

Invisible Nightmare

A short story by Philip Baker

Chapter One: Questions

"You know what a phantasm is don't you?"

"Not really!"

"Well, there are various dictionary definitions and the origin of the word can be read about, but to many people a phantasm is something that haunts them. It could simply be a bad memory from the past, rather like the notion of skeletons in the cupboard, or ghosts from the past!"

They were sitting at a table outside a café near Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris. One of them was troubled about something and her friend had said "We must find a way to get rid of your phantasms".

"Yes, I get the idea, but how do we do it?" she asked.

"Head-on", was the prompt reply, almost before the question was asked.

"OK, but I'm not really a very brave person. I can be assertive with people at work and in shops when I need a refund and that kind of thing, but I don't know about a face-off with an unknown quantity!"

"Are you religious?" asked the mentor. "I mean do you believe in a god and a jesus or other such characters from novels and all that old trash?"

"Not a bit of it. I might just as well believe it was Winnie the Pooh or Marvelman who saved the world! It's amazing how many people have been taken in by all that religious twaddle for so long. I suppose it ranks with the lies people tell children about father christmas and the tooth fairy, all lies and fantasy."

"Good, you are halfway there already, Or maybe not quite half, perhaps about seven sixteenths or zero point four three seven, to three decimal place, of course".

The both laughed. They were both mathematically competent, understood science, and knew something about computer programming, including the simple concepts of signed binary and decimal fractions.

"What happens next?" asked the troubled one.

"We both use a code name. One of us will be X, the other will be Y. Each of us will be an ordinate and when we meet like this we will meet at the co-ordinate, just like an x-y graph in the first quadrant. Actually, that's where we could meet sometimes, in the top right, north east quadrant of the most public place in whichever town or city we are in at the time."

They were both flight attendants with major airlines and met sometimes when trips coincided, but rarely in the same place twice.

"How about in the southern hemisphere?" It's easy here in France because north is the Arctic Circle, but if we are in Oz or Kiwi land do you want north to be the Antarctic?"

"No, best to stick to one direction. North is always the Arctic despite where we are. Otherwise if we met on the Equator itself we might get confused!"

"Check, Roger and out!" she joked.

"Next point, which of us is X the unknown quantity?"

"Well, let me see, you are the one asking the questions so logically you should be Y. Or when, or what, or who, or how, or how much?" she answered, joking again. But on the other hand your phantasm is the unknown quantity so perhaps you should be X, or at least X-rated (still joking).

They laughed the way friends often do, not just at the quips but also at the humour itself.

"Of course, we could bring in a third dimension and add a Z axis to our graph idea."

"You mean bring in a third person?" she asked, suddenly looking concerned.

"No, never. You know what has been said about two's company, three's a crowd. There may be a logical reason why tribunals worked for the Roman Empire, in courts and so on to avoid corruption, but we need to be a pair without other influence. The third dimension is your phantasm. We need to get rid of it, not bring it in. Sound about right?"

"Check, Roger and in!" she smiled, as the humour took over again.

"Perhaps it would be pertinent for you to be X because you are the X-pert and, as you said, I should be Y because I am always asking why".

After some more jokey debate they agreed. X the mentor and Y the one with the phantasm.

"You know you can turn a phantasm into an orgasm just by changing the spelling!" X observed. So they laughed again.

X wondered about the nature of the phantasm that caused her friend's disquiet. Y could handle all the concerns about flying, difficult passengers, terrorist threats, medical emergencies, language barriers, and many others. What could disturb her so much?

No doubt the training helped with many difficult situations. You follow the rules of procedure and get past the difficulty. In that sense there is always someone giving you support: the rule book, those who wrote it, line management and colleagues.

It was unlikely the phantasm troubled Y when she was busy at work. It was the private times alone.

Chapter Two: Somewhere Else

Their first 'X-Y graph' meeting was at the Marquess of Pombal Square in Lisbon.

Rows of bright open-top tour buses on the east side, Edward VII Park to the north, the river Tagus to the south with its 25 April Bridge, and hundreds of people.

The weather was warm. At twenty-eight degrees in October it was delightful. The chance to dispense with the airline uniform and wear loose casual clothing for a couple of days was very welcome. They both thought that.

"Obrigado, senhor!" as Y paid the vendor for the ice cream cones, which were also very welcome.

It didn't really matter if some dripped on her clothing, even though it would be a waste, because there was no smart blouse corporate image to uphold today. She loved her job but free days were always welcome, apart from the phantasm times.

The phantasm, that was why they were meeting here.

Lisbon Airport was a train ride away and the scenery around the city was superb.

They walked into the park, continued uphill, and sat by the old Roman theatre. In the distance but within easy earshot was a radio controlled model helicopter being expertly manoeuvred by a young man standing by one of the many green ornamental hedges.

Beyond him light could be seen reflecting off the surface of the river and the glimmer briefly caused X to lose sight of the little chopper as it darted around, leaving a tangled vapour trail in its wake.

"Sometimes I feel insecure" said Y. "Not now, not usually, but sometimes it's like a shiver which hits me for no obvious reason. I know other people get them too. You hear them say things like 'someone just walked over my grave' and that kind of shiver experience may be quite common, but my episodes are much more intense and recur too often to ignore."

"Night, day, both?"

"Both. It can be any time".

"Do you get a vision, an image, a face, a shape, an object, like some people get in nightmares?"

"Not usually. Of course I have seen things in dreams and nightmares but not to do with the dreaded P for phantasm".

"You know that dreams usually occur just before the dreamer is fully awake. It's a bit like someone emerging from a general anaesthetic when their mind is scrambled. It's best to forget such things."

"What about the horoscope people and the authors who write about their interpretations of dreams?"

"Money-making phooey! If you think about how many people in the world read magazines, papers, watch television, look at Internet pages, etc, you will come up with a big number. Even among a few hundred people on one of our flights, something in a paragraph in a horoscope will appeal to one or more of them. A so called astrologer can write just about anything they choose and someone will take it seriously. The world is full of romantics.

People cash in on coincidences, which is what they are. Someone thinks the stars predicted what would happen because a black cat walked across the road in front of them or some such twaddle, so they carry on buying the paper and can't wait to see the next issue. But, for the publishers it's all about money".

Another point is that different publishers print exactly the same blurb. There may be a dozen "astrologers" with whatever pseudonym they use in the different publications, but if you put the papers alongside each other the "predictions" would all be the same.

I've done it and in my example it meant there was one writer who sold the same output to a dozen customers. That doesn't mean there is only one writer in the world, only that some publishers get their input from a central source."

"I have sometimes wondered about the calendar", offered Y. "You know, we have this month, October, where "oct" means eight but it is the tenth month. Then "nov" which means nine, "dec" which means ten, and so on. They don't tally."

"Yes, it's because the calendar has been changed some time in the past. You get all this stuff about Friday the thirteenth which evidently goes back to some myth about a day when the Knights Templar were killed.

But if could you trace back through almanacs etc and identify the particular year and month when the legend claims it was supposed to have happened, you may find that it doesn't work out. Project it forward or back as appropriate from the supposed date and you may find the thirteenth is no longer a Friday at all, because the calendar was changed. It means the superstitious get concerned on the wrong day, all for nothing!"

"Yes, I get it. But some people are still superstitious and avoid the number thirteen even without a Friday. In the road where I grew up there was no house with number thirteen. Between number eleven and number fifteen there was 11a. I know too that some multi storey buildings don't have a thirteenth floor."

"True, and it's all down to money again", said X. "Probably the developers are not superstitious: after all, they ride roughshod over others often enough and do things the superstitious wouldn't.

The answer is that they stand less chance of selling or leasing a property if it has a number thirteen on display because the prospective customer may be superstitious, or know someone who is. They leave the number thirteen out so they stand the best chance of selling. It's all about making money.

In addition to calendars time zones can also be changed. Did the airline tell you North Korea changed it clocks by half an hour so it was in a different time zone to one of its enemies?"

"Yes, quite recently."

"There are some groups and individuals who think we should have a decimal year, a hundred hour week and so on. There is good logic there but it would be difficult to change attitudes, so we continue with the mismatches: twenty four hour days but decimal currency. The decimal and metric systems have been used by scientists for centuries but we still use gallons for oil and measure tyre pressure in pounds per square inch."

"So do you think my phantasm has something to do with these mismatches?" asked Y.

"Could be!"

A grey pigeon landed not far away and Y commented, tongue in cheek, that it looked exactly like one she saw at Trafalgar square in London.

"Probably something to do with that bloody great statue down there!" said X, gesturing toward the square.

"That pigeon couldn't trump the green parrots in the tree behind us, though, don't see many of these near old Nelson", retorted Y.

X was a note-taker and, with Y's consent, she jotted down some points on a small notepad, adding the date, time and place where they had their conversation. They both knew that recording simple details can often prove useful later.

"Have you had a full medical exam lately?" enquired X.

"The regular airline one and my doctor gave me a going over. You know, something like they do for insurance company medicals, for job applications and so on. It all checked out OK."

"What did the Doc say about your mental health?" asked X. "I had a relation who went for a job medical with his own GP. The questionnaire asked if he was depressive or had suffered from depression. The GP wrote that he was morose, not depressive. So I guess someone is allowed to be normally serious and poker faced without it meaning they suffer from depression" But you know me quite well. I am normally a cheerful person!"

"Roger that!" They laughed together again.

"How about eyesight?"

"Seemed OK, X. I have a test every two years, even though I don't need glasses and the doctor thought my eyes looked healthy enough. No glaucoma or headaches or anything."

"What about periods, the good old PMT and such like?"

"Don't be so personal!" replied Y, grinning.

The two young women, who had been friends for years, had loaned each other tampons in the past, exchanged intimate notes about boyfriends and so on, and thought they couldn't get much more personal. They joked around a lot when they met and that was part of the reason they liked to meet.

"Being serious, though", continued Y, "if you mean do I get the shivers more at a certain time of the month the answer is no! It doesn't seem to matter what physical state I am in, hot cold, hungry, tired, or anything else. I get this deep feeling of unease without any kind of trigger. If it was chocolate bringing on a migraine headache it would be so much simpler. But it isn't that or anything else I can identify."

"Is it getting worse?" X asked.

Y thought for several seconds and seemed to be gazing through the tall trees on the west side of the park.

"No," she replied. After considering what you just asked and having thought about that before we met today, I can't say it's getting worse. But I think that if I don't find out what is causing my 'phantasm' to emerge and stop it I may go Deolali Tap before I'm much older."

They both smiled but didn't laugh aloud this time. They both knew it could become very serious. "What is it that spooks me?" said Y. "I wish I could discover the reason, and why me?"

"Stay positive", X said. "We will work this out and set you straight. Just keep taking the tablets!" They did both laugh at that, partly because one of them had worked for a while as a Saturday girl in a high street pharmacy and helped the Dispenser occasionally. It was a standing joke in the pharmacy.

At the top end of the park was a café with tables under a marquee alongside a pond with ducks and swans. They slowly walked up there and each had a lager beer in a small glass.

Each commented on how refreshing it was, then X asked another question.

"How about when you've had an alcoholic drink?" she enquired.

"You mean does the phantom spirit appear when I've got some spirits inside me?" responded Y. "No. I rarely drink alcohol anyway but when I have it made no difference, so I don't think drink is giving me any strange illusions. Also, before you ask, I don't take drugs, apart from a paracetamol on rare occasions."

"Tell me if you remember anything which may have caused you to feel anxious. For example, hearing a particular piece of music, a TV programme, someone's appearance. Anything at all that may be connected, let me know."

"Okay", answered Y.

"Have you ever been attacked or assaulted?" X enquired next.

"Not in the way I think you mean. Guys have brushed up against me and that kind of thing, it happens often on the plane, but I haven't been accosted in a dark alley or suffered attempted rape or anything that serious, I'm pleased to say!"

"So let's have a quick recap", X suggested. "You feel lousy and somehow threatened at times but can't link the feeling of unease with any particular stimulus or other cause?"

"That's about it."

"Well, to quote a famous person, 'if you have enemies at least you have something', so let's build on that and put some hard facts together to see where it leads."

"Thanks for your support, girl friend", acknowledged Y.

"No need. How about places. They say Crete is eerie and arouses weird sensations in people. Have you flown there?"

"Once, a few years ago, but nothing emerged so I don't think it's places that do it. Sorry I haven't been much help!"

"Not a problem", said X. "You know what they teach professional salesmen, every time you hit a closed door you are a step closer to finding one that's open."

"Love your positive thoughts, X!"

"Next flight destination?"

"Toronto, how about you?"

"I'll swing it. Tell me when and call me as soon as you get there."

They sauntered a while before getting back on the Metro and changing trains once to get back to the airport.

Chapter Three: Seeking The Cure

"Any horrors since Il Portogallo?" asked X, using the Italian name for the country for a change.

They were at the north east corner of Yonge-Dundas Square in Toronto.

"Yes, most pronouncedly!" said Y. "It was horrible."

I was staying in a motel at Milton Keynes en-route to a meeting. I was alone but that wasn't the reason I felt dreadful. The room was nice with the usual remote control TV, mini bar and so on. I was comfortable and felt relaxed and easy at the beginning, quite glad to have a break from travelling for a while. I had a shower, dried everything and got dressed ready to go and eat a little later.

I was sitting at the end of the bed thinking about which shoes to wear, flat or heels, and it started. I felt alone, cold, unwelcome in my own body, frightened, more like terrified, empty, powerless. I don't think death could be worse."

X let her continue.

"The television was off and it was fairly quiet. There were no sounds of doors closing along the corridor or anything else I recall. I had been humming to myself earlier and felt quite cheery. For what it's worth the room seemed quite secure so I didn't have any concerns about anyone wandering in, not like those hotels in New York with a thousand bolts and chains on the door.

I am convinced there is no outside influence, It is all within me, X, I must be going nuts."

"I will cure you", said X, who removed a gun from her bag and shot Y through the head.

On a fresh page of her notepad were the words "Goodbye Sucker".

Chapter Four: A Sucker For Punishment

Luckily the gun was a plastic toy which fired a “dart” with a rubber sucker on the end.

Y had closed her eyes whilst telling X about her bad time at Milton Keynes and X decided to play an old prank they had both tried before.

The entry on her notepad was a reminder to use her gun at the appropriate time, preferably when Y wasn't looking toward her or when she had her eyes closed.

When they had “shot” each other in the past they used terms such as “shot you through the arm”, “shot you through the chest”, and so on. It wasn't literally true, simply a reference to whereabouts on the body the sucker landed. The phrase “goodbye sucker” was something they said silently to themselves as the dart left the gun. They were saying goodbye to the dart with its sucker, not to the target.

Perhaps it should have been “au revoir sucker” not goodbye, because they usually retrieved their missile afterwards, clearly for reuse.

Whatever the rationale may have been for firing the dart at that time, it seemed to work.

“You bitch!” exclaimed Y and started to laugh. Being metaphorically shot through the head had shaken her from her dark study and X's playfulness may have been exactly what she needed at that moment. “I have to wonder if you have taken any of what I told you seriously”, she added.

“I promise you, dear friend, that I have taken it all very seriously! I reckoned you were getting too deep into your thoughts and needed to be reminded that we are here today to continue with the solution”.

One of the giant billboards flashed and X was tempted to break eye contact with Y so she could look at the message. But her sense of loyalty prevailed and she ignored the advert in favour of supporting her friend. The water fountains made some noise but not so much they were distracting, so she stayed focused.

X knew how disconcerting it could be if you were talking to someone and they looked away as if preoccupied with something else or someone else. It questions their sincerity and can make the other person feel “deserted”. That was not what Y needed today, or any other day.

“I hope you washed that damned thing after the last time you used it on me”. Said Y. “Otherwise you deserve to get acne all over your flawless polyfilla-assisted face!”

“That's my girl!” said X. “Shall we proceed?”

Y nodded her agreement..

“So, no improvement and no clues”, X continued. “How long did the episode last?”

“About half an hour. I thought about calling the desk and having food sent along, but I decided I should make the effort and go to a crowded place with bright lights. So I went to an eatery and was glad I did. After having some food and a hot drink there I lapsed back into feeling normal, well as normal as a crank like me is ever likely to be!”

“Good for you”, X responded. “Did you know anybody there?”

“Nope. I did pass the time of day with a couple of other diners and the serving staff, of course, but nobody else. Then I went back to the room, slept until the alarm sounded and I have been OK since. Oh, yes I did make a few notes for reference.”

“I may have asked you this before, but bear with me, do you believe in ghosts?” asked X.

“NO. I believe some people believe they have seen ghosts and I believe some people believe there are poltergeists, but I firmly believe there are scientific explanations to explain all of that.”

“So, if I found, for example, that every place where you have felt uneasy was a place where someone had reported seeing a ghost, do you think it would, perhaps change your opinion or make you think any differently?” X enquired, as delicately as she could.

“No!” said Y assertively. “I have thought about that and even enquired about some places to see if there were any “haunted house” stories or such like which might somehow apply. There was nothing.

Also, it doesn't make sense for me to be affected by a notion of someone thinking they saw something eerie. If I didn't know a place was claimed to be “haunted” there would be nothing to play on my subconscious mind, but even if I had heard such a tale of a claimed ghost presence it wouldn't make any difference because I don't believe such things exist.

I went to the Chislehurst Caves once and the tour guide said part of those was supposed to be haunted near a well which was claimed to be bottomless. She said a senior police officer accepted a challenge to spend a night there alone. She went on that he had a radio which stopped working, then his torch stopped working, that he tried to find his way to the entrance in the dark but banged his head and knocked himself unconscious. She concluded that the was found unconscious next morning, but didn't have any more details.

Maybe that did happen but there was no mention of a ghost presence or the cop seeing a ghost.

The bit about the radio was odd. It was unlikely a transistor radio under thirty metres of wet chalk would pick up a signal anyway, so it may not have worked in the first place.

Bottomless wells are myth. We are told that the centre of the planet Earth is a mass of molten iron which creates the magnetic field we call gravity. Without that we would all fly off into space. So for a well or a pit to be bottomless it would have to go through the core or past the core and out the other side.

Some buildings use geothermal energy for heating and that supports the molten iron theory, so if a well had water at the bottom and it was near the core, the water would be hot. We know there are natural hot springs and geysers in some parts of the world, and hot mud, but the water at Chislehurst caves is supposed to be cold. Quite simply, it is called a well because there is water at the bottom and if there is water at the bottom it can't be bottomless.”

“Roger that!” said X.

“There is a danger to going down holes where water has seeped through chalk and a person could die of asphyxiation from carbon dioxide. That has happened to potholers and various others a number of times. It's why rescue workers have to wear breathing apparatus”, continued Y.

“Many tourist places have weird stories told by guides, It's to keep the crowds rolling in. All about money again!”

“They said hundreds of people were sheltered down there during world war two and they had their own postal system with “post codes” marked on the cave walls. I should think that if there were ghosts and bottomless wells someone would have sussed it all back then. Probably the only things that went bump in the night were German bombs and anti-aircraft guns!”

As she finished the sentence Y pulled her own plastic gun out of her bag and shot X through the arm.

“Two can play at that game”, she said, and they both laughed.

Chapter Five: If You Can't Think Straight Think Sideways

This location was colder and they had outdoor coats, boots, gloves and scarves to keep the heat in.

Market Square in Bruges was dry but very chilly. They hadn't both had flights there. One had, the other one booked a last minute day trip by coach via the channel tunnel. The pick up point was a mile from where she lived so it worked out quite well. A bonus was that the coach stopped at a small chocolate factory.

“Have a piece of Belgian chocolate” . She offered.

“Where did you get this? I though you came straight here. Lovely surprise, though!”

“There was a courier on the coach, never stopped talking. Scouse accent. Said we could stop , tour the factory and buy chocolate if the majority agreed. The idiot then said some people think he and the driver get a “commission” off the owner if they take a coach load of customers there, but denied there was any truth in it. A likely story! Once again, it's all about the money. Only one passenger stayed on the coach and all others went in, so I guess they do well out of the deal, make a shipload of money out of a coach load of tourists. Anyway, I succumbed and bought this.”

“Any recent episodes?” asked X.

“Yes, much the same as before. I was on land , not flying. Some people were in view but I suddenly felt isolated, alone, deserted and very frightened. I put the details down on paper so you can read through if you like.”

“I will, very soon. But I wondered if we should try some lateral thinking and perhaps a bit of brain storming. Even a Buzan mind map may be of use. You know what I mean, we could meet like this forever and tick off check boxes but if we did something else as well we could get to the answer quicker!”

“I think know what you mean. Something I did back at college was decision analysis where we drew a chart with event nodes and decision nodes. The difference here is that I haven't made any decisions. They are all events caused by whatever it is.”

“There you go”, said X. “You have made a decision just by thinking about decision trees and that puts you in control a bit more than before! Tell me the next step.”

“OK, when I get another fright episode, instead of waiting for it to pass, I act positively, mark it on my decision diagram and put a decision node right there.”

“Right!” said X supportively. “So whether it was an evil spirit or a demon of your own mind doesn't matter because you take control and put it on paper.”

“Going slightly off topic”, said Y, “Years ago I read a children's story about a young girl who was afraid of the dark. She was worried there might be someone in her room at night but she couldn't see them. Her parents were against leaving lights on or having candles burning, so her father gave her a safety pin. He told her that if she ever woke up and thought there was a stranger there she could unclip the pin and jab the intruder. Sure enough, one night there was a burglar. She jabbed, he yelped, Dad rushed in and nabbed him.”

“I bet he felt a real prick in more ways than one!” laughed X. Then they both laughed. Then they laughed some more at the thought of a small girl bagging a burglar with a safety pin.

“Pity these modern Pampers have adhesive strips instead of terry nappies with safety pins, otherwise you could train infant warriors almost from birth.” quipped Y.

The laughter and silliness of it continued until their make-up ran. Passers-by looked at them with wonder and some smiled, perhaps wishing they could be let in on the joke. It seemed to brighten up the vendor in the nearby chip stall as he served portion after portion of frites with mayonnaise.

As the laughter ebbed, X said “Do you know they reckon Belgium sells more chips per head of population than any other country in Europe?”

“Didn't think they had enough land area to grow all those potatoes!” retorted Y. “Must import them. Mind you, they get enough rain, so I suppose it's possible.”

“I don't go much on the mayo, though”, said X. “High cholesterol and bad for my figure. Must stay trim for sashaying down the aisle!”

“You're not thinking of getting spliced are you?” asked Y, smiling, but only slightly. “Have you been keeping something from me?”

“I mean the aircraft aisle, Miss Envious. No I ain't got no fella or any such aspirations. As you well know we pose a bit as we saunter along asking the passengers if everything is OK. It's our catwalk.”

“Did you know that Brenda Parsons got a verbal warning for putting a whoopee cushion on one of the passenger seats for a prank. You remember Brenda, hairdresser turned flight attendant. The passenger was a bit nervous anyway and nearly got off the plane in disgust. It took the co-pilot to come out of the cockpit and calm it all down so they could leave on schedule.”

“No, I didn't hear that. A bit daft, wasn't it. But I did hear that years ago people liked taking the early morning flight from Gatwick to Glasgow on Caledonian because they got a free breakfast. Strangely it was a taxi driver who first told me that. Those guys are still one of the best sources of gossip and world politics.”

“Neeps and tatties are best served at cabin temperature thirty thousand feet above sea level” joked Y. “I heard that from a camel driver in Brisbane!” she added, obviously having made it up on the spot. They both laughed but realised it was time to get back to business, so to speak.

“Are you sending anyone a postcard from here?” asked X.

“Not today. Might send a text message or two with pics before we leave but most people I know have been here before and not many people I know collect stamps any more, so postcards are no big deal.”

“Tell me more about your lateral thought notions”, said Y to her friend.

“We have looked at straight line stuff about places, facts, local conditions, etc. and it has all been reactive. Recalling and recording things after the event. Suppose we became pro-active. You know what I said at the beginning about meeting it head-on. Almost like 'here I am come and get me!'”

Trying to eliminate bad experiences by a process of elimination can work but you are waiting for it to happen again, meaning the threat has the upper hand. We need to give you the upper hand. Like on a computer, we make you super user so you can delete the virus.”

Chapter Six: Obsessions

“I expect you know other people who have had fears or obsessions”, said X.

“Yes, a girl I knew at school had a mother who was superstitious about lightning. She had been told that if you crossed knives and forks when lightning struck you were doomed. If there was a thunderstorm she would rush to any cutlery on the table and pull the items apart so they were nowhere near each other. I suppose she thought that if she put them in a drawer or a box they might touch or cross so she left them out but separated.”

“Well, we know from physics that lightning arcs across to nodes, that is why steeples and other pointed type projections are prone. But they run copper strips or such like down to earth electrodes so it all gets conducted away to the common mass. By the way, did you have a Van De Graaff generator at school?”

“We sure did, and there was a pop band with the same name, but spelt with one 'f', not two. Don't know much about them, though.”

“One of my old pals used to go horse riding at a small stud I Surrey. The land owner had an engineering business there and an employee some locals called 'Mad Eric'. Evidently he was a centre lathe turner but had some kind of obsessive compulsive disorder.

She said this guy had a small car, a Ford Fiesta or something like that and when he parked it in winter he switched the lights off then got out, crouched down and stared until the very last glow had gone out of the filament.

One day she was walking past and he didn't see her because he was engrossed in watching the lights. She said “I think it's out now” and he jumped up looking all sheepish, said “sorry”, and headed off toward the workshop.”

“I wonder what his work was like”, said X. “Probably extremely precise, but it may have taken a very long time!” They both smiled but realised it wasn't helping solve Y's phantasm problem and tried to get back in focus.

“So we know people have obsessions, compulsions and superstitions. Some of that may be from their background or because of influence from others”, said Y.

“I don't believe my acute unease is from anything in my early childhood or influence from other people I have known. My parents didn't have any weird traits, neither of them was clairvoyant or influenced by the supernatural as far as I know. They didn't even read horoscopes or have their palms read on the pier”.

“Glad to hear it”, said X. “Those seaside “services” are just a way to make money, as we discussed before. Anything that people are daft enough to fall for and pays well is exploited.”

“More lateral thoughts”, said Y. “I need to do something to fix this. What suggestions do you have now?”

Chapter Seven: Auto Suggestion

“There may be a brain angle to this”, said X, “Some researchers believe part of the brain is responsible for butterflies in the stomach and some link it to the butterflies people feel when they fall in love. Are you in love?”

“Not as far as I know!” answered Y promptly.

“I think we both accept that being afraid is normal and natural. It is part of our defence mechanism and goes back to animal instincts. Maybe people who aren't afraid are more likely to come to grief. Take the steel erector who isn't afraid of working at heights but falls and dies because he didn't take enough safety precautions!”

“But you aren't afraid of working at heights and do take safety precautions. I doubt if your phantasms are due to fear, but I think it may be a silent warning of something.”

A bus passed at the edge of the square, displaying a sports shop advert with a large picture and a potted reference to adrenaline junkies and ultimate sporting opportunities in Switzerland.

They hardly noticed it.

“What about adrenaline?” Asked Y. “You hear terms such as “set the adrenaline coursing through his veins”, etc, but I don't think there is much volume of it in an adult body.

It's a messenger hormone that tells the vital organs to close down temporarily so all the energy in the blood goes to the motor muscles. It's to give people the 'superhuman strength' you read about so they can protect themselves in times of extreme danger. Perhaps I'm short of adrenaline or something.”

“Boxers induce adrenaline flow by breathing a certain way but I expect over-use can be negative”, responded X. “It's called adrenaline because the gland that produces it is located near the kidneys: from the Latin, ad renal, as you know.”

“So if I had a shortage of adrenaline the message may not travel and send the message when needed. But what if I had too much?” suggested Y.

“That may be significant”, said X. “I don’t know how to measure adrenaline but they had some plastic jugs in the shop back there!”, she said, gesturing with a finger over her shoulder. The humour between them rarely lapsed for long and they sometimes agreed that whoever you are, laughter is the best medicine.

Seriously, I think the adrenaline thing is worth checking out. Who shall we ask? I get medical insurance with the job so I could ask my GP to refer me to a specialist”, said Y, looking relieved and slightly excited at the same time.

Chapter Eight: Going Cuckoo

The Bundesplatz in Bern was nice that spring.

The fountains reminded them of Toronto, although the absence of the electronic billboards and the presence of looming, sober, grey buildings made it the less attractive of the two squares.

It was warm enough, around thirteen degrees Celsius. Nothing to get excited about but comfortable for two fit and healthy young females.

“What’s the latest?” asked X.

“They completed the investigation, did a bunch of blood tests and so on, and prescribed some pills.

It seems you were right and I was right. They said over- production of adrenaline can cause serious health problems. It adds to anxiety and causes all sorts of effects, depending on the individual and other factors. Mostly it can be corrected.

I was very fortunate that the medical insurance people let me come here. It was a lucky coincidence that one of their actuaries was doing an investigation of claims and zoomed in on how adrenaline featured in claimants' conditions.

It seems the wrong level of the hormone affects more people than was realised and the insurers were paying out massive amounts each year for lengthy procedures and corrective surgery when in many cases all it needed was a pill or a jab, or something equally simple.

They said I could have the assessment in William Tell country if I agreed to let them see all the feedback. It’s so they can compare cases, see what happened to me, and work out if claims and treatment can be simplified to lower costs.”

“In the end it’s all about the money!” they said in unison.

“What’s the answer?” said Y.

“Just keep taking the tablets!” they said together.

“It’s not as bad as some conditions”, said Y. “One of my aunts was type one diabetic from age eleven. She had to have two insulin injections every day and her legs were a mess of needle marks. Sometimes she went into a coma and had to go to a special hospital unit each time. She kept fighting but it took her in the end. She died at age 27. The effects were a bit like cancer, hair falling out teeth turning black and so on.”

“Is your adrenaline thing easily manageable?” asked X.

“The consultant said in my case adjusting the hormone balance would be hardly noticeable and I could pretty much carry on as usual. Hopefully without the anxiety attacks.”

“Any recently?” asked X.

“Not like before. I must admit I've been more concerned about side effects and wonder if I'll get fat ankles or something horrible like that.”

“What did the airline say?”

“I kept them posted all along and the company medical officer had a chat”, said Y. “None of it affects my work and they couldn't find any reason to change what I normally do, so it's carry on flying the flag until something else changes.”

“Changes. You mean like falling in love, getting butterflies, getting married to the hunky pilot, having six fat babies and gorging chocolate cakes forever?”

“Not likely!” said Y promptly. “Six is my unlucky number!”

They laughed together again.

The End

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