



CHASING SACHERTORTE

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I SAID NO TO PARIS. DECLINED THE opportunity to experience the City of Lights with my love. Where he could buy me roses and champagne and admire Cézanne. Where he understood the language and could order us *le petit déjeuner* with the confidence of a local. Where he could smoke his once-a-year cigar while gazing upon the Seine, one of the world's great, iconic rivers.

Instead, I requested Vienna. A place we'd never talked about visiting. True, there was the Danube. And I had a few loose connections that could string together as a persuading case. One semester of German in university. Brief employment at an Austrian store where I bought a dirndl and a silk scarf. I played Mozart on Sunday mornings. I liked [Jugendstil design](#).

My undisclosed reason: the remote possibility I might find out what happened next in Jim's dream. I was nudging destiny along.

"SO THAT'S THE DANUBE, HUH." JIM STUDIED the low water line, sluggish against the canal. "Rivers never have the same majesty when they pass through cities."

Many years ago, we'd crossed another river passing through a city. Carpooling to a meeting, exchanging random morning pleasantries: political news, the forecast for rain. Jim had glanced into the rearview mirror at me and said, "Oh, last night I dreamed Joe and I were camping in the mountains. As we sat around the campfire, I said I wanted to take you to Vienna. And suddenly there we were, you and I, eating [Sachertorte](#) at an outdoor café." And then he moved on to the day's agenda.

My face had flushed. A strange sensation had flowed through my veins. The dream seemed far too intimate. A vision. A decade later, I still thought about it. Everything else about our unfolded relationship seemed fated. But the appearance of the cake was overdue.

In Vienna, however, something wasn't quite right. A slight misalignment. Jim couldn't seem to recover from jet lag, which made him grumpy. He didn't have an ear for the language anymore and found German menus frustrating. On top of this, the hotel I'd booked was on the outskirts of Old Town, up a steep incline. After a long day walking on cobblestones, the end-of-the-day hill was something to be dreaded.

There were small consolations. The [Albertina Museum](#) was featuring works by Dürer, and the [Belvedere](#) had Klimt's famous painting [The Kiss](#). Jim was moved enough by its beauty to buy me a Christmas ornament of the two lovers.

Mainly though, we wandered around Vienna without a sense of purpose. Jim impatiently following me all over town, me waiting for him to ask me for cake.

ONE LATE NIGHT AFTER A WEARY, purposeless day, we happened to pass a tiny

restaurant filled with warm golden light and laughing patrons eating with great gusto. Jim poked his head inside the doorway. Then, his eyes shimmering for the first time in a week, he said brightly, "I'm going to ask if they can squeeze us in for a brandy."

The proprietors, Silvia and Luca, ushered us in with welcoming arms. They quickly assembled a small table and offered a generous pour in oversized snifters. Jim settled back in his chair, gleaming with contentment. He asked Luca if there was any chance to reserve a table for dinner the following night.

Without hesitation, Luca said, "Absolutely! You must be our guests. Come tomorrow at nine."

THE NEXT EVENING, WE ARRIVED PROMPTLY at Osteria Numero Uno, wearing the dressiest clothes from our suitcase. Jim was puffed like a pigeon with me on his arm. Luca seated us at "our" table. I realized my scarf was missing



and excused myself to dash back to the hotel. When I returned, a party was underway. Luca put his arm around Silvia's waist and shared, "This is our last night serving. We have sold our restaurant. Tomorrow, we retire."

Here we were, strangers, just twenty-four hours since the impromptu brandy, included in their intimate farewell gathering of close friends and family. There were no menus; Silvia would bring us something simmering from her kitchen. Jim's eyes met mine across the table, a knowing glance that affirmed: we

penciled phone number where to reach them in Germany. When we hugged Silvia and Luca goodnight, a little bit drunk and bellies full, our souls felt merged as lifelong friends.

Stepping outside into the starry night, the world seemed different. Lighter. Something had perceptively shifted. Jim was alive again. Eyes to the moon, he declared, "This was one of the most memorable nights of my life." We walked back to our hotel, floating one inch above the pavement.



just won the dinner lottery. Our hearts could not contain the warmth bursting from our chests.

For the next three hours, we ate, drank, laughed, and floated on a lyrical evening of conviviality. Jim bantered with Luca, flirted with Silvia, and befriended the room; Luca flirted with everyone. At the end of the evening, Silvia stuffed a note in my palm—a

IN THE PALE LIGHT OF DAY, WE MADE A SILENT pilgrimage to Osteria Numero Uno. The doors were locked. Peering in the window, we could still see photos hanging on the wall, suggesting their return. But there was a stillness now, an emptiness, a leaving. A handwritten paper sign was tacked to the window. Retired. Our pleasure to have served you.

I saw on Jim's face the unrealistic hope of returning one day, dissolving into small

atoms, then particles, then nothingness. He glanced at his watch, then the sky.

He didn't know there was still one bit of magic around the corner. But if Jim didn't suggest a small café by two o'clock, I would have to take the reins.

I led Jim back through Old Town like a snake charmer, weaving in and out of streets and alleys, waiting for him to invite me for the mystical chocolate-apricot cake. While purchasing last minute souvenirs, I secretly scouted locations. I eliminated the famous Sacher Hotel where the dessert originated. Too touristy, too obvious. No, we'd never find destiny there. It would be at some hidden gem—if only the universe would give me a sign.

And suddenly, there it was: Donnerbrunnen. The four rivers fountain. This had to be the place. I steered us toward the closest café. We sat on the patio; the server approached to take our order. Jim scanned the menu and said, "*Kapuziner und apfelstrudel, bitte.*"

I was momentarily stunned. Disoriented. The way a bird hits a window and falls to the ground. I wanted to question his apple strudel decision, but what came out of my mouth was, "You're speaking German?"

"Funny how a little comes back to me right when we're leaving. Huh."

Deflated but still hopeful, I ordered the Sachertorte. I took an awkward photograph of us. Future evidence of enchantment. I had no choice now but to bring up the memory, remind him of his prophetic dream. Wait for his confession of mutual intrigue. But Jim had no recollection whatsoever. He seemed only lightly amused, the way he sometimes found my observations quirky and charming.

Jim took a bite of his strudel. "*Sehr gut!*" he said with good cheer and offered me a taste.

As usual, he'd made an excellent choice. I picked up my fork and tried the Sachertorte. It was dry and, truthfully, a bit ordinary.

"Is it the stuff of dreams?" Jim asked with a half-smile.

We were indeed at an outdoor café in Vienna, and one of us was eating Sachertorte.

I half-smiled back. "I should have ordered the strudel."

FOR A LONG TIME, I KEPT SILVIA'S handwritten note, but I don't know where it is now. One day I searched in the drawer where it always was, where I had seen it a hundred times before, but it wasn't there anymore. I searched online for the restaurant, but it didn't have much of a digital footprint. Osteria Numero Uno no longer exists. Silvia and Luca have vanished. And Jim is gone now too.

MOST TIMES, A DREAM IS JUST A DISORDER of random people and events that has no esoteric meaning. But on rare occasions, it has an undeniable aura of significance. Jim's dream held a spell over me for ten years.

At some point later I remembered: time is not linear in dreams. Maybe we were always meant to have cake in Vienna—not to discover what would happen next but to experience what would happen right before. We stumbled into magic at a divinely-orchestrated meeting of strangers, to share one perfect, intimate evening. For this, I am achingly grateful. Sometimes I imagine Jim and Silvia and Luca are sitting at our little table, in some ethereal space, laughing and drinking and telling tall stories. They're just waiting for me to rush back in, breathless. ♦