

We Don't Know Why

Rose Wilson did it soon after she had returned on the 227 from her shopping errands in Bromley. After she had triumphantly laid her completed *Telegraph* crossword down on the coffee table. After she had updated the photos of her grandchildren above the settee (one grandchild had just sent his recent holiday snaps; the other was no longer romantically affiliated with the person she was staring at so adoringly). She did it very shortly after she had set her dishwasher, which was barely full (but then it never was). Just seconds after she had proudly dusted the display of her PhD (Astrophysics). Mere moments after she had first noticed a gentle *buzz* in the air. It was then and there, in her neatly organised home, on her peaceful Shortlands cul-de-sac, that Rose Wilson swallowed a fly.

It eludes even the presumed omniscience of this narrator to know how – or indeed *why* – she swallowed the fly. Yet we must take it as a primitive fact that this is exactly what she did. And one must not think of Rose as swallowing it in parts, or over a length of time (with maybe a little involuntary chewing), but rather as a whole, and in one sharp, decisive intake of breath.

Perhaps Rose could have overlooked this atypical digestive event, were it not for the nagging feeling that the fly was still very much intact inside her. This had never happened to her before and she felt thoroughly unprepared. She tried to return to her manageable to-do list for the day, yet a certain discomfort lingered and demanded her attention. She consulted her *Black's Medical Dictionary*, only to be predictably flummoxed at the Index page. She stood for a while in the mirror as she made a series of *ad hoc* stretches intended to expunge the fly, accompanied by an array of guttural noises. She doubled over, massaged her stomach (gently) and then throttled her own throat (aggressively). All to no avail.

Now, Rose Wilson happened to be particularly inclined to the more morbid of speculations. She had long harboured suspicions that she suffered from hypochondria. If a worry lodged itself in her mind, she found it very difficult to shake it off. And the worry she felt now, as ludicrous as it was, was that she might die.

Rose rang her daughter, Shelley. She explained to Shelley her predicament in a cool, unemotional manner, like a scientist reporting an experiment.

Before hearing of Shelley's response, let us learn a little of this lady. If Rose did indeed suffer from hypochondria, then she had most certainly passed it onto her daughter, in whom it manifested itself in a virulent form, with great tendrils reaching out to seize and absorb the worries and pains of others.

"Oh Lordy, Lordy!" Shelley cried.

Yet the only thing which surpassed Shelley's concern for her mother's well-being was the pride and confidence she had in her mother's abilities.

"You *will* sort this out, I just know it," she said, adding, "But you must tell me one thing, mother. *Why* did you swallow a fly?" This only exasperated Rose, who made it clear to Shelley that she was not interested in a *chat*, but in a concrete plan of action.

“Well I only have one idea,” Shelley said, “and it makes sense to me but I'm not sure how it sounds to you. I think that you need to swallow a Venus flytrap in order to deal with the problem.” Rose was taken aback and stared at her phone in utter incredulity.

“That is a preposterous suggestion,” she said, “however would that work?” But it gave Rose an idea. “Can you stay on the line for just five minutes?”

Rose put the phone down and scampered to her garage. She was filled with hope that her new notion would work. Of course, a fly trap was not the natural predator of the fly *in Shortlands*, and the only logical solution to her problem lay atop a cobweb by her old, rusting bike. She delicately cradled a common house spider in her hands and steeled herself for the task. The spider was elegant and horrid in equal measure.

Then in one brave gulp Rose swallowed the spider.

It wiggled and jiggled and tickled inside her. It actually gave her a little bit of indigestion. The indigestion gave way to relief, but the relief was short-lived and gave way to an ominous feeling. She ran back to the phone.

“I have only made it worse!” she cried.

(Incidentally, the indigestion also returned.)

“Oh mother! What now?”

“I swallowed a spider. But now-” and then she hesitated, as she had not yet shared these thoughts with her daughter, and she didn't want to scare her unnecessarily. “I keep thinking I'll die.”

“Stay right there. *Roger!*” Shelly called, away from the phone, “*I'm going to see mother. She's swallowed a spider! To catch a fly!*” And then she said reassuringly to Rose, “It's just a spider, and you have the finest constitution of any lady I have ever know. But I don't want you to worry. See you soon.”

Just before Shelley put down the phone, Rose heard her son-in-law Roger shouting back, “But *why* did she swallow a fly?”

Rose tried very hard to wait patiently for her daughter. She sat drumming her fingers on her coffee table, really trying not to do what her daughter was always chastising her for, which was stubbornly taking everything on herself. She was old now, or so she was told, and she no longer had the strength she once had.

Yet the spider kept wriggling, jiggling, and tickling, and she couldn't concentrate on anything else. And there was something more important than that: Rose simply wanted to make her daughter proud. She wanted to show her that she still had that strength. Besides which, she was convinced that she had worked out a formidable, scientific solution to her current problem.

Rose walked calmly out into the garden. She chose a medium-sized fishing net from her shed and waited with the net by her ornamental bird table. When the time was right, she swung the net in one graceful arc and caught a fat chaffinch. She carefully drew the net towards herself, and picked the bird out all aflutter with her other hand. Then – glad to soon

be rid of all this nastiness – she opened her jaw as wide as she possibly could and shoved the bird down her gullet.

Rose could almost viscerally sense the bird catching the spider and, with it, all of her worries.

Yet suddenly she felt horribly sick. What made her slightly sick wasn't, strangely enough, the fact that she now had a live bird trying frantically to escape from the narrow confines of her alimentary canal, but instead the fact, which dawned on her almost instantly, that she now had an even greater misdeed to confess to her daughter.

Mortified, she couldn't really believe what she had just done, in the privacy of her quaint little garden. And she now felt so embarrassed and ashamed, at having only exacerbated her quandary.

Rose was startled by sound of the door opening and closing. Shelley had let herself in and came out all flustered. She found Rose in the garden, holding her belly and with a look of dread on her face – a face adorned at the lips with a little, sprouting feather. Rose said softly to her daughter with such sorrow and regret:

“I only wanted to make you proud!”

“What... did you do?”

“I swallowed a bird.”

“How absurd!” Shelly replied. “Mother, why didn't you just wait?”

Rose had a great urge to hide herself away and rid herself of this shame. Instead she let her daughter come over to console her, to give her a shoulder to rest her head on, and stroke her hair.

“What will we do with you?” Shelley lamented.

They were both thankful for sharing this moment of closeness. The moment only came to an end when they both noticed the next-door neighbour Alfred's black and white spotted cat, Jumble, jump up onto the garden fence. Mother and daughter turned in silence to look at Jumble, and then look back at each other. They knew what each other were thinking and no words had to be uttered. They knew what had to be done.

The next steps were all but inevitable.

The laying down of a saucer of milk.

The picking up of Jumble (“*Meow!*”).

The painful but quick dislocation of Rose's jaw.

The throwing back of Rose's neck.

The careful work of all four hands.

The swallowing of the cat.

At this point the reader may be thinking: “Well is that the end of Rose's problems?” Let me just spell things out to make things abundantly clear: the cat did in some sense deal with the problem of the bird, but the cat *itself* presented a further issue. This issue was quite similar in form to that which came before it, but it differed in magnitude. The former problem had

been what may be called 'bird-sized', whereas the latter problem was now more 'cat-sized'. What further compounded Rose's distress was that she was an animal lover and she couldn't help but think that every creature inside her could well have been in exactly the same situation as her, housing a series of lesser animals within themselves (and – don't forget - being trapped forever in a predator's belly). All of a sudden, her monthly RSPCA donations seemed rather trivial.

“I say, what are you doing?” Rose asked Shelley, who was tapping on her phone with one finger as she squinted at it through her spectacles.

“I'm just asking Roger to help. He'll know what to do.”

“Shelley! We must do it ourselves!” Rose said, brimming with independent spirit and resolve.

“Too late.”

By the time Roger turned up in his van, Rose had tried: flushing her stomach with water, having a ‘heavy session’ on the lavatory, prayer by the Holy Bible, and all types of squeezing an grunting known to man. She was just in the process of some fairly extreme calisthenics when Roger entered. Roger was a stereotypically straightforward 'bloke'. He was a bricklayer, he liked Sunday roasts, and he watched (but never played) football. He was good at DIY, but if he could get someone else to do it cheaper, then he let them, because why not?

Rose told him sheepishly that she had swallowed a cat to catch the bird, and she had swallowed the bird to catch the spider. He already knew the rest, and they didn't have time to waste.

Roger just stared at her, gobsmacked. “A *cat*? Fancy that!” Then he looked at his wife. “Shelley, are you demented, woman? Your mother needs urgent medical attention. She has a bloody cat inside her.” He got out his keys and walked straight back to the door. “Get her in the van. We're going to A&E.”

The three of them were sitting in the front of Roger's van. None of them had talked since they'd set off. They met with traffic where Mason's Hill meets the High Street, by the Waitrose and the station. Roger's honking did little to get the cars moving. Shelley and Rose felt like errant schoolchildren. Rose had her hands covering as much of her belly as possible, yet, try as she might, she still appeared to be a septuagenarian with an uncanny pregnancy.

“I think it's getting worse,” Rose said softly. Then there was one of those very long traffic pauses, where everyone just mentally wills and prays that they will surge forward. Yet surge they did not, and Rose continued, “I keep thinking I might *die*.”

“Mother! You will not die!” Shelley assured her, before asking, with a little tremble in her voice, “She won't, will she, Roger?”

Roger didn't respond. Then he let out an almighty sigh, backed the car up slightly, and turned to drive up the High Street. They weren't far up – just outside Bromley South

Station, where many people were milling about – when he pulled up on the curb, turned off the engine, and looked at them both.

“What we are about to do is not nice. But it is necessary,” he said. He stared straight ahead, where a middle-aged man was walking a happy, panting black Labrador.

“God will understand,” Shelley said.

They exited the vehicle. Roger strode over to the man and said with an air of unquestionable authority, “We need to borrow your dog. It is a medical emergency.”

“Well if it's an emergency...” the man trailed off, handing over the lead. “And his name is-”

“It's probably best if we don't know his name,” Roger said.

A small crowd started to form around them. A tense silence fell.

Then, just in front of Bromley South Station, and within sight of the car park of Waitrose, there took place the most grotesque physical act ever performed on the High Street of Bromley. To describe it in detail would make the least squeamish squeam, and the most squeamish shudder to their bones in absolute horror.

A larger crowd was amassing around the abomination that was Rose Wilson swallowing a stranger's black Labrador. Lots of them couldn't bear to look, but most of those who did kept half a hand over their eyes and another hand firmly over their mouths. Rose was forced to make eye contact with the very women who she shared the aisles of Waitrose with, and with every inch of the dog's body which filled her up she filled up with an equal quantity of humiliation. Her eyes pleaded with her peers: *But this was the only way!*

Someone shouted out in disgust: “What a hog, to swallow a dog!”

To as many people as he could, Roger explained the unusual events of the day, and all who were patient enough to listen understood Rose's plight and how she had been driven to such desperate measures. One kindly gentleman said: “Well that all makes perfect sense to me now. Except – for heaven's sake! - why oh why *did* she swallow the fly?”

After the act, Rose collapsed into a heap and soon the sirens of an ambulance could be heard.

Rose came to in a quiet and plain hospital room. Shelley and Roger were sitting by her side. As soon as they saw that she was awake, Shelley sprang up, flung her hands all about, and called in a doctor. He was a large and heavily bearded chap who had a calm and reassuring smile.

“You got here just in time, Mrs. Wilson,” he said.

Then Rose whispered, very directly, “Will I die?” She was quite horrified by the sheer size of herself under the pale blue hospital blanket.

The doctor chuckled as he put his clipboard down. “No, not a chance. You need an operation.” He gently clasped his hands together and sat by Rose's side. “Let me describe it to you. If I use terms which are too technical, please just say and I will try to find some other way of putting them.”

As the doctor started his description, a big crate was wheeled in. "Now, your notes say that you swallowed a dog. In order to catch this dog, we will just open your throat and you will swallow a goat."

Another doctor removed the top of the crate and lifted out of it a scraggly, white-haired goat. It was silent and glum. "All of your problems should clear up in due course."

"But aren't goats herbi-"

"Just let us deal with all of the technical aspects of the procedure, Mrs. Wilson."

The two doctors escorted Rose to the operating theatre. She didn't even need an anaesthetic.

The (unnamed) cow stood in a field just outside of Orpington. She munched contentedly on the grass and swished her little tail gracefully at some flies. She was one of a large herd and, in her adult life, had never commanded the real attention of any human being. Yet if you were to observe her behaviour amongst the herd for a couple of hours you might well describe her as lethargic, hard to please, while, at her core, respectful. At a stretch, you might describe her as wistful.

Could anyone have expected the cow to know about the operation in the Princess Royal University Hospital which, although completed without fault, had been entirely unsuccessful in terms of its ultimate goal? Or how the charming, reassuring, heavily-bearded doctor had discharged Rose after apologising for the fact that "conventional medicine can offer you no more"?

Indeed, the cow was barely aware of the three figures that approached her. She gave very little thought to the fact that one of them was significantly larger than the other two. She did not have the cognitive apparatus to ascertain the purpose of the screen being deployed just to her side (which, she would have learnt, was a curtain on rails which had been donated – rather pathetically - by the hospital, in order to preserve the modesty of the larger figure).

The cow was left with the larger figure. If she cared, she would have heard the other two remove themselves from the scene to some distance. This had been agreed beforehand; the sight would be too wretched and painful to endure.

The cow never wondered how it was swallowed.

It took a very, very long time.

Rose emerged from the hedgerow alone and distraught and disgraced. She had started the swallowing alone and this is how she was going to end it. Roger and Shelley had ostensibly gone to find help, but Rose knew there was no other help in the world for her now, and she would never see them again. She thought of the home that she had looked after so

fastidiously for over two decades, of her grandchildren, and of her late husband (and his delicate kisses) until she could no longer stand such torturous thoughts.

She lumbered sluggishly on, her monstrously bloated torso looking fit to burst. The cow wriggled, thrashed about wildly, and, well, tickled inside her. The hide tickled Rose incessantly and Rose could hear the cow's muffled moos of bewilderment.

Rose Wilson felt abandoned by everything: abandoned by her society, by her family, by her own wisdom and abilities, and by the animals which she had always loved so much. She felt as if she had been ensnared by a cast-iron chain of events, each following on inexorably from the last. She was not only a victim of fate, but a victim of science, of logic, and of reasoning. She had only been matching problems with their best conceivable solutions; only trying her best.

She, leviathan, trudged on.

She came to the next pasture, where there were many horses.

And, basically, she swallowed a horse.

It was by mere happenstance that at this exact moment in time Rose Wilson was standing in the trajectory of a hunting rifle's bullet intended for a Woodcock over 400 metres away. The bullet went straight into her brain.

She is dead, of course.¹

Zeph Auerbach © 2013

¹ An unfortunate implication of this calamitous yet coincidental accident is that we will never know whether the horse would have caught the cow, thus acting as the golden panacea that Rose wanted so much.