

Equinox Society Radio 009

My Dear Strangers,

In our last broadcast, society member William Rook was visited by a young girl who'd lost her cat in a dream forest. She asked William to find it and showed him a picture of the cat. He later described it as a thing beyond words and comprehension, saying, "I wasn't traumatized so much as awestruck—full of fear, and wonder, and amazement not only that such a cat had been conceived, but that a ten-year-old girl had drawn it with a pencil."

Despite believing the girl's visit had itself been a dream, William began, every night, to dream of an infinite field of rye, full of ravenous mice, and of a strange, inverted forest where he tried to locate the cat. His dreams grew increasingly urgent. The rye started to die, the hungry mice swarmed, and although William followed signs of the missing cat, he wasn't able to find it. The dreams affected his conscious hours, too, as if even after waking, the mice were steadily devouring his subconscious.

After he told me what had been happening, I was affected, too. At first, minor elements appeared in my own dreams. An upside-down tree. A body covered in pine sap. A friend with a backpack full of mice. During the day, I noticed hints of an evergreen scent, heard rustling rye, and found rodent droppings on my bedroom floor. All of which—like most of William's own initial symptoms—might have been explained in ordinary ways.

But William's symptoms worsened. Mine did, too. One night I dreamt not of the field, but of drinking rye whiskey in a hot, abandoned bar. I needed to drink so my penis would stop writing a novel. It made sense at the time. But after finishing the whiskey, I realized a mouse had been in the bottle, hiding in the rye, and then the mouse was in my bladder. It was drunk, but it kept rolling and swelling inside me, and after I woke up, I had a constant sensation of needing to urinate, and of having a fat, pickled mouse moving in my bladder. I went to the doctor, convinced I had an infection, but I didn't. The next day, I peed blood.

Whatever the explanation for all this, William and I agreed. He had to find the cat before the mice got worse.

This is Equinox Society Radio, and I'm a stranger. Like you.

William sent the following email.

Dear Dennis,

I'm so sorry the mice are after you, too, especially if they found you because of our conversations. Was it the power of suggestion, or did the mice glimpse you in my subconscious without me realizing? I hope none of the podcast listeners were affected after the last broadcast.

You know I've had a hard week trying to find the indescribable cat, or even reaching the forest where its pawprints were. My dreams kept changing. I felt less and less in control of my environment and safety. One night, I took a sleep draft, determined to sink deeper into the dream and, I hoped, track the cat without the interference of my usual self-awareness and volatile sleep patterns. The medicine worked, with horrible results.

I fell asleep and found myself, as usual, in the endless field of rye. The rye was still dead and yellow, and it had been harvested into standing shocks, like those decorative corn-husk bundles you see at rural farm stands. The shocks were narrow at the top, where the stems were tied, and wider at the bases. They stood at intervals as far as I could see in every direction, and the exposed ground between them was as solid as brick.

The shocks of rye started shuddering. I tried digging into the ground like before, to escape through the dirt into the forest far below, but the sunbaked ground was impossible to penetrate. The shocks of rye trembled more intensely. I pounded and clawed the ground, and it was so frustrating, so *unfair* that I couldn't break the surface. I had this awful feeling I deserved it somehow, as if I'd done something wrong and would never be able to change it. I scraped my knuckles and tore some fingernails off, and then my hands were mangled and bloody, and the ground soaked up the blood, and mice began tumbling out of every shock of rye—hundreds, thousands, more mice than the rye could possibly have held.

They swarmed me. I ran. I thought if I ran in one direction, I might at least outrun the mice from the other directions. I trampled the ones in front of me, but more and more covered the ground until it felt like I was running over thick, moving jelly. My ankles kept rolling, and when a surge of mice pushed toward me in a wave, I lost my balance and fell forward, grabbing onto the nearest shock of rye.

The rye and I toppled over together, but there was enough momentum to crash into another shock, and then another, and I kept going and started pulling the rye around my body as protection. My arms and legs and torso were covered, and I felt myself, including my head, turning into rye.

I gathered more of it from the field, getting bigger as I went, and I became a giant walking scarecrow. I was a hundred stories tall. I'm usually afraid of heights, but walking with my head in the sky was different. I felt so powerful, so stable and untouchable. The mice kept multiplying, but they were almost out of sight underneath my feet, like a pale gray ocean way down below me.

But then they started forming into ripples and swells. The swells kept growing, and the waves of mice crashed against my feet, and then rose to my ankles, and pretty soon the waves were battering my knees. One of the waves knocked me off balance, and when it receded, the undertow pulled my feet out from under me. I fell so slowly. My face swooped down from a thousand feet up. I watched it happen and I couldn't catch myself. It was a horrible sensation, like falling out of an airplane. The ocean of mice came closer and closer, and I knew when I finally splashed down, they'd rush into my face and chew me from the inside out.

I woke before I hit. But I must have been sleepwalking, under the influence of the medicine I'd taken, because I woke at the top of the stairs at the end of my hallway. I was halfway to falling, and I grabbed the handrail just in time, stumbled down a few steps, swung in a sideways arc, and crashed into the wall. It was dark at the bottom of the stairs, but I'd have sworn the floor was roiling with mice.

I had vertigo all day. I'd be reading in my chair and my feet would suddenly feel impossibly far below me. Later I fell forward walking *up* a flight of stairs, as if the stairs had suddenly revolved. My hands felt arthritically sore from digging at the field's hard ground. I couldn't overcome a sense of futility and weakness, along with the feeling that I somehow deserved it. It wasn't only that I'd failed to reach the forest or protect myself in the dream. It was that even in my conscious hours, I couldn't control my own body or emotions. Was that what the mice were really doing? Was that how they chewed me from the inside-out? If I couldn't control my dreams, didn't that mean I couldn't control my mind? And throughout it all, in my dreams and in my house, I found myself inadequate and terribly alone.

I needed help. I called Amanda.

She scolded me for not asking sooner, but you know Amanda. Even her scolds are reassuring, like when a doctor shakes their head as if to say, "You idiot. Why'd you let it fester so long?" before handing you a script to make it all better. Amanda came over after sundown with strategies and a bag of her witchcraft supplies. By "bag" I mean the kind of massive toolbag you see lifelong carpenters lugging around worksites. With her materials and moves, she could have raised invigorating dreams out of graves.

But after she and I talked, we agreed we didn't need anything elaborate. I'd been considering my problem, too, all day. What if I hadn't found the indescribable cat or escaped the mice because I hadn't really *wanted* to? Because everything in the dream was living in my head. If I found the cat, and the cat killed the mice, wouldn't I be killing pieces of myself? Whatever the solution ultimately was, it couldn't come from someone else. It had to come from me.

Since my sleeping and waking selves hadn't solved the problem on their own, I asked Amanda to help me put them two of them together. I needed to be in my dream *and* have rational thoughts, but if I thought too consciously, I'd wake and lose the dream. So Amanda hypnotized me, sitting in a chair opposite my own and talking to me throughout. She was the conscious guide in my subconscious experience.

Once she had me fully under, I was standing alone in the rye, and I heard her voice as clear as common sense. She didn't direct my dream or offer solutions. She only asked questions while I told her what was happening.

"What's it like there?" Amanda said.

I told her the rye was broken and scattered all around me. The mice were sleeping underneath it, sensing me and slowly waking up. Their movements stirred brittle leaf bits and grain dust into the air. The particles made it hard for me to breathe. They dried my eyes and made things difficult to see. There was no sun, but the sky was glaring and hot. The mice were crawling out of the rye, and all I wanted was to hide in the dark damp soil underground. But the ground's surface was still as hard as brick, completely unyielding when I stomped it with my heel.

"Is there another way through?" Amanda asked.

I'll say again, I didn't hear Amanda as if she were really speaking to me. Her words came to me like sensible questions anyone might think, and so I wasn't self-aware or jarred into consciousness. *Another way through*, I thought. I had a pickaxe then and started hacking at the ground, and then my hands were metal blades, and I was furiously chipping up chunks and shards.

But the hole didn't grow. It didn't change at all. The mice swarmed over me. I was crouched and naked, and they hooked their claws into my skin, covering me completely, and then more of the mice climbed on, covering each other in layer after layer, pressing me down and blocking the light.

"Can you shake them off?" Amanda said.

"I can't shake them off," I said.

"Can you run?"

"I tried that before. I can't. It doesn't work."

"You have to get away," she said.

But her voice sounded distant, muffled by the weight and density of mice. They were so heavy, tightening and pulsing around me. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. There was so much pressure, I thought I might pop. And then the mice began to eat me, bit by little bit. They started with my skin, taking nips out of my back and face. They took the tiniest, sharpest bites and each one stung. My eyelids. My ears. My nipples. My scrotum. They chewed their way into my fat and meat. I felt the grinding vibrations when they gnawed into bones. They forced their

way into my orifices until my head and intestines were stuffed with mice, and then they ate me from the outside and inside together.

When they'd eaten every piece, they scattered in the field.

"Can you think?" Amanda said.

I was a thousand globs and morsels in a thousand mice's bellies, but yes: I could think. I couldn't move, and I couldn't sense anything from inside the mice, but I didn't feel gone. I was somehow me.

Apparently, still hypnotized, I stopped relating my experience to Amanda. I fell silent for so long, she took a chance and gave me a suggestion, but she did it in a way that wouldn't wake me up.

"What would Amanda do now?" she asked.

"Magic," I said.

"What does Amanda use for magic?"

I thought of a lot of things. Fire. Words. A blade. Her body. Each part of me—every chunk of meat in every mouse's stomach—seemed to have its own vibrating thought, but finally they all had one united instinct. Preserve yourself. Survive.

I turned myself into salt.

"How do you feel?" Amanda asked.

"Good," I said. "Clean."

I crystalized and needled into the mice's stomachs. I couldn't see anything from inside, but I knew the mice were agitated. They were hurting from the salt, and they couldn't regurgitate me, and they were frantic for water, scratching at the field's hard, dry ground until they broke through to the moist dirt below. They burrowed in, absorbing water from the soil, but I concentrated on being salt and they couldn't expel me or dissolve me. They dug and dug, and when they finally got through and emerged on the other side, we were all in the inverted forest together.

And then I wasn't salt anymore. I let myself be *them*. I got my senses back, or rather I experienced the forest as the mice—with their eyes, and ears, and instincts. I saw the evergreen roots from a thousand vantage points. I felt the swirling fog, and sensed the birds moving in the mud, and twitched my toes and whiskers in a thousand different ways.

I felt ravenous and crazed. I wanted to find the birds and eat them. Absorb the fog. Suck the sap from every root until the upside-down pine trees dried out and died. I wanted nothing else. I wanted to waste the whole forest, the way I'd desolated the rye field, and I was about to let myself run in every possible direction when a sound rumbled through me.

It was the indescribable cat, growling in the distance. All thousand of me panicked. I'd never felt a more visceral terror, not even when my William self was eaten by the mice. There's no way to adequately describe the experience of terrified rodents, let alone a mass of rodents panicking together. All I can say is that every cell in every mouse tried to get away. Into the fog, into the dirt, anywhere but there.

Whatever Williamness remained, like an unvoiced thought, made the mice hesitate. I kept thinking, "Wait." I kept thinking, "Stop." The mice were paralyzed, then, and I felt their helplessness and horror as the cat came closer, growling louder and shifting the air with its approach. An awful thing, a terrifying force with a body, so dark that even its proximity blinded every one of my eyes. Its smell infused me like a thick, fatal ink. Some part of me knew the cat had reached the first of the mice. It ate them, one by one, like a furry black hole. I was the mice, and I was me, and as the cat kept eating, I felt myself, piece by piece, blinking out of existence.

But the more mice the cat ate, the less afraid I felt, and then I started feeling bigger. I started feeling stronger. A monstrous darkness seemed to build and billow up inside me. The cat was eating and digesting me, mouse by mouse, but I wasn't turning into nothing. I was turning into *cat*. Its muscles and its blood, its violence and power. I was mowing through the mice, all appetite and slaver and gnashed-up guts, and when the mice were almost gone and I was all feral cat, I knew that I'd restored myself by devouring myself. I wanted to keep eating. I wanted to devour myself over and over, so I was constantly nothing and everything forever.

Amanda woke me up.

Her face looked impossible—its solidity and color, the way her eyes really saw me. The un-catness and humanness of everything about her. She held my hand and I was amazed to have a hand. I felt as if we'd both coalesced out of nothing. It felt good to be in my body again, to hear Amanda's voice, to breathe and move around. My thoughts and senses had a feeling of unreality, but Amanda made me waffles and eggs, and the weight of the food grounded me and made feel whole.

Coffee and conversation made the dream seem increasingly like a story I'd invented. As I'm describing it to you now, the details are specific but have lost their vividness. The sensations remain strong but they're hard to reconcile—a lingering fear of falling apart, and a feeling of voraciousness and self-reformation.

I couldn't thank Amanda enough. My mind might have scattered into bits without her help. She stayed with me all day and watched me sleep that night. I don't remember dreaming. I woke up fresh.

When Amanda left that morning, I walked her to the door and we found a small black envelope on the top of my stoop. Inside it was a piece of notebook paper, with a note from the young girl, thanking me for finding her cat.

I hope your own dreams have gotten better, Dennis. I'll talk to you soon.

Yours,
William

I've been in touch with William since he emailed that report, and I'm happy to say he's fully recovered, both subconsciously and consciously, at least as far as he knows. I'm also happy to say the sensation of a mouse in my bladder vanished within hours of reading his email.

I did, however, have a different dream.

I share a home and a bed with a woman named Titania. We're in love, and not in a swirly short-term way. We've put in major years. We take care of each other. We've grown together, like a cemetery tree that picks up a marker, until one day a child walks by and sees a hundred-pound cross cradled in the leaves. Me and her. We're life and death.

Titania goes to bed earlier than I do. When I crash most nights, she's already asleep. Sometimes she travels for work, and I go to bed and wake up alone, and there's a lostness there I try not to feel. Other times, even when she is there, I have these smeary dreams when I'm half-thinking and half-asleep and I can't tell the difference. I'll be lying in bed sideways, and I can feel her bare foot pressed against my calf, and I have this dreamlike fear of losing her forever.

We're on a city street somewhere. I know the city but I don't. I see the back of her just ahead of me, and I'm following the floral tattoo on her skin, but there's a beige or reddish fog obscuring what I see. She's walking out of reach. There are people around—it doesn't matter who—and they're distracting me, and the whole time, I'm increasingly annoyed at the distractions, and at myself for getting so diverted.

There's a chapel full of salmon, and a woman complimenting my scars. I don't like salmon, and I don't trust the compliment, and in both cases, I feel like I'm to blame. I get preoccupied, thinking about my insecurities, and then Titania's way ahead of me on the street. Just inklings of her tattoos, her hair, and her perfume. I know I'm losing her but it doesn't make me walk faster. It only makes me sad.

I know it's really going to happen someday. One of us will die. The feeling of the dream is so fucking real. It has the déjà vu quality of a deep memory, or the feeling of a warning I can't do anything about.

It's like I'm being shown something I need to expect, and I know I'm unprepared. I'm not ready to lose her. I don't want to be distracted. The simplest thing to do is snap myself out of the dream and feel how together we are right now. Her body, her breath, right there beside me. But even when I wake myself up, she's asleep. I'm still on my own remembering the loss, and so I have to ride it out alone, and eventually fall asleep again, and hope I'll dream something happier and better.

That sense of losing her smudges into the next day. It leaves me feeling lonely and emotionally queasy, as if whatever I choose to do—live in the moment, ignore the fear—can't work forever. Should I tell myself it's only a dream? What if it's something more? Maybe it's all just me, or maybe there are strange, secret energies at play. In every case, real or not—however I define that—part of me is already living with the loss.

Equinox Society Radio is produced by Dennis Mahoney. New episodes appear sporadically.

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Our three-note theme is played by Jack Mahoney.

Imagine our closing song is "Waiting for the Night" by Depeche Mode

Until next time, dear strangers... take care and look beyond.

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