

Oneirology

That morning he took his bike to work, as he did every day, and despite his raincoat he arrived drenched. He waved to Thomas in greeting when he passed reception and hurried on to his office, first through the lobby with the high glass ceiling and then with the elevator to the first floor. It was a grand building, an architect's dream of tall windows, long stairs, and translucent glass. Lucas had always wanted to work in a place like this, the kind of place that came with its own gym and an endless supply of snacks, and it made him giddy to know that he had finally made it.

The Vienna branch of Les Rêves opened its doors in 2024, only twenty years after Lucas' personal heroes, Nivaly and Lewor, won the Nobel Prize in Medicine for their discoveries in neuroscience. Their novel understanding of the hippocampus, condensed in the Devices, would allow medicine to all but cure nightmares, night terrors, any condition of the mind that could interrupt a good night's sleep. Les Rêves was originally a small British company, but just four years after their first branch opened in Oxford, it had become an international sensation. Everyone wanted to have the Procedure, and the Procedure made everyone more productive. It wasn't long before the NHS covered it. But Les Rêves remained a private clinic, and its name came to be associated with excellence and high-quality care. Soon Les Rêves branches sprung up all over the world. It had never occurred to Lucas that what they were doing was wrong.

The meeting that would change everything was by complete chance. Dr Aster was still recovering from an accident and in no condition to come into the clinic that day. Dr Aster's patient was not just his first patient of the day, but one of the first he was allowed to see without his supervisor by his side. He went to meet her in the radiology unit.

RR4 was a dark room with a glass wall that separated the CT machine from the radiologist's control room. When Lucas arrived, the radiologist had already prepared the patient for the CT and was leaving for the control room. "Let me know when you're ready to start," she told Lucas.

He hovered at the edge of the room and picked up the patient information sheet.

Once the door had closed behind her, he approached the patient table, trying to hold everything he'd have to mention in his mind at once.

He was so focussed that he didn't recognise her at first, not until she said, "Lucas? You work here?" It took him a few seconds to register that she had spoken to him in English.

He stepped forward to get a clearer view of her then, and suddenly he realised who she was. Her name was at the tip of his tongue, and still he had to look for it on the patient sheet.

"You grew tall," she interrupted his efforts, her voice soft with wonder.

That's when he finally caught himself.

"God, Magdalen! Meg! It's good to see you. How long has it been?"

He smiled at her, now painfully self-aware. He thought that he could feel his blood rushing, and his heart hammered loud in his ears.

"I haven't seen you since primary school," he said before she could answer his question. "I don't think I would have recognised you. Do I look the same?"

He could feel her studying him, so he studied her as well. He recognised her light skin and the freckles, and her broad mouth, he thought he recognised that too, but other than that she seemed like a different person. Her face seemed softer now, the cheekbones higher than he remembered them, and her hair a dark blonde rather than dark red as it had been when they were children. She must have coloured it. But he seemed to remember that her eyes had been green, and he thought they were green now too, even though they were hard to make out in the dark room.

“You do look the same,” she said. “Just a bit bigger.” Then she added, “You look good.”

He could feel his cheeks growing hot. “Thank you, Magdalen. You too.”

And then, remembering why he had come in the first place: “I’m guessing you’ve had a CT before, Magdalen? Dr Aster wants us to have a look at your hippocampus and hypothalamus. You’ve discussed this with her?” Magdalen gave a quick nod. “She can’t be here today so I’m covering for her.” He tried to stand even taller under Magdalen’s probing gaze, straightening out the shoulders he liked to keep hunched.

Then he had an idea. “After the CT scan, will you tell me what you’ve been up to these last few years? And what you’re doing here in Vienna?”

Magdalen had been craning her neck towards him but now she leaned back on the patient table, and she nodded. “I’m sure we have a lot to catch up on,” she said with a smile.

He cleaned his office while she was in the CT, opening windows and putting away the folders that he normally kept on his desk. For good measure, he watered the plants. Then he sat down at his desk and opened the patient information system to look for Magdalen’s file. Before he was able to get anywhere with it, he heard a knock on his door, and a second later Meg’s face appeared in the doorframe.

He stood and motioned to the chair across from him at the desk. “Come in. Sit.”

In daylight she looked more like her former self, and he had the strange thought that of course this was how she looked now, that there was never another way in which she might have developed.

He remembered something then that he hadn’t thought of in years. The memory was apple trees and green orchards, lazy middays hiding from the heat of the sun at the base of a large tree, and late evenings when the sun just wouldn’t go down but it was starting to get chilly.

“I found a worm!”, Meg squealed, and he held his hands out for her to drop the terrified thing into. They both leaned forward, their faces staring in curiosity at the brown band that felt soft and earthy in Lucas’ hands.

They had brought it to Magdalen’s mother, who gave them a magnifying glass and told them to put the worm back in its natural habitat when they were done.

Now she sat here watching him with a derision that felt strangely familiar, as if they were old friends who were sharing an inside joke.

“So, you’ve been in treatment with Dr Aster?” he asked in an attempt at professionalism. The English felt effortless after months of speaking German.

“Yes, I heard about her accident. Do you know if she’s okay?”

Four days ago around midnight Dr Aster was seen jumping from her terrace screaming bloody murder. But he couldn’t tell Magdalen that, so he just said, “I’m sure she’ll be back to her old self in no time. I see here that you’ve been having nightmares. Are you considering the Procedure?”

“I’ve already had the Procedure.”

He shook his head and looked for the images from the CT on his computer.

“You don’t believe me?” she said.

“No, I do – I’m sorry, it’s just, these cases are very rare. You’re sure that the switch was on?”

“I never turn it off.”

He could feel her fear. But he could also see on the scan that there was nothing to worry about. Her brain was beautiful, like all brains Lucas had seen. There were no strange growths, nothing that could be a tumour or even a cyst. Her Device was exactly where it should be, half of it fitted snugly to the hypothalamus, the other wrapped neatly around the hippocampus. He

could see that the Device was active, and that it would be able to block any stress hormones that originated in the hypothalamus from entering the hippocampus during sleep.

“How frequent are these dreams?” he asked with his eyes still on the CT images.

She told him that it started a month ago, when she first came to Vienna to stay with her dad. “I get them every night now,” she said.

“There’s nothing in the scan that worries me. Would you like to see?”

He was surprised by her enthusiastic response. Happy to be able to share this with her, he turned the screen around and started to point out various brain structures. “Can you see this shadow here? That’s where your Device was fitted.” He flipped to another image, a close up of her hypothalamus.

When he asked if she could come back tomorrow after he’d talked to his supervisor, she teased, “It may be online but I do have a job, Lucas.” Some of the tension left the room then, and he breathed more freely. They made an appointment for the day after tomorrow, and another one for dinner tonight.

He couldn’t remember the first time he saw Magdalen, but he remembered the last. Masses of children were standing in the school courtyard, still more pouring out of their primary school’s heavy front door, and there was a light drizzle but the sun was starting to come out. There was an air of finality about it all. Parents were trying to get good pictures of their children, asking them to line up here, there, one with your siblings, one with your best friend. A few of the girls had their hair done nicely, which made them look older. Lucas tried to imagine how they would look in a few years. He saw Magdalen standing with her friends, and he saw that she had her hair done up nicely too. But he didn’t dare go over to say goodbye. His mum stood behind him, urging him for another photo, and another. She wanted to take photos with all of his friends.

It was a nice morning, and Lucas thought he would miss his classmates, but not too much. He was going to a new school, where they would be kinder to him, and where he would have real friends. He used to have real friends here too. Lucas couldn't quite understand how it went wrong. Magdalen and he were so happy when they were sorted into the same primary school class. After their first day of school, their parents took them to McDonalds and Magdalen had her first tooth come out when she bit into a chicken nugget. It was still morning and they were the only ones on the McDonalds playground. They squealed and laughed as they went down the long purple slide together. It was closed to the top, so they were in a world all by themselves. At school they would go everywhere together, and they'd hold hands too. When the other children started to make fun of them, Magdalen stopped holding his hand, and she got new friends. No more afternoons running around the orchard outside Magdalen's house. No more private swimming pools in the summer either, and no more pretending that they were fairies from a foreign land who had to escape the monsters that were chasing them.

He wanted Magdalen to know that he wasn't that person anymore. He had a wide social circle now, he had friends, and he was successful. The books, the studying, it had all paid off. He just wasn't sure yet how he would show her that.

When he arrived at the restaurant, she was already there, sitting at a table next to the window. He thought she would look up and see him through the glass, but she was too focussed on the menu card to notice him. It occurred to him that he could knock on the window, but then he decided against it and hurried inside. The restaurant felt like a young place, nice but not posh, with calm indie music in the background. A waitress came up to him when he entered, asking, "sit in or takeaway?", and he told her that he was meeting a friend and pointed to the table where Magdalen sat.

He had taken the tube to the restaurant because he knew that if he cycled, he would arrive sweaty and out of breath. However, as he went up to her table, he felt that it wouldn't have made a difference. There was a knot in his throat, and his heart went so fast that he thought it would stumble. Magdalen looked elegant in wide black pants and a black top, brown leather brogues. The unlikelihood of her being here struck him again.

"Hey!" she called when she saw him. "You found it." She looked so happy to see him, her whole face was beaming. He tried to beam back and ignore how sweaty his palms felt.

"This seems like a nice place. Good choice." When he sat down, he noticed that the lacquered table and benches matched the colour of her shoes.

They looked at each other for a few seconds. Then they both smiled and Meg laughed a little. "I can't believe we're here. There must be some rule against this, going for dinner with your patients."

"It's a good thing you're Dr Aster's patient."

"In all seriousness, you won't get into trouble for this?"

Lucas shook his head. "Don't worry, Meg."

Her face lit up suddenly. "I don't think anyone has called me that since primary school."

When she saw his uncertainty, she said, "It's nice."

The waitress came over then, and Lucas went with the classic Wiener schnitzel and a side of potato salad. Magdalen ordered a veal schnitzel.

After that, she didn't wait long to drop bombshells. She told him that her mother had died in her sleep when Magdalen was eighteen. She had the Procedure after that.

Lucas expressed his condolences in the most sincere tone he could muster. He had been at Meg's house often and remembered both her parents clearly. Her father, a violinist, was often

away with the orchestra, but Meg's mother was always there when Lucas visited. He wanted to become a GP like her one day.

"I remember your mum well," Lucas said. "How she played the piano for us."

"For you." Magdalen laughed. "You kept asking her."

Despite the gravity of what she'd told him, he laughed with her.

"Do you still play?" she asked.

He shook his head. Then, he said, "I can't imagine what it must have been like losing her."

"I'm okay now." He could sense her watching him closely before she continued. "But the nightmares worry me. My mum saw someone at Les Rêves before she died. She had a Device and still had nightmares. I know she was researching the Procedure and the companies that perform them." She paused for a moment and played with her water glass. "Don't you think Les Rêves is able to fabricate dreams with their Devices?"

"The technology blocks dreams, it doesn't fabricate them," Lucas said, surprised by her question.

"As a neuroscientist you probably know that the Devices could theoretically do more than block dreams. I never had nightmares with my Device until I started writing about this."

"You've been writing about this?" He had a sinking feeling in his chest.

"I'm a journalist." She sounded oddly defensive.

And then it clicked, and he understood why he was here, and why Magdalen had decided to care about him when she hadn't bothered to get in touch for over fifteen years. It was as if she had drawn a line in the sand and firmly positioned herself on the other side.

She must have been able to see it in his face, because suddenly her own face opened in surprise and she said, "That's not the reason I wanted to go for dinner."

“As a journalist, I would have thought you’d be able to recognise a conspiracy theory when it’s staring you in the face,” he said wearily. “Technology will always come at a risk. There will always be those who say we take the risk and go forward. And those who stay in the past.”

“This is not about me being some sort of Luddite, Lucas. If you had that kind of power as a company, wouldn’t you use it to secure your own existence?” She hastened to add, “I’m not suggesting they’re killing anyone. Maybe they’re giving people dreams to scare them off. Perhaps the hypothalamus produces so many stress hormones that people die from it. Is that killing?”

Lucas felt as though he had bitten into an apple only to find a worm inside. “I told you the Device can’t do that. It doesn’t produce hormones. It only blocks them from reaching the hippocampus while you’re asleep. I’ve studied these things for years.”

“So why the nightmares, why now?” She sounded angry, as if it was Lucas’ fault somehow.

When the waitress arrived with their food, they both fell quiet.

“I just never thought you’d be one of those people.” The words felt heavier than he had intended. They placed themselves between them and expanded until he almost couldn’t see her on the other side.

He thought about leaving for a moment. But then she said, “I’m scared, Lucas. I need to understand what happened to my mum.”

“I understand, Meg.” He paused before asking, “Is that why you wanted to talk?”

“No!” she exclaimed. But she must have been able to tell that Lucas still wasn’t entirely convinced of her motivations, because she added, “I never stopped thinking of you, even when I hadn’t seen you in years. I remembered how you taught yourself to read when we were four. You tried to teach me too but it just didn’t work.” She laughed. “I always wondered what became of you.”

Then she picked up the cutlery and moved closer to the table.

“I felt the same way,” Lucas said. “I was sad when we stopped talking.”

Meg nodded. “I’m sorry for that. I missed you.”

“Me too.”

When they finally started eating, the food was delicious.

They took the U1 back to the city centre together. It was almost midnight on a Thursday, so the tube was empty and very quiet. The only other person Lucas could see from where they were sitting was a drunk who was leaning over in his seat, with his elbows propped on his knees. In his hand was a bottle of vodka. Every now and then Lucas glanced over to where Meg sat beside him. In the neutral, familiar environment of the U1 he could almost convince himself that he had made the whole thing up. But then she leaned her head on his shoulder and he let go of that thought.

Magdalen studied the tube map of Vienna that was plastered above the doors. The six tube lines were represented by one coloured line each. In the middle of the map they met in a circle, with the busiest stations, Karlsplatz, Volkstheater, Schwedenplatz, Stephansplatz written in bold letters. The circle was the Ringstraße, a grand boulevard that went around the inner city and allowed access to the most historic parts of the city. Magdalen looked at the map as if she had never seen it before.

When she saw him looking, she said, “I wonder how long it will take them to make a device that gives you perfect memory. We wouldn’t need these anymore.”

“There are a lot of researchers working towards that.”

“Of course there are.” Meg’s gaze returned to the tube map.

“Don’t you think it’s an interesting proposition?” Lucas asked defensively.

“I’m sure the atomic bomb was an interesting proposition too.”

The tube doors opened, then closed again without anyone getting on or off.

“I thought about you a lot after my mum died,” Meg said to his surprise. “I thought I finally understood what you went through when you lost your dad. I wanted to reach out, but I didn’t know how.”

“To be honest, I was too young to understand what was happening when we lost him,” Lucas admitted. “And maybe it’s different if it’s by choice.”

Magdalen was silent and Lucas started to worry that he might have upset her. But then she said, “I don’t think it’s something that he chose. It’s not as simple as that.”

“Maybe,” Lucas said.

“I was too young to understand what was happening. I was so focussed on other things at the time. I didn’t understand that it was something that could happen.”

“You couldn’t know.”

“It’s hard to make sense of,” she said. Her eyes were shy suddenly, darting between his face and the colourful map of Vienna. “How people leave and you never get to talk to them again.”

“I can’t tell you how many nights I’ve lain awake imagining I could talk to him,” he admitted. “My father.”

The tube made a screeching noise as it entered the next station and Lucas felt a rush of adrenaline that reminded him that he was alive, that he was here with Meg, and that they were in Vienna, city of music and schnitzel and science. For a moment the ugly orange tube seats were beautiful, the drunk man at the side of Lucas’ vision was beautiful, and Meg was very beautiful.

She got off before him, at Schwedenplatz, one of the stations bolded on the map.

Lucas changed to a different line at Stephansplatz, but he wasn’t ready to go home yet. Instead of taking the U3 to Simmering, he took the U3 to Ottakring. It wasn’t until he saw *Les Rêves* towering before him that he started to question his decision to come here at night.

As expected, the front entrance of Les Rêves was locked, but his key worked on the back door. It wasn't completely dark inside. There were small spotlights in the entrance hall that were always on to discourage burglars. Lucas hoped no one would mistake him for a burglar and walked a little faster. He didn't bother to turn on the hallway lights on his floor - there were plenty of city lights coming in through the windows. In his office he closed the blinds while he waited for his computer to turn on. He sprayed his yucca palm with water. He had bought it the day he got the keys to the office and he liked to imagine that as the plant grew, so did his reputation at Les Rêves. It made him happy that the leaves were visibly longer even though it had only been a few weeks.

Then he turned his mind back to the matter at hand, and his excitement dissipated. He opened the CT images from yesterday. It felt strangely intrusive to be looking at a CT scan of Meg's brain after spending the evening with her. He imagined that he could see her thoughts forming in the prefrontal cortex and then dancing along her neural pathways.

He stared at the image for a good ten minutes before he came to the conclusion that there was nothing obvious he had missed, and nothing more to be gained from looking at it. Surely his supervisor would know what to do. When he left Les Rêves through the back door, he noticed that one of the lights on Lucas' floor was still on. *Must have forgotten to turn it off*, he thought.

On his way to the tube, a text from Meg arrived. *Hope you got home safe*. Half an hour later he wrote back to say that he had.

When Magdalen still wasn't there twenty minutes into her scheduled appointment, Lucas decided to give her a call. A man picked up who said he was Magdalen's father. *Don't know what happened*. He spoke slowly and it took Lucas a while to understand that he was crying.