

Magnets

There's a room called the Underpass room which is not really appropriate for Exclusions. I must say, I've never found Exclusions easy. I've no back up that day. It always makes things worse. Mr. Spandler is booked on the 14.00 Emirates to Bangkok. I walk in, trying to look concerned and Mr. Spandler says, 'Steroids. Why I can't walk. Steroids. Only reason.'

The problem with the underpass room is the noise. When an Airbus or something is lifting up you have to stop talking. So we both look through the open door as this plane lifts off. Then he says, 'Normally I'd walk up the steps. Need a stick, maybe. That's it. Steroids. OK to smoke?' I point at the red poster and say, 'I'm sorry, Mr. Spandler; it's regulations.'

Then he says, 'Why I put on weight. Used to be around ten stone. It's why I can't sleep. You'd think they'd tell you these things. Sex, though, can't get enough. Trouble is Roxanne can't handle it nowadays; like it's a favour. Steroids. That's it. You got that sort of problem?'

I say, 'You've got lung cancer?'

He says, 'Lung cancer, yes. It's why I'm going off to Bangkok. Cancer. They take it out. Did it before. Gave me another two years. What's your name? This is it, on the desk? Raymond? Yes. Well, Ray, I was OK two years. You get there; they take it out; fixed. Cash on the table. Chancoi, that's his name, Dr. Chancoi. He does it. Great. That's it.'

Another plane is taking off now and they're finally bringing all his baggage down, as usual in Exclusions. Sometimes it's necessary to confront clients with what we've found. Any way, he looks at them stacking the baggage then he says, 'Lungs? Yes, Ray, lungs. Other places too. Lots of other places. Lungs. That's it.'

One of your responsibilities in these Exclusions is to make some sort of compromise; it's a key part of Aviation Medicine. Three years in College, one year with a mentor, learning transactional and psychological techniques. Both very important. Compromise for me is gaining client acknowledgement, as in, 'we're both here working towards some sort of recognition of the situation in hand.' It's a mutual thing. So I say, 'Mr. Spandler, I'm here on behalf of Emirates, trying to help us all become aware of your needs.'

He says, 'Ray, I'll tell you something. When I told Roxanne I was going to see Chanchoi again, she said, 'Flying? 'You must be frigging mad.'

There you are. By this time Mr. Chandler is looking out of the door. He says, 'Nice day, Ray. Even Southend would look good today. Blue skies, green leaves. Not like Thailand, though. Patong beach. Ever been there Ray? That's where I first saw Roxanne. Thirty years ago. Blimey. She's weathered well. Can be difficult though. Always had problems with women. Love 'em. Starting with mother. Don't know about you, Ray, but UK was never enough for me. I guess you get around a bit on planes. Free for you isn't it? You're like me aren't you, always needed a change, reaching out? Where you from Ray? Round here? Me, I'm East End, still there in a way, that way of life. No dad. No brothers though. That was the problem, see. Mum flapping around all the time, trying to do the right thing. Mum was a flapper.' He flaps his hands at me and says, 'All my life, got mixed up with strong people. Strong women, strong men. Telling me what to do. Roxanne's right, though. Time's running out. Gotta get stuff done, clear things up. I like things being tidy, don't you, Ray? Gets worse, you get older, don't you find that? Wondering what the f... you're doing. Sorry, Ray, language, but that's it.'

For me, by this time, what was emerging was the idea of avoiding unnecessary costs, people paying for lawyers when money is better spent in moving on, as it were. I can have

my moments though; I can be firm if necessary. I know how to keep my cards up my sleeve. Play the long game, if you see what I mean. Sometimes things have to come to a head. You need a sense of when that starts to happen.

Mr Chandler says, 'It's like sex. That's it. Job I do, you need to make sure you're OK; know the right people, else you're in the shit. Keep in touch with 'em. That stuff. Sex is different. Know what, Ray? It's out of the blue, isn't it? Corner of your eye. Blows you away. Like Roxanne. Patong beach. That's it.'

I really needed to get away early this day. The only way was to drive down to Hove, talk to you, Anton, agree a joint way forward. Then back to Reigate for dinner with Sandra and the boys. So I say, 'Mr. Spandler. I'm aware of the time, your time, our time. Are we agreed, then, that any reasonable doctor would feel there's only one way forward. You must see that's logical?'

He says, 'Logical.' as if he'd never heard of the word. He says, 'My view, Ray, none of these doctors are logical. Apart from Chancoi, they all look knackered. NHS they're always running late. Too knackered to be logical. You know something, I'll tell you this, Ray, haven't told many people. Fifteen, twenty years ago, I got to know this doctor, what's her name, really well. Done my knee lifting something. She'd fixed me up in Harley Street. After the operation, I'm paying out the cash for the knee, she looks at me. Next thing, we're in bed. Know what I mean, Ray? Amazing; very passionate. Told me about her Dad, husband, drug problem. Tried to get her off Coke. Dad was the real problem. Husband's no better. She was never good enough for them. I ended up being her shrink. She said she was in love with me. Sex, that's not logical. Blows you away. That's it, Ray.'

I hadn't slept the previous night. Not a wink. The reason's obvious. If you remember, it was either I tell Sandra or you will. I simply can't go on, night after night lying next to her,

feeling guilty, hiding the mobile bills, deleting texts, feeling bad with the boys. I say, 'Sorry, what do you mean, not logical?'

He says, 'That stop-over in Dubai; two hours, they re-fuel. She was the one, that doctor. Winter after we'd met, must have been. Coming back, wandering around the terminal in a state, thinking about the doctor. Which woman, I'm thinking? Two of em, Ray. That's it. I landed, got to do it. Clock's ticking. You know what? It wasn't them, Ray. It was me. Me and two different women, me in the middle. Both at the same time. Doesn't work. Piece of iron on the table. Two magnets, one either side. In the middle. That's me in Dubai. That's it. Two of them. It's me. I'm in the middle.'

By this time I'm getting really desperate. I look at him.

He says, 'Don't work on wood, do they Ray?'

I say 'What?'

He says, 'Magnets. Wood, milk-bottle tops, stuff. Only iron. Has to be. What do you think?'

I stand up and say, 'Mr. Spandler, will you excuse me for a minute?' I have to get out, consider the options. Mr. Spandler, in my view, needs to do the same. The next flight is in two hours, but there will be others. I've been here before. It was not going to be a quick fix. Outside is when I take out the mobile and ring you, Anton, not for advice so much as just a chat. Sort of touching base. I couldn't tell you all the details in case someone overheard.

By now it's mid-day. I walk back in, close the screen door and set the mobile on record, ready for business. Mr. Spandler is half asleep over the desk, head on his hand. I explain that all we need now is for the other party, which is Mr. Spandler, to recognise reality and be reasonable. Everyone can then leave happily, as it were, and get on with their lives. No

recriminations, no formal procedures. None of that, 'you should have this, I should have that.'

He says, 'You ever do that, Ray, hop-scotch?'

I say, 'Hop-Scotch?'

He says, 'Yeah, back in Bermondsey, drawing hop-scotch lines on the street with chalk, falling over, killing yourself laughing. Must be six, seven years old. That's it; kids. Deep down, people want to open up, just like kids. That's why we fall in love, whatever, innit? My first wife, very edgy. Slightest thing, off she'd go. I loved her. You have to love 'em, don't you, Ray? But can you live with 'em? That's it. Walking on egg-shells. Simmering away inside. Bang, no warning, off she'd go, bloody volcano. Others, like the Harley street lady, deep down. Quieter. Need something like a can opener. Psychology stuff. Know what? Psychologists, just as f...ed as the rest of us. That's it. All of us, remembering. Looking back. Sex, drugs, rock & roll; f...ing hop-scotch. Fancy that. Wanting it back, once, just before you die, before it's too late, right person. Harley Street was me. But what about Roxanne? That's it. Who's your favourite?'

I say, 'I beg your pardon?'

He says, 'Favourite musician. You know.'

I say, 'Mr. Spandler, there's not really time.'

He says, 'Go on.'

I think of you, Anton and say, 'Ravel, Vaughan Williams, Miles Davies.'

He says, 'Mine's thingy. See, I can't remember names any more. Sometimes Roxanne fills in. Other times she just gets on with reading the paper. Never liked people who talk. People I work with, hard f...ers just get on with it, don't talk. There it is and you're there. Now, though, can't sleep, steroids, go down, watch telly all night. Sixty channels, flicking through. Rubbish, then ping, there it is. Like women. Ping, that's the one. That's it. Everyone

living longer. Some people die young. We love 'em. Jesus Christ, he's one. Buddy Holly, thingy in T.Rex. Poets die young as well. Bang, get it over with, then die. Love 'em. What if you haven't finished? What if you really want to carry on, Ray? It's all choices in it?

I say, 'Look, Mr.Spandler. I can see that would be an option, carrying on. In my view, it's not our preferred option. Your current medical state is against you. There has to be another option. We can take care of you; make sure you get home safely. Carrying on to Bangkok is not an ideal option. No it can't be. No.No.No!' I'm banging the table, I'm raising my voice and banging the desk, things you should never do in these situations. I know, I know, I have to calm down. I stare at him and say, 'Mr. Spandler, we know quite a lot about you, criminal history and so forth. Let's say we found something in your bags. You may not even know it's there, but we'll find it anyway. That could be really unpleasant, your record. I'm sure you don't want that.'

He leans over my desk and whispers something, pointing behind me at the mirror. I turn round to look and say, 'What?'

He says, 'Anyone through there? No? OK. Turn the recorder off, Ray.'

I've no idea how Mr.Spandler knew about the mirror and the PDA, but there's no choice, I lift the phone out on the desk and turn it off. Then he says, 'You heard of a geezer called Ronnie Kray? Well, he was all right. Some didn't like him. Could be nasty. He was gay, bi- or whatever. No problem. Thing is, George Cornell called him a fat poofa one day in the Blind Beggar. You don't do that sort of thing, Ray. Not to Ronnie Cray, not to anybody. Me, I'd never do it. Anyway, Ronnie blew his head off. Little bugger deserved it. Made a mess though, I was there.' Then he leans over and says, 'This is yours, Ray.' And he shows me that photo of you I keep under the diary in my desk. I'm fuming. I grab at it; I try to grab him as well. I'm shouting, 'How dare you go through my things. That's it; this is serious, now you're in serious trouble. You're going to regret this.'

He hands me the photo, then he says, 'It's OK. Nice looking guy, your friend. It's gonna be OK, Ray. Bangkok, you see everything. I've seen everything. You'll be alright.' Then he looks out of the door. Another jet is taking off. I couldn't make out what he was saying. I think it was, 'Lovely day.'