

My awareness of how dreams actually work probably began and ended at knowing that the frequency with which people lost teeth or turned up naked in public in their unconscious imaginations was high, and also by not knowing what that was supposed to signify.

The rest of my “knowledge” consisted of items that I was deeply aware were not knowledge but bits and snatches of what I’d absorbed from movies. Otherwise known as complete ignorance.

Needless to say I thought it a tremendous oversight on the part of the scientific minds in charge of Dreams Illustrated to hire me, even as a dial-pusher. But the money was very good; I kept my rightful concern to myself and pushed those dials exactly in accordance to the manual’s settings and definitions. I was already sure I shouldn’t be in charge of a single button here—I wasn’t going to risk fracking up this minor job on purpose, or even out of carelessness.

Most of the customers didn’t ever see me. If they had, they probably would not have wanted to wander starry-eyed into the incubator rooms and climb into their eggish escape pods. Escape pods mounted to the floor, the seat belt strap inside existing as a formality. Or maybe something vestigial retained by the suggestion of some savvy advertising exec., to try and trick the particularly flaky brains inside into thinking this would cause them to *fly away to a world of wonder*, or some other such modern-hippie dream-analyst shit. Disney-ass slogans were so overbearing and grandmotherly here I had long since adapted to ignoring them.

It was 2 a.m., the end of the regular shift for the button-pushers and the dial-nudgers. I had only one client in the egg at the time, and the settings were stable and solid at 88. 88 whats, I didn’t know. 88 hertz, 88 milliseconds, 88 drunken kangaroos... I was busy slumped back in the desk chair, blanketed in a baggy gray hoodie, hood tucked around like a ghetto Eskimo trying to block out the not-arctic lighting. Damn lights that occasionally roasted indoor moths alive from their intensity. At the moment corpses weren’t raining down on my cellphone or sleeves—a pleasant reprieve. I had my company headset tapped into the much smaller computer and was funneling a local radio’s top 40 listing into my ear canals when it happened.

The lighting turned red as the emergency lights came on and overpowered them. The alarm keened next, two-second intervals of solid auditory pain and alarm. I fell out of my seat. Cell seemed to have slipped out of my hand as the headset was torn off of my head.

A red-lit figure blew the door back on its hinges as he entered; he was one of the shift supervisors, though who I couldn't make out from the Satanic lighting reddening out all features. He was shouting, slamming the table I had previously been sat behind, turned to me with utter rage popping out like rack-rib shiners at me, but worse was that he looked like fear itself.

"What?" It struck finally, as obvious as it was. I couldn't hear him for the alarm, he was demanding to know what happened. As if I knew.

"What in the hell did you do?" More through dismantled lip-reading and a dose of assumption I figured out what he'd said. I opened my mouth to try and explain I knew nothing. Before I could he turned away, squinting at the dials I was in charge of adjusting. He had a bead of sweat trailing down his pointed nose and threatening to make the leap onto the main dial.

"Do you have any idea what's going on in there?" He whirled back around on me. Stunned at his fist snapping closed on a hunk of my hoodie I could only choke.

Again, this time with more vein-on-the-forehead: "Do you have *any idea* what's going on in there?" He thrust me up against the observation glass. Through it the Incubator room was also tinged bloody with emergency lighting, the horn blares of the alarm echoing over triple due to the room's cavernous nature. Aside from that, nothing seemed amiss. Maybe I could have picked up on more had the supervisor's uncommon arm strength not hauled me back and begun to drag me through the conjoining halls.

On the way to the Incubator room. I wished I felt like one or the other: Either like a sad-sack of idiocy or like a dead sack of meat being drug along by a carnivorous ape. But I felt like both, thanks to the supervisor.

He forced me to my full height, pushed up to the frosted glass window in the top half of the door. It was smeared with handprints. Clawed with handprints. And one opaque streak trickled down across the frosted glass as well, some viscous, nasty substance.

The supervisor and I were joined by some heavies—some security personel and two men who looked like they might've been police. One of the security heavies shut off the emergency lighting and alarm. The whole world returned to normal hue and a watery lack of sound. My poor destroyed eardrums.

One of the cops was staring. At first, I thought he was doing so to me, but turning back to the door's frosted glass window I realized his grim mien was focused past me. On the door's window. On the deep crimson-colored streak slopped about by formerly desperate hands on the other side. Bloodied handprints, diluted with sweat.

I'm in some serious shit now.