

*'Don't do it. I was lying. Please don't...'*

The audience, consisting almost entirely of men, tried not to show any emotion as they watched the half-naked, black-haired woman being tortured.

*'For God's sake, it's a mistake. I just made it all up. A terrible mistake... Help!'*

Her cries echoed around the whitewashed, sterile room; her words were clearly intelligible. Nobody present would be able to claim later that they'd misunderstood her.

The woman didn't want this.

Despite her protests, the slightly overweight, bearded man with wonky teeth stuck the syringe into the crook of her strapped arm. Despite her protests, they didn't remove the electrodes attached to her forehead and temples, nor even the ring around her head, which reminded her of those unfortunate tortured monkeys in animal testing laboratories, their skulls opened and probes inserted into their brains.

Which basically wasn't so different from what was about to be done to her now. When the sedative and muscle relaxant began to take effect, they began manual ventilation. Then the men started administering the electrical impulses: 475 volts, 17 times in succession, until they triggered an epileptic fit.

From the angle of the closed-circuit camera it was impossible to tell whether the black-haired woman was offering resistance or whether her limbs were twitching spastically. The backs of the figures sporting aprons and face masks blocked the audience's view. But the screaming had stopped. Eventually the film stopped too and it became a little brighter in the hall.

'What you have just witnessed is a horrific case...' Dr Emma Stein began her observations, breaking off briefly to pull the microphone a bit closer so the conference guests could hear her more clearly. Now she was annoyed she'd spurned the footstool the technician had offered her during the soundcheck. Usually she would have asked for one herself, but the guy in overalls had given her such a condescending grin that she'd rejected the sensible option of making herself taller. As a result she was having to stand on tiptoe behind the lectern.

'... a horrific case of coercive psychiatry which had long been thought consigned to history.'

Like Emma, most of those present were psychiatrists. Which meant she didn't have to explain to her colleagues that her criticism wasn't levelled at electroconvulsive therapy. Conducting electricity through a human brain might sound terribly mediaeval, but it produced promising results in combating psychoses and depression. Performed under general anaesthetic, the treatment had virtually no side effects.

'We managed to smuggle this footage captured by a surgery-monitoring camera from the Orphelio Clinic in Hamburg. The patient whose fate you've just witnessed was committed on 3 May last year, diagnosed with schizoid psychosis, based solely on what the forty-three-year-old herself said upon admission. But there was nothing wrong with her at all. The supposed patient faked her symptoms.'

'Why?' a faceless individual from somewhere in the left middle of the hall asked. The man practically had to shout for her to understand him in the theatre-like space. The German Association of Psychiatry had hired for its annual conference the main hall of the International Congress Centre in Berlin. From the outside, the ICC resembled a silver space station, which from the infinite expanses of the universe had spun to a halt directly beneath the television tower. And yet when you entered this seventies building – which was possibly contaminated with asbestos (experts disagreed about this) – you were reminded less of science fiction and more of a retro film. Chrome, glass and black leather dominated the interior.

Emma allowed her gaze to roam across the packed rows of chairs but, unable to locate the questioner, talked in the vague direction she imagined him to be.

'Here's a question of my own: What does the Rosenhan Experiment mean to you?'

An older colleague, sitting in a wheelchair at the edge of the front row, nodded knowingly.

'It was first performed at the end of the sixties, with the aim of testing the reliability of psychiatric prognoses.' As ever when she was nervous, Emma twisted a strand of her thick, teak-brown hair around her left index finger. She hadn't eaten anything before her lecture, for fear of feeling tired or needing to burp. Now her stomach was rumbling so loudly that she was worried the microphone might pick up the noise, lending further succour to the jokes she was convinced were going around about her fat bum. In her eyes, the fact that she was otherwise quite slim only highlighted this bodily imperfection.

*Broom up top, wrecking ball below*, she'd thought again only this morning when examining herself in the bathroom mirror.

A second later Philipp had hugged her from behind and insisted she had the most beautiful body he'd ever laid his hands on. And when they kissed goodbye at the front door he'd pulled her towards him and whispered into her ear that as soon as she was back he urgently needed relationship therapy with the sexiest psychiatrist in Charlottenburg. She sensed he was being serious, but she also knew that her husband was well versed in dishing out compliments. Quite simply, flirting was hardwired into Philipp's DNA – something Emma had been forced to get used to – and he seldom wasted an opportunity to practise it.

'For the Rosenhan Experiment, named after the American psychologist David Rosenhan, eight subjects had themselves admitted to psychiatric clinics on false pretences. Students,

housewives, artists, psychologists and doctors. All of them told the same story on admission: they'd been hearing voices, weird, uncanny voices saying words like "empty", "hollow" or "thud".

'It will not surprise you to hear that all of the fake patients were admitted, most of them diagnosed with schizophrenia or manic-depressive psychosis.

'Although the subjects were demonstrably healthy and behaved perfectly normally after admission, they were treated in the institutions for weeks on end, supposedly taking a total of more than two thousand pills.'

Emma moistened her lips with a sip of water from the glass provided. She'd put on some lipstick, even though Philipp preferred the 'natural look'. She did in fact have unusually smooth skin, although she thought it far too pale, especially given the intense colour of her hair. She couldn't see the 'adorable contrast' that Philipp kept going on about.

'If you think the 1970s were a long time ago, that this took place in a different century, i.e. in the Middle Ages of psychiatric science, then let this video shatter your illusions. It was filmed last year. This young woman was a test subject too; we repeated the Rosenhan Experiment.'

A murmur rippled through the hall. Those present were less worried about the scandalous findings than they were about perhaps having been subjects of an experiment themselves.

'We sent fake patients to psychiatric institutions and once again investigated what happens when totally sane people are admitted into a closed establishment. With shocking results.'

Emma took another sip of water, then continued. 'The woman in the video was diagnosed with schizoid paranoia on the basis of a single sentence when she arrived at the clinic. After that she was treated for more than a month. Not just with medicine and conversational therapy, but with brute force too. As you've seen and heard for yourselves, she was unequivocal about not wanting electroconvulsive therapy. And no wonder, because she is perfectly sound of mind. But she was forcibly treated nonetheless.

'Even though she manifestly rejected it. Even though after admission no one noticed anything else unusual about her and she assured the doctors several times that her condition had returned to normal. But they refused to listen to her, the nurses or fellow patients. For unlike the doctors who passed by only sporadically, the people she spent all her time with at the clinic were convinced that this locked-up woman had no business being there.'

Emma noticed someone in the front third of the hall stand up. She gave the technician the agreed sign to turn up the lights slightly. Her eyes made out a tall, slim man with thinning hair, and she waited until a long-legged conference assistant had battled his way through the rows to the man and passed him a microphone.

The man blew into the microphone before saying, 'Stauder-Mertens, University Hospital, Cologne. With all due respect, Dr Stein, you show us a blurry horror video, the origin and supplier of which we'd rather not know, and then make wild assertions that, were they ever to become public knowledge, would cause great damage to our profession.'

'Do you have a question as well?' Emma said.

The doctor with the double-barrelled name nodded. 'Do you have more evidence than this fake patient's statement?'

'I selected her personally for the experiment.'

'That's all well and good, but can you vouch for her unquestioningly? I mean, how do you know that this person really is sound of mind?'

Even from a distance Emma could see the same haughty smile that had annoyed her on the technician's face.

'What are you getting at, Herr Stauder-Martens?'

'That somebody who volunteers to be admitted to a secure unit for several weeks on false pretences – now, how can I put it carefully? – must be equipped with an extraordinary psychological make-up. Who can tell you that this remarkable lady didn't actually suffer from the symptoms for which she was ultimately treated, and which perhaps she didn't exhibit until her stay at the institution?'

'Me,' Emma said.

'Oh, so you were with her the whole time, were you?' the man asked rather smugly.

'I was.'

His self-assured grin vanished. 'You?'

When Emma nodded, the mood in the hall became palpably tenses.

'Correct,' Emma said. Her voice was quivering with excitement, but also with fury at the outrage that had greeted her revelations. 'Dear colleagues, on the video you only saw the test subject from behind and with dyed hair, but the woman who first was sedated and then forcibly treated with electric shocks against her expressed will, that woman was... me.'