BEFORE

Neil Garnett seemed like a typical boy growing up in a blue-collar neighborhood in Pittsburgh. His father was an ironworker, and his mother was a housewife. Neil was the youngest of three brothers and a sister. But since high school, Garnett secretly had a burning fascination with a particular history subject -- that of Medieval Eastern Europe. He strangely dreamed about being alive in the past in the area around the Black Sea, where the 9th Century Vikings and the early Russians -- the Kievan Rus -- once lived. Later, he expanded his interest to include the wild and free 14th Century tribes of horsemen known as the Cossacks.

His family, sadly, was unsympathetic towards his new-found fervor. They teased him when he brought home and poured over library books which included illustrations of both royalty and warrior costumes for men which were popular back during the Middle Ages. These included: linen tunics with colorful embroidery on the wrists, neck, hem, and front seams; rich fur-collared coats, robes, and doublets; thick but loose-fitting trousers or sheepskin leggings wrapped with thongs; silk or wool undergarments and hose; leather vests; gauntlet gloves; leather pouches, belts and boots; iron swords, battle axes, and daggers; and warm, helmet-like hats or hooded cloaks. Metal clasps, protective iron studs, and sometimes even jewels -- if one happened to be wealthy -- were also often incorporated into the clothing styles of that era. Meanwhile, his mother worried when her son largely skipped the usual dating scene, parties, and contact sports that teen-aged boys enjoyed. Instead, Neil brought home posters from art museums which displayed the eras he was most fond of, and decorated the walls of his room with them.

Over time, Neil increasingly felt that he was a stranger in his own house. Why did I have to be born here, in this time period, among these uncaring people? he wondered. Against his father's wishes, and enduring mockery from his siblings, the young man -- having scant savings despite working part-time jobs on weekends -- applied for scholarships to colleges and universities across the country as he entered his senior graduation year. He would study very hard in school, and focus with such intensity that he would work his way out of his dilemma and attain his sole passion, he vowed to himself. He would someday earn a Ph.D. in Medieval History and become a renowned professor, maybe even at prestigious Yale University. And he would never look back...

And so, over the years, Neil Garnett's goal was gradually yet finally achieved. He had initially been accepted on a full scholarship to the University of Chicago, where he earned his doctorate in Medieval and Renaissance Studies. He specialized in Byzantine History, up until the 16th Century of Ottoman Empire rule. Neil also mastered Latin, Greek, and Arabic. After that, he was offered a position (based upon his outstanding scholarly research, sterling references, and multiple publications) as an associate professor of Byzantine Studies at Boston College. While there, he met and fell in love with an art historian named Tricia Stanfield -- who worked at the local Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum -- and they were soon happily wed.

His fascination with period costume -- purchased on-line and/or custom-made by theater costume companies --made Garnett a well-known personality on campus, for he often dressed in colorful medieval robes and tunics as he lectured his students. He even grew out his manly brown beard to complete the look. Some admired his courage and audacity to appear boldly in public this way, while other thought him simply weird or harmlessly amusing and eccentric. Fortunately, Tricia was supportive. They both heartily enjoyed the HBO series "Games of Thrones," and the Netflix series "The Vikings." ("You see, Trish, that is the exact style of clothing that fascinates me! "he admitted.) Soon after they were married, however, he promised his bride that he would refrain from dressing so dramatically off-campus -- even though he felt most at ease in such clothing. He even sported wearing different styles of turbans in class whenever lecturing on Islam and the early Ottoman Empire.

For their summer honeymoon, the couple went off on a long-desired Mediterranean cruise, which would include the various popular Greek Islands and conclude in exciting, neighboring Turkey.

For Neil especially, Istanbul was amazing! He had quickly studied and acquired a working knowledge of the Turkish language while the couple had earlier been cruising off the Turkish coast. Yet when he arrived in the former capitol of Byzantium, then called Constantinople, his mind was dizzy with inexplicable feelings of 'deja-vu.'

"I know it sounds crazy, Trish, but I'm sure I have been here before...maybe in a past life, if reincarnation is somehow possible," he confessed. His wife simply smiled, but was somewhat skeptical with what he just said.

The pair marveled at the city's fabulous mosques. Tricia, as an art historian, especially enjoyed the 6th Century Hagia Sophia, once the world's largest Christian church, which was now a mosque again after being a museum for several decades. Its lofty, colorful tile mosaics were stunning -- representing a huge Christ Pantocrater, the Virgin and Child, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (who had ordered its construction), as well as his Empress, Theodora. Afterwards, the gleeful couple perused the vast Grand Bazaar marketplace for souvenirs, and snacked on grilled kebabs stuffed into still warm pita bread, when they crossed the famous Galata Bridge. Istanbul was truly a photographer's paradise -- filled with such wonderful sights and interesting faces!

But it was in the Imperial Treasury room at the Topkapi Palace museum on the Golden Horn that Neil had his most overwhelming experience. While viewing a dazzling section featuring jeweled Ottoman necklaces, rings, earrings, bracelets, and pendants, Garnett's eye was drawn to a special ring called the Seal of Suleiman. It was crafted in pure silver, and showed a six-pointed star in its center, surrounded by holy Arabic script from the Koran. It had once adorned the finger of Suleiman the Magnificent, the Supreme Sultan who ruled the Ottoman Empire from 1520-1566. As a unique, official seal, it could be pressed into warm wax on important state documents and other private missives as proof of Imperial authority. Neil knew that Suleiman was a great ruler -- a learned scholar, warrior, lawgiver, and an enlightened leader to his people. He had eight sons and two daughters with his three successive wives.

"Trish, I know it sounds crazy, but I recognize this seal!" her husband declared, pointing at it. "I am positive that I have seen this ring somewhere before...I just can't explain it."

"Maybe you saw it in a book during your studies," she replied. "You simply don't remember where or when, my sweetheart," she added, smiling and lovingly pressing his hand as they walked together.

The couple continued their tour, inspecting the Harem and the other important buildings in the palace complex. Impressive tree canopies in the various courtyards offered refreshing shade on this warm and sunny day, and a welcomed breeze off the Bosphorus brought the faintly fishy smell of its waters inland. Topkapi was teeming with curious tourist crowds, as usual, for this was the summer vacation season for many. And during upcoming August, it would be even busier.

Neil and Tricia Garnett spent a happy week exploring more of the spectacular city, but his dreams at night seemed more vivid and urgent. Often, he woke up before dawn in their hotel room, wreathed in a troubled sweat. He saw himself as a wealthy young man, in an expensive, bejeweled, purple silk robe with crimson trim, wearing a turquoise-colored turban and black silk slippers. He was discreetly surrounded by nubile female servants in some unknown location. In his now reoccurring dream, Neil oddly sensed that his life was in some kind of danger as well. Tricia embraced her troubled husband and comforted him back to sleep on more than one of these disturbing occasions.

Back home in Boston, Tricia gently suggested a few weeks later that Neil see a psychiatrist. "These dreams of yours are becoming more serious," she noted. "What may have started as an academic fascination of yours is becoming something more peculiar, honey." After giving his wife's suggestion some deep thought, Neil finally agreed.

Garnett ultimately chose Dr. Kyle Cryton, who had an office at nearby 15 Parkman Street, on a recommendation from a trusted colleague.

After carefully listening to Neil's report over two, one-hour sessions, Cryton asked, "Have you ever heard of Dr. Oscar Trevant?"

Garnett shook his head, no.

"Well, he has done some fascinating research in Philadelphia using minute amounts of lysergic acid diethylamide- 25 in a controlled, clinical environment upon certain patients. You may know this drug abbreviated as 'LSD,' from when Timothy Leary first introduced it to the counterculture masses back in the 1960s. Now, if you are willing to trust me, Neil, we could arrange for such a session right here in my office. I have used it safely on other patients already, with remarkable success. It is only legal in the United States providing it is sanctioned by the D.E.A. in a strictly clinical, experimental environment, which I have been approved to use by the Feds. In fact, I actually prefer it over using standard age-regression hypnotherapy. So...will you consider it, Neil, and let me know? Talk it over with your wife if you like, and see what she thinks too."

Tricia was at first hesitant, but when Neil shared that Dr. Cryton vouched for the treatment's safety and stressed the very low chance of any adverse side effects both during and after the LSD session, she gave her approval. A date for Neil's special therapy event was then set.

When Garnett was ready the following Saturday in Kyle's office, he was ushered by the psychiatrist into an adjoining room which featured soft lighting, peaceful wall posters of nature scenes, and colorful, plush floor pillows. Neil had been advised to drink a lot of water and have a generous, filling breakfast, for the experience of taking an LSD 'trip' could last from 10-12 hours, and be quite dehydrating. He was also asked to wear comfortable, loose clothing and refrain from having any alcohol or taking any medications 24-hours prior.

Dr. Cryton then explained the procedure.

"I will be with you the entire time, Neil. I will guide you with occasional questions, and insure that you are safe at all times. There is a small hospital-style toilet in the corner of the room for our urination needs. Your dosage will be tiny -- just a single 20 microgram tablet dissolved under your tongue. The effects will begin happening in about 30 minutes. Because there is no history of mental illness in your family, your chances of having a terrifying 'bad trip' are slight. Your unique experience will include visual distortions, sensory changes, hallucinations, mood changes, and some physical changes -- such as increased heart rate, higher blood pressure, and profuse sweating. After the session, I will give you plenty of fluids, and your wife will be contacted to drive you home for rest and sleep. You can resume normal eating once your appetite returns the next day. But no caffeine, alcohol, or other drugs for several days, O.K.? Any questions, Neil? No? You are ready? Now, let's have you take that 'one step beyond' and see if we can help discover the root cause -- or causes -- of your concerns."

Neil relaxed as best he could, and took the drug tablet. The entire session would also be video-recorded for later analysis as needed, Kyle added.

Gradually, Garnett's senses began to shift. It was initially very strange and unsettling, but Neil heard Dr. Cryton's comforting voice instructing him from time to time. Colors began to swirl in changing patterns, or exhibit bright halos. Staring at his hands, Neil saw them first shrink, then enlarge. Some of the pillows in the room appeared to float or move. Neil reported being able to 'smell' the colors on the room's nature wall posters, and 'seeing' sounds coming from their depictions of beaches, forests, and mountains. He experienced calm, then euphoria, then sudden withdrawal. His psychiatrist gently guided Neil's focus back to the purpose of this treatment.

"Let's return to Turkey, Neil, back to when Istanbul was called Constantinople...think about the Topkapi Palace...the Imperial Treasury...the Seal of Suleiman ring...you're wearing a purple and crimson silk robe with a turquoise turban ," Dr. Cryton urged. "Remember now? Who is with you? What do you see?"

Neil's swirling mind raced across time and space.

He found himself in some kind of Royal residence, wearing the identical robes the psychiatrist just mentioned from his re-occurring dream. He walked past two attractive servant girls who bowed to him. He looked at his reflection in a polished brass plate next to a table laden with various prepared meats and fresh fruits.

He was wearing the turquoise turban, and appeared to be about twenty years old. The features of his bearded face were somewhat different, but the soulful brown eyes...they were HIS eyes...Neil Garnett's! He had no doubt he was actually there, looking at himself at that very instant -- only somewhere in the past.

Suddenly, a tall, stately, thickly bearded personage in rich, bejeweled robes entered the room. The servant girls bowed low as he clapped his hands and dismissed them. It was none other than Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent himself, whom Neil recognized from various paintings in art museums of the famed Ottoman ruler.

"Sehzade (Prince) Mehmed, my beloved son! How are you, on this glorious day?" the Sultan's commanding voice echoed. "What news have you to report, as my new Governor of Manisa?" Father and son next embraced, then Mehmed concisely shared the asked for information.

The pair moved and sat together on an ornate, raised and cushioned divan. Suleiman confided in a low voice to Mehmed, "I want to show you this ring, my son. It is the official Sultan's Seal. Here, try it on." The ruler removed the unique silver ring with its six-pointed star from his right index finger and offered it. Mehmed, surprised, nevertheless slipped it on.

"Although your brother, Sehzade Mustafa, is six years older than you, I must tell you in strictest confidence that he will never be heir to the throne, which is ordinarily our Moslem tradition. Mustafa is not to be trusted. I have sadly realized over the years that his heart is dark and his mind is scheming. He is selfish, and thinks only about his own needs for power and pleasure, and not for the true needs of our subjects. Instead, you, my beloved, will rule the Empire when Allah someday calls me away to Paradise."

Mehmed was deeply humbled. He grasped and then kissed his father's hand in obedience and respect. "It will be as you wish, Father," he vowed. "May the Prophet and the Koran always guide my selfless actions."

The pair talked further in confidence for perhaps an hour, then Suleiman retrieved his Seal Ring from Mehmed's finger and excused himself to attend important matters of State. "We will meet again this evening over dinner and entertainment," the Ottoman Sultan promised. "*In Sha'allah."*

Shortly thereafter, Mehmed's older brother, Shezade Mustafa, haughtily strode in. He was likewise richly dressed, and had a jeweled scimitar attached to his wide belt.

"So, you have returned," his dark eyes flashed in jealousy and resentment. "I suppose you want to see Gulfem again." She was an exquisite palace beauty whom Mustafa lustily favored but who was attracted instead to Mehmed.

"I'm warning you, brother...stay away from her! She will marry me when I demand it, not you! And don't try to convince our Father otherwise. Your life could be forfeit if you ever try to interfere with my designs," he boasted, placing his hand ominously on his sword's jeweled hilt. Mustafa hated his younger brother, and suspected that his Father preferred Mehmed over him as a beloved son. Mehmed would have to be killed sooner or later, the jealous one realized in his twisted, evil mind.

"What is happening now, Neil?" Dr. Cryton gently prodded.

His patient murmured a few snippets of the dramatic details. Then he said, clearly and urgently, "It's reincarnation...it has to be re-incarnation! That explains my clothing desires and dreams! It's all true!" Then he went silent.

After the LSD wore off about ten hours later, Neil was given a large glass of water and a towel to wipe off his sweaty body. He rested until his heartbeat and blood pressure returned to normal. Tricia was texted to come pick him up. The following Saturday, he was invited back to Dr. Cryton's office for a debriefing and a partial replay of the videotaped therapy session.

Garnett told the psychiatrist everything he could remember about his 'trip.'

"It was so real, Kyle. I had previously known from scholarly research a certain amount about Suleiman -- Tricia and I naturally visited the grand Suleymaniye Mosque with his tomb on our recent visit to Istanbul -- but I knew absolutely nothing about either son, Mehmed or Mustafa. Since my drug session recovery, however, I did some further reading on the brothers. Mehmed was indeed the favorite of his father, Sultan Suleiman. When Mehmed died of smallpox in 1543 at the age of twenty-two, the sultan was so aggrieved that he commissioned a mosque to be built in his memory which would include his son's tomb. It is still there today -- the Sehzade Mehmed Mosque. I must return to Istanbul and see it someday! Suleiman had the same architect later build the Suleymaniye Mosque nearby. As for Sehzade Mustafa, he was strangled to death in 1553, on the specific orders of Suleiman himself, ten years after Mehmed died of smallpox. Mustafa had been caught plotting to kill his father to become Sultan, but Suleiman was warned beforehand."

"Well, Neil, you have had your unique glimpse of 'one step beyond,' which should explain your re-occurring bad dream of impending danger. You sensed that your rival older brother wanted to kill you. You also now know why you tend towards wearing medieval clothing, especially Turkish Ottoman garb. But all of this, you must realize, is just in your mind. Remember, it was a drugged experience -- simply

'enhanced imagination,' if you will. You cried out in your session 'It's reincarnation!' repeatedly. But, my friend, there is absolutely no scientific proof that such a thing can actually be real."

Garnett thanked the psychiatrist as he left the office on Parkman Street, but Neil inwardly disagreed with the doctor's final statement. Instead, he thought: *We have all been here before*. Of that, he was absolutely convinced...

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However, unbeknownst to either Neil Garnett or Dr. Cryton, one week earlier, at the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, Museum Director Ismail Sejer was giving a private tour of the Imperial Treasury room to a group of visiting foreign dignitaries. He was about to explain the Arabic inscriptions on the famous Seal of Suleiman ring, when he noticed that it was missing from its glass case! He quickly called over the room's guard -- naturally a family cousin, by the name of Oznan -- and asked for an explanation. Oznan looked shocked as well, and called the Director aside, and pathetically admitted that he 'might have dozed off' for an hour or so before anyone arrived. Ismail went back to his tour group and apologized, quickly lying that he had forgotten that the ring had been removed for cleaning, as a way of explaining its absence. After the foreign guests left, however, Ismail returned to Oznan and slapped his sweating, obese face in disgust. "We must check the security tapes to see how it was stolen, you idiot!" They rushed to the basement, where the camera monitors and security retrieval units were arrayed.

Inexplicably, the video showed the Seal of Suleiman vanish mysteriously for about an hour when fast forwarded, only to then reappear! Ismail checked the video time stamp against his own wristwatch. Fifteen minutes ago! When the pair rushed upstairs, they discovered that the ring was indeed safely back in its protective glass case, as if nothing unusual had ever happened.

Yet this was exactly the amount of time that Neil -- back in time and space as Mehmed, as well as across the modern time zones from Boston -- had been temporarily wearing the same ring while conversing with his father, the Ottoman Sultan -- Suleiman the Magnificent...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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