

Still Dreaming

The bars rattle every morning as the warden drags his club across the cages in his hallway. At breakfast, forks rattle against fake porcelain plates. Then the chains around our wrists rattle on the way to our repentance for the day; the rattle of gravel on shovel, bags of pellet over shoulders, memories breaking off inside a collective regret. Then forks again, makeshift knives stolen and dropped on cement, dulled knives on basalt tables, busted box springs yielding underneath carnal thoughts, the teeth-grinders then the window-tappers, and the rattle out of my dreams.

The dreams wake me up at the same time every night back to this broken reality. It's always sometime around 4:00 AM, judging by the light, but I don't tell time since they took my watch. When I open my eyes, I have double vision. I see twice as many cell walls and twice as many bars in between the hall and me. Without my glasses, I have to force my eye muscles to pull the two separate, side-by-side images back together. When I wake up like this, I think I'm still seeing the dream world right up next to the real one.

At Dinner, I tell my friends Grim and Sadez about my dreams. When I first met the elderly Grim, I was in the prison's dingy library with a group of other new inmates, when he waved us over to a desk to show us his stamp collection. Pointing at different spots on the page, he said, "Look everyone. Here's dead Queen Elizabeth. And this is dead Ike Eisenhower, dead Marilyn Monroe, dead John D. Rockefeller" He turned the page. "This one of dead Richard Nixon is a new one."

"What's with all the dead dignitaries?" one man from the group asked.

Grim chuckled to himself. "I guess it's my way to keep from killing these horrible guards. Everybody ends up finding a way to cope with something in here. I collect the dead." He shut the book. "That's why I call myself Grim."

"That's pretty grim, Grim," I said. He smiled at me, and stared intently for a little longer than was comfortable, like he wanted to strike up an understanding. His eyes were light green, and flashed with life and newness, as if they were slowly absorbing the energy from the rest of his body as it naturally decayed.

That day, on the way from the library to the small patch of grass outside where everyone barter for pocket-sized goods, one of the other new guys in the group sped up

to walk next to me. He put out his hand, while he caught his breath. “Benny Sadez. Or Sadez is also fine,” he said. I shook his hand, and before I could introduce myself he began talking. “That Grim guy’s a bit of a kook, isn’t he?” he said, pointing his thumb over his shoulder back toward the library. “Personally, I think that all that coping stuff is a big waste of time. Everybody’s just distracting themselves from all the shit that’s really happening that they don’t want to know about.”

I looked at him closer and saw how tired he looked. From deep in their sockets, his eyes moved around with an energy better suited for a different face. In comparison, his other features looked sickly and nearly paralyzed. His cheekbones cast dark shadows on the sides of his thin-lipped mouth. In the early evening light that came through the long windows in the hall, his skin was yellow verging on gray. But his most imposing attribute, which I identified later that night after racking my brain, was the smell of baby powder masking cigarette smoke.

When I didn’t humor his statement, he kept talking anyway. “You see, my uncle is a fourth Mayan blood, and he’s on an email chain with some of his other Mayan friends, and you wouldn’t believe what these people have predicted, and what they’re foreseeing for us now.” He searched my face for a reaction, but when he didn’t get one he tried to up the ante. “9/11. Yeah, they called that one. They’re saying the U.S. government was behind it too. They say Bush himself planted explosives in the towers. Let’s see... Hurricane Katrina, a bunch of assassinations, the moon landing, the Cold War – “

“They predicted the *whole* Cold War?” I asked.

He was oblivious to my sarcasm. “Yeah, absolutely. Wait until you see what they’ve got coming. All kinds of magnetic malfunctioning, severe weather disasters, I think the return of the reptilians was one of them, all the water drying out – it’s on its way. Get ready for the end of the world.”

“Wow. And I’m just finding out about this now.” I turned my head away from him to hide my smirk. “Well, I think it’s time to go eat.”

“Do you mind if I come with you? I have more to tell you.”

We walked toward the cafeteria, and his unpleasant scent stuck to me until, after awhile, I just got used to it being around.

For five months, I've eaten all of my dinners with Sadez and Grim at a table by a window looking out toward the river. Sadez has always been very interested in hearing my dreams; usually, it seems, only for the purpose of challenging their validity. On one of those first days, I told them a pretty generic dream that I had had about flying, and Sadez responded to it, saying, "I don't believe you. That dream is too happy."

Grim smiled to himself and searched my face with his eyes as I tried to translate what was in my head to the world outside. After Sadez had left the table, he told me, "That guy won't believe in any idea that he's not already addicted to. He'll get a thrill when he finds out about this new inmate."

"What new inmate?"

"The word is that pretty soon we're getting that psycho who killed all those people in one of those big chain bookstores," Grim replied casually.

"I didn't hear about that one."

"You didn't? Well, I'm sorry to have to tell you about it. The guy walked up the front steps, then straight through the metal detectors, which were making all kinds of noise because he had four assault rifles in his jacket. He killed all the people who were about to pat him down, all the cashiers, shot out the lights, barged through the children's section first, then moved onto the erotica section, ignored the horror books, spilt blood all over the bestsellers, and when he ran out of ammo in the reference section, he started hitting people over the head with atlases." He shook his head in disgrace. "How did you not hear about this? He killed something like fifty people."

"I don't know. Now I wish I hadn't heard about it," I said.

"Yeah, and while on trial, he kept trying to convince everybody that he had it figured out. A lot like our friend Sadez. He acted like he was saner than everybody else. There's the mark of a real lunatic. 'You just wait,' he kept saying. Fucking prick."

I took a deep breath. "And he'll be here soon? Where are they putting him? What do they do with someone like that?"

"I guess he's already broken out of three other cells in three other prisons. He keeps convincing the guards to let him out. It seems like he's a real sweet-talker. They always mention his deep blue eyes, like it was some kind of hypnotism. So I assume they'll keep him up on your floor in one of those airtight observation cells with the thick

glass walls.” He realized what he had said and winced like he knew my terror. “Sorry. I’m sure he won’t be able to break out of here.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” I said, trying to brush away a subject that would seldom leave my mind alone in the following months.

I should explain that my dreams are usually more complex than something like flying, and I often have to map out their plots while I’m working, under the pretense that, for some reason, I need to make Sadez believe me. I turn over the details in shovels-full of gravel. The words fall out and scatter off in every direction like so many rocks whenever I try to form these things into something coherent.

One day I was moving slow on the job as I tried to straighten out a new dream. In it, I was back in my school years at a church in my town, when the adults began to get reports that a detonation was scheduled out by the train tracks and that we should be sent to our homes. Then, with nothing to separate the two thoughts, I was at home shutting windows. The people on the TV described the pending explosions as a diplomatic maneuver, some sabotage of trade to balance the scales. “It is something that we can’t know, it is only for the higher ups,” the reporters said, and “the explosions are expected to send sand out across the valley in fatal speeds and masses, filling all of your homes and the slits of your eyes.” So I shut windows frantically, and sped across the house at impossible speeds. I stepped onto the back porch to whistle for the cat, and noticed that it was really a beautiful day outside, not one for a catastrophe. The sky faded peach to blue upwards from the horizon, and the view of the land had taken on a desert orange. It was oddly comforting, like a pause in the action of a western film. The cat took her time, unaware of any unnatural disaster. Then I started to hear the planned booms, so I shuffled her in with my foot, and locked the door behind me. I was at the open door from the house into the garage, looking out the automatic garage door, which slowly and mechanically closed on the view pointing toward the railroad tracks and a wall of sand pushing forward to me. The sand slipped through the crack of the near-shut garage door, and crashed against the back wall of the garage like the sea into a pier. I went back into the house and sat on the carpet in the living room, while the walls rattled, and the gritty fallout flew past the windows. I breathed heavily and stared at the floor while my parents,

somehow cheerily, hopped down the stairs and took turns with the television saying, “It’s something we can’t know.”

“Do you think this is okay?” one of the more important guards broke in, “leaning on your shovel like this, and staring at nothing in the sky like some kind of idiot.” A spark flashed across his black eyes like he was excited to have someone to chew out. “You may not think this is important, but those of us who are capable of seeing the big picture recognize the worth in every shovelful of shit you scoop. So start scooping.”

He turned and started to walk away when I said, “Sorry, just needed a rest.”

He spun around and approached me slowly. “But you don’t have the freedom to make that decision,” he said.

“Excuse me? I can’t decide when I’m tired? I have no control over that,” I said, suddenly feeling the rebelliousness of a high school student toward his teacher.

Then he said louder, “Right, but I do. You can’t know when it’s time for you to take a rest, unless you can see into my brain.”

“This is ridiculous,” I said under my breath, as I started to shovel again.

Still louder he said, “Ridiculous, is it? How can I prove to you that it is not ridiculous?”

“You could stop being an asshole,” I said, surprised at myself.

He stepped heavily on my foot with his bulky boot and pressed down. “How’s this?” He pressed down harder, and a hot current of pain rushed up from my foot through my stomach, to my brain. Still louder and now inches from my face he shouted, “Do you understand now?!”

Then my foot cracked under his weight, and with blurry flashing lights in my periphery I kicked him hard in the shin with my free foot. He cursed and bent over. I took off for the high fence, and moved with a limp around the inside of it, following the wide circle it made. I ran my fingers through the chain links just to make that noise. To my right I watched the real world outside move in a panorama from the highway, to the hills, to the river, to the pristine housing developments, and to the city further off. The river flowed parallel to the prison’s walls for a stretch and then veered off toward a single point at the horizon. I kept my eyes on that point as long as possible, and tried to measure the width of the water with my eyes, to imagine it’s volume in clear blue mouthfuls, and

to feel its coldness slowly numbing my broken foot, until I couldn't turn my neck far enough to see it behind me. Then I was looking at the houses in the hillside and I wanted to be in their midst where the sun still soaked that side of the valley. I wanted to throw my back into the hillside like into a heavy mattress. I saw the reflection in my glasses of another guard catching up to me, and before I could speed up, I tripped over my busted foot and hit the ground. A hard blow to the head knocked me out.

I woke up in an empty room filled with grayness. An involuntary and high-pitched yelp escaped my mouth when I realized where I was. *A padded cell*, I thought. *How long have I been in here? How long will I be?* I felt suffocated and I regretted letting out the yelp. *Why padded?* I wondered. I wasn't a lunatic -- not really. Maybe it was some kind of insulation to seal off the prison outside, which subsequently sealed off the outside world. As if they wanted to keep whatever and whomever I liked out of reach. Anyway, that would be the goal of an effective punishment. But maybe it was the other way around. Maybe they wanted to mute me to the outside world, like they wanted to mute that mass murderer in his glass cell. I pictured him screaming at the top of his lungs, hoping to shatter his walls. I shivered at the image of the dead anger in his eyes, and the deadly ideas in his head. They wanted to keep whatever dangerous idea they thought I held in the box of my skull locked up, rattling around in seclusion. I yelled, "Hey!" to test the boundaries. The room was clearly designed to deaden noise. The sound waves hit the walls with an inaudible thump, the non-sound of a sudden and unnatural silence. *Padded, I get it now*, I said or thought. I couldn't tell; my voice and my thoughts sounded the same.

That night, or whenever I finally felt tired enough to sleep, I dreamed Grim, Sadez, and I were winning World War II, in the cockpit of a plane with a comfortable carpeted corner for each of us. As we flew to wherever we were going, I got up to look out the window from the corner where Sadez lay. My movements crashed the plane, and I watched as his eyes opened. They were black like the night sky he calmly looked out at to see us plummeting. Sometime during the crash, Grim died, and Sadez and I were left to surrender and feign good relations with Hitler. We were horribly offended and couldn't bear it, so we attacked with all we had for an army: our own bodies, our own spinning

punching planes. And we threw ourselves at that horrible man's face, over and over, spinning relentlessly. Spinning and punching and drinking and spinning, faster and faster in a circle. Then we were back in the night sky, in our cockpit, fighting each other, spinning and punching and drinking. Spinning, and Sadez stopped us. He said, "Quit it, stop, stop, stop. We're doing it again. We're doing this circling. Going in a circle up here in our carpeted room, but it's not even a circle. There's no continuity, there's no way to come out on the other side, at the beginning. It's a spiral." He sighed, crossed his arms, stared at the dried blood on my chin, and then out the window. "I don't even know who's flying this thing anymore. Maybe it's really flying us, up here in this darkness next to the dead stars and their dead light. We're out of control in whatever war this is, and that's all there is to it. I just miss Grim, and I want him to come back, so we can keep winning, and so I can go huddle up in my corner again forever."

And then I woke up. Someone was jingling the lock to the small window in the door to send in my dinner. I put my hands up to my eyes to block the new flood of light. On top of the food, the guard had left a note on a piece of cigarette paper, which read, "One day." I read it again, dropped it on the floor, and shook my head. *What an asshole*, I thought. *Could he be any more vague? One day? Does he mean that I've been in here for only one day? That I have one day left? One day I'll get out of here? One day I'll pass through these walls?* "One day." I decided he meant, "one day left," and, clinging to that hope, I went back to sleep without dreaming.

When I woke up I had hands under my arms. Not mine, the guards had slipped into the cell and started lifting me out into the daylight. I staggered down the hallway supported by their arms. They brought me straight to the cafeteria, where they let go and watched me limp over to Grim and Sadez, who were sitting by the window looking through its bars. For once, Sadez's eyes were motionless and hollow. He had his hands together behind his head, and Grim looked like he had run out of comforting words to say.

As I approached the table, I blurted out, "I have a dream for you." After quickly reassessing the scene before me, I asked Sadez what was wrong.

"I just got a call. My uncle's dead."

"Oh. I'm so sorry." That's all I said.

“He didn’t get to live to see the predictions come true.”

“Would he have wanted that?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t want to think about it.” He rubbed his eyes. “What’s your dream? I need something distracting. Besides, our time’s running out.”

“Okay. Here it is.” Everything rushed out in a single breath. “The three of us were in a plane,” I started. “We were fighting in World War II, and doing really well, but then I crashed the plane, and Grim died – sorry Grim– and then you and me, Sadez, we were caught by Hitler, and we started punching each other, and you gave me this great speech, I’ve never heard you talk like this in real life, and you said something about incomplete circles and spirals that I can’t quite remember now.” I took a breath. “But it was amazing, believe me. I don’t know why I’m not remembering it, I’ve been thinking about it since I woke up.” I looked down at the table. “I’m sorry. I can’t make it sound as real as it was to me.”

After he processed what I had said, Sadez spoke up. “God, you’re an asshole,” he said.

“What?” I asked. I was not shocked, but again he had shrunk me.

After thinking for a second, he put down his fork and pinched me on the arm. He stomped his foot beneath the table. He whistled, he waved his hands in my face. “I’m real,” he said, with his jaw jutting out. “I’m real, and you’re making me into a character. You didn’t dream any of that.”

“Of course I did. What are you saying?”

“You’re using me like a puppet. Opening my mouth and spitting out your own story. None of the dreams you’ve told me all this time have been real, have they?” He asked, standing up from the table.

I made an effort to keep myself in my seat. “They’re *real*.” I nearly whined it. “I mean, as real as dreams can be. These stories are important to me. I feel like they’re bringing me closer to something – an answer, a consolation – I don’t know.”

“That’s bullshit.” He started talking loud enough for the surrounding tables to hear. “You’re making it up, you’re making me up. Like making me into a character is going to lead you to meaning. Bullshit. I don’t want any part in it. All I know is that the world’s broken and it’s not going to get better. It’s going to keep breaking, until it’s

finally split apart, gone, wiped clean. And I'll be the only one in this place who knew it ahead of time and stopped worrying about solutions and started living." He looked around at the faces now watching him and sighed. "I have to be alone. I'll see you tomorrow." He turned his head and torso toward the door as if to leave, but he didn't move right away. Both his face and his hands were sweating profusely, and for the first time I saw the source of his smell. As he tapped a small bottle of baby powder on his palms, he said, almost inaudibly, "I'm real and I'm not worried." Without turning his head back to us, he walked away.

Grim and I sat in uncomfortable silence for a moment. "Don't listen to any of that. He's worried. Believe me," Grim said. "Whether or not he's real, or I feel comfortable calling anything real, those are things I'm starting to question."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"Look at this place." He gave a lazy flourish of his arm at the room. "This is what every prison in every movie and every book looks like. The walls are gray, the warden's an asshole, everyone wants to get out, and I can't figure out what this is that I'm eating." He flared his nostrils at a bite on his fork.

"Well, did you expect something else?"

"No. And that's the point," he replied. "I didn't expect it to be exactly as I expected. I thought the people on the inside would know something more about prison than me, and those people would shape this place with real reality in mind, not the contrived reality of a movie screen. It's like some kind of... idiot interloper is writing us into a script."

My brain was tired. "Idiot interloper," I muttered to myself. "But I don't think I'm getting it"

He leaned across the table toward me. "Who is Sadez to say when something is made up? Sometimes your dreams feel about as real to me as the reality that we live in here. They're different versions of the same thing. Worlds separated by walls. But they're also on the same level – just as ridiculous, and just as important." When he finished, he gulped down glass of milk.

I grunted. My stomach felt too full. "I should probably go."

“Yeah. Me too. Listen, with that crazy guy here now it wouldn’t be a bad idea to keep something sharp on your person up there while you sleep,” he said, suddenly concerned.

“Is that really necessary? He’s in a high surveillance fish tank. There’s no cracking walls that thick.”

“Fair enough. Well...” He looked from side to side at the other diners, and then moved his face closer to mine across the table, blinking his suddenly shiny eyes several times. “You’ve been a good friend to me in here,” he said softly. “I’m sure Sadez would say the same. I feel bad he just lashed out on you. I mean –“

“Please, stop” I said, and then tried to smile, but by myself. He looked at me with the same eyes. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” I quickly pat his shoulder before leaving through narrow halls.

In my bed I floated in and out of my body between awake and half-asleep. I pictured the inmate in his dark cell down the hall past all the low-profile criminals. His deep blue eyes glowed in the blackness, sending out soft, bruise-colored beams that hit the glass wall and bounced back and forth, slowly getting deeper and bluer. In my bed, the left side of my visual field out into the hall began to bleed this shade of blue. At the same time, I saw that once the inmate had filled the space in his box with this light, he began to color in the blankness of the hallway, spreading blue on the gray walls, and bruises on the skin of the men who watched his cell. In the deep light and covered in bruises, the guards were as vile as the mass murderer and the rest of the prisoners, who were now drenched in this sickly blue. *They unlocked him, I know it.* They were all unlocked now, slowly stepping across the thresholds of their cells out into the hallway, and joining together as one swinging wrecking ball. These men would dismantle the building, bash in the walls, and think they had escaped, but really they would have nothing left when they were all finished. The chains rattled on the floor. *I hear it. He’s out, he’s coming for me.* I tried to wake up to prepare myself, but the sleep was taking me over. I did the old tricks: I clenched my fists, squeezed my eyelids tight, bit down on my tongue, but with no results. I kept going deeper inside myself, and when I heard the

chains at my bars, the noise of metal on metal suddenly dissipated, the blue washed away, and the dream changed.

I was a teenager and I was at home again. I stepped out onto the front steps with my mom to watch the starry night in the still fall air. She felt really tall to me then. Even though I was standing up, her head was far above mine, in shadow. A single shooting star curved around the rim of the sky, giving way to ten and then a hundred until our view was full of intersecting white lines moving off in all directions. Then something light like a single raindrop or grain of sand fell on my head, and my mom spoke calmly above me. "You're passing through," she said. "Just hold on. Watch, it's thinning." Suddenly, whatever was falling was now falling faster, and I realized it wasn't rain or sand, but a fine mineral shower dripping down through the atmosphere from the unhinged stars. Starry dust settled on the earth and my body. The glassy particulate quickly coated my hair, eyes and lungs and sent me stumbling back inside to the living room, feeling weighed down and begging for water out of a straw. I begged uncontrollably and incoherently, while the lamplight in the room started pressing inward to a small center in my vision. I collapsed on the shag carpet at the feet of the brown coffee table in the familiar and comfortable room. The hole in my vision turned darker and as I died in the dream, I went deeper inside; so deep that it felt like I was slowly waking up with my eyes already open to the dark.

I was in my bed. Not the stiff, creaky prison bed, but my soft bed at home. It was quiet. Everyone else was asleep and I could look outside the big window by my head and blur the houselights far off through the woods by squinting my wet eyes, and not feel at all separate from anything out there. I tucked the blankets underneath my legs and gave up my weight to the bed. I dozed off and words moved through my head freely in that sleepy way that only half makes sense. *I've really pushed through*, I thought. *This is the other end of things, and it's real.* From the deepest and quietest place inside my mind, I repeated over and over, *I'll tell them that it was still, and that it was real, it was still, it was real, it was still, it was real.*

