



THE MNEMONIC PLAGUE

The Plague came to Edinburgh. Ironically, no one could later remember how it arrived, or which day it arrived, or who was the first affected. Perhaps the spores had been wafting through the bus-choked streets and spinning round the windy high-rises for days or weeks. Perhaps even for months. And no one had noticed.

The first symptoms commonly presented themselves in a need in the victim to turn to a companion and say the three words: “Do you remember...?” Three words which soon become words to be dreaded. The afflicted person would then embark on an unstoppable flow of recalled memories – from last night, last week, from their distant childhood. Schooldays. Lovers. Dreams. Falling from heights, pavement prat-falls. Summer-holidays. Summer romances. Betraying friends and submitting to bullies. Nightmares. Illicit drinking and things that should never have been said. As these unfortunates recounted tales both likely and unlikely, invigorating and embarrassing, more and more memories would burst out from the recesses of their brains. One tale would be interrupted by a dozen others, each vying for control of the babbling tongue, each pressed hard by yet more memories stacking up behind. It was if a dam had burst under the onslaught of a thousand Spring melts; or a sewer long-blocked had at last cracked apart. The older the victim, the longer and more anarchic the release of memory. In the worst cases, the assault went on for days on end, each new memory prefaced by “And do you remember...?”, regardless of whether there was anyone present to listen or to pay attention. It became common practice, despicably impolite though it was, for the unwilling listener to sneak away at the earliest opportunity. The victim rarely noticed, so inward-turned were their eyes, so self-sufficient their ears, so redundant their mouths: it might as well have been with themselves alone that they begged to share the memories.

Small children, barely able to walk or speak, could be found staring into the distance, transfixed by such memories as no small child should be suffered to remember. Many of them cried with shame, or ran away and covered their eyes so that no one should see them. Older children were suddenly assailed by things best forgotten; worse still, by pangs of conscience which emerged with the memories. No one had thought to tell them that memories were double-edged.

After several days, it became clear that something was amiss. Even in a city that hosted a Festival of an Art every second week, where relentless chatter and serious-minded banter lived cheek by jowl, the quantity and quality of mnemotechnics was something to stop and consider. Carefully. But in many cases, those who stopped to consider were themselves struck down, even as they walked the sticky, wind-ravaged streets of the town.

The Council was obliged to meet in emergency session; they debated the issue; then one of their number started reminiscing; then two and three others joined in. It was the longest Plenary Session of the Council by far. No one could remember a meeting which had lasted even half as long. Minute-takers collapsed in relays. One by one, however, the talkers sank to the floor, exhausted, dehydrated, begging to be left behind by the onward march of memory. Those few who remained uninfected slipped away as early as they could, spurning the chance to go down in civic history as participants in the record-breaking session. The one good thing which came out of these endless hours of debate was the baptism of the affliction as ‘*The Mnemonic Plague*’ - this neat play on words was uttered by a Norwegian tourist who, having joined the world-famous tour of Mary King’s Close, had taken a wrong turning underground. She ended up stumbling into the Council Chamber at the height of its bacchanalia of memories. Her confusion of adjective was understandable. The tourist, alas, has no

memory of her happy turn of phrase, for shortly afterwards she too was afflicted; she cornered a Council security-man to remind him, in a language he did not understand, of all that had happened to her in four-and-fifty years of Scandinavian life.. The media present, however, were happy to claim the memorable phrase as their own, and it was soon splashed across the websites and newspapers of the world – mostly and sadly, it must be admitted, as a story prefaced by “*And finally...*”

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The Scottish Parliament, as always swift to action, had voted overwhelmingly to protect the interests of the Nation; they had moved to Stirling at the first sign of trouble, leaving Holyrood empty, echoing and hopeless. Hardly had the dust settled there than the officials of Scottish Government reasonably concluded that they could not operate at such a distance from their paymasters. They relocated from Leith to the more douce environment of Dunblane, still at arm’s length, but still available should need arise.

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It did not take long for a long slow cold haar of panic to drift across Pilton and Corstorphine, grip Granton and Fairmilehead, bind itself around Burdiehouse and Colinton. People began to keep themselves to themselves. Yes, but more so. It was deemed wise to avoid neighbours and relatives as much as possible. But that folk-wisdom was more of a forlorn hope than an effective prevention, since the victims of the Plague actively sought out people with whom they could share their burgeoning memories. Ideally the sought-after listeners would be those for whom the memories might mean something – so, family and friends. What the victims little realised, and cared even less, was that the very act of sharing the memories triggered that change in the listener which allowed the disease to break in and begin its work.

The pattern of contagion was eventually detected and noised abroad. Nevertheless, it was in vain that doors were barred, windows closed, phones switched off: there was Jimmy or Gemma, chattering through the letterbox or standing down in the street shouting up. Only one means of protection turned out to be effective: blocking up your ears. What the voice could not reach, the plague could not corrupt. Those hard of hearing lived a charmed life. They were much sought out by the babbling hordes who roamed the streets; in the deaf, the plague victims found ready listeners and came away with no guilt at all.

In first few days, however, neither the means of transmission, nor the causes of immunity, were much understood. Scientists from the city’s many great academies of learning were as susceptible to infection as the next woman or man. Many, although openly encouraged by their employers, and threatened else with termination of contract, refused to sit and listen to the victims. On one moonless night, an entire caravan of university lecturers and professors threaded its way out from the campuses and, having reached safe ground, split up and headed south, west, north.

And not a moment too soon. On the following day, the Scottish Government imposed a *cordon sanitaire* around the city, roughly aligned with the City Bypass. All roads out of town were blocked. Only the curious and the reckless were allowed to enter. And were never allowed back out. The people of the City of Glasgow took a decision to mirror the eastern barrier with one of their own. The *Edinbourgeoisie* were not going to bring their English diseases to the west. Trains, buses, cars, lorries, barges – all were stopped at the periphery of the western city by enthusiastic groups of vigilantes. All travellers were hauled out and interrogated. If they were from Edinburgh, and could remember anything at all, they were turned away with a friendly but firm pat on the back. No Mean City was in lockdown.

What the Weegies did not realise, of course, was that no one could have spotted the subtle spread of contagion in such a gathering of the naturally loquacious.

Neither were the citizens of Midlothian slow to detect the present danger. They raised a justifiable

outcry. What if the privileged residents of the capital were to cross over the City Bypass at dead of night, and infect the clean-living souls in the beautiful south? Tired of being treated as second-class neighbours, they raised petitions in Penicuik, they organised a noisy demonstration outside the Council headquarters in Dalkeith. Councillors of every stripe swore to uphold the health and dignity of their constituents. No one believed them, of course. Had not these same councillors failed to secure free Edinburgh tram-travel for the elderly of Midlothian? Nevertheless, a strong note of protest was sent, by email, to the City of Edinburgh. It received no reply: the entire Council, elected members and officers alike, were fast in the grip of cascading recall, with no time for the Present Day.

In the Athens of the North, the Mnemonic Plague settled in comfortably. Houses, flats, streets, hotel-bars, coffee-shops were noisy with the collective reminiscences of tens and hundreds and thousands. The whole place hummed like a hive of angry bees, but without any resulting sweetness. It was exhausting for everyone. Worst affected were those who had expended a great deal of mental effort in trying to erase from their memory a handful of recent nightmares: unbidden, those very same nightmares came clattering in from out of the dark, horsemen of an individual Apocalypse, knocked the victims sideways, then shrieked and pranced endlessly before them in stark pompous awfulness. The Mnemonic Plague was rarely fatal – but many were those who did away with themselves after reliving the fiasco of Brexit, the victory of Trump and the more recent displays by the Scotland men's football team.

No one can remember when it started and it is difficult to tell when it subsided. Safe to say that it was at its height in the cold, dreich months of June and July. Safe to say that it did not begin much before May, since it was on the first day of that month that the MSPs and their handmaidens from Scottish Government did a runner. It is, finally, equally certain that the last embers of the disease had faded to ash by the middle of July: on the fifteenth day of that month, the MSPs and their handmaidens made a triumphant return to Holyrood and Leith, announcing that the security and health of The Nation had been saved, thanks to the swift and decisive implementation of Prudent Measures.

Contagion had ceased, but the weariness of the victims did not. Some never remembered what had happened to them, others dealt with all and every memory much as pest-control deal with wasps. Others again – the vast majority – simply kept their heads down and moved slowly through the grey days, looking neither to right nor to left; and certainly never backwards. Where possible, people avoided all human contact. From a Public Health viewpoint, this was probably a good thing for it was in late July that the city accepted the first waves of the many thousands who had come to enact Edinburgh, City of Festivals; and welcomed the many hundreds of thousands who came to experience the enactment of Edinburgh, City of Festivals. The citizens never had any part to play in all of this, and wisely kept themselves well away from the city centre.

