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Waking Dreams

Becca Van Dam

Frank Turney claims I am the spitting image of his dead wife.

He showed me her picture one time, so I know that's not the case. He's not demented yet either, so what he wants from me is what men have always wanted from me. He's got a crooked nose that looks like it's been broken a few times, and hands that are fairly steady for an eighty-five-year-old. He wouldn't be such a bad bed-mate, but comparing me to his wife isn't the way to get me there. Women on the side either want to know nothing *about* the wife or want to know that she is nothing *like* the wife.

Frank sits next to me in the cafeteria every breakfast, lunch, and dinner. He's got bad knees, so he mostly carts himself around in a wheelchair. He always insists on sitting in the dining chairs though: "Won't let one of my last pleasures be tainted by the damn wheels," he tells me. Frank's friend, Arnie Leota, often sits with us, but he's gone deaf, so mostly he just stares out the window. Gloria Lebarron and Alice Colestrom usually try to snag a chair with us too, and next to Frank if they can manage it. They give me nasty looks when he's not around. Making friends has never been my forte, so I'm not about to try now. Besides, I won't be here long enough to screw those relationships up, so why bother.

* * *

Like all the apartments on Wing D, this one includes a Georgia O'Keefe print hanging above my bed. I ask Nancy just what those pretty flowers remind her of. She knows my game and keeps quiet. I tell her I hope they had the decency to put them up in the men's apartments too.

"Those boys gotta get off on something," I say. She hands me a dixie cup with pills in it

and a glass of water. Ever since I first got here she watches me like a hawk, making sure the pills go down my throat instead of stashed away in a drawer.

"You oughta see if you can get different pictures for the ladies," I say. "Garden hoses maybe." I watch her face carefully as I gulp the pills down—she's gotten better at hiding her disgust for this old lady's sense of humor.

She helps me into bed and pulls the sheet up to my chin. "Goodnight, Ms. Celia," she says with a smirk and flicks the light on her way out. She thinks my vulgar language is a warped attempt to reach out to people. Not so—I genuinely want her to leave me alone; I want everyone to leave me alone so I can get the hell out of here.

I know there's a sleep aid amongst the handful of pills I just took, but they're not near strong enough.

I close my eyes and breathe slowly. As per Dr. Finley's instructions, I imagine a place where I am completely comfortable and happy. Lou's beach house was in the Florida Keys, and I can hear the gentle crash of waves. I relive that one glorious day that I had the house to myself. Lou had meetings all day and left me to fend for myself. I was annoyed at first and pouted how he liked; but work always won with Lou—something both his wife and I knew all too well, though I doubt she'd appreciate the sentiment. I watched television for awhile, then went for a swim. I hadn't gone in the water without Lou before and felt morbidly thrilled by the idea that if I drowned, he wouldn't know for hours. I fell asleep on the bed afterwards.

I had never slept that well before and definitely haven't since.

In my mind's eye I am there again, my young body tight and pink from the sun. I can taste salt on my lips and the cool sheets are wrapped

around me loosely.

I know what's going to happen. It starts with a gentle knocking on the front door. I am barely aware of it at first, but it grows louder and eventually starts shaking the bed. I am frozen, hardly able to think, let alone run or hide. Finally, it breaks the door down and lurches into the house.

A monster, definitely, but not like any I'd heard of. It walks toward me on legs that are sinewy and muscular, knees bending backwards like a bird. Its body is skinny and matted in dark fur, but it has no arms. Instead two great ungainly wings sprout from its back. I can't make out its head because the wings are unfurled above it, casting an inky shadow.

I wait for it to lunge forward and devour me.

Instead, the creature opens its wings wider and I am engulfed in its darkness.

* * *

I know why they make the mirrors in this place so small. Who of us could bear looking at more than a square foot of themselves? Wrinkles seem to be jutting from my face, but when I touch them, they give way easily like putty. I was beautiful once; I knew it then, and I know it even better now that this craggy face stares back at me.

It was a year ago that the monster first invaded my dreams, and a year since I've felt or looked anything but exhausted. I thought eventually the nightmares would stop, that it was just something I was eating—you know, a reaction. I changed my diet, changed my sheets, even my mattress. I tried all sorts of over-the-counter sleep meds. The only relief I had was not sleeping, and so I didn't.

I've lost most of my hair and all that remains now are a few raggedy strands that I hide behind bright scarves. My eyes are veiny, my lips almost nonexistent. If only Lou could see me now, I think and chuckle. Or I try to, but it comes out as a cackle, so I stop myself. I try not to sound so old, even if I can't help looking it.

My teeth are the last to hold out, and I won't deny I'm proud of it. Pearly white, and all original. I take a swig of mouthwash and swish for exactly thirty seconds. Sam and I used to do that together in our little house. He'd stand on a stool so he could reach the sink, and I'd set the

kitchen timer.

I spit the mouthwash out and the memory with it. I run my tongue over the neatly queued teeth but stop in surprise. I lean in closer to the mirror and open my jaws wide. On the bottom left side is a swell of gum behind the last molar. That's new. I poke at it with my tongue and can feel the gum move just a little. It doesn't hurt, but I can't keep my tongue from investigating the oddity.

* * *

I had my wisdom teeth pulled in my thirties—I hated doctors back then as much as I do now, so I put off going to the dentist until the teeth were impacted and riddled with infection. I was given antibiotics for the infection, but wisdom teeth either fit with your mouth or they don't, and mine definitely did not.

They took out all four.

So what the hell is a new tooth doing in this seventy-two-year-old mouth?

I scroll through the Wikipedia page in the computer room and poke at the gum with my tongue. Apparently, there can be more than four, and they don't necessarily only erupt early in life. I wonder how reliable Wikipedia is, but a tentative tap on my shoulder interrupts that universal thought.

Mike Woudstra gestures to the computer nervously, and I relinquish my seat with a sigh. There are four computers here, but Mike must use this one or not at all—don't ask me why. Sometimes I like to give him heck for it, but today's not one of those days.

I consider asking Frank about the rogue tooth, but he'll just make me ask Nancy, who will make an appointment with a dentist, who will insist it be pulled. And I'm not going through that hell again, no siree.

* * *

I almost told Frank the truth when he asked if my monster might be a ghost from my past. It's funny he used that word. I suppose it is a haunting of some sort. Lou was always with me, even after I left him—perhaps especially so.

I was in too deep long before I became his secretary.

It's such a cliché: the businessman screwing his secretary. But it happened all the time—I'm

sure it still does, no matter the women's rights movements and such. People are still people.

I'd watch his door from my desk, wondering what he was doing and what we'd do if I was in there with him. What can I say—the fantasies of a just-barely-virgin. His secretary quit after Thanksgiving to have her baby, and I volunteered for her position.

Lou said later that he'd always wondered about me, but I knew it was a lie—he'd never looked at me before the day I set up my desk outside his office. He touched my hand three days later, and that night he asked if I would stay late and help him with paper-work.

At first it was a strictly office-only affair, but soon he was taking me on business trips, claiming he needed the extra help. It fooled no one, least of all the head secretary, who made a point of not speaking to me unless I did something wrong.

He told me I ought to date to keep up appearances—I would've jumped from a bridge if he thought it was a good idea. Billy from accounting took me out to the Elite one night, and I saw Lou and his wife. I'll never forget the way his eyes latched onto mine for a split second as we walked in; how fast they darted away, his face completely emotionless. I told Billy I didn't feel well and made him take me home. I stayed up most of the night waiting for Lou to call.

He didn't.

I knew from the get-go this wouldn't last, but it was the first time I felt tremors of the end. Not long after he took me to his Florida beach house, the one I dream about now. He came back from meetings that day and had to break the door open because I was sleeping so deeply. I hadn't heard him knocking or breaking in, something I still wonder about.

We caught a plane back to Chicago that night, and he barely spoke to me in the weeks that followed.

Until I called late one night to tell him I was pregnant.

Lou made it clear he wasn't interested in taking responsibility. He said he'd pay for me to get rid of it, but if I decided otherwise, I was on my own. I was too ashamed to go home, and so without telling anyone, I just left. Made my way west by bus, not knowing where I was going, much less what I was going to do when I

got there.

I saw a help-wanted sign in a diner outside the bus stop in Cheyenne—that's how I ended up in Wyoming. When people ask, I say it was because I was sick of the city.

I told Frank the creature from my dreams was probably what the doctors said—a bad side effect of the combination of pills I was taking. Of course, they've adjusted them with no change—science can't explain everything, I tell him, but I can see he's unconvinced.

I don't think Frank really wants to know the truth—what he doesn't know can't hurt him, and I'd like to keep it that way.

We are sitting outside, watching birds fight over a feeder. The home has wonderful grounds, I won't deny that, and they're well-kept too. There are paved paths everywhere that weave through trees with little sitting areas here and there—probably the only thing I like about this place.

Frank sits in his wheelchair next to me, his eyes closed and face pointed toward the afternoon sun. It's September, and a chill in the air tempers the afternoon heat.

I run my tongue over that swollen spot again and my other teeth too. I've been doing it so much lately, it's like they aren't even mine any more.

The chatter of squirrels distracts me, and I watch them chase each other around. I never had much of a yard, not even as a kid. The houses on our street were bumped up right against the next with pathetic excuses for backyards. They didn't even have grass, just old cracked cement. The yard at our trailer house was nothing to brag about either, and it makes me sad that Sam never had an honest-to-goodness American backyard. I never even took him camping.

Frank's eyes are closed; otherwise I'd strike up a conversation—anything to interrupt this line of thought. I'm about to wake him anyway when he says, real quiet, "I know you don't want me to talk about it, but I want you to know.... Sometimes I think about how you said they found you. Half frozen and all, thinking you were dead."

His eyes are closed still, but clenched now. I can feel my heart rate rise, and my cheeks flush.

"And then I think about what it'd be like here if that ever happened again; if they couldn't

bring you back.” Finally, he opens his eyes and looks into mine.

He seems to want to say more, but pauses for a moment, looking up into the trees. Then he takes my hand, and we just sit together like we have so many evenings, watching the sun disappear behind the trees.

* * *

It was my neighbor that found me last winter. She was getting the paper, and there I was, slumped against a tree, snow piled up around me. Or so they say; I don't remember it myself. All I remember was realizing that the creature was in my house, and that I had to get away. Next thing I knew, I was in a hospital with tubes sticking out of me everywhere.

I tell Frank that it was my own fault, that when I try to sleep I have to imagine I'm somewhere other than where I am—like the beach house. Then when the monster comes, I'll wake up and be somewhere totally different and therefore safe from him.

Last winter I started imagining myself asleep in my house. It'd been so long since I had a good long sleep in my own bed, that I started to imagine myself doing just that. It was stupid because when I woke, I'd be in the same place that my monster found me in my dream. When that happened, I'd get so riled up I'd have to leave the house. Often I'd just go driving around until the sun came up, but I was just so exhausted those last few weeks, I didn't know which way was up. I guess I was delirious or something and ended up under-dressed in below freezing weather.

They said if the neighbor lady hadn't found me when she did, I'd have been a goner. I wonder if that would have been such a bad thing.

They had me on some heavy stuff at the hospital—I got pneumonia, and spent most of that time just sleeping. First time in six months that I wasn't lurching awake by the nightmare. I'd give anything to get my hands on that stuff now.

What they give me here is better than I could get on my own, but still not strong enough. At least I can usually get to sleep after the initial nightmare and still get four or five hours each night. It's silly, but I think it helps knowing that ten feet away in the next apart-

ment is another human being. I lived alone in my house for thirty years and thought I was used to it. I was proud of it, if you want to know the truth—a little old lady like me, living on her own. I felt like Rosie the Riveter or something.

It just makes the whole ordeal more confusing, to be honest. I hate this place, I really do—the constant surveillance, the crummy food. But mostly I hate the waiting—for family to visit, for Jeopardy to come on, for death. I'll think of all this and know I've got to get out of here.

But then I think of Frank and find I can't bring myself to even suggest leaving.

* * *

The tooth has finally erupted, but it doesn't want to stop growing. The tip touches the gum above, and it's none too comfortable, I'll tell you that much. It's made little grooves in my gum that throb every time I accidentally chew on that side. It's taking me as long as old Arnie to eat a meal now. I'm glad Frank hasn't noticed yet; he's going to be a bugger about it once he does.

He looks at me over the top of his spectacles and grins. He asks if I have any Aces.

“Go Fish,” I say.

I hate Go Fish, but the alternative is balloon volleyball with the other Wing D Ambulatories. If you haven't witnessed this phenomenon before, just don't. It's the worst combination of pitiful and funny.

Instead, I hang out with Frank and the rest of the Non-Ambulatories, playing board games. We're supposed to switch partners every day, but Frank and I act like we aren't aware of this. If someone points it out, we act like we can't hear them.

After beating me soundly at Go Fish, Frank excuses himself for a nap. I follow him to his room, though I've promised myself a thousand times I wouldn't do this. He wheels himself down the hall in swift strong pushes, his head cocked to one side. He doesn't notice I've followed him until we reach his door and I open it for him. He blinks in surprise at first, but then smiles faintly and motions me through the door.

I've been in his apartment once before when he showed me the picture of his wife. It's the same as mine but inverted, like I was looking

at my apartment in a mirror. The photo still sits on the dresser, and I think again how lovely she looks—a slender nose, pale skin, and dark curled hair. She looks like someone I would have liked had we met, and I feel a little uncomfortable with her there watching us. I push the thought away and help Frank to the bed. He scoots himself over next to the wall and watches me lie down next to him.

He puts his arm around my shoulders, and we both sigh deeply. It's been too many years without this, for both of us. We don't go farther than that, an unspoken agreement, but right now this is more than enough. Frank quickly dozes off, his head leaning against mine. The weight of it feels right.

All of a sudden I am densely tired and my eyelids fall. I tell myself I'll just rest my eyes for a moment.

* * *

I am pounding on the door of our little house in Cheyenne. My fist is sore and my voice ragged from calling Sam's name. I know he's in there. He's locked me out, letting me pound and yell as our neighbors watch from behind curtained windows. I don't care what they think, though, because I know if I don't get inside Sam will leave.

He is sixteen, and I've finally answered the question he grew up asking. I've told him the whole story, about Lou and me, and he is angry. He is so angry that he will buy a bus ticket with my credit card and leave. But only if I don't get inside this house. If I can get inside, I can talk to him, get him to understand. He will look at me how he used to, and when he calls me mom, I won't hear any bitterness or disgust.

I start ramming my shoulder in to the door; and after several jarring collisions, it pops open. I stumble into the entryway, panting heavily—except this isn't my house. This is Lou's beach house, and I've just busted the front door down. I call first for Sammy and then for Lou. I'm confused. Maybe this *is* my house. Maybe I never left.

I half-run through the beach house, searching the empty sheets on the bed, opening the closet door, the kitchen cabinets. But no one is here. There's not enough oxygen, and my breath comes in loud gasps. I have to get out. I whirl

around to flee this place, and out of the corner of my eye, I see the Monster's reflection in the mirror hanging beside the bed. My foot catches on the leg of a chair, and I crash to the tiled floor, splitting my lip against my front teeth. I spin to face the Monster—this must be how he finally catches me.

But there is nothing. I look around the little house feverishly, but all is as it should be. I look down then, and a wave of terrible understanding comes over me. My body lying on the floor is dark and long, my feet are clawed, my legs covered with the Monster's matted hair. I feel the thing's sinewy wings unfurl from my back and I cry out, my lungs bursting from the effort.

* * *

I awake in Frank's bed soaked in sweat.

A dense liquid fills my mouth and spills over my lips, and when I reach up to touch it, my hand comes away bright red. Frank stirs next to me, but I am up and out the door before he really wakes up.

No one's around to see me stumble to my apartment. I wash my mouth out in the bathroom sink and watch swirls of blood go down the drain. I must have been clenching my jaw, making the wisdom tooth tear a hole in my gum. I inspect it with my tongue; the flesh is ragged, but the bleeding has slowed. I look up in the mirror inadvertently; a drop of blood hangs from my lower lip and falls. I look away quickly.

My legs are shaking too badly to hold me much longer, so I lower myself to the floor, my back against the door. My breath is coming out in wheezing rasps, and I can't stop crying.

I don't want to, really.

I hear a tentative knock on the door—Frank. I tell him to go away, that I'm fine. Please, just go away.

He cannot see this.

* * *

Soon Nancy will be coming to give me my meds. I don't know what to do—I cannot sleep again. This self-knowledge will change the nightmare; change how, I can only imagine, but I know it will be much worse.

The obvious alternative is to off myself. I wish to God I'd frozen to death last winter; not

only is it almost impossible to manage here, I don't think I have the guts to do it knowingly.

I always was a damn coward.

I sit on my bed, racking my tired old brain. There seem to be no other options—I cannot live like this anymore, but I can't end it either.

There's a knock on the door, and I jump—Nancy.

The knob twists, and I turn away, ashamed.

The hand on my shoulder is not hers though, and I turn in surprise.

It's Frank. He left his wheelchair in the hall,

and I'm surprised by how tall he is. Of course, I think. Frank.

He sits down on the bed stiffly. He hardly looks at me, and even though I know he's trying to give me time to calm down, I take his face in my hands. I stare into his eyes, letting him see me. My head is bare, and I'm painfully aware of my thin scraggly hair, the ruts of skin on my face, my veined eyes. He stares for longer than I think I can bear. But then he nods as if I'd asked a question, and he reaches out, gathering me to himself.