

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 #4a-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 like a 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 joyous romp through her yard, pausing to lift his leg on her pittosporum before resuming his 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.

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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 did. 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 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.

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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 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 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.

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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 speckled golden green- blue eyes and looks like she just surfaced from the sea brandishing 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, as does Xander, who has summered³ there her whole life.

At age twelve, my mother arranged for me to visit the family of her best friend, 'Aunt Jan' from nursing school, who married a Shaker Heights scion with nice vacation homes. I was twelve, and I wore my Anne Klein pink cotton safari outfit with the tab collar lined in kelly green and

¹ We saw Katz's show at the Guggenheim

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 summered and falled and wintered and springed in Scranton.-MN

matching green belt for my first solo flight. 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, 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 sea scents between the gray ghosts of pine trees. In addition to being a guest in a very old house called Gray Gables, I was to be very polite to Mom Marshall, the dowager in her pale blue quilted satin bed jacket and Vermont Country store nightgown, enthroned on a wicker chair with faded chintz cushions. Her snippy Dachshund was parked between her peach terry cloth slippers, and whenever I passed he yipped at my ankles. Why would anyone want such a mean dog?

When the fog cleared, I saw the glorious Prussian blue sea and hopped and skipped on the rocks and swam very little in the frigid salt water. I loved this part, the wild part, where I forgot myself in the landscape and 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. It was a rite of passage which my mother carefully orchestrated, a revealing glimpse of a rarefied world I knew only from books and her stories.

4e. Back at Greenjeans, the vintage garb search continued, as I was now costuming an 18th century play and pleased that in my dreams I got dream work. We went to a warehouse with several stories of piled up old clothes, 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,

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

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

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 the sweater and she was in her element. She was apart from me, her own being, with dreams of her own.

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If dreams are the stuff of literature, I would write that these are dreams of transference. We were just back from our mother-daughter trip to New York, where we visited the university my daughter had chosen and which had chosen her- the one in the heart of the city of my youthful dreams. While my dreams centered on art and fashion, my daughter's are culinary: she is a passionate and accomplished chef, and works at Michelin starred restaurant in San Francisco. She made a 10:15 pm dinner reservation for us at a hot Brooklyn restaurant, where the chefs 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.

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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. 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 slaying of the pedigreed dogs by my dog is the most literal signifier of fear; taken further, it could 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 lake and gorgeous sea, the familiar vs the vast unknown.

The sweater: Clothes are my love language, and the sweater is youth and the hunt for the rococo costumes is my love of history and fantasy, the familiar vs. the exotic/elevated.

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