

Oblivion by Mark D Watkins

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By Mark D Watkins

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Chapter 1

Did you ever do that thing where you 'fall off a kerb' in your sleep? Something jolts you and your body jerks in reaction to the sensation. On most occasions, you'll wake up, realise what happened and settle back down to sleep. Sometimes you awake and are embarrassed to find that you fell asleep on a bus or train and people are now staring at you. Other times you sleep on, not realising it's even happened. Well, 'falling off' something is exactly what happened to Simon Blundy. Except, for Simon, the thing he fell off was life itself.

It had been a long day. Simon Blundy had just turned 13 and had been determined to squeeze every last ounce of pleasure that he could from the day. That meant waking up at 5.30am and bouncing in to his parents' bedroom. It meant opening every one of his many presents by 7.00am and trying out every one by 8.00am -- this had involved trying on several sets of clothes, inserting new batteries into various powered toys, flicking through a number of books, and watching the first five or ten minutes of three DVDs.

The rest of the day had been spent on a family trip to a theme park. It had taken a couple of hours to get there, a journey during which Simon had peppered every 20 minutes with the standard journey questions of: "Are we there yet?" "Is it much further?" and "Can we stop for a minute? I think I'm going to be sick."

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Theme parks are fantastic places when you're (just) 13. They allow you to be scared out of your wits with fright and calm down again in time to have chicken nuggets and chips for lunch, before doing it all over again thanks to some or other mechanical, gravity-defying ride.

Simon's favourite had been 'Hell's Gates', a roller-coaster which, in addition to the usual twists, turns, and upside-down corkscrews, thrust each car over the edge of a precipice and then tipped it downwards to reveal to its startled occupants, some 100 feet below, a waterfall cascading into the huge, open jaws of some horrific looking creature. Then, just at the last minute, the car was pulled back and sent plummeting down a ramp to the side, into a big pool of water which soaked everybody, especially those at the front of the car.

Simon had seen footage of the ride on the TV adverts for the theme park and, with his limited but valuable knowledge, had ensured that his Mum and Dad had sat in the front seats. This had the simultaneous effect of shielding Simon and his seven year old sister Jess from a full soaking, as well as providing additional entertainment for the two of them to laugh about all the way home.

By the time the Blundy family had reached home, after stopping off for burgers all-round at a roadside café, it was nearly 10.00pm. Jess had fallen asleep in the car earlier in the journey and had been gently lifted from car to bed without making a sound. Simon had felt the call of sleep but had resisted, watching headlights and street lights whizz past his

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back-seat window like fireworks against a black night sky. Now, with the car parked outside his house, and his sister in bed, he needed no encouragement to head up the stairs to his own bed.

Both his parents were at his bed to tuck him in and to share the last moments of his special day and, half-speaking, half-mumbling, he thanked them for the day and for his presents before sinking deep into his pillow and even deeper into sleep.

There are a lot of opinions about dreams. In some parts of the world there are cultures who believe that, through inducing a dream-like state, you can communicate with your ancestors in the spirit world. More common are those who believe that dreams are disguised messages about the waking world -- that recurring dreams about falling mean that you feel out of control in life, that dreams about flying mean freedom, that dreams of death mean the ending of something. And then there are those who don't believe anything other than 'dreaming is just something you do when you're asleep.' The truth is, nobody really knows what purpose dreams serve but, to this day, there are academics and institutions intent on finding out, and a simple internet search will uncover any number of websites offering advice and insights into the world of dreams.

Simon hadn't really given the nature of dreaming much considered thought. Occasionally, he had awoken from a particularly frightening dream and been glad that he had done so.

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More often, he had awoken to recall a really good dream and, the next evening, as he settled down to sleep, had attempted to place his mind in the exact place that the dream had left off earlier that day, in the hope that the story would continue, like some serialised TV show. But mostly, if quizzed on the subject of dreams, Simon's view would have been that they 'just happen'. Which was good enough for him.

Tonight, Simon's dream was vivid. *Rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat*, went the train. He snuggled a little deeper into his pillow. *Rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat*.

Dreams, the really good ones, have a rhythm and a cycle to them. The rhythm is what stops you from waking up, it calms and soothes you, its cadence and pace assuring you that this is the place you're meant to be. Like a good story, it also has a cycle, an arc, with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

If the rhythm is broken, by a startling moment in the dream, as in a nightmare, or something intrusive from outside, then the dream is interrupted and we awake. If the cycle is uncompleted, then the dream intrudes into our waking hours and we wonder what happened in the end. It's all very neat and ordered, most of the time.

Simon's dream was a good one, and he sank further into it, deep below conscious thought into the dark and rarely exercised parts of his brain. *Rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat*.

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There are all sorts of theories about how people die. Science and disease stand alone as their own reasons and justifications. Then there are the god theories about a divine hand implementing a grand plan. Then there are the theories of everlasting souls which are reincarnated time after time. Many of these theories have a common requirement -- that order is preserved within a system which has rules, checks and balances. And that somewhere, some hidden army of administrators ensure that nothing goes wrong, because the effects could be catastrophic.

And because nothing should go wrong, there comes to be an inherent belief by the administrators that nothing can go wrong. Which is a completely different thing altogether.

Simon's dream was slowing in its rhythm. The urgent *rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat* was becoming a lolloping *ker-klunk, ker-klunk, ker-klunk*. In his mind's eye, Simon was snuggled in the corner of a compartment on a old railway carriage. The seat had a sort of soft springiness that, in modern trains, has long been replaced by hard functionality. The seat springs both cushioned and echoed the movement and rhythm of the train, reassuring Simon that this was the place he was meant to be.

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If Simon's mind's eye had been pressed on the matter, it would have described the carriage as old. Not old in a vintage steam railway sense, although that was probably the sort of carriage that it was, but old in a mountains, valleys, sunset and sea sense. Really old.

The lolloping slowed still further and, as is common at the end of comfortable railway journeys, a very satisfactory ride ended with a rude jolt. Just the sort of jolt that, in dreams, will wake you up and tell you that it's time to start the day.

Simon did indeed experience a jolt, and his mind's eye convinced him that it was so physically real, that Simon rolled involuntarily onto the floor with a bump. And then he awoke.

Have you ever done that thing where you awake unexpectedly and it takes you a little while to get your bearings? Maybe because you're staying with relatives, or on holiday, or camping or something, and for a few seconds after awakening, nothing is what you expected to see. Things are in the wrong place, light is coming from the wrong window, you're not as comfortable as you would be if you were in your own bed.

Well, that's exactly the feeling that Simon began to have, because, as he stood up, he noticed that right where his bed should have been, there was a three-berth railway

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carriage seat. Right where his bedroom window should have been, there was a windowed sliding door into a railway carriage corridor. Opposite him, right where his wardrobe and chest of drawers should have been, there was another, empty, seat. And right where his wall of posters and photographs should have been was a scene that took his breath away.

There, across an empty railway track, daubed in a kind of dim half-light, stood a platform, and just beyond a train that had stopped at it. In front of the train were some very ornate, black buffers, which were more elaborate than any railway fixtures Simon had ever seen before. From the doors of the train -- one at either end of each carriage -- were emerging the most unlikely collection of passengers that you could imagine. Adults and children still in their pyjamas, people in motorbike clothing, lots of old people... I mean, a lot. And in amongst them, men that looked like miners at the end of a long shift and some soldiers in battle dress. The list went on and became no less bizarre.

And amidst all of this, were the guards, who didn't seem to be acting like guards in a railway sense, but guards in an altogether more sinister sense.

Simon suddenly became aware of a door slamming and footsteps in the corridor of his own carriage. Fast footsteps. Still struggling to take in what he'd seen, Simon's first reaction was the clichéd one for someone who suspects that they are in a dream that has become all too real. He pinched himself. Nothing. Not nothing as in, he didn't wake up. Nothing as in, he didn't feel a thing.

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The footsteps pounded closer and Simon did the only other thing he could think of, he fell to the floor and rolled under the bench seat he had just fallen from and hid.