

Just a Dream

Anna Pearsall

Oasis

9th Grade

1,486 words

Just a Dream

Flames licked up her legs. Sweat dripped off her brow as she spun around, searching for a way out. All she could make out were flames. Coughing from the smoke, she knew this was the end.

Ophelia's eyes snapped open. Her sheets were tangled around her legs, and her blankets were damp from sweat. She was still coughing. Ophelia's arms were outstretched, reaching for a way out. Panting, she stumbled out of bed. Her skin was fire, her throat a desert. Lurching to the kitchen sink, Ophelia turned on the faucet. Guzzling cool water, droplets splashing on her flaming face, she felt the adrenaline fade. Retracting her head, she turned off the faucet. Wiping her mouth with her wrist, she walked to the front door and pulled it open. The cool air washed over her. Breathing in deep, she closed the door behind her and plopped down on the front steps.

The dream resurfaced, raging up like the fire it was. Shuddering, Ophelia rubbed her hands over her arms, as if she could rub off the memory. She could still feel the sparks on her skin, smoke in her lungs...

Ophelia scoffed and shook her head. Why did it shake her up that much?

It was just a dream.

The next day passed the same as each before. Ophelia went to high school, focused so hard in each of her classes, and aced each exam.

It was because of her parents. Her father was long gone. Her mother was there for her when she was young, but when Ophelia turned thirteen, her mother decided she was done

parenting. Now, her mother never even changed out of her bathrobe. Ophelia suffered for three long years, scavenging any food she could find. Ophelia didn't know how her mother survived. Probably off booze. Ophelia was forced to sign the bills. Their bank account would run out eventually, but Ophelia planned to be long gone by then.

On her sixteenth birthday, she took the first job she found. Cashier at their local grocery store. After that, food was easier to get. But her mother never saw a dime. Ophelia made sure of it.

Now that she wasn't hungry all the time, she focused on school. She was getting out of this god forsaken town. Away from her failure of a mother. Away from their tiny duplex. Away from her childhood.

The next night she had the same dream.

Tears streamed down her face, eyes burning from the heat and the smoke. Falling to her knees, Ophelia gasped in excruciating pain.

Save the children...

Ophelia sat straight up in bed. Once more she was drenched in sweat, sheets wrapped around her legs.

Shaking, Ophelia sank back onto her pillows. What did 'save the children' mean??

A psychology lesson flashed back to her. Dreams were your subconscious working through your problems. But what did the flames mean? The children?

Punching her pillow into a comfortable shape, Ophelia slammed her eyes shut.

It didn't mean anything. It was just a dream.

The flames kept plaguing her. Ophelia began to dread going to sleep. Even though she knew it was ridiculous, the pain felt real.

But Ophelia knew she had to sleep, or her schoolwork would suffer. Her rationality won out every night.

Three nights later, more was said through the flames.

Save the children. On the corner of Dug and Maple... Save them.

Ophelia lost sleep. She often dozed in class. For the first time, she scored a B on an exam. Face flaming, she marched down the crowded halls and pushed a door open. The counselor's office.

A sobbing girl hiccupped and spun around. Ophelia's jaw opened. The girl stood and ran past Ophelia, who stood there, not sure what to do.

"Can you read?" The counselor asked in a tired voice. She gestured to a sign on the still open door, that said in big, bold letters **PLEASE KNOCK**.

"Um..."

"Sit down, Ophelia."

Closing the door sheepishly, Ophelia sat in the chair. "How do you know my name?"

Ophelia had never passed a glance at this office. The thought of coming in here never even crossed her mind. There was never a reason. Until now.

“Ophelia, we keep an eye on all students who have questionable environments at home.”

Ophelia frowned. Questionable environments. Sounded understated.

“You handle yourself better than most. What can I help you with?”

After a pause, Ophelia told the counselor about her dreams, and how they were affecting her school. “What do I do?” Ophelia asked, hating the whining tone in her voice. This was the first time she asked someone for help.

The counselor sighed. “Ophelia, do you know what dreams are?”

Ophelia refrained from rolling her eyes. “Yes. They’re your subconscious working through your problems.”

“Very good. Now, what could this recurring dream mean?”

It took a great deal of restraining not to pound her forehead down on the desk in front of her. “If I knew that, I wouldn’t be here.”

The counselor narrowed her eyes in thought. “I thought you would have figured this out by now, Ophelia. You’re very clever.”

She ignored the compliment/insult. “Just tell me how I fix it.”

“I could.” She admitted. “But I believe it’ll be more effective if *you* figure this out.”

Ophelia stood, cast a frustrated glare, and wrenched open the door. A freshman squeaked, his hand poised to knock. With one look at Ophelia's face, he scurried off. Rolling her eyes, Ophelia strode through the empty halls and out the double doors.

Her shift at the grocery store passed as slow as if someone were stretching it out like thick dough. Eventually, the clock struck six and Ophelia was out the doors.

One microwave dinner later, Ophelia walked past her mother's closed door, through the narrow hallway, and into her mess of a bedroom. She hadn't cleaned the last few days. With a few flicks of her wrist and some tucks, the bed was made. Walking around, she plopped her dirty clothes in her hamper.

Satisfied with her impromptu clean, she slipped between her sheets. Eventually, she drifted off to sleep.

The flames were back. No surprise there. She thought she would get used to it, but the panic was always there. The fear. The knowledge that this was the end.

As usual, the voice came. It said something different.

Last chance. Save the children. On the corner of Dug and Maple. Last chance.

The flames disappeared, but the dream continued. She was in a kitchen, where cook bustled around, preparing tons of food. A dishtowel was draped over one shoulder.

Ophelia watched the cook pull the towel off and slap it on the counter, near the flames of the stove. Too near.

“Wait!” Ophelia cried. The cook didn’t hear her. The towel caught fire. Ophelia watched, horrified, as it started melting the linoleum and the cupboards caught fire. It happened surprisingly quick. The cook, turning around, cried out and dropped the platter she was holding.

Ophelia spun around, heading for the doors. She was out of there.

But the halls were blocked. With screaming children.

Save the children.

The fire spread to the halls. The children were caught in it. Ophelia screamed.

When she woke up, she was still screaming. The horrifying image seared into her mind. Sobbing, Ophelia lurched out of bed. It was so real... There was more to it. Even though it made no sense, Ophelia knew there was something more.

It was no longer just a dream.

Ophelia peddled down “Maple” street, on her old, dusty pink bike, searching for “Dug”.

She knew there was going to be nothing there. Probably some gas station. A little voice told her how ridiculous and naïve she was being. What could it be, if not a dream?

But she kept peddling. The memory of the children’s screams refused to stop.

When Ophelia spotted the green street sign that read “Dug”, she nearly crashed.

An orphanage.

Save the children.

Licking her lips, Ophelia walked up the front steps. In a trance, she read the sign.

Maple's Home for Children

Something snapped inside of Ophelia. Yanking the door open, she dashed inside, looking desperately for a fire alarm. There wasn't one, but a fire extinguisher attached to a wall caught her eye. Grabbing it, Ophelia glanced down the hall, spotting a familiar person. The cook opened a door, walking inside.

Scrambling down the hallway, Ophelia ran inside. The cook slapped the dishtowel towel next to the stove, jumping when she heard Ophelia.

"Who are you?" She accused, glancing at the fire extinguisher clasped in her shaking hands. Not answering, Ophelia pulled the safety ring and pushed the cook aside.

The towel was catching fire. Before the flame was bigger than her finger, Ophelia squeezed. With a hissing noise, the fire was gone, replaced by a white gas.

Ophelia turned to the slack jawed cook.

"Um... Hi?"

2/9/2018

I give permission to publish my submitted story with my picture.

Anna Pearsall

Anna Pearsall