

CHAPTER 1



Once, it seems, in a life long ago, I watched a man hanged. I can visualise it in my mind right now – as clear as I saw it then. A stocky, overtly self-assured man dressed in a long blue-grey coat, starched and obviously brand new, being carried along a broad, paved street in a sturdy little cart, all the while bowing and calling out in greeting to the crowd of spectators as he passed by. But, though I knew for a fact that I was a member of that crowd myself, my view appeared to be that of a distant observer, almost as if I were floating in the air looking down on the scene from above. And all the while I could hear a quiet, calm, and soothing voice in my ear asking questions about what it was that I could see. Questions to which, despite my wanting to provide the answers, I could not for the life of me find the words needed to properly express them.

“What’s your name?”

“Wha’..? Uhh... I dunno... Wha’s yours?”

“My name is Neil. Are you sure you can’t tell us your name?”

“Ahhh... S’Ned... I think... Ned... See... Say... Somefin’... Uh, I dunno... Don’ matter anyways.”

“And where are you, Ned? Can you tell us where you are?”

“Am... Er... Inna field... Somewhere. There’s lots of people all ‘round. They’re scraggin’ the bastard today. Bad cess to ‘im.”

“Who is it, Ned? Who are they scragging?”

“Im there... Can’t you see..? Bloody murderous dog... E’s ‘ad it comin’ for a long time.”

“What’s his name, Ned? Who is it that’s being scragged?”

“Ahhh... There ‘e goes... Look at ‘im cuttin’ a flash... ‘E’s

got 'is foot on the ladder... Ha..! 'E ain't so brave after all, look at 'is leg shakin'... Christ..! 'E's lookin' right at me though."

"Why is the man looking at you Ned? Do you know him?"

"Oh, I know 'im, damn 'is eyes... I know 'im right well... 'E's got 'isself on the three legged mare now, talkin' to the topsman... Stop lookin' at me... Oh, no you won't... You'll not be gettin' no revenge on me, cully... It's too late for that... Ah! 'E's chucked 'isself off..! Jesu, see 'im kickin'... 'E's pissed 'isself... B... By Christ 'e ain't dead... Die, you bastard, DIE!"

"Peter, come forward in time. Come forward to the present. In a moment I will count to five and you will be back with us and fully aware of your surroundings. Come forward, Peter, you will be with us again in one... in two... three... four... and five. Open your eyes, Peter, you are quite safe. We are all here, waiting for you."

And they were. When I did open my eyes I was lying on the couch in Professor Sutherland's comfortable, well-furnished consulting rooms in Chelmsford. Sutherland, a distinguished looking man in his early fifties, dressed in a smart business suit and with his salt 'n' pepper hair brushed straight back, was sitting beside me and I could see Emily's sweet, but obviously very concerned, face in front of me. It was a group session (they were a bit cheaper) and so there were two or three others in the room too – others who were waiting their turn to undergo Sutherland's process of gentle hypnotic regression so that they might, by accessing their hidden memories, either relieve some kind of unexplained stress that was affecting their lives or, like me, explore the possible causes of disturbing dreams. We had been asked if we minded strangers sitting in and none of us had objected. After all, it just seemed like an interesting experiment at the time. I really think though that these people were merely expecting that Sutherland would take them back to a younger state of their own minds and were therefore visibly shocked to witness my apparent journey to a 'time' before my birth and the emergence of a 'personality' that was not, on the face of it, my own.

Emily Hammond had suggested visiting Neil Sutherland a few weeks ago when my dreams had become more frequent and after I had on more than one occasion woken her from a deep sleep with my shouting. Having first met through work, Emily and I had become close, and for the past few months had been living together in the old cottage I rented in the village of Newney Green, just outside the city. I have to say, she was a stunner and I would be the first to admit that, for a geeky web developer, I was punching well above my weight. Slim and well proportioned, Emily's long brown hair and almond-shaped, brown eyes combined with her delicate nose

and full lips to create a vision of loveliness that went far beyond anything I could ever have imagined in a girl unlucky enough to be attracted to me. But for some unknown reason she was, and I was immensely proud of that fact.

“Are you OK, Peter?” she asked nervously.

“Yeah, I’m fine, love,” I said. “I’m feeling quite relaxed, to be fair.”

“You were getting very... excited.”

“What could you see, Peter?” said Professor Sutherland.

“It was a bit weird, Professor,” I replied. “It was like I was having some sort of out of body experience, you know?”

“Yes, that is quite common in some subjects,” nodded the professor.

“It was like I was flying over everything, and yet at the same time I wasn’t. I was right there in amongst it all. I could see a big crowd of people dressed like they were in one of those old fashioned dramas that they put on the telly – men in horse-riding trousers and funny hats, that sort of thing. Everyone was watching a big cart being pulled through the streets with two people in the back of it. One of them was just sitting quietly, but the other was really cocky and was laughing and joking with some of the people closest to the cart. I didn’t like him at all and to be fair I don’t think he liked me very much either because he kept glaring at me. He was a bit of an ugly customer as well, with a rough, scarred looking face, like he had some sort of skin disease.”

“Where were they taking these men, do you know?”

“No, not really, but we went past a lot of tall buildings and out through a big stone gate with turrets like a castle on to a wide road that eventually led to a big field. In the middle of the field there was this massive wooden triangle held up at each corner by huge posts and there was a ladder leading up to the top of it. When I was answering your questions I could hear myself calling the thing the ‘three legged mare’ but I don’t know why, it’s not a name I’ve ever heard of.”

“Do you think that it was some sort of gallows, Peter?” said Emily. “You know, like they used to execute people in the olden days?”

“Yeah, that’s what it was.” I answered. “A gallows, like in the old Clint Eastwood films. And they took the cart right up to it so that the men could step off on to the ladder.”

At that point, one of the others in the room, a thin middle aged, mousey woman wearing a Laura Ashley style dress, joined in the conversation.

“Did you get a sense of where you were, or what time period you were in, Peter?” she asked. “Could you have been in the ‘wild west’, do you think?”

“I don’t think so, Barbara, no. The town we went through was very olde-worlde European, and outside of it everywhere looked pretty much like the English countryside to me. It must have been early spring because, even though it was cold and there was a light dusting of snow on the grass, it was very green and the leaves were starting to appear on the trees. But, as for the time period, I’ve no idea. I’ve never been interested in history – Henry the Eighth and all that – I’ve always been more into maths and science to tell the truth. Anyway, the rough looking man climbed the ladder and someone at the top tied a rope around his neck and then... Well, then he just turned round and jumped off into the air. Before he jumped though I could see he looked really angry and he was mouthing something to me – so far as I could tell he was saying something about revenge – and that’s when I could feel myself starting to get upset. It’s a nasty thought, but I really just wanted the man to die, to get things over with, kind of. And that’s when I heard you waking me up, Professor. It must have been a dream I was having, like the ones I get at night. What do you think, Professor, was I dreaming?”

“Well,” said Sutherland thoughtfully. “I probably should apologise for doing this, but while you were under hypnosis your childhood memories did not seem to be giving much of a clue to the underlying causes of your recurrent nightmares and so I took the liberty of suggesting that you travel back a little further, back to a time before you were actually born. And it seems that there we may have struck gold in that you do appear to have memories of a past life that could have some bearing on your current experiences.”

“What? Are you saying that I’ve lived before? That I’m a reincarnation of someone from years ago?”

“No, Peter. Not necessarily. There might be many explanations for the impressions you were confronted with. It may simply be that your unconscious was recalling something you once read but have now forgotten completely, or else some television programme or film you watched when you were very young. Your brain is a massively powerful organ, you know? It is not unlike one of your computers in that it can process and store the billions of pieces of information that it is bombarded with each day, though the difference is that only the tiniest fraction of this data can ever be brought to the surface by the conscious mind.”

“Yeah, that must be it,” I said, grabbing eagerly at this highly rational explanation that fitted so neatly into my coldly

logical perspective, despite the fact that I didn't read books and I hadn't watched much telly since my mum had sat me down for hours in front of an endless stream of Postman Pat videos (not my fault, mind you, blame the advent of the dreaded PlayStation for that).

"Although," continued the professor. "There are other theories. It could have been ancestral or genetic memory, or maybe even a pool of shared cosmic memory, that you were accessing. Then, as you say, there is the possibility of reincarnation in its 'proper' sense. By which I mean a nonphysical entity, or some other life essence, passing from person to person. Other than that, some might go so far as to argue that there could be a strong spiritual element at play here."

"Like I'm possessed, you mean? I don't like the sound of that."

"No, not possessed. I really wouldn't want you to worry about that sort of thing. No, no, not at all. Some do say, however, that under deep hypnosis the mind can open a channel to the other side and that this can cause the subject to become the passive and unrelated mouthpiece of someone long departed. You know, much like what happens when a medium goes into trance?"

"I'm sure it's more likely that Peter is remembering something he has read or heard," put in Emily quickly. "Yes, I'm certain that's it."

"Definitely," I agreed. "There can't be any other explanation."

Though we sat through the other sessions that followed none of them seemed quite as dramatic as mine and to be honest I didn't take much notice of them. I was glad when Emily and I were by ourselves again, hugging our mugs of steaming hot cappuccino in King's Coffee House at the end of Moulsham Street.

"Well, that was scary," said Emily, after we had sat in silence for a while.

"A bit," I admitted. "At least it was at the time. Afterwards it was like I'd been watching a film at the cinema, or something. It wasn't like any of my dreams, though. Like I've told you, in them I'm usually caught up in a surreal home invasion scenario, or some other kind of awful situation that involves robbery with violence and which nearly always ends up with me being pushed or dragged towards a big fire before I'm finally jerked awake. Now, they *are* scary."

"I know. They're horrible. I feel so sorry for you when you

have them. I worry that you might have a heart attack sometimes.”

“Course I won’t. It’s not that bad. But I do wish we could get the dreams to go away. Do you think I’m wasting my time with this hypnotism nonsense, Em?”

“I don’t know, but I think you should persevere with it for a bit longer. Even if the ‘memories’ you’re having are only the unconscious recall of books or movies you have forgotten, finding out about them might help you release the fears and anxieties that are causing your nightmares.”

“I suppose so,” I muttered.

“Neil said you could book four private sessions with him for £250. That’s not too expensive, is it?”

“No, I guess not. I’ll sort it out next week and see how it goes.”

That night the dreams came back. But this time they were different.

Emily and I passed our evening quietly at the cottage, in front of our homely log burner. Emily, who worked in marketing, was finishing off a presentation she needed for the morning whilst I flicked idly through my phone following the latest developments on Twitter and Instagram until, at about 11.00, we decided to call it a day and go upstairs to bed. The cottage, being all beams and sloping roofs, only had two bedrooms, one of which, though it had a small bed in it, we used as a wardrobe-cum-storeroom. Our room, the larger of the two, was mostly painted white, save for the exposed wall and ceiling timbers and the brick chimney breast, and we had positioned our bed beneath the pitched roofline facing the solid oak door that led out to the landing. It being my habit to sleep naked I quickly stripped off my clothes and slipped into bed. As I settled down I cast a surreptitious glance at Emily as she removed her underwear and pulled on the oversized man’s shirt she wore as a nightdress. Bloody hell, sexy isn’t in it, I thought as I let out a low whistle.

“Down, boy,” said Emily, smiling as she climbed into bed beside me. “Let’s get some sleep. It’s been a long day.”

It had indeed, but it didn’t take long for me to drift off to sleep with high hopes for a peaceful night. But, unfortunately, it wasn’t to be. I don’t know how much time had elapsed after I fell asleep before it happened, but at some point during the night my mind began to become aware of what felt like a weight pressing down on my chest and I started to sense (not to see, you understand) a dark shadow in the corner, by the door. My heart beat faster as the weight continued to press

down on me and the shadow grew larger, slowly filling the room with a brooding presence – a presence that exuded an overwhelming wave of hostility and which was heavily charged with unexplainable menace. I wanted desperately to sit up but I seemed struck by a sudden paralysis and, try as I might, I couldn't move a muscle as the terror rose within me.

Then I awoke. My eyes snapped open and I swear that I saw a face hovering above me – the snarling, weather beaten face of a man whose vulpine features were covered in ugly looking pockmarks – the face of a man I had seen before. Instantly, I was seized by an unutterable, desperate and terrible panic. Yelling something unintelligible, I shot out my right fist, seeking to connect with the monstrous mug that floated in front of my eyes; but my arm passed right through, knuckles slamming into the sloping ceiling to dislodge a chunk of plaster which crumbled and dropped down comically, onto my head.

“Peter!” gasped Emily who was, understandably, now also awake. “What’s the matter? What have you done?”

The face was gone, as was any trace of the dark shadow that I had imagined pervaded the room. I was breathing hard and my hand hurt from where I had hit the roof. Emily put her arms around me, trying to calm me down.

“It’s alright, I’m cool,” I said. “It was just another dream.”

“But what made you lash out like that? You’ve never done that before.”

“It was just as I woke up. I thought I saw someone bending over me. It’s probably to do with what happened yesterday because it looked like the same bloke that I saw when I was hypnotised.”

“Oh, you poor thing. We really do have to try to sort this out as soon as we can. You can’t carry on like this – you’ll be ill.”

“I know, Em,” I replied. “I’ll get on to the professor first thing in the morning and book those sessions, like you said. I’m starting to think that there could well be a link to these peculiar false memories that he’s uncovered and I need to get to the bottom of whatever it is. In the meantime, I don’t fancy trying to get back to sleep just yet so I’m going to go downstairs to make some tea. Do you want some?”

“Yes please. I’ll come down with you; the stove should still be warm but you had better put my dressing gown on so you won’t get cold. Perhaps I’ll sort out some of those nice biscuits to have with our tea. Would you like that?”

“Yeah, that would be good. The chocolate ones – I like those.”

We spent the rest of the night on the sofa, cuddled up beneath a woollen throw.

The next morning, as usual, was all bustle and haste as we got ourselves ready for work. I tried my best not to think about what had happened but I couldn't rid myself of a nagging feeling that things might be getting a bit out of control. This was the first time that I had ever lashed out in my sleep and it worried me. What if I were to hit Emily, or hurt her in some other way? It didn't bear thinking about. Maybe I should clear out the second bedroom and sleep in there for a while – that might be an idea.

I suggested this to Emily when we were squeezed into my old BMW Z3 and on our way to the office.

"Why on earth would you want to sleep in the spare room, Peter?" said Emily in surprise. "There's no need for that, surely?"

"Well, I'm not sure, Em," I replied loudly so as to be heard above the noise of the car's engine (these little soft-tops are very flash, for sure, but you can't deny that they can be bloody noisy and uncomfortable as well). "I would hate it if I were to punch you in my sleep, or something."

"I don't suppose I would like it very much either, hun. But I'm not worried at the moment, honestly. You've never done anything like that before; and you did have an exceptionally stressful time yesterday."

"Even so, I think..."

"Let's not talk about it now. Get yourself booked in with Neil as soon as you can this morning. I'm sure he will be able to help you. And then we can put all this behind us and get back to normal."

We both worked at Purple Donut Digital, which was located in a brand new, glass fronted building on a small business park a couple of miles north of Chelmsford, near Broomfield. I parked the Z3 in the staff car park and Emily and I made our way into the reception area, flashing our badges at the elderly security guard before calling the lift. Emily worked on the second floor and I kissed her gently as the lift doors opened to let her out.

"Bye, love. See you lunchtime," I called, before the doors ground shut again and the lift shuddered as it continued its ascent to the fourth, where my workstation was situated.

"Mornin', Pete," chirruped Dave, as I came to sit down next to him facing my two gleaming 27 inch monitors.

"Alright, Dave," I muttered, pressing the button on the

sleek, black ergonomic keyboard that fired up my powerful HP Omen 30L desktop PC.

“Did you see the game last night?”

“Er... No.”

“Oh, sorry, I keep forgetting you don’t have a telly.”

“Who won?” the monitors were blinking into life now, the lock screen appearing as the OS booted up.

“As if you care,” laughed Dave. “But we did – 2-1 – Harry Kane scored a screamer from 30 yards out in the 90th minute.”

“That’s good then,” I acknowledged, opening up Netbeans (I liked to use the Netbeans IDE for programming because it integrated seamlessly with Tomcat and worked exceptionally well with GIT version control).

“Yes, it is,” sighed Dave.

I did like Dave. An Essex boy through and through, he was always cheerful and up for a laugh, though I suspected that he despaired of me sometimes. I wasn’t terribly comfortable with small talk, you see, and much preferred discussing programming issues or the latest trends in technology.

“You look like shit, by the way,” Dave added.

“Yeah, I dare say. I had a bad night. Didn’t get much sleep, you know?”

After an hour or so, I thought that I had better bite the bullet and call Professor Sutherland. Taking myself off into the lift area where I could be sure of some measure of privacy, I took out my phone, tapped the contacts icon and selected ‘Shrink’ from my list of saved contacts. My call was answered after only three rings.

“Professor Sutherland’s office,” said the lady at the other end, her voice rising as she finished her greeting in the manner of receptionists everywhere.

“Er... My name is Peter Young,” I told her hesitantly. “I’d like to book some hypnotherapy sessions with the professor, please.”

“Ah, yes. Mr Young. We have been expecting your call. A most interesting case, I’m told. I assume you would like to undertake a further course of past life regression therapy?”

“Erm... Yes please,” I said, wondering just how interesting my case might be in that it merited flagging up to reception. “Could I arrange four sessions, starting as soon as possible?”

“Of course. Would 11.30 on Saturday be OK for you? Then we could book the same time for the following three weeks.”

“That would be fine.”

“In which case, I just need to take your credit card details. We occasionally find that clients give up part way through the course and so I’m afraid that we do therefore have to ask for full payment in advance. Let’s see, four sessions of past life regression; that will be £250, if you don’t mind.”

Emily was pleased when I told her over lunch that everything was arranged. PDD had its own small, but by corporate standards, quite comfortable canteen on the third floor, and we had each bought coffee and a submarine roll served in a white waxed paper wrap – the roll, that is, not the coffee.

“You will come with me, won’t you, Em?” I said, already knowing what the answer would be.

“Of course I will, hun,” Emily replied, laying her soft hand on my arm in reassurance.

“Thank you. I’m not really looking forward to visiting the professor again. Except that, in some odd way, I am. Do you know what I mean? I don’t want to have someone else poking around in my mind and I’m worried about what he might unlock and whether it might have some other effect on me. But I need to know what it is that’s messing me up, Em. I really do. I don’t want to carry on like this.”

“I understand. And you know I’ll support you come what may. We’ll get everything sorted out, Peter. I promise.”

That night we went up to bed early, in the same bed and wrapped tightly in each other’s arms. And, perhaps because I was so tired I slept peacefully throughout the whole night, thankfully undisturbed, at least as far as I knew, by any bad dreams or night terrors.

Extracted from *Hempen Fever*, John Pitman’s third historical/paranormal novel.

Visit www.themoondancers.co.uk to find out more.