

BAD DREAMS

My story begins in a ramshackle mansion built on unwanted land, the location in medieval times of eastern Europe's largest plague pit.

Mama said we came from a once-grand family. She tried to keep up the pretence, dining in the grand ballroom even though our chipped plates held only thin, grey stew.

My father? His work was secret, and kept him away for months at a time. Even when he was home, his thoughts seemed elsewhere. The last time I saw him, his eyes had the filmy glaze of a man almost at death. He refused to check my homework on ancient number systems, and as he thrust my 13th birthday present into my hands – a tatty teddy bear and a creased old bookmark – I was barely able to hide my disappointment.

A night at the circus cheered my spirits, until my father and mother argued over his next trip away, and he stormed off. Hours later a terrible fire broke out in his study, ravaging the mansion. As we fled, the roaring flames drowned out my mother's howled refrain: "It was his life's work, his life's work!" We never saw my father again.

My pet mouse Montag survived the blaze. His tiny cage and a couple of books were all I clutched as we hitched a ride with the circus as it left town. Mama said it was only for a week or two, but it turned into years, years that left me with a fear of fires and fire-eaters, darkness and clowns. Only when Mama died could I leave the circus and begin a new life...

NUMBER SYSTEMS		
ARABIC	ROMAN	MAYAN
1	I	•
2	II	••
3	III	•••
4	IV	•••
5	V	••• •
6	VI	••• ••
7	VII	••• •••
8	VIII	••• ••••
9	IX	••• •••••
10	X	••• ••••••

Freaky phobias

- Bibliophobia* – fear of books
- Melanophobia* – fear of the colour black
- Chluophobia* – fear of darkness
- Taphophobia* – fear of being buried alive or of cemeteries
- Pyrophobia* – fear of fire
- Pupaphobia* – fear of puppets
- Coulrophobia* – fear of clowns
- Doraphobia* – fear of animal fur
- Ichthyophobia* – fear of fish
- Entomophobia* – fear of insects and bugs



PLAGUE DOCTORS

Plague doctors wore heavy coats covered in a layer of suet or wax to stop fleas and rats biting their skin. Their strange, beak-like masks were filled with sweet-smelling flowers and herbs to ward off miasma (poisonous air) and disguise the stench of unburied corpses. The eyeholes often had red glass lenses, because red was thought to ward off evil.

PERILOUS PETS

In 1920 King Alexandros I of Greece died from blood poisoning after he was bitten by his pet monkey.

Persian king Cyrus the Great (died 529 BCE) sentenced a river to death because his favourite horse drowned in its waters.

Joe Ball kept pet alligators in a pit behind his hotel in Texas, USA. In 1938 it was discovered that Ball had been feeding the reptiles with the bodies of staff and guests that he had killed.

Zoonoses are diseases that can be transmitted from animals to humans. They include anthrax, rabies and salmonella.

MORBID FEARS

The word phobia comes from the Greek word 'phobos', meaning 'morbid fear'.

Queen Christina of Sweden (1626-89) had a phobia about fleas. She would spend hours firing miniature cannonballs out of a 10cm-long cannon at the fleas that infested the royal bedchamber.

The famous clown Giuseppe Grimaldi (1779-1837) was so scared of being buried alive that he insisted his head be cut off before his funeral.

Three great empire builders – Napoleon Bonaparte, Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan – are all believed to have suffered from ailurophobia, the fear of cats.

