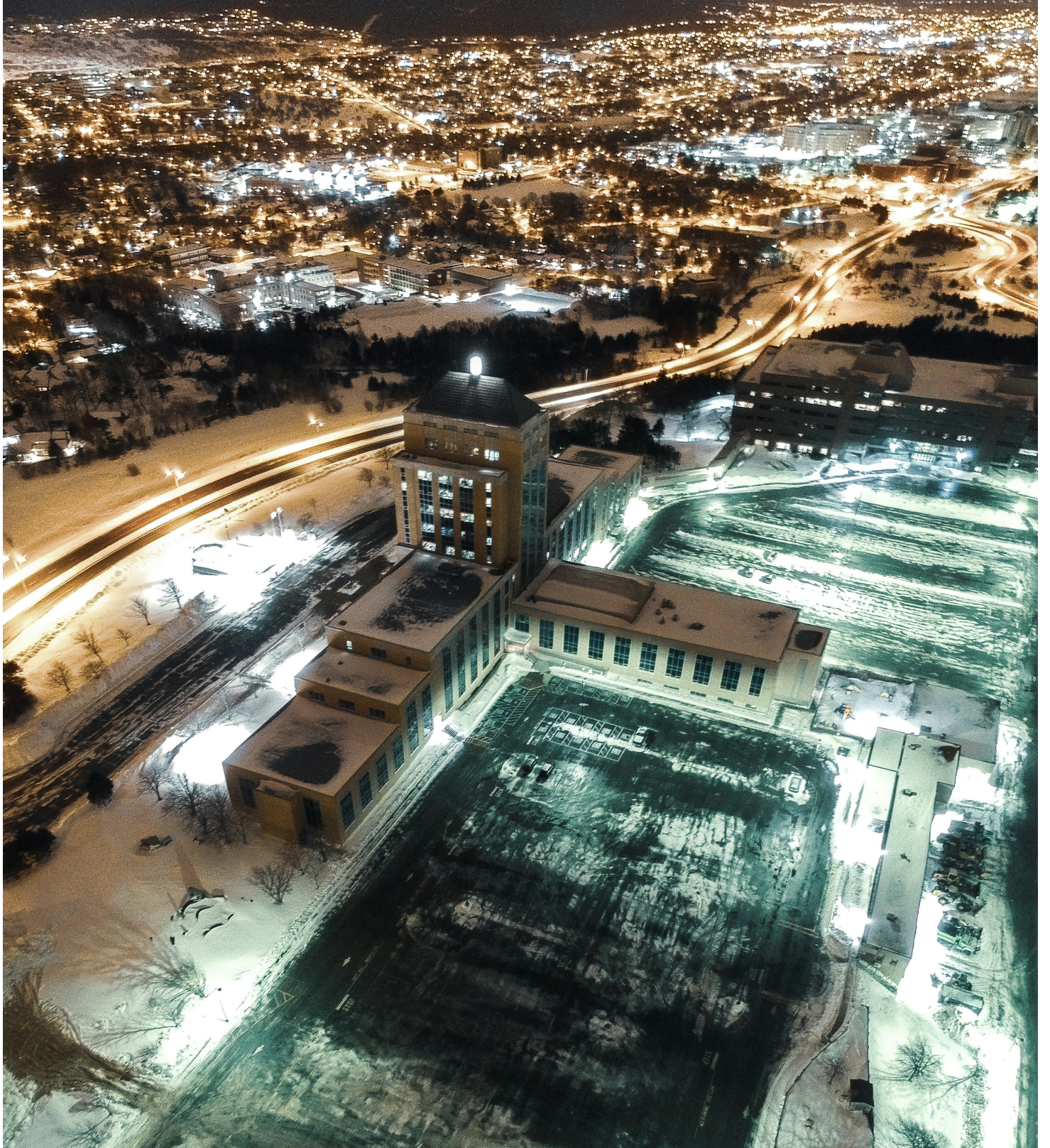


THE DREAM HUNTER

by Leigh Gaddy



I'm not exactly sure how I start talking with Jacques on the roof of the hospital in the middle of the night. But here we are. Jacques says I was in a coma not too long ago. He says I got in a car accident in a snowstorm, flipped over the edge of a steep embankment, and landed myself in a medically induced coma in the hospital for four days. Then, I guess, I just...let go of it all.

And you know what I was doing in the car in the middle of a snowstorm? Stubbornly picking up some order from Target that *really* could have waited till the next day.

Anyway, though, Jacques is a strange sort of person. When you get to this point, you'll see what I mean. Most everyone gets here. Eventually. Even kids, and Jacques says they're some of the best.

"The best *what*?" I ask him. It's late at night. The wind is blowing swirls of gritty snow all around us. I make myself shiver, because it seems like I ought to be shivering, but my brain dimly registers that I'm not in fact cold at all.

I can barely feel the icy roof under my bare feet, when it comes to it.

Jacques is tall and black and handsome. Not in an Idris Elba way (because obviously that'd be heaven and that's clearly not where I am right now), but in a nighttime sort of way. His skin is literally black and covered in shimmering stars. The tall and handsome part is still true, but he is not human. I should fear him, I suppose, but I don't. A lot of fear goes away when the threat of death no longer applies.

"Children are the best dream hunters," he says, in a deep and velvety voice. "Their imagination is powerful, even after death. They...accept their new situation much more quickly than adults."

"Dream hunters?" I ask stupidly. I make my mouth fall open and force myself to blink. I find it's a little harder to react to things in my new undead state. But if dream hunter is a job title, it sounds like the worst kind of YA dystopian novel. "And what are they, exactly?"

Jacques arches an eyebrow and tilts his head toward me. "It's what you are now."

"Huh?"

Jacques raises his hands to the sky and opens his arms wide, dramatically, like he's ushering in the beginning of a play in a theater. His voice becomes loud and, this time, I do cower. "Here, at the end, you have been tasked. Those with unfinished business must complete a series of tasks, without which your soul cannot rest. I am here to prepare you and set you on your way." Snow swirls like a tornado around Jacques, only coming to rest as he lowers his muscled arms. A smile spreads across his angelic face, as though this announcement should make me very happy.

My heart should be pounding with anxiety at this point, but it's not. I should be an ice cube right now, but I'm not. I don't feel like me. My brain performs a mental 180 and asks me how I even know I *don't* feel like me. "Jacques, what *is* this?" I screech. "I'm really...I'm dead and now I've got, what, a job to do? Where's Peter and the pearly gates? Where's the elevator to hell with the demon and the roster on the clipboard? What animal am I going to be reincarnated as?" Jacques grins. His teeth look a little...sharp. I am not comforted. "Please tell me I come back as a...a happy whale or something," I manage to whimper. "I like whales."

Jacques gives a booming laugh and claps his hands once.

We're in a tree next to a house. Jacques stands on a major branch like he's done this his whole life. He waves an arm toward the window. It's still night and there's a lamp on in the bedroom,

so I can see inside. I stand uneasily on a smaller branch, waiting to lose my footing, but the wobble never happens. We're looking in at a guy's room. He's alone in the bed. His phone is propped up on a pillow and something is streaming on the screen, but his eyes are closed. He looks like he's asleep, and I'm trying to figure out what movie he was watching (I think it's a horror movie) when something flits in and out of the corner of my vision. It happens again and I look to the right, over the sleeping man's head. I narrow my eyes to look closer and suddenly I'm *in* the room standing over the man. "I'm so sorry," I say, backing up a step or two. "I didn't mean to—"

"They won't be able to hear you."

"Whoa! Don't *do* that!" I shout. Jacques has appeared at my side without warning.

"Look again," he says, nodding to the sleeping man.

I look down and there it is again. A movement. The air over the man's head has thickened. It's...pulsating. Like a growing bubble. The air is growing darker but worse, there's a bad feeling in the room.

"Something's wrong," I say.

Jacques nods once, his eyes never leaving the sleeping man's face.

The dark bubble grows into a blobby form about the size of a person and then detaches from the man. It settles onto the floor and suddenly it has legs and arms and a head, but no face or any other details. As it grew, the malice in the room grew, too. I feel an old, old fear.

"It's a nightmare," Jacques whispers. He slips something cold and thin into my hand. The memory of a metal straw floats hazily into my mind, but it's hard to focus due to the horror before me.

The nightmare crouches low over the man, arms spread wide. The man shifts uneasily in his sleep. He mumbles unintelligibly. Then the nightmare whips a shadowy hand at the man, who jerks away at an uncomfortable angle. I've had that nightmare before, too. Where you think something is stabbing at you and your body jerks painfully away in your sleep. Anger flares up inside me. I didn't know it was *real*. "Stop it!" I yell viciously. I take whatever's in my hand and slash it at the nightmare's head.

A rip appears in the shadow. Bright light behind the dark shadow blazes outward. It's blinding. I yell again, closing my eyes in surprise. When I open them, the nightmare is gone and the man is still there, asleep in his bed. His phone is still streaming his movie.

"Well done," says Jacques, and he claps his hands once.

We're at the end of a pier at the lake. It's still night. The same night? I don't know, but I can hear the water lapping at the posts underneath the deck. Chunky rings of ice have formed around the posts where the water laps at them, and the water is thick with broken slabs of ice and slush. I think I'm sitting at the end of the pier, with my legs dangling over the end like I usually do, when I realize two things simultaneously: I've remembered something about my life before, while at the same time I have less understanding and control of my body. I can no longer look down to see if I even have a body.

I think I am a mere presence in this world. If I had eyes to cry tears, I think the proverbial single tear would be sliding down my cheek.

But Jacques can see me. He is peering closely at me. "One more, I think. And then the

last.”

“One more?”

In answer, he points his finger back up the dock toward the shore. I follow the line of his gesture and see a body huddled under a bench. No sooner do I think that I *want* to be at this person’s side than I’m there. The person is huddled under a blanket, but it is a bad night to be sleeping outdoors. I was never brave or compassionate enough when I was alive to approach someone experiencing homelessness, but I have to try now. If they don’t wake up soon, they’ll join me here with Jacques. And this is a messed-up state to be in.

I force my formless body to lean over the sleeper and pretend I have arms to shake them with. “Hey! Hey, wake up!” I feel the futility of my actions even as I try. I cannot influence this person or engage with them in a tangible way. “Jacques, what do I do? Help me.”

Jacques has apparently turned to stone, as he looks more like a statue than a man at the moment. He watches me impassively and says nothing.

I feel my nothingness fill with sorrow. Was I this ineffectual in real life, too? Did I ever make a difference for good?

Something flits in and out of my vision again.

I gasp and look back at the person huddled under the blanket. A thickened bubble of air forms around where their head must be. I watch and wait. When the bubble turns black, I get angry. How dare this nightmare inflict further pain and torment on this poor human? I raise the thin, metal instrument in my hand and wait for it to take shape.

The bubble grows larger and settles heavily onto the dock. It becomes spiky, a monster instead of man-shaped, and it thrusts its spikes toward the sleeper. My anger explodes but I stay my hand when the sleeper shifts under their blanket.

“Wait, wait,” I whisper. “I need to let the nightmare wake them up.”

It’s a special torment all on its own. I watch as the nightmare tortures the person—a woman, I see her now, the blanket has fallen off her face—until finally, *finally*, she wakes. But I cannot resist slashing at the nightmare before it vanishes from this world. If I had a body, I think it would be shaking in relief to see the woman stand and wrap the blanket tightly around herself and walk away. I hope she knows where to go.

“You’re a natural,” murmurs Jacques. “I think you’re ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“To complete your tasks,” says Jacques. He claps once.

We’re in a brightly lit room. Outside the window it is still night. The walls are a warm peach color and have large cartoon-y stickers of baby woodland animals on them. There are strange devices everywhere. Computer-like machines have screens full of squiggling, jumping lines. There are muted beeping sounds from multiple directions. Bags of clear fluid hang from wheeled, silver stands and there are carts full of gauze and tape and miscellaneous bits wrapped in sterile paper and plastic.

“Jacques?” I look around but Jacques is not in the room with me.

But there’s an expensive-looking rocking chair with thick cushions. And a man is asleep in the chair. He doesn’t look comfortable, hanging halfway over an arm of the chair like he is. There are multiple hospital bracelets around his wrists, and he wears one of those white, paper-like robes, the kind you throw away after a checkup, over his regular clothes. His brown hair

lays in greasy curls over his forehead. There are the traces of tears on his cheeks and the skin under his eyes is dark and puffy. His chin is dark with stubble. I see the scar there on his chin, the one from that time at the city baseball game...

"Matt," I whisper. I reach for him with my mind, which is all I have left. It's Matt. My beloved, goofy, wonderful Matt. We...we were married. There was a life with this man. A life with breakfasts and board games and bills. We had friends together, and family...

Family.

A steel door falls open in my mind and I suddenly feel the floor, solid and cold, under my feet. I look down to see my body for the first time this whole night. I'm naked except for the hospital gown tied around me. I run my hands reflexively over my soft stomach and freeze. My heart begins to pound, matching the rhythm of the beeping tone from the equipment behind me. I turn slowly, both knowing and afraid of what I'll see there.

The incubator is huge. Much, much bigger than the tiny red baby inside it. A cry is pulled from my body. I rush to the incubator and, somehow, I am both in the incubator and out of it. I can see my body and feel what's around me, but my body is not real. I reach down and cradle my baby in my arms as best I can. There are so many tubes and tapes...I'm afraid to test the limits of my insubstantiality and hurt my child.

"Sam. My Sam." I cradle my baby boy and sob.

How could I have forgotten that I'd been pregnant? That I'd been a wife? Had my life been totally without meaning?

"This was my unfinished business, Jacques?" I whisper. I look up at Matt, still asleep in the rocking chair, and my heart aches with a pain that surely would have killed me just the day before. "Oh Matt, I'm so sorry. Look what I've done."

I stroke the soft, warm skin of Sam's face. He's small. Very small. I wasn't due for another six weeks. Matt dressed him in one of the dozens of little blue onesies we bought. It's much too big on him. This one has an applique animal embroidered on it. I tug the fabric straight and see that it's a little whale.

"I do love whales," I whisper.

I watch my son's face for hours. Days. Years. He shifts and moves in his sleep. The little noises he makes fill my heart with so much love that it threatens to burst. I sing him every song I can think of and tell him all my hopes for his life. Then, just when the sky has begun to lighten outside the window, I see a little bubble of thickened air begin to form over his head. It quickly begins to turn dark. A rage such as I have never felt rises inside me.

How can a newborn have a nightmare? What sort of world is this?

I grab hold of the bubble, containing it, and watch as the sphere turns black in my hand. Sam still sleeps peacefully. I can feel the malice inside the bubble. It is a simple, instinctive fear inside there—the kind of nightmare that needs only the touch of a caregiver to dispel. I can do this for Sam. I can give him this help that he needs. He may not be able to feel my touch, but I can make the bad dreams go away.

My hand clenches more tightly around the bubble. It feels like a glass ball, hard and resistant. I throw all my emotions—the joy of seeing my son for the first time, the horrible pain of loss, and the guilt of my unexpected departure—into my grip.

"You leave my child alone," I say through gritted teeth. A hairline crack forms in the glass. Then another, and another...and the ball vanishes in my hand. Sam's eyes are closed, but

he smiles then, and I revel in triumph while the sun peeks over the horizon.

“Well done,” says Jacques, appearing behind my shoulder again.

I knew he’d be back at some point. “Isn’t he beautiful?”

Jacques leans over to look at Sam, looking more unreal than ever. Night and day are not supposed to meet. He smiles at me and says, “Yes, life is beautiful.”

It’s a tacky, cheesy thing to say, and is absolutely perfect for the moment. I chuckle in response and run the tip of my finger over Sam’s little nose.

“Do you want to bring him with you?” he asks.

My gaze snaps back to Jacques’ face. “What?” I say, horrified.

Jacques watches me and says nothing.

“Bring him with me?” A rush of feelings and hopes and wishes from my real life whirl around me like a snowstorm. Me and Matt were supposed to have a baby. This baby. Sam. We were nearly done decorating the nursery and I was picking up my seventy-eighth order from Target to finish it when...

And Sam is so warm in my arms. He fits there, like a puzzle piece. The piece in my life that had been missing. My life that had not been meaningless after all. The meaning was here, in my arms now. The good thing I could point to and say, “There. There is the proof that I did something right.”

Bring him with me?

I look up at Matt. My beloved husband is now a father. He’s a daddy. I feel a tear fall down my cheek. *No, I think, no, I can do one more good thing.* And I can tell that the light in the room will wake Matt soon, and I don’t think I could bear to leave if I see Matt wake up. I need to hurry. “Poor guy,” I whisper. “He’s not going to get any sleep for a while.”

Sam is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. So is Matt. And so is that sunrise. With a great effort, the greatest effort ever in my real life or this, I pull my arms away from my son. I step out of the incubator and go to Matt’s side. I cannot push back the curls that have fallen over his eyes, but I kiss his forehead and bless him with all my love and hopes for his future. For his future, and our son’s, together.

“I love you both.”

“Come on, dream hunter,” says Jacques.

I step backward toward the man with stars in his skin, and we vanish into the morning light.