

RECURRENT DREAMS

I have two recurrent dreams. I have them perhaps twice a year. They leave me unsettled for the rest of the day.

In the less frequent of the two I am an undergraduate in my first year at Oxford. It is Saturday night, and I have nothing to do. I sit in my room and feel desolately lonely. The dream accurately reflects my first few weeks at Oxford. I had gone up with friends who spent their weekends back home with their girlfriends and it took a little while to move out of the old circle. Once out, I didn't look back, but the fear of social loneliness is burned into a neuronal circuit somewhere. Social loneliness is a terrible thing. Later in that first year, and firmly a member of one of the many groups of friends in College, I was in the crowded College bar when we heard that one of the second-year students had killed himself. Not a single person in the bar knew the unfortunate soul.

In the other dream I am about to take medical finals, and I know I will fail because I haven't done enough work. But the odd thing about this dream is that I am never an undergraduate; I am what I am now: a working anaesthetist. Nonetheless, I have to take medical finals all over again, and if I fail I will have to go back to medical school and resit next year. Like the loneliness dream, it is horribly realistic. I sit with the books, and read stuff I know I'm expected to know, but I don't know it at all. I started having the dream long before anyone suggested revalidation, and the exam I fear is never in anaesthetics, nor am I actually sitting the exam. I also do not remember having any great worries about failing medical finals, or having dreams about it, at the time. This recurrent dream started only when I was already safely a consultant anaesthetist.

Read into these dreams what you will. I read only that we understand even less about the sleeping mind than we do about the awake one. I also have nightmares occasionally, which wake me suddenly and sometimes noisily from sleep. Rarely can I remember for more than a few moments what had been happening. My recurrent dreams never wake me, but during them I have a sense that I wish this could be over. I wake eventually, to a flooding sense of relief that it was only a dream. But the fear stays with me all day.

Stealing geraniums

Real geraniums are hardy, well-behaved plants; unlike pelargoniums (often called geraniums). You don't have to pamper them in any way. You see a gap at the front of a border, think geranium, and plonk one in. If it's at the very front, you do well to choose a sprawling, small flowered kind, like *G x riversleanum* or *asphodeloides*, which will form a haze of white or pale pink over the edge of your lawn or path. Most other varieties can go a few inches further back. None of them gets very tall, although some can spread inordinately. Apart from the vibrant magenta of 'Anne Folkard' and *psilostemon*, they come in a range of almost-too-tasteful pinks, mauves, and blues.

One way to get hold of them is to consult the *Plant Finder* (free online), locate your nearest specialist nursery, and buy in a range. People who grow geraniums for sale tend to be kindly and mildly eccentric, so set aside an hour or two and be prepared to come home with a few plants you don't know what to do with. Get them in the ground at the first opportunity: if they don't fit, you can move them easily at any time except during hot drought.

Young readers with huge mortgages, growing families, and little interest in gardening need their geraniums too, because there are few cheaper ways to cover a garden. Obtain a single plant of *G x magnificum* (rich blue in June), *G macrorrhizum* (pink in spring, and often again later) and one of its varieties with creeping brittle roots like 'St Ola' (pinkish white). In autumn dig them out and break them up and stick them in any patch of unfilled soil. You will soon have more plants to give away than people to give them to.

Which brings me to the title of this piece. The actual theft of geraniums is unnecessary, except perhaps if you see a particularly wonderful clear pale blue form of wild *G pratense* growing in a hedgerow. It will propagate easily from a small portion of root, leaving the main plant to be enjoyed by others, and spread its



useful genes. Don't try and pinch cuttings (I wonder if this is how the word 'pinch' got its second meaning?) from people's gardens because they are unlikely to take. But I think it is permissible for doctors visiting their patients to ask if they could possibly have a bit of some plant they know can be easily propagated. This usually produces pleasure to both parties out of proportion to the effort involved, and it brings nothing more to the doctor-patient relationship than the gentle bond which should exist between all gardeners.

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