

## VISIONS & DREAMS

A raindrop caught the sunlight and cast strands of light across a woman's brow, revealing deep-set creases. Grit was indistinguishable from the sunset-shades that caressed her face. I glanced at the woman and my gaze was caught in the vision.

Her eyes lacked vitality. They were smooth and dull and too dry. They looked like stones that were polished long ago and now adorned with aged ornaments. Little red cracks were like valleys in her stony eyes; her sorrows weighing down like droplets on a tree branch.

She held a misshapen sign that was peeling at its corner. There were sketches of some sort fading on the backside. "Anything Helps," was written in a dilapidated hand on the front. A lump raised up in my throat. "I can help," I'd said. The voice wasn't my own, it was molasses-tinged and throaty with a deep rough crackling and it sent cold coursing up the woman's spine and my own. There was no one around, the sun sat at the horizon; something in the moment compelled me forward—

I burst forth. In the same instant I became disembodied. Suddenly I was omniscient, looking down at the scene bird's-eye. Watching my own body charge forth with fists raised. There was a crack like fire, the crunch of slush, the snapping of branches along a path as the woman ran. Bones fractured while laughter rang, that of children playing on black asphalt fields, and of families rumbling in unison. The woman's memories streamed forth in a geyser, faster than the crimson stream, and far too dense for the inconstant light to reveal. Her thoughts became a river of pictographs requiring deciphering, faces holding an inkling of importance quickly dissolved into a pool of unrecognizability. I could see all of her thoughts, they joined with what was real and what was seen and what was done.

The inundation that followed was equally as interminable as it was instantaneous. Her blood dripped as if juice from a ripe fruit. In a never-ending instant, the vitality that once resided in the woman's eyes re-surfaced and for a moment, everything that once was or had regained purpose and filled the woman's throbbing heart. She collapsed to her knees and witnessed the rippling of her own tears in the pooling blood. I stood above and around her, laughs dominating the soundscape—

The trees shuddered and the wind whispered.

Then, Blackness . . . a tangible darkness surrounded me. Reaching out I felt a shadow's presence—thick as fog wafting through my fingers . . . The air, heavy with the scent of incense—cayenne, cardamom, cinnamon . . . The atmosphere filled with a biting perfume that tingled on my tongue. The shadow enveloped me in warmth; I was smuggled by smoke, the chalkiness of charcoal overwhelming.

. . . There was a humming, it rang and rang and rang. It would not go out of my head—a booming ringing buzz, like power lines. The shrill whir of a fan, a vibrating buzz. It pierced my ears and hurt to the core—a sort of throbbing that went on and on without end. A feeling without feeling, an unseen witness to everything.

I reached, close-eyed towards the nightstand where a phone trembled atop wood. I was so tired that my dream had morphed into reality. My jaw was prickled with stubble, pressing into the firm mattress as I yawned. The cool of morning leached in through the bedroom window's thin

pane, and the sun's rays blanketed me with warmth. Beyond the window, rain fell in sheets that resembled duvets, but other sights and sounds and motions continued to flash through my head until they faded into misty haze.

As I cast the sheets off, I felt uneasy.

The room was more light than shadow and as I made way for the hall, my feet occasionally grazed sharp corners and brushed dust along the wooden panes in a shuffle. It was a Monday. A day which never felt sunny even when the sun's beams were the sole occupants of the sky, but that Monday, the dreariness was especially potent. The dream, coupled with the chill and grey of rain, made the day loom. Ready, I could hear an upstairs neighbor moving about; her feet clicked rhythmically in high-heeled shoes.

My commute was long. Car honks rang out in cacophony while the wind conducted the rain in percussive gusts. At a corner, about a quarter of the way along, I saw them. They were herded by the wind's whips. Makeshift cardboard signs were scribbled on with semi-intelligible prose. Most of the signs were in ink; others were unclearly carved with drought-ridden markers or etched in pencil.

It was possible to distinguish the vagrants from the lazys. Those in need had a tinge of grit behind their ears and wore shoes revealing the hole-ridden socks within. The lazys, had stoic eyes that took in their periphery and slightly upturned mouth-corners shielding clinched jaws. I scrutinized their faces and in an instant, I could see the woman's face. Was it hers? The eyes just as stony and bleak. I remembered a reflection, and a voice, but they were not my own. I signaled to turn as the sun broke through the sky.

The day passed, but it did so slowly.

Work was unremarkable from the days that came before. Meetings came and went. Colleagues popped their heads over my cubicle's edge for episodic small talk. Keys clicked and rhetoric rang. The woman's eyes, however, stood in the back of my mind. They shadowed everything, but were just out of sight—stuck in the furthest corners of my mind. They watched me until it was time to leave.

By then, it was late in the afternoon. The sun had begun its descent and hugged the edge of the horizon. The road was gridlocked; cars inched forwards and backwards as if in parody of the ocean's ebb and flow. As I neared the intersection, the sun continued to fall. The rain stopped along the way, in its place, the air was left damp and heavy. Then, I'd arrived. The sun, nearly cloaked, was out of sight and the streetlights hadn't yet been illuminated. I could just make out the dark figures standing at the corner, fewer now in the cool of the night.

The car stopped at the side of the road and I felt myself get out uneasily.

I searched for the eyes. There was a brown-black pair that stared glossily, a mouth moved beneath them and released breathless words that faded into the dense air. Another pair, I recall, was the blue of the ocean. The irises were rimmed with a grey ring, the pupils slightly hazy. Neither of these gazes belonging to whom I searched for, I continued to scan other faces, all the while the rumbling in my chest grew more and more. I remember taking note—placing a thought—as fewer and fewer people stood at that corner and as the sun finally plunged beneath the horizon.

When I found the eyes I felt the air freeze. It was them, the stony-gaze found, I heard a crack and a rip as I became disembodied.

When I opened my eyes it was black. The air was no longer damp, it was dry and seemed sparse. Each breath made those that followed shorter and shallower and more pressed, until I couldn't breathe at all. I was on the ground face-up, but I felt upside down. I stayed like that for a long while—unable to breathe, gravity tugging viciously, until my eyes had to close.

I awoke to a moaning sound. Unsure whether it was my own, I felt around. My hand disturbed a pool of blood. I could feel it ripple across the concrete beneath me. Breaths growing shallower still, I strained to open my eyes. Through foggy sight I could make out the night sky. The streetlights were off. My surroundings were visible only because of the light cast by the moon. Then there was a voice, "I thought you'd come . . ." the words lingered before fading. The voice was not my own, but it was. Craning my neck and head I could see a figure seated at the edge of the pavement. White teeth gleamed even brighter in the moonlight. I put a finger to my mouth. The lips were thin and rough. I ran my tongue over my teeth, fewer now than before. I could feel that they were jagged, crooked and misshapen. There was another moan.

"Don't be sad," there was contempt in the voice. "Everything will be just fine, just wait and see. You'll be in a better place, you'll be better off, just wait. You'll see."

"What's happened?" As the words left those cracked lips, I felt a shock. The words came out in a croak, they came out in my voice, but the voice was not my own. It was molasses-tinged, slow and drawn-out as if taking a long while to assemble the thought into words. The figure stood and came before me. The rumbling in my heart and raggedness to my breath seized when I saw its face. Before me stood a man. The man was me. I recognized the short brown hair, the sharp nose. The face was angular, brows pronounced, cheeks slightly hollowed beneath. The eyes were blue and clear.

In his hand he held a mirror, "Let's have a look, shall we?" the voice now seemed foreign. He thrust the mirror to my face. I knew what I'd see before my eyes could find themselves: deep-set creases, stony eyes, thin brows, grime and dirt, everything was there. He held the mirror there. Close enough that my stuttering breaths cast foggy plumes across the surface of the glass. The stony eyes looked odd as tears welled at their corners. There was a falseness, an artificiality to it all. "How?" the question left those ragged lips—my ragged lips, in a gasp as the eyes closed themselves.

"It is not a question of 'how' as you say. Do not trouble yourself with the 'how' of it all. You'd not be able to grasp what's beyond your meager mind."

"If not how . . . Then why? What have I done to deserve this?"

"Ah—" the voice trailed off and then erupted in a hideous cackle. "—It is neither what you did nor did not do, nor is it what you did or did not think." The figure—once my own—suddenly moved back and straightened. "It is for you to discover for yourself, give it time and you will see. Let the time pass, you'll be better off!" He dropped the mirror to the ground and it shattered as he ran off into the darkness.

I imagined death. It was imminent. In the damp cool of night, I felt as though I was withering away. The air drew everything out of me. I could see the dream from the night prior, I could feel the warmth beneath it all—my own bed and my own sheets enveloping me. I'd been a cocoon; those visions had been falsehoods. They'd been premonitions too. It was not in my nature

to judge. It was not in my nature to kill. It was not natural for dreams to become reality, but in a sense, this one had.

I thought back to before that dream, before the days and weeks prior. I thought of my mother and father, of my sister, my friends, and all of my family. I thought of us together. I thought of a lit fire—the air was tinged with the heady aroma of the holidays—cinnamon and cardamom, allspice and sage. I could hear laughter in the distance. And there was light. Plenty of light surrounded me. There were red and white strands and blue ones too. There was an ornamented tree at the center of the foyer, the chime of glasses and the popping of uncorked bottles. It wouldn't be bad to die like this. I could feel the warmth from the fire, taste cinnamon. I could hear voices. I felt lightweight. The light grew brighter and brighter, the sounds louder and louder until it was too much.

“Everything will be okay.”

Footsteps on the pavement around me jolted me back to the moment. I could still see the strands of red and white and blue lights. I was moving somehow, being lifted upwards and onwards. Perhaps this is it, I thought to myself. I'm moving on. But then I saw faces gathered around me. I saw their eyes—they were fixed on my own in a grave expression. “Everything will be okay,” I heard someone say once more. Then they took me.

I awoke to the electronic pulsating of a heart monitor. Everything around me was bright and light. The fluorescent lights cast a coolness across the bare white walls and the pale sheets. I could hear nurses speaking outside my door.

“No one knows who she is or what happened to her . . .”—indifferently.

“She looked like she'd been cut open when they brought her in—so much blood”—stirred.

It would take time for me to adjust to this incomprehensible shift in my life. I could still hear that voice, the one stolen from me: “You'll be better off.” I tried to tell anyone who would listen what'd happened to me. I'd tell them that I was really a man that my body had been stolen from me, that now I was *this*. Stuck in a form not my own. At first they assumed the drugs to be talking. Later on they assumed insanity.

How could they believe me? What proof did I have that I was not this nameless homeless-woman, but a man? Eventually I conceded. Regardless of the truth, no one would believe me unless I was able to both prove and explain what had happened. I wasn't entirely sure of just *what* had happened myself. Questions abounded, all lacked immediate answers. Chief among them: Who am I?

I never learned who that woman was before my occupying her body. I suppose her family had either written her off as dead or that they were all dead themselves. None of the people at the street corner took notice of her absence. I never even saw the man with the grey-rimmed irises again. All I could assume, was that this woman had been homeless for an indefinite amount of time. There were no forms of identification to be found pertaining to her body. I was without a name, an age, a family. I lacked the vitality of youth. I felt parasitic—as if an invader, leeching off another's vital essence.

When a nurse came into the room she seemed shocked. “You’re awake?” she said. The words were less than a whisper. I struggled to respond; my tongue felt too large for my mouth. It was constricted by a swollen throat and caused a gag with each movement. The heart monitor beeped with increasing intensity—punctuating the too-long silence. “No need for you to speak just yet, I’ll go get the doctor, he’ll have a few questions for you . . .” she trailed off. “We’re glad to see that you’re recovering so quickly.” Her smile was meek.

The doctor posed questions to which I could only shake my head. Did I know what had happened—no. Did I know who I was—no. Did I know if there was anyone who may be looking for me—no. The questions went on and on like that for a while. At the end of his interrogation he looked down to his feet and shook his head slowly—avoiding my gaze., “That’s all.”

When the nurses came to help me bathe I felt decidedly more uneasy than they did. In the small mirror in the hospital washroom I met my newfound body for the first time. As they undid the gown I stared at my face in the mirror. The face itself was weathered and dark. Creases spiraled like rifts across the parched surface. I knew the eye’s well by then—their stony colorless irises, the red cracks overtaking the whites. Purple bags rested over and under each eye—setting them further into the head. The nose—flat and wide. Black blood had dried above the cleft of the mouth whose flaky-lips stayed pressed—concealing my clenched jaw. My cheeks were hollow, folds of thin skin seemed to flap over the bones. What hair I had was short and sporadic. There was a griminess to it all that kept me from touching any of it.

“Okay we’re going to lift you up for a moment, is that okay?” The nurse to my left asked. I shook my head gravely and slowly. As the two of them lifted me to my feet and the gown fell to the floor, I felt a throbbing pain along my chest through my abdomen. I nearly collapsed from the pain and again when I saw the form—my form—in the mirror, if not for the women supporting me on either side. The emotional turmoil surpassed any physical agony in that moment. I could see ribs protruding through skin, deflated breasts, trembling legs. There was a long seam from beneath the navel up to the center of the chest. It was bruised, swollen and bloody. I turned my head away—ashamed—and wept. It was a deep and drawn-out wail. My tongue, caught in my constricted throat, was bound. Gurgling—gasping sounds reverberated through my body, off the white tiles lining the walls. My body shook as the nurses took cloths and wiped the grime away. Tears salted the murky water that pooled around me.