

Life is But a Dream

Bradford opened the door to his office and bolted through the reception area. Andrea barely had time to greet the man as he passed. Taking a seat at his desk, he shuffled through some paperwork and finally picked up the phone.

“This is Bradford. What’s the scoop?” He paused for a moment to listen. “Well—I want to be there. No arguments damn it! I insist,” he barked and slammed the receiver down. Tapping his fingers on his desk for a moment, he finally rose and headed for the door.

Andrea tried to speak, but he cut her off. “I’ll be gone for the rest of the day,” he uttered as he rushed out the door. She just shook her head, considering the rude nature of the entire exchange.

“Cassandra? Is it really you?” Wright made an earnest inquiry.

“Yes, Jack it’s me,” she uttered softly, glancing down at his gruesome injury.

Eventually realizing what she was staring at, he looked down and nearly passed out from the mangled sight. The pain had returned with throbbing intensity. Cassandra reached down and in one sweeping motion, returned his arm to its original state.

“I don’t understand,” he uttered. The confusion was apparent in his tone.

“It’s all in your mind. This,” she motioned toward the expanse, “is true reality. That corporeal body you left behind is a grossly limited vehicle for a very restricted dimensional plane.”

Wright was mildly impressed. He had never heard her talk with such technical eloquence. “Here, there are no physical limitations. You can be anyone or anything. You can go anywhere in the world—or the universe for that matter.” She paused momentarily as he tried to absorb the information. “Remember how we had always dreamed of going to Paris?” In the blink of an eye, they were standing atop the Eiffel Tower. “Quite a view don’t you think?”

Wright was literally speechless. The view was breathtaking in every direction. At one end, a large river extending from one horizon to another gleamed with a deep azure hue. Several bridges of varying characteristics passed over, connecting the opposing banks at regular intervals. Turning in the other direction, there was what appeared to be a long park extending perhaps a mile, and bordered on either side by well-manicured trees. Most of the neighboring structures were fairly weathered, but each had their own unique personality and style. Wright moved closer to the side, peering through a large wire mesh. Looking down nearly a quarter of a mile, the vehicles and people were mere specs. After a moment he leaned back, feeling a tinge of dizziness.

Cassandra giggled at his trepidation. “You have nothing to worry about. Your perception of falling and death is nothing more than an illusion.”

“You laugh, but what about my arm? That sure seemed real.”

Cassandra smiled as she explained patiently. “Jack, this is why you don’t belong here. You’re at the mercy of your

own limited understanding. You can be hurt only because you still believe that you can be hurt.”

“Yeah, but what about all of the others who were suffering the same horrible repetitive deaths? Surely, they’re not in the same boat as me.”

Her tone became slightly more somber. “In a way they are. They’ve arrived here without the knowledge that they have passed on. So they’re at the mercy of the same beast that has been plaguing you in your dreams. He lies to them and tortures them. Tells them that if they obey him, they will eventually be released. Of course, that’s just another one of his lies. But you see, it takes more than just knowing that you’re no longer bound by human mortality. It is a profound knowledge—an understanding that you receive. But not everyone receives it. Those who’ve lived immoral, corrupt and self-serving lives fall under the jurisdiction of the beast. And it’s their own guilt and self-hatred that prevents them from breaking free of his bonds. You my darling by no means fall into this category, but you have come here prematurely and right now I’m protecting you. Though, to be honest, I don’t know how much longer I can continue to do so. Soon your mind will submit to the fear, paranoia and lies of that horrid beast and you’ll be lost to me forever. That’s why it is imperative that you return now. You have to live out your life. And when that life ends, I *will* be here waiting for you.”

Wright was intrigued by her explanation. “I understand now. I’ll go back and everything will be different. Do you realize what this means? I’ve actually discovered...”

Cassandra chimed in politely. “Jack, when you go back, this will all appear to have been a dream. Your perceptions of it will allude to that. And this is what everyone will tell

you. Even your own mind will tell you that it was simply just a dream.”

Wright was anxious to speak. “But it’s not! Is it? *This* is reality.” Wright motioned towards the Paris backdrop.

“Yes, my darling. This is reality,” she replied with a loving smile.

Crawling to a stop, Bradford eventually engaged the parking break. Directly behind, a single police vehicle came to a rest as well. Bradford sat for a moment waiting for the officers to exit their vehicle and finally opened his own door.

As they approached, one of the officers spoke. “The van should be here shortly. Do you think there’s a lot of equipment in there?”

“To be honest, I have no idea what he has in there, but it *all* belongs to the hospital.” Bradford jaunted officiously.

The officer was slightly irritated by Bradford’s over-enthusiastic attitude. “Look—our instructions are to confiscate any computer-related equipment. Anything beyond that is off limits. You’re here merely as an observer. If you get in the way, I’ll remove you myself. Are we clear?”

Bradford was astounded by the utter disrespect he had just been served, but held his tongue. He didn’t want to ruin his chances of witnessing his triumph over Wright. “Of course. We’re in complete agreement officer.”

As they approached the entrance, the two officers stood apart. The ranking officer rapped on the door and waited. After several seconds, he knocked once again, but there was no response. The two officers eyed one another.

Bradford chimed in impatiently. “Why don’t you just break it down?”

The officers glared at Bradford without replying. Knocking a final time they waited for another minute. Convinced that Wright was either ignoring them or incapable of coming to the door, they finally elected to kick it in. Bradford rolled his eyes in response.

After several violent kicks, one of the hinges became dislodged. The officer stood back a few extra inches and unleashed one last blow. The wood around the doorframe splintered as the deadbolt finally gave way. The door swung open and hung askew on the lower hinge.

Wright was positioned near the center of the room, still seated in the chair with cables attached.

“Cassandra—I just want you to know that everyday since you died, I’ve regretted not telling you how I really felt. I was so caught up in my own self-pity that I failed to realize what we’d already shared. And I was just so angry at the world that I neglected to see that I should’ve been spending our last few hours together simply loving you. That’s what made it all the more unbearable when you left. The last words you heard out of my mouth were words of anger. In some ways I was acting like a child throwing a tantrum.”

Cassandra wore a look of distress as she spoke. “Jack, please. You must stop this immediately. Do you really think that I could have ever been upset with you? I knew what you were going through. I knew the pain you were feeling. You were always good at suppressing your feelings, but this was one time when I really wanted you to let it out. You needed to let it out, and that’s what I was trying to convey that day. I wasn’t angry with you at all. I was actually very disappointed that I couldn’t stay and help to ease your pain,

but I was being called here and I really had no other choice. Nevertheless, just please understand that I loved you then. I love you now. And I will always love you.”

Wright took a deep relaxing breath. He felt as if a massive weight had just been lifted from his heart. Embracing her gently, he gazed lovingly into her eyes. She had never looked so radiant. Drawing his mouth close to hers, he attempted to kiss her, but she abruptly intervened.

“Jack! Something’s wrong. You have to go back now,” Cassandra said with great urgency.

Wright frowned slightly, but acknowledged her plea. “Alright Cass—How do I get back? The last time I looked, the way I came through wasn’t there anymore.”

“Jack. Remember. It’s all in your mind. You have to perceive the door being opened.”

Wright stood there for a moment with his eyes shut trying to open the door, but his efforts were proving futile. Closing his eyes even tighter, he thought this would enhance his concentration. It did not.

Cassandra finally intervened. “Jack, this is not a game. Someone is trying to break your physical connection. If they succeed, not only will your physical body die, but your entire existence could be lost as well.” She paused for a moment and spoke more tenderly. “Darling, you have to want to leave. I know this is difficult for you, but you have to do it.”

The concern was apparent in her tone. Wright finally settled within his mind the idea of returning, and almost instantaneously the opening appeared. To his utter dismay, Bradford was standing in front of the computer.

“Look, I’m telling you that this man’s doing something very perverse and perhaps even dangerous. If we don’t shut this thing down now, he could die. Do you want to be responsible for this man’s death?” Bradford imposed the question to the officers.

“How do you know that disconnecting this thing won’t kill him,” one of the officers retorted keenly.

“Are you questioning my professional medical expertise?” Bradford queried ostentatiously, insulted by the mere inference.

The two officers turned to one another and shrugged. “Fine, but we’re not gonna be responsible if something does go wrong. It’s in your hands now. We’ll be outside.”

Bradford turned to the computer and, locating the power button, leaned over to press it. He was startled by the hand that grabbed his arm.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing,” Wright barked as he shoved his hand away.

Quickly recomposing himself, Bradford wore an insidious grin as he spoke. “It’s over Jack. You won’t be squirming your way out of this one.”

“What are you talking about? And how the hell did you get in here?” Wright glanced over at the remains of his front door. His confusion was mounting until one of the officers finally stepped in.

“You see Jack, the Board ruled in my favor and these officers have been ordered to confiscate everything in this room. Additionally, there’s going to be a formal inquiry into your finances to see if any of the money you received for the Delta wave research was utilized for this perverse little experiment. Jack—you’re in a lot of trouble. See what happens when you mess with the wrong bull?” Bradford

was quite pleased with himself as he concluded his pedantic rhetoric.

Wright turned to the ranking officer to confirm Bradford's claim. In response, the officer produced a single document and spoke. "I'm afraid he's right. We have a warrant to search these premises and confiscate any and all computer-related materials."

Glaring back at Bradford for a moment, Wright made no verbal remark, but just nodded solemnly. Bradford was grinning from ear to ear.

"Where's that damn van at," one of the officers barked impatiently.

"They got hung up at the station," his partner replied. "They said to go ahead and start carrying things out."

"Figures," the first officer uttered sarcastically. "Alright, let's get moving."

As the two officers began disassembling the equipment, Wright stood there quietly pondering his next move. Bradford forced the issue as he turned to find the monitor resting on the table.

"Maybe we should start with this," he exclaimed tauntingly as he snatched up the device.

Wright was infuriated and attempted to retrieve it from Bradford's hands. The two men struggled for a moment and eventually fell into a tug of war. Noticing the commotion, the ranking officer spoke up. "Alright, that's enough." But the two men were equally adamant about their struggle and continued. The officer made a more forceful demand. "I said that's enough!" In response, Bradford suddenly and unexpectedly released his grip. As a result, the device went sailing into the air. Wright followed its path and watched in horror as the device ultimately struck the wall, shattering into pieces.

“Damn you,” Wright shouted in a literal rage. He made a move toward Bradford, but before he could wrap his hands around Bradford’s throat, the two officers intervened.

“Alright, one more outburst like that and we’re gonna have to cuff ya.” Turning to Bradford the officer made an equally grating assertion. “And *you* can wait outside. You’ve caused enough problems.”

Placing his hands in his pockets, Bradford replied rather humbly. “My apologies. I wasn’t trying to create any added turmoil here, but as you can see, this man is obviously unstable.”

In an almost taunting fashion, he reached over to Wright and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Jack, try not to be too upset.” With that he smiled and exited.

Confirming the address she had scribbled on a piece of paper, Andrea took a right turn and started looking for the number. As she approached Wright’s house she was shocked to see the patrol car as well as Bradford’s new Mercedes parked out front.

She hesitated to slow down, but still managed to glance over as she passed. Bradford was standing out front, and through the open door she could clearly see Wright positioned between the two officers. Utterly confused by the bizarre scene, she simply sped off.

Wright stood there with an indignant look on his face, astounded by the radical turn of events which were unfolding before his very eyes. “That son of a bitch has taken this thing too far,” he mused angrily. Yet, he felt completely helpless as he watched the two officers dismantle three years of hard work.

Suddenly, the sound of crushing metal and shattering glass broke the silence.

“What the hell was that,” the ranking officer shouted, directing his inquiry at the other officer.

“Somebody just plowed into our car!”

“Stay here and watch him. I’ll call for back up. This is getting out of hand,” the first officer barked and bolted out of the house. Turning to find Wright, the remaining officer was ill prepared for the blow that he received to the back of his neck. He fell to the floor unconscious.

Wright turned to his computer, rapidly keying in a series of commands. He knew he only had a few moments. Finally, with a single finger he struck the *Enter* key. A small window appeared with a progress bar and the word “**DELETING...**” in the heading. Locating the disc he had created earlier, he headed for the door. Just then, Bradford appeared at the entry blocking his path. Without hesitation, Wright landed a punch square in the center of Bradford’s face. The man instantly dropped to the ground. Patting him down, Wright located his keys and headed for his car.

The other officer was still preoccupied with Andrea. She had exaggerated her injuries and pleaded with him not to leave. Consequently, he failed to notice Wright sliding into Bradford’s vehicle. As the engine turned over, the officer finally looked up, but it was too late. Wright had already pulled away and was accelerating rapidly down the street. Andrea was smiling inside. “Good luck Jack,” she conveyed mentally and returned to her theatrics.

The powerful engine responded instantaneously as Wright pressed down hard on the accelerator. Looking in every direction he flew past several stop signs. It was only a matter of time before the police would catch up and begin their

pursuit. Squealing into a back alley, he started looking for a place to ditch the vehicle and continue his escape on foot. Unfortunately, he had only traveled a block when two patrol cars fishtailed behind him with sirens blaring. "Damn it," he blurted out angrily.

Blasting through the alley in excess of sixty miles per hour, dust and debris kicked up in every direction. As Wright crossed an intersection, the large sedan heaved and scraped the ground, producing a huge shower of sparks. The pursuing officers backed off slightly, fearing a collision.

Finally, turning out of the alley, Wright swiftly avoided a collision with an oncoming vehicle. Looking into his rear view mirror he could see the smoke from the other vehicle's tires still lingering in the air. The car had come to rest directly in front of one of the pursuing vehicles which, in response, swerved and launched off the curb.

The second police car was less fortunate and caught the back end of the other vehicle, sending it into a tailspin. The patrol car skidded sideways across the street, eventually plowing into a telephone pole. Wright noticed the collision and sighed.

Weaving in and out of traffic, Wright handled the lumbering giant with unusual poise. The patrol car was beginning to lose ground as the powerful Mercedes engine throttled effortlessly through its gears. Wright had managed to put a full block of distance between them and was again looking for an opportunity to ditch the vehicle.

Pulling off onto another side street, he raced down the narrow road at ninety miles per hour. "I've got to get rid of this disc," he mused anxiously. Unfortunately, the patrol car had managed to close their distance again by cutting through an adjacent side street. For the second time, Wright

gunned the powerful engine and crept away from the pursuing vehicle.

Up ahead, Wright saw a long freight train approaching. “This is my chance,” he thought. Easing off the accelerator, he began timing the distance from the train. But the driver of the patrol car was keen to his plan. In an effort to thwart Wright’s death defying feat, the officer swerved to the side, attempting to overtake the larger sedan. Wright saw this and in response, easily pulled ahead.

With only several hundred feet to go, the officer reconsidered his plan and backed off. The locomotive was fast approaching. Wright’s timing had to be precise. He finally gunned the vehicle, accelerating rapidly away from the other car. With only a few car lengths to go, Wright was confident of his escape.

Suddenly, the powerful Mercedes engine seized violently. The oil pressure gauge dropped to zero. The earlier hit to the undercarriage had cracked the engine block, causing oil to slowly spew out over several minutes. With no power the car had become an uncontrollable beast. Wright slammed both feet down upon the brake pedal, but it was no use. The car slowed only slightly as it rocketed towards the oncoming train.

The loud horn wailed as the locomotive approached. Wright gripped the wheel tightly, hoping the remaining momentum would carry him safely past the train. As the front wheels struck violently over the tracks, the heavy car lifted off the ground. Wright watched in horror as the train closed to within a few car lengths. An eternity seemed to pass, but the rear wheels finally struck the first track, shifting the momentum of the car and heaving Wright forward in his seat. The train’s powerful headlight flooded the interior of the car

with pure white. Wright sighed with relief as the rear wheels finally pounded over the second track. Yet, the large sedan was far from clear as the massive train struck the rear quarter panel and sent the car tumbling violently.

Rolling over several times, glass and debris flew in every direction. Inside, several airbags had fired, but were already deflating as the car continued to tumble. The battered vehicle finally came to rest upon its roof. Wright laid crumpled in a bloody pile, all but ejected from his restraints.

The lights from the pursuing patrol car eventually came into view and the officer hurried towards the wreck. Crouching down, he produced a flashlight and examined Wright.

“Just hang in there! Help’s on the way!” the officer shouted.

Wright looked up at the officer, but merely smiled. The same bright alabaster doorway had appeared directly in front of him, and this time Cassandra was standing there waiting.

After several minutes, the paramedics finally arrived and carefully extracted Wright’s body from the twisted mess.

“He was conscious when I got to him,” said the officer.

One of the paramedics acknowledged him as they began working on Wright. They scurried about the body for several minutes trying to revive him, but their efforts proved futile.

Wright looked back towards his mangled remains and sighed. As he stepped through the opening, Cassandra took his hand and as quickly as it had appeared, the opening vanished.