

BRAIN DRAIN

Stop snoring I hear Tom say as he nudges me in the ribs.

The bed bounces slightly as I turn over and slip into slumber again.

My head feels heavy against the pillow and weirdly long and large. My arms are too short and why am I wearing boxing gloves? Ah....the boxing kangaroo dream again. Might as well make the most of it. I conjure up Tom's face and deliver a smart upper cut to his chin. Other people who have annoyed me today are obligingly lining up for a punch: the rude ticket inspector on the train; the neighbour who always parks between two spaces; adenoidal Andy at work. But who is that joining the back of the queue? The royal family again. Always spoiling things with their impeccable manners and their 'how-do-you-do's?' and 'have -you come-far's?' I can hardly hit Princess Anne, that would be treason, and any way, Princess Anne would probably give as good as she got. I sigh and join the end of the conga line as it dances past.

Tom moves to the spare room, disturbed by my snoring again. I stretch luxuriously into the warm empty space.

I know that dreams are the brain's way of clearing out the day's chaff, making way for new thoughts, activities, plans, but why are my dreams so exhausting? Now I'm trying to get in a lift with a luggage trolley. There are other people waiting, I push in, manoeuvring the trolley into the corner. Floor three please...no don't press all the buttons...that will take us up to the viewing platform....the glass lift is on the outside of the building...the floor is glass, too transparent, too high. I can't look down. I look up at the tall cranes against the London skyline and the aeroplane contrails. My stomach drops, my toes curl. I'm falling, falling...

I am suddenly, sweatingly, awake; stirrings on the landing; lights switching on.

The cat is sitting proudly in the hallway, muffled mewling through bulging cheeks and a tiny tail hanging from its mouth. We are masters of midnight mouse wrangling and it doesn't take us long to wrestle the mouse from the indignant cat and release it into the garden. Tom goes back to the spare room.

I try to sleep. Think of nice things. Our first grandchild is on the way. I wonder what they will call it. I hope it's something traditional. Names are so important. They reflect your background, your culture, your parent's aspirations for you. I'm not keen on the current trend of making up names with complicated spellings, or names that sound like surnames. I remember reading about 'nominative determinism' which says that your name influences your choice of job or where you choose to live. Mind you, my cousin Charity disproves the theory. She's the meanest person I have ever met. I wonder about my own name, Cassandra – a Trojan princess cursed with the gift of prophecy but never believed. It drove her mad.

Hello Mum. What are you doing here? Mum says she hopes her great grandchild will be called after her, as her grandchildren were named in memory of Tom's parents. I point out that Tom's parents died before the children were born, and at least she got to see her grandchildren. But I'm dead now she says. Dad is with her and we both watch and laugh at him while he tries to open a carton of milk.

I sit bolt upright. I forgot to add milk to the food order for the weekend and it's the annual family barbecue on Saturday. So much to do. It's 5.30am. No point in sleeping now.

I'm not feeling at all well. There's a pain in my chest and it's hard to breathe. I think it might be a heart attack. Tom says it's another panic attack. But it feels different this time. Dad died of a heart attack and no one had believed him either. I remember the panicky 999 call, the lack of

urgent response, the fobblings off with talk of indigestion. He was sent home and died that night.

I make Tom drive me to A&E. The triage nurse looks unconcerned and asks me to take a seat. I refuse, Tom tries to calm me down. The pain gets worse and I collapse. When I come round they say that it was a panic attack. The ECG was normal. Go home they say. Tom drives me home in silence. He's angry that I caused a scene. But I know I'm right and I have had a heart attack. The next one will surely kill me.

I can't sleep of course, and I stay up all night monitoring my blood pressure and pulse. The readings are all over the place. Tom says I am too tired to use the machine properly and that my blood pressure is fine. I am angry with him. I remind him of how they missed the signs with Dad and how only a year ago they had failed Adam and now he was dead too. Does he think that the NHS has improved since then? In only a year? Perhaps they are trying to get rid of me too so that I won't make any complaints?

I am back in A&E again with another 'panic attack'. I insist on an ECG. They say it's normal. They run some blood tests. Normal again. But I know it's more serious and I suddenly understand what's going on. I explain to Tom that the doctors follow protocols and as I don't fit the usual profile of a heart attack patient, they don't believe me. I know they won't mean to let me die, but that's what will happen because they'll stick to the protocols and I will die. Tom says I am being ridiculous, but I know I am right. I can't feel anything and I pull the cannula out of my arm. A nurse rushes round pretending to mop up blood, but it's not my blood. Maybe I am already dead. I know their game. Tom can't see it, but they are trying to stop me complaining about Adam's death. I beg Tom to take notes of everything that they do so that at my inquest he can prove they let me die. At least he and the children will get some compensation. Tom looks grey

with worry. I shout out to the other patients in A&E that the doctors are trying to kill me. They are my witnesses. I shout out my name and address so that they will know who I am and so they will know I was right when they see my death reported in the papers.

I am moved into a side room. They want me to speak to the mental health team. I am calmer. I understand the game now. They aren't going to let me die, but they will pretend that I am mad. I don't trust anything they say. They try to make me talk to someone on a video link, but I know the person is just in the room next door. I can hear them. I throw coffee at the screen and try to get into the room next door, but they hold me down and inject me with something.

I am awake in a bed on a ward. Tom is sitting next to me. He looks tired. He says after all that happened with Adam a year ago, the distress, the lack of help and then his suicide, it's no wonder I have had a breakdown, and I need to be admitted to a psychiatric unit for 'some rest'. But I am wise to their game and I refuse. He says that it's better if I go voluntarily. I am furious that he is taking their side against me and I lock myself in a toilet. Of course, they can open the door from the outside but it takes them a while to find the key and I hold onto the handle for a long time before letting go. I am really strong. Tom is crying. I agree to look at the consent form. It's a load of legal rubbish and it says I must agree not to take photos on the ward. As if I would. But does that mean I can't take my phone? They could lock me up forever and no one would know I was there. Tom pleads with me. I am too tired to argue. He says he will come with me in the ambulance and promises to visit every day. I sign the form but I spell my name wrong on purpose. They won't catch me out.

The Unit is not too bad. I have my own room. There are lots of people here and it's difficult to tell which ones are staff. Some wear uniform, some don't, and they all change their names every day. One girl has different hair every time I see her and when I tell her I have noticed, she

laughs and says that was someone different, so I know they are still lying to me. Tom says I must start taking the anti-psychotics, but I refuse as they have not been prescribed by my GP. Tom confuses me by asking me if I now trust the very same GP who failed to spot Adam's mental health crisis. He says I will never get out of here if I don't take them. I cry for a long time. I've decided to ignore the lies they are telling me. I think that maybe they don't know they are telling lies and they don't realise that I know they are lying. They watch me all the time, taking notes. They come into my room every hour during the night and switch the lights on to make sure I haven't killed myself. It's noisy here – the other patients shout a lot. I don't see how I am ever going to get any rest here. I take the tablets.

It's been a month now and they are letting me out today. Tom's coming to collect me. There's a community mental health team who are going to visit me at home in a couple of days. I'm not to go back to work for a while. I can't remember much of what happened. The doctors say I had an acute psychotic paranoid incident brought on in part by my brother's suicide and my refusal to acknowledge its impact on me. I buried my feelings along with my brother. I don't remember. They say my brain was overloaded and flipped. I tease them about trying to blind me with science. They say it's good I can't remember what happened – it's my brain trying to protect me. I am worried that I may have hurt someone while I was ill and didn't know what I was doing. They say I didn't, but I am not sure Tom would agree – there were tears in his eyes when he came to take me home.

Back in my own bed. Tom says he won't be using the spare room any more no matter how much I snore. It's quiet here. I snooze.

Hello Mum. Nice to see you. I haven't dreamt in ages – the sleeping pills, you know. Yes, I've been very ill, but I am getting better. You brought Dad? Why is he wearing boxing gloves and dancing with a kangaroo? Never mind. Nice to be back to normal.

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