

Coffin Liquor

John Lanchester

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Monday

I realised that things had gone wrong as soon as I arrived at my hotel. The receptionists spoke no English. Only when I showed them my passport did they seem to accept, with reluctance, that I had a booking. I was given a key and took my own bag upstairs. The room was a cramped, overfurnished space with thin brown walls. On the desk was an envelope of conference materials including a laminated pass on a lanyard and a printed programme. It was at that point that I realised I had been enticed to attend the event under a misleading prospectus. The first talk on the first morning was titled ‘What String Theorists Can Learn from Vlad the Impaler: Narrative, Belief and the Immanence of the Imperceptible’. The other events were given similar names and had the same preposterous emphasis on the idea of an engagement or ‘conversation’ between areas that are manifestly questions of proof and fact, on the one hand, and, on the other side, a degenerate mass of whiffle and nonsense. These acts of intellectual miscegenation were interwoven with outings and excursions to sites of local interest.

In short, I find I have been brought to this godforsaken country in Central Europe – I say godforsaken purely as a figure of speech – to attend a conference on the ‘dialogue’ (emetic term) between science and mythology under entirely false pretences. My views on this subject are well known. The conference organiser’s, or purported organiser’s, contact details were appended to the covering letter. I rang his mobile immediately.

‘I have been lured here under a pretext,’ I said. ‘My understanding was that this event would be an opportunity to explain my ideas and to point out the ways in which other people’s beliefs are wrong. I now find that this is not the case.’

‘Professor Watkins,’ the man said, with the devilish nerve to sound as if he were, of all things, amused. ‘A pleasure to hear from you. The flight was satisfactory? The hotel?’

‘Please don’t attempt to change the subject,’ I said. I was polite but firm. ‘You, sir, are an impostor. I bid you goodnight.’ I disconnected from the call and sat down to write this journal. And now to bed. My hopes for the start of the conference tomorrow could not possibly be any lower.

Tuesday

I slept poorly. The atmosphere of this room is oppressive. The furniture is heavy but the walls are thin. The building creaks as it settles. The heating is set high and cannot be turned down, and when I opened a window I was greeted by intermittent carousing from the street outside. An uncomfortable night. Breakfast was dark bread and black jam. Not bad. A number of other guests were eating the meal on their own; I surmise that they too are conference attendees. The conference centre is a short walk away from the hotel, about four hundred metres. The medieval architecture of the town is picturesque for those who have that taste, but not efficient. The streets are narrow and winding and poorly adapted for their contemporary mix of human and vehicular traffic. Generations of superstition and feudal oppression followed by a few decades of communist rule followed by an abrupt transition to a full market economy have all left their mark. It is an airless and gloomy town.

The conference venue is a box-like concrete building with subtly flickering lighting and erratic currents of hot and cold air. I arrived promptly for the first plenary session. I shouldn’t have bothered. The conference has a ‘dual chair’, and both of them made introductory speeches. The first chair is an Italian physicist of about my age. He spouted inanities about the scientific method and then veered into guff about dialogue and conversation and paradigms. Overall, poor. He was succeeded by a female Eastern European sociologist in early middle age who had hair with a coloured streak in it and purple glasses.

Also bangles. As she went up to the microphone I anticipated disaster, and was not disappointed. There ensued a series of platitudes, falsehoods, mischaracterisations, illiteracies – an entire thesaurus of modern error. The ostensible subject of her speech was the continuing contemporary importance of myth, but from the point of view of a scientifically trained mind, i.e. mine, there was no content at all.

Attendees listened to the speeches by means of simultaneous translation through earpieces. At the end of her talk it was a pleasure to take mine out. Others around the hall were doing the same, stretching and chatting and moving from their seats. I did not sense the general atmosphere of mutinous disapprobation that would have been fitting. There was to be a short break followed by smaller sessions in other rooms on specific sub-topics. My own talk, to a session on contemporary discoveries in the physical sciences, is not until the day after tomorrow. The idea of spending the next few days trapped in this building listening to nonsense was insupportable.

The entrance to the main hall was to one side of the podium from which the ‘dual chairs’ had made their terrible speeches. As I made my way out of the room I found myself standing in front of the female sociologist. Under the circumstances, I felt it incumbent on me to say something about her talk. In a professional context, as a point of principle, I do not permit myself to dissemble my views. At the same time I am always scrupulously polite.

‘You are stupid,’ I said.

I left the conference building and stood in the square outside. Since the day was now mine, I decided to take the opportunity for a little sightseeing. I had brought a guidebook and there was a selection of places of interest within convenient walking distance of the hotel. The closest was a famous church and graveyard of both architectural and historical consequence. I took some refreshment at a café in a side street and wandered through the paved lanes towards my intended destination.

This is the medieval part of the town. The buildings were close

on either side; many of them had arcades for, according to the guidebook, the dual purpose of keeping off summer sun and winter rain. It would have made an excellent setting for a film. There were no perspectives or vistas, merely a constant sense of turning and altering one's orientation as one wove through the town. It came as a surprise when I turned a corner and found myself at the entrance to the graveyard. A decrepit stone arch, the equivalent of an English church's lychgate but taller and more forbidding, opened onto an oblong patch of crammed, stacked graves. They were so densely pressed together that they seemed to be squeezing against one another, as only living things can. Some of them protruded sideways and upwards at erratic angles, like a mouthful of unstraightened teeth.

An old woman in a shawl sat on a chair by the entrance to the graveyard. She held out a small woven basket, clearly demanding money. A sign advertised the cost of admission. I handed over the trivial sum and in return took a leaflet. I skimmed it as I crossed the graveyard and began looking around the church. Some of it I already knew. The church had strong historic associations with a monstrous feudal overlord of the town. The count had been a famous torturer, whose favourite practice was to exlinguate his victims (this being the leaflet's term for cutting out tongues, a neologism, I suspect), then partially dismember them, then bury them alive. In time the townspeople had risen up against him and he had been subjected to his own favourite treatment. He and a large number of his victims were buried in the graveyard outside. His activities supposedly continued after his death.

It goes without saying that I was sceptical. I am familiar with the scientific explanation of this and similar narratives. A rash of deaths – their real cause inevitably viral or bacteriological – affects a place. Explanations are sought, and found in the arenas of legend and superstition and dream. A panic begins. Since the living are victims, the perpetrators must be found among the dead. Exhumations take place. Some bodies are

found to have characteristics indicating postmortem existence – for instance, hair and fingernails that appear to have grown. In other cases the liquefaction of improperly preserved corpses leads to the creation of the substance known as ‘coffin liquor’. As a result, in some crypts, coffins appear to have moved or burst. Supernatural phenomena are credited as the cause. Fear and superstition triumph over science, and myths are born.

I did not find the church’s architecture to be distinctive. Or perhaps it is merely that the medieval world was so encrusted with superstition and fantasy that it holds little appeal for me in purely aesthetic terms. Once you have seen a single gargoyle, a single buttress, you have seen them all. The interior was murky and the windows small and high. It did not take me long to conclude I had done enough. The principal point of interest was a series of funerary inscriptions – or rather, the place where the inscriptions had once been. The words had been scratched out and all that remained was a series of blurred indentations in the stone. According to the leaflet, these monuments all belonged to the family of the notorious count: descendants of his victims had sought to erase all trace of his and his family’s existence.

I went back out into the graveyard. The sky had clouded over, and full dark was imminent. I went to the place where the count had been tortured, partially dismembered, had his tongue cut out and then been thrown into a pit. Lime had been thrown in after him and then stones piled on top, and then earth on the stones. For centuries the grave had gone unmarked, but many generations later the site was given a small plaque with nothing other than his name and dates. The story was graphically, too graphically, told on the leaflet, which interspersed genuine information with fantasy about the count’s supposed supernatural manifestations. Without the leaflet one would have known nothing of this. I could instead have been trapped in that Soviet-era conference hall,

being bored and irritated to the point of madness by otiose humanities-based pseudo-scholarship. I had chosen better. It was this thought which gave me my brilliant idea. I could choose not to be in the conference by not being there, but perhaps I could also choose not to be at the conference even while I was there. I could go into a form of internal exile. The medium for doing so was simple: the translator's earpiece. One was supposed to plug these into a small radio, not much larger than a box of matches, and listen to the approved feed of the conference. But there was nothing to stop one from plugging the earpiece into a different device, a smartphone, say, and, instead of listening to sociological flummery about canon formation and the structure of myth, hear something interesting and intelligent.

An excellent plan. I took out my mobile and opened the Audible app. A number of audiobooks were on offer at a special price. My mood called for something not-modern, something substantial; if the conference was to be the epic waste of time it promised to be, I would at least come back with some happy memory to show for it. *Winter. Dickens. Yes.* My finger hovered for a moment over *A Christmas Carol*, but although this would have been seasonally appropriate, I dislike the narrative apparatus of that particular tale. I have no interest whatsoever in the supernatural or the magical or any such claptrap. I despise myths and legends and their ilk. I believe that Richard Dawkins does not go nearly far enough when he says that astrologers should be prosecuted for fraud. Instead, priests and imams and monks and rabbis from every religion should be thrown into prison, unless and until they can prove the truth of their claims.

So no Christmas carolling for me. I settled instead on *Great Expectations*, a book I have not read for a number of decades. I began the download. At this point, an unwelcome intervention occurred. The old woman from the entrance had, without my noticing, come towards me while I was looking at my phone, and was now standing in front of me, bent-backed

and gasping with effort, waving the stick on which she had been leaning.

‘Rău!’ she said, shouting, pointing at my phone and then at the grave. ‘Rău, rău, rău!’

The implication was that she was objecting to my using my mobile at that particular site, where as it happened the data signal was helpfully strong. I decided to make light of the situation.

‘Nothing wrong with my data plan, madam!’ I said. ‘It’s covered under my UK allowance!’ Which in fact happened to be true. If it had been otherwise I would have waited until I was on wifi before downloading the book. One can run up very substantial data bills otherwise. But my levity did nothing to appease the hag.

‘Rău, rău!’ she kept shouting. And then, stretching for what little English she knew: ‘No! Very bad!’

I am always polite and reasonable, even when provoked.

‘You are a silly, silly woman,’ I said to her. ‘Go away.’ My words had no effect, but the download was soon complete, and I was able to leave the graveyard and the crone in my wake.

The future success of this misconceived trip was now secure.

I have returned to the hotel to write up this diary and may attend some of the conference this afternoon, now that I know I have the means of intellectual escape.

Wednesday

The day began with a small but nonetheless piquant disappointment. In the morning, rather than be sucked into any breakfast small talk, I decided to make a start on the Dickens.

As I have already said, the fact that this story has no supernatural component was one of my reasons for downloading it. It was therefore with consternation that, on starting the Audible app, I found my recollection to be inaccurate. Anyone who has read the passage where Pip encounters Magwitch in the graveyard for the first time will remember it, but there were aspects that I had not accurately

recalled. The passage concerned describes the moment when Magwitch leaves Pip:

At the same time, he hugged his shuddering body in both his arms, – clasping himself, as if to hold himself together, – and limped towards the low church wall. As I saw him go, picking his way among the nettles, and among the brambles that bound the green mounds, he looked in my young eyes as if he were eluding the hands of the dead people, stretching up cautiously out of their graves, to get a twist upon his ankle and pull him in.

When he came to the low church wall, he got over it, like a man whose legs were numbed and stiff, and then turned round to look for me. When I saw him turning, I set my face towards home, and made the best use of my legs. But presently I looked over my shoulder, and saw him going on again towards the river, still hugging himself in both arms, and picking his way with his sore feet among the great stones dropped into the marshes here and there, for stepping-places when the rains were heavy or the tide was in. To my horror, I saw that the graves behind him were indeed unquiet. A form which resembled half a person was dragging itself out of the ground. The figure crawled not in the direction of the departed man, but towards me. It saw me look at it and stretched out its arms and made a wordless noise, which carried to me on the salt breeze. I turned again and ran until my legs could carry me no further.

I had forgotten that the afternoon part of the conference today included a choice of excursions. This was more satisfactory than being subjected to the boredom and time-wasting of the main sessions, so I allowed myself to join a group going on a tour of the main art gallery. One of the art historians at the conference conducted the tour. He was an acceptable guide on questions of history and technique, less so when the discussion turned to more speculative matters.

The gallery is housed in the former castle, half of which is now given over to town offices. It is a picturesque building with

turrets. The quality of the pictures was surprisingly high. This country had a few well-known artists from the Renaissance and a number of modernist painters of international reputation, who collected one another's work and that of their contemporaries, and as a result the collection was bigger and better than I had expected. The tour took about two hours. We sat in a nearby café afterwards, a table of perhaps eight of us. One of the group, an art historian but not the one who had conducted the tour, asked me what I thought of it.

'Interesting,' I said, 'informative. I confess I did not know that our hosts had the cultural resources that they evidently do.'

And then, because candour is an intellectual duty, I went on:

'Of course, I cannot help regretting the essential waste of energy involved.'

My interlocutor seemed surprised and asked me to clarify my remark.

'I mean, the waste of energy involved in the choice of subject for the pictures. The waste involved in painting pictures of things that are not true.'

Unless I was imagining things, she had the air of thinking that this was funny.

'So the Dürer crucifixion, for instance, which our colleague was arguing for as the highlight of the collection – your main conclusion about that is not to do with the emotional power, the question of realism versus theatricality as we discussed it earlier, the tension between the physical agony and spiritual transcendence, even the contrast between the picture and the frame, the questions of material culture involved – none of those things, but just, it isn't true?' she said, smiling.

'Correct. I would be failing in intellectual honesty if I did not point out that some of the words you use have no meaning, but I accept the many aesthetic virtues of the work. My point is merely that it is a shame that Dürer lived in a time when he had no choice – and incidentally I accept that he had no such choice and that this is not an act of will or inattention on his part, it is a tragic consequence of living in a benighted age – he

had no choice except to squander his talent on myths and legends and fantasies and, to put it bluntly, other nonsense. If he had a subject of greater truth and consequence, his painting would have been better. Your next rhetorical device will be to ask me if I can supply an example of such a subject, so I will spare you the effort. He could have painted a great picture about the difference between mitosis and meiosis, or how photosynthesis works, or Boyle's law, which should be of interest to you, madam, since it applies to hot air. Now I give you good day.' And with that I left the café and went back to my room.

Against stupidity the gods themselves contend in vain. It made a dispiriting end to the day. I turned out my light and slept fitfully. The hotel was as noisy and unsettled as it had been on previous nights.

Thursday

Since my session at the conference is this afternoon, I felt it was in accordance with norms to attend the entire day of talks and discussions, despite the fact that most of the talks would be annoying and stupid and I would be certain not to learn anything. I would not say that I was glad I did but norms of behaviour are important and the apparatus of conferences and scholarship is a valid thing, even if many of the things said and done at them are not.

Besides, although I did not have great expectations, I had *Great Expectations*.

The morning was divided into two parts. I had a choice between panel sessions on a range of unappealing topics and in the end went into one at random. This was a mistake, since the session turned out to be called 'Ghosts, Werewolves, Quarks and Other Unknowables'. A physicist gave a short introduction to particle physics and then some literary scholars and anthropologists started in on their nonsense. I discreetly – norms! – unplugged my earpiece from the radio that was carrying the translation and plugged it instead into

my mobile phone. I started the Audible app and was soon back with Pip in his unfortunate childhood on the Kent marshes. I once or twice took the opportunity to check in on the translation feed.

‘... which is why the issue of liminality, as expressed in the mythopoesis of the supernatural, can be said to figure ...’

I had now got as far as the visit to Miss Havisham, one of my favourite passages in the book. Dickens’s knowledge of the processes of ageing and dementia was, obviously, not scientifically modern, but to a surprising extent he still had an evidentiary basis for some of his fictionalised account. Cf the narcoleptic fat boy in *The Pickwick Papers*. Obviously a fully modern knowledge of these areas of medical science would have made Dickens a more complete writer.

Pip had made his visit to Miss Havisham and was leaving her premises after being frightened by Estella’s cruel game with an effigy. It had woken superstitious feelings in him, which Dickens, if my memory served (it usually does), cleverly renders vivid without endorsing any nonsense of their supernatural origin.

Nothing less than the frosty light of the cheerful sky, the sight of people passing beyond the bars of the courtyard gate, and the reviving influence of the rest of the bread and meat and beer, would have brought me round. Even with those aids, I might not have come to myself as soon as I did, but that I saw Estella approaching with the keys, to let me out. She would have some fair reason for looking down upon me, I thought, if she saw me frightened; and she would have no fair reason. She gave me a triumphant glance in passing me, as if she rejoiced that my hands were so coarse and my boots were so thick, and she opened the gate, and stood holding it. I was passing out without looking at her, when she touched me with a taunting hand.

‘Why don’t you cry?’

‘Because I don’t want to.’

‘You do,’ said she. ‘You have been crying till you are half blind, and you are near crying again now.’

She laughed contemptuously, pushed me out, and locked the gate upon me. I went straight to Mr Pumblechook’s, and was immensely relieved to find him not at home. So, leaving word with the shopman on what day I was wanted at Miss Havisham’s again, I set off on the four-mile walk to our forge; pondering, as I went along, on all I had seen, and deeply revolving that I was a common labouring-boy; that my hands were coarse; that my boots were thick; that I had fallen into a despicable habit of calling knaves Jacks; that I was much more ignorant than I had considered myself last night, and generally that I was in a low-lived bad way.

I was halfway home, with my spirits thus troubled, before I began to sense a presence behind me. I was possessed with a growing feeling of unease. The woes I had experienced that day made me reluctant to embrace a new source of disturbance but I could not shake off a desire to turn and look. My weariness was forgotten in a sudden surge of anxious energy. I turned my head and for a moment thought that my impression of being followed was nothing but the work of my imagination, still troubled by the encounter at Miss Havisham’s. Then, with a growing feeling of horror, I realised that my initial apprehensions were not mistaken. There was indeed a figure following me, a shape I had not seen at first glance because I was looking for a man standing or walking. This was neither standing nor walking, nor, perhaps, was it a man. At a distance of perhaps a hundred yards a shape was slithering towards me along the ground. It was moving with the propulsion of its arms, assisted by convulsions of its torso. It was neither crawling nor walking because it appeared to have no legs. Its face was largely shapeless but its mouth was open and it appeared to be exhaling, or hissing, with all the force in its lungs.

I turned and ran.

This passage made a very disagreeable impression on me. The only possible explanation is that my recollection of *Great Expectations* is inaccurate, and yet that is unlikely, because my recollection is never inaccurate, and especially not on a question of such particular interest to me as the absence of supernatural paraphernalia from one of my favourite writer's best books – perhaps I should say, my former favourite writer. I passed an unsettled quarter of an hour turning the issue over in my mind. On reflection, the likeliest explanation, by far, is that somebody at the audiobook company Audible has been playing a joke, a joke in exceptionally poor taste. The prank is particularly bad because it is not inconceivable that someone unfamiliar with Dickens should encounter his work in this form in the first instance, and be left with an entirely misleading perception both of this specific work and more broadly of Dickens's attitudes to para- and supernatural phenomena, and superstition in general. I shall make a complaint.

I have abandoned this attempt to listen to this book, indeed I have gone further and have deleted it. Instead I have, while at the conference and making further use of my superb 4G data plan, downloaded a copy of Dawkins's *The God Delusion*. I feel in the mood for an encounter with some bracing plain-spoken self-evidently true atheism. I suppose I can be accused of a form of superstition, in that my wish to avoid reading something superstitious has led me superstitiously to crave something with no taint of superstition, however faint!

Amusing.

My session is this afternoon. I look forward to the opportunity to correct some idiocies.

Thursday (continued)

I had not intended to continue my journal today but the afternoon was so strange and so disconcerting I feel an obligation to record it. My session went as I expected, with the slight exception that although I clearly carried the day with the force of my arguments, one of the women arguing for a so-

called sociological account of science persisted in repeating versions of what she had said before I spoke (even though it was plain that I had refuted this line of thought – I am of course using ‘refuted’ in the strong and grammatically correct sense to mean ‘proved wrong’). One of the men persisted in talking about myth even though I had shown such an approach to be false. However, the idiotic, like the poor, are always with us, and it is not that which was the peculiar thing about the afternoon.

I refer instead to what transpired in the subsequent, final, session of the day. It was another piece of feeble ‘critique’ and accordingly I waited for the first platitudes to wash over me, then discreetly plugged in my faithful friend, selected Dawkins’s tract and awaited the familiar greeting: Audible – audio that speaks to you.

The God Delusion

by Richard Dawkins

Chapter One

However fast I ran, however far I ran, I could not escape the figure pursuing me. Its speed never increased, its mode of locomotion never altered from its terrible, maimed, partially limbless slither. I ran and ran, but it never fell behind me, and as night fell, and my strength began to fail, I turned and looked, and saw to my horror that the shape was now closer than it had ever been. It was close enough that instead of a gasp or hiss, I could now tell it was trying to speak, to utter a single word. It repeated the word several times before, with a sensation of ice spreading through my body, I realised what it was trying to say:

‘Listen ... listen ... ’

I ripped the headphones out of my ears, making a commotion which my immediate neighbours could not ignore. I couldn’t believe what I had been hearing. On inspection, the Audible app was clearly displaying my intended selection of book. The corrupted version of Dickens was nowhere to be seen. And yet, that was clearly what was playing in lieu of Dawkins. The only

difficulty with the forthcoming complaint I will be making to the audiobook manufacturer will be ensuring that it is sufficiently strongly worded.

Well, that's enough excitement for today. I am going to resort to desperate measures and plug the earphones into the conference translation feed for the rest of the afternoon.

Thursday (continued)

This has now gone beyond a joke, beyond a hoax, and is clearly some kind of manufactured attack on my equilibrium. I shall be protesting to the organisers in the strongest possible terms. No doubt some form of loathsome 'hack' is behind it.

Uncivilised, uncollegiate, unacceptable!

The following is what happened next. At the start of the afternoon session I inserted my earphones into the conference radio apparatus and settled down to listen to some – in the context – soothing nonsense about the equal importance of science and the humanities. I had skimmed a synopsis of the proposed conversation in the conference programme. The panel was supposed to be debating the absurd thesis that science merely gives us facts and data whereas it is the humanities that tell us how we should live, and therefore it is the humanities which should take intellectual precedence. The moderator was Eastern European (in fact was the conference co-chair with the hooped ear-rings) and the panel members were two Frenchmen and an American. The three Europeans were all talking simultaneously when I plugged in the earphones. There was a moment's pause, which I attributed to the translators' unenviable difficulty in managing the Babel of competing languages, and then I heard:

I reached my lodging with my lungs bursting and my heart racing, unable to draw a full breath or think a clear thought. I do not believe that any man could have outpaced me through those streets. I tried to take comfort from that thought even as my mind wrestled with the impossible horror it had seen and heard. I found that it was difficult even to speak my own

name. I am Pip Gargery, I said, or tried to say, but my mouth was so dry I could form no intelligent sentence.

And then I heard a noise, a noise I had never heard before and hope never to hear again. It was a noise of a body moving along the ground, propelling itself with audible effort. The lower part of the torso was wet and so the thing (I will not call it a man, though it seemed as though it had once been human), as it moved, made a slithering, sucking noise. It was a sound similar to a heavy man wearing waders and walking through thick mud. I felt an overwhelming sense of cold, not merely inside my veins, but as if all the air in the room was suddenly blowing with the coldest of north winds. The slithering, sucking, mucilaginous noise grew closer and louder and then as it came to the door there was a pause. The silence lasted for a few seconds. I hoped that the creature's strength had failed. Then I heard its crying hiss, louder than ever, through the wooden frame that stood between us.

‘ ... listen ... listen ... ’

The noise, terrible in itself, was followed by an abrupt crash. The thing had flung itself against the door, which shook and rattled and seemed set to give way.

‘ ... listen ... listen ... ’

I again took off the earphones, my heart rate dangerously elevated and my reason and sense of proportion momentarily flown. The people along from me in my row of seats looked across; I had clearly made a considerable disturbance. I did not care. I pulled the earphones out of the radio and dropped them on the floor and stood to make my way to the exit. The man on my right tried to stop me to point out that I had left the headphones behind me, but I pushed past him. My departure made a great deal of noise and I would under other circumstances have gone to great lengths to avoid making such a spectacle, but I had no choice except to get out of that room as soon as I physically could.

Now, writing these words in the complete privacy and partial comfort of my hotel room, it might be expected that I look

back on the events of today with recollected embarrassment. Instead I must admit that what I mainly feel, even at this distance, is unease, even fear. I cannot explain this sensation. I am dining alone in my room tonight and will not attend the final sessions of conference in the morning. The taxi leaves for the airport at 1 p.m. and I intend to be writing my next diary entry from my office at the university.

Friday

Sleep has not come. I lay down and turned out my light and tried to still my mind but the after-effects of my day's encounter with imaginary horrors have been persistent. I can understand having accidentally downloaded a corrupted version of *Great Expectations*, and I can understand how a bug in the Audible app might have overridden the subsequent purchase and download of a different ebook, and I can just about conceive that an ill-meaning hacker, one of the several people at this conference who dislike me and my ideas, might have tapped into the audio stream from the translators' studio, but I cannot conceive how all these things could have happened to me in sequence, even in the most well-resourced and co-ordinated of conspiracies. Brooding on these questions has made it very difficult to sleep.

And now, another persistent after-effect of the day, is that in the settling noises of the sleeping hotel, I seem to be hearing things. It is as if, among the noises of people bidding one another goodnight, trudging up the stairs and down corridors, closing doors and curtains and running taps and flushing toilets, there is another sound, quiet at first but growing louder. It is as if I can hear the movement of a body which is not running or walking or crawling but instead – there is no other word for it – sucking and slithering along the floor. It was a faint noise when I first put out the light but, in the intervals of quiet when the other hotel noises die down, it seems to grow louder. It appears to be coming closer. Now for the first time I can hear other noises beside the muddy traction of a body along the floor, a hiss, or a noise of escaping

air, which is, unless I am overinfluenced by what I was hearing earlier today, just possible to make out as a word:

‘ ... listen ... listen ... ’

I have double-locked the door and put the chair against it, with its weight against the handle. Nothing is getting in that way tonight. And yet the slithering is getting louder, and the cry of ‘listen’ is getting louder too, and all along I can’t help feeling that this is bad, this is very very bad, this is rău, rău!, there is nothing I can do to stop this, listen, listen, it is coming it is coming it is co

Notes by Dr Frances Scott

Director of Acute Inpatient Mental Health Services, Maudsley Hospital

The preceding document was found on the desk of a 58-year-old man, Professor Merritt Watkins, who is now a patient in my care. The professor had undergone a psychotic break while attending an academic conference in Romania. He began making a violent disturbance in the middle of the night and was admitted to hospital on an emergency basis, suffering from auditory and visual hallucinations. The hallucinations were acute and persistent. He was sedated and treated with antipsychotics and five days later was transferred back to London, where he is currently under my care as an inpatient at the Maudsley Hospital.

Professor Watkins has been my patient for three months. He responds to sedation but not to other forms of treatment and is docile for much of the time but is still prone to visual and auditory hallucinations. As sudden onset psychotic illnesses go, it is an unusually abrupt and fully developed case but not an unprecedented one. The prognosis is guarded to poor.

One symptom in this case is, to my knowledge, unique. The professor, however heavily sedated, cannot bear to be in the presence of any kind of paper with writing on it. This psychosis immediately had the most florid manifestations. His symptom is triggered by the merest fragment of script on a postcard, is worse with anything printed, and is unbearably

acute whenever he catches a glimpse of a book. The staff here have to go to great lengths to avoid this happening, because the distress it induces in the patient is both intense and long-lasting. It manifests itself in one particular symptom: he puts his fingers in his ears and starts shouting. He always yells the same set phrases escalating in volume until he has to be restrained and forcibly sedated. 'I can't hear you,' he shouts, as if to the book. 'I can't hear you, I can't hear you. You are inaudible.'

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