



Appointment with Pohlman

By Ralph Pohlman

So, I had another dumb dream last night, the one where I am in my underwear and walking down the corridor to my office.

I wonder, why can't I have dreams like Coleridge, who dreamed the poem *Kubla Khan*, or Ernest Rutherford who worked out the atomic structure in a dream, or Mozart who dreamed the score of *The Magic Flute*?

In the mid-eighteen hundreds, lots of chemistry was being discovered and studied. In 1862 a German chemist named Friedrich August Kekule, after years of studying carbon-to-carbon bonds, had a dream of a snake seizing its own tail. This led to his realization that benzene was a ring-like molecule and it was one of the most important and changing moments in chemical research.

Why can't I have a dream like that? One that will tell me how to kill cancer cells, how to eradicate *Plasmodium falciparum*, the malaria parasite, or stop the aging process.

Instead, I get myself walking around in my underwear. I even have a notepad and pen on my bedside table so I can write down my Nobel Prize-winning idea, but no, there I am in a shopping mall, or subway, or running around in my underwear again.

In 1965 the Beatles were in London filming *Help!* and Paul McCartney was staying in the small attic bedroom of the house

he grew up in on Wimpole Street. One night he dreamed he heard a classical string ensemble playing and he woke up and thought to himself, I wonder what that tune is? He got out of bed, went to the piano and wrote it down.

"It seemed sort of magical," he said. "I'd never written anything like this before."

According to the Guinness Book of Records, his Beatles song *Yesterday* has the most cover versions of any song ever written and was performed over seven million times in the 20th century. Duh! No funny underwear there, either.

In 1936, a German physiologist named Otto Loewi (1873-1961) won the Nobel Prize for medicine for his work on the chemical transmission of nerve impulses. At the time the commonly held belief was that nerve impulses were electrical. Loewi had had the idea some years before that these impulses might be chemical but had no idea how to prove it. He let it slip to the back of his mind until 17 years later.

"It was the night before Easter Sunday. I awoke, turned on the light, and jotted a few notes on a slip of paper. Then I went to sleep again."

In the morning he discovered that he had written the design of an experiment to determine whether or not the hypothesis of chemical transmission was correct. He got up, went to his laboratory and performed a single experiment on a frog's heart,

which became the foundation of the understanding of chemical transmission of nerve impulses and led to the Nobel Prize.

A few months ago I dreamed a poem, sat up and wrote it down in my bedside notebook. In the morning I eagerly read this nighttime masterwork, only to find that I had written, "Where are the snows of yesteryear?". That's a bit of plagiarism from Francois Villon, the French poet from the fourteen-hundreds. Well, at least it's an improvement on underwear.

Elias Howe invented the sewing machine in 1845. He had the idea of a needle that would go through a piece of cloth but couldn't figure out how it would work. He tried a needle that was pointed at both ends, with an eye in the middle, but it was a failure. That night he dreamed he was taken prisoner by a group of natives in Africa. They were dancing around him with spears. But he noticed that the spears all had holes near their tips.

When he woke up he realized that the dream had brought the solution to his problem. By locating a hole at the tip of the needle, the thread could be caught after it went through cloth thus making his machine operable. He changed his design and it worked.

So what do you think? Should I keep hoping? Or is there an important message in my underwear dream that I should consider?

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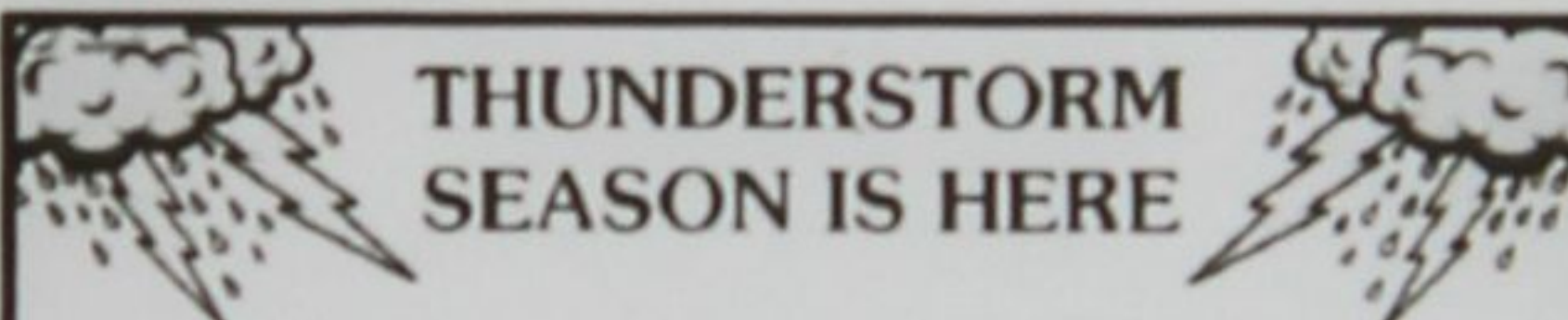
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