

The Dreamer

By William Cutler

Arthur erased a mistake he made in his log. He mused about where the mark went, and how it could be erased so completely. For the now thirteenth month in a row, he awoke at precisely 7:25 A.M., logged his time, and wrote a small summary of his dream. Something about vines, ravens, and boa constrictors. He shuddered at recalling these details; it was not a pleasant dream. But he did take comfort in his scrupulous log of his unconscious imagination. He fancied it gave him a sense of observation and, thereby, control.

He dressed, showered, ate his protein cube, and headed out into the hallway of the apartment building and down the stairs. There were no problems with the elevator itself, but Arthur hated the confinement, especially if a neighbor were present and he were obligated to converse. Once out into the world, he walked with purpose towards the bus stop, briefcase in one hand, lunch in the other. A passerby greeted Arthur with a friendly "Good Morning." Mildly startled, Arthur reflexively mumbled an attempt at reciprocation and continued on.

As he rounded a corner, he collided with an immaculately dressed man in a three-piece with shaded spectacles. The impact knocked the briefcase out of Arthur's hand; its contents spilled messily onto the otherwise neat, grey sidewalk.

"Watch it!" the suit barked.

Arthur mumbled a 'sorry' and looked up sheepishly at the man. Arthur could not see his eyes behind the shades, but still sensed the man was following something or someone with his eyes. The man continued at a determined pace, without any further regard to Arthur or the situation that just unfolded. Arthur recollected his papers, but realized he was now running late. He quickly turned the last corner, but the bus was just leaving. It would be thirty minutes before the next bus arrived.

It was such a rarity that Arthur had nothing to do. He walked into a nearby park and meandered about, making small talk with the pigeons.

"Oh, I'm doing just fine," he quietly responded to the inquiries of one bird.

Arthur turned his attention to the scenery; he found the small piece of green to be quite peaceful. It was circular, roughly one hundred feet in diameter. A thin dirt path bisected the park, with rows of small flowers adorning either side. One single oak tree in the center dominated the small saplings spread throughout, its canopy covering much of the park and a small stream that travelled perpendicular to the path. Under the imposing oak, Arthur sat on a bench next to the small stream. He observed, amidst the gentle current, a frog eyeing a buzzing fly, waiting for the fly to make its final mistake. Arthur found himself rooting for the insect, but the amphibian found its mark and earned a snack. The pesky fly was no more. Arthur noticed

then a small plaque on the base of the oak tree: "Planted in memory of R-- Brad----." Some of the etching had been worn away.

An official in uniform was approaching others in the park, requesting to see their park passes. Arthur searched his briefcase for his, but without luck. He now nervously checked his pockets and his wallet; he must have left it in the apartment. Arthur quickly moved off of the park as the official walked in his direction, calling out to him. He wanted to avoid the confrontation of not having a park pass, and walked briskly, but the officer ran faster.

When the official reached Arthur, he brusquely asked Arthur why he left. "I didn't have my park pass," Arthur meekly replied. "I do have my city pass, however," he hastily added.

Arthur retrieved and presented it. The official took it, inspecting it with great suspicion, before launching a volley of questions at Arthur.

"Why were you in the park in the first place?"

"What do you mean no particular reason?"

"Why were you late for the bus?"

"Haven't you a timepiece?"

"Do you attend your weekly patriotic observances?"

Arthur answered every question truthfully, and, by the end, he had traced his entire day in detail since 7:25 A.M.

"That will do," the officer interrupted Arthur as he explained the vines from the log.

"You are aware I am going to have to fill out a report," explained the officer, without looking up from the ticket he was writing.

"I understand," complied Arthur.

"You would have been better off staying put and not retreating. It compounded your ticket; you should have known you would not have gotten away. No one does. Here is your ticket. You have two days, twenty-three hours, and fifty nine minutes to pay it, and you are prohibited from entering any park, even with your pass, until you clear the fine, do you understand?" the official inquired.

"I do," muttered the accidental criminal.

The official recorded Arthur's information, handed Arthur his passes, and gave a terse goodbye, as if purely customary by law.

Arthur sat at the bus stop, and, with his transit card in hand, waited. As he waited, he replayed the events from the park. It was the first time he had committed an infraction; he very studiously absorbed the district's numerous laws and all of their intricacies in schooling. He hadn't seen or heard of many people receiving tickets. He recalled a colleague who ran too quickly on a walkway and was fined, but Arthur had not conversed with the colleague for quite some time, for entirely unrelated, unimportant circumstances.

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The next morning, Arthur recorded another summary, again unpleasant. He dreamt he was alone on a small tropical island, but the waters started rising. His feet were stuck, planted in the same sand as that displayed in the Museum of Geology, the only he had ever seen. The waters rose without clemency, and Arthur awoke in a cold sweat after a few seconds of simulated drowning. Of course, the tropical island came purely from a combination of his imagination and from a fiction he read many years ago, as he had not yet actually seen anything 'tropical' or been on an 'island' in person.

After his standard routine, he walked along his usual route, but felt something was awry. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw something on the traffic poles move. He turned his head, squinting through his glasses; a street camera peered directly at him, following Arthur's movement. Other cameras did the same, observing and rotating with scientific precision. Something about the hive of robotic eyes struck Arthur in a particular manner, conjuring within his mind images of his only visit to the nature preserve. He recalled the thousands of eyes from onlookers who now appear faceless with the passage of time. They observed, with great fascination, the last of the 'free' orangutans and zebras, munched on their popped corn treats, and begged the animal officials to bring out the hibernating mammals and small rodents in hiding. Their requests were often obliged.

Until this point, Arthur had never noticed these cameras. Naturally, he had known they were there, but never had he truly *noticed* them before.

Arthur grew uncomfortable and quickened his pace, up to the legal limit of course, now visibly anxious, and wishing to catch the bus. He disliked this undue attention, but camera after camera turned toward him; there seemed to be no blind spots. He saw them at the bus stop and in what he could see of the park. Arthur was so focused on them as he entered the vehicle that he nearly jumped when the driver requested his fare. With trembling hands, Arthur put what was probably too much into the machine and sat near the front without relaxing. Before Arthur entered the office, he stopped by the Office of Dues and Fines and paid the fee for yesterday's fiasco. The observation devices persisted, and so did the deep feeling of dread. Both accompanied him the entire workday.

It was dusk when he exited the bus from work; he had to make up for the lost time the day prior. Streetlamps illuminated his rather barren path home; most others were already in

their housing units. He stopped by the park on his way. It was quite dark, as there were no lights nearby. No lights by which he felt he could be seen, just as he preferred. He lay on the bench and lost himself in the gentle rustle of oak and muted croaking of frogs, even forgetting about all of the recording devices. Checking his timepiece, Arthur reckoned the length of his rest, “Almost thirty minutes.”

He sat up, and heard a leaf crunch as he did so. No leaves were under his feet. He looked around. Nothing. He called out an isolated “Hello?” Silence. Arthur noticed one of the latches on his briefcase was undone, and found this extremely odd. The latches were worn, to be fair, but Arthur very seldom forgot to close one. A low grumble indicated he was late for his meal. He secured the briefcase, grabbed his effects, and headed home.

The presence never seemed to leave him. Or maybe it was not a physical presence but a mere feeling. He concluded his nerves were simply still on edge because of the infraction. He arrived at the residential complex, navigated his way up the stairs, and approached his door. After fishing for his keys and two failed attempts at insertion, he finally found his target, opening the door with an eerie, yawning creak.

The interior light turned on to reveal his apartment not at all how he left it. Furniture was overturned, cabinets were rifled through, and books lay face-up on the floor, piled on top of one another. It appeared as eerie as a bloody battlefield during a lull in the fighting. Arthur immediately went to the telecom to report a robbery, although he noted that his valuable electronics and bank credits rested on his desk, entirely accounted for. He dismounted the small rectangular device and dialed the appropriate number. It was long, but he had memorized it long ago. He put the phone to his ear and heard only the on and off beeping of a failed connection. Arthur became increasingly panicked. He almost rushed back out, but just then he heard a pair of footsteps. The presence from earlier intensified greatly. Accompanying the footsteps were voices, talking about something. Someone. *Him*.

“I have never seen anything quite like it, I am truly curious what you make of —”

“Shhhh! He’s here.”

They must have noticed the door left open. Arthur froze, now overpowered by fear. He figured the criminals or miscreants had returned with ill intentions in mind. He heard the shifting of leather and a metallic clicks, and mentally prepared for the worst. The two men entered the apartment, but they were not robbers. One was in officer, in uniform. The other, a handsomely dressed, imposing man in a three-piece with seemingly opaque glasses, which he promptly took off. The officer remained silent, but the man introduced himself as Dr. G----, from the Department of Psychology and Education.

“I’ve been very fascinated by you these past few days, Arthur.”

“D-Do I kn-know you?” Arthur spoke weakly and distrustfully, with trembling lips.

“This is the first time we have officially met, but I have been involved with your case for quite some time. Your dream records are quite amusing.”

Arthur didn't think so.

“Perhaps you had some frightening experience in the pools in your youth? Pah, it's nonsense. There is no real accounting for your dreams and your inexplicable decision to note them. But look at me now noting your notations, derailing the most pressing matters”.

“Pressing matters?” Arthur quietly inquired. “I was about to report a robbery...” Arthur continued, but trailed off.

“Oh, there's no need to report what has happened here, we are well aware and it will be cleaned up I assure you. No, the pressing matter here is you. I am very concerned about what I have observed.”

At 'concerned', the officer walked outside of the apartment, as if on cue. Apprehension flashed visibly across Arthur's face.

“Something is troubling you,” the doctor resumed. “There was something that caused you to flee the officer in the park that day,” he pondered.

“I didn't want to get a —”

“Yes, yes I know the official reason of course; the report was sent to my office last night,” the doctor interrupted. “But you knew you would be caught. It's practically mechanical deduction. I was searching your residence for an answer just a few moments before you found your way inside, and I think I found the answer...”

He produced a small pocket-book, a very old one. The title was smudged out and much of the text was entirely illegible, but some bits could be discerned. Arthur had calmed somewhat, not fearing imminent danger to his person, but now he began to sweat. The doctor looked at Arthur, then cleared his throat, preparing to read.

“When in the course...powers of the Earth...all men...”

The doctor closed the book. “I found this in your shelving unit. Are you aware that this type of material is —”

“It's purely historical! I don't believe a word of it!” Arthur exclaimed, raising his voice for the first instance in a very long time.

“I sincerely doubt that! This dangerous text has been removed for quite some time, you know. We have long progressed past this rubbish. It’s effects on the psyche have been eradicated centuries ago.”

Arthur opened his mouth, but was unable to connect his vocal chords to the words forming in his mind.

“You are very sick, and you need help,” the doctor explained, extending his hand as a gesture of friendship.

“I- I don’t...f-feel very sick” Arthur attempted to rebut. His palms began to sweat. Looking at the doctor’s hand, Arthur thought it flashed the sickly, gnarled green of jungle vegetation for an instant. He felt claustrophobic.

“You wouldn’t know; you do not possess expertise in these matters” the doctor pressed, reoffering his hand.

“What if I refuse?” Arthur asked desperately.

The doctor was surprised at this, but recollected himself. “Then we would have to come to some different arrangement, but I’m sure it will be less...well, pleasing for you”.

Arthur’s clothing seemed to tighten, his shoes glued to the floorboards. He tugged at his collar, but the sensation remained. Looking around desperately, he noticed a letter on the counter. He recognized it. It was addressed to him from his mother, and it was opened. Arthur remembered putting the letter in his briefcase earlier that morning. The report, the cameras, the latch, the leaf crunch, the phone, the *presence*. All flashed in his mind at once. “Of course there were no robbers,” he internally realized.

“Please, it will be much easier if you just...”

Arthur took a step back away from the doctor, and turned toward the window. Arthur felt water at his feet now. He looked down, but his shoes were dry.

“You don’t know how sick you are!” the doctor exclaimed with great worry.

He advanced another pace. Ripples splashed against his waist.

“You don’t know what’s best for you; you simply need to be retaught and all will be better!” the doctor pleaded.

Another. He stood in front of the window. He could feel his heart pounding through his ribcage. All feeling seemed to leave his arms and legs. The doctor called for the officer to come back in, but Arthur didn't hear. The click of the window latch disguised another metallic click from the officer now rushing in. Arthur became dizzy as he looked down upon the city. Seven stories. The waters nearly reached over his face now; Arthur struggled for air.

"FREEZE!" the officer shouted, aiming his firearm at Arthur, but the command sounded so muffled that Arthur failed to register it. He practically swam forward, clawing at the opening, but a current kept restraining him.

"This must just be a nightmare. It will end, and soon I will awaken," Arthur reasoned with himself. But just then, two sharp pops were heard. Arthur felt the bites in his back, but ignored them as he fell through the opening.

As he accelerated, he no longer felt the presence. The waters had receded. His nightmare was over.