

## Dream On, Dream On, Dream Before the Good Lord Takes You Away

by Leslie Filter

"Higher, Mommy, I want to go higher! Please, can we, Huh? Let's go higher!"

"We can't go right now! I don't have time to go higher, honey!" her mother exclaimed as they walked past the escalator farther into the deep reaches of the store. Rushing past the perfume counter, she was pulling her little girl along like a kite on a string that just won't fly. The soles of her white uniform shoes squished along the linoleum so quickly, it sounded like the steady rhythm of the sprinklers you see on a golf course. Finally, she had made her way to the hosiery department, only to find a line stretching from the register to the brick road that led the customers around the store.

God dammit, Barb thought, I'm going to be late for work. Mrs. Tumey hates it when I bring Elizabeth late.

"Mommy, I want to go up. Can't we go up now? Can't we go higher?" Elizabeth whined, interrupting her mother's heated reverie.

"No, Elizabeth! Mommy has got to go to the cafe to work, and you have to go to Mrs. Tumey's. Now, just be quiet!"

"You always go to work! Why can't we go up once? Pleeeeease!"

"Elizabeth!"

In the car, with Elizabeth still whining, Barb thought about a time when she and Chad had first started dating, and they came to this very mall to window shop for Christmas. The mannequins were all decked out in red and green velvet party dresses with the black satin bows, and they were standing on a stage, lightly covered with that styrofoam snow. She remembered watching shoppers hum, and whistle, and walk to the beat of those instrumental Christmas songs, and she remembered her and Chad laughing at them, holding hands.

Today was kind of like that day, she thought, stormy and cold.

"Can we come back, tomorrow," Elizabeth pleaded, "maybe to go up?"

"Well, we'll see," said Barb, noting a bit of doubt in her voice, a detail the child did not recognize.

On the way to Mrs. Tumey's, Barb was stopped by every red light, and the pauses seemed to last forever. Why do I still take my child to this old hag, Barb was thinking, but she knew the answer—Mrs. Tumey was the only sitter she

could afford. Working alone she could hardly pay the low rent of their smaller apartment, across town. I should get a better job, she thought, but she also knew the answer to that—she couldn't afford to take time off work.

On the way, today, she found herself driving by the apartment building she had lived in with Chad, not too long ago. God, she loved that apartment. Stained glass windows, hard wood floors. Well, it really wasn't in very good shape, but she and Chad, and later, Elizabeth, lived there together—on the fourth floor. There were six floors in that building, and one day she and Chad had planned to live on that top floor, which was only one apartment instead of split up, like the others. They were on their way.

Finally, Barb had arrived at Mrs. Tumey's, and as expected she was late, and Mrs. Tumey was unhappy. Like a scolding, scary, old, elementary teacher, Mrs. Tumey pulled Elizabeth out of Barb's arms as if she were a cork in a bottle, and, with just a look of resentment toward Barb, she slammed the door in her face. Barb knew she had interrupted Mrs. Tumey's game show.

She was also late for work, which did not go over well, since her shift was to begin at noon—rush hour. She wasn't sure how late she was, but she knew she had spent about ten minutes in her car trying to put on her hose—a necessary item in her boss's eyes. She had been working this job for six months, but she still could not get used to the odd eccentricities of her boss. As she was struggling to put on her hose without attracting too much attention from the passers-by, she thought with some frustration how she never had to put up with this stuff when Chad was here. He made quite enough money to support them, and even though she had one day planned to work, she enjoyed her time with Elizabeth. Chad, who had been sent to college by his parents, had promised ever since they had been dating, to send Barb to school one day, so that she could do something she really wanted. He kept promising to send her once he got enough money. Promises, she thought.

As expected, she walked into Hal's Diner at the busiest moment of the day, and for a split second she thought that maybe Herman, her boss, wouldn't notice. He had named the cafe Hal's because he didn't like his own name, and thought that Hal's would create a better image.

She was just slipping back to the employees' closet when Herman, leaning over the grill, noticed her. Raising his voice to the loudest level, and attracting the attention of everyone, Herman waived his spatula and yelled, "Barb! You're late!! I have customer's waitin' to be served! Do they need to make an appointment to get service! Now get to work!" Before Barb could say a word, Herman about-faced, and he and his grease-streaked apron were back at the grill.

Furious, Barb whipped open the tablecloth curtain of a door at the closet and she threw in her purse and raincoat. Just as the purse hit the floor, one of the last two seams holding it together ripped and out spilled used tissues, a bag of Elizabeth's candy, the department store bag and the wrappings of her hose, her billfold, a Hal's Diner nametag, coupons for pop-tarts and beanie-weenies, and a small mountain of change. She picked up the handbag, and as she was trying to stuff everything back in, she noticed another item. It was a crumpled old letter of Chad's.

As she knelt beside her things, she stared at the letter, holding it nervously, as if she did not know what lay beyond its folds. But she had read it before; she read all of his letters—over and over. She wasn't sure which one this was or how it got in her purse, but she had almost forgotten those letters he wrote. She had kept every one, and wrapped them together in a plastic baggie tied with an old shoestring of Chad's, and tucked them into a drawer at home.

She heard Herman's work boots scuff along the kitchen floor, and she hurriedly gathered the rest of her spilled life into a mound and put the letter into her waitress apron. She certainly was not ready for another confrontation with Herman, especially since she had seen the letter. Chad always had a way of weakening her defenses.

She got a tray of water glasses, chipped off some dried food that was on the edge of one, and was headed to her first table. She was glad to see it was a couple of regulars. These two ladies came in every day, always ordered the tuna salad on one slice of wheat bread, with a fruit salad on the side, or an occasional cottage cheese and, of course, coffee. They did not require the waitress to talk to them because they were too busy gossiping, but if you kept their coffee cups full you could expect a hearty tip.

Unfortunately, her day did not continue so easily. It seemed that everyone that came in was either a hood, or a bum, neither of which classified as a good tipper, or an easy customer. None of them ever seemed to receive the right order, or get enough fries, and, of course, they gave her no tip. She did luck-out a couple of times and waited

on some businessmen, but they were few and far between, and the day proved to be a long one.

At five o'clock Barb got Tammy, another waitress, to take her tables as she took her lunch hour. Instead of taking her usual free meal at the diner, Barb decided to get away. She used her shopping bag as a purse, and went to the fruit stand two blocks down from the diner. She got a plastic bag of red apples, and at the TV-like newspaper vending machine she got a paper and took a five minute walk to one of the huge hotels nearby.

She loved just sitting in the lobbies of these hotels. They were so beautiful, and so ornately decorated. This one, although it was a skyscraper and was built not too many years ago, was made in Victorian styling, with burgundy velvet upholstery, and dark mahogany furniture that curved in smooth lines. It was all so perfect. She hadn't been in one for so long she almost forgot the clean linen smell of the hotels, and the quietness of it all. These hotels do not have families of screaming children check in, who drive up in station wagons, but rather all of the guests here are serene, and elegant.

Barb unfolded her newspaper, and looked through the first section for an interesting story, but finding none, she went on to the City/State section. On the front page of this part they had a picture of a local Homecoming Queen. She stood in her long, frilly prom dress, holding her bouquet of roses in one hand, and adjusting her crown with the other. Barb thought of Elizabeth at that moment, and she pictured her as a Queen one day. The little girl had her mother's dimples and green eyes, and surely she, if her mother couldn't, would be able to get Homecoming Queen. Barb had been up for it, but she didn't get it, and she knew why. At her school you had to run with the rich girls to get the crown, and although she was popular, Barb knew her "sometimes-employed" factory-worker dad wouldn't score her any points in the wealth category. Maybe things had changed for Elizabeth's sake.

Uninterested by the paper now, Barb set it down, and watched the elevator travel on its little track. It was one of those elevators that stuck out into the room, instead of being surrounded by four walls. It was made of the same mahogany and it had an iron fence partition to cover the opening. Many times it would travel without carrying anyone up or down, or it would just sit at a floor waiting for someone to push its buttons. It seemed alive sometimes as it moved so smoothly, and without mistake, and it seemed to be in control of itself. Barb had remembered seeing many elevators just like this one at other hotels, but this one was

certainly the most interesting.

Being at the hotel so long that day, made her remember how much she loved coming with Chad. She had stayed in a few of these hotels quite a bit when she was with Chad. They always checked-in, Barb pretending they were a married couple, with their one bag and they followed the bellhop to their room, arm-in-arm. They usually stayed just one night, and had the continental breakfast in bed, but once, when she went to visit Chad at school, he got a good deal on a suite through his dad's company, and they stayed the entire weekend. It was wonderful.

Sadly, she finished her apple, and realized with her life the way it is that she probably would never stay in another hotel like that. Not with Chad out of her life.

From six until eight o'clock, the end of her shift, she worked behind the counter and became more ready than ever to go home. She was tired of whisking from one end of the counter to the other, shuffling plates of scrambled eggs, and burgers and fries, that Herman, who worked all-day on the weekends, had slung together and lined up on the metal windowsill between the kitchen and the dining room. Her hands hurt from the burnt places where she had spilled hot coffee, and her hair had fallen completely out of the little bandana Herman made the girls wear, and now it hung in her face. The hose that she had struggled with earlier that day now had twenty runs, holes, and pulls in them, and she knew she would go through the same line tomorrow to buy them in the same rush as she had earlier that day. When the arms on the Pepsi clock above the counter finally marked eight o'clock, Barb was sick of the diner and she gathered her things and without a word to anyone, left. Another day, another \$36.84 (including tips), she thought to herself.

Elizabeth was, to much astonishment and to a blaring TV set, asleep when Barb arrived. Barb payed Mrs. Tumey, and cradled her sleeping child out to the car. Elizabeth was so vulnerable in that position, but she also seemed so carefree. What it would be like, Barb thought, to be a child again, and to sleep whenever you wanted, and have your

mother carry you to bed. Barb had forgotten what it was like to sleep.

That night, after Barb had undressed Elizabeth and put her to bed, she undressed herself, throwing her uniform on the ground, and put on her long nightgown. It was raining out now, and it would probably be a cold night. She turned on the TV, opened her bed up from the couch, and twisted open a cooler she had picked up from the local liquor store on the way home. When she was ready to get into bed she saw the letter she had found earlier peeking out of her apron pocket. Upon a few moments of indecision, she hurriedly grabbed the letter and held it to her breast. She crawled under the covers still holding the letter and couldn't decide if she wanted to read it. She didn't know if she really wanted to remember things that she had forgotten. There was so much to miss from that time she spent with Chad, and it hurt so much to miss it.

On the screen was a rerun from that old television show "Eddie's Father." It must have been the end (when the two always talk, but of nothing that has to do with the rest of the episode) because Eddie was asking his father twenty questions. Eddie asked, "Why do birds fly, Dad?" and in his infinite TV father wisdom, Eddie's father replied, "Well, to go higher, of course." Eddie then asked, "Why do they fly in a group?" and was answered with "So they don't get lost. There aren't any road signs in the sky, you know!" And with that, Eddie was swung into his father's arms, and they were off into the sunset.

During the credits and the closing song, Barb then remembered her own daughter's unanswered question, "Why can't we go higher, Mommy?" Barb thought, Because I can't fly anymore. Not alone.

Without really thinking, she got up from bed and she put the letter in the baggie with the rest of Chad's letters, tied the shoestring, and shut the drawer tightly.

Leaving the TV on, Barb cried herself to sleep, and listened to the TV still sing the theme song, "Let me tell ya 'bout my best friend..."