

FICTION

The Dream

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Niles awoke from a strange dream to find that his snoring had once again driven his wife from their bed. On his way to the bathroom, he peered into the darkened living room and, as he expected, saw her form upon the sofa. Returning to bed, he retrieved what he could of the dream, fully expecting to ponder it with amusement while drifting off for another hour or two of sleep.

Niles and Thora were younger in the dream, perhaps in their fifties. They were at an academic conference in a hotel and had a room many stories up; but he, an early riser, had gone down to the lobby to work on his paper, and then, breakfast time having come, he had returned to their room and found her conversing in the corridor with a couple of other women. He opened his mouth to utter a cheery “Good morning,” but was arrested mid-word by the collective gasp of all three of the women as they turned to look at him. He looked down at himself and saw that, over his suit, he had pulled a sleeveless party dress of flamboyant orange silk. The skirt flared with stiff petticoats, something like a ballerina’s tutu. With a surge of anger, he stripped off the dress and threw it to the floor with a vindictive strength. That was the point at which he had awakened, greatly relieved to know he had been merely dreaming.

Unfortunately, his review of these details failed either to amuse him or to lull him into a pleasant early morning drowse. Instead, it forced unwelcome questions upon him. Did the donning of a dress in a dream signify that the identity of a woman lurked in his subconscious? Was he emotionally the female that, before his birth, his mother had hoped he would prove to be? He rallied almost instantaneously from these absurd, nonsensical questions, the answer to which was an abrupt No! He had been born a male, had always felt himself to be a male, had always wanted to be a

male. Irritably, he got up, put on his robe, and, having fetched in the morning newspaper, went to the study to read it.

The paper said that an aspiring assistant professor who had been denied tenure had filed suit against the university, claiming that the formality of his attire—he habitually wore classic-fit chinos, a navy blazer, and a tie—had been the single negative point adduced by his departmental tenure and promotion committee, which was composed of professors who—according to the suit—prided themselves on an informality approaching slovenliness. Wishing for more facts, Niles read the brief article a second time. But even as he tried to fix his thoughts on the ins and outs of academic selection, his mind returned to the puzzling dream. He could easily see its immediate source: an episode in a recent movie featuring a den of male transvestites, immaculately made up in female attire. The dress he had found on himself in the dream was resplendent, richly decorated and satiny, like those in the movie. What wasn't so easy to see was why putting on a dress in a dream should prove worrisome to a seventy-six-year-old man. Time had been—a very long time ago, in high school—that he had donned a dress and high heels for a skit at an assembly or, while wandering through the state fair, had seen college students in dresses and wigs on an open stage, and had thought of it all as mere tomfoolery.

He heard his wife close the bathroom door and remembered that she had early duty at the welfare center where she served as a volunteer. He went to the kitchen and began to prepare breakfast. He planned to tell Thora about the dream, knowing that its sheer implausibility would amuse her. But the more he thought about it, the more it seemed a needless indiscretion to mention it, as if in some vague manner it wasn't so implausible after all. Better to let sleeping dogs lie, as it were.

While he poured milk onto his cereal, she came into the kitchen, fastening a brooch to her blouse. He glanced at her appreciatively, aware that even in her seventies she was beautiful. She was of medium height, five feet six or so, a height—as she often observed dryly—universally considered desirable for women who wished to bolster the confidence of the men they were attached to. She had an angular chin, lips that curved into a perpetual smile, and a mound of curly hair tinted to an auburn luster. As

for Niles, he was tallish—six feet two, or at least he had been before he began to grow old and shrink; his face was long, bland, and clean-shaven, as became the countenance of an obedient Mormon in the twenty-first century. However, the large, round spectacles, which he had put on while reading the newspaper, gave him—as he esteemed—something of an owlish appearance.

“Any big plans for the day?” Thora asked as she seated herself.

He looked out the window, unsure. There were sunbreaks in the clouds. It seemed as if he ought to do something worthwhile. “Maybe I’ll start on a paper,” he said.

He pondered that idea for a moment, then said, “Maybe I’ll go to the library and roll up my sleeves and dig into those westerns.” He was referring to a large collection of popular cowboy novels in the university library which he himself had gathered years ago.

“I thought you had lost interest in those,” she said.

“True,” he said. “I did lose interest in them.”

“Though you’ve written some very nice papers about other books,” she said.

“Thank you,” he said with a nod. “The thing about these cowboy novels is that they are all about the same imaginary cowboy. Every one of them! And he is a pretty anemic cowboy at that.”

After they finished eating, they rinsed their dishes and put them in the dishwasher. At the door, he paused and said, “But maybe I should give those westerns another try. I have been thinking lately that an old man could do worse than honor the intentions of the young man he used to be.”

“Well, then,” she said, nodding, “maybe that’s what you ought to do.”

She was the first to leave the house, pausing at the door to say simply, “Good-bye,” and to hear him reply, “Drive carefully.” He would have paid no attention to this perfunctory departure had he not felt an extraordinary impulse to give her a hug or perhaps a parting kiss, either of them a gesture so rarely exchanged between them that he couldn’t remember when they had last done so. They had never been demonstrative people. They had grown up in undemonstrative families where affection had been expressed between adults and older children through kindness and consideration, but not through touching of any sort—a reticence which, as might be expected, their own children had inherited. The ex-

ception to the reserve between Niles and Thora had been, of course, while engaging in sexual intercourse. Unfortunately, as old age grew upon them, his embarrassment over an increasing inability to achieve a climax had deprived them of even that intimacy.

A half hour later, he left the house and walked to the bus stop. At the intersection of Moormeade and Grover, he realized with some surprise that he could remember the day when he had first understood that cross-dressing was more than tomfoolery. It was soon after he had begun his mission. He and his companion had shared a train compartment with what he at first took to be three women. However, with mounting astonishment, he inferred from their intonations, gestures, and posture that two of the three were men in fashionable female attire. Even now, past seventy, he still responded to the sight of a transvestite with a smothered sense of incredulity.

After a brief wait at the stop, he caught a university-bound bus. The vehicle was crowded, and he found himself obliged either to cram himself into a half-seat next to an obese man or to stand gripping a pole. He chose the latter. This bus, like all others, smelled of sweat, oil, tobacco, and various undefined essences of an unpleasant sort. Its stark green metal walls were mercifully interrupted by wide windows. Above them on either side stretched a row of relentless placards advertising, among other things, a bank, two grocery stores, a subscription to the *New York Times*, an internet service provider, and a maverick brand of green olives.

For a few minutes, he tried to concentrate on the oft-postponed task he had impetuously decided to reconsider that morning: the production of a scholarly article on the image of the American cowboy in the popular fiction of the early twentieth century. But the flashing scene outside the windows—freeway lanes filled with speeding automobiles, roadside buildings, a background of forested hills, and above that a mottled sky—distracted him. Suddenly feeling a need to be honest with himself, he granted the utter irrelevance of any article he was capable of writing. The scenes he presently looked upon, both inside and outside the bus—*his* world, the world of now—were an infinity away from the world that had inspired all those cowboy novels he presumed to study.

He therefore surrendered all too willingly to ruminations on the bizarre dream that had unsettled his early morning. However, as before, he found himself quickly drawn into worry, if not about the implications of the dream, then about worry itself. It seemed odd that a seventy-six-year-old man would be worrying about his sexual identity. It seemed that, if he were a woman in a man's body or a man who desired carnal knowledge of other men, he would have known about it and dealt with it one way or another long before now. But then he was a worrier by temperament. He had a robust instinct for worry. All his life he had suffered from bad things that never materialized. They were beyond counting.

Soon the bus was crossing the lake on the mile-long floating bridge. He saw a few early sailboats and, only a couple of hundred feet above the blue, shining water, a float plane. After forty years, he was still startled to find himself a part of this scene. Juniper-covered plains, dissected by barbed-wire fences and dotted here and there with the derrick of a furiously whirling windmill, were his natural habitat, which brought him back to the cowboy novels—but only momentarily, for a memory now came to him of the men's restroom in a movie house where a certain fellow with tousled red hair and face marred by acne frequently loitered, waiting—so rumor had it, likely true—to make assignations of an unspeakable sort.

Why had he been so afraid of the red-haired fellow? Would he have been utterly paralyzed had the fellow made a proposition? Why did he now suddenly feel worried for having remembered the incident? Strangely, it roused the question every maturing boy faces: *How do I know that I am not one of them, the queers, or, as people called them nowadays, the gays?*—a question he had thought settled to his satisfaction even before he and Thora were married—*no, a man as interested as I am in his fiancée's intimate parts is no gay*. Suddenly, as of this morning with its strange dream of an orange dress, it was as if the question of his sexual orientation had not been settled at all.

He got off the bus at the inner campus stop and crossed the main quad to the library. He entered the east wing and trudged along a corridor. The morning sun shining through high arched windows and the scent of floor wax touched him with nostalgia. The curator of the special collections—an apparently ageless man

he knew only as Mr. Seymour—let him directly into the stacks, saying as he formerly had, “It’s against policy, but since it’s you . . .”

Niles lingered there for several hours, pulling off the shelf, one after another, hardback novels whose covers were sometimes frayed and invariably faded. They bore titles like *Silver Creek Raiders*, *Shorby of the Z-Bar Ranch*, *Bordeen Wins Again*, *Flashing Guns*, *Thunder on the Prairie*, and so on. How had Niles gotten into this business in the first place? In graduate school, his favorite professor had lectured on the sociological value of popular literature, which by definition had no pretensions to quality. Figuring out what you could know about westerners from the popular western novel had struck Niles as a charming idea. So once he was settled as an assistant professor on the present campus, he had applied for a small grant from the library committee and, with the assistance of a downtown used book dealer, spent it on close to fifteen hundred novels, which were cheap because nobody else wanted them. Unfortunately, as they began to come in, he realized you couldn’t know anything about real westerners from these novels. For the most part, they weren’t even written by westerners, and the titles gave a deceptive appearance of variety to what was actually a single, age-old story of heroic action, dressed in slightly different details from book to book. The same character could be found in cheap novels about sailing the high seas, jousting with medieval knights, and fighting Bedouins in the sands of Tunisia.

Toward noon, Niles emerged from the library, determined to grab a bite of lunch at the union cafeteria and return to the task of deciding, once and for all, whether his early dismissal of the novels had been too hasty. For a few moments, he stood on the library steps, blinking in the bright sunshine, making no move toward the cafeteria because that troublesome question confronting all teenage boys—*how do I know that I am not one of them*—had returned to his mind again just now. But after a few moments more, he relaxed, having suddenly recalled an incident from high school. After a football game in a town far from home, he and a high school friend had gone to bed in an unheated motel room, taking off their coats, shirts, and pants, and crawling between the sheets dressed only in their briefs. The friend instantly cuddled up to him, as he apparently did at home with his little brother, but Niles jumped—quite literally—out of the bed. The friend said nothing,

but the rest of the night each slept on his own side of the bed. Wasn't it sheer untutored instinct that had made him jump? No shred of homosexuality there!

With that, he changed his mind about lunch at the cafeteria. He would go home for the day, though he would keep focused on the possibility—admittedly slim, but still a possibility—that the American readers who had bought the novels composing his collection when they were new understood something about the cowboy that had evaporated from the collective American mind during the succeeding decades. If these novels, cheap as they were, reflected that understanding—and if Niles could discern and articulate it—*that* would make an article worth writing!

However, as he made his way across the quad, he found himself unable to concentrate on this new insight. A new angle to his frantic leap from the motel bed on that cold night had just occurred to him. It might have been acquired behavior, socially conditioned by the derisive banter of boys in the shower room after PE, who directed mock accusations of homosexuality at one another in strident and scornful voices because no one, including the accuser and the accused, believed them. Their banter and their mock accusations—didn't they tutor and educate? The lesson they taught was that boys don't touch, hug, embrace, or fondle one another, or stare at one another's intimate parts in the shower room even if they wanted to. They must show a studied indifference, a blithe oblivion, as if they were fence posts rather than sentient sexual creatures. So his aversion to being hugged by a high school buddy might not have been sheer untutored instinct at all.

In the middle of the quad, he ran into an acquaintance named Jerry Bovig, a lab assistant from the Biology Department whom Niles had met fifteen or twenty years ago at a Mormon-sponsored *Messiah* sing-in. Ironically—as Niles now observed to himself—Jerry was the last person among his acquaintances whom he wanted to meet on this particular day, Jerry being not only Mormon but also gay. Jerry didn't mind talking about being gay. In fact, he gave firesides in private homes on being gay and keeping Church standards, which meant that he had dedicated himself to celibacy forever. As for his colleagues in the Biology Department, they knew he was gay and were okay with that. However, they did-

n't know he was a Mormon, and he had asked Niles not to tell them.

Jerry was headed for the union cafeteria and asked Niles whether he didn't want to come along for some lunch. Not wishing to seem homophobic—and having the memory of many pleasant conversations with Jerry over the years—Niles agreed. In the cafeteria, Niles followed Jerry's example and ordered from the Mexican menu, reputed to be the least unpalatable of the cafeteria's offerings, and they carried their trays to a small table in the overflow room.

"How are things in your ward?" Jerry asked while they ate.

"Same as always," said Niles. "Sacrament meetings made unintelligible by the hoots and shrieks of dozens upon dozens of little children. Sunday School lessons read directly from the correlated lesson manual. High priest quorums divided by the perennial debate over whether Adam-ondi-Ahman is in Missouri or Iraq. At least that's the way it was last time I attended. Actually, I haven't checked in lately."

"I've been ward chorister for a couple of months now," Jerry said. "It's a job I like."

"Well, you're lucky," Niles offered. "However, don't let it be known that you like it, or they'll take it away from you and give it to somebody else."

Jerry chuckled. "You seem to have a clouded view of things."

"Yes, I suppose I do." Niles was wondering why, considering how anxious simply remembering that red-haired fellow in the theater restroom had made him, he didn't feel anxious in the actual presence of a known homosexual. But then he realized he *was* beginning to feel anxious, not so much about having lunch with this friendly man, but about what people like Jerry did to the Mormon concept of the preexistence, which held that God assigned gender to the unborn beings of the spirit world. Men who desired other men and women who desired other women implied some kind of terrible mistake in design on the part the Almighty, an obvious impossibility for any respectable theology. Moreover, a dream on the part of a man about putting on an orange dress was also an obvious affront to any respectable theology. That is, whatever kind of deity a church happened to believe in, by all measures it ought to be the kind of deity that wouldn't trouble believ-

ers with dreams of that sort. Cross-dressing shouldn't happen in a well-ordered cosmos. Not even in a dream.

After lunch, Niles went back to the special collections room in the library, more or less certain that he wanted to have nothing more to do with his collection of popular westerns. Even if diligent research could demonstrate that early twentieth-century America had an understanding of the cowboy that had evaporated from the collective national mind during the succeeding decades and even if that research could go on to demonstrate that the fifteen hundred or so novels housed in the special collections library reflected that now-vanished understanding, Niles wasn't the man to undertake it. He was too old. Too weary. Too indifferent.

However, second thoughts quickly beset him. Abandoning an intention held for forty years was no light matter. It had to be pondered, weighed, decided upon only after due process. He asked Mr. Seymour for a chair, which he placed in one of the aisles where the western novels were shelved, feeling magnanimous and perhaps a bit self-congratulatory about his fidelity to promises from the distant past. But after he had seated himself and fingered through a number of the westerns on the shelves before him, Niles realized all over again how remote they were from the real cowboy, that hired hand on horseback, as Eugene Manlove Rhodes had called him.

Niles had known some of those hired hands on horseback during his boyhood. They were nothing like the walking fashion manikin that passed for a cowboy now, whom you were likely to meet on a city street or in an airport or sports arena. That fashion rack was nothing more than *wimpus americanus* togged out in boots, jeans, pearl-buttoned shirt, and ten-gallon hat. And most assuredly, those real cowboys were nothing like the cowboy heroes in these novels, who weren't togged out in anything except vapid, colorless words. Readers were free to visualize them in any attire they wished. There was a lot of verbiage about nickering horses and wind-whipped waves of grass and spooky-eyed cattle and coyotes wailing in the distant haze. But there was nothing to make a cowboy hero in one western stand out from the heroes in a hundred others. There was nothing to make any of them into a distinct individual.

That settled it. Niles was seventy-six, retired, and not in line

for promotion or tenure and therefore in no need of publications or symposia on his résumé. He zipped his file case, folded the chair, returned it to Mr. Seymour, and shook this faithful factotum's hand, saying he doubted he would ever see him again.

There being no express bus from the campus back across the lake till much later, he took a local that followed a tedious, meandering route. Across the aisle sat a fellow dressed in shabby gray pants, a soiled sports shirt, and running shoes with a hole worn through at the point of each big toe. Incongruously perched atop his head was a brown, flat-crowned western hat. Here, Niles reflected, was a prime example of *wimpus americanus* usurping the signs and symbols of a better breed of man than himself.

Yet, curiously, as he went on to recall, the real cowboys he had known during his boyhood were often dressed as shabbily as this fellow. They wore boots and jeans for work, not for fashion. One of them he could remember, Orville Canover, was a pathetic creature, actually. Niles recalled seeing him one late spring day at the house of Orville's mother, where he had been staying because, he said, he had been let go by his employer after the spring roundup. Moreover, his employer had run out of cash the previous autumn and owed him nine months pay, which was \$30 a month with room and board. He had had the room and board, the room being furnished with a bunk with woven rope for springs and the board being rice, beans, and prunes, uncooked, of course. At the moment, he was barefoot and mowing a patchy lawn with a push mower. His scuffed, run-over-at-the-heels boots stood neatly placed in the dirt pathway leading to the front door. He wore faded jeans, a soiled white shirt, and a ragged vest from an old three-piece suit.

The city bus had got behind a yellow school bus which, with blinking yellow and flashing red lights, was making frequent stops to let off students. These seemed to be little tykes—kindergartners, apparently—which explained the bevy of mothers who stood waiting at each stop corner. Shortly, the school bus turned up a side street, and the city bus picked up speed. However, Niles scarcely noticed, having begun to think about a problem with his authentic example of American manhood, the real cowboy. Weren't those two fellows in that movie that had swept the nation not so long ago, *Brokeback Mountain*, specimens of the real cowboy,

the working cowboy? One was a Montana ranch hand, the other a Texas rodeo rider. They wore scuffed boots, blue jeans, denim jackets, and high-crowned Stetsons. And they were in love with each other. They kissed, they made love in that unspeakable manner, they yearned to be together.

When he got off the bus and walked the final few blocks home, Niles felt himself drained and dejected. It wasn't precisely a physical fatigue. It was perhaps more a weighty disappointment, and it had something to do with that abominable dream of having put on an orange dress. All day he had been set at hair trigger for thoughts and memories that somehow undermined him. Was he so sure that he had always felt himself to be a male, had always wanted to be a male? Hadn't there been the sweetest, most tender of moments in his mother's lap when he had wrapped his arms around her neck and had assented with all his heart to being her little Nilesina, as she sometimes called him? Nilesina! What a travesty to impose upon an unsuspecting child! Say he had been born a girl. Would she have really called him by a name as revolting as that? At any rate, it had influenced him to endorse heartily Thora's selection of very ordinary names for their children—Steven, Mary, Dorothy, and Lisa. Thora, of course, had never been overly charmed with her own name, which derived from a pioneer ancestor who had died on the plains of Nebraska.

Thora was across the street chatting with a neighbor when he arrived home. He waved at the two women and went inside where the dining table was set and a pot roast with potatoes, carrots, and onions simmered quietly on the back burner of the kitchen range. He was moved by deep affection. Thora's suppers were always gratifying, always calculated to please him. He had been favored beyond all merit by more than fifty years of her companionship. He recalled the extraordinary impulse he had had that morning to give her a hug, or perhaps a parting kiss, and wished that he had done so. But perhaps it didn't matter. He knew she knew he loved her. Always. Every day.

After supper he helped Thora place the dishes in the dishwasher. Following that, he went into the study to check his email. There was a message from Steven, asking Thora for the name of the de-worming medication they had used on one of their dogs fifteen or twenty years ago. Being online, Niles couldn't resist

looking up “transvestitism” on *Wikipedia*. Reading about it made him anxious again and also angry, because it seemed a shame, an outright injustice, that a man of his age and dignity should be asked to prove once again that he was qualified to be called a man. It was as if he were taking his prelims all over again, that nightmarish weeklong series of examinations by which he had qualified, not for a Ph.D., but for the mere right to advance to candidacy for a Ph.D. And all because of a single strange dream.

At that point, Thora came into the study and Niles told her about Steven’s request for information. Ceding the computer to her, he went into the family room and for an hour worked out on the stationary bicycle while he watched television. Then he showered, put on his pajamas, and sat in something of a stupor on the edge of the bed. Presently, Thora came in and began to undress, talking all the while about an excitable Vietnamese charwoman at the welfare center who had mistaken powdered milk for floor detergent. When she glanced at Niles, as she did from time to time, he averted his eyes, not wishing to reveal the depth of lust that an old, impotent man could feel while his wife prepared for bed. He thought again for the thousandth time of getting something to alleviate his condition but ended for the thousandth time by deciding the side effects were too daunting.

Once abed, he turned this way and that several times, plumping his pillow each time he did it. Thora turned out the light and climbed in on her side. “Did you have a good day?” she asked in a soft voice.

“More or less, yes, I did,” he affirmed. “I gave up once and for all on those western novels. The world will have to languish in ignorance about them as far as I am concerned.”

“Maybe it’s just as well.”

“I ran into Jerry Bovig,” Niles added. “I had lunch with him. I ordered an enchilada.”

“Sounds good,” Thora said. “How’s Jerry doing?”

“He’s about the same as always. He’s still doing fireside chats on celibacy for homosexuals.”

“Well, that’s too bad.”

“Too bad?”

“Yes. If they are born that way, if it’s their nature, then they ought to be able to marry like anyone else.”

Niles plumped his pillow again, feeling all tensed up and in need of another session on the exercise bike. He hadn't realized Thora had become so liberal. Not that it mattered. What mattered was that he needed a way to get rid of his self-doubts. Or at least to repress them, to smooth them over and go on behaving as if he didn't have any. Once upon a time, carnal knowledge of this affectionate and willing woman—a nightly event when she wasn't having a period—had allowed him to smooth over his self-doubts and go on behaving as if they didn't exist.

“Good night,” Thora murmured.

“Good night,” he replied.

He was wishing there was something more to say. With a racing heart, he suddenly blurted out, “You are a good wife.”

There was a long silence and then she said a simple, “Thank you.”

There was a rustling of the covers, and he realized she had pulled herself close to him. Before returning to her side of the bed, she brushed his forehead with her lips.

Their brief exchange was, of course, an eventuality beyond all expectation, a violation of the undefined reticence that had existed between them for decades. But the perturbations of his day evaporated, his muscles relaxed, and he felt coming over him that sweet soporific lull that precedes slumber.