the judges gave a caustic critique of the act of their friend. Gregory and Greta sat too near the front for Gregory's liking and his anxiety level increased as he watched each talented performer do his or her song until the twelfth act was over and the judges had finished a particularly nasty review. Gregory had been mumbling "no way" over and over in Greta's ear, but she kept encouraging him, telling him he just had to be half as good as he had been on Tuesday and he would blow them all away.

The host then announced contestant #13, Gregory Samson and instructed the DJ to spin the Journey staple. Gregory took the stage gingerly, with his back hunched over and his skinny legs wobbling under him. The rock music began blaring and Gregory stooped silently in front of the microphone. As the tune continued he thought how the words he was supposed to be singing at that time "Don't stop believing, hold on to that feeling..." were now mocking him.

Greta looked on at her pathetic figure of a brother and felt awful for forcing him to come. Finally, when she thought she saw a tear welling in his left eye, she charged the stage, screaming at the DJ to "for God's sake, turn that music off" while carrying Gregory's old ukulele. When he began to crumble in her arms, she handed him the instrument and whispered "Gregory, just click your heels together and sing like the old days in your bedroom." With that said Greta grabbed a chair, lowered Gregory to a sitting position and left the stage.

The room was starkly quiet. Gregory looked at the ukulele and plucked at the strings, reflexively working the keys to put it in tune. Then he began strumming and humming the familiar song. When it was time for the words he almost whispered "Somewhere, over the rainbow..." At first he was singing just to himself, in the kind of cocoon he had formed for the day, but by the time he reached the part of the song where the late Hawaiian singer's medley transitioned to "It's a Wonderful World" his voice had risen and he looked up, surprised to see the audience and judges smiling at him. As he continued the song, it gained strength and volume, filling the theater with clear, clean emotional warmth that no one, especially not Gregory, ever expected to hear. Gregory realized then that if the DJ put on the Journey song again, he could sing that song also, as well or better than he did two days earlier. Finally, he reached the point in the song where it loops back and he sang the verse:

"Someday I'll wish upon a star,
Wake up where the clouds are far behind me.
Where trouble melts like lemon drops,
High above the chimney top that's where you'll find me..."

At the end the audience cheered, the judges refrained from skewering him for his change of song, and Greta hugged him proudly. "My app is a complete failure," he shouted to her. She looked at him quizzically. He did not explain but continued "and I've never been so happy to be a failure in my life."

THE END

Lou Pettey © 2011

(at time of placing on www.petteys.net, counter was at 6567 (and 6566))