

## DREAM LIKE LIFE

As I walk slowly through the park, it is totally dark with the exception of a few lights peaking through the trees from the apartments off Central Park West. Most lights are out at this time of night, but I guess it's not night anymore. It is 2:00 am, Saturday morning. When I first came to the city, this place terrified me at night. Now I am comfortable here. The weather is unusually warm for April. My jacket is over my shoulder and my shirt is hanging half out of my pants. There is a red stain on my shirt from Shelly spilling wine earlier. She is very attractive and pleasant; all the customers love her. It is enough to compensate for her lack of coordination and make her one of my favorite employees.

How did I get here? It all seems so surreal now. I, Marcus from Springfield Vermont, am here in the city a successful restaurant owner. I am living my dream, but it is now all too real. The long hours have taken a toll on my social life, which is practically non-existent. I spend my days preparing delectable meals for the most important people in New York. I make their night out one to remember. The meals that my chefs make send taste buds into ecstasy. My wine list longer than anyone in the east and I have three full time violinists who will play anything your heart desires. The atmosphere is the best in town, formal yet not uptight. I always make sure that waitresses are friendly and attractive enough to keep all of the guys coming back time and time again.

When was the last night I went out? For that matter, when was the last night I didn't work? My last day off was the day after New Years and all I did was sleep to recover from the crazy holiday.

I remember when things were much simpler...back before I opened the restaurant. I was working under a chef in the East Village. His name was Miles. He was a pleasant man in his mid-fifties. His hair was white which matched his mustache and the stubble on his face. During the years I worked with him we became very close. It was a great time. I could focus solely on enjoying life and there was almost no stress. The owner was a large man who was more interested in chasing the waitresses than he was in running his restaurant. I guess this is probably the main reason for its demise. We had a good run there and I think I may have been at my happiest.

I was dating Anne. She was a grad student at NYU. We had an apartment above the restaurant where I worked. It was almost big enough for the two of us. We shared a twin bed and a small dresser. If we ever complained about it we did it in jest. Neither of us had grown up in the city so we were like kids in a candy shop. Every night we would visit a different bar, club or gallery. When we both had time off we would go to the M.E.T. We would sit for hours at a single exhibit, half looking at the paintings and half looking at the wide variety of people that would wonder through rambling on about the paintings. Anne dreamed of being a professor of art history. She brought me up to speed on all the artists and their lives, which for the most part were far more intriguing than their art.

We always had time to go out with our friends or spend an entire day lying out in the park. Our apartment was decorated with paintings and sketches she had collected. That apartment was the only place I have lived in the city that I would actually call home. The apartment I have now is much nicer. There are no cockroaches and the plumbing doesn't leak, but there isn't so much as a cat to warm the furniture while I am gone. That apartment on Lexington Ave. had more warmth in the water stained ceiling than my sauna, expensive bedding and heaters combined.

Anne and I lived in that apartment for four years. Her last two years of school and two years after. When she graduated she took a job as assistant curator for the MET. Around the same time my job with Miles was coming to an end due to the bankruptcy of our dear restaurant. It was at this time that I decided to start my own restaurant. It took all the savings I had, the help of the bank, several investors and my parents to get it off the ground, but it happened and its opening was a bigger success than I could have ever hoped for. The critics gave it rave reviews and all of the little discrepancies that I had been so upset about seemed to go unnoticed. With the restaurant came ninety-hour weeks and all the stresses that come with running a business. As I look back on it now, I unknowingly traded the restaurant for Anne. She stuck it out with my absence for two years before she broke it off and moved out. At the time I was so busy that I barely noticed her absence. After a while the empty bed and bare walls started to bother me, so I moved to a new apartment where I wouldn't wake up every morning expecting to smell coffee brewing or the sound of her newspaper rustling from the kitchen. It wasn't easy at the new apartment and the memories of her did not fade as I had hoped. I missed

her warm smile and the way she would hug me so tight. By the next year I decided I would do anything to get her back, even if it meant selling the restaurant. It was too late. She had started a new relationship and was reluctant to even talk with me. That was the great heartbreak of my life and even now, almost 20 years later, I am not totally over it.

Walking out of central park, I pause as I realized that there was no one at the apartment expecting me. Through the corner of my eye I see a park bench, it looked inviting, so I sat down even though I was less than a block from my apartment. I started thinking of how the dreams of my youth had been fulfilled, but now I realized that my youth was a dream, filled with love and happiness. With the foolishness of youth I worked hard, hard enough to ruin my dream-like life and replace it with what seemed like a dream, but in actuality was just reality. What I would give to be back in that little apartment on Lexington, waking up just before Anne just to watch her dream the last of her dreams.