

Dreaming in the Third Person

The smell of burnt raspberries permeates the kitchen. My hands are stained with them. For me, it is a rare day off from work, and the house is empty except for the two of us. Gam is folding the stack of the day's laundry and I am canning raspberries. The steaming jars of raspberry preserves stand shoulder to shoulder on the cutting board. These jars are the product of the morning's labor, me stirring the pot, and my grandmother making comments as she smooths John's shirts on the kitchen table. The incandescent light overhead glints off the double-horse silver ring that encircles her wedding ring finger.

"Why won't these hands work anymore?" she mutters, raising her nicotine-stained hands, and turning her question into a statement of disgust.

"You have Greta Garbo legs," I tell her. I hope that Greta Garbo's legs were great at one time, since I struggle to remember some fashion icon from her generation. The hills above our Northern Utah home show off their ruddy colors in the window panes behind her shoulders.

"My legs may look alright, but they don't do me any good," she answers, though she is beaming at the compliment. Her thinning hair is platinum blonde. She has lost considerable height since the last time I saw her, and her body is small and frail. I know every inch of it, since I have bathed her several times already.

Seven jars canned, five jars empty and steaming, and I find that I need more raspberries. Phonebook open, I dial the number of a raspberry farm run by a family named Weeks. We live down the hill, only two miles away. "You want to go with me?" I ask my grandmother.

"Yep," she says. She shuffles to the door to put on her shoes. "I'm lame," she grumbles.

"Hold on a minute, Gam, let me clean up a bit first." With my oven mitts still on, I give her a big squeeze around her tiny bird-like shoulders.

Earlier that morning, while we are all gathered around the kitchen table eating pancakes with a scoopful of raspberries, John quotes a reader's question out of the morning paper's advice column. "I'm sure they've consulted their 'team of experts' on this one," he says. He takes a sip of

coffee. My microbiologist husband has a certain distain for these columns. Once they made an error in calculating the energy drain of the car radio on your starter motor, and he has not ceased with the derogatory comments. This morning the question is: "What is more common, dreaming in first person or third person?"

"I don't know," I answer. "Which?"

"First person," he replies. "Here it says that only 17 percent of people watch themselves in their dreams. Everybody else is participating first-hand." My husband folds up the newspaper in derision. "And how do they calculate this?"

Then my diminutive grandmother breaks in. "What is this 'dreaming in third person'?" she asks. At first nobody answers her.

I don't know where to begin. How can I explain this concept to someone who's refused to read anything except the horse racing reports and has refused to write anything but her name since a stroke destroyed her beautiful penmanship. The only thing left of English grammar is her gentele speech. Still I try to explain: "The 'third person' is as if you are floating up above in the clouds watching yourself at this very moment, drinking coffee and eating pancakes like we are now."

"So you're dead," she says.

"Not exactly, Gam. It's like there are two of you, one who's doing things, the other who's watching you do those things."

Will and Camila are having no part of this conversation. They take their plates to the sink and head to the bathroom.

My grandmother purses her lips and stares out the window. The age of psychoanalysis has passed her by; it is all foolishness in her opinion. *There is the body and the soul, period. The soul is in the body while you're alive, and when you die, it goes to God. Why would the soul leave the body just to watch the body?* she's probably thinking. She folds her twisted hands.

Four hours later, I have written a check for a flat of raspberries. Because of the early fall frost, there are only a few flats left, the man on the phone had said. Not great condition, but perfect for jam. Okay, I told him. After going upstairs, washing my face, and brushing my teeth, I come back

downstairs again and help my grandmother finish folding the clothes. We put on our shoes. Then I grab a jacket from the hall closet and test the air outside. For the first time I realize that I am going to have to hoist my 90-pound grandmother into the Ford F250, more like a boat than a car, with its cab doors two feet above solid ground.

Undaunted by the challenge, I locate a metal ice chest in the garage. I bring the cooler under the truck's deep running board and position it securely. Then I go back into the house and fold my grandmother's frail arm over my own. After braving the icy driveway, I guide her teetering body up to the top of the cooler. Ten minutes later, I have her safely seated in the passenger side of the truck. I rev up, and we head into the hills toward Weeks' Raspberry Farm. The air in the truck is chilly until the heater kicks in.

Parking the truck in the lot outside the warehouse, my heart sinks when I see no other vehicle in the lot. A light snow is falling, and the place looks deserted. But there's a flat of raspberries waiting inside for me, I'm thinking.

I turn off the engine, grab my checkbook, and tell my grandmother I am going to get the raspberries. The door to the gray-blue warehouse is open, and I enter. I look around but the lights are dim. I am irritated because my empty jars are cooling on the rack, picking up microorganisms, and my check is already written. Maybe I can just get the berries myself and leave the check somewhere, I calculate, looking around the warehouse.

I spot a sign labeled "Fruit Cooler" above the door on one side of the warehouse. The outside of the room is constructed entirely of cinderblocks, and the metal door looks like it should be attached to a giant safe. I open the door and see the few flats of raspberries lurking in the far corner of the other side of the room. I flip the light switch on the outside wall and walk in. As I approach the flats, I hear the door seal behind me. I reel back to the door, but I find it locked tight. No handle on the inside. My worst fears start to surface. I bang on the door, but to no avail. My heart skips and I sink back, fighting an initial onslaught of panic.

I check for other openings, windows and doors, but there are none. Only a little metal sign next to the door that reads in Alice in Wonderland fashion: *To open the door from the inside, press firmly on the metal plate.* Below the sign, dangling midway on the door, is a limp-looking metal dowel

with a disc on the end of it. There is no other metal plate. I force the plate forward in fifty different angles, but nothing happens. It is clear as early snow in October that I am trapped.

Not only me, but I quickly realize that my grandmother is trapped as well. Even if she can find a way to pull the latch and open the door with her frail arms, she is still three feet off the ground. In my mind's eye, I see my beloved grandmother jumping towards the pavement. Then she is sprawled out on the icy ground. I get down on my knees and pray. *God, please don't let her try to get out of the truck.*

I find I'm going to be cold for a while, and I shiver even in my jacket. That's because this is a coldroom, I tell myself darkly. I locate the thermostat, but it is covered in glass and there is no adjustment from inside the room. I make some mental assessments. Cellphone is in the truck. Windows in the room, none. Food: raspberries. Plenty of raspberries and even, as I now observe, some whipped cream and enough bottled water to last for several days. Loved ones who know where I am: only one, Gam. Of course there would be no reason for my husband to think we made this trip to Weeks' berry farm. The results of my mental assessments are grim. I have just done one of the most breathtakingly stupidest things in my life.

My only hope is the little metal plate. I have to find a way to make it open that door. I stand next to the door and pound the plate in regular intervals. Seventy-five bangs and then I rest. I try this pattern many times, counting, to keep my mind from racing to even more frightening places.

After what seems like an eternity but is really only a half hour, the door suddenly opens. A young man stands before me, with a grin pasted on his face.

"Hi," he says.

"Sorry," I mumble immediately, my eyes flitting downward to the coldroom floor.

He smiles broadly and gestures to the sign inside.

"You have to kick on the plate and the door will open from the inside," he says.

"Right," I say, but I am thinking, *the next time I am trapped in here I will be sure to remember to kick on the plate.* I hand him the check and blurt, "Mr. Weeks said I could come by and pick up a flat."

“My uncle,” he says brightly. He passes by me holding open the door to the coldroom and comes back out with a flat of raspberries, which he hands to me. “These okay?”

“Perfect,” I say. No need to explain why my face was as red as the raspberries. The door behind me slams.

“You from around here?” he asks.

I murmur something barely audible and he says without malice, “I know the place.” I head for the door, waving behind me. Once outside I move as fast as my shaky legs will take me.

My first glance at the truck shows my grandmother sitting there in what seems to be the exact same position as I left her. Her little body rises over the dash like a welcome masthead appearing over the horizon.

“You’re back,” she says when she sees me. She looks annoyed.

“I locked myself into the storage room.” My fingers fumble at the keys. I can’t start the truck my hands are shaking so much.

“Are you okay, honey?” she asks.

“I am now,” I say. In the mist from my mouth, a small prayer of thanks escapes my lips. As the cab grows warmer, I tell her the story, chuckling a little on my own from relief and adrenaline release, while my grandmother’s face grows sterner.

“You were worried,” I admit, when I look her in the eye.

“You’re right, Princess. At first I thought you had met some friends, and were chatting, but I thought, she wouldn’t leave me here so long — that’s kind of rude — and then I thought: my, she’s been gone a long time.”

“You weren’t thinking of coming after me, I hope.” Then I see her nodding, and I shoot her a wary glance. “How were you going to get out of the truck, Gam?”

“Jump,” she says nonchalantly.

“Gam, you can’t jump!”

She smiles. “Why not, honey? How else would I do it?”

“You turn around and scoot your body until your feet hit the ground.”

“Oh,” she says as if considering this method of climbing for the first time. That’s a good idea.” She crosses both of her hands on her lap like the queen mother.

“Gam, let’s go get some lunch and finish these raspberries.”

“Do you think we should tell John?” she asks, with a new spark in her eye.

“Let’s wait a while, Gam. It’ll be our secret.” We give each other a knowing grin to seal the deal. We arrive home safely, and after lunch, I put up five more quarts of raspberries with my grandmother watching over my shoulder, her nose like a hawk’s beak.

A week and a half later, Gam calls me from her apartment in Southern California, eight hundred miles away, but two blocks from my parents’ house. The first thing she does after I pick up the phone is to ask me what time it is.

Without thinking I reply, “Four o’clock, Gam. Why?”

“That’s what I have,” she says.

“But this is Utah time, remember?” I say. “We’re an hour ahead.”

“Right,” she says. “But I’m keeping my watch set at your time so I know just what you’re doing when I look at the time. I know about when you leave for your teaching, and about when you get home and when you start dinner. I know when you pick up Will from band and when Camila comes home from ballet. And I know when you’re having pancakes with raspberry syrup.”

I try to say something but I find that I can’t get the words out. “Gam,” I say at last, “Do you know that you are thinking in the third person?”

“It’s like I’m there with you, honey,” she says. I can picture her rocking back and forth on her leopard print bedspread, cradling a cigarette. Her little apartment is the one place left where she can smoke in the house. And despite the fact that she has my parents to look out for her, she spends a lot of time alone, smoking and reflecting on her life. With the strikes against her health — her age and her smoking — vying against the heredity that works in her favor — her strong and glorious heart — I don’t know when will be the last time that I see her.

“Do you realize that, Gam, you are visualizing yourself here with us?”

“You’re right, honey, I am,” she says.

“You get it now, right?” I ask.

“I do, Princess,” she says, but I’m not sure that she does.

“Did you tell them, honey, about the raspberry farm?”

“Yes — John got mad at me, and now they all tease me. They were worried at first, but now they think it’s kind of funny.”

“I was worried at first, but now I think it’s kind of funny, too,” she says, and starts to giggle. And we both laugh until our sides hurt.