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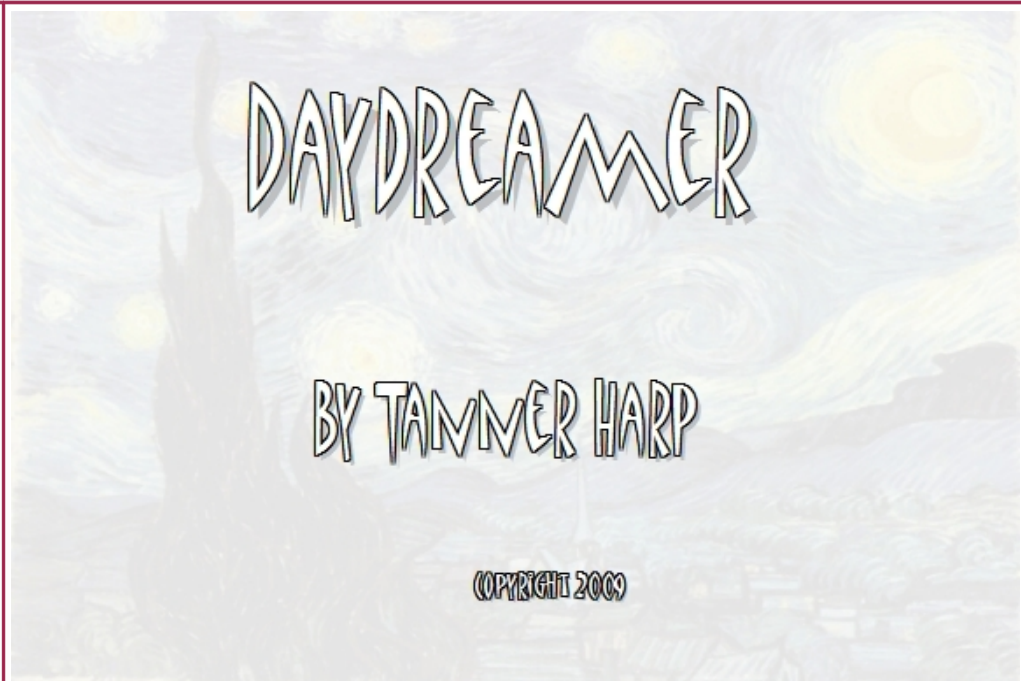
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He stares at the street sign. Scripture Street and . . . Calhoun? That's not right. Chris looks down the street and sees nothing he recognizes in his hometown of Denton, Texas. He starts down this unknown road, where he would have bet his last pack of cigarettes Fry Street used to run. Down this way, he should be able to get to 7-11 to buy some more smokes. He reaches into his jacket pocket to grab a cigarette—damn, he needs one—and stops halfway. He's wearing a blue jacket? He doesn't own a blue jacket. The one he was wearing was black leather. Pants? The same he remembered putting on this morning. Shoes—? Since when did he wear Asics running shoes? He doesn't own a pair!

Turning back to the street, he just wants to get inside his house as quickly as possible. Here's Calhoun and . . . Ponder? Ponder should be parallel to this a street over, not intersecting it. The streets were different only a moment ago.

Chris starts running. He heads home, refusing to look at the street signs or his unfamiliar surroundings. The sound of his ragged breath grates on his ears like an alarm clock. All this smoking has really reduced his capacity for physical exertion. His shoes slap on the pavement, his jacket trails behind him like a cape.

He's only traveled two blocks. Refusing to look around, Chris gets back to his house and opens the door. It smacks the stopper and bounces back, almost hitting him in the face. Instead of continuing his mad dash toward safety, he stops.

This is not his house.

Chris looks around, sees the same layout, but different furniture, different decorations.

"Honey, are you home?" calls a female voice.

Alarmed, but too surprised to move, he stands still, gasping for breath.

A pretty girl with a soft face and short black hair rounds the corner of (what? It used to be the kitchen) a room and stops, stands as still as Chris. Both look at each other

with utter confusion distorting their features. They both stare at each other with eyes squinted, brows furrowed. Like a dog's, Chris's breath.

"Alex, what are you doing here?" asks the girl.

"Alex?"

"Yes, Alex. Aren't you Christine's friend? We had lunch together a couple weeks ago, in Clark Hall."

"Yes, well, no. I mean, I recognize you, and Christine's my friend—" (finally *something* that is the same) "—but my name is Chris."

"Oh. I could have sworn we were calling you Alex. Anyway, what are you . . . what are you doing here?"

Chris looks around. He says, "This is my house." His volume is greatly decreased, no confidence in his voice or posture.

The girl laughs. "Is this a joke? You were quiet at lunch, but you seemed funny enough." The girl takes a step back. Her confidence is the same as Chris's, radiating as brightly as used car oil.

"I . . . I'm sorry. I made a mistake," says Chris.

Chris turns and walks back out the door, not looking back to see the expression of fear finally cross the girl's face. No memory of her or her boyfriend crosses Chris's mind. But then how does he know she has a boyfriend? Obviously, she called out *honey*. She had to have been referring to a boyfriend. No, she has a boyfriend named Cecil. Chris remembers him by his odd name.

And this jacket—it came from a thrift store, a real steal.

No, no. All this can't be right. This is just rationalization. Memory is fickle and false. It's easy to creation fiction to fill in the gaps. Chris remembers reading that in a magazine while waiting for a dentist appointment. Memory is the faultiest thing on earth.

When he allows himself to take in the surroundings outside, he does not recognize his neighborhood, although he just *knows* this is where his house is supposed to sit.

Running again, Chris heads to where 7-11 once was. He gets back to the intersection of changing street signs. Scripture and Fry street, now. That's the way it is supposed to be. His shoulders drop; he relaxes. Eyes closed, he points his head to his jacket. As if waking from a groggy slumber, he slowly opens them. The jacket is still blue. His shoes, however, are now stylish Pumas. He starts to cry. He absolutely cannot be going crazy. This isn't right.

He runs to 7-11, what he now considers his safe haven, before the names on the street signs change again. Into the back of his mind Chris pushes the possibility that they have already changed (he doesn't check them, afraid it will jinx his rotten luck).

The shoes slap hard on the pavement. People are walking to and from class. Some look at him and try to figure out why he's running. Others pay no attention. This is the University of North Texas, after all, where a guy can study fashion design and not be called a queer.

Lungs burning, a sharp stitch in his side, he reaches the intersection of Fry street and Oak. Looking ahead, the buildings are different. A shoe store is tucked quietly next to

a McDonalds that shouldn't be there, but, a little further, 7-11 stands.

Chris's tears fall harder now, streaming down his face. His crying becomes audible, as he makes animal-like noises. Finally something goes right! (He ignores the new buildings; his safe haven still stands.)

Now the thought of a cigarette returns, but he does not really want it. The idea of normality, of familiarity, is all he craves.

Eyes blurred from the salty discharge meandering down his cheeks, he again starts running. Nothing is safe anymore. To be still is to invite the possibility of change again, of insanity. What if the world starts changing before his eyes instead of when his back is turned? Once again, he pushes the thought far from his mind.

He bounds off the curb and onto the asphalt. Only half a step is all he has the chance to take. Brakes squealing is all he hears before pain explodes on his left side. Everything goes black.

When he starts to come to, all the sounds of a concerned crowd seep into his consciousness—the murmuring, the telling of the story, the *is he all rights*, and the *did anybody call 911s*. In a fog, he sees a male figure push through the crowd. He can almost recognize him, but not quite. His vision is still returning. Not that Chris minds not being able to see: who knows what has changed while he was out?

He tries to move his legs. Cannot. Tries to move his fingers. Can't.

Silent tears escape his sore eyes. Chris's whole head is afire with pain. Only dimly is he aware of the warm puddle his head is lying in. He tries to lift it—succeeds!

Then he starts crying harder. Before he notices that some of the more tenderhearted girls are teary themselves, before he recognizes the male figure leaning over him, he notices that his black shoes from Payless and his black leather jacket have returned.

He doesn't so much mind the agony sitting like a boulder on his body. Everything seems to be returning to normal.

The crowd's sound has blurred to a faint rumble, and then he notices a voice. It's the boy leaning over him.

"Chris! Chris!" he says. "Chris, can you hear me?"

"You know him?" asks a voice.

The boy looks up, pausing his attempts at getting this semi-conscious figure to respond. "Kind of. He sits in front of me in my philosophy class. He's quiet. All he seems to do is daydream."

Before the darkness overtakes him once again, Chris latches onto the boy's last sentence.

All he seems to do is daydream.

With sounds of an ambulance drawing nearer, Chris succumbs to the darkness.

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