

## PERCHANCE TO DREAM

There was a slight zinging noise and the overhead display displayed: *Norman Normanson to Dr Kroll's room.*

‘And the problem seems to be . . .?’ Kroll was having a bad day at the surgery.

‘To sleep, or not to sleep. That is the problem.’

Dr Kroll was unimpressed, he knew his Shakespeare did Dr Kroll and Norman Normanson’s protestations of insomnia, hyperactivity and hypertension fell on deaf ears. He’d heard it all before, how Norman’s sleep problems dated back to his Cub Scout days. How he had tried hard to sleep over the deafening snoring of all the other boys in the bell tent. How Akela had proposed his theory of snoring: the reason for making such a frightful din was a sub-conscious defence reflex, a warning sound that would send wolf and bear away from the mouth of your cave.

Norman didn’t snore. He’d stayed awake all night once just to be certain; and that was the beginning. Akela told him how much better the bell tent was compared with the ridge tent where every cub topped and tailed across the groundsheet, each boy sleeping with his head beside the feet of the next. Akela told him also of the ferocious climb of Box Hill the following day and how he needed as much rest as possible for his forthcoming ordeal. Oh, it had been terrible, too terrible to relate . . . now forty years on he was a confirmed insomniac. A CONFIRMED INSOMNIAC. If you could be awarded a PhD in INSOMNIA he’d have one, perhaps even two.

‘One of these as and when necessary,’ Kroll handed Norman a prescription, and peered over his bifocals, ‘mind you take only one, they’re lethal, <sup>1</sup> but you could try some *curl-up-with-me* books which induce the soporific state. I’d recommend among others, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* by Thomas de Quincy. I always start patients with that. If that fails Edmund Burke is a stunner. You can’t beat an Irish philosopher. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Sound OK?’

‘If you mean does it sound boring, well, yes; but I’m not really a reader.’

‘John Stuart Mill. Ever read him? Some of my patients swear by *A System of Ratiocinative and Inductive Logic*.’

Norman turned a greyish colour at the thought.

‘Then there’s *De Consolatione Philosophiae* by Boethius. Scholarly stuff. Best tackled in the original. Dredge up the old schoolboy Latin, what!’

**It was 1.00 am.** There they were, in their tin-foil, in the packet, on the table, in the kitchen. *Megabomb Tablets*, <sup>2</sup> guaranteed to induce the soporific state. All Norman needed now was a glass of water and courage – bucket loads of courage. He undid the packet, but his mouth went dry, so he took a gulp of water.

‘*Funny taste,*’ he thought until he saw his false teeth smiling from the depths. He rushed to the fridge for some ginger beer, the non-alcoholic variety. And then after guzzling the lot he discovered it was 6.5% ABV. Life was getting difficult - and fuzzy.

**It was 2.00 am.** Norman had tried reading one of two of his course books on the bedside table. In the daytime grappling with Fraleigh’s *A First Course in Abstract Algebra* caused his eye lids to droop as he quickly became over-burdened with Sylow Theorems and Ring Structure. At bedtime the text became a patient friend guiding him through the nature of algebraic structures. Inspired, he turned to Stillwell’s *Roads to Infinity: The Mathematics of Truth and Proof* and was soon deep in contemplation about the point of infinity and the role of mathematics in the collection of universes where it exists. Whereas after lunch, at his

desk, he had failed to understand the concept of parallel lines meeting at infinity and decided it really depended on your glasses – and what *was* the point? By tea-time he jerked awake dreaming of mathematicians just going the wrong way because all the lines are travelling towards us.

**It was 3.00 am.** *Eat cheese. Perchance to dream* he mused wishing it would evoke vivid dreams of playing Hamlet in front of an adoring audience. Unfortunately it provoked lurid scenes of ribald rhyme. He blamed an omelette of Cheshire cheese on being woken in a fright by a

*Grinning orange cat with a swishing tail  
Who thought that his name was Wensley Dale.*

The pizza topped with Red Leicester conjured

*Jenny Lester with flame red hair;  
Dyed of course but he didn't care.*

A modest sandwich of Edam produced far from modest images of

*Isabel smirking with her raunchy hips;  
False teeth lurking behind magenta lips.*

Nibbling on a seemingly innocuous triangle of Dairy Lea induced

*Passed out on the bedspread bright  
Lay Janet young, but not too bright.*

But he had learnt to go carefully with the Caerphilly.

**It was 4.00 am.** There was no hope of going to sleep now. He would have to go the full 24 without a break. He agreed with John Cleese who had said he was *Fine with despair but hope he couldn't take*. He wished he could be like that annoying character in *Clockwise* - always punctual – got to sleep by 11. After all, Norman prided himself on being a mature student of mathematics and living in a world of numbers, structure and logic on interactive white boards.

What was the abstract algebraic formula for sleep? Punch the pillow 11 times to induce sleep at 11 pm? Stare at the clock which ticked backwards? Eat biscuits until the tin is empty?

Was a *Megabomb* the missing part of the equation? How much water and how much courage were needed? It was easy to measure a bucket load of water but what about bucket loads of courage?

**It was 5.00 am.** He succumbed to his mood and opened a packet of Cream Crackers and unwrapped some Stilton.

*Where is Stilton*, he thought, *I know where Cheshire, Wensleydale and Leicester are and Edam's somewhere in Holland and I think Dairy Lea is in Essex or is it Hertfordshire, but, of course, Caerphilly is in Wales. But where is Stilton?*

Such questions combined with advanced abstract algebra can do nothing for your sleep patterns.

*My life is of a sporadic nature  
Sleep is always coming later.*

He thought about a Thai curry. The last time he had one for his supper he dreamt he broke the vacuum cleaner trying to Hoover up a cockroach, or was it a courgette – and it wasn't even his carpet. The dream was more of a nightmare but at least sleep had come first.

**At 6.00 am** he tuned into an innocuous music programme and prepared a full English breakfast. As the smell of bacon filled his nostrils he cracked two eggs. He put the completed meal on the table, sat down in a comfortable chair and leaned back with a contented sigh.

The music was interrupted by the shipping forecast ... *warnings of gales in Rockall, Malin, Bailey ... Faroes, Fair Isle ... Tyne, Dogger, Northeast 3 or 4 ....*

'Germans bite,' he murmured.

Unable to resist its undulating rhythm Norman allowed himself to be lulled into a dreamless sleep.

Q.E.D

<sup>1</sup> Kroll not being a native English speaker uses the word *lethal* in its original sense, derived from the Latin *Lethe*, the Underworld water of forgetfulness.

<sup>2</sup> These tablets are manufactured by K G Pharmaceuticals GMBH of Linz, Austria, Sigmund Kroll's home town. The pharmaceutical giant's proud advertising slogan is: *Take an Omega Megabomb and it's the Last Thing you'll Ever Do.*

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