

LARISA JAKEMAN

JULIAN



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«Издательские решения»

Jakeman L.

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Julian decided it was a sign that could not be ignored and with the assistance of girlfriend Roberta and her friend Nicola they attempt to unlock the secret by visiting the places in the visions, slowly revealing a frightening but fascinating history. As the present merges with a dark and stormy past, it becomes clear that the dreams are a message. Julian's friends are drawn deeper into the mystery, but will they eventually understand the message and why, and by whom was it sent?

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Julian

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INTRODUCTION

I never would have believed this tale had it not happened to Julian. His story is so strange, so unbelievable, yet I feel compelled to tell you all about my best friend. I feel everyone should know – has a right to know, so that just maybe this will in some way help us all to understand things which maybe we were not meant to understand.

Let me tell you first about Julian. He was born into a ‘well to do’ English family in Sussex. His parents being on the mature side of middle age, he may have been an unexpected child, but by no means unwanted. On the contrary, Julian was a blessing to his parents in their later life, especially after so many fruitless years of trying when their hope had almost been extinguished. Born into the middle class surroundings of East Grinstead to God-fearing parents, nothing was spared in making their new arrival comfortable in his newly decorated nursery, and attention was lavished upon this child, their ‘gift from God’.

I don’t know much more about Julian’s earlier life until he started at secondary school, which is where I first met this quiet, but intense boy. He had excelled at reading, spending enormous amounts of time in the School library, and it was not long before he exhausted the School’s limited supply of books and moved on to visiting the Public Library on a regular basis. He had fed on knowledge, consuming one book after another. Unlike the other students of his age, Julian preferred reading rather than watching television, finding more power and mystique in the written word.

He had great talent with the paintbrush too and produced outstanding landscapes in oils, which he preferred over watercolours. Slowly, with each expert application, the surrounding countryside became trapped in a moment of time with every blade of grass, every leaf on the trees springing into still life with each brushstroke. On a visit to Hastings, Julian had created a wonderful seascape on canvas, the only one he ever did. The blue sea had rolled in over a warm beach dotted with exotic palms. The sun centrally placed, half-visible as it sank into the sea. It was nothing like how I remember the weather or location that day as we arrived excitedly at the seaside in Julian’s father’s car, but it obviously come out of an inspired mind. He had given me this picture later, and it still hangs in my summer room, illuminating the conservatory with its grotesquely sized sun. I enjoy the way it fills the room with its vibrant energy, surpassing even the bright colours of the hanging baskets. I can relax, basking in the warmth of two suns, as if being somewhere else, in some other time.

Despite being an excellent scholar, Julian also excelled at sport. He was a good all-rounder and had been made Captain in the school cricket team. This fact alone had spared Julian the torment of merciless teasing afforded other boys who had pursued hobbies in music and art. Julian would sit for hours playing on his viola in his parent’s garden, hidden in a small recess between a huge lilac bush and flowering jasmine. His music was so beautiful, you had to stop and listen to how each note seemed to hold on to the next, artistically flowing into the other to form a melody. His music was both cheerful and soulful at the same time, and he never ceased to amaze friends and relatives who were ushered out silently by Julian’s mother, Pamela, into the garden. She would then ruin the moment by asking him to perform her favourite piece, but he would decline politely and quietly pack the viola away saying he felt tired. His music was private, and he had always preferred it that way.

So, it was that we became friends when we were 14 years of age. This was mainly since we lived across the road from his parent’s house. My father had worked as an Underwriter in one of the syndicates at Lloyds, and he had informed my mother that Julian’s father at that time was ‘something in the City’ (a euphemism given to those who usually owned half of it). Friendship with Julian therefore, had been actively encouraged by my mother as she said he came from the ‘right sort

of family' and it would do for me to have such social circles. To me, it was simply the fact that he was someone I could walk the mile and a half to school with. Julian and I preferred to walk, although on rainy days his Mother always insisted on driving him (and me) in the family car.

Our friendship was to change my life completely. I always considered Julian to be older and wiser than me, although in fact I am a calendar month older than he is. His thirst for knowledge overflowed into me, and I spent countless hours absorbing the scraps and leftovers of useful information that had poured out of him during our friendship. Through his art I witnessed the painting of beautiful landscapes and had come to appreciate the beauty of a sunset through the magic of his brush.

But it was his music that truly captivated my soul. I was the only person he would ever play to. Julian taught me the wonderful structure of music and explained to me how the notes were the building blocks of any tune.

"It takes a great architect to transform a pile of bricks into a magnificent edifice", he used to say, "So it takes a good composer to create the same effect with music". He was always very critical of his own work, never satisfied, even when those around him praised his achievements. He would depart and return much later with minute, but important tweaks which transformed the original 'good' piece into something rather unique and excellent.

In fact, it is to him that I owe my livelihood as a musician today. I became interested in his compositions and yearned to be able to do the same, and it was Julian who placed my initially clumsy fingers on my first guitar and encouraged me well beyond my own perceived limitations. Today I am considered talented within my own right, but I know this talent, although truly mine, would have remained hidden had not Julian tapped into it. He picked it out of the very centre of my being the way you might painstakingly prise out a wrinkle when at the seaside, only to generously donate it to your younger less able sibling, as a gift.

I have never once entertained any thought of jealousy in Julian's abilities; rather I revelled in the sharing of his success and hung on to his words as you would an older brother (although strangely I nearly always fought with mine). The only negative vibes I ever had when in the company of Julian was my inability to feel good about my own achievements. My greatest musical piece always seemed lacking when I played it to him, although he always enthused and praised me. I felt musically humbled in his presence, but it had never been intentional, and more likely it was due to a lack of confidence in my own abilities than in his.

CHAPTER ONE

Julian: Sussex, England

2nd September 2003

I will always remember that particularly cold, grey autumn morning when time seemed to be passing deliberately slowly. I was bored, and not even working on my latest composition succeeded in cheering me up. I was making absolutely no progress. The clock in the study went into slow motion; the hands appeared to be frozen in time. In fact, I felt time starting to run backwards, and all my hard work to date was beginning to unravel the more I tinkered with it. Subconsciously I panicked myself into thinking I had a form of writer's block and I remember thinking that I was too young to be cut down so early in my prime.

Deciding that I had best distract my attention, I picked up the previous day's newspaper and attempted to re-read the headlines and even the advertisements. I then noticed a melody in my head, which constantly intruded, into my thoughts. The notes rambled lazily in my mind, starting in the middle and not quite finishing before starting again. It was annoying to say the least, and I recognised the piece to be an earlier composition of Julian's, my favourite in fact, but it was now becoming an unwelcome distraction.

The telephone startled me as I half-heartedly worked on the score. I had an inexplicable feeling that something was not right, and somehow this telephone call would be party to it. Picking up the receiver, a familiar voice blurted out urgently:

"Michael? It's Pamela!"

"Mrs Winfield?" I answered, taken aback.

"Michael, is Julian with you?"

Julian's mother Pamela was not the worrying type, yet the urgency in her voice was unmistakable. In my current mindset, I felt uneasy too, the reason for which escaped me at the time.

"No, he isn't here, Mrs Winfield"

"Michael, I know it's silly, but Julian didn't come home last night. He has never done so before without telling me."

Julian had converted the upstairs rooms of his mother's house into a studio apartment. Pamela told me that she had not become concerned when he initially failed to appear for breakfast, but when it had reached 11 am; she had gone to wake him, only to find he had not slept there that night.

What had been strange was that Pamela seemed to think I had been out socialising with Julian the previous night, an untruth that apparently originated from Julian. In fact, he had telephoned me to say he may not be able to see me for a couple of days. I was tempted at the time to ask why, but he didn't volunteer the information and I did not labour the point as I wanted to continue working on my music rather than getting involved in a protracted conversation.

Whatever the reason for his strange behaviour, I felt compelled for some reason, maybe out of some loyalty to Julian, not to inform Pamela of our conversation, but instead offered to telephone a few acquaintances to see if I could locate him. This entire episode now seemed out of character and I wished I had asked him where he had been going. In reality, I had no idea who Julian was likely to confide in, so I resigned myself to waiting for him to contact me at some stage whereupon I would ask him to telephone home had he not already done so.

This was not to be. At 2pm, Pamela appeared in person having driven over by car. She apparently decided she would wait no longer and had started seeking out Julian's whereabouts herself. In certain circles, Mrs Winfield was known for having a rather overpowering personality, one that surpassed that of even the late Mr Winfield, and it was not considered wise to be an obstacle in her way. When Pamela started a crusade, she generally bulldozed her way through to the end.

“Can you tell me exactly when you last saw him, Michael?”

The question was direct and aimed like a bolt between my eyes. I could see her searching my face, reading every nervous twitch and tick. It was useless to carry on this ‘loyalty of friendship’ nonsense, as I was not inclined to mislead Pamela any further. The furrows of worry in her brow made me regret my earlier deceit. I instead told her what little I knew.

After I explained Julian’s mysterious telephone call and attempted to recount his words to me as best as I could remember them, Pamela had, much to my surprise, appeared visibly relieved.

“If Julian said he needed to go somewhere, then I am sure he had good reason to do so” she said, “What I cannot understand is why he never informed me?”

I tried diplomatically to suggest that by telling me, he knew she would eventually get to hear of it. If he had tried to tell her directly, she would probably have never let him go without an explanation. Pamela, stared at me while she mulled this logic over, and then said quietly,

“You don’t think of me as such an old battle-axe, do you?”

She mercifully spared me the need for a reply by continuing,

“I would like to think that Julian would feel confident enough to approach me on anything he was concerned about, but possibly you are right.”

She conceded the point but gave me the stern Mrs Winfield stare. She then added,

“You have told me everything haven’t you, Michael?”

After I assured her that I knew no more, her face relaxed a little and she started to leave.

“If you hear anything Michael...”

She never finished the sentence, not having to as it was meant as a warning shot across the bows. She knew I would not disappoint her twice.

CHAPTER TWO

Julian: Sussex, England

3rd September 2003

I did not sleep well that night, but instead lay awake listening to some ghostly owl hooting somewhere. Its cry sounded rather scary and disturbing like some banshee. Subconsciously I awaited Julian's phone call whilst I tried to understand what could have made him disappear in that way.

I tried to imagine what could possibly have happened to him and wondered where he was at that very moment. In attempting to understand his feelings and thoughts, I tried to remember all our meetings and conversations for the last two to three weeks. Something had worried him, I could tell from the tone of his voice, and not for the last time, I cursed my selfishness in wanting some solitude for my composition that prevented me from obtaining a suitable explanation for his actions. Something should explain his sudden disappearance, something out of the ordinary, something that had upset him... then it hit me!

"Last Tuesday week! It happened exactly last Tuesday!"

I suddenly realised I had shouted out aloud to myself in the dark, and feeling a little foolish, I switched on the bedside light and tried to recollect my thoughts.

I was at the studio rehearsing when I was called to the telephone. I remember it quite clearly as my producer had been rather irked by the interruption, but the caller had said it was urgent.

It had been Julian, and I remember he sounded rather agitated.

"Michael, could you come over when you finish up tonight?" Before I could answer he added a plea, "Please, I think something may be wrong with me."

My producer Matthew made winding up motions in the foreground and pointed to his watch to indicate our allotted studio time was running out. The last recording had just not sounded right, and we were on the fifth attempt. Nerves were frayed all round.

"Julian, I can't at the moment...things are not going right here, it will have to be tomorrow. Is that OK?"

Julian mumbled something about me doing my best and hung up almost as abruptly as he had called.

The next day had been almost as bad as the previous, and we agreed to postpone the recording until I made some changes, although I had no idea at this stage what they were to be. I had been so preoccupied with this that it was only much later in the day that I remembered Julian's telephone call.

When I finally arrived at Julian's mother's house, he answered the door immediately. His eyes had an almost maniacal brightness, but he looked generally rather pale and drawn. Whatever was troubling him had apparently kept him up half the night, and it was starting to show. He hooked an arm over my shoulder as he ushered me in and I felt him trembling as he rested his hand on my arm. I feigned a cheerful voice in a feeble attempt to cheer him up, "What's wrong with you, mate? Are you ill, or in love?"

Ignoring my remark, he instead led me across to a chair before making a move to get another glass. "He is in a right state!" I thought to myself noticing a half-empty bottle of scotch on the coffee table. Julian rarely, if ever, drank alone.

After having offered me my drink, Julian stood in front of me with his hands clenched behind his back. He then took a deep breath, as if he was about to confess to the Schoolmaster of not having done his homework, he began.

"Well... it's just that I have been having dreams. Horrible ones really"

I was puzzled. "Everyone gets nightmares, its nothing to get worried about!"

Julian shook his head, dismissing my comment with a wave of his hand the instant I uttered it.

“These are different. I am sure it’s real, and that it really happened.”

His brow was covered in perspiration; he really appeared rattled by this. I leaned forward, “Dreams of what?” I asked.

Julian turned and paced to the other side of the room. He looked as though he was deciding whether to tell me. That he was possibly being foolish? The trouble was that by now, he had me hooked so I added:

“They say that telling someone else makes it better. You know, kind of trivialises it and makes it easier to analyse in the cold light of day.” I started to struggle for something else to say, so I ended with:

“Tell me about it.”

Julian’s voice took on a low steady rhythm as he tried to recount his dream. I listened intently, not interrupting. It was important, I told myself, that he gets it all off his chest.

“Can you imagine a large public square? There is a huge bonfire, and there are lots of people around, but there is a mood of fear. This is not a celebration; rather the people don’t seem to want to be there.”

Julian gulped his scotch before continuing.

“The language is foreign, Spanish or Portuguese sounding. Some people are just staring at the bonfire; others are huddled together talking quietly. I do not understand what they are saying. Then I turn to see what everyone is looking at and I see a man dressed in a brown soutane.”

“In a what?” I regretted the interruption as soon as I had blurted it out.

“A cassock, or in this case more like a monk’s type of habit. You know! A soutane!”

I didn’t know, but I indicated that he should continue with his story.

“This man looked like evil personified. He had an ugly leer on his face and his eyes appeared to be scanning the crowd looking for a reaction, trying to make eye contact, but no one would look at him directly. He seemed to command the crowd. Then he looked straight at ME. I am ashamed to say that I too looked away. He started to scream directly at me, I really felt as if I was the focal point of his abuse and I felt afraid. I did not understand what he said, but I know he did not mean well. Then I looked towards the fire.”

Julian’s eyes had flicked up to mine transfixing me with a steady gaze.

“Michael. It was horrible. They were burning a person! They were burning another human being on the fire!”

Before I could say anything, Julian had broken eye contact with me and turned to pace the room, continuing with his story.

“I started to scream. In my dream I mean. I felt that I knew who the man on the fire was. He was linked to me somehow. I could see the man writhing in the flames, but he made no sound. I was the one screaming!”

Julian had reached the end of the room and then spun around abruptly.

“This is important Michael, in my dream I knew this person. It is just that I cannot remember who he was now! I was asking the people to stop, to free the man. I was crying and then I ran forward to the fire and the ugly man reached into the fire and pulled out a burning brand and struck me here.”

Julian lifted his hand to the side of his head.

“I probably lost consciousness because I can’t remember anything else.”

I waited for more.

Julian just shrugged, “Then I woke up.” He sat down heavily in the chair.

“For Christ’s sake Julian! You dragged me over here to tell me that!” It had never been like Julian to make a mountain out of a molehill. I had expected much worse. I was more than a little annoyed as I had cancelled a dinner engagement with a particularly attractive lady to see Julian that night.

“So, what! It was an ordinary nightmare, nothing special. I’ve had even more horrible dreams, believe me. Just forget it! Bloody hell!”

Julian did not react at first, and then he stood up and came towards me.

“Wait, Michael! Look! Let me show you something.”

Julian bowed his head and pulled apart the black shiny hair on the side of his head. Through the parted hair, I could glimpse his scalp and could make out a dark patch, a birthmark. It was the size of a child’s palm and was pinkish-brown in colour.

“He hit me right here, Michael! Exactly here! I felt the unbearable heat on the side of my head; I could even smell my skin and hair burning!”

I looked down again at Julian’s birthmark. In a strange way, it did look a bit like a burn mark. This was silly I told myself. Julian was surely pulling my leg?

I straightened up and told Julian in no uncertain terms that I felt he was over reacting;

“So, what? You discover this birthmark when you are 23 years old and suddenly you wonder how it got there. It starts to bother you and you start to brood over it. Your subconscious mind takes over and you have some stupid dream!”

I was rather harsh, partly because I felt making light of his fears would help dismiss them, and partly because (and this was probably the real reason), I was still more than a little annoyed with this childish and unusual outburst. For Julian, it was totally out of character. I did not really know how to react, so I finished cruelly with:

“Forget about it! Just be thankful it’s not on your face.”

Julian looked at me strangely; I don’t think he had been listening to a word I said.

“Why should it be on my face? He didn’t strike me in the face, did he?”

I was dumbstruck, and not for the first time suspected Julian was somehow taking me for a fool. Was he really serious? I countered:

“Who? What are you talking about, for God’s sake!” my voice seemed to raise several octaves. Julian answered calmly; seemingly oblivious to the discomfort I was in and with a deadly serious undertone in his voice like a preacher verbally underlining the important part of his sermon for a slow and backward congregation he told me:

“Michael, the problem is, I did not find this birthmark until *after* my nightmares. I know it sounds crazy, but I couldn’t stop myself checking my head after my dream. If I had found nothing I would have laughed it off. I probably would never have told you, but I did find it! It does look a bit like a burn mark, does it not?”

Suddenly, I felt very sorry for Julian. He had apparently been rather unnerved by this whole episode, and I hadn’t helped him in the slightest. I believed his story to be nothing more than a delirium. Impulsively I had reached out and gripped his shoulders, gently shaking him, in symbolic gesture of solidarity.

“Julian, you scare me! You cannot seriously believe what you are saying, I’m sure. Look. Just relax. What you need is a good rest. Take some time off. Go abroad! Florida or the Bahamas are nice at this time of the year.”

I needed a more instant solution and added, “But for now, let’s go to the club and chill out! I would stay off the booze for a bit though if I was you”. I nodded in the direction of the empty whiskey tumblers.

We spent the rest of the evening socialising at the club with friends and he didn’t mention his dream again. Julian looked his normal self and even cracked a few jokes. Whatever had been weighing on his mind appeared to have vanished. By the end of the evening, having ignored my own warning on the liquor, the entire episode had slipped from my mind.

Trying to return to sleep now was impossible. The confounded bird had decided to rhythmically hoot somewhere outside my window. By re-running the conversation with Julian in my head I felt rather strange but was confident that he would attempt to contact me soon. I planned to see Pamela

in the morning and tell her ... what? She would think I was mad, or worse, that Julian was! Then again, I mused, maybe she may know about his nightmare already! Had this happened before I wondered? With these thoughts in my head, I made a mental note to tread carefully. Eventually I fell into a troubled sleep until morning.

It was the shrill of the telephone that woke me. I knew instinctively that it was Julian, which proved to be right on the button. Julian was brief and very insistent. He begged me to not ask any questions, and not to tell his mother anything other than to cover for his disappearance. He seemed to know that she would be enquiring about him. He also added that he would be back soon and promised to explain everything to me on his return. Then, as abruptly as he had called, he hung up. I checked the number and found the call had come from overseas but could not determine from where. At 7a.m. I telephoned Julian's mother, and she immediately invited me over for breakfast.

I arrived at the Winfield residence and Pamela answered the door herself. She looked very bewildered and concerned, I was not the only person who lacked sleep it seemed. Putting on a brave face, I entered the house confidently.

"Good morning Mrs Winfield! Julian rang me last night!" I explained that it had been late and that I did not want to disturb her, although I immediately sensed she would have preferred it if I had.

"He's alright, believe me. He said he was a little down and had decided on a whim to go to the South of France. Apparently, he intends to stay a while until his mood has lifted." I hoped she would not see how transparent my tale was.

I intended to leave it at that, a little vague to give me room to manoeuvre, but in the true tradition of all white lies I nervously compounded my tale, painting myself into an increasingly tight corner.

"He is much better now and will probably be back in two to three days" I finished lamely.

To my surprise, Pamela started to cry. I had no idea whether it was out of relief, joy or sadness. With women I generally found it impossible to tell. I guessed it was the latter as she looked so depressed and miserable. Not knowing what else to do I asked if she wanted me to fetch a doctor. That made her smile through her tears, and she immediately composed herself.

"I am so sorry, Michael!" She wiped her eyes with a small lace handkerchief, "You are sweet. I'll be fine!" Pamela turned briefly to look at herself in the mirror, and I busied myself by examining the oil painting mounted on the opposite wall.

"Thank you, Michael, for your help and support. You must stop this 'Mrs Winfield' nonsense. It's Pamela. I'll be fine when Julian is safely home again. As you know, I lost my husband last year. It was a great loss to me and the thought that Julian may not be safe....", she left the sentence hanging, then concluded, "I can't take another loss. Sorry, but I am babbling a bit!" Pamela used her hanky to blow her nose daintily, and then absent-mindedly tucked it into her sleeve just as my mother did. "I just want to see him back safely as soon as possible".

At this moment, I could have killed Julian for what he was putting his mother through. It was now out of the question to mention my conversation with Julian on the previous night, concerning his nightmares and his birthmark.

CHAPTER THREE

Julian: Sussex, England

9th September 2003

Julian returned to England some four days later. Despite my intense questioning as to his previous whereabouts, he declined to answer other than, “Don’t worry about me! I’ll tell you later.” He said no more, but harboured a wry grin behind sparkly, yet penetrating eyes. He certainly had me intrigued.

On the other hand, Pamela appeared to be over the moon at her son’s safe return. Uncharacteristically, she chose not to question his strange behaviour. Maybe in some way she thought she was to blame for his mysterious disappearance and thought it best not to drive him away again with too many prying questions. Only one thing had been important to her: Julian had come back and now that he was home, she stopped worrying. In fact, she looked positively radiant, and no trace remained of her previous melancholy. Her worry seemingly put behind her, she busied herself about the house doing nothing.

Pamela still knew nothing of his nightmares and of the mysterious birthmark, as I had remained silent about these. Personally, I felt she must know of his birthmark having probably seen it since he was a baby, but had probably thought, as did I, that there was nothing significant in it. Certainly, she would have no idea of the torment it had put Julian through. However, I felt that I possessed a great secret and longed to talk to Julian to see if this indeed had been connected with his disappearance.

It was two days later before Julian arranged to meet me at a café near the train station. I arrived first and took advantage of the good weather by sitting outside. Ironically, I noted that it would probably have been preferable to sit inside at the non-smoking tables than be assaulted by the clouds of cigarette smoke outside. So much for fresh air! Julian arrived just as I was contemplating placing an order for a second coffee. He was not alone and introduced a pretty young woman to me whom I had not met before. I had pulled over a chair, a little surprised at the extra company, as Julian had made no mention of her when he telephoned earlier.

“Michael! This is Nicola. Nicola, Michael”, and to Nicola, “I told you about my best friend. Do you remember?”

“Of course. Hi Michael!” Nicola stretched out a slender hand in my direction smiling. I remember only that I was bemused by her presence and had not been sure how to react. I took her offered hand and she gently squeezed my fingers. Despite the introductions, I was still none the wiser as to *who* she was, and Nicola simply babbled on about ordering tapas with the drinks.

As far I knew, Julian’s girlfriend was called Roberta. She was a student at Manchester University. Apparently, she was studying linguistics and was due to graduate that year. Sometimes he and Roberta spent their holidays or the occasional weekend together. I had never met Roberta but had heard Julian talk with her on the phone. As she only had shared student digs in Manchester, it meant he did not get to see her as much as he would have liked. As far as I was aware they were still an item. I had even attempted to contact Roberta when Julian had gone missing, but I could not get anyone at the university to give out her number. Just how serious their relationship was nobody knew, and as always, Julian didn’t volunteer much information on the subject. It was therefore with some discomfort that I sat watching Nicola flick some imaginary crumbs off the table top with the laminated menu. Glancing up, she caught me staring at her and I was rewarded with a broad smile to which I am afraid I grimaced in return. I wondered where Nicola fitted into the scene.

We decided on coffee rather than having anything alcoholic (it’s too early, and it will go straight to my head! More giggles from Nicola.) Julian had disappeared inside to place the order, leaving us sitting outside together. Nicola asked almost immediately;

“So, what do you think about all this then, Michael?”

The question had been quite unexpected, “Pardon?” I responded rather lamely, and then I felt somewhat foolish, as I appeared to have lost the thread of the conversation somewhere. Julian fortunately came to the rescue by returning with a sour faced waitress in tow who took our order and departed with sagging shoulders as if the entire third world’s debt sat upon them. Nicola’s question, for the moment, had remained unanswered.

As Julian sipped his coffee, he at last started to put me in the picture. Nicola, he explained was a friend of Roberta. She had finished University two years previously having majored in psychology. Roberta had apparently introduced her to Julian because she wanted a professional opinion about Julian’s nightmares. I now understood Nicola’s early question which I had fortunately not answered (the term ‘bunk’ might not have been appreciated). For now, at least, I was more interested in what Nicola thought had disturbed Julian. I listened as Julian and Nicola described their story.

Julian had apparently been having the same recurring dream, which had interested Nicola. Coincidentally she was writing her thesis on ‘Human memory and the subconscious brain’. Nicola explained that the subconscious memory was useless in everyday life because we are not able to use it at will. Instead, current theory indicated dreams to be no more than disjointed memories that are a deep-seated jumble of many memories being ‘fired’ off by the brain when in a period of rest. In her thesis, Nicola said she hoped to challenge this belief by researching cases of where subconscious memories appeared to hold intelligence or a ‘message’. Rather than being random, she felt it was possible that the dream is encoded within our very DNA, and therefore very personal and relevant to the individual. During her research Nicola hoped to discover what these dreams meant to the individuals themselves; she enthused,

“These books on dreams where they try to describe in general terms what your dream means are, I believe so *totally wrong!* The Dream State is small glimpses into an *individual’s* own personal subconscious, and therefore is only relevant in the context of that person. For instance, a dream about an aircraft may mean a ‘holiday’ to you, but ‘work’ to a pilot! I want to know how we can learn to decode its meaning.”

“You mean it carries a message?” I ventured.

“Possibly, or it may simply be a type of protective mechanism. For an individual to learn to understand the subconscious would be to further our understanding.”

“You mean to learn to control it?” I enquired.

“Not control, just be more in tune with your inner thoughts. This is practised in some religions such as Buddhism, where adepts attempt to harmonise with their inner self. Control as such may be dangerous.”

“Some people purport to control their autonomic brain activity. You know, slow their heartbeat, breathing etc.” interjected Julian. “That’s control isn’t it?”

“Yes, in a fashion, but controlling your body with your brain, although remarkable, has little to do with subconscious thoughts. These emanate *from* the brain rather than conscious control asserted by the brain on behalf of the individual.”

“Maybe it was not intended by nature that we have access to it” I suggested.

“Maybe not”, agreed Nicola, “but nature is not perfect, and when we do see a recurring dream that is apparently revolving around an individual’s subconscious, an opportunity exists to ‘crack the code’ so to speak. Thus, my interest in Julian”

I listened to Nicola’s theories of the possible source of Julian’s dreams, and although it was interesting, it all sounded rather Freudian. I was thoroughly taken aback by the fact that Julian was getting so intense about his dreams. I felt myself become more distant the more I heard. It all seemed too ‘over the top’. I had never taken anything Julian had said about the content of his dreams seriously. Yes, I had believed they had affected him, that was obvious, but I believed there to be as much

correlation between Julian's visions and some DNA 'message', as there was of Nicola really being an alien!

I now understood Nicola's first question, but I still did not know how to answer it. I did realise, however, that despite my personal thoughts on the matter, this was important to Julian. I felt obliged to listen to what he and Nicola were saying so I could begin to try and understand his problem. I was told many an interesting theory that afternoon, and it was precisely because Julian had not found any support from me when he initially told me about his dreams that he had excluded me and his mother from all his mysterious investigations.

Julian had therefore decided to go and visit Roberta and talk to her. He had left for Manchester on the same evening that he had telephoned me. He had been *absolutely* sure that he would come back in a couple of days, however, when Julian had explained to Roberta what had happened to him, she excitedly suggested they investigate further and had booked tickets to Spain the next day! The plan was to find the place in Julian's dream. They both understood that this plan was rather bold considering the lack of research and factual evidence, but Roberta was caught up in the excitement, so they decided to go.

The next five days were spent touring museums and libraries in southern Spain. Remarkably, they managed to find quite a few historical references to places where the brutal inquisition had tormented the unfortunate. Burning by fire was a popular means of punishing the unbeliever in the fourteenth, and all the way through to the sixteenth century. At one of the numerous libraries and museums they visited, they discovered something which had shocked Julian. A particular engraving, which depicted one of these burnings, which had taken place at the time of the inquisition, was so similar to the scene in his dream that it seemed to him like a photograph.

"The square, the church with a domed roof to the right of the fire. Everything was as I saw it!" he said. "But what struck me most of all was the figure in the long dark soutane. This man had an angry face, and had his hands held up, holding a large Christian crucifix in his left hand." Julian broke off and had stared straight at me; his eyes had taken on a distant look as he continued;

"It was him, it was definitely him. That was the barbarian that struck me with the burning log in my dream" At first, despite her initial enthusiasm, Roberta was sceptical and asked him how he could have been so sure. Julian assured her that it was a combination of things, the man's ugly facial features (not one he could forget that easily), his clothes, and hairstyle.

"It was him!" Julian murmured again to no one in particular.

I felt that Julian's problem was now beginning to verge on the serious. The man appeared obsessed by his dreams. To *actually* run off to Spain at the drop of a hat was not the type of thing I would have expected of Julian in the past.

Julian continued to tell us how Roberta suggested he may be the victim of an overactive imagination. She asked him where this scene in his dream could have come from and suggested he had possibly read a book with this engraving in it as an impressionable child. The picture and story could have remained in his subconscious, only to surface later. This concurred exactly with my opinion, but Julian continued:

"I told Roberta that I have never read anything about the Spanish inquisition in my life, and although it was possible I had been very young and forgotten about it until it surfaced now, it was the discovery of my birthmark which told me that this was different."

I strongly contested that and suggested that it may be a mistake to make parallels between what are probably two very different things. I was convinced that Julian discovering his birthmark was a coincidence and nothing more.

"Michael. I cannot explain, but when I dream, I know it is a dream. This however, does not feel like a dream. That is why Roberta suggested I see Nicola."

His fingers gripped his coffee cup tightly. "To me, it was a *memory!*"

We spent the rest of the evening with several very good bottles of Australian wine that had accompanied an equally excellent dinner. When we finally parted company, I reflected on our conversations. Tonight, I had heard some facts and much fantasy in my view. Just because Julian's theories had tried to weave them together, I was far from convinced that he had suffered anything more than a flashback to some childhood memory. It would be interesting I thought to see how Nicola progressed with her analysis from a scientific angle.

CHAPTER FOUR

Julian: Sussex, England

25th September 2003

It was not until Julian and I decided to go to a Classic Car motor show that a rather inexplicable event occurred. Julian by this time had never felt better. He never mentioned his dreams and I felt him to have returned to his normal self.

We travelled down to the village of Beaulieu, which is situated in the South of England in an area known as the New Forest. Such is the anomaly of English place names; the forest itself is hardly 'new' as it was named thus some thousand years ago and been known ever since by that name. Beaulieu itself is a beautiful small village on the outskirts of the Forest and the home of the Beaulieu National Motor museum, well known to classic car collectors and motoring enthusiasts. Tourists love Beaulieu too for its traditional English look. The town has its share of New Forest ponies and donkeys that wander freely in the streets and have done so since ancient times. The swans too, waddle onto the village green when the lake is high. The ruins of the old Abbey loom as a dramatic backdrop to the tourist cars, which crawl through the narrow streets dodging the tourists and ponies alike as both wander aimlessly in the street. We come here at least once a year and stay at the Montague Arms Hotel in the village centre. It is always a pleasure to walk around Beaulieu, especially before the tourists start clogging the streets.

Having started the day with an excellent traditional English breakfast, with mushrooms picked that morning from the forest, we planned to arrive fifteen minutes earlier than the 11 am start of the show. Already the crowds were forming, and families poured from the vehicles into the wonderfully warm and sunny day of mid-autumn.

The National Motor museum holds many international events, which attract enthusiasts and their families from all over Europe and even the US. It was no exception today as we milled around the exhibits. I photographed some of the vintage cars that had been driven here from various parts of England by enthusiasts. Julian had come for the company, having no real interest in classic cars and stood by helping with my camera bags as I dragged him around the show. It was not long before he spied the 'beer tent' and complained of a thirst. We moved toward the refreshment. The place was a heaving mass of humanity and Julian and I headed vainly into the throng looking for the beginning of the beer queue. There were hundreds of people jostling for space and we had just entered, when a couple who were seated not far from us started to call to a child who was weaving his way. The father was attempting to buckle the younger brother into a buggy, when their not much older offspring ran directly towards us flailing his arms, his face gleefully enjoying his quick bid for freedom. His mother ran after him but did not manage to reach him until after he had tripped and fallen headfirst onto the pathway almost in front of where we were standing.

Immediately the little boy's face changed to one of shock, then hurt. His mother scooped him up, cradling him in her arms and spoke softly to him. I realised then that she was speaking in Italian. She was dressed in an attractive trouser suit and colourful scarf which, now I came to think about it, betrayed her continental origins. As Julian and I looked on she carefully passed her fingers through the boy's hair, caressing his head, willing the pain away as he sobbed into her blouse.

"Alessandro, Alessandro" soothed the woman.

Almost immediately, the sobs that had shaken the little boy's body earlier started to reside and were followed instead by loud sniffs. His mother responded automatically by fishing a tissue from the pocket of her trouser suit and proceeded to wipe the little one's nose.

"Alessandro, Alessandro"

Her voice continued to soothe him and had the effect of implanting a glimmer of a smile where once before the lips had been curled in shock and pain. A loud sniff and then a nervous giggle signified the end of the disaster.

The spectacle over, I turned to Julian and found he was not there! Looking around, I glimpsed his back as he moved briskly through the crowd towards the rear of the beer tent. I had no alternative other than to abandon our place in the queue and run after him.

“Julian?” I enquired. “Are you OK?”

Julian started shaking inside; I could see him physically trembling. He looked back at the Italian couple who were now pouring a drink into a feeding bottle. I followed his stare, not understanding the connection. The little boy, tragedy now forgotten, was attempting to put his smaller brother’s hat on his own head, shrieking now with laughter instead.

“What’s the matter, mate?”

Julian stood holding his head as if in great pain. He looked up after a minute and mumbled to me;

“Sorry, Michael but something is wrong again...” he clutched the side of his head and I helped him sit on the grass. We had veered off a bit into the shrubbery and were more or less alone, the noise of the crowd audible, but muffled.

Julian continued to clutch the side of his head and with tears in his eyes, said;

“My head is so sore; it feels like it’s actually burning!”

When Julian indicated he was feeling better, we went over to a small refreshment stall where I purchased two icy Cokes and we sat on the grass swishing away the occasional greedy wasp. I asked him to try and describe what had happened. Julian however remained restless and started to insist on us returning home. I started to worry and asked:

“Julian, look, maybe you need a doctor?”

“No, please, let’s just go home. Now!”

He said it so forcefully, any idea I might have had at talking him out of it vanished and I resigned myself to cutting short our stay.

“OK! Let’s go, but tell me, what has this to do with the Italian women and the baby? Do you know her?” I had seen the look on his face as he stared back at the couple.

“No, of course not! Don’t be stupid Michael.”

“Well, why the reaction? It looked like you had seen a ghost.” I added, rather cruelly, “What are you going to tell me? That you saw them in your dreams?”

To my surprise, Julian looked at me rather strangely before replying.

“Michael, I have never met this woman or her child before in my life. Not even in my dreams.” He paused a little, “... but I know that it has already happened to me before...”

Julian completely lost me. “What happened?” I asked.

“The same thing: Alessandro! Alessandro!.... and then the experience of horrible pain and the real fear of death.”

I ceased to tease Julian further. He looked terrible and appeared to genuinely be in pain. I drove him back home and advised Julian’s mother that he had not been well, not enlarging on the conversation Julian and I had at Beaulieu.

When I returned to my flat that night, I was exhausted and settled into my favourite armchair with a large Scotch to contemplate the events of the day. I wondered what Nicola would make of it and if I should call her, only then realising that I did not even have her telephone number. I made a mental note then to obtain it from Julian. It might prove useful in the future.

I then began to wonder if Julian needed a different type of help. Nicola’s interest in Julian was totally self-motivated. What he really needed was a doctor who would see him as a patient, not as an object of study. Maybe Nicola could suggest the name of a doctor she thought might be of help.

I was now sure more so than ever that Julian needed help to come out of this predicament, it was not normal to have an inexplicable fear and reactions to simple things like a child crying.

At the very least I felt he should be referred to a psychotherapist and he probably needed to get some rest, preferably a complete break.

“A seaside resort is the right place to go. I must suggest it to Julian”, I thought aloud, “I also need to discuss Julian with Pamela first and see what we can do for him in this situation. She *must* know that her son is not well. Maybe she can persuade him to see a doctor?”

I decided to check up on Julian and gave Pamela a ring. She told me that Julian was still asleep and I invited her over for dinner, explaining that we needed to talk privately. I changed and freshened up a little before Pamela arrived a little later. I offered her a drink, which she declined claiming she was driving. Pamela looked worried and told me that she suspected something was going on with her son. Her quizzical look informed me she was waiting to hear what I had to say. I wondered where to begin. I decided to tell her everything I knew, as I did not want to hide anything any longer. Apologising for my previous half-truths, I promised to be more open with her from now on. She could not help crying as she revealed that Julian had an incident when he had been 4 years old. He had fallen from a swing and broken his arm. Pamela feared it was possible that they had concentrated their attention on his arm and not paid sufficient attention to his head. Maybe they missed some trauma of his head and it only now had started to manifest itself? Pamela was beside herself with worry and together we agreed to convince Julian to at least see a doctor as soon as possible for an investigation. Julian would never have listened to me, he dismissed all my suggestions that he see a doctor, but with Pamela’s help... I believed she would insist on it.

The telephone rang making us both jump involuntarily. It was Nicola.

“Michael, I have tremendous news! I don’t want to call Julian yet because I wanted to discuss this with you first before I tell him.”

“Tell him what, Nicola?”

“Listen, you won’t believe this. I have just returned from Spain. I spent 10 days there and I think I have made an important discovery.” She paused for a second; “Do you remember Julian told us about an engraving which he and Roberta had found in one of the Spanish museums?”

“Yes, I do. It was something about an execution,” I replied warily.

“Correct. Can you believe that I found not just this engraving, but also the place, which is depicted in this picture? I have been there. It has the same square and the same church as shown on the engraving and as Julian described it.”

“But there must be lots of village squares with similar looking churches in them!” I protested.

Pamela was watching me, her eyebrows raised in question. Nicola continued almost as if I’d not spoken;

“Everything looks the same, just as it did then. The place is called Cadiz, it’s not a village, but a city. Cadiz is one of the oldest cities in the Western world and has a port that goes back to the time of Phoenician merchants. The ‘church’ on the engraving is actually a Cathedral. You cannot mistake its shape, although it has been subject to many restorations since the time of the engraving, but the unusual domed roof, not as we would imagine a church in England still exists.”

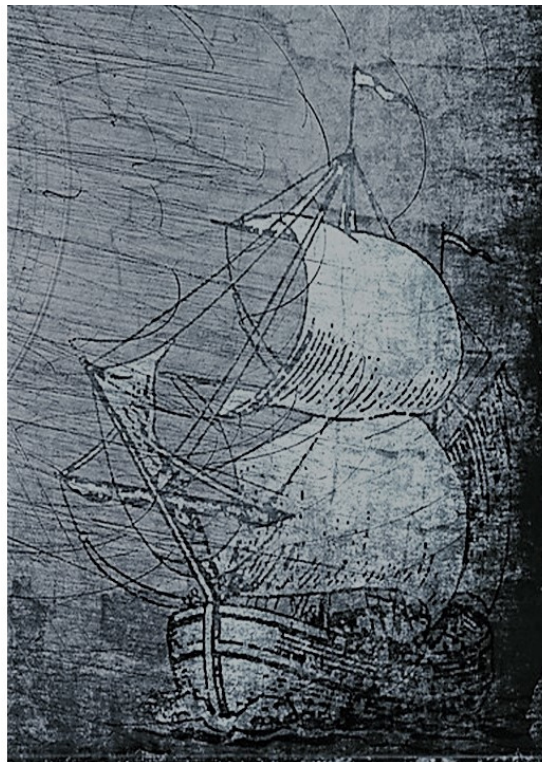
Nicola referred to her notebook as she spoke, I could hear the rustle of paper as she leafed through the pages.

“I introduced myself as a journalist and managed to talk to the Cardinal. He was very accommodating and introduced me to the local Bishop who allowed me access to the Cathedral library. More importantly, I was given access to some of the officials who look after the religious manuscripts and old texts relating to the Cathedral and the city. I was there for about 3 hours and spoke with some of the local amateur historians there. One in particular was nearly 80 years old but he has a remarkable memory for detail!” Pam was hovering anxiously nearby, concerned that the call may be about Julian. I mouthed “It’s OK” as Nicola’s voice continued in my ear;

“He knew the history of Cadiz very well. I asked him specifically about the engraving and he estimated it had to be in the latter part of the 16th century. Now get this...” Nicola added, “There are many documented accounts of burnings within the Church records which he translated for me. Many of them concerned Jews who were persecuted at this time, but we found one, which was unique, as it told of a foreign seafarer’s family. He was burned as a heretic and his wife was also killed by the crowd attending the execution, on suspicion of being a witch.” Nicola paused, and I could almost hear her excitement; “Wait for it Michael; their young son is also mentioned – he was mutilated with a burning log!”

I could sense the excitement in Nicola.

“The records were unusually detailed, as they were not part of the Jewish persecutions but of local people. Oh, and Michael, I even found out the boy’s name. I thought it sounded so nice: ‘Alessandro’...”



“It sounds so adventurous, to be a seafarer...”

CHAPTER FIVE

Alessandro: Cadiz, Spain

3rd July 1587

The smooth sea's surface reflected a calm glaze as the boy poked at a crab with a broken twig, squinting with concentration into the harsh sun.

The cool breeze off the sea ruffled his hair gently as he flipped the crab onto its back in the soft warm sand and he giggled as it struggled to right itself. A serious look came over his handsome face as he observed the determination with which the unfortunate creature attempted to rectify himself. No matter how many times the boy flipped him over; he saw that the crab would just keep trying until he succeeded in getting back on its legs, only to be cruelly flipped over by yet another poke of his stick.

Tiring of this game, he glanced back towards the sounds of preparation as men loaded the tall sailing ship. On this ship, the boy's father would soon be departing on a long ocean adventure to distant waters. It was the boy's dream to accompany his father on such a trip and he longed to be old enough to do so.

"It sounds so adventurous, to be a seafarer," he said aloud to himself. In his imagination he was already the Captain of his own ship. It was large and beautiful as this one. A whistle from one of the men on the rigging brought him out of the deepest oceans and back to the beach.

"When I grow up I will definitely be a seaman!" he thought. "Like father, I will travel over the seas, discover new lands and visit far off countries and places." The boy rolled over onto his back so that he was blinded by the sun overhead. Closing his eyes tightly he could hear the distant voices of the crew as they clambered about the rigging adjusting the sails, the gulls swooped overhead, their cries ringing in his ears. He drifted off into another daydream.

"I will come back home with a lot of wonderful things like pearl shells, large sea stars and beautiful woven shawls for Mother." he dreamed.

His father was always bringing wonderfully designed veils from the East, which were made in an almost transparent magical cloth that nobody here knew how to make. Mother's friend Maria sold them at the market for them and how people marvelled at how fine the cloth was. Maria's husband Philip was a seafarer too and was on the same ship as Father. Philip had told him that he had seen creatures bigger than lions that had orange and black stripes on their fur, but he did not believe him!

Through his thoughts, he heard a familiar voice. He sat up and shook the sand from his hair. The crab had gone, taking advantage of the distracted boy to make good its escape.

The voice called again; "Alessandro, come here, my darling". It was Mother. Alessandro turned towards the sound and saw his mother standing on top of the sand embankment, her hands on her hips in mock annoyance. Mother never lost her temper with him. She waved, making sure he had seen her.

Alessandro jumped to his feet and raced towards his mother; weaving his way in the manner of a young boy of ten years, making sure he stepped on all the white shells which littered the beach after the gulls had smashed them open on the rocks above. The rules of the game were simple: step only on the white shells. Any other would be unlucky but his skill ensured that he stepped on them all. Bounding over them at such a speed, he had difficulty in stopping in time and his mother caught him laughingly. He sank to his knees in a heap at her feet.

Mother bent to straighten his shiny black hair and flicked the grains of sand encrusted on his cheek. Still laughing, she asked him,

"How are you, my son? Where did you adventure today? Was it on a big ship like Father's?"

Before Alessandro could get his breath back to answer, she continued, "Come, let's go home. You need to change your clothes because we are going to church soon. Your Father is leaving today, and we must spend time in prayer for his safekeeping."

“I want to be a seafarer, Mother. Am I allowed to be a seafarer like father when I grow up?” Alessandro asked with hope in his voice.

“My dear Alessandro! When you are a man, you will have no need for my permission then, only my blessing. But to be honest with you, I would much prefer to see you as an artist!”

She smiled at his exaggerated grimace. “How are your drawing lessons with Don Pedro coming on?” she asked.

“It’s alright...” Alessandro tried not to sound too interested. Although in truth he enjoyed painting, it was not as much fun as going on the ships. However, his interest betrayed him as he added a little too breathlessly,

“Don Pedro promised to show me how to make my own paints next week. Already I can change the colours by mixing them!”

To Alessandro, theirs was a happy existence. But it had not always been so. Before he had been born, his mother and father, Loura and Mauro Corrado had lived in Venice on the Adriatic Sea. Unfortunately, the civil war which had ravaged their country had come upon them, leaving them no option but to flee after their house was set alight by the militia. Mauro convinced Loura that they should join the ships leaving for Spain to seek a better life where it would be safe to raise a family. They sold their meagre possessions and had landed in Cadiz some 12 years ago with not much more than they could carry.

Loura had found work doing menial jobs at a local tavern where she cleaned, did the laundry and sewing. The tavern was owned by a surly couple called Francisco and Ana Botella. Ana was lazy and took pleasure in ensuring that Loura worked hard for the little money she was paid. Mauro, having been a fisherman in Venice, applied his knowledge of ships and the sea and found a job as a seaman on the trading ship, ‘St. Sebastian’.

Mauro was an honest hard working man and with sober habits. He worked aboard the ‘St. Sebastian’, an old but durable tub, for some two years before he was able to afford a home of his own with which to house Loura who had lodged at Botella’s tavern whilst he was at sea. When Mauro finally bought their house, Loura, who was already pregnant, moved from the tavern to become a housewife and await the arrival of the baby.

Ana announced her displeasure at Loura leaving her tavern. She had been useful there and Ana had enjoyed taking advantage of Loura’s hard working nature to have more free time for herself. With Loura gone her husband Francisco was reluctant to pay decent money for a replacement and told Ana she would have to do any additional work herself. Ana found herself with many of the unpleasant tasks she had managed to avoid for so long, and her resentment of Loura was matched only by her dislike of the chores.

When Alessandro was born, Loura happily devoted herself to her son and the house. At about that time, Mauro befriended Philip, a seafarer on the ‘Española’, a beautiful modern merchant sailing ship. Philip was the leading seaman and was charged with finding an experienced replacement, which they needed desperately before their next voyage. It was a great opportunity for Mauro and a good change of fortune in their lives, especially now that they had a child. The downside would be that as the ‘Española’ was a merchant ship that travelled to distant lands as far as India, it would mean that Mauro would be away from home for long periods of time.

Spain had developed a trade route to India at the bequest of Charles V since the discovery of the Indian continent at the end of the previous century. Competition was high, and many nations strove to secure the routes that meant lucrative contracts for the ship owners as ships returned laden with spices. It was a prestigious job for Mauro; the ‘Española’ being the largest ship in port in Cadiz and his wages had almost tripled.

In this environment, Alessandro grew up, learning to read and write and appreciate art. He was a clever boy and talented in whatever he chose to do. He loved to spend many hours listening to his father’s tales about the mysterious places in India. It was every boy’s dream to go to sea and

being a port, most families were involved in maritime commerce one way or another, many being fisherman. Not many children though, had a father who went abroad and returned with strange gifts and interesting tales to tell of life in strange lands. Loura, however, saw other opportunities for Alessandro and when he was 10, arranged drawing lessons for him with Don Pedro who taught at the church school. Her dream was that her son would use his gentler talents and become an artist rather than take the risks involved in going to sea like his father.

Loura had talents of her own. She had learned a lot about the medicinal properties of herbs from her mother and her grandmother in the old country. She busied herself with growing and drying remedial herbs and made a small business of her own helping the local people with their health problems. At first the local pharmacist made fun of the poultices and herbal mixtures she peddled. As her popularity increased however, he had a grudging respect for her knowledge, although he would never admit to it in public.

CHAPTER SIX

Julian: Sussex, England

15th October 2003

We sat in the doctor's reception area, a rather elaborate room in art décor style reserved for clients of a wealthy nature. Julian underwent his session with the doctor. Pamela looked calm, just happy that Julian had agreed to attend. She only wanted what was best for her son and she was a very patient woman. I, on the other hand, found myself to be surprisingly tense and nervous as if I was attending the doctor myself. I pretended to look calm, but to be honest, I was rather worried.

Nicola had been allowed to be present in the initial consultation between the psychoanalyst and Julian only on the understanding that she did no more than observe. I hoped that it would be made clear today what really was happening with Julian. Was he experiencing a mental episode and if so, how serious was it?

Before we involved a doctor, Nicola took on board my concerns and especially those of Pamela. She told us that she felt it was best she approaches Julian and explain that his health was important.

"Personally," she advised us, "I cannot see any abnormal signs myself, and I have been working closely with Julian, but maybe I am too close. It requires an objective view of someone not too bound up in Julian's problems to make that judgement!"

Nicola talked to Julian several times and explained to him the importance of his health. She did not hide the fact from Julian that such symptoms like recurring dreams, premonitions, fears (it does not matter whether they are well founded or not) although very interesting for her to study, may constitute a real hazard to his health. The only way to be sure would be to see a psychoanalyst, and she recommended that he check himself out anyway.

Julian only agreed to see a doctor when Nicola offered to arrange an appointment with an extutor of hers. He was one of the best private psychoanalysts in Harley Street, London. Doctor Edward Humphries had an excellent reputation and Nicola knew him from her days at University. He was usually quite busy but did not refuse Nicola when she explained Julian's problem. He was a mild mannered man, with a slim frame and sagging shoulders. Thick rimmed spectacles perched on the end of his nose, which he peered over rather than through. You immediately got the impression on meeting him that you were in safe, if not eccentric hands. He explained;

"The first consultation must be a minimum of one and a half hours for us to get to know each other and discover the background to the problem. I do not expect much from the first session, but it will give me an indication on how to structure the following sessions."

He looked at each one of us in turn.

"After that I will decide what the best course to take is."

Having completed his preliminary session, Dr Humphries had his nurse collect us from the lounge and ushered us into his office. Julian and Nicola were already present, and Pamela and I sat on the leather sofa under a large bay window. Dr Humphries sat behind an old-fashioned heavy mahogany desk, his arms resting on an ink blotter. He made a steeple out his fingers whilst he patiently waited for us to be seated.

Clearing his throat, Dr Humphries nodded towards Julian.

"I regret that the young man is suffering from overt mental strain. We will need to get down to the underlying cause of this. Until we have a precise idea what is causing it, he will continue to have symptoms, but that is something we need to work on."

He inclined his head to gaze at Julian over his spectacles.

"What immediately makes it more difficult is that Julian himself has no idea what is causing his stress, although this is not unusual. In those instances where something tangible is the cause, such

as work worries or debt etc. it would be so much easier. Until the source of the problem is identified, we cannot even begin to remedy it.

He looked in Pamela's direction to placate her.

"This is of course contributing to his insomnia, which in turn leads to lack of sleep and even higher stress levels which have exacerbated the symptoms he is now exhibiting." He glanced at his notes; "Unpredictable reactions to common occurrences, a lucid imagination, paranoia and a proneness to place complicated explanations to simple events. These are all quite classic symptoms."

He paused to allow us time to absorb the information;

"Take the example of Julian's reaction to his birthmark for instance. This is just a banal combination of events. It happens quite often and especially when people find something unusual after a bad dream, but I really do not think we have much to worry about."

I felt jubilant! It was good to know Julian did not have a serious problem. I also felt a little smug at being vindicated in my belief that he was merely over stressed.

Dr Humphries continued, breaking into my thoughts;

"To be honest with you all, there is just one detail I did find interesting. That is Julian's reaction to hearing the name 'Alessandro'. Nicola informs me that she found reference to the description of the life of an unfortunate boy with the same name in similar circumstances as Julian described."

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