

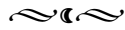
Waking Dream



RHIANNON LASSITER

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

P R O E M



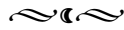
There are three books lying on the polished wooden desk. Each of them tells a story. Professor Greenwood, whose desk this is, has reason to believe it is the same story. But the titles of the books would appear to contradict him.

The first book has a blue cover and the pages are slightly rough to the touch; the type of book sold by art shops to amateur sketchers. Oblivious to this fact, the owner has filled the pages with neat regular lines of script in uncompromising blue rollerball. Inside the front cover the same hand has printed in blockish capitals: THE DREAM JOURNAL OF BETHANY GREENWOOD.

The second book is bound in black leather and the pages are smooth and creamy. The writer has appropriately selected a thick-nibbed fountain pen and in black spikes and swirls the words march across the pages. The book's title is stencilled in silver on the cover above a delicate red flower: *A Book of Lies*.

The third book is handmade. Hard tanned leather has been carefully sewn around pages of a thin brownish paper. But although the title has been burned on to the cover the same words are written again inside with a plain black biro in a careless scrawl: *Rivalaun's Secrets*.

CHAPTER ONE



*Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep –
He hath awakened from the dream of life –
'Tis we, who lost in stormy visions, keep
With phantoms an unprofitable strife.*

—Percy Bysshe Shelley

The Book of Dreams

Bethany's Book

I will begin by describing the painting my father left me in his will. I hadn't expected to inherit anything, although if I had thought about it I'd have realized that there would be money. But my mother refused even to speculate as she hustled me out of the car and up the steps of the solicitor's office. I stumbled on the second step and heard my mother's gust of irritation as she helped haul me up again. Looking glumly down at my green school uniform, worn because my mother refused to allow me to put on black for mourning, I saw a streak of blood sliding gleefully down one pale knobby leg.

'For crying out loud, Bethany,' my mother snapped in a fierce whisper. 'You could at least try to walk properly.' Then she sailed into the solicitor's office ahead of me and I heard her greeting someone in the bright social voice she reserves for clients and relatives. I trailed after her and stopped inside the doorway when I saw my cousin Poppy waiting for us.

She was standing in the hallway with her parents and even in the numb, dazed state I'd been living in since my father's death I felt the same instinctive gush of loathing I always have in Poppy's presence. Most unfairly, I thought bitterly, she was looking artistically pale in an expensive inky black dress and a black ribbon that tied back her red hair. I regarded that ribbon with disgust. It was a typical Poppy touch, a staged quality that I instinctively distrusted.

I stood in the doorway, wondering if my cousin had equipped herself with a black lace handkerchief as well, while my mother accepted my aunt and uncle's condolences with brisk politeness. Ten years after the divorce she could hardly be expected to behave any differently, but I annoyed myself by wishing she had pretended to care a little more. My uncle, on the other hand, was genuinely grieving. While my aunt Emily spoke in hushed tones to my mother and briefly pressed my hand sympathetically, Uncle Sylvester stared straight ahead and spoke in monosyllables until the solicitor arrived and ushered us into a room filled with straight-backed chairs.

The reading of the will didn't last long. My uncle was officially appointed a trustee of my father's estate in a complicated legalese that no one attempted to follow. The lawyer paused in the middle of a convoluted clause to ask if my other uncle was expected and my aunt Emily shook her head.

'Daniel is travelling,' she explained with a touch of embarrassment. 'And we haven't been able to contact him.'

'Then we'll move on to individual legacies,' the

lawyer informed us, and turned to a thicker sheaf of papers on a nearby table.

My mother acquired a drawing my father had made of her on their honeymoon, a smiling girl in an Italian garden, and showed little reaction to the gesture. My cousin Poppy looked sorrowful over a small sketch of the flower she's named for: probably wondering how much it would fetch at Sotheby's.

By then I had realized I was due for some kind of bequest and hoped that it wouldn't be in the same vein as the others. I'm embarrassed by paintings of me, unlike Poppy, who glories in them and has her own portrait displayed prominently in her room at school: a serious eleven-year-old crowned with Titian hair.

It was with dread that I watched the lawyer produce another picture frame when he reached my name. But the painting he gave me was a landscape. I took it automatically, puzzled by the choice. It wasn't one of my father's better efforts. The castle in the foreground looked incomplete and the purple mountains behind too artistic to be real. A river flowed sluggishly across the painting but nowhere did it catch the light because the sky above was an unrelieved slate grey. My mother made a slight sound of disapproval and asked if it would need much insurance. I looked up as the solicitor confessed he doubted it, and caught a look passing between my aunt and uncle that I could only interpret as disapproval – although whether that was of my mother or the painting I couldn't tell. Poppy, on the other hand, seemed fascinated by the gift and craned her head to study it intently.

'It's not like Uncle Felix's other paintings,' she said,

stating the obvious in the little-girl voice she puts on when she has an audience. 'More like he was trying to draw a memory or a dream.'

I jerked my painting away jealously and hugged it to my chest, ignoring Poppy's hurt expression. No one said anything for a moment. Then my aunt Emily, the family peacemaker, stepped into the breach.

'If that's the last, we should be leaving,' she said, rising to her feet. 'Sylvester, are you ready to go?'

My uncle staggered upright. Although he wasn't much older than my father, he walked with a limp and used a silver-knobbed cane to support himself. Poppy went quickly and unnecessarily to help him stand and Aunt Emily turned to my mother.

'I'll telephone you, Cecily,' she said quietly. 'About that other matter . . .' She and my mother both glanced at me at that point and I hugged my painting tighter, deliberately ignoring them. I was used to my mother conspiring with other people about me: the problem child. My mother has spent most of my life trying to tidy me away, and I didn't doubt that another plot, like the one that had deposited me at boarding school when she remarried, was under way to rid me of my awkward and socially inconvenient grief.

Surprisingly, my mother held off for a few weeks, leaving me to sit in the apricot-and-cream bedroom she had decorated for me and stare at my painting. I should have realized what was preoccupying her. My father had finally given up the battle against his cancer a month before the long summer holidays – necessitating my early removal from school. In some ways this

was not inconvenient since I only missed the end-of-year exams and I invariably did well at them.

However, what my father had failed to consider when he died was that my mother had a very definite schedule for the summer holidays. She and my stepfather celebrated my release from boarding school by packing me off to my father for a month while they went on their annual cruise around the Adriatic with a combination of friends and clients. It would be out of character for my mother to allow her ex-husband's demise to change plans made months in advance. My stepfather, although unfailingly polite to me, doubtless felt that London in the height of summer was an insupportable option. But, in deference to my continued grief, they waited until the evening of the traditional pre-cruise dinner to inform me that they were going ahead with the holiday as planned and I would be spending the summer holidays in Camomile House.

I received this information with a marked lack of enthusiasm. Camomile House meant my uncle's family and a Cornish summer of wondering when the rain would stop. At my glum expression my mother finally lost her temper.

'Honestly, Bethany, you might show a little more enthusiasm,' she snapped, whisking the debris from a recent bout of comfort eating into my apricot-coloured waste-paper basket. 'These last few weeks have been hard on everyone, not just you, and it wasn't as if you were unaware that Felix was ill. He told me you'd spoken about it together and you understood . . .' She broke off as my eyes filled with tears.

My father and I had spoken about his illness, and his last letters included a series of little line drawings: a small black-clad Bethany weeping at the graveside followed by a succession of little Bethanys resolutely enjoying themselves hang-gliding, mountain climbing and white-water rafting. But these private images didn't fit with the successful social funeral orchestrated by my father's admirers. The photos in the national press showed me in the background dressed, as usual, in my school uniform. Fortunately Poppy, who would otherwise have eclipsed me with staged Ophelia-esque misery, was still at school sitting the exams I'd avoided.

'At the least you could appreciate your aunt's kindness in offering to look after you,' my mother pointed out, discounting my uncle Sylvester's influence as everyone invariably did. 'And Poppy will be company for you. You could share her room.' I blanched at the thought, the horrific possibility jolting me.

'Poppy's a poisonous witch!' I informed my mother. 'I'd sooner share a room with a scorpion.'

For a second she fixed me with the frozen look that usually means trouble then, unexpectedly, she laughed.

'I admit she does lay it on a bit thick sometimes,' she agreed and sat down on my desk chair. 'Did you really want to wear black, Beth? I thought Poppy looked like an extra from *Macbeth*.'

'Poppy never looks like an extra,' I said in a snuffly voice, disarmed by her sudden sympathy. 'And I don't want to go and stay with her.'

'And I don't really feel like going away,' my mother said, with an edge in her voice. 'But David would be

disappointed if I cancelled now. So we're both going to have to live with it, OK?

'OK,' I replied, accepting the inevitable, and she smiled approvingly.

'Don't worry about Poppy,' she said reassuringly. 'She's probably as scared of you as you are of her.'

I rolled my eyes.

'Mother, that's wasps,' I pointed out.