

The Encounter

by James Lynn Smith

Just over the hill—either the supreme experience or my certain demise. I pushed the accelerator. Air rushing through my hair was tangible evidence that soon the unanswered questions and troubled thoughts would end.

*

Once I was a seeker, thinking that if I sat in a quiet room and listened for inner guidance, the ultimate thought would finally come. It would be so wondrous that I could share it through writing or painting, and no one who saw my work would ever need another thought. Thus I, Steven Cloud, would have delivered a supreme message for an absolute state of ecstasy.

But in time I saw my attempts at great inspirations fall onto the heap of incomplete dreams woven by countless others. That's a big problem for me and affected my way of seeing reality.

I'll be succinct: Pestiferous thoughts urge me to be a solipsist. That's not a person who's sloppy. It means I would believe I'm the only one who's truly conscious. Everything great and evil lies within me and all else is a put-on. In this case even you are a figment of my imagination. All this is peculiar because it would mean I had to make up everything that appears to be around me without being aware of it.

Do I like this idea? Certainly not, but it pesters me for proof it's wrong. A shrink once hinted the ego's way of shirking responsibility is to imagine other people are not real.

Precognition about this occurred when I was young. I imagined that, when out of my view, my parents would freeze and not move again until I came around. It seemed a master puppeteer was behind the scenes. Eventually I felt the puppeteer was in a very scary place, my own mind. Worse, the larger part of my mind was hidden from me and had its own rules.

These thoughts came and went as I grew up. On occasions I would forget them and imagine others could appreciate the wondrous thoughts I had. As a child I dreamed of a beautiful and colorful spiral formation in the sky, one that tasted like cinnamon and sugar merely by looking at it. Anxious to tell my parents about it the next morning, I even drew pictures with colored crayons. They smiled briefly and called me “dream boy.” But I could tell their appreciation didn’t reach any deep awareness. Once again I doubted they were real.

*

In time, I found this state unendurable. So, like others, I took appearances seriously, grew up, became educated, took a career, had a family and subordinated my artistic endeavors to pastime.

Still, whereas others in my family would gather around the TV, chattering about the awful destruction from war, famine, and storms, I avoided such distractions. Maybe this was a residue of my prior convictions. *No true suffering occurs because that requires real awareness.* In time, my attentions coalesced around becoming a writer, while occasionally defaulting to solipsism and a continuing search for inner wisdom. Feeling troubled, I was hopeful my many questions would be resolved some day. I read in Jung that dreams can reveal important self-discoveries. Craving such insight, I prayed that they would come to me in my sleep.

*

One night, a dream did speak to me. I was drifting eastward over a pathway

while hints of dawn illuminated the sky. As I drifted, I descended almost down to the path where tall, green, guard-like beings stood in a line on either side. Soon the path led up a hill, over which reddish rays of the not-yet-risen sun brightened. Then they turned to a light purple, and the sky became misty. From the purple mist a voice intoned, “Ultimate wisdom lies before you. You must display courage and risk your existence to find answers. Move forward over the hill. Throw yourself into the abyss of understanding.”

When I awoke it was the middle of the night and memory of the dream would not fade. I eased out of bed while my wife slept and put on my clothes. Sitting behind the steering wheel of my convertible, I made sure the top was up and there was gasoline. I turned the car onto the street and headed eastward on a road I had never been on before.

*

My recollection of the dream merged with the landscape. Tall, kudzu-covered trees alongside the road appeared as the giant sentinels, nodding their branches in the breeze. Soon sheer, multicolored, clay bluffs came into view where the road cut through a hill. Then the road curved and each bend beckoned me with the potential discovery beyond.

Finally the road elevated and my sight was limited by the crest of an approaching hilltop. Rays of purple light emanated from a mist on the other side. I pushed the button to collapse the convertible top. This was it, I knew. It was just over the hill. Either the ultimate experience or my certain demise. I pushed the accelerator. Air rushing through my hair was tangible evidence that soon unanswered questions and troubled thoughts would end.

My car leaped over the hill, plunging into a luminescent fog. A frightening, weightless feeling gripped my gut. I felt vicious swerving as hubcaps broke off and clanged away. The car bounced and thumped down roughly, skidding to an abrupt

stop against something.

The purple fog contained wavering points of red and blue. At last I opened the car door and found my way through the mist. I stopped before a gate in a high, wooden fence. It was not locked so I opened it and passed through. My legs froze into place.

Before me floated the strangest apparition ever seen. I rubbed my eyes and stared. A rounded shape with moving structures below floated in mid-air. The “head” was covered with luminescent, vein-like filaments. Two large orbs, suggesting dark, eerie eyes faced me. The head expanded and deflated, as if breathing. Multiple appendages below moved, forming wavelets that traveled downward to delicate ends. A hissing sound modulated into vocalization.

“Ask and all knowledge is yours, Seeker.”

“You—you speak,” I said, shaking.

“What are your questions, Steven Cloud? You’ve entered the gate of wisdom.”

At that moment, no urgent questions mattered. I just wanted scary feelings to go away. But I had to see this through. “Is it true I am the only conscious being and others are mentally unreal?”

“Mental unreality?” A bulbous waffle of movement coursed throughout its shape. “That’s the most absurd thing I’ve heard this millennium. Nothing’s more real than mentality and awareness.”

“I mean is there only *one* awareness...Mine? And everything else my mind’s construction?”

“That idea surely elevates your status. No, you are not the only one aware but yes, there is a *higher* dimensional level at which all is the same mind.”

“You mean—”

“Yes, God, Universe, Great Spirit, Cosmic Pudding, and more. I call it GW,

the Great Whatever. All these phantom automatons you imagine others to be are as fully aware as you.”

“Is there any proof?”

“Quick lecture: Your mind goes beyond your awareness. Case 1, your mind contains the universe and its laws as mental constructs or Case 2, there *really is* an external universe of which your mind is aware. But the only entity that can determine existence is your *awareness*. To it, both cases register the same. No point whatever for solipsism as a belief. It’s moot. Next question.”

I felt ambivalence, but I could contemplate it later. Then a depressing, nagging question arose. “What is my purpose?”

“There’s no purpose beyond what you define. It’s not written in the stars.”

“That’s depressing.”

“Listen carefully. The universe contains awareness or else you could never have it. Also intelligence, which is contemplation of cause and effect. Billions of stars and myriad forces provide the conditions for life on your little globe. Have you ever wondered if GW wants to know why bother with all this? Purpose is what *you* provide for GW. So man up.”

“But individually, I can do little. Some achieve far more. I want to write, but so do countless others. Being an unknown, chances of being read by thousands seem infinitesimal.”

“You want to write, then write. Imagine that attentive audience. Your mind and awareness, all-that-is-you, connects to the source. No way your writing *cannot* be sensed by GW. And its awareness is far, far more than thousands of readers. The latter’s good, but fluff by comparison. You are a *sense organ* for GW. Pleasures you have are transmitted. Makes GW do whatever counts as a smile.”

“Sounds pantheistic.”

“So? That’s just a word saying all is connected. If writing is right for you,

you'll get pleasure from it and want to improve. If not, don't bother readers."

"I think I'm getting the picture."

"Good, but don't think you understand everything. Your entire race is still primitive. Particularly on what's important. Enjoy your family. Here's where *you* usually zone out."

The apparition then raised an appendage and eyed a device strapped to it. "Oh look at the time. I've got another appointment. I've got a purpose too, you know. If you want to talk again, click your shoe heels three times...Just kidding...Can you hear me?"

The mist with purple hue turned white. The last question kept repeating in my head "*Can you hear me?*"

*

"Can you hear me?" my wife said again. "Steve, can—"

Upon opening my eyes I saw white walls and that lovely face. I smiled...then groaned. "Time to get up yet?" Trying to sit up, I found needles taped to my arm.

"Lie back," she said. "They put you under a sedative. You're in a partition connected with the hospital emergency room. For observation."

"What happened?"

"That's what I'm asking you. Why did you leave home in the middle of the night, go up County 31, wrap your car around a tree and stagger off?"

"... Things are a little confused right now."

"I'll say. Patrolmen were investigating a fender bender in the fog over a hill on County Road 31. They had their blue and red lights on. Officers say you raced over the hill, slammed on brakes, veered off, and crashed into a tree. Then got out and wandered away before they could see about you. They found you at a roadside amusement area. You were at an aquarium, looking through a big window in the

side of a water tank with an octopus in it. One officer said you were babbling away like you expected instructions. They figured you were bonkers and put you in the ambulance.”

“I have a slightly different view of what happened, but can’t prove it. Call somebody to get this IV out of my arm. I’m fine now.”

*

Okay, I’m no longer bothered by solipsism. I’m an individual who perceives a vast sea of other real, aware beings. But it doesn’t diminish me because I know there is an ear for my inspirations. As long as *I* like them, GW is part of my fan club. My intent is to make GW smile every chance I get. Maybe have a few groupies on the side.

Also, I might sneak back to that roadside aquarium and see my “guru” again. Our talk on mind and universe may seem peculiar, but it worked. Even my wife says I’m more fun now.

More short stories & readers’ theater scripts at

Storylandscapes.net