

ANIMAL DREAMS

By Jennifer Maisel

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DARK.

THE WHIRRING OF MACHINERY. THE RHYTHMIC PULSE OF A HEART MONITOR. THE STEADY DRIP OF AN I.V. NEEDLE.

NATALIE IN A WEAK LIGHT.

BEHIND HER, A HOSPITAL BED STANDING ON END IN SUCH A WAY THAT WHEN NATALIE STANDS AGAINST IT IT APPEARS WE ARE LOOKING DOWN AT HER BODY FROM OVERHEAD. A TALL STOOL. A BLACKBOARD. A POINTER. CHALK.

NATALIE IS DRESSED IN A HOSPITAL GOWN. TUBES WITH VARI-COLORED LIQUIDS RUN IN AND OUT OF HER WRISTS, CHEST, ARMS, NOSE AND UNDER HER GOWN TO HER CROTCH. THE TUBES LEAVE HER BODY AND EXTEND, MARIONETTE-LIKE, TO POINTS ABOVE.

THE MACHINE PULSE LOUDENS.

NATALIE'S BODY SLOWLY CURVES INTO A FETAL POSTION AGAINST THE BED. HER KNEES CURL TO HER CHEST, HER HEAD BENDS, HER HANDS FOLD IN ON THEMSELVES. THE MACHINE NOISE BECOMES LOUDER, MORE PULSING AS SHE TRANSFORMS. THE NOISE STOPS ABRUPTLY.

SILENCE.

NATALIE

Every day, twice a day -- sometimes three or four if she's lucky and they lose track -- they massage her hands and body, trying to instill some memory of movement.

Right hand first.

SLOWLY HER RIGHT HAND GAINS MOVEMENT AS IF IT'S BEING RUBBED.

Right arm.

THE ARM MOVES AS IF BEING MASSAGED THEN DROPS LIMP AGAINST HER SIDE.

The left hand...arm.

THE LEFT HAND AND ARM MOVE AS IF BEING MASSAGED, THEN DROP. EACH BODY PART EXTENDS THEN DROPS AS IT IS CALLED.

Foot, calf, thigh, foot, calf, thigh, torso.

HER BODY UNCRAMPS

Flip over for a minimum of bedsores.

SHE FLINGS HER BODY OVER

Let lie and then repeat entire process from the start.

SHE MOVES AWAY FROM THE BED. STRONGER LIGHT REVEALS THERE IS AN IMPRINT OF HER BODY IN FETAL POSITION ON THE COVERS. SHE STARES AT IT.

I don't recognize that body at all. I mean even if you were to take me into a lineup of bodies and force me choose...It's so...slack, soft tired skin. Look at that razor stubble -- I mean the legs, I used to let the legs go an extra day or two but I always shaved under the arms. I didn't like the way it looked when I didn't shave under the arms. I smelled a little rancid too when I didn't.

That is one sorry looking case.

(Looks around her to call)

Could someone around here just take a minute and, y'know, shave her under the arms please? It would only take a minute. Look, you get so convinced she can hear you, that she could respond if only given the right stimulus, give her a little dignity, why don't you?

Oh, to hell with it.

All the positions you put your body in over a lifetime and when push comes to shove this is the one it chooses to remember. It's a good cliché but not all that comfortable without the waves in the amniotic fluid keeping you afloat.

(to the body on the bed)

Why don't you revert back to one of the good positions, huh?
Don't you remember any of the good ones?

Try this one --

SHE PERCHES ON THE STOOL, LEGS UP AND SPLAYED APART, TWISTING HER WRISTS IN THE TUBING OVERHEAD, HEAD BACK.
--SHE LOOKS OVER AT THE IMAGE ON THE BED

--oh c'mon, this one always worked.

What about--

GETS OFF THE STOOL AND BENDS OVER IT, LOOKING BACK COYLY OVER HER SHOULDER. TRIES A LOOK OF PASSION.

--You are no fun at all. You've gotta remember. It hasn't been that long, has it? The body's supposed to remember these things. Like a bicycle, right?

SHE REALIZES THE HOSPITAL ROBE IS GAPING OPEN IN THE BACK

Oops. There is no dignity in death.

PULLS IT SHUT. CLIMBS ON THE STOOL.
(to the audience)

So they rub the body two, three times a day. The Hickman through the chest, change the drip, check the catheter.

LIFTS THE GOWN, POINTING OUT THE CATHETER TUBING EXTENDING FROM HER GROIN.

It was the only time she ever wished she could grow a penis. Just for a day. Just for the shock effect when they flipped her over.

They give it baths too. Sponge baths. Like wiping the crumbs off the kitchen table after dinner.

They're not sure whose hand they hold. They're not sure whether it can hear them. They're not sure if they're doing any good at all. They're not sure if they know who she is anymore. They can label her - parts of what she was - Mom. Lover. Wife. Bitch. 6th grade Teacher. Friend...Patient.....Statistic.

They're not sure if she is anymore.

A SCHOOL BELL RINGS. LIGHT CHANGE

NATALIE STANDS AND PICKS UP THE POINTER
(rapid and precise)

According to the medical profession a coma is the state from which a person can not be aroused.

According to the medical profession there are fifteen stages of coma -- stage 1 showing no response to the outside world and stage 15 the most...social.

According to the medical profession these fifteen gradations are called the Glasgow Coma Scale and work on a point basis, much similar to a game show.

Treatable causes of coma include metabolic derangements, ingestions, and at times, supertentorial processes in the brain.

The term supertentorial refers to the casing on the outside of the brain.

Examples! -- epidural hematoma - commonly referred to as a conk on the head, pontine hemorrhage or compression from a posterior fossa mass.

Oh! There's also a possibility of Central Nervous System derangement.

And look out for --
barrel chest or big chest.

Cyanosis - blue skin - or just cherry red skin.

Apneustic breathing.

Atoxic breathing.

Are there repetitive multifocal myoclonic jerks?

Apply a noxious stimulus.

Pray for a voluntary response.

Touch a q-tip to the eyeball and keep an eye out for the blink.

According to the medical profession Glasgow's fifteen point coma scale is also a crock of shit. It just depends on who you talk to.

Maybe we're just too tired to wake up. Maybe it's just not worth the effort. Maybe there's a comfort in the deep irreverance of ignoring the commotion and the congestion of the every day. Maybe it's just too painful to be awake right now. Maybe it's time to heal.

Maybe I just need a fucking rest! I need a fucking rest!
(Composes herself)

In the deep stages I've been able to escape the body and watch the remnants of it metastasizing into one connected mass of small cancerous lumps. I keep my eyes focused inward and note the proliferation of cells like a dandelion patch gone wild and I blow one small tumor into pieces that take root where they fall. I make a wish.

And I walk through the inside of my body noting the holocaust of my being, the radiation having killed the healthy and not the sick, the florid growth, the blood full of lumpy cells.

And I notice, my wish hasn't come true. This is still the body they say belongs to me.

WHIRRING OF MACHINES BECOMES LOUDER. LIGHT CHANGE. NATALIE MOVES AGAINST THE BED. HER BREATHING BECOMES HARSH AND IRREGULAR. FOUR BREATHS.

(spoken to her daughter)

Ursula.

You could sit here.

You could sit here, honey, and hold my hand.

You could

You could stop me from falling.

EXTENDS RIGHT HAND OUT IN FRONT OF HER

Reach!

STRAINS. GRABS AIR.

FOUR BREATHS.

I'm falling!

It's a deep pit and I'm sure there is no bottom.

It's a deep pit and I'm sure there...is...no...bottom

I don't want to find out.

Ursula, my daughter, sits by me and tells me it's ok to let go. To let go. It's ok to let go. How the fuck do you know. Trying to get rid of me?...How do you know it's ok? What if I let go and there's nothing. What if I let go to nothing?

Hold tight!

OTHER HAND GRABS OUT

FOUR IRREGULAR BREATHS

FOUR MORE REGULAR BREATHS

Your hand is warm. I can feel that tic of blood at the bottom of your thumb. I'd put my lips there when you were a baby.

You wonder if I like it here. You wonder if I know you.

You wonder if I know where I am.

Don't let go!

Don't bring me out of it.

It will hurt. God!

I'm not coming out of it again. Do you hear me? I am not coming out of it again.

You know as much as they tell you about the inevitability of fate you are very concerned because you don't want to end up like me. You tell people you take care of yourself. You say it's not heredity but environment. You say--

Don't let go of my hands. You little bitch. You little bitch. Where do you think you're going? Come back here.

Come back here.

Come back here!

LIGHT CHANGE. SHE MOVES AWAY FROM THE BED AND STANDS

Things I can tell you that you just might not know:

There are times when I am trapped in my body in a heavy stupor. One of those stupors like after a really bad drunk. One of those times you struggle to get to the surface only to find out it's not the place that you want to be.

There are times when I can look into my body and live in the deep overgrowth...I don't like that. It is like thinking you're going through the fun house and winding up on a subterranean roller coaster ride. I don't like that.

There are times when I'm not in my life as it is anymore but as it was. I am teaching. I am falling in love again. I'm watching Mom die.

My body lets me go. I am in the room, I am on the street, I am flying over the world seeing places I never made it to. I am visiting the people I love and they feel me there but they can't quite put a name to it.

My body lets me go. I want to kick it. I want to punch it. I want to scratch great holes in the skin and watch the blood well up. I want to pinch it black and blue and scream "you goddamn miserable thing, what good have you been for me? What the fuck have you been doing to me. How dare you betray me like this? How dare you?"

But I can't bite and I can't tear or scratch. My body lets me go and the freedom becomes unbearable and I want to be back inside the confines of my body, if only to know my limitations.

I guess you just have to be there.

MACHINE NOISE GETS MORE INTENSE. NATALIE PUSHES THE SLEEVES OF HER GOWN UP AND GOES THROUGH THE MOTIONS OF SCRUBBING HER HANDS. SHE HOLDS HER HANDS UP SO AS NOT TO TOUCH ANYTHING

They called it exploratory surgery. We're going to take a look.

A huge pelican came into the operating room. He looked lost so I asked him what I could do for him. He wanted some fish. I begin to give birth to a fish. It slides out of my vagina already gutted. A big dead glassy eyed fish. It slides out part way and Pelican takes its head in his beak and pulls it out the rest of the way. He flies away with it but comes back in time to pull out the next fish and the one after that. This doesn't hurt but I notice in the angled mirror that the fish don't look as much like fish anymore. Their gills are turning into little arms and hands and their tails into little legs and feet. He flies back and pulls out one after the other until they start looking unappetizing what with those tiny limbs and genitals and all. Pelican thinks about turning this into a sexual encounter but decides against it. He pulls out one more creature and invites me to dinner as he flies away. I hear it crying for me, caught in Pelican's beak, but I am strapped to the table so I cannot save it.

SCHOOL BELL RINGS

(to her husband)

Oh... what are you doing here? You hate hospitals. You hate antiseptic smell not really masking, cotton swabs, tvs positioned high above the bed.

You hate me.

You live that moment when your hand grasped the...breast...over and over. It was sex, it was skin, it was touching, absorbing, culminating...like so many times before, so many times before, we don't have to speak...we've never had to speak. Then you say...what's that? Feel that. What's that? Feel that.

Ruined the mood, I can say that much.

This is how you'll remember me now.

SCHOOLBELL RINGS

NATALIE PICKS UP POINTER AND USES THE BLACKBOARD AND CHALK

Yes, Suzy, that area is commonly called the vagina and the labia. Now that doesn't sound right....Rather, this area is commonly referred to as pussy, snatch...

WRITES THEM DOWN ON THE BLACKBOARD

....hole, box, thang, privates, twat, hole...oops...

CROSSES OUT. WRITES

mouth, lips, the down there, runway, tunnel, train tracks, sword sheath, hair pie, squeezebox...um...quiff...quim....snapper

SURVEYS THE LIST

oh...slash, gash, and tear.

C'mon class, any more?

The core of her womanhood -- good.

Piss flaps, now that's a new one.

Beaver.

WRITES

Good. OK, let's get a few for the breasts now. The breasts are normally found in the upper chest area resting above the pectorals. Unlike the vagina, which appears in both young and old females, the breasts are anxiously awaited for during pre-adolescence and their arrival on the scene during puberty is a much heralded event. Their slow growth cannot be detected by the mere eye but the end result is quite spectacular and crucial to a girl's adjustment through her teen years and on through womanhood.

WRITES

Hooters, jugs, tits, red light/green light, mounds

....are crucial to a woman being perceived as a woman. Too small she is lacking, too big, she's a slut.

Can you repeat that back to me?

WAITS. LISTENS.

Good.

They can get quite heavy, in the way, and seem to function mainly as decorative or ornamental objects except for short periods of lactation. They can be quite pretty or ugly as the case may be ---

WRITES ON BOARD

teats, honkers, bazooms, titties

There is a standard set, but that too can be bypassed with a slight, barely noticeable scar in the fold of her armpit -- children, children, calm down. It's almost lunchtime. Let's just try to come up with a few more.

WAITS

The little fuckers looked at me different when I came back. The little fuckers sat real still in their seats and looked up at me. On their best behavior. No squirming. No secrets. No notepassing. They paid attention. You little fuckers speak up! Fidget, play tic tac toe, carve your initials into the desk with your pen, for God's sake.

The little fuckers looked at me different. The kids' eyes look for whatever's missing. They listened for the first time. They stored it up and went home to tell mommy and daddy. They listened for the first time that day. I couldn't let them look at me different just because they knew that about my body. I couldn't let them look at me different for a reason I didn't myself devise. Not for that. I had to leave teaching my way.

OK, kids. what is wrong with this picture? You were always really good at that game.

You want to tell me what's wrong with this picture?

Why don't you tell me what's wrong with this picture? I'm sure you can say it.

SCHOOL BELL RINGS

SHE MOVES TO THE BED AND STANDS AGAINST IT SPREADEAGELED

The snake and the wolf were just supposed to get together for

lunch but somehow the plans got all screwed up and there they were, room 323, Cancer ward, and not a coffee cart in sight. Wolf whined about how hungry he was and Snake told him to quit his bitching because he noticed an opportunity to use his fangs and his venom and there isn't call for much of that these days.

I can feel the lump, he says. Inside, he says, the cells are growing faster that you can imagine. He slithers around her breast and sinks his fangs in.

Don't, she says, please don't.

I didn't get it all he says.

No! I am praying to you -- I am begging you. No!

The skin hangs empty. My breast is a flap of skin. I was telling him no. He's got my breast in his teeth and he's just spitting it out -- Lumpy tissue clinging to his teeth.

I'll takes its place. I'll kill off the other cells with my venom. I'll slither around inside the pocket. This one. This one too.

Please. You are not making me healthy. My breast it is dripping across there on the floor. I could just put it back in. I could just move to it and put it back -- Wolf! Stay away from that. That is mine, do you hear me, don't eat that.....

I am taking out the rotting, he said, and filling it with my own live skin. I'll sew you up from the inside. I will always be near your heart. I will be right under your skin living next to your heart.

The cancer seems to have entered my heart.

SCHOOL BELL RINGS. NATALIE MOVES DOWNSTAGE.

I was going to bring something very special to show and tell today teacher, but I must have lost them on the way. No I did, really, look.

BARES CHEST. TWO BIG SCARS WINDING WHERE HER BREASTS USED TO BE

I'll look for them and bring them tomorrow, I promise.

They must be around here somewhere.

I'll look real hard. I swear.

SCHOOL BELL RINGS AGAIN. THE MACHINE WHIRRING STARTS UP...LOW AND INSISTENT.

I wonder. I wonder when they tell me about the cancer - is this the wrong thing to be happening to my body? Maybe it's the right thing, maybe it's the only reaction to the world my body can have, maybe it's the only way it can express itself, make itself heard, going out of control, multiplying chaos, anarchy. We try to contain the revolution of cells with knives and poisons and affirmations. What if those cells are my battle against the world? - a way of growing stronger to combat the daily and the lifelong, to make more of just me against the world. What if I somehow agreed to let the doctor cut out my strength?

THE MACHINE WHIRRING GROWS LOUDER

They say go into the light. They say come back to us. I can't. I can't.

SHE MOVES BACK AGAINST THE BED

Maybe if I could have another animal dream...polar bears or iguanas or some kind of bird found only in the remotest part of the rainforest.

If I just stay here.

If I just stay here.

If I could just stay here.

HER BODY STARTS CURLING INTO THE FETAL POSITION

THE SOUNDS OF THE MACHINERY...THE HEART MONITOR, THE DRIPPING TAKE OVER AS THE WORLD AROUND NATALIE BECOMES DARK...