

A Sleuth in a White Coat -by Gail Loon Lustig

Haim had a lovely smile with a giggle that burst forth every time it had a chance. At these moments, his eyes would almost shut, framing his features for a second or two in a charming way. His tall, thin body and casual dress, T shirt and shorts over his tanned legs and sandals, projected a relaxed personality each time he entered my room in the clinic.

'Yes, believe it or not, we were called '**Chait**' in South Africa but in Israel it's a tailor, 'Chayat'. And yes, I recognize your accent and my father was also from Cape Town'.

I always enjoyed meeting patients with whom I could connect easily and what could be better than someone who knew that South Africa was a country and not just the southern section of Africa.

'What brings you to see me, today', I asked?

'Well, here's the thing, Doc, I have these attacks that I can't control. It happens often when I'm really calm, say in the workroom fixing some complicated technical problem on a computer. Suddenly, I feel my heart beating and have an uncontrollable urge to get up and rush out, jump on my motor-bike, drive as fast as I can. Great that the Ayalon freeway is so close by. I speed northwards, for about half an hour, reaching 130 km/hour and only then do I calm down.

'Really?', I ask, listening, fascinated and thinking about the possible causes of these attacks.

And of course, I go into Haim's background, how he was an officer in the tanks and fought in Lebanon and the awful trauma he'd gone through, but had come out of OK, was newly married and doing well in general.

After more listening, asking more questions, doing an examination that I was satisfied with, I wrote out a list of tests that needed to be done.

And, the tests were all within normal limits.

Haim's attacks continued over the next half year. They would happen after he climbed stairs in his apartment building, when at the top he often needed to run and vomit, sitting in a concert hall in Tel Aviv, basically in the most embarrassing situations.

He even landed up in the Emergency Room on a few occasions and one morning I found him outside my door, looking worried, asking if I could recommend a psychiatrist as suggested by a doctor in the hospital.

Hmm, I said. These don't seem to be panic attacks. Doesn't quite fit the bill. You really don't seem to describe any anxiety at the time it happens, and your symptoms aren't typical either.

'If it's OK by you, let's do another round of tests, OK'?

And that's when I noticed that the fasting sugar was a wee bit up. As it happened, we had a great endocrinologist working with us and just as he started his morning session, I stopped him and shared the case with him.

'Check out all the reasons for secondary diabetes', said Avi. 'Also, do a glucose tolerance test and let's see whether it is Diabetes.'

About a week later, I received the results and lo and behold there was one abnormal result of a test I hadn't done before – catecholamines in the blood. Noradrenaline and adrenalin.

And then, suddenly everything fitted into place. Haim's diagnosis was 'pheochromocytoma' a benign tumour in the adrenal gland which secreted adrenalin sporadically, causing his symptoms! The tumour needed to be removed as soon as possible.

'If you agree, we'll shift the consultation from psychiatrist to a good general surgeon, I said. Give me a few hours and I'll get back to you.'

And that's exactly what happened. After a month or so, Haim visited, told me all about his hospital stay, how students gathered around his bed talking to him after the operation which successfully removed the tumour. How happy he was that the mystery had been solved and he felt so much better.

"For you, he said smiling, holding a fish tank with pseudo -fish inside, colourful and 'swimming around' as he pressed a button.

You need something to take your mind off your patients every now and then.

Where shall I put it?

Soon afterwards, Haim moved north and changed his life-style completely, working on the fields which was what he had always dreamed of doing.

I have retold his story often, emphasizing the curious and wonderful side of my profession which offers the freedom to think, rethink and investigate until all the answers are found to the umpteen things that might go wrong in each and every one of us.

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**Written by Gail Loon Lustig in 2023**

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