

Chad Pelley

## I Don't Dream of Genie<sup>1</sup>

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They're all ravenous for a Nintendo Wii U<sup>2</sup> this year, all of them. And they all feel the need to deafen me with their enthusiasm. They think the louder they shout, the harder they thrust their greedy little wishes into my ear, the more likely their request will remain lodged in Santa's brain. But that's not the way memory works. Nor am I on the other side of a canyon, with a hand cupped to my ear, *What's that, come again?* At the end of my two-hour training session, they warned me, *Oh, expect impaired hearing for a while*, and they laughed like there's something funny about having a beehive's buzz trapped in your ears. The ringing is the worst at night when I put my head to a pillow. I've been sleeping on my back. I've been taking it personally that all those kids can believe I'm a fat old man.

My name is Sherry, I'm Jewish, and I wear a 32B<sup>3</sup> instead of boxer briefs. I'm thirty-three years old, and in the right dress, I turn a few heads. But pull a white beard over my delicate cheekbones, and I'm a dead ringer<sup>4</sup> for the fat man? What they do, the kids, is they knife their bony behinds into my thighs, like their asses are old-lady hands kneading bread. It's a violent sort of massaging, and my shifts are six hours long. I expected none of these things. The bruises on my thighs, the ringing in my ears. The way bruises can stack. At the end of my first week on the job, I had a black bruise, in the shape of a Cadillac, stamped onto a yellow star-burst bruise – it looked like a car driving off into the sunset.

The scratchy fake beard is no picnic either. It leaves a rash, some acne. Another reason I'm all alone at thirty-three. The condensation from my own breathing against that fake beard gets trapped in there like some kind of jungle-funk<sup>5</sup> humidity. It wets my chin. It's sexy stuff. Someone has pointed and asked, "What happened there? Why's your chin all red?"

What I do like about being secretly Santa is I like hearing other people are longing for something too; even if it's just new toys. The sign in the Avalon Mall food court had said, "Mall Santa wanted," and I saw it as a clipped sentence: I wondered what it was Santa wanted...and didn't get.

When I applied for the position, I stepped into the room, and they looked over my shoulder to the empty doorway as if I was there to accompany a husband, or a son. Eventually, the short bald one looked at his colleague like, *Oh, shit, she's here for the man-job, man*. The second guy doing the interviews had a gargantuan Adam's apple. It was more like an Adam's grapefruit. It really moved around in there. I'm not sure how this man managed to get his meals down around this enormous Adam's grapefruit. He must have had to really chew his food to the point of maceration, liquefying the food into a slime. Then, *slurp*.

I sat down with a look on my face that said, *Yes, I'll scream sexism for that Santa suit*. Not that I played that card. I just needed a simple, second, temporary job, and the idea of a woman there in front of them had shattered their capacity to conduct an interview with confidence and authority. Their first question was, *ummm*. Guy Number Two's Adam's grapefruit was bouncing up and down as he gulped, panicked, *oh, this is a first. A female Jewish mall Santa*. He put his hands up like he'd been shown an equal opportunity video that very morning, "Not that there's anything wrong with this. With you. As a Santa, I mean. We're certain a woman can play Santa as well as a man."

It would sound more human and strife-y<sup>6</sup> to say I took this Santa gig to help fund my cat's leukemia treatment or something, but the truth is I took it to reimburse myself for a trip to Tennessee. There was a three-day lucid dreaming<sup>7</sup> seminar, just north of Knoxville, and I was crazy enough to think it could change my life – I mean, just imagine being the puppet master of your own dreams, and living out your wildest

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<sup>1</sup> *I Don't Dream of Genie*: a reference to *I Dream of Jeannie*, an American fantasy sitcom from the 1960s

<sup>2</sup> *Nintendo Wii U*: a game console

<sup>3</sup> bra-size

<sup>4</sup> *dead ringer*: someone who looks exactly like someone else

<sup>5</sup> *jungle-funk*: that stinks like a jungle

<sup>6</sup> *strife-y*: struggling

<sup>7</sup> *lucid dream*: a dream where the dreamer is aware that he or she is dreaming

40 fantasies, daily, from midnight till morning. You could screw whoever you want, fly like a bird, land yourself in jail after an all-night bender, then wake up a free woman when your alarm clock goes off.

But all the trip did was put four grand on my MasterCard, and got my mother worried about me. Not that it takes much. Also, I never learned a Goddamn thing at the sessions, other than how hot and boring Knoxville is, how quickly I can make a poor decision, and how channelling lucid dreams is as likely – and  
45 probably as easy – as channelling the dead.

What happened was I couldn't sleep one night, months ago, and there was this made-for-TV movie on. In the movie, an adorable geezer – with eyebrows bushy like squirrel tails – went to a spiritual witchy woman to summon his dead wife. How dumb is that, right?

But I dreamt of Gene that night, my ex. I dreamt everything was all right. I dreamt we were at his  
50 mother's place in Rocky Harbour – the whole six o'clock sky was a jack-o-lantern, flecked by the black sickles of tern wings. Gene was cooking me hash browns with fresh herbs, and I could smell it, sharp as glass in my nose. I had two hands wrapped around a mug of coffee, to take the morning chill out of my hands. It's something I always did, so Gene had made the water extra boiling, before pouring it into the French press. The dream stayed with me for days.

Later that week, I was in my dentist's office, waiting to get my teeth picked and poked, and the TV in the waiting area was blaring about lucid dreaming techniques: *Channel your dream life through lucid dreaming...with Dr. Lee Markus's bestselling book*. But who has the patience to read a 400-page book? So I Googled lucid dreaming on my phone, right there and then, and I bought a package I saw in the Google Ads side-bar. I wanted to be the director of my own dreams; I wanted to Spielberg<sup>1</sup> the shit out of my dream  
60 world; decide on the cast, the plot, the setting; no-holds-barred sex scenes, and *Goddamn* would I be gorgeous in those dreams. The men, they'd melt. But not until I was done with them. Mainly though, I wanted to crawl under my sheets at night, and I wanted to dream of Gene again. I wanted my bed to be a porthole to Gene making me too-hot tea and herbed hash browns. Always there, eight hours a night as I slept.

65 Even the flight to Tennessee had been long and tumultuous. Two stopovers, and the kind of turbulence that made me wish I'd watched the flight safety video more attentively. The plane kept shaking and swaying like we were in a toy plane, and that toy plane was in a kid's imaginative hands, and that kid was making sounds like *whoosh, ma-ah-ah-arr, boussssssh*. I couldn't remember if the lifejackets were under the seat, or in overhead, or what. And, while anyone with eyes knows where the emergency exits are, who really knows how to open those things? In a panic I mean, with everyone pressing into the door, crammed so tightly together no one can move their arms to pull the door open anyway. Even if they did know how.

The plane landed fine. The first seminar happened hours after I landed. The only thing I retained from that day's lecture was how most dreams go from being normal, to being the kind of dream you can consciously control, the moment the dreamer realizes they're dreaming. If you happen to notice you're  
75 talking to your dead grandma, for example, or if you're flying around like a bird, something improbable like that.

"Think about young men," the old guy leading the seminar had said, while smirk-smiling, "this explains why wet dreams turn lucid for adolescent men. They realize they're not lucky enough for whatever their perverse little minds are dreaming up." No one laughed. He looked a little pervy himself was the problem,  
80 and it's got to be taxing to look like such a pedophile. I felt a little bad for him. His weird tan pants never made it to his shoes, and his hair was bed-headed and greasy in a way that screamed he was oblivious to basic hygiene. If you'd met him on a blind date, you'd have a lot to get over to "keep an open mind."

"Another common type of dream that turns lucid is the Flying Dream," he added, red-faced, because no one laughed at his wet-dream joke. "Again, a part of our brain clues in that we're flying and that's unlikely.  
85 Once your sleep-self knows it's dreaming, you can jump right in there and take control of the dream. I'm here to teach you how to make your sleep-self more likely to realize you're dreaming, and more able to

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<sup>1</sup> American film director

commandeer your dream.” He clicked to another slide in his shitty PowerPoint. Nobody legit would have a PowerPoint presentation with such a small font, cluttered text, and grainy photos. The guy used comic sans<sup>1</sup>.

90 I do, however, confess that later that night, before bed, to trigger a flying dream, I watched all the flying-related movies I could think of. Like *Top Gun*<sup>2</sup> and the first two Superman movies. But no luck. No improbable dream sequences. No dreams of Genie. I couldn’t even remember what I’d dreamt about when I woke up the next morning. But that Christopher Reeve<sup>3</sup>: what a handsome man in his day.

95 Another way to tell your sleep-self it’s dreaming, I learned, is to *almost* wake up, mid-dream, and then fall back into the dream immediately. But c’mon, how the fuck are you supposed to do that? Sure, I could rig a big bowl to tip over in my kitchen, at three in the morning, to *half* wake me, but I’m not some kind of engineer who can MacGyver<sup>4</sup> a pulley, on a *timer*, out of dental floss and salad bowls.

100 It was bullshit, all of it, and it cost me way too much money. There was supposed to be a *science* to lucid dreaming. Steps to follow, like how adding soda powder to vinegar will, and always will, result in fizzy success. But none of those sessions in Tennessee provided the 1-2-3 series of steps I could use to get what I paid for. I didn’t even stay for the last seminar on Sunday night, about “The MILD Technique.” I went to a cheap Lebanese restaurant and got food poisoning instead. I spent my flight home throwing up from both ends, in a cramped Air Canada washroom. I imagined half the plane was out there, listening in disgust. So I hung out in the bathroom as long as I could. I didn’t want the person in 24B feeling gross or bad for me. I’m  
105 not one for that sort of thing.

My sister picked me up at the airport. She didn’t even say hello. She said, “It’s time to move on.” I asked her if she had any gum in her purse, and she said, “Gene is long gone. It’s time to move on, don’t you think?”

110 When people say “Just move on” it sounds the way a shrugged shoulder looks: ambivalent, and lacking in compassion. The heart is a compass, it points to what it wants, and we’d be wrong not to follow it. We’d be leading ourselves off course. My sister’s a wretch, and I’m no more ready to move on than I am Santa Claus. I’m allowed to be lonely and longing. In fact, there’s movies starring me. I am a situation we’ve all been in. Well, not my situation exactly: like the man with the grapefruit-sized Adam’s apple said, “There has never been another female Jewish mall Santa before.” I am all alone with my perpetually ringing ears, and  
115 my thighs full of bruises. The bruises are all different colours. I pull down my pants and it looks like I’m wearing army camouflage. Not that it matters: I have no one to pull my pants down for.

120 It was only last Christmas when Gene told me there was another woman. Someone from his gym. I put my hands up like he was gonna shoot me. I ran away from the words. I was on our front lawn in my nanni<sup>5</sup>est one-piece nightgown for all the world to see. I was barefoot and I was cold; the wet grass knocked some sense into me: there I was, outside, in a nightgown, you know? Gene was in the doorway, and I had to charge at him, to knock my way past him, and I did. I started to make my way up the stairs, two at a time, but he’d grabbed me, and I tried shaking him off, but we tipped backwards, and went whirlpooling down the spiraling staircase together, like fish caught in a drain. His last words, as he stood in our porch, bleeding, bruised, and clutching a snapped wrist, were cruel and exact. He’d taken aim with  
125 them, and he shot me down. “I will not miss you.”

I told no one about my broken toe from that fall. Not even a doctor. I think of Gene every time that badly healed bone hums with pain now. I think of him every time one of these wishful kids stomps on my Santa boot, on their way back to their mother, and the simple life they think is waiting for them.

(2016)

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<sup>1</sup> *comic sans*: a font

<sup>2</sup> *Top Gun*: American film from 1986

<sup>3</sup> *Christopher Reeve*: American actor (1952-2004) who played the character Superman

<sup>4</sup> fictional action character who is very inventive and resourceful

<sup>5</sup> most grandmotherly