

## Episode 1: Dreams and The Mouth

### Nick

His heart raced as he followed the trickling rivulet, the remains of Sweetwater Creek, deeper into the cavern. Water sounds surrounded him. It dripped down columns made by stalactites and stalagmites and cut trails over walls of dirt and stone. Liquid gleamed with the cavern's purple glow, the only light, which came from—Nick didn't know. Trickle, drip, trickle, drip. Where was this place? Nick didn't know.

A place of dreams, a place of memory. He didn't know if he'd been here before. Maybe he had. He might have dreamt it. The sensations, rippling through his body with each footstep, felt familiar, shudders of pleasure masking gooseflesh of fear.

He didn't walk in the diminished creek. His bare feet made impressions in mud and took in the barbs of loose rock with minimal complaint. Staying as close to a wall as the cavern's spindly wet columns would allow, he felt roots from unknown trees appear and disappear within dirt, veins of the cavern's boundaries. Some of the roots stuck out more than others, reaching.

The farther he went, the more certain he felt that he knew the place, and the more certain he felt that he'd never been here. He was naked, and the moisture that clung to the rocks, the roots, and his skin was cold, but he felt perverse warmth spreading from his middle to his extremities. Powerful want pulled him onward.

THE MIDDLE REACHES

*This is a dream.*

*Does it matter?*

*But I remember...*

Flattened against the cavern wall, his hand stopped. The rest of his body froze. A root jutting out close to the flattened hand moved, pulling itself away from the wall until it pointed at Nick's splayed fingers. The root's narrow tip traced down his thumb, over his knuckles, and back up his ring finger. Shivering with fresh heat, he lifted his hand from the wall. The root wrapped around his palm. He gripped it.

They held each other. Nick closed his eyes, savoring the sensation. The root pulled his hand toward the wall, and he let it, let it take his hand inside the wall's dirt. With one hand immersed in hugging wet, he used his other hand to rub his bare chest. He licked his lips. He heard his own voice say, "Oh God."

He heard another voice: "Hurry up, Nick! We found it!"

His eyes popped open. The hand on his chest felt his heart pound harder. He knew the voice. It was Sheldon's, but he hadn't seen Sheldon since they were both sixteen, since Sheldon—

"Hurry!" Echoes distorted Sheldon's voice, but it came from further ahead in the cavern, where he already ached to go. The voice made the ache more intense, the want, the need. He pulled his wet, grimy hand out of the dirt wall; the root that had held him did not resist.

"Sheldon!" Nick called. "I never came in here with you, did I?" He paused, awaiting an answer, and heard an echo of his own rapid breathing. "We must have turned back when we... you must have come alone, when you—"

"Nick!"

Hearing Sheldon call his name a second time made him spring into action, leaping and splashing into the rivulet, running toward the sound. "Sheldon! Sheldon! Are you okay?" He moved deeper into the cavern.

Laughter, Sheldon's laughter, bounced off stones around him. It was gleeful, punctuated with a contented sigh. Sheldon was sixteen, which meant Nick was sixteen, which meant he had to be dreaming, dreaming as he heard Sheldon say, his voice so soft that it was almost unrecognizable, "I knew

you'd come.”

The cavern's inexplicable glow grew brighter in the direction where Nick was running, so he slowed to a brisk walk, eyes adjusting. “Sheldon, are you okay?”

A whisper echoed: “Nick.”

Nick kept moving, facing the light, which flickered and circled ahead of him, purple, red, pink, white. “They never found you,” he called. “*We* never found you.” Another warm shiver amplified his awareness of cold wet covering his exposed skin. “*I* never found you.”

The rivulet's path through the cavern turned, and when Nick turned with it, he saw the source of the light: a swirl of clouds, purple with streaks of red and pink, bolts of white, and flecks of black. A blurry, greyish form, like an inkblot, expanded and contracted within the swirl.

Behind him, the root-veins of the cavern's walls crackled. They bent and burst from their places, making dirt and rock crumble around them. Nick turned and saw snakes of wood gathering, intertwining, interlacing to form a barrier. He couldn't retreat. He didn't want to. He faced the swirl of clouds.

Sheldon's voice, a faded echo, repeated: “Hurry up, Nick! We found it!”

Quietly, Nick answered, “What did we find? *Did* I follow you in?”

A root reached out from the barrier and caressed Nick's back before prodding him. He stepped forward, toward the swirl of clouds and its colorful light, which he addressed: “Are you... are you in there?”

For a moment, part of the blurry, greyish form within the swirl became clearer, taking the shape of a row of long, sharp teeth. Sudden, loud noises reverberated off the cavern walls, everywhere gasping, everywhere struggling for air, choking, desperation, followed by Sheldon screaming, “It—it hurts! IT HURTS PLEASE GOD IT—”

Sheldon shrieked and was quiet.

“I can help you!” Nick yelled into the clouds. “Sheldon! SHELDON!”

The form within the swirl became even clearer, two rows of sharp teeth, top and bottom of a mouth, opening wider. Nick's feet brought him closer. Closer. “Oh God,” he said. “Oh God.” His groin throbbed. His body throbbed as he moved toward The Mouth.

## THE MIDDLE REACHES

Caught up in ecstasy, Nick almost didn't see the thing—wagging like a tongue, but tapered and squirming, like a tentacle—extend from between the rows of teeth. It reached for him and, with viscous ooze, licked from his groin to his neck. He moaned, swooning.

When the tongue-tentacle withdrew, his head lolled, and he looked down at his body as he dropped to his knees. Where The Mouth had touched him, his skin burned red, scraped, harvested. Through clenched teeth, he uttered, "My God!" He didn't know whether he burned with pleasure or pain.

The tongue-tentacle returned, retracing its path from Nick's exposed genitals to his unprotected throat, digging deeper, tearing off membranes, ripping through muscle, spilling blood, and opening viscera as if flesh were water. Nick screamed as he became a gaping wound and waited.

He sat up in bed, screaming. The house was his, no romantic attachments, no roommates—he was alone. No way the neighbors could have heard. The screaming was private. He took deep breaths, in, out, one, two, waiting for his pulse to calm. He turned on the lamp beside his bed.

The room spun only once before Nick managed to get from the bed to the bathroom and find the toilet. He vomited, not with the image of his own body torn apart in his mind, but with the sound of his teenaged friend, more than a decade ago, screaming about how much whatever he went through hurt. Nobody knew what happened to Sheldon Vere, but somehow Nick knew it hurt, and lately he was dreaming about it again almost every night.

He opened the medicine cabinet and looked for his benzos. He'd have to tell Dr. Willis something. Things were getting too bad. He couldn't tell him the sex part, though. Erotic nightmares weren't unheard of, but mixed with the memory of a friend who had died while they were in high school—

It was the damned reunion. Nick took a pill. Maybe ten years was too soon to try to see all those people again. Not that he'd been too in touch with anyone senior year of high school. Or for a while before that. After Sheldon died—no, disappeared—after Sheldon disappeared, Nick had more or less disappeared, too.

## Leslie

Not an after party, but “just a little get-together, to catch up,” Celia Mastroianni had said. Celia, who had been one of her best friends growing up. Celia, who, along with the others, had been nothing but a memory—faded—for more than a decade. Since the tragedy. Celia, along with Ambrose McClure, Pedro Jimenez, and Nick Andrews. Leslie had done a fine job repressing her childhood and didn’t see a reason to stir it all up again.

Leslie paid her driver and watched the car speed away down the suburban street before turning to face the house at the address Celia had given her. Nick’s house. The “little get-together” hadn’t been Celia or Nick’s idea, not *per se*, but the idea had grown up *organically*, as a few of them had bumped into each other at the reunion but not had enough time to talk. Nick volunteered his place because he had a full wine rack and enough rooms for people to crash if they over-celebrated.

Organically, especially in the pit of her stomach, Leslie did not want to go inside the modern two-story house with the generous driveway where a minivan and two other cars were already parked. She shouldn’t have gone to the reunion in the first place. It was a bad weekend not to be working. If she managed progress on the Mansworth case soon, she’d be on the fast track to becoming the first black woman in her firm to make junior partner.

The Mansworth case had, of course, been underway since before she’d been a summer associate and would likely drag on for many more years. Leslie didn’t know the extent of Mansworth’s interests—they went far beyond the Futures and Securities that prompted most people to shorten the company’s name to MFS—but she did know they had an army of lawyers, among whom she was but a soldier.

One of MFS’s interests, however, involved real estate in the neighborhood where she and the other attendees at this “little get-together” grew up, a neighborhood that was a short drive from where she now stood. She rented a house in this God-forsaken suburb because the partners viewed her as having a “home field advantage” during asset negotiations.

She would have preferred to be in her cozy rental, refining her presenta-

THE MIDDLE REACHES

tion for Monday's morning meeting downtown, over walking toward Nick Andrews's front door. A few steps up, and her hand hovered in front of the doorbell. Voices, incomprehensible, came from inside the house. Assuming Nick's car was in the closed garage, she concluded she was last to arrive.

Leslie pressed the button for the bell, heard the ring, and thought, *Too late to run*. The muscles tensed in her shoulders. This apprehension, this anxiety—irrational, wasn't it?

*Too late to run*. The door opened. Nick stood there, not a skinny teenager but a man with definition in his arms and stubble on his cheeks. Still, he conjured another face, sixteen years old, handsomer, with ice-blue eyes and a pale complexion. Sheldon. She looked at Nick and remembered Sheldon.

*Too late to run*.

Twenty minutes later, all five of them—Leslie, Nick, Celia, Ambrose, and Pedro—sat around the coffee table in Nick's spacious living room with full glasses of a very nice Cabernet, which they raised together.

"To living through high school and moving on to better things!" Pedro said.

"Cheers!" Ambrose agreed.

Glasses clinked, and they settled into their seats, drinking. Celia and Ambrose shared the sofa. Leslie had the loveseat to herself. Pedro sat on the floor, leaning against the empty easy chair. Nick sat next to the unlit fireplace in a rocking chair, shifting back and forth, making barely audible creaks. He seemed nervous. Leslie was nervous.

"I see some of them around town, or at the shop, but all those people from high school, all at once. Kind of surreal, wasn't it?" Pedro looked at each of them. For some reason, his eyes settled on Leslie.

"I thought I would know more people," Leslie said. "Lots of people seemed to recognize me."

"Well, um, yeah," Pedro said. "You kind of have built-in notoriety."

Celia laughed an airy, pleasant laugh. "You don't mean because she skipped a grade, got a perfect on the SATs, and went off to Harvard."

"That, too," Pedro said, adding to Celia's lightness.

Some of the tension in Leslie's shoulders melted. "It's okay. I know being

EPISODE 1: DREAMS AND THE MOUTH

one of the only black girls in a very white Southern suburb made me kind of famous. I just didn't think my mind would filter out all those white folks like a sieve."

"You've still got us," Ambrose said, "and you don't get much whiter than me. Besides, my memory is crap, too."

"It's funny, though, isn't it?" Leslie asked, realizing she'd been burning to ask. "We all ended up living back here, but we don't talk. We were... close... weren't we?"

Maintaining lightness, Celia said, "When we were a clique we all wanted to fuck each other. We stopped seeing each other every day at school, and the chemistry fizzled." She took a big gulp of wine.

"I seem to recall," Ambrose said, "that if it had a pussy and tits, I would have fucked it, clique or no clique." Leslie considered being shocked, but she thought, without the memory to prove it, that the comment was typical Ambrose.

"Gosh, Ambrose, it's nice to know you're still tactful," Pedro said.

Ambrose shrugged. "I'm still honest. And I'm talking about being a teenage boy, not anything revolutionary. Leslie is right, though. When I left our lovely little 'burb for college, I never thought I'd be back. Yet here I am."

"I stayed because I wanted to be close to family," Pedro said. "Went to the community college. Had a couple of classes with Nick, actually. That's where I met Regina."

"Your wife seemed lovely," Celia said.

Ambrose snickered. "*Totally* lovely."

Leslie imagined what Ambrose was thinking and hid her amusement. "Tact, Ambrose."

"Really, Ambrose," Celia said. "Don't mention that she must be at least a D-cup."

"I wish she could have come to our little after party," Leslie said. "I mean get-together. I'd like to meet her."

"Nick said she was welcome, but the babysitter couldn't stay late anyway." Pedro took a thoughtful sip of wine.

"Nick!" Ambrose practically jumped from the sofa. "You've been weirdly

quiet, bro, and you're, like, the man of the hour. I'd have skipped college altogether if I knew making a cell phone app would leave me a rich-ass bitch like yourself."

"That's right!" Celia joined with similar enthusiasm. "It was some kind of calendar, wasn't it?"

"A schedule-maker for students," Pedro said. "Really quite good."

"So, tell us about it, Nick," Celia said. "What's it like to strike gold?"

The quiet creaks from the rocking chair stopped. Everyone looked at Nick. Leslie knew he wasn't going to answer Celia's question.

"I wasn't planning on this," Nick said in a voice soft enough to make everyone lean toward him. "God knows I'm crazy for asking, but looking at you, I feel... we had a connection, once, so maybe..."

"Maybe what?" Leslie asked. She regretted asking.

Nick drank, likely for courage. "Do you... any of you... have... dreams? About... the place where...?"

The room fell silent. Ambrose and Celia sank into the sofa. Leslie's shoulders tightened as all lightness drained from the room.

*Too late to run.*

## Celia

"To go back to Nick's question, then, I'll admit it. I know exactly what Nick is talking about. I have... dreams." Celia's redirection of the conversation brought new quiet to the room. She waited for others to join her, to admit they had the dreams, too. Somebody would back her up. Ambrose...?

"Everybody has dreams," Ambrose said. "The question, Nick, is whether you have another bottle of wine." He held up his empty glass.

As Celia flashed Ambrose a look with her best combination of disappointment and disapproval, Leslie produced a bottle and corkscrew from the far side of the loveseat. Nick nodded at her. She corked the bottle and poured for everyone. After the pouring, everyone hid behind wine.

"Okay, okay," Celia said, somewhere between frustrated and amused at

EPISODE 1: DREAMS AND THE MOUTH

her old friends' juvenile behavior. "Everybody dreams, but not like this. On the one hand, it makes sense—we were all traumatized. Trauma equals bad dreams. Case closed, maybe. I hardly believe what I'm saying myself."

"What are you saying?" Leslie asked.

"These dreams are different," Pedro said.

Leslie shook her head. "Well, I don't remember my dreams."

"What do you dream, Pedro?" Nick asked the question and sounded a little bit younger. They were all sounding and maybe even looking a little bit younger, and the room had an energy, a craziness, animating all of them behind their still, cautious faces, and Celia didn't like it. It felt—

"We all knew something was wrong about that place," Pedro said.

*Wrong.* It felt wrong. "The sky," Celia said, surprised to hear herself say it. "In my dreams, there's something wrong with the sky."

"I remember," Ambrose said.

By "remember" did he mean—?

"The sky," Ambrose continued, "the sky was fucked up, the moon was fucked up, the stars were fucked up...."

"I have trouble knowing what's a dream and what's a memory," Nick said. Was he responding to Ambrose? Was Ambrose talking about memories rather than dreams? Celia wondered about herself. Was she talking about memories? The images in her mind, becoming sharper the longer she sat with this clique of people she hadn't seen in what felt like two lifetimes, had sheens of experience.

Except one. Swirls of color, a crowd of teeth. A mouth, drawing her in. She knew she'd never actually seen it. It was a dream.

Pedro seemed to sink into the carpet. "I remember one of the... dreams... pretty vividly."

Celia needed to get out of her head, and getting into Pedro's again seemed like a perfect avenue. "Oh?" She smiled at him. "Do tell."

"I was walking," Pedro said. Pedro looked into his wine, gazing into another resurfacing recollection. "We were always on our way somewhere. It was when the sky was starting to lose its color, and I tripped over—something—one of those roots from one of those big trees..."

## THE MIDDLE REACHES

“The trees got bigger, didn’t they?” Ambrose said.

“More twisted,” Celia said, surprised again as the words left her lips. In the distance, the trees became like walls, confining them to the path as they went on their way.

Pedro might not have even heard Ambrose’s and her own interjections. Speaking to the recollections in his wine, hypnotizing the room, Pedro said, “So I tripped, and when I hit the ground, I kept falling. The ground sank beneath me, taking me in. I hit the bottom of... it was like a grave... and turned up, toward the... discolored sky. All of the sudden, coming out of the dark around me, squirming, there were...”

He could stop now. Celia didn’t want to hear what squirmed.

“Worms. Coming out of the dirt that boxed me in, raining down on my head. Crawling up on me from the ground, on my clothes, on my skin. Trying to get in my mouth. I was too afraid to scream. Nick, you and Sheldon—”

A bolt of lightning, the name snapped everyone out of the trance. “Naturally, we come back to Sheldon,” Celia said. Trauma equaled bad dreams, and Sheldon was the trauma, the wound that had never stopped bleeding for any of them.

## Leslie

She didn’t understand why she’d lied, but denying that she remembered her dreams, that she knew what the others were talking about, had seemed imperative. The fantasy that their dreams meant something, and had something to do with Sheldon, had gotten out of control, though, and at any moment one of them would force her part of the truth to burst from her—  
*Mouth.*

“At first it was only Sheldon,” Nick said. “He had you halfway up before I got there and helped you the rest of the way out of the ground. I didn’t see... what you and he saw. Not there, anyway.”

“When he had a hold of my arms,” Pedro said, “the ground at the bottom of the hole, grave, whatever it was... collapsed into a... cloud. The cloud was

EPISODE 1: DREAMS AND THE MOUTH

full of colors and... teeth. The weird thing was—”

“Ah-ha!” Ambrose broke in with a laugh. “Now we get to the weird thing!

Pedro laughed, blushing. “I know it’s all ridiculous.”

“You forget I was there,” Nick said.

“*That* is ridiculous,” Leslie said. “We’re talking about dreams.”

“Are we?” Celia said.

Pedro straightened up and resumed with lighter composure: “The weird thing was that I knew The Mouth wasn’t really there. It was an image from another place, a place where it wanted me to come. Don’t ask me how I knew.”

Half-voiced, Leslie said, “You knew because you felt its desire. It overwhelms your feelings, your thoughts.”

“*Now* Leslie makes us unanimous,” Ambrose said. “We’ve all had the dreams, and Leslie *does* remember. Welcome to the party, my Lady Leslie.”

“I’ve seen it, The Mouth, and I’ve been waiting for one of you to mention it because...” Leslie looked from Pedro to Ambrose to Celia to Nick, hoping one of them could finish her “because.”

“Because we’ve all seen it,” Nick said. “It’s in a cavern, and it—”

“Causes some mighty strong feelings,” Ambrose said.

With a furrowed brow, Celia nodded.

“That’s what defines it,” Leslie said. “Those feelings, even more than death. Not just The Mouth, but the place that’s the reason for it. It yearns. *It yearns.*”