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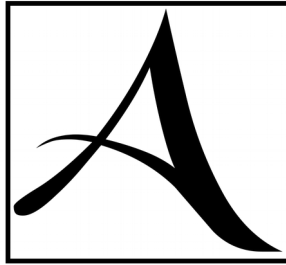


Collective Unconscious

by Michael Robertson

Chris Cwej returns with new adventures in *Cwej: Down the Middle*, a new anthology from Arcbeatle Press. Look for it later in 2020! This story is a preview of the coming attractions, an adventure by Michael Robertson (10,000 Dawns, GoblinPunk) that takes Cwej on a new kind of journey...

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"So. Strange dreams, is it?"

"Yeah. I mean that's not all there is, but the dreams are what made me realize I needed to talk to you."

"Me specifically?"

Sara Willox breathed slowly, calming her nerves to think. "I heard your name somewhere." She thought about how much she should say. "Can't remember where, but you were my first choice."

"Well, thank you very much." Dr. Ashfield smiled and brushed a strand of dark hair out of her eyes. The room was warm and inviting, more like the front room of a house than an office. A plant sat next to a fake fireplace that wasn't plugged in. An entire wall was taken up by bookshelves. "I'll see what I can do for you. When did your dreams become a problem?"

"A few weeks ago. Maybe three weeks? They just seemed too real and vivid. It doesn't help that I used to work early mornings, but now I'm not even getting a full eight hours."

"Used to? Have you changed your hours now?"

"I've been laid off," said Sara, very matter-of-factly.

"Oh, sorry to hear that," said Dr. Ashfield, pushing her glasses up her nose as an excuse to avoid eye contact.

"Yeah, bit of a bummer, but whatever. Office job," she said, as if that made it okay, "I always said I was just working there to get money to do what I really wanted, but I never figured out what that was. Then all of a sudden, I've had to start job hunting again and this question of what I want to do has come up again and it's just..." She caught herself, smiled, and leaned forward to pick up her cup. "It's a mess."

Dr. Ashfield quietly considered the mess. "Is there a common thread to your bad dreams? Any recurring images?"

Sara's tea cup clacked gently against its saucer as she set it back down. "Not really. It's just a bunch of really weird stuff. Always stressful. Sometimes scary, like nightmares, but mostly worrying."

"And you can remember all of them?"

"Perfectly," said Sara, "it's so strange, I had this really weird one a few nights ago. It's the one that told me I should talk to you. I was trapped in a dark dungeon, and I couldn't move at all."

Dr. Ashfield nodded knowingly. "Often our dreams can express the helplessness we feel in daily life."

"And there was this guy," Sara continued, "a blonde guy in a

suit of blue armor."

Dr. Ashfield stopped. Her eyes drifted slightly to the floral wallpaper behind Sara. "Blue armor?"

"I know. It's weird." She shrunk back into her armchair slightly. "It was like... Not armor like a soldier, more like a knight. A knight... soldier. Bright blue metal armor, with some gold bits. I can picture him, as clearly as I can see you. His name was Chris."

Dr. Ashfield sat forward. "Chris? You're sure?"

"Yeah. Honestly, my imagination is so messed up. It can come up with ridiculous creatures and a man in bright blue armor, then it goes and names him something nice and normal like Chris!" She gave an awkward chuckle. "His last name was weird though."

Dr. Ashfield got back to her flat and locked the door. She took a few steps, then turned and checked she'd definitely locked it. The whole walk home she couldn't stop thinking about Sara. Dr. Ashfield sat on her bed and rummaged through the side drawer. At the bottom, underneath makeup and loose change, she found her small green dream journal. She flicked through it feverishly. There it was. Six nights ago. The creatures, the blonde guy, the world that changed shape in a moment.

They'd had the same dream.

Six nights ago, Dr. Ashfield closed her eyes and entered a warzone. That it was a warzone or that she was in any danger at all wasn't immediately clear. She was walking a path that wound gently down the side of a rocky hill. The sky was a brilliant orange and all around her were the most surreal flowers. Slowly, she bent down to pick one. The bright pink petals got bluer around the center and made her head spin. She'd never seen anything like it, and it was as if she was seeing it more clearly than she'd ever seen anything.

Dr. Ashfield closed her eyes and rubbed them with her fingers, then reopened them. The flower was still in front of her and still just as strange. The sun shone brightly in the sky but it wasn't too hot. There was a breeze blowing but it wasn't too cold. Everything here was perfect. Then she had to start running.

Fighting and explosions broke out all around her. Strange shapes wielding strange weapons tried to kill each other. Dr. Ashfield dived for cover behind a large person-sized rock she hadn't noticed before. She hadn't noticed all the soldiers either. There were two sides: a

group of hairy insect creatures with large bug eyes, and a group of elegant tall creatures whose scales ranged from blue to green.

Cries, wails, explosions. Dr. Ashfield clung to the side of the rock, praying she hadn't been seen. She yelped when something grabbed her.

"Keep your head down. This way!"

A blonde man in a blue suit of armor guided her out of her hiding place and down a ditch, which led to the mouth of a cave. They ducked inside and the sounds of fighting outside didn't follow them.

"Thanks," said Dr. Ashfield, leaning on the cave wall as she filled her lungs, "who are you?"

"Chris Cwej. Strange first question. 'Who are you', not 'where am I.' Have you given that one any thought?"

Dr. Ashfield opened her mouth, then shut it again. "I... was walking."

"Where to?"

"Dunno, just anywhere." She straightened herself off the cave wall. When she looked closer at the rock, she saw deep purple or pink veins of beautiful crystal running through it. It took her a while to notice that the mouth of the cave wasn't in view anymore and they were much deeper than she realized. "Did we move?"

"No, the cave did," explained Chris, "that's the problem with dreams - try to keep everything straight in your head and stuff gets twisted and tangled and lost down the middle."

"Dreams?" Dr. Ashfield felt herself and her clothes and the cave walls. "Am I dreaming?"

"Both of us are. What's your name?"

"Jen. I am Dr. Jen Ashfield," she said carefully, as if she was telling herself that, "this is a weird dream. And I study dreams, I should know."

"Oh? Is that what you're a doctor of?" asked Chris. He was shining a torch down the tunnel, leading their way out. The pink crystal in the walls shone and glittered in the light.

"I'm a therapist. A doctor of dreams would be silly."

"Oh, you never know. There are some weird doctors out there." Chris' face was half in shadow as he ventured through the cave.

Dr. Ashfield followed Chris in silence for a moment. "Since you called me out for it earlier, are we walking to get anywhere?"

"Yes, as it happens. I'm trying to find the control center of this

place."

"Of the cave?"

"Of the world."

The two emerged onto a cliff overlooking a lush forest. The skyline was dominated by a mountain that stretched impossibly high into the clouds.

Chris stared up at it. "Yep, that'll do it. Dream geography is very convenient." He turned to face Jen. "Don't worry, I promise I'll get you back home. Won't take long!" He started down the path through the forest to the mountain.

"Oh, I'm coming with you," said Jen, eyes on the mountain, "this place is beautiful."

"It's the Psychosphere. A virtual dream world created by the Geldex. A paradise."

"The 'Psychosphere'?" Jen smiled. "Awful pun. Go on then - what's a Geldex?"

"You've seen some already," said Chris, "the tall, thin, scaly aliens with blue-ish skin."

Dr. Ashfield ran her hands across the lower leaves of the trees they passed. They felt like the softest silk and were covered in intricate patterns, each one unique. "What did you mean, you'll 'get me back home'? I'm not in a hurry to leave."

"Good," said Chris, "if you try to wake up, you'll discover that you can't. You and everyone else who's dreamed their way in here is stuck."

Dr. Ashfield slowly started to panic. "I'm...I'm stuck? Forever?"

"Fortunately, you said you weren't in a hurry to leave, so no need to get upset. There should be an exit at the top of the mountain. Down!"

Chris bounded off the path and into the trees which made Jen jump before she followed him. She peered out, wondering what they were hiding from but not daring to ask. Then, almost silently, they saw two of those insect creatures from before walking across the path. Chris and Jen waited until they were sure they'd both passed before emerging back into the path. "Haven't read Freud in a while so, I'll be honest, not sure what the massive bugs are supposed to represent."

"Hytherians," said Chris, "creatures of powerful psychic energy, like the Geldex. The two species are at war for this place, and the war

has been so damaging that it's opened the Psychosphere to unassuming dreamers like you."

"You're stuck here too, you know."

"I was sent here. That's my job; to sort out loose odds and ends across the obscure areas of the Totality. My mind was uploaded to the Psychosphere so I could find a way to shut it down. Send everyone back to the waking world. I suppose I'm a bit like an alarm clock."

"Right..." Jen looked both ways at a crossroads to check for giant insect monsters. "Let's get this done. Top of the mountain, you say?"

Birds chirped overhead and the sky subtly glittered and changed color as Jen and Chris made their way through the forest. The trees were covered in colorful vines that wrapped around them like tinsel and linked them together like cables.

Eventually, they reached a path leading up the side of the mountain and started to climb. And climb, and climb. The warm sky above turned to a cool purple as the sun started to set.

Jen sat down on a rock for a little rest and looked down to see how far they'd come. She could make out the fluorescent pattern on the back of a beetle four meters below her. They were barely higher than the trees.

She opened her mouth and was unable to form words, instead just making frustrated angry noises to get Chris' attention. He joined her in looking over the edge. "Ever had a dream where you walked for miles but never got anywhere?"

Jen sulked. "This place is ridiculous."

"It's better than an asylum on Golgalith. Barely."

"So, how do we get up there?"

Chris looked around. "The whole idea of the Psychosphere is it's a dream where you know you're dreaming. So, we should be able to do whatever we want if we think about it hard enough." He approached the face of the mountain, looking closely at the pattern of the rocks. Brushing away a bit of moss, he exposed a small metal panel with an up arrow and a down arrow. He pressed 'up', and a perfect rectangle in the side of the mountain slid open with a ping to reveal an office elevator. Chris stepped aside and gestured for Jen to enter. "After you," he said, proud of himself.

"Ridiculous," she muttered again as she reluctantly got in.

The double doors pinged open again at the top of the mountain.

Immediately their attention was drawn to the huge building ahead of them that looked like an art gallery, a castle, and an observatory all at once. It had wide round walls and a domed glass roof, with stone turrets jutting out at impossible angles.

"Look at this!" Jen ran over to a strange shape sticking up from the ground. It was hard to tell what it was from the angle they were at, but as they walked around it, they saw it was a door. A fire exit, complete with a green light floating overhead, suspended on nothing. "What is it?"

"An exit."

"I can see it's an exit, but where from and to?"

Chris walked around the door standing by itself on the mountain's summit. "From the dream to reality, I imagine."

"So, this is how I wake up?"

"Looks like it." Chris extended a hand. "It was nice meeting you, Dr. Ashfield."

Jen shook it. "Nice meeting you, Chris Cwej. I'm not convinced you're real."

Chris smiled. "That's probably for the best."

Taking a breath, Dr. Ashfield pushed the metal bar on the fire exit, passed over the threshold, and woke up.

The door swung closed behind her and Chris turned his attention back to the building at the end of the path. He breathed out through his nose and started walking. Out of the corner of his eye, he couldn't help but notice a few grey clouds drift into view across the otherwise spotless sky. The sky itself was getting darker and darker at an unrealistic rate.

He stopped. The sky's color stayed the same.

He took a step back. The sky got lighter.

He took a step forward. The sky got darker.

Chris thought for a second, then smirked and broke into a run. Clouds consumed the sky and lightning struck as he charged down the path towards the castle.

He burst through the double doors and slammed them shut behind him. A feeling of cold hit him immediately - the first feeling of discomfort he'd felt since entering this paradise. The hall in front of him was gray and stone and dark, lit by flaming torches. Stairways stabbed out from the main corridor in ways that clearly didn't match the outside

of the building. Chris thought hard about how he was going to choose a direction to go in. Then a muffled scream decided for him.

He charged down a flight of steps that curved just enough to hide where they led and seemed to go on for far too long. Eventually, they opened into a large chamber, where a woman was standing calmly facing away at an angle. Her shoulders were relaxed in an inviting, confident stance, and she was screaming through her closed mouth.

Chris slowly walked around her, and as soon as he entered her field of view, her wide, scared eyes snapped to look at him. He reached out and touched her shoulder, and the spell broke. The woman fell to the floor, gasping, finally able to move. She kept screaming for a few seconds, as if to finally get the noise out and be heard in defiance of whatever made her silent. "Where the hell am I?!"

"The nightmare at the heart of the dream."

"Oh good, a poet." She lay on the ground, taking slow breaths. "Thank you. That was the scariest thing ever."

"No problem. The name's Chris Cwej, and right now you're dreaming. None of this is real. Hopefully, that's comforting."

"I'm Sara Willox," said Sara Willox, "I can't believe my dreams are getting worse. At first they were stressful, now they're meta."

"You have a history of bad dreams?"

"Yeah." Sara picked herself up and finally took in all 360 degrees of her surroundings. "Been having a really rough time lately."

"That's a shame. You just missed the dream expert," said Chris, "now, if you'll excuse me, somewhere in this castle is a way to shut this dream world down. What I'd love more than anything is a big red button, those always do the job. The problem is, the closer you get to it the more nightmarish the dream becomes, so you should probably get back to the, uh, paradise area." He turned and gestured to the stairs that didn't exist. "Ah."

"What's through there?" Sara was gesturing to a door that definitely hadn't been there before.

Chris approached slowly and gently pressed on the wood. The door swung open into a room of the castle containing a dark forest of dead trees. The icy wind of the outdoors blew through them. Some of the trees looked like people or creatures, twisted in agony, but the resemblance was obscured just enough to pass as coincidence.

"Don't be scared," Chris muttered, "we're getting close to the nexus point, it shouldn't be long." He took Sara's hand and led her

through the contorted trees.

The two walked together through the forest for longer than they could remember, until they came to a glass box in the middle of a clearing. Chris and Sara peered into it and saw a big red button.

"Welcome."

They turned to see an elderly Geldex with green scales running through deep blue.

"Hello," said Sara with a sigh that said 'whatever, I might as well allow this to happen today.'

The Geldex bowed. His scales flickered in the shadow of the forest. "I see you have wandered in here from outside. This must be very distressing for you both, allow me to show you the way back."

"No thank you," said Chris, "we're here to push this button if you don't mind."

The alien already knew that's what he wanted and breathed slowly. "Hytherian spies? I'll admit, I've never seen creatures with your shape before."

"That'll be because we're not Hytherians. You are right about us wandering in here from outside though. We wandered in from outside the Psychosphere. The Hytherians damaged it and created a gap in the system, through which people like Sara here," he gestured, "and my good friend Dr. Jen Ashfield dreamt their way in by mistake. Now, I don't think it's fair that anyone should have to stay here against their will. I'm sorry to say, your paradise resort is putting people in danger, so I'm here to pull the plug. Everyone wakes up in the real world and you can build another Psychosphere some other time. Simple."

The Geldex thought for a moment about how much this human knew, and looked sadly into the glass box. "This is not a 'paradise resort.' This virtual world is our escape from a dying planet. Our goal is to secure the Psychosphere from outsiders, then sever the connection to our physical bodies. The Geldex will live forever, free of physical pain, the need for food or drink. Free of disease!"

"And what about me?" said Sara, "what about all of us, don't we get a say? What if I don't want to leave my physical body forever?"

"This is regretful," said the Geldex, "but the flaws in the Psychosphere might be fixed given time."

"Time doesn't cut it. I should know." Chris stood over the glass box, examining the button. "I'm sorry, but the Psychosphere is dragging other people into your suffering. There's always a chance the Geldex can

survive another way, or make a new Psychosphere."

The Geldex knew his mind had already been made. "Our future will be uncertain."

"I'm sorry to say that everyone's is. But let's all make the best of it."

Chris turned to Sara. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"I...don't know..." she stuttered, stepping away from the box.

"Dreams are tricky like that." Chris smiled at her. "Have a good morning."

Chris Cwej shattered the glass. It sounded like an alarm clock.

Sara Willox rubbed her eyes and checked the time on her phone. Her eyes narrowed and she did some mental maths. If she ran through her whole morning routine a little bit quicker later, she'd be able to fit in a few more minutes of sleep now. Sara put the phone down and rolled over to face the wall. That was the weirdest nightmare she'd had so far. Weird because of how real it was. The whole thing hung in her memory, refusing to fade.

She rolled back towards her phone, opened the internet, and stared at the blank google search bar. Maybe it was finally time to get some professional help. She was going to find a dream expert.

Sara thought back to her nightmare as she wondered what to search. Slowly, she typed in 'Dr. Jen Ashfield.'

Look for more Cwej, coming soon!