

All in the Mind

Imagine opening your eyes and your wife is standing next to your bed with a cup of tea in her hand asking how you feel this morning and you say something like, 'There's no coalmine along the line I'm fine. Blue before before before before ... yellow now but weebit howling dog. You alpha female must go to rodential place. Runfast with others.'

Your wife, who's used to this, puts her cool hand on your forehead and the coolness flows through your head and down through your body. You worry for a minute that your feet will turn to blocks of ice and you won't be able to get out of bed or walk to the shops or do any of the things you have to do. But you know it's just a figure of speech, no matter how cold you are it can never really happen.

'You're feeling better,' she says, smiling. 'Perhaps the new medication is starting to take effect. I've left the shopping list and today's itinerary on the kitchen table.'

You look at the alarm clock and see that it is nearly eight thirty.

'Aberdour, Aberlour, Invergour, don't be sour.'

Your wife laughs and places the cup of tea on the bedside table.

'I told you last night. I'm going to a conference at the business park today. It doesn't start till nine thirty.'

She checks herself in the dressing table mirror.

That is something you never do because you never know who'll be staring back. Strange people lurk on the other side of the glass. You can shave as long as you don't stare directly into the eyes. If you focus on your neck, chin, cheeks and upper lip, they're just parts of a face, a nobody's face.

Your wife's face is already made up but she frowns and plucks a tissue from the box and blots her lipstick, tossing the bloody kiss into the wicker wastebasket. You'll have to fish that out, wrap it in newspaper and parcel tape and put it in the outside bin, otherwise it might talk to you all day, saying nasty things your wife would never say.

When she walks out of the bedroom, you hear the clip clop of her high heels on the bare varnished floorboards. Don't start counting the steps, you tell yourself. It doesn't matter if it's an even number of steps or an odd number, or if it's divisible by three, four or seven, or even if it's a prime number it means nothing, it portends nothing.

Your wife reappears and leans over and offers you her cheek to kiss. Because of the lipstick she can't kiss you, she knows that. Even the faintest print on your cheek might taunt you the whole day.

When the front door clicks you get up and go through the whole house checking. Checking in all the cupboards, under the beds, behind the curtains. There can't be anybody lurking in these places but you feel better for making certain. You check every window and

there is nobody staring up from the street or from the windows opposite. You check from the kitchen window, scanning the branches of the two cherry trees and the giant sycamore to make sure that single magpie isn't bully-boying his way around the back garden. He always puts a blight on your day. You're glad he's not there, yet feel, this morning, you could have handled him.

You switch on the radio, something you haven't been able to do for the last three days. Not since Terry Wogan started rabbiting on about some character called Ivan Aversion who'd written in a great long list of all the things that piss him off in life. He did it in rhyming couplets and used lots of alliteration and clever puns. It sounded something like that recording you asked your wife to make of you in one of your more manic phases. You became convinced that Terry had somehow tapped into your mind and was broadcasting your thoughts to the whole country. You went back to bed but even with your head under the pillows you were convinced that his laser probe, or whatever he was using, could still reach your thoughts. It was then you had the brilliant idea to make the helmet out of kitchen foil and cover it with your woollen beanie. 'That'll foil him,' you kept telling yourself. 'Keep it all under your hat.'

At the time you're not aware of the humour, the wit. It's all deadly serious. At least that day you were able to get out and about without worrying that eight million people were listening to your thoughts.

Today is one of your better days. You go to the supermarket and nobody follows you up and down the aisles looking in your trolley to see what you've bought. The labels all behave themselves. Heinz and John West aren't plotting behind your back. There are three announcements on the address system asking members of staff to report to the customer enquiry desk or the office, and although you have a momentary flutter of panic you don't feel compelled to do these things. At the cash desk it's the girl with the birth mark on her neck that looks like a little laughing face. She knows you and your problem and has a knack of knowing whether you want to talk or not. You must look relaxed today because she chats away all the time she scans your shopping and doesn't look too puzzled at your replies.

In the kitchen, when you're unpacking the shopping, the phone rings. You force yourself to answer it, counting quickly to five and lifting the receiver before you have time to think about it. It's your wife phoning during a break at the conference to see if you're all right. In the background you can hear other voices and a group close to your wife all start laughing suddenly. It doesn't freak you out. 'All right, shining bright,' you tell her, 'Yellow mellow.' She laughs and tells you the conference is really boring, but the good news is it finishes at three thirty so she'll be home just after four.

This is a great day.

