

symbiosis

Y

In the dream, his daughter calls to him, in that exasperated teenage voice, not to worry. No visual, just her voice calling to him, that “stop treating me like a child” tone.

Then he is at the window, entranced by a small puddle of water on the unpainted sill, hearing only the squeak of her footsteps on rotting floorboards, aware not of concern for her safety as much as annoyance at her intrusion. He has warned her that the floorboards are old, not safe, and she has chosen to ignore him. They are, he and his daughter, in his wife’s parents’ old barn. In the dream, the barn is in the condition he first saw it. A husk, listing badly to the south, with missing slats where the sun breaks through at odd and extreme angles. There is a wooden ramp, with crosspieces for traction, that leads up to an old hay loft. There is no longer a roof. The barn is open to the sky, the elements. And though it is clearly the barn, in the dream he understands it to be his wife’s parents’ house, and it is as though Clark and his daughter are waiting there for the others to come home.

He is in the living room of the barn, transfixed by the puddle of water on the window sill. In the puddle is a reflection, the hint of an image he cannot make out, and he is focused on that puddle, that image, when his daughter’s voice calls out not to worry.

When her footsteps creaking on the floorboards distract him, which causes the image to fade. He is trying to block out the sound of her footsteps and push aside his annoyance, to conjure the image, when he hears the crack of splintering wood.

“Emily,” he calls. The sun through a gap in the slats illumines the wall to his left, where now there is wallpaper. That fact only marginally registers, because he is aware that his daughter’s foot or leg has broken through the floorboards and he is trying not to be annoyed, trying not to think *I told you - why can’t you ever listen.*

“Emily.”

Outside the window, tree branches shake.

He pushes away from the window and walks toward the back of the barn, behind the ramp, where the sound came from. He ducks his head under and around thick beams. Because of the sun’s angle and the missing slats, bright light alternates with deep shadow. It disorients him, and he walks slowly, carefully, floorboards giving under his own feet.

As he ducks under the ramp, cobwebbed wood brushes his hair and he moves to where her voice came from, steps through shadow and light to the back wall of the barn. There are broken floorboards where a foot, even an ankle might have gone through. But there is no Emily. He calls to her. Searches the barn, the surrounding yard, but in the dream she is no longer there. She is gone.

“Why the long face?”

Clark and Emily at the breakfast table, Thursday morning. November chill.

Emily’s head half buried in a bowl of Cheerios.

“Horse walks into a bar,” she says.

“Very good,” he says. He wears layers for biking. Bikes to work every day, all year. Emily finds this equal parts admirable and humiliating. “So why the long face?”

“Tired,” she says through waves of black hair.

It is unusual for her to make a weekday appearance at breakfast. Usually there is no time. Usually she is hustled out the door by Lisa, the two of them in various stages of mother-daughter agitation.

“Up late studying?” He eats oatmeal that he makes, every morning. On weekends, she often – well, sometimes now - joins him.

Her head may have nodded. “Math test.” She shovels cereal into her mouth. “I don’t get it,” she says. “At all.” As a young child, Emily had hurled herself at the world as if she were trying to break through to something. An intensity she has less of now. Sometimes Clark wonders how that changed. Where it’s gone.

Lisa is in the shower. The sound reaches them like soft rain.

“Did you call someone for help?”

“Called everyone. No one gets it.”

“Why didn’t you ask me?”

“Please.”

The math she’s doing now is beyond him. He’ll spend an hour on a problem, his only route into it tortured, circuitous. The solution will turn out to be far more direct. This disappointment dangles between them as her grade suffers.

“Put it on my bill,” he says. He loves the unlikely things that connect them. The dumb jokes. The music – country twang and bluegrass.

“Duck walks into a bar,” she says, automatic.

He worries about her posture. It seems to him she always eats bent over her food like someone's doddering grandmother.

"I had this horrible dream," she says.

"Yeah? What about?"

"Nothing," she says. "Don't do that. I hate when you do that."

"Do what?"

The bathroom door opens. Lisa's footsteps cross the hall.

"You get all interested." Emily spoons cereal. Chews. Speaks with her mouth half-full. "Like nightmares are really cool."

"Dreams are interesting." His oatmeal features bits of dried figs, apricots and blueberries. "What was terrible?"

"Nothing," she says. She pushes away from the table. "I had a hard time getting back to sleep is all."

"They're just dreams, honey. Movies in your brain. Entertainment."

"Right, Dad."

"Okay," he says. "Tell me. What was so terrible?"

"I gotta go," she says. "Mom will be on me any second." She gathers her bowl and spoon and water glass. "It creeped me out is all." Starts toward the kitchen. "You were there," she says, as if it were something from real – waking – experience and he should remember. "I hurt my leg at Grandpa's house."

Y

He has the dream again. Twice. In these revisitations, he notices additional detail. Although he can see branches quake outside the window in what would appear a strong wind, there is no sound of wind. In fact, no sound save his daughter's footsteps and her voice and his own breathing.

He notices furniture from Lisa's parents' house, wonders if that were there before. A green Victorian couch, plush and worn, dark wood and lots of curves. A cane rocker. A coffee table that he cannot recollect in any detail. A framed family photograph, all five siblings, taken the summer before Lisa's oldest sister died.

Emily's steps on the floorboards. Clark's strained effort to see the image in the puddle. A yearning (is that new?) to see the image.

The barn is where Lisa played as a girl, with her sisters, sometimes her cousins. By the time he met her and saw the barn, it was a wreck, a kind of abstract sculpture.

In the dream, Emily's footsteps. Clark's puddle. Dark tree limbs. Something in the background. The footsteps, the creaking of the old boards, the knowledge that she is ignoring his sound advice, all inhibit his concentration. An animal at the edge of his vision, moving across the yard. He registers paws, brown fur. One of the dogs that wander the neighborhood. He wills into focus the image from the puddle. Then the crack of wood, and his irritation, and search for her. This time, when he gets to the back of the barn where the hole is in the floor, he hears her voice call to him as if from a great distance, but he cannot locate the source or direction of the sound. Just hears her call, over and over, so distant he might be imagining it, or dreaming.

He badgers her into telling him about the dream, after he learns she's had it again.
Saturday morning, over oatmeal.

"It's the house," he says.

"Yeah. Gramma and Grandpa's house."

"Not the barn."

"No, the house."

He'd spent the previous evening in the study, surrounded by maps of the Northern Territories. The lakes region of Canada. He is scheming a family canoe trip where they would get airlifted in for a week. Deposited. He pored over maps, both seeking the best area and working out in his head how he could present this so it would appeal to both Lisa and Emily.

Lisa works, devotedly. Administers a nonprofit foundation. Clark has mostly adjusted, his sense of family, what it means to be a parent. When Emily was five, Clark quit his high-tech job to teach high school. To spend more time with her. Have summers. Now, Lisa tells him he needs to push Emily away. Let her go.

He tells Emily he's had the same dream. "There's a sense of water, right?"

"Yeah, but no *actual* water," she says.

They explore the events. Other than the location, the dream is identical.

Her face flushes. "*Don't do that,*" she says. "*Don't copy me.*"

"What does that mean?" he says. A radiator hisses and clanks. The house is old, and slow to warm. "Besides, I had it first."

"You don't know that."

She had gone out with friends. A movie. Until this year, she had been an enthusiast for family adventures.

They eat oatmeal. Drink water. She tells him details from her dream. Belligerently. Furniture. Stuff on the walls. Pictures. He doesn't have that. This seems to have been her intent. To claim ownership. Establish greater authenticity.

He moves her water glass away from the edge of the table, a reflex he can't always suppress. "So, in your version, where do you go?"

Her head hovers an inch over the bowl. She relocates her glass. Her hair smells of citrus, some new shampoo. "I don't know. My foot breaks through the floor, and everything's dark and scary, and then I wake up."

"Dark and scary how?"

"Dark. Scary."

"And then you wake up."

"Yeah, Dad." She hoists her spoon out of the oatmeal. Drops it back in. Glares at him. "Can we not talk about this anymore?"

They eat oatmeal. Lisa asleep upstairs.

"Which foot?" he says.

"Left." An exasperated sigh. "You're supposed to be distant," she says.

"Unapproachable. We're not even supposed to like each other."

He starts to protest but there is nothing to say.

"You've gotta admit, Dad. It's a little creepy."

He goes for the laugh. "Like 'O, Death' creepy?"

His daughter looks at him.

“Ralph Stanley,” he says.

“I remember,” she says.

Monday, she twists her ankle in volleyball practice. She tells him this on the phone, that evening. He’s at his desk, at school, looking at a picture, he and Emily rock scrambling at Zion. Her pure joy of discovery. Life opening anew. He’s going straight from school to a political meeting. Democratic party. Progressive stuff. The ankle’s swelling. She will miss her game Wednesday, she tells him.

“Which ankle?” he says.

“Don’t,” she says, that determined edge in her voice. “I know what you’re thinking. Just don’t.”

Υ

It is not unusual for him to be both actor and observer in his dreams. A full participant, experiencing the emotions of whatever is happening, and simultaneously aware it is a dream – the stakes are not real. So there is a comfort level in allowing events to play out. He has always – since he was a kid – been intrigued rather than threatened by dreams, grateful for the windows into himself.

He has the barn dream again, though there is something grotesque about it this time – the stark way the light hits the walls, the disembodied sound of Emily’s voice. This time, he is particularly aware of it as a dream, of himself as director, editor. He concentrates on blocking out her creaking footsteps so he can focus on the image in the puddle. He’s not wearing his glasses, so he has to squint, and he’s aware of hurrying, that

his concentration, or the play of light, may change any moment. He is aware of soft edges, a grayness to things, like after a spring rain. He recognizes hair, wills it into focus. It's Emily's hair, and Emily, laying on grass, in an orange sun dress he and Lisa had brought her from their trip to Barcelona when she was twelve. There's a sound that's not footsteps and not Emily's voice. He's intent on the dress. Something on the dress. A stain. And her posture. He concentrates, and sees that she is not laying, she is sprawled, and the stain is blood, and it is not merely on her clothes, but on her arms, her face. And the sound he's hearing is a kind of animal chatter, a yip and yowl. He sees and hears this only for a moment before the crack of floorboards, quite loud, wakes him.

“What were you *thinking*?”

Clark tries to keep his voice level. To keep from escalating. He was waiting for her, leaning against the kitchen counter when she walked in the door.

“I was *thinking* I was hanging out with friends. I was *thinking* you weren't going to go all gestapo and check up on me.” She stands just inside the door, jean jacket still on. Scarf. A lingering draft of chill air.

“For the record, Nina's parents called here looking for the two of you. I got worried when you weren't where you said you'd be.”

“Well you shouldn't have.”

“You were supposed to be at Nina's house. It was supposed to be just the three of you, just girls.” His back to the sink. He is a natural barrier to her entry deeper into the house.

“What difference does it make? There was nothing going on. No drugs. No orgies. We were watching a movie, for God’s sake.”

“That’s not the point. You lied to me.”

“You wouldn’t have let me go.”

“You’re not even hearing –“ He stops himself. He makes a habit to resist ranting about what are simply developmental facts of life. “You’re grounded.”

“Fine.” She faces dark windows, arms folded, making a point of not looking at him. Outside, it’s Friday night.

“You don’t want to know details? Boundaries? How long?”

“Whatever.”

He takes a deep breath. Feels undermined. He swallows back that frustration. Give her a chance. “Anything else you want to say?”

“No.” She won’t meet his eyes. Won’t turn toward him. All he can see is hair and chin. He pushes away from the counter. Cold tile. Cold air. Toward the living room.

Her voice. Sharp. A blade. “Stop following me.”

He turns. Puzzled.

The intensity of her stare unnerves him. “My dreams.”

Emily home from school, Wednesday, a walking day. Her backpack deposited on the kitchen floor, so he has to step over it. This is not unusual, and he tries to mention it only when it especially bothers him.

He is sautéing red peppers to add to the pasta sauce he is making. He is making it without tomato chunks, even though he prefers it with tomato chunks, because Emily will not eat tomato chunks. Lisa has called in from the road, from traffic, on her way.

“Hey,” he says, adjusting the flame under the peppers. “How was your day?”

“Okay.” She forages the counter, finds some almonds. “Smells good.”

“Mom’s in traffic.” On the right front burner, the sauce simmers and steams.

“Wanna make a salad?”

A frown. “Not really.” She chews almonds. Leans against the counter, so he will have to circumnavigate both her and her backpack. “I need to tell you something.”

“Tell me while you make a salad.”

“And I need you to not freak out.”

Instant alert. “Did something happen?”

“*Dad*. I’m here, right? Just listen.”

Clark concentrates on the peppers, the reassuring sizzle.

Emily retrieves a bag of greens from the refrigerator. “I’m walking through the arboretum, right, not the Peter’s Hill part but the part before that, and I’m on the path along the brook, and it’s really quiet, no one around, and it’s just the beginning of dark, just a little shadow, and I get this weird sense like someone’s following me.”

Clark focuses on the peppers.

“But there isn’t.” Emily picks through the bag, avoiding the more bitter baby greens. “I look around, a couple times, and I don’t see anyone. Then I’m getting close to the gate, you know, where you cross Weld Street, and I feel it again, and I look up, and there, on the other side of the brook, is this animal, walking along just ahead of me. I

figure it's a dog, but there's no owner, no leash, and that funny walk." She jostles the salad bowl, gauging the minimum acceptable amount. "So it's a coyote."

Clark fixes his eyes on the peppers, his ears on his daughter's voice.

"And I stop when I see him, cause, you know he kinda takes me by surprise. And he stops, too. And we watch each other, like we're each checking the other out. And I kinda grin, cause it's like we're both figuring out what to do, if anything, or what this means, you know, and I swear when I grin at him he starts walking again, what do they call it that limping walk, loping, still watching me over his shoulder while I went out the gate." She holds almonds and watches him add the peppers to the sauce. He wonders if she can see the tremble in his hand. He wonders if she is somehow messing with him, a strange variant of teenage insurgence. "So that was last week sometime. And it happens, same area, again today." She watches him for a reaction.

He wills his face to reveal nothing. He folds peppers into sauce. He is on alert, but against what? There is no evident threat, no protocol. "It follows you – both times?" A coincidence, he tells himself.

"Yeah. But wait," Emily says. "Here's the creepy part."

Clark feels short of breath. "Yeah?"

"Remember, you need to not freak out."

"*Okay.*"

"So this thing, with the coyote," she says. "I've had that *exact* dream."

He stirs sauce. He counts silently to thirty. He can't think.

She watches him. Twirls her hair. "Nature encounter, right? Animal protector?"

"That's right," he says. He stirs sauce. Sniffs it.

“What?” she says.

He won't look at her.

“*What?*” She twirls her hair. The kitchen warm with cooking. She has shot up nearly three inches in the last year. Some days he barely recognizes her. “*Shit,*” she says. “You had it, too.”

He shakes his head. Flushed. Woozy. “No. I didn't.”

“You're lying,” she says. “*You had the dream.*”

“Go wash up for dinner.”

“You had the dream.”

He nods grudgingly. He feels lost. Out of his depth. “A version of it.”

Her finger presses hard against the counter. Her cheeks flush red. “Why are you *doing* this to me. Stop it, Dad. *Leave me alone.*”

She stomps to her room.

After dinner, he says in his most casual voice, “I'm thinking I should meet you after school on Wednesdays. We can take the T together.”

Emily rolls her eyes. “Do you have any idea how that would look?”

Lisa in the kitchen, cleaning dishes.

“Worse than grounding, that's how.” Emily traces with her finger on the table.

The clink of plates from the next room.

A memory follows him to his study, where he tweaks plans for the Canada canoe trip. Then later into bed, into restless sleep. Emily at four, his family's Labor Day party on the quarry in Rockport. The water clear, bottomless. His sister claims to have touched. He has never managed it. Clark on the deck, absorbing sun. The smell of grilled meat. He

has told Emily no swimming. Too dangerous. Languid end-of-summer day. Something flickered behind his eyelids, a shadow or parental sixth sense. His eyes opened to see Emily fly off the dock, into the water and down. A corona of black hair lingering briefly at the surface. The longest seconds of his life to react. Respond. Dive. He feels that way again now. A loss of equilibrium. An inadequacy. He wonders what forces are at work here. But he is not someone who believes one person can control, or even influence, another's dream. Not someone who believes dreams follow us into waking life.

“Where you off to?” Emily in her bedroom, at her desk, her computer. Lisa is at yoga, Clark has his biking gear on. Backpack at his feet. Outside, it's dark and cold.

“Ward meeting.”

“Don't ride. Please.” She has her scarf wrapped loose around her throat. Hair pulled back. She is reflected in the skylight above her desk.

“Will it embarrass you?”

“Dad, the streets froze. There's ice. People don't ride in that. Not sane ones.”

“All kinds of people do. All year.”

“Why can't you take the bus? The car? For once.”

“Will power.”

“You are *so* strange.”

“You used to brag on that.”

“Yeah, well. I also used to like bluegrass.” A wind draws both their eyes to the skylight, a pattern of ice at its perimeter. “Which losing cause is this?”

“Governor. We can win this one.”

“Keep telling yourself that.” She says this with a smile. She flips the long end of her scarf over her right shoulder, gets up and kisses his cheek. “Be careful out there,” she says.

He shoulders his backpack, her voice soft behind him.

“This is something that happens, right?” she asks him. “I mean, it’s normal? This dream thing.”

They have always talked about the importance of honesty. Telling each other the truth. “I don’t know.” He puts his helmet on. He is a poster boy for safe riding. “Weird stuff happens sometimes. Let’s try to not make more of it than it is.”

She drinks from a water glass at the edge of her desk. A ring has worn itself into the wood. “I mean it’s developmental or something, right?” She kneads the end of the scarf in her fingers. “And it’s gonna be okay?”

“Yeah, kiddo.” He tries to think of something both truthful and reassuring.

“Nothing to worry about. Don’t stay up too late.”

Y

She is in the kitchen of their house, Emily is, and it’s sunny like in the other dream, light streaming in the south windows, and he is in the study looking at maps of the Northern Territories, scheming the canoe trip. The sun warms his left shoulder and he soaks that in because the rest of the house is so cold. He can see his breath, little puffs of vapor as he pores over the map. Emily rustling in the kitchen. Foraging. Cupboards

opening, closing. On the map, Canada is yellow. The border between Manitoba and Saskatchewan a snaking red line. Then breaking glass, and her voice calling out – *Dad.*

Dad. I broke a glass.

On the map, the pale green rectangle of North Dakota. *It's okay*, he says. *Just clean it up.* Michigan a purple mitten. He has always wanted to visit Saskatchewan. His goal for the trip is incidental encounters with moose.

A pause, then Emily's voice. *I need help.*

He leaves the map, pulls his shoulder out of the warm sun and into the kitchen where she clutches the broken glass in her hand. A jagged edge has cut into her wrist. Blood drips onto the floor. The sleeve of her sweater. How teenagers can be so oblivious. Though he walks toward her, he gets no closer than a few feet. Just beyond arm's reach. He notices this, but doesn't ponder it. He is focused on the glass cutting into her wrist, her fingers where she clutches it. Red blood against white cotton.

Emily, he says softly. *Put the glass down. You're hurting yourself.*

She looks puzzled, as if she can't hear what he's saying, or doesn't recognize him. He says it louder, takes a few steps toward her but the distance between them in the kitchen remains the same.

Emily, he says. *Your fingers.* And he mimes the gesture, unfolding the fingers of his one hand with the fingers of his other. *Let go.*

It is as if she is trying to listen to him, trying to understand what he asks. And as she tries, her hand clutching the glass squeezes tighter from the effort, and he can't stop saying *Let go* and she can't stop looking at him and squeezing, trying to understand or

trying to ignore and the blood runs down her forearm and into a growing puddle on the tile floor.

Let go.

Then, as if considering his request, his urging, she takes the hand clutching the glass and scratches at the side of her face. The jagged part of the glass cuts into her cheek and then her neck and blood drips across her collarbone and down into her sweater and onto the floor.

And he calls out to her to stop, loud now, and reaches for her hand which is just beyond his grasp, and she chuckles, as if he is mimicking her teenage tendency to drama. As if she found that amusing.