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THESE ARE THE MOMENTS WHEN dream sharing truly feels like a gift.

"So," Alice says after the end of a particularly long giggle fest, "are you ready to try again?"

"Sure thing," I say. "Are you?"

"Always always," she says, and her voice has changed again, assuming that sparkling quality that echoes in my mind as she speaks. She has definitely recovered, and is back to her idealized self.

I scoot the picnic basket over to the edge of the blanket, and Alice and I sit facing one another. Alice smiles before closing her eyes and begins to breathe slowly and deeply. I know that she is forming a picture of the boy in her head and searching for those emotional connections that she will need in order to pull him into our dream. As she does this, I close my own eyes, breathing just as slowly and just as deeply as she does; however, instead of forming an image of the boy we will be bringing into our dream, I am slowly forming an image of what will become the new surroundings of the dream itself. Like a home buyer working with an architect, I grab onto the image of a diner that we both know well, one that we ate at in the real world a million times before Alice moved to Colorado. It was another year before my family moved away as well, but although a year has passed for me and two for Alice since we last sat in our corner booth together, the diner is forever etched in our memory. In many ways, that diner was our public Grove.

I imagine that we are sitting in our usual booth. I think about the cold feel of the deep red and white vinyl cushioned seats against my back and legs. I imagine the cool of the linoleum table and the grittiness of the chipped corner of "our" table. I remember the ticking sound of the blinds tapping softly against the window, pushed there by the artificial breeze of the air conditioner and the ceiling fans. I let myself sink deeper into the image, concentrating on making this memory, this little corner, as perfect and as real as I possibly can. I continue to clarify and enhance my mental picture until I feel as if I could open my eyes and actually see the table, the window overlooking the front patio area, the little basket of condiments and straws, and the miniature sized, faux jukebox, advertising hits from the 40s through the 70s that sits against the window in each booth.

When I am certain that the vision in my head is as real and as clear as I can make it, I slowly spread out and away from myself, adding additional booths and people. As I do this, I add the sounds of muffled conversations, punctuated by brief moments of laughter that explode out, only to just as quickly die down into a murmur again. I imagine the normal smells that welcomed me into the diner: the scent of hamburgers on the grill, with a hint of onion in the air so strong that I can almost taste it. I inch ever outward, filling the walls of the diner with the memories of past events and people that have remained in my mind for all these years, springing to the surface every time I think of this place.

I enhance my mental image with imagined details, events and people that, while not strictly real, are as true to the spirit of this diner as my actual memories. I tweak minor details here and there until it feels absolutely perfect, as if I am sitting inside a real memory, one that is as fresh and vibrant as if it had just happened a moment ago. I hold this image and the feelings that accompany it for a long moment, convincing myself that it is not merely a memory, but real and here and now. I begin to slowly let go, feeling my control over the construction fade. With

every little bit that I let go, I feel the image shudder for a split second, then take hold and persist. *It's working.* When I have completely let go, I take one last deep breath and open my eyes. What I have seen and smelled and heard in my head is now mirrored perfectly in my current surroundings. I am no longer in The Grove, but seated in that far away Philadelphia diner. *Success.*

Alice is sitting on the opposite side of the table. Her eyes are still closed and her hands are resting flat and palm down on the cool table. I reach across and gently pat her hand to let her know I am finished. The corner of her mouth tilts up just slightly in an almost invisible smile. After a moment, she takes a slow, deep breath and opens her eyes as she exhales. When she realizes where we are, her slight smile becomes a beaming grin, and her eyes widen even more in both approval and excitement. She is fully here, having let go of her previous surroundings and accepted my creation, and if her efforts were successful as well, then she has brought someone with her.

We both look around, trying to spot the mistake in the dream. Sharing is easy, at least for the two of us. Pulling someone else in, however, can be difficult. In the many, many attempts we have made in the past, we have discovered two things. The first is that it is extraordinarily difficult to pull someone else into our dreams, although a strong connection can make things much easier. It could be a strong emotional attachment, as with Alice and me, or a relative, or a crush, or direct physical contact, which I discovered when my sister and I would sleep in the same bed and our physical contact brought us into the same dream. The second discovery we made is that while Alice and I can bring other people to our dreams, we've never been able to perfect entering someone else's dream. We have seen brief glimpses of their dreams, but it has never lasted for more than a few seconds before everything melts away and either we are back in our dreams alone, or we have carried someone else across the threshold with us.

On those rare occasions when we successfully transport someone over into our dreams, the person we bring over always carries something along with them. There is always some hint, some blemish, of the other person's thoughts and will in our dream world. After we learned the first lesson, we worked together and developed concentration methods through trial and error that have made things easier, and after we learned the second lesson, we started crafting perfectly ordered surroundings to make the imperfections easier to spot. After all, without the incongruities to identify a visitor, it is impossible to know for sure if we were just dreaming about someone, or if they were actually present and sharing our dream with us.

At first I am drawn to a corner booth, where a man in a dark suit is sitting. No coffee, no food, no menu. He is just sitting there. He doesn't appear to be doing anything, just staring off into space, and he seems oddly familiar, although I can't put my finger on it. I start to point him out to Alice, but she speaks before I can.

"There," Alice says, motioning towards the front door. I look, and there it is, clear as the noonday sun. Where the hostess's podium usually stands, housing menus and silverware wraps, I see a pile of dirt. Not just a pile of dirt such as what one would find in an empty lot, but specifically it is a pitcher's mound. Standing on the mound, right in the front lobby of the diner, is a baseball player. He is in full uniform and cleats, one hand hidden in a glove, the other clutching a ball as if it is a life preserver. Alice and I have spent a few dreams pulling him in quickly to see what he brings with him, and peeking at his dreams for a few seconds before they shimmer away. Every time we have pulled him in we have released him before he spotted Alice, and every time we have peeked into his dreams we have concealed ourselves very well. A majority of the time his dreams, either as his own or as the additions he brought along into

our world, have had something to do with baseball. Alice already knew of his affection for the game just by being observant and talking to him in the real world, but her socialization skills only go so far out there. Baseball is one of his favorite things in the world, and so not surprisingly here he is, dreaming about the game once again. At least, he was until he was pulled into a random diner he has never seen before. He looks as confused as, well, as a high school pitcher from Colorado who was about to wind up to pitch and then suddenly found himself standing in the entryway of a small east coast eatery. He's actually handling it better than I would have.

In all of the times Alice and I have skulked around his dreams, I've never got a clear look at him. I was always paying more attention to his surroundings or to what he had brought with him. I recognize his basic physical attributes, but only now do I look squarely at his face and see him.

"Okay, you were right," I say. "He *is* handsome."

"I told you!" Alice says, standing up. She walks over to the boy, who removes his hat to scratch his head, exposing his blonde hair cut short and combed perfectly, except for the small swatch of chaos that he just created with his head scratching.

"Hello, Jackson," Alice says, and only then do I notice that she has changed her clothes. Gone is her blue dress with white apron, white stockings, and black slippers. Gone as well is her headband, along with her straight, long hair. She is now wearing faded denim jeans with black and white high top tennis shoes. Her hair is pulled back into a sloppy ponytail, falling long over what appears, from the back, to be a baseball jersey. I smile. That's the Alice I know, acutely aware of the wants and preferences of others. If only she could see just how adorable she is when she is simply being herself.

"Alice? Hello." Jackson, a head taller than Alice, looks around confused. He looks down, and doesn't seem to notice that the mound of dirt has disappeared, and he is standing next to the hostess's station, which has miraculously reappeared. But that's the power - and malleability - of dreams. "I'm supposed to... I was..."

"You won't be late for the game, I promise," Alice answers.

"But I was just there. Like one second ago."

"I know, but you wanted to take me out to eat, remember?" Alice's voice changes ever so slightly, become more musical, less real.

"I... I guess so," Jackson says, neither looking nor sounding convinced.

"It was delicious, thank you," Alice says, confusing him even more. "So, what did you want to ask me?" When Jackson, against all odds, looks even more confused, Alice explains patiently, "Remember? You said you wanted to ask me something... something about next weekend. But then the food arrived, so you didn't get the chance." She bats her eyes a little and adds helpfully, "Is it something about the dance?"

Even in this perfectly constructed world that we almost completely control, I can see that Alice is nervous now. Before I agreed to this, we both promised that we wouldn't try to influence Jackson in any way. No creating a dream where they are already at the dance together, or dropping him into a dream where he is picking her up for the dance, or anything like that. If he doesn't like her, he won't ask her, either here in the dream or out there in reality. If he *does* like her, then this is just a confidence boost, a push into an action he is already okay with, and not us making his decision for him.

Jackson stands there quietly for a minute, then clears his throat and says, "Well, um, I really like you, Alice."

"I like you, too," she replies, rocking up onto her toes.

"So, um, maybe... maybe we could go to the dance together?"

"I'd love that!" she exclaims, her face blushing red, even here in her dream, and clasping her hands in delight. "But Jackson" - and here is the closest she comes to actual outright manipulation, although it still firmly remains on the "confidence nudge" side of the fence - "You could have just asked me in class, and I would have said yes."

Jackson smiles sheepishly. "Okay. I'll remember that for next time."

Alice smiles back and puts her hand on his elbow. "Now go win your game."

Jackson smiles back, turns, and leaves the diner, his cleats tapping against the tile floor. The walkway to the parking lot passes right by the window at our booth, but I don't see him walk past us. That means he has faded away and is back in his own dream now, and out of ours.

Alice returns to her seat, where I've created two giant chocolate milkshakes for us to enjoy as we celebrate a job well done. She is smiling broadly, and bounces with excitement. Her jersey is gone, and she is back in her blue dress. The ponytail is gone, too, and her hair is, as always, perfect.

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THE NEXT MORNING, MY GRANDMOTHER sits beside me while I eat my breakfast. Although she has her own little cottage style house at the Sunrise Center, ever since my grandfather passed away she has taken to spending the night with us once or twice a week, sleeping in our guest room. My parents have tried several times to convince her to just move in with us, but she is adamant about her freedom. "I am not helpless, like a child," she told them firmly. Most of the discussions were between my father and her while my mother looked on, because my grandmother's limited English hindered the conversation, and she would quickly abandon her English and argue at light speed in her native tongue, which only my father spoke fluently.

On the days my grandmother spends the night, she always makes breakfast for the family the next morning. She never eats before we do, but she always makes it, and she always sits with us while we benefit from her early rising. She is a woman of her native land, and for someone who never eats with us, and eats very little when she does eat, my grandmother loves large breakfasts. Sausages, toast, several different cheeses, and cuts of cold meats fill the table. On the mornings she stays here with us I eat a larger breakfast than I do dinner, since the very idea of a waffle or toast or a single bowl of cereal for breakfast is horrendous and utterly unacceptable to her. "Snacks," she would say in disgust. "Mere snacks. That is no meal." I know that by the time we have all eaten and departed almost nothing will remain of her efforts, and it is probably from those few leftovers that my grandmother will build her morning meal. I often wonder what she makes when she is alone in her home, without four people to appreciate (and, more importantly, consume) her massive meals.

Even though it is a Saturday, and that's my day to sleep in, the smells coming from downstairs get me up and out of bed at almost the same time I usually wake up for school during the week. My parents have both eaten already, and my little sister Victoria is still blissfully unconscious upstairs, so it is just me and my Grandmother at the table. Mornings like this happen only once or twice a month, and I am not one to let an opportunity pass.

I respect Alice's fears, and in the midst of her sobs last night I gave her my word that I would be very careful and that I wouldn't let anyone find out about what we could do, but as I

sit here eating, I can't escape my desire to know more. As I fiddle with my ring, my grandmother notices and says, "You are worried. What is worrying you?" As she asks she reaches across the table and pats my hand, noticing my ring. "Katalin's ring? You still wear this?" Everyone in my family says 'CAT ah lin,' but my grandmother says her friend's name like 'KAW tau leen.' I love her accent.

"Yeah," I smile. "And there was a matching one that I sent to my friend."

I know my grandmother is sad. Katalin was her closest friend. For years they lived next door to one another in the cottage homes at the Sunrise Center. Katalin's husband had died the summer before my grandparents moved there, and she had no other family. In fact, when her health had finally declined to such an extent that she could no longer take care of herself independently, it was my family that had helped her move. The only person I know of in Katalin's family beside her deceased husband is her sister, who died several decades ago, before Katalin moved to America. Her only remaining "family" consists of her friends at the Sunrise Center, of whom my Grandmother is her closest and dearest friend. We have even had her over for holidays, and on a few occasions she has commented on how much I resembled her sister. I can't imagine having no living relatives. My father has three surviving siblings, all sisters, and my mom has four brothers and a sister, which has brought me and my sister thirteen uncles and aunts and eighteen cousins. The idea of being alone, with no surviving family, is utterly foreign to me.

A few weeks ago, Katalin didn't come down for breakfast in the main cafeteria. After making a check-up call to her room and receiving no answer, the orderlies at the Center paid her a visit, and they found her in her bed, in a coma. There she has remained, silent and unresponsive, and from what my grandmother has told us, she will be unplugged soon if there is no change, as per her personal directive. My grandmother has not given up on her, though. She still visits her friend almost every day that she is home and not here with us, reading to her, talking to her about the day's events, and generally treating her like a living person. My father thinks it's silly. My mother thinks it's sweet. I think it's sad.

"That is good," my grandmother says. "I am happy to see you wearing that. It is as if you carry some of her with you, and she is so ill."

"Yeah," I say, turning the ring around my finger with my thumb, not sure what I can do or say to help my grandmother feel better. I opt, as I usually do, for direct honesty. "I'm really sorry about your friend, Grandma."

She waves her hand and wipes her eyes, looking to the ceiling while taking a long, drawn out breath. "Bah. It is no matter. This is the course of life, yes? We live, we love, we move on." She regains her composure and leans forward. "Now, what is troubling you, my little flower?"

I take another bite from the feast before me, thinking carefully and trying to figure out a way to proceed. On the second swallow, I come up with something that I believe simultaneously protects Alice, respects her wishes, allows me to keep my word, and satisfies my curiosity. I understand Alice's fears as best as I can having never experienced them myself, but my grandmother is the only one I can talk to about things like this without being stared at like I'm a freak or being laughed at and dismissed for being childish. It's a resource I can't ignore, even if I can't tell her everything.

"Grandma," I say, chewing the last bit of sausage, "What does it mean if you dream of a large bird watching you? I mean, does that mean something in, like, traditional folklore or anything? Is it, like, important or anything?" I try very hard to seem as nonchalant as possible, but secretly I am hanging on her pause and body language, eager for her to tell me anything.

My grandmother is very superstitious, and she absolutely loves sharing her "Old Country" knowledge with anyone who will listen. My father wants nothing to do with any of it, and he won't allow it to be discussed in his presence, so that makes moments like this even more special for her, and I know she will talk about it since it is one of the rare times when it is possible in our house. Although, with the language barrier presented by her limited vocabulary, I am not entirely sure that she even knows what "folklore" means. Regardless, she sits up straighter and clasps her hands, resting them on the table and choosing her words carefully, her sentences punctuated at odd intervals as she seeks out the words to express herself.

"What type of bird was this? What color? What size?" Her words, as usual, are thickly accented and delivered slowly, controlled, and almost over-announced. She says 'What' instead of 'What' each time, and somehow turns 'size' into a two syllable word, which makes me smile. She is absolutely serious, facing me fully and furrowing her brows in concentration.

I swallow the sausage and take a drink of my milk, swishing it around in my mouth before swallowing. "Um," I say, trying to act as if I was trying to remember, like it wasn't that big of a deal to me and just breakfast table small talk. "I think it was black. And it was very large. Like a giant crow maybe."

My grandmother furrows her eyebrows even more and taps her wrinkled but delicate finger on the table as she thinks. After a moment she opens her mouth, but instead of giving an answer, she suddenly inhales sharply and puts her hand to her chest, a look of pain fluttering across her face as she clenches her eyes shut. She slumps down in her chair and takes several deep breaths, finally opening her eyes again, moaning slightly.

"Grandma, are you okay?" I ask. I lean over the table and take her hand. It is cold and clammy. "Should I get mom? I'll go get mom."

"No, no," she says, her breathing strained but regular again. "I am fine. It is the... what is the word... my heart has fire."

"Fire?" I say. "I don't understand."

"From spices and things. A fire. A burn in my heart." I can see beads of sweat forming across her forehead.

"Heartburn?" I offer.

"Yes. The heartburn. It is just some of the heartburn. I am fine." She smiles weakly.

"Grandma," I begin questioning, but she cuts me off.

"My little one, I am fine." She says it with the tone one uses with a pleading child in a toy store. One that is crystal clear: the discussion is over.

I sit back in silence. I know that it isn't heartburn, and I know that this isn't the first time this type of pain has overcome her. I've seen her pause before, hand to chest, breathing and wincing. But I also know just how stubborn my grandmother can be, and if she has decided that the discussion is over, then the discussion is over, and nothing is going to change that.

"Well now," she asks, drawing me back to our original conversation. "Tell me, child, what does this bird do? Does it only watch you?"

Hmmm. Just how close am I willing to come to the line Alice does not want me to cross? "I don't know, Grandma. I was just curious. Um, let's say there is nothing else," I say. "It is just there in my dreams sometimes, no matter what I might be dreaming, just watching me." I finish my glass of milk and stand, adding, "But sometimes it feels like it might be more. Like it is frustrated or angry with me, or it wants me to see something... or it wants to tell me something. I don't know. I can't explain it very well."

Grandma cocks her head slightly and looks at me for a long, quiet, awkward moment, as if she is trying to decide just how personally invested I am in my question. I hold her gaze as confidently as I can, trying to conceal my nervousness. She finally relaxes a little and answers, "Birds are messengers - they are carriers. Perhaps this creature has something to say to you." She stands as well and tries to take the empty plate from my hands.

"Grandma, no. Let me. You sit down." While the topic of her health may now be officially off limits, I don't want her doing extra work on my account.

She clucks her tongue and shakes her head. "Nonsense. This is my kitchen, my meal, and these are my dishes." She takes the plate from my hand. I start to protest, but I know it is a futile gesture, so I close my mouth. While the kitchen, the groceries, and the dishes technically belong to my parents, my grandmother is absolutely right about one thing. She *never* lets anyone clean the morning dishes. She won't even allow us to put our own dishes in the sink. Of all of the rooms in the house, the kitchen is her realm, and when she is visiting, she owns it utterly, completely, and without question.

She shuffles over to the sink; it seems as if she moves a little bit slower than normal, but perhaps I am just imagining it. In any case, she says over her shoulder as she turns on the faucet, "Try to have courage, and always face your fears." She looks over her shoulder at me and smiles. "The next time you see this bird, ask it what it wants from you."

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