

DREAM WORLD

by
Michael McCollum

Does modern life ever remind you of a bad 1950s science fiction story? You may be closer to the truth than you think!



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Paula Kaplan was tired and irritable, a natural consequence of having been on the road for the past ten days. It wasn’t traveling that she disliked, but rather the endless string of snotty department store managers and purchasing agents with whom she spent her days. Her nights were no better. During her five years as district sales representative for Dream World Cosmetics, she had developed a routine for passing the hours between dinner and bedtime. Often in a strange town she would search out the local cineplex and take in a movie or two. When nothing on the marquee appealed to her, she stayed in her motel room and watched cable TV. Once or twice each trip, especially when she didn’t have to travel the next day, she would find a local tavern and get quietly drunk. Occasionally she would encourage one of the local Lotharios to buy her a drink and then take him back to her motel. Even these rare adventures had a dreary sameness to them. Almost without exception, her lovers sported an untanned strip of skin on the third finger of their left hand.

This particular night she didn’t feel like the movies and the television didn’t work in the seedy motel her bosses had booked her into. There was a bar next door, but it was a country-western place. If there was anything that irritated Paula more than purchasing managers, it was shit-kicker music. Bored, she hopped into her Hertz rental and sought out the little town’s main drag. There she found a quiet bar in a residential neighborhood.

The bar was a small white structure with a blank front wall adorned by a red neon sign that spelled out *Bob’s*. The lot

behind the building was filled with cars parked more or less at random among the potholes. The entrance on the side was framed in blue neon lights. Inside she found the usual dimly lit drinking establishment whose air held a whiff of stale beer. The bar stretched along an interior wall to her left, while a row of booths hugged a yellow-painted, windowless concrete block wall. To her left was an open doorway leading to a short corridor that fronted the restrooms and led to a back room with tables. Soft rock music floated from speakers precariously balanced on plywood shelves mounted high on the walls.

The booths were filled with couples and small groups. There were several empty stools at the bar, but Paula ignored them, not wanting to be mistaken for the new prostitute in town. After a momentary pause while her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she made her way down the corridor, past the restrooms, to the back room.

The back was more brightly lit than the front, courtesy of a clock surrounded by an illuminated sign advertising Coors beer. Here, too, the tables seemed to be fully occupied. As Paula turned to leave, she noticed one table placed slightly apart from the others in the far corner of the room. A single figure sat there contemplating his surroundings while a half-full glass of beer adorned the table in front of him. He wasn't looking in her direction. He seemed preoccupied by the conversation of three Japanese businessmen and their Caucasian counterpart at the next table over.

"Excuse me," she said to the short, balding man after threading her way through the crowd to his table. "Would you mind if I sat with you? There doesn't appear to be an open table in the room."

He turned to face her. In addition to being bald and overweight, he possessed a receding chin and thick, Coke-bottle glasses.

Paula was aware of the figure she cut in her business suit with the paisley scarf. She expected him to jump to his feet and fall all over himself welcoming her. His reaction surprised her. For fully five seconds he stared as though he were having trouble focusing. The dilation of his pupils, along with the drooping eyelids, told her that the beer on the table wasn't his first ... or even his fifth. Finally, as though in slow motion, some unidentifiable emotion crossed behind his eyes and he gestured toward a chair.

"Sure, why not? It might be interesting."

"Thank you," she replied. She removed her coat and draped it over one of the empty chairs, then pulled another from beneath the table. It came out with a loud scraping noise. She settled into it and immediately kicked off her shoes. It felt good to wiggle her toes and feel the cool air waft across her soles through the nylon of her pantyhose.

When she was settled, she looked at her table mate, put on her most sincere smile, and extended her hand. "My name is Paula Kaplan."

"Morris Cramer," he replied listlessly, shaking her hand. She noted that his palms were as soft as her own. Obviously not a mill worker.

"Is there a hostess in here, Morris, or do I need to go to the bar for my drink?"

"Kerri should be right over."

Less than a minute later a young blonde with a perky manner and a low-cut blouse materialized from out of nowhere. "Whattaya have, honey?" she asked in a Texas twang that was misplaced this far north.

"White wine spritzer, if you have one."

"Sure enough. Morris?"

"Another beer."

"Coming right up."

A minute later she was back with the order. Paula reached into her purse and pulled out a five, received change, and left a tip on the hostess's tray. She noticed that Morris didn't bother to pay.

"I take it you have a tab here?"

"Something like that," he grunted.

She sipped her wine and decided that it matched the rest of her expectations of this sleepy little town.

"Well, what did you think of the game today?" she asked as a means of breaking the uncomfortable silence that had arisen.

"Game?" Morris responded dully, staring at her. From this range it was possible to smell the beer on his breath. She sighed and decided to leave soon. He struck her as a sloppy drunk, another thing she hated in life.

"The Dolphins against the Cardinals."

"I'm not much of a baseball fan."

"I should say not," she replied with a laugh, "since those are football teams."

"Oh, right."

"What do you do for a living, Morris?"

"I'm a writer."

"Really? That sounds exciting. I'm regional sales rep for Dream World Cosmetics."

"Figures."

"Beg your pardon?"

"Nothing. just thinking aloud."

"What do you write?"

"Science fiction mostly. Also a few detective novels and westerns to put bread on the table."

"Science fiction? Do you mean like *Star Wars* and *Total Recall*?"

"Something like that."

"Tell me, Morris. Is there any money to be made in sci-fi in 1996?"

Being in sales, Paula considered herself a fair judge of people. She noted Morris's reaction with professional interest. He seemed to be struggling with some inner decision. Evidently he resolved his problem because, a moment later, the corners of his mouth turned upward in a tiny smile. The expression was so fleeting that she doubted anyone else had seen it.

When he finally spoke, it was in a voice soft enough that the music nearly drowned him out. "What makes you think this is 1996?"

She blinked in surprise, wondering if this was his idea of a joke. She laughed out of politeness and pointed to the tattered calendar hanging on the wall next to the storage room door.

"Because it says so right there."

He turned to look, causing the fat rolls on his neck to pile up in an interesting pattern. "So it does." He turned back. "It isn't, you know. The date is October 12, 1956. I don't expect you to believe me, of course. Not that it matters."

"Why doesn't it matter, Morris?"

"Because you aren't really here. None of you are."

Nuts were another thing that she hated about life on the road. No matter how normal a guy might seem on the surface, they were all a little twisted inside. Looking at Morris, she had trouble thinking of him as dangerous, but then that's what people had said about Ted Bundy. She considered leaving and then thought about how good it felt to have her shoes off. Rather than go back to her room and spend the night staring at the walls, she decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. After all, Morris was a science-fiction writer and they were all supposed to be eccentric, weren't they? Besides, there were

enough husky men in this bar that all she needed to do to get help was scream.

“If I’m not here, where am I?”

“You’re a figment of my imagination. Everyone is. This world,” — he made an expansive gesture with his right hand — “is one I imagined as the background for my next book.”

Paula took a sip of her spritzer. “It sounds to me like you are losing your grip on reality, Morris.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“Of course I don’t believe you.”

“What if I can prove it?” he asked in a tone that was less belligerent than challenging.

“How?”

“By logic. Take you, for instance.”

“What about me?”

“You’re a knockout.”

“I try to keep myself in shape,” she replied noncommittally. A compliment was always good for a woman’s ego, even when delivered by a dweeb like Morris.

“Would someone like you ever come and sit with someone like me in a bar?”

She shrugged. “All the other tables were occupied. Besides, if I’d taken a table by myself, I would have spent the night fending off men trying to hit on me. I just came in here for a quiet drink.”

He shook his head. “No, you just think you did. You came in here because I imagined you would. The other tables were full because that’s the way I set the situation up. You sat down here because I wanted you to. *Cognito, ergo sum*. ‘I think, therefore, I am.’”

“What about me?”

“The principle doesn’t apply to figments of my

imagination.”

“Is that your proof?” Paula asked with a laugh. “You know you imagined this world because I happened to sit down at your table?”

“Want more? Why didn’t I pay for my beer?”

“You have a tab here.”

“Sorry. I’ve never been in this place before tonight.”

He took a sip of beer and laughed. She didn’t like the tone. “Of course, neither has anyone else, because I didn’t imagine this scene until about an hour ago.”

“What if I call Kerri over here and ask her?”

“Then she’ll say I’m an old customer who has been coming here for years. She’ll even show you my bar tab.”

“You said you don’t have a bar tab.”

“I don’t. But to be self-consistent, I would have one in this world I’ve imagined.”

“Circular reasoning, Morris. If you want to convince me, you’ll have to do better than that.”

“If you insist. Do you ever read science fiction?”

She shook her head. “Frankly, I don’t have time to read anything these days. My brother reads a little.”

“Did you ever hear of a writer named Robert Heinlein?”

“Everyone’s heard of Heinlein,” she replied. “Died a couple of years ago, didn’t he?”

Morris nodded. “In my imagination, he did. At the moment, of course, he’s at the height of his powers and soaking up entirely too much money the rest of us could use. His *Double Star* in *Astounding* last spring blew me away ... as you people say in my future idiom. If his new *Door Into Summer* serial is as good, I’m going to be depressed for months.”

“Sorry, I’m not familiar with those stories. What about Heinlein?”

“He has a technique he uses, one the rest of us wish

we'd invented. He convinces readers that a story is set in the future by peppering it with outlandish newspaper headlines."

"So?"

"Tell me, Paula. Can you even think of a headline that is more bizarre than the ones you see daily in the newspapers of your world?"

"Not a fair test, since I'm not an aficionado of sci-fi."

"Ess eff."

"Huh?"

"We call it 'SF,' like the city of San Francisco. 'Sci-fi' is a term I imagine people who don't know anything about the field will be using in another forty years."

"Look, I like to play games as well as the next person, but games have to have rules. So far you've told me things that can't be checked. Surely there is some way to prove that this world I'm living in is fictitious."

"Just look around you," he replied. "Open your eyes and see! Can you honestly tell me that the modern world is logical?"

"Life's not logical."

"Of course it is. *Real* life is eminently logical. This life isn't, because I dreamed it all up."

She sighed in exasperation and mentally kicked herself for trying to find reason in the ravings of a drunk. Still, she had to admit that the man was entertaining.

"We're not getting anywhere."

"All right. What about astrology?" Morris asked.

"What about it?"

"In the real world of 1956, only nuts believe in astrology. In your world of 1996, it has become respectable. Christ, you can call up on a telephone and talk to an astrologer for five dollars a minute."

"I read somewhere that the rise of astrology is a

measure of people's alienation with their lives," Paula replied. "People don't understand the world around them, so they put their trust in something greater than themselves."

"Rubbish. Astrology is my own 'weird newspaper headline' technique. It's my way of convincing the reader that the story is really taking place in the future." He looked into his beer and then up at her. There was a silly grin on his face. "I do like my invention of the 900 telephone number, though. It lends verisimilitude to the plot. Which reminds me, what about the phone company?"

"What about it?"

"What more proof do you need that I imagined this world? In your world I've broken the phone company's monopoly and split it into a dozen little companies. In the real-world, that will never happen."

"There are good reasons why Ma Bell broke up."

"You're damned right there are," Morris replied with a flash of anger. "Those snotty bastards overcharged me on my last telephone bill. I'll teach them to mess with Morris Cramer."

"Anything else?" she asked.

"Everything else?" he mocked. "Do you own a computer?"

"Not personally. I'm on the road too much, although the boss has been talking about getting us all notebooks to keep our sales records in. Why?"

"What do you think of my naming convention? Microprocessor, coprocessor, ROM, RAM, 8088, 80286, 80386, WYSIWYG? Doesn't it just sound like there's an entire industry building cheap little computers that cost just a few thousand bucks each?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"It's silly! Everyone knows that IBM sells computers

for millions of dollars a pop. You don't really think you could squeeze one of those monsters down into a little box you can carry around under your arm, do you?"

"I wouldn't know about IBM's. The boss is looking at Apple portables."

"Aha!" Morris yelled, slamming his flat palm down on the table. Despite the shotgun-like sound, only a few people glanced in their direction.

"What?"

"Apple Computer! Do you really think a big corporation would come up with such a silly name? Not in a thousand years. It's called that because I have a whimsical nature. And what about nuclear power?"

"What about it?" Paula asked with resignation. Obviously, the nebbish was the sort who warmed to his topic once he started rolling.

"You people all hate nuclear power, don't you?"

"They haven't solved the waste problem yet."

"Damn right, they haven't! If they do, I don't have a story to tell."

"Nuclear's bad for the environment."

"What environment? That's another plot twist of mine. Here you have an ecosystem — cute name, huh? — that has been stable for four billion years and suddenly, the puny human race has upset the balance. And the icing on the cake is the ozone layer, which doesn't really exist, by the way. It has a hole in it due to pollution. Neat idea, isn't it?"

"The neatest. I suppose you have an answer for everything."

"Of course. I'd be a pretty poor creator of worlds if I didn't." He looked at her and frowned. "I can see that you still don't believe me."

She reached beneath the table to put her shoes back on,

then straightened up in preparation for standing. "I must say, Morris, that you have an active imagination. Of course, I guess that's an asset in your profession."

"Wait, don't go!"

"Sorry, but I must. I've got some early sales calls."

His look was suddenly pitiful. All of the arrogance was gone. "Look, I don't know why it is so important that you believe me, but it is. Stay for another couple of minutes and I'll think of some way to convince you."

She glanced at her Lady Timex. It was still a few minutes short of ten o'clock. "Very well. I'll give you five more minutes. Make it good."

"Ronald Reagan," he said with an air of finality.

"What about him?"

"He was president for eight years, damn it! Can you imagine anyone more unlikely to become president?"

Paula shrugged. "I didn't vote for him."

"Would you have expected the two biggest stars in Hollywood to be Danny DeVito and Arnold Schwarzenegger?"

She laughed. "You've got me there, Morris. I suppose that is your whimsical nature showing through again?"

He beamed, mistaking her jest for a breakthrough. "You see! Then there's the demise of the Soviet Union. Pure wish-fulfillment on my part. Look, I'm no fan of Joe McCarthy, but I also don't want the commies to win. So I swept them away in my dream world, even though they are on the verge of taking over the real one."

"It must be a good feeling being an author and able to rearrange the map to fit your own prejudices," Paula said.

"The greatest. That's why I have the Israelis acting like a bunch of brown shirts toward the Palestinians in the occupied territories. Only, I'm going to have to take that part out. My editor is Jewish, you know."

“No, I didn’t know.”

He sighed. The manic need for her approval seemed to have passed. He slouched in his chair like a man who had taken all the responsibilities of the world onto his shoulders. Of course, she reminded herself, that was precisely what his delusion commanded him to do.

“Look, I can’t say that it hasn’t been entertaining. I do have to be leaving now, however. May I give you some advice? A little unreality is probably a good thing in a science-fiction writer, but I think you’ve taken it too far. One of these days you’re going to launch off on one of these imaginary trips and not come back. Go see a doctor. He can help you.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Good. Now, if you will excuse me, Morris. She stood, retrieved her coat off the back of the chair, and hung it around her shoulders. She threaded her way through the tables which had magically become uncrowded while they’d been talking. At the corridor, she halted and glanced toward the far corner of the back room. The little man was slumped down in his seat, gazing at the few flecks of foam that remained in his glass. He looked even more like a nebbish than when she’d first come in.

“*Oh, well,*” she thought, “*we’ve all got our problems.*”

She turned and made her way to the side door through which she had entered the bar. Just inside, she paused to fish for the Hertz keys in her purse. As she did so the door swung open and something gray with tentacles waddled in. She stood respectfully aside, then made it outside before the hydraulic mechanism closed the door.

The night was lit by the green neon shamrock over the door and two feeble street lamps. The skyscrapers at the city center showed above the low buildings around her. Halfway to her car, she halted in midstride.

“Funny, I don’t remember them announcing that they’d discovered intelligent life on Mars.” After a moment, she shrugged. *“Oh, well, maybe I missed the news that day.”*

Five minutes later she was seat belted into her car, making her way back to her hotel. Tomorrow she would try to peddle that obsolete face cream to the Jovian Embassy over on the Thoroughfare of the Planets. The boss thought the beetles might use the stuff to polish their shells. She had her doubts.

The End