

Dreaming With the Angels

JACK DANN

Jack Dann is a multiple-award winning author who has written or edited over seventy books, including the international bestseller *The Memory Cathedral*; *The Man Who Melted*; *The Silent*, a novel of the Civil War; *The Rebel: An Imagined Life of James Dean*; and a number of short story collections: *Timetipping*, *Jubilee*, *Visitations*, *The Fiction Factory*, and the forthcoming *Promised Land*, a companion volume to *The Rebel*. Dann lives in Australia on a farm overlooking the sea and ‘commutes’ back and forth to Los Angeles and New York.

About this story, Dann writes, “‘Dreaming With the Angels’ is part of my James Dean alternate history sequence of stories and a novel (*The Rebel: An Imagined Life of James Dean*). It is an alternate America as seen through the eyes of such icons as James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, Jack and Bobby Kennedy, William Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac. I have been experimenting with writing science fiction as mainstream. All the characters in this story are real, but the events are ever so slightly skewed. My hope is that this technique might give new insights into our culture... and our icons.”

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M

y adopted daughter.”

That’s what Sigmund Freud used to call Dr. Marianne Kris, who now sat in her upholstered tub chair and listened to Marilyn Monroe. Marilyn sat stiffly on a large, comfortable couch opposite Dr. Kris and cried softly, daubing her eyes with the tissues provided on the little table beside her. She wore high-heels, an aqua skirt and a blue-green square-shouldered jacket, and no make-up; her face looked washed-out, pale as her fingers fidgeting on her knees. She had shadows under her eyes, and her famous blond hair had broken ends.

It’s lipstick, Dr. Kris thought. Without it, she’s just an ordinary girl, an average, mildly pretty face. *Tabula rasa. Tabu. Taboo*. She noted her stray thoughts, which were distractions. She hated distractions. She prided herself on what she called her focus and noticed the wretched shaving cuts all over Marilyn’s legs. She scribbled ‘scratches’ in a small, leather notepad resting on her lap. The scratches could be indicative of something carried over from childhood. Dr. Kris believed that the problems and dislocations of the child necessarily and absolutely explained the adult. Inexplicably, she thought of her husband. She exhaled and tried to focus, but Ernst had died exactly five weeks ago, and

she was still numb, in deep mourning. Yet she would not, could not, turn down a client as famous as Marilyn Monroe. Nor would Ernst have wanted her to.

But why would the scratches remind her of Ernst... ?

She focused.

“Why are you crying, Marilyn?”

“Because I’m upset.”

Dr. Kris waited for her to continue, but Marilyn just shook her head and rummaged in her handbag for her sunglasses.

“Why are you putting on your sunglasses? It’s not bright in here.”

“My eyes hurt.” She shifted around on the couch, but wouldn’t lean back.

Marilyn looked white, white as porcelain, Dr. Kris thought. White and needy and exposed. No, not exposed. That’s the trick, that’s her trick. Not exposed. Hiding, guarded, disguised, vulnerable, but beneath it all... She had the sudden thought that Ernst was drowning, yes, he’s dead, *oye, Gott*, and you, you are alive, dangerously alive and bloated, bloated sex goddess, fish goddess, shark child, lamb. Focus. Dr. Kris noted that Marilyn was becoming a little overweight.

“Do you have something to tell me?”

“Yes,” Marilyn whispered and leaned forward, cowed, a little girl about to be punished.

“Well?”

“I think I’m pregnant, I think I’ve been pregnant for three weeks.” She heaved a sigh. “Maybe two. My breasts are so sore, they’re too sore to even touch, and I’ve never in my life had that, and they ache, all

the time, and I have cramps and since Monday a little staining, but the staining and cramps are increasing by the minute. I didn't eat anything all day yesterday, and last night..."

"Yes, go on. It's all right."

"Last night I took four whole amytal sleeping pills, that's probably the equivalent of eight little ones, but I just couldn't sleep, I can't sleep, you know that, and with all the aching and everything..." She shook her head, as though shaking off a bad thought. "Could I have killed it by taking all that amytal on an empty stomach? I took some sherry, too. What should I do? If it's still alive, I want to keep it, but I don't think it's alive." Then she started crying like a child who had thrown a tantrum; her breath was irregular, gasping. "It's dead, I know it. I've killed it. Like everything."

"What do you mean 'Like everything'?"

Marilyn didn't respond.

"Why do you think it might be dead?"

She didn't look up. "Because it feels... inert. Dead."

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I will."

"Are you afraid to see a doctor?"

"Why would I be afraid of that?"

“Because you might find out you aren’t pregnant.”

“I know I am,” Marilyn said, looking at Dr. Kris now, as if she had just found her strength or, as Dr. Kris noted, her role... role as actress as mother, *gottenyu*, what a mother. Dr. Kris prayed for focus and objectivity. She didn’t believe in God, not even now in her time of mourning and need. She was a socialist, an atheist, a Jew, and she would look directly, unflinchingly, into the darkness the bleakness the nothingness with the courage Ernst gave her. There was no God, only Nazis... even now, especially now.

“Why do you want to be pregnant?”

“I am pregnant.”

“Why do you want a baby?”

“Because that’s all there is. That’s everything. That’s what I want most of all, more than anything else, but maybe God is trying to tell me something, that’s what I’m afraid of. I’d probably make a kooky mother.” She turned away from Dr. Kris; her head lowered, she looked around the room, as though searching for a safe, protected place. “I’d love my baby to death. Arthur wants a baby, too, I know that, but I’m afraid he might change his mind. Maybe he could lose his enthusiasm. He told me that I’m a movie star, but that’s... nothing.”

“Do you really believe that?” Dr. Kris asked, wondering what a brilliant playwright such as Arthur Miller could possibly see in Marilyn Monroe; she didn’t even have superficial beauty.

“Yes no, I don’t know what I believe, except I want to give Arthur this baby.”

Dr. Kris nodded and waited.

“Do you think it’s dead?”

“You will have to see your doctor. You must see your doctor.” After a pause - “Are you frightened that the baby is dead or that you may not be pregnant?”

“I would not want anything dead,” Marilyn said in a low voice. “Not animals or anything. Arthur wants a child as much as I do. He said it would be my crown of a thousand diamonds. I want to be a good wife to Poppy.”

“Poppy?”

“Arthur.”

“Why would you call him that?”

Marilyn shook her head. “It’s not what you think. It’s just what I call him sometimes.”

Dr. Kris nodded. Even without being able to see Marilyn’s eyes, she could sense the quick shift of personality. “And what does he call you?”

Marilyn grinned, relaxing. “Sometimes he calls me Penny Dreadful.”

Waiting and wondering why Marilyn was wearing two wristwatches and a locket with the face of a small clock.

Marilyn fidgeted.

“Why are you wearing two watches and that pendant?”

She grinned. “To make sure time doesn’t get away from me.”

“Why would it?”

She shrugged. “It always does, probably because I can’t sleep, and -”

“And...?”

“The pills probably.”

“Could it be you don’t want to be where you’re supposed to?”

Marilyn laughed. “Yeah, probably. I don’t want to be anywhere.”

“Is that why you put the sunglasses on?”

“What do you mean?”

“Tell me what you think.”

“I already told you, my eyes hurt.”

“Do sunglasses make you think of anything, perhaps something from your past? Just tell me whatever comes to mind.”

“Oh, shit. Not that again.”

Dr. Kris smiled at Marilyn. “If you wish, we can just sit here and talk about nothing consequential, nothing that will help you.” After a pause, she asked, “Are you going to visit the Strasbergs for your acting lesson?”

Lee and Paula Strasberg ran the Actors Studio on West 44th Street. Their apartment was just down the hall from Dr. Kris.

Marilyn nodded.

“Perhaps you can talk to them. What did you tell me last time? Something Mr. Strasberg told you?”

“He said I have to begin facing my problems in life and work. But he mostly meant questions of how or why I can act, of which I’m not sure.”

Dr. Kris nodded and waited.

“But I don’t want to get into the same shit I did with my last analyst, all that shit about how did I feel about this, why did I think my mother did that. Not where was I going, but where had I been. But I know where I’ve been. I don’t want to go round in circles like I did before. Everything’s new for me now. New York. New car. New husband. New apartment. New company and... and nobody’s going to control me anymore like everybody does, nobody. You can’t trust anybody. You can’t depend on anybody,” and then Marilyn closed her eyes and began shaking her hands violently up and down, as if she were shaking them dry. Then she seemed to relax and said, “There, that’s better.”

“Is that something Lee Strasberg taught you?”

Marilyn nodded. “It’s the way I prepare to do a scene. I shake off everything. It helps me slip into the character.”

“And what character are you in now?”

Marilyn laughed. “Me. A calmer me. You see? It works. Okay, sunglasses.” She took them off with a flourish and dropped them into her bag. “My mother...”

“Yes...?”

“My mother wore sunglasses when she used to visit me at Aunt Ida’s. Aunt Ida wasn’t my aunt, but she took care of me, and wanted to adopt me, but my mother wouldn’t allow it.”

“Would you have wanted to be adopted?”

“I already had a mother.” After a pause, she continued, “And once I saw her take off the sunglasses in Aunt Ida’s bedroom and her right eye - I remember that even though I was a kid - her right eye was bruised all black and blue and closed up.”

“What happened?”

Marilyn shrugged. “She got hit.”

“Who would have done that?”

“Anybody. Could have even been my grandmother, who went crazy and had to be put away in a mental hospital. Everybody in my family goes crazy. My grandmother. My grandfather. And my mother. She’s incarcerated. What a word, huh? Paranoid schizophrenia. We’re all fucking crazy. I remember when I was a baby, my grandmother put a pillow over my face and tried to kill me.”

“You remember that?”

Marilyn looked wary and nodded.

“What stopped her?”

“Changed her mind, I guess. Got sane again.” Marilyn laughed. “Maybe it would’ve been better if she’d done it. Would’ve saved me all these doctor bills. There, that’s enough about the past. Does that make everything clear? Does that help us get through the day? Does that explain everything?”

Dr. Kris refrained from explaining yet again that Marilyn’s childhood was the key to understanding herself as an adult. “You seem angry. Why is that?”

“I’m not angry. I’m sick with worry.”

“That’s understandable.”

“No, because when I’m not talking about the past, you don’t understand shit.” Marilyn looked surprised and giggled. “I’m sorry.”

“Accepted.”

“Would it offend you if I told you that I think you’re a cold bitch?”

“No, Marilyn. Is this part of the new-you role after shaking your hands?”

“Yeah, I suppose it is. One of them.”

“Do you want to talk any further about your worries? About the baby? About what I don’t understand?”

Marilyn giggled. “Are you going to kick me out?”

“No, we still have time.”

“I mean not continue seeing me as a patient.” Marilyn leaned forward, looking suddenly needy and vulnerable.

“We’ve just started, Marilyn. A few weeks in psychotherapy is mere... foreplay.”

Marilyn nodded. “That’s funny, Dr. Kris.”

“It was meant to be. Now, tell me again what’s worrying you.”

“You’re probably right. I’m probably angry... and worried. I’m angry that everyone wants control.”

“So you said.”

Marilyn didn’t continue. She just stared down at her light blue shoes.

Dr. Kris suppressed a smile, for the phrase 'out of gas' came to mind. Where had she heard that? she wondered, then focused. "Who wants control?"

"Everybody. Arthur, he wants me to get rid of Milton Greene - he's my business partner and dear friend - and he wants to move his own asshole friends into MMP."

"MMP?"

"My production company. Arthur resents Milton, and it's Milton's fault, too; he's always putting Arthur down. 'Go write your little play, this isn't your business.' Milton's a shit, a complete shit, but he's a genius, too, and he loves me, and..."

"And what?"

"And he's the only one I could trust. I couldn't trust his bitch of a wife, although I care about her because there's a good side to her, she'll take care of people, but then she'll use it against you, but Milton isn't like that, but he wants Arthur out of everything, and he wants to be the pig producer and -"

"Pig?"

"I meant big. It's all the goddamn Dilantin that fucked him up. I shouldn't talk, but he... he did it to himself."

"Is he an epileptic? Dilantin should help control his seizures. Perhaps he needs to be re-evaluated."

"No, he's not epileptic, or diabetic, or anything else. He was using it to counteract all the Nembutal he was taking, and he heard somewhere that it gives you energy. Makes the electrical impulses in the brain go faster, or something. So he was taking it all the time."

"Do you use it?"

"I tried it, but it didn't help me sleep. Made me sick." She laughed. "Thank God, huh." She continued. "So I'll have to go along with Arthur and hurt Milton. That's always the way, isn't it? No matter what you do, no matter how careful you try to be, you hurt everybody. So there goes Milton, who I trust, and

here comes Arthur who should mind his own business. His own agent told him that. She said he ought to stay out of my career, and I ought to stay out of his. Which is fine with me.”

“Don’t you trust Arthur?”

Marilyn shook her head. There were no wafting strands of stray hair; she had probably sprayed it... and it was just a bit greasy. “He’s my husband.”

Waiting.

“He’s as jealous as my last husband, only more stuck-up and intellectual about it.” She paused, then spoke almost in a whisper. “He thought I was some kind of angel, but then he guessed he was wrong.”

“Are you talking about his diary that you found?”

Marilyn nodded. “He doesn’t want to stay with me. He thinks I’m sucking out all his creativity. He thinks I’m a whore.”

“But you’re not sure he really wrote all that, are you.”

Marilyn shrugged. “I read it.”

“Yes, but you told me you weren’t entirely sure. You suggested that you were under a lot of stress making that picture with Olivier and -”

“So call me a liar. I don’t know what I read. Only how it hurt me.”

Dr. Kris nodded. It was time for an expression of empathy.

“Do you think you’re a whore?”

“I don’t think about it like that.”

“How do you think about it?”

“I guess I don’t.

Change subject.

“What about the Strasbergs? Do you trust them?”

“Arthur despises them. He thinks they’re charlatans. So does Milton.”

“And you?”

“Lee can be very bad. He’s jealous of everybody. He hates film and film actors, for all he’s their guru. But I need him. Arthur was furious about the money for Lee and Paula to come to England to help me through the film with Olivier. It was a lot of money... But I couldn’t do it without Paula. Not with Olivier, who’s a condescending sonovabitch bastard. I thought he was the most important actor in the world. I thought I could learn everything from him.”

“Do you trust them?”

“It doesn’t matter who I trust. They teach me. Arthur teaches me. And Paula, Paula protects me. I couldn’t have got through *Prince and the Showgirl* without her. I need something to hold on to. God, I hate England. I’ll never make another film there, not for love or money. The only thing I liked was Windsor Park and Sybil Thorndike, who was kind to me. She was the only one. I bought Arthur a Jaguar when we were there, did I tell you that? And I met the Queen of England. Did I tell you that?”

Dr. Kris shook her head.

“Well, I did.”

Waiting...

"I'm not going to work," Marilyn said. "I'm going to have this baby. I'm going to be a good wife to Arthur, make everything cozy, cook for him - all the food he likes, Jewish food like *cholent*. I make a really good *cholent*. You know what that is, right?"

Dr. Kris nodded. She could almost smell Sabbath beef and barley stew, as pungent, rich, and mysterious as childhood. Nostalgia and grief overwhelmed her, and she thought of the ocean, swimming in the ocean with Ernst... and the sharks, cold and dangerous as dreams, there they were, always there.

"I'm going to be a good stepmother to his children, and a good mother to his child." She looked down at her stomach, as if to check its distension. "What do you think?"

"I'm not sure what you're asking."

"What do you think about what I just told you? About having a baby and everything."

"If you're pregnant, it could be a very good thing... for both you and your husband."

"Will it matter if it's his?" Marilyn asked almost in a whisper, as if she were talking to herself, musing. Or, perhaps, pleading.

"Do you think it might be someone else's?" *Gottenyu*. This woman would do anything...

Marilyn nodded.

"Do you want to talk about this?"

She shrugged. "It could be Milton's. I couldn't let everything... I couldn't be cold to him. Arthur was killing him. I couldn't take myself away from Milton. He only needed me a little bit."

Dr. Kris nodded. "All right, perhaps -"

“It could have been someone else, too, a senator I know, who came to England to see me. In secret. It was only one night. Or Joe.”

“Joe?”

“DiMaggio.” She snapped at the therapist. “My ex-husband. He’s never been right since the divorce. I can’t help how I feel about him. He loves me, he’s always loved me, and he deserves better than what I gave him. I feel sorry for him, but...” She shrugged, as if sloughing off the memory of Joe DiMaggio, and said, “It *could* be Jimmy’s baby.”

“And who is Jimmy?” Dr. Kris asked.

Marilyn answered in a soft, little girl voice. “James Dean. He’s my best friend. I only trust Jimmy.”

Dr. Kris sighed - *James Dean. What next?* - but softly. Marilyn didn’t hear her.

“Do you think it matters who’s the father?” Marilyn asked.

“What do you think?”

“I think no matter whose it is, it will be Arthur’s. But you know what?”

“What.”

The grandfather clock between the east windows bonged ten times. Westminster chimes.

“I hope it’s Jimmy’s.”

“Why?”

“Because it will be Arthur’s, no matter what, like I told you, but if it was Jimmy’s, it would be more mine.”

Dr. Kris finally took a note, and Marilyn looked up at her expectantly. Now she was radiant as a new bride a new mother a child, and as blond and hopeful as the morning sun warming the cold emptiness of the therapist’s apartment.

* * * *

Marilyn’s apartment on the thirteenth floor of 444 East Fifty-Seventh Street was a freeze-frame snowstorm, a glacier: walls and ceilings painted chalk white, a mirrored living room expanding her life into cocaine infinities. Living room, dining room, bath room, bedroom, empty, achingly white cold white lactescent white stone white bed... white Franklin baby grand piano - her mother’s; ivory chess pieces adrift, suspended on snow white and slush-white squares; eggshell chairs, pearl sofa, frosted draperies and lily soft shag carpet; white motes of down in the air, snow... blond visions behind dark glasses. But shadows were everywhere, impurities, objects, dark, discordant discolorations: books with garish and pastel covers piled on tables and chairs and scattered on the floor, gilt framed photographs of Abraham Lincoln hanging all in a row, the muddy ribbon of the East River seen through a living room window.

Down the hall was Arthur’s study, a smoky, wood-panelled, masculine cave of a room. A man’s room. Marilyn and her decorator John Moore had designed it.

Arthur was away in the country, and Marilyn was home in bed.

On the cross-legged night table beside her were tissues, a long-necked decanter of Portuguese sherry, a water tumbler and half-filled glass, a thin book of poetry by Robert Frost, her diary, a phone, and scattered plastic vials of pastel pills.

Marilyn had just overdosed on Dexamyl, amytal, and Phenobarbital because the sonovabitch bastard gynaecologist had told her she wasn’t pregnant. False alarm. But he was a liar, a sonovabitch bastard of a liar. She felt the pills take hold. She was cold and hollow and numb inside. The air whooshed in her ears. The clocks and watches and pendants ticked, counting her out, tick, tock, ticking fucking tocking, and she reached for the faux ivory French phone and dialled Nick Ray’s number. Nick knew Jimmy. He was Jimmy’s director. He would get a message to Jimmy. Jimmy had left her. How could he do that? She needed him right the fuck now because Arthur needed to be alone in Amagansett, Long Island to get his creative self back. She had a good head for numbers, one, two, three, she would dial all the numbers in the world.

A voice as faraway as childhood answered the phone.

Maybe it was Nick. Maybe it wasn't. She told him to get a message to Jimmy, "*I love him, tell him that, you know how much I love him, and I'm sorry that everything is over, but that's the best thing for everybody, and tell him that I'm -*"

Asleep, dreaming with the angels, floating through Phenobarbital clouds of poetry. She tried to reach for her diary and a pen, but her arm weighed a thousand pounds and her hand was a white, squashed spider. A poem had come to her, full and rich and finished, and if she didn't write it down, she'd forget it. She had to tell Robert Frost, *oh how I love Robert Frost*, and she remembered hours spent with the poet, but right now minutes might be hours, or maybe she had it backwards, and hours were minutes, minutes seconds, and she would fall asleep and die without writing down her poem. The words, so cold and profound...

Robert...

From time to time

I make it rhyme,

but don't hold that kind

of thing

against

me -

Oh well, what the hell,

so it won't sell.

What I want to tell -

is what's on my mind:

'taint Dishes,

'taint Wishes,

it's thoughts

flinging by

before I die -

and to think

in ink.

She giggled and mumbled, “Robert, Robert, don’t let me die...

“Jimmy, Arthur, Milton bye bye bye.”