

Hyperlexia

I had just turned two when I taught myself to read. I figured out the picture books my parents read to me pretty quickly and went on from there. It's part of a condition called hyperlexia - other symptoms include a fascination with letters and difficulty with spoken language. I could read before I could speak sentences and moved on to novels by the time I was five. By ten I could process whole paragraphs at a glance, the meanings springing fully formed into my brain. As an adult, I can read the average book in about two hours, and it is my greatest source of pleasure. Or it was until recently. My ability has been increasing, and far from being a joy it has become a burden. I see meaning everywhere, I've gained a new understanding of the world - one I didn't want. I used to love gaining new knowledge, but some things were best left unknown.

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The changes started gradually, as all my improvements in reading ability had progressed in

my childhood. I was reading a book before bed, just a cheap whodunnit, when I realised I was reading two things at once. Not two totally different things, understand, but two slightly different versions of the same page. A few words changed, a sentence rephrased, that sort of thing. It was like I was seeing two drafts of the story at once.

It was a weird experience, but I put it down to tiredness - perhaps me putting my own expectations of what I was going to read before actually doing the reading. I put the book down, assuming I'd be fine after a good night's sleep.

What happened next couldn't be explained away so easily. When I next started reading, I could see evolving versions of the same story. Whole paragraphs added and removed, comments scrawled at the side of the page - I could see it all. At first it was difficult to take in, but my brain adjusted as it had before when my reading ability advanced. It did make reading less enjoyable though. Seeing the changes throughout a manuscript could be interesting sometimes, but it ruined the flow of the story for me. For the first time in my life, I wasn't reading many books. I watched more TV, played loud music - anything to distract from the noise that reading made in my head.

The changes didn't stop despite my reading pace slowing down. I could see different drafts of any text, even slogans on billboards and text on food packaging. I was looking at several versions of a sentence telling me how healthy my smoothie was when the feelings hit me. Complete despair. My terrible relationship with my parents,

not enough money in the bank, a recent breakup... but this wasn't me. At the time, my family were fine, I had a great job and no complaints about my romantic life. I looked at the bottle again. The same feeling, nothing going right, and I'm stuck in this dead end job writing ridiculous copy for a corporation selling sugary drinks pretending to be healthy.

It was the copywriter. I was feeling how whoever had written the text had felt at the time they wrote it. I stopped looking at the label, threw the bottle away. I felt ashamed to have violated someone's privacy like that, even if it was unintentional and I would never know who they were. I would struggle to share that sort of feeling with my closest friends, yet I had peered into someone else's most private thoughts.

I spent the next few days trying to avoid reading anything. Just think about that. How much text is around you right now? How many times a day do you read something without really thinking about it, or that you can't avoid - a road sign, a text popping up on your phone? I called in sick to work, too afraid that receiving an email might reveal my coworker's deepest secrets.

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I couldn't stay away from from the office forever though, and I knew there was no way I

could live my life without reading. After a few days rest I was bored of tv and had managed to convince myself it hadn't been that big of a deal. It probably wouldn't happen again, and so what if it did? It wasn't my fault, and it couldn't have been as bad as I remembered.

This was, of course, way too optimistic. I made it to work OK, I could take that route in my sleep, but after getting my morning coffee I had to catch up on my email. And then... I've read this story a thousand times, we all have. The hell that is uncontrollable mind reading. I could at least turn it off by closing my eyes or by looking elsewhere, but it was still awful.

I tried, I really did. But as soon as I got past the subject of each message it all flooded in. The stress he was feeling about this project. The irritation she had that no one else ever did any work. My boss was hungry, thinking about dinner that night. The secretary was worried about her brother, had he started using again? The constant little rewrites, I could see them all. Soften that request. Make that point more clear. Does he feel the same way? I need another coffee. I want - It's too - Could we -

I'm not sure exactly what happened, but the next thing I remember I was propped up

in my manager's office with the designated first aider looking down at me. I began to feel less overwhelmed as I concentrated on staring at a blank patch of wall. After we'd agreed that whatever had happened was over, and I'd insisted I didn't need an ambulance, my manager came in to see me.

"I don't know what's wrong with you, but obviously you came back to work too soon. Take the rest of the week off, and don't come in until you're sure you're ready."

I was inclined to agree. I thanked her for her understanding and set off home.

I tried to avoid text as I walked to the train station, but my ability had increased again. I passed a building that had a date carved in stone above the door. 1671. I felt the weight of the chisel in my hand, the worry about my sick daughter. I tried to stare down at the pavement, which provided some relief.

Unfortunately I still had to pass the museum. There were tourists outside blocking the pavement with their backpacks and stopping haphazardly to check guidebooks - I had to look up to see where I was going. Naturally this meant I glanced at a poster for an exhibition - local Roman finds, including a tablet with ancient writing on it. I read the writing - I can't even understand Latin, but it happened just the same. A life so unlike mine I could barely comprehend it. Wanting to marry off my daughter, annoyance at my slaves, I need to get a household shrine to please the gods...

One of the tourists barged into me, snapping me back to reality. The world spun around me as I was transported 2000 years in a matter of seconds. I tried to keep walking home but stepped out into the street as a bus sped towards me. Another tourist grabbed my arm just in time. Catching sight of my expression, he asked if I was alright, but I could only mumble that I was "Fine, thanks" and stumbled off in the direction of home.

I arrived home, barely keeping it together, and collapsed into a deep sleep. When I woke, I was too scared to go any further than the bathroom. I threw all the books in my bedroom out of the window, and didn't leave my bed for the next few days.

I hoped that hiding in the dark was working, that the words couldn't get to me this way. But

the ability continued to improve even as I isolated myself. I thought I had started to hallucinate after days spent alone in the blackness when I first started to see a reddish blur. But gradually the blur began to take shape and clarify into words.

It was no language I could read, characters unlike any I'd ever seen. Blood red symbols danced across my vision. They were so strange that it took hours to gain the deeper understanding of the writing as I had before.

When I did, I was lost. It was many times worse than the Roman writing, at least that had ultimately felt human. All I felt at first was an overwhelming sense of dread. It lasted for hours, maybe days. I was too afraid to move, to think. I knew I was in the presence of great evil.

I gradually regained control, and with it understanding. I had thought I was going mad, but now I knew I was seeing what had been there all along. This writing was the writing of the Old Ones. Those who had ruled the Earth before humans. They lost the planet to us, and they are angry. So angry with humanity. Their thoughts and feelings are everywhere, written in blood. They're dormant for now, but they're plotting to take their world back. They have a plan. Every time you feel anger, every time someone is unhappy, they attack. They inflame tempers, increasing conflict and feeding hate. They fuel war, tribal divisions, all to make us kill each other.

I can see the scars from the mid-20th century, when they thought they'd nearly got rid of us. And I can see their efforts ramping up again now, the hate spreading throughout the world. Nothing that isn't already in humanity, but they feed off it. I only see their words now. Their scarlet hate is all that's left for me. I know what they want and I know their plan to destroy us. If we're going to survive we all have to come together. And I don't know if I have faith in humanity to do what's needed.