

THE DREAM OF DEATH

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Jim was dreaming. He could tell by the way he moved, that strange heaviness of sleep, and the minimal sound. He didn't usually dream so vividly, but recent stress had been causing his sleep to be light, often light enough to make him think he was awake.

This was one of those times his dream felt like waking life, something he experienced occasionally since childhood. He had woken up during the night, and then fell asleep again around dawn. As life outside began to awaken, something stirred in him.

Again he thought he woke up, but he was still dreaming. He was in the house he grew up in. This corner was where they put the Christmas tree. Now the wall was falling apart. Strangely enough there were bricks underneath the blue-painted plaster. Then Jim noticed the numbers - a 350 was painted above a 193. What did it all mean? Jim wandered in confusion. Perhaps the 1 was really an I and he should be looking on Interstate 93. But then why was everything else a number?

Then it struck him - 350 must be March 5, 2000. What had happened on that day that was so important? He tried getting back there. It was very hard to remember an ordinary day so long ago. He recalled the classroom, his seat - but he was having trouble breathing now. He could feel the air draining from him as if he was drowning. Regret raced through him. "What am I doing? Why haven't I done better with my life?"

Again Jim thought he awakened. He could breathe now. He saw Cassandra. Her eyes were sad. "Why did I leave you?" Jim wondered. "After all we've been through why did I think our relationship wasn't good enough? You deserved better!"

Then he realized he was dreaming again. He hadn't seen Cassandra for years. Jim ran, strangled by the fear that he would never escape the confusion in his mind. A face ahead immediately stopped him. It was twisted and marked. The eyes were squinting as they looked into Jim's. Jim couldn't move. What did this monster want? Then the shock struck him. He was looking at himself. The face, despite its deformities, was his. He felt a scream rising from his bowels. "What have I become?"

Jim felt himself breaking down. And now there were people all around him - how embarrassing! Would they think he was crazy? But he must be insane if he couldn't control himself in front of everybody or tell what was real.

Suddenly he was in bed with Cassandra. Things were okay now. But he had left Cassandra. He was really alone in bed.

The dream was going on too long. Jim didn't know how many times he had believed he awakened only to find that something did not make sense, then noticing that odd feeling of sleep. Perhaps he had really awakened only to fall back asleep as he tried to leave the bed.

He just wanted to wake up, to be back in the world where cold logic could explain almost anything. This world of shadows, spirits, and mirrors was too much to comprehend when he was stuck inside of it. It was the confusion more than anything that scared him so much - that visceral terror of feeling that your hold on life was slipping and you had no way to know what lay beyond.

Jim floated out of his apartment again. He couldn't take the elevator. The empty stairway was a nightmare of echoes. Why was he going this way? Was the building on fire? No, there was no fire. He just needed to get out of here. But to escape the dream - how could he do that? Someone was laughing at him. It filled his heavy limbs with rage. "Goddamn it! I'll show them."

Jim realized what he needed to do. He had to confront his next greatest fear after losing his mind. He had to fall. He had to fall far. He needed to feel helpless against gravity as his body hurled toward the center of the planet. Any time he dreamed of falling he always awakened before he hit the ground. Maybe he would just fall asleep again but at least he had a goal now, a goal as rational as it could be in this distorted world.

Jim glided on his feet through the city. Another dream of confronting the unfriendly world. Everyone looked so distant as they stared with confusion, fear, or anger if they noticed him at all. Jim saw he was wearing the wrinkled clothes that he had fallen asleep in. How strange that such a detail would make it into this part of his mind.

There it was - the building he needed to jump from, a pillar of steel rising toward the sky. Jim beheld the triumph of reason in front of him. The legacy of a civilization, built not for kings nor for gods but for work.

As he passed through the glass doors he already felt things getting clearer. He was near his jump - almost out of this frightful world. The guard gave him a dirty look as he walked through

the metal detector. The age of security - he could only feel the hostility and helplessness and move on.

Jim lost track of everything as he stood in the corner of the elevator. The others paid him no attention. It was like when he was a child and treated like he wasn't even there.

They were at the top now. He could see the gray sky ahead. It could have been any time of day with a sky like that.

There was no sun as he stood by the fence. Would it hurt a sleeping man to climb it?

Nobody could stop him. He grabbed the sharp steel above and pulled himself over. The pain was lost in a rush of fear as he catapulted his body over the fence. He fell too quickly to hear the screams. But the fear! The panic! The fog lifted from his mind as the pavement neared. Then there was nothing.

Onlookers were shocked at the suicide. Some took pictures but most just moved on. No suicide note was ever found and everyone was left to guess Jim's motive.