

So This Guy Walks into a Bar

By J. E. Marksteiner

I've been trying to forget the guy.

I'm a salesman. I travel all the time and I meet a lot of people; most of them I forget almost before I'm out the door. But this guy was something else. Boy, was he something else.

I was just finishing my second beer when he walked in. He sat at the bar, two stools away from me. He looked tired. I mean *really* tired, like he hadn't slept well in months. He leaned his elbows on the bar and dropped his face into his hands. The bartender brought him a beer.

Nodding his thanks, he glanced over at me. "Mind some company?"

I get pretty lonely on the road so I didn't mind. He moved over next to me and stuck out his hand. I took it and almost got my fingers broken. He told me his name was Joe Peterson; I told him mine was Benjamin Horvath.

He took a swig of beer and rubbed his big hand over his face as if he were trying to wipe off some of the tiredness.

"You ever have a dream you can't get rid of, Ben? I mean the kind of dream you have every time you close your eyes?" Joe didn't wait for my answer, just kept right on talking. "I do. The dream comes every night now. I wake up when my wife starts shaking me. I open my eyes real wide to try to get myself waked up so I can go back to sleep and try to dream something else.

"That damn dream is so real!" Joe's big fist slammed down on the bar. "It's like some weird creature trying to swallow my soul. Does that sound wild?" Joe glanced sideways at me and laughed a kind of sad laugh. "Yeah, that sounds wild. But it's getting harder and harder to

fight it. Even when I know what it's doing to me, I get drawn back into it night after night. It's getting tougher to wake up. Suzie, that's my wife's name, Suzie. Anyway, Suzie says it's taking her longer to wake me up than it did at first. She says I start moaning and my arms and legs jerk sometimes. That's when she wakes me up, or tries to."

Joe shifted on his stool. He kept looking down at his beer like he was ashamed to look me in the eye. I guessed he was feeling funny, telling a stranger about something so personal. Trying to change the subject, I asked him what he did for a living.

"Construction, farming, odd jobs, whatever I can get," he said. "You know, I'm fine in the daytime. I get up, shave, eat breakfast, drive to work. Most of the jobs keep me outside all the time and I like that. I've worked out in the open all my life, ever since high school. That's when the dream always starts, high school. I didn't do too good back then, just coasted through, with grades barely high enough to stay eligible for the football team. But in my dream I'm one of those really bright guys. You know the type, the ones who carry a briefcase to school when they're fourteen, and belong to the science club. In fact, when the dream starts, I'm in the science lab.

"I can see that round-faced clock over the door. It says 10:30, but when I look around I can see through the windows that it's dark outside, so I know it's 10:30 at night and not during the day. Mr. Mayfield is standing beside me and we're working together on some project. I can't tell what we're doing, but we must have done it right because the next thing I know I'm in college and working on my Ph.D. in physics. Physics, for God's sake! I can't even spell the word, but in this dream, I'm a damn genius." Joe shook his head and stared into his glass.

"Anyway, next I'm in this big lab. Real state of the art stuff like you see on TV – only this place

has things you never saw before. Somehow in the dream I know what all of it does. In fact, I think I invented some of it.”

Joe gulped his beer and rubbed his hands over his face, like he could erase the dream from his mind if he rubbed hard enough. He leaned his elbows on the counter again, his head slumped into his hands. He stayed that way so long I thought he’d gone to sleep. I was getting ready to pay up and head out when he seemed to come out of it.

Honest to God, you’re going to think I’m crazy, but Joe’s face had actually changed. His voice too. He went from a good old boy to a cultured, well-educated man, right before my eyes. But he still looked and sounded more exhausted than I’ve ever seen anybody look before or since.

He raised his head and noticed me. It was like he was seeing me for the first time. He extended his hand, very politely, and said, “I’m Dr. Joseph Peterson. Very happy to meet you, sir.”

“Benjamin Horvath,” I mumbled, shocked. I stuck out my hand automatically. Instead of the bone-crusher handshake he’d given me a few minutes ago, his grip was now merely strong, like a man’s handshake ought to be. And now he was meeting my eyes while he talked.

“You look like a man who can keep a secret, Ben. I can call you Ben, can’t I?”

I nodded, dazed.

“Call me Joseph; that’s what my family always called me.” He shook his head, looking rueful. “They probably think I’m dead. I haven’t even called them in years. It’s the same with the others in the project. All we think about is the project. We only eat and sleep because we have to. If the med boys could make a pill to take the place of food and rest, we’d work twenty-four hours a day.”

He waved the bartender over and ordered Scotch on the rocks. “Time is getting short. We need to make a breakthrough soon.” He rubbed his face, but it wasn’t like before. Instead of trying to rub the skin off, he just kind of passed his hand over his face. It looked like a habitual gesture, one he wasn’t even aware of.

“Two weeks ago a co-worker asked me to check his experiment to see if I could spot something he missed. He said he was too close to it to be objective any more. Damn good thing he did have it checked! His next step would have blown up not only the lab but the northern half of the state as well. When I pointed out his error, he started to shake so hard I had to call the doctor. Now we all check each other’s work every day. It’s getting so close now, any of us could make a mistake. Any little mistake, and it would be the last one.”

His eyes probed mine. He said, “Have you ever had a recurring dream? For a while now, I’ve been having one. It starts when I was in high school, but this time instead of studying all the time to get a scholarship, I’m on the football team. I never had time to date when I was in high school, in fact never had time for it later on either, but in this dream I’m dating a cute little cheerleader named Suzie.” He chuckled. “I tell you, Ben, sometimes I don’t want to wake up.”

The guy tossed down the last of his Scotch and stuck out his hand again. “Well, got to get back to the lab. It’s been nice talking with you, Ben.”

We shook hands and the guy left. I’d have just put him down as a schizo except for what happened next. Just after he walked out the front, the back door of the tavern opened and this cute little woman came in. The bartender looked up and said, “Hey, Suzie, looking for your old man? He just left.” She laughed and thanked him, and went back out.

I shook my head and finished my beer, thinking the mystery was solved. Just a good old boy after all, putting on an act for the stranger in town. My face must have been really comical. I could just imagine Joe and Suzie laughing about it.

But then the front door opened and another man came in. The bartender called, “Hey, Dr. Wagner, lost your buddy again? Dr. Peterson just left. You probably passed him on the road.”

As the bartender wiped down the bar, he caught my eye. My face must have looked really strange this time because he came back and leaned over to whisper in my ear, “Don’t ask.”