

Within You Without You

By Caspar von Wrede

What I am about to write about I have been meaning to rid myself of for a very long time, almost forty years, to be exact. It relates to the events that occurred in No. 21, Sacks Street in the autumn of 1963. What I know about these events I have never shared with another soul, not even my late wife, and my knowledge of the affair has at times come catastrophically close to totally undermining my view of the world and my place in it. I intend to eventually destroy these writings but if you are reading them now then I suppose it means I never got the chance, for reasons that I do not want to contemplate.

My narrative begins when I was a young neurologist scribbling some notes in a dusty office at the Memorial Hospital, not far from here. It was before lunchtime, when the phone's shrill ringing broke my chain of thought. I picked up the receiver and my life would never be the same again. Dr. Mitchell, who used to be head of Clinical Neurology, said that he needed to see me urgently, not in his office, but rather in a local café.

"What we have to discuss relates to something which I do not want to be in any kind of professional context. Maybe you'll understand what I mean when I tell you".

Dr. Weir Mitchell was actually a professor, and despite the fact that he was thirty years my senior, a genuine and straightforward friendship existed between us. He had briefly fought as a young sergeant in the Great War until he had collected five German machine-gun bullets in his right leg during the first battle of Ypres. He had once told me that the only person he had killed during the whole war was a 17 year-old boy from his own platoon, who had been terribly injured by a shell burst, and had begged to be shot. I had thought that there was nothing in the world that would unsettle him until I heard the tone of his voice over the telephone on that September morning in 1963.

I immediately went to see him at his favourite table in the small café opposite the hospital and was slightly relieved that he appeared to look as composed as ever. He bade me sit down and we briefly avoided any serious issues by discussing various frivolities of mutual interest. But then the pretence began to grow strained and he reached down beside him and produced a thin file. He made no effort to give it to me but began to talk.

"Last week I received a patient by the name of Linda Pratt. Some months before she had been involved in a car accident of the most bizarre nature." He was taking his time, stirring a large coffee throughout the conversation. "It appears that she and her husband were driving along a lane in the hills when their car came off the road. Her husband was killed instantly by a branch that came through the windscreen and went straight through his chest, whilst she was almost totally uninjured except for the fact that she lost the index finger from her right hand." Weir looked up with a troubled expression and a smile that was trying to be born at the corner of his mouth, but failed. "We found Linda's finger in the mouth of her husband. It appears that he was *sucking her finger* at the time of the accident and when he was fatally injured he bit it off cleanly in his dying spasm. Yes, I know what you're thinking: that's probably why they crashed in the first place, but that's a problem for the police, not us."

Weir took a long gulp of his coffee and sighed deeply. "No, our problem is that she has a phantom..."

A “phantom”, in the sense that Weir used the term, denotes a persistent image or memory of part of the body for months or years after its loss. There are several different sorts of phantoms described – some strangely ghost-like and unreal, some compellingly real, some intensely painful, some photographically exact, some peculiarly distorted. They can be caused by central factors, such as damage to the sensory cortex, or peripheral ones such as disturbances in the nerve-stump or the spinal nerve-roots. Weir had a semi-professional interest in phantoms and I knew that he had many patients with the phenomenon. I too had some experience with them especially as I had some amputees under my care, and phantom limbs are essential if an artificial limb is to be used. One patient of mine describes how he must wake up his phantom in the morning: first he flexes the stump towards him, and then slaps it sharply “like a baby’s bottom” several times. On the sixth or seventh slap his phantom shoots forth, rekindled, and only then can he put on his prosthetic leg.

“More specifically, the problem is that her phantom is unlike anything I’ve ever seen before. She claims...” Again he was not meeting my eyes and seemed to be very uncomfortable about what he had to say. “She claims that she feels complex sensations, not simply pathological proprioception—”

I interrupted him for the first time. “What do you mean by complex sensations?”

He looked at me, “she says that despite the three months that have passed since the car crash, she can...*she can still feel her husband sucking on her finger.*”

“Don’t tell me you believe that, Weir,” I said, but his expression had already given me the answer.

“It’s true. We’ve done the scans and all the right areas of her parietal lobes are showing constant activity. This is not some kind of traumatic psychosis, believe me, I’ve tried to come up with every possible explanation. And there’s nothing in the literature whatsoever...”

“Well congratulations. It seems you have got yourself a very unique patient, and can describe an entirely new form of body-image neuropathology.” I think I sounded almost relieved, but my speech faded when something new came across Weir’s lined face, something that resembled almost anger.

“For God’s sake, do you think I’ve dragged you out here just to tell you about some interesting new form of neuropathy? No, it’s something else, now listen.” It was one of the few times during the time that we knew each other that he exerted his undoubted personal authority over me. Again he was staring into his coffee and seemed to be having trouble finding the right things to say.

“It seems that these sensations that Linda feels in her missing finger are very specific indeed. She claims that she feels her husband’s tongue actually tapping against the tip of her finger, in some unelucidated pattern. She says that the tapping is quite quick – about two taps a second – with different lengths of pauses in between. During our last appointment I tried to describe the exact nature of these phantom taps, and asked her to call out the taps as they occurred, so that I could note them down. However, they came too quickly so I got her to jot them down on a sheet of paper. She said that the pauses seemed to be either long or short so she drew a small circle to represent a short pause and a larger one for a longer pause, and drew a consecutive line of circles across the page. This continued for around a minute until I asked her to stop and we both examined what she had drawn. We could find no discernible pattern, and I remarked light-heartedly that it must be some kind of code...”

He stopped again for a long pull from the coffee cup, and then he continued, more slowly. "I...I...as soon as I had uttered those words... it seemed to initiate some kind of epiphany in her. She stared at me in total shock and then rushed out of the room before I could intervene. I was only trying to lift her spirits, but I do not understand how I could have come up with something so insensitive, so unwholesome...it's criminal."

I wanted to say something but I could find nothing.

"There's something that makes this affair a thousand times worse. It transpires that her husband used to be in the merchant navy, he was a communications officer, which means he must have been very—" he coughed and he finished the sentence in a barely audible whisper, "...which means he must have been very proficient at Morse code." I suddenly noticed that my throat was very dry, but when I spoke I thankfully still sounded calm.

"Weir, this is absolutely absurd. This woman needs psychiatric help as soon as possible. Has she contacted you again?"

My companion looked at me blankly for an uncomfortable length of time and then spoke with a mechanical voice. "Linda Pratt has not been seen for over a week. She has missed two appointments and she will not answer her phone. You are the first person to know about this and I'm terribly sorry to get you involved, but I...I...really had no options left."

"What...what do you want me to do?" Now it was my turn to sound mechanical.

"I want you to go to her house and find out what's wrong. I would go myself but..." he gestured pathetically at his crippled leg "...and at my age I really need to keep my wits about me, and not occupy myself with—" he stopped.

"What about the sheet of paper that she originally wrote on. Did she leave it in your office? Maybe we could..."

Weir shook his head. She had taken it with her. We talked a bit more and gradually my unease subsided a touch. I decided to go and find Linda Pratt that very moment so that the whole ridiculous affair would be finished as soon as possible. Weir was of the same opinion and seemed almost enthusiastic. He gave me the unfortunate woman's address and I set off towards Sacks Street, which was around a mile from the café.

If you want to know exactly what happened and what I saw when I reached my destination, then the police reports and the newspaper articles of the time cover everything in excessive detail. You will probably still remember some of the facts yourself if you were around at the time. Linda Pratt's living room had been almost totally demolished in some terrifying destructive frenzy and the only sign of her was a vast quantity of blood, sprayed wildly around the room (around six pints, according to the coroner's report, close to the maximum that a woman such as Linda would have contained). There was no sign of violent entry or even the slightest thing amiss in any of the small flat's other rooms, which remained grotesquely untouched and innocent of what had occurred in the living room. Neighbours had nothing untoward to report.

Of course Weir and I were questioned at great length, and there were one or too uncomfortable things to explain, such as why Weir had not reported the fact that she was "missing" earlier, and why he had finally gotten me to investigate and not the authorities. Eventually however, the tedious judicial mechanisms were satisfied that we were innocent and we were left in peace. Naturally we did not mention the unusual nature of Mrs. Pratt's phantom finger, and Weir kept quiet about what had occurred during their last appointment.

Another thing that we never alluded to was the sheet of paper that I found on Linda's living room floor. It was the same sheet that she had taken from Weir's office and was totally

covered with the mysterious code. Underneath, she had written an English “translation” using a book on Morse code that was also found in the room (yet another piece of evidence that complicated the mystery for the police). I assumed – even though all my scientific experience rebelled against it – that whatever was written on that blood spattered sheet had somehow caused Linda’s death. I folded it up and put it into my pocket taking great care not to read a single word (a very shrewd decision, as Weir remarked). Later, after I had informed the police and left the horrific scenes at Linda’s flat, I wrapped the sheet around a pebble and threw it off a bridge to make sure that Weir’s mind was firmly at rest.

He and I swore each other to secrecy, which was unnecessary, but we did it just the same. As a scientist, I knew the whole episode would remain in my mind, impossible to ignore, but its consequences and implications stubbornly and deliberately unexamined, as I’m sure was the case for him too. The subject was never mentioned again, as if it had never even happened, and I’m glad to say that we remained close friends until he passed away exactly 20 years later.

Now another 20 years have passed and I myself have grown old. However, there is one chapter in this matter that still remains to be written. Everything that I have recounted so far is the course of events as Weir thought they occurred, bar a single falsehood. It concerns the sheet of paper with the apparent code scrawled onto it by Linda’s shaking, three-fingered hand.

I understood straight away when I picked up that sheet of paper amid that terrible scene forty years ago, that even though I must not be allowed to read it, an insidious curiosity was born in me that would grow with every day that passed. How could I destroy something that might just prove to be a communication from a realm from which no one has ever returned, a message that should never have reached this world? What I threw off that bridge was a sheet of ordinary paper whilst the original I placed in a safety deposit box. I filed the number off the key and kept it in a very safe place, untouched and unseen over all those years.

Now I have decided that the time has come to read it. Yesterday I went to the bank and retrieved an innocuous manila envelope, which I clutched with a delicious fear tingling my senses. I have not opened it yet but I imagine that what it contains will be yellow and brittle and that the bloodstains will have turned black.

Finally, forty disturbed years of burning curiosity are about to come to an end. All I have to do is to put down this pen.

Do you have any thoughts on this whatsoever? If so then please e-mail me: caspar.wrede@ic.ac.uk. Go on.