



Source: Katherine Zoepf, 'In Syria, a quiet Islamic revival', *New York Times* in *International Herald Tribune* online, 29/08/06.

Tags: [disease](#), [dreams](#), [death](#), [theatre](#)

Writer/s: [Iggy McGovern](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

"Macbeth hath murdered sleep"—He'd never forgotten that line from the school play. How could he, how could any of them? The Scottish Play they had called it—bad luck to refer to it by its proper name. Bloody bad luck, as it happened, when the young MacDuff from Form V keeled over in rehearsal with a brain haemorrhage. But, in the best theatrical tradition the show went on! For months afterwards he had dreamt about MacDuff; his spiky fair hair and his freckled forehead, mouthing the words 'Horror, horror, horror...' But eventually that memory faded; in fact he hadn't even thought about him for nearly forty years, until last night, that is. A disturbed night, as he told the nurse at work. It's probably Sleep Apnoea, she said.

When he got home that evening he looked it up on the web. There were hundreds of sites about all kinds of sleep disorders. Why had he never heard of it before? He was advised not to panic, that twenty per cent of the male population suffered from it, but, yes, in extreme cases it could be lethal...at this point he noticed that he was breathing more heavily. Autosuggestion, he thought, think about something else. He remembered learning about breathing in Science class; the most natural thing in the world, the teacher had said. And then later on there was that classic problem in the College Chemistry course: estimate the number of oxygen molecules currently in your lungs from the last breath of Julius Caesar! You needed to make all sorts of guesses about the height of the sky and the size of your lungs but, amazingly, the answer turned out to be a few thousand molecules: not enough for an 'Et tu, Brute'. He remembered that they'd done that play as well, which made him think about poor MacDuff all over again. And what was The Doctor's line response to Lady Macbeth's nocturnal ramblings: something like 'therein the patient must minister unto himself' or was that herself, for wasn't she more manly than her husband, at least until Macbeth really got going. He'd read somewhere that Macbeth was the most boring man in the whole of Shakespeare, on account of his opening line 'So fair and foul a day I have not seen'—weather-watcher turned mass-murderer.

He focused again on the screen, determined to at least understand his problem. How did it happen that he could stop breathing for no reason. There were lots of diagrams but it was clear that the root cause was relaxation. There's an irony, he thought: you need your sleep to relax and as soon as you're off to dreamland, your tongue and soft palate and uvula (whatever that was) start to choke you; then the brain suddenly realises it's not getting enough oxygen and shouts 'wake up, wake up, you stupid

bastard'.

The first time it had happened he'd been in Germany, in the Harz mountains. His immediate thought had been, I'm dying in Germany, what's that going to cost? He really did think he was finished, trying frantically to open the window to breathe the cooler night air. There was another time in Rome where he almost threw himself off the third floor balcony of the hotel. And even without knowing its name or any of this new knowledge, he had worked out that he was more prone to it while travelling in warmer climes and that too much alcohol was a factor. He'd certainly had a skinful that night in Rome. Another irony, you drink to forget and forget to wake up!

Was he overweight, the site demanded! No, not really, a bit of middle-aged spread, of course, not what you'd call obese but not attractive to the ladies either! Did he smoke? No, he almost shouted back, sensing a small silver lining in the cloud. He scrolled down to Famous Sufferers and clicked on 'Uncle Junior': The mad uncle of Tony Soprano stared back at him, long-time exponent of Sleep Apnoea. He certainly smoked and drank and murdered before and behind him, almost doing in poor Tony in the end. He marked that page for further consultation and hurried on to Treatment.

He was quite unprepared for the solution, though he could see that it made perfect sense. A mechanical mask that gently forced air into the mouth to keep the airways open—a Continuous Positive Air Pressure or CPAP device. He wondered if anyone in the company had toyed with replacing Positive with Regenerative or Restorative, to give a more memorable acronym. In the same vein he now saw himself as a kind of Darth Vader figure, turning to the attractive woman in the bed beside him, rasping out 'how—was—it—for—you,—dear?' And he could see the woman clearly, he had met her just the other night at a business dinner, Susannah somebody; far too young for him but a man can dream—or not, as now looked likely. What he remembered most about her now was the story she told about the mad female relative who believed that a dying person's last breath was a direct link to God. And somehow or other this madwoman, who had managed to crawl onto her (Susannah's) grandfather's deathbed while everyone was distracted with grief, was suddenly shouting into the poor man's mouth 'Hello, God, it's me!'

At which point he closed the computer lid and went to bed.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Iggy McGovern.*