

Mind Runner

By Adair Broughton

He could not understand the guilt that slithered in his mind like a snake too sick to bite. The poison of his thoughts was hidden from other people, the venom free from his tongue. Yet, his mind danced with writhing demons imbibed by the hatred in his veins. His soul reached out to freedom, to find somewhere he could be himself, to be someone unique and not just a poor reflection of a life he could never have. No words gave away what he really wanted to say, how he really felt. They expected too much. They took him for granted.

He made no one aware of this. His silence was the armour of stoicism but no arrow of help could pierce that shield of pride. Sacrifice was far away, no sign of it on his horizon. There was to be no solitude at the place where the earth met sky.

It wasn't just his brother who was paralysed. It felt his life had been too, placed on hold for its entirety, sacrificed to someone who would never be aware of the cost of that commitment. To walk away had meant more than a few broken steps. There was a hidden cost to freedom, an invisible rope attached like a noose around the neck, binding sanity to regret, always pulling thoughts home. Home is where the heart is, but what if there was no heart?

It was a slow death, suffocation by intent born through the lack of love. Or was it too much love? Was his escape just breaking free of emotion, the best way to prove he could not feel, to prove he was not weak? Ambiguity strangled life into difficult decisions that people should not be forced to take. Force was a means to power. Power was intimidating, both scary and beautiful, a dichotomy of daunting duality.

Sweat dripped off him, as he struggled with heat and weakness to remove the wet shirt clinging to his back like an angel of death about to claw retribution into his day. There was no respite of cloud, no extra hour lurching toward late afternoon that seemed to lessen the oppressive heat. His eyes hurt, looking out at that burning sun and the stifling day that put everyone on edge, none more so than him. This weather was hell's playground. The lizards basked in the sun; the energy of photon absorbed by osmosis through impossibly dry and thick skin which itself was the colour of sand and dust. People tried to hide from the same burning rays but air conditioning seemed small relief, a shower equally otiose. He had to try something.

There was no breath in the air, he felt drained. The air was dead. Like he had felt at night sharing the room with his brother, lying awake, staring at the ceiling just so he had some time to himself. School was not freedom but concentration was escape. His grades did not lack where his concern had.

Cool water running down his back would freshen his mind, give him renewed vigour all too frequently lacking. He stripped and stared at the mirror.

Behind those grey eyes was a piercing blue recognition as vivid as the summer sky outside. He looked at himself with a different perspective; false, fragile, disjointed and deteriorated. These were the words that painted his portrait, the landscape of his character, the etchings ingrained on his serious face. It was as if the sun's rays causing the haze on the ground matched it in the mirror. His form was not solid, the liquid heat matching his melting mind. Realisation was closing in and for the first time he was truly afraid.

Something didn't add up and this confused him.

His muscles were built from the frustration and anger of being alone and far away from his home. He had found comfort in the pain of exercise. It was liberty from the textbooks. His outer strength gave him some inner tranquillity, hidden like the still waters of myth that always ran deep. There was no energy now to tense sinew and define his masculinity. He still felt subdued, lacking any resolution of spirit. Thoughts were a heavier burden than any weight. Once thoughts had been placed down on the mind, they were oppressive, hard to lift off, like thick mud on shoe.

He looked through himself, back to the days when he had done his duty, had spent a childhood caring for his brother. He remembered his brother always lying there immune to life, consistent, giving nothing back. A permanent smile, a mind state of false happiness that did nothing to induce calm in him then, like he knew it couldn't now. Why did he feel like this about his own brother?

His love was artificial, his hatred constrained. The bull was straining at the gate, ripping its flesh on the barbs of twisted metal. Fenced in, his only option had been to walk out the gate, left open by everyone else's presumption that he would always stay in that field of someone else's need. He had his own opportunities to plough. Secret applications in far off places proved that. That journey had been difficult, choking him with each field passed until the accumulation of greenery arrived at a destination. He had done it; he had the long and wished for freedom.

None of those internal wounds had healed. The tears of colourless blood were as barren and selective as the years that had subsequently passed. They had never found him. Had they even tried? So many times he had wanted to return but not because of his brother, not because of that endless smile. It haunted him, as if his brother knew something nobody else did. It was smug. It controlled him even now, appearing in dream as much as daylight, in the reflections of car windows or advertising boards.

Throughout all this time he had not expected it to come to this. Even chance had some discretion. Or so he thought.

People think choice is freedom but choices stay, they stick to memory like parasites of possibility, chewing on the flesh of what might have been and eating into the bone to make things harder to move or change, to numb the life the decisions were supposed to

free. That structure of self should have been immune once the action was made but decisions stay with doubt, to haunt and tease.

If it had been one person he might have been surprised. The fact that it was two was more than chance. Something was wrong, something he couldn't escape from. His thoughts tortured him as much as the heat.

His eyes looked back, the reflection neither enemy or friend, those same eyes that had so often stared down at his helpless and prostrate brother and wanted desperately to put his hand over that unchanging smile, absorb the life, watch it ebb away. Whose suffering would it stop? He hadn't done it so he did the next best thing and walk away. His brother wouldn't miss him. Was that the tragedy or the consolation?

How could he say what life or thoughts or emotion and feeling was contained in the minds of those who could not communicate in the same way as him. Cognition was not a requirement of life. Could he entertain the notion that his brother was having some notion of life, in his own terms, his own way, beyond comparison or understanding of a doctor or a family member? Was that smiling more than just a quirk of the paralyses?

He could remember stroking the hair from his brother's eyes when it had become too long. It was the only time he had shown affection when no one else was there. It had made him feel strange, shocked him. He had stood back and left the room. The hair was never kept long again.

To even contemplate those thoughts sickened him now, made his mind congenial into jelly of distaste and self-loathing. What kind of man was he? He was the kind of man who had forged himself a medical career by working impossibly hard then leaving it because the only person he couldn't treat was the one he wanted too. If he had not cared for his brother why did he care for all these other people? Everything he did felt a sublime lie. People were too easily convinced that his silence meant commitment, his seriousness meant he felt too much passion and was forcing himself not to feel.

Changing his name had not felt like a fresh start. It had only cemented the feeling of betrayal. Blood was thicker than water. It was also thicker than the ink in his pen as he signed his new name for the first time.

He had joined the police. Doctor detective was his moniker. He would have laughed if he felt he needed the friendship. He was lucky he could work alone; solving cases of medical anomalies, instances of concern from families fearing every other Doctor was death in a white coat. The cases had gotten stranger as his success at sourcing mystery became better known.

One thing he didn't believe in was miracle. This was primarily why they employed him, for cynicism. There was reason for everything and he knew it. He was resigned to the blind faith people could show in unseen gods. The hope people placed in things saddened him. As if tomorrow could ever be a better and brighter future. People too readily

believed; in their gods, in love, in trust and other people. The only difference was in how well that reason was hidden. He was adept at finding out truth, finding logical interpretation for what were seemingly impossible and often eerie happenings.

It was almost too easy for him. He knew what people were capable of, what hidden thoughts were harboured in the minds of most relatives. It wasn't the Doctors people should fear but their own kin.

This was his life and some small part of him was secretly happy with the success of being Doctor Diogenes of Sinope who could solve each case. It was cold comfort but it gave him reason to continue. He could help those without life if he couldn't bring himself to help those with life.

This time it would be different. For once he could not comprehend how it was possible. Every hidden nightmare had come true. Things were drawing him closer. The man who believed everything could be explained was being intimidated by the invisible.

He had recognised the first body straight away, memories flooding back, a cascade of imagery he wished he did not have. His shock at the body had surprised him, causing dryness to the throat never before experienced, a tightening of the stomach muscles a precursor to being sick. Yet he wasn't sick, just nauseous from the memories that filled his mind.

He recalled the starch white sheets, of the two boys and the girl all wheeled into the same room, each with the same problem. Did they really believe that some unique bonding could occur between these three mute unobservant people? It was shameless. How could they share experience, even recognise each other. It was a funny human instinct to group people together, to find order in community. Who felt better for placing the beds in a tidy row? Comfort was not a makeshift friendship that had no words.

They had let them lie there for afternoons at a time, afternoons when he could walk the grounds of the hospital preferring the company of air to the contaminated chat of hope from the parents of the other two people.

What connection had he missed? Why did he feel something more had occurred on those afternoons? Was it an experiment? Had some latent drug cause a reaction to spur tissue and nerve endings that gave them the ability to run?

He could not accept there was any cognisance as tests had disproved that. There was no voice to have given him clues and no movement to justify the fact that the two bodies had been found miles away from their beds. An impossibility considering how wasted the muscles should have been. People had to learn to walk again after weeks, let alone lifetimes.

If only it was cooler, he would go for a run too, free his mind. There was too much heat and too little energy.

He had not managed to solve that first case but it had only been three days until he received another call. Another body. This time it was the girl. This time his shock was tantamount to incredulity. Something irked and impossibility vexed him. There was a sick twist of logic he had missed, a piece of evidence to tie everything into the knot that could sometimes be common sense.

The girl lay naked, her nightdress dumped by the entrance to the care unit. Nobody had seen her leave; no other fingerprints were on that dress. Post mortem revealed intense trauma to the body and bursting lungs unfit for exercise. The strain on the heart had been too much. There was no trace of drugs. The only conclusion to make was that both these people had decided to wake in the night and run until they died. How did that make sense? Why three days apart?

The spine was studied but evidence was inconclusive. Comparison of x-rays showed subtle changes to the spinal column, insignificant in terms of movement. These two people should not have been able to run. Nobody could force them to run. It was too strange but he had to believe in a reasoned answer.

Why was his brother doing this, still interfering in his life after all these years? It couldn't be his brother. It would destroy so many of his beliefs to have somebody act like that, to influence life outside the realms of the possible.

It had been two days. His family had not moved but he had travelled some distance from the other bodies that had moved with their families' years before. The distance was a greater mystery. Who could know that these three people had shared a room over seven years ago?

The heat was not clearing his head, the location he had returned to intimidating him even more. He was too close; he could feel it, like he was being watched.

It would be impossible to explain this to his superiors. It was personal but he had a professional duty to tell someone. His silence could get him in trouble. Yet he wanted to understand this no matter how much he felt it was all too strange, like a bad dream that makes reality a much-maligned safer haven

Would he now have to look after his brother again? Was that a cruel irony, a simple twist of fate? It felt sinister, like he was being toyed with. His mind was in freefall. It was too light, too confusing. He should have called someone else in to solve this. He should have escaped like he always did.

Why did he feel like he had been running too long? Why wasn't he strong enough to face up to his handicapped brother? He felt bitter that his brother could have so much power.

The fear befriended intrigue. He wanted to feel bad. Those seven years had not cured him or relieved him of any guilt. The distance had not lessened what he saw as an error, a

mistake so selfish it cut through bonds of kinship to destroy them forever. Had it all been worth it?

There was a message he had not received, a reason why he had escaped, had even seen it as an escape. The rope had pulled him back, without him realising it, dragging him before it dawned on him that he had already taken this too far. Just one step nearer was the weak link in the chain.

Two people had died. Two people had learnt to run. A miracle was not meant to murder. What was bothering him? He knew he couldn't solve this. There must be a way.

He was looking too deep for answers. He could see into people. He could read people. He knew people's thoughts, was intimate with their guilt as much as he was his own. This was something to do with his brother. If it wasn't, his brother was dead. Maybe he could strap him down, force him to stay still. He would make sure there was a camera. Maybe he could guard his bed.

Some part of him wanted to be the protector, do something more than the years of palliative administering of care that had done so little.

He felt a fraud more than he ever had. He had helped for so many years, all without comment or complaint. Did it mean any less to help someone if what was behind it was contaminated? Was the action the most important thing or the thoughts behind those actions? A good deed could be done that wasn't implicitly good but who defined what constituted good?

Even now he felt a justification for being afraid of his brother. He had never been able to see past the smile, to look into the eyes and read the soul like he could other people. His brother was not the sole reason for his solitary style; it was that people scared him. What they did was always different from what they thought. He saw that in everyone.

He could read everyone except them, the soft silent bodies that had shared nothingness and used time. He knew they had minds, that they had something he would never have. They saw more than him, knew more than him because they were so separate and different.

All along he felt his brother could see through him. That was the fear and in essence that was the escape.

No interview had shown guilt. There was no suspect. He could not write his thoughts down on his reports. He could not say his brother had murdered those people, that would be the end of his report. He was awakening, feeling stronger for it. The reason did not have to be logical. An open mind was his greatest asset. He could not state why he was located where he was. He needed to be precise to remain cynical, ask the pertinent and searching questions. Right now the heat was betraying him even after the cool shower.

He closed the curtain, looked up at the remorseless but inefficient fan and lay down on the bed. The hotel bed absorbed his weight but only with reluctant creaking that matched the tiredness in his aura. Sleep would help. Sleep might make him forget, even for a short time. He could face the questions later.

He woke from weird dream to a dusk of death. That was what he expected. He knew what he had to do. It was time to confront his brother. Head on. There needed to be an equal playing field.

If he didn't believe in chance it was time for faith in it. The first time in his life he had faith, the first time he had real strength. He would walk out the hotel room and walk into the road. There would be no escape. He needed the truth as much as he needed to save any others that might be seduced by the mind runner.

Some things should never be believed, some fears should.

He heard a car horn, a flash of light, a screech of breaks and then silence. The same silence his brother-faced daily. They had found the note in his pocket, the reasons for walking out in that road. They believed he had lost his mind. Funny how the same people who needed him not to believe would now be cynical of him.

They felt sorry for him. At least he had never felt that for his brother, just contempt.

Had it been a sacrifice? He was in a room next to his brother, like old times. He couldn't cry but he felt calm, as if he had done the right thing. Then the voices had come whispering how they could make him run, allow him to feel the breeze on his face as he took long strides into the future. He fought them, knew that his answer was found. He could understand why the others had been tempted, had given in.

He must have won that battle and somehow they had not tempted his brother, the brother with the smile he could only now feel comfortable with and understand. The swirling images in his mind promised so much, gave warmth to life. There were visions of a future, of many pasts. Maybe it was the drugs, he did feel a huge difference in his soul, a deeper understanding. He knew things now but of course he couldn't say.

As the nurse came in to roll him over, they looked down on him, eyes of sadness, but he didn't know why. All he could do was smile.