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## My Dream

Mark Rake  
*College of DuPage*

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Most people attending college have dreams. They have dreams of the future, of finding the right person and achieving success. For me, however, college inspires a very different sort of dream, one which haunts me every night of every quarter. It is a nightmare, a nightmare that writhes in my stomach like a living thing, clawing at my ribcage and squeezing my bowels. Again and again its relentless, irrational scenario repeats in my mind, and it goes a little something like this:

The night is clear and cold as I drive south on Lorraine Road. Class starts in five minutes, so I gun the engine as the White Hen store passes me. Rows of apartment buildings flash at the edge of my vision as my car squeals into third gear. After a few seconds the road rises and I find I have run fresh out of roadway; before me Twenty-Second Street cuts off Lorraine as abruptly as a razor intersecting a throat. I slam on the brakes and grind to a halt at the stop sign. Express trains of dense traffic thunder through all four lanes. I check my watch: three minutes before class. In order to reach school I must make a left turn into the far right lane. I sit and watch helplessly as the endless stream of cars shoots past, and I search frantically for the slightest opening.

Two minutes until class. I clutch the wheel in a death-grip, my palms slick with sweat. My desperation mounting into frenzy, I realize I have no choice but to chance it. My intestines tensing like a steel spring, I blast forward across the oncoming lanes. For one brief instant I can see a sweet, clear shot into the far right lane. Then, with a sickening gasp, my engine seizes up in an eternal millisecond of hesitation that floods my gut with a liquid despair. Hanging there in limitless Time, I catch the glare of headlights in the rear-view mirror, flying toward me like the burning fist of God encased in steel and chrome...

The smells of alcohol and its fellow antiseptics nudge me awake. A tangle of colored tubes winds all around me like a jungle of rainbow vines. My head feels stuffed with cotton, cotton dipped in ammonia. I try to speak but I can't feel my tongue. I try to move: nothing. Panic welling up like bile on a one-way trip, I peer through the thick plastic web; there, at the foot of my bed, my parents stare



at me with expressions of naked horror. A middle-aged man, totally and strikingly bald, is speaking to them in soft, comforting tones. My mother suddenly breaks down and begins crying uncontrollably. My father puts his great, strong arm around her and pulls her close. He looks at the ground as she sobs, looks back up at me, then slowly shakes his head. "Doctor Hundt," Dad says, voice cracking, "are you saying you lost all your hair by the time you were thirty?"

"Yes indeed," comes the genial reply. "Yes, gone, all of it, entirely departed. Receded for years like the chalk cliffs of Dover; the hairline just eroded, millimeter by millimeter. Sheer torture to watch."

Dad nods glumly and runs his hands through his own sparse follicles. Mom wails and tears herself from his grasp, throwing herself upon Hundt and clutching wildly at the edges of his coat.

"My son, doctor!" she shrieks, her mascara trickling blackly down her face. "You have to help him! You can't leave him like this!"

The doctor smiles and pats her hand reassuringly. "Now, now, Mrs. Rake, as I've already told you, several times and at length, we're doing everything possible for the lad. Working yourself into an emotional state won't help matters, although I'm sure the staff would find it amusing."

Dad gently takes Mom by the wrists and steers her toward a chair. The harsh overhead lights refract violently off her vinyl rain slick as she struggles, but in the end she gives up and sags into the seat. She stares at me, her eyes like those of a wounded deer. I fight to say something, to move, but my efforts are useless. My mother dries her cheeks with a Kleenex as Doctor Hundt produces a mint-green string from his pocket and starts to floss.

"But what about his chest, doctor?" she asks hoarsely.

Hundt holds his string up to the light to examine a piece of gristle. "Yes, Mrs. Rake, what about it?"

"Can't you get the engine block out of it?"

"That is problematic," the doctor declares, licking his piece of floss clean. "There are limits, dear lady, to what we can do. For all our knowledge, all our advanced techniques and state-of-the-art equipment, there are simply some things that are beyond the scope of your medical coverage." The doctor takes a tiny scalpel from a



metal tray next to my bed and commences to clean his fingernails. "It was a miracle that we even managed to save his legs. They're in those cardboard boxes next to the cabinet. Doctor Hugo had set them down in the lobby where anybody could have just walked right in and taken them." Finishing his nails, the doctor proceeds to scoop out ear wax with the blunt end of the scalpel. "A good man, Hugo, but a bit too fond of his Percodan."

Mom collapses into a fresh seizure of grief. Dad's great, scarred hands rest on her shoulders as he stands over her. His face is impassive, but his eyes smolder with inner turmoil. Suddenly his head snaps up, his gaze burning holes through the doctor's body. Moving slowly, measuredly, he takes one menacing step forward. "Doctor," he says, voice husky with emotion, "I just cannot believe you let yourself get bald. I always heard you medical guys had some secret treatment, something you kept for your own..."

Doctor Hundt pops the blunt end of the scalpel out of his mouth and smiles indulgently. "Sadly, no," he murmurs, "nothing of the kind. The wife, of course, was shattered when it happened, really carried on to no end. But things settled down after I cajoled her into that radical hysterectomy. Became quite docile, in fact."

I observe the scene with growing terror. As sensation gradually returns to my limbs I find I can feel the engine's belts and gears embedded in my sternum, the drive shaft sprouting from my groin. The odor of contagion, of my own fear and horror, fills my nostrils, mixed with the pungent scent of motor oil. My throat tenses in a soundless scream; Mom obligingly provides the audio. Two burly attendants are dragging her out of the room while Dad tries to clean his fingernails with a matchstick.

"Don't fret about your wife, Mr. Rake," the doctor says in a whisper. "They'll just give her a small sedative and prop her up in the women's washroom."

My father clasps the physician's hand warmly and blinks back a manly tear.

"Doctor, I can't begin to thank you for all you've done—"

Hundt waves and shakes his head. "No thanks are necessary, sir," he replies. "We'll be adding her sedation as a line item on your son's bill."

Dad grimaces and looks heavenward, suddenly unable to



meet the doctor's eyes. "Ah, about that bill, Doc, you know, you see, I'm afraid our policy's benefits run out after tomorrow and we, uh, well..."

Doctor Hundt's affable expression turns grave. "Mr. Rake," he says, in the tones of a revival preacher quoting the book of Revelation, "I do SINCERELY hope you're not implying any lack of commitment to meeting the financial obligation you owe both the hospital and myself. Particularly myself."

Dad turns and stares directly at me. My eyes are barely open due to my debilitated condition; I wish desperately I could tell him I am awake and aware of his presence. I long for the strength to speak, to gesture to him, even the strength to blink my eyelids in some half-remembered Morse code. He stands beside my head and looks down at me silently. I yearn to communicate with him somehow, to let him know how much I love him, how much his being there means to me. "Buck up, Dad," I want to say. "Things may look bad now, I may be pretty banged up, and maybe I will have to be kept alive on these machines for the rest of my life, but I know we'll get through it somehow! You and Mom and me are a team! A family! We've faced the good times and bad times together, loving each other, nurturing each other as a family unit, and I know that nothing can ever change that. We'll work together, strive together, and sacrifice for each other to the end. My ordeal, my long, dark night of the soul will never make me despair, for I know the dawn is no further away than the loving faces of the two who gave me life." And with that I would embrace them both, our familial love flowing through us like gentle power through an unbroken circuit.

Dad nods almost imperceptibly as he gazes at my battered face and holds a large pillow above it. "Doc," he rumbles, "how about you go get some coffee and leave me and the boy alone for a minute?"

Doctor Hundt frowns and wags a reproving finger. "Now let's get one thing straight," he says darkly, "and let me make it absolutely clear: as a member of the medical profession, bound by the Hippocratic oath, I can neither countenance nor condone euthanasia in any way, shape, or form." He flings the door open. "Of course, as a private individual with twenty years left on the



mortgage and three on my BMW, I realize that we must take a broad, general view of things."

The door slams shut behind him. The soft whiteness descends upon me like a suffocating shroud. Faintly, I hear my father's muffled, anguished voice speaking to me for the last time.

"Dear God in Heaven," he cries, "thirty tons of clothes, sixty tons of food, five years of orthodontists and now THIS!" I gasp and choke violently, a thin trickle of blood flowing warmly behind the roof of my mouth. Deprived of oxygen, I can feel the fluid forming in my brain, the pressure growing, the inevitable, violent hemorrhage...

I wake sitting bolt upright, wheezing like a clogged steam engine. I throw off the sweat-drenched sheets and get up, heart hammering away at my chest. I glance at the clock and recoil in shock. I dive into the shower, rinse myself off and hurriedly toss on some clothes. Bounding out of the house I sprint to my car in record time, jump in and peel out into the street. Rubber smoking in my wake, I spare a second to check my watch.

Five minutes before class.