

# CONTAGION IN TRANQUIL SHADES OF GREY

*Running wild.*

BY DEBORAH WALKER

The lecture had gone well. I'd introduced Tranquiltron, the latest mood stabilizer from my company, OedipusPharm. The last drug developed from the root I stole when I was 16.

But when I see her in the audience, the sound of applause grows quiet, colours fade to grey.

Offstage, Professor Mungan of Göbekli Tepe University asks, "Is anything wrong, Dr Hyde?" She's the founder of PersonalCon, a holistic event, artists and scientists exploring the personality. She's also very, very young. When you think professors are scandalously too young, it's a sign you're getting old.

A riddle emerges, unbidden. I whisper, "A sister gives birth to her sister. She in turn, gives birth to the first. Who are they?"

"Night and day," Professor Mungan answers. "The Sphinx's second question, not quite as well-known as her first riddle."

I nod. Already, I'm recovering. I need to leave.

"Can I escort you to the hotel, Dr Hyde? This heat is dreadful today."

"There's no need, my dear." She's worried about me. I'm old. The heat is quite fierce. She doesn't know I spent my childhood in Göbekli Tepe. And as any personalogist will willingly debate: childhood leaves its indelible marks.

I return to the hotel and pack. I leave the hotel by the back stairs, not leaving a note.

Like the servant seeing death in the market place, when I saw my sister, I fled. Swiftly, using not a fleet horse but my Amex, travelling along the route long-planned, full of secret caches: false passports and cash, until I reach the cottage in the Derbyshire peaks, and find, not entirely to my surprise, my sister waiting for me. My sister Sphinx does not pursue, she waits at her prey's final destination.

My twin, looking ten years younger. The version who stayed out of the sun. She's the me I could have been: calm, white-skinned, emotionless as the Virgin Queen. The sun has shone on me for many years, I have felt many things.

I won't use the knife. I might have killed a stranger. But not my sister. She always was the clever one, the better one. I took the role of rebellion.

She walks around the room outwardly observing the decoration.



Once, long ago, a man who would become a Stoic philosopher called us Sphinx: inscrutable, guardians of knowledge. A name so fitting, we embraced it.

From every surface of the cottage, we were watched by a thousand implacable eyes. The gaze of the stone and painted sphinx.

"The décor's quite unusual for a Derbyshire cottage."

Speaking so slowly, with exquisite detachment. My sister's a product of cultural and pharmacological repression of emotion. Sphinx are medicated to the root.

Only briefly do youngsters RunWild, tasting emotion before committing fully to the Sphinx. During the RunWild, I ran.

My sister admires a black and white photograph of the Great Sphinx of Giza. "My knowledge of English interior design is admittedly sparse. So do forgive me if I've made an incorrect assumption."

"Sister, I doubt you've ever made an incorrect assumption."

"Sister, how you misremember me."

"That's probably true. I remember the Sphinx in shades of grey."

"Our family never did have a penchant for colour."

"Sit down, Sister, rest your old bones."

She slips into a chair as agile as a girl, with no sign of the arthritis that plagues me. "I'm getting old," I tell her. "I have regrets. Tell the council I'm sorry I stole the root to fund my life outside the family."

"They should have supported you on the outside."

"I was shunned."

"We don't do that anymore," she says.

"Really?"

"We have a new leader."

"Old Metza's dead? Who's the new Sphinx Father?"

"Me," says my sister.

I laugh. The Sphinx were always so rigid about gender. "You changed the system from the inside? Be careful, Sister, power corrupts."

"We just have to hope that I never get absolute power."

It feels good to laugh again with my sister. Yet... "Even though I left, this change is... unsettling." As any personalogist will willingly debate: childhood leaves its indelible marks.

"The change started with you. Your example fed thirsty soil." She's curious. "RunWild is such an extreme of fear and joy. Has that been your life?"

"Good grief, no. No one could sustain that. But it's been memorable." I glance at a photo hidden among the sphinx, a picture of a man and a child.

"I wonder what made us so different," she says.

"Maybe we attest to the existence of a soul, with our differences despite our genetics."

"Maybe we attest to the countless yet incremental differences in environmental factors."

I nod. "Nature versus nurture is an old riddle. Yet, despite our differences, blood is thicker than water."

She inclines her head.

"But why are you here, Sister?"

"I come to invite you back to Sphinx."

I think about my life. The memories flash in technicolour. "I don't think so."

"The root and the calm would give you more years."

It's tempting, but, "No. I've lived a life in the light. I won't dwindle in the underground city."

"Things are changing, Sister. We're moving into the light. We intend to share the root with those who want it."

"You're offering to stabilize the mood of humanity?"

"They need the gift of content. As do you, Sister. Will you take it?"

There it is, the root of the Sphinx. Calm and long life for the suppression of personality. The root of all content, nestling in my sister's hand like a contagion that will fall onto the world in tranquil shades of grey. ■

Find Deborah in the British Museum trawling the past for future inspiration.

ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY