

## “A Dream Within a Dream”

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Ryan began with his bedtime routine: donning pajamas, brushing teeth, combing hair, setting alarms, and finally sliding in between the nondescript grey sheets that Alix had bought him when she helped redecorate his apartment. He reached over to the nightstand, grabbed his pen, lifted the steno pad onto his lap, and flipped open the cheap black cover to the first available page. It didn't take him long to find one; he'd only been using it for a couple of weeks.

For a moment, he simply stared at the page with the tip of his pen poised breathlessly above it, allowing his mind time to process the empty lines of faint blue ink. Sighing, he began to write:

*February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008. I still think it's weird and a little emasculating to write in this thing, but I guess it helps. Alix says it does, anyway. And she's the resident expert, isn't she? Went to Theo's Java House again today, mint chocolate cappuccinos over Macbeth. She likes to read the parts out loud in different voices, especially the witches—says it helps her relax to laugh when she breaks character. She has a beautiful laugh. Carefree. Kind of innocent in a way. Like she just doesn't care what anyone thinks. It's different. Don't know why she ever bothers to drink coffee. She doesn't need it. The caffeine just makes her twitchy, and her energy level goes from about an eight to a fifteen on a ten-point scale. Cute. Tried to grab her hand today as we left. Normally she lets me, but today I left Theo's cold. Offered no explanation. I need to stop dwelling on this. I know I can make it work.*

Ryan quickly laid the steno pad back on his nightstand, open, and flipped the switch on the table lamp, cutting the light in his room so that only moonlight invaded the darkness. His body sank down between the sheets. His eyes closed, and soon his subconscious was just as ready as he was.

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Ryan groaned, opened his eyes, and drew into himself, rolling over on the bed to face the nightstand. Cool blue light like Alix's eyes showed the time: half past five.

He found the power switch under the streamlined lampshade, turned it on. He lifted a pen off the stand and placed its tip to the top page of the open steno pad. On the next empty line under the heading *February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008*, he wrote, *Wake: 5:30 AM. Rocky shore, rocks in weird colors like red/purple/green, warm water, stormy weather, trying to hold sand in my hands but it's falling.*

Recalling no more details of the dream, Ryan flipped back a few pages to compare notes. He was up earlier than expected anyway, and Alix did tell him to look out for patterns: those were key. They would help him figure out his dream signs.

“Dream signs?” he'd asked, confused. He didn't know the first thing about dreaming.

She picked up her thermos, took a sip, and swallowed thoughtfully; her body radiated caged energy. “Yes. Like if people’s hands have the wrong number of fingers. Or if clocks don’t work right. Green skies, purple grass. Different things, specific to you. What’s weird in your dreams may not even exist in other people’s dreams.” Ryan looked doubtful. Alix smiled and said teasingly, “Are you taking this seriously?”

“Don’t you want me to?”

“Yeah, I mean, dreaming is fun, once you get the hang of it.”

“Once you get the hang of it?”

“It’s hard for some people to do it right.”

Ryan chuckled. “I didn’t know there was a right way to dream.”

“I’m talking about taking control. The laws of physics don’t apply when you’re the one creating the world.” She grinned mischievously.

“I’ve never done that before. I can’t even remember them very often.”

“So start a dream journal. Think about it right when you wake up and write it down as soon as possible. It’ll start to stick better. You’ll learn how to remember. Practice, right?” She took a larger drink of her coffee and her nose scrunched up. She must have forgotten how hot it was.

Ryan smiled, amused. “So what do I do after that?”

“Learn to recognize your dreams. Dream signs, remember? Lucidity is the first step to taking control.” Alix had winked and then laughed.

Looking back now through the brief descriptions he’d jotted down before, Ryan’s lips parted in surprise. Water—saltwater. It was everywhere in his dreams, the first thing he seemed to notice. And apparently his subconscious mind had a fascination with abnormally colorful rocks. His dreams showed patterns. These might be his dream signs.

Lucidity was the first step to control. And control was when the fun happened. That was what Alix said.

Practically humming, Ryan closed the steno pad, placed it on the stand, and rested the pen on the cover. Then he rose from his bed and prepared to go to the gym before another day of class.

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That evening, Ryan sat at a four-person table that was painted to look like the sky from *Starry Night*, looking at Alix over the crimson-and-silver thermos his mother had bought him for his birthday. Theo’s offered a discount for patrons who provided the mug for their beverages—it was small, but money saved was money saved.

Alix’s head was bent over one of her anthropology textbooks, her elbow propped on a blue section of the tabletop, her hand supporting her small chin as she read. Her tongue sort of worked at the inside of her cheek as she thought about the text she was reading, underlining and highlighting passages as necessary. It didn’t take her long to knock out several pages of reading, but then her focus wavered and she looked up at Ryan, noticed him watching her.

Embarrassed to be caught staring, he looked away, observing the curve of the painted lines on the *Starry Night* tabletop, but Alix's forehead became creased, her light eyebrows drawing closer together.

"Ryan," she began, and then stopped. She picked up her mint hot chocolate but didn't drink any.

"Yes?" he asked, prompting her to continue. He sipped his coffee.

"Tell me something. Do you know what you want out of your life?"

Ryan paused, surprised by the question. It was one he hadn't heard since all of the hasty introductions to new faces he had suffered freshman year, when everyone was so frenzied to make friends who could keep them company on their adventures at university. "Well, yeah, I mean, sort of. Most of the time I do."

"What is it?"

"I'm going to law school when I graduate. I'm over halfway there already."

"Barely, though." Alix met his eyes and laughed lightly. "But what else do you want to do? Law school can't be all that's important to you."

"It's not. There are other things, but... that's my career. My livelihood. My dad makes good money at it and he loves his work, and it's always been an area I'm interested in." Ryan looked over her thoughtfully, tracing the outline of her face with his eyes. "Do you know what you want from life?"

"Not very often, I guess." Her mouth quirked up in a wry smile.

"But surely you've got some idea."

"I've got an entire world of ideas. I just don't know which one is for me."

"Do you have to limit yourself to just one?"

"No, but... I guess they all come down to one thing. People. It's why I study anthropology. I just don't know where I'm going with that yet."

"Well, 'grad school' seems to be a viable answer for something like that. At least until you figure out something more permanent to say." Ryan smiled, sipped his coffee, and watched Alix's fingertips tap dance along the side of her plastic thermos.

"To be honest, I haven't really thought about grad school yet."

"Why not? Too far away? You've got less than three years before you'd be starting it, Alix. It's probably something you should give some thought to."

"I know, I know. You don't have to lecture me about that. But people here and now are much more... interesting to me."

"What do you mean?"

"I think I need to figure out the people in my life now before I move on to anything grander."

Ryan felt his ears perk up as if he were a dog listening to an unfamiliar whistle. "What's there to figure out?"

Alix grinned. "Plenty. It's complicated, Ryan. Don't worry about it." She finally took several swallows of her hot chocolate and dropped her eyes back into her textbook, as if to say "conversation over."

Ryan frowned, but tried not to let her vague speech get to him. Instead he raised his Shakespeare anthology to eye level and continued his halfhearted reading.

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That night he set his habits on repeat. Pajamas, teeth, hair, alarms, sheets, steno pad. He took the pen into his hand, twitching with the irritability trapped inside his muscles, and wrote:

*March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008. I can't wait for law school. Sick of reading shit by all these dead guys. Half of it isn't even good. They're all overestimated. Who seriously writes with the intent of confounding future generations of readers and scholars with hidden meanings that require hours of discussion and debate to discern?*

Ryan paused, inhaled, exhaled. He realized his grip on the pen was too tight, and relaxed it. More breathing. He crossed out what he'd already written.

*Okay, so I exaggerated. I wouldn't be an English major if I didn't like lit. Alix confuses me. Lunch today with some friends at Maria's Café, some little Italian joint, just opened up downtown. She wasn't even herself. First time I've seen her so exhausted in months, rings under her eyes and everything, and she wouldn't tell me why. I asked after everyone left. Wouldn't hold my hand either. Shied away. Hardly let me touch her. I'm worried. She's pushing me away. Been growing distant for the past week and I didn't even notice because I was too wrapped up in the way she laughs. I don't even care about the dreams anymore.*

Ryan threw the still-open notepad and the pen down on the stand. The circuit to his lamp was interrupted with a click, and he settled his head on his pillow.

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The smell of the salty sea air of Ryan's dream faded into the pure smell of air conditioning as rapid eye movement drew to a stop. Ryan heard Alix's voice in his memory, speaking over her thermos: "You can only dream during the REM sleep stage, if you're wondering. Look into that."

He turned to the nightstand, brought the lamp to life, and consulted the steno pad in the focused light. He wrote, *Wake: 2:24 AM. Pickup truck with woman. Blue-grey eyes. Kissed her forehead on sandy beach. She gave me sand, but it felt like gold. Couldn't hold onto it. I had twelve fingers. Finally recognized I was dreaming. Must have been the fingers that tipped me off. LUCID! Then she disappeared. I followed. More sand. Something about a little girl. Was I heading to a stack of rocks in the distance?*

Ryan dropped his pen carelessly, watched it roll off the nightstand, and, sighing, bent to pick it up; then he returned to his pillow. On the way he swore he smelled the dream woman—salty, fresh, beautiful. She reminded him of Alix, if Alix liked beaches.

They'd been in her apartment, several weeks before, when Ryan had learned that she didn't like beaches. "Why not?" he asked.

“I don’t like places that are too warm,” she had confided in him, giggling over a mug of hot cocoa.

“Oh? And why’s that?” Ryan had joked, supposing that he knew the answer. He stirred his own cup of cocoa and admired the way her deep brown hair fell in gentle ringlets around her cheeks and shoulders. It was the first time he realized how beautiful she was.

“I like sweaters.” She had looked at him very seriously, as if she’d just imparted the most precious piece of information she possessed, and then her face broke into a wide grin, showing teeth. Alix had a very kissable mouth, Ryan realized. He quickly looked away to admire her apartment instead.

That was the first time he had held hands with her, too. It had seemed natural, talking for hours, him placing his hand over hers where it rested on the tan-colored couch cushions. She’d smiled over at him and shifted closer, threading her fingers through his as they spoke. They’d shared something that night, a sense of closeness, although they hardly knew each other then. Ryan had kissed her forehead before he left.

In the darkness of his room, he remembered and smiled. Then the corners of his lips turned down. How do you get close to someone who doesn’t want to let you in?

Earlier that day at Maria’s Café, Alix had picked at the rigatoni on her large, restaurant-sized plate, staring at the marinara sauce and shredded parmesan on her fork. Her friends weren’t unaware of her abnormal silence, but neither were they indulgent of her meditative mood. Ryan had been searching her face for some sign of her usual exuberance, but he’d found only the dark circles beneath her eyes, which had been growing rather than diminishing for the last several days.

The meal was uncomfortably quiet for Ryan. Even though he considered Garret, Lacy, and Erika his friends too (and by all rights they should have been plenty to keep him entertained with their stories of terrible professors, high school shenanigans, and parties that he might or might not have been at), Ryan fed off of Alix’s lack of enthusiasm. The virtually nonexistent sound of Alix’s fork moving back and forth among the short pasta noodles on her plate drowned out most of their friends’ words.

He waited impatiently until their meal was over. Alix had class at two, but Ryan was already done for the day, so he joined her in the trek across the warming campus to Temple Hall. “Alix,” he started lightly, to get her attention. She looked at him. “Are you all right?”

She grinned to herself, a nasty little thing showing no real amusement or joy. “No, I guess I’m not. No use trying to hide it.”

“Why would you want to hide it from me?”

Alix shrugged.

“You know you can tell me anything, Alix. I don’t know what’s been going on with you lately, but…” He’d been about to mention the dark circles

when he remembered that some women found it offensive to be told they looked tired. “You’ve been really quiet today. Lately. The past few days.”

“It’s kind of complicated, Ryan.”

“Who cares about complication? That doesn’t make a difference. I’m here whenever you need me.”

She continued walking, looking straight forward on her path, admiring the trees and the grass and the cement beneath her shoes. Anything but Ryan’s face.

“I’m just worried about you, is all. You haven’t been the same Alix.”

Ryan saw a flash of energy in her eyes—anger, maybe, or irritation—and she responded, eyeing him directly: “If it was something I felt you should know, I’d tell you. But this is my life, Ryan. No offense, but I don’t need to invite you to my problems.”

“I’m sorry,” he’d said, but before the words had left his mouth, Alix had already walked into Temple Hall, leaving him outside in the semi-cold spring weather.

Sighing, Ryan rolled over in his bed, the image of what had happened still fresh in his mind. He buried his face in his grey pillow and stewed over her words and the dark circles under her eyes. It took him a long time to drop back into sleep.

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Ryan’s eyes gently slipped open, and he rolled on his mattress to face the streamlined lamp, staring at it without recognition; the light automatically followed. He sat fully upright, gathered the pen and steno pad in trembling hands, and wrote, *Wake: 5:45 AM. Rocky shore, Alix and a little girl standing far off, sand in my hands again. This time I make myself catch the sand. Maybe she’ll let me in after all.*