

Somnium

Sitting on a stump, looking out at the dark water, I realized it was more of a pond than a lake. But—and I don't know how I knew this—it was very, very deep.

There was a night chorus of katydids and peepers and crickets and chirping things, buzzy bugs. Every now and then I could hear something extraordinarily quiet flap past overhead, probably a bat, maybe an owl. We've got little barn owls around here. I don't know how I know that, either. Sometimes you just know something, even if it's not anything you need to know.

Anyway, as I was sitting there, I noticed on the other side of the lake was the house. All the lights were on. It's an enormous house, and I could see there were people in it, stuff going on, things like that.

Then I woke up. I guess I was a little disoriented for a couple seconds. Then I realized I was upstairs—in the house. Of course. I could hear people moving about; something was going on downstairs, not a loud party or anything, just that sense of activity way off.

It felt like there was something I needed to know, something I was supposed to find out. So I got up and started wandering around, and I tell you, I've been in that place a thousand times and I know it like the back of my hand, but this time I kept getting lost.

I stayed lost upstairs for a while, going in and out different rooms, and eventually found the stairs. My guess, a house that size probably has a lot more than one set of stairs. I should have remembered. Anyway, I went down and it turned out I must have been on the third floor, because I

still wasn't at the bottom where all the noise was coming from, and it was beginning to sound like a party after all.

There were people talking down the hall a ways, some open bedrooms and a couple of men and women standing around inside, and I wandered in to see if I could catch the drift of what they were talking about, or something like that.

For some reason, I didn't recognize any of the people, but they all seemed pretty serious, and they obviously knew what they were doing and where they were from, and what they were about. Some of them did begin to look familiar, but they ignored me.

I remember suddenly feeling bored, and going back out into the hallway—couple more bedrooms, more semi-strangers talking about stuff that didn't mean anything to me. It still wasn't very interesting, and they didn't seem interested in me one bit.

Down at the end of the hall there was another flight of stairs, like I expected, or maybe I already knew. This was the grand staircase, I guess, because it came out on the main floor right by the front door. Actually there was a whole bunch of front doors. That house was a pretty big place, and it all looked familiar, but you know how a place looks familiar but you still don't know your way around? I guess I hadn't been back for a while.

Anyway, there were quite a few people in the front hall, a big room with a wide staircase going up, and I thought I'd recognize somebody, but I didn't. And I was thinking, *I've woken up here before, but this time I wasn't in the bed, I was on top of the covers. Maybe I don't live here; I only happened to come to this party.* And I thought, *Well I've been to this party before, too.* I recognized the party even though I didn't seem to know anyone.

The main living room, or one of them, was jammed with people, all over the place, all kinds of people, and every one of them looked like I oughta know who they were, but I couldn't remember their names. But when I looked at their faces, I knew each one had a history, some kind of detailed background that maybe involved me, like we'd talked about it before.

I was feeling nervous about not remembering anybody's names. A couple people had turned when I walked in, and I thought I'd seen some glimmer of recognition. Somebody must know who I was, but I didn't know any of them, or why they knew me. Then I realized they were all

looking at me. But they were also still talking to each other, still talking like I wasn't there. But they were definitely looking at me. I could only make out snatches of what they were saying, as if they were too far away, and that made no sense at all, and then I woke up.

I was standing up—I hadn't been lying down in bed. I was standing, facing the bark of a tree from a couple inches away, so I couldn't figure out what it was at first; then I realized, *Hell, this is tree bark. What the hell am I doing looking at tree bark?* I turned around. I was alone in a clearing in the woods. A barn owl screeched off in the distance, way up high in the dark, only a little moonlight coming down through the trees. I couldn't tell if I was hot or cold, but everything seemed normal, ordinary. I didn't really feel anything.

It was time to get moving, don't know why, but definitely time to move on. I started walking through the trees, like I knew vaguely where I was going. I walked for a while, trees going by, and didn't recognize any landmarks, didn't see anything familiar, but the next second I was right out in the open, standing on the other side of that lake that wasn't big enough to be a lake, and across the deep water was that huge house I've seen so many times. Maybe I lived there once, or I used to visit the owners a long time ago.

It was all lit up. There was a party going on or something, downstairs, like there usually is. I could see people out on the patio. It had a couple of different patios. There were balconies too, on some of the upstairs rooms, and people on the balconies, laughing. I could hear tinkling of glasses and some voices, coming across the lake, and I thought, *Shit, I coulda sworn I was just in there*, but that's how I always feel when I see that house, like I'd just been in there a minute ago.

I thought back: *Yeah, you were just dreaming about being in that house. Now you woke up and you're in the woods, and the house is over there.*

Then I thought, *Naah, you weren't sleeping in the woods standing up, leaning your face against a tree in the middle of the night. That doesn't make any sense. You had to be sleeping somewhere, or doing something, but this wasn't it, so this has gotta be the dream. You're gonna wake up from here, for sure, and then you'll actually be somewhere, and that's what you've got to look forward to.*

For a while I stood there, waiting for myself to wake up, with the house

over on the other side of the lake, and the people coming and going. And I could hear their voices, but they were so far away I couldn't make out a single word anybody was saying. I thought, *Well, I guess the least I can do is walk the rest of the way around the lake and see what's going on.*

I started walking, water on my left, trees on my right. There's a big yard, lawn really, more like a field, out to the right side of that house, on the edge of the trees. It seemed like once I got out in the open again, out in that field in the moonlight, I'd be safe.

As I got closer to the open field, though, I realized I wasn't feeling safer at all. It wasn't like something was after me, don't get me wrong. I didn't think I was being chased or there was some kind of monster—it wasn't that kind of dream. It was one of those dreams where you get this uneasy feeling like you gotta keep moving and you gotta do something. I didn't know what it was but I figured if I got out in the open, somehow everything would become clear.

And then I was in the field again, and I stood there in the moonlight and not a damn thing was clear. I didn't know any more than I did before. But there was still something I was supposed to do, something that had been in the plan for a very long time. And I'm standing there thinking, *How can it go on like this.* And that's when I really woke up.

I awoke in my bed, in my bedroom, and I thought, *Oh, yeah, this is my house; I gotta go to the bathroom something fierce.* So I got up and went to the bathroom, and I'm thinking, *Geez, was that whole thing about the lake or the pond just some weird kind of water symbol to tell me I need to take a leak?* Is that the only reason I woke up? Or is that why the lake was in the dream, and if I hadn't had to pee it would have been some other dream entirely? I don't know. It's really hard to tell. You never know about these things.

I finished up in the bathroom and went back to bed. Everything looked normal: obviously it was my house. I had an important appointment tomorrow, so I needed to get some sleep. I've been feeling a little mistrustful about everything lately, but I figured, *No, I know this place, this is where I live, this is who I am.* And then while I was thinking, *Who is it that I am?*, I started to realize I wasn't at all sure. But the night plays tricks on you, so you never know exactly what's happening. I lay back down on the bed, and pulled the covers up and tried to relax, but I was feeling increasingly

nervous. Maybe it was the appointment, but I couldn't remember where I was supposed to be going.

I woke up with a start. I must have fallen asleep without even noticing, and I was still a little jumpy. As I was lying there in my bed looking around, I realized I wasn't actually in my bed. I was lying on top of the covers, and it also wasn't my bed. The room was huge and dark, still nighttime, and the walls were way too far away, and the bed was way bigger than my bed. I sleep in a twin-size because I live alone, and this was an ultra-king plus-size bed. It was long enough for a ten-foot person to stretch out and their toes wouldn't even reach the bottom, and it was wide enough for five or six of them to be sleeping next to each other and still think they were alone.

I rolled over three or four times to get to the edge of this damn thing, and I got off the bed and looked around. The room must have been 40 feet square, fifteen-foot ceiling or more with complicated carvings all around the edge, and a big chandelier hanging down in the middle. Hell, the bottom of that chandelier must have been six feet above my head.

I found the door, a great big oak door with double knobs, and I opened it up. Fortunately it did open, but boy that thing weighed a ton. There was a big hallway outside and I could hear voices downstairs. I thought, *Damn, is this part of the big house again?* And then I thought, *I don't know, it seems like just one dream after another.*

And then I woke up. I was back in my bed, my actual historical bed from real life, I think, and the sun was up, and I could hear traffic outside, and I looked around to figure out what day of the week it was, but the bedside clock said it was 9:00. It didn't say what day, what year. It didn't say what city I was in. But I knew I was back in town, and I knew it was Iowa, and I knew there was nothing much going on, just people driving to work or out to buy groceries, taking their kids to school, whatever. I heard the cars on the street, heard the swish of the tires, and I thought, *Oh, it's been raining.*

I got up, stretched, looked around, put on my pants and shirt, went out into the kitchen, poured a glass of orange juice, opened up the venetian blinds over the sink, and looked down on the street. My street's kind of small; the houses are kind of small. Everything was exactly the way it's supposed to be. Life was normal. And I figured, *Boy that's another one of these long nights, a lot of confusing shit going on, waking up, and dreaming*

about waking up, and waking up from another dream, and dreams inside of dreams.

Or maybe it wasn't dreams inside of each other, maybe it was one dream after another, and I'd wake up and immediately fall asleep again in a different dream. I don't know. I don't know how that stuff works. It sure doesn't work any way that makes sense. But it's probably not supposed to make sense, being a dream and all, so I stood there in the kitchen, drinking my orange juice, looking out the window, thinking, *Thank God that's over.*

I glanced at the calendar. It's the fourth of July, and I thought, *Oh hell, we're gonna have fireworks tonight.* And then the phone rang.

It was Dan. I wish he wouldn't always call so early. I grumbled hello.

"What's the problem?" he said. "Are your dreams still bothering you?"

"No, it's the waking up," I said.

"You mean you'd rather be dreaming?"

"No, no, it's waking up again."

"I don't follow you."

"I keep waking up. I don't go to sleep—I wake up. I'm dreaming and then I wake up. And then I wake up again and realize I was just dreaming, but now I'm awake. And then I wake up again. It's the same damn thing over and over—I think I'm awake, but then I wake up, so I must have been dreaming." I stopped and stared at the ceiling: cottage cheese. "It's not really sleep," I said. "Just dreaming and waking up, ceaselessly. I can't even tell what awake is anymore."

"Shit," Dan said. "That sounds annoying as hell."

"It is."

"Did you see that guy about it?"

"No. How could he help?"

"I don't know. Oh, I've got a message for you from Beverley."

"Beverley? Why is she giving you messages?"

"I don't know."

"She could call me herself, can't she? Why doesn't she?"

"I told you, I don't know."

"So what's the damn message anyway?"

"She said it's over and she's done and—you should wake the fuck up."

"That's not funny," I said. Dan's always had a pretty warped sense of humor.

"I'm not joking. That's exactly what she said."

"Right. Well, you can tell her it's been over for a month and I don't need her to remind me."

Dan didn't say anything for a minute, and I was about to hang up.

"One more thing," Dan said.

"What's that?"

"Your blanket's on the floor."

He was right. I must have kicked off the blanket, and the bedroom was getting chilly. I felt around in the dark and dragged the blanket back onto the bed. *Nice of Dan to mention it*, I thought, and went back to sleep.

When I woke up, I was in the huge bedroom. No, it was a different bedroom, but not my own—I don't think. It wasn't as big as the other one; no chandelier either. I started to turn over, but there were wires all over me and a big plastic box by my pillow. I was trying to figure out what the hell was going on when a young woman in a lab coat opened the door a crack and whispered, "You about ready to get up?"

I looked around the room and remembered it was the Sleep Center at the county hospital. The technician came in and smiled at me. I looked up at her dumbly while reality slowly refilled my brain, displacing all the confusions of the night.

"Did I get much sleep?" I asked.

She shook her head. "You moved around a lot, but you were only in REM for about thirty seconds, just before you opened your eyes. You didn't actually sleep more than a couple of minutes."

I stared at her and she said, "It wasn't long enough to get any valid measurements. I'm afraid you'll have to do another session."

That was disappointing. It wasn't all that bad an experience, but getting hooked up was uncomfortable, and sleeping with dozens of wires all over me obviously didn't work very well. I could have sworn I was asleep for hours. I couldn't remember anything before the long series of crazy dreams. I wondered, *How could they all fit into 30 seconds of REM?*, but I didn't ask.

"Would you like to get rid of these wires?" she said.

I nodded, and she began undoing the colored tangle that festooned my head and chest. The EEG electrodes were glued on with sticky white paste, not just on my head but on my face. Sticky pads with snaps on them dotted

my torso and ankles, and there was a sensor taped to my nose to measure breathing. *What would we ever do without all these handy adhesives?*

She left me alone to finish getting up. I took a long shower and soaped off the white glue in my hair, and by the time I was dressed I felt like myself again.

As I was signing out at her desk, I said, "Are you sure I wasn't asleep? The whole night's a blank, except for a long series of really detailed dreams." I didn't mention about waking up from one dream to the next. How do you explain something like that?

She looked up with a seminar expression and said, "Dreams can seem to take hours, even if they're only a few minutes long. In a dream your sense of time isn't real."

She sounded like she was reading; obviously she had no insights to offer, and it wasn't her job. I thanked her and left, glad to be out of the medical complex. She'd been attentive and friendly, though, so I didn't hold it against her.

Later that week I made an appointment with my neurologist to go over the results of the sleep study. He was a tall thin guy, fairly old, and he listened passively while I told him my problem.

"It's perfectly normal," he said, tilting back in his desk-chair. "Characters in your dream can have entire back-stories as elaborate as any movie or novel. You can have memories in a dream that go back for decades, even if it's the first time you had the dream."

"Then what's the difference between dream memories and real memories?"

"There isn't any," he said. He paused, to enjoy the shock value.

"But then how do we know we're awake?"

"Because experiences in waking state come through the senses, and in a dream the senses are turned off. Dream experiences all come from inside."

"You mean it's only the senses that tell us it's the real world?" That was a more tenuous connection than I would have liked.

"Exactly. The brain doesn't keep track of non-sensory experiences. It even produces chemicals that help you forget dreams so they don't create confusion."

I thought about that. “Maybe my dream-forgetting chemistry is out of whack,” I said.

“I suppose that’s possible, but I’d recommend you get a sleep study first. To get a baseline.”

“That’s why I’m here,” I said. “You ordered the study a few days ago, but apparently I didn’t sleep more than a couple minutes.”

The doctor said something, but I couldn’t hear him. His mouth moved, but there was only silence. Was I suddenly deaf? I jumped up, pushing my chair back, but there was no sound and my hands were numb.

The doctor stood up, too, alarmed at my reaction. He appeared to be talking, but I couldn’t hear anything. And the light was going dim.

Soon it was black as night, but I could smell the sweet pine trees and feel the crunch of twigs underfoot. I could hear the familiar chorus of katydids and peepers, and see the lights and the people in the big house across the water.