

Tariq Shah

Felix and Pauly

The other evening I had a terrible dream that has managed to cling to me; even now, as I write this, I still discover threads of it— in the mirror when I shave, crawling under my shirt or when I slip away for an evening smoke.

Even when I walk to work it's there, this nightmare, trailing at my ankle like a cobweb, or some leash woven from a broken braid of witch's hair.

-I woke up spooked.

Wet-templed, bell-rung by a deranged yellow gush bursting in from the window. My tongue hurt. Despite my perspiration the only cool position I found resided beneath my blankets. It's an eerie thing to writhe around in bed, wide awake.

The alarm clock read 10:11. Already I heard Felix griping, in his way, on the phone downstairs. The deliberate patience in his voice, wafting up the staircase, the gradual, patient cadence of speech—it was meant for a five year old; he was dealing with the idiot plumber again.

I didn't want to move but stillness submerged me in misery. I gazed into the white of the ceiling and studied the icicles of dream I was still able to conjure, before wakefulness reduced any color and it all became another dark pattern in the carpeting.

A matron, my sentence in her throat. A glowering throng, horseshoed around me.
A netting of futile avenues: *Even if I killed you first, you'd only have 10 minutes.*

She spoke it at me, into my face. It was her hellbent declaration. My eyes opened and the despair seemed overwhelming to me for one panicked moment, like a pierced artery: that this unblemished day would be strangled to death before it ever left the cradle.

Let's not dwell on dwindling shocks. It's not the end of the world. Something Felix would say.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand, rattling the rings I'd flung there last night. The dregs of my ginger lemonade quivered within a goblet. I snatched it up and threw the liquid down my throat, which was unwise, then looked to see who rang me—another unknown number.

I laid back down and spent a minute gathering a plan for the morning, but they never remained in place—they slipped from my grasp whenever I came near enough to touch them. Like elusive little koi.

“Paul.” Felix lobbed my name into bed with me.

“So, I think we have a problem.”

“Any idea where my glasses went?” I asked.

He smiled where he stood, pitying me from the doorway before sauntering, arms folded, to the center of the bedroom and picking them up.

“Keep telling you we have a gnome situation,” I muttered.

He placed them on my face. “What do you think about an organ at the top of the stairs?” I asked, scootching up in bed and quickly recoiling on account of the agony. Felix sat down next to me.

“A pipe organ that went up *with* you as you ascended.”

“We're getting scammed,” he said, folding his hands in his lap.

“We have a contract. It will be fine.” I sprawled out, imitating someone's chalk outline.

“The contract does not account for indolent day labor.”

“There is some *thing* in my brain. It has a bullwhip of lightning.” Felix eased off the bed and closed the curtains.

He goes, “I wish you'd get up. You have a lot to do today.”

“It's a holiday.”

“Saturday is not a holiday.”

“Bastille Day, *Señor*.”

Felix looked me in the face without expression. His hand drifted in towards the edge of the bed. I tracked him where I laid. He slowed further. He stopped. Then he tickled the bottom of my foot. I immediately retracted into a ball. There was a lag, then an invisible tidal wave of pain crashed over me. He gave a laugh and smirked.

“Even if it’s Bastille Day,” he sang from the hall, “you only have 10 minutes before Contractor Bob arrives.”

He retreated downstairs.

One minute I was surrounded, the next I was marooned.

“Was that a warning?” I whispered. I spoke to Felix; I spoke to my Dream Doyenne, my Sentencer, dripping in emerald paisley, from the throne room of her disintegrating continent, somewhere just twelve minutes ago.

I sat up. Popped a pill. I glanced at my cell.

Voicemail.
Stranger.

I was unprepared for this late morning barrage. Draping on my robe, I left to greet the garden.

There is something august about July mornings. Barefoot on the patio, I stretched my toes and waded through the puddles that formed, shallow and clear, from the sprinkler’s scattershot yesterday evening. It felt like it cured me of something.

“Hello Jonquil.”

“Hello Avocado.”

“Good morning, Bougainvillea.”

Perhaps it was just the Advil.

Across the street my neighbor, Dean, came out on his porch and glared towards the sky, the sun a kind of nuisance to him. He didn’t notice me from my vantage point behind the ersatz floral camouflage. A rogue breeze nudged a daffodil towards my bare shin and it was the most soothing thing to happen to me in a decade of mortifying weekends.

I knelt in admiration, tickled the daffodil’s chin. It all rapidly soured, though. I felt corny. The mind loiters where it will. Invokes its own phantasms, real as anything. Drawn to jeopardy, mine orbits the peril, confusing the tar pit for the birdbath every time. Tell yourself whatever you want.

Now you see it now you don't.

Felix watched me from the windows above the kitchen sink.

10 minutes.

Dean ripped back the cord on his push lawnmower. The engine turned over with a puff of blue exhaust, shooting beige, withered grass clippings into the air like a blast of confetti.

“Ah.... Paducah.”

Inside, over coffee, I let Contractor Bob drone on about the roofing and menaced Felix with the details of my dream, mumbling to him when the mug was near because I liked it when the steam licked my face. He was a sport about it; as much of a pest as I am, he deserves a gold star for merely groaning during Bob's presentation. “It is time for you to shut up,” he stated. His face darkening.

I stuck a finger in his ribs.

He swatted my shoulder. “Thank you Bob. We'll take a look at the slate and the terracotta, and let you know what we think.”

“Have you ever had a nightmare that, in some way, spoke to you?”

“Pauly, I'm married 17 years.” Bob gathered his blueprints and materials and went on his way.

When he's confident no one is watching, he'll run his fingers along the fine grooves of his face. Trace the regal, aquiline plunge of his nose. The deepening twin crevices arching down his cheeks. As if to mold it all back to its younger form. I see it as a form of therapy.

“God's Country.”

Felix said nothing. He kept his eyes trained on Dean, dismembering the weeds along the driveway.

“Yeah he's an asshole but it's not easy weed whacking and smoking at the same time.”

He shook his head and laughed. “You have a big mouth.” He let out a long breath. “I’m glad you’re over it. But maybe if you could learn to set things aside, Robert wouldn’t have to make six thousand trips out here. Gasoline is expensive.”

He stood up and searched the cabinets for the sugar. “I mean he plays it off like he doesn’t mind but of course he minds. Anyone would mind.”

I didn’t reply. The silence was enough. When it seemed most damaging to do so, he bent to the truth at the heart of the matter, divining it preternaturally, like a bloodhound, and it floored me every time. He took the licks he’d earned. Felix was a man. I was just another charming dodger.

“You’re just scaring yourself.”

I found myself nodding along, as we sat in the kitchen, letting whatever it was about today gently settle into the background of our immediate concerns. Terracotta. Simple syrup. Retuning the piano. I made some toast. Eventually the mail arrived.

“Someone called this morning. She asked for you. I said you were sleeping.”

“What did he want?”

“She wanted to talk is all, I suppose. Number’s on the fridge. Didn’t recognize the voice.”

I mentioned he could have told me sooner. “I’m an architect. Not an answering machine.”

“Do I call back?”

“Toast’s burning.”

“I like it a little burned.”

“Maybe text her?”

“So it’s a her? Are we sure about this?”

“Look at you!”

“This whole thing began so tragically and now look! Non-stop laugh-a-thon.”

“Call him back.”

“I’m going to call. After toast.”

“Post-toast chit chat.”

“Gabba gabba.”

“Even if I killed you first, you’d only have 10 minutes. That doesn’t even make any sense,” he adds.

“The weight of this prophecy in her tone of voice. That came from me, somehow. She was nonchalant—like Auntie Helen, declaring she’s driving out to Oahu next Christmas. She pointed her finger at me. And a tone of finality to the exchange. It was inevitable.”

“Inexorable. Grim.”

“Super grim.”

“We won’t let that happen.”

I strolled outside again. The afternoon had shaped up nicely: after eviscerating a few hundred dandelions, Dean took to washing his minivan, sloshing buckets of hose water over the roof and scrubbing it with a mop-handled cloth brush, like he was bathing an elephant.

A few other neighbors went about their business as well: The Murphys unloaded groceries, hauling the paper bags into the garage refrigerator. Hoffman down the street blithely nursed his screwdriver, his sun-slackened face like a dozing kitten’s in the shade of his tacky plastic gazebo.

He saw me and raised his glass. “Bastille Day,” he proclaimed. I nodded to him in solidarity.

I realized I was wandering down the street in nothing but violet terry cloth. No one bothered by it. Hoffman’s granddaughter—Becky?—gave me a funny look as she biked past me up the hill. That’s it though. I shuffled along, following the meandering strip of grey her bicycle painted on the asphalt. The phone was in my hand. My hands were in my pockets. At the top of the hill I paused for a moment. Standing on one leg, I brushed the gravel from one foot, then the other.

You could see the clouds gathering, closing in on the sun like it was a wounded animal, its injury bleeding light in vast lakes of Chablis across the sky. It seemed too early for the sun to set. By instinct, I gripped the phone tightly, meaning to note the time, but I held off. Plenty of time for that at the bottom of the hill.

I followed the road down. A pickup truck drove by. The driver spat towards me from the window. Black Sabbath temporarily suspended in the air.

Walking barefoot on asphalt makes one lonelier, somehow. Maybe it's just me. The world is immeasurably quieter, its impenetrability more apparent and unforgiving beneath the meager plant of a naked sole atop it. The world could care less. Two squirrels regarded me, puzzled, from the branches of a maple standing sentry at the entrance to the subdivision. They eyed me. I eyed them.

It could've been the IRS. Then again it might've been the family up North, whom I adore but can't stand. It could've been some telemarketer, some sweepstakes spokesman. Perhaps a check didn't clear.

It was Elizabeth. Elizabeth from 11th grade French. She was leafing through the yearbook and feeling adventurous, whimsical, disconnected and drunk. She remembered how we giggled every time klutzy Mr. Bittles leaned against the chalkboard in his charcoal or cranberry turtleneck and turned and unwittingly revealed the dust of his notes powdered all over his back. Who couldn't help grooving to the funk of Trigonometry.

That was so long ago. That was 1983, two years before I ran into Felix at the Double Door and nearly broke my spine on that icy staircase.

I stood still for what seemed a long time. I thought it was silent but I realized I was wrong: all I could hear were air conditioners, and distant jet engines. A minor, seething motor underneath the regular cacophony.

High in the sky, a platinum birthday balloon rose and cruised off, fleeing the houses and I watched it and it made me a little blue, a little envious, and just a little magical.

I would call tomorrow. Tomorrow morning. First thing. A task for Sunday. Let it slide. Face the music. I'd tell Felix something. Voicemail, I'd say. Machine. I'd sit and stare at the funnies. Then I'd behold the sky from the patio. I'd slow down. Reflect. Eventually I'd stand up and mix a drink, one for each of us, something that looked like it had mingled with it the last exquisite drops of sunset. I'd sit down again, and eventually talk would turn to the future. Histories, renovations, projected conquests. Maybe we'd get lively, maybe not. I was just scaring myself. It was summer.

But by the time I'd reached the driveway the bulk of the daylight was already buried, concealed and cooling into a slab far beyond a range of glum blue clouds, preventing any refuge even in the whimsy of the moon.

All the firearms, the entire arsenal of the world, trained upon my open mouth.

I had all the time in the world. It was all probably nothing. No one would mind. Everything is usually nothing. I would call back tomorrow.

Just then Becky and Hoffman sped past on their Schwinn as they cut a path across all the front lawns of the block, her bright white tires nearly catching my toes.

“*Watch!*” she yelled, glancing behind her.

I opened the door. He was still there, at the kitchen table, dissecting our next twelve months. 6:46 post meridiem. I turned off my phone.

“Hello, Tulip,” Felix said, the best of him shining in his eyes, looking up at me.