Fragments

Lawrence Watt-Evans

Once upon a time, my mother told me, back in the Dead And Gone, there was a land called California where the sun always shone, and it was always warm, and it never rained; where the people were beautiful, and everyone had a great big car that could drive as fast as the wind, and there were good roads everywhere to drive them on. And in California was a place called Hollywood, or maybe Holywood, and that was where all the dreams came from.

And people didn’t dream their dreams alone in bed, inside their heads, the way we do now; they watched them unfold as colored pictures, larger than life, brighter than life, on great silver screens that hung in theaters, above the stage, or in magic boxes called “videos” that they kept in their houses. And the dreams always had happy endings, and they always made sense—virtue triumphed, and evil was punished, and true love won out in the end.

I’ve never been sure how to take my mother’s stories—I mean, it all just sounds like a fairy tale, or an allegory of some kind, but she didn’t seem to mean it that way. Even when I asked her straight out, she insisted that California was real, in the Dead And Gone, and Hollywood was real—but she changed the story, said that they didn’t really make dreams there, they made films, or movies, or videotapes, or television, and when I asked her what all those things meant she couldn’t explain.

They were all just other names for dreams, she said.

And maybe Hollywood wasn’t exactly real real, she would say, it was all sort of fake, but it wasn’t made up, and then she would get confused, or I would.

So maybe dreams used to be different, I don’t know.

\* \* \*

Iasked my mother once what had happened to California, and she said she didn’t know. I asked if it was still there, just all ruined, and she said she didn’t know. It might have fallen into the sea, she said.

She didn’t know.

I was reading a book we found—it still had the back cover and almost all the pages. I don’t read very well, because I’ve never had time to work at it, and there isn’t all that much to read anyway, but I read this book. It talked about a place called Atlantis that sank into the sea.

I asked my mother if Atlantis was another name for California.

She burst out crying, and wouldn’t talk to me for hours.

When she would talk to me again, she told me that California was real, and Atlantis wasn’t; that California was still there fifty years ago, and Atlantis had been gone for at least two thousand; that there are lots of made-up places that sank, like Lemuria and Mu and Numenor, and Atlantis is just one of them.

I don’t understand any of it. Why would people make up places like that? Why are there so many? If Atlantis wasn’t real, how could it have sunk two thousand years ago?

I asked my mother if she was ever in California before it sank, and she got angry again.

“It didn’t sink,” she said.” Or maybe it did.”

She wouldn’t say if she’d ever been there.

\* \* \*

We found videotapes one day. Videotapes are brittle black box shapes.

I thought videotapes were a kind of dream, but my mother said these black things are videotapes.

They aren’t dreams; they’re just black plastic. They don’t seem to be much use; they aren’t strong enough to build anything. They’re shiny, though.

\* \* \*

We were taking apart a car, and my mother yelled at us.

“Not that one!” she said.” That’s a fifty-six shevvie, it might be the last one in the world!”

I told her we needed hoses and pipes, and steel springs for weapons, and wheels, and that we wanted the oil to burn for heat, and she said,” Yes, that’s fine, but not that one! Can’t you find any others?”

Lindsey and I didn’t see what difference it made, but we decided we could let my mother have one car for herself. There are plenty of cars, though most of them have a lot more pieces missing.

When we left her there she was sitting inside it, holding the wheel thing and talking to herself.

\* \* \*

When Lindsey first found Stuart he tried to rape her, but we didn’t mind, really. Anybody would have, in that situation. She ran away from him, and we went back together and talked to him. We figured we could probably trade with him—just about any time we find someone new there are things we have that they want, and things they have that we want.

All Stuart said he wanted was sex with Lindsey.

We thought it over, but Lindsey didn’t like him very much, so we said we didn’t think so.

But I could see he had a lot of good things—he had aluminum pans, and lights that were much brighter than ours. So I asked if he would like to meet my mother—with us as chaperones, on neutral ground, of course, in case she didn’t like him, either.

But she did like him. She sent us both away almost at once, and we walked off, leaving the two of them sitting on a block of concrete, talking about computers. Old people all seem to know about computers, but none of them can explain very well what they were for, and I’ve never figured it out. There are a lot of things from the Dead And Gone that are like that; it makes it very hard to understand the old people, sometimes.

We had a computer once, but the battery died when I was a baby.

\* \* \*

My mother lived at Stuart’s place for months. She liked it there, with the aluminum pans to cook in and the lights that were bright enough to read by.

“He’s got a generator,” she told us. I don’t know if it was true. I never saw it.

Lindsey and I didn’t move in there with them; we liked having our own private place, and Stuart and my mother liked having their own private place. We didn’t have bright lights run by a generator, we just had old car batteries that kept our old lights glowing, but that was enough. And I cooked in the same pots I always had.

\* \* \*

We didn’t see Stuart that often, so it took some time before we realized how irritated he was getting.

When I saw his hand was bloody, I asked how it happened.

“I hit a wall,” he said.

I looked at his hand.

I’d seen people hit walls before; when we were with the Chicago tribe there was a man who hit walls when things went wrong. I looked at Stuart’s hand, and I knew he hadn’t hit anything just once.

“Are you and Mom getting along okay?” I asked.

He looked at me sideways, like I’d just shown I was smarter than he’d thought.

“No,” he said. I nodded.

“I thought you two would have fun together, talking about the Dead And Gone. And the other thing, of course.”

“We did,” Stuart said.” Really, we did. But she won’t talk about anything else.”

I blinked, and thought about that.

“What else is there?” I asked.

My mother came to find us. She was crying. Stuart was packing to go; he said she could have the old place, he’d find a new one. She wasn’t invited to come with him. He would leave the aluminum pans, too.

I went to talk to him— “man to man,” my mother called it.

“Georgie,” he said when he saw me.” I thought she might send you.”

I nodded.

“Well, it won’t do any good, but I don’t mind talking to you,” he said, as he heaved bundles onto his cart.

“Then why are you going?” I asked.

“Because I can’t stand listening to her any more,” he told me.” Because all she talks about is the Dead And Gone.”

“Well, what else should she talk about?” I asked, puzzled.

“Well, how about what’s yet to come?” he asked, pushing the bundles neatly into place.

“What do you mean? Nothing’s left to come.”

“What about tomorrow?” he asked.

“What about it? It’ll be just like today.”

“Will it? Why?”

“Because...”

I didn’t have an answer. It just always had been. Ever since I was born, everything had been the same. Oh, the weather changed, it was cold in the winter and hot in the summer, sunny some days and rainy on others; I grew up; some days hunting was good, some days it was poor; but nothing really changed.

“Georgie,” Stuart said,” your mother saw a lot of movies as a kid, and I think she remembers every single one of them, but she never got the point.”

“What point?”

“The people in the movies never did what your mother does,” he said.” They never sat around waiting for life to happen to them. They went out and made things happen.”

“But that was in the Dead And Gone,” I said.” Dreams were different then.”

He looked at me, and it was a funny look, as if he thought I’d been hurt or something.

“No,” he said.” The world was different then, all right—but people were the same, and dreams were the same. Those are two things that really don’t change.” He pulled some straps tight across his cart.” People change the world with their dreams, but people don’t change, and dreams don’t change.”

“No, my mother told me,” I said.” People watched dreams together, she said.”

He made a face.

“That’s what she does now,” he said.” She sits there, watching the old dreams in her head and telling me all about them.” He sighed.

“Georgie,” he said,” I want my own dreams, new dreams.” He picked up the pulling bar.

“I guess it’s because you’re from before,” I said.

He left.

\* \* \*

Ididn’t tell my mother what Stuart had said; I just told her he was gone. She cried for awhile.

Dreams don’t change the world. My mother has plenty of dreams. I don’t, but she does.

Sometimes she sits in her car, talking to people who aren’t there, pretending it’s going down the road as fast as the wind.

Cars don’t run any more. My mother says it’s because there isn’t any gasoline, but I don’t think that’s why. I think it’s because the Dead And Gone is dead and gone. All the old dreams and the old magic are dead, and we need to live in the here and now.

My mother tries to live in the Dead And Gone, but she can’t. She wants to live in California, I think. Stuart tried to live somewhere else, too, I guess—someplace that’s never existed.

Atlantis, maybe.

But most people live here and now. I do. Lindsey does. Our baby does—we named her Shevvie, to please my mother.

Really, you know, it’s a good world, a young world.

Why would we want to change it?