

I Tasted Venice by Moonlight.

Is there any person in the world who does not dream? Who does not contain within them worlds unimagined?
-Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman*-

Now:

The phone rings.

* * *

Then:

Brian spends forty-five minutes with the receiver pressed to his ear, and the entire time he's thinking about how much he hates the phone: the hard press of plastic turning from cold to warm to hot, and the way his ear reflects that change in flesh and cartilage and turns red, and aches.

After fifty minutes, he notes the four and a half minutes since the line went quiet and says, "Are you alive, or am I wasting valuable minutes talking to a corpse?"

On the other side of the line, Justin says nothing – just breathes. In, out, a steady rhythm, a tiny mutter, breath.

Brian listens to the soft rush of air for 52 seconds before he hangs up.

(He sleeps, that night, in silence, legs stretched over the space where once they would have interlocked with another, shorter, paler pair. Eyes closed, mind draped heavy with night, he dreams.)

* * *

You dream of empty landscapes and frozen plains – fields of snow glistening, pale, paler, white, across grey stalks of grey grass. The trees (white, grey, silver) sway in some undetectable breeze, and the platinum sunlight casts no shadows behind their looming forms and empty land.

At your feet, the road swerves and twists into the horizon, the edges blurred by mist. Above you, the chrome colored sky speckled with clouds. Having little else to do, you walk.

* * *

Then:

Sleep, Brian finds, is a reasonable metaphor for the past years. He started in one place, eyes open, mind alert (if somewhat muddled by the blue-red-flashing pink of drugs, the cold blue cast of the light over his bed), and for five years (six?) he fell asleep and in his sleep he dreamed of blond hair, and fire trapped in human form. Milky plains stretched over a frail skeleton, held in by muscles, sinew, things he never thought of before, sketched out in vivid detail in HB, 2B, H. Justin always drew in black and white, and then he got older, and pencil became Photoshop and black turned to red and then to full color as his vision widened from

literal to abstract.

(They say blue is the color of sadness, red is the color of rage. Brian doesn't know if it's true, but he knows these colors lived in Justin during those dark days.)

And then it's over, and he's awake.

But his routines have been displaced, his life interrupted and shifted just slightly to the side – everything moved to make room for Justin, everything a little askew. In that way, he thinks, it was more of a coma.

His days are long and peaceful, in a way that's not dissimilar from silence. And Brian has always liked the quiet, loved his solitude when he could bear it (though he couldn't *always* bear it), but this silence can get thick and heavy and sticky and sometimes he wants to break it open and see what's hiding on the inside.

So, compartmentalize. After their last fight, he hangs up the phone, pushes it all away, closes the door. Standing outside Babylon at midnight, his cigarette smoke breath runs like a river flowing upstream – curling along the edges, twisting like a scene from one of those drug-haze movies, and his mind flashes through memories: the fog lingering on the ground when Justin blew him in a diesel, their breath running together as they planned the never-taken trip to Vermont.

When Michael asks, Brian exhales it all, expels it, says he's fine.

* * *

In the dream, locations flow like water, and you ride them to LA, to Pittsburgh, to New York, Italy and Paris. All around, the air is a lake and it ripples under the light of the full moon; it shimmers.

You think of puzzles, riddles, going back to high school mythology courses, examining folklore. Any moment, you expect a sphinx.

* * *

Then:

One year, two. Brian hears rumors drifting down through the endless grapevine of gossipy queens, and everyone knows someone who knows someone who knows Justin Taylor. 38 years old, and Brian's still surrounded by the ghost of his ex-lover and what he lacks in contact, he substitutes with knowledge.

Sometimes, he knows Justin, too.

Christmas '07, Brian steps through time and into Michael's living room, covered with gaudy plastic, red-green tinsel, a Christmas nightmare exploding on the floor and the shoes, and Michael smiling, Michael laughing, Michael trading anecdotes with the familiar blond boy by the kitchen. (No longer a boy, though, really – the widened shoulders, weary eyes.) Justin looks up when Brian says hello, and says, "I didn't think you'd come." Brian says he didn't think so either, but of course he did. He always knew, he always comes.

He comes again in Michael's guest room, face buried in Justin's shoulder and their sweat mingling, salt and salt, water and water, running together in streams and dewy beads. When the air grows cool and their breath grows even, Justin says, "Shit. Look at the bed, Michael's going to kill us." Brian smooths back the sheets before they leave.

That night, Brian takes the Vette to Babylon and dances with the go-go boys in red and white, red and green. Justin takes his current lover's hand and goes back to the guest room. Brian thinks of Justin, thinks of his new beau, their naked limbs entangled. He thinks of them fucking on sheets stained with Brian's sweat.

Spring '08. Brian finally opens that New York branch of Kinnetik. He doesn't drop Justin a line. He doesn't leave the number of his business line on Justin's voice mail.

* * *

Now:

"Leave a message."

"Brian?"

Unmoving, drowning in the white fog of his cigarette smoke, Brian doesn't open his eyes.

"Brian. I know you're probably there. If your patterns haven't changed in the past five years, anyway, which... knowing you, they probably haven't. So. Pick up the fucking phone."

The cigarette is useless – only ashes and smoke, a filter dangerously close to flame. He discards it in the ashtray by his bed, and listens.

* * *

You dream of fucking. One after another, a series of nameless, faceless men, and it's just like a scene from your day-to-day life. Beneath you, they're all tense muscles and grunting – some of them, they're fingers digging red lines into your back. Every time one leaves, you know they'll remember your name. You've already forgotten theirs, if you ever knew.

Waiting for the sweat to cool, you wonder when your loft turned to black and white. You wonder why every fuck is another step along that road, and how you know even when you can't see the path moving underneath the sets.

Dream logic, you think just before you wake.

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Then:

Brian turns 39 in 2010.

Michael throws a party, and everyone wears black. He tells Brian that in a year, he'll be at the loft, checking to make sure there aren't any scarfing incidents. Brian says he'll just drive off a cliff then, and Michael pushes Brian's hair back, the long front strands tucked behind Brian's ears, and says "Well, you have at least one year to live, right?" Brian just laughs.

That night, when everyone else has gone, they lie on the floor in the center of the loft just like they did a decade before, five years before, five minutes before. Michael says, "So, Mister No Excuses, No Apologies, No Regrets. If you had to change one thing—"

Brian exhales pot smoke into his face, and Michael coughs. No answer is offered – there's none to give.

(Sometimes, he wonders how anyone can tell the difference between regretting nothing and regretting everything.)

Michael falls asleep on the sofa, and Brian stands in the kitchen, lids drawn down with weed and alcohol and the inexorable tick-tick-tick of seconds passing by. Almost without thinking, he presses buttons, dials numbers.

On the other side of the line, Justin sounds half-asleep when he mumbles, "Hello." It's 5am, and the world is all asleep. Even New York, it seems, is asleep.

Brian hangs up.

* * *

You dream, that night, of windows and of doorways, open and shut, stretching out before you like some kind of surrealist painting. Through every cracked open space, there could be a thousand thousand universes, all these little spaces folded into each other, growing smaller and larger simultaneously, turning into everything hidden in nothing. For once, you aren't sure which route to take, or where to go.

* * *

Then:

Brian says he's been having this dream. "It's windows," he says, fingers wrapped tight around his drink, sounding as baffled as he feels. "Or... doors? Honestly, it's past the point where I can tell the fucking difference."

Babylon, at 1am, is still just waking up.

Michael says, "Doors swing. Windows are more of a push-up thing." and leans against the bar.

Glass to his lips, midriff bare, Emmett says "Not always. Back in Hazelhurst, I had a cousin – hot as anything, but he never talked to me—"

Next to him, Theodore says, "Why, Emmett Honeycutt. I didn't realize you were *that* Southern."

"Teddy, that is *not* what I *meant*." Pink light dances on Emmett's skin, attracted its feather-laden kindred spirit, standing in his salmon pleather and and sparkling with violet glitter. "I'm just saying he got the good genes in the family. If I looked like that—"

Brian glances at him. "Your Mississippi swamp rat wouldn't have hopped the first bus back to

the bible belt?"

"Thank you, Brian, for that kind contribution." Emmett huffs softly into the rim of his glass. "My genes are fabulous enough on their own; if Calvin wasn't interested, it's his loss. *Anyway*, my cousin's house had these old fashioned windows that swung out just like a door!" Almost as an afterthought, he adds, "They weren't door-sized, though."

Some things never change.

But the beat changes. Everywhere, and everything turns blue – the people, the floor. In the lights, even the air is blue.

Michael says, "I've seen windows like that."

"Fucking windows," Brian says.

Emmett glances across Michael's chest to where Brian leans against the bar. "Is that what you were doing? *Brian*."

Ted raises his ginger ale. "Even in dreams, you bring the kink."

(All that blue light; it's almost like being underwater.)

Michael pats Brian on the back; Brian downs a shot.

* * *

Sometimes, you dream of Venice.

* * *

Then:

On the eve of Brian's 40th birthday, he goes home, and he sleeps.

(When Justin left, Brian didn't hesitate to close the door. He thought back over five years, and everything it taught them. Everything they taught each other. And he thought, sometimes things don't go the way you expect. Sitting on the edge of his bed, finger touching the surface of his unused wedding band, he thought, aside from the bizarre side trip into surrealism, this was not one of those times.)

* * *

Now:

"I've been thinking about you recently. In theory this may be related to the huge fucking Kinnetik ad in this year's Yellow Book. This year's *Manhattan* Yellow Book. God, Brian, what the fuck is wrong with you? Why didn't you tell me? I get that we haven't been in touch exactly, but we can actually meet for lunch while you're in the city."

The air is thick, and Brian lights another cigarette.

"Sometimes I feel like you've been dodging me for like five years which is completely uncalled for. I'm not going to stalk you, you know? I'm not seventeen anymore.

"Anyway, it doesn't matter."

* * *

In the end, every step and tree and fuck leads to this empty landscape, the floating windows, endless doors. And in the center a man, the grey-white landscape shedding nothing across his grey-white skin, clothes. You think, he's a canvas, in a way, and Justin in all his volatile glory would paint him with colors and shadows. That's when you know who he is. You wonder why you'd dream of Dream. Michael would be so fucking jealous.

Watching him move, you think of drifting, drowning.

Watching you move for an instant, he turns away.

You want to ask where you are, or how you got here, but the taste of burning marijuana is still on your tongue, and you must have drifted off.

(Watching him is unnerving, and suddenly you'd rather be anywhere but here. Still, you watch him open windows and inside every one you see another life – sometimes yours, sometimes not. Myriad possibilities – marriages and children, repression and celebration. Your hand entwined with Justin's, or with Michael's, or with Lindsay's. Other men and other women. The things you could have become, or let yourself be forced to become.)

"Not quite," *the man* says. "What you think that you could have become. This is, after all, a dream." *And everything here...* "A reflection your mind. I'm curious of what brought you to me, and what brought me to you. These journeys are usually longer, and not undertaken lightly. There was, once, a fox... but that is another story."

Looking through the windows, you think of opportunities lost, paths untaken. You think of the grey, and how Justin would have painted in bold reds and blues, yellows and blacks.

Some things you can't take back; sometimes, paths diverge too completely. And sometimes...

(You wonder at your imagination, sometimes – the grey plains and colorless comic book figures. The dreams and wishes, hopes and regrets you never let yourself know that you have.)

"I would not help you," *he* says, "This being a mundane world, and all things being equal."

* * *

Then:

When Brian wakes up, the loft is still empty, the room is still quiet, and morning still came.

(They say all good things must come to an end, which is true. And all bad things too. Which raises the question, do endings end? And when they do, do you start again?)

* * *

Now:

"I'm in Pittsburgh, Brian. Right now. God, it's been three years since we saw other. Hell, it's been five since we had a decent conversation – I wonder if we still can."

(Justin laughs, and Brian pictures him, still young but with older eyes. Still shining. Always that.)

"I say still, as though our conversational skills were ever anything but dismal.

"Well," he says, "We can try."

* * *

Then:

After his fortieth birthday outing (Woody's. Babylon. Drugs in the VIP Lounge, alcohol by the bar), he goes home. Michael drops the car keys on kitchen counter before he goes, and Brian lies on his bed and smokes and thinks of paths untraveled, roads unwalked.

Ticking time clocks, and how every second is only time.

4:30 am.

The phone rings.

* * *

Now:

And from outside, Justin's voice is lower than Brian's answering machine, muffled by the door. It takes a moment to hear it, and another to connect the dull knock-knock-knock to the machine saying, "It's a strange concept, I know, but we could try now."

Justin's electronic voice, saying, "Open the door."

(And the thump-thump-thump of Brian's heart as he stands, pulse hard in his temples as he answers, *Yes.*)