

It is a Neurological Condition.

By

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People who know about Thom's condition touch wood or say an internal prayer when they see him coming towards them in the street or at a party, then they try hard to act normal. Most normal people are really bad at acting normal, so when these interactions are observed by an unknowing friend, it is the normal person trying to act normal whose behaviour looks weird and stilted. It is only later, when the normal person turns to their friend and says 'God, I'm glad Thom's gone, he has this neurological condition etc., etc.', that the now knowledgeable friend remembers how Thom's behaviour was excruciatingly smooth, so perfectly normal, as though he were completely and utterly human, a total subject; a visible body and a behaviourally presented inner mind. They realise that Thom's behaviour was freakish and odd, and the stilted acting-normal of the other person was human and natural and context responsive.

It is a neurological condition. The product of an accident. It means that all of Thom's actions are conscious actions. It means that when Thom speaks he is speaking each word, one after the other. Each step he takes, he knows about before it's taken. Each breath is a new breath; a rhythm regular but never settled.

You wouldn't know. He looks normal. But this gives him away, once you know. His physical movements are incredibly normal, uncannily natural. People who knew him before the accident cannot even look at him now. They shudder. They say it is like watching a man possessed by the spirit of a tree. His wife left him. His children refuse to see him.

Thom has stopped telling people about the condition. He says that once he tells people about it, he becomes an object to them, and he says that he can see it in people's eyes (though, as with all his behaviour, he has to think about the seeing before he does it, as in he has to consciously think, 'I'm going to see what sort of signals are being sent by the movements and overall look of this person's eyes' rather than just noticing like how other people would notice).

Some people who know about his condition try to undermine him. They walk slower next to him. Or start leaning ever so slightly to the left when they are standing opposite him. Or breathe in a distracting way when they are sitting near him in a quiet room. It doesn't bother him. At first, when Thom was relearning his behaviour (which was not so much an act of relearning, because that implies that you learn these behaviours and that he simply had to replicate a process that had come before, which is untrue), he could be put off by this sort of thing. His breathing might lose its rhythm, or he might lose his balance. But now he is so practised that it is rare for him to be overwhelmed by other people, whether they are trying to overwhelm him or not. Thom has concluded that some people are scared of him, once they know. Scared of how natural he appears. This is why they try to undermine him.

It is a sexual thing for some people - they like the way that he physically collapses into sex. Thom has to decide upon orgasm some minutes before it happens, and then he has to focus on it to a point where he is breathing very slowly and deeply, eyes closed like a huge, sleeping puppet, and only then can he come. And when Thom wakes from this state (though, waking is the wrong phrase perhaps - even when he wakes from sleep he is not really waking up, but rather, choosing to come out of a sleep state and into an awake state), it can take him ten minutes to cycle through his start up sequence and get limbs moving and eyes blinking and mouth ready

for speech.

It is the visibility of the behaviour which is tiring. Thom could be a functioning human with far less effort, but making the behaviour *appear* human makes it tiring. At home, alone (he lives alone), Thom goes into what he calls Weekend Mode; full functionality but with no effort expended on appearance. If you saw this, you would be terrified. But it would be a self-reflecting terror, a terror of your own essence which is so inhuman that no human would dare express it.

Thom is aware that people think horrible thoughts once they know about his condition (hence his not telling people) but he chooses not to recognise it, mostly. He knows that the alternative would be to put less effort into the appearance of his behaviour, and have it come across as terrifyingly inhuman and hope that people got used to it. But in the core of his being he knows that people would not get used to it. The essential inhuman spark that makes us human does not want to be recognised.

In moments of consciously realised despair, slumped loose on his sofa, exhausted at the effort that he must expend on a perfectly flawed acting out of human behaviour, Thom chooses to cry, which does not have a cathartic element for him, but does in some ways reflect the lost possibility of cathartic behaviour and allows him to physically consider what it used to feel like.

Thom sees an advert in the local paper for a drama group and thinks that he'd be good at acting. He's right. He joins the group and it turns out he's really good at acting. The women in the group, which is mainly women, crowd around him and tell him how good he is, how natural he seems when he is in character. They don't literally crowd around him. It's a metaphorical

crowding round, with everyone in the room - when the group has their break - half-watching Thom, waiting for their own conversations to finish so they can go and talk to him.

There is a jostling for the places next to Thom in the warm up exercises, which warm up exercises Thom is so good at, so natural and warm and smooth and human, that the leader of the drama group - a small woman called Siân with a distinct East Midlands accent - thinks to herself that she might suggest workshopping a few of the ideas that Thom has come up with in the warm up exercises, just her and Thom.

One of the warm up exercises is the warm up exercise with the ball. It involves all of the people in the drama group standing in a circle and throwing and catching a ball. When you have the ball in your hands you have to say a sentence, and then throw the ball to someone else. The idea is that through the throwing and catching and sentence-saying, the drama group builds up a narrative that begins to make sense i.e., a coherent story is built up from each individual's seemingly disparate contributions. Also the warm up exercise produces juxtapositions of ideas that are playful and unexpected. Well, it does when people are good at it. This warm up exercise is a little bit nervewracking as not only do you have to throw and catch a ball, you also have to remember what the last person said, as well as the gist of the story so far, and then *also* try to think of something that makes sense but is playful and/or unexpected. Various alternative names have been suggested for the warm up exercise with the ball, but Siân has rejected them all, so everyone ends up referring to it, formally and casually, as the warm up exercise with the ball.

Thom is incredibly good at the warm up exercise with the ball. He never drops the ball and always throws it really well - without that over-excited or worried look that most people have when they throw a ball. Also, his sentences are well crafted and funny, and always move

the story on in an interesting way. On more than one occasion, a sentence from Thom has had the entire drama group in stitches because it was so playful and unexpected, with Siân laughing particularly hard and telling everyone to take a break because ‘Thom’s got us all on the floor again’.

Siân is feeling like she really wants the drama group to push themselves today, so she decides that this round of the warm up exercise with the ball is going to carry on for a bit longer than usual. She wants the story to find its natural endpoint. She doesn’t want to guide it; she wants the group to find the story that is within and between them. The narrative develops for a while, with people leading it this way and that. Characters emerge, as do themes. The main character in this story is a struggling female actor (not an uncommon character to emerge in this warm up exercise). In the story, the female actor is beginning a relationship with another character, a struggling male actor in the same theatre company as her. They are playing the male and female leads in a play, though it’s unclear what the play is. There is romance in the play and they are falling in love through the reading of their lines. The director of the company is a powerful and charismatic woman (this is heavily implied by a high percentage of the sentences spoken by Siân whenever she has the ball), and this powerful and charismatic director tells the female actor and the male actor to ‘have no secrets’ from each other for that ‘is the only way you can truly *become* your roles’. This advice is meant literally, within the story being told through the warm up exercise, i.e., the female actor and the male actor have to tell each other all their secrets to become better actors.

The female actor tells the male actor everything about her life, and with each confessed

privacy, she feels her skill as an actor growing. As she becomes more comfortable with presenting her inner reality, she becomes more adept at presenting the outer reality of her character. The male actor tells the female actor many things about his life, many secrets he has told no one else: about his fear of death, about his struggles with depression, and about how he once killed a man next to the bins out the back of a Yates's Wine Lodge (this last revelation provided by one of the few other men in the drama group - Diego, an Argentinian guy who has tattoos and works as a chef and takes a lot of cigarette breaks whilst at the drama group [these are unsanctioned breaks, but also unremarked upon by anyone in the drama group, even Siân, who is normally quite strict, and even though the general rule is one 20 minute break at 8:30pm]). But it's clear in the story that the male actor is holding something back from the female actor, a Final Secret so core and essential and meaningful that the female actor knows that if he (the male actor) would only tell her the truth about this Final Secret, then they would be able to play their lead roles with such conviction and humanity that they would surely be the stars of the play which would lead inevitably on to their becoming successful actors who trod the boards of West End theatres, and appeared in successful TV dramas, and didn't have to live in a bedsit with three other men and work as a chef in the stinking, fetid kitchen of a Yates's Wine Lodge (Diego here taking the reins of the story).

The female actor and the male actor have torturous conversations about this Final Secret, the secret that the female actor believes is the key to unlocking their relationship both as actors and as lovers. When someone throws the ball to Thom, his sentences are mostly about these conversations between the female actor and the male actor. In Thom's sentences, the male actor is trying to get the female actor to understand that this Final Secret is the only thing that must

remain hidden, and that if the male actor told the female actor this Final Secret then it would not create the conditions for the full realisation of their relationship, both on and off stage, but, rather, the revealing of the Final Secret would destroy the *very possibility* of their relationship ever being fully realised. It would reduce the effectiveness of their acting to a point where they may well be booed off stage on their opening night, and would create such an uninhabitable atmosphere of distrust and suspicion in their personal, off stage relationship that they would no longer even be able to look each other in the eye, let alone look each other in the eye whilst making gentle love in the warm summer breeze in a secluded picnic spot in a woodland glade on a lazy August afternoon (this being a reference to an earlier, very long and descriptive sentence by Siân, spoken with eyes half closed and face all dreamy). They would also not be able to have hard fucking against the wall in the stockroom of a Yates's Wine Lodge (Diego again).

The male actor tries to reassure the female actor that it is not the *content* of the Final Secret that will ruin everything; the Final Secret does not contain information about unforgivable, ghoulish actions perpetrated by the male actor in his past. Rather, it would be the *state of knowing* the Final Secret, on the part of the female actor, that would create the unbearable situation of distrust, forever tainting their relationship, on and off stage. The male actor is quick to point out that this would not be the fault of the female actor; anyone to whom the Final Secret was revealed would react in the same way.

When Siân has the ball, she uses her sentences to push hard at the part of the narrative that attempts to discover the content of the Final Secret. It's becoming clear that there are two opposing camps when it comes to the direction of the story being told through the warm up exercise with the ball. The story pushed by Siân (who by this point in the warm up exercise is

making subtle but unignorable signals that she wants the ball to be thrown to her as much as possible [but without it seeming *too* obvious]) aims at a narrative endpoint that involves the male actor revealing the Final Secret to the female actor, and this revelation creating the conditions for the dramatic conflict to resolve into romantic love.

The other camp, with regards to the narrative drive of the warm up exercise, is led by Thom. In a way, he is blocking the natural conclusion of the story, which is making the warm up exercise go on for longer than anyone expected, but no-one *really* minds because the sentences that Thom is saying are still delightful and without any pretence. Unlike Siân's sentences, which are long and forced and full of banal detail.

At some point the ball stops moving around the circle in the roughly even distribution pattern that is the unspoken, practical essence of the exercise and begins instead to only pass between Siân, Thom and an intermediary member of the drama group. This is because Siân now stops being in any way subtle about wanting the ball and simply stares at the person with the ball, looking impatient and breathing loudly through her nose until they finish their sentence and throw the ball her way. The way it goes is this: Siân, after nose breathing and foot tapping, receives the ball from a scared and flustered member of the drama group, and then says her sentence; maybe something about the female actor and the male actor in a rehearsal room, reading out lines in weary, tired voices; tired from arguments and sex and torturous conversations and more sex. The female actor makes an impassioned plea to the male actor to 'tell her the Final Secret', because 'the spark has gone' and 'she needs this more than anything'. Then Siân throws the ball (quite hard) at Thom, who responds with a sentence about how, for example, the female actor and the male actor are walking in the woods and the male actor is

talking about trust being more important to love than factual knowledge, and how the *rejection* of the tyrannical demands for Total Honesty in contemporary relationships could be a way for the female actor and the male actor to transcend their subjectivity and fully realise their professional and emotional dreams in another, ultimately more real, more *human* way. Then Thom throws the ball to another member of the drama group, and Siân glares at them and tilts her head to the side and breathes like someone with sinus problems and the person says a very short sentence, something basic and non-committal about the male character's clothes or the weather. Then they throw it back to Siân, trying and failing to not appear flustered or scared.

Diego is on another unsanctioned cigarette break.

Some of Siân's sentences are beginning to sound more like they are coming directly from Siân, i.e., the sentences feel more like they concern the situation in the small, windowless room rented out by the drama group, rather than the situation in the narrative formed by the warm up exercise with the ball.

Thom is starting to feel strange, physically strange. The strong, rhythmic cycle of Siân-Thom-intermediary is dragging essential focus away from the basic rhythms of his behavioural management. Thom can never entirely lose concentration on the basics of living: breathing, blinking, balancing, etc., but he has built up ways of syncing the sequences so that they feel more like a single pattern; a drummer using his different limbs for the parts of the drum kit, rather than a desperate spinning of plates. These practised rhythms are starting to unravel ever so slightly. Siân's clear focus on Thom is beginning to overwhelm his ability to appear fully in control of his physicality. His responses still appear coherent and natural, but it is taking more and more effort to keep up with the warm up exercise.

Siân is getting riled up. It's clear to everyone in the drama group that Thom's refusal to expand on the possible content of the Final Secret and thus resolve the narrative in the way that Siân clearly wants it to be resolved has become an unwitting challenge to her authority as leader of the drama group. Unwitting because Thom is still speaking sentences that seem totally in keeping with the narrative and are human and natural and, well, just so... Thomish, that the rest of the drama group are certain that he's not purposely antagonising Siân because Thom just isn't like that. Also, you don't want to antagonise Siân, not one bit. She can be very snide when she wants to be, especially when some of the drama group go to the pub after rehearsals and Siân is really nasty about anyone who isn't there, doing cruel impressions of their voices and mannerisms which elicit uneasy laughter from the members of the drama group who are in the pub.

Siân's riled up-ness is complex and layered, because Siân has made it clear from day one that she favours Thom above all the other members of the drama group. He is her 'golden boy' and her 'prize student'.

Thom is finding that more and more of his attention has to be focused on his breathing. He is having to listen very hard to work out what Siân's sentences mean and how to respond. Then Diego comes back from his unsanctioned cigarette break. His hacking cough (and, his smell; a mixture of old smoke, sunflower oil and the raw stench of unwashed genitalia) sends Thom's auditory system into spasmodic rupture, completely obliterating his (hard practised) ability to distinguish between different people's voices, and even to distinguish between people's voices and background noise.

Siân is now just holding the ball, saying sentences and not passing it on. She is

completely disregarding the primary rules of the warm up exercise with the ball. No one challenges her. The situation is confusing and tense. It's confusing because Siân isn't going to get a response unless she throws the ball to Thom. It's tense because Siân is shouting the same question over and over again. Her face, which is usually a pale, mottled grey-pink, is bright red and perspiring in tightly delineated streams of sweat. It's also tense because Thom has suddenly frozen up, and clearly can't hear anything. The people in the drama group are all staring in horror at Thom. Their faces have assumed the features of people witnessing a hideous and slow industrial accident, e.g., someone drowning in a vat of adhesive, or someone being pulled inexorably into the workings of a huge machine that no one can remember how to stop. Thom's face is hard; pulled tight by some force above his head. His eyes are rolled up and round behind themselves. His breathing is short and irregular and loud. His fists are clenched. He is operating at a disturbing level of visible output. He is overwhelmed.

His form is puppet-like. He does not hear Siân's question being intoned over and over again in a loud, strained voice. Diego, unaware of his part in Thom's sudden change of state, turns to the rest of the group and says, 'Hey man what's up with him? He's looking like a tree bout to fall down in a storm man.' Thom doesn't hear Diego, and he doesn't hear Siân. It is all noise.