

The Merchant of Dreams

Legend had it, there was a man who sold dreams. Hidden behind Franny's Diner was a spiraling cobblestone stairwell. At its base was a candle lit in a copper sconce. Its light appeared to observe those who approached, blinking and whispering in the breeze, and illuminating a swinging wooden sign with the metal inscription: "DREAMER'S EMPORIUM".

Below was the bottom half of a door, seemingly split at its center. Dusted orange paint peeled away at the door's edges, like a worn leather satchel peeling back to expose its ugly graying underbelly. To reach its rusting knob, one must bend at the waist. Then, to enter, one must dirty their knees and crawl through its gaping mouth. On the other side of the door was a large oval room. Mulberry curtains covered windowless walls, and glittering golden baubles dangled from the ceiling. Promises of magic lingered in the atmosphere. This was where dreams were made.

Tina, a plump, red-faced and chatty waitress at Franny's Diner, would entertain the local children with such stories. She'd tell them of dreams where cotton candy clouds floated overhead and chocolate rivers ran deep into the underbelly of gumdrop jungles. The Seller of Dreams could wake the sleeping heart's true desires.

"It's just a fairy-tale," Tina would tell questioning adults. Though Tina wanted it to be true most of all.

When Tina's husband, George, called her late, again, to notify her that he would be working overtime, fire raced through Tina's veins. George was a damn good liar. But what was she to do? George went to church every Sunday. George volunteered at the homeless shelter.

George was a dependable mall cop down at the center square. George didn't look the type to cheat on his wife. He had the graying receding hairline of a hard-working man, the thick-brimmed rectangle glasses of an intellectual, and he always tucked in his striped button ups over the hump of his belly like a homely father figure. Hell, that was why Tina married him. But, hard as she tried, Tina couldn't think up any other excuse for the lacy thong she once found mixed among the monochromatic briefs in her laundry hamper.

"This isn't mine?" she had said as she pulled out the incriminating pink object by one of its strings.

"Well it's not mine" George chuckled and paged through the newspaper with his thumb, "So did you hear the news about the new traffic laws?" The rim of his coffee mug had fit back between his lips, Tina had dropped the evidence into the trash, and that was that. Or it had been until Tina spotted the mall secretary, Veronica, with her lips pressed against his neck.

Tina couldn't blame George, really, she always felt he deserved more than her. Someone with a slim frame rather than Tina's ballooning thighs and thick neckline. Someone with a delicate powdering of freckles where Tina's wrinkles webbed around her eyes. Someone young and blushing, not red in the face and heaving after a couple flights of stairs. Veronica Jones was anyone's first choice, Tina reckoned. Though that didn't decrease Tina's growing desire to replace the vixen's shampoo with super glue.

As Tina locked the back doors to Franny's one chilly autumn night, she caught a glimpse of the haunting stone stairwell in the glass reflection. She wondered briefly whether children's tales had any merit. Could something fantastical be right under her nose? Where do stories begin if not in reality?

She stood at the precipice and peered over the railing. The melting candle at the base of the stairs winked at her through the shadows. The joints of the wooden sign screeched as the wind picked up.

Maybe it was the wind that pushed her. Or perhaps it was the ringing phone in her purse that was undoubtedly a call from George. Whatever demonic spirit compelled her, Tina stepped down the stairs one at a time. A sort of calming quiet settled over her. The wind didn't rage below the surface. Her heels echoed hollowly through the stairwell with a click-clack, click-clack, on the cobblestone. It was as if she had descended into another world. The air was thinner. She could feel her throat closing and could hear the loud drum of her heart in her ears.

The orange face of the halved door glared at her through the flickering light as she neared. She watched the shadows whirl across its surface like a ritualistic dance around a fire. Her eyes were on the brass knob. She swallowed the bile forming in her throat and began to bend to reach the cold metal.

The candle blew out. Darkness swallowed the threshold and Tina stumbled back. Her hands searched for rock, wall, railing, anything to grab onto. Using the sparse light from the glowing sliver of the moon above, Tina lumbered up the stairs heaving and trembling. She keeled over at the top. Her heart threatened to tear open her chest. She ran to her car, lit the ignition, and sped home without a glance back.

She desperately needed an extra hot cocoa, her fuzzy slippers, and the feeling of George rubbing circles into her back while whispering the words "shh, honey, it's alright". Instead, she found herself seated alone in her worn-out recliner in the living room, flinching every time the cat skittered by, and waiting for her husband to come home from loving another

woman. It was four in the morning when Tina woke to her husband stumbling through the doorway. He reeked of extravagant champagne and Dolce & Gabbana when he placed a kiss on each of Tina's doughy cheeks.

Tina went to work the next morning with an awful sour taste caked onto her tongue. Five cups of coffee later, the taste in her mouth turned bitter. The coffeepot trembled in her grip as she made her rounds to refill customer's mugs. When six o'clock finally rolled around, Tina hustled out of there without so much as a goodbye to her coworkers. She was tearing at the roots of her poorly dyed red-hair, flustered with the buttons on her cell phone. When the screen went black—a dead battery of all things—Tina hurled it across the back alley. It scraped over the railing and clattered down the cobblestone stairwell. She let out a frustrated wail and clamored after it. She leaned over the railing, trailing her eyes over the stairs, and there it was, right at the base of that split orange door. And there was something else. A lacy pink thong hung from the door knob. An exact copy of the one Tina found in her laundry weeks ago.

Seething, Tina barreled down the stairs. The whites of her teeth were bared beneath her cracking lips. Her frayed hair shot out of her ponytail in deranged curls. She slammed her fists on the door, heaving, and sobbing, and sick.

"What do you want from me?" She screamed. Her voice cracked at the seams, raw and broken. The purpling, bloody flesh of her battered fists throbbed. Her forehead hit the stone above the door. Hot tears spilled over her cheeks where George had kissed her just the night before.

There was a creak. The low orange door had been opened from the other side and now sat slightly ajar in invitation. Tina dropped onto her knees, fresh pain stung through her on impact. On all fours, she crawled through. Dirt and grime mixed with the blood on her hands.

The room on the other side was framed by dark velvety purple curtains, like the tales suggested. Golden bells, spoons, and, whistles hung from shimmering linked chains. A small round table sat in the center of the room. Covering the surface of the table was an assortment of vials which bubbled and fizzed from dark reds to vibrant greens and swirled through shades of everything in between. Tina approached the table. Her hands floated over the tops of the vials. The steam that wafted from the colourful concoctions chilled her skin.

“Get any closer to those, and you’ll lose a finger,” a deep voice gurgled from behind Tina. She fumbled back from the table and spun on her heel. The owner of the voice was a telephone pole of a man. The puffs of gray hair on the top of his skull dusted the ceiling even as he hunched over. He wore a maroon tuxedo that must have been two sizes too small. His colourless eyes peered at Tina from under thick round goggles. Cracked lips pulled back in a gnarled toothless smile. Tina’s breath caught in her throat.

“Are these dreams?” asked Tina.

The man shook like a branch in the wind as he laughed, “These here? Are these dreams? Oh no. Oh goodness, no.”

Tina felt the bubbling of her blood under her skin. The man scuttled past her still quaking and squawking with laughter. He pulled open one of the mulberry curtains to reveal numerous shelves filled with jars containing transparent liquids. Floating in these liquids were small fibers

like tied bundles of webbing. The man trailed his fingers over the tin lids of the jars while mumbling incoherently. He finally snatched one off the shelf, spun around, and tossed the jar at Tina who barely managed to catch it in her large, blood-caked, and fumbling hands.

“Drink a spoonful of that before you decide to rest tonight, and you will have the fantasy you desire,” said the man.

“What do I owe you?” Tina ripped open her purse and dug around for any cash she could find.

The tall man closed his eyes and shook his head, “You owe me nothing.”

“You will help me for nothing in return?”

“I am not helping you,” the man’s eyes were cloudy when he opened them once again. The wrinkles on his face became more pronounced as his lips drew down into a frown, “From here you help yourself”. He extended his arm towards the exit in a silent goodbye. Not wishing to push her good luck, Tina said no more and crawled back through the halved orange door.

Tina laid lifelessly beside George that night. He had fallen asleep hours ago and his loud snores made Tina feel a little less lonely. If captured in a photo, they’d look like the perfect couple, Tina thought, aside from the blinking light on George’s phone which rested in the palm of his open hand. Every few moments, the screen lit up to signal incoming messages from a certain V. Jones.

Tina’s toes slipped into her fuzzy slippers and she wandered through the dark to the kitchen. The jar of liquid dreams was still in her purse which sat innocently on the counter. She

pulled it out, admiring the way it seemed to glow when a sliver of moonlight from the kitchen window shone over it. Its silvery fibers seemed to dance, illuminated in the liquid, as she tilted it side to side. She picked a clean spoon from the cupboard and popped off the lid of the jar. The spoon carved easily through the fluid, like a knife through marmalade. It was odorless, but the taste was pungent. The acidic flavours of Colombian roast coffee swept into the sweet, syrupy tastes of lilac and honey. Tina's legs gave out beneath her and her mind came tumbling after.

She fell into an alternate reality. One where there was no Veronica and no pink lacy thongs. Here, George brought her flowers, held her close, and whispered sweet nothings into her ear. She was thinner, her lumps and humps were smoothed down into the figure of a magazine cover model. Everything was perfect. It was exactly as she had imagined as a young girl. Here she had an honest, caring husband, and a beautiful silhouette. The Seller of Dreams gave her exactly what she desired, but when she woke to the sharp light of dawn, sprawled out on the tiled kitchen floor, she was still as imperfect as before.

Her waking life couldn't compare to her dreaming life. She began to dread going to work, until she stopped entirely. She pulled away from George. The dishonest man he was in reality was incomparable to the romantic and attentive man in her dreams. The days and months that passed seemed to blend at the seams. She escaped into her dreams, but outside of them she began to shrivel into dust.

George confronted her. He told her about Veronica as if Tina hadn't already known. Said the guilt had eaten him away inside. But rather than insisting he'd leave Veronica behind, and begging for forgiveness like Tina had expected, he asked for a divorce. Instead of facing his

decision head on, instead of dealing with the consequences, instead of demanding more respect from George, Tina drowned herself in liquid dreams and never woke again.

There was a man who sold dreams, tucked away down a stairwell behind Franny's Diner. If escape is what you desire, look no further, but if you seek a solution, go back from whence you came. Dreams are mere illusions, fabrications of the mind, and they will digest you.