

*Peach* (Working Title)

Okay, look. This is going to sound crazy, but you have to believe me. I think I've caught a virus, and now I have to spread it to you.

No, come back! Listen! I swear, it's not going to make you sick. This isn't— Look, this doesn't have to be weird. You're the one making it weird. I'm just trying to give you a virus!

...I guess I know how that sounds. But look, if it makes you more comfortable, I'll stand all the way over here. With this kind of distance—

No, see? Airborne diseases don't spread this far. Just stay over there if that makes you feel better, but I *have* to do this.

I get it. You're confused. I am too, sort of. I think talking this through is the only way to get it to make sense for *myself*, too.

What? No, I feel fine. Look, that's besides the point. I—

Yes, I'm sure. What, do I look sick?

What do you mean?

No, I swear I'm okay. I feel fine. I promise. Can I just tell my story?

Okay. Thanks. So, it's about this dream I had. Last night. The dream wasn't that weird, or at least not beyond standard dream-logic stuff—

Like, well, okay. Fine. I'll just tell the whole thing. It started out with me just grocery shopping. Totally normal, just walking down the produce aisle. Lot of peaches. I think that came from a news story I saw before I went to bed. You know how dreams are constructions and deconstructions of the stuff we experience throughout the day?

Look, I swear—

Will you just let me tell the goddamn story? Jesus.

No, it's fine.

Right. So, anyway, I was grocery shopping. Lots of peaches in the produce aisle. I think there was a whole quest to even get to the grocery store, but I don't remember that part. You know how dreams are. It's not important. So, I pick up a peach, and I look back up, and *bam* – the grocery store is gone, and now I'm just at a little fruit stand in a small town.

No, like *small*. Like, my-high-school-campus small.

Yeah, whatever. Anyway, all the buildings are huge for such a small town. Not like *skyscraper*-huge by any means, but a few stories, lots of windows. No single-family homes.

Right? Their zoning must have been a mess.

Yeah, I guess it really could have been my actual high school campus. A few tweaks.

No, like, none of them were academic buildings—

I just knew, okay?

You know, in that way you just infer stuff about your surroundings in dreams sometimes, and you're like, "Where did this information come from?", except you don't even ask that, because you're in a dream so it just seems natural?

Could you shut up for two seconds?

So it's this small town. The peach doesn't matter anymore.

I put it down.

Why are you so invested in the peach?

I don't know! It was a dream, dude! Chill out about the peach. It doesn't matter.

Right. Anyway. So, it wasn't exactly my high school campus. All the buildings were visually there, but repurposed, and it was flat instead of being on a big hill.

No, like the math building was a tavern for weary travelers or some shit.

I don't know. I didn't go into the tavern.

Yeah, there was a sign—

You can't read in dreams. Did you not know that?

You can read in your dreams? That's crazy.

Right. Yeah. So, the tavern is unimportant, it was just there. Oh, and it was daytime when I went into the grocery store, but it was nighttime in this town. Like, *creepy* nighttime. Like, something-was-off nighttime.

I'm just gonna stop answering your questions if you keep asking them.

Dream logic, I don't know!

Ugh. Look. Okay? Shut up. So, I put down the peach, and I find myself holding this box of chocolate bars. Like, middle school event, some parent bought a 35-pack at the wholesale store for eight dollars or something, and they're selling them for two bucks a piece at the bingo night for a PTO fundraiser.

Parent-Teacher Organization. Did your school not have that?

Huh.

No, I just—

Yeah. Weird. How did changes happen around your school then?

I guess that makes sense.

Wait. God damn it. You got me off track again.

No, don't worry about it, I just—

Look, I'm trying to tell a—

Yeah, I'm getting to that part. I know this doesn't make a lot of sense.

If it makes you feel any better, there's not even a virus in this dream.

Yeah, I guess I'm not sure why that would make you feel any better...

I told you, it doesn't make a ton of sense to me either. Just stick with me.

Okay. So, I've got these chocolate bars, right? And I'm thinking, "Well, why don't I go hand these out at the orphanage down the street? Make those kids' days." Right? Seems like a nice thing to do.

Yeah, it is, but—

It's not the real world, dumbass. Dream orphans are awake at whatever time is convenient to the plot.

Whatever. So, I walk down the street to this orphanage, right? And I think it's modeled after this church near my house.

Not *that* near my house.

No, the one on the hill. Two buildings, one church, it's like you could walk through the sermon hall and across twenty feet of grass and end up in the... Whatever the other building is.

I'm not sure. I've only ever been there for blood drives and voting.

Yeah. Who knows how the subconscious mind works? So, I walk to this orphanage, right? Holding these chocolate bars. I start walking around to the back, because, I don't know, I guess that's where the main entrance to this twenty-four hour dream-church-orphanage thing is.

Yeah, I know how it sounds. Could you imagine doing that in real life? "Yeah, I'll just take this box of chocolate bars around to the back door of an orphanage in the middle of the night. This is not suspicious at all, and I will definitely not be arrested for it."

*Right?*

Haha, *yes!* And then—

No, you're right, you're right. But it's fine. This was in a dream.

I guess we can't justify most things like that, no...

Right. Yeah. So, anyway, I loop around the right side of this orphanage, headed to the back door, for unknown dream-logic reasons. But out back from the orphanage, there's this little lawn, and then a chain link fence, and then a super steep hill with ridiculous amounts of trees on

it. But the hill is only like, I don't know, fifteen feet tall or so? It's shorter than the orphanage. And I'm headed to the back door, and I hear this rustling from beyond the fence.

No, I know, it's just—

What?

That wouldn't make any sense.

Well, yeah, but I don't think that would make sense *even if* we accounted for dream logic.

Whatever, man. Weird.

Yeah, so this rustling. It's super nondescript. Can't tell how big the thing that made it is, can't tell exactly where behind the fence it's coming from. Just somewhere on that hill. So I get a little closer, to see if I can figure it out, and—

Yeah, I know, right? Dream-me would totally die first in a horror movie.

What are you—

Dude, I told you, I feel *fine*. I feel *great*, actually. I think getting this into words really is helping me. Are *you* okay, though? You've been...

I don't know. You're getting weird.

Just weird, is all.

If you say so.

Right, so I'm getting closer to this fence, probably only a little farther from it than I am from you now, and suddenly my eyes go super wide and I get this... *chill* down my whole body. Like, "Oh shit, I should *not* be getting closer to this thing." And I *swear* I felt this chill lucidly, like in my non-dream body.

I don't know, I'm not a... sleep... scientist? What are those called?

Huh. Well they've got to have a name.

No, most—

What?

I don't think that's even a fake word that shares a root language with English.

No, not at all. Most people who study things are generally called something-ologists. Geologists, neurologists, oncologists...

That is *not* what you said before.

No. Your first thing sounded like an alien tongue I shouldn't even be physically able to hear with primitive human ears, much less *understand*.

What? No, you said— Well, I'm not going to try to repeat it, there's no way I *could*.

Do you not remember saying it?

Weird. It sounded... *wrong*. Like, *cosmically* wrong.

How could you—

Okay, okay, whatever. I'll drop it.

Yeah, the chill. It was insane. And for some reason – dream logic, so stick with me here – for some reason, my first instinct was to throw a chocolate bar right in front of the chain link fence. And I throw it, and suddenly I hear this... It's not a gurgle, it's not a hiss, but it's *some* kind of horrific animal-esque noise. And even though it's not saying any words, I can tell that whatever this thing is, it's sounding off a warning before striking.

Me. Who else?

No, they're all still in the orphanage.

I never said—

Seriously, are you okay?

I said, *are you okay?*

“It's just” what?

Are you sure?

Okay! Damn! Jesus. I'm telling it, I'm telling it!

You were running from the beginning of this story not five minutes ago.

Sure. *Invested*. Are you sure you're okay?

Uh... If you say so.

So I throw that first chocolate bar, right, and I hear this noise, and I'm like, "Oh shit, I just invited this thing to jump the fence for a treat," so my next thought is of course to grab like five more chocolate bars and huck them *over* the fence.

Seriously, right? Why didn't I think of that the first time?

So, I'm still getting this gut response of *RUN*, so I drop the rest of this box of chocolates and book it around the other side of the orphanage. I run right up that street I first came down, and – welcome back to dream logic – it's suddenly midday. And it really feels like I'm *barely* outpacing whatever this thing is. It's got to be *impossibly* hot on my heels, and I still feel that sound rattling around in my brain. I make it back up to the fruit stand, and—

What is it with you and that peach?

No, I—

No.

No! Dammit! Let me just tell my story! The peach is not important!

I never said that! What is with you, dude?

I will not be coming back to the peach.

I'm not making this up as I go, man. This is a dream I *already* had. The plot is set in stone. I can't just come back to the peach because it's your favorite character. It's not even a character! All it did was passively distract me from the weird dream shenanigans of my surroundings spontaneously changing! It was a plot device at best.

God dammit, shut it about the peach. I'm not bringing it up again.

So I'm at the fruit stand again, this noise is still in my head, and there's this nun from the orphanage standing there. And she's staring down the road behind me, and all she says is, "It's giving chase..." And I turn around, and I thought it was *right* behind me, but I don't even see it now, and I see that one guy from that cartoon you showed me, the guy with the... sword-club-thingy?

Yeah, him.

Yeah, he's there, but—

The whole gang, yeah. So, anyway—

Yeah, but—

Hey, can you—

Just—

Hey! I mean—

God, will you just shut up? For two goddamn seconds? I'm almost at the end here, and you're being ridiculous! Shit, you're being—

Fuck, dude, *shut up!* Let me finish the story!

Yeah, we're getting to the virus part! Jesus! What has gotten into you?

If you so insist, *your majesty*. Pfft. So, this nun, right? She says this thing is chasing me, and I'm like, "No shit, Sherlock!" She turns to look at me, and— This is the most ominous shit, and I'll never forget it. She says, "You've heard its chatter, but I know not from what range. At best, from afar, you will write its folklore forever, and spread its memetics to your world. At worst, from the nearer range... I'm afraid you're already gone." And I look back down the street, and I see sword-club-guy fighting with this shadowy thing down by the orphanage, which I guess has to be the creature – and I mean *shadowy*, like I couldn't even tell if it was bipedal or quadrupedal – and a single tear rolled down my face, and... That was it. Now you're caught up. That was the dream, and then I woke up.

No, I told you, you're not gonna get sick from this. It's not that kind of virus.



Yeah, I—

I said that part already! Were you even listening? I said there wouldn't actually be any viruses in the dream!

Ugh, you really don't get it, do you? You're already infected. It's too late.

I *mean*, you're already infected. There are no other words for it.

*What do you mean*, "What do you mean?" I just said—

...What?

Oh. Well, so, I never actually got the monster's name in the dream. But that's the weird part: I didn't need to. I woke up, and I just *knew* it. It was totally inexplicable. I just—

No, I just—

God dammit, stop! I just—

*I just knew, okay?* I know it doesn't make sense! I know! But *you're* not making sense right now either! What has gotten into— ...Oh. Oh no.

No, I just... *I know* now. *I know*. And now you know, and that's the problem. That's your crime.

I don't know what's happening to you. I'm just as confused as you are, but... I think... It's me. *I'm* the Nonogon now.