

## IN YOUR DREAMS

“Well, imagine you *could* go back to one of those *key events* in your life Steven - and imagine doing what you should have done, or saying what you should have said!”

The fat man on the bar stool next to me smiled and sucked the foam off his latest beer. “It’s hard not to,” he slurred. “I mentally kick myself if I catch myself at it, cos I hate it. Cheers!”

He belched briefly and excused himself. He tipped the glass further back and when he put his glass down his ginger moustache was all foamy. He let out a long sigh of pleasure. He swept back his sparse strands of hair yet again, as if to make sure they had not vanished like their predecessors.

“What?” I asked. “What’s hard?”

“Hard? I just told you. It’s hard not to dwell in the past. But what’s the point, I ask myself. The action is always the same - and the outcome. Outcome. Hate that bloody word. Functionary-speak. ....The same memory clip....rolls and you still feel like shit when you’ve seen it again. Like a feature-film you’ve seen twenty times and you know the script word for word. I doubt whether happy-go-lucky people - if they really exist - do it. Only sad old gits like me. I won’t forget how my mother was in her final weeks...couldn’t read, couldn’t watch the box, couldn’t hear very well. Just sat on the bladdy sofa staring. “What you thinking about?” I’d ask. “Oh nothing, Lionel” she’d say. And I realised she was staring back into her life - and pretty glum she looked, too. She had nothing to look forward to, only back. I reckon that’s the most terrifying think about old age. There may be physical pain....cancer...arthritis and all that jazz, loss of appetite - imagine me not being able to get a beer down my scraggy neck! - loss of strength and zest. But the loss of a future with no comfort from the past? Fuck me! Rather be senile and crapping me old-fashioned strides!”

He tipped the glass to the vertical.

“A metaphor for a good day and a good life that - a glass! Try and keep it fulfilled, like every waking hour. Oksana! There’s a good girl!.....You having another, mate?”

I looked at my watch. My flight would be called in a half-hour.

“Go on Steven! On old Lionel. Just a quickie.....me being well past the *other* kind of quickie, haw-haw!”

I’m not the type to get chatting to strangers in bars, preferring to keep my own company but there was something entertaining and compelling even about this old - well, not exactly old, more old-fashioned gentleman. His sports jacket and trousers - his strides! - in Rupert Bear checks put me in mind of a clown as did his rosy nose. Once he began to chat away I found myself drawn in and glued to the barstool. His silver, brilliantined hair with a middle parting and weather-beaten face seemed too old for his darting, mischievous eyes and wry grin. It was not long before his turns of phrase and beguiling Aussie accent were making me laugh out loud. He had been sitting there for ages, he said.

“Bladdy flight’s been put back again, ain’t it! That makes an eight hour delay.”

He was drinking one beer after another but I realised he wasn’t paying for them.

“See you alright at the end, Oksana, my little beauty!” he said every time the blonde barmaid poured him beer afresh. And she was indeed such a little beauty that I could hardly take my eyes off her. Lionel imitated her eastern European accent perfectly making her laugh and hence even more delicious to look at.

“They won’t let you on you know.” I dared to say after he had downed another - the third to my one. “If they think you’re drunk, you won’t get on the plane.”

“What? Moi? I can do sober as easy as pissed!”

And he could. He sounded then like a solemn Oxford cleric. He did not do small talk, he drawled. Life was too short to talk shit. Philosophy was his thing. **Time** for example. What was that all about?

“You heard of Albert Camus? Algerian goalkeeper in the thirties - and existentialist. He used to stand for ages in cinema queues and walk off when it was his turn to pay - just to experience Time in its plenitude. And Proust? Knew he had no future - had bad lungs - so he lay in bed for the last few years of his life and dreamt of his childhood. A bite of a biscuit would take him back as vividly as a dream. A tiny time-capsule. Do you think we're the only creatures who think about their past? What percentage of the day do we spend there? Or dreaming of the way a *future* event might turn out? Rehearsing what we might say.....I bet you talk it through to yourself out loud, like me! And we reckon we live in the present - as if we surf it like the crest of a wave? We say *live for Now!* - but do we? I try to. That's why I drink so much. Anchors me here, mate. I hate my past! And the future? Sitting in a bar every day would do me!”

He looked at me and grinned. He could tell I was the *other* way, he said - that I didn't enjoy the present. My third beer - unusual for me - had had its effect and I nodded. That's when I had told him about my fantasy - the one he commented on at the beginning of this account. As soon as my flight was called he grabbed my arm and a charge of energy seemed to run into my shoulder and neck. It had been great to chat, he declared. (In fact, he had done most of that!)

“You know, Steven, now I think about it, I reckon there's not a single person on the planet who'd not like to do exactly what you dream of. Even me! You go and have a good life now, mate!”

As I walked off I could not help but look back. The chap who had taken my seat was already roaring with laughter at something Lionel must have said. It was not every day you were lucky enough to meet such a character.

On the flight I closed my eyes and meditated. Feeling light-headed, I found myself thinking of his remark about my enjoyment of the present. On a scale of ten how happy was I? Be honest! Five? Six? Being honest, I wondered if I would I stare, like Lionel's mother, glumly into this present as a banal past when I was old. The thought froze me. I thought about being *anchored* here, but the image of a becalmed ship going nowhere troubled me. I opened my eyes and made a deliberate effort to stay in my surroundings; I watched the pretty stewardess handing round drinks, saw her skirt ride up her lovely, long thighs as she bent down to pick up a dropped note, looked out of the window at the clouds and tried to persuade myself this was a happy state to be in. But it was not long before something - akin to Proust's biscuit - was leading me astray and away, a descent into sleep a tired mind cannot prevent.

Even on a walk amongst beautiful flowers, imagination and memory will eventually kidnap our conscious minds and leave our bodies to stroll on like machines. In our imagination we can create our ideal chain of events - or the worst possible, if we are neurotic. In our memory we experience again the sights, the sounds, the smells, the textures as well as the sentiments of a significant moment. Our imagination might edit and reshape the film but between the desire and the deed there is a huge difference. However much we distort, tone down, embellish, abridge or prolong a memory, the truth and effect of the deed cannot be altered. All the dead remain dead, the injustice remains an injustice and the cruel act remains as cruel as it always will be.

But sometimes a sudden memory can be so vivid - as vivid as a dream - that it stops us dead, as astonishing as a photograph we come across in a box which has captured a reality to which we would love to return. If our life is a wiring diagram, then any point or connection on it is as vital as any other on that route whereby our present shining light is charged. But how we yearn to return to certain junctions and alter the flow of events; to render an experience perfect; to eradicate the wrongs; to tell the truth; to tell a lie; to say what we meant but could not express or dared not, no matter what the consequences to the quality of the light! But how much *more* brightly might it shine if indeed we had the means of alteration??

And no matter how often we mouth clichés like *move on - put it behind you - forget it - it doesn't matter any more - it's water under the bridge* - and all the others - we remain children whistling in the dark because - look at us - we are prisoners of the past and what it made of us. Every bone in our body, every crease on our face, every fibre of our muscles, every habit, every word we speak, every influence of a gene we have inherited, every feeling and every opinion - declares that we *are* the past. We are fossils living in the present.

The captain's announcement of our descent interrupted my reverie. A thought about the plane landing and the aftermath immediately intruded and I just as immediately banished it. What Lionel had said about our picturing of the future made me uneasy. I put it down to the beer. I stared at the clouds again.....I wondered which of those tiny grey and white ghosts were truly necessary for the weather. And which of those millions of past events were truly formative of me? In one sense they all were - but which were the ones without which I would be lesser or better or very different? Lionel had been less interesting when he had talked about returning in a time-machine to right a great historical wrong - the stuff of science-fiction. To prevent the Holocaust would be morally right, he had declared, but would cause millions of others to spring up in the place of those who *had* inherited - in all innocence - the earth. Against that I had argued that a return to tamper with a tiny event in our own tiny lives would only cause the tiniest of ripples.

"Like a phrase of music - in a new, brighter key - ebbing away to nothing" I had said. He had nodded vigorously - *he would make a mental note of that*. He had asked whether I had particularly vivid dreams.

"The kind that remain with you most of the day - like a light you have stared at stays in the eye when you close it?"

"Now and then. Doesn't everybody?" I had replied.

"My wife hardly dreamt at all - and could never remember the ones she did have. But mine are like real. Dreams and nightmares demonstrate the power of the subconscious when all the distractions of the real world are switched off. Think of all the fantastic things we can do in dreams which seem perfectly natural - but absurd when we wake. But who ever shouts out in the middle of a dream *This is impossible! This is just crazy! ?*"

"But Lionel, you were talking more about memory, not dreams. I can recall whatever I like, but have no control about what I dream. Do you? I might say as I fall asleep please let me dream of making love to the most beautiful woman I can imagine, but it doesn't happen."

"For all you know, it does. You just forget!"

"No. No. But if I say - *memory! Load that file of the time when I **did** make love to a beautiful woman*, then it happens. I can remember it from the loosening of the first button on her blouse to the final moment of ecstasy."

He had leant in close and whispered. What if he told me that we could be trained or stimulated to dream any incident we had experienced just as vividly as the original experience itself? But not only that - the dream could transform that experience in a way which we consciously or subconsciously desired?

“Then I’d say you’d had too many lagers for one day?”

He leant away and laughed, slicking back his hair again.

“Power of the mind, mate! Most of it is untapped!”

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It was forty-five minutes from Birmingham airport to home in the taxi. The driver chatted for a few minutes but soon fell silent when I gave him little in return. I had supplemented the beers with a mini-bottle of wine on the plane and my mind had begun to storm. You can only realise how lucky you are not to be dead when you are alive.....And you can only wish you were dead when you are alive.....You can only realise how insignificant your troubles are when you realise how soon it will be as if you never had existed.....Passers-by might glance at your headstone from time to time until one day it becomes as inscrutable as the secrets of your life.....I cannot decide whether I should be content or not about such futility. No life was progressing towards a happy ending. No-one is getting younger. Good. If life is futile then nothing matters. Is that good or bad? I cannot decide. Does tragedy matter? I’m not sure whether not caring one way or the other is good or bad. Good or bad. Happy or sad. Is there such a huge difference? Are they not, like Kipling’s imposters, success and failure, much the same? Things and events happen.

If I were a tree, then from my point of view the universe would not even exist. As a tree, I am only a thing for someone else to admire or chop down; or to create, by my seed, other trees to exist and pose the same dilemma. My atoms instead of being me might have been a tree or a stone. Or once were. The earth consisted once only of stones. Mars still does. And always will. How *pointless* Mars is. Until a knowing eye appeared - and I not mean a flatfish’s - the universe was futile for billions of years and contained no *idea* that it existed. Were eyes accidental or deliberate? Was light? Are not light and then eyes a bit of a coincidence? What is light? Did light have to exist? Why light? Why colours? There is no WHY! - shouted another voice.

On *good* days I think I might be only just missing by a whisker a huge, very strange and obvious Point. But on *bad* days I return to the dark thought that even a dark void would be odd. On *very bad* days I get so resentful of the universe that I feel like screaming. Something tyrannical in it - call it God or a force - obliges things - including me to *be*. None of us, from pebbles to people, have any choice. We have to exist. Suicide is no answer. A pebble cannot destroy itself and nor could I. All the end of me would mean was that I would free the bits and pieces in me a bit early; to go and be something else - or somebody else feeling the same way. Thinking such strange thoughts is on the whole better than not thinking them. And thinking them holds out the hope that I might see sense in them in the end. It is a happy kind of discontent and I do try my best to smile. People say - *Ah what a lovely day!* But the trees, the blossom, the blue sky - even the mad birds - have no idea they are lovely. Their loveliness is a mirage but I do try not to think it. The paradox is that they *are* amazing. This temporary madness of mine had developed within just a few years out of many billions - and in these few years - and not before and not after. That timing was also amazing. Existence is - as that would-be philosopher David Coleman used to

say - *quite extraordinary*. But I never envy the people who are not afflicted by my madness.

Those folk chug through life taking it all for granted like green caterpillars chomping a green leaf which keeps them green. They remain *of* the landscape and never outside it. Going to car-boot sales; buying what they have seen advertised; copying fashionable turns of phrase and intonation; reading the Sun and the Daily Mail; watching soap opera; discussing it; being fascinated by minor celebrities; supporting Manchester United from afar; thinking how important is the status conferred on them by owning the right car; being too shy to be outrageous; being obsessed with "bettering themselves" ( while remaining no better or even deteriorating - certainly getting older (is that better or worse?) - all these things and a thousand more were utterly disgusting to me. (God - what a bloody snob I sound on re-reading that - but, bollocks, I'm keeping it in.)

The taxi was already on the outskirts of Earlstone. Here I was trapped in a present I did not like, in a system I did not like, in a culture I did not like. Soon I would see my wife Fiona who was a "success." She had "risen" to be head of Human Resources - like a Dalek in charge of great simmering vats of human material? - at the council in Naunton just over the border in Warwickshire. I had to admire her briskness and business-likeness. She wore a dark suit. She used words like "inappropriate" and "unacceptable" to describe things which the twins said when they spoke to us - a rare event in their morose middle teenage. God, they were so predictable. Fiona excused their wordless, eyeless rudeness as a *phase*. She appeared to have everything plotted and charted. It felt as if we were less a family and more a formula. I yearned for the vanished days of innocence when the world was fresh to the boys - long before it had narrowed to their *space* where they had the right to their self-pitying anger, their ear-splitting music and their computer games.

And what was Fiona's world? A series of corridors, offices, agendas, minutes, tables, chairs and coffee. She was in the business of suspending and dismissing "colleagues" who had strayed across the boundary of appropriateness. They were supposed to behave like junior machines and not have tempers and frustrations. Fiona was blonde like an angel and still pretty (though she could not quite appreciate, having eyes only in the front of her head that her black-trousered bottom, looking a little larger than she imagined, did make her look faintly ridiculous under her vented jacket, one flap for each buttock. On the early road to falling out of love, I had begun to visualize her rear as donkey buttocks from which a bushy tail protruded and swished. ) Her being blonde and pretty - and therefore obviously kind - made it all the more poignant for her victims - when she announced - no doubt with great proclamations of regret - her terrifying decisions. Was she aware of that, and did it give her a perverse, secret pleasure? Was it not more humane to hire only ugly people to sack people? I had saved the questions for a future debate on our *core values* as a couple and a family.

We were in the consuming and rearing business and I suspected that when the latter had been accomplished she might wish to wind up our limited, bankrupt company - as her friend Michaela had done with poor Roger - and start up afresh with a different partner and a different mission statement. She seemed unaware she had changed. I remembered well the first time she had had to dismiss someone. She had come home upset. Had Albert Pierrepoint felt similar after his first hanging? Nowadays she clipp-clopped with obvious relish to her black Mercedes in her black suit with her black briefcase full of spells - nasty statements and accusations in the dark early morning.

She “loved” her job. Don’t misunderstand - our downstairs and upstairs life was still just about on the right side of acceptable and appropriate. But the love affair was over. She no longer minded me being away for a couple of days in the week servicing and repairing mainframes, occasionally as far away as Edinburgh, from where I had just flown home. We had a mega-income. We were very comfortable. Ironic, then, that I was quite uncomfortable about being so comfortable.

I paid the taxi driver and went in.

“Good trip?”

She offered her round cheek for a peck.

“Yep.”

She sniffed the air.

“Had a drink?”

“Yep - but not an inappropriate amount, my love.”

She studied me for signs of sarcasm. I kept a poker face.

“What’s this about?”

“What’s what about?”

“This!”

I had tossed the coins and keys and odds and ends from my jacket pocket onto the side. She had picked up a calling-card.

“*In Your Dreams*. An 0844 number.”

She said 0844 with all the disapproval she reserved for the inappropriate.

“Go to a nightclub or *somewhere* when you were in Edinburgh.....*my love?*”

Then the penny dropped. “Oh God! That Lionel! He must have slipped in my pocket when we were in the airport bar!”

I felt odder and dizzier.

“Lionel? Recommending *somewhere* was he? Or reminding you where you’d been?”

I decided to ignore the insinuations and told her I was tired and off to bed. She said she had a report to read through for the morning. She would be up in an hour. If I was asleep, she would try not to wake me. I was grateful. Upstairs, I put the card in my bedside drawer. I rubbed the ache on my forearm and remembered that this was the spot which Lionel’s great mitt had squeezed. I laid my head on the pillow and the last thing I saw was him tipping his glass right back and smacking his lips.

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We were queuing outside the door and halfway down the stairs in absolute silence. It was Latin and we were - like that poor queen on her island - to a boy, overcome. Overcome with dread. I examined our skinny legs poking out of our stiff grey short trousers into our grey woollen socks and scuffed black leather shoes. Most knees were already green with grass. Pattering at first then slapping came the sound of running footsteps and I saw the inevitable long, solemn face I hated round the corner below, followed by gangly arms and legs. And of course the dull tan briefcase out of which so much misery was pulled; our test papers; his master text book **An Approach To Latin**, stiff and severe, whereas our copies were sloppy and slovenly; his squeaky chalks with which he loved to made us squirm; and of course his mark-book, catalogue of our sins. He ordered us to go in and we obeyed. I sat on the left next to Carstone who was as good at Latin as I was bad. The Latin master, Devlin, who did not like little boys, had a special dislike of the lesser lights such as me. Belcher was worse than anyone but a promising rugger player. And Devlin was the first year

rugger coach. So no-one teased Belcher about his appalling name or being crap at Latin.

The briefcase was yanked open and our grotty test papers thrown around the room like litter for us to retrieve. But mine he slapped down on the table with unusual emphasis and grinned. For a second I wondered if I had done well and I watched with awe the great bunch of sausage fingers slowly withdraw. I had scored a *disappointing* 7/20. Now the mark book was prised open and the usual time-wasting ritual of taking in our marks began. I suspected I was seated next to Carstone for a reason. Not only was he the best boy in the class but he would never let me copy his work and sat with his arm and shoulder around his books like their lover. He was also my direct alphabetical predecessor. His twenty would show up my seven good and proper.

“Adams?”

“Seventeen, Sir!”

“Pretty good...Revise the ablative.....Berry B?”

The ablative. To or from a place. Mensa - with a long a - *from a table*. Mensa - with a short a - *O table!* The vocative.

Amazing to me all of a sudden, and to all those around me, my hand was up.

“Yes Carter?”

“Please, Sir...Is Latin defined as a synthetic language because it alters meaning by way of inflections? While English is an analytical language, in that it uses, for example, prepositions?”

“W-what?”

“But then of course, Sir, it must have developed from a pure synthetic language towards the analytical, as shown by phrases such as *ad mensam* - *to the table*, where the preposition *ad*, though not strictly necessary, clarifies meaning?”

(What Devlin did not know - and nor did I when I was a mere eleven - was that I would go on to get a Grade 1 Latin O Level with a brilliant teacher at Earlstone Upper.)

“And Sir! Why did Romans talk to tables?”

Gasps all round. This was the question we asked each other but never in his earshot. Devlin’s ghastly face was incapable of turning a ghastlier shade, but his eyes were bulging, on the verge of departing their sockets, as if being popped out from behind.

“Did the vocative appear before or after the Romans went mad due to the lead in their drinking water? And another thing, Mr Devlin. Do you think this is fair?”

“Fair? W-what?”

“This rigmarole. Wasting valuable teaching-time when you could easily write in our marks in your own time. *And* it publicizes the shortcomings of the weaker members of the class.”

More gasps.

“I mean, can you justify this morally - or pedagogically? Do you think it encourages or discourages us?”

Had his lower jaw not been hinged to the top of his rugger ball head it would surely have crashed onto the table.

“And I’ve always wondered, when the queen is overcome on her island, whether she is overcome by force of numbers or by grief? Or is it crude sexual passion? Or a flood? Or lead poisoning?”

There was a large explosion of laughter immediately quelled by a loud explosion of fury.

“On.....your....**feet**.....BOY!”

I shook my head and lazily turned my protractor around on its corners. I announced

without raising my eyes that I could not stand as I was superglued to my chair.

Carstone had done it for a joke.

“Superglued? What on earth? How? STAND UP!!”

“Marcum Super-glue-bum, Sir, Accusative case. J'accuse Carstone!”

I stood and the chair came with me. Hilarity! He stalked over and slapped me on the face. It did not hurt and I laughed. He slapped me again.

“Did you do this, Carstone? Glue this insolent boy to his chair?”

Carstone began to weep. Taking this as an admission of guilt, Devlin shook him and yanked him to his feet. His chair followed him too. Then all the boys stood and every chair was stuck to every pair of trousers. We began to do the twist. Even Carstone...then Chubby Checker came in.

I awoke and lay shaking with noiseless laughter for five minutes. Fiona stirred and looked at her alarm clock. It was only six something and barely light.

“You woke me up!”

“I’m sorry. I had a dream. A wonderful dream.”

She turned on her light.

“What have you done to your face?”

I looked in the mirror. Big red marks.

“Oh my God! Devlin! The bastard!”

“The devil?”

“No. my old Latin teacher. I dreamt about him. I must have slapped myself!”

And at that very instant the mark began to sting.

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“What’s this?”

“What’s what?”

“A fifty pound direct debit.”

I came to look at the computer screen. I shrugged at it.

“No idea. I haven’t set one up. It’s probably some posh boutique and you’ve forgotten.”

She was indignant to be so accused. Fiona was a paragon of efficiency and organisation. She clicked on **Your Payees** and let out an exultant cry.

“There! Fifty pounds. Fifth of the month. *In Your Dreams*. Your clip-joint in Edinburgh! Fifty! I hope *she* was worth it. *And* you’ve set up future payments for when you’re up there next!”

She flounced out and slammed the door, causing the whole house to shake and the foul music upstairs to pause but for only a second. I ran up and retrieved the business card from the drawer. The number was the kind you get charged for calling - which only made keener my sense of outrage. Typically, I was taken all round the houses by the recorded voice like a corrupt cabbie. Finally I was speaking to a live person, a chirpy young woman I imagined in the shallow act of studying her false nails.

“I wish to be put through to a person in authority please. And please make him or her aware that I am far from best pleased!”

“What is it to do with caller? And can you give me your name.”

“Mr Steven Carter. A direct debit has been set up to your company without my knowledge - and certainly without my permission!”

Units of five pence or ten pence ticked by to the accompaniment of music almost as inane as that of the twins. It was getting on for a pound when at last a voice came on I recognized.



“Hello Steven! I’m glad you called. Have you had your first dream yet? Enjoy it?” Instantly my anger vanished. Then he told me I had two more to come for my first payment.

“Why not tell the missus you’ve cancelled the DD and I’ve promised you a refund next month? I tell you what - put her on and I guarantee she’ll forget all about it! Fiona, didn’t you say her name was?”

Automatically, I shouted her down and angrily she grabbed the phone. I went into the kitchen, afraid of the imminent explosion. I held my breath and watched the second hand on the clock jerk around. A minute passed and I heard her giggle. I put my head around the door.

“OK, Lionel” she was saying. “I understand.”

Cheerily she bid him goodbye and handed me the phone back. She trotted upstairs.

“Lionel, I don’t know what you said, but it did the trick. What’s your secret?”

He laughed and told me my next dream was imminent.

“How does it work?”

“All you needed to do, mate, was to do what you have done - to ring me and listen.”

I went upstairs to our room and asked Fiona what Lionel had said to appease her.

“Appease me? Whatever are you talking about? *Lionel who?* I’m going down to make coffee. Fancy a cup?”

“No. I’ll have a whiskey if dinner’s nearly ready.”

“Well - only one then.”

Lowering her voice, she embraced me and put her fingers into my waistband.

“We don’t want to have to try and raise the dead tonight, do we?”

I was astonished. Ripe humour was usually *inappropriate*. All evening it played on my mind that I was on a promise. But by ten thirty she was yawning and saying she was having an early night. The promise seemed to have slipped her mind. She went to bed. I had a brandy.

For some reason I found myself thinking about my father who had been dead since I was fourteen. I got into bed. Fiona was lightly snoring and I knew the sound would send me quickly off to sleep.

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“Dad. I know what will happen tomorrow. I can’t tell you, but this night of all nights let us be friends.”

He had taken me to the pictures one recent afternoon on the back of his new motorbike. We saw *A Taste Of Honey*. *Rita Tushingham*. I had marvelled at her lovely, long nose. Dad joked that she looked like a duck, just as he had joked about the astonishing ugliness of the woman selling the tickets - who scrutinised every new customer’s face for signs of repulsion.

“God” he had muttered as we walked through the red curtains into the dark auditorium “And I thought your mother was *ugly*.”

I hardly remember the film. Was Dora Bryan in it, calling her daughter - lovely Rita - a slut? I forget because the abiding memory of the afternoon was the proximity of Dad and the delicious feeling that I was back in his good books and that this was a making-up present. It would only dawn on me many, many years later why he had been cold - even cruel - to me.

Now, this morning, I will tell him honestly that his worries were misplaced. He is dozing in the car - a passenger on his last journey to work. I go to him now as he dreams his final dream in my dream.

“Dad, Dad. Don’t wake. Listen. You were so wrong. I only realized years later you were having an affair with Joanne. It came to me when I was thirty. It’s true! When I saw you with her parked in her car outside the house - kissing - I saw nothing sordid in it. She was Joanne - our new auntie - Mam, you, Joanne and Denis were good friends and we all loved being together! So you had no need to fear me and hold me at arm’s length. I would never have said anything because there was nothing to say. I’m getting out in a minute. It’s nearly time. I can’t remember kissing you, Dad. I will now.”

So I kiss his cheek and stroke his wavy blonde hair. I smell his lemony aftershave. He is forty-three. I am forty. I see his pale blue eyes flicker open and he smiles. He seems aware of who I am. He shakes his head and whispers I have it all very, very wrong. I smile. I look up. In the far distance I see a car beginning to cross the central reservation in the pouring rain. The driver is helplessly trying to steer on bald tyres. I tell Dad to close his eyes. Now Cantrill, his driver, is shouting in alarm with his hands off the wheel. The car is dead on course for him and Dad.

I stand in the downpour and watch paralysed as they collide. Then, waking, I do not feel sad, but warm. I picture my childhood walks with Mam and Dad. We are in a sunlit field golden with buttercups. He is calling to the cows to *cub, cub, cub* - and Mam is halfway between screaming in fear and laughing at his teasing.

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Fiona asked me what I was looking for. I looked up from the photo box I had fetched from the empty bungalow of my childhood, now up for sale.

“This is my Mum and Dad on honeymoon. In Jersey. I’m going to paint them and frame it. I’ll hang it in her room.”

“I don’t know how you can, if you know he was cheating on her.”

“No. I’ve realised now it just looked that way. There was nothing to it. He thought I thought he was, but didn’t know how to talk it over with me. Now it’s all sorted.”

“All sorted? *Now* it’s all sorted? Are you feeling alright, Steve?”

“Better than for a long time.”

That night I slept all the way through and did not dream once.

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“Lionel.” I whispered “You said I would have three dreams. It’s been two weeks. I don’t know how you do it, but....”

“Trade secret, matey! I’d never tell yer!”

“It’s something to do with that flutey voice of yours....and that grip...I can still feel it.”

“No comment.”

“Well, the reason I called is to ask what happened to the other dream. The first two were brilliant. How did you know what I wanted?”

“Me?? I had no idea. It’s what *you* wanted, Steven! I just - well - got you thinking along the right lines. I told you - the mind has no idea of its own power.”

“Well this third dream won’t come.”

“And I’ll tell you why it won’t. It’s because you dare not admit to yourself what you would *really* like different in your life. Now that you’ve called me, and once you face up to it, the dream will happen. The third is always the toughest.”

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Lionel is right about the past. It dominates the present like a long evening shadow across the landscape. I gaze into the far distance and see Fiona and Louise standing bent over with laughter. They are laughing at me, *Sobersides*, *Grommit-gob*, *Fiddle-face*. I can’t help it if I’m serious. And I can’t help loving Louise. She has dark, curly hair, an infectious grin and hiccupping laugh, and clever, dark, daring blue eyes which no-one with proper-seeing eyes can help but admire. Fiona has just been teasing me in class, announcing that *Sobersides* can’t stop staring at Louise. I blushing deny it but no-one is convinced and I am laughed out of the room.

Louise had been in my Junior School classes since we were seven but at eleven we had gone to single-sex secondary schools. I had not taken much notice of her early on - why would I? I was a loose-socked, British Bulldog-chasing little boy. And then later, we boys and girls, reaching fourteen, were reunited at the Upper School. I saw Louise, remembered her and instantly adored her. She introduced me to Fiona who was taller, platinum blonde and glamorous. She was slim and had immense breasts of which she was immensely - and rightly - proud. We all gaped and admired her - her parents were well-off - Father owned a shoe shop - and she was all elegance, poise and style. By the age of sixteen she had earned herself the reputation of being a *prick-teaser*. No-one dared to boast they had penetrated her defences - her clever, sharp tongue would have dealt a devastating blow to anyone so rash. She was held in awe and her favours much sought. I did not even try, reckoning myself in the lower reaches of the league of those who might compete for the shining trophy of Fiona Anderson.

Imagine then my stupefaction one day when Carstone - who had abandoned his four-eyed swottiness to become quite a dashing, athletic young man and a good friend - and the latest object to be blessed by Fiona’s radiant smile - asked me - me, the oddball who tended to sit in the school library or wander the school grounds alone - if I was interested in making up a foursome with him, her and *Louise*.

“Fiona says Louise fancies you.”

I felt my heart nudge my ribs. But I scoffed at the idea.

“She’s going out with *whatsisname*.”

“*Was*. Packed him in. Too serious.”

Too serious? How serious did she think I was with my tragic school magazine poetry? Carstone assured me it was no joke.

“She thinks you’ve turned out a bit *odd*, but reckons you’re handsome. Silly cow!”

Where were we going? The pictures? No! Fiona was going to cook us a soufflé at her mansion. Her parents were going to a posh dinner and would be home late that evening.

\*

That evening has arrived. We are welcomed at the door by the girls side by side.

Fiona is wearing a yellow denim dress with buttons down the front which are just about managing to keep her chest in check. Louise is shy but mischievous. She is crammed into jeans and a tie-dyed tee-shirt which shows off well her more modest but equally pretty bosom. It feels odd to see them out of school uniform. They look a year older. They sit us in the lounge and bring us cider. We must stay put while they cook. They return to the kitchen. Their giggles turn to hysterical laughter and we cannot help but peek. The soufflés have not risen and Louise is poking them with a fork. Fiona enquires of them in disgust whether they are edible. But we sit down and attempt to eat them. Mine is so soggy I soon give up. I feel myself blush as I stammer out that I'm not hungry. Louise, next to me, grabs my arm and laughs. I shiver with pleasure. Fiona wonders, with a show of innocence, what we should do now. She glances at Louise. Carstone raises his eyebrows.

"I know!" says Fiona, with another meaningful glance at her friend "Hide and Seek! We'll be on. Stay in the kitchen and count to a hundred. Then come upstairs. But you can't turn the lights on!"

Before we can say a word, the kitchen door has slammed and they are running giggling up the stairs. My friend asks me casually which one I *want*. His casual manner convinces me he is an old hand at this sort of thing. I can barely breathe. I have never been in a bedroom with a girl - except in my sordid imagination.

"Let's make it pot-luck" he says when I fail to respond. He opens the door and shouts *Are you ready?* Two distant yesses come back.

The staircase is dark and the landing darker. My ears are singing in trepidation and excitement. Carstone is in front. He whispers that he will try the doors on the left. I open the first one on the right and feel around. I find myself holding slippy taps, turn round and find my way out. I ask Carstone if he is still there, but he fails to reply and I can only think he has found one of the girls. The air in the next room is cold. I listen. There is no sound of breathing. Except mine. As soon as I open the next door there is warmth and I hear a rustle. And the catch of a breath. I walk in slowly until something stops me below knee-height. I put out my hand and feel something silky. A counterpane? The edge of a bed? I feel further and touch warm skin. There is a slight gasp.

"Who is it?" I ask. A hand takes mine and draws me down. It guides my hand to a warm breast and - shockingly - something very hard. A nipple. She moans. I find her mouth and kiss her. I feel her hair for a clue. It is soft.

"Are you Fiona?"

She does not reply and puts a hand inside my trousers. I try to undo my zip but she says NO with her mouth closed. With her other hand she takes my hand resting on her breast and places it at the top of her legs which I am amazed to find wide open. Why is it so wet there? Has she washed and not dried herself properly? Her hand in my trousers has grabbed me tight and I feel a great rush. She pulls her hand out quickly and glues it onto the back of mine, pushing it up and down until first one then another finger is inside her. She gasps and begins to moan. Her heavy breath smells of the cheese we could hardly eat. She moans louder and I ask if I am hurting her. Her head shakes violently against mine and she pushes my fingers further in, holding my hand so tight that finally I cannot move it. She lets out a final loud squawk and falls back. Then she springs up and is gone!

I lie there a while longer, as if by prearrangement. I am dying to wash my sticky hand. There are giggles and rapid footsteps on the landing and stairs. I dare to creak the

door open and look out. The light, as if sharp-edged reality has returned after a dream, is on. A tousled, redfaced Carstone is emerging from a bedroom further down. I suspect I have lain with Fiona. I go to ask my friend but something in his face forbids it.

Downstairs the girls are tête-à-tête, giggling. We drink more cider as if we have never left the kitchen until Fiona declares that her parents might soon be home. They have no idea we are there, she adds, and we had better go.

Carstone is sick on the pavement almost as soon as the night air hits us; there is a mini-nova of cider and soufflé - of which he had gallantly eaten more than me. I can stand it no longer.

“Who were you with?”

“Louise. You got a hankie?”

“Here. What...what was she like?”

“Swear, swear you won’t tell anyone?”

“I promise.”

“She had a johnny. She wanted to but I couldn’t. I was too nervous. It was my first time. Did you shag Fiona?”

“Why are you so sure it was Louise? *I* couldn’t tell.”

“She spoke to me! She put the light on so I could...you know. She was just so beautiful.”

The more I thought about the wonderful scene I had not witnessed - and never could - the angrier with Carstone I got. Our friendship cooled. I would keep his secret - as would the girls - but I spoke to him less and less - and then one day, and thereafter, not at all. Then one awful day I discovered that Louise was leaving. She was very popular in the sixth form and I never got a chance to say a personal goodbye - even though I could tell she wanted a word on her own with me. A few weeks after she had gone, I received a little note which simply said

*I wish it was you I was with that night*

without a signature, without an address.

Poor Fiona was lost without her Louise. One morning she came to me in the school library and pulled up a chair.

“What are you doing?”

“My physics homework.”

“Steven. My parents are out tonight. Will you come round? I’ll do a proper soufflé. I’ve been practising. It’ll be really good. I promise.”

Her wide eyes left me in little doubt what delectable pot the soufflé was disguising and any remaining doubt was instantly dispelled when a slender finger crept into my trouser band. I thought of Carstone and his johnny. I was left me at the table feeling dizzy - dizzy with desire and - there was no better phrase for it - utter terror.

\*

I awoke in tears in the dark, thinking of Louise. Why did I have this life? I felt Fiona’s hand on my shoulder.

“What’s the matter? Are you crying?”

“It was just a dream. Go back to sleep.”

“What did you dream?”

“I dreamt about that first time with you - when you wore that yellow dress.”

“Me? Your memory! *I* wore those jeans I could hardly squeeze myself into. Fiona wore the dress.”

“*Fiona* wore the dress??”

“Of course! Who have you been dreaming you were in bed with, you naughty man?”