

THE OLD MAN'S DREAMS: INCIDENT IN A BOY'S LIFE

An easy breeze filled and lifted the curtains above the kitchen sink. It was a cool breeze with an edge of autumn and a canvas of sunlight, pledging a decree of shortened days, colorless skies, and endless columns of brooding darkness. His mother was in the kitchen, surrounded by the warm smells of coffee, fresh baked biscuits, and lavender. "Is he up yet?" The boy asked.

His mother laid a bowl and wood spoon into the deep sink then turned the spigot. "I haven't heard him stir yet," she said above the straining rattle of pipes.

The boy walked over to the counter, rose to his tiptoes, carefully taking down a small plate from the wood cupboard. Studying the plate, he gave it a cursory wipe then from a pie-tin, still holding the oven's heat, broke off two steaming biscuits setting them gently onto the center of the plate.

Quietly, his mother watched as he took a knife, splitting the biscuits then with an earnest scrutiny; feed soft curls of butter into each one. When he noticed she was watching, he stopped then looked up smiling.

"If he's not awake, don't wake him," she said firmly.

The boy reached up, and lifted a coffee mug from its hook. "Don't worry mother, I won't."

He filled the cup half way with hot coffee, for a moment watching the braiding steam, then picked up the plate of biscuits. Feeling his mother's eyes watching him, he walked from the kitchen into the narrow laundry room, carefully navigating a large concrete sink, hanging laundry, a barrel- shaped washer and stacks of boxes. "Martin, don't forget you have school at nine," he heard her say above the sounds that came from the sink. Carefully making sure he didn't spill anything, he stepped up to the single plywood step, and then to the wood door leading to the old man's room. He looked back to see if he could see his mother but he couldn't, so he set down the coffee, waited a moment, then softly knocked.

No sound in any form came from the room, so the boy leaned forward, listening then knocked again. This time there was a response, muted and not articulated and even though he didn't know what the old man had said, or even if he had, he knew he was awake so he took the handle and with greasy fingers, turned it and opened the door.

The old man was sitting at the bottom corner of the bed, he was wearing his long-johns, with his elbows propped against his knees, his face buried in the heels of his small hands, when the boy walked in he looked up, his blue eyes sparkling as if shot with flecks of ice. "Good morning," the boy said, holding out the mug of coffee.

"Good morning." The old man answered. Nodding, he took the coffee and placed it carefully on the floor.

The boy handed him the plate of biscuits. "What were you doing?" he asked curiously.

"Trying to remember," sighed the man.

The boy sat on the floor then slid himself closer to the bed. "Remember what?"

"Dreams," smiled the old man.

"Dreams?"

"Yes." With a hand resembling a claw, the old man picked up a biscuit, oily with butter, he took a small bite then returned it to its plate then set the plate down on the floor next to the coffee.

"I didn't know you dreamed," said the boy.

"Yes, I just said I did. We all dream you know."

"My mother doesn't dream."

"And how do you know that?"

"Because she never talks about it, she never mentions it."

"All of us dream, even your mother, every night, - multiple dreams, - yet maybe in our lives we mention only a handful of these dreams to anyone other than ourselves."

The boy shrugged as if the matter were now too insignificant to consider, then leaned back on his elbows, cocking his head from one side to the next. "Are your dreams good dreams?" he eventually asked.

"Sometimes," the man answered softly, "but not always." With a hand, liver spotted and twisted with veins that reminded the boy of drowned blue worms, he picked up the partially eaten biscuit, took a bite then returned it to the plate.

"My dreams are good," the boy stated proudly.

"You don't say."

“Yes.” He started to say something else then paused, reconsidering. “Except when I have the nightmares and those only started after my father left us.”

The old man nodded understandingly, then looked over at the hard light filling the window. “And when you have those good dreams, what are they about?”

“All sorts of things,” the boy said eagerly. “Sometimes I’m flying or running, or being chased by a lion, or riding horses with Indians, or on a pirate’s ship. The other night I had a dream that I found a huge hidden treasure with gold and pearls and glowing jewels the size of a walnut.”

“Yes, those are good dreams,” the man agreed, “I can remember when I had good dreams like those.”

The boy tugged at a frayed piece of rug, then looked up at the man with something more than just the concept of a curious child. “And what are your dreams like now, old man? What do you dream of at night?”

A melancholy softness touched the man’s face making him look, in the mornings light, exceptionally frail and older than he might have been. “I dream of different things now,” he said, “things that sometimes, in the morning when I wake, make me feel oddly uncomfortable, sometimes even foreign.”

The boy leaned closer, his brow furrowed, curious, but also sensing the presence of some distant unexplained sadness, “you don’t have dreams of exploring or adventures or having fun with friends or women?”

“I used to dream about women,” the old man smiled, and it was more with his eyes than anything else. “The softness of their skin, the comfort of their bodies, the exciting, awakening warmth of their touch and breath, yes, I’ve dreamt of beautiful women, and fishing the great rivers, and trapping with my father in the panhandle, and being the best at my job, and chasing wild mustangs across a painted desert, vibrant and racing with shadows.”

The boy waited, the man folded his birdlike arms in his lap and laced his fingers as if contemplating a prayer. “Now, I have only a recollection of these memories, a frail accounting of the people I loved and cared for, and shared my victories and disappointments and life with. Ambiguously and sometimes even cruelly, I’m reminded of those things. And at night, I find myself alone, walking a darkness into a world of other worlds, a journey where we never know what rooms await, or the places and people we will visit on those strange stages. My dreams are now of my past, people I haven’t seen in a long time and people I will never see again, and then the things I will never do again. Yet, I see these things

and do these things in my dreams, and sometimes the dreams feel like an enjoyable reality and the morning's reality seems like a disjointed dream. I realize now, that the best part of my life and the things I cherished and loved, and yes, also took for granted only exist now in the incarnated presence of those memories because now there is no longer a viable investment or even a simple calculation of the future." The old man, paused, running a bent finger, that sounded like sandpaper, along the sparse whiskers of his chin. "This morning, when I woke, I felt as if the dreams I dreamt last night were real, as if that world held more of a tangible significance and desire than the one I breathe in now. Someday they will be one and the same," he sighed, "someday I will only exist in that other world, alone and without the hesitation or interruption of this one. That's why it's getting so hard to tell the difference between the two now."

The boy stood, straightening his tee-shirt. He looked at the old man who sometimes reminded him of a frail squirrel. "I have to go to school now, old man, but I'll be home this afternoon and we can talk more then."

The old man nodded. Smiling benignly he picked up the coffee, took a sip then turned his head towards the small square window now filled with a china blue sky wheat colored light.

“Goodbye,” said the boy, rising to his feet. He walked out of the room wondering if the old man had heard him, and if he had, why he hadn’t answered. He also thought as he closed the door that he really didn’t want to talk about dreams anymore.

He got home just before dusk, under an amalgamation of cold arching stars and the pale shell of a moon and as the days last light trembled along the western rim of a disappearing world. Some of the houses had already ignited their lights and they flared in the night like the distant glow of sulphur struck matches and the air was cold and still and heavy with the smell of wood smoke. He changed from his school clothes to do his chores, noticing that one of his sneakers had worn through and he could see the cloth of his dirty sock peeking through its sole. He’d do his chores first, he thought, and then when he was finished, he’d go in and visit with the old man.

He finished dressing, then tapping the glass of a jar where he kept maybe a dozen butterflies; he walked out of his bedroom, through the small dining room, and into the kitchen. His mother was on the phone, her back turned, the cord wrapped nervously around the wrist of her free hand. “Yes, the boarder,” he heard her say, then, “no. He never mentioned anything about family.” When she

turned and saw him standing behind her, her expression flattened then filled with an awkward heaviness. "Martin's home let me call you back."

As she hung up the phone, he knew something was wrong and he tried to think if he had done anything bad at home or in school.

"I need to talk to you," she said, the tone of her voice solemn but immediate.

He waited, not saying a word just searching her face. Nervously she stood clutching her hands and looking at him in much the same manner as she did when she told him that his father had left them. "It's Bill," she said, her words hanging like hooks, against the silence. "I'm so sorry Martin but Bills no longer with us. He passed while you were at school."

He looked through the kitchen into the laundry room, past the bowed line of slack clothes, the columns of boxes, the porcelain washer, the naked bulb pulsing out a corona of dull light. The old man's door was slightly ajar, a strange gap of burning light between the pale wood door and its frame. "No," he heard himself say, his mouth suddenly dry, his head shaking involuntarily.

Slowly, he walked through the utility room and up the step to the wood door where, for the last year and a half, he had stood holding coffee, plates of food,

occasionally a beer, and even a dead snake. The wood felt cold and rough as he pressed his palm against it, then eerily the door peeled back, as if opening on its own. For a moment he stood in its frame, hit by a profound loneliness like nothing he had ever experienced. So this was what death was like, he thought, feeling the authority of life's random but unavoidable design. He looked at the unmade bed, the clothes draped loosely over a plain, red chair, the worn and faded shoes, neatly paired and waiting on the floor. He saw the plate he had brought earlier, a half eaten biscuit sitting among a satellite of crumbs, the coffee mug inches away.

At the foot of the bed, opened and turned on its pages, he saw a book and he walked over then cocking his head and mouthing the words, read the creased and worn cover smiling. Even old men liked Tom Sawyer, he thought.

His mother was calling him now, an impatient edge to her voice and he looked one more time, solemn but not sad now, around the room. The tiny, single bulb lamp, a crumpled candy wrapper next to the drug store reading glasses, the window filled with a litany of swaying shadows. "You're in your dreams now, old man," he heard himself say. And then with the smells of fried chicken, boiling corn and fresh bread filling the room, he turned off the light and walked out the door.

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