

TITLE: WAKES UP IN DREAMS

To sleep, perchance to dream. No, not perchance; that cruel thing called rapid eye movement rears its head too often for it just to be a possibility. If Shakespeare was a visionary, this is what it must mean to be blind. To sleep, to dream, to suffer. Over, and over, and over again. William, you taunting bastard.

Running, now. My nerves barely register the transitional phases between actions before my lungs are burning and screaming. I want to be awake, I want to be awake—I promise I won't pretend to hate it next time. God, make me a narcoleptic, so that I can understand what it means to be a real person. I am opening and closing my eyes as I move forward (offhandedly, I can see that my eyelashes are fluttering like the wings of some exotic bird, and that the light catches in them marvelously) just for sand and powdered glass to turn my soft tissue into softer tissue. I realize now that this is what it must mean to be tortured.

It stops, sometimes. Nothing like this can continue without a break every so often. When I am free from the dream (and I do not mean awake) and hidden in dark places, where it doesn't hurt, I can... be. Sometimes I am the eye in the crack in the door. Sometimes I am the creak of the hidden space under the floorboards. It is only in these lonely, haunted moments that I can feel peace.

But doors have a tendency of being opened. When light hits my eyelids, there are very few choices but to—

“What d’you want to be when you grow up?”

Blink. I am conscious again, pulled from the long dream into the confines of pastel painted walls, chalkboard, and cheap wooden desks. The low din of children chattering is intermittently broken up by that screechy, pre-prepubescent squawk only a child can do. My small chin is resting in my hands, and someone has leaned close to peer past the cage of my fingers. Though my brain is active again, it is still too sluggish to render the details of whoever is speaking to me.

It is number whatever of countless days spent in elementary school. I am in the third grade. This is the unfortunate process of childhood, the prodding of the body that eventually produces a decent member of society. Perhaps I will eventually look back on these days with the same nostalgia a murder victim has in their final moments, but it’s more likely that this will be a barely-present memory. For now, however, I am here, and I am in the third grade.

"What d’you want to be when you grow up?" the voice asks again. It's a child— a classmate I've not yet talked to since joining the class. I keep my eyes shut behind my fingers.

"Astronaut," I eventually reply. I’ve happened to think about this before, during a snacktime whose meal had since been forgotten by my mind. The astronaut, I thought, was a hero of space who went further from home than anyone else. That was, of course, a very scary thing; being far away from home required a spectacular amount of bravery. Have you ever heard about the *Challenger* disaster, I ask in my head. I fail to realize the question was not verbalized.

"Dunno what that is," the asker continues. I had been led to believe the conversation would end after their question was answered.

The *Challenger* disaster was the explosion of the American Space Shuttle *Challenger*, which killed all seven of its crew members on board 73 seconds after launch. Structural failure

by two bad O-rings. After the explosion, the shuttle was blown apart by the forces it experienced and it was flung into space. I've seen the picture, you know. It looks like a big, coiling worm of smoke rising in contrast to the darkness of space. You can see on the trail where the explosion was too— but it's all just smoke. You can barely see anything of the space shuttle left. It took three months to recover everything from the bottom of the ocean floor. The worst part is that the cause of the accident was already known beforehand. Engineers suggested something needed to be done about the O-rings, which could have their seals depressurized and erode from combustion gasses. They received no response from NASA. This happened more than once, but regardless of what the engineers said, NASA maintained the opinion that the O-rings were fine as they were. Disaster born by a desire for unity, a desire to reach that stupid silver circle in the sky, one could say.

“... So what's an astronaut?”

“Someone who goes to space,” I choose to answer.

The asker, a classmate who sits across from me, hums in acknowledgement before slowly leaning back and returning to her worksheet and crayons.

“... is a very smart child. They do so well, I’m sure they get bored in class!”

My teacher chortles, prompting my mother to smile along. She places her hand on top of my head. It’s one of the rare times I see her out during the day, but I’m sure it’s because she will return to work and come home even later than usual. But maybe we’ll get food on the way home, so it won’t be too bad.

“... can be a little shy, but that’s alright! I’m glad that my class this year has been especially good. You know, I once taught a class...”

Again, my mother smiles and nods her head at the teacher’s ramblings. It must be nice, I thought, to interact with people your age after having to talk to kids all day long. My mother isn’t fond of small talk, and I’m sure she’s thinking about what she’ll need to do when gets back to work. In the brief moment of lucidity I can manage in my child-brain, I register that both my mother and teacher are only exchanging pleasantries, and this was going to last a while. I get up and leave. I am not stopped.

The hallways are empty.

It is the liminal period between when teachers leave and janitors arrive, when the school is as empty as it can be, aside from nighttime. Wide windows, which line one side of the long, second-story hallway, allows the dusk sun to set this world on fire; the gentle light of morning and afternoon are gone now, replaced by the high-contrast orange that twilight casts before the night takes it. Rooms pass. Home room, home ec room, art room. Other home room classes.

Why is it that my mother is taking an interest in my education now? Why is it that my teacher seems to care now? Are these necessarily questions for me to know the answer to? This is why it’s aggravating—when there’s nothing to address in the meantime, the mind wanders to

useless things. Things that, normally, don't matter to me. I guess even the cruelty of that is part of it, too, though. It's aggravating.

“Astronaut.”

Why did I say that? I have no interest in astronomy, or physics. The only reason I care about the *Challenger* is that I cried when I watched the documentary. I stop walking, and raise one soft hand to a cheek.

I don't remember crying.

Something catches my eye outside. Two figures enter the school grounds through the field. They are solitary figures floating through the field's tall grass, backlit by the evening sky. From this vantage point, it is as if the white lines of the soccer field are turning to arrows and aiming towards them. One figure is small, and the other is large. They hold hands. The grip is loose. Moving through the grass with purpose, the taller figure drags the smaller figure to the small space between the school's shed and the school proper.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?”

When the two figures are free from the harsh gaze of sunset, I can see the smaller figure is that child—the one who asked that question, earlier today. I step backwards, hoping the reflection of the sun against the window will prevent them from seeing me. I watch.

The taller figure has released the hand of the child, though I come to realize that she had been holding her wrist instead. Her arms are folded across her chest now, chin tilted in a way you should not tilt your chin towards children, and it appears she is speaking. With each word, the woman's mouth contorts. She seems disgusted as each syllable exits her mouth, and the movements of her speech are so erratic that one might think strings were attached to her lips.

Finally, the woman's mouth stops moving, and she simply looks down at the child. Her eyes swallow light; they are the dead eyes of a fish in a human skull.

The woman strikes the child. Skin is almost non-Newtonian in the way it reddens and tightens when it is struck, yet the child absorbs the impact by turning her head. As if these are twin behaviors, growing up together. It comes so suddenly that I trip over my own foot as I step backwards, landing on my bottom and releasing myself from the scene. I cannot move. Why did she hit my classmate? Is she her parent? Is it abuse?

Questions. Questions, like usual. Why have I been awake so long? I don't want to involve myself in this.

I wish everything could just end.

But the next moment comes, and the next after that. The color of the sky transforms from orange, to blood, to nothing. The purple firmament, when stars are just beginning to peek over the horizon, will slowly fade to black. This day will end. I will not. When I get up and look through the window again, the child and the woman are gone. My body remains still for a moment before some force moves me.

I begin to run. As if guided by heavenly wind, my back is pushed forwards as door after door passes through my periphery. I can feel the glow of sunset slowly fading on my skin as the final stretch of twilight begins. Have you ever heard of the solar barques?

Ancient Egyptians believed that Ra, the overgod, was the life-giving sun, riding across the sky on the morning barque over the course of twelve hours. Once the day came to a close, though, Ra died and was reincarnated in the Duat. The Duat, the ancient Egyptian equivalent of the underworld, was where the sun went during the night; a perilous journey through hell on the evening barque so that Ra could be reborn in the morning. During the day, he was accompanied

by a divine entourage through the sky. Sometimes, at night, other godheads would aid Ra's journey through the Duat. Other nights, Ra dies at sunset alone.

The sun's importance and value was recognized, even in antiquated times, as being worthy of worship. But this, too, represents cruelty. The thing that loves this planet, the golden eye staring from the heavens, must die every single day. Not that it really does, but even ancestral humans wielded the power of belief. But to believe that something that loves you would live and die over, and over, and over again? What a cruel ideology.

Ra dies at sunset alone.

My chest heaves. Hallway gives way to stairs, and I leap down them two at a time. Before I can realize, purple has given way to the short half-life of dusk, the darkest time of day before night. Is this how Ra feels as he journeys through his final hours of the day? Is he still there, crashing and burning and dying an atmospheric death as the morning barque hurtles to the underworld? I can understand this god, I think. Living every day, but still being dead. Dying for the sake of others, but to only find pain afterwards. Over, and over, and over again. On second thought, maybe I can't understand this god.

Moment after agonizing moment passes. At the bottom of the stairwell, I am god too. I have the right to live for myself, and to choose what to die for. I couldn't go on doing otherwise if I wanted. Ra, the divine masochist. The all-powerful, with no power over the decision of his life. If I were him, I could do it. If I were him, I would leap out of the morning barque before noon. If I were him, I could choose—

“Astronaut?”

She is there, suddenly. Sneaking through human life to get here, in front of me. I nod.

“What’re you doin’ here?” she asks, head cocking to the side. Her cheek is still cherry red.

My mind is blank for a second, and no immediate answer appears for me. I realize that I am still sweating and panting from my flight and, embarrassed, I turn away. I can still feel her looking at me. I don’t know how to respond to her question.

“... Can you do a handstand?” she asks, once the awkwardness of my silence becomes apparent. My neck almost snaps to look at her again, and I shake my head ‘no.’ My classmate’s mouth breaks into a grin. She’s missing a tooth.

“Want to see me do one?”

Without an answer, she stretches her arms to the sky before throwing her body forwards. Legs and arms switch places as her shoes kick into the air. She wobbles, but balances, before jumping back onto her feet. Her already wide smile has grown wider. I clap politely.

Now the only thing I can think of is her dark silhouette being struck.

“Is your... mom here?” I manage to say. My throat is dry, and the words scratch their way out of my mouth. For the briefest of seconds, her smile falters, but then she cocks her head and nods.

“Does she, uh... ever hit you?”

The floor has just been waxed. I realize this because there is no way in hell I can look somebody in the eyes asking that. God, why can’t I just be asleep right now? Why did I even ask that? Why why why why why why why—

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I want to tell her not to make such a mature face. *Oh, I see!* That’s not what I say, but I think she might appreciate that kind of blockheadedness. My gaze moves shakily from the tile

floor to meet hers. Her cheery disposition has been deleted. Yet, there is no scowl or grimace on her face. No tears or shaking lip. This is something that matters to her, a secret that must be taken to the grave. Something to be treated with the utmost seriousness.

“Oh. Me neither, then,” I say. The words are hesitant to leave my mouth, but they do so anyway.

She takes my hand, fingers slipping through the gaps of my own before grasping tightly and squeezing.

“You promise?”

There are no trains of thought in the station of my brain. I am here, fully here, at this moment. Not dreaming, not awake. In this small microcosm of the world at the bottom of the stairwell, it is only me, her, and fading light. Despite the face she is making, tired eyes and all, her hand still shakes like a scared child’s. I nod again.

Her face breaks into a grin when I answer.

“Starting today, you’ll be my friend and I’ll be yours! My name’s Marja, so you tell me yours now!”

I do not register her question, or her words. My senses have left me, but mercifully keeps the feeling in my small hand as Marja holds it. Marja, I repeat in my head. I do not want to let go of her hand.

I think if you keep putting me in such beautiful moments, I might really believe you exist.

The second time I speak to Marja is several days later. The mocking song of the locusts and the blistering heat reminds me that it's the tail-end of the school year, just before summer break. I am underneath the shadow of the elementary school, washing my hands at a faucet built into the side of the building. The motions of my small hands are beginning to take over my brain's facilities. Up and over, up and over, back and forth, back and forth. The repetition is nice. If my skin weren't beginning to prune, I would probably wash my hands forever.

“Astronaut!”

Immediately upon hearing Marja's voice, I turn to face her and shake my hands as dry as they can get before wiping the rest onto my legs.

“Marja,” I say in response. I realize that the faucet is still on and quickly shut it off.

“Hello!” she continues to exclaim. Her face has broken into its familiar gap-toothed grin. The imprint of it is still fresh in my mind; it's as if I had just met it several days prior.

“Hello,” I continue to respond. I'm the happiest I've been in a while. In the back of my mind, I remember a moment from sleeping-but-not-dreaming. I am alone in my gray room, sitting on my gray bed, and when my father calls my name, the room and everything in it becomes red. I don't remember my father well—it's the first time I can remember hearing someone call for me like that in a while.

Eventually, as we chat through classes and walk home from school together, I realize most of our interactions are just that. Almost like a call-and-response game. Marja doesn't seem bothered by it, thankfully. She is still talking, and Marja talks about many things. What she heard on the radio on the way to school, what she watched on TV the night before, what she's been reading lately. I nod and listen intently whenever she speaks, and when brief silence comes, I fill it until Marja knows what to talk about next. This must be the most joy I've felt in my whole life.

“Say, Astronaut—I can’t just keep callin’ you that. What’s your real name?”

I blink. Oh, of course. I know her name, so she should know mine. I had grown so pleased at being referred to as an Astronaut that it didn’t cross my mind to correct her.

“It’s...”

My name is lost, to a summer breeze. Marja is looking straight at me now, head slowly tipping to the side. I realize now why this stare is so interesting to me; it’s because of her eyes. I can barely tell what color they are as they reflect the dim, saturated colors of evening like a puddle of fresh rainwater facing the sky. My mother must be worried by now. This is the latest I’ve stayed out after school on my own. Yet, still, I want to hold Marja’s hands and tell her, *Marja, your eyes are mirrors, and I want to stay here forever.*

She hums slowly as she parses my name in her mind.

“We’re friends now, right?”

I don’t even need my voice to answer this. I nod. She is still staring at me. Her gaze is too steady for a child. Her pupils do not so much as shift as we hold each other in our vision. I’ve seen these eyes before.

“When friends make promises, they never break them,” Marja says. Her voice is low and heavy, emanating from a place too deep for her small body. Despite the lack of joy in her voice that I had grown used to, I continue to nod. It’s easier, anyways.

“And you promised you didn’t know what you were talking about.”

Where have I seen Marja’s eyes before? Not the reflections—I see that often, and not just in her. It’s something beyond the fragile surface of her eyes, somewhere beyond the pinprick of her pupil. Where only needles can reach.

They are the dead eyes of a fish.

I didn't realize we had started walking, but stopping feels much more sudden once Marja speaks again.

"Why'd you promise that?" she sighs, kicking a pebble with just a bit too much force. I can feel my eyelids tighten as I strain my eyes to look at her more, more, as much as my brain can possibly render. Marja's face is expressionless, and when she is not smiling, the mirrors of her eyes give way to the pit underneath.

I don't know why I promised that. I didn't know what else to say—it was all I could come up with at the time. But I don't make promises often, and when I do make them, I really mean them. And I didn't know what we were talking about anyways, truly. It came out of me because I wanted your happiness. Slowly, I can feel the small prick of teardrops forming on my eyes. My lips do not quiver; my mouth is agape. Like a fish.

Mother, why am I thinking of you now?

Marja shoves me. She had managed to walk right in front of me without me realizing it, and once the kinetic forces of her arms and my body exchange, I am suddenly on the ground. I don't know what to say, but from this low place, I look up at Marja. From here, she is grand; a living monument. I don't know what to say.

"... Why did you push me?" I ask.

"You weren't sayin' anything."

Marja does not help me up. She looks down at me for a second longer before beginning to walk once more. She must be expecting me to follow, and I am still covered in dust when I am by her side once more.

"I don't know," I eventually say, after we wander past some small, forgotten bar that is preparing to open. "I didn't know what else to say."

Like she usually does, Marja hums as we walk. She has not looked at me since she pushed me. In these brief reprises of silence, it is my turn, a solo, to speak.

“Have you ever heard of the RMS *Carpathia*?

“It was the boat that came to pick up the survivors of the *Titanic* after it sunk. My... mom likes that movie. Everyone talks about the *Titanic*, but never the *Carpathia*. You know, the wireless operator on the ship missed the *Titanic*'s first distress calls. Even though it was after his shift, he relayed a message to the other ship from Cape Cod, to which the *Titanic* responded with another distress signal.

“Even though the *Carpathia*'s officers weren't sure, the wireless operator went to the captain directly. The captain ordered full steam ahead—you know, I don't think many people know what that means anymore. In this case, he turned off the ship's heating and hot water so that the ship could produce the most steam it could, and by the end of it, *Carpathia* crossed 67 miles in three hours to get to the *Titanic*, going nearly eight miles faster than it was supposed to go.

“It took four hours to get the survivors on board. And everyone helped, not just the *Carpathia* and *Titanic*'s crew. The passengers of the *Carpathia* did everything they could to help.”

I take a long, slow breath in, as if I am taking a drag from an invisible cigarette to ease my nerves. I really do ramble.

“The *Titanic* still sunk,” Marja eventually says, stopping to look at me. She leans against an electrical pole that stands watch over a street corner. I don't know what to say, but she speaks first.

“My house is down this way. I'll see you tomorrow, 'kay?”

Like usual, I nod.

“Promise?”

I am taken aback by Marja’s voice when she says this. When Marja speaks, it’s as if the wind jealously wills itself to her lungs to become her words. As if something greater than her is speaking from beyond her. But when Marja says the word ‘promise,’ her usual grandness is gone. It is just me, her, and the setting sun on a quiet street corner. The locusts are far, now, likely destroying one field amongst a vast, golden ocean—but their songs are still reaching us, from this far across town.

“... Yeah. I

promise.”

I am a rocket escaping orbit and self-destructing, the *Carpathia* roaring towards the *Titantic*, and Ra sailing the underworld all at once. I still don’t know what a promise is, exactly, but I know that it must be something like the way your hand fits in mine.

