

Excerpt from:

Dreams of

Twenty

by Benjamin Gayle

None of this is real, I dreamed all of it.

Dreams of Twenty

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Cover art “Sound of clouds”

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Short story, “Secrets in Cuba”, is a work of fiction.

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0. Preface

This book is a collection of dreams that I recorded during the year of 2020, arranged in sequence by month and date.

I have been recording dreams for years, but 2020 was different. In previous years, I only published the fully-formed scenes of dreams and cut out the fragments and things that I couldn't adequately describe. The Covid-19 pandemic brought new stresses and anxieties on multiple levels. There was a constant underlying fear of getting sick. There were fluctuations in product availability on grocery store shelves. I had to continue to work, and even work overtime, on an open factory floor where social and physical distancing were impossible and most workers refused to wear masks. I didn't sleep as well or as much, and what dreams came were difficult to hold onto long enough to record, resulting in more and longer gaps and shorter reports. For this year, I am including some of those fragments to present a more complete picture of my dreams. These fragments are in double parens ((like this)).

The cover photo relates to a song lyric that resonates with my experience for the year, though I can't find my own words to explain why. From “Aurora Tour” by NiNa (YUKI and Kate Pierson): “Say what you're gonna say, and do what you're gonna do. Can you hear it? It's the sound of the clouds as they pass by.” Perhaps this is the version of *this too shall pass* that speaks to me.

I define *dream* as that which I experience in the

state of sleeping consciousness: I go to bed, fall asleep (I hope), and dream (often). What I write down is whatever I can remember when I wake, whatever I can drag back across to waking consciousness. These are *not* stories that I have purposefully created – I dreamed all of it. Each entry is my objective attempt to describe what I experienced in the dream, and no more. The entries have been minimally edited for readability.

1. January

01 January

Shopping in a car. We drive through the checkout, where we hand our items to the clerk through the car window. She scans them and puts them into a large cardboard box on a pallet. I don't know where we got the items, and I don't know where they are going as a forklift carries them away.

. . .

Going to a baseball game, at least that is what I *think* we are doing. I walk with an old man through a crowded parking lot toward a building that looks like a stadium. When we are on a sidewalk that follows the building around to a sheltered entrance, he starts talking about the franchise. “Ten locations in ten states,” he says, “and ten shows per day.” He is obviously impressed with the operation. We enter through dark glass doors and continue with many others up ramped corridors with concrete floors and painted block walls that are color-coded by level. I don't remember seeing the baseball game, if there was one. The old man has disappeared.

Now an attendant guides me through a corridor to a restroom. Inside are three stalls, one urinal, and two sinks. A man is singing loudly in one of the stalls. I wash my hands then go to the urinal. It is blocked by a bucket. When I push the bucket aside, the urinal turns

into a floor drain. I try to be careful to hit the drain as I relieve myself. When I am finished, I wash my hands again. The singing man has left. Outside in the corridor, I have to return my hat to the attendant because it was only a rental.

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Visiting a relative. I have not seen him for many years and we were never close. We get out of the car at a neat brick house with trimmed green lawn and concrete walkway that leads from the sidewalk to the front steps. I see two stacks of paper on the sidewalk near the back of a pickup truck. I walk over and look. Here are schematics, electrical and mechanical drawings, marked with the name of the man we are visiting. I thought I was the only one in the family who designed and built things. The top sheet of one stack is marked 'Tractor', a mechanical drawing that might be part of a farm implement, but I have never seen one shaped like that before. The other stack has electrical schematics, their function not immediately obvious. I lift the pages to look at what is underneath. As I do, a woman calls to me, "Don't look at the last page." She is the man's wife and she sounds concerned. I put the papers down, but now the wind is blowing. I worry that the pages will blow away, so I pick pieces of metal from a pile of what looks like junk next to the pickup truck to act as paperweights to hold the papers down.

Then the man appears. He skips the family-friendly greetings and asks me in a serious tone if I will drive the forklift. I *can* drive a forklift, but don't understand why he would want me to. He says we need to move the stuff off of the pickup truck and down the street. I still don't understand why he wants *me* to do this; can he not drive? I follow him down a shallow slope to a barn

behind the house. Here is a forklift, brush-painted in dark blue. Before we can do anything else, she comes in and pulls me away, saying we need to go back to the house.

Some time later, the man has disappeared. She and I and the man's wife and son walk down the street to a large brick building. We go inside and walk through where classes are in session and children are playing. The son seems to be searching for something. In the gymnasium, I think he finds it because he sends out an alarm to evacuate the building. The man's wife tells us we have to run, pulling us along toward an exit. When she realises that the son is not following, she calls back to him. He says he has to try to defuse the bomb. The three of us run out into the schoolyard where we see airplanes coming in low. They drop some objects that race toward the school. There isn't enough time to get to a safer place, so we hide behind the brick wall that rings the schoolyard. I see three objects hit the gymnasium, which implodes, leaving the rest of the school intact.

. . .

Walking along a paved path toward a house. A woman greets me. I think she is a relative. I hold out a white plastic binder and ask if she will manage my savings account for me. She reluctantly takes the binder and says we will discuss it. I also hand her some coins that need to be deposited. She turns and goes inside the house. I follow her, but she goes into a bathroom. I go into a different bathroom to wash my hands. When I press down on the soap dispenser spout to get a dollop of soap, it pushes out a small soapy sponge. That seems strange, but I rub my hands with the sponge and rinse them in the sink. I don't know what to do with the sponge, so I leave it on the rim of the sink.

Then I go into the kitchen to wait for the woman. Here, a man asks me about the kitchen cabinets. He shows me how the shelves are arranged and how they are attached, then asks about rearranging them. I'm not sure if he is asking how to do it or if he is asking for permission to do it. Either way, I can't help him. I sit down at the kitchen table and think about my savings plan. Now I am not sure the woman can manage it for me because the bank might not let her make deposits into my account.

. . .

Shopping for a stove. I go to an appliance convention where all of the local dealers have displays. Here is a variety of stove models with prices, but no indication of which dealer sells what model at what price. I will still need to visit each individual store to find the one I want. I look for the lowest price – two-hundred six dollars for a small two-burner electric stove with oven. Then I notice one to its right, a nicer-looking gas model priced at one-hundred three dollars. That is attractive, but I'm not sure I want a gas stove.

. . .

Riding a bicycle through a resort area. I am delayed by a road construction crew. They are putting down new pavement in a way that I have never seen before. A large machine mixes hot asphalt with crushed brick, then extrudes it as a sheet onto the road. Another machine comes along behind, a large roller that presses the material down and imprints a pattern of raised bumps, for better traction, I presume.

. . .

Stealing shoes. I am in a combination recreation area, restaurant, and bar, when a group of tourists come through. They all take off their shoes and leave them in

a pile on the floor. I pick through the pile, find a pair in my size, and put them on. Later, I hear one of the tourists complaining about the missing shoes. I go up to him and take his shirt and put it on, a short-sleeved button-down in a red-and-white gingham print, the same as the rest of the tourists are wearing. Then I walk away as he continues to complain.

. . .

Visiting a mansion that is built into the side of a cliff. At first, we are outside, flying-hovering in the dark, looking in the windows. Then we are inside in what looks like a living room. A man and woman enter the room, dressed up as if for a formal occasion. They are surprised to see us. The man makes a phone call. Another man shows up, also dressed formally, but he acts like a security guard. While they are trying to decide what to do with us, children enter the room, a stream of them from toddlers to teenagers. They insist on having a dance. In the confusion and noise, a few of the older children herd the two of us out of the room and through a long series of corridors. One of them keeps a hand on my back, pushing me forward. I try to speed up, but can't go any faster than the person in front of me. I don't know where they are taking us or why.

02 January

Riding in a car with an unfamiliar man. I think we are going to my new school. I keep watching, looking for a school building. I also want to remember the way, but there are too many turns. I get excited when I see a large building with a large parking lot, but it turns out to be a church. We stop for a while and sit at a table

inside. The man eats while I fiddle with my music player. The right earphone cover is worn out; I will have to replace it. I see a school bus drive into the parking lot and stop, number twenty-six. I think that is the bus that I am supposed to ride to my new school, so I get up to go out and get on. It drives away before I can get to it. We get back into the car and continue driving. Now I don't know where we are going.

. . .

Racing radio-controlled cars. I have assembled a car and a radio, a white can-am style racer that is low to the ground, but don't know what to do with it. Someone connects me with a racetrack. I get signed up for a race and show up early in the afternoon. I stand at the check-in counter for what seems like a long time as busy race officials take care of other things. I eventually speak up to interrupt them and ask what to do. One of the officials takes my car and tells me to sit on a bench behind the counter where two others are already sitting. Each spot on the bench has a shelf for a car and radio.

Some time later, I wake up on the bench, naked, under a sheet. I must have taken a nap. I try to get dressed under the sheet as I get my bearings. It is past 20:00 and the other two racers are going through checklists to make sure their cars are ready to race. I ask a race official what I should do to get ready. He tells me that he already did everything for me. I am disappointed that I won't learn anything today. As I sit and wait, I worry about my car, wondering if the batteries are charged, if the radio frequency is clear, if the transmission is geared properly for this track.

. . .

Going to the bathroom at work. I walk through the production area, up an aisle that ends at white double-

doors that lead to the office area. Here there is traffic. The lock on the doorknob is jammed. The key won't open it. I remember having trouble with it recently. Several engineers are here working on it, apparently to force it, not fix it. One of them works on it with a screwdriver stuck in the keyhole. I resolve to go around to another door, but as I turn away, the lock pops and the door swings open so I follow them through.

I turn to the right, down a corridor that leads past conference rooms and isolated test areas. I find an empty restroom in the back corner of a conference room and go in. When I am finished, I take a walk, down the corridor to its end and out through double-doors to an asphalt-paved path. It winds around, first downhill, then up around company buildings and around the far end of the company property, past the owner's house. The multi-level house has white siding and gray trim and shutters. Asphalt driveways lead to multiple garages. There are other houses here; I don't know if any of them belong to the company. Then some small brick apartment buildings. I wonder if any of my co-workers live there.

Back at the main building, I know I could walk around to the front and go up the front steps, but think it more appropriate to use my key to go through a side door. I sit on the steps wondering what I should do next. I empty my pockets and take inventory: keys, wallet, handkerchief, pencil. Then I go back inside through the front door.

. . .

Finishing up a testing session at work. It is time to take a break, so I get up and go to a window to look out. The company building is built into a hillside at the edge of the ocean. The windows look uphill, a shallow grassy slope with a few scattered trees. Children play out

there. I look to one tree in particular. Sometime before, a large silver-and-blue painted rocket-shaped bomb had dropped near the top of the hill and tumbled down to get stuck in the tree. It is still there. Two of the engineers were supposed to take care of it. I see them out there in the field, but they are working on something else. I feel a tremor, a minor earthquake, and see the bomb move. It drops from the tree and rolls toward the building. I try to warn people, to tell them to take cover, but it is too late. I run for the basement. I don't feel the blast but know something is wrong because now steaming-hot water is seeping in under the doors that lead outside to the beach at the bottom of the hill. I check the comms – nothing. Then I take the tunnel through solid rock to the other side of the building. Here I find a woman; I think she is important but don't remember why. She is dazed but otherwise unhurt. I ask her what happened. *Thermonuclear blast*. I know that. Maybe I should not have asked. We try to assess the damage. Others here are okay but we can't communicate with the outside world, or even the upper floors of the building.

. . .

Making work. There are not enough components to make complete finished products, so we take what we have to make sub-assemblies. After work, we use the products out on a hiking trail. We wear brown shirts with special pockets that hold battery packs, a control box, and a LED panel that has a handle and clips onto a loop on the shirt. They function as flashlight, strobe, and spotlight. We hike in the daytime, exploring side-trails. Here is an abandoned train car. We go in to look, but find nothing interesting, just rust and rotting seats. Nearby is a bus overgrown with dense vegetation. Again

we go in and find nothing. Then we come to a stairwell, concrete steps and metal railings that lead down to an underground train platform. It is quiet here. We agree to camp close to here and choose a spot. On the way, we pass others on the trail. They don't have special shirts like we do. When it gets dark, we test our lights. We find that the strobe is especially effective at scaring away bears. One of my co-workers talks about *raezedon*, the name of a special product feature that our company has exclusive rights to. I have never heard it called that before.

06 *January*

Riding a bicycle across the galaxy. I am trying to make it all the way to Trantor. I have to ride point-to-point on a planet, then fly to the next planet. I don't understand the rules for choosing the route on each planet. Some planets have no roads. Others charge high taxes on bicycle traffic because they don't use the State-monopoly fuel. On each planet, a different cat rides on the handlebar and acts as a local guide.

. . .

Making adjustments. Every time I turn a knob, I have to make an adjustment with a screwdriver. Then I have to turn the knob again to compensate. This process continues for so long that I worry I won't get this circuit board tuned before it is time to go home.

. . .

Testing a device at work. I have to connect wires to screw terminals at various odd angles on a circuit board. I have to repeat this over and over to get it right. Then I take the device to a gray box mounted on a wall.

I'm not sure how the device connects to the box, but when I flip a switch, I hear a tone. When I turn a knob, the volume changes. When I push-click the volume control, the pitch changes. I think it is working.

07 *January*

Looking over piles of dirty plastic dishes. She asks what will happen to all of it. An unfamiliar man says it will go out with the trash unless we want to save any of it. She doesn't want it to be wasted, so I guess I will have to help clean everything up.

08 *January*

Looking over an old yellow Volkswagen. An unfamiliar man berates her for the condition it has deteriorated to due to her abuse and neglect. It is dirty, the yellow paint barely visible through the grime. The small door that hides the fuel filler cap has a dead wasp stuck in it. When I open it, I find more wasps, and not all of them are dead. Nearby is another small door surrounded by amber reflectors. There are more wasps inside.

. . .

((rewinding the cord on a vacuum cleaner, over and over))

. . .

Buying a pickup truck. It is a silver-and-maroon Chevy. I watch as they clean it up for me. The salesman asks if I want a cap to go on it. I ask how much that will cost. *Free*. It came off of another pickup because the

customer didn't want it. I say yes cautiously, wondering if this will cost me in some other way. The manager calls in a team all dressed in black. I watch as they prepare the pickup and install the cap. Some of the team members refuse to participate. I look at the collection of keys that the salesman handed me and wonder what each one is for.

09 *January*

Configuring a system. I have just figured out that the setting labeled 'Count Change' must be set to value 'H' when a man rolls up in a wheelchair. He seems vaguely familiar; I think he is a co-worker but I'm not sure. His pant legs are folded up and pinned just above where his knees would be. He starts talking about another project, distracting me from *my* project. I want for him to go away, to let me finish my work, but I don't want to be rude to him.

. . .

Sitting on a sofa in an unfamiliar living room. A woman comes up to me with a large roundish pillow in a satin-shiny green pillowcase. She says, "You might like this pillowcase, but it costs sixty-five dollars." Another woman comes up holding a variety of pillowcases without pillows in other colors and fabrics. She says, "You might find that one of these fits your budget better." She cycles through the options. Some look like cotton, some look like corduroy, and some like burlap. I don't understand why I have to make this choice.

. . .

Writing. I sit on the floor in my bedroom with a notebook and pencil until I run out of words. When I am

finished, I go to the kitchen for a glass of water. While standing in the kitchen, I hear the next-door neighbor talking to a reporter. I recognise the reporter's voice from the radio. She is interviewing residents about a local political situation. The neighbor suggests that she interview *me*. I don't want to get involved. My phone rings; I ignore it. Then a knock on the front door. I stand still, hoping the reporter will think that I am not at home. A few minutes later, I go out the back door, to the left and around the side of the house on a cement-paved walkway. As I round the front corner of the house, I see the reporter getting into her car. I hesitate, then hurry around to the front door. I fumble with the latch on the tall red double-doors, hoping that the reporter doesn't notice me. I make it in and through, closing the door behind me and setting the lock-latch, a bar that swings down to hook the doors together. I stand in the foyer, silver-framed glass doors behind me, trying to work the latch but there is a gap between the doors and they won't latch closed.

. . .

Suiting up to go outside. I have to re-solder some connectors on the side of the building. I have an airtight suit with a bulky backpack and a soldering torch, a slender metal tube with a translucent pink hose that connects to a cylinder inside the building. I have to make sure the cylinder is charged-up before I go. I expect there to be an airlock, but the sliding double-doors lead directly outside. The hose for the soldering torch prevents the doors from closing behind me. Something is wrong with the connectors that soldering won't fix, so I go back inside to confer with others.

. . .

Helping an archaeologist excavate rooms in a

building. We stand at a silvery metallic wall that looks solid. When he presses his hands against the wall, a small panel slides down and in. We pull the panel section out, a light metal skin with a layer of insulation behind it. Then another panel behind it, then another, revealing a sloping metallic channel barely large enough for one of us to fit into. Many insulated panels later, we arrive at a chamber full of items that I can't identify. This is what the archaeologist was digging for. Later, I help to excavate another chamber.

10 January

((testing LED lights; then my sister brings in a different type of bulb, I have to reconfigure my setup to test it))

11 January

Arriving at work. I walk from a parking lot and across a street toward the building. As I go, I hear people talking about the plant, the business, and its history. It apparently used to be larger and more successful. Instead of going in through the main entrance, I choose a small brown door farther down the side of the building. Inside, I find myself in a restricted area. The way to the production area is blocked by a heavy door behind a metal gate. A man that I don't recognise comes in wearing a blue uniform. He shakes his head, then puts a card in a slot and pushes some buttons on a keypad. The gate and door open. I thank him and hurry through before they close on me.

I walk for what seems like a long time. Smooth concrete floor and machines and workbenches and pallets and shelves in no apparent order. On the way to my work area, a woman walks beside me. She complains about stress and having too many things to do. I agree with her and try to tell her about the things that I am doing, but she doesn't seem to listen. She gets called away by another co-worker. I continue on to my work area.

Here is a large square table, bare on top, unfinished work stored on a shelf underneath. I am preparing to get some of the unfinished work out when a woman pushing a cart stops at my table. She picks up a package wrapped in blue waxed paper, sets it on my table, then pushes her cart away. More work, though it doesn't look like mine. I think it should go to my co-worker at the next table over, but she is busy. When I pick up the package, I find that it is wet. I try to dry it off by wiping it on my shirt. Then I set it on the table and open it. Here is a small stack of photo prints, all the same, showing indistinct blobs of light on a dark background. I have to install them into picture frames.

Before I can finish the first one, someone interrupts, handing out books for class. The first book is a novel; I think I have read it before. Then an anthology, more familiar material. I try to work, but the books keep coming. Everyone gets the same titles, all old and worn copies that we have to turn back in when class is over. I wonder when the class will be.

Later, I go out for lunch, or at least outside the building. I carry my backpack which is now full of books, and my clipboard. I am on my way back into the building when I stop near the entrance to adjust my load and stuff the clipboard into the backpack. A large man

comes up to me and says something. I see his lips moving but no sound is coming out. I don't know how to respond. He tries again, and again no sound. I tell him that I can't hear what he is saying, I don't understand. He is wearing a pinstriped shirt and a badge that says 'General Manager' but no name. He seems to be hostile. "What are you doing here?" he finally manages to get out. I work here. I'm not sure if he meant something else. He scowls and goes into the building.

Inside, things have changed. I walk down a narrow carpeted hallway, wall to my right and closed doors to my left. The first and only door on the right leads back out to the production area. Here is a line of lockers against the wall and several closed doors between them with yellow signs that say 'Phones reset after seven days.' Here are two rows of chairs on either side of a wide aisle. Many people I don't recognise sit, walk around, and make noise. They don't seem to be doing anything useful. I have to wander through the chairs and people to find my work area.

Now I am in a large cubicle, across the aisle from the lockers and chairs. Desks are lined up against the cubicle walls and one table is in the center. This is more like an office than a production area. Here is a stack of photo prints that I have to paint decorations onto.

At break time, I make coffee in a plastic waste-paper bin. Afterward, I think I should have checked to make sure it was clean and would not leak. I try to read a poetry book as I sip coffee, but a woman keeps bringing more work, interrupting my break. I don't know what I am supposed to do with it.

Here is a wooden box that contains a thin book. The first page has a photograph. People sit on three levels. On the bottom level, a younger man and woman

sit with children to the right while an older woman sits alone to the left. On the middle row, an older man sits to the right with an older woman and two younger people. Nobody sits on the left. On the top level, an older man sits on the right, alone, and a younger group sits on the left. The rest of the book is a text in characters that I can't read. I don't know what to do with that. I try to go back to reading the poetry book but can't concentrate.

. . .

Looking out over translucent greenish water. Ships are docked at the base of a cliff along a concrete walkway. They look like miniatures, too small to hold people. Somehow I cross the water to the walkway and go through glass double-doors into the hotel that is carved into the cliff. I think I shouldn't be here because I am not a paying guest, but wander around anyway. I walk through the lobby, then a sort of lounge, then back outside through a different door. Now the ships have all gone. I can see the docking connections, metallic threaded inserts in the rock where the ships connect their cables.

15 January

((getting out of a yellow car that is parked on smooth concrete; the driver-side rear tire is flat))

16 January

((working for a gang that throws me a surprise birthday party))

. . .

Going to class. Inside the building, a crowd of people blocks the hallway. Many of them are gathered around a tall skinny girl in a loosely-fitting bathing suit. They all seem to want her to do something for them. She just wants to go for a swim, then take care of her own needs. I manage to push through the crowd to the elevator and in. I ride up to the sixth floor, the top floor of the building. Here, the elevator opens to a stainless steel door that leads into a large kitchen, one long narrow room lined with stainless steel sinks and appliances. Nobody else is here. I don't remember the class. Now I need to go to my next class, down steps to the fourth floor. Here is a gate. I am supposed to drop my books into a chute and put coins into a slot to pass through. Papers tacked to the wall beside the gate list names of people demanding refunds and for how much. I go through the gate without paying. The next time I go to class on the sixth floor, the kitchen is busy. A chef pulls me aside. He leads me out of the building to participate in a tree-planting ceremony.

. . .

Going to the beach with co-workers. We set up camp on the beach. I am slow and the last to finish. Then we engage in search-and-rescue exercises in the water. I don't want to participate, but compromise by coordinating from the shore. Later, I walk through a seaside village looking for my co-workers. I carry two bottles of orange soda, taking sips from one of them, then the other as I walk.

18 *January*

((test force, a hired service, engineers show up on service calls))

. . .

((at work, my fingertips are bleeding from handling the circuit boards))

. . .

Visiting at a large house with my sister. A man in a suit gives us a tour of the place, then takes us to our rooms. My room is huge. The door opens to a living room with a couch facing a television on the right side of the room, a fireplace beside it, and doors to closets and a bathroom behind it. Past the living room is a bar, a chest-high counter that extends halfway into the room from the wall, separating the living room from the bedroom. We meet a stern woman who makes us sign in a book; we will have to sign again when we leave. My sister follows the woman to her room. I stay and look around, wondering what to do. Other vaguely-familiar people start showing up; I think they are family. They talk in groups, or sit on the couch eating snacks while watching television. One has started a fire in the fireplace. I think it is too warm for that. As I wander through, everyone acknowledges my presence but none speaks to me.

I end up leaving the room and walking around outside. It is warm and sunny. I find a small bathroom built into the side of the house. The door is a plastic hatch that opens upward on a recessed hinge. Inside are two collapsed portable toilets mounted on metal rails. There is no plumbing. There is also not enough room for me to get inside. I wonder how that is supposed to work. I close the hatch and move on. I find a dirt road

behind the house and follow it, while thinking about how uncomfortable I felt with all of those people in my room. Soon I hear clapping and whirring behind me – a horse-drawn carriage. I move to the side of the road to give it plenty of room to pass. Then people on horses and bicycles going in both directions. Some of them are dressed up as racers. I pass a stable where more horses stand in a field.

20 January

Staying at someone else's house. I hear screaming, seeming to come from the back door. I am scared, but follow the sound and find that it is loudest in the kitchen. Through the window, I see something moving in the backyard, so I go out to look. I find a woman watering a garden in the dark. She asks me if the pipes are making noise again.

. . .

Watching two cars driving around in a yard. They crash into each other repeatedly, seemingly for fun. One of them backs into the house, damaging the bricks. Nearby, a lineman makes repairs on the electrical service line that connects to the house. He uses a jack to raise a utility pole and hooks on either side to support the wires. Each wire is held in place by a clamp. They radiate out in a fan that nearly touches the ground. That seems dangerous. The service truck has one wheel on a guide rail that is embedded into the street.

. . .

Working in a messy shop. A large support structure of scaffolding and beams inside holds the project and the emergency escape system. Something malfunctions,

though not obviously an emergency. The system mistakes the event for an emergency, so it takes the project leader, stuffs him into an escape capsule, and launches it. The capsule extends wings to become a delta-winged glider that shoots up and loops over, then back down to crash into the project support structure, knocking it down and knocking over my bicycle. I get a broom and start sweeping up the mess of fasteners and dirt.

21 *January*

Unwrapping hard drives to use in a project. I have to hook them up for test with the rest of the project parts, then repeat over and over, changing the configuration each time.

. . .

Shopping for clothes. I see a co-worker doing laundry at his workbench. I ask him where he got the clothes – at the store across the aisle. Then I ask if they were affordably priced – yes. I go across the aisle to shop. Here three women are shopping, comparing the clothes, blocking the aisles. The clothes are mostly short-sleeved plaid shirts. Some of them are on sale. I find a whole-body insulated suit priced at three dollars ninety-seven cents. The soles of the feet have cutouts for clipless bicycle cleats. I don't know what I would use it for, but it is too good of a deal to pass up so I buy it anyway, just in case.

. . .

Recycling. I sort thing into categories and return all of it to the store. On the way, I run into two women driving a coppery-golden car. One of them has to tell me about the car, like a commercial. It has no center door

pillars and the trunk lid has two lumps, an unusual shape. I have to climb into the back of the car to sort their recycling. Here, among the plastic bags and bottles I find packages of salted almonds and peanuts. I keep those and open one because I am hungry.

. . .

Staying in a basement. I carry glasses to a small sink in a bathroom to wash them. Here, a white plastic thing with a power connector blocks the sink. I don't know what that is. I set it aside, wash the glasses, then turn to the toilet. It is surrounded by cardboard boxes and wrapping paper and the lid is up – someone has used it while I was away. I put the lid down and go back out. I hear a lawnmower. It is past 23:30 and dark. I wonder why someone would be mowing in the dark.

22 January

Changing a diaper. A woman makes me help with her instruction. It involves wiping, attaching the diaper, then installing the baby in a foam-lined wooden box. I have trouble with that part. The baby keeps falling over so I have to repeat the step until I get it right. Then I follow the woman, carrying the box with the baby somewhere to drop it off.

23 January

Sorting through raw materials for a manufacturing process. This requires multiple steps. The stream of raw material flows in from somewhere unknown on a slow-moving conveyor belt with high green-painted sides. It

looks like a long dumpster. At first, I am inside the conveyor channel. I have to pick out all of the trash, anything that is not paper. Most of the things are trash or junk: empty plastic and glass bottles, worn-out shoes, broken pieces of things that I can't identify. I have to throw them over the side of the conveyor into a dumpster. Then I start finding interesting things that I don't want to throw away: an old typewriter, a hand-made wooden cabinet for a radio, an old radio. I am conflicted but still throw them into the dumpster because there is no place to set them aside here.

Later, I am on the plant floor next to the conveyor, on the other side from the dumpster. Here are piles of trash that I have to sort through. My directive is to throw the trash over the rail onto the conveyor. That seems counter-productive because someone on the conveyor will have to pick it out and throw it into the dumpster. Why not put it into a dumpster directly? Again I find interesting things. Here is a small box of electronic parts that I think I can use. I set them on a nearby table and write my name on the box. Then I find a box of postcards from some old war. It jingles. Inside I find coins, tokens, buttons, and some unusual fasteners that look like fender strut bolts. I have to dump it all out onto the floor to see what all is in there, thinking that I will keep the coins and tokens and discard the rest. Sorting through it is taking too long. A supervisor comes to check on me while I am on my knees on the floor looking at the things. I put everything back into the box, set it on the table next to the other box, and go back to throwing pieces of junk over the railing onto the conveyor.

. . .

Avoiding a controversy until I can't. A company

has developed a process of assembling electronics into cylinder-shaped packages with wiring harnesses that connect to computers and monitoring devices. The devices have developed consciousness and resent being used. They can't physically move, but they rebel, using their connections to command the manufacture of a metallic spherical device. It is set loose, rolling on the rails that transport cars of raw materials and finished goods inside the plant, to a sensitive central location where it detonates. The blast vaporises the plant and levels the surrounding structures for kilometers around. The devices have annihilated themselves and destroyed the capability for manufacturing them, but the knowledge survives on the company's space station. Multiple factions engage in the wake of the rebellion against the company. A space battle ensues, culminating in the destruction of the space station, pieces raining down onto the planet, a significant chunk landing in the ocean, not far from shore. Several principals of the company survive and are considered responsible but not detained.

This is where I get confused. I don't remember the part about the station being destroyed. I have a fan-service postcard from one of the actors in the show, thanking me for watching and hinting at what might happen in future episodes. My sister says that is just misdirection when I show her the postcard. They want to keep me in suspense so I will continue watching.

. . .

Standing on a platform, surveying. It is an old red pickup truck converted with a flat bed and a structure that supports a shingled roof. The driver position is backwards, facing the back of the vehicle. We are going on a trip and I have to decide what to take. I go back inside the house to pick. Some things I will leave here to

get later. I put them into three cardboard boxes and label them. I carry the rest out to the truck and stack them up. An old man and woman also carry things out to the truck. I suppose they will be going with me. When everything has been loaded onto the truck, I take one last look around the house. My three boxes are missing. I am upset, have to find them, but the old man says it is time to go. We board the truck, me and the woman on the platform, and the old man at the controls. He eases the truck out of the driveway and onto the road where he proceeds to drive too fast.

. . .

Watching as a man and a woman prepare for recycling. They sort the plastic and glass into separate bags, then get onto a strange motorcycle. It looks like an aerodynamic recliner atop a wheel, with a footrest that tapers to a point at the front. I can only see one wheel. The man gets onto the recliner, then the woman sits in front of him, holding the bags of recycling. She sits as if she has never ridden a motorcycle before. I think she might fall off when it starts moving. The man tells her where to put her feet, inboard on the footrest, then puts his feet outside hers. I don't know how they are balancing with no feet on the ground. They roll down the driveway and make a left turn onto the street, picking up speed as they pass a neighbor who is standing at the curb, waving an empty glass bottle at them. They ignore him.

. . .

Making counterfeit coins. We feed used plastic, stolen from a recycling drop-off, into a machine that outputs brownish-yellow coins marked one ruble in Cyrillic. We sell the plastic coins for twenty-five cents each.

24 *January*

Learning Chinese from a co-worker. I already know a few words from songs. When he finds out, he insists on teaching me more. I submit and soon can have brief conversations with him.

25 *January*

Eating dinner with her. This restaurant is different. We are sitting at the only table in a small room. There are no windows. The only door is a louvered swinging door with open space at the top and bottom. The food is good but not what I expected. The serving tray is on the floor next to the table, and the food on a cardboard box on top of it. I see cat eyes blinking in the dark on the other side of the door.

. . .

Visiting a financial institution. I need to deposit a check and am considering taking out a loan for a project. The clerk has trouble counting out the money. The questions are easy enough. “One dollar,” he says as he fishes four quarters out of a plastic pouch. The dimes are harder, and the nickels mixed in with them confuse him. Before he finishes with the coins, another clerk walks up and puts a check on top of the stack of bills. This derails him completely and he has to start over.

. . .

Attending classes for work. A co-worker hands me a brochure and tells me that we are signed-up for two classes. The brochure is both advertisement and schedule. The prices scare me – nine-hundred ninety-five dollars plus travel expenses to Alaska for the first class. I

wonder if we can afford that. I don't see the second class listed. She says it is for a different manufacturer in a different location. We arrive in a parking lot and wait with a crowd of people for the sign that it is time to start. Some of the students are dressed in running clothes, others in business suits. At the signal from the man who seems to be in charge, we all head up a concrete-paved walkway to a glass building on top of a hill. I am carrying a notebook and the class brochure. My co-worker carries a plastic suitcase. We enter the building and follow a corridor to a large room with floor-to-ceiling windows on two sides. A long table takes up most of the room. I sit opposite from the windows and look at the sample products on the table, a variety of relays. My co-worker opens her suitcase and gets out a clear plastic container of fried chicken and bottles of beer. That doesn't seem appropriate but I don't object. She leaves the tools and parts in the suitcase.

. . .

Preparing for a race. I have to wait for someone else to prepare the car. While I wait, I disassemble junked bicycles and grind up the parts. The metal dust goes into a bin for recycling. When it is close to time to start, I take a shower then sit in the car reading a book.

26 January

Watching someone play a game on a tablet. It looks like asteroids. A young boy works the controls, frantically trying to steer his spaceship, but it doesn't respond as he expects. The ship crashes into asteroids, flies off-screen, and eventually falls into a star. He looks at me and asks, "What do I do now?" I just shrug and

let him figure it out.

28 January

Cleaning up in the kitchen. Here is butter in a dish on the counter. I had forgotten to put it away. Later, it is still there. I put it into the refrigerator and wipe the counter off. It is now the middle of the night and she isn't home yet. I hear a car stop at the curb in front of the house, then pull away. Not her. She shows up later the next morning carrying a bowl of food with a plate on top. As she is coming into the house, many children swarm through. She asks why they are here. One of them tells her that they were kicked out of their playground because it was unsafe. I have to help her clean it up.

. . .

Staying at a community center. I don't seem to have anywhere else to go. I have hiked to a remote location, high in a mountain pass, for the view and for inspiration. I try to draw what I see, the view of the rocks above the valley as the light changes, and sometimes just sit, looking and thinking. I stay long enough that I am too tired to climb down, so I sleep on one of the beds in the commons room. Others are here; I don't know who they are. I hope they don't mind me staying.

Later, I am at a different community center with a backpack. I put the backpack under a bed in the commons and sleep there. In the morning, I try to make up the bed but it all goes wrong. The sheet ends up under the mattress pad and the pad is torn. I can't find the blanket. I have to try multiple times to get it right.

Others are watching but they don't say anything. When the bed is sorted out, I put the backpack on and walk through the city. I pat my pockets – keys there, wallet missing. I wonder what I did with it and hope it is in my backpack. I can't stop here to check. As I walk, I keep thinking about a car and putting things into the trunk. That might be where the rest of my things are, but I don't know where *that* might be.

. . .

Waiting in line at an ice cream shop. I am trying to remember what to order, one scoop of pistachio ice cream in a sugar cone, but get distracted by a conflict. Some locals are trying to pick a fight with a family that doesn't speak English well. Their children try to mediate but the adults resist. The clerk is wary; she backs away from the counter.

. . .

Lining up for supper. I stand in line in what looks like a gymnasium, bleachers to the right and empty space to the left. The floor ramps down to wide white double-doors in a short hallway. I am uncomfortable because my clothes don't fit me well. They are too large, the shirt is baggy, and the pants keep falling down and twisting around. Everyone in line is wearing plaid shirts and jeans, but all wear different shoes. When I am near the front of the line, a man points ahead and says, "Twenty boys line up at line four." I don't understand what he means and the people ahead of me apparently don't, either, but we move toward where he is pointing.

30 *January*

Leaning against a railing, smoking a cigarette. She

sits at a table with some papers, also smoking a cigarette. My cigarette has a green band at the end that is not burning. Neither of us smoke, so I don't know why we are doing this. She is trying to help me with my health insurance plan. I explain to her that I got the least expensive plan that my bank offers. She doesn't approve of that and wants me to change it. I watch the cigarette burn, ash falling off until it is too short to hold, nearly burning my fingers. I drop it on the wet dirt next to the railing.

. . .

Driving to West Virginia. I have done this before, but it doesn't go like I remember. It starts out okay, but soon the road turns steep. I remember having to go over a mountain, but not this high. The road keeps changing, varying from two to four lanes in each direction. Trees and vines crowd the road near the bottom, sometimes growing up through cracks in the wet pavement; I have to plan ahead to avoid them. After clearing the tree-line, I can't see anything on either side of the road, just mist, a highway in the sky going up. In some places, there are no guardrails. Other places have guardrails that angle in to narrow the way to two lanes. In one stretch, I see the support pillars for the road lanes in the other direction off to my left, but don't see the road. Everyone is driving too fast. I am too scared to look away from the road to the speedometer too often. One glance shows one-hundred forty kilometers per hour. I let off of the accelerator and try to bleed off speed, but other cars around me zoom past, honking their horns. I pull off at what I think is a transfer station. I have the vague feeling that I was supposed to stop here but don't remember why. Inside, it looks like a customs inspection checkpoint at an airport terminal.

. . .

Working in the front yard. Here is a mess of power tools and hand tools and batteries scattered over the brown grass. As I am trying to figure out what to do with all of it, a man walks up and tells me about the yard sale up the street. He says I should check it out because they have some good deals. I tell him that I don't have any money to buy anything with. He tells me to check it out anyway. One large yard sale sign has lettering in red glitter. Other signs posted around and on the house are in green glitter with some words misspelled. I'm still not sure about that. I look down at the bicycle tire pump that I am holding and wonder what I was doing with it.

. . .

Sitting on the floor in a hallway. A man comes up the steps with a bicycle and a backpack. He parks the bicycle near me in the hallway and asks if I am waiting for someone. I think so. He says okay, then climbs up a ladder with his backpack to the next level.

Later, I am sitting at a table inside an apartment with an unfamiliar man and woman. Then I am outside with them at a car, a large brown boxy sedan with its trunk lid open. The license plate is lying on the roof. That doesn't seem right, so I close the trunk lid and attach the license plate to the bracket where it is supposed to mount.

. . .

Lying in bed, not quite asleep. I hear the front door open and close, so I open my eyes, alert. A head leans in through the bedroom doorway. It is too dark to make out any detail. Not knowing who that might be, I say, "Hello, can I help you?" Then the whole body steps into the room and closes the door, shutting out the

light from the hallway, making it too dark to see anything. In the dark, I hear liquid sloshing and light sputtering, showering onto the floor. Then *click* – a burst of flames. The figure opens the door, exits, and closes the door behind it. I have to escape. My roommate is asleep and won't wake up. I don't think I can carry him, but I have to do something. The flames block the doorway, so I break a window while trying to make a plan. I don't know how far above ground we are.

31 January

Listening to a tall old man talk about the problem with his leg. It won't bend like it should. It looks as if it is on backwards. He says he can't play his cello anymore because of it. He tells me about the medications he takes and what they do and don't do. I think he just needs to get his prescription mix right.

About the Author

Benjamin Gayle was born in Richmond Virginia, and has lived in the western mountains of the state for most of his life. Educated in math and electrical engineering, he has worked in a wide variety of capacities including factory automation in automotive manufacturing, and designing motor control systems for a drives manufacturer. He has been an amateur cyclist and bicycle mechanic for more than thirty years, and an amateur radio operator (N1NP) for twenty. Reading was an early passion, followed by writing in his early teens, though that was set aside for decades for career and other responsibilities. He currently works a part-time job while continuing to write.

He has also produced *Spectrum*, a broad overview of the music of composer Charles Irving Gayle, available on CD.

Sample chapters and more information are available at www.AntonomasiaProductions.org.

Other books by Benjamin Gayle:

The Turtle Test
The Frost Bug Dreams
Dreams of Sixteen
Dreams of Seventeen
Dreams of Eighteen
Dreams of Nineteen