

DREAM DRAMA DYSTOPIA



The Unauthorized Story about
the World's Most Notorious
Lucid Dream Cult Leader

1.

For many minutes, he looked at Ms. Cordea as she slept. He loved the way they looked when they slept, so content, so vulnerable. She was dreaming, but clearly not lucid.

Dr. Dennis Dalton could tell such things; he had begun the study of dreams at eight years old after his first lucid dream. Here, thirty-six years later, he had built an empire based on these studies. A network of followers - students as they were called - provided him with a handsome income and gaudy lifestyle.

Despite a hectic schedule, leading several sleep schools up and down the west coast, Dr. Dalton still took the time to give personal sessions to a lucky few. Ms. Cordea was among them.

He saw by her subtle movements that she was soon to wake. Moments later she did awake, marked by a few heavy breaths and stretches. Dr. Dalton called this the reboot, and believed that up to 40% of dream memories could be lost during this time, unless of course one were trained in his methods.

"Welcome back to the outside," he said after she had regained her faculties.

"Thank you, Dr. Dalton. I..." Yawned.

"You weren't lucid."

"That's right...but how can you tell?"

Dr. Dalton smiled.

"How about these dreams you had? You looked troubled. Tell me. I can write them down in your dream book for you."

"Ok...I was in this sort of abandoned factory in the middle of this huge field. I saw my old friend Judy and we climbed up on the power lines and were bouncing around on them, doing flips. Then this man came walking with his pack of vicious dogs. He told me not to be afraid as he let go of the leashes and the dogs began to chase me. I ran through this old city. I ran down this dirt road through the woods. After a while the dogs were gone but I kept running. I had to get home..."

He wrote busily into the notebook.

"Doctor? What does it mean, what do the dogs symbolize?"

"I don't believe in universal symbols. On the inside, your subconscious creates everything. The meaning is entirely what you believe it to be. I can, however, help you find patterns within your dreams, which may help you better understand your own

subconscious. For example, I noticed in your dream journals that you are often playing, doing something totally free. But then something gets in the way. Something that scares you, something you're running away from."

"That's so true, I feel that I'm always running. That something is keeping me from being truly free. How could you tell that about me?"

"I've done this before."

Dr. Dalton looked at the way Ms. Cordea looked at him. She saw a man completely in his element. He moved with a presence that exuded confidence and control, and yet he seemed to really understand her.

Having done this before, he knew to lean in and to put his hand on her arm gently but firmly. He suddenly became aware of his pulse, a warm, bubbling sensation washed over him. Anxiousness wrestled with euphoria. This feels to Dalton the most alive he can possibly feel. That is why he does these things.

As he moved to kiss her, the feeling swelled to even greater heights of aliveness. The waves of it crashed as he felt her mouth; the uncertainty faded with each heartbeat. Doubt gave way to desire. Dr. Dalton stood up and looked once more down at his student, Ms. Cordea. He turned towards the door

and walked there slowly, but with purpose. He then pulled out his keys and locked the door.

2.

"Membership levels have actually declined there this last quarter, and they were already too low to really sustain the location."

"Don't even suggest that we close it, Nick, you know I wouldn't let that happen," Dr. Dalton replied to Nicholas Humphrey, his friend and colleague.

"It's bleeding money, and it's not just your money, you know."

"We can't retreat."

"We'll be back...we just have to regroup."

"I'm going out there. Right away. We'll have a big seminar. We need to inspire the group."

"Alright, Dennis, if you believe it so strongly, go. Go to Sacramento." Nick chuckled, "I've learned that there's no use in fighting once you've made your mind up."

"If you want something to grow and to flourish, you must pay it attention. Presence is the most powerful thing we have to give "

Dr. Dalton momentarily shifted from his conversation to look out his office window and upon

the grounds of this, his flagship school. He looked at the gray sky and the leaves changing their color. He thought to himself how the once-young maple trees had grown in these many years.

3.

Morpheus Dalton giggled as he raced past his parents and up the sidewalk. Upon his target - a pile of dried leaves - he dealt three determined kicks, sending them fluttering up into the autumn air, much to his satisfaction.

Dr. Dalton looked on, gently smiling, appreciative of being able to watch this piece of himself reborn, once more able to enjoy the gift of naïveté. How does it happen that one so completely forgets what it is to inhabit the inner world of a child? So alive with imagination and adventure. His reverie had distracted him from the conversation with his wife, Lydia.

"...you know Rosalie, tall, brown hair; she's a fairly new student."

"Yes, that's right. I remember her."

"This week, in group, she was talking a lot about her husband, Jeffrey, who is not a student. I guess they have been fighting a lot recently. He has problems with her about being at the academy so

much of the time. He complains about all the time she spends sleeping.”

“It’s unconscionable how hard it is for some people to accept us.”

“No but there's more. So last weekend she found a key in his pocket for the Hotel Magnolia downtown. This while he was supposed to be in Los Angeles.”

Dr. Dalton inhaled deeply but slowly, careful not to show the felling of anxiety that was suddenly forming around the crown of his head. He thought he had convinced himself that he was comfortable with straying from monogamy (this was the phrase he used internally so as to avoid having to process words like cheating or infidelity) Yet, when confronted with the subject while in her presence, he couldn't help but feel the tension that had built in his temples and was now spreading down his jaws and to his neck.

“Terrible for her,” he shook his lowered head.

Lydia herself tried not to let show the sinking feeling she had as she looked at him. She had heard the whispers and read the signs. She couldn't know for sure if the rumors were true, but she didn't want to. Would she confront him and split up the family? Would she have him apologize and commit to

family counseling? No outcome seemed desirable. They continued walking.

Morpheus, now wielding a thin stick, began whipping it around, with jumps and lunges, slicing through the leaves of ornamental bushes along the sidewalk. He stopped at one plant in particular and began thrashing at it repeatedly.

"Moe! Stop! That's not your plant!" his mother shouted.

Dr. Dalton pondered why boys are so moved toward destruction. It must certainly be to experience the feeling of power and control over the world. He wondered if it might be their ultimate purpose. As boys become men, ever grows their capacity for destruction.

"So when do you leave for Sacramento?"

"Saturday afternoon. I should be there for a few days. Maybe a week. I will have to start making more regular trips as well, you know."

The way she looked at him caused him to say, "I'm sorry "

"Why do you have to go? Isn't there someone else who can do it?"

"The Sacramento branch has not taken root as well as I hoped it would. If you want something to grow and to flourish, you must pay it attention."

“And so this is what you choose to have flourish.”

4.

The city he walked through was so beautiful. Its streets were adorned in ancient architecture and magnificent trees. Its great hills provided vistas of mountain and sea.

He only knew that he needed to go somewhere, so he kept walking the streets of this majestic place. Blocks went by. At some point, he noticed that he was walking with a woman.

He didn't know her, but she seemed like the type of person that he could open up to and hold on to. But there was a wall between them. He could feel it and he knew it. Still, they walked together down these wondrous streets. They looked at the things they passed and told each other what they thought about them. It was blissful. They skipped as the road bent down steeply to the waterfront. There, sitting on the rocks just over the breaking waves, he looked at her again. He now was unsure whether or not the wall was still there. He looked to her eyes he felt himself falling into them. They opened up into a tunnel through which he entered a whole inner

world. In this world was a woman standing before him, her eyes tunnels to another world. On and on, deeper and deeper. Then, all at once, he pulled himself back out of this chain of worlds and looked at this still nameless woman.

"I made you," he said. "You're are my dream, my subconscious. You are me."

Now, having gained lucidity, Dr. Dalton remembered what he had to do. He manifested a cloud of birds, of many colors and many species. They made visually pleasing patterns as they flew in to pick him up, carrying him back away from the sea, over the hills towards the mountains. He looked out across the vast landscape, weightless, completely free. Looking ahead, Dr. Dalton determined which mountain was the highest and willed the birds to carry him towards it.

Here, atop the snowy peak, where it always had been, lied a cave. From inside it glowed and gave a radiant warmth that could be felt from where Dr. Dalton's feet took land. The birds, having been relieved of their burden, resumed their flight of aesthetically pleasing patterns. Dr. Dalton crouched to enter the cave and before him was the magnificent creature he sought. Lion-like in its build and its golden fur, and yet very human in posture

and expression, the creature stood up to greet his guest. Dr. Dalton kneeled before him.

“O, great Alalngar, avatar of the divine, I seek your wisdom.”

The anthropomorphic beast, reached for a book that was thick and heavy, bearing a red cover gilded with knotting patterns. Its yellowed pages and worn corners suggested an ancient origin. The beast held a pen and after writing for but a second, he handed the tome to the human. The immaculate calligraphy, written in ink that glowed on the page, read thus:

“Tell me what you wish to know?”

5.

The auditorium filled, and an electricity built in the air - that of a mass of people collectively trying to restrain their great excitement. Some had arrived hours early in order to claim the best seats, to savor more of the experience, and to watch the man sleeping on stage.

The rumble grew to a fervor. “He's moving!” a child exclaimed. Indeed he was, and the crowd became hushed in anticipation. After waking, Dr. Dalton took several breaths without moving - focused on controlling his reboot. A moment passed and he stood up to a wave of hearty applause. He

smiled at his legion, stretching his face to ensure that even those in the back could see the width of his smile.

“What dreams I’ve had, my friends. What dreams I’ve had!” He let the applause rise again for a moment. “How about you out there? Are you having beautiful, powerful dreams?”

The speaker nodded as another roar let out.

“Alright everybody. It’s a pleasure to have such an enthusiastic and engaged audience here this evening. Now I know everyone wants to hear about my conversation with my avatar, the great Alalngar. Trust me, I’m still trying to absorb it; he had a lot to say. And to our most generous contributors out there, he had answers to your personal questions.

But before I get to all of that, I want to talk about something very serious, something going on here in the outside world.”

With this he began to pace the stage slowly as he spoke.

“As you know, it is very important to me to be in touch with my students. As much as I can, I talk to you. I listen to you. And recently, I have been hearing a common complaint that troubles me very much.

“Many of you are saying that your families and loved ones don’t accept our teachings.

"They have a problem with you sleeping more. They don't understand you and this inner world you are working to develop. They have a problem with your abstinence from alcohol and marijuana. They don't understand how those things upset the REM cycle and weaken our dreams.

"Unfortunately, somewhere deep in our history, this country has developed an obsession with work. We are valued by the time we spend at work, but not by the quality of our work. Certainly not by the greater meaning of our work. Our politicians boast about how many full-time jobs they can create. And what suffers? All of the restorative activities we desperately need: family, hobbies, and of course, sleep.

"And so, without thinking, the people around us push these empty values upon each other. They try to make us feel guilty about engaging in something as Natural and Healthy and NECESSARY as sleep! What absurdity! But my people, do not fight ignorance with ignorance. Instead, we need to find strength in one another. In this room with you is a group of people who understand your struggles and will share your journey. They strive for the same goals - seeking that which is spiritual and substantive, not merely chasing something Material and Fleeting. Now I'm not saying to neglect your

loved ones. But when you feel alone — you have a place to go. Our group sessions are always open. You can enroll in additional classes at any time. And the more hostile THEY make this outer world, the more WE shall seek solace in our inner world - a world that is every bit as full, as rich, and as endless as the outside, if only we cultivate it.”

Dr. Dalton continued to paint in the medium he had mastered, his audience rapt. He invoked the feelings of loneliness and isolation deep seated within his subjects. To them he offered the hope of acceptance and the means for escape.

6.

“Okay Nick, I see you smiling. Give me those numbers!”

Nicholas Humphrey closed the door as he entered the office. He had been Dr. Dalton's assistant principal since the founding of the first school. It was in those days that they began this custom of meeting at the first of every week - Monday morning, 9:00.

“Sacramento is rebounding. Twenty new enrollees in just the last two weeks. Attendance is up. Prescriptions are up,” Mr. Humphrey beamed.

Dr. Dalton's slight smile belied the thrill of success that filled him.

"I don't think you'll have to keep going to Eugene, Dennis. You can get back to your family."

Dr. Dalton pictured Morpheus and Somnus, his two sons. He believed it was for them that he must succeed and prosper. In a way this was rationally true, for many would argue that the will to power comes from the evolutionary drive of reproductive success. Still, there was more to it than this. The desire for status and prominence manifested itself in many ways within him. He was consumed by it.

"So then what is our next step? Should we talk about the next school? We've discussed Fresno. We should start looking for land there."

"Dennis, can't we just slow down for a minute? Catch our breaths and enjoy the large amount of success we've had?"

"In this world, nothing is static. If we aren't growing, we're dying."

Mr. Humphrey sighed and shook his head, but, as always, acquiesced to his superior. "Okay, I'll look a bit into the real estate there. Thing is we're not done saving Sacramento quite yet. We have to install some new leadership there to carry on this momentum."

"Who did you have in mind?"

"Evanston. Brian has been raving about him up in Bellevue. We think he's ready."

"No. Evanston? No. He he's just a little too...eager. Too bold. He needs some years to temper this before he could ever be a principal."

"Don't you see? That's what we need there. Someone bold and charismatic to inspire people. What, are you afraid that he reminds you too much of yourself?"

The question made Dr. Dalton stop for a moment to think.

7.

A person cannot find success in this world without structure. Ritual, routine, schedule – these are the tools of leaders and visionaries. One can never reach his true potential unless he is highly intentional about the allocation of his time, the purpose of each minute. This is what Dr. Dalton believed.

He was in the downstairs of his house, stretching, as was part of his morning routine. Usually, he liked to meditate on his dreams as he stretched, but this morning he had remembered none. This occurrence was rare, but not unprecedented. Still, it troubled him. His mind went

back over the last evening to determine where he may have made a misstep in sleep hygiene, but could draw no conclusions.

As he did every day after stretching, Dr. Dalton made a breakfast of spinach and eggs. He had almost finished eating when his son, Morpheus, entered the dining room. The boy tried to entangle his father in a game that consisted mainly of chasing an imagined elephant around the house. Dr. Dalton engaged for a few minutes before directing his son back towards breakfast. Morpheus ate little of the egg and spinach and so was then given a small basket of raspberries, which he ate in handfuls.

Somnus was the next to enter the room, dancing as he did. Dr. Dalton was often amazed at the boundless energy of a child, running from morning until night, fighting sleep with their all.

"I don't feel like eggs today. I want to make pancakes.", Dr. Dalton's 9-year-old son always seemed to challenge.

"You don't know how to make pancakes.*

"I can if you help me."

"No, Somnus, we only have 15 minutes until we have to go. It's eggs or yogurt."

"Or leftover pasta!" Somnus said as he pulled the Tupperware from the refrigerator. He then took it to the microwave before bounding out of the

kitchen, jumping and slapping the top of the doorframe as he passed it.

Dr. Dalton quickly dressed Morpheus, packed his bags, and called for Somnus to leave – all happening impressively quickly. Lydia Dalton was still not to be seen, as her morning runs were becoming increasingly longer.

Somnus sat now in the front seat of the car, playing with the radio as Morpheus slept in the back. Their father was silent as he drove, his mind on the dreams he hadn't had. Breathing deeply while at a red light, he regained his awareness of the outside world and looked over at his son who was staring deeply out the window.

"So Som, do you have any classes you're excited about today?"

"No. They're all just old people talking at you for an hour," Somnus snapped. His father was weary of his attitude, but refused to accept the idea that it couldn't be changed.

"Well what about Dream Philosophy? I've long known Professor Duval, and he has always had a great reputation as a teacher."

"All the stuff he talks about, about his avatar and the teachings of the divine word, you have already told it to me yourself. But how do you know that the stuff the avatar says is always right? How

do you know he's different from other dream characters?"

Dr. Dalton dropped the pitch of his voice to give an air of great wisdom, "One day, Somnus, you will find your avatar and you will know."

"But a lot of the kids say it's all made up. I swear they laugh behind my back about me being your son and believing in it."

Dr. Dalton tightened his grip on the steering wheel. "Tell me the names of these kids."

8.

Dr. Dalton stood in front of a large room with rows of leather recliner couches, each containing its own scowling child. He knew he needed to work quickly, having maybe half an hour before the medication would start to set in.

"It is being said around here that some of our elementary students are questioning the teachings of this school. They deny the transcendent powers of the dream. They don't believe in the existence of avatars or the truth of the divine word."

He looked out upon the class he had assembled for this special guest lecture, consisting of the

troublemakers and rabble-rousers from around the elementary school.

"First, I'd like to say that it's perfectly natural for a young mind to doubt the things he is told. To search for answers by oneself. At some level, the truth must necessarily come from within. But you see, to dream is to exist totally within oneself. It is the greatest avenue we have to find that truth within."

The eyes were already sagging heavily. The ears unalert.

"But Dr. Dalton," quipped a young Mr. Harrison, ten years old, a nuisance to many, "Isn't your avatar supposed to know the future? Can you ask him who is going to win the basketball game tomorrow night?"

This livened the room with snickers, but didn't break the stern resolve of the teacher.

"Find him yourself and you can bother him with such frivolities. For me, Alalngar provides wisdom and guidance that I can share."

"Can he tell me what will happen to my sick grandma?", asked a student, Mr. Adler.

"Can you find him in your sleep then tell him to come to me in my dream?", Mr. Harrison piped in again.

Dr. Dalton's mind caught on the thought that it had now been days since his last dream.

"The point is: if you control your dreams, you control your subconscious. It's a skill that must be trained and developed, but once mastered it will lead to a whole new level of existence. This is how you find your avatar."

A few had by this time drifted into sleep. Acutely aware of this, Dr. Dalton walked over to a button that hung on the wall behind his desk, which his pressing caused a loud, buzzing alarm. The sleeping lifted their eyes with a jolt.

"We are going to sleep now. It is going to be a mindful sleep." His words were soft, relaxing, persuasive. "Pay attention to your dreams. Only when you are aware that you are dreaming will you be able to gain control. Look for writing in your dreams. If you look at a page or a sign and find scrambled markings, you will know you're in a dream."

The eyes steadily closed as he spoke. Dr. Dalton waited several minutes before ringing the alarm again.

"Remember that you are in a dream. Hold on to what you are dreaming about."

Again they drifted. Dr. Dalton found this technique of using rapid sleep-wake cycles to be

very effective, especially when paired with Dormidol, an antihistamine that causes drowsiness, branded for use only through the Academy of Lucid Sleep. He could see from the way the children's eyes moved that two of them were lucid. He paid mind to the names and faces of those two. He then left the children to sleep and paced at the window to think about the days that had passed since he last dreamed.

9.

Dr. Dalton sat on the padded table as Donna, the nurse/receptionist/secretary of the clinic began strapping a blood pressure band over his bicep.

"You know Donna, it's nothing serious. Really. This is not necessary."

"We have to do this to everyone, Doctor. Or if you'd rather I could start disregarding policy?" she responded with a sly smile. Donna was of the rare breed who possessed the most splendid combination of a sweet disposition and a cynical sense of humor.

"Sorry, I should let you handle your own job."

Both were silent as she squeezed in air to tighten the band. Donna knew what "nothing serious" must have meant. After all, the unofficial

purpose of the clinic was to hand out prescriptions for a variety of sleep and dream enhancing medications. Still, it was a curious event; to her knowledge, Dr. Dalton had never come in for this reason before. Rather than remark on this she removed the band, wrote on the clipboard and said, "Dr. Hughes will be here in just a minute," as unenthusiastically as possible before walking out.

Dr. Dalton sat and looked around the room, sparsely decorated with medical diagrams. He took some focused breaths and tried to relax but could not. Doctors' offices had always made him uneasy and his present situation didn't help.

The doctor walked in suddenly, wearing a wide smile and intense gaze - the expression he almost always had. Do not take this to mean that he was always happy. His affect did more to cause one wonder whether or not he was entirely sane. Dr. Dalton himself was more amused than troubled by this characteristic. After all, Dr. Hughes had been loyal throughout his long employment at The Academy. A tall, lanky man, he had to stoop, just a bit, to shake Dr. Dalton's hand. "Dennis, good to see you. What's going on here?"

"Well, it's been five nights since my last dream. That's the longest I've ever gone without."

"Dr. Hughes wrote on his clipboard. "I can see how that is concerning, Dennis, considering, of course, your position here. Have you noticed anything else different lately? How is your sleep hygiene? Your overall health? Mental?"

He eyed Dr. Dalton intensely, failing in his attempt to convey attention and compassion.

"Everything has been fine. Yes, I have been maintaining good sleep hygiene. I have been using all of the dream practices - I invented most of them!"

"I know, Dennis, I'm not trying to question you, just giving due diligence."

Dr. Dalton nodded. "You're right. It's just that I've been trying everything and nothing has helped. I think I need the pills."

Both men thought about the early days. He and Dr. Dalton did a lot of experimentation. For a time, Dr. Dalton loved the effects of the drugs - vivid, euphoric dreams and easy lucidity. But, as it's the nature of drugs, the more he took, the less they worked, the more dependent on them he became. Eventually, he fought against them and won. He found that he didn't need them, that it was better to work to control his dreams himself.

He didn't mind letting his students use these medications. After all, the subscriptions were an

important source of income. He told himself that for many, this was the only way to give new students a taste of lucidity.

"Of course I can set you up, Dennis. It's OK to get some help from time to time. Lord knows it's been long enough since you have."

"It's critical that this stays between us. I'm sure you understand. Can you deliver them to me discreetly?"

"Yeah not a problem. Haven't you heard of patient confidentiality?" Dr. Hughes laughed too wildly for such a joke.

10.

A small red light lit up over the door to room E-14. Dr. Dalton took a moment before walking in. "Strong. Confident. In control." His affect was dull, and lacking that vital spark that so effectively drew people into his words. His eyes were tired, reflecting the preceding nights of sparse and restless sleep. Rather than induce the dreams he so needed, the drugs only left him foggy and detached. Gathering himself as well as he could, he entered to see his student sitting upright in her recliner.

Ms. Jennifer Myers, twenty-four, unmistakably pretty and quite shy, may not have been acutely aware of the difference in him, but she must have felt it. One must not discount the tremendous amount that happens beneath the surface of consciousness. Some may attach fantastical phenomena to this process: vibrations, auras, beams of energy. But according to Dr. Dalton, this can all be explained as the subconscious perception of subtle gestures, eye movements, vocal inflection - a mountain of information that our brains summarize into a vague feeling.

Ms. Myers's thoughts, however, were on the dreams she had just exited.

"I did it, Dr. Dalton!"

He smiled, making sure to show his teeth. "Yes, wonderful. I knew it! Tell them to me, I'll write it down in your dream journal. It's especially important to write down your lucid dreams.

"Oh doctor. It was... beautiful! I was in this forest in the fall and the trees were such bright colors. Then I knew I could fly, although it was more like swimming through the air. I flew up through the trees to this huge tower. It was like one of those Japanese pagodas with a million levels that reached way up into the sky. As I flew I looked down and saw

mountains poking up through the clouds. I got to the tower, but I was starting to lose lucidity.

Dr. Dalton interrupted her there, "Remember that tower. That may be important. That may very well be where you find your avatar."

She blushed.

"Go on," he said.

"Well, then I saw my brother and he said we had to go home, so we went down the stairs and we ended up on this wooded road near Paducah, where I grew up. It gets kind of fuzzy from there, I think we got lost and lost and lost."

Dr. Dalton wrote then looked up at her. "Yes, you felt lost. Where do you think that comes from?"

"Maybe it's because I'm out here, in Oregon. Maybe I am longing for home."

That was not the direction he wanted this to go. He wanted this to be her home. "Home can mean a lot of things. it could mean you're looking for a new home. Looking for yourself."

"I guess so. I mean, I do miss home but I don't really want to move back there..."

"Think about that tower. I think you are going to find it. I think you could be one of the special ones."

She put her head down, blushing brightly.

He scooted towards her, putting his hand on her leg. She remained still, looking down at the hand that touched her leg. He leaned in to kiss her, but she pulled away just as his lips began to touch her.

"I'm sorry. I can't. Dr. Dalton. I... no."

That she felt compelled to apologize was telling of the psychological dynamic at work.

"I think...I think I should go."

Dr. Dalton turned away and squeezed his eyes closed as she walked out of the room.

11.

The table was long, custom-made of fine walnut with geometric inlays. Around it was a shared feeling of concern and seriousness, held by the men who had gathered there - the principals of each of the six branches of the Academy of Lucid Sleep, along with a few high-ranking administrators. Dr. Dalton sat at the head staring down at the beautifully stained woodgrain.

Mr. Humphrey broke the momentary silence, "Really, the numbers are not that bad. A few defections. A little bad press. It's nothing we haven't seen before."

"It's true, our base is still solid, but we can't let this downward trend continue," responded Dr. Thurber, the principal at ALS Tacoma, "What are we going to do?"

Mr. Humphrey suggested, "We should do some big events! Have Dr. Dalton speak. Have some warm-up speakers."

"That's a start. But who else is going to speak?" The men at the table looked at each other.

"How about Dr. Evanston?" offered Dr. Sloan of ALS Bellevue.

All turned toward Dr. Evanston, who nodded, "Of course I would love to."

"That's well and good," Dr. Metzger of ALS Eugene broke in, "but why aren't we talking about the bigger problem here. The IRS is threatening to revoke our exemption as an educational organization."

There was a collective groan.

Dr. Metzger continued "But the youth program would still be eligible if we turned it into its own entity, so that helps us out somewhat."

Dr. Dalton remained quiet, unusually withdrawn.

"So what of the adult programs? That's the bulk of our income." wondered Dr. Thurber of Tacoma.

"They will only grant exemption if we focus on employable skills and certifications. I don't see how we can manage that any time soon."

"What if," interjected Dr. Evanston, the youngest and newest of the group, as he sat back, relaxed, in his large leather chair, "What if we claim status as a religious organization instead."

The group looked around at each other, nodding in cautious approval.

"We can't do that," Dr. Dalton finally spoke.

"Why not?" challenged Evanston.

"Because that's not what we are." Dr. Dalton sat up, making intense eye contact with Dr. Evanston. "Our students are here to learn and not to worship. I don't want anyone thinking otherwise."

"Don't you realize how much this is going to cost us? We'd have to make significant cutbacks just to stay afloat!"

Dr. Dalton pounded the table as he stood up. "Why don't you just pipe down, Evanston! You don't know a goddamn thing about this business. You think we're under scrutiny now? It's nothing compared to the heat we'll take if we start calling ourselves a 'religious organization'!"

The other men sat nervously silent. The tension in the room was palpable.

Evanston stood up and made eye contact with everyone. "Who here in this room wants to suddenly reduce our income by 30%? Raise your hand!"

The other men sat nervously silent.

12.

Lydia Dalton turned in bed to find her husband gone. This was becoming a regular occurrence over the last couple of weeks. She had noticed as well a host of other subtle differences in him - he was especially quiet, was eating less, seemed withdrawn, and had scarcely spoken to her or the children. Her husband was clearly experiencing a crisis, and she was certain of what it involved.

For days, she had thought about how best to confront him. Alone, of course, at a quiet, calm time. She imagined the angry things they would each say, but allowed her thoughts some loving words as well. These quiet and alone moments together, however, were rare - nonexistent even. So here she found herself, lying alone, too troubled to sleep. Now was the time.

She got up and walked through the house as it slept, silent with dim light and subdued colors. She

noted that the surroundings bore a strange contrast to her inner storm of fear, anger, sadness. Dr. Dalton was found in the study, reading under a lamp, Lydia stopped for a moment, unseen, to remind herself that, for everything that it means, this was a human being before her.

"Dennis."

"Lydia," he looked up and removed his reading glasses, "I couldn't sleep."

"Dennis, I know what's going on."

Had Dr. Hughes violated his promise of secrecy, he worried.

"I didn't mean to keep it from you. I just, I didn't know how to talk to you. I didn't know how to deal with it. I still don't." His eyes held a noticeable amount of moisture. "I'm nothing if I can't dream."

"What does dreaming have to do with this? I'm talking about your cheating."

He was taken aback. He wasn't expecting this now.

"What do you mean?"

"A young new student, Jennifer I think her name is, she told Jean that you made advances towards her. I've had a feeling about it for a long time. All of the pretty women getting personal sessions."

His first instinct was to deny the evidence. That had been his plan for such a moment. But he found

this impossible when being confronted so directly and so precisely. The years that were forming would have made such an attempt futile anyway.

"I...don't know what to say."

"So it's true." Here is where her exercise of recognizing her husband's humanity would reap its rewards. It allowed her to keep her composure and to keep him from escalating. Shouting, fighting, arguing would only have served only to sharpen the pain. "All of it? The other women as well?"

He nodded solemnly as tears formed little streams on his face. She inhaled deeply to give the facts a chance to settle in and to gather the resolve for her next course of action.

"I need to get away. I don't know yet if it will be permanent, but I can't be here right now."

"Okay," the only word he could produce, he did so weakly with resignation.

"I'm taking the boys. To my sister's."

Dr. Dalton hadn't thought of his two sons until now. He felt the tears soaking into the collar of his shirt.

Dr. Dalton lied still, eyes closed, but he was not sleeping. He was listening intently on the other side of the curtain, where Dr. Evanston was giving his lecture. As hard as it was for him to accept, Dr. Dalton had to acknowledge that Evanston was good - very good. The response of the audience confirmed this beyond any doubt.

"Now is the time for us to take the next step, as a group, as an organization. We are under attack by those that don't understand, those who doubt the power of the dream. But this will only strengthen our resolve and tighten the bonds of our community! Now I want everyone out there to turn to their neighbor and take your neighbor by the hands. I want you to look them in the eye and tell them, 'I value you and I respect your journey. You always have a brother in me.'"

The crowd obeyed.

"And when the world tries to bring you down, you remember these words and find your strength here. When they say you're sleeping too much, I want you to sleep even more! When they say you spend too much time at the academy, I want you to sign up for another class. Together we will find the gods within us!"

He had them, and yet, he continued to play with them. The crowd hung on every word and roared

with every punctuation. And when the enthusiasm in the room swelled to a crest, he announced, "I want to thank each and every one of you for being such a great audience, and such great members of our community. Now, I hope you're ready for the main event. I know for me personally, it is an honor to be here for a special presentation by the great Dr. Dennis Dalton!"

As the curtain slowly opened, Dr. Evanston held his arms up, gesturing towards the ostensibly sleeping man.

An applause rose.

"Okay everybody. We can give an especially loud, riotous cheer, we should be able to break through and signal him to wake up. You ready? On the count of three. One, two, THREE!"

The crowd roared. Dr. Dalton opened his eyes and lifted his head up in exaggerated motion to ensure those in the back could see it. He stood up and let the applause rain in. It is uncertain whether any in attendance noticed that he forgot the reboot.

"What dreams I've had, what dreams I've had, people." False, even from his signature opening line, and he could feel it. The crowd responded, but not with the fervor to which he was accustomed. (Or was that simply his perception?) He gave them the biggest, emptiest smile he could manage.

"{sigh} Such a beautiful crowd we have here, such wonderful people. So many of you I've gotten to know personally. Give yourselves a hand!"

They did so with what he felt was a lack of gusto.

"Tonight I want to talk about something that's been on my mind a lot lately. It's something I think is so important to our existence - all of us, as humans, as living beings. I want to talk about perseverance.

"Now a lot of people come to me and they want to talk about their struggles and they want my advice. And you know what? I relish it. I feel honored to give counsel. I believe that above everything else that's what I'm here for."

His speech was beginning to take on momentum, for these words were genuine. He truly believed that his purpose was to serve and support his people.

"And I've had this feeling that lately there has been an exceptional amount of trouble facing us. There is a great weight we are carrying. And my advice now in these hard times is the same as the advice I always find myself giving: find strength in your dreams. Find strength in your dreams. Find answers in your dreams. Whatever may happen out

there, your dreams are your place to be within yourself, to discover yourself.”

Dr. Dalton listened to himself speaking these words and they brought him a growing sense of doubt and insecurity. Such feelings were foreign to the man, especially when on stage and in character. His shrinking confidence began to show itself subtly - reaching for words, perspiring considerably.

“And I don't want anyone in this room to take for granted this gift that dreaming is, because dreaming...it can go away. I don't know if all of you knew that, but I had...recently, I had a student come to me with this problem and it was just so, so troubling. He had been using his healthy dream practices. He had tried medication. But nothing...”

He stopped for a moment to gather himself, to hold back the tears he felt coming.

“And to be honest, I didn't know what to tell him. It may be the first time I was at such a loss. All I could say was to persevere.”

He lowered his eyes and shook his head.

“Persevere.”

If any had known that he was talking about himself, they would likely have been moved by such a moment of raw vulnerability from this once-invincible man. Mr. Humphrey, who sat in the sound booth behind the audience, watched with great

concern. He himself had noted a recent change in his leader, but was not aware of its severity until this moment. Always one to keep his head through moments of pressure, he spoke to Dr. Dalton through the earpiece, "Dennis. Time. You've got to move on to the questions."

This was a simple yet impeccable response to the situation at hand, and Dr. Dalton was glad to follow. He paced the stage for a moment to ready himself.

"Alright people, it's time now for some of your personal questions!" The audience, thrown off a bit by the uneven performance, gave a hearty, if uninspired, applause.

"And our first question comes from miss Anne Bleisen! Where are you Anne?" he squinted through the stage lights to make out a middle aged woman standing, waving her hand.

"For those who don't know Anne, she is a member of our Distinguished Circle, for her contribution of over ten-thousand this year."

She received her own round of applause and smiled as she sat in attention.

"And she writes: 'Great voice within all voices, writer of the indelible word. I am very troubled. Recently all of my investments seem to have been going south. I'm worried that if this continues, I'll

have to start selling assets. It scares me to think that I may have nothing left to leave for my children. Please advise me. How can I right the ship and bring the money back?"

Dr. Dalton felt a surge of fear. Was he too losing everything? His composure continued to waiver.

"This is touching, Mrs. Bleisen, and... I think we all can relate to your fears. My sons..." he lost himself in thought for a second. "I sought for your answer at the foot of my avatar, Alalngar, and..."

Dr. Dalton was certainly no stranger to deception and manipulation. The cynical among us would say that no man can rise to power without employing these dark tools. At his core, however, Dr. Dalton fully believed in his teachings and in the messages of his dreams. This would be the first time he had falsely delivered the word of his avatar. This he could not handle.

"He told me..." he could feel his pulse gain intensity. His breaths shortened. "Alalngar wanted to send a message of hope, and he said that... that..." There was a pressure now building around the crown of his head, and plumes of heat filled it. "He said to...you need to...you need to..."

He fell to his knees, maintaining a blank gaze out toward the audience. The entire room stood up and inhaled simultaneously. Mr. Humphrey came

running down the aisle. As Dr. Dalton fell sideways to the floor, a few stagehands rushed to attend to him. The curtains began to close in front of them.

13.

The following period of time for Dr. Dalton was called by many a “mental break”. Impaired memory and a faulty sense of time were symptoms of his affliction. For this reason, the account of it must likewise be fractured and uncertain.

He remembered being in the hospital. He saw his family and probably talked to them. Hopeful, reassuring words that did not inspire hope or reassurance. After some amount of time, he walked out of the hospital with Mr. Humphrey. The day outside was so bright that it made him feel as if he might collapse.

He remembered being in a meeting with the board. Everyone was looking at him in a way he they had never looked at him before. Mr. Humphrey had such sad eyes in the few instances he lifted them. Dr. Evanston was glowing. These were the only breaks in the wall of serious faces.

He remembered lying on his couch as movie marathons played before him. He laughed at times

and that was seemingly the only thing that kept him breathing. All other details, storylines, whole movies were lost. How many went by, he couldn't be sure.

He observed the sounds of the empty house. It stretched and it breathed. He faintly heard his sons laughing and followed them into empty rooms.

He hadn't remembered eating, so he cooked a frozen pizza. Then another. Then the freezer was empty. He remembered crying as he walked around the store. He walked the aisles over and again, not knowing why he was there. He remembered buying beer. He didn't remember the rest of that week.

He remembered trying to remember where his sister-in-law lived. It was in Bend, Oregon, for sure. None of the streets looked right. He must have found it though, because he remembered he and his wife yelling at each other, a struggle, other people yelling, pulling, his brother-in-law blocking the door. He did not remember seeing his boys. Why couldn't he see his boys?

14.

Dr. Dalton awoke in a dull white room. Dull white light filtered through dull white curtains. He pulled back the dull white covers and sat up to find

himself wearing a gown colored by the slightest bit of blue. The door to the room being open, he stood up to explore what he could. With caution, he leaned just his head past the threshold to look around.

The hallway was long, lined with rooms presumably like his own. The walls were decorated with what appeared to be informational posters, the contents of which he could not make out. As he stepped into the hall, a chair came flying out of the door two down from him. It slammed into the wall across it, leaving a dent and a poster half-ripped and barely hanging. Dr. Dalton quickly ducked back into his room.

His confusion gave way to a feeling of dread, only magnifying his need to investigate his surroundings. He took to the window to find that the facility had the most exquisite grounds – wide, manicured lawns and flower beds were shaded by grand oak trees and encircled by classic brick buildings. The setting evoked that of a historic college campus - the kind he envisioned his sons attending.

“Dr. Dennis Dalton?” He turned around to a young woman (certainly under forty) in a white jacket. Before he could read her badge, she held out

her hand, "I'm Dr. Sydney Hoeffler, and I'll be your primary doctor while here at the institute."

"Institute?"

She gave a gentle laugh. "I'm sorry, I know you're probably not sure what all has happened, how you got here, what here is. Don't worry, I'm here to explain."

Dr. Hoeffler was immediately disarming. Her speech was measured and gentle. Her eyes a soft gray-blue that suggested deep understanding.

"This is the Institute of the Human Mind. I always tell people to think of it as a cross between psychiatric facility and research institution. Our ultimate goal here is to develop the most complete and comprehensive model of human thought and behavior in all of its forms. We employ the leading experts in all fields of psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, and even artificial intelligence. Feel free to stop me if you have any questions."

"Why am I here?"

"I hope to help you figure that out." she gave a wry smile.

"No, I mean-"

"Just a little joke, Dr. Dalton. Partially. A sense of purpose is very useful towards mental well-being. You see, my area of study is of dreams and sleep. I've read your books and found them quite interesting.

When I heard about your recent troubles – your breakdowns, losing your ability to dream - why, it's very curious. I had to bring you here. I would like to help figure out what's happening. I think we can learn a lot from each other.”

“But what if that's not what I want to do? What if I want to go back to my life and my family?”

“Well, technically you are here voluntarily. You can fill out a request for discharge, but I really want to discourage you from doing so. You are and have been in a lot of distress. I know that. We can help you heal here.”

Dr. Dalton thought back over everything that had happened - not just of this recent crisis, but everything: the peaks and the valleys, the summers and the winters, the faces of all those who meant something to him, this winding river rolling down ultimately towards the mysterious sea of death. He tried desperately to understand how it was that he had ended up here.

15.

He could not stay in here. That much was certain. He had walked several times every foot of the area he was allowed to go. The doors, of course,

were locked. He had read all of the posters, which stated the rules of the place or about mental upkeep. He had looked at the hanging art - tortured, beautiful, at times brilliant. The books were stored behind a bolted-in plastic barrier. It was probably bulletproof.

He observed the others he saw wandering these halls, the likes of which he could never have conceived. There was one who claimed to have been present for the beginning and the end of the universe, giving her unique insight as to all that happened in between. There was one who periodically bent over to lick something - a windowsill, the floor, a door knob. He would then lean back and lightly smack his tongue, as if absorbing useful information. Dr. Dalton never spoke to them and avoided eye contact, for fear of what kind of doors that might open. For he had also seen arguments spring out of nothing and heard terrible screams coming from bedrooms. He saw a man shouting extreme threats as he was carried away by a team of staff into a locked room. He could only imagine what happened in that room.

"Don't dismiss these people Dr. Dalton, everyone here is here for a reason. They have unique abilities to go along with their unique debilitations," the words of Angel Benitez, a so-called "tech", who are

responsible for the general functioning of residential facilities. She was at once kind and stern, the disposition necessary for her duties of keeping peace, ensuring patients follow their schedules, and providing them a reasonable voice to talk to. She claimed to have had the job two years, a duration which Dr. Dalton took as evidence of great mental fortitude.

"I can't stay here."

"It will get better, Dr. Dalton. Tomorrow you'll begin your schedule. We have a lot of structure here and a busy schedule. Group therapy, art therapy, exercise. It does our patients a lot of good."

"How can I get better when I'm not safe?"

"You'll probably get transferred over to Annendale Hall once we determine that you're not a threat to yourself or others. It's much calmer over there."

"I just want out. How do I get out? Dr. Hoeffler said I was here voluntarily."

"They do that at the desk."

'The desk' was the seat of power here on the third floor of Twigg Hall. It is where documents were signed and medications were administered. Behind the desk one could see the busy dance of nurses, clerks, and even the rare doctor moving

about in their work. Dr. Dalton stood there to no one's attention. He tried to subtly show his growing impatience as he watched various colors of scrubs whisk by. Finally, a young man with a tight crew cut saw him and stopped.

"Hi there. Do you need something?"

"I want to get out of here. Dr. Hoeffler said I was here voluntarily."

"Well, I can give you the papers to sign, but I have to warn you not to. The doctor would probably take it as a sign of impulsive behavior and get a court order to keep you here against your will."

"So, I'm free to leave, but asking to leave will make it so that I'm not free to leave."

"Sorry, that's just how it is."

Dr. Dalton felt his frustration flow from his clenched teeth to his fists, but restrained himself to a single grunt as he walked away. It was now upon him to accept what was to him an unfamiliar idea - that he was at the mercy of a power much bigger than himself.

16.

It was not quite like looking at strangers, more like people he recognized but didn't know, like TV

characters. Dr. Dalton's wife and children seemed to be looking at him with the same sense of unreality. It was the youngest among them who could most easily break this imagined barrier.

"I made you dis cawd daddy," Morpheus handed over a slightly wrinkled piece of paper. It was crayon scribbled with the honesty only a child can produce. It had green grass and human figures and a few colored splotches. A blue line at the top of the page represented the sky. It was interesting that the blue did not extend down to the horizon, which was left of white blank paper, but existed only on a plane high above the rest of the scene. Of course the sky is untouchable, separate from us. The child draws his understanding of the world and not the objective appearance of it.

"It's us pwaying with Chunky (their dog). You, me, an mommy and Chunky is awr chasing the bawl."

"Thank you so much, Moe."

He looked down again at the drawing and longed for the now inaccessible world it depicted.

"I love it."

"What do they do in here?" asked Somnus, wanting to get right to the details.

"There's a lot to do. They have art activities, and time to go outside and exercise, and groups where

we can talk about our problems, kind of like we do at The Academy.”

He attempted to paint a comforting picture for his sons. The reality was that he had been refusing to participate in group activities, electing instead to spend the extra hours lying in bed, removing himself mentally as much as possible.

“But why do you have to be here to do that stuff?” Somnus, as was his nature, kept probing.

“Yeah, Som, there is a lot more to it than that. There are these expert doctors and I'm helping them research about dreams and sleep and they are helping me get better. At night they attach these wires to my head to see what's going on in my brain while I sleep.”

“Woah!” said both boys, properly mystified.

Dr. Dalton made eye contact with Lydia. She had been silent, intentionally distant. Though she tried to maintain this cold demeanor as she looked in his eyes, she couldn't help but let a sliver of love through. At least that is what Dr. Dalton saw in them. His mind would linger on that moment during the many more hours he would spend alone in bed during group activity time. It gave him belief that as long as he could find that spark within himself again, he could get her back, no matter what

had happened. The moment was brief, as she quickly looked back towards her youngest son.

"How is school going, boys?"

"We're going to a new school. Moe stays at home with mom. All of the kids were testing me and said that you went crazy."

"We had to. They couldn't stay there." Lydia finally spoke.

Dr. Dalton's heart sank. So little remained of the world he'd spent his life building.

17.

"Now I want you to think about your neighborhood. Imagine taking a walk there. Think of as many specific details and images as you can. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

There was a metallic knocking sound as the fMRI machine clicked on and began to hum loudly, a sound that, now that he had become accustomed to it, was strangely both jarring and soothing.

Dr. Dalton closed his eyes and pictured the streets of Lake Oswego, Oregon. The shade of large fir trees, deep green against the gray skies. He thought of his neighbor's houses - huge, bland,

hidden back among the greenery. Everything was still and quiet, for nothing wild or violent ever happened in his neighborhood. He had always loved how peaceful it felt - such a welcome contrast to his childhood in New Jersey. After a couple of minutes, the machine switched down into a soft hum.

"Now I want you to picture this city from your dreams. Again, as detailed as possible," Dr. Hoeffler instructed.

Like everyone, Dr. Dalton had experienced a rich variety of settings in his dreams: forests, fields, houses, factories, the insides of volcanoes, even places that defy comparison to the real world. But there was a city in particular that Dr. Dalton dreamt over and over again. It was this place Dr. Hoeffler was referring to.

Dr. Dalton felt his body stiffen as she gave her instruction and he tried to stretch and shift himself, pulling against the straps that held his upper body and head in place.

"I don't think I can keep still in here any longer."

"Ok, this is the last one. You're doing great," she reassured.

With a few knocks and clangs, the great hum of the fMRI machine subsided and the platform that held Dr. Dalton rolled out from inside the metal tube.

"You did very well in there, Dr. Dalton," Dr. Hoeffler said as she undid the straps that held his head in place. "I think we're going to get some really good data."

He sat up, rolling his head and stretching his shoulders.

"So, what did you find out?"

"It's going to take a few minutes for the information to process, but there's plenty for us to discuss in the meantime. I have looked over the results of the EEG tests we have been taking during your sleep."

"And?"

"As you probably know, REM sleep is the part of the sleep cycle when dreaming typically occurs and it is characterized by increased electrical activity throughout the brain. Our tests show that you are not entering REM sleep."

"Was that not obvious?"

"It was my suspicion, yes, but we needed to rule out the possibility that you are having dreams, but are simply not remembering them."

"True."

"Something seems to be suppressing REM. At the point of the sleep cycle that we would expect it to occur, there is a small spike in electrical activity

that characterizes REM, but you then switch back into deep sleep.”

“So, what could be interrupting the REM cycle?”

Dr. Hoeffler paused for a moment and shifted forward in her seat. “What do you think caused you to stop dreaming?”

Dr. Dalton shook his head. “If I knew that, do you think I would be here?”

“I know it's not an easy question to answer, Dr. Dalton, but it's important that you continue to ask it. A crucial part of the program here is giving you ample opportunity for introspection.”

“Do you think the problem is purely psychological or does it stem from a physical affliction of the brain?”

“The more I've studied, the more I've learnt not to separate the two.”

Dr. Hoeffler turned her head toward the computer screen and Dr. Dalton mirrored her shift in focus. She began clicking through the collection of cranial maps with differing splotches of red, yellow and green.

“What do you see doctor?”

“Remember how I asked you visualize yourself walking through your neighborhood, then later to visualize a cityscape from your dreams? You probably noticed that each dream image had a

corresponding real-world image. I hypothesize that we can use the differences in each corresponding brain scan to develop a map of which brain areas are responsible for your personal dream imagery."

"Hmm. Very interesting. What then do we do with that information?"

"It's highly experimental, but I'd like to try using electrical impulses to artificially stimulate those areas when you sleep."

"I'll try anything."

"Great. Now it's going to take a little time compiling all of the data into a final map. There is one interesting thing I've noticed just from looking at the scans." She continued to click through them. "A remarkable amount of your brain seems to be dedicated to dream imagery."

Dr. Dalton smiled wistfully. He had built his entire identity on the belief that he was in possession of a singular ability - to dream more powerfully than anyone. How cruel it seemed that only after having lost this ability, would he have scientific evidence for its existence.

"That must be the result of my years of training. A lot of people don't understand that lucidity is only the beginning. It simply means that one is aware that they're in a dream. The next step is to begin to control the dream experience. It is a process, like

strengthening muscle or learning to paint... I'm sorry I'm getting off track here."

"No no. Go on. This is very interesting."

"When you gain lucidity, the first thing is to discover and develop one's own powers. Flight, limitless strength, you might even be able to summon other people or animals early on, but the world around you seems out of your control. It can be vague and lacking detail. That's why we teach students to notice details like writing. If you notice that writing is blurry or scrambled, it tells you you're in a dream and you can become lucid. But with practice you can more finely control your surroundings. True mastery means you can build the world around you exactly as you want it - even the written word. That's why the avatar communicates through writing. It is symbolic. To gain control of one's dreams is to gain control of one's subconscious. To control one's subconscious is to control one's own life!"

Dr. Hoeffler took a breath before her reply, "This is fascinating and I will want as much detail about this process as you can give. But first, before we continue, I'd like to point out how many times you have just used the word 'control'."

18.

As had been promised, Dr. Dalton was transferred to Annendale Hall. Though the dormitory had a similar institutional feel to his previous residence, there were a number of details that made him feel immediately more at home. First, he was allowed to wear his own clothes, rather than a gown. He was able to wear shoes, rather than a thick pair of socks with stripes of rubber grip on the soles. He noticed that the (still drab) hallways held objects that could be picked up. There were potted plants, framed pictures, even bookshelves with books that could be touched.

There was one change that Dr. Dalton found not quite so easy to welcome: he was to have a roommate.

"Harvey, I'd like you to meet your new roommate, Dr. Dennis Dalton," said Stacia, a tech for this floor, entering first into the room. Dr. Dalton followed to see a modest room, sparsely adorned but clearly lived in.

"Dr. Dalton, this is Harvey." The man, who had been lying on his bed, stood up quickly, gave not quite a smile and offered his hand. His eyes looked intently, not into Dr. Dalton's, but about twenty degrees to the left. He was tall and slight of frame

with a round belly that was visible through his shirt. It might just have been the way he held himself, but his face (his whole being for that matter) seemed to have an asymmetry about it.

"It is good to meet you Dr. Dalton. I am also a doctor. I have an honorary doctorate from the California Institute of Technology, but I just like to be called Harvey."

"That's great. Well, I hope we'll get along well."

"Me too. Dr. Gulick says that I have been doing very well in my social skills classes."

Dr. Dalton had noticed the sound of a faint tone, like that of a tuning fork. It was at first unnerving, but its quality so pure and unwavering that after a moment he began to question whether it was there at all.

"Do you hear that?" Dr. Dalton asked the room.

"Harvey, would you please turn off the tone? After Dr. Dalton gets settled, you can ask him if it's okay, but be prepared that you might have to start using headphones again now that you have a roommate," Stacia gently instructed. She was a small, sprightly, young woman with dyed blue hair that had faded almost to the bleach. Harvey reached to turn one of several knobs on a small metal box.

"That's a tone generator that Harvey built. The tones are very calming for him, but you should not feel obligated to let him have them on all the time. He is working on being accommodating and the headphones are fine."

"I think it will be fine... we'll see... once I get settled," said Dr. Dalton, struggling with his unease about the situation as a whole.

"How about we go get the rest of your things?"

"Sure."

Harvey put on a large set of headphones and lied back down as the other two stepped into the hall.

"Isn't there any way I can have my own room?"

"I know he seems odd, but Harvey is a very sweet and very interesting man. You two just need a little time to get comfortable. Social connection is a very important part of the program here. And if you have any problems, I'm here to help."

"I just...I need some place where I can feel comfortable."

It is at this point pertinent to make clear that The Institute of Human Minds is indeed, as it is claimed to be, a world-class institution from top to bottom. Stacia was, herself, a special cog in this special machine. She spoke to her patients with an honesty that showed a deep respect for their

humanity. For this reason they yearned for her approval. She had a way of looking past her patients' faults and seeing rather their true needs. It was with evident mastery of these abilities that she responded, "Dr. Dalton, you will be comfortable if you let yourself be. There are times when one must adapt to fit their circumstance, rather than the other way around."

Her words struck Dr. Dalton to his core, and left his mind running back to his conversion with Dr. Hoeffler. He pictured this shell of himself desperately struggling against the tide. Stacia took his silence for acceptance.

"You should talk to him. Learn from him."

Dr. Dalton went into the room and unpacked his few belongings. He lingered on the drawing that Morpheus had made for him before pinning it to the wall. He looked across the room at the man lying there, eyes closed, and cracked a smile at the faint tone that was barely audible through the headphones.

18.

Harvey lay on his side, moaning, plugging his ears as Dr. Dalton left the room.

"Why is he so upset about the sensory therapy session?" Dr. Dalton wondered. "The doctor said they could reschedule it for this afternoon"

"Any change to his schedule is likely to do that," Stacia replied as the two continued down the hall, "He is very dependent on predictability. It makes sense if you think about how he is constantly flooded with information."

"Yeah, we talked a bit about that, but what does the schedule have to do with that?"

"It's all about predictability. The best way I can explain it is this. Imagine yourself driving somewhere on an unfamiliar road. You're scanning both sides of the road for the address, trying to filter through signs and landmarks, while still trying to give enough attention to traffic around you. It can be very stressful. Now compare that to driving somewhere you know well. You don't have to focus nearly as hard and it frees you to look at what you want to and lets your mind wander. That's how a regular schedule is for him. It allows him to filter out all of that information that would otherwise overwhelm him."

"Yes. Yes I can see that."

Stacia leaned down to run her badge across the scanner and backed through the doors as they unlocked with a click.

"So who is it here to visit you, doctor?"

"Nick. He's a friend, who helped me run the academy. I've known him for... jeez, twenty years."

They descended the stairs into the large foyer of the building, which was adorned stiff leather couches, large landscape paintings and a behind-glass exhibit about some specific aspect of brain physiology. Nicholas Humphrey turned around from the exhibit and held up his arms at the sight of Dr. Dalton.

"Dennis!" he said before giving a hearty embrace.

"Oh, Nick, thanks so much for coming out here. It's good to see a friendly face," the warm reply.

"Care to walk around the grounds while we catch up? The Ullrich garden is lovely."

"Sure, sounds nice."

"Have a nice walk gentlemen," said Stacia, "I'll see you back at..." she looked up at the clock, "two forty," then left them to be alone.

"How are you Dennis?" Mr. Humphrey tried to ask casually, so to hold back some of the weight of the question, but Dr. Dalton could very much feel it. He was, however, prepared for it.

"A lot better, a lot better. I'm still not dreaming, but I will. I wasn't doing well at all for a while here, but this is a great place and I'm starting to feel at

home. I've finally started participating in all of the classes and activities they have scheduled."

"That's great, you do sound much better than you did before. So, you may not need to stay much longer?"

"We'll see. I'm ready to stay as long as I need to."

"Of course."

"But yeah, it's very interesting here. My doctor, she really is brilliant. She has taught me a lot about the scientific side of sleep and dreaming. At the same time she has been listening and learning from me. She has a great appreciation for the experience of dreaming. She has explored lucidity quite a bit herself. She probably knows more about the subject than anyone in the world, certainly more than I."

"Ha. It's a surprise to hear you say that. You always had such supreme confidence in your mastery of it."

The two walked past grand, ivy covered buildings. Twisting old oaks shaded the lovely early-spring sun. Periodically, a smiling white lab coat would walk by.

"And my roommate, Harvey, is possibly the most interesting person I've ever met."

"Really?"

"At first I thought him so peculiar. He doesn't ever look directly at you, but off to the side. At

times, he seems so deeply enfolded by his own world, but then can quickly and sharply respond to external details I would never notice."

"Hmm."

"As he describes to me his inner world, it all makes sense. It's unbelievable how differently he sees the world, how his mind works. It allows him to do things no other human can."

"Like what?"

The path now opened into a large square of evenly-cut grass, interrupted by classical statuary. Everything centered around an extravagant fountain.

"He sees everything as mathematical functions. The shapes of things, like the curvature of surfaces, even sounds. I'm sure he could tell you the exact shape of that fountain and by it the flow of water through its spouts. But here is the cool part: he explained to me that any function, even very complicated ones, can be broken down into simpler functions, he calls them series solutions, which he then adds together. These basis functions might be like $y=x$, x squared, x to the third, x to the fourth, and so on. So then he gets the rough idea of the function, and refines it by adding more and more base functions."

"That is interesting, though maybe a bit over my head. Sounds like he's turned you into a mathematician. I should like to meet him."

"Oh yes, you really must, but not now. He is very dependent on his schedule. You see, all of this information and processing can be very overwhelming for him. Here is an example: mechanical or chaotic noises can really agitate him, even to the point of shutting down. He might scream and drop to the ground. This happens because he is trying to break the sound down into sine waves and these sounds are very complex and require a great many different frequencies to be added together. It's too much to handle. So, when he is in the room relaxing, he likes to use this tone generator machine he has built. It plays just one single pure tone - a simple sine wave - and this really helps him relax."

"It must be hard to be so much at the mercy of your surroundings," Mr. Humphrey showing the deeply empathetic person he was.

"Yes, that thought has been on my mind a lot lately..." Dr. Dalton reflected.

The two passed under a gate of Laurel into a secluded garden. The great variety of trees, shrubs and flowers filled the space in a more natural, unordered way than the rest of the grounds. Still it

had a balance and harmony that suggested the intention of some architect.

"Well, I'm glad to find that you are getting so much out of being here, but I sure hope you can recover soon and get back to us."

"Thanks for saying that. How are things going there on the outside?"

"I hesitate to put this kind of pressure on you — to bring bad news at such a time — but things are falling apart at the academy."

"Oh no."

"Obviously, your crisis shook up the community quite a bit."

Dr. Dalton considered, perhaps for the first time, this group of people caring for him as a human, rather than as a leader. This idea brought him a plume of complex emotion. He was touched by the sentiment, whilst sorrowful at the outcome.

Mr. Humphrey continued, "Thurber took charge, but he just wasn't cutting it. He lasted only a few short weeks, as falling numbers and a lack of clear direction bred discontent among the rest of leadership. This paved the way for Evanston to boldly step in, but he has alienated much of the base. Some of our oldest and most generous donors have defected. We're looking at shutting down multiple locations."

Dr. Dalton held a deep gaze - out past the brilliant blooming flowers, through the laurel walls of the garden.

"But I believe in you. We all believe in you. When you get back, we can rebuild this."

"I don't know if I'm coming back, Nick."

"I know you're going through a lot, but you'll be back - back on top again," Mr. Humphrey gave a reassuring smile.

"I can't do it. I see now that I had lost what this was really supposed to be about. Dreams are about freedom, about looking inside and discovering the rich, vast world in there. No one can teach that. Each must discover it for himself. I was leading people astray, convincing them to live for me and for the organization, not for themselves."

Mr. Humphrey looked at his friend to see, once again, that unshakable resolve, and he had no response for it. The two looked in silence at the garden. It really was lovely.

19.

Dr. Hoeffler, to be sure, loved her work - she lived for it. The day to day reality, however, was that of an arduous and relentless challenge. Late into

each evening, she could be found pouring over lab results. On weekends, she would squeeze in extra therapy sessions or study the latest research journals. And this gives only a hint as to the mental and spiritual demands of her vocation. Not only was she witness to staggering amounts of human torment, she was tasked with curing it. The challenges faced by her patients were immense in scale, yet subtle and complex, elusive to any solution. Her daily ritual was to formulate as many hypotheses as possible and prove them all wrong.

With moments of success so rare, it makes sense that she would have to hold back joyful tears as Dr. Dalton entered his office proclaiming, "It happened! Oh, doctor, it happened! A dream last night!"

"That's wonderful!"

"I almost forgot what I had been missing. I finally feel alive again."

"I'm so happy for you. Do you want to tell me about it?"

"It was vague, so I really don't remember much. I remember looking for my son *Morpheus*, going to all these different familiar but transformed places. I don't know what else, though. I didn't have my journal to write in."

"Haha, I'm sure you didn't expect to need it. We can get you a journal."

"Thank you, doctor, but I don't know if I'm going to use one any more. I need to do things differently. Maybe I shouldn't focus so much on lucidity. Maybe I should let my dreams just be what they are. Do you think this is a good idea?"

"You know, Dr. Dalton, the funny thing is that for all that I've studied, for all that I've learned, I really don't know anything. I can't tell you what to do, and I can't tell you how to live. But self-reflection is never a bad thing. Just pay attention to what you think and how you feel. Pay attention to the people around you, and you'll figure out the right thing to do."

Dr. Dalton nodded with understanding.

"Out of curiosity, Dr. Dalton, if you're willing to give up lucid dreaming, does this mean that you no longer believe in Alalngar?"

"Remember that he is just an avatar. I never named the source of eternal wisdom of which he communicated. I didn't and don't ultimately know what it is, but I believe it is more likely to find me than I find it."

Dr. Hoeffler paused. "Quite profound."

"So, doctor, where do we go from here?"

"Well, I want to keep you here just a bit longer. We need to see that you're having dreams consistently, first. I also want to do a few more tests

and get some new brain scans to compare with the ones from when you first got here. It would have been great to have ones from before that.”

“So what do you think the difference is? Why did I stop dreaming?”

“I'm sorry, but again, I don't have any definitive answers, and I probably won't any time soon. My opinion, as best I can say it, is that you weren't letting yourself have them.”

He knew this to be true. He had felt an oppressive force within him, preventing him. Now, having let go of the need for total control of his world, internal and external, he was free of it.

“But if things go well, I think I can get you home within a week.”

A switch was flipped and Dr. Dalton's conception of life outside of The Institute of Human Mind went from fantasy to impending reality. He had no idea what to do.

20.

The smell of garlic, sautéed in olive oil, filled the kitchen. Dr. Dalton inhaled with a slight smile before lifting the pan to add it into the sauce. As he did, there came a small crash of tumbling toy blocks

from the other room. Since, for the moment, the meal did not need his attention, he took the opportunity to check on Morpheus, whom he found intently rebuilding the structure he had just demolished. Dr. Dalton thought to himself how he once would have been puzzled by this futile cycle.

“Build a tower, dad!”

“What, so you can knock it over?”

“Yeah!” He demonstrated by kicking the stack he had started. “You can build it taller than me.”

Dr. Dalton thought to himself, “No, it’s definitely the simple act of destruction he wants to repeat.”

“After dinner. Dinner is in a few minutes.”

With that, Dr. Dalton walked out into the small back yard to find Somnus throwing a tennis ball against the fence.

“Dinner is in ten minutes.”

“Okay,” the boy replied without turning from his activity.

Dr. Dalton looked back at his new home, a modest craftsman-style house in the outskirts of Portland. Lydia had pushed to sell the old house in what seemed to be a declaration of the finality of their separation. The pain of it was lingering and at times acute. Often, he would have dreams of her still as his wife, a part of him refusing to let the idea go. Despite this, he felt himself at peace in this

place. When he didn't have the boys, he enjoyed taking long walks and reading long books. He had a favorite café to visit, when he felt the need to be around other humans. One could say by the choice of these activities that his time and energy were spent primarily on the act of observation. He was hesitant to intervene on a world that seemed to be functioning perfectly well on its own. While reasonable, this point of view left a void that he struggled to fill.

The motherless family sat quietly together eating pasta.

"Morpheus, use a fork. No hands in your food."

The boy complied for moment.

"Somnus. Napkin."

He sighed in protest as he wiped his face.

As he gave each command, Dr. Dalton felt a twinge of self-conflict. He was unsure of the origin, but he had always held the idea that it was a parent's duty to guide their children towards societal ideas of gentility and success. This was an idea he now began to doubt. He didn't want to mold his sons in his likeness, he wanted them to be fully themselves. He didn't want to burden them with his own beliefs, or fears, or values. He was confident they would discover such things on their own.

The doorbell rang. Dr. Dalton stood up to answer it, bewildered, unable to assign a purpose for the call. He opened the door to a young woman whose eyes met his immediately and intensely. His heart accelerated as he recognized her face, unreal and out-of-place in his new life. It was Ms. Cordea, his former student and sometime lover.

“Dr. Dalton, I’m so glad I’ve found you.”

He turned around to ensure his sons were still a room away, unaware that the elder of the two was crafty and curious enough to listen unseen around the corner.

“Hi, Juliana. It’s good to see you, but this really isn’t a good time.”

“I just had to see you. Nothing has been the same since you left. I don’t know what to do. My life is so uncertain, and my dreams have been weak. They’re giving me no answers. When will you come back? I need your guidance.”

“I can’t help you dear. That’s not what I do anymore.”

“I know things have been hard for you lately, but please think of me. Think of all of us, a flock without a shepherd. ”

“Miss Cordea, I need you to leave. This is my home and your problems are no longer my concern.”

"Fine, I'll go. But I will try again. You can't give up. You'll come around. Goodbye, doctor."

And she would indeed try again. Over the coming weeks, such visitors, such appeals, would become a regular occurrence. Each was a trial of his patience, of his resolve to live what he believed to be right. He could no longer use his well-developed skill of manipulation to steer people towards his own gain. He no longer could steer people at all lest he send them to their own ruin. The waves of former students, so dependent on his instruction, seemed proof of his damage to them.

He closed the door and returned to his sons, hoping to himself that his influence had not already done harm to them.

21.

"I need to go away."

Lydia Dalton took a focused breath with a forceful exhale. "Okay. For how long?" She did not ask where.

"I'm not sure. I'm sorry to leave you alone with the boys again, but these people keep coming. I can't get away.

"I know. I understand."

She looked out, for a moment, into the overcast day from the porch of her house. The air was floral. The trees and the grass were the deep green of high spring.

"The boys have just missed you so much already."

Dr. Dalton nodded. He knew it would be hard on them, but he repeated to himself that they are strong-willed, independent boys, who will grow to be brilliant, remarkable men.

"I've arranged with a lawyer," he stumbled, "there's a trust fund for each of them. In case anything happens."

Lydia gave a look of concern.

"In case anything happens."

She moved forward and hugged him deeply.

22.

Those who had brought notebooks began fanning themselves as the heat built in the conference/activity room of Hotel Magnolia. The anticipation was reaching levels beyond even the greatest of Dr. Dalton's speeches. He remained calm and ready backstage.

"I've heard he's announcing his return and he's planning to kick Evanston out, meaning out of the academy."

"No way! He's starting a new school. Otherwise, why is he not holding this lecture at the academy auditorium?"

"Did you notice the sleeping table onstage is empty? This definitely isn't one of his typical dream lectures. But what is it going to be?"

Those in the back of the room didn't see Dr. Dalton as he took the stage, as the front row shot up with standing applause at the sight of him. The cheers were deafening. He had to wave emphatically to bring them down.

"First off, I want to thank everyone for all the support they've given me, not just here in my time of need, but in all of these years."

This drew another round of wild applause.

"Now over the past weeks, I've had a lot of you come ask me to return to the Academy of Lucid Sleep. They've asked me for help, for guidance. And I know it might be difficult to accept, but I can offer none."

The energy of the room shifted quickly. The audience began to mutter anxiously as he continued to speak.

"I will leave you with one last lesson – do not trust those who claim to have the answers, for they seek power over you. Trust instead those who speak of uncertainty, those who ask the questions, for they understand that existence has a way of defying explanation."

The room had now settled back down anxiously into full attention.

"I have always believed and always preached that the answers are within and I will live that belief. I come here today to share with you the beginning of my next journey in life."

With this Dr. Hughes, the long-time doctor at the Academy of Lucid Sleep, joined Dr. Dalton onstage.

"Dr. Hughes has worked with me on a medical regimen that will put me into a coma and keep me in a state of permanent sleep. I plan to spend the rest of my life this way. This is goodbye."

He looked out at audience, left in stunned silence; one could not even hear a breath in the room.

"This is goodbye."

Dr. Dalton turned away to lie down on the sleeping table as Dr. Hughes stepped forward to administer the injection.

((**THE END**))