

Futures

My dreams have been weird since the magpies arrived

Flights of fancy. By Wendy Nickel



When the birds start snatching up pieces of the scenery, that's when I know I'm dreaming.

I'm standing before my old high-school locker and, as in most dreams, I have no idea how I got here. My mind won't compute how old I am now, but my gut knows, deep down, that I'd washed my hands of this place long ago, that it's been years since I smelled that particular combination of cleaning solution and Old Spice. Years since I last heard Mr Jorgenson's voice echoing from the nearby biology lab, droning on about midi-chlorians.

"Shouldn't that be mitochondrion?" My teenage voice is nasally. Know-it-all. The kids around me roll their eyes.

"Yes, mitochondrion," Mr Jorgenson corrects.

The birds are magpies, although the dream-significance of that particular species

eludes me. They pick at the background, carrying off sports pennants and combination locks and articles of people's clothing, and I recall, in the slow and cloudy manner of dreams, their purpose here.

It comes to me like a newscast. I'm seated now in a familiar break room of the company where I'd had my first internship, watching an old Kenmore TV. A magpie perched on the antenna swoops down and carries off my time sheet.

"Ever since oneirologist Tanya Watts uncovered a method to tap into people's dreams and extract data from them, marketing companies across the world have been vying for a slice of the pie."

I'm eating pie now. It's strawberry, and the magpies gather around, their heads melded onto the bodies of my former fellow interns. They study me, their hands folded on the table, evaluating what aspect of the pie I enjoy the

most. What makes it most marketable. Is it the flaky crust? The fresh Traverse City cherries?

"Wasn't it strawberry?" My voice is far more pretentious than an intern's should be. "I don't even like cherries."

The next bite, it's strawberry again.

Two magpies swoop in and carry off the plate, and I can almost see the data being processed in the reflection of their black eyes: strawberry, not cherry.

I can't shake the feeling that something's wrong. Something to do with the magpies.

"Oneirologists discovered that when a company uses dream-dive technology to enter a person's subconscious during sleep, they leave a trace," the newscaster drones on. "An idiosyncratic tone that manifests in the dream as a particular species of bird. Hummingbirds. Robins. Cardinals. Canaries."

Even within my REM sleep, I sense there's something I'm overlooking. Some red flag I

should be more aware of.

A flag.

An American flag whips in the wind just beyond the second-floor window of the lab where I now work.

"I flagged your project." It's Dr Hanson, in a white pressed jacket, talking more to his clipboard than to me. "It shows promise, but we'll need to consider the repercussions. Something like this could —"

I don't hear the rest. A magpie has perched on his clipboard, screaming over his voice, while another uses its clawed toes to sift through the filing cabinet that's normally locked in the sub-basement archives.

"What's that doing up here?" As soon as I say the words, the magpie looks up at me, startled, and then bird and cabinet both disappear. But it's triggered something in my sleep-muted brain. The combination lock. The time sheet. The files.

And suddenly, I remember what else Dr Hanson said that day.

"Something like this could have serious repercussions, Tanya. If companies can extract data about one's preferences and the elements that shape their subconscious, how are people to keep personal information secure in their

dream state? What would prevent someone from going after PINs and social-security numbers and people's dirty little secrets?"

"We'll just have to be very specific in our contracts about what sort of data they can extract." My voice sounds flippant; I'm concerned only with the bottom line.

It hits me: that's what's wrong with the magpies. They're not one of the companies I've contracted to beta-test the dream-dives. Which means they're not here for marketing information. They've hacked our servers. They're here for me. For my personal information.

I'm running down the street in my underwear, fleeing from the magpies. My teeth are falling out, and the divebombing birds snatch the discarded molars.

I need to wake up before it's too late. Before they find something to use against me. A test I cheated on in graduate school? An ill-advised romance? The magpies squawk at me, trying to turn my thoughts to all I've done wrong, to force me to reveal something they could use for blackmail.

I focus on a paper I wrote: 'Methods of Waking Oneself from Lucid Sleep'. I need something jarring. Something I'd never do while awake. I imagine a cliff, and it materializes

in front of me. I put on a burst of speed and squeeze my eyes shut.

Feathers fly around me as I leap.

I gasp and sit up, wide awake.

I'm at my desk with my laptop open before I'm fully awake, but by the time I've sent the e-mail to Dr Hanson cancelling the beta-test and suspending the entire dream-dive programme, the sun is bright outside my window.

I press 'send' and lean back, letting my eyes close on all I've given up. Years of work. Fame. Fortune. Prestige. I'm back to square one with a click of the mouse. But Dr Hanson had been right.

A bird call interrupts my thoughts. On my windowsill sits a magpie. He calls out again — the same sharp sound that had permeated my sleep — and, with a cunning look in his dark, shining eye, he takes off, laughing in the morning sun.

Wendy Nikel is a speculative-fiction author with a degree in elementary education, a fondness for road trips and a terrible habit of forgetting where she's left her cup of tea. For more info, visit wendynikel.com.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Wendy Nikel reveals the inspiration behind *My dreams have been weird since the magpies arrived*

Stories aren't always written under ideal circumstances. The night before I wrote this, I had insomnia. I also had a contest deadline for my online writers' group that I really wanted to meet. So when I sat down at my desk with a big cup of coffee and the determination to write, it's maybe not too surprising that my mind turned to dreams and how our brains function somewhat differently when we're asleep (or half-asleep), and how a mind disarmed by sleep may be more susceptible to subliminal messaging.

The magpies in this story came from my backyard. We have parliaments of them that saunter around the neighbourhood, bossing each other around and feasting on the leftovers from our fruit trees. I've always loved their distinct colouration and have been fascinated with the idea that they like to collect shiny things. Although this stereotype hasn't held up in recent studies, it's still a fun trope to explore, especially as the magpies in this story aren't real birds to begin with.

