

The Dream Thief

Our story begins with a funeral. Zak, a boy of 9, skinny and short for his age, had to stand on his tiptoes to see into the coffin. He peered inside and saw his grandmother lying there in her favorite polyester pant-suit, her hair all hairsprayed into a perfect silver shell, her skin waxy, her make-up grossly over-applied. The expression on her face was one of utter peace, and this troubled Zak somewhat, since she was a kinetic, frantic woman who threw fits one minute then smothered you with kisses the next—rarely was her face in a state of repose.

When the funeral was over, Zak's parents had to pry his fingers away from the dead woman's hand. He was very close to his grandmother, and her loss was felt more deeply by him than anyone else at the viewing. He cried all the way home, and when at last he was in his pajamas, tucked under the covers, he tried hard to keep his eyes open, but at last they fluttered shut and he was consumed by his wrenching nightmares.

Zak regularly dreamed wild, extravagant dreams. He'd had more dreams as a 9 year old boy than most people have in their whole lifetime—no studies had been conducted to prove this, but it was nonetheless true. Not only did he dream more frequently than the average person, he also experienced them more deeply. After a full night's sleep, he would often wake up disoriented and it would take him several minutes to realize he was no longer in the world of his dreams. If they were good dreams, Zak would think about them all day and regret not being able to return to them. But if he had nightmares, he would seize awake, dripping with sweat, his mouth dry as a bone, and thank the fates that it wasn't real.

Night after night, Zak dreamed about his grandmother. She was fussing about something he'd done wrong, but he didn't know what it was. He kept asking what he could do to fix it, but that just made her more mad. Seeing her like this upset Zak greatly.

One night he started awake and after a moment his clenched jaw relaxed and his fists uncurled, and he lay there in the dark, his eyes wide open to the dark. A gust of wind threw open the bedroom windows and something was coming inside. It was a robe hovering just above the ground, shimmering and casting the moonlight on the walls, billowing in slow motion as if it were under water. At the end of its robed arms were thin hands so white they were almost see-through.

"Who are you?" asked the boy.

"I am the Eye-Closer." The being's hands moved to emphasize each word it spoke. "Don't be alarmed. I am the bringer of sleep."

"I've fallen asleep tons of times before. Have we met?"

"Of course. I come to close your eyes every night. I close everyone's eyes."

Zak sat up in his bed, inspecting the ghostly visitor. The hood of the robe was drawn up, but inside there was no face, only darkness. And yet its voice sounded resonant, as if it came from Zak's own throat.

"Can you give me nice dreams, instead of the nightmares I've been having?"

"I'm sorry. I only make people sleep. Nobody can give you dreams, just as nobody can give you talent, or imagination."

"Please don't make me go back to sleep, my nightmares are horrible."

"I'm not here to make you sleep, not yet. I need your help. Someone has been sneaking into peoples' sleep and stealing their dreams.

"Dreams can be stolen?"

The Eye-Closer sighed. "Evidently so. Now listen, you dream more vividly and abundantly than any person in the world. Because of this you are in a position to help me."

"How can I help *you*?" Zak said. "You're, like, a spirit. I mean, you can float!"

"I can't enter the world of dreams, but you can. Your help in this matter is crucial for us both. It is believed that you will be the thief's next target."

Zak's heart leapt into his throat. But then an idea formed. "Will he take my nightmares away?"

"The thief will take away your nightmares and dreams alike."

"What do you want me to do?"

The Eye-Closer's hand reached into the floating mass of robes and emerged with a sphere of ice the size of a basketball. The white hand cradled the ball, separating from the arm and hovering away from the robe, floating through the air like a magic trick. It set the ice sphere gently on Zak's bedside table, then sailed back into the sleeve of the robe. Zak saw that there was something inside the ice. It began to melt, slowly at first, then more quickly until water was cascading off the bedside table and pouring onto the carpet. At last, all that remained on the table was a pair of glasses.

The robes of the Eye-Closer rippled with the breeze coming in from the window.

"What're these for?" asked Zak, picking up the glasses, which was completely dry.

"When you go to sleep, wear these and they will cross into the dream-world with you. They are magic glasses, whatever you see, I can see."

"Kind of like a glasses?"

"Yes, except they record everything, not just reality. Now, are you ready to dream?" said the Eye-Closer.

Zak put the glasses on. The lenses were the size of grapefruits, and he felt like a dweeb. At least nobody from school would see him like this.

One of the Eye-Closer's white hands disappeared into a fold of his billowing robes, and after a moment it emerged holding a small vial of what looked like perfume. The other hand pulled the cork out with a pop. The room filled with the fragrance of mango and fresh rain.

"This is pure, concentrated sleep," the Eye-Closer explained. "I'm going to leave it with you, since you're working with us now. But be careful, one sniff is all it takes to keep your eyes closed all night. And never, never touch it to your lips. If you ever taste pure sleep, your eyes will close forever."

Zak took the vial with trembling hands and carefully placed it on his table. At last he said, "It's not working. I'm not sleeping."

"Are you sure about that?" it said.

On the bedside table stood a picture of Zak's grandmother. Usually, it made him sad to look at her silver hair and her severe face, but now he stared at it in wonder because his grandmother's eyes seemed to be watching him.

"Zaky, I do believe you've grown since the last time I saw you," said the grandmother. "Give us a kiss!" she said.

Zak knew all this should feel odd, but for some reason it felt perfectly natural, just like it did when she was alive. He picked up the picture frame and gave the glass a quick peck.

"Mom says I've grown an inch an a half since last year," he replied.

"I believe it," said the grandmother. "I wish I were there to watch you grow."

"Me too," said Zak.

The Eye-Closer was watching a screen on the wall. On the screen was the projection of what the glasses saw. When he looked at the screen he saw another screen within it, and a screen within that—thousands of screens within screens.

The Eye Closer grumbled, "Don't look at the screen, please. It just creates a feedback loop."

"Sorry," said Zak. He now understood that he was asleep and dreaming.

Suddenly the room was flooded with water. His bed became a sailboat, and he was lost at sea. Mountains hovered above the horizon in the distance, clouds morphed into real animals in the sky. One of them was a dog, and it started to bark. Then a cloud-cat hissed and scurried across the sky, ruffling it up like a carpet. The dog gave chase and all the other clouds muttered in complaint. A cloud-elephant said, condescendingly, "Could someone call animal control?"

Zak stepped out of the boat and onto the water, which had turned to slick, black rock. He stood at the mouth of a volcano and peered inside.

Zak feared heights, and his palms got sweaty as he teetered on the edge of the volcano. In addition to all this, the heat was making him sweat all over. The oversized glasses slipped down his nose and tumbled into the belly of the volcano. The Eye-Closer would surely be irritated if Zak lost them, so he dived into the volcano.

He fell for what felt like years, perhaps into the center of the Earth, he thought. Just below him he could see the glasses, falling at the same speed as himself. He reached out until his fingertips brushed them, then his hand closed around them.

The red light of the volcano throbbed and grew even more intense. He was no longer falling, nor had he landed in hot lava. He was flying, or hovering really, in mid air. It occurred to him that he should have thought about flying much earlier. In dreams, he could always fly. He zipped up through the throat of the volcano towards the blue circle of sky above.

But then something very strange happened. He stopped flying upwards, as if he had been halted by an invisible leash. Zak couldn't believe his eyes, he had never seen anything like it in dreams before. The blue circle of sky crumpled in on itself and began to peel away like old wallpaper unrolling into a black abyss beyond it. Behind the thin layer of sky, there was nothing but inky blackness. Zak watched the roiling pit of lava below him crumple like a photograph and roll away in a long scroll to reveal the same abyss of blackness.

Zak wanted desperately to get out of there, but something told him not to fly into the blackness. There was something very wrong about the blackness—it frightened him to his bones. Now the sides of the volcano were crumpling and rolling away in strips. Soon there would be nothing left but the blackness. Zak tried to scream, but couldn't. He couldn't move a single muscle and it almost made him burst into tears.

Then he awoke in his own bed, relieved that the volcano had been a dream. He removed the glasses and yelped when he realized

the Eye-Closer was still in his room, watching the screen on the wall. The screen displayed what he'd just seen in his sleep: the clouds, the volcano, the strips rolling away to blackness...

Zak felt suddenly cold. If the camera could see those things, then maybe he was really there, and they were really real. But that was impossible, they were only dreams.

The Eye-Closer was now hovering over the foot of Zak's bed. "It's worse than I thought," said the hovering being. "Much worse."

"Why? What's happening?"

"He is aggressively stripping away your dreams. He must know you're helping me."

"Who is he?" asked Zak.

The Eye-Closer paused the video on the screen. One of his translucent white hands hovered away from him and touched the screen. "See this figure here, on the edge of the Volcano? That's my brother."

"You have a brother?"

"Like me, he is also called the Eye-Closer. Though some call him Death."

Zak swallowed hard. "Why is Death stealing dreams?"

"That is the mystery," said the Eye-Closer. "This is becoming dangerous for you. My brother will find you again. And he will try to steal your dream again. But you must not allow this to happen, for if he steals your dream away entirely, you will never wake up."

Zak shuddered. "And what am I supposed to do, exactly?"

The Eye-Closer placed the vial of sleep in Zak's hand, the fragrance of mangoes and fresh rain wafting on its shimmering robes. "Take this with you," it said.

This time Zak found himself at a dinner table with his family. Everyone was eating ferociously. He noticed that nobody seemed to have a face. Where their faces should have been, there was only blurriness. Except for his grandmother who sat next to him. He could make out every line of her smiling face. She raised an eyebrow to him and asked if there was anything wrong with his roast beef. "I'm not hungry," said Zak.

"Something on your mind?" asked his grandmother.

"Yes, I'm supposed to find Death, but I'm afraid that he might steal my dreams away."

"Well, you know what I do when I'm scared?" asked his grandmother. "I turn around and face whatever is chasing me. Then I am the one doing the chasing."

"Thanks, Grandma, but I don't think that's going to work for me this time. I can't chase Death."

"Why not?"

"I just can't. Death is more powerful than I am."

"If that's what you believe then it must be true."

"I don't want it to be true, it just is."

Zak's grandmother patted her lips with her napkin.

"Good look for you," she said, indicating the glasses on Zak's face.

"Yeah right."

He looked around and realized he was no longer in a dining room, but riding a horse on a carousel. He was in a crowd of children about his same age. All of them screaming and hollering as they rode the mannequin horses with their grotesque smiles and wild, rolling eyes. Zak wanted to join in with the screaming, but found that he had no voice. A handful of children began to crumple and strip away.

He's here, thought Zak, and strip by strip, the scenery tore away. From the void of the blackness came an icy chill. The other children continued to yell as if they couldn't see their world was falling apart.

And then Zak saw him. He wore a white cloak, worn and tattered like burlap, and hovered above the ground like the Eye-Closer. But instead of white hands, his hands were as black as charcoal, though not as black as the void. As one hand floated away from the silver cloak, another appeared in its place. All told there were ten or so black hands floating around, picking at the edges of the crumpling scene and peeling them back, wrapping them into neat scrolls, and spiriting them back into the folds of the white tattered robe. This was how the thief collected his dreams.

"I know why you are here," said the figure in gray.

"I'm to capture you," said Zak. "You're stealing people's dreams and it has to stop."

"Why? Why does it have to stop?" said Death.

"Because people need their dreams."

"The living will always dream again."

"Not if you steal their dreams. If you steal all of a dream, the dreamer dies," said Zak.

"I'm not going to take your entire dream. Just most of it. The last thing I want, boy, is for you to die."

"What do you want with my dreams, anyway?"

"I'm robbing from those who have more than enough to give to those who have very little, those whose eyes I have closed forever. Tell me, where is the harm in that?"

"Why does your brother want you to stop stealing dreams?" asked Zak.

"When people's dreams are taken away, a little bit of their happiness is taken with them. It is an unfortunate side effect of what I'm doing. My brother is only protecting those he serves."

Zak detected a hint of melancholy in Death's voice. "My grandmother died recently," said Zak.

"I know," replied Death. "She went peacefully, in case you were wondering."

Zak felt himself suddenly wanting to cry. He loved his grandmother, and he wished that she was here now to advise him on what to do. But there were only a few shreds of dreams left here and there: thin strips of color where the dream world used to be. This is what death must be like, he thought.

"If dreams help make people happy, it's a shame that the dead can't dream. Can't your brother help you somehow?"

"My brother and I aren't exactly on speaking terms. We never really got along, really. I always wanted be the one to bring sleep. I mean, it's lousy being the bringer of death. Everyone spends their life in fear of you, they do everything they can to avoid you, and when you do finally meet them they can't stick around to tell their friends your not such a bad guy. Then there's my brother, the bringer of sleep and dreams and rest. Everyone looks forward to his visits. But don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining. Actually, I don't want to talk about it anymore, I've already said too much."

"I have an idea," said Zak, his face brightening. He took the vial of pure sleep out of his pocket and held it up to the white-robed being.

"You have some too?" said Death, producing his own vial of pure sleep. "My brother and I use the same formula. One taste on a person's lips and my job is done."

"I wasn't sure why he gave this to me at first," Zak said, "but now I think I am. I'll keep it open next to me forever so I'll always be asleep. Then you can take my dreams. Just mine and nobody else's. That way, the Eye-Closer wouldn't have to worry about you making people sad by stealing their dreams, or accidentally killing them."

Death crossed its arms. "Absolutely not. Then you would have neither dreams, nor reality. That would make you very sad I'm sure."

Zak hesitated, then spoke. "But if it means I can give some of my happiness to my grandma, then it would be worth it, wouldn't it?"

Suddenly, from one of the distant strips of blue sky that still hovered in the darkness, a voice bellowed.

"Zak?" A figure stepped through the strip and walked into the blackness where Death and Zak stood facing each other. It was Zak's grandmother.

"Grandma!" he shouted, throwing his arms around her.

"Oh Zak," she knelt beside her. "I overheard your conversation, sorry for eavesdropping, but I don't want you to sacrifice yourself

for me, honey. I know how much you need your dreams. How much they help you feel less alone."

Zak nodded. It was true. He valued his dreams immensely because they helped him feel like there were other worlds where he belonged.

"Now listen, I have an idea that just might solve everyone's problems." And Zak's grandmother laid out her plan to both Zak and Death, which was simple really:

Zak should continue to capture his dreams on the magic glasses. Then, rather than stealing the dreams of the living, Death would give the footage of Zak's dreams to those who could not dream. That way, Death wouldn't have to sneak around stealing people's dreams, and the dead could get to glimpse into Zak's nighttime world.

"And then," Zak said to his grandmother, who was now standing next to him in his room, "Then everything I dream, you will see too!"

"Yes," said Zak's grandmother. I would like that very much. But now, you must arise. And live." And Zak did arise, bright-eyed and well-rested.

He plunged into the daylight and spent the rest of the day running around the woods that surrounded his house. He was filled with a wonderful sense of purpose, as if he were going to accomplish something great in the coming times.

Of his dream the night before, of Death and his grandmother, and the deal they made, he remembered almost nothing. All the strange events of that dream were already drifting away like cobwebs on the wind. This was the nature of Zak's dreams; he remembered them only for a short time. And that was good for the boy, because it was better that he not be constantly reminded of his responsibilities.

The Eye-Closer returned every night thereafter. He held on to the glasses for Zak now, returning them every night so his dreams could be recorded, then brought the recordings to Death. The brothers, Sleep and Death, made amends. Death felt much less envious now that the dead could experience a little bit of happiness by dreaming, and the Eye-Closer was relieved that his brother was no longer stealing dreams of the living.

As Zak grew into a young man, then an old man, he always awoke and forgot about his dreams and his obligation with the magic glasses. But the Eye-Closer never forgot to slip the glasses on him as he fell asleep, and they were grateful for all the years of the boy's life.