

Dreams

by Francis Paul Wilson, 1946–

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The nightmare again.

I almost dread falling asleep. Always the same, and yet never quite the same. The events differ dream to dream, yet always I am in a stranger's body, a huge, monstrous, patchwork contraption that reels through the darkness in such ungainly fashion. And it's always dark in the dream, for I seem to be a creature of the night, forever in hiding.

And I can't remember my name.

The dreams are well-formed now. My head has cleared in them. So unlike the early dreams, which I can barely remember. They are no more than a montage of blurred images now—a lightning-drenched laboratory, a whip-wielding hunchback, *fear*, a stone-walled cell, chains, *loneliness*, a little girl drowning among floating blossoms, a woman in a wedding gown, townsfolk with torches, fire, a burning windmill, *pain*, *rage*, *PAIN!*

But I'm all right now. Scarred but healing. And my mind is clear. The pain from the fire burned away the mists. I remember things from dream to dream, and more and more bits and pieces from long ago.

But what is my name?

I know I must stay out of sight. I don't want to be burned again. That's why I spend the daylight hours hiding here in the loft of this abandoned stable on the outskirts of Goldstadt. I sleep most of the day. But at night I wander. Always into town. Always to the area around the Goldstadt Medical College. I seem to be attracted to the medical college. The reason rests here in my brain, but it scampers beyond my grasp whenever I reach for it. One day I'll catch it and then I'll know.

So many unanswered questions in these dreams. But aren't dreams supposed to be that way? Don't they pose more questions than they answer?

My belly is full now. I broke into a pastry shop and gorged myself on the sweets left over from yesterday, and now I'm wandering the back alleys, drinking from rain barrels, peering from the shadows into the lighted windows I pass. There's a warm resonance within when I see a family together by a fire. Once I must have had a life like that. But the warmth warps into rage if I watch too long, because I know such a scene will never be mine again.

I know it's only a dream. But the rage is so real.

As I pass the rear of a tavern, the side door opens and two men step out. I stumble farther back into the shadows, wanting to run but knowing I'd make a terrible racket. No one must see me. No one must know I'm alive. So I stay perfectly still, waiting for them to leave.

That's when I hear the voice. The deep, delicious voice of a handsome young man with curly blond hair and fresh clear skin. I know this without seeing him. I even know his name.

Karl.

I lean to my right and peer down the alley. My heart leaps at the sight of him. It's not my heart; it's the huge, ponderous heart of a stranger, but it responds nonetheless, thudding madly in my chest. I listen to his clear, rich laughter as he waves goodbye to his friend and strolls away toward the street.

Karl.

I follow. I know it's dangerous but I must. But I don't go down the alley after him. Instead I lumber along in the back alleys, splattering through puddles, scattering rats, dodging stinking piles of trash as I keep pace with him, catching sight of his golden-haired form between buildings as he strides along the pavement.

He's not heading for home. Somewhere in my head I know where he lives and he's headed in the wrong direction. I follow him to a cottage at the north end of Goldstadt, watch him knock, watch a raven-haired beauty open the door and leap into his arms, watch them disappear inside. I know her too.

Maria.

The rage spewing up in me is nearly as uncontrollable as it is unexplainable. It's all I can do to keep myself from bursting through that door and tearing them both apart.

Why? What are these emotions? Who are these people? And why do I know their names and not my own?

I cool. I wait. But Karl doesn't appear. The sky lightens and still no Karl. I must leave before I am seen. As I head back toward the stable that has become my nest, my rage is gone, replaced by a cold black despair. Before I climb to the loft I pause to relieve myself. As I lower my heavy, crudely stitched pants I pray that it will be different this dream, but there it is—that long, thick, slack member hanging between my legs. It repulses me. I try to relieve myself without touching it.

I am a woman. Why do these dreams place me in the body of a man?

Awake again.

I've spent the day talking, laughing, discussing the wisdom of the ages. Such a relief to be back to reality, back in my own body—young, lithe, smaller, smoother, with slim legs, dainty fingers, and firm, compact breasts. So good to be a woman again.

But my waking hours aren't completely free from confusion. I'm not sure where I am. I do know that it's warm and beautiful. Grassy knolls flow green through the golden sunshine toward the majestic amethyst-hued mountains that tower in the distance. Sweet little birds dart about in the hazy spring air.

And at least when I'm awake I know my name: Eva. Eva Rucker.

I just wish I knew why I was here. Don't misunderstand. I love it here. It's everything I've ever wanted. Friendly people wandering the hills, wise men stopping by to discuss the great philosophies of the ages. It's like the Elysian Fields I read about in Greek mythology, except I'm alive and this is all real. I simply don't know what I've done to deserve this.

I have a sense that I was brought here as compensation for an unpleasantness in my past. I seem to remember some recent ugliness in which I was unwittingly involved, unjustly accused, something so darkly traumatic that my mind shies from the memory of it. But the wrong was righted and I've been sent here to recuperate.

I think of Karl and how he became part of my dream last night. Karl... so handsome, so brilliant, so dashing. I haven't thought of him since I arrived here. How could I forget the man I love?

A cloud passes across the sun as my thoughts darken with the memory of the dream-Karl in the dream-Maria's arms. Maria is Karl's sister! They would *never!*

How perverse these nightmares! I shouldn't let them upset me.

The sun reemerges as I push the memory away. It's wonderful here. I never want to leave. But I'm tired now. The golden wine I had with dinner has made me drowsy. I'll just lie back and rest my eyes for a moment...

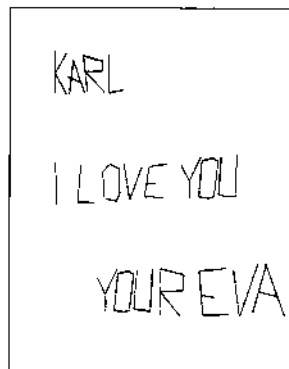
Oh, no! The dream again!

I'm in that horrid body, stumbling through the night. Can't I close my eyes even for a few seconds without falling into this nightmare? I want to scream, to burst from this cocoon of dream and return to my golden-lit fields. But the nightmare tightens its steely grip on me and I lurch on.

I stop at a school house. I'm hungry but there's something more important than food inside. I break down the door and enter the single classroom with its rows of tiny desks. I rip the top off one desk after the other and carry it to the shafts of moonlight pouring through the windows until I find the paper and pencil I seek. I bring them to the teacher's desk. I'm too large to seat myself, so I kneel beside the desk and force my huge ungainly fingers to grasp the pencil and write.

I know this is a dream, but still I feel compelled to let Karl know that even though my body has metamorphosed into this huge ungainly monstrosity, his Eva still cares for him.

After many tries, I manage a legible note:



KARL
I LOVE YOU
YOUR EVA

I fold the sheet and take it with me. At Karl's uncle's house—where Karl lives—I slip it under the door, then I stand back in the shadows and wait. And as I wait, I remember more and more about Karl.

We met near the University of Goldstadt where Karl was a student at the Medical College. That was in my real life. I assume he remains a student in my dreams. I so wanted to attend the University but the Regents wouldn't hear of it. They were scandalized by my application. No women in the College of Arts and Sciences, and especially in the Medical College. *Especially* not a poor farm girl.

So I'd hide in the rear of the lecture halls and listen to Dr. Waldman's lectures on anatomy and physiology. Karl found me there but kept my secret and let me stay. I fell in love with him immediately. I remember that. I remember all our secret meetings, in fields, in lofts. He'd teach me what he learned in class. And then he'd teach me other things. We became lovers. I'd never given myself to any man before. Karl was the first, and I swear he'll be the only one. I don't remember how we became separated. I—

Here he comes. Oh, look at him! I want to run to him but I couldn't bear for him to see me like this. What torture this nightmare is!

I watch him enter his uncle's house, see him light the candles in the entryway. I move closer as he picks up my note and reads it. But no loving smile lights his features. Instead, his face blanches and he totters back against the wall. Then he's out the door and running, flying through the streets, my note clutched in his

hand. I follow him as best I can but he outdistances me. No matter. I know the route. I sense where he's going.

When I arrive at Maria's house he's already inside. I lurch to a lighted window and peer within. Karl stands in the center of the room, his eyes wild, the ruddy color still gone from his cheeks. Maria has her arms around his waist. She's smiling as she comforts him.

"—only a joke," she says. "Can't you see that, my love? Someone's trying to play a trick on you!"

"Then it's a damn good trick!" Karl says, holding my note before her eyes. "This is how she always signed her notes—*Your Eva*. No one else knew that. Not even you. And I burned all those letters."

"So what are you telling me?" Maria says with a laugh. "That Eva wrote you this note? That's certainly not her handwriting."

"True, but—"

"Eva is dead, my love."

The words strike like hammerblows to my brain. I want to shout that I'm here, alive, transformed into this creature. But I keep silent. I have no workable voice. And after all, this is only a dream. I must keep telling myself that.

Only a dream.

Nothing here is true and therefore none of it matters.

Yet I find a horrid fascination in it.

"They hanged her," Maria is saying. "I know because I went and watched. You couldn't stomach it but I went to see for myself." Her smile fades as an ugly light grows in her eyes. "They hanged her, Karl. Hanged her till she stopped kicking and swung limp in the breeze. Then they cut her down and took her off to the Medical College just as she requested. The noble little thing: wanted her body donated to science. Well, by now she's in a thousand little pieces."

"I know," Karl says. His color is returning, but his flush seems more a shade of guilt than good health. "I saw her brain, Maria. Eva's brain! Dr. Waldman kept it in a glass jar on one of the lab tables as an example of an abnormal brain. *Dysfunctio Cerebri* his label said, right next to a supposedly normal brain. I had to sit there during all his lectures and stare at it, knowing the whole time who it had belonged to, and that it was not abnormal in the least."

"It should have been labeled a *stupid* brain," Maria laughs. "She believed you loved her. She thought I was your sister. She believed everything we told her, and so she wound up taking the blame for your uncle's murder. As a result, you're rich and you don't ever have to think about her again. She's gone."

"Her brain's gone too. I was so glad when pranksters stole it and I no longer had to look at it."

"Now you can look at me," Maria says.

She steps back and unbuttons her blouse, baring her breasts. As Karl locks her in an embrace, I reel away from the window, sobbing, retching, running blindly for the stables I call home.

Awake again.

Back in my Elysian fields, but still I cannot shake off the effects of that horrid dream. The dream-Maria's words have roused memories in my waking mind. They are partly true.

How could I have forgotten?

There was a murder. Karl's rich uncle. And I was accused. I remember now... remember that night. I was supposed to meet Karl at the house. He was going to introduce me to his uncle and bring our love out into the open at last. But when I got there, the door was open and a portly old man lay on the floor, bleeding, dying. I tried to help him but he had lost too much blood. And then the Burgomaster's men arrived and found me with the slain man's blood on my hands and the knife that had killed him at my feet.

And Karl was nowhere to be found.

I never saw Karl again. He never came to visit me. Never answered my notes. In fact, his barrister came to the jail and told me to stop writing to Karl—that Karl didn't know who I was and wanted nothing to do with the murderer of his uncle.

No one believed that I knew Karl. No one but his sister Maria had ever seen us together, and Maria said I was a complete stranger. I remember the final shock when I was told that Maria wasn't his sister at all.

After that the heart went out of me. I gave up. I lost the will to defend myself. I let them do with me as they wished. My only request was that my body be given to the Medical College. That was my private joke on the Regents—I would be attending the University after all.

I remember walking to the gallows. I remember the rope going around my neck. After that...

...I was here. So I was saved from execution. If only I could remember how. No matter. It will come. What does matter is that since arriving here my life has been a succession of one blissful day after another. Perfect...

Except for the dreams.

But now there are clouds gathering over my Elysian fields as I remember Karl's betrayal. I'd thought he avoided me in order to protect his family name, but the dream-Maria's words have not only awakened my memory, they've shed new light on all the things that happened to me after that night I went to Karl's uncle's house.

The clouds darken and thunder rumbles through the distant mountain passes as my anger and suspicion grow. I don't know if Karl lied and betrayed me as the dream-Maria said, and I don't know if he was the one who killed his uncle, but I do know that he deserted me in my hour of most dire need. And for that I will never forgive him.

The clouds obscure the sun and darken the sky, the storm threatens but it doesn't rain. Not yet.

The nightmare again.

Only this time I don't fight it. I'm actually glad to be in this monstrous body. It's a curious thing, this body. Not a seamless creature, but a quilt of human parts. And powerful. So very powerful. My years of farm work left me strong for a girl, but

I never had strength like this. Strength to lift a horse or knock down a tree. It feels good to be so strong.

I head for Maria's cottage.

She's home. She's alone. Karl is nowhere about. I don't bother knocking. I knock down the door and step inside. Maria starts to scream but I grab her by the throat with one of my long-fingered hands and choke off all sound. She laughed at me last night, called me stupid. I feel the anger surge and I squeeze tighter, watching her face purple. I straighten my arm and lift her feet off the floor, let them kick the empty air, just as she said mine did in the dream-death she watched. I squeeze and squeeze and squeeze, watching the blood vessels burst in her eyes and face, watching her tongue protrude and turn dusky until she hangs in my hands like a doll. I loosen my grip and shake her but she remains limp.

What have I done?

I stand there, shocked at the rage within me, at the violence it makes me capable of. For a moment I grieve for Maria, for myself, then I shake it off.

This is a dream. A *dream!* It isn't real. I can do anything in this nightmare body and it doesn't matter. Because it's only happening in my sleeping mind.

The realization is a dazzling white light in my brain. I can do anything I wish in my dream-life. *Anything!* I can vent any emotion, give in to any whim, any desire or impulse, no matter how violent or outrageous.

And I will do just that. No restraint while I'm dreaming. Unlike my waking life, I will act without hesitation on whatever occurs to me. I'll lead a dream-life untempered by sympathy, empathy, or any other sane consideration.

Why not? It's only a dream.

I look down and see the note I wrote Karl in last night's dream. It lies crumpled on the floor. I look at Maria, hanging limp from my hand. I remember her derisive laughter at how I'd donated my body for the furtherance of science, her glee at the thought of my being dissected into a thousand pieces.

And suddenly I have an idea. If I could laugh, I would.

After I'm finished with her, I set the door back on its hinges and wait beside it. I do not have to wait long.

Karl arrives and knocks. When no one answers, he pushes on the door. It falls inward and he sees his lover, Maria... all over the room... in a thousand pieces. He cries out hoarsely and turns to flee. But I am there, blocking the way.

Karl staggers back when he sees me, his face working in horror. He tries to run but I grab him by the arm and hold him.

"You! Good Lord, they said you'd burned up in the mill fire! Please don't hurt me! I never harmed you!"

What a wonder it is to have a physical power over a man. I never realized until this instant how fear has influenced my day-to-day dealings with men. True, they run the world, they have the power of influence—but they have *physical* power as well. Somewhere in the depths of my mind, running as a steady undercurrent, has been the realization that almost any man could physically overpower me at will. Although I never before recognized its existence, I see now how it has colored my waking life.

But in my dream I am no longer the weaker sex.

I do not hurt Karl. I merely want him to know who I am. I hold up the note from last night and press it against my heart.

“What?” he cries hoarsely. “What do you want of me?”

I show him the note again, and again I press it to my heart.

“What are you saying? That you’re Eva? That’s impossible. Eva’s dead! You’re Henry Frankenstein’s creature.”

Henry Frankenstein? The baron’s son? I’ve heard of him—one of Dr. Waldman’s former students, supposedly brilliant but highly unorthodox. What has he to do with any of this?

I growl and shake my head as I rattle the paper and tighten my grip on his arm.

He winces. “Look at you! How could you be Eva? You’re fashioned out of different parts from different bodies! You’re—” Karl’s eyes widen, his face slackens. “The brain! Sweet Lord, Eva’s brain! It was stolen shortly before you appeared!”

I am amazed at the logical consistency of my nightmare. In real life I donated my body to the Medical College, and here in my dream my brain has been placed in another body, a patchwork fashioned by Baron Frankenstein’s son from discarded bits and pieces. How inventive I am!

I smile.

“Oh, my *God!*” Karl wails. His words begin to trip over each other in their hurry to escape. “It can’t be! Oh, Eva, Eva, Eva, I’m so sorry! I didn’t want to do it but Maria put me up to it. I didn’t want to kill my uncle but she kept pushing me. It was her idea to have you blamed, not mine!”

As I stare at him in horror, I feel the rage burst in my heart like a rocket. So! He *did* conspire to hang me! A crimson haze blossoms about me as I take his head between my hands. I squeeze with all the strength I possess and don’t stop until I hear a wet crunching noise, feel hot liquid running between my fingers.

And then I’m sobbing, huge alien sounds rumbling from my chest as I clutch Karl’s limp form against me. It’s only a dream, I know, but still I hurt inside. I stand there for a long time. Until I hear a voice behind me.

“Hello? What’s happened here?”

I turn and see one of the townsfolk approaching. The sight of him makes my blood boil. He and his kind chased me to that mill on the hill and tried to burn me alive. I toss Karl’s remains aside and charge after him. He is too fast for me and runs screaming down the street.

Afraid that he’ll return with his neighbors, I flee. But not before setting fire to Maria’s cottage. I watch it burn a moment, then head into the countryside, into the friendly darkness.

Awake once more.

I have spent the entire day thinking about last night’s dream. I see no reason to skulk around in the darkness any longer when I’m dreaming. Why should I? The townsfolk realize by now that I’m still alive. Good. Let all those good citizens know that I am back and that they must deal with me again—not as poor Eva Rucker, but as the patchwork creature from Henry Frankenstein’s crazed experiments. And I will not be mistreated any more. I will *not* be looked down on and have doors

shut in my face simply because I am a farm girl. No one will say no to me ever again!

I will be back. Tomorrow night, and every night thereafter. But I shall no longer wander aimlessly. I will have a purpose in my dreams. I will start by taking my dream-revenge on the University Regents who denied me admission to the Medical College. I shall spend my waking hours devising elaborate ways for them to die, and in my dreams I shall execute those plans.

It will be fun. Harmless fun to kill them off one by one in my dreams.

I'm beginning to truly enjoy the dreams. It's so wonderful to be powerful and not recognize any limits. It's such an invigorating release.

I can't wait to sleep again.

