

Motorway Phobia By Kate Morris - The Times

I am driving on the M4, feeling as though I am stuck on a macabre conveyor belt, which will end in death. All around me, lorries are thundering past, aggressive drivers are inching up right behind me at recklessly fast speeds and I am panicking because it seems impossible to stop or get off. I am imagining a whole series of morbid scenes – the tyre will burst, I will lose control and the car will swerve into the crash barrier. Whatever happens we will all die. My heart is palpitating, my hands are clammy and my breath sounds strange and unnatural. My ten-year-old son asks me why I am panting. I slow down to 30mph and wonder if I will make to the layby. I am shaking and sweating. I try not to cry.

My last serious panic attack on the motorway happened two years ago and was exactly like that. Last summer I drove on the motorway for the first time since then, and only because I went to see a hypnotherapist. I am slowly regaining my confidence, but when I read about the pile up on the M5 in Somerset in which 7 people died and 51 were injured, I felt myself regress. I have been a nervous driver and passenger since I was sixteen and broke my femur in a horrific car crash, which I was lucky enough to survive. I imagine

I will always be nervous, but I know I am not alone. In a recent survey of 13,905 AA members, only 44% of the women surveyed said they felt confident driving on the motorway.

Last summer, after a panic attack on the three-lane Westway in London - which at the time only had a 30pmh speed limit - I booked to see hypnotherapist and psychotherapist Charles Montagu, who had been highly recommended. He suggested that I was suffering from post-traumatic stress from my accident so many years before. He guided me in some breathing exercises and finally hypnotized me, addressing my subconscious. It was hard to believe that it could work, but three days after my first appointment, I drove up the M11 with my husband in the passenger seat, breathing deeply and repeating the mantra “I am relaxed and in control.” My husband probably thought I was mad.

I have driven on the motorway a few times since then, but not yet alone. I still wonder whether I will ever be able to drive up the motorway like a normal person, without even thinking about it. The artist Polly Morgan told me that when she drives on the motorway she is in a ‘constant state of heightened awareness that she is in a potentially life threatening situation.’

This is exactly how I feel if I am brave enough to drive on the motorway, although there have been fleeting moments, when I think of nothing, or just enjoy a conversation.

Dr Henrietta Bowden-Jones, Consultant psychiatrist, ventral North West London NHS Foundation Trust, explains that my problem can be classed “as a specific (isolated) phobia. These phobias are restricted to highly specific situations,” In my case, driving on the motorway. “The trigger was the accident at 16 but the contact with motorways in later life is able to produce high levels of anxiety or indeed panic attacks.”

According to ex Police advanced driver Phil Truss, who instructed me on a Drive Alive DAD (Driving Anxiety Disorder) course which I booked after news of the M5 crash, it’s “mostly women who are afraid of driving on the motorways, maybe because men are too macho to admit it.” Managing director, Michael Sweeting agrees that women are much more willing to ask for help. “Quite often they just need reassurance to build their confidence.” In the ten years that he has been helping people with driving disorder, he doesn’t recall one man who has admitted to any kind of fear on the road,

although Montagu has seen a few.

Obviously the severity of the paranoia depends on the individual– some women start fearing the motorway after their children are born, because they are conscious of not wanting to put themselves in potential danger. My fear really took hold after I met my husband and became accustomed to him driving on the motorway, so that on the few occasions that I did drive, I became overtly conscious of what I was doing and it seemed terrifying.

Polly Morgan’s anxiety, also started when she met her partner and he always drove on the motorway. When she attempted to drive after he was tired and needed a break, she had a “total, consuming, crippling attack.” At one point in desperation she emailed Darren Brown offering to barter her work if he would cure her, but he failed to respond. When she split up with her partner, she bought a car and confronted her anxiety by forcing herself drive short distances up the motorway to see her sister. The more she practiced the better it became, until one day it lifted and has never been quite so severe since.

Jenny Jones, a teacher, had sessions of cognitive therapy for her motorway phobia. What finally cracked it for her though, “was having to put the whole

thing in perspective. When my mother suddenly needed me at home in the country as my father was vomiting blood, I had to make the decision that getting to my father was more important than my fear.” Another woman I spoke to admitted she would sometimes fantasise about crashing into the car ahead, just to end the nightmare of driving up the motorway. After being rescued by police in a lay by, she was enlisted the help of a psychotherapist and ex police driver and embarked on a structured course; she has been a confident driver since.

Not everyone is able to find the strength to get help. Angie Barry, a stylist has not been able to drive on the motorway since her daughter was born 20 years ago. Charles Montagu explains that an anxiety can develop into a full blown phobia over time and gain in intensity. “The bigger it becomes, the smaller we feel. We get to a point when the irrational fear is disproportionate to the risk and inhibits our ability to live life fully and freely. That is the point we should seek help.” “Something happened when she was born,” Barry says, “lorries on the motorway turned me into a basket case. When my daughter went to boarding school I couldn’t drive myself down to see her and hated myself because of it. Over the years I have booked serious motorway driving lessons and then cancelled them. It didn’t help that we

lived near one of the most dangerous roads for fatal accidents, the A361 near Exeter and I would get into a state and my ex husband would tell me I was not driving properly.”

The author Susan Hill has been driving since 1965, but chose not to drive on the motorway four years ago because as she says, “I decided it wasn’t good for my blood pressure.” In the past she had behavioral psychologist treatment for general driving phobia which she says worked ‘brilliantly and quickly’ but she still avoids motorways. “I don’t like the speed of the motorway, plus knowing you can't stop that easily and that when there is a crash it seems to be major and involve so many. Fear begets fear, so I don’t bother any more.”

Mitey Roche a writer who lives in rural France, insists that her decision not to drive on motorways is not a phobia. “I think my fear is rational. What happened in Somerset could happen any second anywhere. All it takes is one mistake. There are too many cars on the roads. In France they only have two lanes and people are going a minimum of 130km an hour, including trucks. I don't fear driving in the States simply because people go slower and the lanes are wider. I am looking to buy a house near a station, so that I don’t

have to drive any more.”

During my sessions with Montagu, he reiterated that motorways are statistically safer places to drive than anywhere else, but for someone like me it's hard to believe that is true. Researching this article I found out that Department of Transport figures confirm that UK motorways are safer than other roads. In 2010, 1910 people were killed on British roads. Most fatalities occurred on rural A roads with a further 22% on other rural roads, 32% on urban roads and only 6% of fatalities occurring on motorways, these facts do comfort me a little.

On the morning of the DAD course, my apprehension at the slightly strange situation of going out in my car with an ex police driver, Phil, was surpassed by how embarrassed I was to see him wipe squashed popcorn from the passenger seat of my car. We drove to the motorway and he kept up a running commentary of what was happening on the road, which was slightly odd, but rather useful and I exited the slip-road onto the motorway - a real trigger point for me -feeling safe. There was not much traffic and I was being accompanied, so I am still unsure how it will be when I drive on my own.

The following day when I rang Charles Montagu to make a top up appointment, he made a reassuring and extremely good point, “The only reason the crash on the M5 was headline news, is because it is such an unusual event. If it were a usual occurrence- it would have been a small item on page five. Motorway drivers usually have a very mundane time of it.” I think in the end he’s right.

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The Yemen by Kate Morris - Vogue

Long before I was married and became a mother, I was invited to join four writers and two photographers who were travelling to the Yemen. I barely knew where the Yemen was, but it sounded exotic and enticing, and I soon

discovered that it lies between the Red and Arabian Seas. It was November, 1996, and as the date of departure grew closer, I learnt more, and became excited about seeing the mud tower houses in the desert, the stone dwellings in the mountains, and the conical clay huts in the Tihama.

We were lucky to travel to the Yemen when we did. The latest news from The Foreign and Commonwealth Office advise against all travel to Yemen and strongly urges British nationals to leave. They warn that there is a high threat from terrorism throughout Yemen and specific methods of attack are evolving and increasing in sophistication. Not only did we not experience any hostility or threat, but we were treated very well.

I packed long skirts and scarfs to cover my head and flew to San'a, the capital of the Yemen. The old walled city has been occupied for over 2,500 years and is a world heritage Unesco site. The first morning, I strolled outside to find medieval tower houses rising like sculpted cakes and the decorative window surrounds dripping like white icing. The men – (many of whom strode around hand in hand) wore red and white check turbans, sarongs and swashbuckling jambiyas (ceremonial daggers worn at the waist). The city was bleakly devoid of women and the couple that we

eventually came across, were veiled head to foot in black. In the souk we passed a mad man, shackled at the wrists and ankles, shuffling through the juice bars and fruit and vegetable displays with a haunted, wild, expression.

One of the group, a photographer, (who was later to become my husband) beckoned me down some stairs toward the frenzied sound of drumming, into a dark cellar lit by bare, swinging light bulbs. Men squatted on the floor, cheeks bulging with qat, dealing the narcotic leaf, to men who lined up to buy it.

Later that evening, we met Tim Mackintosh Smith, the writer and Arabist, who has lived in the Yemen for more than thirty years, in the summit of a mediaeval tower. He was wearing a long flowing gown, chewing qat and sporting a huge beard. He offered us black tea with cardamom, and we chatted over the haunting backdrop of the Call to Prayer, from one of minarets nearby. He was working on what would become *Yemen: Travels in Dictionary Land*, which won the Thomas Cook/*Daily Telegraph* Travel Book Award in 1998.

The following day we set off in a Toyota Landcruiser driven by a man called Hussain. He had weary brown eyes and owned an English/Arabic phrase book, with quaint phrases and illustrations and answered ‘no problem no problem’ to our every request. We were all charmed by him immediately. We were heading for the Hadhramaut, which extends from the coast to the Arabian Sea to the southern deserts. When we reached Ma’rib, 120 miles East of Sana’a, Hussain led us to a restaurant, where tribal men had laid down their AK47 rifles to eat grilled chicken, garlic beans and flat bread. There were no women in the café, although a female beggar sat on the doorstep collecting leftovers. Later that day we visited old Ma’rib, an almost deserted mud town set high on a hill. I wrote in my diary: *“dark eerie windows in the baked towers look like the eyes of Antony Gormley sculptures. An unveiled peasant woman dressed in red scavenges among the decaying houses for firewood and a three legged donkey lies exhausted in the road.”*

On the third day we embarked on a journey to cross “the empty quarter” a desert, covering 250,000 square miles of southern Arabia. Wilfred Thesiger, the legendary explorer of Arabia, described it as 'a bitter, desiccated land that knows nothing of gentleness or ease ... a cruel land that can cast a spell

which no temperate climate can match'. We bumped across the dunes, driven by an angry young Bedouin in a white turban and another man who sat cradling his machine gun on his lap. After a long, hot dusty drive we eventually reached the ancient town of Shabwa, built from granite volcanic rock, where the derelict houses are sculpted against a backdrop of black mountains. Later that day, we passed Shibam, a sixteenth century walled town, which guidebooks call 'the Manhattan of the Desert.' From a distance the medieval mud skyscrapers are truly staggering to behold, magnificent and beautiful. Located at an important caravan halt on the spice and incense route across the Southern Arabian plateau, the city of dwellings up to seven storeys high are developed on a fortified, rectangular grid plan of streets and squares. We left Shibam as long shadows played on the ribbed sand of the dunes.

By day 4 we had reached Tarim, a dusty, desert town where men were playing lazy games of dominoes and chess. There were no ceremonial daggers around their waists and the pace of life seemed gentle. Goats, chicken and donkeys wandered through the souk and unlike Sana'a, not many of the men were chewing qat; it is not grown in the region.

On the long drive to Mukhalla a troop of baboons were squatting on the lunar landscape. We stopped at an ancient mountain village where men were making bricks, and one of our group, Annabel, bought some honey that the Yemenis claimed was an aphrodisiac. The port town of Mukhalla was filthy and pungent and the men wore Westernized jackets. It was nothing like Freya Stark's description of 1935, "Tall houses every shade of white and grey... a naked crowd with brilliant loincloths and turbans." We spent a day at the beach, mesmerized by a large school of dolphins.

Back in Sana'a, we were invited to Hussain's house for lunch, one of the highlights of the trip. We removed our shoes at the front door, and then sat on the carpeted floor lined with hard cushions and bolsters. We were served fenugreek stew and doughy bits of bread dipped in a herby soup with chives, and brought in by a dutiful smiling son. Hussain's daughters, wife and mother remained firmly out of sight, but we caught glimpses of them when we said goodbye, before Hussain's wife hastily covered her face.

It was a long, winding drive to Ta'izz, high up in the mountains – a cosmopolitan town with lots of cafes and shops, where many of the women were unveiled. We visited the Ashrafiya Mosque, a white building at the top

of the old town built with minimalist-style arches and tall narrow walkways that kept it cool.

Towards the end of our trip we reached Al-Khawkha, once an important coffee exporting port and the biggest fishing village on the southern coast of the Red Sea. In better times it is touted as a tourist resort. We saw beautiful, unveiled women wearing long, patterned dresses, walking freely through sandy palm groves. Walking by the coast, we passed colourful fishing boats and saw flamingoes, sea eagles and sandpipers.

The next day we visited Zabid, one of the oldest towns in the Yemen, and on the Unesco World Heritage List after Shibam and San'a. It was the capital of Yemen from the 13th to the 15th century and a center of the Arab and Muslim world due in large part to its University of Zabid. In 2000, Zabid was listed on the list of world heritage sites in danger, due to a state of poor upkeep and conservation. Sadly when we visited it was in a state of disrepair.

The last couple of days in the Yemen, we drove back to San'a along the dried up Wadi Sari. We saw weaverbird nests, girls carrying firewood on

their heads, and boys selling bananas. The mountain houses were made of coloured patterned stones and the temperature dropped as we reached Thilla, situated above a sloping basin of terraced fields where we ate our last lunch. At the end of a magical journey it was as though we had visited several different countries within one, mediaeval cities, desert towns, coastal resorts, and mountainous regions. It was a deeply romantic and memorable journey, and one that I will never forget.

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Boarding School By Kate Morris – The Times

It was the mid seventies, I was ten and my parent's marriage was floundering. Having devoured Enid Blyton's boarding school stories, *Malory Towers* and *St Clare's*, and inspired by the adventures of Darrell who played 'pranks' and went to midnight feasts, I expressed an interest in boarding. My parents went to visit a clutch of country schools and when they told me they had chosen one, it already seemed too late to change my mind.

The recent press about boys who suffered abuse at prep schools, such as Ashdown House and Caldicott during the sixties and seventies is harrowing to read, and the Bafta award-winning 2008 documentary *Chosen*, is compelling but heart-wrenching viewing - three middle-aged men reveal how they were abused by three different masters at Caldicott. It occurred to me that there have been no revelations, (that I know of) about girls boarding

schools in the same era. Although I was not sexually abused and my experience can't compare to that unimaginable horror, I was emotionally and psychologically abused, and my time at school has had a detrimental effect on my psyche, leaving me at times angry and sad.

My father boarded from the age of seven, and a few of my parent's friends had children at boarding school so they considered it normal to be sent away. In September 1975, I was due to start at a school I had never even seen – unthinkable now when children are given choices. My mother tried to assuage my last minute fears saying it would be so much better to be at school in the country, rather than make a daily commute on the tube. It was to this supposedly privileged and expensive environment that I arrived with my new trunk piled neatly with labelled uniform including four pairs of huge grey knickers (we called them grey bags) that were worn on top of your underwear. Every morning, at 7.00, we would line up in front of the truculent matron and lift up our skirts so that she could make sure we were wearing them.

Outwardly it seemed that I was being given an elite education. The school, a former stately home that was situated in 25 acres of parkland was huge and

imposing. My first day of the term, I remember the heavy sense of impending doom, as my parents waited for me to go off and play with someone before they turned and left. I would see them for just two Saturday nights and one short half term over the next three months. We were only allowed to write letters on a Sunday.

The sense of abandonment stays with many children who board and severe abandonment issues revisited me in later relationships. It's only since I got married fifteen years ago that I began to feel secure. I am perhaps too vigilant with my own children, afraid that they will suffer in silence like I did. Nick Duffell a psychotherapy trainer, and author of *The Making of Them: The British Attitude to Children and the Boarding School System*, (2000), and *Wounded Leaders: British Elitism and the Entitlement Illusion – a Psychohistory* (2014) explains that, “children (who board) have nowhere to go with their feelings of abandonment, so they learn dissociation, which becomes a lifetime habit. Without being able to feel you cannot be empathic, which is why ex-boarders inevitably have difficulties in loving and letting love in.”

That first day was the beginning of what I consider a five-year sentence at a penal institution; growing up in an environment where we were taken care of by people who did not appear to even *like* children –stuffy old women who were mostly bitter and uncaring. When problems arose - about homework or friendships – they seemed insurmountable and loomed dark and huge, festering inside. I was often criticized about my messy appearance and deportment, but no one seemed to care about my mental health.

In those days, children were shockingly unprotected– the Children’s Act and Ofsted inspections were both inaugurated in 1984 and so there was no body that regulated our welfare. The ISC (independent School Council) only began inspecting boarding conditions in 2012. Our environment was at the best Spartan – no heating or curtains in the dormitories, our hair roughly washed for the first two years, fortnightly, by local women. It was paradoxical that we were considered old enough to be sent out in the world alone, but not mature enough to wash our own hair. It was prohibited to personalise our living space, a standard requirement now, and our loo paper was like tracing paper, (awful for girls) our bath times restricted to three a week. There was nowhere comfortable to sit; the beds were narrow like coffins and hard. We often used to chat pressed against the warm pipes in

the basement, as we were so cold. When my beloved grandmother died, it was my housemistress who delivered the news and she did not make a move to comfort me.

The teachers were uninspiring, apart from one, my English teacher who read Shakespeare with some delicacy but soon left. **One housemistresses' breath always smelt of alcohol, another couldn't see and marked according to how many pages had been written, a A for lots of pages.**

The boredom and tedium, the cold and the hunger are things that stand out. The food was inedible and unhealthy, inappropriate for growing girls. We had tinned tomato crumble, powdered eggs, spam and cold pilchards. For tea there was as much white bread and sugary jam as you could stuff in your mouth.

The suppression of any kind of individuality, by imposing too many rules and regulations, and giving us no choices or freedom was very depressing. Our morals were guided in a rigorous fashion; we were only allowed to read the *Daily Telegraph* and the head-teacher, an unmarried woman, told us confirmation girls that abortion was evil. Our sex talk amounted to a little old lady who intimated that if we had “you know what” we could get

pregnant and demonstrated that by putting a doll in a shoe box: The shoebox was meant to be the womb and the doll slid through a hole at the other end, that represented the vagina.

The most difficult and distressing time was during my last two years, from the age of 14 to 16. A housemistress (from a different house to mine) singled me out for sadistic treatment. Perhaps she was jealous of the fact that I was an attractive teenager, whereas she resembled a Halloween ghoul. She would appear almost nightly in my dormitory and as a punishment for 'talking' she would pick me out and force me to stand in the chilly dark corridor. Hours later she would reappear saying she had "forgotten" me. Finally she gave up on the corridor and arranged solitary confinement in a dormitory on my own, where I was banished for a term. My sense of rage and injustice sits with me still. It was frightening and lonely in the vast room and without my friends, life at boarding school became insufferable.

My parents were unaware of what was going on because I was not in the habit of confiding in them. One telephone box was provided for over 300 girls and there was always a queue outside. Children get used to coping on their own and I had hardened and detached. Nick Duffell confers,

“Prematurely separated from home and family, from love and touch, all boarding children must speedily survive on their own. Whether they get bullied or abused or not, this survival is the problem.”

Somehow we got through the years by forging close friendships and smoking illicit cigarettes. My friends replaced my family but I morphed from being a good student who had been head girl at my London prep school, to a frustrated rebel, who became increasingly disenchanted and rallied more and more against my incarceration. One friend, who took years to recover from her experience, remembers her boyfriend visiting her at school and being told she was a “sinner” and would no longer be allowed into “God’s House to worship.” Another friend at another girl’s school remembers a girl of six having her teddy bear cut up with scissors by a matron, because she had peed in the. **My best friend was asked by the games mistress to pull her pants down to prove she had her period, when she said she couldn’t swim, (tampons were prohibited) and on another occasion was slapped across the face by her housemistress for answering back.**

Thankfully times have changed and some children, particularly those who enjoy life outdoors and a packed agenda appear to thrive at boarding school. Kate Chancellor a psychotherapist who specializes in young people is cognizant that boarding schools today offer a different experience, “largely due to much stricter criteria imposed by Ofsted, particularly regarding pastoral care. Children can see their parents at weekends and communicate regularly.” However she points out that her clients who like boarding school, “generally have a difficult home life; mentally ill, divorced or selfish parents.”

The number of UK boarding school pupils seems to be in decline and this maybe because of the soaring fees, but there is no doubt that parents today are generally more respectful of their children, and want to be part of their lives, perhaps too much so, as we now live in a child-centered era. The 2014 Independent School Census, (representing 1257 independent schools) shows that 13.4% of their pupils are boarders, 4.8% from overseas, compared to the earliest available 1984 Census, when children at boarding school comprised 27% of ISC pupils. It would sadden me deeply, not to be part of the minutiae of my two children’s lives – fascinating to me but uninteresting to anyone

else - and that is the point, no one can replace your parents, not even the most well meaning housemistress at the glossiest boarding school.

For therapeutic help for ex-boarders please visit

www.boardingschoolsurvivors.co.uk

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Hoarding by Kate Morris – Telegraph Magazine

My sister is a secret hoarder. Age 40, she lives in a flat that is overrun by things she is unable to throw away. It's not the usual clutter that people (particularly with children) have in their homes, but mountains of useless junk that restricts her movements and ruins her life.

My sister is four years younger than me and we were not soul-mates as children, but in our teens and twenties, we were close. Our parents lived abroad so we saw each other regularly and relied on each other for help, support and friendship. Twenty years on, we no longer communicate except on the most superficial level and I haven't been to her house for at least ten years. She is a single mother with one child still living at home, but because of the hoarding, she is too ashamed to let anyone through her front door.

The last time I was there, she was still married, but the first sign that things were awry was evident. The living room floor was piled high with stuff and we had to forge a pathway through the junk. The sink was overflowing with unwashed dishes; there was clutter everywhere. We were devastated and it must have shown, as that was the last time she let us through the door. A few months later her husband moved out, and perhaps his leaving tipped her over the edge. She seemed permanently exhausted, and probably didn't have the energy or inclination to tidy up, money was tight; she didn't want to talk about anything.

The years pass and as a family we have accepted the fact that no one is allowed to visit. It sounds strange; careless perhaps. Maybe we should be more forceful or more loving or both. She keeps us away by saying she she "is sorting out the house," and we want to believe her, although we know that the house is in a far worse state now. About six years ago, a family friend sat on the doorstep until my sister had no choice but to let her in. After the visit, my friend telephoned me to say that if social services were to visit, the children would be taken into care. It was shocking and awful to have confirmation of what we suspected. She needs therapeutic help but it

was only after her teenage daughter moved out in desperation over the chaos, that she agreed to a few sessions with a counselor. She excels at keeping up the pretense that her life is normal, until the bell rings and she and the children hide away.

I would love to help my sister but she has made the subject of her hoarding taboo which exasperates me. I was so angry at being constantly lied to, and of her repeatedly not returning calls that our relationship was at breaking point. More recently I have realized that she has a mental disorder and I have to make one last effort to be compassionate; she is still my little sister and she has lost all her friends.

A hoarding addiction is a dark and lonely place; there is plenty of help for alcoholic and drug addicts, but rehabilitation for hoarders is hard to find. Only %5 of hoarders come to the attention of professionals. Sometimes I feel desperately sad and tearful about the situation and at other times, I struggle to understand her inertia. Where did this hoarding habit come from and why? It can't be easy being a single mother, but others get through it. I remember that as a child, she did collect vintage bears, hundreds of them, but there were no other obvious signs. I have a theory that being surrounded

by stuff going back years makes her feel safe, armour against a scary world.

A while ago, I read about a couple that had been arrested and charged because they were hoarders and their house was uninhabitable. The story resonated and scared me. I've been tempted to ring social services to make it all stop and to extricate my nephew (who still lives at home) but of course I won't.

My children have never been to visit their aunt and cousins, even though we live near each other. They know why and are sad about it. The situation seems insurmountable. My sister knows that if she asks for help I am here for her, but I fear that she will have to reach a massive rock bottom before that happens. I hope in a way, that comes sooner rather than later.

By Kate Morris Insomnia – The Times

It's four in the morning and I am staring into the darkness, aware that in just three hours, it will be time to get up. It's going to be hard to cope with the day ahead, which makes me fret and worry. I am overwrought and exhausted, but too alert to sleep. I turn the light on, sit up, read, turn the light off, lie down, turn to one side and then the other, get up, tiptoe downstairs and warm a pan of milk in the cold kitchen,(more to relieve the monotony than anything else). My husband remains oblivious to my nocturnal wanderings and slumbers on snoring beside me. Although I am quite adept at going through the motions of work and childcare on four hours sleep, at worst I am snappy, intolerant and unproductive. At the very worst (perhaps after two or three days of not sleeping) I feel demonized, low, plagued with headaches and debilitated with exhaustion.

One in five people suffer with insomnia at some point in their lives. Mr Horta-Osório, chief executive of Lloyds Banking group has recently

admitted that he was forced to take time off work to recover from sleep deprivation and spent eight days recuperating in the Priory. His lowest point came after he couldn't sleep for five consecutive nights. "Now I understand why they use sleep deprivation to torture prisoners," He said. He has apparently planned to cut down his excessive working hours. Being a banker in this economic climate is probably a very stressful life.

I have no such valid excuse to justify insomnia, but I do share the view that not being able to sleep can be tortuous. Hours pass slowly in the early hours and the night feels interminable. As Mr Horta said, "normally we think that time is very short and it passes very quickly, but at that time, it was very long and passed very slowly." In the early hours of the morning, my life seems bleak. On the rare occasions that I sleep well however, I feel invincible and optimistic. There are insomniacs who are only on good form for part of the day, Jim Cooper, a digital producer and consultant, says that if he's had a bad night he will be "fine all morning, but after lunch is often a dead zone. Not a good time to drive or give a presentation as I just want to sleep. If I'm in my office I often lie on the floor and close my eyes."

Night-time has never been great for me. I was prescribed valium when I was too nervous to sleep during the summer of A levels and was very scared of the dark, as a young child. Bedtime was something I rallied against. I remember being sent for afternoon rests in the dark when I wasn't tired and going to bed early. Dr Chris Idzikowski, director of the Sleep Centre in Edinburgh, says, "if children are sent to bed too early and lie in bed awhile before they fall asleep, it can possibly lead to an association with remaining awake in bed, ie insomnia. The same is true for adolescent's who's biological clocks run slightly slow so they don't fall asleep as early as most parents would like. They go to bed and remain awake, with the same potential problem of an association of remaining awake."

Repercussions of insomnia can be severe. When our son was one, my husband and I separated for three months, both worn down with the broken nights and exhaustion, he despairing at the fact that I was permanently tired. Things are better now, but I have to take precautions to increase my chances of a good night. No caffeine or chocolate after 2pm. Alcohol, particularly champagne, keeps me awake. Eating too late or rowing can stop me sleeping. If my adrenaline gets going (most recently when my husband was away and I thought I heard someone slamming the back door) I won't sleep.

If a room is too light, or too noisy it will wake me, and I may not get back to sleep. I remember a holiday in a hot room in Greece when I didn't sleep more than four hours a night the whole week. There are so many rules to follow and things to factor, that sometimes something slips.

Dr Idzikowski agrees that for an insomniac everything has to be just right. "Sleep is controlled both by the brain and the mind. In the area called the hypothalamus, in the brain, there are three important control mechanisms, one controls sleep, another wakefulness and another is the 24 h biological clock, which permits sleep to occur during the night. The sleep controller needs to be turned fully on and wakefulness fully switched off for good night's sleep. Psychological mechanisms such as conditioned wakefulness and over-active mind also contribute. Everything has to be right for sleep to occur and perhaps this complexity is what causes sleep to go wrong."

Jim Cooper thinks his reason for not sleeping is medical. "I was diagnosed with over-productive adrenal glands. My body naturally produces an excess of adrenalin. I take pills to bring this under control. When I can't sleep I am completely wired., thinking of ten things at once. It's like having 10 screens

in your head all showing different things. I've decided that if I can't get to sleep or wake up early I should just get up and read or work.”

Dr Idzikowski supports alternative therapies that are scientifically backed up to help insomniacs, like acupuncture, yoga and Thai Chi. He treats insomniacs with cognitive behavioural therapy and if someone needs help regulating their sleep patterns in the short term, he would prescribe sleeping pills but as he points out every case is different.

In an attempt to combat insomnia, I have tried homeopathy, acupuncture, reflexology, massage, over the counter drugs, yoga, hypnotherapy, regular exercise, lavender spray, Jin Shin Jyutsu, the therapist places hands on your body “to determine energy flows”. (This seemed to help, though costly, and the therapist left) I once even tried a meditative walk around a labyrinth in Arizona, which was wacky but rather wonderful. The most recent attempt to induce sleep, involved listening to a CD of ambient music for insomniacs— it didn't make me sleep.

My husband once insisted that I try sleeping pills. When my GP finally agreed to prescribe them it was a miracle to drop off instantly to sleep, but after a while the pills made me feel hung-over, as though I had permanent jet lag. I never take them now.

There was a breakthrough when a fellow insomniac, recommended Acem Mediation. If I practice this simple mediation daily, my sleep patterns are better, but I need a good chunk of time to do it properly. I sometimes use it as method to fall asleep for a ten-minute nap, which always leaves me refreshed. At the moment I am taking supplements that contain serotonin, magnesium and valerian, but they are not guaranteed to work particularly at key hormonal periods of the month. They haven't worked tonight for example. I have turned on the light and write this at 1.41 am.

