

The Wow

by Austin Siegemund-Broka

Gray Thompson awoke that night from troubled dreams. It was 2:54 a.m., as he gathered from the iridescent blue numbers of the nightstand clock, and there was a figure seated at the foot of the bed.

Gray did not start, he did not cry out, he did not attempt to flee. He did not feel much surprise at all, to be perfectly honest. The apparition seemed to be a normal human person, a tall, moderately well-built man. Its garb was utterly nondescript: faded blue jeans falling over solid black Chuck Taylor Converse shoes, and a thick black sweatshirt. The figure's face was obscured, however, by the sweatshirt's large hood—abnormally long and delicate, the hood dropped entirely around the face and masked it in shadow.

The voice was even and calm, and almost androgynous. "Do you like baseball, Gray?" it asked in the android tone, and the figure produced a ball from somewhere in its sleeve. It rolled and tossed the little orb from hand to hand a few times, still looking straight forward.

Gray was still slightly mystified. "Not particularly," he answered, slowly and without much emotion. The hands juggled the ball once more, rolling it from one to the other and then seemingly disappearing it within a sleeve again.

"No, no, of course you don't." The apparition's voice was methodical, and Gray thought he even detected a note of sadness or resignation. But before he could ponder it further, the figure spoke again. "You don't like much at all, these days, do you, Gray?"

Gray scrutinized the figure sitting on his bed. It had touched a nerve, and Gray had just tipped from apathy to wariness.

"The world is going down the tubes," continued the figure, its hollow voice expressing no opinion at all. "Everything's as bad as it looks. They *are* out to get you. Any moment can ruin things. I know how you've been thinking, Gray: that this is a washed-up, misguided world, a world too consumed by hatred over the tiniest of differences to possibly achieve happiness. A world where the default impulse is to look out for oneself, and oneself only, regardless of how other alternatives may actually help us."

Gray still sat motionless, his wary apathy shifting into a quiet anger. This was precisely true, which is exactly why Gray was becoming indignant.

When the figure spoke again, its voice held a shot of emotion: however tiny, there was a dose of understanding and even pity in it. "It makes perfect sense,

really,” postulated the figure, “with murder, deceit, and betrayal running rampant across our headlines.” The figure paused for a second. “But that’s exactly why I’ve come.”

Others saw this too,” it continued. “You ask, what others? Who others? Who has been in this situation before? More figures than you would believe, Gray, have stood in the aching shoes you now occupy. Siddhartha Gautama, also known as Buddha, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vladimir Lenin, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., Mohandas Gandhi... I could go on. All of these felt exactly what you’re feeling, that hopelessness not only with one’s own situation but with that of humanity. And all of these experienced this particular encounter.”

Despite his annoyance, Gray had started to listen more closely now. It was preposterous, that which the hooded figure had just uttered, and yet the apparition exuded a sort of mystical quality that made its claims seem somewhat valid. And despite the irritation this brought Gray, the figure had ultimately summed up exactly what had been ricocheting around in his skull. He paused, and sure enough, the hooded apparition spoke again.

“It’s called the Wow,” the figure said slowly, and admittedly a bit anticlimactically.

“The Wow?” It was the first time Gray had spoken since the baseball comment, and his voice sounded out of place echoing around the room. The apparition was unfazed.

“The Wow,” it repeated. “It is a moment of supreme realization, of sudden revelation. It is comparable to lighting a chandelier in a previously dark room—not only are the physical and aesthetic features revealed, the stairways and doors are illuminated as well. It is an unveiling of the grand deity, and ultimately...of the path our journey must take. And upon you, Gray, I shall bestow this gift.”

There was a long pause. Gray waited, and waited. The apparition did nothing, simply sat at the foot of the head, its long hood tilted toward the ground. Time hung like a guillotine.

“Well, go ahead, then,” Gray said at last, his irritation having been converted to cautious confusion.

These seemed to be the words the apparition needed to hear. It stood up, and walked the couple steps until it was standing right over Gray. Its face was still pointed at the ground, and the features were entirely bathed in shadow. Gently, it took Gray’s right hand, and the world exploded into lights and colors.

Gray was shocked and blinded by the sudden optic overload, and it took his poor eyes several seconds to acclimate. What he saw astounded him. He seemed to be

floating, weightless and alone, amidst a genuine galactic starfield. He had air and was of a normal temperature, and yet he floated alone through space. His surroundings began to morph and flicker. The galaxy remained, but superimposed upon them were dancing patterns of life, an endless slideshow crafted from the stuff dreams are made of. There were sunflowers growing, there were buildings being constructed in New York and buildings being obliterated in New York, there were row after row of marchers, making their way in some eternal forgotten parade. It was all surreal to the point of acceptance.

And as if Gray wasn't preoccupied enough with this, his mystifying surroundings began to change again. The undulating patterns of dreams remained stitched across space, but through those endless depths and toward Gray now came a figure. It seemed to levitate through the gravity-less black, and as it came nearer to Gray he recognized it was in fact the hooded apparition he had spoken to only minutes ago.

The figure gently halted its trajectory in front of Gray, coming gracefully to a stop and hovering there slightly above Gray. It spoke now, but its voice was a deep, deep boom. It was almost as if the apparition had channeled some entirely new mystical source. "Gray Thompson," it echoed through space, "do you believe yourself ready to receive the penultimate blessing of knowledge and direction that is the Wow?"

Remembering the last awkward silence, Gray said with genuine feeling. "Yes."

"Your life has led up to this moment, and your life subsequently shall forever reflect it. Are you ready to meet your God?"

"Yes," said Gary simply.

And with that simple answer, the figure slowly lifted its arms to its billowy black hood. The fingers grasped the edges and with a simple flick, the hood was gone. Gary now stared at an exact copy of *himself*. It was he under the hood the entire time, he who had led himself to this revelation... and ultimately he who was to guide his own destined path.

Light flooded the sky again, totally blinding Gray. Instants later, the young man lay gently in his bed as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. Tonight, however, he smiled, as visions of the Wow carried him into kindly dreams.