

Dream Girl

One morning, upon awakening from satisfying dreams, Mermot Higby slid his left index finger along the inner corner of his left eye and without much thinking about it—no, not at first—scooped free a miniscule dollop of crud. Higby reclined in the afterglow of his dreams. He thought about the enchanting female figure who had visited him this morning and perhaps all through the previous night, a sort of beneficent succubus, as he liked to imagine. It was only in his fruitless attempt to recreate the exact details of her face, to capture in his mind's eye his wispy notions of a surrounding hairdo that may or not have been wispy, that may or may not have flowed as if underwater, that before Higby's eyes there resolved an unexpected and inspiringly mundane image.

“The crud!” Higby exclaimed, sitting bolt upright suddenly. Likewise, his left index finger was bolt upright, and Higby studied it with a rapt empiricism, specifically the tip, where the small sandstone of his sleeping hours sat in the balance like a petrified potato. Higby was careful not to shake the adhesive nugget loose. He slid sideways from the bedcovers like a man whose hand was locked in the iron jaw of an invisible vice-clamp. Before he knew what he was doing, he descended to his knees beside the bed, the whole time maintaining the extended positioning of his hand. He sunk his head into the soft quilt and for the first time in his life uttered a devout prayer.

"Oh God, let me have this one thing," Higby pleaded, paranoid enough after years of isolation to believe that everyone knew what he was thinking, that God was no exception, that there was therefore little need to elaborate further on the exact nature of his desire. But Higby spoke his thoughts anyway. "Yes, the girl!" he wailed, clutching the quilt in his free hand, pointing righteously, almost blasphemously to the ceiling with the other. Higby remained in this position for an hour, intermittently crying. When his reverie ended he discovered in his eye sockets enough crusted matter to create the equivalent of a peanut when combined with the original deposit.

Higby rolled the resulting peanut between his forefinger and thumb with a satisfaction reminiscent of his dream, the exact details of which he could no longer remember. As Higby rolled the peanut between his fingers, so he rolled the dream inside his mind, turning it over and over again, but each time less certain of what the girl looked like, of whether he knew her or not, of whether or not he had dreamed her at all. It was up to the peanut to decide.

Higby rose from his knees and walked to the dresser. He put the peanut down on the dresser top as if majestically releasing a beetle. The peanut wobbled slightly before coming to rest. Higby mimicked this motion with his torso. He was pleased with himself. He did not recognize the feeling by its name, but the feeling was faith. Higby had it. He had faith in the peanut. He had faith in himself, in his mission. He pulled open the top drawer of the dresser, attending the action so completely as to accomplish it fluidly: the peanut

did not move. Higby pulled free his favorite pair of light blue dress socks, separated them in his hands, and for a short period waved them in the air like samurai swords. He galloped to the bed, brought home the samurai sock blades upon the comforter, repeated the assault, and finally sat calmly in the spot he had carved to put the socks on.

Once dressed, Higby picked up the peanut and dropped it lightly into his breast pocket. Should he carry it to work? The idea of the peanut beside his heart throughout the day made the grim prospect of his job at the bank a little less grim. But it also disturbed him with a series of “what if’s”. What if, for instance, the peanut fell out of the pocket somehow? What if the pocket absorbed or diminished it? What if his tyrannical boss became aware of the peanut and forced Higby to discard it or eat it? What if his boss had a peanut of his own—more like a prune, Higby thought—and he forced Higby to add to the peanut to the prune? The idea was revolting.

Higby decided to give the peanut a permanent home and carry it beside his heart in the figurative sense only. With the peanut in his breast pocket, Higby descended the steps to the basement and scoped a proper location. Between a low pile of cardboard boxes and a dilapidated sit-up board, he found an open space large enough to accommodate a nearby dusty glass top table. “Why have I never thought of moving that table there before?” Higby wondered, as if the omission were like forgetting one’s brain. He walked into the open space and turned around several times. “It’s perfect,” he said. Then he moved

the table into the space and dusted it off with his necktie, which he was wearing. While Higby dusted, the peanut slid free of his breast pocket and dropped directly to the center of the dust-free circle Higby was widening for it. It landed softly without bouncing or rolling, like putty.

This manner of landing impressed Higby. He did not see the peanut fall, but he heard the sound it made when it struck the glass, like a single understated note plucked from a harp. The music of it made Higby stop cleaning, look down. He saw the peanut on the tabletop and smiled lovingly. He slid beneath the table along the filthy basement floor and gazed upward at the peanut's slightly flattened underbelly, the sacrifice of its perfect obliquity for the sake of a more stable foundation. Yes, it was perfect indeed. It was only a matter of time, of commitment. He would build the woman from the toes up, using crud.

Higby slid out from beneath the table and rose to his feet. He dusted off the backs of his legs with his hands and beat against his tie like a rug. He dusted his legs again. He stroked his tie. He looked for odds and ends in need of attention around the basement. The washing machine was full of damp clothes. The dryer was full of dry clothes. The black construction paper over the small basement windows above the washer and dryer was peeling away at the corners of the panes, admitting light. Higby walked over to the dryer and examined the situation more closely. It would have to be fixed. Yes, fixed. It

required immediate attention. Higby would need to ascend the steps to the utility closet, gather suitable tapes and adhesives, perhaps change his clothes.

"I must spend the day in the basement," he suddenly announced. The words echoed within the musty chamber and returned to Higby repeatedly, provoking a mix of euphoria and horror. He could not spend the day in the basement. He had a job. He had expenses. He had.... He had.... Well, there are certainly expenses, he reasoned. But only by regarding the maintenance of his new basement platform and the fledgling project thereon as one of those innumerable expenses, in fact as the chief expense, was Higby able to tear himself away from the basement that morning at all. "I'm doing it for you," he explained in a tone of apology, addressing the peanut. "I must keep my routine, induce sleep, awaken with more of you in my eyes. It's for you," he repeated over his shoulder, guiltily ascending the stairs. At the top he closed the door behind himself and leaned back against it, his heart pounding.

That day at the bank was one of consternation for Mermot Higby. In everything he did he was highly distracted, uncertain amidst even his greatest attempts to concentrate whether he miscounted bills, miscalculated totals, mismanaged loans. It did not help at all that his fingers visibly shook, so that clients of the bank adopted distrustful attitudes towards him, in one case reporting him as suspicious to his branch manager, who responded to the complaint by hovering over Higby the rest of the morning. "Mermot, why so nervous?" the branch manager, a perspiring blowfish of a man named Cray,

hounded. "And why this dirt on your back?" The question was engrossing for Cray and he quickly fell into his usual manner of talking about Higby as if he weren't there. "Mermot comes in covered with dirt," Cray observed to himself, pacing. "He behaves nervously, carelessly. Or no! No! Not carelessly, but carefully to the extreme, much too carefully. He can't think, function." Cray talked his way forward, approaching a dazzling deductive conclusion, but stopped short. "Well?" he remarked.

"Sir?" Higby asked.

"Oh, stop fidgeting," Cray commanded in a huff, storming away.

"Yes, sir," Higby assented, his skeleton rattling. He could not understand.

The very same line of questioning that Cray was following perplexed Higby himself, only Higby carried it further. Should I not be relaxed instead of nervous? Where did my sense of purpose and peace disappear to? How many hours are left until I can go home, crawl into my bed, pull the covers over my head and shut out the world? It was there, in that notion. That's where the peace went, where the purpose was. In the soothing idea of pulling off one's clothes and descending into the depths of one's bed. Once the thought came, Higby could think of nothing else, and without really knowing what happened, in the middle of a complicated exchange of multiple foreign currencies, he fell deeply asleep.

That Higby's current customer did not rebuke this alteration of consciousness owes to the frequent graciousness of foreigners in an unfamiliar

land, always dipping their heads agreeably at solicited advice too colloquial to understand, smiling affably with wide uncomprehending eyes, accepting of any surprise because unable to distinguish surprise yet. Perhaps Higby's sudden narcolepsy was a business practice in this part of the world, a means of validating trust by shutting one's eyes to the heavy transaction going on and finishing it anyway. Besides, Higby's hands persisted in their actions despite their owner's absent mind--accurately. Higby drew in shekels, Swiss francs, deutschmarks, drachma, all the while sorting it, arranging it, crisping it, practically loving each and every bill, as if acting out the invisible drama of his reactivated dream life on a set of paper surrogates.

The customer was impressed, culturally gratified, put at ease. He began to draw from the deeper recesses of his wallet, pockets, travel belt, socks, all for the sake of prolonging the positive ritual taking place across the teller window. He passed Higby earmarked tourist maps on glossy paper, coins from all corners of the world, a thin gold neck chain with a crucifix, a baseball card, handwritten highway directions to Graceland, the only word in English on the page. All these items Higby stroked, rubbed, tenderly caressed, not infrequently cooing and making sounds comparable to a well-fed pigeon on a bright sunny day. Meanwhile, between these amorous gestures, Higby stiffened his left index finger, scraped along the left inside corner of his eye for any hint of developing crud, wiped the finger on the counter's far edge beside his own hip, payload or not, and finally, after a preliminary circling motion akin to a mid-air wind-up,

repeatedly stabbed the scraped finger into the keypad of a desktop calculator to produce complicated conversion commissions, which he deducted from the general flow of native currency going in the direction of the foreign customer.

In Higby's dreaming, these necessities of the business context became playful taunts, pokes at the soft supple flesh of his giggling, invitingly evasive lover. And Higby's stiff index finger was not the only thing poking. Every body part and real world sensation translated across the great divide of sleep into a gamut of possibilities. Skipping over the obvious, Higby was a matador, raising two tapered lances like fangs for the bull's trembling back. He was also a pole-vaulter, propelling himself to impossible heights over lonely, arrogant bars. He was a man in the rain, holding an umbrella aloft that branched out from his finger. He was carving endless, fresh "I love you's" in sparkling seaside sand as resplendent waves rolled over to lick up the words. But strangest of all, Higby was the number one in its purest, most pristine form. He was the essence of the pointing finger, the triumph and the unity. He was the clairvoyant ability to see all things as one, as one thing, as mistakenly separate through a false parsing caused by perception itself, and the girl cleansed that bad filter.

Then there was the girl herself. Was she Higby? Was she his feminine side, what psychologists might call his anima? Was he so far apart from that side of himself in his waking life that asleep he fell immediately in love with it? Or was the girl something larger, something so large in the humanized universe that falling in love with it is the only possible response to its presence? That is,

was the girl love itself, the embodiment of an archetype, what ancient Greeks might call Eros, what a gifted poet might disclose as his muse, what might headline a newspaper as "The Capital L"? It was impossible for Higby to say; nor was he especially analytical about the issue. On the contrary, what mattered to him was exclusively the feeling, the likelihood of restoring it whenever it vanished. Toward that end, he would think, but no further, not indulgently. He preferred to observe without mental note-taking: for instance, how the girl's hair was the color of light, perhaps blond, perhaps all colors at once; how her physical features completely transformed whenever she moved, and how the transformations themselves were the source of her movement; how her feet were made of earth, then sky, then the world around her became water; how she occasionally looked like his mother; how he himself changed in her presence so that he hardly knew who he was, didn't care, didn't have to. For Higby the residue of these dreams was that he had to know more, needed to find out what he was dealing with, what he was not dealing with, what the issues in his life were that invited this ghostly divinity and what her arrival portended. He needed to bring her down to earth, the motive informing his collection of the crud.

Higby awoke at 4:30 PM, the exact time for the bank tellers to balance their cash drawers and report any discrepancies. So automatic was this daily routine for Higby that he fell into line with it at once without first noticing it marked his return from his dreams. He pulled open his drawer, reaching forward for the leftmost stack of bills, the hundreds, looking at them like a zombie,

peeling their corners one after the next until the end of the handful. Higby proceeded to the fifties, the twenties, the tens, fives, ones. He tallied the coin rolls in the locker beneath his desk. He accounted for the foreign currency exchanges, vaguely aware of something strange about them, about one in particular, about the way it began but then total blankness about how it concluded. Apparently well. Higby rang up the daily total for his work, comparing it to the computer-generated balance expected of him. The two figures matched. Then it became too clear to deny: something was wrong. Or rather, something was not wrong, and that state of not wrongness was too not wrong not to be wrong.

The memories assailed Higby all at once. He was cringing from Cray, who rebuked him for behavior disturbing to the customers. He was wading through tedious conventional transactions one after another, a checking account deposit, a paycheck to cash, a balance inquiry followed by a monthly account statement. Foreign currency slid across the green marble counter top. Foreign currency... A strange mix of types.... Foreign currency.... And then I.... Fell asleep? Higby wondered, suddenly alarmed at the fate of his eye crud, which he remembered immediately. He scavenged his cash drawer savagely, raising the eyebrows of Cray, who stood up from his desk, on which his protruding abdomen sat like a perched watermelon.

"Something amiss?" he asked sternly.

"No sir, a perfect day," Higby replied, cutting short his investigation. It was fruitless. He knew it. His intuition told him he would not collect his eye crud in the cash drawer, which gets locked up at the exact close of the business day for the rest of the night, prohibiting access to it should its more personal cargo not be remembered quickly enough. No, Higby surmised, I'd have done something smarter, something more amenable to a groggy state of mind. When he added to this supposition the recognition that his actions while sleeping would need to be subtle enough to escape the awareness of the visitors at his window or at least not provoke their anxiety, Higby knew exactly what he had done, and leaned his head to one side to view the far edge of the counter top to the right of his drawer.

"A perfect day," he repeated loudly, observing the tiny globules of soft matter, defiant of gravity in their faithful adhesion. He did not scoop them up, but broke irresistibly into a whistle, which he blew throughout the entirety of his trip to the vault with the head teller, synchronizing his most warbling notes with every longer action, such as turning his locker key, sliding home the drawer, pulling the key away and carving an exaggerated arc with it from the lock through the air above his own head and finally into his trouser pocket. After that, Higby returned to his workspace and adopted a demeanor of insignificance so as to rid himself of the attention he had drawn and about which he was suddenly self-conscious. He put his hands together on the counter top and shook his head lightly, as if to say he was not doing anything one should look at,

all curiosity was misplaced. But he also periodically scanned the main foyer and executive desk stations of the bank to make sure he was unwatched.

“Go home, Higby!” Cray admonished, anxious to be rid of the pest.

“Sir?” Higby asked, maintaining the farce of ingenuousness.

“Home, Higby. You do have one?”

“Ah, yes, very good, sir. Not having a home.”

Cray rolled his eyes. “Don’t explain my wit to me,” he said with exhaustion.

“Well, sir,” Higby said. “There is one thing. Before I go. One thing I need to do to bring my day at the bank to an end.”

“Yes, Higby?” Cray inquired, total unwillingness to understand or extend himself on the issue dripping from his voice. There was no easy way out. Higby was cornered. On the one hand, he feared and almost visibly shrunk from willfully testing the patience of another human being, especially Cray. The action was tantamount to defiance insofar as Higby wanted one thing and Cray wanted another—namely, that Higby forego any final necessary actions and leave at once, without delay. On the other hand, in this single instance in his otherwise exceptionless life, in direct contradiction of a thick film of habit by which Higby reflexively and automatically accepted his own role as an agent of too-extreme concession, he incontestably needed to procure those eye droppings at whatever the cost. He knew it too. He looked over at Cray; he looked down at the counter’s edge.

"These are mine!" he exclaimed, claiming the residues of his sleep one after the other with one assertive drag of his left index finger. The cherished droplets of crud transferred obligingly onto the inside of his finger, where they resembled faded freckles newly released from two to three dimensions. Higby watched over them protectively, lovingly. He glanced momentarily at Cray and then carried on with the serious, imperturbable business of combining the separate crumbs into one cohesive peanut, strikingly similar to the first. The likeness was readily apparent to Higby, even sentimental on some level, and he responded to it immediately by depositing the peanut in the same breast pocket occupied temporarily by its twin, as if to offer a home made more comforting by its former associations. Higby fondled the peanut through the cotton fabric and reassured it in a delicate voice.

"What are you raving about?" Cray said absently, rhetorically, incorrectly.

"Peanuts!" said Higby, and strode from the bank.