

HEAD SHOT



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Headshot

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The TV was on, and Eeva was watching. She didn't know what the happy people on-screen were about at all, but they were happy, and Mom liked them, so she liked them as well. One of them was Hoovering the floor with a shiny purple vacuum cleaner. The same one Mom kept in the closet. Now, the man on TV was showing how easy it was to empty it. He held the whole thing over the bin, flicked a switch and a neatly packed chunk of dust slid out of the container. Mom never managed to take out such a perfect cube of dirt from the one they had. She had to reach in for it. It was messy and it made her curse a lot. The happy man on TV wasn't cursing at all. He was beaming, very content. He said that the first people to call would get some sort of steam accessory that went on it, for only twenty-nine nine-nine. Or maybe hundred-twenty-nine nine-nine. The figure didn't stay up long enough on the screen for her to be sure. It didn't matter though, because they already had the steam-thing too.

She really liked to see their vacuum cleaner on TV. But they always played the one with the cocktail machine right after. She didn't like to see the cocktail machine on TV. Mom had ordered it too, but only Mom was allowed to use it. And Eeva didn't like it when she did. She watched anyway, feeling a bit tense.

Next, the happy people on TV started on about the one that made you lose weight. That one always confused Eeva because the happy people were lifting weights and doing push-ups instead of losing weight. She had asked Mom to explain, but Mom always shushed her without answering. She would have asked again, but Mom was in the kitchen. Eeva brought back her attention to the TV. She had heard the humming of the cocktail machine.

Before the happy people went on to show how the food processor could be used to make all sorts of delicious-looking meals, she heard a great noise coming from the kitchen. She was so startled that she actually jumped in the air. Like when Mom slammed the kitchen door really hard. But the door was open and hadn't moved. And there were no other doors over there. The fridge maybe, but it would have made all the bottles chink and there had been no such sound. Just that loud slam and nothing.

"Mom?"

Mom didn't reply. That happened sometimes when she used the cocktail machine too much. But it was too early for that.

"Mom?" She stood up.

Everything was so still. The chatter from the happy people had been absorbed by the silence. The door of the kitchen was a bit ajar, inviting. She stood up.

"Mom! It's not funny!"

Sometimes Mom and her would play hide and seek. And sometimes Mom would hide so well that she couldn't find her. Then Mom would happen upon her with a big "Booh!" and she would be so scared and so upset that Mom had stopped doing it. Or so she thought. She stood up and took a few steps towards the kitchen. Nothing moved. Had she gone somewhere and Eeva hadn't noticed? But then, who had made the noise?

"Mom! I'm scared!"

She took another step. She could see the fridge now. The fridge was open. But she didn't pay attention to it because she could also see Mom's hand. As if Mom was lying on the floor. She froze. What was happening? Why was Mom lying on the floor? Maybe she needed help standing up! Eeva took the three remaining steps to the kitchen door. Mom was on her back. And she was surrounded with a pool of thick red goo. And a bit of her head was missing.

Eeva screamed at the top of her voice.

* * *

Her voice was gone by the time a policeman pried her away from Mom. She'd been screaming for a couple of hours before a neighbour finally called them up. And they took another hour to come. By that time, she had lost her voice and the policemen outside could only hear her sob. Another two hours passed before the firemen came and knocked the door down. She had been conscious the whole time. She would never remember any of it, though. But she would always know she was awake and conscious for the whole of it. The pain had burned right through her memory, only leaving a charred hole in it.

She wouldn't remember much of what happened right after either. The police couldn't question her because her voice was gone. Grandma had just been notified and was still on her way. She lived far so it would be half a day before she arrived. One policeman just hung around with her. The other uniforms were probably busy measuring the hole in Mom's head. They might even have thrown a blanket on her shoulders. They might as well have gone home and left her there for all she cared. They were no use.

They never found the killer. Even though they went all-in, Grandma had told her. Put their best detectives on the case and all. Not because Mom was such an important person to them. Just because they couldn't figure it out, and it puzzled them. They found the bullet in the wall, in the middle of the blood splatter. They computed the direction from which it had come and found that it intersected the kitchen window. Only the kitchen window wasn't broken, and was locked from inside. So the killer had been in the kitchen, right ? So they looked at the floor and found foot prints that weren't from her or her mom. But the door hadn't been forced, there weren't any fingerprints anywhere, nothing had been stolen... They simply had nothing to start from. Her mom wasn't just unimportant to them. She was no one remarkable. Why anyone would go shoot a bullet through her head was a mystery to everyone. They had contacted all her recent former boyfriends and they all had an alibi. None of them could have afforded a hitman, none of them had a motive, and it didn't look like an ex's revenge at all. It looked more like the work of a mafia professional. Which was out of question because the mafia never killed women, right ?

She was dead for no reason. And Eeva kept this charred hole in her memory. It still burned. Even ten years after.

She always thought that one day she would find the killer and confront him. But, now, she knew that she simply didn't have it in her. She wasn't even able to stand up to the other girls in school. And that would be *if* she found him, given that the best cops in town couldn't, even when the evidence was fresh. Two years earlier she had gone into detective-mode, when she was thirteen, but quickly realised that that was it. The murderer had escaped, would stay at large. He would never be caught and punished for destroying her mother's life and her own.

She had the most horrible nightmares. The kind she woke up screaming to. Lately, they had become worse and worse. She had come to dread going to sleep. She'd drink too much coffee, stay up and slack on the web until Grandma came up for the third time. By that time it was two in the morning, and she couldn't keep her eyes open anyway. She'd worm herself into bed and hug the pillow the way she had hugged Mom when they were watching TV together. She would quickly fall asleep and quickly find herself screaming and panting and shaking and wet with sweat. The next day, she'd fall asleep in school. The only place where she wouldn't dream.

She couldn't take it anymore. She had started dreaming of Mom. Dreams that weren't scary at all. Real memories of when Mom was alive. She'd wake up from those and cry and cry and cry until she had no more tears. She had to do something about the dreams. That's how she ended up in Doctor Astikainen's waiting room.

"Eeva Roivas?"

She stood up and walked into the office.

* * *

The doctor studied the recommendation letter from her GP with a slight frown. He raised his eyes to her a couple of times before going back to the paper. When he was done, he folded it back into the shape it had come out of the envelope and laid it on his desk, the long side parallel to the edge. His desk was surprisingly bare. She had expected it to be covered in stuff, though she couldn't have said what in particular.

"Could you be more specific about 'Father unknown'?"

Those were the first words that she heard Doctor Astikainen utter. That guy was direct. She used her usual answer. The one she gave to nosy school principals: "My mother never told anyone."

His eyes flickered for a second, like if he was already drawing conclusions.

"You asked for hypnotherapy yourself."

She stared at him blankly for a while. Was that a question? He had probably read it in the letter. Since he stayed silent, she decided that it was a question and that she was supposed to answer something.

"I thought it'd help." He didn't move. "With the dreams, I mean." she added quickly.

The doctor remained motionless. What was she supposed to do? All she knew about hypnosis she had learned on TV. He'd probably guess if she went into details.

"It could," the doctor finally said. "It will depend on you," he added. "On how receptive you are. And how cooperative."

"There is nothing I want more than for the dreams to stop."

"That is what you think you want. The dreams about your mother, about your memories of her, you might not let go of them so easily."

"I do! I feel so bad when I wake up! I cry for hours! For God's sake!" Who was this guy, to try and

second guess what she really wanted?

“Yes. Receptive and cooperative, you see. We might have a problem on both levels.”

“Fuck!”

She stood and walked out.

That was the full extent of her first visit at Doctor Astikainen’s office.

The following one was a little more fruitful.

“The reason why you cry so much when you wake up is possibly because you are so happy in your dreams. You cry not because of the dream, but because you come back to reality, where your mother is absent.”

She hated when people used euphemisms like that. She hated it also when they talked bluntly and said she was dead. She hated when people talked about her mother at all. The doctor was right about one thing, this was not going to be easy, receptive-and-cooperativewise.

She tried to tell him some of the dreams, but even that, she couldn’t. She hadn’t even told Grandma. She stuttered for a full minute on the first sentence before bursting out in tears. That was the dream where she and her mother were running out of the kitchen, with the killer after them, into the bedroom and into the bathroom and into the kitchen (even though there wasn’t a door from the bathroom to the kitchen) and back in the bedroom, and the killer kept getting closer and she heard a gun shot, and she felt a spray of blood on her back, and the body of her mother collapsed on her, and she could feel the hot blood pouring on her, and she couldn’t get herself out from under the body of her mother, and she looked back at where the killer was and there was nobody. Just her and her dead mother.

She practiced dream-telling a bit in front of the mirror before going in for the third time.

* * *

“Any more dreams since last week?”

“Every night”

“Anything special”

“They’re getting worse. I have a new one.” She took a deep breath. “I was in the house, and my mom was sick in bed, we had locked ourselves in the room and the killer was in the living room. He was trying to kick the door down and the whole room shook every time. And then, I heard a key working in the lock, and the knob turned. And the door opened, and I didn’t wake up. I saw him.”

“Was that the first time you got a good look at him?”

“Well...” She thought real hard. Dreams are easy to forget. “Might be. I can’t remember a dream where I could see him so clearly.” That sent him into a note-taking frenzy. She hadn’t realised that before and felt a bit silly that the doctor zeroed on it so easily. It seemed important.

“What did he look like?” he asked when he finally raised his head.

“He had no face. Just a black hole. And a gun in his hand. He aimed at my mom. She couldn’t move. She was unconscious in the bed. I jumped between the gun and her. He moved so he could shoot her without hitting me. But I moved too. And he fired the gun. And I took the bullet in the chest. And I saw the blood running out of me. I turned around, and I saw that the bullet had gone through me and still killed my mother. In the head. I collapsed. I saw him leave while I was dying. I still didn’t wake up. It’s only when I *died* in the dream that I found myself suffocating in my bed.”

“That’s very peculiar”

Eeva couldn’t get used to his detached manners. When she started telling her dreams and couldn’t do it, he wouldn’t even encourage her. He’d just sit there, gazing straight into her eyes. But not like he was focused on her or anything like that. More like he had put his eyes on her for them to rest a bit after spending too much time on the computer. And now, she had just told him she had *died* in a dream, and he was probably going to bitch about some minor detail.

“Most people would have woken up when he broke in. Weren’t you not scared at that moment, in your dream?”

“You kidding me! I was shitting my pants.” She actually *had* wet the bed, but she wasn’t going to tell him that.

“Failing that, you should have woken up when he shot you. Right before being hit actually.”

He fell silent again, expectant, unbearable. She felt he wouldn’t speak again before the end of times unless she stepped in.

“Well, I didn’t.”

“You stayed in the dream for as long as the dream would allow you to. Right until the end.”

Another please-break-me silence.

“So what?”

He leaned forward. “There seems to be a part of you that is stronger than your own will and that wants these dreams.”

“That’s bullshit! I want them to stop. Just do it! It will work!”

“On the contrary. From what I have gathered, hypnosis might make it worse. Until we figure out what it is that makes you stay asleep even after obvious wake-up cues, hypnosis would be a very dangerous step.”

“Fuck!”

She stormed out again. The one cool thing about this doctor was that he never seemed to take notice when she cursed or did something impolite like storming out of his office before being dismissed. Both of which she did quite often.

* * *

It was night when she hopped on the tram. She had one connection before getting home. She got there just in time for dinner. Her sessions with the doctor were scheduled for after school. It made a long day into a never-ending bore. She was exhausted when she got home. Grandma had fixed something, as usual. Normally, Eeva would do most of the kitchen chores. Grandma wasn’t in the best shape. She got tired easily. Chronic Fatigue Syndrome or something in the way of that. What a family of psycho-girls they made. For a second, she wondered what kind of nutjob her mom might have been. Didn’t remember enough to guess.

But she did remember many bits and pieces, starting from when she was three. She and Mom at the park, at the Mac Donald’s, in the bath, watching TV together, eating in the kitchen... Short and simple stuff, always happy memories. The very stuff that was surfacing in the mom-dreams. But she couldn’t remember specific stuff. Like her mom’s voice, or even what she looked like. Grandma could only find pictures from when Mom was a little girl, so she was stuck with her imagination.

They had dinner in front of the TV. She cleaned the dishes. By the time she got around to starting her homework, it was already bedtime. That was fine, she never went to bed at bedtime. She wished she could just not sleep. But tiredness caught up with her, and by 1:30, she was lying on her bed, lights still on, laptop open next to her, casting crude light on her closed and twitching eyes.

* * *

She woke up feeling really weird. She couldn’t remember a nightmare. That was unusual enough. It was daybreak, which meant that she had slept all through the night. But there was something else. The ceiling had a weird stain. The bed was missing a couple of boards, and the room... *Shit! This is not my room!*

She got up as silently as possible, trying to put her feet on the unstained bits of the rotten carpet. This place was a cesspit! The paint was peeling off the walls, the scarce furniture was all broken, *where am I?* She walked past a cracked mirror askew on the wall. In the mirror, there was a fat girl with sleepy eyes staring back at her. She suppressed a scream as it was leaving her mouth. The fat girl squeaked as well.

She kept staring at her reflection, unable to process the information. After a whole minute of it, she looked down at her body. *That* was why she felt so weird. She had put on ten kilos overnight in addition to waking up in a new room. What was this? The twilight zone?

The door behind her opened suddenly: “Are you all right? I thought I heard you scream.” She turned to face a woman whose face she had forgotten. She recognised her instantly nonetheless. Tears burst out of her eyes. She took a step forward, extending a hand towards the bewildered apparition: “Mom!”

* * *

“Before we proceed to this week’s dreams, I’d like to come back to the dream you told me about last time.”

You mean, just before I said Fuck! and ran out slamming the door? “What about it?”

“The description you gave me of the killer. You said he had no face. Could you tell me more?”

She shuffled through her notes. Since she had started seeing Doctor Astikainen, he’d told her to write her dreams when she woke up, to capture the details that she would otherwise forget between visits. She found the dream he was referring to. She’d had it three times more, with variations. Sometimes, he kicked the door in. Sometimes he shot the lock. Sometimes she’d take the bullet in the belly instead of the chest.

But there were no variation on the killer. Tall guy with no face. She said that to the doctor.

“What do you mean, ‘No face’? As if his head had been cut off?”

“No, no, just, he had a hole where his face should have been.

“And you could see the things behind him that would have been hidden by his face, should he have had one?”

She ran the sentence twice in her head before she made sense of it. What a nerd! Did he have to phrase things like that all the time? “No, there was a black hole instead of his face. I couldn’t see through it.”

“How about hair, or ears, did he have those”

She frowned for a second and whispered: “I don’t know. I can’t remember. I was too scared.”

He scribbled something on his pad. He was probably the last non-hipster alive using pen and paper to take notes. He’d probably have to spend hours entering them in his computer later. When he was done he raised his gaze back to her. This particularly inexpressive gaze of his. How could he hypnotise anyone with such empty eyes? “Can we now talk about this week’s dreams?” Her heart started pounding.

“I dreamed something really weird.”

“I’m listening”

“I dreamed that I was waking up in another house, ten kilos heavier. When I saw myself in the mirror, I screamed, and my Mom showed up at the door.”

“What age were you?”

“Like right now... More or less.”

He scribbled something for a while. “You saw yourself clearly, in the mirror?”

“Quite clearly”

“Could it be that the person you saw was someone else entirely?”

“No, no. It was me all right. Just fatter.”

He fell silent for a while. Silent and bland, like if he were on ‘pause’. She almost said something but he resumed by himself. “Anything else about this dream?”

“Well, to begin with, the room was a mess. Dirty and smelly.”

“You could actually smell? In the dream?” he interrupted. He had never interrupted her before.

“Why, yes. Cold tobacco mainly. Is there something wrong about that?”

He frowned. Something else he had never done before. Maybe a slight tension in his brow as he was taking notes or thinking hard, but now he was obviously pissed about something.

“What’s going on?”

“Anything else you can tell me about this dream?”

He hadn’t lost his frown. She added hesitantly: “Huh... When I saw my mom, I saw her face really well. Normally, I don’t really look at her. But in this one, she was really clear. I even saw the wrinkles around her eyes.

He pursed his lips. Something was definitely wrong. He was way too expressive.

“Miss Roivas...” he started, with this concerned look in his eyes, “from the very beginning, I have expressed doubts that our work together would result in a fruitful conclusion.” He stared down at his notes. “In the light of your recent description, I am left with no other choice than to terminate our collaboration.”

“What!”

“You see, it is a recognised fact of my profession that the sense of smell can occur, in dream, only in a specific set of circumstances, which you do not satisfy.”

“What!” She sort of understood what he said, but she couldn’t quite believe it.

“I can do nothing other than conclude that you are inventing this dream from the ground up.”

“I’m not!”

“I should commend you for having fooled me for so long. I’m afraid that we will not meet again after this session,” he checked his watch, “which ends in a few minutes anyway.”

“But... But...”

“I will, of course, report your behaviour to your GP, and she surely will suggest a course of action that will address your mythomania before anything can be done about other problems you might have.”

“I’m not lying! It’s true!”

“I will request that you leave my office now.”

“Fuck!”

And she was out.

The last thing she needed. Tears were rolling down her cheeks as she cut through the cold, damp wind. She walked all the way home, teeth clenched with frustration. This was so not fair. Why did she even mention the smell? This asshole obviously didn't know squat about his own job. But her GP would never give her a recommendation for another psychiatrist after the email the doctor was going to write her. She was fucked. She'd have to deal with her dreams herself, and she knew she couldn't. Only the hope of going through hypnotherapy soon had kept her together. Now that that was gone for good, her next dream was going to kill her.

She arrived home super late. Grandma was all alarmed. "Why didn't you call back?" She had turned her phone off before the session. She was so upset she had forgotten to turn it back on. "Sorry Grandma. Please don't be mad. I'm not feeling good."

"How is it going with the doctor?"

"I'm not feeling good, OK? I'm going up to my room, OK?"

"Aren't you gonna eat something?"

She closed the door before answering anything. She didn't know what to answer. She threw herself on her bed and started crying again. Her life was hell. She couldn't take it anymore. She wished for a dream to take her away, for good, to never come back, to die in her sleep. She fell asleep thinking that.

And, boy, did her wish get granted. Mom and her were hiding behind the couch. The killer was in the house and he was looking for them. They didn't dare look but they heard his footsteps when he was near, sometimes saw his shadow sweep the room. Every time a little closer. He was getting impatient, started throwing things around, and they both cowered and shivered at each noise. Eeva turned to Mom and saw that she was scared out of her wits. She knew that if someone was going to save them, it had to be her. She heard the killer go in the kitchen. She dashed to the flat's entrance, pulling Mom along. But Mom resisted. Eeva turned back, "Come on Mom!" she whispered, "We need to go!" When she turned back, the killer was at the kitchen door. He'd heard them. She pulled hard on Mom's hand. The killer moved out of the kitchen and into the living room in three great impossible strides. Eeva tugged as hard as she could but Mom was so *heavy*! She wasn't looking at the killer, she couldn't. She got kicked in the chest almost all the way back behind the couch.

She fell down, her head ringing. Gasping for air. *Mom!* Mom was standing there, dazed and confused. The killer raised the gun to her head. "*Mom! No!*" Eeva jumped to her feet and dived into Mom's midriff as she heard the gunshot. They both tumbled over and fell into the kitchen. *Not the kitchen!* She led Mom under the kitchen table. What a stupid move. The killer was still in the living room. Maybe he knew they were cornered. She turned to Mom and gasped in horror. A bit of her head was missing. Blood was pouring down her shirt. Mom faced her, her eyes empty but the hole in her head almost staring. Eeva was petrified. Only when the table was lifted up in the air and thrown to the side did she snap out and look away. The killer was there, his gun pointed at them. Eeva screamed. He shot Mom in the head again. Eeva felt the blood sprinkle her face. Mom fell back on her behind, still looking up. The killer fired again, and again, and again, each time Mom's body jerking, each time a pink mist spraying over Eeva. When he stopped firing, she was crying and screaming and covered in blood. The gun pointed to her, she could see all the way down the barrel. *Shoot me!* He obliged. She was still screaming when she woke up.

Grandma was by her side, holding her hand. "You've been yelling for ten minutes. I couldn't wake you up." Eeva burst into tears. Why didn't the dreams just kill her? Why did she have to live through them over and over again? An inescapable torture. People thought of Hell that way. For her it was everyday life. Why couldn't she be like any other kid in school? It was still pitch black outside, but she wouldn't go back to sleep. Not after one like that.

She took control of her sobs. "Go to bed Grandma, I'll be all right." Grandma was too old for that shit.

"Don't be stupid. You're not all right at all. And I don't sleep much anyway."

Eeva lost it. She put her head on Grandma's shoulder and cried and cried and cried.

And she dreamed and dreamed again that week. The old dreams, some new ones. She woke up a little more exhausted every day. School was like a haze. She was going to fail this year so bad! And she couldn't care less. The immediate survival of her sanity was all she could focus on. She grew overly

anxious in the evenings. She tried to put off sleeping as much as possible. Coffee helped a little. But she'd been a caffeine junkie for so long that it had little effect on her. She was up to ten cups a day. And strong ones too. If depression didn't kill her, an ulcer was next in line.

She had another dream like the one where she saw her mother's face clearly. She was in the same dirty, and definitely smelly, room. There was an ashtray on the nightstand, overflowing with ashes and cigarette butts. That was weird because she only smoked a little bit, and never at home. Just borrowed cigarettes over coffee with the two other misfits in school. There was the same broken mirror on the wall that returned her the same fat version of herself. *If I scream, Mom will come.* Her heart started beating dubstep. "Mom?", she called. She listened intently. After a few seconds, she heard a voice: "Did you call me?" She closed her eyes. It was Mom's voice. After all those years, it was the sound of home. The sound of all things good. "Can you come up?" This room wasn't feeling like home at all, on the other hand. It was nothing like the flat where Mom had been killed. Her dreams of Mom always happened at her old home. Why would she dream of this place?

"You come down!" Mom yelled.

Her dreams of Mom always had a killer too. If she left the room, she'd go down to the kitchen, and it would be her old kitchen, and the killer would come and shoot her. The simple fact that she just thought of that was bound to make it happen in the dream, wasn't it? Oh! This one was a lucid dream! She was aware she was dreaming! "Please Mom!"

She heard a muffled grumble. "All right then!" Footsteps got nearer and nearer until she saw the door handle turn. Eeva held her breath. The door swung, and there she was. Looking so short and vulnerable. And behind her, there was no faceless man with a gun. It was just her. "You better have a good reason. My show is on." Eeva threw her arms around her. "Mom!" She started crying, she held her tight. "Hey! Stop it! You're choking me!" Mom managed to push her away. "What are you on? Crack?" Eeva felt so confused that she woke up.

* * *

The days and nights started blending in a grey blur. She only fell asleep at the end of a desperate coffee-fueled battle to stay awake. She'd usually last until sunrise. She stopped going to school. Grandma tried to get her out of bed but she wouldn't budge. When she was in a nightmare, she was unwakeable. She'd open her eyes at last, sweating and panting, already freaking out in the expectation of the next row.

Every other day, nested between nightmares, she'd get the killer-free dream. The dream of Mom. It always started the same. She woke up in the dirty room, looking like she'd been on a McDonald's diet for a year. She started paying attention to things beyond the fact that Mom was downstairs. For starters, she realised there were parallel scars on her arms and forearms, some still red. Like she'd been cutting herself. She went on to find stuff that would have been at home in a government-sponsored anti-drug infomercial. A square of aluminium foil dirty with brown powder she assumed was heroin, a pressured gas lighter and a charred spoon. She was relieved to find no syringes at all and went and almost stepped into a used one on the floor. What the fuck was this dream about? She'd worked up the courage to leave the room and found that, even though the rest of the house was even more rundown than her room, there was no crouching killer about to pounce on her. Once she got used to that oddity, she started experimenting with the dream.

The dream was always lucid. While in-dream, she'd always remember the previous runs. But the dream never remembered her. So she could try something different every time. Once she ran out of her room, straight out of the house, into the street, and down the block. There were only few people outside but she got the clear impression they were avoiding her. Most of them looked the other way, one changed sidewalks, one gestured something at her that she caught out of the corner of her eye. At first she thought that the guy had waved to her. But when she looked at him and he turned away, she figured that it wasn't that at all. He must have flipped her off. *What?*

She had to navigate a couple of streets to get to a place she recognised. Gosh, they were in the worst fucking neighbourhood in town. She'd been there only twice, because of some jerk she'd called "boyfriend" for a week before she agreed to have sex with him and subsequently got dumped. Was her first time too. Why on Earth would she dream of living there? But it did fit with the dump-of-a-house she and Mom called "home" and with the general hostility of the people in the street.

The Mom-dream was always very short. She'd look forward to it if it weren't always nestled between two particularly gruesome nightmares. She'd only have time to do one or two things before waking up. And she couldn't follow through the next time because the dream always reset. She tried some silly things

just to test the dream. She stopped short of walking into the living room and kicking the TV over, Mom watching. The TV was the only expensive-looking thing in the house, so that was sure to raise hell. But why the fuck not? Everything would be forgotten in the next dream.

If she wanted to try something on Mom, she'd first need to get her off the couch first, which was no easy task. Mom really liked that show. It wasted precious dream-time. She tried a couple of lines before settling on "Mom, we need to talk" as the quickest way to get her attention. At first she wanted to ask her about the years she'd missed. She wanted hugs and kisses. But she couldn't find a non-awkward way of doing it. She was fifteen after all, and gathering from Mom's responses, they didn't have the cuddliest relationship.

Actually, it looked more like they were on the war path. Mom was snappy, dismissive and quick to resume watching TV. Like they had just had a big fight. That didn't help. The dream assumed a pretty definite recent history that she had no idea of. Through a couple of trial-and-error, she managed to gather that she'd been working at a local fast food joint and got fired recently for being late for work. Her Mom was obviously pissed at her for that and expected her to know it, which she didn't in the beginning and it made communication very difficult. Once she figured that out, she tried apologising for it. "I'm so sorry I lost the job, Mom. I'm going to get busy finding something else soon." Mom glared at her defiantly. "Don't bullshit me, I know you're not." So her in-dream self was not the apologising type. She made a mental note for later.

It wasn't just the people in the street that had a pretty low opinion of her. Her mom seemed to despise her. Getting something out of her required much persuasion. That one time when she tried to find out why she wasn't sending her to school ended in a lot of yelling and no answer at all. And she had to run out to avoid having the remote thrown at her when she suggested cleaning the house. She didn't know how to bring up the subject of her dad without escalating the discussion to nuclear levels.

Her Dad. Mom had taken that secret to her grave. She toyed with the idea for a while. It probably wouldn't work at all. But the dreamscape was such a realistic projection, she had to try. If Dream-Mom told her a name, she'd find him in reality and maybe... The more she thought of it, the more she liked the idea. This dream was so weird. Maybe it had been sent for her to find him. And when she would, the nightmares would stop. She hung on to that line of thought for dear sanity.

But it was a dud. There wasn't enough time. When she first tried, her mom went nuts: "What! Fuck him! And fuck you too! Don't you ever talk about this!" And she got slapped in the face so hard it woke her up.

Another time, she tried begging. Literally on her knees. Mom reacted with contempt. "Pick yourself up, you look ridiculous." And she walked out to the kitchen, leaving the TV on.

She would go for something more subtle, but the dream was too short. She had to find a way to yank it out of her quickly. If she had more time...

She stopped trying after a few more failed attempts. This dream was only coming every few nights anyway. The other nightmares kept her on the verge of exhaustion. She had entered a routine of fighting sleep, surrendering, getting battered, and standing up again, bruised and scared, waiting for it to happen over again. Reality itself started looking more and more like a hallucination. So she wasn't even surprised to find Doctor Astikainen waiting on her porch when she went out for groceries one morning. Or was it an afternoon?

"Good afternoon, Miss Roivas."

Ah there it was. "'Sup." She walked past him and stepped out in the fog. Or was it rain?

The doctor started after her, spreading a big black umbrella over his head. Rain.

"Wait, Miss Roivas, I would like to have a quick conversation with you."

"Have it your way." she mumbled, not even turning around. No way he heard it. But her body language must have spoken for her.

"Doctor Juvonen had me worried when she said that you missed two appointments and weren't returning her calls."

Doctor who? Oh... Her GP. She'd been calling? She hadn't noticed. She hadn't checked her voice-mail in ages either.

"I was concerned that my quite abruptly ending our collaboration might have caused you to stop seeking medical assistance."

"It did." she mumbled again, picking up her pace, wanting him to go away, not wanting him to leave, wanting him to pull out a gun and make reality end like dreams always did.

"Then I must..." He broke into a jog that allowed him to overtake Eeva, spun to face her and said,

“Then I must deeply apologise to you.”

She was stopped in her tracks like she hit a brick wall. She looked up in his eyes and they were not inexpressive at all. The dude really was sorry.

“I would like to take you to see Doctor Juvonen and ask her for an independent diagnosis. In any case, I’ll do whatever is necessary to take you back to a specialist.”

“Not you.” She didn’t know if she meant it as a question or a condition. His reply didn’t help her figure it out.

“I expect not.”

They were still face to face on the sidewalk, rain quietly sprinkling on them. Eeva wanted to slap him. To hug him. She didn’t trust him, but above all, she didn’t trust herself. She might have never got to the shop. She might have snapped on the way and thrown herself under a passing bus. The perspective of having someone else take charge was very attractive. Even if it was this asshole.

“I need coffee. Can you get me some?”

* * *

“The dreams are getting worse. And I’ve had more of the impossible dream. The one you kicked me out for.”

“Miss Roivas, I must be clear and honest with you. My purpose today is to get you back into the hands of a more appropriate specialist. I am very interested in hearing what you have to say, but you’ll have to repeat it all to your GP.”

“You still think I’m a liar.”

“I would not put it this way. I am open to hearing you and help Doctor Juvonen find you the treatment you need.”

“You think I’m a liar.”

He lowered his gaze. “The dream you told me about simply could not have happened.”

“It did. It still does. Once or twice a week. You stubborn condescending asshole.”

By this, she wanted him to scream, or slap her, or walk out and slam the door, and not without one of his overblown phrases with a four syllable average per word. But he did none of this. He didn’t even look pissed.

“To believe you would equal denying proven hard science.”

“Well fuck you then.”

He gave her a long, hard, blank look. The kind he got when he wanted her to end the silence. But she stayed put and he had to be the breakee.

“I am not unwilling to change my mind, you see. That’s how science advances. When someone challenges established knowledge. But I need a good reason for that.”

“And you don’t have one, so why bother.”

“Well...” He looked down, like he was not sure what to say. Was she getting somewhere with him? “Actually, I wonder. I’ve seen you long enough now to know that you’re... well... a wreck. You couldn’t possibly entertain the perspective of fooling me again in the state of advanced exhaustion that you’re in. I’m confident I would see through you in an instant. So, now that I think about it, there is only one possibility. You were telling the truth, you’re actually about to disprove proven hard science and I should lose my license to practice for having thrown you out the way I did.”

Eeva let her heart inflate to three times its normal size before getting a hold of it and shoving it back into place. The last thing she needed was to break down crying in public. “Glad you came to your senses,” she said instead. “But brace yourself because it only gets weirder.”

And she told him of the recurring setting. Of the fact she’s always conscious in-dream. Of the stunts she’d pulled, trying to get a hang of the place. He listened politely through the whole thing with the typical expressionless expression. He believed her. Or at least, he had decided he would until further notice. So she also told him of her failed attempt at using the dream to find out who her father was. “It was a stupid idea anyway.”

“I don’t think so. Given the extraordinary nature of the dream, it was a pretty sensible idea.”

“Yeah right. But I meant that it wasn’t going to work.”

He looked up for a while. Eeva could almost hear his hard-drive clicking. “Not necessarily. Dreams are a frequent vector for suppressed memories to take shape. It might be that some critical clue in finding who your father is is right there in your subconscious mind, and that dream might be a way of unlocking it.”

“You got to be shitting me. You actually saying that if I find out who my father is in-dream, I’ll be able to find him when I wake up?”

“No, I never said such thing. I only said it is not impossible. Let’s not get all carried away.”

“Shit! Why won’t she fucking tell me!”

“In the eventuality that it really is the way I just said, it probably is because the memory is heavily suppressed for one reason or another, and it takes time and dedication to unlock it.”

“Yeah. And the dream is always so short! I can’t do any lock-picking if I only get ten minutes with her.”

“This is when a hypnotherapist comes in handy.”

She stared at him blankly. “Come again? Are you just saying you want to try it?”

“I certainly am. I refused to resort to hypnosis earlier because I was worried it would put you in danger. But, and this is an official diagnosis, you are already in danger. It is time to... hem... pull out the big guns. We’ll go to my office immediately if you agree.”

* * *

The taxi trip took only a few minutes. That’s how much time Eeva had to come up with a good plan to make her dream-mom spill the beans. Pull out the big guns, he’d said. Maybe it *was* time. Carried away by the taxi driver and the wind of hope, she came up with something before she was told to sit, and breathe, and empty her mind.

“...and when I’ll count ‘three’, you will sleep and you will dream, and it will be the dream of your life with your mother. Do you understand that?”

“Yes.” she said, absent-mindedly, already drifting away.

“And you will not leave the dream until I clap my hands. Do you understand that?”

“Yes.”

“And you will tell me what is going on in the dream, so that I can decide when to bring you back. Do you understand that?”

“Yes.”

“Now, I’m going to count to three, and then you will fall asleep, and dream that dream. One. Two. Th...

* * *

On the bed with missing boards, Eeva woke up like a firecracker. Like she’d been flung out of her dreams with a slingshot. She was already sitting on the bed when she opened her eyes, fully alert. She looked around. Messy. smelly, broken mirror, the usual. All right, down to business.

She stormed downstairs. “What the fuck is going on with...” she didn’t bother to listen to the end. “Expect me in an hour.” she said on the way out, right before slamming the door almost off its hinges. That should keep her on her toes.

She hit the street until she found someone who would talk to her. “Where is the police station please?” It was a kid her age, with a smoking joint hidden in his palm between his fingers. He laughed at her face. Like she had just told a really funny joke. The next one was an old Chinese lady. “Three blocks down that way, and then another couple of blocks to the left.”

* * *

“Where did you run off to like that?”

“Mom, we need to talk.”

She had come back running and was still panting. With her new fat belly, thighs and those huge blobs that kept bobbing around, better not be in a hurry. Breath made even shorter by the heroin she’d been probably shooting every now and then. But she wouldn’t have it any other way. She didn’t know squat about hypnotherapeutics and was worried Doctor Astikainen could only keep her in-dream for so long.

“What da fuck you mean ‘we need to talk’. You just ran out like a maniac.”

“I was at the police station.”

“And why would you go to the police station? You looking for a job there?”

“I’m suing you. That’s why.”

“*What the fuck!*”

“That’s right” she pulled a paper out. “This is a police injunction. You have to go to the station within two weeks and tell them your version. You’ll get a copy in the mail in two or three days.”

“And why the fuck would you sue me? For not kicking your ass hard enough when you deserved it?”

“For refusing to tell me who my father is. But tell me now, and I’ll run right back to the cops and cancel everything.”

That froze her like a ‘pause’ button. *I crashed the dream.* Eeva thought. But after a couple of seconds, Mom collapsed back on the sofa, her face hidden in her palms. “What have I *done* to the world to deserve a little... bitch... like you.”

And Eeva knew that she was going to win this time.

“Your father is the worst asshole that ever saw the light of day. I don’t understand why you’d want to meet a guy like that. Isn’t it enough for you to know that? What do you want to do when I tell you?”

Eeva felt her resolve waver for a moment. Was Dad the person responsible for the state in which she saw Mom now? Then the last thing she wanted was to meet him, if not to slap him in the face. Then she remembered this was a dream and that she was fighting some figment of her dormant mind-thing. “Not your problem. Tell me. Or the cops will make you.”

“Fuck you Eeva. You’re the worst thing that ever happened to me.”

Eeva’s heart sank. *It’s just a dream.* She almost burst into tears. *Mom wasn’t really like this.* If Mom hadn’t had her, she might not be living in such a dump now. Maybe it was because of her that...

“If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be alone and poor. If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t have let this asshole destroy my life.”

This is not real. Not real, not real, not real. This is just my subconscious mind trying to keep stuff from me. Or whatever.

“One way or another, you’ll have to spit it out. I don’t mind waiting for the court.”

Mom raised a flaming gaze on her. She stayed like on the verge of physical assault for a couple of seconds. *My mind wouldn’t attack me, right?* Then something broke in her. She shrunk back into the couch, staring at her belly.

“I wasn’t telling you to protect you. But if you want it so bad, there it is. His name is Kimmo Anttila. He used to live uptown. I don’t know where he lives now. He might be dead, for all I care. I dumped him because he was a loser, and he prevented me from getting married to the man of my dreams. The one that would have been good to us. He’s the worst asshole on Earth and this is the last time you hear me talk about him. Now get the fuck out of here, I’m gonna need to puke.”

Eeva heard hands clapping and she was jerked up into Doctor Astikainen’s office, screaming hate and anger and frustration and sadness ; yet overflowing with hope. Her head landed on this son-of-a-bitch’ shoulder and there she cried long and hard. And fell asleep again after what had felt like an eternity.

And she dreamed of nothing at all.

* * *

In the bus, she felt terribly scared. She actually held hands with the doctor. He didn’t seem to mind at all and was watching out the window like they were going to the park or something. When she had woken up again, it was early morning, and she was still on his office’s couch, under a blanket. She felt so rested she couldn’t believe it. That’s what a night’s sleep felt to normal people? Even orgasms couldn’t be better than that. It was so awesome she actually cried out of happiness. Then she noticed that the doctor was right there, at his desk, shamelessly looking at her and she felt really silly. The poor bastard had probably stayed up all night.

He had. And he had kept himself busy.

They went to a cafe downstairs for breakfast and he told her everything he had gathered on Kimmo Anttila. First, the guy did exist. Second, he was the right age. Third, it appeared that he’d been living in town fifteen years before. This couldn’t be a coincidence!

“It actually could,” the doctor said. But she could tell he wanted to believe it too “keep yourself open to the possibility of it. Of it being a coincidence. If it turns out he knows nothing of your mom, you’re going to be very disappointed.”

“No dreams last night. That a coincidence too?”

“Actually, this is something to expect. Given the state of exhaustion I found you in, and the quite intensive hypnosis session that I had you go through, it is not unlikely at all that your brain went into maintenance-mode, if I may be allowed such a gross metaphor, and stayed in slow-wave sleep with REM phases so short that dreams just didn’t have time to formulate.”

Blah blah blah. Have it your way, this Kimmo dude is my dad alright. And asshole or not, he’s going

to get a piece of me very soon. He still lived in town. Doctor Astikainen had found his address. He had even called and requested an interview. He actually said that. 'Request an interview'. What a douche. They were meeting him at noon.

And that's how she found herself riding the bus with the doctor, squeezing his hand like a lemon.

He was a painter. Her dad was a painter! She couldn't even draw! And a good one too. The doctor had shown her some of his stuff on the internet. It wasn't just good, it was awesome. Not that she could tell a good painting from a bad one, but it just looked that way to her. She obviously wasn't the only one thinking that because he was exhibiting in an art gallery right now. They were going there.

Granted, it wasn't exactly the Museum of Modern Art, but it did seem like a cool gallery nonetheless. It wasn't packed with people, but it wasn't empty either. Dad was a decently successful painter. Her imagination had gone up in flames when she'd heard he was an artist. Millionaire-type living in a castle over the lake, finding inspiration watching the sunrise from the highest tower... Then she remembered what her mom had said about him and she managed to not feel too disappointed. The worst asshole on Earth couldn't be selling paintings in an art gallery, right? And the price tag on each frame had enough zeros that he must make a good living out of it.

There she was, wasting her time looking at the walls, because if she turned around, she knew she'd notice that, of all the people in the gallery, only one guy fit the description. It was him, she knew it and she was so not ready.

"Do you want me to go talk to him?" The doctor. Doing his job.

"I don't know... maybe... you could introduce us?"

"That's a very good idea." He started towards him at great strides. *No! Wait! One more minute!*

She followed him a few steps behind. The guy was probably expecting to talk to a buyer or at least something related to his exhibition. The doctor had told him nothing over the phone. The guy gave him his best smile, not paying the slightest attention to her. Good. She could keep observing him. He wasn't bad-looking at all for a guy in his forties. "Doctor Astikainen! How are you doing? – Very fine, thank you. Is this your daughter behind you?"

Fucking asshole! She pushed the doctor aside, stepped forward and nailed him with a look that said shut the fuck up and listen. "No dude, it's actually yours."

The doctor gasped. She hadn't actually meant to say that! She found herself to be scared shitless. Her heart was pounding harder than batucada. But she did not stutter, did not lower her gaze. She was dead serious, and he had to fucking know it.

The guy knew: he turned livid. Like a tween on a weed-induced bad trip. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but said nothing. Looked to the left, to the right, back at her...

Then he did something she hadn't expected, because she hadn't really expected him to be the worst asshole on Earth. But he must have been: He turned his back on them and dashed out of the place like the hounds of hell were after him. Everyone stared, one woman even let out a startled scream as he ran past her. Eeva felt the doctor's arm going around her shoulder. Not the comforting kind. The ready-to-catch-her-when-she-fainted. Eeva used the opportunity and did just that.

* * *

She didn't actually black out. Her legs just went limp like overcooked pasta. The doctor carried her to a chair, sat her down and called for coffee to be brought forth (he did use the word 'forth'. This guy... seriously...). One sip on the sweet caffeine juice was enough to take her back into the world of the living. Everyone in the gallery had formed a cluster around the two of them, gossiping heavily. They were totally getting the wrong idea, even the one that incidentally whispered "She could be his daughter!" Dad was going to have a hard time selling paintings to those people... Eeva turned to the doctor. "What the fuck just happened?"

He looked up. "I'm confused. I never would have expected such a reaction." Then back down at her. "Are you feeling strong enough to walk?"

"Yeah, let's get the fuck out of here."

Once they were out, away from the gossiping crowd, they tried to frame Dad's reaction into a perspective that made any sense. In vain. "It's not like it's any use running. We know where he lives. He'll have to come back to his home one day and we'll find him then."

"It is likely that he did not think it through."

Or did. Because he never picked up the phone, never replied to their emails, and never came home. For the three following days, she stalked his home during most of her waking hours. Her sleeping time

had been taken over by the nightmares again. After the dreamless night in the doctor's office, she'd actually thought the hypnosis had cured her. The doctor must have been right about her brain being too exhausted to dream. Or maybe she *had been* cured by the certitude of having found out who her dad was, and had gone back to the nightmares when he ran. Depressing food for thought.

Three days standing under the facing porch in the cold. *This is bullshit*, she thought. *I've found my Dad, saw him for a second, and poof he was gone again.* And for good, it seemed. She would never even be able to ask him why he ran!

That's when she thought of it: yes she could! She just needed to find him in-dream!

* * *

"You seem to conceive of your dream as a parallel universe, but you have to realise it is a story that your mind is telling you. If you try to dream of him, you probably will. But since your mind has no idea why he ran, his dream-avatar will probably just make up a realistic reason that might incidentally coincide with reality, but most likely will not. In any case, we won't be able to tell."

She really hated these long-winded explanations of his. "Dude, it is a parallel universe."

"I am very reluctant to send you back in there if you're so deluded about the nature of dreams."

"How do you explain that I got the name of my father?"

"This we have not confirmed yet. It might very well be that he ran because of some reason completely unrelated to you or your mother. We don't know if he really is your father."

She hadn't thought of that. And she must have looked like it because he said: "Things are not always what they seem."

"But... You saw his face! He didn't even pretend it was a joke. It must have rung real true to make him run like that. It's him all right."

"When I'll hear it from his mouth I'll consider the question answered. Until then..."

"Aren't you curious? Let's find out. Send me in again."

"I am very curious indeed. The paper that I will write when I finally understand this phenomenon will likely make me quite famous in the field of cognitive science. But I am also concerned about you. As your therapist."

"I was fine last time!"

"As a matter of fact, no, you weren't. I clapped you out as soon as you had the name because you were getting febrile. And the description I was getting from your conversation with your Mom gave me the impression that you were in a lot of distress."

He was right. She had been. And if the dream-world was consistent with itself, Dream-Dad was likely to be "the worst asshole that ever saw the light of day". She wasn't looking forward to that. But she had to know and hypnosis was the only way. Waiting for Reality-Dad to resurface was simply unbearable. "Then do that again. Yank me out as soon as you get the wrong kind of feeling. You're the one in charge, aren't you?"

She didn't have to argue a lot to convince him. He wanted her to explore the dream just as bad as she did. After all, they were now both in the business of 'challenging established science', weren't they?

* * *

She didn't feel too good when she woke up in the dirty smelly room with the cracked mirror askew on the wall. Last time she had come, her mom had told her some pretty fucked up shit. She hadn't had much time to think about it, and maybe she shouldn't do it now. But how do you stop yourself from thinking about stuff? *Worst thing that ever happened to me.* What could have Mom meant with that? When Eeva had heard it, she had dismissed it as some manifestation of her subconscious, trying to keep her from finding the truth. But then, they had gone and used the information gathered here in the real world. And it had worked. And now, she knew that this place was as real as the other one. This is how the world *would* have been if her mom hadn't died when she was five. The horrible bitch downstairs was who her mom would have become. *Did she become like this because of me? What kind of shitty daughter must I have been?* She wanted to go down and ask her. But she wouldn't get it. She would go all "What kind of drug are you on?" Getting cross-reality information from her was just too hard. What she should do is try to get something nice out of her. Something to remember her by, in case she never came here again. If they did find Dad when she came out and the dream stopped.

She walked out of the room, downstairs, into the living room. Her mom was there, watching TV; check. Ashtrays full of dead butts; check. Half empty bottle of vodka on the table; check. "Anything good

on TV?" Eeva asked. Mom turned her head towards her and snapped: "Shut up, bitch. I'm watching." Eeva sighed and walked towards the door, grabbing the phone book on the way.

"Where the fuck are you going."

She stopped with her hand on the knob. "I might have a job."

"Well, make sure you get it fast. I got bills to pay."

She turned around. "Mom."

Mom turned to her with the *What?* look on her face. The cigarette hung forgotten on her grayish lips, the ash about to fall.

She tried to swallow the lump in her throat. "Since I was a little girl, I've never stopped loving you. I'd be devastated if I lost you."

Mom put on her *What drug you been doing?* face. "What are you trying on me, you sneaky bitch?" Her hand jerked involuntarily, spilling a bit of her vodka glass.

She sighed again. "Nothing. Gotta go. Bye." And she left with tear streaks on her cheeks. What the fuck had happened to this family? This was worse than getting your Mom shot dead and never knowing your dad. Grandma was no mom-surrogate, but at least she didn't harass her. She opened the phone book, paged through to Kimmo Anttila in it and ripped the leaf off. *You know, asshole. And you're going to tell me.*

A woman picked up the phone. "I moved here six months ago. Maybe you're looking for the former tenant? Do you want the number of the agency?" The leasing agency did know him. He *was* the former tenant. They gave her a phone number that didn't work and an email address that she didn't have time to use. Was her subconscious getting in the way again or was this place the real deal and Kimmo Anttila was just hard to get hold of? She took the tram to the former address and walked around a bit. That was the shop where he probably bought his groceries: "Kimmo? Sure I know him. He comes every now and then." the clerk confirmed.

"Still?"

"Yeah, weekends mostly."

He still lived in the neighbourhood. "You know where I can find him?"

"He hangs out a lot at the Molotov. Maybe you'll find him there."

It was a pretty hardcore punk bar. The tables seemed like they were kept dirty on purpose. He wasn't there, but the bartender knew him well. He gave her his address.

The place was a squat. She got into the building by just pushing the gate in. She knocked on the first door.

"Nah, Kimmo lives on the third floor. Door on the left."

Take that, unconscious mind.

* * *

He didn't look too different from Reality-Dad. He had longer, messier hair and was sporting a three-days beard. Did she just wake him up? She was standing squat in front of him in case he tried to run away again. But he didn't do anything weird. "Do I know you?"

"Apparently not, but you should. My name is Eeva, I'm the daughter of Olga Roivas and you. The cops are downstairs, don't you try to run."

The cops weren't downstairs but she couldn't take chances with him taking off again.

His eyes bugged out like crazy, he forgot to breathe for a few seconds. "That bitch!" he whispered. Now *that* was an expected reaction. That's when it hit her: *Reality-Dad already knew about me! This dude doesn't.* He interrupted her train of thought.

"Come on in. Why the cops?"

"Protection. They're listening in," she patted her phone pocket "and will come up break your neck if they hear something fishy."

"I've got no beef with you. Though you understandably have some with me." She followed him in. "I didn't know about you, Eeva. Olga... she must have been early in the pregnancy when she dumped me. And she never picked up the phone ever. I never even talked to her again after we broke up. I never suspected anything."

"Will you make us some coffee?"

"Sure. I'll be ten minutes."

He headed into another room and stayed there for a full minute. She noticed an open pack of cigarettes on the table and helped herself. Her dream-self needed her nicotine fix. He crossed into the

kitchen, speaking into his hands-free. “Hi buddy... I’m fine, it’s just... No, something big just happened. I’m gonna have to skip rehearsal... I’ll make it up... Really sorry... Gotta go, I’ll tell you all about it.” A woman emerged from the room he had just gone in. She was so sexy-and-she-knew-it, it made Eeva shrink a bit. You could tell she had just picked up her stuff the way she was carrying it; and that she had just gotten dressed the way her clothes fit ill. *This is trouble*. But the girl walked right past her, popped a head in the kitchen, “Call me soon.” and was gone. With just an apprehensive side look at the clearly underage girl who had just gotten her kicked out of the bed of her lover. Before Eeva could even wonder what Dream-Dad had told her, he was back with two cups of brew. He had washed his face too, and put on a shirt that didn’t look like he had slept in it.

The coffee was a delight. Better than at the coffee shop. “I found a crate of beans in the dumpster of an organic shop. The expensive kind.” He’d found this in the trash? She put the mug down. “Relax! It was sealed. And, really, they put an expiration date on coffee beans because they legally have to. They even put an expiration date on honey! Honey literally lasts forever. Archaeologists find palaeolithic honey that is still good. Coffee beans don’t last millennia, but I guarantee you those are fine.” She let it slide. After all, the guy had just learned he had had a daughter for fifteen years and wasn’t freaking out. The least she could do was to keep calm as well. She left the mug on the table though. Better safe than sorry.

While her coffee was going cold, they went at it rationally, trying to piece back together what Bitch-Mom, as she thought of her now, had done to herself. With Dad’s side of the story, it was a piece of cake.

* * *

“You’re fifteen, right? So I met Olga when I was... twenty-four. I don’t remember how old she was. Probably the same. We stayed together for two years. Two really bumpy years. She was really sweet and really pretty. I was in love with her for that. But she was also very jealous, possessive, manipulative... Stuff I normally don’t like at all. But... I don’t know... I was hooked. I just stayed with her. And then one day she dumps me for no reason. After so long... I felt cheated. Which turned out to be spot-on, because one week after she stopped taking my calls, I saw her walking down the street hand in hand with that jerk... what was his name again... Timo Something. Ten years older, a lawyer... At the time, I wasn’t even dreaming of having my stuff in an exhibition yet. I was *broke*, see? And so was she. University dropout, couldn’t keep an underpaid night-job for more than a week. It’s so obvious she went with him for the... huh... security. It only lasted a couple of months. I don’t know exactly. She had ignored me long enough that I had stopped trying. But I couldn’t help noticing that that Timo asshole was walking down the street with a new bimbo hanging to his arm. I thought she’d left town.”

That was what Mom had meant. He prevented me from getting married to the man of my dreams. The bitch was blaming others for her own failures. Eeva should have known better. Coming from her, “worst asshole” ought to actually be “awesomest.”

“She hadn’t left.”

“No, she probably found out she was pregnant after jumping ship, and obviously failed at convincing Timo Asswipe that you were his, and got subsequently dumped.” He turned to her with a startled expression. “Shit, that’s not a very nice way to describe the way you came to be.”

“I lived as an orphan most of my life. Anything beats that.”

“What do you mean, an orphan?”

Shit! She’d blown it! She was getting way too comfortable around this guy. “I mean, that’s the way I’ve been feeling for some reason.”

He gave her a skeptical look. She had to divert the conversation. “So, you’re painting?”

“Yes!” His face lit up with glee. “Took forever, but I’ve been a full-time painter for a couple of years now.”

“Can’t be making so much. I mean, you live in a squat. You get stuff from the dumpster.”

“And? You think it’s because I have to? Because I can’t afford buying things? I’d rather save stuff from the incinerator than buy new. Food in particular. Supermarkets dumpsters are overflowing with good stuff. And nobody’s taking it! If poorer people than me were lining up for the pick, I wouldn’t fight for it. Same for the furniture. Same for the squat. We take it because it’s there, nobody wants it and if we didn’t, it would be spoiled. Not only is it the right thing to do, it’s also great fun.

She had nothing to answer to that. Probably because it *did* make sense, and she *had* said something stupid. But he hadn’t gotten on any high horse. He was busy gathering the leftover sugar in his cup on his finger and licking it off. This. Guy. Was. Fucking. Awesome. She picked up her lukewarm coffee and started sipping on it. Why did he run like hell when he saw her in reality? Could it be that Doctor

Astikainen had been right all along? That her disconscious-or-something had summoned the dad she wanted to have instead of the one that really would have been? She wasn't getting anywhere here.

"I wasn't serious about the cops."

He smiled. "You're a pretty good liar, but I already knew that. Cops can't go into a squat unnoticed. Squats get evicted every few months. We can even tell a plain-clothes copper from a regular guy."

"I was afraid you'd run."

"That's ridiculous. Run where? This is where I live. You'd just have to sit at the cafe downstairs and wait for me to return." *Exactly!* she thought. "Plus, why would I run? To be honest, I find this really exciting. I'm not looking forward to confronting Olga again, but you and me have a lot to catch up on!"

Butterflies. She literally never felt such a strong happiness in her whole life. Even being in love couldn't beat that. But the part of her that wasn't tripping on adrenaline knock-knocked her. That did it. This guy and his double from the gallery were two completely different people.

She almost expected to hear hands clapping and wake up, gasping, on the doctor's couch. But she was still there, and so was he, and he was smiling. She wished he would lean forward and hug her, or squeeze her hand... But she knew the years of holding hands and hugging were behind her. She'd missed them and she'd have to live with that void forever.

"How did you end up finding me?" he said.

"Oh. I threatened to sue her. I actually went to the police station and filed a complaint and showed her the receipt."

"Wow."

"You can say that again."

"How did she react? I mean... Do you need a place to stay?"

Butterflies. Squared. Yes she did! She liked this place more than reality now. She'd lose the weight. She'd wear long sleeves. She'd stop smoking. She'd avoid the Bitch. She had found her Dad. And he was so cool she couldn't believe it. *Wait.* She closed her eyes. She shouldn't believe it. This had to be fake. The doctor was right. Dream-Dad and Real-Dad were just two different people.

She was relieved somehow. Mom wouldn't have become that bitch either. Dream-Mom was just a fictitious monster her mind had whipped up to guard the secrets of her past. Everything here was fantasy. She opened her eyes again, and there was the doctor, the couch, the rain against the window, Mom dead, Dad gone... reality. Shit.

Back home at Grandma's, she couldn't shake off the depression, after having been so happy there. Why couldn't it have been like that at the gallery? Why was her life such a nightmare? Why did she feel like she belonged in the dream? Imaginary happiness. Wasn't that better than what reality served her every day and night?

* * *

"I understand that you *want* to keep believing in the parallel-universe fantasy, but you cannot go back there and you know why. You *know* now that it isn't 'what your life would have been'. It is just a manifestation of your subconscious."

She lowered her gaze. "But it's OK. I just want to see him again. I'm not gonna pretend he's real or anything." Her nights had become unbearable again. She had had the parallel-dream again a couple of times, but there simply wasn't enough time to go meet Dream-Dad. The only way was through the doctor.

"It is no coincidence that your nightmares have become worse. You need to make peace with your past. With *reality*. However hard it might be. Dwelling in makeshift happiness will only delay your finding closure."

Real-Dad was still on the run. It had been ten days now. They had found friends of his who had no idea where he was and sounded genuinely worried. The doctor was sure he would come back and that they should just wait. But she couldn't do that. The nightmares had come back swinging. She was getting her head blown up every other night.

The doctor had her back so she didn't feel so helpless. They were meeting two or three times a week now. He would schedule only one. The rest was off-the-record. On his free time. "In my own interests, of course," he said with no trace of irony in his voice. She had grown indifferent to his presence and didn't confront him so much. She even kind of appreciated his tireless support. She'd called him in the middle of the night once, and he didn't seem upset about it. She knew he was doing it only to study her, hoping to make some scientific breakthrough that would award him a wikipedia article. That was OK though. It prevented her from feeling like she was abusing his niceness. Even though he *was* nice to her and she

wasn't giving him half the credit he deserved. Without him, she might have already been dead or dying.

She had gone back to the gallery. They had removed all of Dad's paintings and were displaying something else. He hadn't called them back since that night. She still lurked at his place sometimes. The neighbours knew nothing either. Maybe the police would find him, but why would they look? There was nothing more she could do. She needed a vacation. She needed to see her Dad. The one from the dream.

But the doctor just wouldn't.

When she had the Mom-dream, she just stayed in bed, listening to the drone of the TV downstairs. She didn't feel like talking to the Bitch at all. Even a fake-ass imaginary bitch that wasn't like her mom at all. But the dream-dad that she had created herself, she wanted to go see him so bad. He was right there, a few kilometres away. All she needed was one hour...

She wasn't going to go back to school. She had missed enough that her year was wasted. She wasn't going to sit on her ass either, drinking coffee all day, feeling the sorry gaze of Grandma on her neck. So one afternoon, she jumped into her sneakers and walked out with a plan.

* * *

"Doctor? You hearing me? Can I talk to you now?"

"Of course Eeva. What is it?"

"Something wicked. You're not gonna believe it."

"One second." She heard some typing. "I'm all yours."

"You're not gonna like this, but I went to his place. To Dad's. I mean Dream-Dad's. I went to where he lives in the dream."

No noticeable sign of disapproval, but she was sure he thought it was a bad idea. "Yes?"

"I'd never been here except in the dream, see? But it's all exactly like I remember. The streets, the building."

"You think it validates the 'parallel universe' theory?"

"Wait, that's not all. Better sit down if you're standing. I don't know how much I told you when I was in-dream, but I had gone into a local shop to ask for directions. The shop is there in reality. And the guy in the shop, it's the same guy."

"OK..." Ah! He was hesitant. He couldn't explain that!

"It gets better. I went to his building. It is a squat."

He stayed silent.

"There was a cafe in front, both in the dream and in reality. I stayed there all evening looking at the people coming in and out. I recognized one of them. I had asked him which floor Dad lived, in the dream. He lives there. I talked to him."

Still silent.

"He doesn't remember me though. Neither does the shop clerk."

Still nothing.

"Doctor, are you still there?"

"Yes Eeva. I am. And I am left again with no other explanation than that you are lying." Her heart turned to ice suddenly. She heard a long sigh. "But I won't make the same mistake twice. Can you come over now?"

"Already in the tram. Be there in twenty." Yes!

* * *

"I've done a bit of thinking in the tram. An idea I got when I saw how Dream-Dad had reacted to me in the dream. Remember how Real-Dad ran away as soon as he saw me? He didn't even try to pretend he thought it was a joke. I think he recognised me. Even before I told him."

"Hold on for a second." The doctor took her coat and hung it on the hook.

She slammed the door open and jumped on the couch: "That's the difference between reality and the dream, you see? In the dream, he never knew. And in reality, he did."

"Eeva. Please. Can we first go over the recent events and try to evaluate them within the frame of—"

"Proven science? Fuck that! This is it dude! The proof we needed. It is what life would have been with Mom. Now are we challenging shit or are we not?"

"I... I agreed to ignore a minor detail last time. But now, you're asking me to believe in... fairy tales. This is simply not possible."

"Damn! Why do you have to be such a dork. As I told you, I was doing some thinking in the tram. I

sort of guessed you were going to be difficult. You want final proof? I can point it to you, but you'll have to get it yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"Remember Timo Whatshisname? I bet you can find him, call him as my doctor and get him to tell you what you already know because Dream-Dad told us."

The doctor couldn't help the hint of a smile to show on his face. "All right. Good idea. That should settle it."

Half-an-hour of internet cross-referencing later, they called the only lawyer whose first name was Timo and that matched other criteria such as "living in town 15 years ago" and "aged between 38 and 55". The doctor was already looking grim as the phone was ringing. It only got worse as the conversation unfolded.

"Mr Holappa, I am sorry to find myself calling you in the evening hours, but I figured it was better than bothering you during your working time. I am Doctor Astikainen, and following a patient called Miss Roivas. Does that name sound familiar to you?" The doctor's brow sprouted two creases as listened to the reply. "If I may interrupt, Mr Holappa. It is not Olga Roivas that I am referring to, but her daughter Eeva Roivas." Brow-creasing increased significantly. "I am fully aware that she cannot be related to you. She knows full well that her mother was already pregnant when she met you. I only called to check if you were aware of it as well. I will not bother you any longer. – No, she is not planning to press charges against you in any way. – Yes, everything is very fine. – Good evening, Mr Holappa." He hung up, brow way over-creased.

"Well, maybe I should!"

The doctor's hand still laid on the phone, his gaze lost in the background.

"Press charges, I mean. What an asshole! That's the one Mom wanted? When she'd been with the cool one for two years?"

The doctor stayed still, giving no hint he heard anything she said. His lower lip was hanging a bit.

"Did you notice, he had forgotten Mom was dead? Like, he must have known, right? They must have had friends in common."

The doctor stood up and wordlessly crossed the room to the little dependency in the back of the office, where he kept a microwave and a coffee maker. Eeva felt a bit weirded out. He was so polite normally.

He stayed holed up in there for ten minutes before walking back in, a steaming cup in his hand. He didn't even glance her way and started pacing the room. After another minute, he looked up at her and seemed to come back to his senses: "Sorry, did you want one?"

* * *

They were now at his desk, each holding a steaming mug. It was late. The doctor had called Grandma to excuse Eeva, then he'd called his home to excuse himself.. They had all the time in the world. And Eeva knew exactly what to do with it. The dream world wasn't a dream world at all. It was just as real as this one. Hell, it might even be more real! What says she wasn't living the dream here and that her real life was on the other side? In any case, she was gonna go there and fucking spend time with her father.

"I wanna go back in and talk to Dad."

"Well..."

Was he going to try and block her again? "What more proof do you want?"

"Eeva..." She clenched her teeth. He saw it. His features shifted slightly. "You're missing the point. Of course I'll send you back. If only to help me gather more information on this incredible phenomenon. But, before I do, don't we... don't you need to consider the implications of your recent discovery on the situation with the one we suspect is your father?"

"You mean... Reality-Dad?"

"According to you, he's the same person as the rather pleasant gentleman from your dream."

"Yeah. He knows something that Dream-Dad doesn't. He recognised me when we met, I told you. Even before I said anything."

"If he knew you, why do you think he stayed away when your mother died? In the dream, he seemed more than ready to claim you."

"I *have* been thinking of that. I don't know. Maybe she was keeping him away. Or maybe when she was killed, he was in another country, or he was in a situation where he couldn't take custody. Like he was in debt with the Mafia or something. And when he had it all fixed and became successful, many years

had passed and he was ashamed. So he ran when I confronted him. Or something like that, I'm not 100% positive about it.

"Oh..." The doctor raised his gaze a couple of degrees, "I hadn't thought of it this way..." he locked on her again, "But there is a much simpler explanation. I think you haven't considered it because it would hurt you too much."

Eeva froze. Was that why he was pacing like a maniac before? What was he talking about?

"You really don't realise..."

"What is it?"

"I don't know how to bring this..."

"Spit it out already!"

The doctor's furrowed brow locked into place. "What is the point of difference between your dream and reality?"

"That Dream-Dad isn't afraid of me."

"Or, as we suspect, that he doesn't know you."

"Right. And?"

"And? It is not the only difference. There's another one."

Eeva gave him a long stare. "Mom is alive. I don't see the link."

"The link is that those two seemingly unrelated facts are the only two differences we noticed between the dream and reality. That I have to spell it out to you demonstrates well the state of denial you're in. The two facts might not be unrelated at all. One might be the consequence of the other. The only actual difference between dream and reality is that, in reality, your father found out about you when you were five."

Eeva was pissed. And? And he killed her mother? What nonsense! He could have just gone to court. No, not after five years. He would have never gotten custody. Especially if he was a struggling artist. But still. Kill her? Why would he do something like that? If he was the jealous type, he would have killed her when she dumped him for the lawyer. And he didn't. So it had to be to get his daughter back. But by killing her, he wasn't doing that at all. In fact, he was giving up any chance of getting her back. Maybe he thought he had no chance at all... But... It still didn't make any sense! It would only make an orphan out of her. That would be really stupid. What was he accomplishing by making sure she grew up without her Mom?

This was worst than getting your Mom shot dead and never knowing your dad.

Of course!

"You think he killed her because it was the only way he could save me from her!"

"The way the dream is set up clearly points that way."

"This... is... bullshit..."

"He ran because you greeted him with rather a lot of hostility. He thought you knew and you had come to turn him in."

"Shit."

"He might even have been planning for this moment ever since he did it. He might very well have stashed resources abroad to facilitate his escape if he ever needed..." The doctor rambled on about possible possibilities. She lost track. She soon felt his hand slide under her armpit and she let herself be led to that faithful couch where she soon felt the weight of that trusted blanket, and of a thousand fears unlocking. That was it.

* * *

Eeva was five years old. The TV was on, and she was watching. She didn't exactly know what the happy people on-screen were all about, but they were happy, and Mom liked them, so she liked them too. The happy people were doing the funny thing with the weight-loss device that she never understood. She wanted to ask Mom, but Mom was in the kitchen, with the cocktail machine. It wasn't the right time to ask.

Suddenly, she saw the outside door open. She hadn't heard the key turn in the lock or the handle turning, which was a bit odd. A man was there that was closing the door very slowly. Like he was afraid of breaking it.

Eeva was a bit scared. She didn't recognise the man, but she never recognised most adults. They just all looked the same to her. She only knew the man at the shop. She didn't like him at all and hid behind Mom whenever they went shopping there. Maybe this was one of Mom's friends. They never came often

enough for her to remember one of them. Mom would be happy to know one of them was here. She was about to call her, but the man was looking at Eeva with a finger resting on his lips. She knew it meant she wasn't supposed to make any noise. He silently tip-toed towards her looking like a fool. This was fun! Eeva sealed her mouth with both hands and tried to muffle her chuckle.

When he passed in front of the kitchen, he slowed down even more, looked quickly, but didn't go in. He kept walking towards her. Soon he was kneeling down in front of her, and he had taken her hands into his. She looked up his face and saw he was crying. But his mouth was smiling so much it made him look really silly. He took her hand up to his lips. She resisted a bit, thinking he might bite, but he just kissed her hand, and then the other one. Then he leaned forward and whispered in her ear. He said: "You cannot tell anyone you saw me. Alright? It is super-secret. You really really must forget me. Alright?" And he backed away and waited for her answer. She nodded frantically. She'd never tell anyone! Ever ever! His smile broadened even more, and he stood up, still walking without a noise. He walked into the kitchen, where Mom was. She heard a big slamming bang. And then, the man came out of the kitchen, walking very quickly, not bothering about making noise. He didn't even look at her. He slammed the door shut behind him.

"Mom?"

* * *

Eeva woke up on the doctor's couch. He had pulled a mattress from somewhere and was sleeping on it, all dressed up. She tried to put the blanket on him, but that woke him up. Soon they were in the cafe downstairs, having breakfast.

"I've remembered some things from ten years ago. When my Mom was killed, I actually saw the killer."

The doctor turned his expressionless 'I'm listening' gaze to her.

"He talked to me before doing it. He told me that I couldn't tell anyone about him, that it was a secret. He made me swear. Must have been a hypnotist himself, because it really worked. I forgot all about it. It's only now that..."

"A classic. The suggestion was carved into you by the trauma of seeing your mother dead. Hypnosis is not needed. It's a pretty common symptom of post-traumatic disorder. Victims have no memory, or redacted memories of the events leading to the trauma. Pre-trauma external suggestion would have a lot of influence on a victim. A well-studied disorder. He probably just read about it on the internet."

"Really? Why didn't the cops think of that?"

"Well, they had no reason to doubt your account. The phenomenon is mostly accidental. Few people actually know about it. But it is probably true in your case. It incidentally very well explains the faceless killer from your nightmares."

"So we got it. We know why he ran. We know who killed Mom."

She kept her eyes on the table. He fell silent for a full minute. No doubt giving her his favourite non-expression. Coffee was cooling down. She finally raised a helpless gaze on him. "I don't fucking know what to do!"

Her eyes filled with tears. She'd found the killer. She'd been dreaming of it for so long. If she'd turn him in, they would find him for sure, wherever he was hiding. She'd go to court, and testify against him. She'd probably have a good case. The doctor would explain them about the post-traumatic-suggestion. He'd get locked up for a long time. Her dad. Fuck!

And what? He'd given her ten years of being an orphan and having nightmares in a world where every other kid had a mom, and a dad, and had dreams that were not populated with faceless killers and memories of a forever lost happiness.

But if he hadn't... She knew now what life with Mom would have turned out to be. He'd turned a life in hell into a mere purgatory. Maybe not a whole life. Maybe only ten years. Maybe she didn't need to be an orphan anymore... Maybe if she found him and talked to him...

Maybe they *could* be a family... Maybe they could fake him finding her after fifteen years. Come up with a credible reason. Live together. Have a dad... The police wouldn't even look if nobody tipped them off. Could he be persuaded of trying something like that?

The doctor interrupted her train of thoughts: "You don't have to decide anything today. Get some rest. It will all be clearer tomorrow. Or the day after. Or next week. There really is no rush."

"But I can't! I need to talk to him. For real."

"That might not be possible at all. He had 10 years to prepare for this day. If he doesn't want to be

found, you might never manage to find him.”

Unless she turned him in. The police would definitely have a way to find him. If he left the country, they would at least be able to tell where to. And when they found him, she might be able to cancel everything and he wouldn’t go to court. Would that work? Maybe the doctor would know. Maybe he would diagnose her insane for thinking along those lines.

“The police would find him.”

“They might... But if they do, he will be prosecuted, whether you’re incriminating him or not.” Was he reading minds too? “Only by retracting your account, by confessing that you made it up, he might be able to walk out of it free. But then, it is likely that the police would sue *you* for wasting their time.”

“They’d do that?”

“Oh yes. You would have been using them as a free investigation service. They don’t take kindly to that.”

“A private investigator! That’s it!”

That had to be a really silly idea. Did private investigators even exist outside of movies? But the doctor raised his gaze a little, evaluating. He was really awesome for that. He always took her seriously.

“It would be a very expensive option.”

“Do you think I have any chance of finding him on my own?”

The doctor was looking hard at the table. Like he was embarrassed or something.

“It is likely enough that he has left the country. Finding him might involve a lot of travel. And, at your age, it would be dangerous to travel alone...”

“You kidding me? I got no problem catching a plane or a train! What other choice do I have? Sit here on my ass and wonder?”

“I really recommend against it. But if you’re going to ignore my warning, I promise to help you the best I can from here.”

“Thanks.” she said. And, the way it felt in her mouth, she knew that it was the first time she was thanking him for anything. That didn’t feel right. He had done so much for her. She should be hugging him or something. Though that would feel way awkward. He was as unaffected as ever behind his glasses. She let it roll.

“You don’t even know where to head to, do you?” he said.

“I soon will. There are some things that he doesn’t know I have access to. Hypnosis works over the phone, right?”

THE END

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