

The Mind Palace

The words rang out in his head like a reverberating snare cymbal filling every corner of his mind, although not abating in the way you would expect.

“You’ll be seeing your tart,” she said, slamming the door on the way out.

“Why the hell am I in this relationship?” he thought.

He knew implicitly the marriage he entered twelve years earlier was a sham, having been completely miserable for ten of those years. The realisation that it was over hit him soon after he discovered the union between Claire and he would never produce children and would ultimately only produce pain. It was on his side, he was told; low sperm count. “Low sperm count, how many sperm do you need?” he thought at the time. Children might have saved the relationship, or at least sustained a common interest.

The physical abuse followed shortly after the verbal stuff reached a plateau some five years hence. Her assaults grew, and were both vicious and unrelenting. It was a slap at first, then a punch, and then anything heavy she could lay her hands on. A favourite of hers was a walking stick, her father’s, which seemed to validate the strike. With her father’s stick in her hand, the strength and the might of him behind it, it almost compelled, justified, and forgave the action; just as it did when as child she hit the dog, the cat, and anything that moved.

She once killed a goat because it butted her. She was only twelve, but she planned its death meticulously. Responsible for its feed, she went into its pen every day, and threw the food into the field behind the byre. The goat became so weak it couldn’t stand, and just before the vet arrived to discover the reason for its deteriorating condition, she took her father’s shotgun and blasted its brains out, almost

knocking her back across the byre. She explained her actions as a mercy killing and, after all, she had seen her dad do similarly with other animals so many times before.

Given a chance, he knew she would do him proper. He remembered the day well: a sunny day offering a future and an escape with Jenny. She had rumpled it and had burned his passport. That day, he decided he was leaving and there would be no going back.

He pondered the thought as the bedroom door opened and she entered. As she did, he automatically shut his mind to her; a mental door slamming shut. He rushed into his Palace—his Mind Palace—just as the pain hit him; and just like that first decisive blow to the back of his neck; the one that disabled him, forever.

His physical body would never move again, but in there—in his mind—he ran along the internal corridor of his mind to escape the reality of his pain. In there, in his mind palace, he found a place without limits and total safety.

In its construction, he felt like a Pharaoh, with no financial, physical, or material constraints, building a palace of dreams, for the afterlife. His mind palace took *his* dreams to a place between subconscious and unconscious, but not for the afterlife, for this life, a life forever in his head.

The first door in, on the right, was always available as a portal from the unbearable reality to his free world.

He crashed through the door, as he did often, but this time he fell face down on his own, deserted, beach.

Shovelling the sand with his arms over his head, he felt the warmth of the sun on his back, the sand covering his head. He sighed and rolled over. He was on Camusdarroch beach in Arisaig; he remembered it from *Local Hero*. He rolled again and he was on the Lido in Venice, and then the Vendee in France - he remembered

them from holidays; happy times; and then any beach in the Caribbean, because he just knew they would be good. He sat up to see a bright turquoise sea. He was young, tanned, fit and pleased at the way he looked.

Today, this was to be his day; he looked forward to it and would enjoy it to the full. He pondered its prospect, confirming every detail in his mind.

Just then, a smack on his face fired him back, dragging him through a time warp. In a second, as his eyes opened, there she was standing over him. He was now back; to his paralysis, his prison, and his lifeless limbs: his shackles. Immediately, as if to take advantage, she forced a tube into his mouth. He felt the burning liquid enter his throat. It burnt its way down toward his stomach.

“Enjoy your soup now!” she said, taunting him.

But the burning heat triggered a mental reaction, transporting him instantaneously back to his beach, where he ran down its shore and plunged into the warm clear sea, covering his body in safe, warm water.

He was swimming now, and was free, strong, and alive. He dove down until he was amongst fish of blue, green, red and yellow. Swimming further down, he had no need of breath. Escorted by a dolphin, now well known to him, he held onto its fin. It took him further and further down, and there it was, a ship. It was the ship of his dreams, a large cruise ship that sank sometime around 1900.

Swimming to a porthole, he peered inside. Stewards were carrying trays of champagne. Ladies in ball gowns mustered around in groups, talking about the fashion of the day, and who was wearing what. Gentlemen in coats and tails stood at a bar. With a shove, he was in, and almost immediately, he was in fine Victorian clothes. Picking up an empty glass on the way, he made for the bar.

“More champagne, please?”

“Certainly, Sir.”

He accepted a large glass of champagne, took a large gulp and spun around, and there she was, Jenny, his Jenny. She was standing next to a petty officer and looked incredibly beautiful. He moved toward her, took her hand, and they were running down the corridor toward her cabin.

He was now fumbling with her stays, and then, with such ease, he was one with her, locked to her body and her mind. Breathing in her perfume, he delighted in the enormity of a stark, physical need for her. But just as ... bang, he was back.

His eyes were open and they circumvented the room. What brought him back? He thought it may have been that he was just too close to actual and total happiness, and he snapped back, or maybe the pain was just too much.

Anyway, he was back. In doing so, he saw, and felt, the stark reality of his predicament. His head was held tight in a clamp. The ceiling he knew like the inside of his head: a patchwork quilt; the flaking paint dripped like stalactites in a hellish cavern, which it was; and the pictures on the walls depicted the highland glens he would never again walk, just to torture him.

He could just about see the top of the window and if he forced his eyes way out of their sockets he could just make out the sky. This glimpse of the outside world was his only means of establishing whether it was night or day, and, depending on the amount of light, and whether he felt his lifeless body shiver, the season of the year. His real world existed in his head and no more from his eyes.

He heard only her ranting, scolding and abuse. He smelt only his excrement oozing into his colostomy bag, alongside the other bag for his blooded urine. He thought death couldn't be too long, maybe weeks, but most probably months; he dreaded years. She would keep him alive long enough to sustain his torture, and to

provide penance for daring to love and be loved. She was devoid of love. Oh sure, she cried buckets after his “accident”, until the insurance was settled. In time, any suspicion abated.

She had managed to convince the district nurses, who called every other day at the start that she could manage. She was a nurse after all, and if she needed help she would just ask for it. He was alone, with her, of that he was sure, and was surely lost. His broken neck and severed spinal cord made sure of that. In his sleep, he dreamt of demons, horrible creatures that crawled over him; the nightmares only depicting his reality. He tried to stay awake to avoid them, but his only real escape was into his head, to his Palace.

Its construction occurred spontaneously one day; a particularly bad day. He found himself in an imaginary place, a construct of the mind, and it *felt* safe. Immediately he knew it was a way of giving his internal world structure and meaning.

His first task was to construct a massive door which he bolted mentally and locked from inside. When shut, he *was* safe. There was no other way in and no need for windows.

He moved inside, and corridors grew before him like a long carpets unfurling in all directions, and all at the same time. He wandered one corridor and noticed a few doors, leading into a few select rooms.

One was his childhood room, where he could be transported back to his happiest days, with his mother, his friends, and his adventures.

In another, he was in a library the size of the British Library. Here, he would converse with Karl Marx, O’ Casey, and Gray, and immerse himself in the classics. He was also amongst *his* books and *his* writing.

In his music room, he played the fiddle in sessions with the best traditional musicians in the land. He found he could play mandolin, naturally.

In his pub room, he could drink and talk, and was always likely to meet old friends.

Then there was Jenny's room. She would be waiting for him, of course, perhaps with some dinner prepared. Occasionally, she was in bed and eager for him. Sometimes she was sitting by the fire reading. In there, he could sit and watch her for hours.

These rooms were enough in the old days, but as his need for adventure grew, so did his range of rooms. He toyed with a sex room for a while. In there, he could embark on any sexual fantasy he could ever wonder about or dream of. In there, there was no boundary, and every shape, size, colour of woman, and any perversion available to him. When he tired of women, he moved onto men, then both, but always went back to women.

His mountain room allowed his escape into the hills. Some hills he created, some he had still to climb. K2, Everest, or the Cobbler? Some he had climbed and wanted to return to. Aonach Eagach in Glencoe and Breariach in the Cairngorms, were musts. In the Lairig Ghru, he awoke with the dawn, the deer around his tent, and the burn running near to fill his kettle.

More rooms just happened. An interstellar room took him to new worlds, new inhabitants, and new life forms. Boldly going!

His history room took him to events in world history. He slept with Cleopatra, sailed with Cook, and walked with Livingston. He fought alongside his grandfather at the Somme. He helped Kennedy to live, to survive the coup, and to become the greatest of Presidents. He thought about killing Hitler and might yet!

His travel room had no boundaries. He travelled the States in a Ford Cougar picking up hitchhikers, staying in Bates type hotels; Norman beware! He walked the Great Wall of China and drank tea with the Dalai Lama; in Tibet.

There was a dark room, with no light and only touch to guide—to feel. He lay in silence rehearsing his coffin, but sometimes rolled around in mud baths with naked mud wrestlers, feeling a hundred hands caress every part of his body, his new life had such contrasts.

In his real world – sometimes - he lay in the dark. Although some light permeated through his closed eyelids, he wanted to sleep without the demons that invaded his dreams.

His mother's room was particularly special. Here, he could snuggle up against her, smell her perfume, feel her warmth; hear her voice, stroking his head and his hair. The words, "There, there, there," soothed him. He could smell and taste her cooking, in particular his favourite stew.

Just when all was good, there *she* was, banging on the outside door - drawing him back - as if she just knew he was happy. Sometimes, he resisted her and she let him be. Other times, she dug her nails into his ear lobes, demanding his return.

She was convinced he was in a coma once, but he was in his Palace and in Cuba at the time, fighting with Che Gevara at the Bay of Pigs. She brought in a Doctor; shone a medical torch into one of his pupils, illuminating the Palace like a search light, bringing him back. She later punished him by stuffing his excrement into his mouth, prompting a major stomach upset, but only after vomit slowly exuded from his mouth and nostrils, almost suffocating him. He took weeks to recover, physically.

There was one room in his Palace; a room he knew was for the end. He would enter there when he was ready. He wondered if there were two ways out: one, through a physical reality to his death, or two, into this room, to heaven or to ... , but he knew it would not lead to heaven, really. He doubted it would lead to hell, because that is where he was physically, but he wondered if it would lead to a release from both his physical and his fantasy world; perhaps to somewhere else?

He wondered whether he could remain in his Palace for eternity, but he knew it would crumble as he died. He had settled, at the right time, on entering his heaven room and into his departure lounge, as he called it. Here he had prepared the way. In there, he had all he needed to move over—through—cross into; become a ghost? Everything he wanted to take with him was there, a few items, some photographs, music, books, and items from his life.

The room was always waiting and was always available. He always knew she would eventually kill him and, in that reality, he would be ready, but he wanted to deny her that pleasure – move - just before she delivered the fateful blow, injection, pillow over the head, whatever, and, in control, leave through his departure room. She would then find him dead. That would show her he still had some control over his destiny. He was fearful, though, that he would wait too long, and she would act, for he knew not when.

One particular day he lay, thinking. It was dark; possibly early morning, and he knew she would be in bed. He allowed himself out of his Palace, through a safe portal to a spring morning, and, like a young rabbit outside its burrow, enjoyed the warmth of the sun. His eyes were open and he could just about see the sky. He heard the dawn chorus and delighted in the singing, chirping, and warbling of the birds.

He thought about taking off into the air and, closing his eyes, there he was, in his freedom room, like an eagle, launching himself off a cliff top.

He worried sometimes that he might confuse normal imagination, or even dreams, with his Palace. For him, this was a distinctly different consciousness. While normal imagination and dreams were overly exposed and vulnerable, his Palace was safe. In there, he could go anywhere, without intrusion or threat. She could normally get into his dreams and his imagination, and into his head, but she could not get into his mind, here she was denied access; the mental barrier: the massive door of his Palace.

He was now in the air, flying high over his house. He saw the garden he tended, the garage he had built, and the car he had bought. He flew over the hills behind the village and headed down towards the sea some twenty-four miles away. It was warm and he was now flying above his car.

He could see himself, behind the wheel, driving to see Jenny. His arm was hanging outside the car window with a cigarette in his fingers. "Filthy habit", he thought, as he headed along the bypass. The car was new and he knew it would have been early in his relationship with Jenny. He wanted to impress her and nearly ruined himself by buying the car that was way out of his meagre means, but he felt good in it. He was excited about the prospect of driving off towards the coast and to a woman who was both attractive and giving.

He swooped almost in front of the car, almost to say, "Here I am you poor bastard, your future," but he delighted in sharing, recounting, in one of the happiest times of his life. "God, is this a dream, memory, my imagination, or my Palace"; he really had to check himself.

And there she was, waiting at the bus stop, the rendezvous point where they always met, without ever acknowledging it.

She was beautiful and he was extremely in love with her. She had come into his life like an early spring overcoming a miserable winter. She wasn't from those parts, her family arriving from Canada some eight years earlier, but she was so different from everyone he had ever met, especially his wife. He had been tempted before, but loyalty, guilt, conscience or pure practical circumstances, prevented him from straying, but she was worth risking all.

He met her at a conference and knew from that day she would change his life. He had no control after that. She was in a loveless marriage and fell headlong with him into a passionate affair. He could only hope to conceal their love until it was time for them to leave, but it was not to be, *she* would see to that.

The Palace had given him the ability and opportunity to return and revel in those halcyon days. He knew just about every word he had ever said to her, every word she had ever said to him. In truth, he filled in lots of spaces; don't we all. He had spent months in his diary room, documenting their every movement, and had massive logs of their times together. Every now and again, he remembered something new, and he would return there to confirm it, or just to enjoy it all over again, but he knew he could never again feel his arms around her, in a physical sense, or have the feel of her body, or experience the sensation of making love to her.

But, in there, in his Palace, he could hear her voice, could just about smell her perfume, see everything they had ever done together, have some form of transcendental experience the yogi talk about; but he missed her physical presence so much.

He knew that he would never experience her properly, and this thought just about destroyed him. This normally sent him back to the physical world, but not for long before he had to return, shuttling back and forth like a bagatelle.

He compiled memory files, in chronological order from the minute he met her, covering everything they ever did together, and everything he did in anticipation of being with her. Like buying the car, and like eventually telling his wife, which proved to be the stupidest thing he ever did.

“She had to be told,” he thought, she deserved to know. “She would accept it,” he thought. After all, he couldn’t give her children, and she could move onto a man who could. They could deal with it like adults and find some kind of agreement, but he didn’t count on her rage and her, damaged - so very damaged - personality.

He was so in love with Jenny, so looking forward to a new life, and he thought everyone around him felt the same. He even found some peace with his wife in those days, as if Jenny had filled his life with some happiness, making life at home almost tolerable.

In those days, he felt something in himself, something realised because of Jenny. He thought this a complete love in many ways. It invigorated him; it made him feel like a man, and confirmed for him the reason for living. He was truly, truly happy, and knew if he had died then, then he had known love.

After his injury, he tried to contact her through the district nurses, for he knew she would have been told of his terrible injuries and that he had no consciousness. “Brain dead” he heard her say to some of his friends who came to the house, not allowed to enter the room. “It would be too upsetting,” he also heard her say.

He knew she would have tried to reach him, but also knew that *she* would have used all her powers to keep her away from him.

He wasn't sure what happened to her, whether she remained in town, in her sham of a marriage. He was reasonably confident that their love would have prompted her to get out and maybe find love with someone else. She would have never have loved another, she had said, but he knew if she was now denied love in her life, she would have found something with another, and some semblance of happiness.

He hoped she would never forget him. She had said if she ever lost him, she would keep her love for him in a box, until they met again. His Palace, her box; this thought intrigued him. He cried for her every night and knew she would have cried for him; although by now, she may have moved on. His Palace was as much a shrine to her, as it was his escape, and very often, she was also part of his escape.

Spring would arrive soon. He could feel the chill air submit to the warmth of the sun's rays which flooded his room. The days were longer now. He had worked out that the clocks had just been put back, by the amount of light and the time she entered the room each morning. It must have been around the beginning of April, he thought. It might soon be his birthday and he would be fifty-one. He had no real way of knowing this as she would not have told him.

She had hit him in August and he was in hospital for over three months, arriving back there just before Christmas. Great Christmas that, he thought.

The early days in hospital going through the clinical dealings to establish the damage and to try to achieve a degree of rehabilitation, were both demeaning and degrading. He thought about the need to escape into his own head in those early days and had initial thoughts about *a Palace*. Not that there was any great pain in the early days, he was oblivious to pain then. The pain came later when she withdrew his pain killing drugs.

At first, he tried some meditation techniques to cope with and ameliorate the pain. He used a technique called “the Rock”, where he would completely detach himself from the evasions into his body, and steeled himself against any indignity or shock.

He also used a technique where he would focus on a point in his vision. He started with a picture, in the hospital ward, of the Taj Mahal. He would concentrate intently on the copula of the majestic building, and count down from one hundred, until, with practice, he could detach himself completely from all that went on around him.

He would meditate for hours at a time, and during these times he seemed impervious to any medical procedures, and oblivious to the attempts of the physiotherapist to get his legs and arms moving, not that they would ever work on their own ever again.

Never properly told, he knew implicitly that he would never be able to move any part of himself from the neck down. He fought hard against the depression that followed. The construction of the Palace replaced some of his loss with something new. They say that helps in depression.

His marriage to Claire was a way to retreat from his mother who needed his support and away from a father he wanted to hurt. He needed an out and she was it.

She was a gregarious and pushy sort and he was easy prey, reasonably attractive in a vulnerable way, and she knew she would eventually dominate him. To the shame of his father, who didn't rate her very highly, they were married. At the same time they bought a small one bedroom tenement flat in the centre of the village. Shortly after, he dropped out of school and found a job in the local library, infuriating

his father even more. He was out of his control and away from the brutality. He loved it there as it allowed him access to books of every description.

They moved into a one bedroom flat. She seemed good for him at first and brought him out of his shell somewhat. They became quite popular around the town at parties where—for a while—they both drank too much. The extravagant and eccentric, generally wearing loud clothes and makeup, invariably attended these parties.

In those days, she experimented with a range of wild colourful clothes, while he never deviated from Levis and sweatshirts. She always drank more than he did, and regularly he would pour her into a taxi, home, and into bed. She eventually grew bored of him as he tired of her need to drag him along to entertain her flamboyant friends. She had a skill in insulting him to his face, without him knowing.

The assaults began when it was clear that he would not conform to her lifestyle, preferring to sit alone at home with his books and music. The hitting started mostly when she arrived home after the parties. She was infuriated when he refused to acknowledge him as she entered the room; he, as he was normally, deep in a book at the time.

He was so absorbed and completely missed the shoe that spun across the room that hit him square on the face, nearly blinding him on the one eye. She then launched herself at him, clawing at his face viciously with her nails. He fought her off and managed to reach the safety of the bathroom, locking the door. She kicked and battered the door with all her might, but it held fast. He stemmed the blood with towels and cold water, and left the bathroom as he heard her going to the bedroom, continuing her ranting and raving as she went. He slept, well away from her that night, in the living room with a chair prised against the handle of the door for some

protection. The scratches and injuries to his face were evident the morning after. She apologised slightly to him, but blamed him for the incident. “You never acknowledge me like other men do - it served you right. You were lucky I didn’t do you proper.”

Well, later she did.

Although adventurous as a young man, he was never sporty. He had never learned to swim, or play football, and always felt odd. Building the Palace to overcome his terrible reality, he found it balanced some inadequacies he had felt earlier in his physical life.

In his Palace, he could be the hero from his books, the star from the silver screen. Kirk Douglas in *Spartacus*, Burt Lancaster in the *Pirate of Penzance*. Sometimes his heroes transcended both his books and the movies. Jules Verne: *The Time Machine*; *Twenty Leagues Under The Sea*; *Gulliver’s Travels* and *The Count of Monte Christo*. He could enjoy the movie or the story in anyway he desired, in any location, and with any ending.

The Time Machine was of particular interest to him, and, at the controls of the machine he was Rod Taylor manipulating the controls deftly travelling one year at a time. He, not intentionally though, found himself leapfrogging back forty years to his childhood, and back among his family.

It was a cold winter evening and his mother was at her sewing machine, a Singer, next to the open fire. It was calm and warm, and there he was in the corner playing with his toy soldiers, an eleven-year-old boy. The radio was on. Doris Day was singing ‘Que Sera Sera’, his mother humming along. It was a scene that filled his heart, but every few minutes she looked anxiously at the old mahogany clock on the mantelpiece.

“Time you were in bed, wee fella,” his mother said, and again she looked at the clock. “It’s nearly nine o’clock, son.”

“Not yet mammy.”

“I want you in bed before your dad comes in.”

There was a fear in both of their eyes. Just then, there was a noise of the outside door closing. Both of them sat up startled, the living room door opened, and there he was, just as he remembered him, standing there in all his glory, and in all his brutality.

Just then, he wanted to intervene, to protect him, his childhood, his mother, but he knew to change this, would be to change himself, and to do that, to change his history, and maybe his time with Jenny, and this was too much to risk.

He resigned to leave, and left there with an extremely heavy heart, but he knew he would be back. “The bastard would not get away with it,” he thought. He pondered with the idea of turning up at the door, as a hit man with a contract for him. “He would cut his throat at the door,” he thought, and then he worried about the upset it would cause his mother, as she tried to remove the stain on her new linoleum. Life presents terrible conflicts.

He entered his time machine and raced onwards, fifty years; then ten years on from his injury. He was now back in the marital home, and it was different. The house was empty, the furniture and décor completely different. He was gone and she was gone. He had no idea whether she was alive or dead.

The Time Machine took him back. He wanted to make sure she was dead, and the only way to be sure of this would be for him to kill her. At first, when he had this idea, he discounted it completely out of hand. How could he do it, he was completely

disabled. Anyway, she was intent in killing him, and he wasn't going to resist that, but not before he stepped into his departure lounge, and the sooner the better.

Exploring this idea in his Palace, he came up with a plan. He sat in his library room, a good place for inspiration. He could not kill her with his hands, but he could with his mind, which he knew was superior to hers. She would take her own life, that's it, he was pleased with his work, it took him all of fifty seconds. The process would take longer.

But his body was immobile and his Palace an abstract world, so what could he do; how could he do it? He must turn her against herself, he thought, and redirect the rage she had for him toward herself; but how could it be done? There was only one way: with his eyes, with his heart, and with his mind. Yes, that is it, he thought, but he was distracted.

"What are you doin' up at this time," his dad growled. He was back in his house of fears.

"He's just goin' now... . You're home early the night."

"Well, they said I had too much."

He slumped into the large armchair, extremely drunk.

"Should you not be going to bed yourself," his mother said in a trembling voice.

At this, his demeanour changed. He rose and towered over both of them. Mother and son held each other, and waited for the inevitable. They both felt the bony back of his hand as it hit them both, almost simultaneously. She cried out loud, he just cried inside.

As a boy, he had always been an adventurous sort, but quite solitary, preferring his own company where he would ramble amongst the hills and burns,

creating his own world; and in his bed at night before he fell asleep, he would explore all his favourite places in his mind.

Sometimes in his mind, adventures were difficult to separate from his reality; although, his rich imagination paid dividends at school, where he excelled in English. His compositions were always full of exploration and exciting adventures; his childhood wanderings, an escape from an overly restrictive and alcoholic father, who completely dominated everything.

He sought expression outwith the family home, and avoided returning home when his father was drunk, which was most times, when he would be hit for missing dinner, grabbed by the neck, thrown into his room, and into his bed.

This was fine, he always thought, as it allowed him the solitude he so fervently desired. So, this was no great punishment, although his father thought it to be. It allowed him an escape from his brutal ways and a chance to enjoy his trips into his imagination.

As she always did when his father fell asleep, snoring loudly in his armchair by the fire, his mother snuck a sandwich and a glass of milk into his room.

As he looked down upon this scene, he saw the boy and the antecedents of the man; his developing mind; his future world; his loves and his hates: his Mind Palace.