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INDEPENDENT



A red line drawing of a young woman with freckles and two braids, wearing a tank top, stands behind the title. To her left are three green dice with numbers 1, 2, and 3.

SUBMARINE

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Submarine
by
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Triskaidekaphobia

It is Sunday morning. I hear our dial-up modem playing bad jazz as my mother connects to the internet. I am in the bathroom.

I recently discovered that my mother has been typing the names of as-yet-uninvented mental conditions into Yahoo's search engine: 'delusion syndrome teenage', 'over-active imagination problem', 'holistic behavioural stabilizers'.

When you type 'delusion syndrome teenage' into Yahoo, the first page it offers you is to do with Cotard's Syndrome. Cotard's Syndrome is a branch of autism where people believe they are dead. The website features some choice quotes from victims of the disease. For a while I was slipping these phrases into lulls in conversation at dinnertime or when my mother asked about my day at school.

'My body has been replaced by a shell.'

'My internal organs are made of stone.'

'I have been dead for years.'

I have stopped saying these things. The more I pretended to be a corpse, the less open she became about issues of mental health.

I used to write questionnaires for my parents. I wanted to get to know them better. I asked things like:

What hereditary illnesses am I likely to inherit?

What money and land am I likely to inherit?

If your child was adopted, at what age would you choose to tell him about his real mother?

- a) 4-8
- b) 9-14
- c) 15-18

I am nearly fifteen.

They looked over the questionnaires but they never answered them.

Since then, I have been using covert analysis to discover my parents' secrets.

One of the things I have discovered is that, although my father's beard looks ginger from a distance, when you get up close it is in fact a subtle blend of black, blond and strawberry.

I have also learnt that my parents have not had sex in two months. I monitor their intimacy via the dimmer switch in their bedroom. I know when they have been at it because the next morning the dial will still be set to halfway.

I also discovered that my father suffers from bouts of depression: I found an empty bottle of tricyclic antidepressants that were in the wicker bin under his bedside table. I still have the bottle among my old Transformers. Depression comes in bouts. Like boxing. Dad is in the blue corner.

It takes all of my intuition to find out when a bout of my father's depression has started. Here are two signals: one, I can hear him emptying the dishwasher from my attic room. Two, he presses so hard when he handwrites that it is possible, in a certain light, to see two or three days' worth of notes indented in the surface of our plastic easy-clean tablecloth.

Gone to yoga,

lamb in fridge,

Ll

Gone to Sainsbury's,

Ll

Please record Channel 4, 9pm,

Lloyd

My father does not watch TV, he just records things.

There are ways of detecting that a bout of depression has finished: if dad makes an elaborate play on words or does an impression of a gay or oriental person. These are good signs.

In order to plan ahead, it's in my interest to know about my parents' mental problems from the earliest age.

I have not established the correct word for my mother's condition. She is lucky because her mental health problems can be mistaken for character traits: neighbourliness, charm and placidity.

I've learnt more about human nature from watching ITV's weekday morning chat shows than she has in her whole life. I tell her: 'You are unwilling to address the vacuum in your interpersonal experiences,' but she does not listen.

There is some evidence that my mother's job is to blame for her state of mental health. She works for the council's legal and democratic services department. She has many colleagues. One of the rules in her office is that, if it is your birthday, you are held responsible for bringing *your own* cake to work.

All of which brings me back to the medicine cabinet.

I slide the mirrored door aside; my face cross-fades, replaced by black and white boxes for prescription creams, pills in blister packs and brown bottles plugged with cotton wool. There's Imodium, Canesten, Piriton, Benylin, Robitussin, plus a few suspicious-looking holistic treatments: arnica, echinacea, St John's Wort and some dried-out leaves of aloe vera.

They believe that I have some emotional problems. I think that is why they do not want to burden me with their own. What they don't seem to understand is that their problems are already my problems. I may inherit my mother's weak tear ducts. If she walks into a breeze, the tears come out of the far corners of her eyes and run down towards her earlobes.

I have decided that the best way to get my parents to open up is

to give them the impression that I am emotionally stable. I will tell them I am going to see a therapist and that he or she says that I am mostly fine except that I feel cut off from my parents, and that they ought to be more generous with their anecdotes.

There's a clinic not far from my house that contains numerous types of therapist: physio-, psycho-, occupational. I weigh up which of the therapists will provide the least trouble. My body is pretty much perfect, so I plump for Dr Andrew Goddard B.Sc. M.Sc., a physiotherapist.

When I phone, a male secretary answers. I tell him that I need an early appointment with Andrew because I have to go to school. He says I can get an appointment for Thursday morning. He asks me if I've been to the clinic before. I say no. He asks me if I know where it is and I say yes, it is close to the swings.

I am amazed to discover that there are detective agencies in the *Yellow Pages*. Real detective agencies. One of them has this slogan: 'You can run but you can't hide'. I fold the corner of the page for easy reference.

Thursday morning. I usually let my Mum wake me up but today I have set my alarm for seven. Even from under my duvet, I can hear it bleating on the other side of my room. I hid it inside my plastic crate for faulty joysticks so that I would have to get out of bed, walk across the room, yank it out of the box by its lead and, only then, jab the snooze button. This was a tactical manoeuvre by my previous self. He can be very cruel.

As I listen to it, the alarm reminds me of the car alarm that goes off whenever heavy-goods vehicles drive past. It wails like a robotic baby.

The car is owned by the man at number sixteen on the street below us, Grovelands Terrace. He is a pansexual. Pansexuals are sexually attracted to everything. Animate or inanimate, it makes no odds: gloves, garlic, the Bible. He has two cars: a Volkswagon Polo for everyday and a yellow Lotus Elise for best. He parks the VW in front of his house and the Lotus out the back, on my road. The Lotus is the only yellow car on my street. It is very sensitive.

I have watched him many times as he jogs up through his back garden, swings open the gate and points his keys at the road. The wailing stops. If it happens late at night, he looks up to see how many lights have come on in the windows of the houses on my street. He checks the car for scratches, tenderly sliding a large hand over the bonnet and roof.

One night, it cried intermittently between the hours of midnight and four in the morning. I had one of Mrs Griffiths's maths tests the next day and I wanted to let him know that, in our community, this behaviour is not acceptable. So I came home at lunchtime – having performed poorly in the test – went into the street and made myself sick on the bonnet of his Lotus. It was mostly blueberry Pop-Tart. The rain that afternoon was fierce and by teatime the lesson had been washed away.

When I make it down to breakfast, my dad asks me why I am up so early. 'I'm going to see a therapist at eight thirty – Dr Goddard B.Sc. Hons.' I say this as if it is no big deal, this new-found responsibility-taking.

He stops dead in the middle of slicing a banana on to his muesli. The open banana skin sits in his palm to protect him from the downward slash of his spoon. This is a man who knows about maturity.

'Oh right. Good for you, Oliver,' he says, nodding.

Dad admires preparation; he leaves his muesli in the fridge overnight so that it can fully absorb the semi-skimmed milk.

'Yeah, it's no biggie. I just thought I'd like to have a chat about a few things,' I say, all casual.

'That's good, Oliver. Do you want some money?'

'Yes.'

He pulls out his wallet and hands me a twenty and a ten. I know when I am spending Dad's money because he folds the top of his twenties back on themselves, like a bed sheet, so that they fit inconspicuously into his wallet. Blind people also fold their banknotes.

'Eight thirty,' he says, looking at his watch. 'I'll drive you there.'

'It's only on Walter's Road. I'll walk.'

‘It’s okay,’ he says. ‘I want to.’

In the car, my dad treats me gently.

‘I’m very impressed’ – he checks his wing mirror, signals right and turns on to Walter’s Road – ‘that you’re doing this, Oliver.’

‘It’s nothing.’

‘But you know, if you want to talk about anything then me and your mum have been through quite a lot, we might be able to help.’

‘What sort of thing?’ I ask.

‘You know – we’re not as innocent as you think,’ he says, with a little sideways glance that can only mean sex parties.

‘I would like to have a chat sometime, Dad.’

‘Oh, that’d be great.’

I smile because I want him to believe we have a chummy rapport. He smiles because he thinks he is a good father.

Dad stops outside the clinic and watches me walk across the forecourt. I wave at him. His face is tensed in a mixture of pride and sorrow.

The practice looks nothing like a hospital. It reminds me of Gran’s house: all banisters and carpet. On the wall is a poster of a spine rearing up like an adder, about to shoot venom. I follow the signs to the waiting room.

No one is at reception. I thumb a doorbell that has been nailed to the desk. It has the words ‘Press for Assistance’ written next to it.

I keep ringing the bell until I hear footsteps from upstairs.

I pick up the *Independent* from the newspaper rack and sit down on the seat next to an Edensprings watercooler. Although I’m not thirsty, I pour myself a drink just to watch the translucent jellyfish gurgle to the surface.

The seats are shaped to improve posture. I straighten my back. I pretend to read the paper. I am commuting.

A voice says that I must be Mr Tate. I look up and he is standing in front of me holding a clipboard. He has large hands. I recognize him.

‘If you wouldn’t mind filling out this form then we can get started,’ he says, handing me the clipboard. ‘You live at number fifteen, don’t you? You’re Jill’s boy?’ he asks.

I realize that he’s the pansexual who lives on Grovelands Terrace. I’m surprised that pansexuals are allowed to work as receptionists.

I reject the impulse to write a false address.

‘Okay, that’s great. If you’d like to follow me.’

We enter a room with a stretcher-type bed in it and a skeleton, standing in the corner. There is no one in the room but us. The pansexual sits down in the doctor’s chair.

‘Sorry, I don’t know if I’ve introduced myself. I’m Dr Goddard’ – he holds out his hand – ‘but please call me Andrew.’

His hands are even bigger up close. Not true – merely a matter of scale.

‘So then,’ he glances at my form, ‘Oliver. What’s the news?’

I tell him it’s my back. That it hurts.

‘Right, if you wouldn’t mind taking off your gear – everything but your pants – then we can have a look at you.’ By ‘we’ he means ‘I’.

I tell myself not to feel sexually threatened. I am of no special interest; he could just as easily be angling for the printer.

I take off my shoes, then my jeans, but I leave my socks on. Then I take off my jumper and T-shirt in one, saving time.

‘A bad back is often partly to do with lifestyle.’ He taps some keys on his keyboard. ‘Do you spend a lot of time sitting down?’

‘I sit down at school,’ I say. ‘And I sit at my desk in my bedroom in the attic.’

He nods and turns to his computer screen.

‘I can see into all the back gardens on your street,’ I tell him.

He’s reading something, squinting.

‘Uh huh,’ he says.

He keeps tapping the down-arrow key.

I let the information catch up with him. He stops and turns to me. He nods, blinks, then he points at my legs. ‘Oliver, you are tall

for your age and you have long femurs. This means that most chairs won't fit you.'

I rest my hands on my thighs.

'You'll find yourself slouching or leaning back too much.'

I straighten up in my chair.

'If you could just hop on the bed for me then we'll see what we can do.'

By hop he means sit. I sit on the bed with my legs dangling over the side.

'Do you know about pansexuals?' I ask, on my guard.

He stops. 'No, I don't think I do.' He moves round the bed so that he is behind me. 'Someone who has a thing for pots and pans?'

This is a joke.

He spiders his fingers up and down my back while talking. 'Why do you ask that?'

'You know your next-door neighbour, the man at number fifteen?' I ask.

'You mean Mr Sheridan?'

'He is a knacker. A knacker is someone who slaughters horses.'

He doesn't say anything. He rubs my back at approximately the sixth vertebra.

'Would you mind lying on your front for me, Oliver? You can put your face here.' He could have said 'lying prone', saving two syllables.

He points to a small hole, a bit like a toilet seat, at one end of the bed.

'Here, Andrew?' I ask.

He nods. I shift on to my belly and poke my nose through the hole.

'I'm going to lower the bed now, Oliver.' The bed lowers, becoming briefly animate. I wonder if he lied about not understanding the word pansexual.

He massages the area surrounding my eighth vertebra. 'I know Mr Sheridan quite well, Oliver.' He has moved up to my neck now. 'He's a painter-decorator.'

He rubs my back at approximately the ninth vertebra.

‘Andrew, he has the eyes and overalls of a killer,’ I say.

My mum says that if you want to remember someone’s name you should be sure to address them by their name at least twice during your introductory conversation.

I can only see this tiny patch of light-blue carpet. I think about spitting on it. Or trying to vomit.

He applies a little more pressure on my neck.

‘The family at number thirteen are Zoro . . .’ I lose my breath as he kneads my back. ‘Zoroastrians. Zoroastrianism is a pre-Islamic religion of ancient Persia.’

I can’t stop myself from grunting. I hope he doesn’t think I’m enjoying myself.

‘Hmm, I’m fairly sure that they are Muslim, Oliver.’ He presses harder on my neck. If I wanted to throw up, I could.

‘Okay,’ he says. A machine bleeps like a television being turned off. ‘I’m going to do some ultrasound on your back.’ I don’t know what the word ultrasound means. Normally, I would note the word on my hand but, in this instance, I am forced to bite a chunk from the inside of my cheek as a reminder.

‘This is cold,’ he says, and it feels like he is breaking eggs on my back. It is not unpleasant.

I think about what he has told me about the family at number thirteen and the man at number fifteen. I think about the way he touches my back and the model skeleton and that he said I have long femurs.

I could easily throw up.

He rubs the gel into my spine and shoulders with what feels like an underarm deodorant roll-on. I don’t need to use deodorant yet. Chips says that roll-on is for gays.

‘I was sick on your car,’ I tell him. He stops rubbing.

‘What?’

It is quite difficult to speak; my cheeks are squished together.

‘On the bonnet. But it didn’t stick because of the rain.’

‘You were sick on my car?’ he says. This is like speaking to a baby.

‘Yes, I was sick on your car. The yellow one. Your car alarm had been going off all night and I wanted to teach you a lesson.’

I really feel like I might be sick. My face is starting to feel numb. There is another bleeping sound. I think he has turned something off. I hear him pacing. I am very vulnerable. I occasionally glimpse one of his loafers. Then he stops. I wait for him to say or do something.

‘You can sit up now, Oliver. We’re done.’

Afterwards, the doctor was very nice to me. He told me that I am really very healthy and my back isn’t bad at all. He gave me a free lumbar support, a salami-shaped cushion, because, he said, he wants us to be friends from now on.

I hide the lumbar support under my shirt as I open my front door.

Mum is waiting inside, sat on the bottom-but-one stair.

‘How did it go?’

‘Great – I feel really relaxed.’

She has half-dried her hair. The tips look darker brown than the roots.

‘Good. Will you go again?’

‘Nah, it turns out I only had a small bit of childhood trauma; it didn’t take very long to sort out. He says that one of my main problems was that I don’t feel close enough to my parents. They don’t share enough with me.’

She watches me. She’s wearing a terrible purple fleece.

‘What’s under your jumper?’ she asks.

I look down at my barrelled chest.

‘That’s a new pillow.’

‘What?’

‘So I can sleep at night. I’ve been having trouble sleeping. It’s mostly your fault.’

‘Can I see it?’

‘No. I lied. It’s rolled-up porn magazines.’

She squints at me.

‘Tell me what’s under your jumper, Olly?’

It's times like this I am thankful to be a teenager.

I take advantage of my parents' current stance on swearing – that it is *up to me*.

'Fuck sake!' I yell, barging past her and taking three steps at a time. Thank our Lord for long femurs.

I run up to my bedroom, sit down at my desk and start writing a short story:

There are nine planets in our solar system, Saturn being the largest. The life forms of Saturn are silent. They don't need mouths because they communicate using thoughts, not speech.

'I want to stay in my room,' a young Saturnian thinks to his mother.

His mother understands completely. She comprehends his meaning in a way that spoken Earth monosyllables could never replicate. She knows that he feels like having some time to himself – no need to ask if he's okay or worry about him or leave booklets around the house.

I tongue the small notch in the wall of my mouth. Then I look up the word ultrasound in the encyclopaedia.

Ultrasound uses high-frequency sound waves to study hard-to-reach body areas. Ultrasound was first developed in the Second World War to locate submerged objects: depth charges, submarines, Atlantis and such.

The first thing I ever stole was three pounds and forty-five pence from the mantelpiece at Ian Grist's birthday party. I spent it on Copydex.

The second thing I ever stole was my father's *Oxford Encyclopaedia*. I caused a small argument between Mum and Dad. He said: 'I always put it back in exactly the same spot after I use it and – look! – it's not there.'

The next day, he went out and bought two hardback copies of the encyclopaedia; one was black and one was navy.

'Okay,' he said, 'now I've bought you your own copy.'

I heard the thunk of the book landing on her desk.

Some months later, when Mum was away at a conference, I left his old encyclopaedia on the landing outside my bedroom. I wanted

him to find it. It was open at pages 112–13, which contains the entry for ‘*cognitive dissonance*’:

Cognitive dissonance is a condition first proposed by the psychologist Leon Festinger in 1956, relating to his hypothesis of cognitive consistency.

Cognitive dissonance is a state of opposition between cognitions.

A cognition is basically a thought, belief or attitude.

The theory of cognitive dissonance holds that contradicting cognitions serve as a driving force that compels the human mind to acquire or invent new thoughts or beliefs, or to modify existing beliefs, so as to *minimize* the amount of dissonance (conflict) between cognitions.

Dad read this entry, then, without comment, he quietly placed the book back on my bookcase.

For my last birthday, Dad bought me a pocket-sized *Collins English Dictionary*. It would only fit in a pocket that had been specially designed.

Last Christmas, in the way that my father tends to when he feels he has hit upon a seam of easy, pleasing gifts, he gave me a blood-red *Roget’s Thesaurus*, a square bulge in my stocking.

I have my reference books to hand while gazing in through the windows of our downhill neighbours.

I have the attic room in a building that is partly owned by my parents and partly owned by the bank.

We live halfway up a steep hill in a three-storey terraced house. The area is known as Mount Pleasant. The Victorians built the streets in a grid shape so that all the houses face the same way, looking out over the bay. My parents tell me that I have a fantastic view, but I don’t believe in scenery.

Swansea is shaped like an amphitheatre. The guildhall is somebody in the front row wearing an ungainly, clock-tower hat.

From their first-floor bedroom, my dad likes to watch the Cork ferry as it appears from behind Mumbles Lighthouse and shuffles out into the bay.

‘Here’s Corky,’ he says, as though introducing a game-show host.

I like to look into the windows and the back gardens of the houses on Grovelands Terrace. I consider myself an excellent judge of character.

The family at number thirteen are still Zoroastrians.

The ugly old woman at number fourteen is a triskaidekaphobic. She fears the number thirteen.

The man at number fifteen is still a knacker.

And there’s Andrew Goddard at number sixteen – both an excellent pansexual doctor and a compulsive liar.

Sunday. Me and Dad are at the tip, which is nothing more than a car park full of skips, crushers and enormous freight containers. The sky is concrete grey. I can smell beer slops, vinegar and soil.

I’m high-fiving wine bottles through stiff brush. It is a bit like a mass grave and all the green bottles are Jews. There are brown bottles and clear bottles too but not nearly as many. With Gestapic efficiency, I pick out another green bottle from the crate.

All the bodies will be crushed, recycled and used in building motorways.

‘Oliver, we’ve got something to tell you,’ Dad says, dumping a cardboard box full of garden waste into a toad-green mangler.

Unlike the doctor, when Dad says ‘we’, he means ‘we’, because Mum is omnipotent.

‘Who’s dead?’ I ask, shot-putting a bottle of Richebourg.

‘No one’s dead.’

‘You’re getting a divorce?’

‘Oliver.’

‘Mum’s preggers?’

‘No, we –’

‘I’m adopted.’

‘Oliver! Please, shit up!’

I can’t believe he just said that. I yelp with laughter. He looks flustered and red, cradling a slush of Sunday newspaper supplements. I keep laughing long after it has ceased to be funny.

But what Dad says next cuts my chortling short. Nothing could have prepared me:

‘Your mother and I decided: we need a holiday. We’ve booked for us all to go at Easter. To Italy,’ he says.