Waking Dreams

by

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We were at a holiday party on Fifth Avenue, which was lined with cute federals and gingko trees that painted the streets in yellow, leafy walkways. The houses all had wrap-around porches, some with swings, overhead lamps, rocking chairs. On the drive over, my boyfriend and I had listened to Joni Mitchell and idly chatted about the day. He drove slowly, as the roads were rimmed in ice and covered in brown slush, an early fall snow.

The party was an old tradition the two of us kept without knowing why, a gathering of people we’d met as graduate school students, he as a mathematician, I as an aspiring writer. Since then, our lives had diverged from those of our friends, Frost’s old forking path. We hadn’t changed our circumstances much. We remained in the same one-room apartment we’d shared during school, were still dating. We hadn’t changed at all. Though we were slightly sadder, I suppose. We hung our coats in a small closet, which smelled of mothballs, and entered into the fray of Christmas music and smiling people we half-recognized. It was a shame we weren’t drunk on arrival.

Everyone else at the party seemed to be married. They were canvassing real-estate markets, talking about load-bearing walls and the cost of renovating, about finding a kitchen table made from chestnut, about putting in open kitchens. They were reviewing crime stats on their phones, discussing new coffee shops and neighborhood bakeries. They were talking of home brewing and future housing projects involving smokers and bay windows.

Some people had children. The children weren’t there, and the people seemed to be wishing after their children, looking anxiously at their watches, scrolling through their phones to find photos of birthday parties, ballet performances, and karate competitions. One couple was watching their nanny on a camera they’d had installed in the kitchen. She was making spaghetti.

After I’d walked around enough, I found a few people who were single after break-ups. Now they were reading self-help books and taking trips to Southeast Asia, riding on motorcycles and working on volunteer boards, or doing CrossFit and hot yoga. Everyone seemed happy. Everyone seemed to have one or two dogs they loved and took on early morning walks, and wasn’t that the nicest time of day to be alone? The way the light had a tinge of green, and the sound of wet leaves underfoot. Wasn’t the air so crisp at that hour? Some days when I wasn’t working at my temp job, I slept until noon.

None of those people interested me. We didn’t have a dog or children. My boyfriend was allergic to dogs, and I wasn’t going to be anyone’s mother. There were too many things to do in life—visit Argentina, learn to cook paella, watch the Oscar-nominated movies, practice meditation more diligently, follow up with my congressman, call my grandmother—to be spending my time picking shit from the sidewalk or wiping a child’s bottom. Mind you, I rarely used my time to do any of those things, but the thought of being unable to use my time as I pleased nearly paralyzed me.

One of the most profound features of my childhood was my mother’s palpable loneliness, the way her face closed off when she wasn’t talking to one of us, her cheeks sagging, and her eyes looking into the distance. I didn’t want to get married and have children and wind up feeling the same way, looking out a window at geese in a wild blue sky while children clambered for seconds on pancakes they hadn’t helped to make, spilled syrup, and whined about not watching cartoons.

I could hear the strains of a Louis Armstrong song that made me want to throw up, because everyone now knew it was about sexual assault. The group I was standing in had started a discussion of a Viognier. At our age, discussions of rubbery flavor in wines could last interminably and soon people would be sharing about trips to Southern Italy, Southern France, other places I hadn’t been. I excused myself and stepped out onto the porch, an old habit from when I’d been a smoker.

The eaves of the house were lined with long, murderous appearing icicles. The voices inside were mercifully muffled along with the Armstrong. After a moment, I realized I was not alone. There was an older man that I half-recognized, elbows resting on the railing, smoking. We were on opposite sides of the porch, distant enough that we wouldn’t have to talk, though it would be awkward if we didn’t. Most times, finding myself in this sort of situation, I’d look at my phone and sigh, giving some indication that my presence had meaning. I liked to convey that somewhere else people were waiting for me or I was in a hurry to be elsewhere. Anything but the reality of the situation, which was that I was rarely needed by anyone. I didn’t look at my phone though because I remembered something interesting about the man. He had a dead wife.

The man’s fingers were quite long. Once, years ago, he had played piano at one of these gatherings. It had been quite lovely, his wife at his side, her hand resting on his shoulder. And now she was dead, a car accident a few months ago. Was he thinking of her now, or of that distant night, the piano? Although maybe the two of them had been terrible and unhappy together. Who the hell knew anything about another relationship? I watched him, wondering what he made of the talk of fluffy dogs and adorable children. I wondered if he wanted to grab one of the icicles and go around stabbing people, too.

*(continued in Prism Review #20)*