

Beyond a Dream's Veil

The first time I remember having a dream, the only dream I've ever really had, was as a child. It honestly felt like it was less a dream and more like a memory, a place I had actually gone, but that is besides the point.

I was with my family and some family friends at a water park, Roaring Springs, off Overland in Meridian, Idaho. The family friends we had also had a daughter around my age, so I went with her and her mother around the park while everyone else broke off into their own groupings to enjoy the day on their own as well. Went on a handful of their slides and spent a solid hour in the lazy river when the friend's mother asked if I knew how to swim.

I scoffed, and simply said, "Of course, why wouldn't I?" thinking back then that my semi-successful attempts at staying buoyant while paddling about like a hamster running on a wheel, never really going anywhere while burning tons of energy, was swimming.

So off we went to a large slide that dropped off into a ten foot pool, a size that was approximately three times the height as I was back then. I stood waiting in line for a half an hour, hoping the entire time that my bluff would actually pay off.

It didn't.

Rather, I slid down the slide, thinking that everything was going to be alright, thinking that if I moved my legs just right that I could skip across the top of the water like a stone, and end up on the same steps that others were climbing out of the pool with. Because, I, like a stone, always seemed to find my way into the bottoms of pools, and never at the top. The idea of skipping on the top seemed just as folly as actually skipping a stone, something I've never done myself. I wanted to be my first stone.

From the exit of the slide, straight to the bottom. The force of hitting the water was jarring for me, a panic that I wasn't going to skip off the water, rather I was just plunging beneath. In the surprise that my *infallible logic* was in fact failing me, I let out the half-breath I had been holding, and I went down, down, only to breathe in the acrid, chlorinated water.

A sensation of death, or something akin.

Waking in a shallow white basin, surrounded by a gloom I had never remembered having seen before. Bony trees rested on the horizon, merely a silhouette in a dark gray landscape. There I was alone, dressed in clothes I had never seen before, not anything I'd of decided for myself, yet there I was, in a cool shallow basin, a clear, cold water barely cresting over my toes when standing.

Any sleep that was attained was not the 'ticket' to getting out. Rather I wandered. The second I took a step from the smooth white marble, I felt a tug, a pull, out on the horizon. The sound of a heartbeat echoing through the plains, *thump thump, thump thump*, as the trees stayed motionless in the background, yet just as tall and bare as always have. The only two changes on the horizon were the almost shining white basin, a source of light had fallen over the hills, and the shadow of a jagged mountain ahead.

Yet I still followed this pull, this thumping tug, into a burrowed cave. Traversing through a rough, uneven stone tunnel, with no light to speak of, walking with a stride that would otherwise singal confidence, which instead was a product of the tug becoming stronger, and far more painful as I delved where I knew I shouldn't be.

At the end of the tunnel, a singular source of pure white light, pulsing in the distance. On, off, on, off, on, off, the pace regular, unchanging. The closer I walked, the more it seemed to dim as it turned off, and return from the dim as it turned on.

Mesmerized by this pure, white light, I finally noticed the nature of this light. Not a flickering light, and opening light. Open, close, open, close. A large blinking eye, looming deep inside the cave, waiting for me.

Turning back around, I was a reflection of myself, a younger version of myself, and I turned back around to find another mirror, this with an older version of myself. I screamed at the top of my lungs, and started slamming my child fist on the mirror.

I saw the cracks form, as the glass shattered, it fell away. Some shards still floating under this large white eye, in a spiral of glass fangs. A voice deep in timber, echoing in the chamber, reverberating in my bones, simply said, "You are mine now, Kylie." before it bit me with its spiral mouth, and I woke up.

The rough concrete by the pool was more itchy on my back than scratchy. Still, the discomfort of being little more than a soaked, leaden weight permeated from myself as a whole. A heaviness in the chest. The lifeguard on duty seemed surprised at my rousing, as she hung up with the paramedics with some rushed response. I leaned over, and coughed out a torrent of water before I realized I was cold. At least, far cooler than I had been.

The family friend's mom took me by the arm, ignoring the lifeguard's attempts to get personal or medical information from her, and half-dragged me to the concession's stand where her daughter was waiting, having eaten a significant portion of a sundae "while the grown-ups have a conversation."

The friend's mother simply looked at me in shock, and said that this would be our secret, no one else would know that I "almost" drowned. So I ignored it, told no one.

The only thing that changed was that I didn't dream at night from then on.

Senior year of high school was rough. Between the school's academic expectations and the pressure from parents, and other adults, to care about the impending election and to "make good choices" while simultaneously balancing a slowly fracturing social friend group was a lot. More than a child of my age needed.

It was October, in the year 2016, when my life really started falling apart. My best friend, their name was Simon, was kidnapped, at home, from a burglary gone awry. The curse of being an "off-day" in college. They were missing most of the month, and life was expected to maintain the pace in which it had, go to school, do well in class, and maintain the sense of outward perfection that was expected.

It wasn't until the month was nearly over that it was public knowledge that they had been murdered. Simon had been the backbone of the entire friend group that I had in high school, the one person that kept together the entire group of nerdy misfits (or at least the closest thing that a technical school has to nerdy misfits) whom I socialized with during the school week.

Given that Simon was in college, as well as half of the friend group, their acting as the backbone was less noticed, functional, ever since the Class of 2016 graduated, leaving me with the four other friends while seven left for "greater, grander things." But, Simon still was a wonderful friend, but I digress.

I felt the world spiraling out of control, and the more I tried to keep a hold of such things, the more I seemed to fail in regards to actually doing something that mattered. A part of me felt like a failure, for being a person that failed to maintain a close-knit bond with these people in my own class. But there I was trying very hard to maintain some semblance of cohesion with so many things being up in the air. As the year progressed, it simply got worse. More distance from the rest of the kids my own age at the time. School was only getting more difficult, and the self-placed expectation of perfection that I had just got to be too much for me at the time.

So, I sat down to work on a large school project, took an amount of caffeine that would probably be lethal to a normal person, and got to work, figuring that if I died, "oh well."

Fifty-six grams of caffeine, and twenty minutes later, I was in that gloomy hellscape.

Waking upon smooth marble is a sensation which I am oddly familiar with. Almost like a porcelain bathtub, the water, only two, three inches deep of the coldest water that one could reasonably understand. Instead of getting up like I had the last time I was there, I laid there, staring at the starless sky, indistinguishable from the landscape. Apathy gripped my limbs, lethargy convincing me that I should just wait, deal with whatever existence was in this one location.

'Twas just a dream, right?

My unconventional silence was broken by a voice, a feminine voice. I sat up to acknowledge her presence, an amalgamation of drifting shadow, cascading off a seemingly cloaked figure like black mist. She never seemed hostile, nor was she a figure I had ever seen before, rather a second soul in an isolated place, a benevolent being, by comparison to the figure that existed at the end of the cave.

She loomed at the edge of the basin, and simply asked, "Why?"

That was her only response to anything I said. "Why?"

I don't know whether it was pressure, nerves, or just the desire to be left alone that I finally started working toward getting some understanding of what she was asking for. Why?

Why what? "Why?"

Why was I sitting there? "Why?"

Why was I here? Silence.

That was the first time I ever thought this place to be death, what awaited everyone at the end of the line. Lacking the fire and brimstone, or the opal, pearl and gold structures on poufy clouds that so many claim death to be. Or want death to be.

And she listened. Waited. As I explained to her the flawed rationalization of idealizing nonexistence to just trying to continue. Every time I left something with any amount of doubt, she would only ever ask her same question. "Why?"

I finished recounting my story over several hours. Taking time to think over my own actions between fragments, sentences uttered without full cohesion. Over those hours, I finally told someone everything that I had been bottling up over the years, more notably what I had been bottling up since that October. Things I never wanted to admit, things that were supposed to go to the grave with me.

At least in a way, they did.

When this figure was happy, or at least content, with my responses, she let me leave. To follow that same *thump thump* and tug I had the last time. Trudging through that uneven ground, through that dark cave, with the opening and closing light.

I didn't scream as the mirror shattered, and all the entity said to me was, "I won't tolerate this folly again. Don't disappoint me, Kylie."

I was cold, and sick, the next morning. Exhausted, sore, but alive. That's what pain is though, by some definition at least. Proof that the body was still alive. That was the first of three days I'd ever take off from school, too tired to function, yet still too wired from caffeine to sleep. Sicker than a dog, just trying to process everything I had gone through.

It's safe to say that I cut out caffeine for a long while after that. It's also safe to say that from then on, I stopped trying so hard to hold onto things that were inevitable to fail. Things doomed to take everyone down in the aftermath. Grades slipped, friends were lost, but I started the process of not giving more of myself that I couldn't function. Something I had been doing for so long at that point, what I cut it down to was, and still is, considered unhealthy when I asked the actual support group of friends that I've made since. That is life though, learning your limits to be who you are going to be, and how you can make that last.

I admit that I am uncertain as to the confines of what this dream is, was, or will become. Looking at these specific instances, I can tell you one thing for certain: I either nearly died, and this was the barrier keeping me from actually dying, or this was death and something decided to bounce me back like a yo-yo. I cannot say for certain, as if it were to be death, then I couldn't write this, and the fact it exists maintains a mystery of reason, function and cause. Yet, based on memory of the events that have happened before, I cannot believe that it was anything but death, or near death. Something no one can ever confirm, nor can they deny. At the very least, it's a limbo, a limbo of the unknown subconscious that will be something no one can truly understand.

And that's the glory of dreams, isn't it? No one knows the full meaning therein unless they experience it themselves. Personally, I feel drawn to the idea that this was just a perception of death, where it is just what I personally have to go through. But who knows, it's not something I really want to start testing out any time soon.

Ever since I was a toddler, I never actually got sick. Not colds, fevers or the flu. Rather I got migraines. That's a different story however. My mother confided in me once that when I was a toddler, I was so sick, from some constant routine of sinus infections, strep, and every strain of

the flu, that it was touch and go for a while. Then one day I just stopped getting sick. And I was like that up until January of the “Year of our Lord” 2020.

January of the year 2020 was rough, kinda. Just getting off the required Holiday Overtime at Fred Meyer, a location I used to work, right at the early beginnings of a “Chinese Virus” starting to pop-up across the sea. Started feeling pretty badly, had a hard time breathing, no sense of taste or smell, in addition to just a horrid, lousy sense of self. A feeling I hadn’t really had a frame of reference for, but I was sick. Something that would deteriorate rapidly over the course of two weeks.

I wasn’t able to keep anything down; water, crackers, warm tea, ginger ale (flat or carbonated), and after five days, couldn’t even get out of bed. By the seventh day, I couldn’t lift the covers off of myself when I got too warm in bed. So I laid there, overheating, having lost thirty-five pounds in just over a week. It was the ninth or tenth day when I was far too exhausted to do anything more than stare at the ceiling.

I had just woken up, after I think four hours of sleep, when I felt that same tug in my chest that was only familiar in this recurring dream.

I awoke in that white, marble basin again, drenched in my own sweat and the ever so thin layer of water that has ever existed in that shining, shallow bowl. I still felt weak, just as, if not more than, when I had been in bed. I tried to move, failing to even wiggle my way to sitting upright.

Then I heard a familiar voice again, a shadowy figure who was the one comfort in this place. She only said one thing.

“Rest.”

Rather than trying to combat her statement, I complied, and slept in the cold basin for who knows how long. By the time I woke up again, she was gone. I could move, albeit slowly, but I was none worse for wear. I headed out, half hobbling toward the cave, following a much weaker *thump thump*, a lighter tug in my chest. Rather than the multitude of hours in which this walk normally took, I was there in mere moments. Almost as if the distance it took was inversely related to my acceptance of what awaits.

I forced myself to stand upright, and walked right through the maze of tunnels, following the large white eye. I stood there, staring at it as it stared at me.

“You are nearly ready, Kylie.”

Then I woke up from this dream again.

I sprung up from my bed, and forced myself to look at the alarm clock in my room. I had slept for twenty-two uninterrupted hours, and was freezing under the fifteen pounds of blankets I had slept with. I forced myself out of bed, learned I had twenty something text messages from concerned family all of whom were upstairs, and who were all surprised that I hadn't said a word to them the last two days.

For the second time of my life, I reintroduced myself to the land of the living.