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Bagdonas: The Dreams of Vernon Lloyd

THE DREAMS OF VERNON LLOYD

by John Bagdonas

Shadows fluttered in the doorway. He heard water falling and a warm draft surrounded him; curiosity urged him to find what was at the top of the stairs but he couldn't move. He pulled his shoulders back to throw himself forward when the dream vaporized, and he found himself upright in bed, eyes open and chest pounding.

Vernon Lloyd, 79 years old, had just begun another day at the Silverburg Nursing Home.

Falling back, he propped himself on an elbow and viewed his reflection in the mirror. The deep wrinkles and white hair were out of place in contrast with the clean cinderblock walls and cold, shiny floor of the small oblong room.

As he lay in bed, the knotted fingers of his hand trembled against the sheets. They had shaken with similar conviction seventeen years ago when he stood before the school board to appeal a mandatory retirement. It was a dead giveaway. He was old.

Advancing age had eaten into his wholeness as a vulture gouges carrion. His job, his wife, the house — all gone, gobbled down by a famished scavenger, old age.

The door opened and a woman walked in. Her stomach pulled painfully at the buttoned white uniform. "Morning Mr. Lloyd" she said with an absent tone. Her pudgy hand tugged the cord of the blinds. Bright sunlight broke into the room. He squinted as she stood with her back to the window. "Might you knock before you come in?" he said. There was no lock on the door of the room, nor the bathroom nor anyplace the residents were allowed.

The nurse looked at him without expression and said, "You had better get your breakfast, your daughter will be here soon."

He moved to the edge of the bed and stood. Meanwhile the attendant made the bed. Finished, he joined her at bedside while she laid out his dayclothes. Next to his slacks sat a pair of unfamiliar green socks. Vernon stared at them and said "Those aren't mine." The nurse sighed deeply and said "Certainly they are Mr. Lloyd, I took them from your dresser."

"They never get the damn socks right," he mumbled to himself.

"Can I help you dress now?" the woman said with a hint of impatience. He sat down and she began to remove his clothes. Her meaty hands gripped his arms and pulled on the clothing strongly. "You must be behind schedule," he said.

"If we don't hurry, your daughter will be here before breakfast," she said with another tug.

Denice came to visit at nine am every Thursday. She was his youngest of four children and the only one that visited. The others were spread across the country and rarely came to see him.

Denice had been close to him. She had come late in his life and lived at home too long before marrying and moving out. He knew the weekly visits were a strain on her. There were three children, whom never accompanied her and a husband that protested any inattention brought on by his aged father in law.

Denice always looked haggard when she came to visit. Vernon knew about Denice's problems because, despite his fading senses, he was sensitive and listened to her. It was always small talk, like that exchanged by strangers on an elevator. Occasionally, he tried to reach her with his problems, but she didn't listen. She would patronize him to a point then abruptly change the subject. He would lament over the memory of the close relationship they had when she was a child.

Fountain in a Shopping Mall

Tossed

pennies

nickels

dimes

plummet

dive

for luck.

Rhythmic water consumes,

buries with constant design.

Ripples dissipate.

Women with blue hair & men with jaggling pockets bribe fate.

— Kimberly J. Kyp

DEATH

(A tribute to John Lennon)

Time is ended, life is still

It can't be corrected with a pill

Souls are lost, some are saved,

Life is hell in a way.

Drugs are took to escape the pain,

Eternity will still remain;

Life is short and lived too fast,

The only hope was in the past,

God is right in His way —

No matter what people say.

The void marches onward,

and never will end —

For once you're dead,

Sins won't mend.

— Warren James Flamm

A tenseness existed between them now that couldn't be erased. If he aggravated it, she became frightened and her guilt began to show.

Leaning heavily on the cane, he walked slowly to the dining area. When he passed through the hall, the grim faces of the residents bothered him. Nobody smiled until their mind began to go and sometimes not even then.

He no longer had friends at the home. When first moving in he associated with a group of men that ate together, played cards and talked. As the years passed several of them died and the group broke up, each death disturbing the remaining friendships.

They became isolated from each other by the fear of separation. They saw each other from across a chasm of loneliness and drew within, hiding from the look of waiting death mirrored in each others eyes.

He sat at a cafeteria table, his breakfast in front of him. The attendants wheeled chairs filled with sunken, unfed faces to the table and rolled them away once fed. A bald man snored loudly and was awakened. Vernon began to think about the dream.

It had been a long while since he first had dreamed about the staircase and the doorway. He didn't sleep well and spent most nights dozing and waking. Sometimes he couldn't sleep at all and would lie awake and listen to the night sounds. In the quiet darkness he heard the ventilating system hum an imperceptible tune, the gentle vibration touching him everywhere at once. A door close and a toilet flushed, both sounds muffled by the thick walls. An occasional voice, high pitched and urgent, would call the name of a child or long dead spouse, and he sensed the torment caused by sleep induced memories. He listened hard, identifying each sound precisely until the effort tired him.

When night was almost over, and he lay exhausted in bed, sleep would come. And then the dream.

The steps were steep and mottled with shadows from an open doorway. As he climbed up he heard water falling. The sound was deep and distant and like the mute thunder of a far off waterfall. It sent a tremor into the ground that he could feel. The warm air swirled around him with a pleasant odor; a familiar, welcome odor. He continued up but the doorway remained at a stationary distance, its shadow fluttering in the breeze.

He always awoke suddenly before reaching the top. Although he knew it was a dream, it left him with an inner urging that he couldn't explain.

A hand touched his arm. "Hello Dad, how are you today?" It was Denice. "Am I early? I've interrupted your breakfast," she said.

He looked at the cold oatmeal, an unopened carton of milk and a glass of orange juice with the pith gathered in a ring around the top of the glass. "No, I'm finished, let's go sit somewhere else." He allowed her to help him up but pulled the arm away as they began walking.

Denice was a small woman thirty-nine years old. Her dark hair was peppered with grey and the center of her body wrapped in extra flesh. Her clothes were discount store bargains. A large handbag, its bulging vinyl sides bounding against her back, hung from the shoulder. Greasy makeup covered her face and the watery brown eyes watched sadly as her father hobbled ahead of her.

His body was withered. The bones of the hips and shoulders poked at the loose clothing as he walked. Sparse white hair covered the shiny, freckled scalp and his arms hung helplessly by his side as he shuffled down the hall.

They neared the lounge area while Denice looked around. The facility was spotless as a hospital, the antiseptic atmosphere interrupted only by an occasional green plant beneath a skylight. As they approached an elderly woman in a faded housecoat, Denice heard her conversing with herself. She stopped speaking and stared at Denice as they passed. The conversation continued when they rounded a corner. Further on a man sat outside a doorway in a wheelchair. His thin legs were crossed and looked entwined. A cruelly curved spine forced him to hold his head awkwardly. His lower lip jutted out as he stared at the wall.

Denice could not avoid watching the faces of the people her father lived with. Their expressions were strange, even when they smiled the eyes contained something odd. She thought it was loneliness or fear of maybe a reflection her appearance stirred.

She didn't know but wondered what her father felt, and it bothered her until she couldn't think about it. His problems weren't real to her, she had substantial, concrete problems of her own. Children to raise, a husband to care for, a house to run. These things taxed her attention. Father would fend for himself as he always he. There was no other way, these few hours were all she had to give, even if it wasn't enough.

The tiles beneath their feet changed to carpeting as they entered an enclave filled with parlor furniture.

The old man dropped into an armchair and put the cane on top of a table scattered with dog eared readers digests. Denice pushed a straight backed chair to the table and sat down. She fidgeted with the handbag and put it beneath the chair after unbuttoning her coat. With a crumpled tissue in hand she dabbed her nose while looking at him and asked, "How do you feel Dad?" His tired eyes met hers while his hands trembled as he folded them.

"As well as an old man should, I expect," he said. She wasn't a child anymore even though her features gleamed through the middle aged face like a beam of light, reminding him of her as a girl. He longed for the days when they were close and an exchange of hugs could solve any problem, soothe any hurt and send the cares of the world into flight, away from the protective circle of their arms.

"The kids send their love. It's been a busy week for us. The first week of school and all," she said. Her face was flushed and damp with perspiration. She pulled her coat off and let it fall behind her. She continued to speak, offering family news and other bits of information, held out like a candle to a man in the dark. She hoped they were important to him but he didn't hear. Instead the words flowed past him in a wave, and he wished he could tell her. And she would understand, and it would change things. He wanted to blame his misery on her, but it was his fault, and it would never get better. The failure hurt the most. He tried to be happy but couldn't. It was in a slide down. He had lost control.

"What time is it," he said suddenly. It didn't matter to him but Denice was eyeing her watch like a school kid waiting for the bell to ring. "It's after ten Dad, I'll have to leave soon, the kids will be home for lunch," she said.

She kissed his cheek and said goodbye. He watched her walk quickly down the hall towards the exit.

The rest of the day was spent sitting in his room. They brought his meals and chided him for not eating, but he didn't answer. Thinking of the dream, he sat and watched nothing until it was dark.

He felt tired and got into bed. He was weary and his arms and legs ached. He fell asleep and began to dream.

He climbed the stairs without hesitation, the sound of the water and the touch of air drawing him up. The stairs disappeared behind him and the doorway drew nearer until he stepped into its archway.

He stood in a flurry of bright shadows, a gentle tide touched him with a warm rush and he joined the breeze, moving with it through the door.

That morning, the nurse opened the blinds in the oblong room and walked to the bed. She touched his shoulder to wake him, but her hand came back quickly.

Vernon Lloyd was dead.

*People sail through life — like ships passing in the night.
Occasionally, a lighthouse appears — that beacon is like a friend.*

— Mary Ryder-Swanson '83