

# Dust and Horns

By Eli Graves

Try to relax and calm the thoughts. Make the mind quiet, inactive, serene. Sleep is living death. A respite from the insults and strains of life. For a brief period we forget everything and abandon reason and logic. Eight hours of rigorous nothing. Only during slumber do we understand 'nothing'. Close your eyes. Relax. For the insomniac darkness brings no sleep or balmy solace. The soft mattress becomes a bed of thorns and the pillow: a mental agitator.

"Es ist sehr schön, ja?"

"Das Wetter ist okay, wo wohnen sie?"

"Um die ubernachten"

"Ich werde Sie später besuchen"

Staring up at the ceiling there are vivid patterns convulsing. Specks waxing and waning in a rhythmic dance. Slaves trapped in their eternal travail, struggling to become real.

Emblazoned by infinite rays from the night skies glistening tears. Beautiful, serene, inescapable and terrifying the stars I cannot conceive. No amount of rationality and reason can understand the magnitude of the tiny spots in the night sky. Reason has no place here. There is nothing more external than the stars of the universe yet at night I study their opposite.

At night I lay awake. During the day I sleep except for a poor impression of consciousness. There is some great wrong doing that has made this so.

Why don't they run away!? That spider is crawling along the ceiling devouring all of the little dots in its path. They could easily move out of its way but they just dance patiently until the spider is upon them. The monster! Maybe the little dots are dancing for me if I close my eyes they may stop and dissipate back into the ceiling.

The universe lights up. A symphony of colour so vivid and beautiful. I am strangely separated from myself. I am looking through me into existence. A kind of fuzzy barrier protects me and makes me feel warm. Except for the hands and feet which are freezing. The coldness seems to be creeping into my body. Spreading along my limbs. What would happen if it reached my heart? Maybe I am about to die. "How wonderful is death. Death and his brother sleep!"

When the sun sets we look deeply into the mirror. At night we see what our reflection sees. The vile,

writhing, poisonous beast that stalks us silently and occupies the place which is opposite us. With us always, hidden by shame and denial. It's not until we look inward that it becomes clear. It will hold our gaze for as long as we care to look at it, staring back showing us everything that we do not wish to admit is within ourselves. At dawn the normal senses regain control and the figure in the mirror fades.

I am tired. I am awake but barely aware, scarred by the travails of the night. Unable to think about what comes so naturally inside the dusky veil. Has this torture broke my sanity yet?

When I struggled to sleep next to her I would roll over and see an image of blissful serenity. No matter what problems were keeping me awake they would become insignificant. Then I would sleep and dream beautiful dreams. My last thought of the night is always of her.

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"What the bloody hell is going on Simon?"

What a question to ask first thing in the morning. What the hell is going on in the universe? Stars exploding, black holes dragging matter out of existence, life, death. It's all going on out there.

"Where is the smart, hard-working, passionate guy from a year ago? Now you don't even brush your hair in the morning. I ask you to come for a drink with the rest of the staff and you refuse. What's going on Simon? I don't understand it. I need you to get back to where we were before..."

Before Sarah left. The bastard.

"Come on Simon just show me something. Anything. You are still my man. But you need to get over this, move on for your own sake."

I think his hushed tones were supposed to indicate empathy for my situation. But it was a well-rehearsed script that he had been plotting for a while. He had pounced on me unexpectedly as he always did. His motto is prepare and assail your victim when they are least prepared.

"Yes, you are absolutely right, its all been so..."

"I know but I need you focused and with it. This company doesn't work unless everyone is fighting and working hard. We can't afford to have people here who aren't contributing and fully on board. This is a fantastic company with fantastic prospects. People would kill to work at a place like this."

\*

Jeremy was waiting for me when I got back to my office. He was staring at a photograph on the wall which I had been meaning to throw away for some time.

"Is this you Simon?" he said holding his glasses and squinting through them.

"Yes."

"Looks like a party. Looks like you were having a good time. Who is that woman with you?" He looked at me, eyebrows raised. "An old flame?"

"It was the Christmas party two years ago. That woman is my wife." My shoulders dropped. "Was my wife."

Jeremy tried to make eye contact. I didn't want his sympathy. He didn't know anything about it. Even if he did, he was twenty seven years old. What could he possibly say to me that hadn't been said a thousand times? Amanda came in and paused. She looked at Jeremy and then sat down at my desk. Jeremy followed suit, he crossed his legs and sat back.

I looked at my watch and scribbled down some notes of the date, time and who was present.

"This is to let you both know that I am giving you a formal warning." I didn't look up from my pad. "In twenty minutes I will be on my way to Darkheath hospital and I don't even have the god damn environmental survey."

Amanda's eyes began to swell.

"Simon, I..." Jeremy started.

"Nothing. This isn't a social club." I looked at Amanda and frowned, "It certainly isn't a singles club."

They were lovers. Everybody in the office knew about it. It had given them special dispensation but now the slacking was going to stop. I didn't care how sweet they were. I didn't care that they made each other happy. I didn't care.

"I think you two should put things on hold." Jeremy stared into space defiantly. "At least until you can demonstrate that it will not interfere with your work." I looked at Amanda, "For fuck sake Amanda, stop crying."

The words were harsh, even in my state of separation from life the uncaring manner in which they were said pierced the sleepy shield that deflected everything else...

To: Richard Eaves [r.eaves@industrialpropertiesolutions.zs]

Subject: Jeremy and Amanda

Richard

Have had a meeting with Jeremy and Amanda r.e. work. I'm not happy with their output at the

moment. The legals on Darkheath are really dragging. I am going out there this afternoon to start generating ideas for the presentation to PharmaCorp. Will give you my immediate thoughts when I get back.

Regarding Jeremy and Amanda I think we ought to get onto the employment consultancy about the procedure required for dismissal in case things don't improve.

Regards

Simon

To: Simon Rose [s.rose@industrialpropertysolutions.zs]

Subject: RE: Jeremy and Amanda

I think maybe we should keep our eye on it. Nothing drastic. We'll keep the informal on record. Good luck at Darkheath.

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The rain beat against the window and the wind began to howl. The sky was a foreboding grey. You could smell the electricity in the air. Any moment now the maelstrom would erupt in a flash of furious light and a crash of demonic thunder.

It was a sparse room, most of the furniture had been removed long ago. It had the same smell that most of the buildings in the hospital had, a musty, damp odour. That would soon go. I had expected there to be a echo of the madness that had occupied this room lingering in the walls. Some rooms hold onto emotions greedily. But this had potential, a bit of wallpaper and a lick of paint it would be a very nice working space.

The bay window looked over the valley. It was an ideal place to watch the thunderstorm. I sat down and sat back waiting for the show to start. The sky lit up and a few seconds later there was a deep rumble of thunder. I caught sight of something hiding in the shadows looking out at me. I paused to see if it would move. Something small and black. I thought it may have been a rat, but it remained dead still. I waited for the next flash of lightning to see if it was still there, Maybe I had imagined it.

The wind was blowing the rain sideways now, pounding it against the widow. The room lit up. It

looked like a statue of some sort, hiding in the corner. The thunder was louder this time, and quicker. I reached out into the darkness and pulled up the figurine. A ghastly spectre appeared out of the gloom at me. A dark face with a large blood covered tongue. Four arms flailing excitedly, in one hand she held a human head, a knife in the other and the third one pouring out blood. Around her neck she had a chain of human heads, around her waist a belt of human forearms. It seemed so alive and vivid.

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To: Richard Eaves [r.eaves@industrialpropertiesolutions.zs]

Subject: Darkheath

Richard

Had a look around Darkheath today and my immediate thoughts are that you are a complete arsehole. I hope you find my attitude more agreeable.

Regards

Simon

...Save to draft.

\*

Keep relaxing. Think of Respighi's Pines of Rome. Breathe. In and out. There are almost sleeping moments. Like a day dream where you are not actually asleep but you are not perceiving anything just processing your inner thoughts. This is on the very edge of that place called balmy slumber. It is at the point where dreams start and your ego still has influence on your mind. The place that seems so accessible to children and artists.

Is that a spider on my leg? It's crawling up my leg. Slowly testing its footing along the way. Its going to build a nest in my belly button. I think its web is catching my thoughts. It knows what I'm thinking. It obviously has some subversive plan for me ("der Rabe ißt die Spinne").

In a few weeks my body will be home to a colony of baby spiders. The meal they make of their mother will not satisfy their appetite for long! What will be next on the menu? Do baby Spiders know that they are not supposed to eat humans? ("Die kleine Spinne ist heißhunger")

Maybe they will feast on my thoughts. It is known in the animal kingdom for parents to stockpile

food before the offspring is inflicted with the bile and putrid effluence of this world. The child in the womb protected from knowledge, its innocence unmolested until it enters this world. Sarah...

Do I fear death or long for it? I sometimes fantasize about an off button. One which instantly disables the brain. Stops the thoughts and the untethered introspection - looking where it will, digging up seeds to sow for later harvest. Maybe then - splendid sleep. Is it actually sleep I crave? Or his brother death? I ask the question again but even now that is a place I dare not go, the answer has too much truth about it.

It all stops at ineffable truth. There are no questions to follow truth.

Oh Kali I wonder what it feels like to open up an artery of a live animal and let it watch as its blood showers a shrine to you under pressure from its beating heart. Would the excitement fill the void and would the guilt re-start my dead heart? I need to feel again.

She didn't answer although I could see she was on the point of laughing, looking down at me without pity from the bedside table.. Her maniacal grimace revealed a mad lust for vigour. She was so alive, so certain. Kali please let me sleep. I make this sacrifice to you. This drop of blood from my finger for one nights release. Is it a strong enough bargain? Would you take some fresh tears as a deposit? I give myself to you Kali if you would grant me this night a dream uninterrupted.

Still she grinned, eyes piercing through logic and reason. A look of pure emotion: joy, lust, mischief, life. I wonder if...

When will I sleep? What is the mystery I contemplate endlessly whilst staring at the exhaustion induced manifestations on the ceiling? The Tickapod sits on the edge of the forest watching the degrading carcass of its nobler friend the Eagle. He sits praying for a rising from the ashes. Its not in the Eagle's nature to be re-born it is in its spirit. In a baptism of fire our melancholies dissolve and flail away. The Tickapod contemplated this on his wooden perch. Eventually it will know what the Eagle now knows. The empty void. The void that I am slipping into.

\*

To: Richard Eaves [r.eaves@industrialpropertysolutions.zs]

Subject: Darkheath

Hi Richard

Had a bloody good look around Darkheath Hospital yesterday and I think we are onto a real winner here. No major renovation work will be required, we could get it ready in less than six months! I definitely

recommend we take this to planning.

Catch you tomorrow

Simon.

...Send

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"Simon got your email yesterday thanks very much. Good to see you're back on track." He spoke casually on the phone, he was probably out at lunch. "Working a bit late for a Sunday still having trouble sleeping?"

"I'm feeling great actually. Best night's sleep in ages."

"Did our little conversation help?"

"Immensely thank you Richard. Really helped me focus on what's important you know."

"Let's go out tonight to celebrate. Just the two of us, talk about where we are taking this company."

"Can't wait."

\*

The world is so beautiful. Most of the time you forget it. You are distracted by work that overburdens you, friends that demand more of you, advertising that wants you to spend money, governments that want your taxes, people who want your obedience. When you do suddenly catch a glimpse of it, it wrenches your heart right out of your chest. That sense of longing that has always been there but now consumes you brings tears to your eyes as you stare out into the infinite universe and say 'Oh my God, it's so beautiful.' Then you understand what bliss is. You live in it but you can't see it because life gets in the way. The solution is obvious and scary.

"Why do people become alcoholics Simon? I mean here I am, a few pints and I'm totally pissed and to be frank. It feels awful."

"I'm not sure."

"You've been quiet tonight, you okay? You're not still a bit you know?"

"Upset? No. I'm just contemplative that's all."

"Don't be so bloody meek, this is a celebration. You're back and I've missed you damn it."

"Okay then, tell you what, lets go to Darkheath."

"What? Now?"

"Why not? We can do some reconnaissance and there is something I want to show you."

Sleep is not the solution to my or man's problems. Dreaming is a sociopathic state. We feel neither the presence or appreciate the existence of others when we dream. It is the eden of I. Separated from the other, it is liberation of the individual and ultimately unsatisfying. It is only through unity that I understand and perceive as I am born to do. It is such a wrench to be separated from the other that we live our lives longing for rebalance. Finally I understand.

When we made love we were unified. Staring over the precipice together. As close to death as we dare get without falling over into the endless state of rarefied existence. That of being but not doing. Now she has crossed over. As I see her falling into the endless nothing alone, she stares up at me watching from the edge, unable to pull her back. How can I leave her? Falling forever, alone. Man is only solitary by constraint. Nature made man a social creature and it is only the simulacra that we call 'reality' that keeps us separate. We are not separate, we are one. Except her.

"I'm not sure we should be doing this Simon. It feels a bit kooky"

"If only you knew."

"Come again?"

"Nothing."

"That last Jack Daniels really pushed me to the edge you know. This cab is spinning, I'm probably going to vomit in a minute."

"Good, " I smiled, "we live on the edge."

"I want a Kebab."

"We're here, " I tapped the driver on the shoulder. "Just pull over here."

"Wow its dark."

"That's the country for you."

"Are we gonna walk in the dark?"

"Yes"

"Through an abandoned mental institution?"

"Absolutely."

"It's a good job I'm pissed."

\*

"I like being pissed Simon."

"Oh really how come?"

"Well it lets you be yourself you know?"

"Not really."

"Well when I'm not pissed there is all this shit that just gets in the way you know. When I'm pissed I can just be me, to me. No bullshit."

"I think I understand. Have you ever wondered why you're not you to yourself when you are not pissed?"

"Why are we here really?"

"Have you ever heard of the Hindu goddess Kali?"

"Nope but I just saw a shooting star."

Bereft of thought I need to be in order to dream. We lose all concept of the moment. What is now? What is here? There is only me, selfish and separate from everything else. My dreams have gone and I am disappearing. Who am I? The answer to which becomes more obscure with each sleepless night.

Look at him. Barely able to think. Stumbling along the path, I'll be holding him up soon. A raging animal. Servant to his desires. 'What I need is what I must have now and I shall have it.' If only he would inscribe that on his face, all other communication would become redundant.

"Who are you talking too?" I'm pretty sure I hadn't said anything. "You've been mumbling all night. There was a moment in the bar when I thought you were going a bit bonkers."

Some people would say that, probably most in fact. They hadn't experienced what I had experienced. It is not something that you can teach someone. Knowledge gained by experience is not logical. It can't be. I see it so clearly now. I am living proof. The universe is not as simple as our imperfect senses can perceive. We are constrained by what we are, the only way to expand our limits is through experience and someone has shown me the way. I now have someone else to dedicate my life to.

"You know I only wanted what's best for you Simon. I was hoping you would open up tonight. I know I can be an asshole but I was really concerned about you. What you've been through with Sarah is unimaginable and I can't fix it but I was hoping you would tell someone about the burden you've been carrying."

It's too late now. Your empathy and understanding is irrelevant and was never really required.

"Thank you Richard, but really I'm feeling much better. After you've seen this you will be too."

I could hear his mind churning it over. I was being elusive and beyond control. Even when he was drunk he needed to remain in control. We approached the small villa. The one I had sat and watched the

thunderstorm in. It had become the place of my salvation, it was from here that I could see Damascus.

"What are all these rose petals on the road for? Just piled up look." He seemed quite breathless as he kicked the pile of rose petals into the air. "Smell that." He said and inhaled a lung full of air.

The air did not smell of roses. It smelled of death. A pungent odour that is genetically programmed into us as a warning sign. He stopped walking.

"That smells awful, like rotting meat or something. There must be a dead animal around here."

"We're nearly there now."

I opened the door and the smell hit me. I could hear scurrying, the building had become infested with rats.

"It smells like an abattoir, what is this Simon? What's going on?"

"It's just through here."

I put my hand in my coat pocket and felt the handle of the knife. I could easily out pace him. I was sober, he wouldn't be able to run in a straight line but I didn't want it to come to that. I put on a calming smile.

"Maybe we should talk about getting you to see a therapist." he said.

He stepped over the threshold and into the small lobby. He didn't see me turn the lock.

"Just through here Richard."

\*

Any day now I was going to be a father. It had worked out pretty damn well for me in the end. The woman I love is going to be the mother of my son. Work was excellent, I was up and coming, singled out for success and all round golden boy. Sure I worked late but I had to get these building checks finished before I took some paternity leave. I would have called Sarah to tell her that I was on my way home but the home phone was out of order. The engineer would be coming out tomorrow. I should have called on Friday but was so busy at work I forgot. 'What if we had the baby over the weekend?' She asked. 'how would you tell our parents?' It wasn't a problem I had my mobile.

It was dark. The nights had been drawing in for a month now and it was noticeable. If only there were more hours in the night. I seem to be tired no matter how many hours I get. That will all change once the baby is born. Maybe I should get it settled in my head, once little Timmy was born. Timmy is a good name. Sounds like someone you want to be friends with. An easy going sort of bloke who people just like. Nobody has a bad word to say about Timmy. Especially when he grows up to be a successful architect. They will say

'that Timmy made it. I'm glad for him he is such a nice guy.'

"Timmy Rose." I said out loud and smiled.

I couldn't wait to get home. Hopefully dinner was waiting for me. Sarah had never really been into cooking but ever since she became pregnant the mothering instinct kicked in. I remember the day she told me. I had been cagey about the whole thing. We were young and still had to establish our careers. She loved her teaching job. She loved the kids. She always had wanted some of her own and her resolve had only focused since she had started working at the primary school.

It was another rainy Sunday, I was reading the paper when she just looked up at me and smiled. 'I'm pregnant.' I smiled back at her or at least thought I did. 'No need to panic,' she said 'you'll make a wonderful father.' She knows me so well.

There is a moment when an expectant father suddenly realizes what is happening in his life and the gravity of the moment becomes apparent. New life in my own image. So fragile and wonderful. My heart broke the moment we had a name. Suddenly I could hardly breathe and my eyes flooded with tears. That name just seemed to make it so real. I was so overcome by love for Sarah and Timmy that for the first time in my life I felt part of something more special than Simon Rose. My family is bigger than I can ever be on my own. I had been so conceited and wrapped up in myself that I only ever stepped out of that for small periods of time with Sarah. She made me feel normal, she showed me the truth of the world. A world without me.

The streetlights flickered on. Orange grimy street lights. I no longer wanted to be outside, I wanted to be home with my family. Everything seemed so horrible out here. Even the roses had given up. There were petals all over the floor. Deep red petals dancing slightly in the gentle breeze. I could feel winter in the wind. It seemed so dark as I walked through the gate, there were no lights on in the house.

The house was cold. Where was Sarah? I wonder if she... I ran to the cupboard under the stairs. Her bag was still there she hadn't gone to the hospital.

"Sarah?" I called out. No reply, she must have gone out. I didn't blame her she had been complaining of getting bored.

I went into the kitchen to see if she had left me any food. I turned the light on which flickered into life. There was some water in the kettle I turned it on and found her friend Katie's number in my mobile. No answer. Maybe she was asleep upstairs.

I crept up the creaking stairs. I didn't want to wake her if she was asleep. I quietly opened the door of our room and saw her sleeping quietly on her back. Silent and with her mouth open she was completely

peaceful. She had the phone in her hand, she must have forgotten that it wasn't working and tried to call someone. The Doctor had advised her not to sleep on her back for too long. I went inside to roll her onto her side. When I put my hand on her shoulder it was completely cold.

"Sarah?"

She didn't answer. I pulled back the duvet and saw blood. Lot's of it. I went numb inside.

The ambulance man tried to comfort me as they put my dead son and wife into the back of the truck. I phoned work and left a message that I wouldn't make it in the morning and climbed into a taxi to go to the hospital.

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Richard heaved when he saw the dead bull. The room spattered with its blood. It lay lifeless on the floor. It was majestic. A sacrifice, it had given its life for the veneration of something greater. Now it knew death and was the better for it. It was at peace. Unshackled to this life of misery and recipient of the positive karma it's sacrifice had generated. Kali had given my life back for the sake of this sacrifice. I looked at Richard.

"Isn't it magnificent?" I said.

He panicked and frantically searched the room for a way out. The fool, he is in the presence of a greater power than he or I can fully understand and all he can think about is his own skin.

"It's monstrous. What the hell is going on here Simon?"

He seemed quite sober now. Already his mind had been elevated. The shock and power of the shrine had jolted his rudimentary and base ego into an inquisitive person.

"Don't you see it is amazing. I want you to understand what is happening here."

"What is happening here? Tell me for Christ's sake."

"Do you agree that I am a changed man?"

"Definitely. Absolutely, you're sick."

"No Richard it is you who are sick. I have experienced something that lets me see just how sick the world is. I want you to become part of that experience."

He stared at me for a moment and shook his head.

"No, never, this is black magic."

He really was pathetic. Black magic indeed, a childish myth used along with fairy dust and unicorn horns to mystify and confuse people. It was plain to see in front of him. There was nothing magic about

this. There were no rules being broken here, these are the rules only they had been forgotten.

"This simple sacrifice has changed me from a morose and practically suicidal slave into master of my own destiny. Such a profound change for a tiny life. The bargain is a good one is it not?"

"Simon listen to me. We're friends remember?"

I pulled the knife out of my pocket. It was still stained with the blood of the bull. At first it had struggled, its grip on life was strong and then as it watched its own blood spurt out from its open artery it began to relax. It suddenly realized that it had been struggling all its life against its own liberation. Alive it was a slave treated monstrously. Dead it was free.

"For a bull I get my own life back. What would the price of Sarah be? What would the price be to bring her back do you think?"

"No Simon, you couldn't."

I walked slowly and confidently towards him. His fate was now out of his hands. With the power I had at my command all I had to do was make a decision and it became inevitable. He backed away towards the corner of the room. He pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket and started pressing the buttons. I darted forward and smashed it out of his hand. He struggled, grabbed my hand and tried to push the knife away. He amused me. Struggling for his life the same way as the bull had. Soon he too would know peace and I would hold Sarah in my arms again. Sweet, sweet Sarah. He sunk his teeth into my wrist. It hurt, I recoiled and pulled the knife back towards me. He pushed my body away with surprising strength. Its amazing what powers fear brings out of you. I fell back and hit something with my heel. The momentum was still pushing me back and I tripped.

Richard stood over me. Fear and panic in his eyes but it was a different kind of fear. He was looking at my chest. There was blood all over my hands. I felt serene and hazy. No pain. I tried to tell Richard not to panic. Soon I will be with Sarah and Timmy again, it was just a matter of a few small moments.

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