

After Dinner Conversation

Philosophy | Ethics Short Story Magazine

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This magazine publishes fictional stories that explore ethical and philosophical questions in an informal manner. The purpose of these stories is to generate thoughtful discussion in an open and easily accessible manner.

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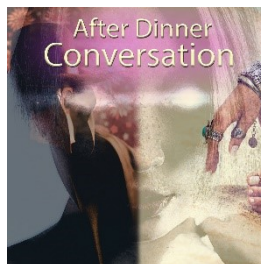
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Table Of Contents

FROM THE PUBLISHER
BOOMCHEE.....
HIS NEIGHBOR'S WIFE
THE WAITING ROOM - 2 -
TEDDY AND ROOSEVELT
BELIEVING IN GHOSTS.....
MONSTERS
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION - 12 -
FROM THE EDITOR..... - 13 -

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The Waiting Room

Kate Choi

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Overhead, the lights hummed. They were bright and fluorescent, and they reflected off the clean white walls of the waiting room to produce the unsettling effect of being folded away inside a sheet of paper. Cross-legged on the floor by the door, the boy squinted against the glare and tapped his fingers together—one, two, three, one, two, three. Across from him, a man sat on a long low bench, his knees pointed at awkward angles. As the boy watched, the man put a pen to a sheet of paper, scribbled slowly, and looked at what he'd written. Then suddenly, violently, he crossed it out. He started over. The cycle repeated itself twice before the writer flung down his pen and put his head in his hands; the pen rolling away beneath him. Across the room, the boy watched. His fingers tapped—one, two, three, two, two, three.

Finally, the silence became too much. “So, I’m waiting, you’re waiting,” the boy said. “What are you here for?” For a

moment the writer didn't move, and the boy thought he may not have heard. But then the man shifted his hands and spoke through them.

"What are *you* here for?" he grunted by way of response.

"I'm here to get a new Dream," the boy said. The writer nodded. He looked down and picked up his pen, but made no move to write.

The boy waited, but when nothing more came, he prompted, "And you're here to..."

The writer jerked. He had forgotten that the boy was there. After a moment, he said, "I'm here to get back an old one."

The boy nodded slowly, though he had to fight the urge to raise his eyebrows. "Why'd you give it up?"

"Sorry?"

"Your old Dream. Why'd you give it up?"

"Why are you giving *yours* up?" the writer retorted, irritated.

But the boy just looked down at his fingers—tap, tap, tap—and said, "I ran out of chances."

The writer didn't scowl at that, but nodded. He, too, had run out of chances. He looked at his crumpled paper, tried to smooth it out on his knee, and scribbled again. He stared at what he'd written.

"You didn't answer me," the boy said, cutting into his thoughts. He shifted; the hard floor was painful to sit on. "Why'd you give it up?"

For a moment the writer looked as though he was debating whether to answer. At last he said, tersely, "It was

foolish.”

“But it isn’t foolish now?”

“No. It’s still foolish.” The writer stared at his page, mouthed a sentence, then abruptly struck out the words again, drawing a furious scrawl of lines over the writing. “But all I have left now is foolish.”

As the boy opened his mouth to reply (though he wasn’t sure what he meant to say), a sudden commotion outside the room made both of them look up at the closed door. A few muffled shouts, one or two alarming thuds, and the door was abruptly wrenched open and a woman thrust inside, her hair a wild flurry of bright red and her body long and too tall. She turned back with a cry, but the door had shut as quickly as it had opened, and everyone in the room knew without trying that it was already locked. The newcomer pulled at the handle anyway, and when that failed, she pounded on the door and yelled. “Get me out of here! Come back! I’m not meant to be here. Come back!”

“It’s no use,” said the boy, still sitting by the wall, and the woman started and looked at him, only just noticing that she wasn’t alone. “They won’t come until they call for you.”

“But they have to—come back. I’m not meant to be here,” she said again, this time to him, but he only shook his head.

“If you’re here, you’re meant to be here,” he said.

“But I don’t *need* a new Dream.”

“If you’re here, you must.” He added, his face soft and his fingers still lightly tapping, “It’s okay if you don’t realize it yet. You’ll see, soon enough. We’re lucky that they’re taking care of us—they always know what’s best.”

“No, they don’t,” she said, her hands clenched at her sides. Her hair formed a harsh red halo under the fluorescent lights. “I don’t need a new Dream. I don’t *want* a new Dream.” She smelled like flowers, like petunias. The writer hated the smell of petunias; he had once known it too well, before he became tired and lost all of his chances—before he had been foolish, he had been like her, like this woman and her petunias. His mother had smelled of petunias, too. Her Dream, like that of many before her, had been to invent a medicine to cure cancer... but she had worked too hard, failed like all the others, and when she died, even at the funeral where there were only lilies, the air had reeked of petunias.

For the first time since the woman had entered, the writer spoke. “It doesn’t work that way.” His voice was toneless, though, recitative.

That made the woman angry, not placated. “It doesn’t work that way! Of course it doesn’t. That’s not how *they* operate. That’s not how they do it.”

After a moment, the boy said, “What do you mean?”

Instead of answering, she looked around—at the white, white space, at the bench, at the poster on the wall with the words, “Dreams drive us!” in bright, big letters. “They’re giving me a new Dream. I can’t believe this. They’re giving me a new Dream.”

“You mustn’t have been successful,” said the writer. “What could you expect, if you weren’t successful?”

She sighed. “I’ve always been successful.”

“Always?” said the boy disbelievingly.

“I needed the Benefits, the Reductions. I had to be

successful.”

“You speak like it’s been more than once.”

“Five times.” She looked at her fingers, counted them as she counted her Dreams. “I’ve been reassigned five times.”

“Then you must not have been successful,” said the boy.

“I was successful. I was always successful.”

“Then what?”

She was quiet for a moment. “I reapplied. I changed them.”

“But if you were successful—”

“I didn’t want them,” she snapped, and ran her hands through her hair, making the ends stick up and the smell of petunias stronger. “I wanted this one. The other ones... I was an accountant once. A successful one. But I was overworking myself, I was too successful. So I started going on walks. I went walking around the city. They reassigned me then, kept reassigning me. Do you go on walks?” She looked at the boy, the writer, but neither replied. “They’re beautiful. Or they should be, but they’re all mixed up. Hardly anyone who should care cares enough to make the places beautiful—only *they* really Dream, see, it’s all theirs in the first place, not ours. So the places are ugly but the spaces are beautiful. It should be the other way around at least.”

Neither of the others understood. The boy asked, finally, if only to interrupt the silence that had followed, what her Dream was now.

“I’m a florist,” she told them. “I sell flowers.”

“You must not be successful,” said the writer again.

“I was happy,” she said. “The flowers were mine, and they

were beautiful. No one else could interfere with them being beautiful.”

“Were you successful?” asked the boy, confused.

She almost tried again, but only shook her head—not in answer to the question, but to say it did not matter. “I sell flowers,” she repeated, softly, to herself.

“Sold,” the boy corrected. “You won’t be a florist for much longer.”

“No,” she said, her voice dangerously quiet and angry. “No, I will be. It’s my Dream. They can’t take it away from me!”

“Of course they can,” the writer said tiredly. “They gave it to you, didn’t they?”

“But they can’t take it away! I was happy! I was happy!”

“If you were happy but you weren’t successful, then it must not have been the right Dream,” the boy reminded her gently. “Mine wasn’t. I ran out of chances. So I’m here to be reassigned.”

She wheeled on him. “But were you happy?”

Across the room the writer was writing, almost without realizing it, “I was happy... I was happy” on his sheet of paper. When he saw what he was writing he stared at the page in consternation.

The boy said, “I had to be successful to be happy.”

The writer interrupted. He recited the poster above him, without really meaning to: “Dreams drive us.”

“Drive us *where*?” cried the woman, exasperated. “Drive us where?”

“Towards a better future,” said the boy, as if it were obvious. It was.

“And what’s that?” she asked, as if she genuinely did not know, but she did. She knew what it should be, but not what it really would. Neither of the others bothered to answer.

After a pause she spoke again—she seemed unable to stay silent, or still, her fingers twitching, her whole body stiff and expression still disbelieving, as if she were in a trance. “You know what I think? I don’t think it’s ours, any of ours.” Before either of her companions could register her words, she turned to the boy again. “What’s *your* Dream?” she demanded.

Taken aback, the boy stammered, “To—to be a pianist.”

“You had to be a successful pianist?” she said, and her tone—it was almost a scoff—made the boy flare up defensively.

“What’s wrong with that?” he demanded harshly. She only laughed, but it was a brittle sound.

“Yes, indeed. *What’s wrong with that?* Ask them. They’re the ones who made you come to be reassigned, aren’t they?”

“No, I came myself,” the boy said staunchly, coldly. “I ran out of chances. I know when it’s time to move on.”

“Do you, now? And I wonder why. Tell me, who gives you those chances? What was it—failed competitions, lost prizes, empty auditoriums? The lack of applause from all of the rest of us standing around with our own empty, *driving* Dreams?” Her voice was full of scorn and the boy said nothing, his expression frozen stonily on his face. His fingers had stopped tapping. “Sweetie, *they* give you the chances and when they don’t like you they take them from you. They don’t need another pianist. They need doctors or builders. Artists... flowers... they’ve had *enough*.”

The boy’s face had hardened as much as it possibly

could, and from behind that stony exterior he unfroze long enough to say, stubbornly, “It’s for the greater good.”

“But it’s not. It’s *not!* They get the success, the money—”

“So do we!” cried the boy. “We just have to find the right Dream—be successful.”

“The right Dream! And have it stolen away from us when they don’t like it anymore? No more flowers—no more pianists—when we work ourselves to death for the stupid Dreams that aren’t even *ours*—”

The writer froze, stopped writing. The boy cried, “You don’t know what you’re saying. Stop it, it’s not right!”

Before she could reply, the writer spoke from the other side of the room, addressing the woman. “Don’t say things like that. Don’t go around saying mad things like that.”

“And *you!*” she exclaimed, turning now on him. “What are *you*, again? What’s *your* failed Dream?”

He said nothing, but his pen twitched in his fingers, and she saw. “A writer, then,” she said. “What kind of writer? A screenwriter? A poet? I bet you’re a poet.”

“I was, once,” he said, in a voice as stubborn as the boy’s. The boy looked up and asked, with interest, “Is that the Dream you want back?”

He said nothing, but that was only confirmation for the woman, who laughed again. “Another failed artist! And you want it back? That’s foolish. They’ll never give it back. Not for a poet.”

“All I have left now is foolish,” the writer said again. For the first time the woman seemed to understand; her face softened.

“That’s right: all we have left now is foolish. Foolish for leaving behind our foolish dreams for foolish following to foolish ends. My God! How I’d love not to be a follower for a day!” The silence was broken by a loud, sharp buzz in the ceiling that made them all jump and look at the door. “Number 52130, please exit for resignation. Number 52130, please exit for resignation. Remember, Dreams drive us!” A click from the door told them it had been unlocked, and it opened, revealing two stony-faced impassive men in black standing in a stretching corridor of white, white, white. The woman looked at them, no longer fighting but exhausted. “My God,” she said softly, and left. When the door shut behind her with the same buzz and click the boy and the writer looked at each other but said nothing. The writer looked down at the paper in his hands and saw the words he had written. *I was happy... I was happy.*

He stared at them in the silence of the humming white fluorescent lights and then he tore them up, dropping tiny fluttering pieces of inky paper to the floor, like a rain of soot and ash. Across the room, the boy tapped his fingers—one, two, three, one, two, three. The silence regrew. Finally, the boy spoke.

“So,” the boy said. “I’m waiting. You’re waiting. What are you here for?”

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. Is it important that you be successful in your dream, in order for your dream to be a success? Or, can you be successful in a dream that you will never be particularly good at?
2. Many of the characters in the story are emotionally attached to their current dreams and don't want to give them up, why do you think that is? If they had been given a different dream would they be emotionally attached to that other one instead?
3. The poster in the waiting room says, "Dreams drive us!" Do you agree with this statement? Where do you think dreams that drive us come from?
4. What is your dream? If you could change it to a dream you would be more successful in pursuing, would you?
5. Is it selfish to follow a failed dream if following a dream you would be successful at would be more helpful to society? For example, is it selfish for a talented (*but unhappy*) surgeon to quit medicine and take up (*mediocre*) painting?

* * *

Additional Information

Reviews

If you enjoyed reading these stories, please considering doing an online review. It's only a few seconds of your time, but it is very important in continuing the series. Good reviews mean higher rankings. Higher rankings mean more sales. More sales mean a greater ability to release stories. It really is that simple, and it starts with you.

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From The Editor

The story of Sisyphus is one I have never understood as it is told. In the Greek story, Sisyphus is “punished” by Zeus by being forced to eternally roll a boulder up a hill.

In my opinion, this was not a punishment, but a gift. Sisyphus was gifted a life purpose. He will never wonder if he should go left or right. Forever, he has moral reason to get out of bed, and moral reason he does not want to go to sleep. In short, he has a goal.

Years ago I saw an interview with big wave surfer Laird Hamilton and he said the biggest fear of a dragon slayer is not that he would die, but that there will be no dragons left to slay.

That is my wish to you for the new year. May you always think what you are doing is the moral equivalent of “curing cancer.” May you always have a rock to push up a hill. May you always have a dragon to slay.

Best Wishes,

Kolby Granville