

The Dream of Elyas

I woke up this morning with a dream that, because I was struggling not to sink in an infinite body of water, I associated with one I had years ago when I was a teenager. I remember I was fifteen because it was at the beginning my sophomore year, a few months after I had met Elyas. I didn't understand that dream when I woke up that morning years ago, but as the day went on, it started to make sense. Like the one I had this morning, in the past dream, I was struggling to float in a body of water, vast as the Atlantic Ocean, that stretched far behind me into the darkness of night, its waves like little white bouncing slivers illuminated by the moonlight against the blackness of its water. Stars dotted the sky. Unlike the dream I had this morning, the water didn't reach infinitely all around me, but rather started at Elyas' patio, on which he stood next to our friend Finn and a man I didn't recognize upon waking.

The man was telling me about a beautiful fish, big as a dolphin, which would be coming my way soon. I was nervous, and when it came out from the moat surrounding Elyas' house and I noticed its greenish scales peeking out of the water, I treaded water as fast as I could, attempting to lift myself out. Finn and the stranger told me to relax, and expressed astonishment at the fish's beauty, both to calm me down and out of genuine emotion. When I tried to relax, though, I felt as if I was sinking and couldn't bear the idea of being vulnerable to an attack from the beast that was circling me. The stranger told me that she was the most beautiful creature, but I couldn't

imagine it as anything other than a giant catfish. As soon as I thought that, the face flashed before me, the face and neck of a scrawny, mousey girl attached to the underside of the fish.

I woke up from the dream with the fish before my alarm sounded and opened my eyes as soon as I recognized I was conscious. I tried to fall back into the dream, to no avail. There were parts I was missing from before, like how I got there, or what else we were doing. I tried hard to remember the rest of it, but kept getting interrupted with memories and other conscious thoughts. I thought, for example, about the way Elyas looked in the dream. He was tall, as tall as he was when I saw him on the first day of school in late August when he came back from vacation with his family. It had only been a month since I had last seen him, but things were different. Since I had first met him in May, every week I saw more of him, until by the end of June I was seeing him every day for the music festival, and even spending nights with him and his cousins, in July when they were visiting from France. In August, I went to Spain with my family, and he went to the north to his beach house. I would look across the Mediterranean to see the skyline of Morocco, and think of him spending time with his friends there. One of them was Dania from our school, in his class, one year below mine.

Years have passed and the distance has grown between my feelings at the time and my feelings now, so thinking of Dania is familiar but doesn't elicit any sort of chemical reaction. I went through a period of numbness before my feelings over her disappeared, but before the numbness, before the tears, before the anger, I first felt disgust. Disgust for her at the time; at least, that's who I attributed it to. I knew about her from talking to Elyas through the messages we sent each other when we were apart, but it wasn't real until that moment I saw her playing with his hair during morning break on our first day back. It was a punch to the stomach, or that's what I would have liked it to be, so at least I could have had a better reason to suffer. I wanted to

vomit at the way he let her touch him like that, so unashamed of that sappy pre-teen behavior, when I always tried so hard to respect our physical boundaries.

I wanted so much to walk away, to look him significantly in the eyes as I walked and make him understand, but I knew he wouldn't understand; he was stupid and would just be confused as to why I didn't say hello after what felt like months of being apart. I decided instead to show my feelings through interacting directly with them. Especially her.

I forced a smile and dived for a hug – he was sitting – thereby pushing her, as she was standing behind him. He was glad to see me but seemed surprised at the forcefulness of the hug. I held him for as long as I could before it got weird. I raised my eyebrows at Dania and her friend, and then I hugged Finn, who was sitting with them, then said hi to whoever else was there.

I didn't want to descend into boring conversation so I asked them if they wanted to play cards like we used to. Cards are commonly played during Ramadan, and since we met at a “*four* party” during Ramadan, where we all broke the fast together at Soraya's house and hung out afterwards, we met playing cards. I had started helping Finn out because he was new to the Moroccan card games that Elyas and some other kids were playing; Finn was an international student from Canada. Then we started doing it at school during some break and lunch times.

So we played a round of Touti, the Moroccan version of the Spanish game Tute (like the French Belote); since Elyas was sitting next to me, I played against him and with the kid across from me. Without making it obvious, I purposely didn't include Dania, not accounting for the possibility that she might help Elyas, which she of course did. Not that she helped him much; she mostly rested her head on his shoulder. Break ended before we were done, but nobody felt like playing at lunch, so we just hung out together, without Dania.

Two days later, on Wednesday, I woke up from the dream of the fish. I had swimming class first thing in the morning. When I closed my eyes in the water, I saw the dream before me. With my eyes still closed, I tried to imagine that it was dark all around me and I was swimming in the ocean behind Elyas' patio, hoping it would bring back some other memory of the dream, but it was lost. The sound of the other swimmers and brightness of the day light were interrupting my consciousness.

The locker room smelled of chlorine and was echoing with girls' voices. I went into the first section of the room where my stuff was and on my way to the shower saw a few girls I knew but didn't like, laughing and spraying water on each other in the other section of the room. This area was where the "Moroccan" girls always changed, these being the Moroccan girls who knew each other and had been at the school since they were little, as well as an Emirati girl and a Spanish girl who were friends with them.

There was one other Moroccan girl in our class, Soraya, who was also Italian and who had only started attending the year before. She used to hang out with the two Moroccan girls who were laughing, but those two had gotten a lot closer over the summer and Soraya couldn't stand being around them anymore. And then there was me, another Moroccan girl who got along better with the "Americans" because I started attending later than the others. Internationals at school were called "Americans" by the Moroccans who'd been there since their youngest years, because the dominant international citizenship at the school was American. In reality, in our class, there were three American girls, and three girls from other countries.

It now seems to me that the Moroccans in our class must have felt that new students threatened the status quo of the tight-knit environment they grew up in, and felt more comfortable sticking with the people they knew. But the way I looked at it, they had a superiority

complex and didn't bother getting to know people who weren't immediately interesting to them, such as me. It wasn't so much that they wrote me off, it was more that I never wanted to make the effort to impress them once I realized I would have to. But someone like Soraya, who was new the year before and was open to meeting other new people, wasn't so prejudiced – she was someone I was interested in getting to know. The internationals were cool but they could get cliquish too.

As we were leaving the locker rooms, Soraya asked me if I was going to Elyas' after school, because she would be going there. She and Elyas knew each other because she had hosted a lot of parties last year and liked to hang out with the younger kids. I did too. The sun was out by then and I felt its warm rays on my fresh skin. Yes, I would go to his house, and it was going to be a good day. What I didn't foresee was that Dania would also be invited.

I've gone over this story so many times, I almost forget the details of it because with time, I've reduced it to the main events. It wasn't the first time I had felt rejected, but it was one of more significant times.

I was in a good mood after school, knowing I was going to hang out with my friends who I hadn't had a full chance of catching up with, and going back to Elyas' house for the first time since the summer vacation ended. When Soraya and I got to the front gate after class, Elyas, Finn, three of our other friends, as well as Dania, were standing together. I was putting it together that she was coming with us when Soraya said, "Ugh, why does she have to be here?" I was a mess, my heart was beating, I think I even started sweating or at least feeling hot. When we were getting ready to leave, I almost didn't want to get into the car that Elyas and Dania would be in, so I could remove myself from my feelings of disgust, but I also couldn't bear the

idea of not being able to keep an eye on them. It was an ugly side of me that I didn't even try to control in the moment.

We were all standing around the pool and Elyas was talking to Dania, when something overtook me and I shouted "party! Woo!" and pushed Elyas and myself into the water. Those few seconds that we were submerged was the first time we were alone since July. If we had been completely alone, I might have tried to kiss him. Some unusual energy was inside of me; I felt like I could do anything. That feeling quickly disappeared as soon as we got out to breathe, when Elyas yelled "my phone!"

He frantically got out; I hesitated as I tried to process what had happened, or maybe tried to keep my chill. "Don't worry," I said, "I've done this before-- we need some rice and a vacuum cleaner." I got out as quickly as I could. Everyone looked concerned. "Don't worry, I'll take care of it." I tried to give off an air of control and chill, but inside, I was losing it. My thoughts were on a loop, trying to analyze what had taken me over, or that I should have thought about his phone, but I forgot because my own phone was safe in my bag, and that it was so stupid for me to shout "party" because it didn't actually mean anything, and now I had turned into the opposite of a party. But I was more concerned with mending the mess I'd created.

His maid Khalida gave me a bowl of rice and the vacuum cleaner; I vacuumed the battery and wiped it off before putting it in the rice and vacuuming the inside of the phone. Elyas brought me a towel, and as he towered over me, I said I was really so sorry, and that I was stupid, I should have thought of his phone... He said it was fine, that he knew I didn't mean it. He was too nice, I honestly didn't deserve him, I thought. He hadn't even changed before coming to give me the towel.

"Are you going to change?" I asked.

“Well, yeah,” he teased, “I’ll leave some clothes for you in my room if that’s what you’re asking.”

I felt stupid for asking.

“Really? I mean, thanks. You don’t have a bra, do you?”

“Um... my sister might have one.”

“I’m joking? We’re probably not even the same size.”

“Uh... I don’t want to think about that,” he smiled, uncomfortably, and then went back to his room.

That hurt; I knew he probably meant because it’s his sister, but I couldn’t help but think if he meant because it was me, too.

After a solid twenty minutes of vacuuming (I wanted to be thorough), wondering what the others were doing, thinking how perfect it must be for Dania to have gotten me out of the picture, and listening to Khalida tell me I should go change or I’d get sick, I finally got up to go to Elyas’ room.

It was quiet, save for the distant voices of people laughing and splashing in the pool. He had laid out clothes for me on his bed – a big t-shirt and sports shorts that I had worn one night when his cousins were here and I decided to spend the night at the last minute. I closed the door and took my clothes off before walking on the carpet so as not to drip on it. It felt strange being naked in his room, where he could walk in at any moment. It was nerve-wracking and exciting at the same time, though I wouldn’t admit the excitement to myself. I put the clothes on and laid my head down a while, just looking at the ceiling and thinking how that was the same view he looked at every night.

In a flash I saw a different part of my dream I thought was lost. Being on the bed had reminded me. Right before being in the ocean with the creature, I was flying in the sunshine over a turquoise bay holding Elyas' hand. I held onto the pillow, wishing I could be in the dream again. I remembered the time he tried to hold my hand under water, that night we swam in the Atlantic with his cousins. His fingers had grazed mine, but I started using my hands to keep myself afloat, for absolutely no necessary reason.

Outside, everyone was swimming except Soraya who had her feet in the water. She was waiting for me, so she got up really fast and handed me my swimming bag so that we could go change into our suits. It was like she was ushering me away from everyone, like she didn't want me to see anything. I got her to tell me that Elyas and Dania were being very physical. Instead of being mad or disgusted, I felt embarrassed for having been so crude by pushing him in the pool, and stupid for missing out on what was happening.

Soraya tried to comfort me. "You know he'll realize that he likes you once you're gone. They all do that. They'll be with another girl, and you just have to stop caring about them for them to come right back."

I trusted she was right because she had experience with these things.

"Guys in Italy used to do that all the time."

At the far end of the pool, Dania was sitting on the ledge in a tiny bikini while I was wearing my sporty one-piece that I had with me from swimming class this morning. Elyas was in the water, his arms on the ledge right by Dania's thighs. Everyone else was throwing a ball around, so we joined them. Whenever the ball came my way, I would spike it into the water. Within a few minutes, Elyas and Dania joined us. They didn't know what they were in for. I played all the

more aggressively, almost hitting Elyas' face one time when I hit the ball instead of letting him do it.

At the end of the afternoon, when people were leaving, I told Soraya that she didn't need to wait, that I'd get a ride with my parents. When Elyas and I were alone in his room, there was a bit of a silence. "So..." he said.

"You should leave your phone in the rice for the rest of the night."

"Okay?" He looked at me. "I know. Do you want to play video games?"

"No," I said.

I felt him still looking at me. I could tell he was confused but I wanted him to read me, to understand, just by thinking about it. I looked at the black screen of his TV.

He got on his computer.

After a while of typing, I asked him if he was talking to Dania again.

"Yeah, but not only," he said, not looking up.

"Are you going to talk to her all day?"

"Why do you care? Anyway, you don't even want to talk."

"I don't care. You can do whatever you want. You just seem ridiculous, that's all."

"Well, fuck you." He didn't look up from the screen.

"Wow, okay. Really?"

"Really to you, you're the one acting weird,"

"You're the one who's weird for even liking Dania, when you know she's always been a bitch to everyone, and she's slutty, too."

"She never did anything to you."

“If you don’t believe me you can ask any of the guys in my class-- she used to hook up with some of them in the bathroom next to the cafeteria.”

He took a while to answer me.

“You’re just jealous,” he said.

I scoffed at this. “Jealous of what? If I wanted to be slutty, I could, but why would I want that?”

“I know why you’re jealous.” He looked up at me from behind his screen.

I felt like I went red when he said this. I didn’t know what to say so I just looked at the TV again. I cleared my throat. “Fine, let’s play video games.”

So we did, we played a round, and things smoothed out. I was being competitive, but we were laughing about it. At one point there was a lull in the game, and I turned around and looked at him. He could sense it, so he turned to look at me too. Then I kissed him before I realized what I was doing. And for a few seconds, he did kiss me back, right before he pulled his head away.

Facing the other way, he looked at me from the corner of his eye with his eyebrows furrowed, and scoffed.

I sat there in silent immobility. My head was spinning, I was treading water to stay afloat, to get myself out of the dark waters, away from the unknown beast.

He turned back to the game, I, but then he paused it.

“So you are jealous.”

I looked away, at the TV across from me, at the door, trying to come up with the right retort, with something witty, with something to prove him wrong. Neither of us could think of what to say. He just looked at me, waiting, and eventually I made eye contact – just long enough to say that I was going to leave.

After that, in the garden, I called my mom and got her to come get me, fought back some tears and convinced myself this interaction didn't matter, that there were better guys out there, that I didn't need to waste time with a guy who liked girls like that.

I didn't say bye to him when my mom got there. And the next few days at school I did my best to avoid him, and it worked, but the campus and school were so small that it was hard. I spent time with other people during breaks and lunch times. When I did cross him, we acknowledged each other with short glances and terse smiles. In fact we ran into each other often because, after all, I did get along with that group of friends better than others. The tension was there, until I made a move, because he never was going to. The story between us was only just beginning at that point, and it lasted through the rest of my years at school. It never really ended.

I have always had dreams about water. Sometimes I happily swim in the bright sunshine, other times I am lost at sea. The dream I had this morning could have been another one of those where I was anxious and lost, but because of the clear starry night and the dark waters of the Atlantic, I connected it to the dream of Elyas. I treaded water with the same speed and fear of sinking. Soon, in the dream, I realized the surrounding water and clear night sky were so peaceful that I stopped treading and let myself float. Because of the sensation of serenity that overtook me, I was able to gain lucidity and lift myself away from the unknown depths of the ocean and into the starry sky.