

Something Great

The violent dreams started the day I met S. It had been years since I'd had any intense dreams at all. It wasn't until the third or fourth morning after a series of tough dreams that I wondered where they'd come from, and the only thing I could think of was I'd met S the day before the night of the first one. We hadn't even had a date yet. I got her number after we started chatting in a store—a courtship the length of a sandwich order. I texted her about getting some coffee, but she was busy so we put it off. The first dream had family in it. I don't remember much about it now, but I woke early, before the alarm, like I never did. I was being chased. Then there was a long one, the kind that seemed like it lasted all night. I was exhausted when I woke. I was wanted by the police for some bad stuff. It was all fuzzy and uncertain in the dream, what I'd done. Some people had died. It had gone on for awhile, but then I understood they were on to me, and I needed to get out. I remember the difficulty—this is in the dream—the difficulty of switching from being the perpetrator of these unknown bad acts, inhabiting the power of that, to giving that up so immediately, being on the run and becoming the subject of someone else's aggression. The terrifying impact of going from power to fear in a flash. That's really, when you think about it, a whole other way of being, going from being the aggressor, feeling confident, in command, and stable in that, to being on the run, sneaking around, fearful and anxious of every twitching blade of grass, every shifting shadow.

Anyway, that dream ended before I was caught so I came into the light of day suspended in that feeling. It was night, I was on the run, then suddenly it was morning, I was awake in bed, again early, hun-

gry, and that's when I thought of S. I was really hoping she'd text back.

There was one more dream where I found myself making out on a couch with an old guy friend I was very surprised to have slip into my unconscious. This is someone I'd come to hate, perhaps unfairly, after he pricked something deep in me and dredged up a truly frightening variety of jealousy. It took me apart quickly, and things just went south. I'd honestly have to say it ended a really good relationship I had going at the time. In the dream, we were looking at a book so large it spread open across both of our laps. One of those kind you never see anymore bound in thick red leather. There was gold leaf decorating some of the pages, flakes of it in odd, elongated, radiating patterns. (When I mentioned them to a friend, she said they were vaginas, and they're not odd.) As we sat, I resisted his more enthusiastic advances. He was smiling a lot.

But it was the transition in that long dream that I couldn't wrap my head around. I had to coach myself through it. Talk myself through every step. Now do this. Now do that. I was thinking about how parents always say toddlers have a tough time with that, their difficulty in transitioning from one activity to another. That made me think it's something deep in us that has some resistance to that kind of switching. We have to be taught how to manage it. We have to learn it. For the healthy, awareness of that effort disappears into adult habits.

So anyway, it wasn't the dreams themselves or what they were about that stuck with me. It was that I had to make a drastic change right away. And I did it. I mean, that's a dream, I guess. Anything can happen. Your whole way of being just replaced in an instant. And it was that replacement, that new mind, that put me on to the idea of psychedelics.

I think it's important to be clear about this: the psychedelics did not in any way introduce angry or violent emotions. Rather their place in this story is

the great creative thrust they provided. All my old excessive deliberations in creative activity diminished greatly. I could proceed straight away from the seed of an idea of a form right into constructing it without all the second thoughts and hesitations and paralyzing doubt that had been my whole world. I'd spent so much time in those modes that I thought that's who I was. And then, boom, all that just tossed aside.

Sometimes I miss it. There was great pleasure in that rummaging through the mind. Excursions and diversions that turned up treasures that surely would have been overlooked had I remained attached to the concrete matters of physical objects. Those digressions felt like necessary journeys. A long look along a tree branch, the mystery of each segment's joint that turned the tree a degree this way or that. I would be stunned to stillness, rapt by the sense of an underlying order. Or at other times, under the same concentrated focus, things would fall apart, and then I'd think about the possibilities in those new broken-off parts. It takes time to consider the things that no one else does. That used to be my thing.

One thing that's stayed the same is that I've always believed, even at my lowest points, that I would do something great. I feel like the biggest thing in my life hasn't happened yet. I don't know what. It could be anything. A movie, a novel, save somebody. Do you know that feeling you get when you're just sitting somewhere, anywhere, and there is a patch of sunlight nearby and then all of sudden it just blooms brighter, like the quick slide of a dimmer switch? That's the way I feel right now.

That first time I took mushrooms I remember a kind of weak demon made an appearance, and I took a deep breath and I walked right up to it and I asked, "What do you have to teach me?" and it just walked away. Sure, it didn't hurt me, but it didn't help me either, which was kind of disappointing. I was hoping for more, so the next one, I said, "Get the fuck outta here you fucking piece of fuckwad shit!"

I think of the psychedelics something like the little experimental bombs I started making around the same time. Bombs is one word, but we could exchange it for another: explosive devices. That gets you thinking. Mind-altering drugs, things that go boom, artworks perhaps—a set of *explosive* devices—tools for immediate, profound and great transformation.

When I started making them, it was just another project. The online research, the digging into how things work. I don't think I was even thinking about using them. I just liked making them. I liked the challenge. It was a kind of satisfaction I hadn't had in a while. Kids used to really get into that stuff with their basement chemistry sets, and then we got all scared of that, and now there's a whole generation of kids that don't know anything about chemistry. All of this together, the creative burst and a project to get into, I guess it felt like I was really coming alive. My sleep stabilized. I ate healthier. My sweet tooth vanished, and without any effort at all I was making salads and sautéing discs of eggplant among scrambled eggs. I even made my own injera, and when a doctor diagnosed me with arthritis of the big toe, I did not accept that. I knew I could figure a way out of it. That's me 2.0—attack the day.

The other day at a café I suddenly began to think about having a conversation with my brother who took an offhand dig at George Clooney—his limited range or something. What I'm saying is, this conversation didn't happen, but I thought it. He, my brother, didn't mean anything by it, just talking in that casual way we do about the famous, using them to cast judgment for our own entertainment. But I interrupted him before he said anything truly mean because, "I actually know him a bit." There's always that awkward pause when you tell someone that. "I've stayed at his place in Costa Rica a few times. He's just a guy you know, doing his thing like we all are." Again, none of this happened, I was just having some coffee. And a really, really good rugelach—raspberry.

Then I relayed to my brother this story Clooney once told me about an appearance on Letterman. His segment was done. Unusual for him he'd showed up alone, but he'd been there so many times it had become a pretty casual thing. So, he just let himself out the back door. Of course, you know, he's George Clooney, so his first thought was "I can't just walk down the street alone without security." Who knows what might happen? How far could he get before someone made a scene? Usually he'd get a car, but a mood struck him and he felt like a walk, he felt like he needed it. So he thought it was a minor risk, thought he might slip right through the lives of the rest of us undetected, just this one time.

It was dusk, but the streets are always still bright at that time during New York Summers. The weather was perfect for his light suit jacket. He tugged his cuffs like he does and cocked his head sideways like he does, and headed west toward the river.

Sure enough he didn't make it half way down the block before someone approaching locked on his gaze. He smiled his smile, but they did not smile back. In fact, no change at all in their expression. OK. Not so friendly, he thought. New York. He thrust his hands into his pockets and kept moving. At the corner, the avenue was busy, and he paused near the building's edge. People passed and he smiled and they kept going. He stepped further into the center of the sidewalk and just then someone was coming from behind and they bumped each other. Clooney grabbed both of the man's arms to save both men from falling, and then they were face to face and Clooney smiled demurely in a "Sorry, yeah it's me" sort of way, and the man just said Okay, Okay. He let go of his arms, and the man dusted himself and walked away down the avenue. Clooney stood for a moment, was feeling a little uncomfortable now. Anonymity was disorienting his bearings.

He shrugged it off, crossed the street, and continued west. He loved this time of the evening when the sky over the city was still light, bright blue at

the horizon, and yet the buildings were already dark, almost black. He headed North for a block. A woman in a skirt suit was passing alone in the opposite direction, walking rather quickly—he remembered the clop, clop of her heels. She hadn't been looking at him, but just when she was right upon him all of a sudden she stopped him. He braced. Was she headed South she asked. Hi, he smiled. Her brow lifted and she took a half-step back, Is that way toward 42nd? Yeah, yeah. Perfect night isn't it? Sorry, she said, someone's waiting on me. She was off. Okay, he wasn't used to this. He opened the single button on his jacket that had been keeping it closed. He pivoted to the street, siddled up next to a parked van, and looked into its side mirror. Yes, it was him, still the same. The light was flattering.

When he looked up again, he could see a man across the street watching him closely. Was it his van? As a precaution, he took the next left to get back in the direction of the river. A quarter of the way along the block, in stride he took a wary look over his shoulder, and it looked like the man was now on the same block trailing behind. He crossed over to the other side of the street, and in the middle of his angled path he could see the man was crossing too. Up on the sidewalk, he picked up his pace. He tuned into the sounds, but he wasn't close enough to hear footsteps. The street was empty. He was along the tall side wall of a commercial building. Large, industrial air conditioners thrummed and obscured the sounds. He crossed back over again with a little hop in his step. The man did the same.

Clooney turned the hop into a jog, and then soon heard the man's footsteps quickening. He cut a hard left around the next corner, planting hard on his outside foot—leather sole scraping the concrete—to accelerate into the turn. He glanced back—think Cary Grant in *North by Northwest*, full sprint, tie tossing over his shoulder. The man was coming, charging hard. Clooney cut mid-block across four lanes of traffic and took a right. At the end of that short block he was across the highway from the wa-

terfront. He couldn't see the man, but there were so many shadows it was hard to make things out. He questioned the idea of continuing to the river where there would be fewer people, but then he saw a shadow move and he darted across the highway. There were few cars, but he had to wait on one to get across. He waved it by impatiently, insensibly. It blasted a long horn without slowing. Across the highway, he headed down toward the piers.

He was panicked and knew his judgment might be clouded. He needed to clear his mind. Just where the pier butted the boardwalk, there was a gap between the old chain link fencing and the new designer fence being installed. The opening was like a gift, and he twisted his torso to slip through sideways—the corner pole rubbed the buttons on his shirt. He took a step down and suddenly he was among the boulders of the embankment that buffered the city from the river. The grade was very steep and in a few quick, reaching steps he was completely below the level of the pier.

He heard footsteps above. One, two, three—the last one a hard stop. Someone was right above him. He froze. All of his weight was at the end of a stiff arm on an old wooden piling. He pictured the man leaning over the railing to look for him. He heard footsteps going back and forth like a stuttered dance, maybe a dozen steps total, then they moved South further down the boardwalk, hurried but not running. They faded. Clooney swung himself further under the pier and crouched in the dark among the boulders. He was catching his breath but his heart was beating fast. Patches of sweat turned cold in the breeze coming off the river. A foot below the tips of his shoes the water sloshed in and out of the gaps in the stones.

He was afraid the man was going to circle back, and stayed awake down there for three hours, well past the transition to night. Occasionally he heard couples pass above, head out onto the pier and then later circle back and return to the boardwalk. It was a very romantic place at night under the

moon, perfect to be arm in arm with someone you loved. There was something about being out on that tendril of this enormous city at night, like you could crawl out and stop time for a just a moment and stare into someone eyes like it was forever.

The longer he stayed the more paralyzing it became. Every moment seemed like the wrong one to come back out. At one point off to his right, out in the moonlight, a cat crawled carefully down the rock wall, softly, deftly, putting its paws from one rock to another. It came toward him under the pier, paused when it noticed him, but just for a moment, and then continued. It stepped right up to him, pressing a paw into his thigh, and then sat on the rock next to him and looked out toward the river.

It may seem hard to believe, but Clooney fell asleep down there curled up against the rocks, the cat right next to him. In the morning, he woke early when the boardwalk came alive with joggers clomping above. He crawled out, got a cab, and took his new cat home.

OK, I don't know if you'll get the connection here, but after that, after the coffee, I rode the motorcycle up to the Guggenheim to see the Giacometti show, an all-time favorite. Outside there was some lousy street festival with costumed dancing teenagers that looked really bored up on their stilts. The toe was hurting and I was worried the ramp was going to aggravate it. I never knew whether to start from the top or the bottom, so I got some intel from the guard at the entrance, "You start at the bottom and work your way up, just like life." Okay, Okay.

In the first room, they'd pieced together an approximation of a never-realized public plaza work. A kind of kit for the viewer to put together. There were the works, an oversized grainy black and white photograph of the plaza at the time, and wall text with a story that included the detail that Giacometti himself visited the plaza later in life. He used his wife and friend as stand-ins for his own

sculptures and placed them just-so in the plaza to consider what might have been.

About two-thirds of the way up the ramp, there was this one bust of his brother Diego, a head rising on a spindly neck from a big lump of a torso. The head was flattened like two open hands had taken it at the ears and compressed it into something like a flounder. The broad flat sides were worked into profile portraits, and if you came around to the front you got just the thin stripe of a head-on portrait, lips perched there on the leading edge. The forehead swooped back and altogether it was like a dorsal fin cutting through the gallery.

As you moved around it, it would switch instantaneously from that flat side portrait to the very narrow straight-on one. It was as though Giacometti had cut out the third dimension. There was no transition between these two perspectives. You just snapped between them. The effect was disorienting because there you are in real time moving slowly, carefully, continuously—I mean that's the only way we can move—and then it's like this object just made you jump in space and time from side to front, front to side. I kept circling it, watching it snap back and forth, trying to get into that in-between space.

I finally broke the spell, stepped away, and then popped into a side room where they were showing a video of him at work. He was giving an interview, and the whole time he talked, he was reworking the brow of this bust. He just kept moving the clay around as if he were animating its expression. It gave you the idea that the final form preserved out on the ramp was not the perfected one, but rather the one caught whenever the interview ended—a record of that single fragment of time. When I came back out on the ramp, each and every one of those figures looked animated—just like I was tripping. Demons running up and down the spiral, teaching me quite a lot, I must say.

Have I ever done anything violent? I wouldn't say so. Nothing stands out. Not that I haven't felt like

it. We all have, right? But I've always been able to keep myself in check. I once lived in this loft in Greenpoint, an old factory chopped up into apartments with Sheetrock on metal stud walls that did little to insulate sound among the units. I'm a quiet guy. And, you know, I am very sensitive to environments and noise. Actually, when S and I finally did have that coffee, I cut it off early because while telling me a story about her neighbors she said, "I think it's kind of a faux pas in Brooklyn to ask someone to turn their music down." I knew right then it wasn't going to work. I need long, quiet stretches and someone who's going to understand that. So, in that loft apartment, I didn't make much noise, and I think that gave my young neighbors the idea that the walls were solid, that I couldn't hear them. On both sides, I shared walls with twenty-something men—models of such nascent adulthood that spend their new paychecks on well-researched sound systems—in their first big city apartments, there to be part of a scene. And that was it: I went mad listening to their music. I was friendly with the landlord, so he agreed to insulate the walls. Including delays, it took two weeks living alongside workers during the day. All of my possessions crowded into two islands draped in clear plastic. They even removed the entire kitchen so they could layer new material on the wall behind it.

But it didn't make any difference. If the sound was diminished, I just cranked up my sensitivity. And that probably made getting angry quite easy. My mind went to work on revenge.

Sabotaging their stereos without getting caught would require getting in and out of their apartments undetected. That's when I got into the online lock-picking community. They were very helpful. From them I learned that for the do-it-yourselfer the best metal blanks for homemade picks were street-sweeper blades. They regularly fall off as the sweepers do their work, and with a sharp eye on the gutter you can pick up several in an hour's walk. Online videos of competitions convinced me that with practice I could get in and out of an apartment quickly. I downloaded sets of pick pro-

files, converted them to vector files, scaled them just right, printed and pasted them to the blades and went to work with a Dremel and files. Then, I was practicing and improving, forming my own opinions about which tools and techniques worked best. After I got a handle on the basics, for practice, I bought the same model of locks that were on all of our doors. I charted the comings and goings of my neighbors to find the best window of time to carry out my plans.

But you know what: I never acted on it. Just another project, driven I think more than anything by my own curiosities. I got a little obsessive sure, but then I got distracted with other projects that took me away from the apartment, then I moved out and forgot all about those assholes. I left the anger behind. I still have the picks I made tucked away at the bottom of a drawer. You never know, right?

I've been in this city long enough to become accustomed to its changing nature, its perpetual re-invention. Long enough not to expect that what you remember of a place will still be there the next time you idle by. I like to think that it's the city most like nature—a wilderness too large and complex to comprehend. Too many forces acting upon it (and you!) to sustain any stable definition. It is something to be understood obliquely and partially, and walking within it is an odyssey of joy and discovery of its forever state of regeneration.

At some point I began to take a special interest in the small, interstitial spaces produced by those forces—something of that old self making an appearance. I studied the odd gaps between the built structures of the city—the cut-offs, corners, and pockets where the bases of tall buildings met at odd angles: the volumes of space formed by the awkward angles where new construction met the old; the spaces implicated in the remains of aborted plans; the complicated cavities created by the imperfect joining of backyard projects with the cold, back corners of apartment block foundations.

I snapped photos of those details. I sketched them and measured them against the parts of my hand. At home, I pasted together life-size cardboard box constructions that would fit into those unique shapes, sculpting into reality positive representations of those negative spaces. I painted them to match their environments, returned to the sites at night, and slipped my assemblages carefully into those awkward voids. You could almost see an artist—our great educators on possibility and transformation—doing something like that. In a generous mood you might even allow that I was facilitating a conversation among these independent entities.

I admit that in my mind I did connect those furtive fabrications to the explosive devices I had stowed away at home. It was a kind of thought exercise that enabled me to feel close to the potential of great change. There was never a plan to place the devices inside my makeshift constructions, but perhaps there was something intriguing about the idea of it.

Then one night someone spied me, ratted me out, and I soon found myself answering the knock of a few stern officers. It was not a dream. I can't think there was anything illegal about what I was doing, but there are enough vigilant eyes in this city that such activities do not stay unnoticed. It was just a weird thing, and they looked at me all kinds of sideways. I get it—it looked suspicious. They had a warrant, and that's when they found the devices. The idea that I never intended to connect those two activities kind of rubs against the predisposition of a detective. Indeed, at the time, I envied such states of mind that could derive, out of the innumerable events of the world, so many trenchant affiliations. It's quite the kind of refusal to accept things as they are that I aspire to.

I appealed to them with a benign interpretation of my experiments, and they allowed a demonstration. The room was silent for a long second after that comical little puff of purple smoke rose over

the kitchen table and then full of the roar of the laughter of armed men.

Perhaps that was inevitable. Everything catches up to you. Some worn out wisdom like that. I say we say such things precisely because they're not true—because we want them to be true. As if saying them might make them true. Inevitable? The most likely thing you'll be doing tomorrow is exactly what you're doing right now. A change might be inevitable, but maybe not the one you've been preparing for.

I am not a criminal. I'm just trying to make something work, trying to get a bead on a life that seems to be running away from me, catch a hook into something that's going to pull me out of the mud and closer to that something great.

I'm not there yet, but I've learned one thing: It is that state of being accused that creates the most fertile and incisive conditions for reflection. Until you find yourself in that position, you are on weak ground if you claim such authority for your philosophies. They have not been put under the right kind of pressure. Once someone lays something heavy on you, you comb over your whole life. Memories you thought you left behind rise up right next to you and say hello like you're as happy to see them as they are to be relevant again. And once they've warmed that seat, they do not slough off easily. Suddenly you've got a lot to deal with, and you can either get to work on it or succumb to a transformation you weren't expecting.