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I Think There's Something Wrong With Me

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Chapter One

Bad Vibrations

Wednesday, 14 November 2001

So I'm in the surgery talking to this locum GP, an urbane old duffer who looks like Colonel Sanders. After thirty seconds I reckon he's got the same dedication to keeping his clients alive as the king of the spicy wing. I tell him why I'm here; I have this numbness thing going on. Left side of tongue is numb, ring and fourth finger of left hand, left half of left foot, oh yeah, and left side of my face is heading that way too. I'm turning into Igor.

'Ramsay Hunt syndrome, old boy,' he chuckles, like I'm his naughty nephew with a grazed knee. He does everything but ruffle my hair as he ushers me out. He's busy, he's got four thousand chickens to batter and stuff into stripy buckets. 'Couple of days and it'll sort itself out.' He was right about that. Two days later and I certainly wouldn't have been back for a second consultation with anyone but God. For whom I'd have a few questions.

I learn later, because I do become something of an expert on this subject – something that annoys doctors – that my presentation (the posh word for symptoms) indicates a classic neurological problem. 'Indicates' is not strong enough. Imagine I am walking about with a giant sandwich board with 'golf sale' crossed out and 'this man's got a brain problem' written on in neon spray paint, with the arrow pointing straight at my head. That's what I mean by 'indicates'.

Instead of sending me away with a smile and a shrug to die at home, he should have immediately referred me to an NHS consultant for an urgent

scan. Though the first available scan date would have been six to eight weeks later, and would have come through just as my headstone was being carved.

After my consultation I don't quite make it home cos I'm feeling a bit poorly. In fact I have a little sit-down in the waiting room. I ring my mate and sometime writing partner Phil Hammond (the guy on Have I Got News for You when they can't get a proper comedian). Phil is a clap doctor but in the same way country folk prefer to talk to vets than doctors, I give him a call on the moby. This is verbatim:

ME: Oi, ginger bollocks.

PHIL: Oh not you. Can't talk now, I've got someone's knob in my hand.

ME: You at work then?

PHIL: No.

NOTE FROM DR HAMMOND'S LAWYERS: The implication that our client is in any way homosexually inclined, or indeed sexually unfaithful to his loving wife, is bad and wrong, etc.

OK, that last bit's not true, but this is:

ME: I've seen some bloke who's told me I've got this syndrome but I think it's doctors' rhyming slang to get rid of me – you know, that I'm a bit of a Ramsay Hunt.

PHIL: No, that's not in the book. We use acronyms, not rhymes. Like, women who are into alternative medicine are GROLIES – Guardian Readers of Limited Intelligence in Ethnic Skirts.

ME: Right. Funny. See, but I've got this numb—

PHIL: [on a roll]: Or on the notes we might write C. K. BUNDY.

ME [sigh]: Go on then.

PHIL: Completely Knackered But Unfortunately Not Dead Yet.

[We laugh a bit.]

ME: Back to me.

[I tell him my presentation and await the usual knockabout stuff. Pause. No, really. A proper, uncomfortable pause.]

ME: Phil?

PHIL: You serious, mate?

ME: Yeah. What you reckon?

PHIL: I reckon you're fucked.

He tells me to get a scan. I ignore him and go home. My wife rings him and he tells her to tell me to get a scan. I ignore her and to prove I'm fine, go straight to bed. In the afternoon. Look, tomorrow's another day. And bloody hell, it certainly is.

Thursday, 15 November

Every year on 15 November I have a party. It's always on the fifteenth even if it falls on a useless day, i.e. every day except Friday or Saturday. But as few of my mates have real jobs it doesn't matter much. It's known as the 'Nigel's Not Dead Party'. It's always great. If you like this book you can come. You know when it is.

What follows explains why it's on the fifteenth.

I get up. I fall over. Not a good start to a Thursday, I think, as I proceed to chuck up. The wife would be quite justified in telling me off for not listening to her as she bundles me into the car, but she's being nice. Now I'm worried. As we stop again for me to stagger about and throw up in the gutter, she's passing up a gilt-edged opportunity to say she told me so. I put my now insane dizziness and sickness down to my not having had any breakfast and her driving, which is, I perceive, quite fast.

We pull up outside a private doctor's in South Kensington. He took half a look at me and did a brief touch-your-nose-with-your-finger-no-that's-your-eye-tryagain-ow-now-that's-my-eye, and pointed us in the direction of the Cromwell Hospital. Go straight to the MRI scanner, do not pass go, do not collect £200 (in fact, hand over a couple of thousand).

Magnetic Resonance Imaging uses a fabulously hightech piece of equipment that enables neurologists to see parts of your brain that were previously only available to them post-mortem, sliced on a Petri dish. Probably with some fava beans and a nice Chianti. It works because most of the human body, around 75 per cent, is made up of water, and water is made up of ions, which are charged particles. The magnets in the MRI machine make these particles stand up and jiggle about, like iron filings on a magnet. Then a computer works out what's in your brain by the movements of these particles. It's all terribly clever.

But if it's so damn smart, why is it so bloody noisy in there? Given that we can reasonably assume that if you are unfortunate enough to get squeezed into the damn thing, like a sausage in a big metal bun, you have a headache at least, and given it's doing all this space-age stuff for forty minutes, why does it have to sound like you're in Bob the Builder's toolbox? It's like shoving your head in the bass bin as a death metal band warms up.

But there it was. Deep in my medulla, the signal junction of my brain, the top end of the spinal cord, the vital link between the thought and the action, the area that controls everything from temperature to erections, from

heartbeat to breathing, from eyes to feet, in there, was something. And something wrong. What it was was another question, and one unanswerable from this type of scan, but what it was doing was clear:

It was killing me.

Here's something I only learnt later. When the radiologist was handed the scan, he asked, 'Righto, where's the body?' He was quickly shushed as I was sitting about ten feet away. Shame I missed that cos I could have done with a laugh. The verdict came quickly – unlike paying off the bill for the scan, which I only did about a month ago . . .

The lovely old boy who delivered the news was one of those proper old-fashioned consultants with a bow tie, Rumpole nose, a bootful of golf clubs and a basement chocka with Montrachet. He was adamant about three things: that I needed to go into hospital yesterday, that the thing – now given the scientific name of 'lesion' – discovered in my brain wasn't a tumour, and that we were, however, in for 'a rocky ride'. Good old British understatement. When my number's eventually up I hope I get someone like him to deliver the news. He'll tell me I had a good innings, took a tricky googly on the leg side and it's time for a short walk back to the pavilion.

The wife asked him if he could admit me to the Cromwell. He said he could, but asked if I had private-care insurance. 'No,' she said. 'What do you think it might cost?'

'Your house,' he answered, before getting on the phone to Charing Cross admissions. So, I thought, this is probably not a two aspirins and a Lemsip situation.