

Jeff Hart

The Amazing Dreamer Stays Awake

Today Flob-O uses a piece of thread and some paper clips to hang himself from the tiny ceiling fan of his mini cubicle. He kills himself while I am in the break room getting my third cup of coffee. Marcy and Craig are there and they comment on how bright and lively my new tie is and I tell them that it was a gift from my girlfriend and Craig jabs me in the ribs with his elbow telling me what a dog I am and I humor him by barking and this just has Marcy cracking up until Phil walks in and then, wiping tears from her eyes, Marcy heads back to her desk joshing us about our boys club and next thing I know we're talking about last night's game and Phil is showing me some new pictures that he snapped of his kids Brett, Bobby and Brenda with the new digital camera he was able to afford thanks to the Hopecon Non-Denominational Holiday bonus and so really this turns into quite the bull session and by the time I return to my cubicle to finally knuckle down on some of these expense reports, Flob-O's little body is already swinging, his eyes all bugged out sort of comically, his bowels emptying all over the carpet.

I get down on my knees over Flob-O's cubicle and try to lift him out of his noose, but he has tied some darn good knots. His body has the consistency of marshmallow, like one of those puffy neon Easter candies, the rabbits and the chicks, the ones that are always deep-discounted well into May. Flob-O feels just like that, only rapidly cooling, the frantic hilarious life already gone from his gelatinous body.

I bite through the thread with my teeth and Flob-O drops to the floor, bouncing with a wet bloomp noise. I use my fingers to administer CPR, pushing into his

soft flesh where I assume Flob-O's heart would be but before I get very far, he starts to evaporate. Flob-O turns into a dark blue smoke that smells a lot like cotton candy laced with sulfur. His cubicle starts to fall apart too, crashing in on itself, melting back into the gray Hopecon carpet until the only things left are Flob-O's two googly-eyes, floating a few inches off the carpet, staring at me and then they blink and are

gone.

They've been giving me the tiny cold shoulder since I missed their battle-of-the-bands with Alligator Death Squad. Apparently, Adolph Alligator swallowed a few of the Pygmies, most of the rhythm section, and they blame my absence for the carnage.

I sit down at my desk and turn my attention to today's expense reports. Between the long coffee break and Flob-O's suicide, I've lost all my morning momentum. Basically, I'm behind the eight-ball and it's not even lunch time. I put Flob-O out of my head. He wasn't Hopecon material anyway.

Pretty soon I'm going to need another cup of coffee. I haven't been sleeping well lately.

After work, the Pygmy Rockers are waiting. When I step outside, the entire shriveled retinue breaks off from anxiously thrumming their guitars with their shrunken hands to glare at me. I haven't seen these guys in weeks. They've been giving me the tiny cold shoulder since I missed their battle-of-the-bands with Alligator Death Squad. Apparently, Adolph Alligator swallowed a few of the Pygmies, most of the rhythm section, and they blame my absence for the carnage. As if I could've done something if I hadn't been at home trying to figure out how to animate a bar graph on PowerPoint.

"We thought you'd like to know," squeaks the lead-singer, "that Rhinopotamus is dead." His wide Pygmy eyes blink back tears.

"Oh," I respond, glancing over my shoulder. "What happened?" I move slowly, cautiously, not wanting to agitate the Pygmies, but also wanting

to get down the block, away from the prying eyes of my co-workers.

"What's the matter, Dave? Afraid some of those suits will see you associating with Pygmies? Don't they like punk rock at Hopecon?"

I almost laugh, imagining some of my colleagues from Hopecon at a Pygmies show. How out of place and awkward they would be, buffeted about the moshing pit, sweating through their Sears suits, afraid for their lives. It was always the threat of violence that made the Pygmies live shows so thrilling, and I can just picture Phil or Mr. Drueger taking a spear to the throat during the second encore's ritual sacrifice. Of course, then the Pygmies would be the ones out of place. They'd be in our world, filing claims and typing out statements, assigning liability. Shitting red tape, as Phil likes to say.

"That's not it at all," I say, shaking my head as I usher them further away from my office. Behind me, Craig and Phil are talking about happy hour. "Come on, let's go talk in this dark alley."

Pygmy-Harpsichordist begins screaming in Pygmy at Lead-Singer-Pygmy, looking outraged and bloodthirsty. Many of the other Pygmies nod in agreement and Tambourine-Pygmy even pulls one of the ornamental skulls off his thong and smashes it on the sidewalk.

"We don't want to talk!" shrieks Lead-Singer-Pygmy, tremors of anger shaking his frail, nearly naked body.

I notice that some of the Band have begun brandishing their poison dart blow-guns and are fixing me with that just-give-us-a-reason look.

"So what do you want?" I ask as I make a subtle glance at my watch, giving off one of Dan Dawkins' fourteen physical indications that my time is valuable as laid out in his book 'Fourteen Ways to Indicate that your Time is Valuable Without Resorting to Words'.

"We want you to help us move his body."

I trail a few feet behind the Pygmy Rockers at all times as they scurry through the rush hour foot traffic, leading me toward Rhinopotamus. This is just the kind of stuff that would hurt my reputation at the office. I think back to the time that Roger caught Intern Jenny kissing another young lady at a club, how quickly that spread all over the office, all the hilarious 867-5309 but gay song parodies that people CC'd me on. Being seen with the Pygmies would be much worse, especially now, at a time when I really need to look good, what with the institutional accounts manager position opening up, the sort of promotion a guy like me could really sink his teeth into. I visualize myself as a guy with a pay raise—he's a happier, wealthier Dave. He's a guy I'd like to have a drink with. We'd belly up to the bar and I'd pick his brain about how to get ahead. Unfortunately, fantasy promoted Davis is clueless. He just shrugs and tells me hard work, and then he tries to change the subject. He can't help me

get past Mr. Drueger. It's been keeping me up at night, thinking about the interview, how Drueger will hit me with tough questions, and suddenly I'll break into a cold sweat and have to turn the light on, frantically flipping through the copy of *101 Killer Answers to Deadly Interview Questions* that I keep next to my bed. Even once I have the right answer and I'm running the phrasing through my head, visualizing my calm smile and wink placement, even then I still can't sleep, still can't slow my heart down and the only thing that relaxes me are soft-core fantasies of Astrogirl and I spending a sexy week on a Polynesian island thanks to my bonus money. Maybe then I get some sleep, have some dreams about work, or some dreams about not being able to fall asleep and I still wake up exhausted and nervous because maybe they weren't dreams at all. Tonight, I'm sure, visions of Mr. Drueger bumping into me consorting with Pygmies will keep me up well after Leno's monologue.

"Here," says Lead-Singer Pygmy as we reach Rhinopotamus' bloated, smelly body. He collapsed while the Pygmies were trying to parallel park him. A few of the band members still sit astride him, digging their tiny heels into his sides with forlorn futility.

"He definitely is dead," I say.

"No shit, Dave."

I'm thinking about my dry-cleaning bill as I put my shoulder into Rhinopotamus' side, trying to push him onto the sidewalk. He doesn't budge and after a few minutes of this, me pushing while the Pygmies tug at Rhino's ears and tail, we give up.

"You know," I pant, "it looks like Rhino could've used a visit to the vet. Maybe if you guys had real jobs," I trail off, the Pygmies all glaring at me, too appalled and hurt to even shake a spear. Lead-Singer Pygmy combs a hand through his dreadlocks and shakes his head. I had no idea their tiny faces were capable of expressing such disgust.

"Go home," he sighs. "You fucking sell-out."

So I do. Before I've gone far a poison dart whistles by my ear. When I turn around to admonish the Pygmies, they, along with Rhinopotamus, are gone.

I arrive home to find Astrogirl setting out cartons of Chinese food. She smiles when I enter, warm and a little rueful, her teeth perfectly straight and shiny.

"I hope you don't mind," she waves a hand over the food. "Busy day."

"Of course not," I tell her, and we kiss. Astrogirl is still in her Astrosuit, purple and gold latex hugging every inch of her lithe form. There is the familiar feeling of her soft body pressed against mine, the smell of her platinum blonde hair, her pina

colada shampoo over the vaguest hint of sweat, a good, sexy, active smell. I run my hands over her hips, massaging the spot on her side that I know is sore from a day of carrying around the Raygun that now hangs by the door.

“So tell me about your day,” I say as I pull out a chair for her.

“Oh you know,” she shrugs carelessly, so unrepentantly airy and girlish, despite her near invulnerability and super strength. My beautiful cosmos-hopping avenger. “There was a breakout on the Saturn containment station. No biggie. What about you?”

“Getting closer to that promotion.” I tell her about the word that came down from the District Manager; that he liked my proposal for overhauling the HR department, that he’d been ribbing Mr. Drueger about how much paperwork I’d saved him, and how I seemed like exactly the kind of level-headed self-starter they needed to head up Institutional Accounts. I omit the details about Flob-O’s suicide and my run-in with the Pygmies.

“Promotion or no promotion,” she says, “my love for you is unconditional.”

After dinner I unzip Astrogirl’s Astrosuit and her nudity pours across me like sunlight. Every inch of her is smooth and toned, tanned, pert and nubile, her areolas in perfect proportion to her nipples. She laughs playfully as she unbuckles my belt and leads me by the front of my pants into the bedroom. We make slow, languid love, which crescendos with a simultaneous orgasm. Then we collapse against each other, her hair fanning over my face as her head fits neatly against my chest. Her breathing slows and she is asleep. I stay awake.

Our bedroom window is open a crack. A cool breeze blows through, goosing our curtains and letting in the moonlight. The pale blue light falls across Astrogirl’s back and that’s when I notice it, there, on her shoulder.

A constellation of acne.

Maybe my lungs are collapsed. Maybe I have a brain tumor. Maybe my eyelids have turned transparent.

I try to match the shallow rhythm of Astrogirl’s breathing, but it just isn’t happening. Something is wrong in me. WebMD diagnosed my condition as sleep apnea with ninety percent certainty. But I’m not overweight and I don’t think my tonsils have grown back—I had them out when I was a kid and it was ice cream and movies with mom for a week. And anyway, maybe I wasn’t even totally honest with the computer. Do I fall asleep and then wake up? Or do I never fall asleep at all? How am I supposed to tell?

Of course, the next question I should be asking here is obvious. What is sleep? At least that's what Dan Dawkins tells us to ask in his best-selling book *Can I Sell This? Twenty-Six Rhetorical Questions, and Answers*. I know this is a totally way out metaphor, but what if I was trying to sell sleep to myself? What is the defining characteristic of sleep? What is the hot button? The steak sauce? The big rubdown?

Dreams. Bad or good, wet or dry, lucid or the opposite of lucid—dreams are the saleable quality. They're the bubbles in the Coca-Cola. Dreams are how you know that you are sleeping or have slept. But me, I can't tell the difference anymore between my dreams and the shadows writhing on my ceiling, slowly bleeding into daylight. Am I dreaming about shadows and ceilings? Or am I just not dreaming at all and, therefore, not sleeping?

And golly, am I tired of having to ask myself these questions. What would Craig, Marcy, and Phil think? I bet they'd have a real good laugh at poor tired Dave the philosopher and then Phil would launch right into his spot-on Confucius-says routine, but if they only knew just how much this was nagging at me—the not sleeping, or the maybe sleeping—and how exhausted I feel and how much coffee I have to drink just to stay up and how much productivity that costs me in trips to the bathroom alone even though caffeine also suppresses the appetite and so most days I can just work right through lunch. Pretty soon they'll be talking about Dave the insomniac and everybody knows that you can't spell insomniac without maniac. Next thing I know I'm getting called into Mr. Drueger's office to talk about my home life and maybe I should talk to someone. Good luck keeping that from spreading all over the office, especially with big mouth Tina handling the psychiatrist bills at the benefits desk. Might as well kiss that promotion good-bye.

Now I really can't breathe.

I tiptoe out of the bedroom and downstairs into the kitchen where I fix myself a glass of warm milk even though it never puts me to sleep and tastes pretty gross to boot. At first, staring out the kitchen window, I don't even notice him. His skeleton face hovers out there—grinning at me with all his teeth, the two howling abysses that serve as his eyes flickering bemusedly in my direction. His billowing cloak of unearthly material culled from the nether regions of the shadowzone dances in the wind, the Bonesword slung over his shoulder glinting lethally in the moonlight. When I do finally pick him out of the darkness it is too late; Skull King the Crusader is already phasing into my kitchen.

"Hey buddy," he says as he settles his armored bulk before the breakfast nook. "Tough day?"

“Yeah,” I say, feigning a yawn. “I was just about to turn in.”

The Bonesword glows an unholy azure as it detects my lie. Skull King the Crusader fixes me with an impatient look.

“Come on, Dave,” he says. “Don’t bullshit with me.”

He pats the spot next to him at the nook, his gauntlet loudly clanging against the marble.

“Hey, hey,” I start. “You’ll scratch it.”

“Sorry.”

I sit down next to him and let me tell you, I am feeling really inadequate. I find it hard to believe that I once did battle with Skull King the Crusader over the mouth of an active volcano or, for that matter, at the nexus of time. Hard to believe that we once formed an uneasy alliance to fight off the invading Ron-Demons. And a lot of good any of that did either of us anyway. Interdimensional Combat didn’t even make Dan Dawkins’ top 100 Resume Busters. Heck, suddenly I’m not feeling so darn inadequate. I mean, me, I’ve moved on. And here’s Skull King the Crusader still acting all theatrical, still up prowling at all hours of the night. He doesn’t know what real work is.

“So,” I say, “to what do I owe the pleasure?”

I bet he can sense it—the cool, brusque aloofness in my voice, the kind of tone I can imagine myself using with a subordinate. I bet Skull King the Crusader can sense it and he realizes that carrying around an enchanted broadsword is no way to get ahead because he seems to deflate a little right there in my kitchen.

“I’ve been thinking,” he begins slowly, “about the trees.”

“What trees?”

“If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?”

I snort.

“Of course.”

“You can’t possibly know that.”

“Look,” I tell him. “You could set up a camera or a microphone or something. And then when you ran back the tape—”

“Okay. Okay, you’re right. But what if a tree fell in the forest and no one was around to hear it and there wasn’t anything around to record it?”

“There are satellites—”

“God dammit, Dave,” he pounds his gauntlet on the counter, rattling the fruit bowl. His hollow eyes spark with coldfire. “Just forget it, all right?”

“Just trying to play devil’s advocate,” I tell him while shrugging innocently and feeling guilty. Even though there’s no shame in putting the tough questions to your colleagues, I realize that maybe this was one of those times where my deductive reasoning should have taken a backseat to my earnest listening skills. I mean, here’s poor Skull King the Crusader trying to have a moment, really trying to work something out, and I’m inhibiting him. If only I wasn’t so tired and out of it, maybe I’d have picked up on the need in my old nemesis’ voice but that’s gone now, he’s already drawn himself back into his cloak of shadows, staring churlishly into the distance.

“So,” I begin, “you’re feeling like a tree. Like no one listens to you.”

“I heard about Flob-O,” he says. “And Rhino dead too. The Pygmies dropping like flies.”

I don’t know what to say. How does he know about Flob-O?

“How long do the rest of us have before we end up like them?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“We’re the trees, Dave.”

“Huh?”

“If a tree falls and nobody thinks about it, does the forest stop existing?”

“Have you been drinking?”

“You’re killing us.”

“Look, it’s getting sorta late here.”

“What about Astrogirl?”

“What about her?”

Skull King the Crusader is glaring at me now and the Bonesword is glowing madly, so bright that outside the neighbor’s dog starts to howl, so bright that it hurts to keep my eyes open.

Dan Dawkins says that the cubicle is a womb and that after the three “try-mesters” we’ll all be birthed into prosperity.

Dan Dawkins says that a practical man never stifles his creativity, but that a creative man always stifles his practicality.

Dan Dawkins hates the term “grind.”

Dan Dawkins says that realists never have to give up on their dreams.

Dan Dawkins is the author of twelve books and the CEO of the hugely successful DotCom.Com. He is widely credited with inventing such concepts as Hawaiian-Shirt Day and Take Your Daughter to Work Day. He lives in Seattle with his wife and two children.

*

My eyes snap open when Craig loudly clears his throat and, startled, I nearly spill my second cup of now lukewarm coffee all over my lap. He's leaning at the entrance of my cubicle, smirking.

"Resting your eyes, captain?" he asks.

"No," I snap, annoyed at my uncertainty. Was I? Did I blink or doze off?

He shakes his head, laughing.

"Christ," he says. "I don't know if I'd make it through the day here without a catnap. But, shit man, don't do it out here. Drueger spots you and you're toast. I usually catch a few with my buddy John."

"John?"

"Yeah, John. All the coffee you drink, I'd think you'd have met."

I stare at him.

"I sleep on the toilet," he says.

"Oh." I nod. "That's clever."

Craig squints at the stack of expense reports that I had been working on. Then he squints harder and next thing I know he's leaning over my shoulder.

"Who's this little guy?"

It takes me a minute to focus on what he's talking about, on the curls and loops and bubbles that I've drawn all over my expense reports. Though I don't remember doing it, there he is, Flob-O, in all his corpulent gelatinous glory. He capers stupidly across the top of the page, dancing and jiving and then, suddenly plummeting off an unseen cliff only to bounce safely on his expansive rear, rebounding off the footer and landing safely in Column C where he wipes off a single bead of sweat and then resumes his dancing. I never thought I'd see Flob-O again, not after his suicide and subsequent evaporation, but here he is, drawn by my hand, ruining my work.

"I had no idea you could draw," Craig is saying.

"I didn't—I mean, I must've done it when I was sleeping. I guess."

"Wow. You sleep-draw?"

I shrug.

"Well, he's pretty funny."

"That's Flob-O," I say, sounding maybe a little incredulous. "You don't remember? He used to work here."

"I think I'd remember if we had like some fucking gumdrop man working here, weirdo."

He looks over the drawings for a moment longer as I feel increasingly uncomfortable, wondering if Craig will report me or just start telling people that I draw in

my sleep which, you know, I'm not even sure if I really do or not. But then Craig sighs and pats me on the back.

"You should've been a cartoonist," he says.

I shake my head. "I've got to redo these," I reply, crumpling up the reports.

"You know, I used to play a little guitar."

"I didn't know that," I tell him.

"Yep," he says, and then we're quiet.

"I got the promotion," I say as I close the door behind me, beaming at Astrogirl. Leaning against the counter while eating potato chips out of the bag, she is still dressed in the baggy cardigan sweater and khaki pants that she wore to work today. Her nametag says 'Carrie'.

"That's awesome," and she rushes over to kiss me. Her mouth tastes like salt and vinegar.

That night we celebrate with a box of wine in front of the television, laughing like crazy at that Charlie Sheen show, you know the one. I try to remember this great line about men and their lawnmowers, but I can't get the phrasing down and anyway, I'm sure Phil will have it locked and loaded for tomorrow, cracking people up in the break room. He's so great at stuff like that.

Carrie can't stop talking about how with my promotion we can move into a bigger apartment and she even drops some hints about me being able to realistically save for an engagement ring. Finally make an honest woman out of her—wink wink.

After the local news we retire to the bedroom for some promotion sex, but it's late and neither one of us can stop yawning. We're just yawning right into each others faces while I hump her until that dissolves into exhausted sighing laughter. So I roll off her and we say goodnight.

And then I'm at Hopecon, in the human resources department, filling out the forms for their highly competitive and super flexible retirement plan. There's a guy from HR interviewing me, asking me health questions, except that it's not any of the usual people I've dealt with down in HR—it's Skull King the Crusader. His salmon colored Izod polo and wrinkle-free slacks strain at the seams, pulled as they are over his suit of armor. Skull King runs me through all the basic questions on the LF-10 form and I answer mechanically, trying to figure out just what the heck he's doing here, crammed into that dorky outfit, the Bonesword's deadly glow reflecting dully off the soul-sucking taupe of this non-threatening, windowless, pointless little box

of an office. What is he doing here, Skull King, larger than life and stuck in this little pen, filling out forms like some automaton? Why him? I wish it wasn't so.

"Well, Dave, we're almost set here. Just one last thing. We here at Hopecon, we realize that this might not have been your first choice. So, in no more than thirty words, what did you really want to do with your life?"

"What?" I say, this question throwing me. I lean across the desk. "That's not really on the form."

"Sure it is," Skull King replies, but he shields the form with his body. "It's in the Ambition and Wasted Potential section."

"Let me see."

He shields the form with a spiked obsidian gauntlet.

"Just think about it, okay Dave?" There is a note of alarm in Skull King the Crusader's voice. "But hurry up."

I try to remember, thinking back to college. Before that. I try to remember what I used to tell people when they asked what I wanted to be when I grew up. I try to remember what I'm good at, but the memories are murky, faded, and then it's too late because the ceiling of the office rips open and blinding light fills the room. In the distance, the sound of trumpets.

"You don't have to answer him," a booming voice calls down. Dan Dawkins descends from the ceiling, the heavenly light radiating from his body. He is wearing a sports coat and jeans. His hair is slicked back, his beard is perfect. He looks just like the picture on his book jacket.

Dan Dawkins grabs me by the shoulders. "There are childhood aspirations and grown up perspirations, Dave. Part of growing up is learning how to sweat."

"That's from your book," I mumble.

He shakes me. "Don't you answer his question, Dave! The hungry are always successful, but are the successful always hungry?"

Skull King shoots to his feet, shattering the desk with one mighty blow of his gauntlet.

"What does that mean?" asks Skull King. "What does that even mean? Speak like a person you fucking hack fraud."

"It's from my book," growls Dawkins. "*Are You a Winner: Or Is Your Wallet Getting Thinner?* Best-seller."

"You've accomplished nothing," Skull King bellows, his fury shaking the walls of the office. "Your books are ghost written by fortune cookies."

I feel very cold and that's when I realize it's because Dan Dawkins created a vacuum into space when he blew that hole in the ceiling. My breath mists in front of me and I can feel myself being pulled into the abyss. The sweat on my forehead freezes my eyebrows.

"Negativity is a cancer," Dawkins shouts as he teleports behind Skull King. "And proactivity is a skilled surgeon."

Maybe it is the business casual attire that slows down Skull King, because he doesn't even bother to turn when Dawkins snatches the Bonesword from its scabbard. Or maybe he is too busy staring at me, trying to impart some last bit of wisdom. But whatever lesson he has for me, I don't grasp it. It takes too long to learn, it doesn't rhyme, it isn't easy to memorize and, frankly, I'm too concerned with the vacuum of space.

Dan Dawkins lops off Skull King's head. Bone fragments and coldfire hiss against my face and ears. As Skull King decomposes into the carpet at an accelerated rate, Dan Dawkins hurls the Bonesword into space. All the while, he stares at me.

"The only capital punishment I know," he says, "is the lack of a progressive benefits package." Then, he glances at his watch.

I awake with a start. I must have been twitching like crazy, or moaning, because Carrie is propped up on her elbow next to me, her fingers working through the sweaty knots in my hair.

"What's wrong?" she whispers.

"A nightmare," I pant, my mouth dry.

"Oh baby," she nuzzles her face into my neck. "Forget it. They're only dreams."