

STEPHEN KING – Harvey’s Dream

(From: The New Yorker, June 2003)

Janet turns from the sink and, boom, all at once her husband of nearly thirty years is sitting at the kitchen table in a white T-shirt and a pair of Big Dog boxers, watching her.

More and more often she has found this weekday commodore of Wall Street in just this place and dressed in just this fashion come Saturday morning: slumped at the shoulder and blank in the eye, a white scruff showing on his cheeks, man-tits sagging out the front of his T, hair standing up in back like Alfalfa of the Little Rascals grown old and stupid. Janet and her friend Hannah have frightened each other lately (like little girls telling ghost stories during a sleepover) by swapping Alzheimer’s tales: who can no longer recognize his wife, who can no longer remember the names of her children.

But she doesn’t really believe these silent Saturday-morning appearances have anything to do with early-onset Alzheimer’s; on any given weekday morning Harvey Stevens is ready and raring to go by six-forty-five, a man of sixty who looks fifty (well, fifty-four) in either of his best suits, and who can still cut a trade, buy on margin, or sell short with the best of them.

No, she thinks, this is merely practicing to be old, and she hates it. She’s afraid that when he retires it will be this way every morning, at least until she gives him a glass of orange juice and asks him (with an increasing impatience she won’t be able to help) if he wants cereal or just toast. She’s afraid she’ll turn from whatever she’s doing and see him sitting there in a bar of far too brilliant morning sun, Harvey in the morning, Harvey in his T-shirt and his boxer shorts, legs spread apart so she can view the meagre bulge of his basket (should she care to) and see the yellow calluses on his great toes, which always make her think of Wallace Stevens having on about the Emperor of Ice Cream. Sitting there silent and dopedily contemplative instead of ready and raring, psyching himself up for the day. God, she hopes she’s wrong. It makes life seem so thin, so stupid somehow. She can’t help wondering if this is what they fought through for, raised and married off their three girls for, got past his inevitable middle-aged affair for, worked for and sometimes (let’s face it) grabbed for. If this is where you come out of the deep dark woods, Janet thinks, this . . . this parking lot . . . then why does anyone do it?

But the answer is easy. Because you didn’t know. You discarded most of the lies along the way but held on to the one that said life mattered. You kept a scrapbook devoted to the girls, and in it they were still young and still interesting in their possibilities: Trisha, the eldest, wearing a top hat and waving a tinfoil wand over Tim, the cocker spaniel; Jenna, frozen in mid-jump halfway through the lawn sprinkler, her taste for dope, credit cards, and older men still far over the horizon; Stephanie, the youngest, at the county spelling bee, where “cantaloupe” turned out to be her Waterloo. Somewhere in most of these pictures (usually in the background) were Janet and the man she had married, always smiling, as if it were against the law to do anything else.

Then one day you made the mistake of looking over your shoulder and discovered that the girls were grown and that the man you had struggled to stay married to was sitting with his legs apart, his fish-white legs, staring into a bar of sun, and by God maybe he looked fifty-four in either of his best suits, but sitting

there at the kitchen table like that he looked seventy. Hell, seventy-five. He looked like what the goons on “The Sopranos” called a mope.

She turns back to the sink and sneezes delicately, once, twice, a third time.

“How are they this morning?” he asks, meaning her sinuses, meaning her allergies. The answer is not very good, but, like a surprising number of bad things, her summer allergies have their sunny side. She no longer has to sleep with him and fight for her share of the covers in the middle of the night; no longer has to listen to the occasional muffled fart as Harvey’s soldiers ever deeper into sleep. Most nights during the summer she gets six, even seven hours, and that’s more than enough. When fall comes and he moves back in from the guest room, it will drop to four, and much of that will be troubled.

One year, she knows, he won’t move back in. And although she doesn’t tell him so—it would hurt his feelings, and she still doesn’t like to hurt his feelings; this is what now passes for love between them, at least going from her direction to his—she will be glad.

She sighs and reaches into the pot of water in the sink. Gropes around in it. “Not so bad,” she says.

And then, just when she is thinking (and not for the first time) about how this life holds no more surprises, no unplumbed marital depths, he says in a strangely casual voice, “It’s a good thing you weren’t sleeping with me last night, Jax. I had a bad dream. I actually screamed myself awake.”

She’s startled. How long has it been since he called her Jax instead of Janet or Jan? The last is a nickname she secretly hates. It makes her think of that syrupy-sweet actress on “Lassie” when she was a kid, the little boy (Timmy, his name was Timmy) always fell down a well or got bitten by a snake or trapped under a rock, and what kind of parents put a kid’s life in the hands of a fucking collie?

She turns to him again, forgetting the pot with the last egg still in it, the water now long enough off the boil to be lukewarm. He had a bad dream? Harvey? She tries to remember when Harvey has mentioned having had any kind of dream and has no luck. All that comes is a vague memory of their courtship days, Harvey saying something like “I dream of you,” she herself young enough to think it sweet instead of lame.

“You what?”

“Screamed myself awake,” he says. “Did you not hear me?”

“No.” Still looking at him. Wondering if he’s kidding her. If it’s some kind of bizarre morning joke. But Harvey is not a joking man. His idea of humor is telling anecdotes at dinner about his Army days. She has heard all of them at least a hundred times.

“I was screaming words, but I wasn’t really able to say them. It was like . . . I don’t know . . . I couldn’t close my mouth around them. I sounded like I’d had a stroke. And my voice was lower. Not like my own voice at all.” He pauses. “I heard myself, and made myself stop. But I was shaking all over, and I had to turn on the light for a little while. I tried to pee, and I couldn’t. These days it seems like I can always pee—a little, anyway—but not this morning at two-forty-seven.” He pauses, sitting there in his bar of sun. She can see dust motes dancing in it. They seem to give him a halo.

“What was your dream?” she asks, and here is an odd thing: for the first time in maybe five years, since they stayed up until midnight discussing whether to hold the Motorola stock or sell it (they wound up selling), she’s interested in something he has to say.

“I don’t know if I want to tell you,” he says, sounding uncharacteristically shy. He turns, picks up the pepper mill, and begins to toss it from hand to hand.

“They say if you tell your dreams they won’t come true,” she says to him, and here is Odd Thing No. 2: all at once Harvey looks there, in a way he hasn’t looked to her in years. Even his shadow on the wall above the toaster oven looks somehow more there. She thinks, He looks as though he matters, and why should that be? Why, when I was just thinking that life is thin, should it seem thick? This is a summer morning in late June. We are in Connecticut. When June comes we are always in Connecticut. Soon one of us will get the newspaper, which will be divided into three parts, like Gaul.

“Do they say so?” He considers the idea, eyebrows raised (she needs to pluck them again, they are getting that wild look, and he never knows), tossing the pepper mill from hand to hand. She would like to tell him to stop doing that, it’s making her nervous (like the exclamatory blackness of his shadow on the wall, like her very beating heart, which has suddenly begun to accelerate its rhythm for no reason at all), but she doesn’t want to distract him from whatever is going on in his Saturday-morning head. And then he puts the pepper mill down anyway, which should be all right but somehow isn’t, because it has its own shadow—it runs out long on the table like the shadow of an oversized chess piece, even the toast crumbs lying there have shadows, and she has no idea why that should frighten her but it does. She thinks of the Cheshire Cat telling Alice, “We’re all mad here,” and suddenly she doesn’t want to hear Harvey’s stupid dream, the one from which he awakened himself screaming and sounding like a man who has had a stroke. Suddenly she doesn’t want life to be anything but thin. Thin is O.K., thin is good, just look at the actresses in the movies if you doubt it.

Nothing must announce itself, she thinks feverishly. Yes, feverishly; it’s as if she’s having a hot flash, although she could have sworn all that nonsense ended two or three years ago. Nothing must announce itself, it’s Saturday morning and nothing must announce itself.

She opens her mouth to tell him she got it backward, what they really say is that if you tell your dreams they will come true, but it’s too late, he’s already talking, and it occurs to her that this is her punishment for dismissing life as thin. Life is actually like a Jethro Tull song, thick as a brick, how could she have ever thought otherwise?

“I dreamed it was morning and I came down to the kitchen,” he says. “Saturday morning, just like this, only you weren’t up yet.”

“I’m always up before you on Saturday morning,” she says.

“I know, but this was a dream,” he says patiently, and she can see the white hairs on the insides of his thighs, where the muscles are wasted and starved. Once he played tennis, but those days are done. She thinks, with a viciousness that is entirely unlike her, You will have a heart attack, white man, that’s what will finish you, and maybe they’ll discuss giving you an obit in the Times, but if a B-movie actress from the fifties died that day, or a semi-famous ballerina from the forties, you won’t even get that.

“But it was like this,” he says. “I mean, the sun was shining in.” He raises a hand and stirs the dust motes into lively life around his head and she wants to scream at him not to do that, not to disturb the universe like that.

“I could see my shadow on the floor and it never looked so bright or so thick.” He pauses, then smiles, and she sees how cracked his lips are. “‘Bright’ sa funny word to use for a shadow, isn’t it? ‘Thick,’ too.”

“Harvey—”

“I crossed to the window,” he says, “and I looked out, and I saw there was a dent in the side of the Friedmans’ Volvo, and I knew—somehow—that Frank had been out drinking and that the dent happened coming home.”

She suddenly feels that she will faint. She saw the dent in the side of Frank Friedman’s Volvo herself, when she went to the door to see if the newspaper had come (it hadn’t), and she thought the same thing, that Frank had been out at the Gourd and scraped something in the parking lot. How does the other guy look? had been her exact thought.

The idea that Harvey has also seen this comes to her, that he is goofing with her for some strange reason of his own. Certainly it’s possible; the guest room where he sleeps on summer nights has an angle on the street. Only Harvey isn’t that sort of man. “Goofing” is not Harvey Stevens’s “thing.”

There is sweat on her cheeks and brow and neck, she can feel it, and her heart is beating faster than ever. There really is a sense of something looming, and why should this be happening now? Now, when the world is quiet, when prospects are tranquil? If I asked for this, I’m sorry, she thinks . . . or maybe she’s actually praying. Take it back, please take it back.

“I went to the refrigerator,” Harvey is saying, “and I looked inside, and I saw a plate of devilled eggs with a piece of Saran wrap over them. I was delighted—I wanted lunch at seven in the morning!”

He laughs. Janet—Jax that was—looks down into the pot sitting in the sink. At the one hard-boiled egg left in it. The others have been shelled and neatly sliced in two, the yolks scooped out. They are in a bowl beside the drying rack. Beside the bowl is the jar of mayonnaise. She has been planning to serve the devilled eggs for lunch, along with a green salad.

“I don’t want to hear the rest,” she says, but in a voice so low she can barely hear it herself. Once she was in the Dramatics Club and now she can’t even project across the kitchen. The muscles in her chest feel all loose, the way Harvey’s legs would if he tried to play tennis.

“I thought I would have just one,” Harvey says, “and then I thought, No, if I do that she’ll yell at me. And then the phone rang. I dashed for it because I didn’t want it to wake you up, and here comes the scary part. Do you want to hear the scary part?”

No, she thinks from her place by the sink. I don’t want to hear the scary part. But at the same time she does want to hear the scary part, everyone wants to hear the scary part, we’re all mad here, and her mother really did say that if you told your dreams they wouldn’t come true, which meant you were supposed to tell the nightmares and save the good ones for yourself, hide them like a tooth under the pillow. They have three girls. One of them lives just down the road, Jenna the gay divorcée, same name as one of the Bush twins, and doesn’t Jenna hate that; these days she insists that people call her Jen. Three girls, which meant a lot of teeth under a lot of pillows, a lot of worries about strangers in cars offering rides and candy, which had meant a lot of precautions, and oh how she hopes her mother was right, that telling a bad dream is like putting a stake in a vampire’s heart.

“I picked up the phone,” Harvey says, “and it was Trisha.” Trisha is their oldest daughter, who idolized Houdini and Blackstone before discovering boys. “She only said one word at first, just ‘Dad,’ but I knew it was Trisha. You know how you always know?”

Yes. She knows how you always know. How you always know your own, from the very first word, at

least until they grow up and become someone else's.

"I said, 'Hi, Trish, why you calling so early, hon? Your mom's still in the sack.' And at first there was no answer. I thought we'd been cut off, and then I heard these whispering whimpering sounds. Not words but half-words. Like she was trying to talk but hardly anything could come out because she wasn't able to muster any strength or get her breath. And that was when I started being afraid."

Well, then, he's pretty slow, isn't he? Because Janet—who was Jax at Sarah Lawrence, Jax in the Dramatics Club, Jax the truly excellent French-kisser, Jax who smoked Gitanes and affected enjoyment of tequila shooters—Janet has been scared for quite some time now, was scared even before Harvey mentioned the dent in the side of Frank Friedman's Volvo. And thinking of that makes her think of the phone conversation she had with her friend Hannah not even a week ago, the one that eventually progressed to Alzheimer's ghost stories. Hannah in the city, Janet curled up on the window seat in the living room and looking out at their one-acre share of Westport, at all the beautiful growing things that make her sneeze and water at the eyes, and before the conversation turned to Alzheimer's they had discussed first Lucy Friedman and then Frank, and which one of them had said it? Which one of them had said, "If he doesn't do something about his drinking and driving, he's eventually going to kill somebody"?

"And then Trish said what sounded like 'lees' or 'least,' but in the dream I knew she was . . . eliding? . . . is that the word? Eliding the first syllable, and that what she was really saying was 'police.' I asked her what about the police, what was she trying to say about the police, and I sat down. Right there." He points to the chair in what they call the telephone nook. "There was some more silence, then a few more of those half-words, those whispered half-words. She was making me so mad doing that, I thought, Drama queen, same as it ever was, but then she said, 'number,' just as clear as a bell. And I knew—the way I knew she was trying to say 'police'—that she was trying to tell me the police had called her because they didn't have our number."

Janet nods numbly. They decided to unlist their number two years ago because reporters kept calling Harvey about the Enron mess. Usually at dinnertime. Not because he'd had anything to do with Enron per se but because those big energy companies were sort of a specialty of his. He'd even served on a Presidential commission a few years earlier, when Clinton had been the big kahuna and the world had been (in her humble opinion, at least) a slightly better, slightly safer place. And while there were a lot of things about Harvey she no longer liked, one thing she knew perfectly well was that he had more integrity in his little finger than all those Enron sleazebags put together. She might sometimes be bored by integrity, but she knows what it is.

But don't the police have a way of getting unlisted numbers? Well, maybe not if they're in a hurry to find something out or tell somebody something. Plus, dreams don't have to be logical, do they? Dreams are poems from the subconscious.

And now, because she can no longer bear to stand still, she goes to the kitchen door and looks out into the bright June day, looks out at Sewing Lane, which is their little version of what she supposes is the American dream. How quiet this morning lies, with a trillion drops of dew still sparkling on the grass! And still her heart hammers in her chest and the sweat rolls down her face and she wants to tell him he must stop, he must not tell this dream, this terrible dream. She must remind him that Jenna lives right down the road—Jen, that is, Jen who works at the Video Stop in the village and spends all too many weekend nights drinking at the Gourd with the likes of Frank Friedman, who is old enough to be her father. Which is undoubtedly part of the attraction.

"All these whispered little half-words," Harvey is saying, "and she would not speak up. Then I heard

‘killed,’ and I knew that one of the girls was dead. I just knew it. Not Trisha, because it was Trisha on the phone, but either Jenna or Stephanie. And I was so scared. I actually sat there wondering which one I wanted it to be, like Sophie’s fucking Choice. I started to shout at her. ‘Tell me which one! Tell me which one! For God’s sake, Trish, tell me which one!’ Only then the real world started to bleed through . . . always assuming there is such a thing. . . .”

Harvey utters a little laugh, and in the bright morning light Janet sees there is a red stain in the middle of the dent on the side of Frank Friedman’s Volvo, and in the middle of the stain is a dark smutch that might be dirt or even hair. She can see Frank pulling up crooked to the curb at two in the morning, too drunk even to try the driveway, let alone the garage—straight is the gate, and all that. She can see him stumbling to the house with his head down, breathing hard through his nose. Viva ze bool .

“By then I knew I was in bed, but I could hear this low voice that didn’t sound like mine at all, it sounded like some stranger’s voice, and it couldn’t put corners on any of the words it was saying. ‘Ell-eeitch-un, ell-eeitch-un,’ that’s what it sounded like. ‘Ell-eeitch-un, Ish!’”

Tell me which one. Tell me which one, Trish.

Harvey falls silent, thinking. Considering. The dust motes dance around his face. The sun makes his T-shirt almost too dazzling to look at; it is a T-shirt from a laundry-detergent ad.

“I lay there waiting for you to run in and see what was wrong,” he finally says. “I lay there all over goosebumps, and trembling, telling myself it was just a dream, the way you do, of course, but also thinking how real it was. How marvellous, in a horrible way.”

He stops again, thinking how to say what comes next, unaware that his wife is no longer listening to him. Janet -that-was is now employing all her mind, all her considerable powers of thought, to make herself believe that what she is seeing is not blood but just the Volvo’s undercoating where the paint has been scraped away. “Undercoating” is a word her subconscious has been more than eager to cast up.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it, how deep imagination goes?” he says finally. “A dream like that is how a poet—one of the really great ones—must see his poem. Every detail so clear and so bright.”

He falls silent and the kitchen belongs to the sun and the dancing motes; outside, the world is on hold. Janet looks at the Volvo across the street; it seems to pulse in her eyes, thick as a brick. When the phone rings, she would scream if she could draw breath, cover her ears if she could lift her hands. She hears Harvey get up and cross to the nook as it rings again, and then a third time.

It is a wrong number, she thinks. It has to be, because if you tell your dreams they don’t come true.

Harvey says, “Hello?”