

Out Of The Blue

I sit up with a start. I feel groggy in that way you only get when you've dozed off in the midday sun. I notice the empty martini glass next to me. "Well that will hardly have helped," I mutter to myself. I wonder how long I've been lying here. The combination of sleep and alcohol has totally messed with my sense of time. Not that it matters, I'm on holiday right? Who cares how long I spend lazing on the beach, that's what I come here for.

The beach is even more deserted than usual. If I look to the left I can just about make out a family in the distance, quite possibly having a picnic. I can almost smell the homemade lemonade, just like Mother used to make. And the Battenberg cake! That was my favourite. Once she brought a lemon drizzle cake instead, which she described as "a nice change", but to me just tasted of inferiority and disappointment. But the lemonade... wow, it's been a long time since I've thought about Mother and those family picnics. I wonder if she'd be ashamed to see how I spend my holidays now, knocking back martinis on my own. I guess there's still a beach at least.

I look out at the sea. The rise and fall of the waves is hypnotic and so intrinsically beautiful that I could never get tired of watching it. The water looks especially purple today and the dolphins seem to be sparkling like glitterballs in the sun's rays. This is paradise, no question. People may have often mocked me for coming here as often as I have, but it's been my refuge and my saviour on so many occasions. "Hey Mike, where are you going on your holiday this year? Like I have to ask! You do know there are other holiday destinations, right? Why not go on a city break? Take in a bit

of culture! There's more to life than just lounging on a beach you know."

Condescending pricks. Not that I really care what they think. Not anymore.

Thoughts of work are forbidden here. The city becomes some mythical place where everyone's priorities are upside down. It's almost comical. To be calm and relaxed is laziness. If you're not having a coronary over the monthly expenditure on printer cartridges, then you're clearly not a fully-functioning member of society. I chuckle to myself, then wait for the flush of intense fear that comes from the realisation that this vacation will end and I'll have to return to living in that backwards world. The fear doesn't come. How many martinis have I had? Clearly just the right amount!

A butterfly happily perches itself on my knee. The pattern on its wings is like one of those Rorschach tests. If a psychologist showed me this one, I'd have to say it reminds me of my best friend from primary school. It's got his eyes and sense of mischief. Ah, those were the days: riding bikes up to the next village and feeling like we were explorers; playing marbles until our fingers hurt (though mostly because we'd start throwing them at each other); that time we found a porno mag down the disused railway line and felt like it was a portal into another world (albeit a very naked and confusing world). Ah...

I close my eyes for a second, letting the memories swim around my consciousness. When I open them there's a waiter there. He hands me another martini. The olive in it looks like Helena, with its shock of red pimento hair. I've tried not to think about her over the past 10 years, though it seems fitting that her head's skewered by a cocktail stick, as that's basically what she did to my heart. I feel no animosity towards her

now though. I can finally look back with some pleasure at all the good times we had, before things went sour; before she muttered the immortal words “I can’t be with someone who’s so scared of being happy”. She was the love of my life, no question. If I had some kind of life conference, that’s what her name badge would say. I smile at this ridiculous notion. I sincerely hope the afterlife *isn’t* like a work conference. Unless I’m destined for hell I suppose. I have a vision of myself falling to the floor, clutching at my chest with one hand; the other hand holding the printer cartridge expenditure. That’s probably how I’ll go, sad as it is to admit.

Suddenly I’m pondering the afterlife. As an atheist, this seems a strange thing for me to be doing. Does the notion of an afterlife contradict my beliefs? I guess it depends on how you define an afterlife. Hellfire and angels with harps is ludicrous bullshit, plus once you’re dead, you’re dead! Once the synapses in your brain stop firing... wait... Oh my mythical-God, I’ve got it! It makes sense and it’s perfect and I’m a fucking genius! Right, right, ok, so, life after death is bollocks, any scientist will tell you that, though they might use a more scientific term for ‘bollocks’ - maybe ‘testiculus’, they like their Latin. Anyway, yes, death is death. *But*, death isn’t instant, right? There’s a period between you losing consciousness and your brain actually ceasing to function. I don’t know how long that period is, I’d imagine it varies from person to person, but that doesn’t really matter. If you’re unconscious, your experience of time won’t be the same as it is when you’re conscious, it’ll be like when you’re dreaming, where you can dose off for 30 seconds and feel like you’ve experienced a whole week’s worth of adventure. *There’s* a fucking afterlife! One final dream that could feel like an eternity, but take place within the space of 5 seconds. I’ve got it! This is the greatest moment of my life! It all makes sense, it seems so

clear to me. I need to write this down... I scabble around in my bag and pull out a notepad and pen. I write 'the afterlife is a dream-state'. That's enough to remind me of my thinking.

I take a celebratory swig of my martini and let my mind run wild with all the implications of this epiphany. So you get to have this one final dream, but what would you dream about? Would it be just like any other dream? Or would some part of your subconscious be aware that you're dead and therefore your dream would be affected by this? I reckon that makes sense. So surely religious people would use it to vindicate themselves, even though they're actually wrong. If you've spent your whole life believing in heaven, then when your brain knows it's dying, it's going to show you whatever you expect to see; angels with harps an' all. Unless it rebels against you. Ha ha ha, what if you'd spent your whole life going to church, repenting your sins, desperately trying to live by the bible, then in your 'afterlife' you have a nightmare where you're burning for all eternity! I laugh so hard at this idea that I knock my glass over – the alcohol quickly consumed by the thirsty sand. Usually I'd curse at such a waste, but I'm so deliriously happy. The mundanity of my life and all the mistakes I've made seem so insignificant and fleeting. I'm strangely excited by the thought of my own death. But how can I ensure I get a good 'afterlife' and that my brain doesn't rebel and send me to an eternal loop of secondary school PE lessons? I guess I can't. I'll just have to hope my brain's kind to me and pictures something like this. This is a good day. I'd happily have this day last forever.

I wonder if you could control your afterlife dream. I've read about people who can control their dreams, but I've never had much luck with it. Lucid dreaming, that's

what it's called. I know the first stage is to work out that it's a dream, which involves noticing certain signs: things like light switches that don't behave as they should, or text that changes every time you look at it. I've managed to do that a few times, but then I get so excited I just wake up. Maybe it'll be different when it's my last dream though – it's not like you can wake up from that. Maybe I'll finally get to do all the things I've always wanted, like becoming an artist, or swimming the channel, or winning back Helena with some grand romantic gesture. Or, hell, just telling my boss to go fuck himself. I'd happily end things like that.

I pick up my newly-full martini glass (the waiters seem even quicker here than usual) and swirl the contents round. Wait, what the hell am I doing? Looking forward to my own death so I can finally do the things I want to? How messed up have I become? This is ridiculous. I hate my life. Hate it. My job's meaningless and unnecessarily stressful; my colleagues are all self-righteous assholes; I've been single and lonely for 10 years as I've been scared of getting hurt again; I've been scared of pursuing any dreams I've ever had, just in case I fail, or in case they 'make me happy', as Helena perceived it; I'm scared of practically everything! And the only times I'm ever even vaguely happy is when I come here. And that's not really happiness; it's just a brief respite from the misery. But not anymore. This is it. This marks a new chapter in the life of Michael Wilford. I can quit my job, pursue my dreams and find true love again. Yes!

I pick the Helena olive out of my glass and kiss her. Wow, this is it. I'm really going to do this. But where to start? I should write stuff down - thoughts and ideas - start making a plan... I grab my notepad; the one that says 'the afterlife is a dream-state'.

Except it doesn't say that... the words are blurred and moving around... I can't read them. That must mean... am I dreaming? When did I fall asleep?

I have a vision of myself falling to the floor, clutching at my chest with one hand; the other hand holding the printer cartridge expenditure.

Shit.