

Dreamless

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I never dreamed at all, until we moved into the wrecking yard. Old Cooch said that was wrong, that I must have dreamed but I never remembered it. I wasn't sleeping well anymore; dipping in and out with one eye on Peanut. The world of dreams opened up to me, as though I tuned into the channel finally, after eleven years. The birds gave me the first sign.

I was sitting with Old Cooch on the boot of a frontless Kingswood. We were chucking rocks at a line of mismatched bottles on the sun-peeled roof of Cooch's caravan. Peanut was arranging car parts in the dirt, stinky-pants again. I kept telling myself I should change the kid's nappy, but then Cooch would hit another bullseye and taunt me that I hadn't yet hit one.

I was lining up a shot, sure that this time one of the bottles would explode, when a flock of birds flew over head. In an arrow, I guess, but with one arm longer than the other by two birds. I thought, why doesn't one bird go on the other arm, make it even? And a weird feeling washed over me. Memory of something not real. I realised I'd dreamed last night about birds in formations. I actually laughed out loud.

Cooch wanted to know why I laughed and I told him, and that's when he said I'd probably been dreaming my whole life and just didn't know it. But I'd been sleeping in a warm, safe, dreamless bed for most of it, in the house we lived in with Auntie Jemima (who I'm named after even though I'm a boy). When they took Auntie J to the hospital and she didn't come back, when the landlord came and kicked me and Peanut out, that's when we shuffled around town for a day until we came to the wrecking yard. It spread out over two square kilometres, right in the middle of the city. We found an old silver Volvo with no wheels, but it was weather-tight and the seats were leather—luxury! We moved right in. The car smelled of dirt and old bananas, kinda like Peanut, so it felt homey pretty quick. It took less than a day for Cooch to find us; he lived in an abandoned caravan about two-hundred metres away. And even though he was a thief and a liar, it made me feel better to know there was a grown-up close by.

"So what did the birds do in your dream?" Cooch asked, lining up a shot and taking down a VB bottle with pinpoint precision.

I frowned hard, trying to remember. "They flew over, then they came back. And one dropped dead and landed on the ground right in front of your caravan."

Cooch had lost interest now, was sniffing Peanut's pants and telling me I needed to change him before he stunk out the whole damn universe. I scooped up Peanut with one arm and he put his chubby hand either side of my face and called me Mimey. I blew a raspberry on his neck and he giggled like it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard, even though I did it, like, eighty times a day. I took him back to the Volvo, wiped his bum and then opened all the doors to air out the car. My tanned fingers with their dirty nails were getting pretty practised at this by now; I could turn almost anything into a nappy: tea towels swiped off washing lines, old jumpers pulled out of Lifeline bins, squares of threadbare blankets left outside the animal shelter. We couldn't afford nappies, and we couldn't afford laundry. I'd had fifty-eight dollars the day Auntie J left, and now I had forty-two dollars; and then when that was gone we would be eating out of bins. Peanut's only two. I reckon you have to be minimum four before

eating out of bins is okay. He could get sick and he could die, and then I'd have nothing and nobody.

"Jemima! Hey, kid! C'mere!" This was Cooch, shouting at me from where he still sat, splayed knees, on the Kingswood.

"What is it?" I shuffled over. Peanut followed, picking his nose.

Cooch was pointing to a grey shape on the ground in front of his caravan. I picked my way over broken glass, but couldn't make it out until I was nearly on it. A bird. A breeze scuttled over the ground and its feathers moved slightly, almost as though it was breathing. I gave it a poke with my toe. It was impossibly light, and totally dead.

"And?" I asked.

"Those birds came back," Cooch said, in a cold voice at odds with the blazing hot day. "This one dropped right out of the sky."

I looked at him, and my heart thumped a couple of times up near my neck.

"Yeah," he said, "just like you dreamed."

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So. Cooch was full of creepy stories and he was a thief and a liar. Probably he found a dead bird and played a joke on me. That would be just like Cooch. When we first met him, he used to go on all the time about the ghosts that prowled the wrecking yard. Trying to get us all worked up. Peanut didn't understand a word, and I just ignored him. Then one night about a week since we'd been there, Cooch came and knocked on our car and he had two hot pizza boxes.

"Come and share, boys," he said.

Peanut was already asleep but I woke him up because he loves pizza. Cooch told this story about how he'd been walking around town and he found a pizza delivery driver dead at the wheel of his little white car with the fibreglass pizza on top. And Cooch had grabbed the pizzas and brought them back. Who knew if the story was true or not? I had pepperoni juice running down my chin and that's all that mattered. Peanut ate his pizza and started to doze in my lap, and I got talking to Cooch about stuff and he brought up the ghosts again. Only he called them the "wraiths".

"I seen 'em three times now," he said. "On every full moon, they come out and they sniff around all the cars and look for people inside. So you've got to be careful that you have your doors closed and your windows up."

"What do they look like?" I asked.

"Long and black, with scratchy fingers."

I shrugged it off. He was lying. That's what Cooch did, and he did it well. Making me think I had some kind of psychic dream by planting a dead bird was no surprise and, really, I wasn't scared.

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Really late that night—the night after the dead bird—or maybe even it was early the next morning... anyway, it was dark and I woke up. Dream and reality laid over the top of each other. I'd been dreaming about rain, and here it was raining. But before I could get myself wound up about it, I figured that I'd heard the rain because I was sleeping lightly, and it had made its way into my dream.

I leaned over the back seat to check on Peanut. He was curled up on his side. He'd kicked off his blanket and his arm was hanging off the edge of the seat. The rain drummed on the roof of the car, sluiced off the windows and into the dark nothing outside. I wondered how Cooch was going. He had about six leaks in his caravan. I sat up and peered out, but couldn't see a light on over at his place. Maybe he was just sleeping through it.

I settled back down into my seat, pulling my blanket up even though it was humid and sweaty. I didn't get back to sleep until dawn.

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Didn't think about dreams for a while. Perhaps I was getting more comfortable, more used to being eleven years old and responsible for a little kid in nappies. I went into the city a few times and tried to call the hospital where Auntie J was staying, but nobody would tell me anything about her, just that she couldn't see visitors. I guessed whatever sickness she had must be really contagious. I loved my Auntie J, even if she wasn't my real auntie and she smelled like cabbage. Peanut seemed to have forgotten her already. Old Cooch kept saying I need to go see the government people, and tell them I'm living in a car with my two-year-old brother. Auntie J said never trust the government. So I was stuck not knowing what to do and, anyway, we were eating, sleeping, and having kind of a fun time at the wrecking yard with Cooch and all the car parts everywhere. Cooch helped me build a little go-kart, and Peanut pushed himself around in it for hours every day, until his nose was peeling with sunburn. I still had thirty-six dollars and Peanut started to figure out how to pee against a pole instead of in his pants.

I almost didn't notice the full moon when it came. I've spent my life looking down, not up. But it had been hot for a few days and Peanut and I had taken to playing at night, when it was cooler. He was jumping up and down shouting, "Mimey, Mimey, my turn!" while I drove the go-kart around (okay, it only actually moved if you were on a slope or if you pushed it with your feet on either side; but it did have a real steering wheel, even if it wasn't attached to anything). I thought, you know it's really light out here tonight and I looked up and saw the cold white moon, just a sliver off being a perfect circle. Cooch had locked himself inside his caravan and wouldn't come out for shouting; but I figured it must be the day he got his government cheque and spent it on booze. We'd see him, blinking in the daylight, in a few mornings, I was sure.

I bundled Peanut up and said it was time for bed. We settled in the car and I opened the driver's side window half way to let some air into the stuffy car. I told Peanut his stories and sang him his songs—such dumb, kiddy songs; he loves them so much—and then he was asleep and I was drifting off too.

That's when I heard a noise. Think of all the words with s's in them that you know, especially the ones that are unpleasant. Slither and slink and hiss. The noise was made up of bits of those words, all joined together in unnatural ways. I sat up, listening, skin prickling. Something scraped across the bottom of the car. I reached across for the window winder, began winding furiously. Something elongated and black began to close over the top of the glass. A finger. Two fingers. I wound. The fingers jerked away; a howl of pain.

I threw myself into the back seat with Peanut, pulled the blanket over the two of us, and breathed. Just breathed. Peanut stirred, whimpered, settled in my arms.

Took me five minutes to figure out it must have been Cooch, playing a trick. *Bastard*. Yeah, Auntie J would hate me to swear but, *bastard*. I'm eleven. I'm just a kid. That was a bastard thing to do.

My heart slowed down. A slick of sweat was forming between me and Peanut, but I didn't let him go. We slept, tight against each other, me and my baby brother.

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Next day was hot again. Shimmering waves of heat sitting on the dry ground, spearing off old mirrors and windscreens. Peanut found a dead rat by the tyre stacks, and I wondered if it had died of the heat. Cooch didn't come out of his caravan. My stomach started grumbling around eleven. We were out of food, and I knew I'd have to go into the city and get something to eat. I wanted to leave Peanut behind. He was slow and always stopping to look at stuff, then demanding to be carried. I usually left him with Cooch, and even though Cooch was probably drunk and also still a bastard for last night's prank, I went to knock on his caravan door.

Only, as I stood there in front of the door, with my hand raised to knock, I got a horrible feeling. A churning-gut feeling, a raw-throat-burning-heart feeling. I had dreamed this last night. This moment, this body posture, this peeling paint, this *everything*. And the dream, now triggered, came tumbling back fully in my mind. In the dream, Cooch didn't answer and I opened the door. In the dream, I went in and Peanut tried to follow. In the dream, the floor of the caravan was awash with blood. In the dream, the wrecking yard wraiths had been in, and they'd finished off Old Cooch.

I didn't want to knock.

"Mimey?" Peanut said.

I turned. "Go back to the car, okay? I'll come get you."

He kicked a rock and sat down in the dirt, but didn't go back to the car. I told myself I was being a baby. I told myself dreams don't come true. I knocked hard. The door opened a crack, under the force of my knock. My breath got stuck in my throat.

"Cooch?" I called in a baby voice that made me ache with embarrassment for myself. "Hey, Old Cooch," I tried again, manlier. "You there?"

He was probably drunk, that was all. I pushed the door all the way in.

Blood. Everywhere.

I pushed the scream all the way back down; I pushed it so hard that it got stuck in my stomach. I wanted to run and never stop running, but Cooch was the only grown-up I had. I took a step inside, another, couldn't see his body. Peanut was suddenly there, at the door, calling to me.

"No, Peanut!" I cried, turning to shoo him away from the caravan. My foot slid in the blood, I came crashing down on my elbows, face to face with Cooch's dead eyes.

Peanut began to cry. I scrambled to my feet. Cooch was under the table, head hanging by a flap. Something had torn out his throat. I launched myself towards Peanut, I didn't want him to see any of this. I tackled him to the ground outside the van—the sun shone hard, not scared of a thing. Peanut cried louder. I picked him up and took him back to our car. Popped the boot and got out clean, blood-free clothes for us.

"Peanut," I said, as I pushed his little hands and elbows through the armholes of a fresh t-shirt, "we've got to go to the city. We've got to see the government people."

"Gubberment," he echoed solemnly.

"Yeah, kid," I said. "It's not right for two little boys to be living here."

We left the car behind and headed for the city.

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Oh, yeah. The city. The big shiny pointing-to-the-sky city, all glittering with money and heartlessness. Everybody gliding from place to place in their fine clothes. Well, all except Peanut and me in bare feet and clothes last-year-too-small; both of us kind of crab-crawling because I had to chase Peanut as he followed his baby instincts into anything he'd never seen before, which was practically everything. I eventually had to pick him up and carry him, all achey-arms, through the hushed sliding doors of the government building.

The aircon hit my skin like ice, and I immediately felt less of a savage. The whole place was white. White floor, white walls, white furniture. Like nobody ever felt anything here. Peanut found some empty forms to scribble on, and I filled one out too, to take up to the counter.

Name: *Jemima and Peanut*

Address: *the silver Volvo next to tyre stack, city wrecking yard*

Next of kin:

I scratched my head. A lady with white hair pulled back so tight it made her eyes tilt up at the corners came over.

"Are you all right?"

I turned. "Um... me and my brother have nobody to look after us, and I'm pretty sure something bad's going to happen."

Her eyebrows lifted half a millimetre. "Where are your parents?"

I shrugged.

"Your guardian then?"

"Aunty J's been looking after us. I don't know my parents. I only remember her."

The woman indicated Peanut. "Then where did your brother come from?"

"He just turned up one day."

I heard the sliding doors open and close, quiet voices, people with manners and houses talking to each other.

"And where is your Aunty J now?" the woman said.

"She's in hospital for a while."

She nodded. She could work with this. She reached for a phone. "I see, and which hospital?"

"Galloway."

This time, she physically recoiled. "Galloway isn't a hospital."

Right then Peanut came barrelling into me, nearly knocking me over. He held up a page of scribbles proudly.

"Hey, that's great," I said, just like Aunty J would say to me when I drew a picture.

The woman had beckoned over another worker, a tall man who watched over her shoulder.

"How old is your brother?" she asked, punching keys on her computer.

"He turned two in November."

"I'll see if I can get him into an infant care facility right away. As for you, you might have to spend a week with a foster family, until we can transport you out to a farm home."

I shook my head. "Peanut and me, we're brothers. We've got to stay together."

Her pupils contracted. "Forgive me, but you don't know your parents or his. You don't even look alike. I doubt that you are brothers."

"Aunty J always said we were."

She sighed, turned to the man next to her and said, under her breath, "Aunty J is in a prison for the criminally insane."

I clutched Peanut, helpless. This wasn't part of the deal, us getting split up. The woman looked intently at her computer screen and said. "We can't get a case worker here to talk to you until tomorrow. As for tonight..."

I thrust the form across at her, trying not to think about Old Cooch dead and roasting in his caravan. "I'll take care of Peanut. Our address is on here. We can manage one more night. Just make sure they come tomorrow, okay?"

On the walk home, I held Peanut close against me as long as I could, but he got so heavy and I was horribly aware that I just had little-kid arms, little-kid brains. I didn't even know what "criminally insane" meant, at least not what the words meant together like that. Tonight we would sleep in the car, and I would make sure all the locks were locked and all the windows were wound up tight—don't think about Cooch, doing the same thing on his caravan—and it didn't matter if it got to thirty degrees I would sleep with Peanut in my arms. And I wouldn't let anybody, no wrecking-yard wraith no Gubberment case-worker, take him away from me.

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Dreaming feels like being half-connected, feels like being lost in patterns pretending to be real things. In this dream, I wake up in the back of the old Volvo, and I look down and Peanut isn't in my arms. There's an old blanket instead, rolled up and empty. The driver's door is open and I think, it's all my fault because I couldn't drive. There is a trail of blood, thin and dark, over the door and awful spots of it on the dusty ground outside, and the sniffing, snuffling sound of something—not a dog, not a man, not anything natural to this world—just...

There!

I sat up with every nerve in my body alight. I looked down. Peanut, still in my arms. His eyes were closed but his eyeballs were moving around underneath; he was dreaming too. I listened into the dark, but heard nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing but—oh, shit—the dream.

That was two hours ago. I'm pretty sure that it's about midnight now. All I have to do is stay awake until dawn because if I don't fall asleep, it can't happen, right? I can't wake up to find Peanut gone if I don't sleep in the first place.

But I'm so tired. My eyelids are lined with lead. I'm weak. I'm just a kid, though I hate to admit it. I want to be big: big enough to survive the loss of Aunty Jemima, and big enough to live in a car, and big enough to stay awake all night, and big enough to protect Peanut. But I am a child.

And dawn is so, so far away.



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