



MUNCHKIN DREAMS

J. Messersmith, 1977

I have a recurring dream. No, it is two entirely different dreams with a common theme.

In the first form of the dream I am walking west on the North side of the 100 block of East Washington Street in Indianapolis with a good friend. She walks close by my side. Our arms brush together with a pleasant randomness. It is a sweet feeling. I steal a glance at her. Her clear, smooth skin is the colour of milk chocolate. I grin at the familiar crooked little smile that decorates her pleasant face when she is swimming through her thoughts. The mica flakes in the sidewalk twinkle up happily at me when I cast my eyes down to watch our feet as we occasionally skip-step to synchronize our lazy march. I think to myself, "I can dig it." It is the early '60s. What we are doing is still a cultural sin in Indianapolis.

There is something very strange about this dream. The geography is screwed up. As I look forward, and to my left a bit, I can look over the top of the L. S. Ayres department store and clearly see the upper third of the Soldier's and Sailor's Monument in the area commonly called The Circle. Anyone with the vaguest knowledge of Indianapolis will note that this is impossible, since from this location, the two are visually at least ninety degrees apart and the Ayres building would hide the monument anyway.

As we are walking along, we begin to sense a disturbance in the aura of the crowd coming and going around us. How else can I explain it? You had to be there. An anomalous motion draws my notice to the area of turquoise sky above the monument. I see a small single engine airplane droning lazily from South to North. It is passing directly over the monument. Within a few seconds, I begin to feel some dreadful wrongness about this innocent, fat bumblebee of a plane. Try as I may, I can never understand why *I know* that

the day is turning into a monumental bummer. Everyone else around us seems to know it also.

The plane is going very slowly, just fluffing along in the updrafts. This is all taking a very long time. When time stretches out weirdly after a few tokes — that is how it seemed. I hear someone near me say, "Oh, look," not loudly, as if it were a warning. It was more like a comment one might hear at Holcomb Gardens when all the irises are in bloom; as if when you see something unexpected and mildly startling. My concentration focuses in a sharp cusp on the little plane. I can clearly see the pilot. He is waving at us and chuckling insanely. He is wearing a clown suit and an old-fashioned leather aviator's cap and goggles. As I zero my consciousness in on it, the plane magically transforms itself into an intense little starlike point of actinic light. Slowly, oh so slowly, it blooms, like a white daisy on a summer day, the dark orange eye in the centre being the expanding broiled areas of my retinas, and the so very white petals ever blooming — blooming bright and beautiful.

The dream is set in winter. It is a crisp clear day. Now I begin to feel the warmth on my face as the bloom continues to unfurl. There is no strong sense of danger, no flight syndrome, no blue funk. There is no sound. It is so quiet in fact, that I can distinctly hear the deep slow breathing of my friend. Distantly, incongruously, I hear a dog barking. It is a playful sounding yippity-yap.

In my dream, I recognize what is happening. In fact, my lips form some inane expression like, "This is *it!*", or something equally trite. Still, in my dream, I cannot come to grips emotionally with the *badness* of it. As in almost all of my dreams, I know that I am only dreaming. When the adrenaline gets flowing and my heart starts to pound hard enough to rattle my ribs, I will wake up, panting and sweating.

I feel my friend move closer. She seems suddenly very dear to me. There, in the midst of the crowd, I am desperately alone. Our hands find each other and fuse as we continue to gaze at the spectacle. She meshes her fingers with mine and we make a little basket of our hands. I can smell her White Shoulders perfume. We are chocolate and vanilla ice cream soldiers melting in the summer sun. It is very still now. It does not hurt. I wake up.

The second manifestation of the theme is harder for me to describe, because it is pure emotion. It crystallizes my fear — it distils it.

It is a clear, warm summer night. I am young again. I am with a girl. This is not an ordinary girl. This girl makes me feel the way I have only ever felt in dreams. I do not know who she is. She is every girl. This feeling goes way beyond fumbling with anatomy. It is not love. It makes the euphoria of the most memorable of highs seem like a bad trip. It is *The Dream Feeling*.

We are lying on a red and yellow plaid wool blanket on our backs. Our arms, thighs, and bare feet are touching. It is so

very nice. We are just lying there bathing, soaking, swimming in *The Feeling*.

The springy summer grass beneath us smells ever so sweet. The night is strangely quiet. The gentle breeze is just spunky enough to toss a random strand of her long corn silk hair onto my face to tickle me. There is no moon. Someone else is using it tonight. We nudge and poke at each other and ask each other silly questions, just to keep the stillness from becoming too intense. We are so young and so sweaty-palmed, limber-limbed, hot-juices-flowing *alive*. Tonight, we are playing with fire, as we have never done so before. How long can we just lie here and feel so good. Who will be the first to grapple? Just as we are beginning to consider the possibility that we are not children anymore, we have become as startled babies again by our first encounter with the bone melting heat of post-pubescent emotions.

We are laying just a few feet from the highest point in Marion County. It is located in Crown Hill Cemetery, at the tomb of James Whitcolmb Riley, "The Hoosier Poet". We are oblivious to the frigid silence of the stone monuments surrounding us. They have their world; we have ours. Ours is better. At the very edge of perception, familiar sounds whisper to us. Murmuring, comforting voices, not distracting from, but rather focusing, intensifying *The Feeling*. That summer feeling. Music from the open windows of a car passing a couple of hundred yards away. Crickets doing hot licks on tiny cricket guitars. The occasional buzzing of a flying insect taking care of business on the night shift. The distant thrumming moan of a locomotive. A dog barking.

The stars, hard and bright, are embroiled in a furious twinkling contest. We have no idea what time it is. We care not. We are both beginning to convince ourselves that we can keep this up forever. If we just lie still, touch each other like this, and concentrate on *the feeling*, it will just go on and on. Now we are lying so motionless and silent that we can watch the stars wheeling overhead, reckoning to us one by one the minutes of our lives as they slip past quietly and unregretted.

An anomalous glimmer catches our eyes, a shooting star! The bright gash in the blackness grows longer. Before we can purse our lips for a much-deserved "Oohhhh.", a sibling star joins it. As we stir to voice our amazement, other lights join the untidy procession. Soon bright streamers of grape, saffron and lime crisscross the sky.

No sound from the sky, our lips form no words. It seems not a moment for symbols. She is very bright; no explanation is required. We turn our heads toward each other even as our eyes yet gaze heavenward. We hold breath. Finally, our eyes meet. Hers, deep blue by day, are jet in the suddenly cold darkness. Our joined vision sears a channel through the space between us. Through the channel, our souls gently mingle. In her eyes, scintillating now with unshed tears, I see reflected the wounded night. We are holding hands. Our fingers mesh as lovers; our palms flatten sweatily against one another. I can hear her breath whispering now and feel it on my face. *The Feeling*

is yet there, undiminished. We are warm and still. I want her so. The dream fades to black. I awaken.

I have spent the better part of my life pondering these dreams. I am not obsessed with them. I have found time for other things.

Is my flawed psyche a product of the epoch? Did Protestants dream of the Inquisitors' cellars? Did Jews dream of Auschwitz or Buchenwald? Did Munchkins shiver in their homely cots, tortured by nightmares starring the Wicked Witch of the West? Who is the friend/girl? Why do intensely sexual feelings dance the boogaloo with death? Does it matter? Do the dreams matter? In the light of the dreams, does anything matter?

It is so difficult to find a message in death, when life itself often seems to present no clear purpose. This is all, of course, so highly subjective. What one sees as profound, another dismisses as gibberish. However, I cannot muster enough faith to believe that there is nothing in which to believe. Yet the answer hides itself from me. It is selfish. It is miserly with its light.

If it were not for *personal extinction*, there would be little fear, I think. Neither pain nor deprivation could cower us long. In the face of any defeat, there would always be time — time to recuperate, consolidate, fight again, time to lick our wounds. No loss or betrayal could crush our spirits. Love lost, time to love again. The evil within us lashes out, time for forgiveness to envelope our shame. Time for everything; everything in its time. It must be true. It's in the Bible.

If it were not for fear, evil would diminish. The wheel of fear, evil, and extinction rolls ponderously to its bloody destination. I cannot help but question its origin. Is it reasonable to posit that evil came first? I wonder. It must have. It would explain so much. Whence comes fear without the presence of evil?

I honestly believe that I could, with little introspective effort, blame nearly everything bad that I have ever done on my fears. It may be that that is why I am so bad, because I am mighty fearful.

Please understand me. I am not admitting to being especially cowardly. Few things frighten me. Cats, for the most part, do not. Most dogs do not. Cottage cheese, as long as it smells okay, does not. Violence frightens me no more or less than, say, being flat broke. In fact, some of the urges towards violence that inflict themselves upon me in a violent situation scare me more than the danger itself. I have led what most would consider a very risk-tolerant life. I do not linger in trauma over a few occasional moments of stark terror. Near-death experiences are no strangers. However, there is a world of difference between being excited and scared and being chronically scared. Grey hair, in and of itself, doesn't scare me much. The thought of getting old, however, practically causes me to soil my underwear. Loosing my hair altogether does not seem to be much of a threat, since it is rumoured to be a product of

continuing virility, and oh *God*, don't we want to hang onto that. However, the prospect of the teeth going by onesies and twosies nearly gives me a coronary. I can, with a certain grim amusement, countenance wrinkles. It is amazing to me how, when just a few years ago I was merely homely, now I have heard myself referred to as "ruggedly handsome". However, if you want me to break out in a cold sweat, let me ponder, just for a moment, disappearing permanently from the slightest notice of thirty-year-old women.

You see, by all that is Reasonable and Holy, I should not be too surprised if I were to find myself a mass of neuroses. Of course, that would be entirely too dramatic. I simply do not have time for that crap; neither can I afford the therapy.

All these Crosses I bear, the fears I fear, are also yours in kind, if not in intensity. They were our fathers', and our fathers' fathers'. All these save one. That one is a whopping great *Son of a Bitch*.

Even as I cosy up here in my recliner next to my toasty warm Jodl stove, occasionally puffing wisps of silver hickory smoke from its pug snout, and think about what a wonderful thing is human language, the fear shoulders its way unbidden into my forebrain.

At any random moment, on any higgledy-piggledy day, in any catch-as-catch-can year in my sadly wayward but sincere life, through absolutely no fault of my own, by no misdeed, action or inaction on my part, and because of no particular malice on the part of another individual directed to me, by no act of God or Nature or whatever omnipotence reigneth, on account of no unlawful negligence of any person, corporation, or governmental body, and my suffering no infirmity of either body or mind sufficient to cause me similar harm, I still stand a reasonably small, but nevertheless statistically significant chance of suffering (a) instantaneous personal extinction, or (b) a slow, lingering, literally unimaginable death surrounded by fellow humans in like condition or, anything that is possible between (a) and (b), along with the rest of the human race within a period so brief that most would not even be aware that it was happening.

It took zillions of years for the life forms of Terra to learn to do as best they can with all the traditional modes of zapping and being zapped. Us bunch of yahoos have carried on this grand tradition with a style and enthusiasm heretofore undreamed of by our less clever but notably more ecologically minded predecessors. We learned to function efficiently in both roles - as zappers and as zapees. Never before, never even imagined, was a time when so few could zap so many so efficiently. We could, in all likelihood, within the length of time usually allotted for a Sunday morning brunch, zap each and every person on earth at least ten or twenty times, not that it would accomplish much after the first couple of times.

It seems to me that there are two distinct ways in which this new factor disturbs the natural order of things. I can best explain them by telling you how I feel about the situation.

First, I do not want to die unhappy. Ideally, there should be a moment when I might see it coming, and I might think to myself, "OK, this is the best it's ever been. It could be all downhill from here. If it's got to happen, let it happen now." You might think it morbid, but I have to admit that particularly good sex sometimes has this effect on me.

Second, it seems somehow unfitting that I should be robbed of one of the most important moments of my life. I do not think that it is stretching too far to consider that the moment of dying is a rather important milestone. It is not that I want to have gobs of time to mull it over. It is just that I feel I somehow have a right to recognize and accept it. You might well ask, if I believe that death is extinction, why should I give a tinker's damn about whether I get to shake hands with it and say, "Howdee doo." Ah, but you see, I never said that I was *absolutely convinced* that death is, in fact, personal extinction. On the odd chance that there is another episode to follow, I prefer not to be caught unaware. It is as if I had were having an intimate evening of dining and conversation with friends and suddenly find myself mired knee deep in camel turds somewhere in the suburbs of Kathmandu. If one is being shoved through the door, that is even more reason for wishing to stay alert. At the deepest level, there is always the feeling that I will be able to somehow screw up the action and walk away.

This new thing though, it is a bitch. Either way, I loose. I am either creamed before I can get my finger out of my nose, or I die in the most miserable conceivable circumstances. In the first case, either I am permanently out of touch with reality, or I wake up somewhere thinking, "Now how did I get *here*?" In the second instance, I have the two equally unappealing choices of continuing to live a life that possibly surpasses anything nasty that death may have to offer, or actually dying simply to satisfy my curiosity.

How the hell did we get into this mess, anyway. Why does it have to be going on while *I am alive*? I don't believe the crap the technocrats dish out about survivable scenarios and surgical strikes and acceptable losses. I know that *I am an acceptable loss*. Moreover, why do the bastards keep on trying to think the unthinkable? Unlike them, I have no stake in the never-ending design, production and distribution of bigger, better, more sophisticated and cost-effective slaughter machines. It profiteth me not. Shortly after the shit storm ends, I fully expect to be up to my freezing ass in dead bodies, and praying fervently to join them shortly. That is if I am *not* lucky.

But, what the hell. Life goes on, until it stops. That's that.

LYRICAL INTERLUDE:

NO RESPITE FROM THE TEMPEST

Years and years ago, I took a sweet young thing to the movies. That was back when boys took girls places. We did not go to places together. The boy took the girl and the girl went with the boy. (I can practically feel the vibes turning bad out there.) We rather liked it that way then,

probably because we were all too ignorant to know better. For the most part, I think it is better now, but I fully recognize that my opinion no longer counts, since I have been out of the game for so long.

Anyway, I took Jenny Wilbert to see *Dr. Strangelove*. Jenny was my intellectual date favourite. It was not that she was in any way averse to pleasures of the flesh. Rather, Jenny was one of the rare ones who really enjoyed talking about something as opposed to talking about nothing, if you know what I mean. Lest I am to be branded an unrepentant sexist swine, let me state that there were many more monosyllabic males in my acquaintance than females. It is just that I did not date the males.

We tooted downtown in my red Austin Healy to the Circle Theatre. Back then, you could actually drive around The Circle. If you were astoundingly lucky, you could park close to the theatre. We parked right in front of the door that night. Jenny was a marvellous girl. Cute was the style then, but Jenny wasn't having any. She had a face that some guys wouldn't look at twice. However, if you ever did look again, you could not stop looking. The more you would stare at her, the better she looked. Her beauty came from deep down inside her and just oozed out of her skin and made her glow. Just watching her move and hearing her talk was a lesson about awareness. Soon, you would start trying to find an excuse to talk to her. By then, she had you. I can still remember how I felt getting out of the car squinting in the bright theatre lights and walking around to open the door for her. I couldn't wait to get her out where I could just get a good look at her again.

In the lobby, we got our Chuckles and popcorn. It was early yet, so we found good seats in the centre. We sat and talked, held hands, and munched. I could tell she was enjoying herself. That got me very high. I kept thinking to myself what a great time we were having. It was always like that with Jenny. Disappointment was not on her menu.

The movie started, and I will tell you, we laughed our asses off. It was the golden age of black comedy, and we were digging it. When Slim Pickins came to the recitation of the items in the survival kit and mentioned the condoms (he called them prophylactics, we called them rubbers), Jenny let out a whoop that left the older members of the audience glaring at us in silence. She looked around sheepishly and slid down in her seat. Feeling bad for her, I leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Fuck 'em, if they can't take a joke.", and she whooped again. Dirty talk was okay then, but only if it was funny or used to shock one's parents.

When the soldier used a machine gun to blast open the Coke machine to get change to call the President of the United States, we were uncontrollable. Jenny could only hold her hand tightly over her mouth and make little farting noises through her fingers as she howled behind them. Tears were streaming down our faces. I felt mildly hysterical – a little drunk. Jenny seemed to be coming unglued at the seams. She was all elbows and fanning fingers accompanied by giggles and snorts. I have always loved people who can

really laugh, and I loved Jenny. Even the inevitably sombre ending provoked us to snigger at its irony.

We sat and analysed a while as the crowd oozed out. Jenny was always saying things that struck me as profound. I will always remember what she said about *Dr. Strangelove*. She told me that she thought the movie would become a classic of its genre because of the way its bizarre surrealism mirrored so grotesquely the bizarre reality. Okay, she said it much better than I write it. As I reflect on the things that we talked about, the exchanges we enjoyed as we learned to express ourselves to each other, much of it sounds trite and immature to me now. Back then though, there was never a knife so sharp to cut me, never a light so bright to help me see, as Jenny's words.

As we left the theatre, giggle time was nearly over. We made small talk to settle down a bit. It was still early and we were looking forward to some earnest groping. I felt the familiar tightness in my belly and didn't have much to say. I was thinking about Jenny. I didn't want to talk, I just wanted to enjoy thinking about her.

As we drove up Meridian Street with the top down, she had been silent for a few minutes. After a while, I thought I heard her singing softly to herself. I looked over at her. Her head was bowed. Her eyes were shut tight and there were tears streaming down her cheeks. She was shivering as if she were freezing. I reached out for her hand. She grabbed mine and held it tight against her above her breasts. I felt her warm tears cool as they trickled down my forearm. Awkwardly, I pulled the car over and shut off the engine. Now I could hear what she was singing. The tune is not important. If you wanted to try it out, you could make up your own. This was *Jenny's Little Song*. It's corny, but from the heart.

Ohhh GOD, - it could really happen
Aaeae – they could dooo it any tiiiiime
Jus' push the Magic Button
Make us all disssssappear - oohhhh
an' Daddy toooo . . .
Humm-dee-dumm-dieeee-ohhh (improvise)
Ohhh GOD - I'm so afraaaaiid.

I could not comfort Jenny. I had no words. I had no wisdom. I had no clue. Her sudden awareness of the intensity of her fear mimicked mine so precisely that I felt we had touched each other in special places. So, after a while, I sang along.

God knows where Jenny is now - I certainly do not. I wonder if she remembers that night. I wonder if she remembers me.

Jenny, if you are reading this, I love you still. I still sing your song.