

TRAIN THE BRAIN

‘...two times twelve is twenty four; one times twelve is twelve.’ Wilfred smiled to himself. Task accomplished. He’d recited the twelve times table backwards without even the smallest hesitation. His eighty-year-old brain was still working as it should. Exercises like that keep the mind in shape. It was the mind that was important; he didn’t give a toss about the body. Especially now that What’s-her-name had upped and absconded with her Toy-Boy and left him to take care of himself. Served him right for marrying a woman twenty years his junior. He had kept on the subscription for the Viagra really more in hope than in expectation. No, he had no longer any great aspirations for his body, but he would do everything he could for his mind. Anything to avoid ending up doolally and wandering around the town without a clue who or where he was.

He congratulated himself on his arithmetical performance. It had been a feat of pure recall. If his memory had slipped up, he could have subtracted twelve from the previous answer, or multiplied the number by ten and then by two and added the answers together. He hadn’t needed to, and he was bursting with pride. His brain could still deal with any problem, even at his age. Tomorrow he would do the list of English monarchs from 1066. He loved a challenge.

Wilfred didn’t yet know it, but he would never revisit the Kings and Queens of England; life was about to get in the way.

Wilfred shuffled along the corridor and into the lift for his regular morning expedition to the newsagent. It was only two minutes from his tower block and it comprised the sum total of his daily exercise. More than enough, in his opinion. If he was lucky, he wouldn’t meet a soul or have to speak to anyone. A grunt would be all the girl in the paper shop would get when he handed over the money. He liked to keep himself to himself. What’s-her-name used to moan on about him being taciturn. That’s probably why she had run off with that garrulous Yank nearly half her age. Wilfred hadn’t been fond of Americans before, but he hated them with a vengeance now.

His dream of solitude was shattered in the lift, and in the most unpleasant way possible.

“How you doin’, Wilfy? Ain’t seen you for a while.” Wilfred’s cold, silent glare penetrated the speaker as if he was made of frosted glass. “Somethin’ troubling you, Wilfy?”

The American’s false concern got right up Wilfred’s nose. He seldom answered genuine questions and always ignored rhetorical ones. His icy stare hardened to a level no Englishman could ignore. But Americans are notoriously less sensitive. “Hey, Wilfy, is your wife OK? I ain’t seen her around for a while. She ain’t ill, is she?”

Wilfred wavered, but still said nothing. The bloke probably knew the whole story and was just trying to turn the rack up a notch or two. My God, he even looked a bit like Toy-Boy. And sounded like him too. As far as he could tell.

Half hidden in the doorway he had caught the cheating pair at it. But even with his hearing aid turned up full, Wilfred hadn’t seen or heard Toy-Boy all that well. What’s-her-name had whispered something like *At last we’ll be together, Chuck*. ‘Chuck’; very droll when he was the one being chucked.

But this talkative American’s name was Tex, so it couldn’t be him, in spite of the physical similarities. Same greying beard, dirty jeans and long woolly sweater. Wilfred detested all middle-aged hippies almost as much as Americans. This bloke in the lift was doubly odious. Trebly, if you counted his similarity to Toy-Boy.

When they reached the ground floor, Wilfred strode out of the building without having uttered a sound, eyes fixed firmly to the front. But he could feel the American’s gormless grin bearing into the small of his back.

“Are you sure you’ve told us everything, Mister Wilbrahim?” Wilfred eyed up the rather butch woman sitting on the armchair across from him, her pencil poised above her notebook.

He shook his head; he had already spoken more words in the past ten minutes than in all of the previous month. Enough was enough.

The policewoman continued. “I’m appreciative of the cognitive difficulties of the elderly, but could you please rack your brains and try to recall everything. Every little clue could help us.”

This insult moved Wilfred to make that extra effort and exercise his voice yet again. “There’s nothing wrong with my memory, miss. I do regular mind exercises to keep the brain active. I’m not a geriatric. Not in any way. When I say I’ve told you everything, I’ve told you everything.”

“No no no, Mr Wilbrahim. You’ve been very lucid and clear. I didn’t mean to offend, but having an experience like you’ve just had would disturb anyone. It’s not every day you come across a murdered body lying in a heap on the floor of your lift.”

“Look miss, I am a totally stable and rational person and quite able to deal with such an experience. And I’ve already answered all your questions. So if you wouldn’t mind leaving, I’d like to heat myself up a little soup and watch some daytime television.”

He indicated the exit with what he considered to be a firm gesture. The policewoman rose and strode to the door. “If you do remember anything else, give us a call,” she said as she left.

When the door closed behind her, a furrow crossed Wilfred’s brow. He hadn’t hidden anything from this redoubtable Sherlocka Holmes, but somewhere in the back of his mind, he had the feeling that there maybe was something else. Something lurking around in the subconscious, refusing to drift into the clarity of knowledge. It was really troubling. Was he losing it? Was old age catching up with him after all? Best to check! Twelve times twelve is one four four, eleven times twelve is one three two...

Wilfred sat at his dining room table supping his soup and surfing his recollections. He revisited the evidence he had given to Sherlocka. He’d come back from the shop with his morning newspaper, pressed the lift button for the seventeenth floor and it was only when it

was in motion that he looked round and saw the body. That's what he had told her. It was clear, concise, to the point and, above all, accurate.

She may have been expected to wonder why he had pressed the button for the seventeenth when she knew he lived on the sixteenth, but she hadn't asked. Remarkable lack of curiosity for a criminal investigator, Wilfred thought. Had she pushed him on that point, he would have explained in more detail. He would have pointed out that there were two elevators: one for the even numbered floors and the other for the odd. That he had, of course, pressed to call the even numbered lift, but it hadn't come. That this wasn't an infrequent occurrence, either because the lift was broken or because some selfish idiot had decided to jam the doors open on another level. The only solution was to take the other lift to the floor above and walk down the stairs to his own floor. Wilfred hated having to do this; the stairs stank of urine and used condoms. Today's youth! It would never have happened when he was a young man.

The upshot was that when he finally got into the lift, the wrong odd-number lift, he was in a rage: not quite a blinding rage, but he was pretty irate. So telling Sherlocka that he had pressed the lift button was a bit of a euphemism. What he had actually done was tighten his hand into a clenched fist, with the thumb extended. He had thrust the thumb against the button, pressing and turning vehemently as if he were trying to push the damn thing through the wall of the contraption. He made no impression on it, but it gave him a feeling of power and a surge of satisfaction that to some slight extent assuaged his rage. As if he had wreaked his revenge on the bloody thing. Maybe it was this feeling that was at the back of his mind, making him feel guilty that he hadn't told the policewoman the whole story. Or maybe not. Perhaps it was something else – he couldn't be sure. In any case she was gone now, and with any luck she wouldn't be back.

Next morning, as Wilfred was sitting at his dining room table eating breakfast, his doorbell rang, making him jump. His doorbell never rang, not since What's-her-name had left. Best to ignore it, he thought. But it didn't stop. It was drowned out by a loud knocking and shouts of *Police! We know you're in there. Open up!* Wilfred realised they weren't going to go away, so he reluctantly opened the door.

Sherlocka's sturdy frame filled the space, her notebook and pencil poised for action. Half-hidden behind her was an even bigger uniformed policeman. Her bodyguard, Wilfred supposed, as if someone her size needed protecting.

"You didn't tell us the whole truth, Mr Wilbrahim," she said, nodding her head sternly like one of his prim primary teachers from the early fifties.

He wasn't going to be lectured to, not at his age. Where did young people get the idea it was OK to treat the older generation as children? He raised his voice in defiance. "I told you everything I know."

Sherlocka stepped over the threshold. "Shall we come in, or do you want all your neighbours to hear?" Wilfred wasn't sure whether he had stepped back or she had just pushed him out of the way, but before he knew it, she was sitting in his armchair and the burly bodyguard was standing behind it with his arms folded. Sherlocka signalled with her eyes to Wilfred that he should sit in the sofa across from her.

She licked the tip of her pencil and held it over her notebook. "You didn't tell us yesterday that you knew the victim," she announced.

"You didn't ask."

"Hmmm!" She scribbled in her book, then looked up. "Well, tell us now."

"I knew the victim." Wilfred glared at her and shrugged. "There, now I've told you."

"Don't be smart, Mr Wilbrahim. This is a serious matter. Tell me everything you know about the dead man."

"He lived on the fourteenth floor of this building, he was a loud-mouthed American, and his name was Tex."

The policewoman scribbled in her book again, before looking up. "His name wasn't Tex. It was Charles, Charles Houston."

“Well, everyone called him Tex. It must have been his nickname, maybe because his name was Houston and they thought he was from Texas.”

Something in Sherlocka’s look told Wilfred that she was beginning to suspect he was lying. “Mr Wilbrahim, nobody else we spoke to called him Tex. He was known to all of them as Chuck.”

“Was he really? Well I never heard that. I always thought of him as Tex.”

The policewoman frowned as she scribbled. “Anything else you’d like to tell us about Mr Houston.”

“No, I didn’t know him all that well.”

“Really?” Wilfred quivered with the uneasy feeling that she knew something she wasn’t telling him. She moved on to another topic. “But let’s leave that aside. What can you tell me about your wife, Mr Wilbrahim?”

“What’s my wife got to do with this?” He had no intention of making public What’s-her-name’s treachery and his humiliation.

“We’d like to speak to her. Apparently, she knew the victim very well. They were both on the management committee for this block.”

“Well, she’s not here.”

Sherlocka was smirking at him, and it was unnerving. “Where is your wife then?” she asked.

“She’s gone.” Sherlocka raised her eyebrows, but Wilfred had decided he’d said enough.

“Where?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

What a nosey bitch this woman was! He would have to tell her something, but it would be as little as possible. “She’s left me.” He scowled at his interrogator, who was still scribbling away.

“I’m not surprised,” she said as she put the pencil and book in her pocket. “If she gets in touch, do let us know, Mr Wilbraham. Come along, constable.”

The door slammed, leaving Wilfred to wallow in his anger.

He had been sitting motionless since the police had closed the door behind them. The fury within him had grown and grown, but Wilfred had refused to give in to it. The demons of anger rushed frantically around his head, the screams reached up into his throat, but not a sound passed his lips. He was trembling from the effort to contain the waves of emotion that were beating down on him. That bloody woman, he couldn’t let her win. He had to get a grip.

He knew what to do. He stretched his arms out in front of his body, hands open, palms facing each other. The next step would give him back control. The tension in his muscles as he closed his fists would make him feel strong. It had worked in the lift, and it would work now. He forced the tips of his fingers inwards, towards his open palms. They were resisting, and he could feel the tautness creep up his arm. Once the fists closed, he would be fine. Redemption was close.

Then the fingers stopped moving. He was looking down at two half closed fists, refusing stubbornly to move further. Something was stopping them. He was squeezing against an immovable barrier, but there was nothing there. He could see the empty space between his hands. And yet, he could feel something. Whatever it was seemed warm, soft to the touch but refusing to yield. He squeezed and squeezed, but his hands refused to move. The ‘thing’ he couldn’t see began to change. The harder he pushed, the more the heat drained out of it, until it was like pressing against a lump of ice.

What was wrong with him? Was his mind going at last? Best to check! Twelve times twelve is... Twelve times twelve is... Twelve times twelve is? He didn't know.

The journalists hadn't shown much interest in the murder. A couple of reporters from the local papers and a solitary girl with a microphone from the community radio station were the total audience for the police press briefing. The sturdy policewoman preceded her remarks with a sigh of resignation.

"Thank you for coming. My name is Inspector Thatcham. I am heading the investigation of the incident which took place here yesterday. The body of the man we found inside the building behind me has now been identified. His name was Charles Houston, a resident of these flats. He was a fifty year-old American. The coroner has confirmed the cause of death was strangulation, so this is now a murder investigation.

"A further development in the case has been the discovery of a second body in the basement of the building. The victim was a woman of around sixty, who has yet to have be identified. The modus operandi in both cases seems to be similar, and we consider that there is a connection between them.

"A resident of the building is helping us with our enquiries, but no one has been charged yet. We are not taking questions at this point but if any new information comes to light we will keep the media informed."

END

