

The Escape Artist 2/25/23

Note to reader: I took an online lucid dreaming seminar through NY's Tibet House in the hope that it would shed light on Saint Augustine's mother's sleep visions. So far it has not.

In my own lucid dreams, I toss and turn because my back and neck ache and I am sick with the flu and I am thirsty and hot like mother earth, and I am scared of what the dog will do next, that panting emblem of instinctual drives.

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Lucid Fever Dream #4 (a-d)

4.a Home: The dog, the escape artist, was unchained and on the loose, ravaging the neighborhood, gleefully traversing manicured lawns, chasing pedigreed dogs, tearing off their heads. The dog picked up speed with each joyous kill-romp, his dark jowls flapping, tawny back fur mohawk, black lips wide in a demented clown grin. He kicked up a spray of dirt as he skittered through barrel racing turns, his arse skimming the ground, the off kilter turn threatening to become a sideways wipeout, before his hind legs and paws found the earth again and he launched himself forward at increasing speed. I marveled at the locomotion of this beast, his rippling haunches and gleeful abandon, as he pursued yet another golden retriever who mistook the chase for a game. I acknowledged in my dream that the dog was acting out because I had left him for a few days, and now, worse than my being away, I was home but sick in bed. He whined and pawed at me to take him for a walk, to no avail- a dog's life.

Among his kills, there was one dog head that was particularly noteworthy: the head cleanly torn off, no blood, just a tidy brown and black death mask lying in green grass. The Daschund head resembled the enormous doggy diner statue in the Sunset, but smaller and without the white chef's hat. I felt badly for the beheaded dog's owners, who would eventually discover part of their dog on the green grass not far from the fallen camellias. An old woman in a pale blue bed

jacket yelled at us from the window, but she did not come out. I was grateful she was an old yeller and not a chaser, and I hoped she had poor eyesight as well. My dog continued his joy romp through her yard, pausing to lift his leg on her pittosporum before he resumed the pillaging of another dog with poor risk assessment skills. I considered tossing the doggy death mask into the overgrown brambles where her property abutted the woods, but didn't. Best to leave the scene of the crime intact. I wondered where the rest of the dog lay.

There were more severed dog heads in more yards, I noted, before changing locations. One of the benefits of dreaming is that you don't have to take a Greyhound bus.

4b. *The Lake*

Lake Wallenpaupack in the Poconos, familiar to me from my childhood: on the unusually serene water's surface, a lone dog head floated. I looked to the woods where I hoped the dog would have the sense to hide his victims like the local mafia does. On the shore sat my middle child at age eight, wearing a navy sweater with a yoke of knit flowers. Several older boys sat talking with her. She looked happy. My college roommate Sarah, a fine artist, stood back from the water with her arms crossed, surveying the lake with apparent horror. The lake had once been a town which ambitious men flooded and dammed to control the water. Resorts and homes sprang up at water's edge with time, but something of this strange submerged history leached to the surface and colored memory in ambiguous, hard to name colors, like the lake's murky water. For my artist friend, whose ideal day involved temperature controlled masterpieces in precise lighting and good coffee, NYC was a two hour drive but worlds away.

4c. *NYC*

We were now in the wood paneled gallery of a great museum, and the artists, who all had the smooth glowing knowingness of Alex Katz¹'s urbane subjects, were seated at a long banquet table the length of the hall; it was the late Fifties in New York, with clouds of cigarette smoke and

¹ We saw Katz's show at the Guggenheim Museum so the images were fresh in mind.

locks of rolled brown hair falling artfully from beehives and soft shoulders which curved forward to reveal a wide shell pink bra strap. It was the heyday of the raucous and refined white man of the arts with coyote eyes behind serious frames and tinkly low ball glasses and pale creamy women in iced satin dresses which forced their knees together, creating a delectable tension which would release like the spring of a mouse trap in the back of a dark cab or stranger's bedroom. At least this is how the male authors made it all sound. The women told another story but they were game.

I awoke to the snappy profane conversation of familiar male voices, and saw my middle child in the bed next to me. Judging by the light it was afternoon and the voices were those of the men of *Succession* on the tv, and I turned them off and went back to sleep.

4d. *Greenjeans*

The artist friend and I were now vintage clothing shopping² at GreenJeans, my friend Xander's plant nursery, where I worked in the early days of the Pandemic. Xander has gold speckled oceanic eyes, as if she just surfaced from the sea holding a clam with the prize pearl. There among the packed stacks of other people's old stuff were the pink corduroys I had just bought; they reminded me of my one trip to Christmas Cove, Maine. By kismet or fate, I met Xander, who has summered³ there her whole life, in passing that summer.

At age twelve, my mother arranged for me to visit Maine with the family of her best friend from nursing school, Jan, who married a Shaker Heights scion with lovely vacation properties. For my first solo flight, I wore my Anne Klein pink cotton safari outfit with the tab collar lined in kelly green and matching green belt. It was the summer of the Christopher Cross song 'Sailing' on the radio, and I was on the slow cusp of a sea change. I would soon find out I was no Maine preppy, but I had the right colors, according to The Preppy Handbook⁴. I made the mistake,

² Xander pronounces Nike sneakers as it is spelled, which might clue you in to the absurdity of clothing shopping at her plant nursery

³ 'Summered' is a Wasp term, not mine. I four seasoned in Scranton, Pa.-MN

⁴ Lisa Birnbach's definitive guide to all things'preppy', which had a 1980s cultural moment

which I have often made, of overdressing rather than underdressing, which made me out of step with the lowkey LL Bean vibe of the families in dark green Volvo wagons. I was white, but not a Wasp. It didn't matter, I was invisible in the custard thick fog on which hung a lobsterman's net of pungent briny scents between the gray ghosts of pine trees. As a guest in a very old house called Gray Gables, I was to be very polite to Mom Marshall. The resident dowager, in her pale blue quilted satin bed jacket and Vermont Country store nightgown, was enthroned on an ancient wicker chair with faded chintz cushions before a Nixon era television set. Her snippy Dachshund parked itself between her peach terry cloth slippers, and whenever I passed Mom Marshall, whose chair was in the middle of the action, he nipped at my ankles.

When the fog cleared at last, I saw the glorious Prussian blue sea was just beyond the tall pines. Down the rocky path to the water's edge, we hopped to and from turtle rock, skipped stones, and avoided swimming in the frigid salt water. I loved this part, the wild part, where I forgot myself in the landscape and my worries about the people faded away. It was a magical and unsettling visit to a foreign land,⁵ which whet my appetite for travel and the joys of dislocation. My mother orchestrated this glimpse of a rarefied world which she herself loved from her annual visits with Jan, a world which I knew only from books and her stories.

4e. *Back at Greenjeans*, the vintage garb search continued, except now I was costuming an 18th century play and was pleased that in my lucid dreams I got dream work. We went to a warehouse with piles of dark old clothes several stories high, an unpromising site for rococo silk gowns and gilt embroidered waistcoats. There were the pink corduroys again, wrong size, wrong century. Familiar feeling of loss. Then we were back in the car and the dog was crazy but not puking, thankfully, and I found the little navy sweater with a yoke of flowers from my youth. Again I saw my middle child sitting by the lake on a picnic blanket with the older boys, who said 'he' referring to her, and she did not correct them. She was wearing my sweater, but unlike me,

⁵ By a remarkable coincidence, I met Xander there at a neighbor's picnic. Forty years later here we are in the wilds of Marin- elective affinities in a small world.

she was comfortable in her skin. She was apart from me, her own being, with dreams of her own.

If dreams are the stuff of literature, I would write that these are dreams of transference. We were just back from our first mother-daughter trip to New York, to visit the university my daughter chose and which chose her- the one in the downtown heart of the city of my youthful dreams. While my dreams are of art and fashion, my daughter's are culinary: she is a passionate and accomplished chef, who has honed her skills working at a Michelin starred San Francisco restaurant.

On our first night in the Big Apple, she made a 10:15 pm dinner reservation for us at a hot Brooklyn restaurant; the chef sent her special dishes and came to the table to talk shop with her. I was in awe of her preternatural poise and confidence- she was in her element, and so young. What more could a mother wish for? She had moved from the lake to the ocean. The missing chef's hat from the Doggy diner statue from the early part of the dream was in fact hers. It is hard to say what a lucid dream is, beyond the definition: a dream in which the dreamer is aware within the dream she is dreaming. In my lucid dreamscape, there is the intermingling of Jung's collective unconscious with personal signposts: a lake, a sweater, a dog. From there, it is reading the cards, a matter of interpretation:

Dog: The fearful but truthful nature of the animal instinct; The slaying of the pedigreed dogs by Paco the mutt is the literal signifier of overcoming fear; taken further, it can be read as the slaying of the old guard by the upstart new generation; the end of old dreams and the beginning of new dreams, each generation's attempt to preserve or upend established privilege.

Water: the brackish manmade lake and gorgeous ancient sea, the safe and familiar vs the vast unknown.

The sweater: Clothes are my love language, and the sweater is youth and innocence; the hunt for the rococo costumes among the piles of cast off clothes is the pursuit of exotic dreams, the challenge of discerning reality from fantasy, the familiar vs. the aspirational.

Finally there is mother and child: There is the child separating from the mother, and rewriting the story inherited from the mother and there is the mother's own amended story, as she holds out her hand with the pried open clam shell, offering the pearl to the child. The child now woman will in turn offer her exuberant energy and her youthful dreams to the hungry jaws of the City.
