

This whole story ended in a small clinic, lost miles away from any major city. A few patients were hospitalized at this time, all coming from the nearby villages. As an example, on the first floor, there was a kid with a broken ankle due to a bad fall while he was playing on his father's tractor. In the room right next to his was a young pregnant woman, holding strong her boyfriend's hand most of the day as he was reassuring her and swearing that he would never leave her. In the one above was a man with lung problems, a regular patient who spent most of his days praying for a total recovery that never came. All of them were at the clinic for a time, confident that they would get out soon. Only one patient was there forever, an old woman condemned to stay in her bed until the last of her days. She was living in a small annexe, transformed in an old folk's home and inhabited by a few other sick elderly people. The other patients never really knew why she was there, and stories began to spread. A few of them saw old white scars on her thin arms, imagining tales of old battles or dreadful accidents. Others talked about a mysterious disease that was slowly killing her, the medications only able to soften her agony. No one ever thought of the truth. She never did anything to hide it. Quite the opposite, actually. The old woman liked to talk with nurses, doctors or even visitors. The subjects were many, according to her mood. Anyone could have easily understood who the old woman was by listening a little closely to her stories, but no one ever did it. Until one day.

It wasn't a special day, just a normal Tuesday like any other. The residents were all receiving visitors, all but the old woman. No one ever came for her but two nurses, here to check up on her health. While they were setting up one of the machines, the old woman started to talk like she was always doing. "I have had a nice dream tonight. I have dreamt every night since the day I turned eighteen. Most nights I remember more than one." The old woman said to one of the nurses. They were in the common area of the old folk's home. A man who was visiting a relative overheard her statement. He turned to listen as she kept talking. "But my dreams are nothing like they used to be anymore. Wherever they take me, I recognise familiar faces, familiar places, remnants of old adventures here to thanks me. And everyone is always so nice with me, they come to me and take care of me like no one else does when I'm awake." A smile drawn itself on her worn out skin, brightening her old tanned fade. Taking advantage of the small silence, the man got closer. "What where they like before, then?" he asked as he couldn't help but to be interested. Having just learned that his old man had once again refused to meet him, he just felt like thinking of anything else but his family's story. Surprised by this interruption, the two nurses stopped and turned to him. The old woman, however, nodded her head as if the question was natural, almost expected. "Oh, they were truly wonderful. Dreams of enthralling adventures and unthinkable wonders. I recall, she laughed lightly, how I was waiting for them all day long. What a boring girl I was, with a boring life. So dull, to say the least, that sometimes I was mistaking it for a nightmare, thinking that the dreams of my nights were my reality. I still remember my first dream." she added, her eyes slowly closing as she was drowning further in her memories.

"I was so excited that night. I had just become an adult and couldn't wait to see the wonders that life had for me. Mother had prepared me a cake, and I had received a new jacket. Oh I loved this jacket so much. I wore it every day for years, even after it got teared apart and stitched countless times. I think I was wearing it this night as well. My shining armour in green fabric." "But what about the dreams?" the man interrupted, curiosity filling his voice. For some reason, his instincts were telling him they were more to hear than he could imagine. Opening her eyes once again, the old woman grumble after having been so coldly interrupted. "The dream, yes. I remember waking up in an empty field. Soft grass was covering the land wherever I landed my eyes, spreading endlessly. All there was to see was a small path covered in dry soil. I didn't knew where I was but I knew I had to follow this way, that at the end of it I would find the reason for my presence there. As I walked through it, I finally reached a small village hidden behind a hill. The place was small, but most of all, empty. All the villagers were hiding inside of their tiny huts, barely reaching for my shoulder. I still recall how I had to get on my knees to get inside. The inhabitants were barely half my size, and so terrified, so hunched, that they seemed even smaller. An evil giant was threatening them, capturing and eating whoever met his

way, and they first thought I was like him. But after I offered to help them and to free them from this burden, they opened up. They gave me some food to give me strength, some straw to rest on before I left. Then I suddenly realised I was exhausted from my long walk, and decided to take a nap. That's when the other dream began." "The other dream?" The incredulous sound in the man's voice made the old lady chuckle. "Well, of course. Every time I go to sleep, I travel further away, be it from one dream to another. This time I woke up inside a dark cave. Humidity was soiling my clothes, and a deep growling was coming from the depths of it. As scared as I was, I knew I had to go there, to find the origin of this terrifying sound. I..." This time one of the nurses interrupted her, gently reaching for her shoulder and pointing at the clock on the wall. "Sorry to interrupt, but visits time is over. You need some rest." The old woman nodded in agreement as her chair was dragged away. She turned her head to the man. "Will you come back?"

And he came back, one week later. This time again, his father denied him a chance to talk by locking himself in his room. And this time again, the man went to see the old lady. "You were telling me about your first dream. The moment you arrived in that cave." "Oh right, the cave. How many times have I been there? It changed so much between my different trips. Now it is a lovely place, filled with glowing mushrooms and shining gems. And the dragons are so good to me." "The dragons?" "Yes, Have I not told you about them yet? It was the first I met after the little ones. Not on my first night, though. I have spent several nights, crawling alone in the dark, before I first met a dragon. He was gigantic, a scaled giant with spread out wings as wide as a town, screaming and spitting fire in fury. His rage was keeping him from resting even a single moment. I stayed away from him for a month, hiding in some corners. Sometime I would fall asleep and go back to the little one's world, searching for the nasty giant to chase him. Other nights I would find myself on a stormy island, following the faint glow of a distant lighthouse." "Always the same places?" "Of course. There have been more than these three, but later. With time, I have been in a lot of different worlds, discovering them one at a time. But the dragon was the first one I could actually help." "And how did you do that?" "It wasn't easy. It already took me a long time to realise the poor creature had a sword stuck in his back, trapped deeply between two scales. All his efforts to get rid of it were useless. So I decided to help him. I waited for him to look away from me and started to climb him. Gigantic as he was, he never realised my presence. Oh, it wasn't easy, and neither was it safe. I even felt once, and grazed myself while grabbing whatever I could to stop my fall. That was my first scars. I remember how terrified I was when I woke up, seeing on my arms the remains of the adventures of my night. Mother, however, was just furious. She never believed me when I talked about my dreams. She insisted that I must have done that to myself. Even when I woke up with a broken arm she refused to hear me." Her mood darkened as the painful memories flew on her mind. By her side, the man was standing in silence, unable to find the words to match the maelstrom going on in his head.

It took him several weeks to really understand. By that time, he was used to his father's refuse, and he was only asking to see him out of habits. The old woman had already told how she finally took the sword out of the dragon's back, freeing him from his pain. How she felt with exhaustion, waking up in the little one's village with the sword on her hand and how she used it to repel a giant twice as tall as her, and even bulkier. She had told him about more worlds she had been through, a labyrinthine city ruled by an evil king and a frozen mountain plagued with herds of monstrous wolves. He finally came to realise that, as incredible and unbelievable these stories were, he still wanted to think that they were true. That this lonely old woman he was talking with, week after week, was really travelling to foreign lands in her sleep. That this scar was coming from a dragon's scale, this one from a wolf's bite, and this one from a mechanical spider's claws. He had stopped asking questions for long, only listening to the stories as they were piling up. One day, however, he couldn't help himself. "When we talked for the first time," he said, "you told your dreams had changed. How comes?" "Oh, they haven't changed, not really. I still visit the same places, greeted by old friends wherever I wake up. But the time of adventures is over now. I am too old to fight, or travel, or to do anything but sit and enjoy the hard-earned peace of the worlds I saved. In all of them I am treated like a heroine. They take good care of

me, they help me rest and enjoy my last days. They all know who I am, you see? They believe me when I talk of all these places, and all these wounds. They do not think I am crazy nor I have inflicted this to myself. They really understand me.” “Then why not staying there? Do you have to wake up in this old house every day, where no one visits you but me? Wouldn’t you be happier with them?” She answered by a weary smile, her empty eyes looking at something only she could see. “Oh, I would. But that is not possible. Dreams are a wonderful thing, but in the end, everyone has to wake up.”

As time kept going, stories were piling. Countless worlds as different and extraordinary as one can imagine. A world dominated by man-hunting machines, an empire spreading around one hundred stars, a city of chrome and lights. Glorious fights, dreadful dangers and epic quests kept flooding, entangled together as the old woman was jumping from one to another. Then came the day when all the stories had been told. All that remained to talk about was descriptions of worlds that had stopped changing years ago, when the old woman came back from her last adventure. All that was left was peace and slumber, a long wait for the final moment. Upon realising that, the man understood the sad truth behind her slow decay. For the thing that was killing her wasn’t a disease, neither was it a wound. Only time and boredom, eroding her little by little. Then the man knew what he had to do. That week, he came with a bag under his arm and directly asked to take the old woman for a walk, without even enquiring about his father. Persuading the nurses was hard, but he managed to do so and less than an hour after that, he was walking the streets, pulling the old woman’s wheelchair. Once they got far enough from the old people’s house, he took the bag and gave it to the old woman. Inside, she found a green fabric jacket, just like the one she used to wear. “You have been to so many places”, he said, “and lived so many adventures. Yet they all happened in your dreams. None of them took place here, in this reality you’ve been born in. I find it sad that you consider your time awake so boring. That’s why today I will take you on an adventure with me, a last one while it is still possible.”

When they came back, several hours later, the old woman was wearing a now scratched jacket and a bright smile like she hadn’t in years. The nurses jumped on the man, scolding him for having taken their patient out for so long, but the old woman calmed them with ease. They reluctantly led him go, returning the old woman to her room. The next day, the man came once again, the memories of their trip still engraved in his mind. But all that awaited him was sad news as the old woman had died during the night, while she was quietly sleeping. One of the nurses came to him, ready to cheer him as he would fall in tears. But all he did was smiling. Then he asked if she had had the time to say farewell to everyone before waving his hand and brushing the question away, asking the nurse to forget about it. He turned back, preparing to leave, but paused before reaching the door. “Please,” he said as he was turning to face the nurse, “tell my father that I forgive him. All I want is to talk to him one last time, to make up for everything I told him.” He turned once more to the exit, but this time, a nurse stopped him. “Your father agreed to meet you. He asked me to say that’s all he wanted to hear.”