

Bad Dreams

Dreams do come true, if we only wish hard enough.

J.M. Barrie

"I can't believe we're back here again," Jessica said to Laurie, looking out of the window at the students filing past.

"Y'know, I was *this* close to never coming back," said Laurie.

They gazed outside rather than looking at each other as they stirred brown sugars into their black coffees. Streams of students passed on their way to or from somewhere, in dozens of shades of denim and corduroy. The girls observed the crowds thinning and the stragglers hurrying as the clock on the library tower chimed the commencement of ten o'clock lectures and seminars. They let their silence stretch for another few minutes while there were still a few latecomers to watch.

Jessica brought the coffee to her lips. She saw Laurie over the rim of her cup and thought how changed she looked. Better, though. Not that that would have been hard. She blinked to try to rid herself of the image. When Laurie lifted her cup from the table there was a ring of coffee underneath.

"Nervous?" Jessica asked.

"Not too bad." Laurie managed a tight smile. "I'm glad we don't start until eleven today. Nice to meet up like this and go in together."

"It'll be alright. I had a dream about it last night actually."

"Yeah?"

"I dreamt we walked into the lecture hall and everyone turned around and clapped. Then we got a standing ovation. Then Dr Hollamon - remember him?"

Laurie rolled her eyes. "Duh, of course!"

"Right, well he's standing at the front giving a little welcome speech for us and he hands us flowers and kisses us both on the cheek, but as he's kissing me the whole lecture theatre melts

away – you know how things change suddenly in dreams? - and it's just him and me. What a great lecture eh?”

“Maybe they've changed the timetable this year,” Laurie said.

“Yeah, right! I saw Dan when I got off the bus this morning and he reckons Dr Hollamon isn't teaching undergrads this year. Typical, eh?”

“Oh well, you'll have to make do with your dreams I suppose,” Laurie shrugged, recouping her distant look. Having thawed the awkwardness a degree, Jessica was eager to keep the silence broken.

“Well, so...how about you?” she said, cringing at how graceless her words were. “I mean, any developments on the guy front?”

Laurie lowered her eyes, glimpsing her reflection in the surface of her coffee.

“I just don't seem to be quite there yet,” she told Jessica, looking up once she had her emotions under control. “Right now I think even dreaming is ambitious enough for me.”

The sadness in Laurie's voice shot Jessica straight back to that night. Back here, where it had happened, and sitting so close to Laurie that their knees touched under the table, the picture had ripped itself right out of its vault. Jessica remembered as much about the ridiculous details as she remembered about the shocking conclusion of that night. She remembered which bars they'd gone to that night and who was there, although not everyone had gone on to the club after closing time. She and Laurie had, though, with half a dozen others. They were pretty drunk by eleven but Jessica had never suffered memory lapses, even after she'd been drinking.

Once inside the club Jessica had decided to make one drink last, since she didn't want to bring on another one of the excruciating headaches she'd been having recently. Laurie had continued drinking for the both of them and not long after midnight was feeling sick in the toilets. Jessica remembered seeing how disorientated Laurie looked when they ran into each other again at half past twelve, and that she offered to get a taxi with her and call it a night. Dan had said he didn't think they should go and wait for a taxi on their own, and that he'd just grab his coat and come with them. As Dan headed for the cloakroom, a tall blond guy from the next block over in their

halls leaned in and suggested he give Laurie a lift back. They recognised him of course: they'd seen him around halls just about every day for an entire term, although they didn't know much about him other than that he was Swedish and had more money to throw around than most students. He leant Laurie a strong arm as she swayed towards him, and introduced himself as Ivar. He didn't drink, he explained, and his car was outside. He had been about to go back to campus anyway.

Jessica recalled how Laurie had insisted, slurring her words but repeating them to show she meant what she said, that Jessica stay and enjoy the rest of the night. Promise to knock on my door when you get back, she'd said, as she took Ivar's arm and turned to leave.

She and Dan and three of the others had shared a taxi after staying at the club right until the end. It had turned out to be such a good night that by the time they left the DJ was packing up his stuff and the bouncers' polite veneers were wearing thin.

The kitchen light was on as Jessica put her key in the entrance door. When you shared a kitchen with ten people someone was always up. But, in case someone was asleep, she told the others to be quiet. Not that it would bother Laurie, Jessica thought, she'd be well under by now. They went straight to the kitchen to put the kettle on and see if anyone had bread for toast. Jessica had led the way. She was first to see.

Under the glaring strip light of the cold stainless steel kitchen, she saw Laurie standing still in the middle of the room, as though someone had pressed a pause button. Her grey irises were islands in the widened whites of her eyes. She seemed to be looking straight through Jessica and the others. Tangled ropes of her waist length copper hair, matted with vomit, fell about her starved white face. Jessica would perhaps have concluded that Laurie was suffering the ill effects of too much alcohol, but then she cast her eyes lower and saw the trickles of blood running down her legs and into her shoes.

The confusion that followed – one of the other girls screaming, Dan looking for the culprit and other students rousing from their beds – didn't break Laurie's fixed expression. Jessica had crossed the kitchen floor, stood in front of her friend and, ignoring the pungent stink of vomit and semen, put her hand on Laurie's arm. Laurie drew her breath in with a shriek and then burst into tears.

Ivar wasn't charged. He was arrested and questioned while Laurie was examined. Jessica, Dan and the three other students gave police statements. The students in the block hadn't heard anything during the three hour attack. The students in Ivar's hall were also questioned, and several of them stated that they'd found him difficult to get along with: girls had felt a mixture of discomfort and indignation around him, owing to the superior air he took over women. Guys had felt uneasy about his bragging: he liked to talk about how many virgins he'd slept with. Meanwhile, Laurie had her blood alcohol level tested, and it was this that prevented the case ever getting to court. A few milligrams of alcohol was enough to dissolve the rape, the blood, and the stitches that had to be put in.

Ivar was moved across campus to a different hall. The Dean of Students threw Laurie's mother out of his office when she demanded Ivar's expulsion. The Dean threatened Dan with expulsion when it was suspected that he was behind a physical attack on Ivar a month later. Jessica was warned that if she distributed any more of her homemade posters warning girls not to associate with Ivar around the campus, she too would be expelled. Foreign students brought in a lot of money, and Ivar was only in his first year.

Shortly after that, Jessica visited the doctor for the results of the tests he had run in response to her complaints of severe headaches behind her left eye, and learned that she had a brain tumour. Within a week she had left university and gone into hospital. Laurie, having struggled to keep her life on campus going following her ordeal, gave up the moment Jessica left and returned to her parents' home town for the rest of the year.

Throughout Jessica's recovery from surgery and Laurie's months at home, the girls stayed in contact. Since their home towns were two hundred miles apart their conversations were confined to email and letter. To reveal their thoughts fully, selectively or not at all, was a much easier business over a distance. Especially when each had the time on her hands to hover the pen over the page waiting for suitable words to come, or the security of the delete key. Meeting face to face again left no such shelter. And while recommencing university was a triumph over adversity for both of them, for Laurie it was also a test of nerve. Many students were aware of Jessica's illness; there was not a single one who hadn't heard every detail of Laurie's ordeal.

“Anyway,” Laurie said, pushing her cup aside, “how are you feeling?”

“Really well – not as tired as I was even a month ago. I've got some more tests coming up, but I'm not too worried,” Jessica replied.

“That's excellent news,” Laurie said, and there was a genuine smile this time.

“There's just one thing that's a little weird.”

“Oh? What is it?”

“It's nothing to worry about, it's just my dreams. They're different since the operation.”

“Your dreams? What do you mean?” Laurie couldn't help laughing. “You haven't been dreaming about lecturers kissing you every night have you? Because I think that's a symptom of your active imagination rather than any effect of the surgery.”

“Very funny. No, it's not that. Although it kind of is. You see, whatever I go to sleep thinking about, I dream about.”

“So? Most people do, don't they? You're worried about something, you dream about it all bloody night.” Laurie had had enough experience of recurring nightmares over the past few months to know.

“It's more than that. Say I'm thinking about what I've got to do tomorrow while I'm drifting off to sleep, right? So, I'm thinking about getting some books out and going some place for lunch and thinking that I musn't forget to phone my mum, something along those lines. Well, when I fall asleep I dream about those exact things, in precise detail. I mean, dream elements creep in, but basically I dream the story of whatever was in my head when I dropped off.”

“So, last night you were thinking about your first lecture here with me and the fact that you wished Dr Hollamon was giving it?”

“Yes,” Jessica said, grinning with embarrassment. “Which grew into a little fantasy scenario about him, y'know.”

“A girl's got to dream!” Laurie teased.

“Seriously though, I have to be careful what I go to bed thinking about. Once I was worrying about this spider I'd seen crawling under the rug. You can imagine that didn't give me a very restful night.”

“Yeah, but think of the possibilities!”

“I have had some fun with it, I admit,” Jessica said.

“I wouldn't mind trading with you, any night of the week,” Laurie said, trying to keep her tone light and not quite succeeding.

“What would you dream about?” Jessica asked.

Laurie drew her finger through the coffee ring on the table, making wet patterns on the wood.

“Dan,” she replied, looking down at her liquid doodle. “I would dream about him and me in the club that night, and that I didn't go home, and that we just stayed on the dancefloor. That's it.”

“Yeah, I wish I could make that one come true,” Jessica said. She glanced out of the window towards the clock on the library tower. “Laurie, we'd better get going. It's five to.”

*

That night when Jessica got undressed for bed she caught sight of herself in the mirror and realised how long her hair was growing. It was almost touching her eyebrows at the front. It was odd to think of her hair as long now when once it had reached halfway down her back in thick acorn brown waves. For the surgery they'd had to shave a patch and, knowing how long it would take to regrow one square of hair to match the rest, she had impulsively decided to embrace a skinhead. As soon as the stitches were out she'd dyed her cropped hair a different shade every

few weeks, just until it got long enough for a softer elfin sort of style that wisped more femininely around her face and ears.

She pulled a photo of her and Laurie off the mirror. Studying it by the light from the bedside lamp, she felt overcome by how different they looked a year ago. Matching flushed cheeks from the wine they were holding up to the camera, their free arms wrapped around each others' waists, long hair flowing over bare shoulders, dressed for a night of clubbing. Laurie had cut her own hair off two days after the rape when she'd imagined she couldn't get the smell of sick out of it. Jessica contemplated the way the camera had captured overt felicity in Laurie's eyes, which appeared an enchanted silver-grey under the flash. She wished to see such a look in her friend's eyes again but feared it was not possible to recover such a thing, once it had been lost.

Jessica put the photo on her beside table and settled under the covers. She tried to reclaim how Laurie's face used to look. How it might look still if she had stayed with Dan that night in the club. Jessica had always suspected Dan was keen on Laurie but hadn't dared to show it. If Dan had had more courage and chosen that night to flirt with her...

Jessica arrived early for their nine o'clock lecture the next morning: a slot on the timetable she'd expected more often than not to be late for. But when she hurried into the building, Laurie was already loitering outside the lecture theatre doors. As soon as they saw one another they hurried to meet in the middle of the lobby, where Laurie blurted out: "I had the dream!" as Jessica said: "I had such a vivid dream about you!"

While other students made their way into the lecture theatre, the two girls stood talking. Laurie had dreamt about being at the club with Dan, just as they had conjectured in the bar the day before, and with the kind of vivid plot that Jessica had described her own dreams as having.

"That's amazing," said Jessica. "I was thinking about you having that dream before I fell asleep and then I dreamt the exact same thing."

"Really?" Laurie gaped at Jessica, open-mouthed.

“For the first time since the operation, I wasn't in my own dream. I was watching yours.”

“This is pretty spooky!” Laurie laughed. “Let's try it again tonight.”

They did and it worked. The night after that they decided not to discuss the dream that Jessica would try to send Laurie, to prove that there was no cheating. Jessica scribbled down a synopsis of the dream before she went to bed, trying to make it obscure in its detail and nothing that Laurie would guess. Laurie wrote out every detail of the easily recalled dream she'd had as soon as she awoke. The synopses matched exactly.

Although the girls were fascinated by the phenomenon and, when alone, could talk about nothing else, they wanted to find out what its limits were. They invited Dan and some other old friends to Jessica's place for a reunion party and, once the early hours crept in and every last guest had passed out, Jessica tried to send Dan a dream. She could not help exchanging looks with Laurie the next morning when Dan strode into the kitchen and announced through a yawn: “I had *such* a weird dream last night.” He proceeded to relate the details of it, which the girls had deliberately made as bizarre and amusing as possible in order to secure the highest probability of him mentioning it, and concluded by saying he found it all the more remarkable because he never remembered dreams.

“That's what happens when you drink your own weight in lager and watch crap telly before you pass out on a beanbag,” one of the others pointed out.

“You know what this means?” Jessica said, once everyone but Laurie had gone home.

“God, yeah – you can have some real fun with this! Imagine!” Laurie replied.

“What if we didn't use it for fun?” Jessica said.

“How do you mean?” Laurie asked. She stopped thinking about the practical joke potential when she picked up on the serious undertone to Jessica's enthusiasm.

“What if we used it for revenge? For justice.”

Laurie stiffened. She swallowed the lump that had suddenly obstructed her throat.

“C'mon, think about it!” Jessica said. “Might make him reflect on what he's done to you. If

the so-called justice system won't help you, perhaps this is our chance to get some payback, without leaving a trail.”

“What would you send him?” Laurie looked down and saw her hands shaking.

“Anything you like. The way you looked after what he did to you, the pain you were in when the doctors stitched you, the two week wait for the HIV test results...”

Laurie felt her whole body tremble. “Rape him.”

“Okay.” Jessica was taken aback by the abruptness and the certainty with which Laurie spoke.

“Send him an image of me, but make me huge, and scary, and mad as hell. Give me the biggest cock you've ever seen in your life and have me do him over and over for three hours, maybe more if you can stand to think about it for that long.”

“Well, what happens is generally I just think about the basics of the thing and it spins itself out into a full story in the course of the -”

“Make sure you give him plenty of pain, worse than he's ever experienced, so bad he goes into shock. Don't let him pass out though. He should always be conscious.”

“Laurie, you're shaking. Sit down. I'll get you some water.”

Jessica did as she was asked and sent the dream every night for almost a week, with Laurie fine tuning details as she thought of them. Some of her suggestions were stomach-turning, but Jessica knew Laurie had not invented them. They were all things that Ivar had done to her.

Laurie began to write new dreams. There were elaborate thriller plots where Laurie stalked Ivar through the night, allowing him several last minute escapes before slitting his throat or shooting him in the head, the eye, the crotch. She castrated him in one dream. In another she had him strung up naked from the library tower whilst the entire university population gathered beneath to point, laugh and (once they were bored of that) stone him to death.

Occasionally Jessica added a few details of her own, either when Laurie was stuck for a horrible twist or as some suitable embellishment occurred to her. She let Laurie do most of it though. It

seemed to be doing her some good. She had related her first few dream scenarios in a trembling voice, but after a couple of weeks she could hardly wait to tell Jessica the next one. They frequently ended up laughing about some of the things they were planning to include.

It wasn't all they used Jessica's talents for. Now and then she had a night away from Ivar's nightmares to send Laurie a dream about Dan, or Dan a dream about Laurie. And while the dreams she sent to Laurie were just for fun, as a bit of light relief from the campaign against Ivar, the dreams she sent to Dan had an agenda. Jessica and Laurie designed each one carefully to set Dan thinking about how much better his life would be if Laurie were his girlfriend. He didn't mention the dreams to anyone, as far as the girls knew, but it didn't take long for his behaviour to change. It was subtle at first, amounting to no more than lingering glances and a little more attention. But after the third or fourth dream over the course of as many weeks, he began inventing opportunities to snatch time alone with her.

As Dan and Laurie spent more time in each others' company, Dan became braver about broaching the difficult subject of Ivar. He had wanted to say something for a while, and eventually he chose an afternoon when they were sitting in the union bar, having a drink after lectures.

"Have you seen Ivar around campus lately?" he asked her.

"No," she answered, setting her glass down on the table. Her hands began to shake. "Since they moved him over the other side of campus I hardly see him at all."

"I'm sure there are no tears shed over that, but I thought you might like to know: I pass him a couple of times a week because our seminars are over in the same block, and lately he's been looking...well, rough."

"Rough?" Laurie's hands shook more. She tried to hold them still in her lap.

"He's dropped a lot of weight, looks like he hasn't been sleeping or he's drugged up or something. You know how he always used to look pretty clean shaven and neat? Well his hair's all over the place, looks like he came to seminars in the clothes he wore in bed last night, that kind of thing. Maybe he has got a conscience after all, huh?"

"You never know..." said Laurie, pressing her hands onto her thighs to try to steady them.

"I doubt it somehow," Dan continued. "I bet the students over his end of campus know what happened to you and they're giving him a hard time. Maybe his classmates too. I hope so anyway. He deserves everything he gets."

*

Once Laurie had explained what she had learned from Dan, Jessica still looked bewildered.

"So what if he's freaked out? That means it's working! That means we should keep going. If anything, we should turn up the fear. I was thinking of some more ideas last night actually -"

"No, Jess, I don't think it's right. To be honest, I wasn't convinced he'd have the dreams."

"Why not? *You* did, didn't you? And Dan. What made you think Ivar was immune?"

"I just thought...maybe Dan and I got the dreams because you know us and you see us every day. I thought it wouldn't work so well on him."

"You doubted I could do it."

"I didn't doubt you, I just wasn't sure it was possible. I have no idea how you're doing this, and as far as I know you don't either, and we'd never tried it before on someone who's not close to us. Now we know it works – or it would seem that way, unless what's happened to Ivar is just a coincidence – I'm scared. We're messing with someone's head."

"Oh, and he didn't mess with yours?"

"I'm not saying he doesn't deserve it, I'm just saying I don't feel totally comfortable dishing it out."

"No one else is going to. This is the only way you're going to be able to pay him back for what he did to you."

"Jessica, the past few weeks have been better for me than any therapy. I've exorcised a lot of my anger by going through these dreams and focusing on fantasies of revenge. And I'm glad if he's had to experience all the things that went through my mind. But I'd like to move on now. He's been at the forefront for too long. It's time to start giving more time to other things."

Jessica knew Laurie was referring to the way things were going with Dan, and she was pleased for

her friend, but she couldn't ignore her conviction that there was still room for more. She endeavoured to persuade Laurie that to stop now was to let Ivar off too lightly.

"Ivar will easily forget a little bout of bad dreams," she said, "unless we force him to remember."

"It's playing god, Jess. It's not right," Laurie said. Her cheeks were inflamed and she was trembling again.

"It's justice," Jessica said.

"I don't care. I want to stop." She tried to sound as steady as Jessica did.

"I'll stop when justice is done," Jessica said.

Laurie fled the house.

It was a fortnight before they spoke to one another again. They avoided one another's eyes in lectures and missed nights out with mutual friends. After a few days, both wished they could relent, having done a lot more thinking about the other's viewpoint. Fortunately, both chose the same essay title for their week four assignment, and found themselves in the same aisle of the library one lunchtime, looking for the same book. Once they were over the difficulty of coming face to face, it wasn't such a descent for one of them to suggest lunch in the bar, and the other to agree.

They were at the table by the window again, with a view across to the library and the crowds hanging around the centre of campus at lunchtime. Laurie unwrapped her sandwich but didn't touch it.

"Look, I'm sorry for running out on you. I wasn't ready to see it through your eyes," she said.

"It's alright," Jessica said, pulling her bread roll apart and picking out the doughy innards.

"I hope you don't mind, but I told Dan about it, and he was on your side. He told me how much he'd wanted to hurt Ivar after what he did to me, and how it's still a struggle to restrain his anger when he sees him. I know you wouldn't be that angry if you didn't care," Laurie said.

"Dan's right, Laurie. But I understand that you want to put it behind you. God knows that'll

be hard enough – you should take any chance you get to do it. And anyway, what are a few stupid little dreams gonna do? You wake up, you carry on with life, don't you? It's not real. It's not like what you went through.”

“Well, I don't know...I think dreams are pretty powerful,” Laurie said, and a slow smile spread across her face. “Got me and Dan together, right?”

“Maybe that was gonna happen anyway – you two always got on well,” Jessica shrugged. “No – I think it's time to give up on petty dream revenge. Think I'll start to focus on having some sweeter dreams myself.”

“Yeah, you should!” Laurie nodded, taking a bite of her sandwich.

In that moment, as Laurie bit into her lunch and nodded at her friend, and Jessica stared at the ceiling for a second as she contemplated what she might dream about that night, a dark mass fell from the top of the library tower. It was visible from the window which neither of them were looking out of. The simultaneous screams of dozens of students near the library tower shook them from the moment they were in and made them swing their heads to look. They saw hoards of students turn to the foot of the tower. The initial screams gave way to a second's stunned silence, superseded by hysteria. One girl backed out of the crowd with blood dripping from her coat. Her mouth was open in an upside down crescent of disbelieving shock.

Jessica and Laurie tore their gazes away from the scene and looked at each other. Before they even made it outside they heard the news: Ivar had jumped.