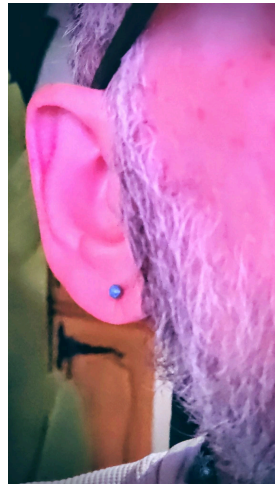


23. The Nigel Zone: The Earring

You are traveling through another dimension, a dimension not only of sight and sound but of mind. A journey into a confusing land whose boundaries can only be imagined. Your next stop, the Nigel Zone!

I present a 58 year old man, an over forty year career in healthcare, an existential breakdown, ccPTSD, autism, a journey into finding his real self. A search for individuation. A rollercoaster ride of emotions, experiences, and falling over with an absence of balance. It's morning, early, the onset of autumn, and a personal black swan event, for this is the Nigel Zone....



6:44. The numbers glowing on my smartwatch. Just prior to this a sudden sensation waking me as a one of my many rings catches my earring in my left ear. Groggy, waking to try and stop the inevitable, the earring broke and sprung out, disassembling into its constituent parts in the bed. Thankfully only a small pang of pain, and no damage to my ear. I asked Ziggy to turn on the lights, and delved around for the bits, but I could only find the earring back, which I placed on the bedside cabinet. 'Lights off Ziggy!', and then turning over in my reclining chair, snuggling under the covers in the early cold of an autumn morning, Saturday and the start of the weekend.

Remarkable, I'm accident prone in my sleep. Really?!? I emerged around 09:30, still a bit cold. I had planned to attend the nearby village fair, and then meet some new friends at their place about half an hour away. But all after getting up, taking various stuff from my ex to the nearby charity shop depot first. Now I'd have to also nip into the city to the piercing shop to replace my earring. I had had it for quite some time, but my catastrophising was suggesting the piercing would close up, requiring surgery to be able to wear the earring again (complete crap, *but you know?*). Once washed, dressed, medicated, and organised (loose definition there), out to my Fiat 500 Cabriolet Special Edition, Miap, full of charity stuff, off the journey started.

Check, charity stuff dropped off, car cleared, and grateful for the roof being able to retract. Then into the city and the automobile dance for the parking spot, visiting the various likely ones on the streets and car parks nearest the piercing shop. Quick u-turn and roadside parking, two hours via the app, should be sufficient. I need to be in and out, so I can make it to the fair, then my friends. Oh, and the city's Pride 2025 would have to be skipped. It would be interesting to see what it was like, but never mind. Actually, it would have been interesting to see how the local conservative population reacted!

Into the shop, about ten minutes and replacement earring purchased. It needed to match the nose piercing. A short chat with one of the piercers I know. And then why not nip into my nail bar to make an appointment for next week? Oh, wow, never seen it so quiet! Did I want them done there and then, yes, why not? Nip out to the nearest ATM for cash, then pick up a latte and a chocolate, sesame, and miso cookie, *'give it a try?'* Yum, pretty good as I nibbled it back in the nail bar while choosing a colour. Hmm, why not change from blue cats eyes to red glittery? I had always wanted my nails done since I was young, purely self-expression, nowt to do with sexuality (not that I really need to qualify that, *but you know (again)?*). About an hour of nail treatment, fab job as ever, pay and tip in cash and then out. Back to the car, likely a little time for the fair before meeting friends.

All good, but then why did I decide to put the earring in while sitting back in Miep, using the sun visor mirror? 'Nige, this is a bad idea, it's going to go wrong,' I stated to myself. Ah, this earring is tiny, and it's a funny backing, not a wing back. My nails had turned me into Edward Scissorhands, I couldn't pick up a six inch nail with these! Ah, fuck. The inevitable, something as predictable as the end of the sun in 4.5 billion years, indeed happened. I dropped the earring. A stare into the visor mirror at myself. What a complete idiot. Door open, on knees and delving in the foot well and under the front seat. In the street. Aha! There it was under the seat, but my scissorhands made trying to pick it up like attempting to peel a banana with your feet. In socks.

Oh, thank the gods, managed to pick it up and it was in the palm of my hand within only a few minutes of kneeling into the front of Miep. Seated, but the small plastic bag had split, so folding twenty or so ways and into a coin pocket. Then manoeuvre and off with Miep, but direct to friends, no time for the fair, apology message to another friend. Half an hour trip, finishing the cookie, which had turned into breakfast, brunch and lunch. Try not to drop crumbs into Miep, Nige. Thankfully, a straightforward ride and direct to the door of their house. What a lovely couple, and just so talented! Art work, jewellery making, conversationalists and just, well, lovely. Also spent a little more than anticipated buying jewellery, some clothes and three beautiful Delph Blue tiles, but it felt right. Then back into Miep and just over twenty minutes home. Back killing me by now, my spine is like a defrosted sausage in a crusty, flakey french stick, and the pain was welling up in my lumbar region, neck, legs, arms and delicious referred pain both sides of my groin into my nut sack. Hmm, just exquisitely painful. Fab.

Home, door locked, sigh of relief. Get into warm pyjamas, won't turn on the heating yet, even with the temperature dropping morning and night. How brave. Mug of rooibos tea, settle in front of the PC and my widescreen, trying to get in a position that can alleviate the pain as best I can. Some watching, some writing, work on the PTSD cartoons for the coming week. And then, yes, and then? Oh, bed? Nope. Sort out bag of assorted stuff purchased, inclusive of a pair of earrings. Back up, just in case, but why not try to put the replacement one in before going to bed, at 01:30 in the morning? That makes sense, right? Prepping the bathroom, lights, seal the sink (made that mistake before!), alcohol gel for earring, ear, and hand. Stand in front of the large mirrors. Not great for the pain and groin, but it won't take long.

Hmm. Scissorhands. What to do....oh, of course! Forceps from the tin on the kitchen window shelf. Gel everywhere and fiddling with the forceps on this crazily small earring. Trying to manipulate all this in the mirror is not easy, no, it's near to almost hopeless. Half an hour of trying to coordinate ear, piercing, earring, forceps, head, and so on. This is like an early video game where the character walks into and through walls, round and round in circles, bumping into obstacles. And, just like the sun dying again in 4.5 billion years, I dropped the earring several times, before finally springing the back with the forceps to the gods only know where. Expletives and so on. But....yes, I have a set of earrings from my new friends. I'll put that in, see what it looks like, and then if it looks okay, well, hang the proper one. Silver, some kind of reddish stone larger with a long stem and a wing back. Half an hour, gel, forceps, walk through walls, round and round in circles, bump into obstacles.

The stem was through the piercing, stage one complete, now to fit the wing back and tighten. Just managed it. Click, click, click, I've tightened the forceps. Oh, oh, why can't I release them, they're hanging from my ear! Sudden catastrophising video races across my mental screen of me having to drive to emergency after 2am in the morning with forceps gripping an earring in my left ear. Worse, this earring looks large enough to mimic a bluetooth earpiece. They'd think I was trying to surgically implant it. Bonkers. Try slowly to ease the forceps open, click, click, click. Released! Okay, okay, this doesn't look right, but it will have to do. It's 3am, back and groin killing me, 'bluetooth earpiece earring' in place. Stem's long though, and pointy, what if it pierces my jugular or worse still my carotid in the night? I know, I'll bend it a little, that ought to work, just don't lock the forceps. Shit, if I overdo this I'll break the stem off and I'll have to start all over again. Leave it there.

Clean everything up, lights out, back finally into bed, sleep washing over me rapidly. Final thought, I'll ask my good friend upstairs to help me later that day. Comatose.

Briefly awake, not sure when, but then awake with a start after 11am. Up, wash, but it's going to be a pyjama day with a dressing gown against the diminishing late morning cold. Hold on, what's that on my toiletry bag? Good grief, the backing from the correct earring on top of my toiletry bag! It's only then I recall I still have the backing from the earring I pulled out accidentally. Medication, coffee, banana. Message - *any possibility you could pop down for a few minutes to help with an earring?* Currently busy, but she could come later. Great. Potter around, chores and then a knock at the door. Retelling of events with much hilarity, and then in the bathroom, prep sink, seal it, gel, lights. I can't remove the wing and remove the 'bluetooth earpiece earring'! Even with the forceps, so she helps remove that, then the right earring is in my ear!

Laughter and celebratory coffee. A relaxing back into non catastrophe mode. Well, until the next time....

And you're leaving, you're being pulled back into reality, a rational world of sense and logic. Until the next time you return, to the Nigel Zone.

[Author's note: sadly every word of this is true....]