

Sewer Side

By Adair Broughton

The man looked behind at the trails of blood, poppies of remembrance against a white snow, accentuating his crime against the purity of his last wish.

Some days ago the rains had decided to freeze, like his memories and hopes. Falling discreetly, smothering the ground with soft caress, consistent in their torment. It was like the snow wanted to whitewash the past while blanking out his future into a void, where the nothingness could be a serene imitation of life. His thoughts had slowly been devouring him and the rain was not here to wash away the distaste. The rains he once hated he now craved. They could help him.

Red and white reminded him of lips against pale skin and now the blood was a message of truth and reality that signified the waking he knew was inevitable.

Time felt like a rapist, taking from him all that was precious, any chance to forgive or forget lost to a starch lament. Even the dust and grime was hidden from view. Everything was gone except the trail to sewer side.

Sewer side was the last place he wanted to be but he knew he had crossed boundaries. The chemical dance had created the dream but the graceful movement of his soul had disturbed the neat choreography. It had been her last waltz instead of his.

Indeed, that had been the intention, to try and give his anger and pride embodiment, to murder his past to live his future in one of two ways. With spirit and integrity or as a man lost to the loneliest and most peaceful sleep there was. Now he had neither, no chance of rest if he curtailed his wanderings through life or even death. It was a strange feeling.

He did not know at what point the dream had ended. He had been told that reality and dream often swam the same tide in the mind, utilising the same synapses of sense and memory. He had trusted people twice, which was twice more than he should have. Should he trust again? Maybe it was not about trust; this was something deeper, a finer and richer understanding of who he was.

He had liked the rumours and the intrepid deliverance in shadow as the man hidden beneath a hood had told him the presumably established grooved rhetoric. The words were a strong foundation, lines given from above to those who sold below. They were too neat and less whimsical than if he wanted to score the more established drugs. The seller was articulate and masterful at the seduction of need and requirement. Whoever sought him had purpose; the man was an officer who could send trench men over the top to a killing field; fields now remembered with poppies. Yet it was no mans land that he wanted to avoid

‘When you are awake, you know that dreams exist but when you are asleep you don’t know of reality, only the dream. Life and death are antinomies, easily understandable. Dream and reality are not. They converge at one point only and the key is this red pill. You need to take this journey; I can see it in your eyes. You are here for a reason not

an off chance trip to freedom. I can see your subtle reactions to my words and how a little of your soul is missing. There is something haunting you. This pill will find ghosts; will help abandon that spirit that spooks you from a different place. Let your dream become a reality, something that you can use as a conclusion, that succinct desire to.... finish what you started and end on a high.'

It was a significant sum of credit transferred via a blank data order, nothing traceable, binary floatation with as many zero's, as his allowance would allow, given to these harbingers of whim. Yet it was always more than that. Like a tattoo, this was something done to last, life changing, life ending? The scars would be more colourful and longer lasting than any accessory of delight for the skin.

With each snow white step, he thought of the money not matching the look of the area, the seedy grime and neon lights that the city leaders (a silly misnomer, because who actually leads people anywhere in a city) turned blind eyes too. It was the seeing eyes that he worried about, how obvious problems were sidelined and sidestepped depending on where they occurred. Hence, throughout childhood fathers would say to children if they didn't educate themselves they would end up on the Sewer Side. The child who had the least colour in their fabrics was labelled 'Sewers'. Mud sticks they say, but sewerage was obviously a necessary waste.

It had been his first willing trip here, even if his dwarf steps had signalled trepidation. The city was so big some countries would be proud of the landmass. Food was not a necessity in fields anymore; the large warehouses were built upon. Layer and layer of plasglass became huge greenhouses on the outskirts of the cities, feeding the population within. How strange that the fields of opportunity now grew up, nearer the sun, rather than the old patchwork of land.

From the midst of that within he had now become someone without. One pill to play out a wish, something done every day on the visuals by teenagers had caused a complete upheaval of every emotion he had ever felt. How strange it would have been had his conjecture for her right of leave been because of his caring reticence. He should have dropped a credit in a pleasure machine and made the bang of a different drum.

Without love, without an answer, without a chance of survival, the list could go on. Had that been his subconscious game all along? How do you answer the subconscious knowingly? It was a silly question and he knew it. He hated cliché'. Life was not an act so they said. Yet his pill had allowed him access to a play of his own narration and caught him in something so real that lives had been lost. Droplets of blood were thicker than water. That was why they sank in snow leaving their crimson tide as evidence like the scum after a bath that had not cleaned anyone.

It was difficult to know what was rumour and fact. The dream pills were something exotic and never taken lightly. For years they had made the newscreeens on the portables in discreet references, elusive yet with foundation. There had been books contemplating their effects, programmes discussing their truths but at no point could he have simply walked somewhere to buy one, or even taken the pill as a weekend excursion as simple as a skyride to the city of sun or the city of mist.

They had religions of critics, questionably infectious in their criticism. Hospitals could refuse to look after a mental patient if they believed the degeneration caused by the dream pill. It was always 'there' in society if reference was sought but if a person did not register its importance they could lead their life quite easily without absorbing its existence. Everyone knew of Sewer Side, its horrors were as much fantasy as fact, so there was scope to believe or not too, you know, like God.

In essence Sewer Side of town was a dearth of prostitution, drugs and violence, but so were the visuals and netcasts and serverlogs. Even the printed screen cheerfully desired violence. Most things beget but some are just hidden better. Is it safer to see the dagger in front or in your back, if the outcomes are the same? Out of sight and out of mind. It was a strange pity the dream pill couldn't have been.

He had absorbed it and its taste was bland. There was no moment of clarity like an electric shock of momentum, like the old literature detailed as a kick. The word was punishment now. 'Man, that drug could punish.' He presumed there would be a penetrating or galvanising force, like the fist he saw as a child when he felt time had slowed down as his friend had hit him, the pale ball in the distance becoming slowly bigger, then a fist, as his nose cracked under Newtonian surprise, from boy to man in seconds. Yet the dream pill was nothing, or so it seemed at the time. There was no feeling of tiredness like when he had fallen down some stairs and broken his leg, the injection numbing his leg then his mind, and only after that his wanted erection as the nurses cleaned him up in dreary post surgical ghost world.

He had felt nothing and yet hours after he had taken the pill he was listening to his exhale form an icy breath, which informed him that the city finally had seasons. He now had to piece together what exactly had happened. Maybe the dream pill was like a reverse encoded wish trajectory, the end event was his wish and he could create the past to fulfil that. That would make sense but had he really wished her dead?

Each footstep made a crisp musical note of deliverance and it was either more snow or rain that would cover the blood and his escape. Could he just go home? Didn't people who knew the victim commit most murders? It would not take long for any of the shadow police to find his story, ask a few questions and watch the sufferings of guilt twitch nervously on his face. This was just another statistic to the list; even if the intent was one of make believe. He could claim mental disorder, or his mind could be blown for real. Too many electrical currents had fused his neuron network.

Days before he had watched from his window as his breath made awkward characters from the mist. The spider web outside was absorbed in grey magnified by droplets of rain sliding slowly down. All rain went down, seeking the low. Was this just a metaphor taunting him that all life in the city eventually sought the sewer? He wiped with his wrist smudging the glassy mist into a foggy haze. Why did it always do that?

When it had cleared they had gone. The man below had been waiting for her, her new friend or lover. He was wearing a hood but it wouldn't have mattered, his face had been discreetly clouded by distance anyway. Did it matter who he was? A data regulator, shadowcop, drug dealer, it was hardly an issue.

It hurt to think they had discussed what she would do. The traditional salacious goodbye, the clever woman's game of keeping the man on the precipice of desire, that she just needs a little time to realise she still lusts after him and that if he bides his time, the wooden door will creak to a remembered knock. Funny then, that he had noticed a man outside. How long had she waited to tell him? Two weeks? Days were like deep breaths anyway. He had moved away from her for weeks before, aware of what was coming and hoping it wasn't true. It had to be her act. He was the victim, the game he liked to play. No, he could not say it was funny since he had become the executioner.

He knew then that he could not reap an overlooked harvest. There would be no future field of opportunity with fruits eaten by another. Maybe he had always been ploughing this particular furrow. The lines on his brow agreed.

He had been silent and assured, not responding to her soft excuse at lament. She was barely dangling her toes to a deep sea of regret. He could however, still drown in her shallows so he was careful with his breath. 'We will not talk again' he wanted to say but as much passed between them as it had for days. The slice of inevitability was as sharp as the knife that would have once taken to separate them.

He just stared, a blank look that she took as a sincere retrenchment of emotion rather than the cowardly reticence of disengagement that he knew was his only armour against himself at this time. Why didn't cupid just shoot himself all those years ago? She walked to the door then, he expected her to turn round one last time but she was obviously stronger than he expected.

He had remembered this as he was walking away in the snow. Was there much difference between away and toward? He turned around then, but needlessly, she was already around a corner and an alleyway and somewhere on a ride to oblivion or lost in the immutable dream that the planet locked called death. The bible might show the heavens, the Principia how the heavens work, but the pill had provided the true meaning of life. It was a series of moments interlaced with dream, lasting less than other moments. Sweet dreams and nightmares where toast always lands butter side down. You could never win, because the competition is never fair. The fair of face were only full of grace when their blood ruined the only time in years that the city of rain had a blanket of white beauty.

He stepped on the streetcar, riding the blocks till even dawn registered he was tired. Dawn was when a streetlight turned from white to orange. The city was so tall the best clock was an acknowledgement of colour. So much for unweaving the rainbow, time stood still for no man.

Yesterday's paper digitised itself on and off, the weak batteries seeking power from online sockets. The currents were lower at this time of day; another hour would see a surge as people grabbed images of the electric news. He turned over the plasma sheet. 'The truth about the Dream Pill'

He could still smile. The cold-blooded killer could still react to coincidence. Maybe that was a good sign.

The article began 'There is no certainty in dream. Otherwise the past and present of everything would be known. Yet people on the verge of breakdown, those who have lost a clarity of thought believe that the dream pills offer one last chance of fulfilment, like a knowing last battle cry or dying wish before chaos reigns them in.'

He didn't continue it. What were words and thoughts and opinions anyway except devilish remarks by those too weak to find real interpretation. At this point in time, this moment between past and present, he just wanted his bed. He wanted a real dream. Had he even had the dream? Maybe the pill was something for after the event, to alleviate any misgivings of guilt his predetermined action would cause. It had been a strange night and his tired legs left the streetcar a few concrete blocks from his apartment. The bed beckoned like the most powerful drug there was, what all were addicted too.

Maybe there would be a knock at the door later that day or in a few minutes. He hoped it wasn't soon. Cause and affect and then law.

Fingers pressed and opened locks. His morning glory was basking under crazy false neon. He liked that plant, as it had been a constant friend.

He needed to find his own mind and right now the only way he knew how to do that was to fall asleep. No one knows what will happen the next time you wake. Not even a pill can know that.