

## AUGUST 24TH, 2016

There's something in the corner. Something enormous and *breathing*. Air rattling through its lungs, claws scraping the floor of this deep and dark void. Something hides. Something waits.

Every night is exactly the same and also totally unpredictable. I fall asleep suddenly and get dropped into an empty, endless space and then . . . nothing. I stand in that void, changeless and infinite, never knowing when I'm going to wake up again. *If* I'm going to ever wake up again. I always do, obviously, but when I'm in that space, it feels real. Like that's where I live now and I'm no longer in control of waking up and going back to my *actual* life. Which, you can imagine, is pretty anxiety inducing!!

I don't know why the doctors thought keeping a dream journal would help me. "Doctors." Who am I trying to impress here? It was a high school nurse. Despite the fact that my *own mother* is a nurse, I went to the nurse at a school I don't even go to anymore to talk about the fact that I'm sleeping so much — too much — but never feeling rested, my head full of strange, as-real-as-life dreams, and he suggested keeping a journal.

"It's most likely anxiety," he said, as I sat on the sticky plastic chair in his un-air-conditioned office.

"What?" I said, "I'm getting so anxious I'm passing out?"

This seems like a dubious diagnosis to me, but then again, my idea of medical intervention is holding up my bleeding hand until it stops and julienning single-handed so that the sous chef doesn't yell at me.

"You're in the workforce now," the nurse went on. "That's a very stressful transition."

"High school was stressful." I snorted. "A restaurant kitchen is spa-like compared to this place. I don't *feel* more anxious than I was before."

He just smiled at that sadly and patted my knees. A little patronizing, but I'm the nineteen-year-old who went to her old high school because I'm . . . taking too many unplanned naps? So . . .

Wasn't as bad as it would have been if I had gone straight to my parents. My mom would have a million things to say about my lifestyle and "those restaurant hours aren't good for you, why can't you just *consider* going to college" but that wouldn't even be the worst part. No, if I tell my mom and dad that I'm having an unusually difficult time staying awake, they'll make me go see *their* doctors. Their special doctors. And I just don't want a bunch of people poking and prodding at me to see if I burst into flames. I'm nearly twenty — if I were Atypical, we'd know by now. Or my mom would have had a vision about it. *Something* would have happened. But no, instead I have to be the ONE person in my family with a normal human ailment. And I just couldn't stand the disappointed looks when the Atypical doctors tell my parents I just have extreme anxiety or narcolepsy or whatever other boring non-superpowered thing I might have.

So we'll give this dream journal thing a shot.

There's a door in the middle of the void. It isn't shaped like a door, doesn't have a handle or a frame, but I know that's what it is. Light seeps through the cracks around its curved edges and I can feel a breeze, crisp and clean, flowing through from the other side. I walk toward it, my feet tracking over something solid, even if there's no floor beneath my feet, wanting to see what's on the other side.

The light fades and I wake up.

AUGUST 27 TH, 2016

Describing dreams is . . . hard. Not to mention, usually mind-numbingly boring, even if the only person you're describing them to is yourself. The edges of that void are getting clearer with each sleep. But trying to picture it – the look of the place, the way it makes me feel – is like trying to catch light in my hands.

Writing has never exactly been my strength. Neither has talking, if I'm honest. I'm at my best in the kitchen, moving silently through my routine, or having orders barked at me by Chef and frantically prepping the mise en place. Restaurant communication is the kind of talking I can get behind – efficient, straightforward, with no expectations around “politeness” or “socializing.”

It's not that I'm an antisocial person, it's just that I'd much rather spend my time laser-focused on mastering a brunoise or getting the perfect rise on dinner rolls than trading stories with a bunch of people I'm squeezed into a kitchen with day after day. I meant it when I told the nurse that a high-paced restaurant environment was more relaxing than high school. I was never into the “school” part of school very much – too active and impatient to sit and focus on a lecture or a test – and I barely talked to the other students, too afraid of being made fun of for being chubby and gay or, even worse, somehow revealing my family's secret. To my classmates' credit, I never was teased for anything. I mostly wasn't noticed at all.

Sometimes it feels like that in my family – I skate by unnoticed except on the rare days, like today, when my mom takes TOO much notice of my life choices.

“I just wish you would save *some* of that hyper-focused energy for things unrelated to food,” she'd said as I was cooking dinner tonight (last night? it's 3 a.m., so whatever).

“But I like food,” I said, hoping that'd be enough to end this conversation. It wasn't.

“You don't only like food,” she said and I braced myself for a list. “You like rollerblading and Lord of the Rings and girls.”

"Oh my god, Mom, you're making me sound like an eleven-year-old boy." I had to speak up to be heard over the sizzle of the metric ton of wet spinach I'd just dumped into the hot pan in front of me, dampening the delicious smell of garlic already in the pan.

"There's nothing wrong with your interests." She sniffed.

"I know that." I rolled my eyes. "But none of those things translate to a career. I'm not going to be a professional rollerblader or *Silmarillion* scholar or . . . well, I guess I *could* translate liking girls into a career . . ." I mumbled.

"Rose!" she gasped, trying her best to sound scandalized, even though my mom loves a saucy joke. "You're spending too much time with those edgy restaurant people."

"Mom, no one has *ever* called Milton *edgy*," I said. Milton, despite the vaguely pretentious one-word name and gold lettering on the windows, was less Michelin-star and more "old man Boston supper club." The menu hasn't changed in a thousand years and we don't get a lot of foodies in, so it isn't exactly cutthroat. The fact that I'm allowed to do meal prep at all, as a teenager with no formal training, is proof of that.

"Inappropriate jokes aside," she said, "when was the last time you went on a date?"

"Whenever it was, I distinctly remember it prompting a conversation about you staying out of my love life," I muttered. The memory of looking my mom straight in the eye and asking her to back off still makes my skin crawl. Usually evasion and deflection are the best modes of escape with my family, but some things require a stronger hand. And BOY do I hate that.

"Oh, are we sticking to that?" she asked innocently. I turned my back on her again, facing the stove in the hopes that giving my full attention to dinner would be a sign that she could leave me alone for the time being. A hollow wish.

"I just think it might do you some good. You never hang out with your high school friends anymore—"

"Because they're all away at college . . ." I explained calmly, the air around me filling with steam and making this already oppressive conversation even more claustrophobic. I didn't mention that plenty of them ended up at college in the city because then I would be forced to admit that we weren't really all that good friends to begin with.

"—and I know that Aaron has invited you to go see a movie with

him a few times this summer." Her voice was moving into dangerous "you're making me sad, Rose" territory, and I really hated wading in those particular waters.

"Pity invites from my brother aren't exactly the height of social life." I wiped my forehead with the back of my wrist – I can normally handle the heat of the kitchen, but I had started to feel distinctly sweaty and woozy.

"I wouldn't know *what* your ideal social life *would* be, Rose," she continued, like a dog with a bone. "That's part of the problem."

I sighed. I avoided confrontation with my mother at all costs but she's so unrelenting about this stuff. I turned toward her, keeping my voice steady, trying to explain this as rationally as possible.

"Just because I want to live my life a little differently from you doesn't mean –"

And that's when I passed out.

I know! This journal just got interesting.

I don't know where I went – if I did go anywhere at all. I remember everything going black, a quick flash of light, and then I woke up on my back to see my mom's face above me, pulled tight in worry, her hands gripping my shoulders to shake me awake.

"M fine," I mumbled, though I wasn't sure that I was. She made a fuss over me all the same, making me sit down at the kitchen counter while she attempted to finish dinner for me. "Attempted" is maybe harsh – she actually did a pretty good job even if I did have to add a lot more salt at the last second.

And I *do* feel fine! I mean, as fine as I've *been* feeling, which is a lot more run-down than I would have expected to feel at nineteen. Despite the fact that I keep sleeping in longer and longer and, apparently, now just passing out randomly, I'm still inexplicably *exhausted*. Maybe writing down all my thoughts in the middle of the night *isn't* all that helpful.

Enormous trees stretched their branches over me like a loving canopy, their roots floating above pristine, glittering, blue-green water. The smell of salt and pine filled the air, even though there wasn't an evergreen in sight. I glided over the water, watching it ripple underneath me, and I felt like I was barely touching the air, skimming weightless and free.

Flowers blossomed up from the tree roots, sending sweet perfume up to me as I flew along. I've rarely felt such peace, such calm understanding. I was contented but still curious, moving forward to something exciting and glorious. A light shone bright in the distance, reflecting off the water of the horizon, and I felt as if the water must be cascading down the side of the earth, falling into the sun, mixing with its beams to create warm, swimmable light. I moved swiftly through the trees, out onto the open water, closer and closer to the light, ready to touch it, knowing it wouldn't burn me and knowing that, when I did make contact, I would finally understand.

But before I got there I suddenly did understand – I was dreaming, I was somewhere deep inside my mind, or somewhere else entirely . . . but that light . . . if I just kept soaring toward that distant horizon, everything would come into sharp focus, the dream would be mine again and then –

I woke up.

I don't remember ever . . . waking up inside a dream before. Is this what lucid dreaming is?

I know I should go downstairs, eat breakfast, start the day. I slept right through my alarm, again, wanting to stay forever in that breathtaking beauty of water and trees. But I could feel consciousness encroaching back on me, the water underneath me starting to ripple away, the horizon growing dim. I feel tired and heavy, and like if I just stayed in that place, flying through that world, I'd figure out how to finally get some rest.