

“Use the Force”

So this whole Luke Skywalker thing—it is really my brother’s fault.

The dream isn’t a new one. I have had it many times. I am in a darkened metal cavern. I know it is metal because of the clanking that echoes every move I make. Soon I will see a faint red glow moving toward me from far, far away. As the glow nears me, I will hear the sound that terrifies me. Soon, faint but distinct, it begins.

Hollow.

Mechanical.

Menacing.

A labored inhale and then an exhale. Pause. Inhale exhale, pause. Breathing.

Darth Vader breathing.

I am six. I am trapped in the cavernous bowels of the Death Star. And Vader is after me.

No matter how fast I run, the red glow of his breathing panel and the sound of his inhalation follow me. No clever hiding place can fool him. This is the power of the Dark Side. Even in dreams the mythic cadences of George Lucas’s creation follow me. The dream always ends in the same way: I find a panel that leads into a crawl space, the crawl space leads to a corridor, the corridor leads to a wooden door. With all my strength I burst through the door and find myself in my room, the closet gaping wide behind me. The relief is intense but brief. The sound of Vader is here. In my room. I crumple to the floor knowing that there is nowhere I can hide. I always wake up screaming.

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My brother, ever logical, ever wise in the ways of good and evil—he is eight after all—says the best way for me to deal with the Dark Lord of the Sith is to conjure my own rebel alliance.

It is the next day and I am groggy over my Cheerios. He lectures me on battle tactics over his bowl of LIFE cereal and juice.

“Just think of Han Solo and Chewbacca—no one messes with a Wookiee.”

I am skeptical of course, “Luke Skywalker is cooler.”

“He’s a whiner.”

“He’s got the Force.”

Mom pours me another glass of orange juice and smiles indulgently at our intense conversation. This is not new. We were raised on *Star Wars* after all. But as my anxiety clearly oozes into our argument, worry creases her face.

“Maybe it is time for a new movie, guys,” she says as she eats her oatmeal. “If Lisha is having bad dreams maybe you should watch *Karate Kid* now. *Empire Strikes Back* might be too much for you.”

Quickly and loudly we assert that we are fine, and I hastily change the subject. Throughout the day I try to prove that I am brave and courageous and not desperately afraid of sleeping, so that we don’t lose our movie privileges. But the fear comes back right before the lights go out. That time is the battleground of childhood, when mom and dad leave the room in a new darkness that even a night light can’t dispel. Before I slip into panicked slumber I hear Aaron whisper, “Just think of Han and Chewie. They will save you.”

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Again, I am in the bowels of the Death Star. The dream plays out in the rising tension of terror. I hide; I run; I find the panel, the crawl space, the corridor, and the white wooden door of the inside of my closet. I know what I will face on the other side, but I can’t stop. I am bound in a flow of action that I cannot withstand. Will it work? Or will the dream deny me of my one way out?

I careen into my room. I know that soon the breathing will start and I will be able to make out the deeper darkness of Vader's body armor from the normal darkness of the room. No nightlight in this dream. There are the two twin beds. There is my brother's sleeping form in the bed next to me under the Transformers quilt. I am compelled forward. My heart begins to pound as I hear the ominous rasp of breath on the other side of the room. The fear is dead weight on my chest. The breathing roars in my ears. I feel my will melting as I crumple to the floor—"Save me. Save me."

Aaron's words break through the vacuum of air in my ears. "Just think of Han and Chewie. They will save you."

Something snaps in me. My imagination conjures as quickly as it can a scenario where Han and Chewie exist and suddenly they burst out of the closet behind me, blaster and bowcaster leveled at the Dark Lord.

"Your time is up Vader. The girl is ours—you just walked into your own funeral!" Chewie roars his agreement to Han's swagger and vibrato. Maybe I am going to be alright.

Cruel laughter shatters the darkness, "Don't underestimate the power of the Dark Side, Solo. You will pay for your impertinence."

The room explodes.

Nothing could withstand a firestorm like that. Maybe is going to work.

Han and Chewie stop firing.

Silence.

"See I told you there was nothing to worry about kid." Han grins at me.

Then we all hear it. The breathing is there again. Out of the darkness comes Darth Vader. Not a scratch or wound is visible on his armor.

“I’ve got a very bad feeling about this, take cover.”

Vader blocks every shot and then uses his power to yank the blaster and the bowcaster from the hands of my rebel friends.

“It’s not my fault,” Han gasps and dives under Aaron’s bed; Chewie finds cover by the bookcase. I alone am left in the open, paralyzed. It isn’t going to work. I am not strong enough. How can Han and Chewie lose?

“Use The Force!” It is as if Obiwan Kenobi finally is speaking to me and me alone. “Use the Force, trust your feelings!” The disembodied voice of Sir Alec Guinness gives me courage.

Vader methodically and cruelly closes the distance on my position. The Force! I am no Jedi. I’m a little kid. Of course, like all kids my age I have pretended to be a Jedi; I created a character of my own Alsiah Windrider a powerful Jedi scholar. But that’s just make-believe right? I need help, I need a hero. I need—

Suddenly out of the depths of the closet there is a snap hiss—and in a flash of illuminating green light saber immerses Luke Skywalker—not the wimpy whiner from Tatooine, but the fully matured black suited Luke equipped with rebuilt Light Saber and robotic right hand. Everything is suddenly still. Even Vader’s breathing takes on a choked quality. The non-robotic humans in the room hold our collective breath.

“So . . .you have brought Skywalker into this, have you child? Even he cannot withstand the power of the Dark Side.”

“It is you who are mistaken Vader,” Luke’s voice states calmly. “It is you who cannot withstand the full power of the Force. Your thoughts betray you, Father. I feel the conflict within you. ”

“There is no conflict.”

“You couldn’t bring yourself to kill me before and I don’t believe you’ll destroy me now.”

“You underestimate the power of the Dark Side. If you will not fight, then you will meet your destiny.”

“Yes, Father. We all will meet our destiny this night.”

And verbatim, even to the swelling of a soundtrack no one had heard before, I watch the ending fight scene in *Return of the Jedi*, which has just recently come out on home video, unfold before me. I see the courage, the despair, the fear and anger. But most of all I see the hope of us all. The hope that Luke will survive—that somehow his father, Anakin, will return again to the good side of The Force. Cowering on the floor, the flash of the light sabers dazzles my eyes. I close them to ward off the intense energy being expended over my head. I begin to slip away, spiraling into oblivion.

When I awaken it is in the half light of dawn. Luke Skywalker sits at the foot of my bed. He looks tired but determined.

“What happened?” I ask groggily.

“I think you know. Search your feelings.” He murmurs softly.

“Darth Vader is dead?” I ask hopefully.

“Yes,” Luke says sadly. “I think inside you knew that only I could vanquish the man that my father had become. He did turn back to our side in the end. His life was wasted by fear and anger. Those are the tools . . .”

“Of the Dark Side,” I whisper.

He smiles. “Yes. I think you know more than you give yourself credit for. Life is full of fear and hurt and anger. But it is also full of friendship, loyalty, and hope, from a certain point of view. These are the ways . . .”

“Of the Force.” So many thoughts swirl in my head. Like the great tumblers of a lock each of the pieces begin to fall into place. I sense that it will take a long time before it all makes sense.

“So I don’t have to be afraid?” I ask hopefully.

“You will be. But it is what you do with that fear that will control your destiny.”

“Will you help me?”

Luke smiles. “I will be here as long as you need me, in some form or another. Now, go back to sleep.”

“But I ‘m awake.”

“Go back to sleep.”

“I’m awake.”

I feel someone shaking me gently by the shoulders.

“I’m awake!”

“Lish, you’re still in your bed! Did you have a bad dream?”

“Not all of it.”

“Wow, what happened? Did you call Han and Chewie? I bet they shot up Lord Vader faster than . . .”

Aaron’s babbling continues as I try to grasp on to the last of my dream. All that is left is a faint echo of Luke’s voice.

“The Force will be with you. Always.”