

A Loss of Insight

It was a glorious Welsh summer's day. Roger sat in the conservatory whilst a cool breeze whispered through the open sliding door. The world was bright and warm. A bumblebee lazily landed on the table beside me before deciding there was no nectar to be had and returned to the garden. The deliciously fresh aroma of cut grass mixed with the luxurious sweetness of peonies and roses. The calls of the pair of swallows that had taken their yearly residence in the tool shed could be heard over the faint sound of a tractor in a not-too-distant field. Roger, however, was oblivious to his blissful surroundings.

I sat watching him. His body was rigid, his brow furrowed with effort as he wrote his daily journal entry. What used to be his relaxing ritual had turned into a strained exercise over the past month. He was getting worse. I wanted to help but he would not burden his son. He wouldn't let anyone in.

Thursday 14th June

I sit bolt upright in my chair and I tremble from mental exertion. My mind is a ruined castle. Once the source of my power and independence it now crumbles into disrepair. There is nothing I can do but watch forsaken images tumbling from the parapets above and through my mind's eye. These once were meaningless and mild but are now so terrifying that I cannot bring myself to vocalise them. That would make them real. As I sink further into the depths of my keep, the drawbridge closes sealing me inside. I can't be helped. I can't even tell my wife. She would think I am wrong. Broken. I alone must bear the fear of knowing I cannot escape this desolate fortress.

Another day brought another entry to his journal. Dad began to hurriedly stab today's thoughts into the paper. He could not attain the neat lettering of his usual script. He was wound to the tightest pitch and nursing anxiety I could only guess at.

Friday 15th June

Faster and faster, these images blitz through my head. They have sped up to the point where it is like trying to watch a motor race through a pinhole. I am compelled to acknowledge each one. As the frequency increases, my concentration is pushed to the limit. My focus is at capacity, like that of a racing driver at a high-speed corner. I am overwhelmed but there is no chequered flag in sight. Guilt. Shame. Terror. All self-worth gone. I am losing this race. I am running out of fuel. My whole life now revolves around trying desperately to right the steering wheel. I am exhausted.

I arrived home after work that Saturday evening and could hear shouting over the sound of gravel underfoot as I walked to the front door. Dad charged past the window in the living room. I entered and nervously crept towards him, trying to understand what was awry. He whirled towards me, his words nonsensical but delivered with conviction.

“The world is ending! I am turning into a dog! HELP ME!”

With one hand on his shoulder and one holding an arm, I managed to guide him into a chair. Mum caught up with us, trembling. “I don't know what's happened! He was sitting quietly all day.” She explained how anxious he had been this afternoon, how his mumbling slowly grew

to yells. He had picked at the skin on the back of his hands until it bled. He then hit breaking point, as his inner turmoil overwhelmed him, and began his senseless rampage around the house.

I looked at his large, weathered hands and could see thin trails of drying blood stemming from shallow scratches inflicted by his own nails. Mum took his hands in hers to prevent further damage. As I went to take a seat next to him, I saw his modest, unembellished journal open to today's date. No attempt had been made at an entry. A habit of six years broken.

Over an hour of patient questioning, we came to understand his alarm. All of Roger's fears had now merged with his reality. The part of him that knew the difference between his thoughts and those caused by his condition had become dormant. After a small cut from a shaving accident four days ago, Roger began to obsess that he was now infected. This had begun his supposed metamorphosis into a canine and the delusion of infecting everyone around him. He could see dark, coarse fur growing on the backs of his hands and up his arms. He could *feel* it. He saw grotesque marks on our faces, the apparent cardinal sign of the disease he had given us. The sky was now a blazing orange, signalling the impending apocalypse. He was turning into a dog and would live alone until the sun extinguished whilst everyone else perished. And he was terrified. All he could do was animatedly repeat his forebodings. All we could do was try, without much success, to convince him everything was going to be okay.

Roger, as we knew him, had all but disappeared. I could still physically see him, his dark but gracefully greying hair, his proud Roman nose, his strong, broad jaw. But that light from his eyes had gone. The once rich, kind brown surrounding his pupils was flat somehow. They were now two murky puddles; we were uncertain of their depth.

The tension in his body matched that of the atmosphere in the house. We saw he was struggling recently but could not have predicted this. We questioned what we should do. We had vague but disturbing ideas of what he might face in a psychiatric inpatients ward. Flashes from a BBC Panorama echoed through my head. An asylum was no place for him. Sleep escaped us that night, comforting the man we loved with reassuring veneers that hid our panic.

He was seen by a psychiatrist the next day as an urgent case. She decided that Roger had adequate home support to not require admission, to our great relief. She prescribed new medication to try and regain his mental clarity. He was also given sedatives to help calm him in the short-term. On his return, after taking his first dose of the new medication, Roger dragged himself into his usual leather armchair in the conservatory and slept. No longer postured like a wolf preparing to lunge, I was comforted that he had finally found some rest.

Mum and I alternated providing company for Dad. There was very little interaction from him. We felt helpless. All we could do was reassure him, whilst silently wondering when the medication would return him to us. As winter drew in, the conservatory was no longer the warm and bright place of relaxation it had once been. It was now lit by unnatural light, casting creeping shadows from the furnishings. It became a bleak place for those that sat with the man who had descended so far.

With all the speed of a glacier, Dad began to improve. His icy prison was slowly defrosting as the powerful medication built up in his brain. Hope slowly began to return. Christmas came and went, and the days began to get lighter. Mum and I began to talk about a future. She made plans to take Dad on a holiday narrow boating when he was 'back to his old self'.

Roger is a middle-aged husband and father with OCD. From his teenage years, he has suffered from obsessive thoughts which mainly manifest as images in his mind. These are followed by compulsions; actions Roger must carry out to relieve the anxiety from these obsessions. This has been well controlled by medication and allowed him to live a normal life, unconstrained by the constant need to respond to his compulsions. However, the dose was reduced to fall in line with NICE guidelines. As the level of anti-depressants in his body reduced below its therapeutic range for an OCD patient, Roger slowly deteriorated. On that Saturday, Roger lost all insight into what was real and what was in his head. He had a psychotic-like experience, no longer believing his obsessive thoughts to be unreasonable or illogical.

It took 9 months of trial and error with medications and dosages to rectify the chemical imbalance in his brain. He went from needing constant reassurance, to being left to tend to the house and garden. Mum was able to return to work full time. Dad was assigned a care coordinator to aid his rehabilitation. He regained the confidence to drive again. He eased back into his job, eventually returning to full time hours. He has rediscovered his love of watching football and listening to music from his youth. He is excitedly planning a holiday on the Grand Union Canal with Mum. He has recovered. He is my Dad again.