

UNBORN AGAIN

CHRIS LAWSON

Chris Lawson writes: "I grew up with pet crocodiles in Papua New Guinea. I now live in Melbourne with my wife Andrea. We have a pet cat, which is far less exotic than a crocodile, but more relaxing to have on your lap. While studying medicine, I earned extra money as a computer programmer, and I have worked as a medical practitioner and as a consultant to the pharmaceutical industry. I continued my tumble down the food chain when I took up writing."

The story that follows will make you uncomfortable ... will make you wonder ... might even call you out to action. It's about pragmatism and pain and the nightmares of John Stuart Mill.

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Take lamb's brains fresh from the butcher's block and soak them in icy water. Starting from the underside, peel off all the arteries under running water, add lemon and salt, and boil in water. Once boiled, dry the brains, quarter them, and marinate them for ten minutes. Serve them with steamed custard and Tabasco sauce.

The delicacy of the dish is exquisite, and I can easily digest two portions. Eating is more than a necessity; sometimes it is a pleasure; now it is a duty.

The brains slide down like oysters. I love the texture and the tang of the sauce. The pinot noir is a touch dry, but not enough to tarnish the flavour of the brains. Good wine is virtually unaffordable in Hong Kong nowadays.

The marinade is an old family secret, but I don't want it to die with me, so here it is: ginger, spring onion, rice wine, sesame oil, and oyster sauce. And my own variation: a dash of pituitary extract.

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"In here." The nurse shows the way into the room. The walls are antiseptic white. The bed is made with clinical precision. Sitting in a chair is the room's sole occupant: a woman in her mid-forties who rocks and drools like a demented centenarian.

“Ignore it,” says the nurse. “She always does that when a visitor comes. She’s perfectly able to hold one end of a conversation during the day. She only becomes confused at night.”

Stepping into the room is a small man in a brown suit. His tie is knotted too tightly, and the purple paisley teardrops clash with the khaki suit so gratingly that his colleagues have been known to grind their teeth down to the gums. His hair has somehow defied the short cut and fallen into disarray.

“She has Alzheimer’s?” the brown-suited man asks the nurse.

“Something like that,” the nurse says. “If you need anything, just hit the buzzer there.”

The nurse leaves, and the brown-suited man finds himself standing, briefcase in hand, in front of this woman. Her face and skin look young, but she sways in time as she hums an unrecognisable tune.

“Dr Dejerine? I’m from the Customs Department.”

Dejerine smacks her lips and fixes the visitor with an unfriendly stare. “You look like a cheap detective.”

“I suppose I am. My name is Gerald Numis.”

“I won’t remember that, you know. Not by tomorrow.”

Numis nods. “I’ll give you a business card. How’s your long-term memory?”

“Better than my short-term memory, I’m disappointed to say. I didn’t expect it to be this way. I can quote verbatim the monograph I wrote twenty years ago.”

“What was it?”

“It’s called *Utilitarian Neurology*.” Dejerine looks at Numis as if that should mean something.

“What’s it about?”

Dejerine laughs. “I don’t know. Maybe, if you’re interested, you could

look it up and then you can tell *me* what it means.”

Numis coughs. “Do you remember what prions are?”

Dejerine nods. “Of course I do.”

“There was an outbreak of Lethe disease in Hong Kong last year. Two people have already died and another five are infected. It’s unprecedented — a prion disease that was once confined to the Papuan highlands, and a disease that has virtually disappeared with the decline of ritual cannibalism. The Chinese health ministry was terrified that they had a new, virulent form, so they posted the amino acid sequence on the internet. It corresponds to a rare variation that was registered to your lab.”

“What a remarkable coincidence,” says Dejerine.

Numis continues. “Coincidence? Lethe disease has never been known to jump a thousand miles overseas to a non-cannibal culture, and no-one can suggest a natural vector for this unprecedented event. And there’s the matter of ten missing vials from your lab. And the visas. You visited Hong Kong twice five years ago, which just happens to be the incubation period of Lethe disease. The coincidences are piling up.”

“A close shave with Occam’s razor,” she says.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Occam’s razor. Very good for shaving.” She laughs.

Numis thinks for a moment. This woman is blatantly demented, or an exceptional actor; either way he doubts that charges will ever be laid. The Director of Public Prosecutions will probably let her rot in this room. If the Chinese police see her, they will lose interest in extradition. Numis concludes that the whole visit will be a waste of his efforts. However, he has a job to do and he believes in procedure.

“Did I mention the visas?” Numis asks.

“No,” says Dejerine, and smiles crookedly.

Numis knows he mentioned the visas. He knows her short-term memory is not *that* badly affected. He decides this woman is not nearly as demented as she makes out. He wonders how much of her disability is from disease and how much is a sham.

“Dr Dejerine, I have to caution you that transporting a biohazard without customs approval is a serious offence. You may request legal advice before answering any further questions.”

“So convict me. It’s just a change of prison.”

“Are you declining legal counsel?”

“Did you know that *prison* is just *prion* with an S?” She giggles at her own joke.

“Dr Dejerine, are you declining legal counsel?” he asks again.

“Yeah, sure.” Dejerine nods in agreement.

Numis places a tape recorder on the bed and taps the record button. “This is a taped recording of an interview with Dr Claudia Dejerine. Present are Dr Dejerine and Mr Gerald Numis, Senior Customs Investigator, Biomedical Division.” He checks his watch. “The time is 2:47 pm on the 19th of March. Tell me what happened, Dr Dejerine. In your own words.”

Dejerine says, “I wrote it down somewhere so I could explain it when someone like you came along. Now where did I put it?” She rummages in her bedside drawer and withdraws a foolscap notebook, bound in leather. “Here it is.”

Numis opens the pages. They are handwritten. The scrawl is cramped and careless, the work of an author unconcerned with appearance.

“Dr Dejerine has just given me a handwritten document,” he says for the benefit of his tape recorder. Numis sits down to read; the recorder recognises silence and switches to standby.

* * * *

My name is Claudia Dejerine and I was once Professor of Pathology. The other things you need to know about me are that I had a friend called Leon Shy-Drager; I cook as well as any *cordon bleu* chef; and I speak to John Stuart Mill in my dreams. It’s not so strange. They say one of the US Presidents’ wives used to seek advice from an imaginary Eleanor Roosevelt.

My father died when I was a girl. I remember him sitting me on his lap in his study and pointing out all his favourite books. On the desk he kept two antique portraits of serious-looking men.

“Two great minds,” my father said. “Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, the Fathers of Utilitarianism. They wrote about morals. They said the best outcome is the one that gives the greatest happiness to the greatest number. Life’s not as simple as that, you know, but their ideas were magnificent.”

After Dad’s funeral, I asked Mum what “Toutilitism” was, and she pointed out Dad’s copies of *On Liberty* and *System of Logic*, and held back tears.

“You can read them when you’re older,” she said.

Dad had been tall and gaunt, like Mill. His build was imposing and I remember it clearly, but his face started to blur in my memory. His lanky frame and my strong association of Dad with the antique portraits sculpted an image for me. Over the years, the image I had of my father merged into that of John Stuart Mill. Dad was in the grave, but *On Liberty* was on the shelf any time I liked, so even his words started to merge. Eventually the figure who visited me in my dreams became indistinguishable from the portrait on Dad’s desk. Over the years, the works of John Stuart Mill consumed the memory of my father.

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By my thirty-ninth birthday, my hands shook more than the young Elvis Presley. I did my best to keep the shakes from public view, but my tremor was too coarse to hide. My hands were safe at rest, but when I tried to use them they would turn stiff as lead and shudder just like a learner driver bunny-hopping a car. Cooking became impossible.

I knew the diagnosis before my doctor gave it to me: Parkinson’s disease. Deep in my brain, the *substantia nigra* was rotting away.

Leon Shy-Drager, my friend, also had Parkinson’s, but at the more reasonable age of fifty eight. For him, though, age was no excuse for complacency. He wanted every chance, regardless of legality.

Leon was no stranger to breaking the law. He frequently downloaded illegal research from the black net, and used the work of unethical researchers to design his own studies. Ethics committees vetted his work

of course, but none of his “ethical” work would have been possible without the black research. I have always wondered exactly how well informed the ethics committees were. Surely they must have been aware that much of Leon’s work bore an uncanny resemblance to the more infamous examples of illegal research that leaked out of the black net. Leon always laughed when I brought it up.

“Of course they know,” he used to say. “But it’s a waste when good research goes unpublished. I make black research respectable for the mainstream journals.”

It was a sort of laundering process. “Money, like research, is just another avatar of information. Casinos launder cash. I launder science.”

He flew to Hong Kong, where he auctioned his life insurance for a nigral implant. It is illegal for any Australian citizen to procure one, even if the operation is performed overseas. This law — guilty even if committed on foreign soil — applies to only two other felonies: war crimes and paedophile sex.

Of course Leon told no-one about the procedure, but suspicion could not be contained. He flew out of the country on long-service leave and returned three months later with a marked improvement in motor skills. Some thought it a miracle. Most knew better.

Leon was a brave man. When he saw my hands shaking, he knew that I was falling off the same cliff that nearly claimed him. With enormous courage, he took me aside and risked jail by telling me what he had done. He told me every detail about the operation, even the petty ones. He gave me a contact number.

Leon never asked me to keep our conversation to myself, never begged me to stay away from the police. He trusted my friendship.

“I can’t do this,” I told him.

“You have to look after yourself. No-one else will.” When I looked away he said, “Think about it at least.”

I thought about it.

John Stuart Mill used to appear in my dreams every month or so, but he came more often during crises of conscience. That week he spoke to me every night.

I would dream of a study lined with leather journals. Book dust sparkled in the candlelight. On the other side of a titanic oak desk sat Mill, age-whitened sideburns spilling over his coat and collar. He never wore shirtsleeves. Even in dreams, he would not allow himself such informality.

Every night for a week, he would lean on the desk and say, “The foetuses are dying anyway. You know that. It’s silly to fret over the use of a by-product. You can implant those brains and heal people, or you can throw the foetus in the bin. It makes no difference to the foetus.”

“But it’s illegal in Australia!” I objected.

He smiled at me. “Illegal, eh? I have always maintained that Law and Morality are at best dancing partners, and clumsy ones at that. For every deft step, a hundred toes are trampled.”

Ever so slowly, the ghost of John Stuart Mill whittled away my objections, one moral sliver a day.

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Numis puts down the book and stretches his arms. He cannot believe his luck. This demented woman wrote down all the incriminating evidence he would need to fire the prosecutor’s engine. Numis is not aware that the law insists the defendant must be mentally fit to stand trial, even if the crimes were committed in a lucid state of mind. Numis is not a lawyer. He is familiar only with the Customs Act.

He looks over at Dejerine. She is rocking back and forward, staring out the window, still entranced by a view that has remained exactly the same for the last hour. A prison sentence is out of the question, but perhaps a conviction could act as a deterrent to others. He returns to the book.

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The clinic was called The Lucky Cat Hotel: “Lucky Cat” to appeal to superstitious millionaires, “Hotel” to conceal its purpose. My room had a million-dollar view over Kowloon Harbour, but unlike a hotel room it had a nurse’s buzzer and a medical dataport.

The hotel is ignored by the Chinese authorities, who find it a useful way of bringing hard currency to mainland China in exchange for thousands

of recycled foetus brains. I find it hard to imagine the Hong Kong of twenty years ago, when the ultra-capitalist port was an unwelcome barnacle on the hull of communist China. Now the old British colony is too moneyed to shut down, and China's bicycling masses give way to retired Maoists in Mercedes.

The "Hotel" reeked of pine and ammonia. The hospital must have spent a sizeable portion of its operating budget on disinfectant, which banished the spice and sweat and humidity that had nearly overwhelmed me when I first arrived in Hong Kong. In a melancholy mood, I got to thinking that all this sterility was driving away life itself. I thought life was more than happy children and sunny parks. Life was bacteria and fungi and virions. What the hell was I doing here? Then I looked down at my rolling hands and remembered what it was like to cut sushi from a slab of tuna meat. When Dr Tang came to talk, I signed all the consent forms.

Dr Tang took care of me. He explained the procedure, told me the graft had an eighty percent success rate, and assured me that all foetal tissue came from abortions that were to be performed anyway. Then I waited for a donor to match my immune markers. I only waited two days. Leon had waited three weeks.

The operation was seamless. I can't see the scar at all. Dr Tang drilled a needle through my skull into the *substantia nigra*, and injected a bolus of fresh young brain cells. Within a few weeks, the new brain cells had differentiated into nigral tissue, and my tremors waned dramatically.

I could use my hands again. People could read my handwriting. At last I could cook the way I had always loved cooking: with exquisite precision.

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Now Numis holds a written confession that Dejerine had bought an illegal graft; but her journal has not answered his main question: what did she do with the Lethe prions? Did she sell it to China as a biological weapon? Was it a trade — a weapon for a cure?

The sun has moved noticeably, but she still stares out the same window and her only movement is a gentle rocking, as if she is impatient for *something*. Numis cannot imagine what she could be waiting for. The next mealtime? The evening games shows on cable? A more entertaining visitor?

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The results of the surgery were stunning. I felt my dexterity renewed. The Parkinson's was a fading memory, just a sepia photograph of a long-dead disease. My hands did exactly what I asked of them. Tremors only affected my fingers when I was tired, and they were barely discernible even then.

When we met, Leon smiled at me and never said a word. I tried to thank him but he always cut me off. He did not want to hear the words. My improved health was enough for him. He knew I was grateful without being told, and for a while I really *was* grateful.

Then, just as I was adapting to my wonderful new hands, the pain started.

At first it only happened in my sleep. I woke curled up with pain and in a pall of sweat. I recalled dreaming about bright lights and a deep pain that I could not name. As soon as I awoke, the sensations disappeared, but the memory remained.

After a few nights waking at three am, I was exhausted.

Then the pains started during the day.

If I drifted off or daydreamed, I would be startled by the pain. Every day it seemed worse. It was a deep ache in the pit of my stomach, but I can describe it no better than that. I asked Leon about it, and he ran through a medical checklist of "character of pain": burning, i stabbing, shooting, electric, crushing, bloating. None of the words were adequate. The pain was too ill-defined to label. Leon said abdominal pain could be from the gut, the heart, the liver, the pancreas, the kidneys, the uterus, the abdominal lymph nodes, the lower surface of the lungs, the hips, or even from the psyche.

"Well, that sure narrows it down," I said. "I suppose that rules out maybe five percent of my body."

"I forgot about the spine. It could be nerve root irritation too."

"Thanks, Leon. You're a hypochondriac's best friend."

Leon looked worried. "None of this happened to me," he said. "I can't figure out what's causing it. You really should check it out with your doctor."

“Yeah, right. What should I tell her about the implant?”

Leon shrugged.

By the third month the pain was hitting me at any time of day, even when I was alert and concentrating. Once it hit me while I was overtaking a truck and I doubled up with pain, unable even to care about driving the car safely. I slid off to the other side of the road and hit the brakes just in time to stop myself scooting into the freeway barrier.

After that I took taxis everywhere.

Once the pain hit me while I was walking along the street. I fell to the pavement and then had to hide my embarrassment when a flock of Samaritans came to help me. I laughed the pain off. “Sometimes I just faint,” I said. I was not very convincing, but what was a bystander to think? They let me go on my way.

After that I rarely went out in public.

The pain even caught me once while I was preparing a Japanese meal. The sashimi knife sliced through my hand like warm butter. I needed twenty stitches and a tendon repair.

After that I stopped cooking.

I stowed away all the sharp objects in the house. I bought a personal medical alarm. Soon my life was so restricted that I began to wish I could turn back the clock. Parkinson’s was paradise in comparison.

Sometimes the pain came unaccompanied. Other times my field of vision would fill with strange patterns of light. I looked up a medical textbook. It could have been a migraine prodrome, but that would be more like shooting stars or blind spots, not at all like my strange visions. One possibility matched: temporal lobe epilepsy, which causes bizarre hallucinations. Sufferers can smell burning rubber, or sense objects shrinking around them, or experience extreme *déjà vu*; sometimes they even think they are walking in a forest only to wake up tied to a hospital bed. However, temporal lobe epilepsy could explain just about *any* symptom, and I would need a brain scan to investigate it. I was terrified of a scan showing the evidence of my illegal surgery.

Leon caught up with me at one of my rare appearances at work. He had been worried, and my feeble attempts at reassuring him only made him

more concerned.

“I think I have an answer,” he said. “Meet me tonight in my lab.”

“You’ve got a solution?”

“Just meet me.” His eyes looked away as he spoke. He was avoiding the question. So he had an answer, but not a solution. He had gone before I could ask why he made the distinction.

That night, at his lab, Leon showed me a maze. “I used this as a post-grad. It has sentimental value. I used it to replicate a classic experiment.”

“How does this help me, Leon?”

He looked at me sternly. “I’ll get to that.” He waved his hands over the maze. “It’s an unusual design because it’s made for *Planaria* flatworms. I’d put a worm at one end of the maze, food at another, and let the worm go. After a few hundred trials they would get pretty quick at doing the maze.

“I took all these trained worms and threw them in a blender. Worm puree. Then I fed the remains to another bunch of flatworms. Worms aren’t fussy, you see.”

“I guess not.”

“The amazing thing was, the new worms did the maze quickly. They were faster than a control group fed on a puree of *untrained* worms. They were also faster than a group of worms fed on the remains of worms trained in a *different* maze.”

“You were a Worm Runner?” I asked.

“Oh, yes. I even had a couple of articles in *The Worm Runner’s Digest*.”

“I had no idea you were that old!”

“Hey! The *Digest* only stopped publishing in 1979.”

I laughed. “I wasn’t even born.”

He coughed.

“Besides,” I asked, “wasn’t the research shown to be flawed?”

“Not exactly. It was equivocal.”

“Equivocal. You mean equivocal, equivocal? Or equivocal, there’s lots of black data in support that’s too politically sensitive to publish?”

“It means memory might be transferred in tissue from other animals’ brains.”

I laughed. “Leon, I never took you for a New Age mystic. Are you trying to tell me I’m remembering life as a foetus?”

He looked at me but said nothing. He was waiting for me to figure something out.

“Seriously, Leon. You’re not trying to tell me I’m having foetal flashbacks? Like I’m unborn again?”

“No,” he said. I was missing the point. “I had an implant too, but I’ve had none of your symptoms. Foetal brain tissue is probably too undifferentiated and too unstimulated to have any real memories in it.”

“So, if we both got foetal tissue, why is it only me with the pains?”

“It’s possible you didn’t get foetal tissue,” he said, and I felt a cold shiver as he spoke. “It had to be reasonably undifferentiated to work as a nigral implant, but already has memories.”

Then he was quiet again, damn him, waiting for the realisation to hit me. I cocked my head and tried to work out what he was getting at. His face gave away nothing.

The penny dropped. From a skyscraper.

“Like an infant?” I asked.

Leon nodded.

“Jesus. Why would they put infantile tissue in, when they could have used foetal tissue?”

Leon grimaced. "You haven't heard of the Dying Rooms? If they can recycle aborted foetal tissue, why not tissue from killed infants?"

I did not want to hear any more. "Why tell me this, Leon? It's a disgusting thought."

"It's better to know, isn't it?"

Not always, Leon, not always. I remember at your funeral wondering if knowledge had killed you, too. If you had never cracked the ISIS-24 trial code, the netridders might have left you alone.

* * * *

I dreamed that night that I was visited by the ghost of John Stuart Mill, or possibly my father. He was dressed in his formal suit. He spoke to me, his voice cold with certainty. By candlelight he tried to comfort me. He said, "There is no need for despair."

Fine for him to say! He could not share my feelings.

I told him, "I spent the day in the library reading about the Dying Rooms. In parts of rural China, baby girls are called 'maggots in the rice'. Under the one-child policy, no-one wants to squander their one chance at parenthood on a girl, so many babies are abandoned by their parents. The unwanted baby girls are brought to a room. There are up to twenty in a room at once. They are tied to chairs and left to starve. I can attest that they are too young to understand. Their pain is diffuse and undefined but the pain is real. The child whose memories I took suffered terribly."

John Stuart Mill said the infant would have died anyway: the Chinese have a one-child policy; boys are highly prized; therefore some parents will choose only to have boys; since antenatal testing and sperm selection is still unavailable in most of China, this inevitably leads some parents to abandon their daughters. Not many parents choose this option, but in a population over a billion, there will always be enough to keep the rooms filled.

I said, "And the Hong Kong clinics make enormous profits from those daughters. Those profits could be used to enable education campaigns to improve the status of girl children, or for sperm screening, or even for early antenatal testing. The profits could be turned to fix the problem rather than perpetuate it."

Mill was silent in thought a while, then said, “But *you* are not responsible for the situation in China. The killings would happen regardless. So it is no sin to benefit from it.”

“I *paid* for it. I helped finance the system.”

“No, those children would die anyway. Their pain is regrettable, but it is not your responsibility.”

“I *feel* responsible. I have eaten a child’s pain, and it is poison.”

He pondered again. His jaw clenched and relaxed as he chewed through his consternation, which made his sideburns wriggle up and down. His mind worked furiously at the problem. In his eyes I saw his certainty crack. No matter how he tried to shift and pivot, he was pinned on a moral spike; the same spike he had taught me, in his books, to use as a compass point. His face turned stony, then he stood up. His jacket creaked with age and dust fell from the sleeves.

He said, “Your pain is outside my theory.”

That night, in the moonlight of my dreaming, the ghost of John Stuart Mill hanged himself in the parlour, neatly. It had never occurred to me that ghosts could die.

The next evening, I dreamed again of his study, but he was gone. An empty noose swung gently from the rafters. In Mill’s place there was a dark, moist presence. I could feel it but never see it. It never moved but I could feel it watching me. A ghost of a ghost.

Once, and only once, the shadow spoke.

It said, “You know what to do.”

* * * *

Pathologists and food have an ancient marriage. Tuberculous pus is called *caseation*, from the Latin for cheese; horse blood is cooked to make *chocolate* agar; right heart failure causes *nutmeg* liver; diabetes mellitus means *honey* urine; people suffer *cucumber* gallbladder. Strawberries are particular favourites, leading to *strawberry* haemangiomas or, in Kawasaki’s disease, *strawberry* tongue. Well-differentiated lymphomas have a *raisin-like* appearance. Squeamish? Consider *miliary* tuberculosis, which

causes *sago* spleen. Autoimmune heart inflammation leads to *bread-and-butter* pericarditis; glomerulonephritis makes *cola* urine. If you have a truly strong constitution, you might consider *Swiss cheese* uterus, stomach acid acting on blood to make *coffee-grounds* vomitus, or my personal favourite: the post-mortem blood clot which separates, like boiled stock, into *chicken fat* and *redcurrant jelly*.

In ancient times, if you couldn't eat it, it wasn't pathology. I have merely carried on the relationship in a more palatable fashion.

I told Dr Tang how wonderful my implant was because I could cook again. It was so lovely to breathe in "coriander, and to taste garlic and lemongrass on my fingers. For the first time in months I could make proper *masala dosai*. I told him how grateful I was, and would he accept if I prepared a feast for him and his surgical colleagues next time I was in Hong Kong? He did not hesitate.

In Hong Kong I cooked one of my specialties: the lamb's brains. I soaked the brains in the Lethe prions I had stolen from the lab. Despite the change of recipe, they still tasted delicious. I served it up to Dr Tang and a few of his staff. I insisted on seconds for the tissue broker who had sold me the implant.

My guests loved it. They devoured every morsel.

Trojan *hors-d'oeuvres*, I call them. Just my little joke.

* * * *

Numis at last understands the purpose of the book. It is not, as he first suspected, a confession nor a request for absolution. It is a document designed to incriminate Dr Tang and the Lucky Cat Hotel, and the entire gulag of the death rooms. She has left a trail, hoping to be caught. She had already passed judgement on herself and executed her own sentence. It had such a glowing irony that she was unlikely to be punished further by the constabulary of Australia or China.

Mobilising Western nations against human rights abuses in trading partners has long been like rousing a snail to anger. Perhaps her revelations will move the great nations to outrage, maybe even China itself. Cynic that he is, Numis thinks any outrage will not come from the use of dead children to earn money. Rather, he imagines the statesmen and power-brokers of the world choking on their breakfast as they read in the

morning papers that their brain implants came from murdered girls.

What Numis does not realise is that Dr Leon Shy-Drager never existed. It is a code name, but she has lost the key in the Lethe. Dr Shy-Drager has a real-life analogue, dead three years now, but there are insufficient details in the text to make a positive identification. Dr Dejerine took great pains to protect her friend's memory from recrimination. Sadly, even the good memories will have to be carried by others. Her own memory is crumbling. She has a recurring image of a bearded man laughing, but she can no longer put a name to the face. She recalls a funeral, but no longer knows who died or why she wept.

Numis stands and tucks the book under his arm and picks up his tape recorder. Dejerine is still looking out her window. Only the shadows have moved.

"Thank you for your cooperation," he says gently. She does not hear him.

"Dr Dejerine? Hello?"

She whips around, startled. "Who the hell are you?" she screeches.

"Gerald Numis. Er ... Customs Investigator."

"Get the hell out, whoever you are!"

"I just wanted to say ..."

Dejerine starts screaming "Help! Help! Help!" with mechanical regularity.

Numis rushes out of the room, book safely tucked away in his jacket. The nurse who introduced him chuckles as he bolts for the exit.

"Don't fret, Mr Numis. At least she's not crying 'Rape!' like she did with her last visitor."

The doors slide open and he rushes into the carpark. He never thought asphalt and petrol fumes could be so reassuring. As Numis fiddles for his car keys, he can hear the faint "Help! Help! Help!" It reminds him of a distant car alarm. At this distance he feels no social obligation to help. He turns and looks back at the window to Dejerine's room and wonders now whether she was acting after all. Realising that he will never know, he

shrugs and blips the car.

Under his breath he mutters, “Mad old cow.” As he drives away, the image of rotting brains haunts him.

Back in her room, Dejerine is comforted by the nurse, whom she recognises.

“It’s okay. He’s gone now. He’s gone,” the nurse whispers in her ear.

Dejerine stops screaming and the tears roll down her cheek. “I was so scared! What did he want?”

“He just came to fix something. He’s gone now.” It is easier to lie than explain.

She settles, and turns back to the window. The nurse leaves, pleased to have calmed her before she disturbs another resident. Sometimes one resident’s distress can trigger another’s, and then another’s, in a screaming domino effect.

Dejerine looks out at the dusky light. Her eyes see a shape move in the distance. The image on her retina is as keen as a sashimi knife, but her disease reduces the crisp image to a cognitive blob drifting across her cortex. It could be a car leaving the grounds. Then the scene is still. She rocks back and forward again, soothed by the abstract clouds that filter through to consciousness. She tries to remember why she is impatient in this purgatory. She is bathing in the Lethe and her memory is slowly washing away in its waters. She feels cleaner every day.

As the sky darkens and the stars appear, she recalls what it is she so desperately awaits:

The fall of night.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

Why did I write this story? I was brainstorming titles for another story altogether and the title came to me — “Unborn Again”. I had no idea what it meant, but it sounded good. The title made me think of the foetal implants used for Parkinson’s disease, and the story concept was born. From there

the plot and characters arose. But I had a problem: I could not believe that foetal brain tissue would be sufficiently differentiated to carry coherent memories. It's a bit much for me to ask the reader to suspend disbelief when I couldn't do it myself.

After a few weeks soaking in my unconscious, the solution struck me: what if the tissue was not foetal? What if it came from neonates? From there I researched the Chinese Dying Rooms and learned that the truth was much worse than my imagination had allowed. Now I had a setting (partly in Hong Kong under Beijing) and a moral core (a *reductio ad absurdum* of utilitarianism). All that time I thought the story had been rotting, it had been composting.

So it is with some embarrassment that I confess "Unborn Again" was not inspired by moral outrage, but because I thought up a snappy title.

Where did the rest of the story come from? I can't really say. Thousands of bits of information; things I've read or seen; people I've spoken to; ideas that intrigued me ... neural implants and prion diseases, the handover of Hong Kong; internet censorship and research ethics; cuisine (the brains are based on a real recipe); pathology nomenclature; molecular theories of memory; philosophy and ethics; a few puns and inside jokes (Shy-Drager and Dejerine-Stotts are rare neurological diseases) ... all of these ingredients were thrown into the story. Probably no more than a handful of people have the right collection of trivia in their heads to have thought up this particular story. Likewise, I could never have conceived of most of my favourite stories, such as "Flowers For Algernon" or "Fondly Fahrenheit". The experiences and readings necessary to write those stories are outside my light-cone ... which is precisely why I read.

For the record, "Unborn Again" is *not* anti-abortion; nor, you may be surprised to read, is it anti-utilitarian. There's not enough room here to give a thorough explanation and I leave it to the inquiring reader to examine John Stuart Mill's philosophy, its triumphs and its limitations.

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China has a venerable tradition of oxymorons, from the People's Liberation Army to the Shanghai Children's Welfare Institute; the latter is responsible for orphans and disabled children. The Institute "cares" for many children, mostly girls. The orphanages are tough for all their wards, but those who are ill or require exceptional care — and sometimes those who are naughty or "just not good looking" — are marked for *jiudi jkjue*, or "Summary Resolution", a new entry in the Thesaurus of Euphemisms.

The existence of the Dying Rooms is denied by China, but their practices are documented by the United Nations, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch/Asia.

Thanks to One World Online for their excellent Web resource. You can find them at <http://www.oneworld.org> for superb coverage of international issues with a human rights angle.

Brian Woods, the journalist who covered the story, helped set up The Dying Rooms Trust, 68 Thames Road, London W4 3RE, United Kingdom.

Amnesty International can be found on the Web at <http://www.amnesty.org>.

Human Rights Watch can be contacted at 485 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10017-6104, USA.

— *Chris Lawson*