

NEURAL PATHWAYS

It is impossible to imagine being dead, because it is impossible to imagine not being able to imagine. Why did this thought keep going round and round in his head? At his age so many of the people he had loved were already dead, perhaps it was this that gave rise to such persistent intimations of his own mortality. As if those that had gone were now sitting like ghosts on his shoulders, whispering in his ears.

It wasn't that he was afraid of dying, in some ways he looked forward to it after a life that had, especially recently, been as turbulent as it had been fulfilling. But it was, nevertheless, an unknowable unknown and just not being able to know when he knew so much about so many other things seemed an affront to his intelligence and extraordinarily agitating to his brain cells.

Anyway, time to get off to tennis. It was a fine day and Reg would be waiting to get revenge after the thrashing he got on court last week. He gathered up his whites (which were not very white), his best and second-best tennis rackets and set off. The Wednesday tennis games with Reg had become the high point of his week, not just because he loved tennis to an almost fanatical degree, but because he exalted in being vigorous enough to still play singles matches with a man half his age and nearly always win.

The walk took him past the library which reminded him that his borrowed books were overdue. He'd given himself a challenging bunch of authors with his last selection and had taken longer than usual to read them all. Not George Eliot, she was an old favourite, and re-reading *Middlemarch* always gave him keen pleasure. It was the Hemmingway he had struggled with. Surprising, as he had much admired the chiselled writing and the unrelenting gaze of the narrator when he had first encountered *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in his early 20s. In fact, he had once hoped to be another Hemmingway himself and a critic reviewing his youthful collection of short stories had actually made the comparison. But trying to re-read *The Sun Also Rises* had proved horribly frustrating and all those ambitions for literary success were long gone.

Walking quite briskly, both because he was running late and as an instinctive response to feeling cross about his struggles with Hemingway, the question of not being able to imagine not being able to imagine jumped back into his brain to further torment him.

It was not a good game and losing in just three sets made him even crosser, his mounting anger fuelled by Reg who failed to contain his triumph at being victorious. Today was proving to be a truly irritating day. He walked home, ignoring the library and its associations, and arrived back at his front door really breathless and unexpectedly tired. About 2 hours later he called an ambulance.

When he came round, he was in a room on his own in a hospital bed. Gentle whirring and clicking underpinned by a continuous hum conveyed a reassuring sense of rhythm and movement. He was still alive. Without turning his head, he could see a number of different coloured tubes and wires linking his body to a whole raft of machines and drips as if he was the still small centre of a great mechanical brain.

It was impossible to get any sense of the passing of time, though things did change now and then. Nurses would come and go, checking screens, feeling his pulse and muttering words of encouragement. So time was passing.

Out of nowhere, snips of memory would surface and then disappear... lying anxiously in a cot waiting... then another quite unconnected... singing boisterously with his beloved daughter on a long family journey to stop her getting car sick... then another... getting first prize for English... then... digging for worms with his chattering grandsons... feeling crushed when his father told him off for failing Latin for the fifth time... the shining optimism of his young wife, defying all odds to escape from oppression only to succumb to severe mental illness... his inability to help her to be well... guilt at his decision to leave her... shame at the lies he had told to cover up his many subsequent unsavoury relationships... joy at reading Primo Levi in the original Italian... his long-haired greyhound killed on a motorway as a result of his carelessness... despair as he had slipped further into genteel poverty... the friends who had stood by him...the friends who hadn't...

The pauses between thoughts got longer and the thoughts themselves started blurring and becoming harder to hold on to.

The machines whirred, clicked and hummed. All quite reassuring but slowly beginning to fade into near silence. His last coherent thought was that he could no longer imagine being able to imagine ever having been alive... as he finally let go and slipped quietly into unconsciousness.