Dream Reality

Inesa Dolenyk

No, it’s not a mistake. Lina now refers to what's left of her life as "dream reality". Her marvelous, organized life with a business built from scratch, a happy marriage, and the hope she gently carried under her heart... What grand plans she had for the future! Thanks to her habit—her ability to clearly organize her time-space—by thirty, she undoubtedly had a successful background. Why not apply a working scheme to her family? If anyone had told her before the great war that she, a realist to her core, would seriously become interested in such nonsense as "lucid dreaming," she'd have laughed till she hiccuped. But the war had slashed and crumpled everything with a blood-red pencil.

…After the terrible news, Lina dared not look inside herself: there was a black vortex, a hole that sucked in everything alive. No strength to resist—better not to look. Her mother rushed from abroad, leaving a sick stepfather with a caregiver. She held her hand. Covered the piercing wounds of her soul. Stood by her side in chillingly mournful winds. She comforted. Caressed her head. Took on the organization of Leo's funeral, since his parents remained in occupied Kherson... Lina was mute. She came to herself only when she saw her husband in the coffin. In his wavy hair—there was a grey strand... When they had met, it had also been white, but not with grey... Back then, Lina parked her car and, in her favorite long ivory coat, confidently headed for the doors of PrivatBank. A remarkable man in a striped bright scarf emerged from there, standing hatless in the snow, with snowflakes entwining in his thick curls as they tried to escape the wind... Instead of stepping aside, he blocked Lina's way:

- Greetings, blue-eyed lady, you have no idea what you’ve just done for me...

Lina reluctantly stopped:

- What, excuse me?

- I now know exactly how my Snow Queen should look! I'm illustrating a poetry collection, and there's this character... I am Leonid Pilyai, or just Leo. Would you mind if the queen looks like you?

His hazel eyes radiated self-confidence and genuine curiosity toward his interlocutor.

"He reminds me of a charismatic Matthew McConaughey," thought Lina, but she curtly replied:

- I mind.

The young man was not expecting such an answer. The girl fleetingly glanced at him and disappeared behind the doors. Poetry and she—they were opposite poles, even though her mother had named her after Lina Kostenko... She had forgotten about the incident within a moment. Leo had clearly said he was an artist. And that whole fraternity—poets, artists, actors—had never interested her. Their creations—yes. They themselves—no. Because mostly they are unserious people, unreliable and without a broken penny in their pocket. But the wise had warned in vain: never say never. The universe has a strange sense of humor...

Leo had not forgotten about Lina... The next morning, he was waiting by her house when she went out for a run. They exchanged quick glances, ran alongside each other. Only the war parted them.

…Her mother gently touched her shoulder—a classmate, Petro, had come. They hugged in silence. At school and well after they were inseparable—“Siamese twins," as a classmate once hissed in their direction, smitten with Petro. And regarding him, Lina had a special item in her plan… And she made numerous plans—as far back as she could remember. Once, while cleaning, her mother accidentally stumbled upon one—a plan for the third quarter of eighth grade. There were three items: finish the term with excellent marks, win the math Olympiad, and meet her first love. The third item clearly showed she was no swot. A normal girl with dreams... And her mother laughed until tears. She explained her laughter by saying that planning a miracle was impossible. But in March, a new boy came into their class. Handsome, tall, wearing glasses. Smart but not a nerd. Lina got along with him, as they were both, so to speak, playing the same game "Achieve the Goal." The game had different levels and became more interesting. Those who got stuck on initial levels, and those who didn’t even suspect the existence of games other than active and computer ones, didn’t understand them. Petro and Lina discussed various complex topics. Once, they pondered what time was:

- Time is the most valuable resource.

- It's so simple to miss. Better to convert: into a desire, a dream, a life's work, in the highest sense—a mission.

- You just need to make the right plan, - Lina shone.

- Says someone who… That’s tactics. Strategy’s more important.

They decided: a day when you learn nothing new is considered wasted. And education became their fixation. Never stop. Risk and win, even if not on the first try.

Mogilyanka, post-graduate studies, an internship in London… Everything was going to plan. Only their marriage fell apart like a stone from a mountain. And it seemed, that stone heavily oppressed Petro. Thank heavens, despite everything, they remained friends.

…Two weeks after the funeral, a caregiver called: "Lora, I can't bear it, come back." Recently pretty, her mother Lora looked like a critically tired elderly woman. Lina noticed it—and it pinched her heart, like in childhood when after her parents’ divorce, her mother desperately tried to make ends meet, and Lina felt guilty and furiously missed her father… who never once helped financially, and for some reason, her strange mother did not seek alimony through court… The one time she mended her only pair of nylon stockings—not with thread, but with a hair from her braid, so the seam was barely visible. After another failed job interview for her dream job, they hired some Ivan, not her. She cried but suddenly hugged Lina fiercely: "Daughter, study, and study so that you'll be not a head—seven heads taller than any guy. Only then will they hire you for a good job, not him,"—and Lina imagined herself as a giant girl, with boys as Lilliputians, it was a bit funny, and her mother continued. "See, anything can happen in life, and you, whatever it takes, must provide for yourself and your children"... But already in a moment, she pulled herself together. Saying, we’ll manage: there's a neck—a yoke will be found. But it was then that Lina made a firm promise to herself that she would grow up and earn a lot of money, so her mother would never have to mend stockings, and always have new ones. The seed had fallen on fertile ground…

- Go, Mom, today. He’ll be lost without you… Don’t waste words—I’m staying. I’m okay now.

Now Lina looked at her mother with different eyes. Previously, she never wanted to be like her, too sensitive, soft, not very self-confident. But there's no denying: her mother raised her, and she had everything just as good as other kids. She took care of a bedridden grandmother for three years after a fracture, is looking after her stepfather, flew to see her now… Maybe she’s not that weak? Just a fine soulful organization… A gentle flower…

…Lina saw her mother off and, for the first time, mindlessly scrolled through her Facebook feed. She stumbled upon a post in the group "Matrix Glitch", suddenly recalling something similar she had heard from Leo (supposedly, there’s this theory that the real life happens in a dream, and what we perceive as reality is, by and large, an illusion). She had said back then, "Nonsense," but now her torn, shattered heart begged for hope, however illusory, small as a poppy seed. The pains of reason were too excruciating. Into this fissure slipped the controversial topic, becoming the only straw holding her to this side of life.

Lina meticulously studied information about lucid dreaming from Aristotle to the most recent research. The first necessity—learning to recognize oneself in a dream, then moving to the so-called consciously initiated dream... But if lucid dreaming was the only way to see her husband and their unborn son, then those special methods were her allies—she was used to achieving goals…

By day, Lina lived an ordinary life. Conditionally ordinary, considering the bloody and destructive adjustments from the war. She managed the remains of her business—a chain of festive apparel salons "Your Day"—and donated to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. And at night, she'd put on earplugs and immerse herself in her own dream reality, where there was no war, where her son, Davidik, was born, so much like Leo… In her last dream, they celebrated his third birthday—a pirate party with treasure hunts and a cake in the shape of a ship… But she especially loved the dreams of reminiscence.

…April 2021. The botanical garden adorned in a lace of apricot blooms. The aroma made her head spin. The only desire—to close her eyes and breathe in... Sweet languor, full, absolute happiness: the bouquet, the ring, the velvety hazel eyes. “We come to Earth to learn how to love. Shall we begin?”—Leo couldn’t help but jest... But he was right: the only way from human's animalistic nature to the divine is through love in all its facets. When you give, you actually accumulate. And then you have something to pay for eternal life. And you become an integral part of the grand mystery of light's triumph over darkness. And you find out: for your sake, it is created, this mystery…

To those around her, it was a mystery how Leo and Lina, so different, became a couple, falling over each other for inspiration. No, she didn’t lose her head. Just next to Leo, she saw the world from a different angle: extraordinary, full of unexpected surprises and secrets. Out of nowhere came bright colors, unheard sounds, dizzying smells, and ultimately, new meanings and a new her—light, cheerful, happy.

Leo admired her, though sometimes he'd jokingly ask: "You're not related to Margaret Thatcher by any chance?" And Lina would have her breath taken away as from different lines, figures, colors, the play of light and shade on canvases, something "more real than reality" emerged, as noted by a famous art critic at one of the exhibitions. Something people didn’t notice themselves.

…The phone chimed. A message from the secretary, Anya: “A military man is waiting.” Nothing unusual—Lina was volunteering. But this was different.

- I’m Dmytro Hai. I served with Leo… I’d recognize you, Lina, even in a crowd from his drawings. Here I came to meet Kateryna from the maternity ward, and at the same time, to give you these. Can you imagine how happy Hnat would have been to have a son?…

Lina’s eyebrows made a breathtaking leap: Hnat and Leo had died together at Bakhmut, and it hadn’t been nine but eleven months.

- I thought you knew. Hnat then donated, together with Leo, that... what’s it called... genetic material. Hnat asked Leo to accompany him, for…

Lina’s face changed. With trembling hands, she carefully opened the folder. From the first drawing, straight eye to eye, Davidik from her dream reality looked at her. Whispering almost, she asked to be left alone.

…The workday had already ended. Secretary Anya knocked, entered, and froze: her Lina Lvivna… is asleep! Peacefully, with a happy smile on her lips. On her chest lay a drawing: a curly-haired boy with painfully familiar hazel eyes, his index finger touching his lips, as if to say: "Shh." For some reason, Anya nodded and tiptoed out of the office.