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THE DREAM EXCHANGE

Oliver's tired and yawning dad had read to him at bedtime Eduardo Galeano's *The Land of Dreams*. Oliver was also tired, but he never wanted to go to sleep. Now that he had a little sister who mum had to sing lullabies to, in the evening he became as lively as a bat. Dad had just read to him that at the dream fair singing salads and shining chilies flew out from a witch's hat, and dreamers exchanged dreams. Oliver was excited by the idea:

"Dad, can you swap bad dreams for good ones there?"

"Yes," said dad with a nod, "you can always find people who'd like to dream about monsters. They'd happily give you their dreams about flowers and nice mothers."

"What about evolution?" asked Oliver.

"Of course," dad laughed. "There are so many dreams about evolution that people are happy to swap them."

"Where is the Land of Dreams?" asked Oliver.

For a moment, dad looked puzzled. He looked through the window of the boy's room, from where you could see the castle and a large illuminated sign on a block of offices. Oliver sometimes mistook the sign for the moon and had once asked dad if the two could be swapped round. Dad couldn't remember what he'd said because at that moment he was busy with geography.

"Hm," said dad, "the Land of Dreams is probably in South America. The writer Eduardo Galeano is from Uruguay."

"Then I'll go there," said Oliver decisively. "Today!"

"Alright," said dad, lost in thought. "But you must take care."

Oliver first made a flying fish that could use its scales to easily break the sound barrier. The turbine engine was controlled via a small computer. The fish, called Big Popper, was very comfortable. Above the padded seats there was an open umbrella with red spots that birds and air submarines, despite Big Popper's extreme speed, could see from a distance and so easily avoid the scaled flying machine. Then he put on gloves, took his wizard's key from the freezer and ran up to the loft. The old locked door didn't interest him. With his ice key he touched the tiny stain on the wall, half a metre from the floor and about the same from the door frame. After a moment the key slipped into the invisible keyhole, a hatch appeared in the wall, Oliver gave it a slight push and crawled through.

In the room, twisted like a snail's shell, there lived a scholar who had filled it with telescopes and microscopes, models of space, collections of cheeses, beetles, pipes, penknives and rubber stamps. His name was Darwin and he was an exceptionally clever dog. Darwin was never afraid of anyone and had a very refined, almost English sense of humour. This time he was a bit glum, as if he'd got up on the wrong side of bed.

"Come on, Darwin," called Oliver, "I'm in a hurry to get to Uruguay. You're going to help me find the dream exchange."

"Can you give me one good reason why I should go with you?" yapped the poodle.

"Galapagos hot dogs," replied the boy.

"Vamos!" shouted Darwin, with bright eyes. He needed no more convincing.

They were above the Azores in a flash. Darwin said that the Azores were like bores: you had to fly over them like a rocket and before anyone put anything in your pocket, head south.

The journey was a long one and Darwin never shut up. Oliver's head was buzzing with explanations about the sidetracks and dead ends of evolution, worms that became vertebrates, hamsters that developed into sloths and wild garlic that became apple sauce.

"Did we people really develop from apes?" asked Oliver, to change the subject.

“Stupid human bragging,” said Darwin angrily, banging his paw down on Big Popper. They immediately found themselves in an air pocket. “Two thousand million years ago, in the Proterozoic, dogs developed so much that they could fluently speak a hundred and twelve languages. They could make lace and dance salsa. Because after one thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine point ninety-nine years it became clear they would develop into man, they withdrew and became very sparing with words.”

“Apart from you,” said Oliver pointedly. “So many words and you still haven’t answered the question.”

Darwin was silent for a while, staring with an offended expression at the ocean below. “Okay, if you really want to know: nonsense! People didn’t develop from apes. It’s clear to everyone that apes developed from people!”

This conversation, which led nowhere, brought them above the capital of Uruguay, Montevideo. When Oliver wondered who to ask about the way to the Land of Dreams, Darwin opened his cute mouth. “The best thing to do is speak to the President,” he said.

“Are you friends?” asked Oliver.

“Just acquaintances,” replied Darwin. “When I discovered that Uruguayan jellyfish are more advanced than Argentinian ones, I was invited to a reception and given a national award. I got a golden sausage, decorated with swordfish.”

He sat at the computer and a minute later they landed at a small lake in the middle of a forest. The President was standing by a hammock. With one hand he was rocking his housekeeper Madreus and with the other fanning her. His bodyguards stood at a respectful distance, struggling to stay awake.

Even before the travellers reached the President, sleep won; the gorillas snored like lions.

“Oh!” exclaimed the President. “Have you come to disturb me while I rescue the country from a serious crisis? I can’t help you. And even if I could, I wouldn’t want to! I’m the fanatical leader of a footballing superpower!”

“That’s not very kind or hospitable, sweetheart!” said his housekeeper from the hammock. She was a black woman, so well fed she had trouble opening her eyes. “You can be fanatical with footballers, but not rude to children and dogs.”

“Not to mention flying fish,” added Big Popper sourly.

“I like children and dogs,” breathed Madredeus. “I’ll tell you how you can get to the Land of Dreams.” With surprising agility she fell out of the hammock.

“Do you see what you’ve done to my personal advisor for steaks and snake venom?” yelled the President. This was his last statement that day, because in helping up his housekeeper she rolled on top of him.

“There,” pointed Madredeus with a tired hand. “Go inside our hut. Tread carefully, only on the rotting planks. When they give way, you’ll fall into the Land of Dreams.”

They bravely went inside the hut, the floor creaking alarmingly.

“I have an idea,” Oliver said to Darwin. “Since it’s not clear how far we’re going to fall, it would be best to get into the airfish.”

“Clever boy,” said Big Popgun proudly. “I know how to land wonderfully.”

When the fish swam to the middle of the room, which wasn’t only a reception but also bathroom, billiard room, library, observatory and solarium, there was a CRACK and they began to fall.

They didn’t fall far, the Land of Dreams was in the cellar, but more spacious than the Ljubljana Marshes. They found themselves at a fair, in a colourful pleasure ground, where strange dreamers and dreamy oddballs were selling dream products. They included hippies who knew how to dream with their eyes open, railway workers who blew steam from their ears when they dreamed, poets with dreamy pens, beauty queens who saw chocolate cakes in their dreams and lifeguards who in their dreams were transformed into ostriches and buried their head in the sand. There were even some politicians who lied with open eyes as they sold their bla bla bla – and they say that dreams never lie!

The visitors were enthusiastic about the heaps of glowing, fluttering and rustling dreams. They saw suns out of whipped cream covered with cherry syrup; they saw breathing cubes in which twittered friendly rappers; but there were even more monsters – horrors with protruding teeth and eyes poked out, Supermen that had been attacked by deadly dandruff, not to mention loads of screeching umbrellas. There were also a lot of wasted words, gently lamenting and singing sad folk songs. The range on offer was exceptional and so choosing was that much harder. The sellers boastfully yelled out their wares; some of them were so pushy that they hung dreams around the visitors' necks or shoved them under their t-shirts.

It was good that Oliver quickly managed to get rid of a dream in which appeared a poisonous green Gila monster, which shot you with looks and choked you with bad breath. The dream with the Gila monster was bought by the Uruguayan defence minister because he feared a military coup. In exchange, he gave Oliver a not very inspiring dream about military training. In it, orders kept being repeated: "Lie down, get up, stand up straight, crawl in the mud, don't wait!" Oliver didn't want this dream, but the minister didn't have a better one.

They spent a long time looking for a likeable dream they could swap for the one about military training. They had immense luck that a noble wild boar was selling dreams caught in a magical glass ball and wanted to exchange it for the defence minister's dream.

"That's just the kind of dream I need," she explained to Oliver. "My spoilt little lad is disobedient and doesn't want to roll in the mud at all."

The magic ball contained very gentle dreams, pig dreams, impish dreams with shaved heads, travel dreams of the warm south and school dreams that began: "Whoever is studying, leave dreaming behind."

You can imagine that Oliver wasn't too keen on this strange dream mixture, but the wild boar quickly consoled him.

"The magic ball is precious," she said to Oliver, "because you can choose the dreams you want. If you are awoken by a nightmare you just shake the ball so

that the dreams inside it dance like snowflakes and then you choose with a look the one that you prefer. It all depends on you and you are never bored.”

That’s exactly what Oliver was looking for!

The journey home was dream-like because the whole time Oliver was shaking the magic ball and choosing dizzyingly interesting dreams. Of course, he shared them with Darwin, passing on to him a dream about the developmental forms of the salamander, about the adaptation of giant squid in deep oceans and about shellfish that did not want to be flat. For when leaving Uruguay, Darwin had complained that they had forgotten about Galapagos hot dogs and that he couldn’t eat promises.

When Oliver rang the bell at home, his mum burst out crying from happiness and pride that they had such a brave son, little sister Lili smothered him with kisses, while dad just smirked and agreed that Darwin could stay with them (until gripped once more by the passion for new explorations). The flying fish was lent, with her agreement, to the Imagination Institute at the Academy of Arts and Sciences, on condition that Big Popper visited them at least twice a week and slept in the washing machine at the weekends.

After a few nights, thanks to the magic ball, Oliver, his parents and little sister were a lot more rested; the bags beneath their eyes disappeared and they forgot about yawning.

One evening, their arms round each other, they were staring into the magic ball. Suddenly, Darwin burst into the room. “Oliver,” he said in excitement, “can you come with me for a moment?”

In Darwin’s twisted room they sat down breathlessly at the computer.

“Look at this message” gasped the learned dog. “I caught it with the most up-to-date search engine for mysterious words.”

Oliver had no problems reading, but what was written on the screen confused him. It said:

IA WILLA STARTA DESATROYA EARTHA. IA AMA ONA TAVAEUNIA
XEROX

“Can you help me?” he asked Darwin.

“You know I’m the best in the world at deciphering secret writing. This creature, who has evidently come from outer space, is going to start destroying the Earth. It is on the island of Taveuni, far away in the Pacific Ocean. Very far.”

They looked at each other.

“Vamos!” cried Oliver. “There’s not a moment to lose!”

Dad, mum and little sister, who were waiting for Oliver, noticed that the snowflakes in the magic ball were suddenly dancing wildly.