

Sleep Stories: Daffodilly Dreams by Salena Godden,

introduced by Dr Erik Hoel

Introduction: [music swells] [whispered] Sleep Stories.

Salena Godden and Erik Hoel in a Sonderbug Production in association with Durham Book Festival and New Writing North, and with music by Jayne Dent. This is Sleep Stories.

Dr Erik Hoel: I'm Erik Hoel. I'm a professor at Tufts University in Boston. I'm a neuroscientist. I study dreams, among some other things. And I'm also a fiction writer and an essayist, as well.

'Daffodilly Dreams' by Salena Godden in a sense embodies the fundamental nature of dreams because it reflects very well on dream phenomenology. Phenomenology is the structure of conscious experience, and in the structure of dreams, categories are always shifting and changing. And that's probably a good hint at the fundamental function and nature of dreams - this very common category breaking aspect of it. Evolution invented fictions because it invented dreams, and dreams are explicitly things that never happen: they're biological versions of fictions. So for some reason, evolution basically programmed in an inner novelist, right, or an inner film director. So why would they do that? That seems very strange. But maybe if we can figure out the reason why we dream, we can then figure out the reason why humans love fiction so much, and the cognitive utility of fictions.

Everyone knows that dreams have certain properties, like, if they think about their own dreams. And yet it's often the case that these aren't counted as things

science needs to explain. It's actually interesting that, when you go to talk about some of the leading neuroscientific theories of dreams to people, all of whom dream or can report their dreams, most of the time the theories won't exactly line up or won't explain why they dream about what they dream about, or why dreaming experience has the structure that it does. For example, dreaming is very low resolution, like you don't see your cell phone in a dream. Why don't you see your cell phone in a dream? Probably because the text is too small. So the dream world doesn't have the resolution to sustain tiny text. And that's probably a very good hint as to what exactly dreams are for and what they're like.

They are probably a pretty expensive metabolic state that evolution has somehow selected for. Certainly we, at minimum, spend several hours a day dreaming. That seems very strange. I mean, during dreaming, you're immensely vulnerable to attack, right? A predator could sneak up on you and eat you. And not only that, this is shared throughout the mammalian kingdom, right? It's not like some animals dream and some don't. So far, we've got pretty good evidence of sleep and dreaming across mammals. And that hints that there should be some evolutionary function of dreaming. We certainly know that sleep in general is important for learning or for memory. Those have been connections that people have had for a long time, it's more difficult to pay attention and learn things, and sometimes you'll be learning something and then you'll kind of plateau on it, and then after a good night's sleep, you'll get even better at it. So we've known that there's this connection to learning. The question is, what's the actual specific connection, right? And here is where all these different neuroscientific theories come into play. And some draw on different metaphors. Like if you think about the brain as the computer, then the brain

needs to store the information. So maybe dreaming is somehow storing the information you experienced or learned during the day. But that seems very strange because, again, if we go back to the experience of dreaming, you generally don't just re-dream your day. That's actually quite rare. And most people will just say, "Yeah, no, I don't just dream my memories again." And in fact, if you do, it's generally actually a sign of PTSD. So that seems very unnatural.

I prefer the interpretation that dreamings are to prevent you from actually learning something too well; they're actually there to prevent memorisation, and they're there to give you something to learn that's very different from what you do day-to-day. So the truth is, is that most mammals have a pretty boring day-to-day, right? Like, everyone can attest to this. You wake up, you get the coffee, and so on. And you know, it's no real difference for a beaver, or somebody you know, he's gonna go out and chop wood, day in day out, and you can't turn off the learning of a mammalian brain. So it's like we're getting more and more sculpted toward day-to-day experiences.

But if your day-to-day experiences don't contain all the things that you need to know about in the world, which can be a very unpredictable and surprising place, then what you want to do is change that up. You want to have them be experiencing things that are very different from their day-to-day waking life. I think that the important aspect of them is that they're providing you with an experience that's very novel and very different from your day-to-day life. So, in a sense, the meaning of dreams is very much their disconnectedness from life, their weirdness, their dream-like aspects.

Salena Godden: 'Daffodilly Dreams', written and read by Selena Godden.

I feel as though he might knock on the door any minute, Sarah said under her breath, it's as though he is always near. She is kneeling and slopping out water from the bottom of the fridge, she is still in her coat, on her knees on the wet floor. Her shopping bags have been dumped by the kettle on the side, beside the sodden contents of the fridge: half a packet of crumpets, an unopened Christmas pudding, a half-pint of warm milk, a knob of ginger, some wrinkled potatoes and an open tin of baked beans, half-eaten and congealing.

Halfway through the job of cleaning her fridge, she gets up and dries her cold hands and puts on a record. He'd like this, she thinks, and then stops with a jolt: what am I thinking? She sighs and shakes her head. She takes her coat off and goes back to the task of wiping out her fridge. She starts humming; she gets a tingle of pleasure putting new food in the clean fridge. She has fresh spinach leaves and goats' cheese, cherry tomatoes, a punnet of strawberries, fresh dill, and a fish. It looks like the contents of a fridge of someone with a healthy balanced diet. If he were to come now, she thinks she would say, look at you all skin and bones, I bet you could use a good meal, come and sit here at the kitchen table and I will cook you something whilst you tell me all about your adventures, you rascal.

Sarah often talks to him this way and only in her mind.

She opens and closes the fridge door a few times absent-mindedly looking at her food and half singing along to the record. It's a scratchy Chet Baker LP. He sings, '...I guess I'll go through life, just catching crows and missing trains...'. The record reminds her of him, it sounds like him, she thinks, it sounds like the kind of way he'd say a thing without saying it. As she listens to the music she meanders off

into her thoughts, feelings, longings, words unsaid, his smile – whilst unwrapping a packet of daffodils. She rinses three vases and arranges the flowers on the windowsills and her shelves in her one-bed apartment and proudly places one vase in the centre of the small kitchen table.

There you are my lovely daft daffodilly, she says out loud, finally we can have a bit of spring.

Outside it is dusk and the buzz and thrum of the Manhattan traffic is constant. She isn't hungry even though she just got all that good food. She hasn't much appetite or the concentration to do anything practical like cooking or opening her mail; it's always just bills anyway. So she sits on the sofa and listens to the record for a while, eyeing her flowers, enjoying the anticipation, wondering how long the daffodils will take to open. They look like vases of spring onions – closed, tight buds.

She opens her library book. It's a collection of short stories from *The New Yorker* and she tries to pick up the thread of where she had got with a J.D. Salinger story on the bus earlier when she was surrounded by shopping bags and school kids, but her mind wanders to considering the business of flower farming. How the tight buds always open too fast, then the petals dry and wither in the central heating. She wonders what he would say about it. Maybe he would know about the conditions they grow flowers in, like the way they breed roses that don't smell like they should and the tulips from Holland that they grow under neon lights.

Ah there you are, what's the time? I must have dropped off – look I've got loads of food in the fridge. Come, take your coat off, put your guitar case down there. I don't mean to fuss, it's just I missed you, I adore having you here, and you could

use a bit of looking after, a bit of spoiling, we could all use a bit of spoiling from time to time.

He stands in the kitchen doorway, his mouth pouting, his eyes big and glassy, he is tall and shadowy in the hallway and wearing a soldier's uniform.

Come into the kitchen and let's sit together and have a nice cup of tea. How do you like it? MIF or TIF? Milk in first or tea in first, MIF or TIF? That's what my Scottish granny used to say ... that's funny, I miss her now I've said that ... You have your grandmother's eyes don't you? Yes how do you know that? I just guessed, I'll have KIF. What's KIF? Kiss in first, kiss me then. Kiss you? But I, I've got a lovely fresh mackerel in the fridge – Look! Urghh, its eyes are all full of ash. Maybe if I rinse it off it will be OK. Oh no! Look inside, the guts are bloody rotten and there's that smell of burnt rope and cigarettes and bent metal and broken glass. Oh dear, don't worry, I can pick the glass out. Oh the vegetables have rotted too. Oh no why are you leaving...?

I have to go now. I hate that smell of burnt ropes.

Come back, please come back, it's cold out there. It is as cold as fire, cold enough to tear the skin from your face, smash your head into pieces, freeze your eyes wide open, please come back! The stairs have collapsed and you will get trapped ... stay in the elevator ... stay with me ... the lift is carpeted on the ceiling and there are silk flowers.

Can I see your legs? Your legs are soft and smooth, I want to kiss your face and then I want to kiss your legs. You do? I love your legs. I think about your legs all the time! Oh! The lift is stuck, it's stopped between floors. He lifts her skirt up. He

kisses her mouth. I want to eat these. What, the daffodils? Yes, they are firm tight buds, just how I like them, let me, let me eat them...

She wakes suddenly upright on the sofa. How funny, I was dreaming. She scratches her head and mutters and goes into the kitchen. He is sitting at the table with a plectrum in his hand, he is playing a guitar and he starts to sing. Have I ever told you how handsome you are in your uniform?

You look like you are in The Beatles. You look wonderful. Come here, my boy, let me hold you. I love how the hairs on your neck are so downy. You have no idea how much I dream of you. So funny, I was just now on the sofa having a dream about you. We were just like this in the kitchen, but you were standing there in the hallway and the food had rotted in the fridge and then we were in the lift and I had the daffodils, and you wanted to ... oh no, the toilet is overflowing ... wait there ... the mackerel is swimming in the toilet and it's flapping in the toilet bowl. Put the fish into your guitar case. Hold my hand. Don't be afraid. Come, we must jump. The stairs have collapsed and the lift is stuck. Just take my hand, we are flying, open your eyes, look there's the sea! I can see the sea!

Click click click ... The record has ended.

Sarah opens her eyes and sits up. How strange, I was dreaming I was dreaming that I was dreaming, she mumbles aloud to herself and reaches for a cigarette. A dream inside a dream. Outside it is dark now, the orange streetlights cast an amber light onto her walls. One or two daffodils are already puffing up to open, the tight green buds beginning to turn yellow. That's weird, she says, looking straight at a tight new daffodil bud, I must have fallen asleep reading and dreamt I was dreaming he was here.

Sarah walks into the kitchen and switches on the light. No, he is not in there and the food is not rotting in the fridge. What odd dreams, she thinks, and goes into the tiny bathroom. She looks down into the toilet bowl to check the mackerel isn't there and of course it isn't. Wondering what it could all mean and still milky with her dreaming she starts to undress for bed. She is in her knickers and socks; she slips under the cool clean sheets. She closes her eyes and nestles up to remember her dreams of him. You funny thing, she whispers into the night, my lovely daft daffodilly.

No matter what happens or who you are somebody somewhere falls asleep thinking of you, loving you. You are somebody's last thought before they fall asleep. She closes her eyes, sees his face and his smile, hears his voice, like music playing in her head.

[close music]

[white noise]