

EXTREMES

by
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She now lived outside a secluded, rural village several miles from the nearest town and rarely went there more than once a week, but today she was having to make one of those extra visits. It was something that she was unable to put off any longer, inconvenient and worrying that it would inevitably be for her, and for days she had tried unsuccessfully to find a reasonable excuse to avoid making the visit. But she failed and today the weather was good - mild and dry for the time of the year. She had run out of soap, anyway, and in the general store in the village they didn't sell the sort she felt obliged to use.

It would take a long time to get there, but riding the battered, old bicycle she had been given would make the journey much quicker than walking and it would be a lot healthier and cheaper than catching the local bus with its irregular timetable and an even more irregular, if not idiosyncratic route.

She followed the narrow road through two more villages, both unspoiled architecturally but now inhabited by wealthy incomers from the city, and when she saw some elderly people whose advice she felt she could trust, she asked if she was going in the right direction. Assured that there was only one road to the town, she rode on and arrived in just under an hour and parked her bike behind the building where she had her appointment.

She was early, she was always early, and hated being late for any arrangement, social or otherwise, and with ten minutes to kill she went into the ladies room to freshen up and tidy herself before she was called.

She was impressed by her surroundings, the cleanliness of the waiting room, the pleasant receptionist and the selection of magazines available to read. Usually such reading material was out-of-date by at least a year or, at best, were the well-thumbed magazine sections from weekend newspapers.

When it was her turn, she was surprised to find herself in an expensively decorated room with original prints on the walls and fresh flowers in cut glass vases. Six in each one, she counted.

“Good morning. I'm very grateful that you've agreed to see me at such short notice,” she said, still admiring the décor.

“Not at all,” the doctor replied, carefully opening the file his secretary had given him and lining up a note-pad and pencil on his desk. “Just lie down on the couch, make yourself comfortable and tell me about it any way you like.”

“Thank you.” She settled herself and started to talk. 'I seem to have got over one problem, but I'm afraid I'm starting to replace it with another similar one.' She frowned and bit her lip.

“Go on, but you may find it easier to concentrate and more relaxing if you close your eyes.”

“Well, a few weeks ago I decided to try not to be so obsessive about my domestic arrangements – checking I'd closed the door, locked it, switched off the cooker, the heating and

left enough food for the cat. It was all becoming too time-consuming.

“Whenever I went out, I followed the same routine then checked again and sometimes, to make quite sure, I did it all three or four times and, though it embarrasses me to say it, I have occasionally done it five times. When I was confident that everything was switched off and locked, I'd pull the door at least twice, usually more, in case . . . Then I'd set off, mentally ticking off the familiar list of items and trying to convince myself I was just safety-conscious and that everyone behaved that way.

“But I knew they didn't, I'd watched them. My parents, friends, relations, casual acquaintances all did what they had to do once and never checked again. I envied their confidence and their faith in their memory and wondered how I would have coped if I'd lived in a large house with ten or more rooms. My own place was bad enough with just a few rooms to try and control plus the daily load of office work I always brought home to make sure there was nothing outstanding. And then there was an active young cat that always needed watching.

“I realised they weren't the problem; I knew they weren't. I was. And the worn pathways on the carpet testified to my constant journeys to check and check again. But my decision to improve my ways didn't last long. It took less than a day for me to abandon it completely, and it was a day I'd sooner forget.' She suddenly stopped and opened her eyes, remembering the trauma she had referred to.

“Take your time, there's no hurry,' the doctor said as he placed his pencil on top of the spotless file.

“Well, it was half past eight that morning when I was ready to leave the house, and phase one, the first check, was about to start. Everything was correct. Then came phase two. Like a scientist undertaking a delicate experiment, I cross-checked my previous findings - cooker, kettle, microwave, washing-machine, radio, TV, lights, taps, back door and the cat's food. And the second phase produced identical results. But I still wasn't satisfied, so phase three began, and I always devoted as much time to that stage as to the first two.

“I made sure that the cooker, kettle and microwave were definitely switched off, but I felt uneasy as if something was wrong, and that meant six more items to examine as well as putting more food in the cat's bowl in case I hadn't put enough in before.

“As I started, I thought about my obsession and realised how I was essentially a loner. It was my nature to be like that, and if I been married, it wouldn't have altered anything. I could be alone in a lively party with people and noise all around me, yet I would often be distant from everything that was going on, even from the person I might be talking to. Something in my personality made me into an observer from as early as I can remember and when I used to participate in team games, I never fully integrated into the collective ethos. Nor, though, was I really an outsider.

“This obsession of mine seemed to make it worse. Nobody I'd ever met behaved the way I did. They might make a final check before going to bed, just looking at the switches, but not in the neurotic way I used to carry on, looking at them then turning them on and off to be absolutely certain. I had even started talking to myself while doing it : *Right, that's the kitchen done, now to turn the television and radio off. And then fill the cat's bowl and lock the doors. It's non-stop. Every day the same. Check, check and check again. And then check that I'd checked.* It was at that point that I overturned my decision to stop checking.

“Moments before it happened, I had been going through the list in my tattered mind, making sure I was following the usual pattern of items to tick them off when I suddenly felt anxious. There had been six more things to look at and the three I had supposedly switched off, but I had no idea where my uneasiness had come from - those I had already checked or the six remaining

ones. Was I feeling concerned about the past or worried about the future? That's what it amounted to, and I had no idea which it was.

“In order to put my mind at rest, I went back to the cooker to start again. And the moment I began mumbling, I underwent a sort of conversion. What was the point of all this? It is said that if someone watches television for about three hours a day it means that in a lifetime six years will have been spent watching a box. But how many minutes, hours, days or months even had I lost because of my obsessive behaviour? I didn't know, was afraid to guess and would have been horrified if someone more mathematically competent had told me. So, I glanced hurriedly at my list and made my way to the hall to open the door, lock it and leave.

“The noise occurred the moment I closed the door. Initially, there was a sort of roar, a flash and finally the explosion. That was the turning point in my life, and the devastation that followed was the reason why I abandoned my obsession. Firstly there was not much of the house left and secondly there was nothing in the rubble for me to check. Luckily, the cat had been out prowling around somewhere.

“Someone must have made a phone call because the emergency services arrived before I had even realised what had happened and they told me what a narrow escape I'd had. Later, the Chief Fire Officer told me what they'd found and I was shocked.

““That house was a death trap,” he said. “It could have blown up at any moment, and whoever installed the gas and electricity should be locked up. It's a serious offence and the police are looking into it.” But I didn't tell him a friend had done it to save me money, nor that he was someone whose way of doing things was less obsessive than mine. Obviously not.

“Anyway, after a week in a small hotel and the cost of boarding the cat, I made a decision and, as I told you, I now have a new obsession. Being broke and homeless, I'm helping with research into the practical management of natural resources in a very basic environmentally friendly home. No gas, no electricity, and everything ecologically pure. And my present worry is ensuring that I don't ever cross that *green* border.

“It's a bit uncomfortable and it's certainly safer, but I'm constantly worried about the things I've brought with me and the food I eat. So, I keep checking to make sure nothing I've got is harmful to the environment. No plastic bags or bottles, aerosols or any chemicals. And as for food . . . no processed items at all. But I keep reading the list of ingredients of everything I buy to eat, and shopping takes ages. Then, before cooking, I check again to make sure there's nothing in it that shouldn't be there. I feel I'm getting worse than I was before. So, please, Doctor,' she opened her eyes and stared at him, “is there anything you can suggest to get me out of this vicious circle. It's driving me mad.”

“Well, obviously, there are pills I can prescribe for you, but it wouldn't be ethically correct for you to take them. Long-term counselling is expensive and, from what you've said, things are a bit tight financially. So, all I can do is suggest you look into herbal remedies. I can't recommend any, as you must appreciate, but I'm sure they'll give you some advice in a health shop.”

As soon as she left, he tidied his desk, checked that the note-pad was correctly aligned, that the pencil was half an inch from it on the right-hand side and that his clock was showing the same time as his watch. Then he moved the chair the woman had vacated and replaced it in exactly the same marks the legs had made in the carpet.

He looked about the room to make sure nothing was out of place and pressed the buzzer with his right index finger to call his next patient. To have used his left hand would have been wrong. Everything had to be done appropriately and had to follow the correct pattern, though it was a pity that the poor woman was so confused about her own way of life.

