

Entranced

A Short Story



Royal Alvis

ROYAL ALVIS

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He might have preferred a dismissal, but instead Robert was offered a junior partnership at Blacksmith & Cooper, and now that he was at liberty to work from home, he left the office early driving a company car, which was another bonus of his new position. This leased reward was a Lexus XR something or other, and though it performed smoothly, Robert wasn't impressed, because he didn't give a fig about luxury cars. At high noon he crossed the McKinley Bridge to the outer district of the city, taking note of the motorboats that swarmed in the river below him. It occurred to Robert that he could buy a fine boat now if he wanted one, but in truth, he didn't care any more about boats than he did cars, and if he wanted to be brutally honest with himself, he would have to admit that he didn't care about his career at Blacksmith & Cooper.

He disliked the people he worked with. Years ago, he had joined the firm because it was supposed to be a watchdog group advocating for the common consumer--and he now sadly shook his head at the misguided notions of his youth, because in reality, the partners were a bunch of corporate blackmailers soliciting for hush money, and it was embarrassing, almost shameful, to have once been so naïve, to excel in a field that was

this deceptive.

Within the hour, he arrived at the Fillmore Estates where he lived in an expansive three-bedroom apartment with his wife Carol. A security fence surrounded the property, and as he keyed the code, his feelings changed from glum to eerie, for he realized that he was no longer driving the same Lexus.

He sat still and gaped at the dashboard, which now looked old and dusty. The floorboard was littered with old coffee cups and empty water bottles; the gray upholstery was torn, and a silver logo for Hyundai was now imbedded in the center of the steering wheel. Seeing all this placed Robert in a dream-like state, for it seemed he had left work in one car and arrived home in another, and since that was impossible, he breathed deeply and tried to be patient with his mind, waited for some memory to explain this paradox, but since such a memory did not surface, he eased out of the driver's seat and studied the car from a few steps back.

He examined the red dented exterior, the rust around the quarter panel, the license plate, the bumper sticker with a green ribbon, which read "Save Darfur." It all looked familiar, and he squinted and rubbed his face, for he felt as if some key fact was on the edge of being remembered—and he concentrated so hard that his brow furrowed, but still he was flummoxed.

Slowly and carefully, he crept towards his apartment but the surreal sensation only worsened, because he tried to open his door, but his key no longer fit the lock. He rang the doorbell. He noticed that the doormat was not his doormat. He pounded and called Carol's name, but there was no answer, and a feverish worry wet his brow, for he suspected that some dark force had taken away his life and left him in some demented twilight zone.

His apartment could be accessed through a window on the ground floor, so he ran outside and dragged a deck chair from the

pool area and stood on top of it while reaching for his windowsill. He grabbed and shimmied until he was resting his elbows on the sill, his foot finding purchase on a water spigot, and what he saw now terrified him. Nothing inside his apartment was as it should be. Knickknacks and porcelain collectables surrounded the Victorian furniture. He forced in the screen and stuck his head inside. The air smelled of cats and muscle liniment, and Robert gasped, for a ghostly old woman was walking towards him. He could see the yellow of her teeth as she snarled at him, and he noticed too late that she was carrying a toaster by its electrical cord, so that the appliance dangled from her hand like the spiked metal ball at the end of a flail.

For an old person, she swung the toaster with remarkable force, and Robert being poised as he was, could not ward off the blow. He fell from the window, landed on his back, and struck his head so hard that he blacked out for several moments. When he came to, he moaned and tried to stand up, but he couldn't, because a large hairy foot was pressing down on him. The foot belonged to a large hairy man who had come from the swimming pool, who was bare-chested and dripping on Robert, and from this position, Robert found himself looking up the man's swimsuit and could see the wobble of his scrotum.

He turned his head towards the column of balconies where several people had come outside, because the old woman was now sticking her head out the window and screaming for help. The dripping man told him to be still. Robert heard the approach of police sirens, and among the balcony people, he recognized his old neighbor, Peggy Albright—and just like that, he found a missing memory that made sense of everything.

Peggy was his "old" neighbor, because he and Carol had moved from the Fillmore Estates years ago. He had been

fired from Blacksmith & Cooper. He remembered the mental affliction to which he occasionally succumbed, a fugue-like state that eclipsed the present and led him into past years, and recognizing his error now caused his chest to broil with shame. From the corner of his eye, he could see the blue and red lights from a police car. He stared up at his former neighbor and shouted as loudly as he could: "Peggy, please don't call my wife!"

But Peggy's eyes widened as she turned to rush inside, and Robert realized that all was lost, for he knew Peggy had misheard him, that in her mind, he had shouted: "Peggy, please call my wife!" And she had hurried towards her phone to carry out his mistaken order.

Carol was at her parents' house when she received the call from her former neighbor. For hours she had been preparing lobster soufflés, because Joe Cantor and three people from his campaign were due to arrive at seven for dinner. Joe had long been a friend of Carol's family. She called him Uncle Joe, and often spoke to him about her husband, Robert. She told Joe that Robert was smart, a charismatic speaker, that he had graduated magna cum laude from Columbia . . . yes, he had suffered a mild nervous breakdown, but he was back on his feet again. . . and since Joe was curious, since he was solicitous for Carol's well being, he agreed to meet with Robert and perhaps put him to use in the upcoming election.

Though now, of course, the meeting and the dinner party was ruined, because according to Peggy, Robert had been arrested for breaking into their old apartment.

Carol felt her face redden as she listened to the account. She knew what this was all about, could not believe it was happening

again, and after apologizing to Joe and the other guests, she drove off to post bail for her husband.

At the precinct, she did not speak or look at Robert when he was brought before her. They left the station together, but walked several feet apart. Robert offered to drive, but Carol would not allow it, so he slouched in the passenger seat and stared at the shabby homes surrounding their neighborhood. They passed an abandoned house, which had been gutted by a fire. Close by a vagrant slept on the sidewalk, and as Carol stopped at a red light, Robert noticed three shady young men loitering on the corner. One of the boys drifted toward them. Carol sped through the intersection to escape the young gangster, and then she sneered at Robert as if the hoodlum, the ruined dinner party, and this crime-ridden neighborhood were all her husband's fault.

"Don't you think . . ." she said, which was the first thing she had said to him all evening, and she spoke with such vehemence that she sputtered and coughed and had to start again. "Don't you think I would like to leave here and live in our old apartment? But I can't, Robert, because I have to live in reality, and so do you."

"I swear to God, Carol. I didn't know what I was doing. I really thought we were living at the Fillmore Estates. I thought I was driving home from Blacksmith & Cooper. I thought it was just a regular day."

"A regular day that happened six years ago?"

"Yes!"

"You know, you're not fooling anybody. You want us all to think that you have some kind of weird psychosis, but you're just hurting people who are trying to help you. Do you know all the trouble Dad went through? Do you know Joe Cantor was going

to give you a job? All you had to do was show up tonight—and why, Robert? Why couldn't you just do that?"

"Because Joe Cantor is as corrupt as they come," Robert thought. "He's nothing more than a lobbyist for the pharmaceutical industry, and I'd rather be working for Blacksmith & Cooper again."

But of course Robert didn't say this. Such a statement would indicate a deliberate reason for not showing up tonight, and in truth, his spell had taken him to a past year, and he couldn't do anything about it, because he didn't know it was happening.

Carol squinted and scowled at his silence, and since she was staring at Robert, rather than at the road, she drove through a red light, and this time swerved to avoid a pick-up truck. A car horn blared. Robert gasped and braced against the dashboard, and once the danger had passed, he was tempted to use this mistake in his own defense.

"You see, Carol, every child knows that red is stop and green is go, but you were distracted by the things in your mind, so distracted that the outside world faded away, and that's what it's like with me, except it lasts longer."

But again he didn't speak his thoughts, because Carol pulled over and began to cry. Over the last five years, he had been fired several times because he didn't show up when expected. To manage their debts, they moved into this developing neighborhood, which never developed, which had gone from bad to worse since they arrived. Last year Carol quit volunteering with The South Sudanese Action league—a job she had loved— so she could accept a paid position with a company that distributed pet products. Robert knew all these things were his fault, but he did not know what to say, because he did not know why such spells consumed him.

“I want you to see someone,” said Carol.

“I have seen someone.”

She dried her eyes and took a business card from her pocket: William F. Schneiderman, PhD. Psychologist/ Psychoanalyst.

“He’s a friend of Dad’s. He’s supposed to be a miracle worker. He helped Joe Cantor when he had a breakdown.”

“If that’s what you want, Carol, I’ll make an appointment.”

“I want you to get better. You have to get better, or we have to end this. There’s no other way.”

“I’ll get better,” he promised.

They had been married for eight years. Seldom had he lied to her, but he felt he was lying now.

Carol’s father agreed to pay for Robert’s therapy, and Robert made an appointment for the following Thursday. Schneiderman’s practice was in a fashionable high-rise with views of both rivers. The office was decorated with African masks, Tibetan carpets, and plush leather furnishings, and after greeting one another, the doctor began the session the way all previous analysts had begun, by saying: “So what brings you here?”

Robert described his delusion of living in years long past. He tried to sound calm, but he was irritated, because he had been through all this before. He had been to hospitals to receive CAT scans, MRIs, X-rays. He had his head examined inside and out, and nothing had come of it, and he didn’t think anything good would come now, but still he was willing to try, and when Dr. Schneiderman asked, he described the spells with as much detail as possible.

“I feel like I’m dreaming, or rather that’s how I feel once I realize what’s going on, before that I feel . . . I don’t know, I feel very ordinary, like I’m doing something I’ve done a hundred

times. Last week, I thought I was driving home from work. It's usually something mundane like that."

"Do you associate any particular emotions with these spells?" Dr. Schneiderman asked, and Robert clenched his jaw and took a deep breath, because he felt he had just answered this question.

"No Doctor, not while I'm in the trance. Once I come to, I feel like I've been dreaming and then—well then, I start to worry about all the trouble I caused."

"Does trouble usually result?"

"Usually. I've been fired several times because I've missed important meetings and court dates. Naturally, this has placed a lot of strain on my marriage."

"What about these jobs you've lost? Were you happy with your employment?"

Robert shifted in his chair because he knew this was coming, and he wanted to answer with cool detachment, but he raised his voice in spite of himself.

"Well, I didn't go into the office each day skipping and whistling. There were lots of things about my job that I didn't like. In case you're going to ask: what things? Well, they were things that had to do with personal fulfillment. Moral issues. But I had planned to cope with this in a gradual and competent manner. When the time was right, I was going to look for work more suited to my ethics, just like any grown man would do."

"You seem rather defensive."

"Maybe I'm defensive because lots of people think these trances are a way to avoid work and responsibility. My wife thinks that. And yes, in case you were going to ask, it bothers me very much that people think that about me."

Dr. Schneiderman raised his eyebrows, which so far was his only facial expression.

“I didn’t mean to imply that your episodes are voluntary. Personally, I don’t think that volition is so important when evaluating erratic behavior, but it might be helpful to identify the causes and characteristics of your spells, if we want to prevent them. You mentioned ‘ordinary’ and ‘routine.’ Those are good descriptions. Those are exactly the sort of characteristics we want to place on our list. If you think that ‘frustration’ or ‘dissatisfaction’ belong on the list too, then fine. If not, we’ll leave them off.”

Robert sighed as he leaned back in his chair. He noticed that his leg was jiggling as he tapped his foot on the floor. He had wanted to go through this session with the same sangfroid as Schneiderman, but obviously he had failed because the subject was excruciating. He could hardly sit still. Anybody would notice, and surely Dr. Schneiderman had noticed.

“Listen doctor, I didn’t feel frustrated every time. It’s not like I walked around all gloomy with thunderclouds over my head—but maybe around half the time, I remember feeling dissatisfied before a spell occurred. All right?”

“All right. Is there anything else that should go on the list?”

Robert tried to think of other feelings and characteristics, but found himself reflecting on something the doctor had just said: *I don’t think volition is particularly important when evaluating erratic behavior.* He was going to ask Schneiderman to elaborate, though he could already guess his meaning—the doctor thought he was acting out on purpose—and he wondered if Schneiderman had already spoken to Carol, if the two of them were in cahoots.

For Carol’s sake Robert continued to see Dr. Schneiderman on Thursdays, but personally he felt the sessions were pointless.

One day he succumbed to another spell and spent the afternoon at the mall, because in this dream-like state, he believed he was once again a teenager. Three weeks later, he was scheduled for a job interview, but instead he drove to the town of Millhope, because he believed that he had been invited to a barbecue, which had actually happened four years earlier, though in Robert's mind, this bygone invitation seemed like a plan for the near future. Because of this delusion, he spent two hours on the road before arriving at a small dark house belonging to an old friend. It was one o'clock, but when he rang the doorbell no one answered. No other cars were parked in the driveway, and for a while he puzzled and scratched his head, until he eventually realized that he had been entranced by his mental illness, that he had receded four years into the past, and afterward he didn't want to go home, because Carol would be furious.

He drifted down the main street of Millhope, and spent the next hour staring into shop windows while reflecting on the job interview that he had missed today. In part, he was glad he missed it because the firm was partnered with a shady hedge fund manager, and Robert was now sorry that he mentioned any of this to Carol, because she would accuse him of missing the appointment on purpose.

He wondered how he would manage if his wife left him, how he would even subsist if his condition grew much worse, and thoughts of nooses and car fumes were in his mind when he accepted a flyer from a young lady on the sidewalk: "Free introduction to Dream Meditation, by Dr. Hera Blakesly."

Robert assumed this leaflet-lady belonged to a religious order, because she wore a turban, a white linen outfit, and a garland of marigolds. She was very attractive and smiled at Robert. He had no idea what dream meditation might be, but he thanked the

woman for the flyer, and for the sake of new experiences—and for the sake of avoiding Carol and killing time—he found the YMCA and made his way upstairs to the auditorium, where three dozen listeners were already assembled. A light buffet was arranged on a table in the corner. Robert grabbed a sandwich before taking a seat in the back, and soon Dr. Hera Blakesly approached the podium.

She was a tall, comely woman, middle-aged and well postured. She also wore a turban and a white linen outfit, but in place of marigolds, an amulet with a large red stone hung around her neck. She began her talk by detailing her career as a clinical psychiatrist. She mentioned her years at an ashram in Sri Lanka, then described her research into lucid dreaming:

“Now, I’m sure some of you have had the sensation of dreaming and being aware that you are dreaming. Maybe some of you have taken control of your dreams and placed yourself in exotic worlds, or have gone flying, or engaged in erotic couplings with beautiful people. I know I have.”

She grinned mischievously and a few people in the audience tittered. Robert decided that if nothing else, the doctor was a relaxed and charming speaker.

“And, I’m sure some of you have had positive dream encounters which you would like to repeat or remember more fully, but my studies show that only one in ten ever experience lucid dreaming, and only one in eighty-seven can return to a dream after awakening, which brings me to the focus of our program. Through a simple series of daily meditations and waking exercises, we can dramatically increase access to lucid dreaming. Nearly all of our long-term followers can sleep, dream, take control of their dreams, and then awaken with complete recollection of their sleeping experience—and let

me tell you, conjuring pleasure is only the beginning of what can be accomplished. Many of our followers have been cured of clinical depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. We've taken our practice into hospitals and achieved curative results, which are remarkable. These results, by the way, have been willfully sabotaged by the medical industry, but that is a story for another time. For now, let me ask you to imagine a dream where you can cast your greatest fear as a small and conquerable foe, where you can enlarge yourself with charms and supernatural powers. Imagine it, I say, because the victories in dreams have real life benefits. Seventy-six percent of those surveyed have reported inspirational dreams, which have led to self-improvement. History is filled with great leaders, musicians, and scientists who have discovered their greatest works through dreams--and wouldn't it be great if such dream epiphanies could be accessed all the time? Wouldn't it be fascinating if thinking, as we understand it, were just the beginning of what thinking could be? Imagine little handheld sparklers compared to fireworks that light up the whole sky. Imagine it, I tell you, because the one thing I've learned is that dreams are not merely wish fulfillment as Freud would have us believe. Dreams are a means of communicating with entities that we're hardly even aware of. Beings that are far away though right inside us, who want us to succeed because they made us, because they are the voice of the stars that speak each night as we sleep, and to hear their call is the destiny of each human being. Indeed, it is the next stage of our evolution."

Dr. Blakesly paused for emphasis. She sipped some water and spoke more about intergalactic spirits, then described the nuts and bolts of her program, how weekend workshops were being offered in select cities, how monthly seminars were conducted

at an ashram in the Catskills, and those who completed this course could apply for permanent residency in order to prepare for “The New Beginning.”

When the lecture ended, Robert grabbed a sweet roll for the road. While crossing the auditorium he tried to gauge the reaction of the other listeners, and to his surprise, several people looked pensive. Personally, he thought the talk was too far-fetched to take seriously. The notion of space angels was particularly hard to swallow . . . but then again, some aspects of lucid dreaming had stirred his curiosity. Several times his spells had indeed felt like lucid dreams, as if he were on the verge of recognizing his entrancement, as if he could almost step in and take control, and perhaps a dream workshop might be the very thing that would help him.

As he drove home, he continued to think along these lines. The next day he found himself weighing the pros and cons of a dream workshop, and the day after, the pros grew more favorable. What did he have to lose? Traditional methods were not helping him; Dr. Schneiderman was not helping him. ...and the following week, he made an excuse to Carol and traveled to Scranton, Pennsylvania to attend a weekend workshop.

For the first time in his life, he learned how to meditate. While lying in corpse pose, he fell asleep and had his first lucid dream since childhood. He found himself back at Blacksmith & Cooper. Giant snakes were invading the office, and once Robert realized that he was dreaming, he jumped from a window and managed to fly. He woke up feeling exhilarated. His heart was beating as if he had just stepped off a roller coaster, and when the workshop was over, he spoke to the instructor, handed over his credit card, and registered for a three-week seminar. The tuition, however, was far more than he expected. As he drove home, he wondered

how he would explain all this to Carol— and when he did finally explain, the results were disastrous.

He chose a Tuesday evening. Carol had returned early from the administrative office of Super Pets, and Robert began by pouring her a glass of wine. He opened his laptop to show her the website of Dr. Hera Blakesly, and read aloud the passages that he felt were most salient. At first she laughed because she thought Robert was joking, but then he mentioned that Dr. Hera Blakesly was a Harvard graduate. He described his lucid dream at the weekend workshop, the five-thousand-dollars he had spent on tuition, the fact that he would be going away again for three weeks . . . but at some point he realized that Carol had stopped listening. Her eyes had turned wide and watery and she stared out into space as if watching a movie about her own life being wasted.

“Carol,” he said softly, “this really works. I know it’s expensive, and maybe it sounds a bit much but . . . ”

“A bit much, Robert? They worship space aliens!”

“Well, they do try to make contact with spirits that can be deemed extraterrestrial, yes. But that’s not so different from prayers offered to a heavenly being, is it? Besides, it’s not the space aliens that interest me; it’s the lucid dreaming. I have a facility for it. I don’t know, but maybe the screwed-up thing in my mind that causes the delusions is the same thing that allows me to enter a lucid dream so easily. Don’t you see the symmetry, Carol? Doesn’t this all seem to point towards a cure?”

Obviously she had stopped paying attention. He was in mid-sentence when she walked into the bedroom and began to pack a suitcase.

“Carol, you don’t have to go. I’m the one who’s going away for three weeks, and when I get back we can talk about this. You’ll

see. You'll see how I'm better."

"I'm not going to be here when you get back. I'm going to be staying with mom and dad, and if you want to say anything to me from now on, you can say it to my lawyer."

"Carol, it's not my fault. I've been ill and this is how I'm going to get better."

"You're saying something, Robert, and I just asked you not to. I asked you a thousand times to stop doing this, but you don't care. You don't care about anything. I gave up so much, Robert. I could have played a role in developing the new nation of Southern Sudan, but I sacrificed everything to salvage this stupid marriage, and all you want to do is ruin us. You were a fucking lawyer, Robert! You were good at it, but you threw it all away because—I don't know—because it didn't meet your standards of moral behavior, and whatever made you think that is so disgusting I don't even want to think about it. You're weak. You're a coward, and I'm not going to wait around anymore for the person I fell in love with to be like he was."

Hearing all this did something to Robert's eyes. He was looking at Carol but he couldn't really see her. He should have been hurt and angry, but instead he felt numb, the insults echoing in his ears, as he drifted between now and a time when she adored him. He tried to gain his bearings, but realized that he was screaming after all, as if a part of him had become irate without the other part knowing.

"Don't you see what a hypocrite you are! You thought it was just fine to play the holy savior from an ivory tower as long as I did all the dirty work to keep us in a comfortable lifestyle. Well, what if I wanted to do something that counts? What if you stopped worrying about people halfway around the world and did something for the people in this community? What if you

used that big virtuous heart of yours to show me just a little bit of understanding? What about that?"

But Carol was not listening. She left the apartment with her suitcase and slammed the door behind her— and for the moment, Robert was happy to see her go.

His car broke down while driving to the ashram, so he had the vehicle towed to a nearby junkyard, and the next day, arrived by bus at The Hera Blakesly Institute of Lucid Dreaming. He was greeted by a group of followers who tossed petals and bashed tambourines upon sight of him. This welcoming committee took off Robert's clothes to re-dress him in an outfit of white linen, then wrapped his head with a turban, and blessed him with a garland of marigolds. The next morning, he awoke at five o'clock to join a yoga group at sunrise. After breakfast and morning naps, he attended his first lecture and took notes on the lore of angels who had engaged with people through dreams. He learned about biblical references, so-called historical references, references to other worlds, how the ultimate goal of lucid dreaming was to bridge human reality with the reality of intergalactic spirits.

Robert tried to be open-minded, but after half an hour he huffed, put down his pen, and wondered if he had made a terrible mistake in coming here. Everything said during this lecture sounded like nonsense. Every person at the ashram was more eccentric than he'd imagined. He was only thirty-seven years old, but most people here were younger, and perhaps he was too set in his ways to embrace something so wayward.

After the class he had lunch with some other newcomers. After midday naps he joined another group for meditation, which was similar to the practice he had learned in Scranton. The instructor

began by serving tea. Afterward she told the group to lay down on yoga mats, and with a whimsical singsong tone, she guided the class through a body scan, telling them to relax the top of their heads, to relax their brows, then to relax each part of their faces, then to relax neck and shoulders and each lower body part until they were relaxing their toes. After fifteen minutes of this, Robert felt so relaxed he wondered if there was something in the tea he drank. He kept his eyes closed but heard the instructor play a recording of chimes, a high note followed by a low note, and she told everyone to inhale with the high and exhale with the low. After several breaths, he felt a tingling pleasure move up and down his torso like the climax of being pushed on a swing. The feeling tickled the top of his lungs as he inhaled, and when he exhaled, it extended further down into his belly, until it moved through his genitals, and he felt a sensual squirt shoot backwards into his blood, and this ecstasy was carried with his breath to the middle of his forehead. His eyes rolled back and he found himself in a field of daisies, as rose petals rained down on him. A tribe of little elf people undressed him so they could all run naked through the flowers. With Robert at the center, they all stood on the backs of giant dragonflies and rode them like skateboards. Robert bent his knees and shifted his weight from toe to heel to steer the insect.

“Which way should I go?” he asked the sprite surfing on the dragonfly beside him.

“It depends on why you are going.”

The creature’s voice sounded like a whisper in his ear, and even though Robert was controlling this dream, he sensed that the words had come from a deep part of his mind, perhaps from somewhere outside, and who could say it was not the voice of an angel?

Robert never again suffered from a spell of delusion, and never again did he see his wife Carol. Each day during the seminar he logged a new dream in his journal. After three weeks the program ended, but Robert felt he was just beginning to learn something invaluable, so he went home to settle some personal affairs, then returned to the ashram and applied for permanent residency. He was broke but paid for his board by working in the kitchen. After six months, the Dream Elders moved him to the administration office where his background as a lawyer could be better utilized. Dr. Hera Blakesly was impressed with Robert's legal abilities. She asked him to review the contracts for a new temple that was scheduled for construction. Later that same year, he won a legal battle involving property margins, and eventually he helped Hera devise a new marketing platform that doubled her following. He was always busy. He was often reminded of a quest that began when he first became a lawyer, to devote his talents toward a righteous cause, because even though he still doubted some core tenets, he believed there was no better undertaking than that of Dr. Hera Blakesly.

Lucid dreaming had cured him. He had seen thousands of others come here to recover their constitution, and for the next ten years he stayed at the ashram serving as its legal counselor. Eventually he was given his own cabin. He was granted the title of Dream Elder, and was esteemed by the entire congregation, because he was often seen in the company of Dr. Hera Blakesly, and the only impediment to his joy were the dreams of the very angels he doubted.

One night his subconscious led him through a crystalline cave with the blurred shape of dark serpents slithering in the translucent walls. When he looked up he saw dead cherubs hanging

from the ceiling, and across the cavern, on a throne of ice, sat the angel Orion.

“Robert, you once placed faith in false madness, but you deny me, and the consequences can no longer be stayed.”

When the angel spoke, the walls of the cave quaked and cracked, and a rotting stench pervaded the grotto. A palpable fear reminded Robert that he was dreaming, that he had the power to steer or end this phantasm, but when the angel pointed, Robert turned his head to look and saw dozens of his colleagues from the ashram, all of them dead, all of them pale and rigid.

He awoke screaming. His bedclothes were damp with perspiration. His cabin was cold and dark, and even though it was four o'clock in the morning, Robert got up to put on his coat and boots. Never before had a dream registered with such warning. A grim instinct called him to search outside, his footfalls crunching on the frozen ground, the night wind blowing against him, and his steps slowing when he noticed the glow of candles in the temple. At this hour, the sanctum should have been dark and locked, but the door swung open as he touched it, and when he entered, he found himself walking through a hall of the lifeless. The bodies reflected the same vision of death he had just seen in his dream. The same pale blue skin, the darkening blue lips; some of their eyes were closed and some open, and some of the dead were still posed in lotus, while others had fallen sideways and seemed to stir by the flicker of candles. Hundreds of candles had been lit. The moonlight beamed through a glass wall, and for a moment, Robert looked outside and was hypnotized by the dark sway of winter branches. Everything was still so dreamlike that he tried to test his reality by moving his hand over a candle. He counted backwards from ten, but he was truly awake. All these people were truly dead,

and he didn't know if he should scream or cry, if he should run or stay. On the dais, surrounded by its own set of candles, was a parchment, and since he had to do something, he picked up the document and read it.

Many of us here have stopped our hearts through the focus of our meditation. Others who were in need of assistance used a formula we found on the Internet, but in no way has any physician or institute been responsible for our departure. All of us have received a shared dream sent from the angel Orion, and by his blessing alone, we have abandoned our earthly presence in order to explore a greater existence. The bodies we leave are only a small part of our being, so we do not think of ourselves as dead, but as pioneers, the first to proceed toward a destiny which will be the only salvation for our species. Therefore rejoice and prepare yourselves for the New Beginning. Rejoice for we will come again, guided by the angel Orion to embrace all those willing to join us.

Robert shed tears and shook his head while reading the note. Some here were his dear friends, and he could not believe that they had formed a suicide pact without him knowing, or that anyone of them truly believed enough in angels to forsake their lives.

The waste was so abominable that his own heart nearly stopped, and when he looked up, he realized that he was no longer alone, that Dr. Hera Blakesly had also entered the temple and was aghast and ruined by the sight about her.

Her gray and white hair hung down past her shoulders. She wore a nightgown and a bathrobe. Her bare feet were scratched, bruised, frostbitten at the toes, and she shivered from cold and terror as Robert moved through the dead bodies to hand her the suicide note. He watched her face twitch with horror as she read.

She glared at him with her mouth open, baring her teeth as if to bite him, but she did not speak or move, and he again wondered if she had ever believed in her own doctrine, if it was all fiction cast for warm assurance— and she had assured him and made his life good, and he could not fathom where all this ruin had now come from.

“Robert,” she whispered and grabbed his hand. “We have to move everything into the offshore accounts. No one can know about this until the money is safe.”

He had never hated her before, but he hated her now. So much disappointment, disgust, and death that he couldn’t think or see clearly, and at some point, he found himself reflecting on his old spells of delusion. He had never admitted this to himself, had never honestly recognized his past as it was, but his ex-wife had been right: he had been pretending. He was a fake and a coward, and he had not been cured. He had only exchanged one fabrication for another.

“Hera, I’m going to call the police,” he said, but she threw her arms around Robert and tried to hold him.

“Don’t! Don’t leave me alone with this!”

She was hysterical, her eyes wild, a strand of drool oozing from the corner of her mouth, and for a moment he wondered how she knew, what had hastened her barefoot across the frozen acres to this temple of death. But there was no need to ask. They both knew they had been called by the same dream.



About the Author

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Several of Royal Alvis's stories have appeared in literary Magazines and on-line journals. Although he has said this before, his novel is nearly finished and will be available soon; it's a mix of yoga, travel and the supernatural. A bunch of short stories are also on the way, most of which share a surreal and fabulist vibe. When he's not writing Royal likes to practice meditation and Tai chi. He has not been in trouble or done anything excessively stupid for a very long time. Instead, he volunteers at a New York senior center where he delivers meals and teaches creative writing. He is very much in love with his girlfriend, and both of them are very much in love with their dog, Ember. He would mention his degree from the MFA Writing Program at Bennington College, but he doesn't think anyone will care.

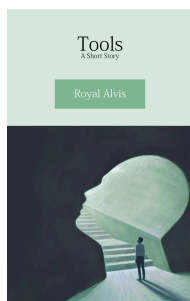
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Also by Royal Alvis



Tools

A young boy with feminine qualities tries to please his father with more manly behavior. His efforts lead to failure and embarrassment, and an unexpected new bond between father and son.