

We Are Many

By Aluki Chupik-Hall

"Been havin' that dream again." Dawson tells me. He leans back in his chair with a pained sigh, as if untying a knot in his esophagus. He sets a half empty can of beer down beside him.

It's a good summer night, humidity lingering in the air from the day, the sky a solemn navy. Everyone is outside tonight. The kids are scampering around the gravel paths, screeching and playing keep-away with a half-inflated soccer ball. The younger men sing a few rounds and drink twice that many, and the women are sprawled in the sand of the volleyball court, whispering amongst themselves. Men like Dawson lay back, often alone, unmoving.

Men like Dawson are slow on their feet but still quick in their minds. Perhaps too quick for their own sanity.

"The one about the animal?" I push, attempting to meet his eyes.

"Say, Sam, just you're here for the summer, right?" He's asked this of me before.

"Nope. I'm here year-round, remember?" It's a fair question. I'm a lot shinier than most of the men around here. My suits are pressed, my hair is moussed, and my degrees sit level on the wall of my trailer. To the untrained eye, I look like a scummy businessman dragging my kids on a cheap vacation. I look like summer.

"Right. I remember." He nods slowly, eyes trained on the horizon. Dawson has a round gut and wispy, untamed white hair. The kids in the park call him Santa, and years back he bought a used red suit in a size too small and now brings it out on every possible occasion. He's good with kids, always engaging them and throwing the ball to them when it lands in front of his chair, but there's this dullness to his eyes that is always there, even when he's in his best spirits.

When he's in his worst spirits, he talks to me.

"Tell me about the dream." I insist.

He nods. "I'm out in the woods. Oscar is there, right beside me."

Oscar is one of his war buddies. I know little of him, only that he's buried a few miles away in town. "Go on."

"This *thing* is chasing us. Ol' nasty dog thing. Slobberin' all over. You can tell he wants blood. The trees are high, and we come up on this clearing. The animal has its nose to the ground. We can see it through the trees, both of us, and we can see each other, but it can't see us quite yet." He recounts, pausing to take a slow sip of his beer.

"That part is always the same, right? This... predator is chasing you, and you stop at that same clearing. What happens in the first dream? Remind me."

"Well, I run. I'm twice as fast as Oscar, always have been, and I reckon it'll distract that beast for long enough. I hear him pick Oscar up in his mouth and swallow him whole, and then he picks up and eats me too." Dawson tells me, shivering as he nears the end. He's more rigid in his seat, now, shoulders raised. His eyes dart back and forth, as if what he's describing plays out in front of him.

"I remember. Despite sacrificing him, you're still killed. What about the next dream? How does it end?"

Dawson exhales. "I die again. Try to draw him into the clearing this time. I've always been brighter, I think, maybe it'll accept the offering. Oscar is eaten again. This time I watch, before the animal turns and eats me. This is a puzzle, right? I just need to find the answer and it's over."

"And you're lucid during this time? Can you make these decisions consciously?" I ask.

"Yeah, I suppose. Not like there's somethin' controlling me. Just me."

"What about the others? Have you had more?" I was intrigued, now. He was playing these dreams as if they were meant to give way, as if they were meant to reveal something.

"Shouldn't you be charging me for this?" He asked, turning to swat a mosquito away from his beer.

I pause for a moment, examining the situation. It's not as if I've given him advice, or even contributed anything meaningful to the conversation. Based on what I knew, he wouldn't take any guidance from me even if he was paying, and I almost didn't blame him. I'd lived a third of the life that he had, and was about half as moral for the duration of said life.

"Come on," I urged, "I need to hear the rest."

"Third dream I started to reason with the thing. I'm stronger and faster than the beast'll ever be, and I won't complain if you ask me to haul your prey around, or even hunt with you. Hell, I can use a gun. I can prove myself to you, beast." He tells me, before finishing off his beer and crushing the can under the heel of his work boots.

"And?"

"What do you think? He eats Oscar, I walk with the beast for a while, but the moment I get weary I die." He responds, throwing the can into the garbage bin he's positioned against the trailer. Based on the way the can arcs and lands satisfyingly

in the middle, I can tell that he's been doing this since the beginning of time. That he's been *here* since the beginning of time. Just sitting and fossilizing.

"You haven't told me that one before. Was that the most recent dream?" I ask, hoping for a clear resolution where it is likely I will never get one.

"One more, and I'll tell you what happens, just so long as you answer one question for me." He looks me in the eyes. His are piercing, blue. I could imagine them once installed in the head of a Hollywood movie star, or a yearning soldier. Now, they're just a cruel reminder of youth on his sagging face. "Why is a guy like you wasting his life in a place like this?"

I turned to look away. I'd avoided the question from neighbours and acquaintances for a while, but if anyone deserved to know, it was Dawson. "I grew up here. My grandpa and I lived in a trailer just down the path. We'd watch old tapes at the neighbour, Sally's, place. She had a TV, and I was always jealous. I thought that she had to be a millionaire or something, just to afford a decent cable subscription." I look over at Dawson, who seems intent on hearing the whole thing. I gather myself. "My grandpa had this heart deformity that he couldn't afford to get fixed, and one morning I woke up and it'd killed him. When I found out I had the same thing I studied my ass off for my psychology degree so that I could get every scholarship, every degree. I took clients everywhere, for a while. High paying clients, celebrity clients in LA who benefited massively from my work. Mostly child stars, they all need plenty of therapy, but other people, too. Normal, everyday people. I took the surgery and I had some pretty severe complications. I'm healthy now, but... I spiraled into debt. A lot of debt, even with insurance. I couldn't keep paying for my apartment, or my car, or any of the organic groceries that they sell, so I moved my practice back here. Right back where I started."

"You still think you're better than us. Just holdin' onto that last piece of prestige. Almost every one of us has tried and failed to leave this place. It calls you back." He stands up, stretches, and then turns to face me. He's much taller than me, which is made more noticeable by the fact that I remain seated.

It's dark now. Pitch black with few stars, and only the flickering porch light illuminating Dawson.

"We're approaching the clearing. I say to Oscar, 'you go for the eyes, I go for the throat'. We jump at the animal when he's still. I use my teeth to rip right through his jugular. He goes down, twitchin' in the legs. It's all quiet now, forest-like. Only some faraway birds and the trees to keep us company. We keep on walking on this soft grass for what feels like hours, just talking like we used to. We don't get tired, or hungry, just all calm. Then the dream ends. Simple. Don't make sense hurtin' the weak. Don't make sense only takin' them down when it's the beast that's the problem." He heaves a heavy breath and stands beside me for a moment.

"I understand." I say, though I'm not entirely sure that I do.

Dawson glances at his door now, like a skittish dog. "Well, it's getting late. Should be getting to bed soon."

"Night, Dawson." I nod.

"G'night, Sam."

I am left in the perfect night with more questions than I have answers, my ankles swollen with fresh mosquito bites and my forehead slick with moisture. I walk home past the empty lot that once held my grandfather's trailer, my eyes lingering too long on the fresh, dewy grass there. Before I reach my own trailer, I stop to survey the park. Lights turn off one by one. Couples sit outside on their lawn chairs and speak in hushed voices. Old couches and tires crowd front porches. The shattered glass under my shoes reflects the moon so strongly that it could blind an airline pilot, if they ever bothered to fly overhead. For once, I don't mind. For once, the place doesn't feel like an ill-fitting suit.

I don't pity the people here so much, not anymore. I don't befriend the beast, I don't run from my allies. As I near my trailer, I pull my showy Hollywood business card from my pocket and stamp it into the ground with the toe of my shoe.

I'll go for the eyes if you go for the throat.