

## DREAMLIKE STATES

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

In 1999, Kristine Kathryn Rusch won three Reader's Choice Awards for three different stories in three different magazines in two different genres: mystery and science fiction. That same year, her short fiction was nominated for the Hugo, Nebula, and Locus Awards. Since she had just returned to writing short fiction after quitting her short fiction editing job at *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, she was quite encouraged by this welcome back to writing. She never quit writing novels, and has sold more than forty-five of them, some under pseudonyms, in mystery, science fiction, fantasy, horror, and romance. Her most recent mystery novel is *Hitler's Angel*. Her most recent fantasy novel is *The Black Queen*.

When Carter Monroe was six, he and his twin brother Desmond had the same dream. They dreamed that they were alone in a large city. All of the other people had vanished—been taken Somewhere Else—by aliens, Carter thought, although Desmond believed they had been taken by God. The boys, left behind, took what they wanted from shops, ate out of cans, and tried to find a way to make the television station broadcast.

The boys awoke at separate times and did not discuss the dream with each other, although both told their mother. Forty years later, Carter could still remember the look on his mother's face when he started recounting the dream. Her narrow features moved to stark surprise, then to good-natured laughter.

"Don't play no more tricks like that on me, boys," she said, and nothing they could do ever convinced her that they hadn't made up the story to spook her.

But they hadn't.

And Carter saw that moment, that disbelief in something he truly knew had happened, as the beginning of his life's work.

Dream science had always been the most fascinating—and marginal—part of sleep science. By the time that Carter got his MD, at the turn of the century, anyone who went into the science of sleep with the idea of studying dreams was scrutinized more than any other sleep researcher.

Dream study was considered frivolous, a by-product of the more important research. Since most sleep research was funded by pharmaceutical companies, the bulk of the work focused on chemical ways to prevent narcolepsy, insomnia, and jet lag. Researchers who concentrated on the Rapid Eye Movement periods of sleep usually did so with other goals in mind—the ways that REM sleep affected the development of the brain; the brain's chemical mechanisms for preventing movement during REM; and the ways deep sleep differed from REM.

Most of this research involved studies of newborns and infants. Children under the age of two had much higher incidence of REM sleep—in fact, most of their sleep was REM—and they seemed to act out their dreams, a trait lost as the child gained the ability to move in the real world.

Carter found all of these facts fascinating, but as details, not as the central part of the study. Two of these details formed the foundation of his work. The first was the result of infant study: the fact that the brain waves of an infant in REM sleep hardly differed from his waking alpha waves. The second was a quote that appeared in the journal *Neuroscience* in 1992, the year that Carter decided he needed to specialize in three areas: psychology, neurology, and physics.

"Wakefulness," the researchers R. R. Llinas and D. Pare wrote, "is nothing other than a dreamlike state modulated by the constraints produced by specific sensory inputs."

Carter placed the quote on his wall, and within weeks had modified it to a simple line.

Wakefulness is a dreamlike state.

He knew that scientifically the difference between being awake and dreaming was that a person who was awake received input from his senses, and a person who was dreaming received input from his neurons.

Human beings, he knew, accepted information from the senses as real, and information from the neurons as not. But what if they were both real? What if the places people saw in their dreams were as real as the places people walked when they were awake? And was it possible to travel physically from one to the other?

Those were the questions he wanted answered, but he knew better than to pose them in any grant proposal or research paper he presented to private industry. He focused his public work on two different areas: helping schizophrenics through the use of drugs (he believed that schizophrenics "saw" their dreamworld while walking in the real world-again, an opinion he kept to himself) and finding ways to prevent sleepwalking (so that he could investigate why the infant acted out his dreams and the adult did not).

He also founded a sleep clinic for various sleeping disorders, but he made sure his researchers collected information on dreams for him. In the series of three hundred questions he asked of the sleep clinic's patients, the most important one was buried in the middle: Have you ever, while asleep at the same time, shared a dream with someone else?

To his surprise, over half the respondents said yes.

Forty years after Carter had shared a dream with his other, he wanted to try again. Identical twins, he had learned were the best subjects for this type of research, and he was lucky enough to be one. Studies of twins had shown him that twenty percent of all twins had shared a dream, and eighty percent of all identical twins had shared more than one dream. Twins who had used psychotropic drugs, particularly LSD, had claimed to have the same trips, and identical twins tripping in the same room at the same time would have the same kind of trip, even if they didn't share the exact same images.

He had repeatedly gotten identical twins in his lab to share dreams but, as his research associates had pointed out, the lab was an artificial environment and the twins had more in common than any random two people placed in a lab. The associates pointed out that twins might simply have a propensity to share mental imagery. Put them in the same environment and give them the same stimuli, and twins might actually have the same dreams.

Carter thought the idea a stretch, but his research associates were adamant. He would not have good, publishable results until he got random people in separate rooms to dream the same dream.

He thought that was possible. He even thought he knew how to do it.

He had, over the years, combined his neurological knowledge, his psychological training, and his understanding of physics to make a working model of the dreamscape. Dreams, he had learned, followed a pattern. Each dream had its own logic, rather like each country in the world had its own culture. The logic was never violated.

Sometimes, however, one dream overlapped another, making the dreamlogic seem as if it had been violated when, in actuality, the dreamer had changed dreams-or locations.

Thinking of dreams' as a wakefulness-like state- the inverse of the quote he'd had on his wall so long

ago-made him apply different rules and regulations to it. Watching babies go through their REM sleep and moving with images only they could see made him realize that dreamlogic was an inherent part of being human, a part that humans, raised in Western European traditions were taught to deny.

He experimented with various things. Psychotropic drugs made the dreams more intense, but did not improve incidents of sharing. He tried Native American dreamwalking on his own time and found that while it was close, it wasn't quite what he was seeking.

What he was seeking was simple. He wanted a way to make the dreamer's world no longer private, the way the real world was never truly private. The true difference between wakefulness and dreams, he thought, wasn't the way that the brain reacted, but the way that others did.

If he shouted in a crowd of people when he was awake, they would hear him. The same would probably happen in a dream. The difference was that days later the crowd from his wakeful state would remember his shout, while the crowd from his dream (if he could find them at all) would claim they never heard him.

Dreams were solitary experiences; being awake was not.

He did not know if that was because the ability to share dreams became as frozen as the limbs did, or because dreams all took place in the head. What he really wished, and what he knew he could not do, was talk to the waking infants after their rambunctious dreams. Did they share the experience? Did newborns in a hospital nursery all dream of the same landscape-with each other in it? And then was that tendency to share dreams denied so much as they got older that they forgot how to move fluidly through each other's dream landscapes?

Did the importance of his forty-year-old memory lie in the shared dream? Or in the relatively advanced age at which he and his brother had that dream?

Or was the importance truly his mother's response-her laughter and her denial?

The older he got, the more he thought it was that last.

Carter had three research assistants with inipeccable credentials and just enough courage to believe that anything was worth one attempt. Two of these assistants-Shira Montgomery and Amos Kelly-had been with him for years. The third-Glen Goodwin-had been on his staff just six months, but had proved to have an ability to see the corners of the world that no one else was willing to admit existed. He asked them to assist with his own private experiment, the one that he hoped would lead him to greater things.

He asked them to watch as he tried to invade his brother's dreams.

To set up the experiment, he agreed to abide by set standards of behavior.

For six months, he did not contact his brother-a wrenching, painful experience made worse by two things: the first was that he and his brother hadn't been out of touch for their entire lives; the second was that he did not explain to his brother that he was severing ties. One day they were speaking, the next day they were not.

Carter then moved into the lab. He turned in his cell phone and his beeper and whenever he left the office, he was tailed by one of the three assistants, who made sure he did not contact his brother while away. He couldn't have contacted his brother in person, since Carter's lab was in Maryland and Desmond lived in Southern California. But the assistants guarded against the phone call, the chance meeting, the surprise visit. They also refused to put Desmond's increasingly baffled calls in to Carter.

Finally, on a day randomly chosen by his assistants, within no predetemiined time perimeter, Carter had

to submit to the sleeping portion of the experiment. He would sleep in the lab, use the control he had learned with all his experiments, and cross the boundaries of time and space to visit his brother.

He would pick a time in the evening when he assumed both he (on the East Coast) and his brother (on the West) would be asleep.

When he awakened, he would record the dream and its imagery, and he would remain in the lab. His assistants would then call his brother, ask him to report the dream he'd had the night before, and record the conversation.

It was an experiment that could only happen once, and it was one that would not hold up to scrutiny in any public paper or major research journal. But it would answer questions once and for all for Carter, and it would lead him to the next step in his publishable research-guiding others to shared dreams.

On August 24, 2016, at the behest of his three treasured assistants, Carter Monroe fell asleep in the experimental dream chamber of his lab. He found it easier to sleep than he had expected given his state of nervous excitement. But the room had been designed to encourage sleep-and to encourage sleep among the nervous.

The room was small and very dark. It was warm, but not hot. It smelled faintly of the ocean mixed with the crisp air of the mountains. The bed was soft, but not too soft, the sheets smooth, and the blankets thick and luxurious. A faint comforting sound, chosen by the sleeper (in Carter's case, he chose the sound of a babbling brook), eased him into sleep as gently as an infant being rocked by his mother.

Carter did not realize when he fell asleep, but he knew when he started to dream. And it was a familiar dream, the landscape he had seen often as a child-a gold-and-orange sunset on a perfect summer's day.

Much as he loved that dream, he did not want to stay there. He wanted to choose another, familiar landscape, the empty city he had once shared with Desmond, when the rest of the world had disappeared.

First, though, he had to get Desmond and that, he knew, was the trick of it all.

Trick. His mother's word. Was it a trick? Or was it something else? Carter pushed the thought away. He did not want to analyze while he was dreaming. He wanted simply to be.

He recognized this feeling from his dreamwalks, the feeling of being in control of himself in a landscape where the rules of physics-the ones his senses understood-did not always apply. He did not have to take an airplane or a car to his brother's house. One moment he was in his lab, the next he was standing beside his brother's bed, watching his brother sleep.

They had diverged over forty-six years. Different life experiences, different hopes, successes, and failures, had made them individuals instead of two forms of the same person. Still, his brother, curled in a fetal position, clutching his pillow beneath his head, looked so much like Carter himself that Carter was startled. Perhaps that was the dream image. Perhaps the brother he had not seen for nearly a year no longer looked just like him.

Perhaps.

The bedroom was stark. Just a bed and end tables, a lamp and an alarm clock. His brother-a geneticist with one of the major California private industries- had learned something from Carter's sleep research:

always make sure your sleeping environment was used for sleep only.

Desmond slept alone, just as Carter did. Neither of them had married. Both, they liked to joke, had been married to their work. Their other, older siblings were married and had children. Carter and Desmond were nothing like them and never had been. They did not entirely understand the need for companionship, for a "real life." They thought there was more to living than the expected, and constantly sought it out, whatever it was.

Carter sat on the edge of the bed, and the mattress did not sink beneath his weight. He knew then that he was still in the world of dreams, where physics as he understood it, did not apply. He toyed with waking Desmond up, and then decided that would not work. The results his brother might report to his research assistants might be as vague as "I felt my brother's presence, and when I woke up, I thought I saw him for a moment. Then he was gone."

Instead, Carter used the skills he had learned dreamwalking. He remembered how it felt to be six- they had both lost their front teeth that summer. Little reedy boys who were growing out of their hand-me-downs so fast their mother had no idea what to do.

He shrank himself down to his six-year-old self, reached out, took Desmond's hand, and dragged him into the landscape they both had once shared.

The city was more desolate than Carter expected. It was a cinematic New York of the 1970s-no Trump Tower, no speed trains, a filthy, dirty, and empty Times Square. The buildings, which had seemed full of treasures to him as a child, seemed too dingy to hold promises now. They were dark and frightening, made more so by the lack of humanity around them.

Desmond stood beside him, adult and awake now, eyes blinking at the harsh artificial light from the ancient neon. "Carter?" he asked.

Carter nodded.

"What are we doing here?"

"Experimenting," Carter said, but his voice came out petulant instead of excited, accentuated by the lisp caused by his missing teeth.

"I remember this place," Desmond said.

Carter watched him. "I don't want to be here."

"We can try on clothes on Fifth Avenue," Carter said. "We can go to the television station and see if we can make it work."

But Desmond stood in the middle of Grand Central-Station-how they got there, Carter did not know. It was not part of the original dream-and looked around at the emptiness.

"Where did they all go?" Desmond asked. His voice echoed in the vast expanse.

Carter shrugged. "I suspect they were never here in the first place," he said. "This was our secret spot. We never invited anyone in."

Desmond looked down at him then. "Where have you been?"

"Working."

"I called you and called you and called you. Are 2 you dead, Carter?"

"Of course not," Carter said. "If I were dead, you would know."

"If you're alive, why are you six?"

"I'm always six in this place."

Desmond held out his hands in a gesture of confusion. "But I'm not."

"That's because I brought you here," Carter said.

"I don't want to be here," Desmond said. "Let me go."

Even though his brother wore his adult form, he seemed diminished somehow, smaller than Carter had ever seen him.

"I thought this was our safe place," Carter said.

Desmond shook his head. "I never felt safe here. I was the one who was always trying to find a way out."

A newspaper blew past them through the canyons of Madison Avenue. The city had a stale odor, like that of an abandoned house that was filled with dust.

This place didn't feel safe to Carter either. Perhaps the safety he had once felt had not come from the place, but from the fact he had shared it with Desmond.

"Let me go," Desmond said, and Carter, unwilling to put his brother through any more anxiety, did.

Carter woke with a feeling of unease mixed with a sense of elation. He had to calm himself, reminding himself that he might have dreamed of Desmond because he had fallen asleep thinking of his brother. Carter was supposed to stay in the lab until someone let him out. Shira appeared and brought him breakfast, but would say nothing. On the tray was a hardcopy newspaper and an e-reader with no internet or e-mail capacity.

Those were there by his request, so that he would have something to do while they contacted his brother.

Amos said nothing when he brought lunch, and at dinnertime, Glen did not speak either. But he had worry lines on his forehead that had not been there the day before.

Carter was worried himself. He did not know if spending another night in the room would be productive. He had assumed that his assistants would contact his brother that day. Another night might taint the experiment entirely.

Or might add.

After midnight, Carter fell asleep again. This time, he dreamed he was in the nightmare New York alone. He arrived in Grand Central and searched for Desmond until he remembered how to dreamwalk. He made his way to his brother's bedroom, but it was empty, the bed mussed, the pillow scrunched as it had been the night before.

He was about to walk through the rest of the house when someone shook him awake.

Shira.

He blinked at her face, uncertain whether or not he was still dreaming. Then he heard the babble of the preprogrammed brook, smelled the faint ocean air, felt the softness of the mattress beneath him, and

recognized these as input from the senses.

The lights were coming up in the room. Her face became clearer: eyes red-rimmed, lips cracked and bleeding. She bit them when she was nervous.

"I'm sorry," she said.

And he recognized then what he had been feeling all day. "Desmond?"

He didn't need to make it a question. He already knew the answer.

"He's dead," she said. "We got one of his colleagues to let herself into his house. He died in his sleep."

Let me go, Desmond had said.

And Carter had.

He closed his eyes, but not to sleep. To shut out a world that was no longer safe. No longer comfortable.

A world in which he was entirely alone.

Desmond's death had its real world logic. He'd never had any friends. He had broken up with his last girlfriend two years earlier. Like Carter, he hadn't been in touch with his older siblings for more than a decade, and his parents were dead.

His only real contact outside of work had been Carter, and Carter had cut off all communications nearly a year before. The decline, Desmond's coworkers said, began then. It was not swift or sudden, but it was noticeable. His dark moods became darker, his emotions vacillating.

He complained of dreaming of empty places, places where he spent all of his time alone.

In the end, said the woman who found him, she hoped he had found a better place.

And when she had said that, Carter thought of sunsets on perfect summer evenings, and the kind of beauty a man could only see in his dreams.

The kind of beauty a man should have shared with

someone else.

Someone he loved.

Later that month, Carter sold his lab to his three assistants. He went on a cruise to the South Pacific, a where days felt like summer and sunsets were always perfect.

He now knew the answer to all his questions. The strictures on shared dreaming were cultural and learned and could be overcome, but at great cost. Just as babies needed an adult to feed and clothe and shelter them against the world, they also needed companions in their dreams to make that reality a safer place. But as they aged, the reality molded to the mind that was strongest, and that strong mind might not know what the other dreamer needed.

Even if the dreamers were close, even if they were twins, they might not have the same reaction to the same landscape. One might find it exhilarating, the other terrifying.

The dreaming world became private before it could become dangerous.

I never felt safe here, Desmond had said. Let me go.

Carter had let him go. In the physical world too early, and in the dream world too late.

Wakefulness was a dreamlike state, and Carter wished he could find a way to wake up.