

The Man Who Disappeared

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IT MADE ITS way through the brain, destroying as It went. It saw the workings of the brain as a series of wires and laughed at how easy it was to unplug them. Sometimes It cut through them cleanly and quickly, a neat execution, killing the memory before anyone had time to remember It had been forgotten. Other times It dragged the death out, made it slow and painful, Its own unique form of torture. Sometimes It was picky about its food, choosing one memory over another. It had a particular taste for faces, previously it had been names.

In the beginning It lay low, not wanting to draw too much attention to itself, not until It had gathered its strength. To begin with the man didn't even realise It was there. It sent out Its scouts to explore the man's mind and search out the weak spots. Once It had gathered enough information It slowly began to flex Its talons and by the time the man began to notice the army invading his head it was too late; It had already taken hold and woven Its web too tightly for it to be broken.

Sometimes It made Its presence known through only the quietest of whispers, a forgotten name or a wrong turning. Other times Its greed would overwhelm and It would swell in size until It engulfed everything. The blackness in the man would expand until he no-longer knew where or who he was. It made him lost within himself. On other occasions, instead

of withholding information, It would overload the brain with a tsunami of material: thousands upon thousands of memories, thoughts, images, facts, voices, faces; a dizzying mass of information; haircut at half past three get sausages from Dales Wildman Street dinner with Anne second house on the right with a blue door the 567 bus don't be late the taste of salt in the sea air new shoes for his birthday walk the dog feed the cats pay the electricity bill Christmas '85 in Dumfries his mother shouting for him to come downstairs his wife shouting for him to come upstairs the children shouting for him to come and play with him in the garden Carol's face coming closer and closer her eyes shining where did he leave the car didn't he sell the car when did he sell the car on, and on it went, never stopping. The befuddlement this never ending stream of thought caused the man made It laugh at Its own wicked cleverness.

It followed the man into the kitchen one afternoon. The man was hungry but couldn't remember if he had eaten lunch or not. The pile of dirty plates in the sink suggested that he had so he surmised that he just needed a small snack to tide him over until teatime, whenever that would be. Time confused him these days. He picked up a banana from the fruit bowl and that's when It decided to play a game with him. As the man turned the banana over in his hands to ascertain that it wasn't still green, he became perplexed and suddenly could no longer remember how he was supposed to eat the fruit. He passed it back and forth between his hands struggling to remember. He knew some fruits like oranges needed to be peeled before you could eat them, yet with others like apples and pears one simply bit into it, skin and all, but of bananas he could not recall. It enjoyed the man's uncertainty and let the image of the apple linger at the forefront of his mind until the man decided the peel was meant to stay on and took a large bite out of the fruit. The peel's waxy texture turned almost powdery as it made contact with the man's tongue. It was tasteless, yet somehow sharp, drying out his mouth in the way that the acidity of a gooseberry will do, and left an unpleasant

and lingering aftertaste on his tongue. As the man spat out the banana skin, his face contorted with disgust; It was beside Itself with laughter. After a few moments spent struggling to work out how to peel the fruit, the man finally succeeded and paced up and down the kitchen, slowly chewing the banana. Once he had finished, he stood holding the banana peel in front of him unsure whether he was meant to keep it or throw it away. Uncertain, he resolved to wait until his mind felt clearer and to make the decision then. He placed the banana skin in the breadbin for safe keeping and left the kitchen.

It enjoyed watching the man search for a memory that was no longer there, watching him reach out desperately for the names of people and places. It enjoyed taunting him, dangling the thought just out of reach, edging it towards him and snatching it away. It made trying to hold onto memories like trying to keep a firm grip on a bar of soap with wet hands. More often than not, like the soap, the memories would gaily slip from the man's fingers and slide down the plughole.

There were days when It seemed to have disappeared and the man's mind worked almost as well as it had in his youth. His brain would spring back into colourful life, words flowed freely, names matched faces, and the man would tentatively begin to wonder if perhaps this time It was gone for good. But inevitably It would return. It would wake from Its hibernation with renewed energy, returning with greater force than ever before and usually with some new cruel trick It had learnt and would mercilessly test out on the man. It made the man think he was young again. It played him memories from his youth, working down the docks, drinking with friends, meeting his wife, holding his new-born son for the first time. Some days It would make the man forget who he was.

One morning It led the man over to the high bay windows at the front of the house, where the window cleaner was just finishing up his work. The window cleaner was an elderly man; his face was thin, drawn, and covered in a layer of greying skin that hung loosely from his cheekbones like an oversized piece

of cloth. The man was surprised he was able to work, his movements as slow and seemingly painful as they were. Realising he was being watched the window cleaner beckoned for the man to open the window, presumably to discuss payment or arrange a future booking. The man fumbled with the catch and after a few failed attempts succeeded in opening the window. A light breeze wafted through the newly created space bringing with it the scents of spring and filling the man with a welcome sense of contentment. He greeted the window cleaner cheerfully and enquired how he could help but the window cleaner merely stared back at the man as though waiting for him to say something more. The man began to repeat the question but as soon as he did the window cleaner began talking. The man paused and so did the window cleaner. The man tried again and the same thing happened. Despite his usually calm nature the man was beginning to get annoyed. He made a further attempt to find out what the odd old man wanted but once again the window cleaner talked straight over him, he too sounding increasingly annoyed. At this point the man lost his temper; the window cleaner should know better than to play such foolish and childlike games. It was something he wouldn't even expect of his own grandchildren and he told him as much. To the man's ever increasing annoyance the window cleaner didn't appear to register the man's comments as he was too busy shouting his own insults back through the window. By now the man was angry and confused; he'd only opened the window because the other man had asked him to and now he was caught up in some kind of ridiculous argument with a man he didn't know. He finally lost his temper and began to shout at the other man. To his displeasure the window cleaner responded in kind, becoming ever more vocal and animated, hurling a barrage of insults towards the man.

The garden surrounding the window cleaner began to change; the world became distorted as colours merged together and fragments of the garden seemed to disappear and float away. The window cleaner's shouts became louder and louder until they no longer sounded like words but an unbearable roar that filled the man with an overwhelming sense of fear. Then as quickly as

it had started, it was over. There was no window cleaner; there wasn't even a window, simply an old man shouting at his own unfamiliar reflection, a reflection that stared back at him with a face filled with confusion. It had fooled him once again.

When It was feeling particularly strong It would break Its way out of the brain and venture forth to new playing fields, untouched land It would claim for its own and lay waste to, where it could wage its war and conquer the body. As It took control of them, one by one the man's fingers began to work against him. They refused to do the simplest of the man's bid-dings and often he couldn't even remember what it was he wanted them to do. The craftsman quickly disappeared to be replaced by a man who struggled to tie his own shoe laces.

In the garden was a crumbling outhouse that functioned as a utility room, just large enough to fit in a washing machine and tumble dryer. On washing day the man would amble to and fro between the backdoor and the outhouse carrying bundles of laundry, first to the washer, then to the dryer, and finally back inside to be ironed. Now he lived alone it was a much smaller task than it used to be, but the man liked this routine and habits like this helped him feel as though he was in control. It had noticed this and was displeased. It watched one day as the man carried the laundry basket back into the house and set it down on top of the kitchen table. It watched as the man sorted through the basket pairing socks and folding underpants. It watched as the man retrieved the ironing board from the cupboard under the stairs and brought it through into the kitchen. And then It struck.

As the man tried to set up the ironing board his fingers lost their grip and the object fell from his grasp. Bending down to retrieve it, the object suddenly became unfamiliar to him and he could no longer see how to manoeuvre the criss-crossed legs into a position that would let the ironing board stand up. The man tried to pull one of the legs so that it was at a right-angle to the top of the board, but this only forced the other leg into a horizontal position which confused him further. The man made

various attempts to get the ironing board to stand with diminishing success. At one point he managed to slot the holding bar into one of the grips but when he stood it up the board only came up to his knees. Exasperated, the man tried to alter the board's height but he couldn't remember how he'd got it to stand in the first place and his fingers were refusing to grip properly. Losing patience with it, the man began to haphazardly push and pull at the thing, wrenching it until, with an unpleasant grating sound, the legs jammed. The man swore in frustration and aimed a sharp kick at the ironing board. As the pain shot through his foot, the man's frustration bubbled into anger until, with an amount of strength that took even It by surprise, he lifted the ironing board above his head and threw it across the width of the room where it crashed into the wall and broke.

The man stood panting for a while. His head felt as though it was full of smoke. His thoughts clouded; he was unable to remember what he had been doing or why his arms ached so much. The man gazed around the kitchen blankly looking for something that would jump start his memory and explain to him what he was doing. Curious, It held back any clues, waiting with interest to see what the man would do next. The man's eyes came to rest on the laundry piled up on kitchen table; he smiled to himself confident that he had remembered now. He crossed the room and scooped the clothes back into the laundry basket and headed out of the backdoor towards the outhouse.

As he closed the outhouse door behind him, the man could hear the whoosh of the water as it filled the drum of the washing machine. He was overcome with a sense of satisfaction and achievement, confident that this time It hadn't won.

In the kitchen, the ironing board lay broken on the floor.

As It grew stronger It began to alter the world around It. It made the familiar, unfamiliar and the new, terrifying. It took the street map in the man's head and jumbled it up, moving landmarks and changing street names. Once familiar journeys became never-ending mazes in which he would remain trapped for hours, retracing his steps over and over again, confusing left from

right and going around in circles. Sometimes this could happen without the man even having to move. It distorted the man's perception and regularly made him lose his footing. It began to play with time. It made the days stretch on for months and years fly by in seconds. For all the man knew the birth of his daughter could have happened fifty years ago or merely five days ago.

In the very early days of Its attack, back when the man had first become aware of It, he had sought help from doctors. They sent him away with a myriad of pills and vague, non-committal assurances of confidence that their prescriptions would keep It at bay. For a short time the medication appeared to have an effect. The chemicals confused It. It hadn't prepared for a counterattack and for a while It was forced into hiding. The man felt lighter in body and mind. He rejoiced in being able to return to a sense of normality and congratulated the doctors on their excellent concoction of drugs, but it was not to last. Soon It learnt how to work its way around them and they stopped being effective. After a time they told the man not to take the pills. It had become too strong for them to be able to work anymore. They were a waste of his time and a waste of their money. They exchanged the pill boxes for removal boxes and moved the man out of his home into a different sort of home, a home with locked doors and set meal times.

It was triumphant in Its victory and celebrated by testing out Its latest trick. In Its last and final act of cruelty, It started to make the man fade away. As with everything It did, It began slowly at first. It made the man disappear for seconds, then minutes, and then when It was confident no-one had noticed, hours at a time. Soon there were days when the man didn't seem to be there at all, It smothered him and replaced him with a stranger. A stranger that was unable to do anything for himself. A stranger that would scream and lash out when approached. A stranger that spent his days rattling locked door handles, trying to get out in time to collect his children from school. A stranger who spent his nights crying for the mother he thought had forgotten him.

Then one day It won and the man disappeared altogether.