

LOOP

DREAM FICTION



41,056 words (2,442-word excerpt)

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All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream.

~ Edgar Allan Poe

In everyone's life, there is a great need for an anamāra, a soul friend.

~ John O'Donohue, A namāra

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LOOPNotice**

My buddy Carl and I slip by my old digs one evening during Labor Day weekend. I lived here a long time, almost eight years, so the place still feels like mine. Forgot to move a few odds and ends on my last trip out, but my landlord likes to chain and padlock the ranch gate and doesn't answer my phone calls. Tom Tucker may be from a pioneer family whose name graces two towns and some roads on maps around here, but anyone can unbolt his gate and lift it off the hinges. I decide to grab my stuff and put the gate back together later, no one the wiser.

We disassemble the gate hinges with a vise grip and monkey wrench, and drive onto the property.

"What the hell," Carl says.

"Sheez," I say, looking around. A quarter of the one-acre property is covered in gravestones. Mostly in front of the sagging trailer, but a few jut up in the back yard, too, scattered at random. They all tilt sadly like they're marking eternal time. "I guess someone's moving graves."

"A whole fuckin' graveyard," Carl says.

I reach for the door handle.

Carl makes no move to get outta his truck. He settles back in the driver's seat and surveys the scenery.

I begin to fuss and fume about the situation. Just like that damn Tucker to mail me a thirty-day notice rather than drop by. Before I'm even outta the stinkin' trailer, he begins to

develop the property. Dust and commotion, backhoes and graders, surveying and trenching for new plumbing and electrical. Besides Tucker's plan to remove the trailer and replace it with some goofy modular house, a big multistory building abandoned by some bankrupt developer now sits nearby like a crusting scab. Pity, 'cause the area's always been scenic and rural. This abandoned hulk pisses off folks in the neighborhood because the economy stinks and the corporation didn't hire any local construction workers like they promised. I went to Town Hall last night to check out all the commotion. Windy Valley Town Council meetings are hot entertainment with irate accusations lobbed back and forth between townies and county residents . . .

Oh, well. I shrug, get outta the truck, unlock the back door, and go inside. Carl follows. Not hard to notice the velvet-lined trays of sparkling jewelry spread all over the room – across the matted carpet, mangy sofa and reclining chair, and the mangled coffee and lamp tables. The 1970s furniture, shag carpet and wood panelling still look decrepit despite all my scrubbing. I notice my diamond ear studs (Costco, not Zales) sitting in a little ceramic dish on the bar cum breakfast nook. I don't know whose dish, isn't mine. I remember leaving the studs on the saggy bathroom counter when I packed the towels and shower stuff on my last trip out.

I pick the studs up and put 'em in my pocket. Then my attention zaps toward a black box on the chrome and glass kitchen table. It has disk drives like a computer tower, each with a start button and a little red light.

"Hey, look at this," I say.

Carl watches me with his hands in his pockets. "You're not going to touch it, are you?"

"Why? I'm not harming it."

"You might start something you don't wanna finish."

“Wise man.” I press one of the buttons anyway. The machine simultaneously plays a recording and ejects cards with printed info. Information about Tucker and his business partner, a brother or a brother-in-law. Probably his wife’s brother, who I met one time when they picked up stuff from the storage shed. Blond with a pig nose like Tucker’s wife, Tucker-in-law seems a lot smarter than Tucker.

“In 1970, informant X reports contact . . .” Carl listens to the bland, computerized voice and twitches his mouth. The card in my hand reads like an FBI or law enforcement report. Name, date of birth, current and previous addresses, occupations, aliases, and arrest record.

Now the recording goes into some short sound bytes, a documentary report. It seems to indicate that Tucker and his brother-in-law are both criminals and informants.

“Did you hear that? Those two helped track Angela Davis down in the ‘70s! Shit, there’s something about Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez, too.”

“Doesn’t surprise me. Dude’s a major bigot. Trump supporter, no doubt.” Carl’s always on the alert for his brand of political incorrectness.

“Why do they have this machine?”

Carl looks dourly at the door. “Let’s get out of here, Victor.”

Ever the ex-Marine, he’s probably right. But my eye wanders back to the jewelry. The word T-E-M-P-T-A-T-I-O-N scrolls up in the air in big red, arching letters that I swoosh my hand through. These dissolve like smoke. I pick up a particularly sexy piece, what I call a movie star necklace. T-E-M-P-T-A-T-I-O-N spells itself out in front of me again, the letters blinking on one at a time like some Indian casino marquee. I hold the necklace up between the word and my face. The clear and amber-colored gems wink and sparkle even in the waning light.

“This shit looks real.” Stolen property, I bet. Tucker and Tucker-in-law seem to be working both sides of the law-enforcement equation. “Hell, this’ll boost my bank account,

then.” I shove the necklace down deep into my jeans pocket. I think the temptation sign will come back but it doesn’t.

Carl’s face doesn’t change much. Knowing him, he disapproves but he’s not into confrontation.

We stroll outside past the gravestones and get into his truck all nonchalant, cool as drool. Outta the corner of my eye, the gravestones jerk in the other direction and lean again.

Carl pulls his baseball cap off his smashed-up ponytail and doffs it as we roll through the gate. “What are you going to do with it?”

Patting my pocket to feel the sharp edges of the stones and settings, I look at Carl and shrug. “I dunno. We’ll see.”

Dilemma

Gavin scans the mystery paperback and places it to one side of the public library circulation desk. I finger the necklace in my pocket like some damn talisman while he picks up another book.

“Hey, Vic. We’re baptizing our son on Saturday afternoon,” he says. “The big Presbyterian church in downtown Tuckerville.”

“Wow . . . that’s the same day as my cousin Roberto’s wedding. Sorry, Gav.”

“Yeah, well, been a while. Hoping you could come. Maybe you heard. I got Mary Faith pregnant,” he says in the matter-of-fact way he always talks at his job. “Married her.”

“I did hear something about a rugrat a while back,” I say.

He grabs a big coffee table art book, scans the barcode under the red laser line, and starts a new pile. “We’re not very close, really, but she decides she wants to have the kid AND that we should raise him together . . . he’s pretty neat, though the situation’s awkward as hell. We thought about raising him just as friends, but we didn’t want him getting any weird ideas about families and whatnot . . .” Gavin continues to pick up books from his left, scanning the bar codes and piling them to his right. He blushes, knowing I’d think about his age. Probably he has grandkids from his first marriage.

“Listen, I’ll try to make the baptism and arrive late at the wedding,” I say. “Sometimes they’re hurry up and wait affairs, anyway. Brides are always messing with their makeup and what not.” I glance backward at the patrons fidgeting behind me. “Best wishes!” I say as I push through the outside doors, thinking about the churches’ locations relative to one another.

On the wedding and baptism day, I shine my black shoes, dress in my only suit, and wander down the street to do a quick straightening-up at Roberto and Terri's so they can honeymoon and come home to a tidy house. Like my bachelor cleaning is any better than his. Why doesn't Terri get one of her finicky friends to clean? Anyway, I putter around for a half-hour, picking up stray socks, abandoned undergarments, and newspapers, closing closet and bureau drawers that look like they're ready to fly away.

Just fifteen minutes before the church bells toll, another guy saunters in. I'm picking up debris in a hallway with a clear view of the living room and foyer, but he can't see me. I think I recognize his blue trousers and rodeo belt buckle. He removes his cowboy hat and looks around the living room, perplexed.

Roberto suddenly jams through the kitchen, as jovial as a bridegroom gets. I forget about the guy standing in the foyer. "Looking for a bride?" I call from the hallway. He doesn't hear me.

Robo's best man and Terri's maid of honor stride through the kitchen door. Then Robo's fiancée Terri follows in a slinky olive-colored velour gown and gloves, with matching hat and bejeweled earrings. If she had a red bouquet, she'd look like one of those relish tray olives stuffed with a pimento even though she's as tall as Robo, over six feet in high heels. Another bridesmaid follows behind in an amber cocktail dress that matches the maid of honor's dress, only one girl is stick skinny and the other marshmallow chubby. The men's quiet business suits make the women look overdressed, like they're wearing their party duds to an office.

Everyone lines up at the far end of the living room, opposite the hallway. Maybe the man with the perplexed look is the minister. But the wedding is supposed to take place in St. Catherine's Cathedral in downtown Tuckerville, near Gavin's Presbyterian church. Why is the wedding party here, and where are the other guests? As I contemplate this, the wedding

party breaks into a song whose words and tune sound popular, but I'm not sure where I've heard it before. I s'pose you could call it rock opera, because the wedding party behaves like a group of actors in a stage musical, twirling around and singing at the top of their lungs. The song details how Robo and Terri met, how it's the second marriage for each, poor souls, which probably explains the women's weird wedding apparel.

Another groomsman enters, this time through the front door, and the man in the doorway finally comes forward. Indeed, now I can see that he's donned the short robe of a cleric over his blue trousers and rodeo belt buckle. He opens a slim prayer book and begins to sing. "Do you, Roberto, take this woman, Terri?"

"To have and to hold, to have and to hold," the wedding party sings with a twenty-first-century bump and grind.

The happy couple mailed engraved invitations last month, the kind you send with an RSVP card for dozens of guests. Is this some kind of joke? If it's the real deal, why's there just a wedding party and me? Where's all the doting parents and grandparents and aunts? Mexican weddings and receptions are huge affairs with kissing cousins and cousins twice removed. Maybe I mixed up the wedding and the reception. That's probably it. They're having a big reception downtown at the cathedral. But I planned to go the baptism first. I don't wanna let Gavin down. Should I leave now or go after the vows?

For a moment, my questions hang between the music and me in the form of big purplish question marks. I watch as the Terri sings "I do, I do, I doo-oo," and blows me a kiss, which makes the images and question marks fade away. Maybe I'm caught in some fever dream, but even when life has this weird edge, it's mostly routine.

Never mind, Gav, I think, and return my attention to the promise of that kiss. I finger the necklace, which I've carried around in my pocket since I picked it up. It's truly Terri's

style and even matches her gown. Glowing light bulbs replace the hovering question marks.

Give the damn thing away – a perfect wedding gift.

Genius

That necklace must be worth a mint because someone – Tucker and Tucker-in-law – are sure interested in retrieving it. My voicemail is on twenty-four seven now that the phone rings a hundred times a day. At least Tucker has something to play with. I could just disconnect the landline; after all, I use my cell phone for almost everything. But what might happen then?

Doesn't Tucker deserve his loss? Not because he made me move, but because it shows him someone's onto his little ideological schemes. Glad I didn't try to profit from his crap, though. It's nice the necklace made a pretty lady happy on her wedding day.

The phone starts ringing again. I could just pull the cord, but then the voicemail won't take the calls on this old DSL phone. Maybe I should change to wifi calling. That'll kick in even if I unhook the phone. Duh. Better yet, why don't I just turn off the ringer? I look, but all it lets me do is reduce the volume to an audible twang. Suddenly I see Carl's number on the caller ID. I grab the receiver. "Hey," I say.

"Movie?" he asks. Carl's a big film fan.

"Sure, why not? Beats sitting here with this phone ringing off the hook. Pick you up?"

"Nah, meet me inside. Don't need to be seen with you," Carl says, grumpy as usual.

"New 3-D?"

"Sure. No problem. Seven?"

"Uh huh."

Carl ends the call by hanging up without saying good-bye, his usual. But I have something to show him. An old Hopi kilt, something Gavin acquired when trading for his dad's Indian jewelry store in Sedona. I go to the bedroom and pull it outta the tissue paper. . .