

Dreamer

A Science Fiction Story By Noah Goble

11th Grade

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It was April 13th, 2096 when the first Dreamer subject was approached. I remember that because it was me. I remember that day because of how the rain felt; it landed with such impact, seeming to almost force my head down under my heated windbreaker. I was glad to get out of it at the time, walking into the massive university building anticipating a pretty significant payoff. My fourteen year old daughter needed surgery, so I did whatever I could for cash. But I'll never forget how real that rain was, the sheer force with which it seemed to exist, far beyond the influence of anything as minuscule as human thoughts or wills.

I was the very first test subject for a brand new technology which allowed a machine to control our dreams. The trial I took part in was extremely illegal, only carried out out of a kind of impatience on the part of the technology's inventor. She thought she knew her idea was perfect; she thought this was her destiny. Of course, that all changed after me.

The first thing they had me do was just sit and dream, with the technology in the form of a cage around my head sending some kind of wave into my brain. I remember the room clear as day; it was the building's basement, so it was filled with humming machines, while the walls were the grey cement of the foundation. There was so much depth in that cement. So much detail invariably unseen, so much to explore. The basement was fairly large, and the place they brought me was situated in the far back of it, with the building's utilities and laundry and everything else blocking any view from the door. Pipes and wires hung from the ceiling and dust clung to almost every available surface. Except for where they brought me.

There was not much there but a chair and two folding tables, each aggressively plastic white, each filled with scattered monitors and untraceable wiring. The chair was simple, likely taken from a classroom, but sporting a metal apparatus mounted on the back which allowed for the wearing of the machine, while also containing a crudely attached pillow for the user's head. I

remember the contraption looking like a scorpion's tail, the crude piece of clumsily printed metal arching up and over the chair.

So I sat in that chair for about thirty minutes, going in and out of weird "test dreams." They would inject me with a sleeping agent and I would move from our world quickly into a strange one, a world of grids and numbers and formless shapes containing infinite mass and yet somehow no substance, a world I never knew was a dream, though I suppose that's how they always go. When I came to they would question me, asking what I saw, confirming that their projections had reached the wall of my unconscious imagination. This part, the head doctor explained, she had tested before herself, but it was necessary to carry out the same tests on any new subjects. And after the third test they were done, and then the real work could begin.

An air of excitement and anticipation had already hung over the room, but the moment the head scientist (Anita Sze, a name I thought I'd always remember) uttered almost casually the words "let's move on," the place took on a frenetic quality. Each of the four grad-student assistants moved to and fro from monitor to monitor, clicking and typing here and there while I sat dumb and waiting, expectant, almost curious as to what was in store. Finally, their fearless leader turned to me, saying "we're going to try to give you control now, like in a lucid dream. Make sure you remember who you are and what you're doing. When you get in everything will be formless, so you should try to effect change on your surroundings somehow. Create something and destroy it, or shape something, do whatever. It'll be weird, but the experience should normalize after a bit. Once you've done that, try making the dream into a memory, something you know well, maybe from your house or workplace. Good luck" were the final words of her speech, the last words that were said to me. I remember nodding, the pain of the

needle, and then the slow onset of the dark waiting to greet me. When I opened my eyes, I was inside of myself.

This dream world was how Sze had described it: formless. I was surrounded by the pure essence of void, lacking structure, lacking everything but me. I remembered to remember who I was: Keane Taylor, New York native, husband, and father. I remembered what I was doing: an illegal test of illegal technology that paid enough to get me the drugs my daughter needed. I sighed a sigh of relief, then realized I could sigh. I looked down at my hands, at my body, at my clothes, and realized that I could feel them, almost as if I contained them. I imagined my hand moving, and so it moved. I raised it, still not used to this strange connected disconnect, and tried to do as Sze had said: to make something. I imagined a small bird out of the nothingness, dove white with a golden beak, and to my astonishment, it came to be. It was motionless until I gave it movement, and then I imagined it moving without me and it did that too, hopping and chirping as all birds do, resting still in the palm of my hand. I imagined it flying and it flew. Marveling at this power of mine, I tried to make the nothing into something. I gave it solid ground and gravity, and made attempts at trees spring up, painting the formless solid below me with grass and mud, giving it hills and crevices with something close to instinct. I continued shaping the world around me until I realized I was carving into this imaginary stone a scene from my childhood, a hilly area back behind my house where I, an only child, would play. The trees were the same light, sunny green; the tall grass with a hint of blue swayed in the wind; the sky (I only just then realized I had painted a sky) was home to wispy clouds and a strong, bright blue. I felt warm because that was what felt right, and then the scene was complete.

I estimate around an hour had passed of playing around before I noticed that something was wrong. I had remade countless memories, artfully sculpting the world around me with the

glee of a child who has just discovered fingerpainting. I didn't want to stop in the slightest, so I didn't think about the fact that at some point I had to. So it took me awhile to notice that I was supposed to have been pulled out of this dream quite a long time ago. I carried on with my creation, pushing the slightly nervous thoughts to the back of my mind, determined to treasure every second with this world I could make. I did, however, quickly make a watch, forming its brown leather around my wrist and setting it in motion with a gratuitous flick of my fingers.

Four hours later, I was beginning to worry in earnest. Eighteen hours after that, I was on the verge of panic. I spent the next six days doing just that, to varying degrees; panicking. There isn't much like the feeling of being trapped in a world. My wife would have to care for my daughter all on her own, my daughter might not survive without the money I brought in. On the second day, I grieved for them, overcome with a kind of all-consuming terror. My creations crumbled around me as I curled up and cried, not needing food or water, not having any reason to change my position. Some part of me still hoped for rescue from the prison of my mind. It began to rain after the first day, but the rain was different, uninteresting, entirely apart from the unforgiving reality of its real counterpart. I made massive messages to the scientists whom I had now begun to hate. At first, they were simple, something like "let me out," but they grew steadily more emotional as the days past. On the fifth day, I was consumed with this hatred, cursing those who I then considered my captors for carrying out their experiments. On the sixth day, I was numb, trying over and over to create phantoms of my loved ones, phantoms which ultimately crumbled because they could never compare to reality. It's hard to know somebody well enough to make them from scratch, even somebody as close as a wife or a daughter.

On the 7th day, I accepted it. I stood up, shakily making ground around me, stopping the rain that had gone on all those days without getting me wet. Almost in a trance, I made a bird

again. that same golden beaked dove. I watched it as it flew. Looking up at my sky cloudy with sadness, I parted the clouds and made a sun far above to cast rays through them. Those rays illuminated nothing, so I made earth for them to illuminate, raising my arms and letting my subconscious take control as green grassy hills and valleys flooded out from under me. I made trees, bringing them together into a forest. And as I raised myself up into what was now air to take stock of my amazing made-up world, I laughed. I was a god.

My watch had stayed somehow through my grieving, so I used it to give my world time. I swept the sun down below my earth so that darkness crept across my land for twelve hours of every twenty-four. I made myself a thousand flowers, some real and some imaginary, and let them fill the land around me in a gently sweeping circle. And in the center of this circle, I made a round clearing that I filled with the purest of grey cobblestones. There at the center of my mighty garden, I made for myself a table, and upon it I placed fruits and bread of all kinds. I did not need to eat in this world, but I could imagine the taste of something, and that meant I could experience it. And so, silently, I ate, pondering my plans.

My goal was to make life bearable here. I realized as I ate that there was some essential aspect to taste that involved surprise; which is to say that eating food exactly as I had imagined it could not mimic true tasting. But it was something, so I ate on. I decided that I needed something to do, some challenge to overcome. I was all-powerful here, so any challenges would have to be either mental ones or creative ones. I began to get thousands of ideas, now having my imagination unconstrained by the bounds of reality. I could create beautiful cities and natural wonders, painstakingly altering every detail to perfection. My mind rushed to a fantastical place that had captivated my childhood mind: Avalon, King Arthur's realm of magic and fairies.

Overcome with a kind of inspiration, I was able to put the pain in my heart to the back of my mind as I focused on building this pointless project.

I spent two and a half weeks on Avalon, making five cities, dozens of towns, and thousands of acres of landscape that seemed to flow with a natural magic, containing glowing plants and lakes still as glass and wondrous, beautiful creatures. I had planned another two cities and their accompanying villages and land, but I had to confront myself with the fact that I was very quickly getting bored. I had completed the first three cities with an enthusiastic vigor, spreading my creative wings for the first time since middle school. But the last two had been relatively uninspired, and as I made more and more I began to realize that it was sad and useless without the thing that made cities and towns and landscapes live: people. So after those two and a half weeks, I began a new, much more complex project: I made fae folk. Tall and elegant, they were like humans except long haired and pointy-eared and somehow more handsome. I made the first two, male and female, and then I let the variations play out in my subconscious, making hundreds. But these were simply mere bodies; I needed to imagine them alive for them to live at all. I set aside five of the bodies, holding the others up in the sky with my mind as I did my best to breathe life into my selections. I imagined them getting up, and they did; I imagined them walking, and they did; I imagined them speaking, each with a different voice, and they did. But just as my beautiful birds couldn't do much more than fly in circles, so too were my fae folk dumb. And no matter what I made them do, I could not make them think or feel or be as I was, as every living thing must do to be alive. They were nothing more than beautiful puppets.

I abandoned the skeletons of the fae folk, wiping them from existence with a wave of my hand, to focus on something a bit more familiar. I made people, male and female, and I imagined them thinking, looking around, seeing the world. But I could not fully imagine their

experience, and so when I looked into their eyes I saw staring back at me none but my own, for while I was not controlling them, they were still me. They knew nothing I did not know, could see nothing I could not see, could be nothing I had not been. On some level, I knew that, but I felt the overwhelming grief of my family's loss at the back of my mind, and I knew truly that I could not be idle, for even a second. So I devoted myself to that project, to imagining fully the one thing I could not imagine, to create a person. After the first month, I started talking aloud to myself, and after the second month, I started answering. Still, my grief hounded me onward as I tried angle after angle, attempt after attempt. I quickly stopped destroying them, and my magical lands were soon filled with my rejects, my puppets, my broken half-people. I barely thought about the world around me anymore, and slowly it began to fade with my inattention as I stopped imagining it. The parts that stayed grew gray and rotten; my trees died and my castles crumbled and my automatons moved on, occasionally saying aloud the odd phrase. I suppressed my grief, so it made itself visible in the world that surrounded me; every day I was haunted my everything I saw. I saw no reason to wash it away and replace it with the sunny flower gardens of the time before. I was concentrated on my work, my impossible task.

Three times I thought I had succeeded, and each time some flaw had been quickly revealed, and then my creations were discarded, thrown out into the rest of my fading world. As it reminded me of my grief I fled from it, and so I slowly began to lose control over my world. As my ever faithful watch marked six months spent in my imagination I began to see phantoms of my lost loved ones, fleeting and faded. They were rare at first, but became more common as more time passed and I surrendered more and more of my world, pouring my imagination into the creation of mankind. Then my default human bodies with which I played began to be replaced by copies of my wife and daughter, then of my parents, then of my friends, all of those

who I had abandoned in the world outside this prison of my dreams. I had forgotten about the doctors, forgotten about the experiment, forgotten all of the real world except those who I loved.

Finally, as my world was almost entirely beyond my control, I made a breakthrough. I made a person who was an amalgamation of how I imagined my loves. I imagined it would learn from each one as I had, calling upon different personalities to achieve something very close to dynamic thought. It wasn't a true person, but it was a very very good illusion. So good that I thought I had done it. I looked at my creation, whose body was that of my mother's, and I interrupted my now ceaseless muttering to ask them hello. I barely felt my subconscious make them respond as I imagined. I hugged them, and the warmth of their body felt just as I imagined a living, thinking, feeling body would feel. I was fooling myself. And as I embraced them I felt them fading, felt my last small inch of control be surrendered to the cosmos of my subconscious brain. As I felt the phantoms of my family surround me, some part of me wondered if I would die.

There was nothing but bright light and noise, the noise of beeping instruments and keyboards clacking. I looked up and saw a familiar face, one that inspired a kind of hatred in me. I heard her say "hi, you awake?" and some part of me felt the ground ripped out from under it, felt the unexpectedness of that phrase, felt that no part of me had imagined that that would happen. I breathed in and felt the cold of air that was unfamiliar, I moved my fingers and touched a cold that felt like metal. The woman leaning over me repeated her question, and I tried to say something but couldn't. My brain stumbled and fell over any words far before they could make it to my mouth. "You've been asleep for almost four hours now, we couldn't get you up manually" the words seemed to bounce off of my brain, leaving the way they came in. I tried to stand and

succeeded, feeling something fall away from my head, and as I looked and saw the infinite intricacies of the concrete wall and saw the two people standing in front of me, I heard that same voice say “we called your wife in case there was some risk, I hope you don’t object to your daughter being down here.” And I saw my wife’s eyes, lined with worry, light up at the sight of me; I saw my daughter running forward to greet me; I saw in their eyes that they were there behind them, and as tears began to run down my face I pulled them both into an embrace that was the most real an embrace could be.