

PERCHANCE TO DREAM

ISOBELLE CARMODY

Multiple award winner ISOBELLE CARMODY began her first novel, *Obernewtyn*, in high school and has been writing ever since. She completed a Bachelor of Arts and a journalism cadetship while she finished the novel. *Obernewtyn* was shortlisted for Children's Book Council Book of the Year Award; and its sequel, *The Farseekers*, was an honour book in the CBC awards. Her award-winning Obemewtyn Chronicles have established her at the forefront of fantasy writing for young people.

Her fourth book, *The Gathering*, was joint winner of Children's Book Council Book of the Year Award and was second in the Western Australia Young Readers Book Award. She has since then written more than twenty books. The title story of her short-story collection *Green Monkey Dreams* won the Aurealis Award for the best young adult short story; and her novel, *Darkfall*, the first book of the Legendsong series, was shortlisted for the Aurealis Award for Best Fantasy novel. She has also won the coveted Golden Aurealis for her young adult novel *Alyzon Whitestarr*. Her books have been translated into many languages; and she has just completed *The Stone Key*, which is the next to last volume in the Obemewtyn Chronicles. The National Library of Australia has recognised the importance of Isobelle's work by recording an interview with her as part of its oral-history program.

And you, gentle reader, are about to enter one of Isobelle's lucid dreams. A word of warning, though: you are entering a trap...

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For Marjorie

Anna woke knowing she had been dreaming, but as so often with dreams, to wake was to forget. Strange to remember vividly that she had dreamed, yet to have no recollection of the dream. On the rare occasion that she did remember, the minute she tried to describe it, the dream would dissolve. Pinning a dream down was like trying to catch hold of a skein of smoke.

Leaf claimed it was possible to train yourself to remember dreams by writing down anything you could recall, after which you could analyse them.

It would be nice to believe that dreams had meaning but her feeling was that they were nothing more than a churning of the thoughts and events of the day. Dream analysis was all of a piece with tarot cards, the zodiac and ley lines. Wishful thinking. Not that she would dream of saying so to Leaf. Dear, overweight, dreamy, compassionate Leaf was one of those people whose longing for meaning was so strong and lovely a part of her nature that even their cynical friend Izabel could not bear to do more than poke occasional gentle fun at it.

Anna yawned and turned over to find that she was alone. For just the slightest moment, she felt uneasy. Then she laughed at herself for undoubtedly David had gone to town to get fresh chocolate croissants and papers. These and the coffee that he would brew when he returned were part of their Saturday ritual. He would carry the lot in on the enormous antique tray left to her by her grandmother, complete with a sprig of something from the garden. He had done this the very first Saturday they had awakened together, and he never forgot.

She smiled smugly at the ceiling and told herself as she had done once or twice every day of the three years that she had known him that she was incredibly lucky. It was not until three months after he had been introduced to her at Izabel's retrospective, and only days before they had married, that Anna discovered that he was almost six years younger than she was. She had been horrified and he had laughed at her, asking how knowing their ages changed anything. Amazingly he seemed not to care at all about the age difference, so they had married and suddenly all those long lonely dispiriting years broken by occasional lovers who did not wait to see her face in the morning light were over. She was now that incredible, dazzling thing: an object of love and desire.

'The gods will get you for gloating ...' she warned herself, and though it was a joke, a little shiver of disquiet ran down her spine because at some level she did feel that this much luck had a price tag, and that sooner or later, she would have to have a leg amputated or get cancer to balance the books. 'Idiot,' she muttered, deciding that she had better get up and have a shower before she got any more morbid.

Pulling back the quilt to air the sheets, she found herself trying to remember what she had done the previous night. Maybe she had got drunk. She almost never drank, but it was possible she had tried one of the strange drinks David sometimes brought home from his trips abroad for her to try. But if she had got drunk, surely she would remember the early part of the evening, even if she had forgotten the rest.

'Early onset of senility,' she muttered, and drew open the curtains.

She gasped, for instead of the sunlit dew drenched garden with the sea shimmering behind it, there was a mist pressed up against the glass, obliterating everything but the cloudy shapes of the nearest bushes. Then something black flew out of the mist and smashed against the glass, shattering it and showering her with cutting fragments. She screamed.

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Anna sat up, heart pounding, and felt her face with trembling fingers, but the skin was smooth.

'A nightmare,' she whispered and lay back to ponder the doubled oddness of dreaming you were waking, only to find you had woken into another dream. She looked at David's side of the bed and wondered if she had subconsciously registered his quiet departure and that had been the seed for the dream. She was too wide-awake now to go back to sleep, so she got up and pulled on her kimono. Then she crossed to the curtains and drew them open.

To her astonishment, the garden and the road and the sea were all hidden behind a thick mist, just as in her dream. She stepped back from the window, but nothing came hurtling out of the mist. She laughed shakily and turned to make the bed, reminding herself that mists were not so extraordinary on this part of the coast. In fact, they were common in summer, and sometimes she got into the car and drove only to find the sun shining two kilometres away. It was one of the things she liked about her little stretch of the coast, that weather here was often anomolous.

Showering, she thought how as a child she had loved walking through the mist to school, pretending that she would pass through some hidden magical gate into a world full of adventure and danger, where she would find friendship worth dying for and the truest of true love, not to mention meaning and purpose. But of course there was only one world and only one way to escape it. So she had remained in the world with her grief-sapped father, the ghost of her mother and her bitter, half-mad grandmother. When her father finally committed suicide, she had continued living with her grandmother, whose corrosive bitterness scoured anyone with whom she came in contact, and her granddaughter most of all. The old woman had died when she was twenty-four, leaving Anna a small amount of money and her furniture. The house had gone because of something to do with capital gains tax, and it was only when Anna decided to sell an enormous lounge setting that she had been keeping in Leaf's shed for lack of space in her

minute bedsit, that she discovered it was an antique. As were many of the pieces of furniture crammed in her bedsit and Izabel's attic. Where her grandmother had acquired them, she had no idea. Perhaps someone had left them to her, or she had brought them as a job lot when she had left her philandering husband to set up on her own all those eons ago.

Their sale had brought in enough money for a new car, the cottage by the sea, and had enabled her to quit her job as an art teacher and paint. That she had then exhibited shyly and found unexpected success as an artist seemed to be part of that excess of luck that sometimes worried her.

'I don't know how you can see yourself as lucky,' Izabel had said when she had once voiced this apprehension. 'Your mother dies of cancer and your selfish father kills himself, leaving you in the clutches of your vicious, tightfisted cow of a grandmother. I'd say you paid in advance for your luck, it that's how it works. Mind you this much luck is totally wasted on you, Anna.'

'He wasn't selfish,' Leaf had reproached their vivid friend gently, for she had gone to school with Anna and had known her father. 'He was just so sad. Think of it, his mother left his father and never allowed them to see one another again, and then his wife gets cancer and dies. I think he stayed alive as long as he could for Anna's sake.'

'Oh bully for him,' Izabel sneered. 'He kills himself when she is thirteen, which everyone knows is the worst age to have anything like that happen.'

'All ages are the worst age to have that happen,' Anna had murmured, but neither of them heard her.

Had she been scarred by her parents' deaths or her grandmother's terrible bitterness, she now wondered as she towelled herself dry. She did not feel scared but she supposed those things might be at the root of her excruciating shyness; especially with men. She had never been able to imagine that anyone could love her and Izabel maintained that was why no one did. According to her, men only wanted what they couldn't have. They were natural hunters and Anna's meekness and lack of confidence made her as exciting as a tortoise. Anna conceded her shyness, but maybe that was her nature as much as the circumstances of her childhood. And it was not as if she had ever been glamorous like Izabel, with her flaming red hair and gorgeous face and body. Nor did she have Leaf's irresistible charm to distinguish her. She was merely ordinary looking and awkward of manner, and it had seemed foolish and vain to try to change that with clothes or

make-up, as Izabel always urged. That would be too much like donning a mask, and if someone were won by it, then she would be doomed to wear it forever. Better to remain herself and alone.

Then David had come into her life. She could still see Izabel in her peacock coloured coat, smiling as she introduced them, and David's serious eyes above his soft wondering smile. 'I might be a little out of my depth here,' he had confessed, voicing her shy discomfort.

Slowly she rubbed into her face some of the expensive cream she had brought at his insistence when they had flown back from Paris, but she did not wipe the clouds from the mirror. Better not to look at her pale, plain face with its mouse-coloured eyes and mouse-coloured hair. It was not so much her mousiness that bothered her as the lines about her eyes that betokened her age and the slight thickening of her body, which might be the beginning of a middle-aged spread. Revolting phrase. As if you got soft and runny and incapable of holding your form when you got older.

Pulling on her favourite primrose silk kimono, she went to the kitchen to look at the clock but was distracted by the sight of the mist through the kitchen window. It obscured not only the back garden but the enormous hill that rose greenly up behind the house. Beyond it lay the vast wilderness of the national park. When she first used to come here she had been able to walk from her back door across blackberry-choked fields and up to the top of the hill where she would gaze at the forest that spread as far as the eye could see. But the older couple that had brought the land behind Anna's encompassed the hill and they soon poisoned the blackberries, repaired the fences, and put in a bad-tempered bull to discourage anyone trying to climb them. They were possessive ex-city folk with a loathing for cats, and twice Anna had been forced to go to the council to rescue Electra after she had been lured into one of their traps. David disliked them intensely and had more than once suggested she simply make an offer of money for their land, which the pair would be unable to resist. But Anna had not wanted to do that. She did not like the neighbours any more than he did, but life was full of people with plans that elbowed you and stepped on your toes, and you could not buy out everyone. Life was about adapting and finding a way to live with other people.

Anna frowned, remembering a rare argument with David about the neighbours, in which he had accused her of being too passive. It had happened a month after the wedding, and a few days after David had first met Leaf. She had always wondered if her friend's support of her refusal to act against the neighbours had precipitated the quarrel. 'Don't you ever want anything passionately enough to fight for it?' David had demanded.

'Will you always simply take what life gives you and strive for nothing?'

All at once the mist shifted and thinned so that suddenly Anna could see the bottom of the neighbour's hill. Unexpectedly, there was a man in a long black cloak striding along its flank! Leaning on the sill and squinting, she decided that it was not either of her neighbours, who were both grey haired, for this man had shaggy black hair. Besides, the neighbours never walked anywhere. They used a noisy two-stroke tractor to traverse their property and even to collect the mail from the postbox at the front of the house. The man might be a visitor, in which case he would know about the bull. But what if he was a hiker and had come down the creek from the national forest?

Anna stood there indecisive, until the memory of David's accusation of passivity drove her out the back door, across the veranda and through the trees to the waist-high fence which was the real border of her land. 'Hey!' she called.

The man stopped abruptly and looked across at her. He stood so still that he reminded her of a deer or a fox caught in the headlights of a car. Belatedly it occurred to her that she was wearing nothing but a thin kimono and was all alone. When the man began to come towards her with swift, purposeful strides, she had to resist the impulse to back up, reminding herself that she had called out to him. His face was extraordinarily pale, and if not for his dark eyes and his black brows and hair, she would have thought he was albino. That his clothes were black, only accentuated his palour so much as to be an affectation, except that somehow, despite his queer clothes and dramatic good looks, this man did not strike her as the sort who desired attention.

'I just wondered if you realised this is private land,' Anna said when he finally stopped on the other side of the fence. 'There is a bull, you see. It's not mine,' she added and then she blushed at the foolishness of her words. Why was it that she was unable to utter a single sensible sentence when she met someone for the first time?

Still the man did not speak, and although his Slavic features showed little of what he was feeling, she had the strong feeling that he was astonished, though she could not imagine why. Surely she was not such an amazing sight wearing a kimono in her own back yard.

'My husband and I saw you from the kitchen window. We thought you might not have realised that you had got onto private land. There is the bull you see. The neighbours let it loose and it has a very bad temper ...' She

stopped, abruptly realising she was babbling on like an idiot. The man might not even speak English. That could be the explanation for his sombre, old-fashioned clothes and his silence.

'I did not realise there was a place here. The mist,' the man finally spoke, pointing behind her. He had a slight but definite accent, which she thought might be Russian or maybe Hungarian.

'This is my land. Mine and my husbands,' Anna said, then she blushed for surely in mentioning David so often and pointedly she was making it all too obvious that he was not at home. Get a grip, she told herself in Izabel's sharp clear tone. She said calmly, 'The land you are on is not my land. But I am trying to warn you that there is a bull loose.'

'A bull?' The man turned hastily, lifting his hands as if to defend himself. She saw from the breadth of his shoulders under the cloak that he was strongly built. But after a moment, he relaxed and glanced back at her. 'The bull is not yours?'

'No. The bull and the land you are on belong to my neighbour,' Anna repeated, unease giving way to exasperation. 'You must go along the fence there to reach the road.'

'The borders of this place are strong,' the man said, his dark eyes now seeming to examine her closely. 'I could not enter without being invited.'

This was such a peculiar thing to say that Anna wondered if the man had understood anything she had said. She said firmly but kindly, 'Just go that way Follow the fence down to the road.' She turned and headed back to the house.

'Wait,' the man called. 'Will you tell me your name?'

Anna turned only to find that the mist had thickened so that she could no longer see the man or the hill. But some impulse made her call, 'My name is Anna. Goodbye.' She ran lightly through the trees to the porch and was inside the house before it occurred to her that it was a long time since she had moved so swiftly and easily. Maybe Leaf was right in saying that ageing was all in your mind. Then Anna grinned, remembering that Izabel had responded sourly to this pronouncement by saying unfortunately it was all in your body.

Anna looked out the kitchen window again, but the mist was thicker

than eve, and she could see no sign of the man. She hoped he had understood and was making his way to the road. Maybe when David came, he would go and pick the man up and offer him a lift to town. He had seemed very persuaded when Leaf had given him her random acts of goodness to counterbalance a world full of random acts of violence lecture; funny how he had gone from calling her a featherbrained hippie to admiring her genuine kindness and compassion. Thinking of David reminded Anna that she had come into the kitchen to look at the clock. It showed three o'clock, which was impossible. She put her head against the clock, and sure enough, there was no ticking. She shrugged. The real wonder was that the old clock had ticked on for so long, rather than that it had stopped. She grinned, thinking how often David had asked how she could endure something so ugly. The clock was in fact quite hideously ornate but Anna liked it anyway. Or maybe that was why she liked it. Ironically, it was the most valuable by far of the things her grandmother had left her, and David said she ought to sell it before it broke or was stolen. But she had refused, saying it was the only thing out of all her grandmother's furniture that she liked and they had more than enough for their modest needs and for quite a few wants as well. It would be a nest egg for their old age.

Anna went into the living room to look at the little clock on David's desk. Incredibly, it had stopped at three o'clock too. This was odd enough to give her pause because one clock ran on batteries and the other on an intricate antique system of tiny pulleys and pendulums. She was tempted to call Leaf, who was bound to have a vague but thrilling sounding theory that would cover the mist and the stopped clocks, but she resisted the impulse and returned to the kitchen. She reached out and touched the antique clock affectionately. She would take it up to the city, to the old watchmaker who had valued it, next time she went and get it repaired. In fact she might drive up with David on Monday. It would be fun to go with him for a change. Maybe she would book the Windsor for the night and they could stay and even see a show. Or go to a Jazz club. David would prefer that. The more she thought of the plan, the more it appealed and she went to find the hotel number, thinking that she could just pack a bag for them and slip it into the boot of the car and make the whole thing a surprise. She would wait to tell him until he said disconsolately that he supposed they had better head for the hills.

Finger poised to dial, it occurred to her that David had not said that for some time. In fact the last time they had gone to the city, he had only said cheerfully, 'Let's call in and see Leaf on the way home.' The contentment in his voice had been profound, and she had stared out the window of the car to stop him seeing how moved she had been to hear him call the cottage home. She shrugged and dialed, then she stopped. There was no dial tone.

The phone was dead. She stared into the receiver in disbelief; first the clocks and now the phone.

Maybe it was just the third thing. Leaf always said everything came in threes.

Anna's stomach rumbled loudly and that decided her. Instead of waiting, she would drive into town. No doubt David had been waylaid and if he had tried to ring, she would not have got the call. Would he have got some sort of signal or message to let him know the phone was out, or would he simply think she had gone to the beach? It was possible that the mist had rolled in after he left, and only extended as far as Point Defiant. She had a mobile of course, but there was no reception unless you drove out to the point. She debated walking along the road to the neighbour on the other side to find out if their phone was out as well, but they might not be down for the weekend.

The phone began to ring. Anna stared at it incredulously then she dived on it, snatching up the receiver. 'David?'

No answer.

She was about to hang up, when she realised she could hear someone speaking, but it was as if they were very far away. She pressed the receiver hard against her ear and strained to catch the words. 'I'm sorry,' she heard. 'I never wanted this. I never meant you to be hurt...'

'Izabel?' Anna whispered. 'Is that you?'

But now there was only a faint humming sound. Anna set the receiver down slowly and deliberately, and lifted the receiver again to dial David's number. Then she realised there was no dial tone.

'This is impossible,' she said.

She went to the bedroom and threw off her kimono, pulled on jeans, canvas shoes and a frayed red T-shirt that had once belonged to her father and went to get the keys to her car. But they were not on their hook by the door. She stared at the bare nail incredulously. David had taken her keys along with his own once ages back but she had driven in another nail since then, so their keys had hung on different hooks. The only answer was that he must have absent-mindedly put his keys on her hook the previous night when he had got in. Normally it would not have mattered, but so many queer things had happened already that morning that their absence disturbed her.

For some reason, she thought of the pills Izabel had given her when she had been so nervous before her first show that she had kept vomiting.

‘Vomiting is not good PR,’ Izabel had announced, and she had given Anna a pill to calm her nerves. After the show, she had presented Anna with the bottle, saying that it looked as if she was going to have to endure many more shows. She had been right, for Anna had been inundated by offers from galleries and agents after that first night. But she had never taken any more of the pills for shows. She hadn’t liked the way they made her feel as if she was wrapped up in cotton wool, all her senses numbed down.

Suddenly there was a loud thud against the window. Anna started violently but there was no broken glass. She drew a long steadying breath and went outside to see if the bird was lying in the grass, stunned. She thought how uncanny it was to have this happen after she had dreamed of something smashing the window. Of course birds frequently flew into the oversized windows David had insisted they install in the cottage. It might even be that she had subconsciously registered a bird hitting the glass when she slept, and had simply incorporated it into her dream. Certainly more birds hit the windows when the fog was in. But there was no bird lying under the window so it must have managed to flap away after all. Or else Electra had been even faster than usual.

As if her thoughts had summoned the Siamese cat, Electra was by the door waiting to be let in, blue eyes guileless.

‘Don’t you think this is a very weird day, Electra?’ she muttered as they came back into the kitchen.

‘Not really,’ Electra answered in exactly the sort of raspy smokers’ voice Anna always imagined the cat would have if she talked. Then her mouth fell open at the realisation that *the cat had talked!* Electra yawned elaborately, showing a pink tongue and sharp white teeth. ‘I hope you are not going to be boring and do the whole oh my god the cat is talking routine.’

‘This has to be a dream,’ Anna said faintly.

‘What else?’ asked Electra drily.

‘I’m dreaming!’ Anna repeated. Relief washed over her at the realisation that this was the answer to all the strangeness of the morning. The mist, the foreign man, her inability to remember the previous night, even the birds hitting the windows; they were all part of a dream. But that

meant she had dreamed of waking two times in the course of a dream, without ever actually doing so. The thought made her feel dizzy. Then it struck her that she was not just dreaming. She was *lucid* dreaming; she was aware of dreaming while she was dreaming. According to Leaf, that meant she could direct her movements in the dream, and wake when she wanted just by voicing the wish aloud. But the experience was so amazing and novel that she had no desire to wake.

'I don't want to wake,' she said.

'Fortunate, under the circumstances,' Electra muttered obscurely, as she began to groom her tail.

'This really feels real,' Anna said.

'What is reality?' Asked Electra.

Anna looked down at her. 'I always imagined you would sound like this.'

'Which is why I sound like this,' Electra said. 'So are you going out?'

'I can't. David took my keys by accident,' Anna said. Then she remembered she was dreaming. The real David was probably lying right beside her sound asleep. In fact, Leaf claimed that when you dreamed about a person, it was only the bit of you that the person represented, so it was actually she who had taken her keys.

All at once Leaf herself was sitting at the kitchen bench cupping a mug of green tea in both hands. Only instead of one of her voluminous tent dresses, she was wearing a close fitting emerald green silk dress with a long train that hugged her multitude of curves and trailed across the terracotta tiles, and rather than being cropped into a white blond dandelion, her hair hung well past her waist and was bound into a loose plait from which fetching wisps escaped. She looked wonderful.

'I'm dreaming you,' Anna said.

'Of course,' Leaf responded, beaming. She bent down and picked up Electra, who began at once to purr. Anna was startled to notice that the cat's eyes had turned the same shade of green as Leaf's own.

'What does it mean that I keep dreaming of waking?' Anna asked.

'You mustn't look for the obvious in dreams,' Leaf said in her gentle pedantic way. 'To understand the meaning of a dream, you have to regard it as a message from the parts of you that are intuitive and voiceless, rather than reasoning and rational. In a sense, a dream is a code and you have to find the key if you want to unravel its meaning. Sometimes it will be a recurring image or event, or it might be one of the people you dream about that is the key. I mean, whatever it is that they represent for you.'

Anna frowned. 'Let's see; I dreamed of David being missing, and of mist and of birds hitting the window. Of the clocks being stopped and the phone not working. And I dreamed of Electra talking and then you appeared.'

'Not me exactly,' Leaf corrected her. 'I probably represent an aspect of your personality, too. You must think of me as a symbol.'

'Of what?'

'I'm not sure. Dream symbolism is very subjective. But if you want an educated guess, I would say that I symbolise the spiritual, imaginative aspect of your persona, and you have conjured me because whatever it is that your subconscious is trying to tell you is to do with intuition rather than facts.'

'What about Electra? What does she symbolise?'

'Well of course not everything in a dream is a symbol. For instance, *you* are not a symbol and it might be that Electra is simply Electra, but the fact that she spoke is surprising. It suggests to me that she represents a part of you that does not usually voice itself. Given that she is an animal and a cat in particular, I would say she represents atavistic aspects of your nature. Jealousy or rage perhaps.'

'But I don't feel either of those things,' Anna protested.

'Electra could also simply represent animal awareness; Your primal sense which existed in humans before reason. But don't get hung up on a single aspect of the dream. Tell me about this dark man? Is he attractive.'

Anna shrugged. 'He was a foreigner wearing black old-fashioned looking clothes. He had the palest face, too. I was trying to warn him about the neighbour's bull and then he said something odd. I can't remember it exactly, but something about not being able to visit my place unless I invite him.'

'Sounds like a vampire,' Leaf said. 'I hope this is not going to be a nightmare.'

Anna laughed. 'He was just a hiker that got lost in the mist.'

'Your mist,' Leaf reminded her. 'Your hiker.'

'What about David taking the keys?'

'It suggests to me that part of you has been set aside or misplaced in your relationship with David.'

'That's ridiculous,' Anna protested. 'I knew you didn't like him. It's because he's younger isn't it?'

'If that's what I think, it's what you think,' Leaf said mildly. 'In fact I did have reservations about him to begin with. It was something of a shock to come back from a trip and find you married, and he was always so controlled that I felt he was playing a part. But you know all of this because I told you. Yet in the end, I came to see that under the coolness and sophistication, he is a man in pain.' She laughed, adding, 'No, I don't wonder any longer why you are with him. These days it's Izabel who says he's not right for you.'

'But she introduced us!' Anna protested, but she thought of the whispered voice on the phone; Izabel apologising. But that was a dream. This is a dream, Anna reminded herself.

'Tell me what aspect of the dream stands out most for you,' Leaf asked. 'Sometimes that is the best way to understand a dream.'

'I guess it's that I dreamed of waking but I was still dreaming, and then I woke again, but I'm still dreaming,' Anna answered.

'Sounds as if you are trying to wake,' Leaf said. 'Tell me about the clocks.'

'They stopped. That antique of Gran's and David's little electric travelling clock. One runs on battery and the other has a mechanism that works on a pendulum but they both stopped at the same moment. Three o'clock.'

Something smashed into the kitchen window and Anna jumped and

swung round in time to see something dark fly up and out of sight. It looked a lot bigger than a bird but when she turned to ask what Leaf had seen, she found that her friend and her cat were gone.

There was a knock at the front door. Anna stood for a long minute, then she went through to the front door and opened it. The foreign man was standing on her doorstep. 'Anna,' he said.

'This is a dream,' Anna said.

'I know,' agreed the man, 'I was only able to penetrate this far because you gave me your name. The giving of a name is always an invitation. Have you been beyond the boundaries of your dream yet?'

'Beyond?'

He nodded his glossy head. 'If you wish, I can escort you. It can be daunting in the beginning to go beyond your dreams. But I have been exploring around your area lately and there is nothing too bad. No nightmares. I came because I saw the hill but I could not find the house because of the mist. Then you called me.'

'I don't understand a thing you are saying,' Anna said. 'Are you trying to tell me that you are not part of my dream?'

'I am a part of your dream in this moment, but I can leave it and retain solidity and form and identity as I travel though the larger dreamscape. As you can. It is one of the advantages of being a long dreamer.'

'What is a long dreamer?' Anna asked, beginning to feel uneasy.

'A person who has been asleep long enough for their dream to have become solid. This means you can leave your dream and return to it without it vanishing. And once you become a lucid dreamer, you can direct your course as I have done. Of course, there are short dreamers who lucid dream, but they cannot travel outside their own dreams because the dream will immediately dissolve, causing them to wake.'

'But am I ... I mean, why am I sleeping for a long time? What happened to me?'

He shrugged. 'Car accident, failed suicide, embolism, bomb explosion. Could be anything really.'

'You mean I'm in a coma,' Anna gasped. All at once she felt weak.

'Let me help you,' said the man, but he did not move. Then he said, 'You have to invite me. I can't breach the boundaries of your dream.'

'I'll come out,' Anna said.

'I'm not a vampire,' the man said. 'But you should try not to think about such beings else you will summon one and they are very difficult to deal with. We may not be able to be killed but we can feel fear and pain very vividly.'

'You read my mind!' she accused.

'Not really. You projected an image into my mind of me as a vampire. But listen, let me show you what I mean. We should have a very good view of the dreamscape from the top of your hill.' He held out his hand.

'What is your name?' Anna asked.

He smiled. 'I am Nicholas and knowing my name will allow you to summon or repel me from your place. But it is rude to summon a person physically. You must say my name and allow me to come to you. Remember, though, that if you speak the name of a short dreamer, it can sometimes make them lucid but more often it will cause them to wake.'

'You mean I can go into other people's dreams?'

'Have I not been saying so?' Nicholas asked. 'But remember, the dreams of short dreamers are instable and like to vanish when you are in them. Then you will be drawn back to your own place. But you will pass through the void and that is a place of pure nightmare. Best to learn the signs that tell you a dreamer is about to wake, so that you can abandon a dream before it abandons you. Come.' He held out his hand again and, after a hesitation, Anna stepped outside telling herself this was a dream and ordinary rules could not possibly apply. She expected his flesh to be cold to match his pallour, but his hand was warm and strong as it closed about hers.

They went down the side of the house to the back yard, past her car. She was startled to see that it was not her new car in the driveway but the little green Volkswagen she had brought out of her first earnings at teachers' college. She touched it affectionately as she passed and was shocked when it purred.

'Things are often as you imagined them in dreams,' Nicholas said, reaching out to pat the car. At the back of the yard, he leapt over the fence and then he helped her over it, adding, 'Best not to think about the bull you mentioned the other day.'

Anna stared at him. 'The other day? I saw you less than an hour ago.'

His winged brows lifted. 'Time is subjective here.'

* * * *

They climbed the hill, which was as steep as she remembered from years before. Anna grinned to think how it would irritate her neighbours to know that she had appropriated their hill as part of her dreamplace. But thinking of the neighbours made her think of David and her smile faded. 'Am I in a coma then?' She asked flatly.

He was a little ahead and he looked back at her. 'It would seem so.'

Anna suppressed a surge of claustrophobia. 'But I can wake, right? I mean, I can wake up eventually.'

'It is possible. But the longer you sleep, the less likely it is that you will wake.'

Anna wanted to ask how long he had slept, but there was a remoteness in his face that prevented her voicing the question. They toiled up the last steep sloping part of the hill, and then turned to look around them. The hill had brought them above the mist and they had a panoramic view in all directions. But what Anna now beheld was not what she had seen the last time she had been to the top of the hill, save for the part of the hill that ran down to her house, or what would be her house, if it was not hidden in mist. There was no sign of the beach or the sea. Beyond the mist, a vast city rose up, which was bordered by a desert on one side and on the other by factories and housing estate homes in a rigid grid of streets. Further away was a wood, and a lake and then what looked like a castle, but in between each, there was mist.

'Those are all dreams?' Anna asked.

'This is the dreamscape. The solid seeming parts are dreams and the mist is void. But those solid places will vanish as soon as their dreamers wake. That is what makes your hill so unique. It is a true fixed point and so it

can be used to navigate by. The nearest solid place beyond it is a wood with flaming trees.'

'Is that the dream of another long dreamer?' Anna asked.

'It must be so, but I have never found them. It may be that the dreamer has taken the form of a tree rather than becoming lucid. True long dream travellers are rare.'

Anna felt dizzy at the alienness of what he was telling her. Nicholas said sharply, 'Don't! If you let go, you will go back into the void and drag me there with you.'

'Won't I just wake?' Anna asked.

'An ordinary dreamer would do so, but waking is no simple matter for long dreamers. The best way to describe it is to say that there is a gap between waking and dreaming, and that is the void. To get from one state to the other, the dreamer must pass over the void. But while ordinary dreamers have a bridge to cross, long dreamers do not.'

Anna nodded slowly. Then she drew in a breath of surprise, because over his shoulder she saw that the city was beginning to shimmer and lose definition. Nicholas followed her gaze, then he said, 'Someone you know is waking.'

'Someone I know?'

He nodded. 'The dreamscape is formed of dreams resting alongside one another. Of course it is in constant flux as dreamers wake and sleep, but usually, each dream is surrounded by the dreams of those who think of their dreamer most often.'

'So the desert and that housing estate and the city are the dreams of my friends?' Anna asked. 'What will happen if I go there? Could I speak to them?'

'You can enter their dreams easily enough because they are not solid enough to have barriers. But then you must find the dreamer. If you can do that and if they have taken a form that permits you to question them and allows them to answer, and if they do not wake, of course you can speak with them. But what would you ask?'

Before she could frame an answer, an enormous oversized raven

swooped into life in the sky above them and dived on them. Anna screamed and threw herself to the ground, but Nicholas stood over her batting at the bird until it flew away. When its shrieks had faded, Anna rose on legs that shook. 'What is it with these birds?'

'There have been others?' Nicholas asked, looking worried. Anna nodded. 'Two, I think. They crashed into the windows of the house. What are they?'

'Warnings from your undermind,' Nicholas said. 'It seems that some part of you does not want answers.' He held out his hand and Anna was horrified to see there was a gash on his arm from which blood dripped freely. He glanced around. 'Let's get down from here.'

'I want to visit one of the other dream places,' Anna said.

* * * *

They went to the housing estate. They reached it by walking along the road that passed the front of Anna's cottage. Nicholas explained that roads and paths were archetypes, and because all dreams contained them, a lucid dreamer could move from one dream to another using them, so long as they could visualise their destination. 'That is what makes the wood of flame trees and your hill so important. Because this is a land of constant change, and yet they do not change. Fortunately, we also saw the dreams surrounding yours from the top of the hill.'

'I don't know whose dream this could be,' Anna said doubtfully, and they made their way along streets lined with houses that were all exactly the same.

'Try one of the doors,' Nicholas suggested.

Anna went up the nearest path and knocked at the door. She heard the sound of movement and then the door opened to reveal a small, grubby child with dirty straw yellow hair. 'What do you want?' he demanded.

Anna stared at him, not knowing what to say. 'We wish to see your mother or father,' Nicholas said, smoothly.

'No one but me's home and I ent to talk to anyone,' said the child. He shut the door.

Nicholas looked at Anna expectantly. 'I don't know him,' she said.

‘Don’t be so sure,’ he warned. ‘People are not always as you would expect to see them in dreams. They can take on forms that express their inner selves, or some aspect of it.’

But Anna shook her head. ‘The only man who is close to me is David and that child could not have been him. David grew up in England in a village. He told me that his father was a history professor at Oxford.’

‘Let us try another house,’ Nicholas said.

They did and to Anna’s amazement, the same boy answered the door. ‘We need to speak urgently with your parents,’ Nicholas said firmly.

‘They’re out at work and I’m not supposed to let anyone in,’ said the boy, but less aggressively than before.

‘What does your father do?’ Nicholas asked. ‘Perhaps we could visit his place of work.’

The boy glared at him and suddenly there was a pit bull pressing at the security door. ‘Go away or I’ll let Ghengis Khan out.’

Anna gave a start and Nicholas gave her a swift, searching look. ‘It *is* David,’ she whispered. ‘He told me once that when he was a child, he had a dog called Khan.’

‘David?’ Nicholas addressed the boy.

‘That’s my middle name,’ the boy said suspiciously. ‘How did you know? Did my dad send you?’

‘David, do you know a woman called Anna?’

The boy recoiled and all at once he was not a boy but a middle-aged man with thinning blond hair and a paunch. Anna was shocked to see that it was David, but a much older and coarser David than she had known. ‘Anna’s dead or as near as makes no difference,’ he said in a surly voice half-slurred with drinking. ‘It warn’t my fault. I couldn’t help how things came out. I had a plan and then I fell in love. How could I have expected that? And a lot of good it did me. I ended up with nothing.’ The man stepped back and slammed the door closed.

‘I don’t understand,’ Anna said.

Nicholas only took her elbow and led her back to the street and along it. 'Let us find somewhere to sit and talk. Do you feel hungry? Hunger is an illusion of course, but eating is always pleasant, I find.' Anna let him lead her out of the housing estate and back along the road towards the mist that hid her cottage. Once within it, the smell of the sea was very strong, and Anna felt a powerful longing to wake and walk on the beach. Perhaps she had projected the thought, because instead of leading her up the path to the house, he guided her down the path through the bushes that edged the road, to the little beach that she had visited so often. Nicholas bade her close her eyes and imagine a picnic she had enjoyed.

Somewhat bemused, Anna obeyed, imagining the picnic her father had prepared for her twelfth birthday. It had been a month after her mother died, and she had been allowed to ask Leaf. Her father had got a restaurant to prepare the food and it had been delicious.

'Perfect,' said Nicholas and Anna opened her eyes to find exactly this picnic spread out on an eggshell blue cloth. It was still misty but the air was warm and sweetly scented by the little purple flowers that grew along the track leading from the road to the beach. Nicholas sat and drew her down beside him, lamenting the single wine glass.

'It was my father's. I was a child,' Anna said.

'We will share it,' Nicholas suggested, and he uncorked the bottle deftly, poured some of the ruby dark wine into the glass and offered it to her. She sipped a mouthful, looking at him over the rim of the glass. Then as she passed it to him, she asked him why he was helping her. He took a long drink and then he said gently, 'Long dreamers are always searching for other long dreamers.'

'Why?' Anna asked taking the peach he had given her and absently smoothing the down.

'In part, for the solidity of their dreamplaces. But also out of loneliness. It is impossible to form any sort of relationship with an ordinary dreamer. Even lucid dreamers can only communicate until they wake. So we search for others of our kind. Of course even a long dreamer can wake, or retreat into the void. Or ...' He stopped abruptly.

'Or die?' Anna concluded softly.

He turned his face towards the invisible waves.

Anna was silent a while, then she said gently, 'I understand what you are saying, Nicholas, and I am sorry for your loneliness. But I have to tell you that I mean to wake as soon as I can figure out how. Don't *you* want to wake?'

He gave her a strange look. 'There are wonders here that you could not imagine in your wildest dreams, Anna. I have seen a mountain of glass that shines like a diamond in the sun, and there is a white sea so vast I think it must be God's dream. And you can change things. You can use the stuff of dreams to build anything. You can change yourself.' He looked at Anna and saw her expression. 'What is it?'

She shook her head. 'I don't know. I had the feeling that I had heard you say that before. Can you have *déjà vu* in a dream?'

'You can have anything in a dream,' Nicholas said.

'I can't have my life,' Anna told him.

'Life is only another kind of dream,' Nicholas said, but he spoke softly, as if to himself.

They finished their picnic meal in silence, and then Anna stood up and said resolutely that she wanted to try visiting the desert. 'I need to know what happened to me. I need to understand the things David said in his dream.'

'The words he said may not mean what they seem to mean,' Nicholas said, as he rose too.

'They mean something,' Anna said determinedly.

* * * *

They went up the leafy path to the road, but instead of coming to the road and seeing the mist swathed cottage on the other side, they were standing on the rim of the desert they had seen from the top of the hill.

'Any idea of whose dream this might be?'

Anna shook her head. 'No one I know is like a desert.'

He shrugged and set off across the desert. 'Perhaps, then, this is an

unknown face of someone you know.'

They had walked for several hours when Anna noticed trees rising above a bare dune in the distance. It was an oasis! She set off towards it, the sand slipping away under her feet. They ran for a long time tirelessly, but also without getting any closer to the oasis. Finally Nicholas stopped. 'It is a mirage.'

Anna said nothing, for now she had seen a woman dragging herself up the shifting face of a dune with painful slowness. Anna noticed with horror that the woman's hands were covered with blood. Nicholas laid a hand on her shoulder as she would have reached out to help the woman. 'Be careful. If you touch her and she is the dreamer, she will very likely wake. Try talking to her.'

Anna nodded. 'Can I help you?' she asked.

The woman turned to look at her and Anna was astounded to see that it was Izabel, but not the elegant, sophisticated Izabel of the real world. Her face had been burnt to a terrible blazing red, and her eyes looked out in staring madness. Her lips were cracked and bleeding as if she had chewed them, and her hair was so filthy it looked grey brown instead of red. But all at once the madness faded in the wild eyes.

'Anna?' Izabel rasped, and her face twisted in a ghastly mingling of despair and rage. 'I never meant you any harm. I swear it. It was all his idea. He said you were soft and that it would be easy to gull you. But then he changed. He said he had not meant to fall in love but that it changed everything. He told me that he would give me money, but it was never the money I wanted. I never meant you any harm. I just couldn't see straight I was so jealous. I lost control.'

The desert began to tremble and a great terror flowed through Anna. She tried to stand but the ground was shuddering violently. She turned and saw Nicholas reaching out to her. Instinctively, she threw out her own hand, but it was too late. The world dissolved into the squeal of tyres and the grinding shriek of metal. Then there was a bone-crunching impact and terrible, excruciating pain. Then silence.

* * * *

Anna woke.

She was lying in her bed in a rumpled tangle of sheets. She thought with

bewilderment of the vividness of the dreams within dreams she had experienced and thought it was no wonder the bed was a mess. 'At least I know that when you hit the ground in a falling dream, you do wake up,' she muttered. She turned to find David was not in bed. 'Déjà vu,' she said. 'Déjà vu squared.'

She sat up and rubbed her face, remembering the bird smashing into the glass, and the one that had swooped her on the hilltop. Warnings from her undermind, the dream man had named them. Anna's thoughts shifted to the dream Izabel in the desert. She had not named David, and yet it was David she had been referring to. Then there had been David before that, saying that he had a plan, and that he had not expected to fall in love.

All of it had been a dream, and yet Leaf always said dreams contained messages from the subconscious. And so, what was she being told? Anna thought of Izabel in her peacock coat, introducing David. How beautiful she had looked that day. Anna had taken it for the glow of pleasure at her exhibition, but in fact nothing had sold that night, nor in the weeks that followed. Normally that would have enraged Izabel, but in fact she had dismissed the failure of the show lightly, saying that the next one would have the proper gallery and pre-publicity. It had not occurred to Anna to wonder what she meant.

What had the plan been then? David was to marry Anna, and after a time, divorce her? Izabel had known her well enough to realise she would not contest a reasonable claim; especially if they had come to her and confessed to falling in love. She would have accepted it as the natural fate of a plain woman. Then Izabel and David would have money and one another. Except that according to Izabel, David had fallen in love with her.

Anna heard the sound of crockery in the kitchen, and wondered if she had the courage to go in and confront him. After all she had no evidence. But if David had fallen in love with her, perhaps it did not truly matter that he had begun by pretending love. Except that it did. In that moment, Anna understood that loving David had been more a matter of loving someone who could love her. Anna got up slowly and drew on her kimono. She was trembling and her whole body ached as if she really had fallen from a great height. Entering the kitchen, she said, 'I had the strangest dream last night...'

She stopped, for the man making coffee was not David but Nicholas. The room swayed and shimmered but Nicholas leapt across the room and took both of her hands in his. 'Look into my eyes, Anna. Look into them and stay. Don't retreat.'

Slowly the shimmering faded and the room lost its strange radiance. Anna looked down at Nicholas' hands, clasped so tightly about hers that his fingers were white. A sense of déjà vu washed over her. 'I'm sorry,' he said, loosening his grip. 'Are you all right?'

'How long has this been going on?' Anna whispered, looking up into his dark eyes.

His expression grew very still, his eyes watchful. Then he breathed out slowly. 'Countless times, but you have never got so far before. Last time you retreated after confronting Izabel.'

'Was it always the same? The other times?'

He shook his head. 'Last time it was a jungle for Izabel, and David was working in one of the factories with his father.'

'He married me because of the money. Izabel loved him and he wanted the money so they deceived me. Then he fell in love with me ...' She sat down at the kitchen bench and Nicholas set a cup of coffee before her.

'I hope I have done it well enough. The implements here are unfamiliar to me.'

Anna took the coffee. Then something occurred to her. 'How did you come in here? I thought you couldn't unless I invited you.'

'You screamed my name as the desert dream broke,' Nicholas said. 'It allowed me to bind myself to you.'

'But what if I had retreated into the void? I could have, couldn't I?'

He nodded. 'You could but...' He shrugged.

Anna nodded, but she was thinking of the blood on Izabel's hands, and the screech of tyres and the sound of grinding metal. The broken glass when the bird had hit the window. 'I think there was an accident,' she said softly. 'I think I was in a car with Izabel and something went wrong. Maybe David had told her he would not leave me. She said she lost control.' She shivered and wondered if they were both in a hospital; Izabel in an ordinary room and she in a special ward for comatose patients. Maybe David was sitting beside her, holding her hand, longing for her to wake.

She rose and went to the window, noticing that day had turned suddenly to night. The mist had thinned to veils of gauze and beyond them, the sea shimmered and glittered in the light of a full moon. 'Does night come here, then?' she asked.

'Night and day; winter, summer, autumn and spring; full moon and high noon. But they might not come when you expect and they are more often reflections of a dreamer's mood than of the natural state of the world,' he answered.

'Thank you for helping me,' she murmured.

'Thank you for giving me purpose,' Nicholas said. 'It is more precious than you can know.' He lifted her hand and kissed it.

'I need to go to the city,' Anna said.

* * * *

The city was no ordinary city. As they walked along the road towards it, Anna saw that the skyscrapers were actually ruins wound about with some sort of leafy creeper, and what she had taken for roads were actually long stretches of dark lawn broken here and there by moon-sheened ponies and shimmering silver streams. Night blooming lilies grew in great clumps, filling the air with a heavy languorous perfume, but even as they moved through the city towards what Anna sensed was its heart, the sky began to lighten towards dawn and birds began to sing.

'This is beautiful,' Anna said.

'We have not been here before but ... it is strangely coherent,' he said, answering her unvoiced question. 'Dreams are not usually so,' he added. As they moved deeper into the strange city, the sky turned pink and gradually the light increased until it was a rich beautiful dawn. Then Nicholas pointed down the street to a grassy intersection where there was an immense marble fountain. Sitting on the edge of it bathing her feet was an enormous green skinned woman with flowing yellow hair. Squirrels and birds were perched fearlessly on her shoulders. Then the giant woman turned her face and Anna saw it clearly.

'Leaf,' she said softly.

The giant woman's eyes widened as her mouth curved into a smile of

delight. 'I am so happy to see you, Anna,' Leaf said. 'I always believed I would, one day.'

'You are a lucid dreamer?' Nicholas said.

The goddess Leaf nodded. 'I meditate before I sleep.' She seemed to look at him more closely before asking, 'What is your name?' He told her adding that, like Anna, he was a long sleeper.

'Tell me about David,' Anna said.

Leaf sighed, 'Poor David. One can't help pitying him for in the end he really lost everything. I have not seen him for a long time, but the last I heard, he was living in a unit somewhere on one of the new housing estates. Izabel begged him to come and see her, but he refused. I suppose it was shame.'

'You know about them?' Anna asked.

'Izabel told me the night of the accident. I truly believe it was an accident though she lied about you driving, of course. The police worked that out almost at once and then she had that terrible trial. The prosecutor was very savage with her. She would have gone to prison, I believe, if she had not had a breakdown. She never did recover completely, though she does have good periods, and the money you left between us enabled me to engage a nurse to take care of her. After I heard what Izabel had to say, I did not think you would wish me to produce the will you made leaving everything to David. I took Izabel some herbal medicines and offered to open her chakra a while back, but she was never very receptive to such things.' She looked at Anna, and her expression became very serious. 'I hope that you do not trouble yourself about David. He was never worthy of you, my dear. I knew it when he came to tell me that he was falling in love with me not a month after I met him.'

'You!' Anna stared at her, and then she began to laugh. 'Of course he loved you! Who wouldn't?'

Leaf laughed, too. 'Quite a lot of people, actually.' Her smile faded. 'I did pity him of course. One could not help it. But his aura was so yellow, my dear. That is always the colour of spiritual weakness.'

'His aura?'

Leaf nodded, blond curls tumbling. 'I see them, you see. I always

have. Yours is a lovely shade of violet with streaks of gold and the tiniest bit of green. Much prettier than the muddy brown and mauve aura you had before.' She beamed at Anna.

'What about Nicholas?' Anna asked shyly.

Leaf looked at Nicholas, whose skin was so white against his black clothes and hair. 'You must tell her, young man. There can be nothing real without truth.'

Anna looked at them in bewilderment. 'Tell me what?'

Nicholas sighed and nodded, glancing out the window to where the last vestiges of the mist were vanishing. 'I swore that I would tell you, if ever you became fully lucid. I have waited long for this moment and now that it has come, I fear it. You asked who I was and I told you Nicholas. I gave myself that name because I have no memory of anyone giving me a name in the real world. I can only suppose from this that I fell into a coma soon after I was born. I do not know why my parents kept me alive, nor how long I lived, for as I told you, time flows unevenly. But I think they must have kept me a very long time, and that this is why I did not vanish here, when my body died. I knew it had happened because my dream place vanished and I fell to the void. I had been there before and I knew it was difficult for a long dreamer to get free of it, but now I learned that without flesh, it was virtually impossible. I do not know why I fought so hard and so long to escape, but at last after eons of nightmare, I found my way back here to the dreamscape. I vowed never to fall to the void again, for I knew that it was a miracle I had escaped, and I would not manage it a second time.'

'But you ... you stayed with me when my dream broke,' Anna said.

He nodded. 'I hoped that this time, you would not retreat. And I was right.'

'You risked much for loneliness,' Anna said.

'You speak of loneliness who do not know it as I have known it. When first we met, I was lonely almost to madness. You endured my madness with compassion, though you do not remember, and you allowed me to share your quest for truth. And then you vanished into the void. I waited and kept watch and in time you came again but you did not know me. That was hard, but I grew accustomed to the forgetting, for countless times you retreated into the void and each time, I searched and found you. In the beginning, I sought you for companionship and sanity, and then as time

passed, for friendship. The last time, I thought that you would finally come to the truth you sought, but you were not ready and again you vanished. This time, it was as if my soul went with you into the void. I waited and I watched, and then one day, I saw your hill. I could not find your house, which meant you were not yet lucid, but I continued to search, knowing that you had at least come from the void. Then one morning you called out to me. And when I saw you, I knew that I would rather go to the void forever, than to let go of you again.'

'You love me?' Anna asked, something inside her unfurling.

'It would seem so,' he said, then he added gravely, 'But I do not expect you to love me.'

'I ... I'm afraid your expectations will be thwarted then ...' Anna said shyly, and she held her hand out to Nicholas, who took it, his pale face lighting up with joy. Then he stiffened and looked about them.

'Quick,' he said urgently, and he leapt to his feet and pulled her to the door.

* * * *

Leaf woke, smiling, to find the nurse shaking her gently.

'You fell asleep again, Miss Leaf,' she chided. 'You ought to have gone to bed. She doesn't know you are here. The monitors have shown no evidence of brain activity in all the decades she has laid here. Most people would have thought long ago about switching off the life support machines.'

'I am not most people,' Leaf said placidly. 'As to these clever machines, they may show no evidence of brain activity, but are they sensitive enough to measure the activity of a soul?' She reached forward to pat Anna's withered hand and said softly, 'For all we know she is dreaming. Imagine the sort of dreams that might come to one who never wakes.'

The nurse suppressed a shudder, thinking how ghoulish old people were. After all, what sort of dreams would someone that old have, even if there was anything left in her capable of dreaming?

* * * *

AFTERWORD

I have been writing for a lot of years. More years than I, frankly, want to think about. I like thinking about all that writing, just not all those years. I'm an insomniac. I've never seen it as a curse. I'm the only person I know who was not tired with a baby waking her every two hours. Sometimes I was awake waiting for the baby to wake. My partner never had to get up at night. I didn't even want him to. My daughter is now showing strong signs of the same insomnia. One day recently, she said, 'What do people do who can't sleep when other people can?' I said smugly, 'Feel smug, because think of all that time they are wasting while we get to be awake and think and read and write and daydream. They waste years and years of sleeping, and we get to be awake instead.' On the other hand, my partner sleeps enough to make up for my daughter and me and possibly several other children. He also dreams vividly and often. I never dream, except the occasional nightmare involving vampires. Unfortunately, I'm never the vampire; only its prey. Maybe that is why I write so much about dreaming. I've been doing that for as long as I've been writing, too. 'Perchance to Dream' came to me when I started wondering what would happen if instead of never sleeping, you never woke; if life was truly a dream ...

— *Isobelle Carmody*