

TEETHING TROUBLES

by

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TEETHING TROUBLES

**For all the lovely patients that
I have encountered over the
years. Think of the fun of
dental treatment not the pain.**

Chapter 1

‘I know - you can work in a flower shop’. Those words uttered by Annie’s desperate father shocked her into reality. She was sixteen and newly released from the schoolroom with qualifications for nothing save perhaps becoming an artist. She had attained an A grade in sketching at school and had briefly been accepted into a prestigious art college. Two hours into her future career in the commercial world she fled the studio. She decided that she could not draw in the manner the teacher demanded. It seemed she wanted a dualist, for Annie had to stand in a fencing posture with her pencil on guard, parrying with the easel as though she were defending herself against an assault. When she nearly stabbed the sharp point into the teacher’s eye Annie made a hasty departure, considering that occupation as too dangerous to pursue.

That left her with few options which provoked her father into considering any avenue. She balked at shop work, wriggled out of office positions, was mulish over domestic service and generally set obstacles in the way of her father’s best efforts. The flower shop idea he thought brilliant until Annie reminded him that she suffered from hay-fever. Whilst he subsided into his chair like a pricked balloon his daughter stood waiting for the next suggestion. None was forthcoming and the matter of her future employment was momentarily shelved.

Fate intervened as she idled at home, free to contemplate the prospect of working for her keep which loomed like a depression over the Hebrides.

Within days her father strode up the front path, his moustache bristling with renewed determination. He had chanced to talk to the local funeral director and been given a tip. A dentist associate had a vacancy for a dental nurse and her father had agreed to supply the candidate.

Annie stared, unable to contribute one enthusiastic word to the general idea. A dentist? Nurse? What did that have to do with her? More to the point what had a dentist got to do with an undertaker? A tooth monger and a mortuary engineer. Gold teeth? Extracting wealth? Who knew?

‘Well?’ Her father impaled her with dark eyes, willing her to respond.

‘Yes.....’, Annie murmured, thinking in frantic circles. It sounded about as exciting a culmination to her miserable school years as a nude walk in pouring rain.

‘Good’! Her father took it as an acceptance and rolled his moustache between triumphant fingers. He had in one sentence sorted out his daughter’s future. She would become a dental nurse.

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Annie stood waiting on the front step for her interview fretting over the possibilities if she accepted the position. What if this dentist was like Sweeny Todd who she had read despatched his clients through a trap door in the floor. Or was he a barber? Well barbers and dentists were much the same in Annie’s view. Before long her imagination was conjuring up dreadful scenes of death and destruction.

In the midst of her reverie a sudden rattling of the door drove the spectres away. She stood poised on the threshold as the door was wrenched vigorously back revealing a man of unrivalled magnificence. The sun was streaming down onto his white dental coat and white wavy hair, which rose round his head like a halo. Annie thought she was meeting the angel Gabriel. Whilst she stood and gaped her future employer laughed at her dumbstruck state as she had never met a man with such a larger than life personality. ‘Come in my dear’. He opened welcoming arms and swept the young girl into the basement dental suite. Annie ventured nothing as he began a guided tour of the premises.

She had sneaked a preview and noted his name from the gleaming brass plate screwed to his gatepost. Mr Toth it advised and his European origins were further revealed in a heavily accented conversation. It transpired he was from Hungary and she had to admit his sculpted features spoke volumes for the attractions of its people.

From that moment Annie was enslaved by his charm and found the future prospecting in a more interesting fashion.

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The interview proceeded like a strange scene out of a stage play, surreal in view of the surroundings. It all appeared to Annie like an interior from another planet. The surgery was a small oblong box with an alarming array of equipment and instruments. Mr Toth clearly loved his professional domain, stroking and patting the monstrous enamel coated units as though they were bosom pals. She thought he showed an outrageously inappropriate amount of enthusiasm when demonstrating the spittoon bowl, the drill workings and the extraction forceps. For a young girl it was

overwhelming, especially when Mr Toth placed an arm about her shoulders and began stroking her back as though she was a cat.

What on earth was she doing in this other-worldly realm where everything appeared hostile and threatening? That thought had no sooner crept into her mind than Mr Toth's smile chased out the welling nervousness. Before she knew what was happening she had agreed to start work the next week. Mr Toth beamed in delight and propelled Annie back into the sunny street. His exhortations for her to arrive on time drifted away on a cloud of euphoria. She had a job. Maybe not what she would have picked for herself but nonetheless, a job. Her father would be relieved and strangely she found she was justifiably proud of her accomplishment.

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Annie arrived early for her first morning. Not through her own efforts but by fortuitous design. Her father dropped her off at the surgery as he motored to work. He wasn't taking any chances. Waving him off up the road Annie smoothed down her demure skirt and stepped over the threshold into her new life.

The Persian carpeted waiting room seemed less intimidating than at the interview. After Annie had hung up her coat in a small passageway she strolled into the basement suite and studied the décor. Three velvet armchairs gathered around a circular table. A large television set rested on its polished surface. In an alcove a tropical fish tank contained a multitude of guppies, angel fish and black mollies. Annie soon found it would be her task to clean out the tank. In the corner of the room a chaise longue stretched which was draped with a Persian throw rug. Black wrought iron lamp hangings completed the effect. It was a lovely room for patients to sit whilst contemplating their forthcoming torture. It might not completely neutralise the procedures ahead but the female nude statuettes would most certainly distract the male victims Annie speculated. The *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue* magazines might distract the female patients. She also thought the television was a good addition. At least in between patients she would be able to watch it. The patients too might avail themselves of it in order to anaesthetise themselves to the ordeal ahead.

Mr Toth was already balanced on his stool by the chair-side, keen to launch his newly employed nurse into her new career. After absorbing his instructions Annie was allotted the task of bringing in the first patient of the day. Her nervously squeaked invitation succeeded in terrifying the man. A magazine he had been sightlessly staring at fell to earth like a wounded bird

when Annie's, 'would you like to come in?' penetrated the pit of terror which had rooted him to the chair.

Throughout the morning the patients were admitted and discharged with monotonous regularity. Through the procedures Mr Toth muddled German with Hungarian and English making a goulash of the languages. He oversaw the performance as though he was a film director on a stage set, bullying his stars into shape. Annie obeyed out of respect for the end of week pay packet. The patients obeyed out of a fearful respect for the hand that wielded lethal implements, not wishing to invite any incontinent slips.

By the end of the morning Annie was accustomed to looking into the mouths of patients. They all looked as though they'd never met a toothbrush let alone known the cleansing effect of toothpaste. At the conclusion of the session 'calculus' or 'tartar' had been added to the young girl's growing vocabulary. She soon realised that inside the public's terrified mouths a fencng of tartar lurked, often cementing teeth together that otherwise would have been jettisoned with one good sneeze.

During the individual treatments and in between, Mr Toth kept up a heavily accented commentary. Annie learned that he was an Hungarian émigré who came to England in nineteen fifty seven having escaped the Hungarian uprising of nineteen fifty six. He had settled into the little suburb where he opened his own practice with the aid of his fifth, psychiatrist wife. Three previous wives had been discarded on the streets of Budapest. The fourth wife was residing in an upstairs room at the top of the house. She was his son-in-law's mother. He married her apparently because he thought it would be nice to keep relations in the family. That marriage obviously had not worked out and Mr Toth dismissed that wife with an airy wave of his hand. 'She vas frigid you know', he confirmed when Annie dared to ask what had happened. She stood silently listening as he further enlightened her 'Marry-arge iss bad ven ze voman iss not accepting ze man's little ambassador'. Annie stared at Mr Toth's sculpted face with its halo of white leonine waves and had to admire his magnificent features. Sixty five years old he had confided to Annie but far from being content to dig his garden like other retired folk he had no intention of downing any of his tools.

'What's an ambassador got to do with it?' Annie ventured. Mr Toth laughed at her bewilderment.

'You know a man always vants to crawl back into ze voman from vere he comes. As he cannot he sends in his little ambassador'. So that was what he meant? Annie wasn't too sure that she agreed with the 'little' part of it. She would have thought that an understatement of the situation but dared not advance her views for fear of overstepping her inferior position.

Annie had given no thought to lunch but found herself included in the family's fair. Various members of the household converged on the long oblong kitchen from different regions of the large house. Mr Toth's current wife, Dr Marx, abandoned her psychiatric patients and joined her husband. Each of the group sat at their allotted place whilst the housekeeper Esme, served them, garnishing the proceedings with her own brand of Irish blarney. Annie was introduced to veal schnitzel, pumpernickel, salami, sauerkraut, and goulash. She thoroughly enjoyed the novelty of the new tastes.

Mr Toth liked a stem vase with a seasonal flower placed at his left elbow. Annie watched in amusement when, after he had consumed half a carafe of wine with his meal, he knocked it off the table.

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The afternoon presented more problems than had the morning. Annie tried to master the sucker but found it more difficult that it had appeared at the outset.

She found tongues came in all shapes and sizes. Small and tremulous, middling and treacherous and large and bullying. She had never given thought to them in her previous life. Now they featured in all their multitudinous variety.

The biggest problem was the aspirator tip which had a tendency to suck up any flesh that made contact with it. Consequently it kept getting cheek and tongue and other bits stuck in it. The mouth would fill up with water. 'Steek it in, push ze tong away'. Mr Toth ordered as the patients gagged and shot a fountain in the air like spouting sperm whales. Annie tried hard, gripping the tip until it bent along its length. The tongues however refused to be pushed into position at the back of the mouth when they liked to be centre stage.

'Gott in Himmel. Steek it at ze back. Don't be afraid. Push ze tong out of ze vay'. That oft repeated exhortation had no effect. Whatever Annie did, those writhing miscreants seemed to have a life separate from their owners. They rose to fill the mouth like Moby Dick heaving up from an ocean bed. Some shrank back only to suddenly snake out like those lizards that flick a long whip. Saliva would fountain up nearly hitting Annie in the eye. She strove to control the tongues churning over Mr Toth's lethal drill but even under his condemnatory eye they refused to behave in a proper manner. Like unruly children they swarmed everywhere at once.

'Vat you doink. You must hold ze tong down vith ze socker. Press it hard, pull it away from me so I can get into ze mouse'. Mr Toth ranted at a

defeated Annie, goading her to ever greater efforts. How on earth could anyone hope to make a tongue obedient to a slippery piece of metal when the space they occupied was being invaded with so many alien objects, there wasn't room for anything else. Soon Annie concluded they had minds of their own. When opposed by a particularly mean specimen which refused to admit any instruments Mr Toth tried sneaking them in, forcing them in, in fact he tried everything in and out of the book. Then he appealed to the patient. His pleadings fell on a totally indifferent patient who seemed missing a few gigabytes of brain connections.

'Achh....vat...ishting...' Hungarian oaths made the air around the patient tainted with goulash but he had no idea that the dentist was swearing at him.

They fought their way past the villainous flesh and at the end of the day Annie began to make inroads into the interior. She had learned that if she stuck the sucker too far back the patient would gag, thereby depositing the contents of their stomachs onto her nicely starched nurse's uniform. After one such mishap she was determined not to provoke a repeat performance, bearing in mind Mr Toth's thunderous expressions, both facial and verbal. He prodded and drove her and soon she found the confidence to strain against the tongues, thereby clearing the operating site for her boss.

'Zat ees right. You lean on ze socker. Pull ze tong across ze teet. Now you haf it'. A jet of saliva squirted from under the patient's tongue and hit his mouth. 'Achh.. Mein Gott'. Vat ees zat gland doink. Zey ar vatering me as zo I vas a flower'. Mr Toth wiped his mouth and completed the drilling. The filling was equally difficult to execute when the tooth ended up floating in a lake. 'Vere ess ze socker. Sock, sock, you dumkopf'. Annie did not understand the word but felt sure it was not complimentary. She wafted the sucker about, stabbing it here and there. In this manner she managed to keep the operating site dry which meant the flow of Hungarian and German oaths diminished to a trickle.

At the end of the first day Mr Toth showed Annie how to close down the surgery. She soon realised the procedure was akin to shutting down a Boeing after a flight.

Waving goodbye to Mr Toth Annie set off home on the bus. She was so exhausted that she fell asleep en route and was woken by the conductor at the terminus. She crawled onto a return bus and finally crashed onto the living room sofa at home. 'It can't have been that bad', her father jollied, anxious lest she throw in the towel.

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Annie did not vacate her position by the chair-side. Much as she sometimes felt that she would like to, those tongues presented a challenge which had to be conquered. No stupid bit of human anatomy was going to deflect her from collecting her pay packet. The first instalment was pressed into her hand at the end of the week. Her own hard earned wage sat in her hand like bounty from heaven.

Mr Toth had paid her by cheque. Annie stared at it and her bubbling happiness began to dissipate. She explained to her boss that she didn't have a bank account. Promptly Mr Toth marched her off to his bank, introduced her to the world of thieving managers and sponsored an account for her.

During that first week it wasn't only tongues that had dominated the proceedings. The admiring stares of women had raised its spectre amidst the drilling and extracting. Annie could appreciate that her elder boss was a handsome specimen. But she was not prepared for the worshipful eyes that followed his every move. Even the young girls would gaze up at him when he was in the throes of wrapping their teeth in matrix bands or stuffing amalgam into their cavities. When he did extractions his nut cracking contortions brought them out in a pick glow. How could they place adoring eyes on his sculpted mouth when he was injecting them with a lethal looking needle?

Hence when Annie found herself in the bank with her employer she was more than prepared for the look of blatant admiration on the middle aged Teller's face. That lady batted her bald-tooth-combed eyelashes vigorously at him. Had she been possessed of the thick brush variety a draught might have been created. As it was not even the cheek hair was stirred.

In his usual Grand drama manner Mr Toth exerted the full force of his magnetism on the lady. She was as putty in his manipulating hands. If he commanded she probably would have walked under a bus in the road. Of course Mr Toth was well aware of the effect he had on women and took advantage of the situation. Before Annie could count the number of bald eyelash bats that the lady's eyes made Mr Toth signed the papers with a flourish and the new account book was produced. She left the bank with the paper work and a new cheque book tucked in her handbag, her first weeks pay having been ceremoniously deposited. The bank Teller placed yearning eyes on Mr Toth as he swept Annie out into a suddenly transformed day.

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Annie floated back to the surgery and was soon poised again with the sucker. She was beginning to feel it was an extension of her arm. When Mrs Titmus plonked herself in the chair Annie didn't take too much notice. She was trying to assess whether the lady had a small and tremulous tongue or the bullying fighting type. At least she had small feet, did that mean that she might have a small tongue? Annie was becoming fixated by them and came out of her reverie when Mrs Titmus steeled herself for the injection. However before Mr Toth could administer it she pushed him away and pulled up her skirt. 'Do you mind if I adjust this?' Her fingers were fiddling with her stocking top. Annie looked at Mr Toth but he was just staring into the distance, quite unmoved by the display. The lady smoothed her stocking, which looked like loose skin on a chipolata, readjusted the suspender and pushed her skirt down. What was all that about Annie wondered as Mrs Titmus began mooning at Mr Toth whilst he fiddled in her mouth.

Mrs Titmus attended on her next appointment with a vast area of dispirited cleavage on show. It resembled her after part but seemed to shrink from the task. The black dress she was wearing was scooped out so low that her navel nearly made an appearance. Mr Toth was completely unreactive. This was no surprise to Annie as she had at that stage realised that her employer preferred a more nubile package, not one that had outlived its display date.

On the third visit some weeks later Mrs Titmus tottered on high heels into the surgery. Mr Toth was in the middle of a monologue on the vagaries of the Health service. The stream of complaints issuing from his mouth blocked out the events as they developed. Mrs Titmus looked up at him and sweetly invited him to unzip her dress. Annie never knew why he did it? Maybe, because he had been married five times and had used that reflex so often, he just went into automatic pilot and did not even need to glance in the direction of action. Whatever, the speed with which he accomplished the unfrocking showed a level of expertise that perhaps a man who had been less married might have demonstrated.

The dress was deposited on the floor and Mrs Titmus pushed up her barely contained breasts for inspection. They reminded Annie of jellies on a plate. Her modesty was scantily conserved when she was strung up with the meanest bits of lacy string that dug into her flesh. Annie gawped at Mr Toth who was still oblivious to the state of affairs. When his eyes veered in the direction of the proffered breasts they almost popped from their sockets. 'Cover her up vith bib und trowel, I can't vork vith zat heaving under my nose'. Why on earth did he not tell the stupid woman to replace her clothes Annie wondered as she escorted the mincing Mrs Titmus to the

chair. She placed a bib and towel and prepared to assist. Hysteria drove her out into the passageway. A coat hook helped support her whilst she hung and writhed, totally out of control. In the end Annie knew she had to return to chaperone her employer for he was in danger left alone with a near naked patient.

Later, when she had made several departures and returns and had mastered her hysterical outbursts, Mr Rickman the dental technician strolled in. He was ignorant of the ongoing situation and unsuspectingly chatted to Mr Toth. Mrs Titmus rose from the treatment and turned about. 'Hello Mr Rickman', she said at which moment the bib and towel slid slowly down into her lap.

Mr Rickman saw the exposed breasts and his eyes became arrested on them. Annie turned in time to see a purple tide line begin to ascend his face. It rose from his collar edge and swam, like a tideline, up to his hair-line whilst Annie stared, mesmerised at the coloured effect. At the end the technician stood like a bursting damson with his eyes still riveted to the lady's upper region.

Annie took a towel and covered up the patient. After that she chivvied the two men outside and handed Mrs Titmus her outdoor clothes. The lady pursed her frustrated mouth when making another appointment. What would happen at the next visit Annie worried.

Chapter 2

It was not many weeks before Annie saw the more unpleasant side of human nature.

She had seen that most people were happy to pay for their treatment on the spot. Some habitually attended without bringing with them any means of settling the bill. 'How zey can meet ze vorld vith not a pfenning in zere purses I cannot condescend'. Mr Toth grumbled about that habit but Annie found those who arrived without money in any shape or form were not the problem. They more often than not would rush home and return with the payment. Usually they would knock on the surgery door begging admission when Annie was up to her beehive in blood and roots. They were an unwanted interruption but had to be dealt with politely when Mr Toth demanded utter professionalism from his minions. Even though he did not always conduct himself in a manner befitting his position.

Annie had soon realised the dichotomy in his character when a patient, Mr Phillpot, happily sat and allowed Mr Toth to cement a newly made crown in his mouth. After the patient had admired the work in a hand mirror he began feeling about in his various pockets, searching for his cheque book with an 'Oh dear me I've forgotten it', look on his face.

Mr Toth's expression grew progressively thunderous as he watched the performance, knowing exactly where the shame-faced act was leading. Mr Phillpot's patting hands and probing fingers brought forth from his pockets nothing more barterable than a half sucked mint, a tattered bus ticket from a ride taken several years previously and a screw without a nut.

The patient stood penitently but with the slight suggestion of a smirk as he calculated that he was in an unassailable position.

Mr Toth at that point lost his rag and tipped Mr Phillpot into the chair with such a suddenly applied nudge that the patient's eyes nearly popped from their sockets. 'Right, you sink you can fool vith me. A poor foreigner. An alien who you sink is an ee-dee-yot. Vell let me speak you. I am not zo happily put away. I vill take off zat crown und you go ride a double-deck to China'. With that off his chest he grabbed the drill and began cutting the crown in pieces. The patient was so surprised that he put up no resistance. Soon the mutilated crown was flicked off and flung on the bracket table. Mr Phillpot bared his fang in disbelief and before any further assault could be made on his tooth or person he leapt from the chair. In a blink he fled the scene, furious that his little scam had failed.

Annie found that when an incident such as that occurred there followed a series of others that seemed like a needle stuck in a record groove. Condemned to play the same notes indefinitely. So after Mr Phillpot tried it on Mrs Guineawell and Mr Farthingsworth arrived on the same morning and repeated with a variation of detail the procedure, all intent on receiving something for nothing.

Mrs Guineawell sloped in looking as innocent as an untouched birthday cake. Cyanide and marshmallow Annie later concluded when the patient's true colours were revealed.

Carefully Mrs Guineawell eased herself into the seat and placed penny-thrift eyes on Mr Toth's engrossed face. He was concentrating hard when he was trying to fit a gold crown at the back of the mouth. It kept slipping out of his fingers but patiently he worked to seat it correctly. Suddenly it sprang through his slippery fingers. 'Dont swallow. Dont swallow'. He exhorted as he poked a finger so far down the lady's throat that she gagged. The crown shot out onto the floor. Annie retrieved, washed and handed it back to her boss. Again through the fumbling execution of placing it that wretched crown was launched into orbit by the patient's reflex retching. That time it descended and came to rest behind a cabinet, in amongst a pile of black fluff.

Again Annie brought it back to light, washed it and handed it to Mr Toth. She was getting fed up with the whole situation. They seemed to be making no progress in reaching the end of the treatment and discharging the patient. She was aware that two patients were waiting. Their presence could be felt by a lot of ostentatious coughing and scraping of throats which they directed at the door which separated the waiting room and surgery. Annie slipped out and turned on the television for them. Maybe that would appease their impatient throat frogs.

Back in the surgery Mr Toth was beginning to show the strain. His face had become tinged with purple but he struggled on until the lady gagged and shot the crown up in the air. It came down to land seemingly near the patient's handbag. 'Could you haf a look und see if ze crown comes into your bag?' Mr Toth directed the full force of his charm at the lady. She was past her sale by date but he needed to get that crown back and cement it. With reluctance Mrs Guineawell opened her clutch bag and exposed the contents. Mr Toth and Annie looked amongst the meagre contents but could see nothing resembling the gold crown. A frown grew on Mr Toth's brow. Something was wrong?

There was no purse nor cheque book nor other method of payment. A lipstick, powder compact, mascara wand and comb were the only items. The lady had no pockets in her clothes where she could have secreted a

purse or wallet. Mr Toth took the bull by the horns. ‘You haf come vith ze money to pay?’ Mrs Guineawell lowered lids over guilty eyes when confronted with two accusing looks.

‘Haf you ze means to pay. For if you haf not I vill not fit zis crown. You vill go home without zis toot’. Mr Toth leaned his threatening bulk over the patient and she shrunk from his flaring nostrils. He backed away and she squeezed out and ran past the two startled patients in the waiting room. She had thought to get away with it. No doubt having no intention of paying the money later.

Mr Toth careered out after her. ‘You dishonest, thieving criminal without a consciousness. I vill not be taken off so easily’. The words echoed up the road as the lady made her getaway. Mr Toth was so furious that Annie rescheduled the two waiting patient’s appointments. She thought it best for he had stormed past their goggling eyes, into the garden to get air. Whilst she wrote out the appointments on a card she could hear breaking flower pots and violent crashes. One sounded like her employer’s foot had made contact with a hard object. A bellow added to the general racket of objects breaking and parts of human anatomy making contact with bricks. They seemed almost relieved to make their exit judging by the din arising from the garden.

Towards the end of that same morning Mr Farthingsworth sidled in. Again he appeared a very nice man. Like roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. Pleasantly savoury Annie thought. Within five minutes she had to amend her original assessment. Mr Farthingsworth did not have an appointment but begged to be seen. He was clutching his face, cupping it in an oil smeared hand. Annie felt sorry for him. She could see he was in pain and asked Mr Toth if he would fit him in. A patient had failed an appointment she pointed out to him. ‘I vill see him if he pays twenty pounds. He iss not my patient.

Annie relayed the message to the man. ‘Twenty pounds?’ she asked and Mr Farthingsworth said yes that would be fine. A card was made out and he was escorted in. Mr Toth stood and looked him up and down. His clothes were a bit tattered and he was covered in oil. Annie thought her employer was going to object to the dirty clothes. Instead he asked, ‘Haf you ze money to pay. Ze twenty pounds zat you agreed to?’ Mr Farthingsworth cast shifty eyes down at his shoes.

‘Well no. But I’ll go down to the bank and get it immediately you have done with me’. Annie and Mr Toth knew what that meant. No payment.

‘I vill not see you. You haf not ze money to pay zerefore I vill not be doink anysing. If you vant me to take away your pain you haf to pay now’. He looked so furious that Mr Farthingsworth backed away.

‘I only wanted a prescription. You could have done that for me. It’s a little thing to ask’. That provoked such a thunderous response in Mr Toth that she was afraid he would have a stroke. She took the patient’s arm and steered him out of the premises.

Mr Toth had had enough. He gave vent to such anger that Annie thought he’d do himself a real injury. The chairs and table were kicked and upturned. The television was assaulted but remained intact. The tantrum blew itself out in violent Hungarian, German and English oaths shouted in a goulash of expletives as magazines and cushions went flying. When the storm had abated Mr Toth made a Grand exit leaving Annie like a hurricane battered plant.

What a to do she thought as she put the waiting room to rights and savoured the silence. This particular morning had been more difficult than usual. What would the afternoon be like?

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After lunch Annie rested quietly in the waiting room, trying to gather strength for the next onslaught. Soon she had to haul herself from her comfortable seat when a patient wandered in. Again the replay syndrome emerged as the individual scenes unfolded throughout that session.

Mrs Makepeace looked a loser. From the moment she opened her mouth till the final removal of her shrinking person from the chair she inspired nothing but the feeling she was completely pathetic. She shambled in and scurried to the chair trying to hide her black eye.

‘My zat’s a nasty looking bifstek you haf. Vat haf you been doink?’ Mr Toth smiled jollyng the lady along. Mrs Makepeace was in no mood to be encouraged and bared her broken front teeth without saying a word. ‘My... my..., vat happened to zose teet. Haf you been boxing?’

That remark was met by a scowl, one that was determined to be miserable. The lady had lost her voice as well as her teeth and remained mute. Mr Toth set about repairing the damage, inserting a post into each of the two exposed roots and fashioning temporary crowns until permanent ones could be made.

At the end of the procedure Mrs Makepeace glared at Mr Toth and slunk past Annie, again trying to hide her swollen black eye. ‘What do you think happened there then?’ Annie asked Mr Toth wondering why the woman appeared so hopeless.

‘I sink you might find it’s her husband. He has punched her und she is too humble-iated to own it’. He scrubbed his hands matter of factly, not seeming in the least bit perturbed.

‘But that’s awful. What kind of man would do that to a woman?’ Annie stalked about the little room her anger boiling over at life’s injustices.

‘You say vot kind of man. Vun who is not getting his little ambassador into the consulate, vere it wants to be’. Annie stared in amazement.

‘Is that all marriage is about. An emissary infiltrating a diplomatic corps’. She felt like kicking Mr Toth in the legate region but resisted the impulse. She might get the sack for opposing his right, as an employer to be right.

Mr Toth just smiled with patronising wisdom and they continued with another patient before a phone call interrupted Annie. It was another lady patient. She had been playing with her boyfriend in the bathroom, she told Annie and somehow in the process of the game she had managed to get her teeth at a low enough level to hit them on the glass door knob. Annie relayed the message to Mr Toth and he instructed her to get the patient to attend immediately.

Within the half hour Miss Brocklehurst loped in and when in the chair pulled back her lip. Her two front teeth were cracked half way up. Mr Toth began the process of reconstituting them. ‘Vat anozer bifstek eye. It iss a habit today?’

Miss Brocklehurst stared up at him not knowing to what he referred. Later she explained. ‘I got the black eye when my teeth hit the doorknob’. Annie cast a disbelieving look thinking of little ambassadors. Where did they come into this particular incident?

After the patient had gone she tackled Mr Toth and his theory. ‘That last patient apparently has a very happy relationship with her boyfriend so where does the little ambassador idea fit with her situation?’

‘I would sink she is coverik up her boyfriend. She is not going to tell us if zeir legations never reach ze nuncio. She would be too shy’. Well Annie grudgingly conceded defeat. He had a point she supposed.

Before the afternoon finished another battered female rang for an emergency appointment. Mrs Prendergast explained she had lost her two front teeth in a fracas in a Greek airport. ‘I want the dentist to put them back. I’ll bring them with me’, was her parting shot. She was so desperate she offered to pay privately and Mr Toth ingratiatingly agreed to stay late for her.

Annie was justifiably put out when she was advised that her presence was necessary. She would have to stay and the prospect annoyed her. That was the evening spoiled. She wouldn't dream of asking for overtime but nursed a grievance against Mr Toth. He would not be forgiven in a hurry.

Mrs Prendergast arrived in a flurry of speeding taxis and flying coats. She rushed to the chair and slithered into it with an eagerness that was out of keeping with its general unpleasant ambience.

Mr Toth looked at her mouth and she pointed out the gaps. After grovelling in her bag she drew into the light two whole teeth. 'There we are. Now can you put them back please. I've got a plane to catch. Back to Greece I'm going and got to look nice for that'. She firmly laid back her head and waited for her resurrection.

'But zis is not ze teet zat you said on ze phone had been knocked out. Vat I do vith zees'. Mr Toth rolled the two perfectly whole teeth between his fingers looking as lost as a child in a maze.

'They are the ones I rang up about'. The lady confirmed which made her position look more impossible every minute.

'I vas to understand zat you had crowns come off. Zese are ze whole teet und I cannot do anysing about it. Ze sockets vill haf closed and anyway you haf vashed zem'.

She felt she was being accused of being dirty and rose to her own defence. 'Of course I washed them. I didn't want to come back and have Greek germs inserted in my mouth, did I?' Mrs Prendergast gave Mr Toth a filthy look. He was the expert, he aught to agree with her judicious washing of her teeth.

'Even if ze sockets vere open and I could put zem back, ze dirt would have helped zem to knit back into place. Greek or any ozer kind of dirt is better zan no dirt at all. But anyway I cannot put zem back. Ze holes vere zey fell from are closed over. It is useless'. Mr Toth laid down the teeth on the bracket table with a weary expression on his face. His desire to help had been misguided.

'What am I going to do. I can't walk around like this. My husband won't allow it not to mention my boyfriend'. Her hands came up to her face and she burst into tears, sobbing as though her heart would break.

'How you come to loose zese teet anyway?' Mr Toth was curious. This was the third woman in a few hours. Each had lost front teeth. What on earth was going on?

'We were in the airport lounge and Reggie, that's my other half, saw this man making eyes at me. He didn't know it was my boyfriend. Reggie got so furious that he punched my boyfriend. I tried to stop them fighting and got in the way of Raymond, my boyfriend's punch. His fist caught me

in the mouth and my teeth flew out'. Mrs Prendergast looked as woebegone as a parrot without its feathers.

Annie was intrigued. One husband and one contender for diplomatic immunity. How would Mr Toth explain that one away.

An impression was taken and a denture made to fill Mrs Prendergast's gaps. Within a week she left her husband and flew back to Greece and the arms of her boyfriend.

When she had gone Mr Toth remonstrated over the warring public. Annie continued their original discussion. 'Well how do you explain that one. Two ambassadors fighting over one legate'. Mr Toth threw a dark look at his nurse. She could be a real pest sometimes.

'She got vat she deserved. She entertains two ambassadors instead of vun she expect to be punished'. That was his last riposte on the subject. After that he stalked off to bed and Annie rushed to catch her homeward bound bus.

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On the following morning three patients failed to attend for their appointments. One after the other. Mr Toth grew restive with the lack of activity and decided to teach Annie charting. The language of dentistry was like Gobbledegook but she knew she had to get to grips with it sometime.

She sat down on a stool and Mr Toth seated himself opposite. He began calling out the names relating to different parts of the teeth. Annie dutifully repeated them and made an effort to memorise them. Mes-i-al, dis-tal she parroted quite unaware that Mr Toth was staring intently at her lips. Just as she drew breath before saying the next name he put a hand behind her head and drew her towards him. All she saw was his mouth advancing to hers. Then he kissed her. A wet, slippery kiss which infuriated her. She jerked her head away and wiped a hand over her lips, trying to erase the sensation.

'Don't you ever dare do that again', she retaliated in a tone that brooked no argument. Far from being contrite over his action Mr Toth smiled at her maidenly modesty, finding it amusing.

From that moment on Annie watched her employer like a hawk, determined to nip any further inappropriate behaviour in the bud. The afternoon progressed with her monitoring eye showing its disapproval should Mr Toth press too closely against her. It was difficult for it was a small surgery with no surplus space to keep a distance between individuals.

In total ignorance of the ongoing contretemps Mrs Wimpory insinuated herself between a wary Annie and Mr Toth. She took a seat and

Mr Toth looked at the patient's record card. 'Vere are ze patient's male parts?' He looked around as though he might find them walking through the door.

Male parts? Annie stared at him as though she was on another planet. What on earth were they? Did he mean the patient's husband? 'Vell vere are zey?' Mr Toth began rummaging in his drawers whilst a mystified Annie kept her distance. What was he looking for. 'Ring Mr Rickman. Ask him if he has ze patients male parts?'

Annie glanced at Mrs Wimpory wondering if she was aware that her dentist appeared to be going out of his mind. Mrs Wimpory seemed to be oblivious to the situation. She was happily staring at the cracks in the ceiling, clearly not interested in her male parts. Did she ever give thought to little ambassadors or her husband who presumably was the one who possessed them.

'Vell go on. Ring Mr Rickman. Get a jump on'. Mr Toth was getting irritated and Annie sidled to the phone. She dialled the number almost dumb in the face of what she had to say. Mr Rickman answered and Annie blurted the question at him. Strangely he seemed to find nothing odd at the request.

'Hasn't Mr Toth got them there. I thought I gave them to him last week?' Annie relayed the message and received a rude response for her pains. A few Hungarian oaths carried to the phone and Mr Rickman heard them. 'Tell him I'll look here again. If I find them I'll bring them over'. With that the line went dead. Annie put down the receiver. What was going on? Who had Mrs Wimpory's male parts? Her husband presumably. Then why did the technician have them? And more to the point why did Mr Toth think he should have them? She knew that male and female parts were liberally shared amongst neighbours and friends so perhaps the patient was involved with the technician? Or Mr Toth? Or both? Perhaps they made a threesome? Maybe the patient had once been a man and been deprived of her male parts when becoming a woman. That was why everyone was looking for them now?

Annie glanced down at Mrs Wimpory's serene face. It showed no signs of being remotely akin to a man's face. She was very feminine. No that could not be the answer.

The phone made her jump and she lunged for it. It was Mr Rickman. He had found Mrs Wimpory's male parts in his drawers. Why were they in his drawers and not her husband's? Further to that why were they being brought over by the technician? Annie stood frozen in place whilst Mr Toth asked her to hand him various instruments. He remained sanguine in the face of her complete bewilderment.

When Mr Rickman arrived she shrank from what may be revealed. In the end it was Annie who laughed at herself. Mr Toth pointed out the female parts of a precision attachment embedded in the lady's crowns in the mouth. The male parts would slot in and be embedded in a denture which Mr Toth was in the process of making.

The male parts were slotted in the crowns and an impression taken. When that was completed the lady was discharged until her next appointment.

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Whether or not it was the stress over losing the patient's male parts or not, Annie could never decide, but it seemed to galvanise Mr Toth into reacting to his. He tried again to kiss her but she pushed him away. Then he began chasing her. The only route they could take was round the chair. So Annie ran away from her employer. He was a big man and for every great bound he took she could only take, in comparison, a few scuttling steps and soon he was gaining on her.

They circuted the chair several times before Annie made a heroic lunge for the surgery door. She wrenched it back and hurtled up the stairs to his flat. She would be safe there in the presence of his wife.

Dr Marx batted not an eyelash when Annie hurtled through the door with her beehive dishevelled. A cup of tea was proffered and Annie gratefully took it. Soon Mr Toth strolled into their midst looking as innocent as a newly iced birthday cake.

Later when they had returned to the surgery Annie told her boss in no uncertain terms that she was not prepared to accept such behaviour. Mr Toth had the effrontery to try and defend his behaviour. 'You are a very pretty girl und I am only a man'. He looked so penitent, like a small boy seeking forgiveness, that Annie had to smile at his explanation. He had almost apologised. Soon they were on the best of terms again.

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They took a coffee break and the act of sitting tipped back in his swivel chair seemed to spur Mr Toth into a reminiscent mood. He began a nostalgic stroll through the byways of his past. Annie sat, a demure maiden, whilst he drew the scenes of his youth in graphic detail.

Mr Toth had been born on Christmas Eve. Like the infant Jesus he had made his debut in a manger surrounded by donkeys and sheep. His mother had been caught short of the local birthing place and had been

forced into a stable as there was no room in the guesthouse. However the star and the worshipping shepherds failed to appear. Annie sipped her coffee with her mind's eye seeing the fantasy unroll.

It didn't sound quite right, but she adopted the look of a suitably impressed audience. Mr Toth was nothing if not a man who loved the limelight.

It transpired that he had trained to be a dentist in Vienna. In one of the early Hungarian uprisings he had been commissioned into a woman's army camp as Chief Medical Officer. His dreamy eyes were fixed on the opposite wall as he continued with the monologue.

Being a young man in a woman's camp was entirely in keeping with that closest to his heart. Women. To be in a position of unassailable authority over them was like a dream come true. Should any of the women seek a consultation for even the most mild condition then he would demand that they strip naked. The women privates were given an examination not expected in view of the minor problems they presented. And of course Mr Toth relished every encounter confident of his power over the yielding female.

On one occasion an urgent message had to be delivered to an army camp some miles distant. His commanding Officer gave his instructions and left a young Mr Toth to arrange the carriage of the missive. Mr Toth applied his fertile mind, noting a dejected looking horse in the next field idly flicking flies from its rump. The horse was rustled from the enclosure in the dead of night. It stood, emaciated with wash-board ribs, looking unable to walk to the gate let alone be the bearer of tidings brought into a camp at the gallop.

Still Mr Toth was determined if not hopeful. He mounted the horse and instructed a woman private in her task. She peered up at him with a strangely tight lipped expression. Without ceremony she then stuffed a stick of ginger up the animal's posterior orifice. That galvanised the nag into action. It took off like a rocket and galloped at full speed. On reaching the destination Mr Toth proudly dismounted and handed the message over to an Officer. At that moment the horse crumpled in a heap and promptly expired.

After that stint as a medical officer he returned to Vienna and his lucrative practice. One evening a young female opera singer came hammering on his door. She sobbed out her problem on his flattered chest and he pressed her closer against him. She had broken her dental bridge. What was she going to do she cried. She was singing the lead in 'La Traviatta' but without her front bridge the audience was doomed to disappointment. And more to the point she wailed, she would lose her fat

fee. Mr Toth could identify with that unpleasant empty purse and promised to try and come up with a solution.

He set about trying to invent a method of welding the broken bridge together. Not an easy task when he had decided that he would not remove it. No he was going to unite the two halves with a carbon torch that would reach three thousand degrees centigrade whilst the bridge remained firmly secured in the Diva's mouth.

Within three weeks he had devised a revolutionary technique and cobbled together from various oddments a workable prototype. When he had satisfied himself that the method would not kill the unfortunate recipient he bade the Prima Donna to attend and summoned two professional friends.

The scene was set for the historical innovation and Mr Toth's compatriots arrived ready to act as witnesses. On hearing what was entailed the Doctor refused to stay in the room. He agreed to standing across the road outside where he would observe the upstairs window. What good that would do to anyone was mute but he would not be moved. The solicitor nervously accepted his prime position and stood at the lady's head on the left side. He had been recruited into squirting a jet of water at the moment of welding and steeled himself for the ordeal. Mr Toth quickly completed the preparatory work and indicated that he was ready to apply the lethal carbon probe. He secured it in the mouth and pressed a foot pedal. The torch suddenly lit up and a great light emanated from the patient's mouth. The Solicitor was so terrified that instead of dousing the light with his water jet he grabbed the mouth wash glass. In one quick movement he emptied the entire contents over the patient's elegant bouffant hair.

The Diva was oblivious to her saturated state as Mr Toth whooped with joy. It had worked and he received an exuberant kiss on the cheek from the lady. The Solicitor melted into the gathering dusk and trudged away with the speechless Doctor. They had witnessed a new invention and neither realised the importance of the event.

Chapter 3

Annie ignored her employer's volatile moods and paid due attention to the flow of patients. In between the serious business of teeth she set a vigilant eye on Mr Toth, ready to defend her position and suppress any further inappropriate behaviour. Her defensive manner served to inflame his sense of paranoia and his thwarted desires found another outlet. From that moment he was galvanised into accusing Annie of various crimes. A missing cushion was the first item to have disappeared and she was considered the felon.

'Vere is zat cushion zat vas out zere?' That was the first Annie knew of the theft.

'What cushion?' She innocently asked staring into the waiting room wondering what her employer was talking about.

'Zat cushion. Zere vas a cushion vonce out zere'. Mr Toth glared at Annie's bemused face.

'I can't remember a cushion', Annie countered but that served to produce an explosion of such magnitude she shrank from the blast. 'What did it look like?'

'Like a cushion you dumpkopf. It vas out zere. In ze waiting room chair. Vere is it?' The instruments flew past the patient's swivelling eyes and before any further violence could be witnessed by him he was dismissed. 'Now', Mr Toth flared, 'Vere is eet?'

He turned and bounded up the stairs leaving Annie wondering about the cushion. There had never been a cushion in the waiting room, not that she had seen. What had provoked this tantrum?

Mr Toth's bellows drew her upstairs. Once in the kitchen Esme and Annie cowered behind the door. Every now and then Annie would place an eye to the draughty opening trying to gauge the state of play in the drama. At one point Mr Toth galloped down the stairs, stood for a moment in fury. His face had turned a nasty shade of purple and he appeared to be frothing at the mouth. Annie frowned from her bowed position worrying that her boss may have a stroke. What would she do then for a job?

Stroke or no stroke Mr Toth swung about and like a dragon breathing flames proceeded to bound up the stairs again as though all the demons in hell were after him.

Silence ensued as Annie and Esme strained their ears from the kitchen. Not a sound penetrated the atmosphere which was laden with threat. Annie placed her eye again to the small crack of the door and

watched the stairs. Suddenly a beaming Mr Toth skipped down. Against his chest he clutched a red velvet cushion. Annie had never seen it before. Her boss descended to the basement with his prize and placed the cushion in the armchair. He patted it, arranged it perfectly in one corner and returned to his position by the dental chair. Annie sidled behind him and continued where they had left off. He muttered about the theft overlooking the fact that he found the cushion in a tenant's room at the top of his house. Annie had never been up there and pointed out the omission. Mr Toth kicked the chair base and settled to grumping over some NHS forms.

Later in the day when Mr Toth had calmed down and forgotten the cushion episode Mr Grimshaw shuffled into the arena. He was a man who was unhappy with some aspect of his treatment. Neither Mr Toth nor Annie could work out quite what it was that had upset him. Mr Toth had made a denture and at the fitting stage the patient smiled at his reflection in the hand mirror. Between the moment he clambered from the chair and the point where he had to part with his money a bee had flown into his bonnet. He began thumping his fist on a cabinet top, adamant that he wouldn't pay. 'I won't pay. I won't', he bellowed for the neighbours to hear.

Mr Toth stood aghast at the development. What was to be done next? When he realised that Mr Grimshaw was really not going to pay he lunged forwards and deftly snatched the denture from the patient's mouth. That settled matters and no amount of apologies or fawning round him by the patient would alter his stance. The patient had destroyed all goodwill and the patient/practitioner relationship. Even had the man paid the money Annie doubted that Mr Toth would have returned the denture to the patient's mouth. Instead a furious Mr Toth escorted a begging Mr Grimshaw from the premises.

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Those first weeks wore Annie out as they passed in a haze of technical jargon. She learned that communication in the dental world was achieved with a completely different language to standard English. Symbols replaced words, charting grids placed the patients' teeth in a picturesque form and hieroglyphics ran amongst the corrupted explanations on the record card.

MO, DO or other strange abbreviations were bandied about over the patient's heads. At one point Mr Toth advised her that an MOD was needed and Annie was to chart it on the record card. 'What's an MOD', Mr Wynniatt gurgled through the impedimenta in his mouth. His eyes widened in fear and a twitch developed under one eye at the thought of some awful

fate awaiting. Annie did not know how to chart it. Did not even know what it was but the sound of it brought to mind a military term with serious undertones.

‘Don’t worry, it ees not ze Ministry of Defence’, Mr Toth assured the poor man who became slack with relief. Annie also relaxed but was still none the wiser as to how to record it. Soon no hieroglyph got the better of her.

A routine procedure emerged which Annie soon carried out like an automaton. Tray of instruments removed. Mouth wash glass removed. Blood wiped. A new tray of instruments on bracket table, new mouthwash glass on stand. A last glance down at her uniform to check no spatters. The area was then ready to receive the patient. At the door Annie would paste on her face the obligatory smile whether it wanted it or not. That smile was meant to ease the patient into the spotlight but she suspected the patient sometimes mistook it for a gloating overture. She was not the one on the receiving end.

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Those first days were a trial of nerves over the unaccustomed gore. On witnessing her first extraction Annie bottled her shock. For hours she walked about in a state mildly removed from reality. Soon she overcame the weakness and at least could watch an extraction without nearly fainting. She soon became accustomed to the procedure and then with complete indifference could remove the extracted teeth and wipe up the blood. Mr Toth chivvied her into securing each patient’s head in the crook of her arm when he was extracting teeth. Annie obeyed and held on with a vice-like grip. From her spot-lit vantage point she had a good view of proceedings and became immune to Mr Toth’s nut cracking contortions. He screwed his face up and applied himself so vigorously to the task that Annie would become concerned for his cerebral plumbing. She didn’t want him to have a stroke just when she had got herself a good job.

In the first week not only was she subjected to foreign procedures. She also met a variety of alien Hungarian and German émigrés. They crossed the threshold and kissed the air each side of Mr Toth’s face. In those days this greeting was not fashionable in England so it was a revelation to Annie. She decided that it must satisfy some primal instinct of sniffing the others of your species much as dogs do when they meet. In humans one cannot go poking a nose into your associates nether regions but those kisses in the air served the same purpose. You could greet friends in a civilised fashion with your nostrils legitimately close to the cheek

whilst subliminally sniffing their scent to gauge whether it agreed with you or not.

Those were Annie's thoughts as she stood silently in her subservient position, watching each performance. On some days English was barely heard and she began learning odd words of Hungarian and German. On one occasion Mr Toth made a complete goulash of his words. He instructed a patient in the middle of a morning session to 'rinsen ze ouse'. He then hauled Mr Pomfret up to the spittoon bowl. The man clung to its white china side staring at the mouth-rinse glass without the slightest idea what was expected of him. He then proceeded to drain the glass in the manner of a contestant in a beer drinking bout. Mr Toth looked surprised but made no comment. Annie supplied another mouthwash for the patient to rinse out correctly as commanded. Mr Pomfret dared not disobey and this time rinsed, spitting the mouthfuls back in the bowl. A mollified Mr Toth then dismissed the man.

Within a matter of days Annie met Mr Toth's sibling. His sister arrived for treatment. She swanned into the surgery, over the top in height, personality and teeth. These teeth brought to mind a camel of the dromedary variety. She seemed to fill the cubicle, teeth and the rest of her, overshadowing everything except her brother who outshone her in all departments. And he at least did not look like a camel.

The obligatory sniffing was dispensed with. No doubt, Annie concluded, as siblings they had long since become used to each other's scent. Baroness De-Rakoszy impressed her title on Annie and she wondered whether she was meant to curtsy. When the Baroness wafted a dismissive hand over Annie's head the nurse's mood became belligerent. She decided from that moment to bestow on the vain noble lady the title of Mrs for Annie was not prepared to pander to her vanity. Thereafter whenever the Baroness appeared in the surgery Annie would refer to her as Mrs. The look of distaste that lady directed at the nurse, a mere minion, was murderous but there was nothing that she could do about it without revealing the depths of her snobbery. When in the chair the Baroness spat and choked in the same manner as every one else. A title made no difference, Annie concluded, when it came to the basics of life.

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The revelations continued in their moments of rest and Annie learned a lot about her employer's past affairs. It had not taken her long to realise that he loved women in all shapes and forms. 'All women is beautiful ven laying on zeir backs', he told her before returning to the past.

He had been in love with Gisella, a beautiful Swiss socialite. They had lived on the banks of the Danube in a wooden chalet. For some reason Mr Toth had never contemplated marriage to her. Annie wondered why for he spoke of this particular woman more than any other.

At one stage in their relationship he had gone away on a trip to Vienna and had encountered a previous lover when taking a break in a café. They had shared a meal and enjoyed reminiscing. This lady had explained to Mr Toth that she was happily married. She loved her husband but she feared to have a child of his. He was ugly she explained and begged Mr Toth to father a child for her. It could not fail to be good looking and her husband would never know. He would be allowed to believe the child was his.

Mr Toth agreed and they spent a weekend in a hotel indulging their passion with the intent to produce an offspring from the connection. They parted and Mr Toth returned to Gisella and his life with her in their chalet.

Some years later Mr Toth was again in Vienna and he bumped into his previous paramour. The lady told him she had born a beautiful girl and her husband adored his daughter. Mr Toth came away from that meeting delighted that he had an unknown daughter who, he was assured, was beautiful, with his wavy hair and dark eyes. His eyes would go misty at the thought of this unseen progeny. He had one daughter by one of his wives though Annie could never work out which one it was. The multiple marriages made things confusing and she kept quiet refusing to draw her boss any further into his past.

She learned a great deal about Mr Toth's life as a young dentist in Vienna where he plied his trade when not in military service.

He had practiced in a salubrious area of the city and frequently had to treat people of the higher stratas of society. Aristocrats, actors and actresses and renowned people of the business world soon tripped over his threshold. Even the Tzar of Russia had briefly bared his teeth for the young dentist. Toothache afflicted even such nobles and kings Annie learned. Mr Toth was a very innovative young man and had invented many techniques to be used in dentistry and many technological advances. All were patented and he drew a lucrative revenue from them.

Mr Toth elaborated on the intra-oral welding technique which had been created purely to help that poor opera singer. It employed a carbon torch which would reach three thousand degrees centigrade in the mouth. A piece of platinum would have been placed over the break in the bridge. The torch would be positioned on the platinum and borax would be dabbed on a flux. A foot pedal would then activate the carbon torch. With another placed at the end of the bridge as an earth the process would have been

embarked upon. The torch would heat the platinum and melt it. It would run into the crack and join the fractured halves. Annie sat drinking in the details her imagination working over time.

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After the revelations he dragged the young nurse to a corner of the surgery and wheeled out a battered machine which was the final version of his welding process. Following her introduction to it an American man made an appointment wishing to have his broken bridge welded. Annie was instructed to polish the contraption for the event.

Mr Umpleby was a garrulous little man who managed to outdo Mr Toth. He breezed in looking as though he were just going to have a manicure instead of a dangerous treatment. Annie was more nervous than the patient and stood waiting for the act to start like an actor must wait in the wings before a performance on the stage, her heart crashing in her head. She had this wild idea that they might end up officiating at a cremation and was worried as to the disposal of the patient's ashes. With those thoughts milling Annie stood with syringe poised at the chair-side.

She had been instructed to squirt a jet of water at the light the moment it emitted. She stayed tense and waiting. Mr Umpleby bared his bridge for the task, straining his mouth to the limit. The field was isolated with wet cotton rolls and the platinum sliver placed over the borax coated crack. The earth was applied and Mr Toth's foot hovered over the pedal as the lethal torch was positioned over the site. 'Now', Mr Toth shouted as his foot crashed down on the pedal. The moment she saw the light Annie surged into activity, directing a good jet of water at the eruption. The light was momentarily blinding and a display like a firework spitting lit the mouth. Then the illumination was extinguished and a boding silence fell. 'It's OK. The veld iss successful', Mr Toth crowed as Mr Umpleby slapped him on the back, hugely grateful. He rose from the seat inviting Mr Toth to a shared lunch. He wished to try out his newly repaired bridge. What better than a steak and chips he laughed as the two men departed.

Annie retreated to the coffee den and sat in stunned immobility for a while to overcome the shock at the strange event. Many months later another patient from some far flung place descended for the treatment. Again they went through the procedure. Annie was just as nervous. The cremation notion took hold again. Three thousand degrees centigrade, she fretted, seemed an alarming temperature at which to subject the patient.

In the event that welding too was a success and her thoughts on disposing of Mrs Fogle-Blyth's ashes receded in the face of her euphoria at its success.

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There were no more cases for welding after those two for which Annie was thankful. She still did not trust the machine, preferring instead the more mundane procedures.

But that intra-oral welding technique showed her just how the patients trusted the practitioners. They willingly laid down their lives in the confidence that their saviour would remedy any situation with which he was presented. She had learned that a dentist could cure all dental maladies, no concessions being made for his human frailty.

Soon after an old soldier arrived proudly displaying a string of medals pinned to his chest. Mr Earnshaw marched into their midst clutching what appeared to be a fancy jam jar. Marmalade Annie thought guessing he had been shopping.

'If you don't mind. I'll put Myrtle here on the cabinet', the patient said before carefully setting the jar in the middle of the shelf directly opposite the chair. Mr Toth didn't react and Annie stood wondering why the patient was taking such care of a marmalade jar. Mr Earnshaw must have realised they hadn't understood him and enlightened them. 'It's Myrtle, my wife. She died five years ago and I carry her about in the urn'. Annie tried to freeze her face to hide her amusement but Mr Toth's mouth, buttoned against the explosion which threatened, looked as though he might burst. Mr Earnshaw was too busy stroking his wife's ornate lid to notice. Having laid aside Myrtle he began divesting himself of his waistcoat and braces. Annie have no idea why, except he pointed out, that Myrtle had always encouraged him to be comfortable when exposed to the dentist's or doctor's touch.

They undertook his treatment with Myrtle watching the proceedings from the cabinet, safe in the confines of the urn. Apparently she accompanied her husband everywhere. Whether climbing the mountains of his fancy or shooting the rapids of imagination, Myrtle in her urn remained tucked in the crook of his arm. She had travelled the globe, seen the seven wonders of the world and flown in Concord so they were told. The only problem was that in America the authorities had impounded her because they thought she was illicit contraband that Mr Earnshaw was trying to smuggle out. He had to spend a night in an American jail separated from her. Only when a forensic specialist had examined the contents of the jar

and pronounced it ash from a fire was he reunited with her. Undaunted he continued on his world trip hugging Myrtle to him.

When his treatment was finished he again tucked Myrtle in the crook of his arm, speaking to her from the corner of his mouth. Soon he moved off with medals jangling, carrying on a conversation with the jar. 'Don't you think that's sad. He's so lonely', Annie opined but Mr Toth gave her a dark look.

'He is an eed..ee.yot. Vat is ze point of carrying your wife in a jar. She can be no goot to you anymore in ze bed'. Well Annie thought that a really cynical view. The patient obviously felt comforted by Myrtle's presence. However if he ever found another lady would he let his demised wife watch his goings on from the dressing table? She might get upset.

~

Mr Earnshaw had the characteristics of many patients who thought that dentists were magicians. He had warped his denture by sitting on it and expected that Mr Toth could take another off the shelf. 'What do you mean. You can't make a new one for four weeks. This is an emergency. I can't walk around without teeth for that length of time', he snapped pointedly glancing at the jar, drawing their attention to the fact that he was an old soldier and a poor widower. A veteran of the war who should receive preferential treatment and a man who should be pitied for his wife-less state.

'I cannot help ze situation. Eet vill take me four veeks to get a denture ready. I haf no magic to make it qvicker'. Mr Toth was angry Annie could tell and the spectre of Myrtle did not move him to accommodate her husband. In the event Myrtle had to wait the requisite four weeks until her husband was restored to his former toothsome condition but of course they never did know what she thought of them.

The third patient of that cluster waddled in looking a mite vague. Mr Toogood was a tramp-like old man. He was dressed in the most dilapidated coat and had his pyjamas on under it. His coat was covered in gravy stains and his pyjama top covered in dried food.

He complained of a numb spot on his face and wanted someone to help him with it. Annie stood well back trying not to breath. The smell was disgusting.

Mr Toogood stood gnashing his dentureless gums, scratching a spot on his neck. Before they could demure or agree he removed his coat and the tattered under coat. He moved about like a rusty old mechanical

automaton, all the while moaning and grunting. Annie saw his ratty hair and the dirt under his finger nails.

In the end Mr Toth examined him and could find no reason for the numb place on his face. An Xray revealed nothing wrong. The man was emaciated and seemed as though he may have been drinking. Also he smoked like a factory chimney judging from the smell of him.

A prescription was given to him and when he tried to stuff it in his pyjama pocket a shower of paper money fluttered out. It was so unexpected that Annie stood frozen to the spot. Her employer raised a disbelieving eyebrow and began gathering up the notes. He handed them to the old man. Mr Toth did not even care whether he was paid or not. He wanted the Worzel Gummage figure out of his premises. Annie made an attempt to get rid of him and was coerced into physically removing the man. She took his skinny arm and steered him out to the street. Compassion got the better of her and she walked up the street with him until she felt safe that he could totter the last few yards to his home.

When she got back to the surgery she expressed her sadness at the patient's state. 'Ahh vell. He is a mess because he drinks and smokes. It is his own doink. No vun can do anysing for such peoples. And he has the money to waste on such tings.' Her boss was more pragmatic than Annie. She felt angry that an apparently frail and helpless individual had been left to fend for himself. 'You cannot take on ze troubles of ze world. You must commemorate of your own life und leave osers to sort out themselves'. Annie thought her boss was probably right and tried to forget the poor Mr Toogood.

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Several patients descended on them wanting the magic wand treatment. The Media had raised their hopes and they were convinced that dentists could not only get dentures from a shop shelf, but they could stick or glue teeth back into place when they fell out. Frequently they refused to believe the expert when they were told that gluing things back was impossible. 'What do you mean, they glue them on the telly and my neighbour's just had a tooth stuck back with Gum-Gum', Mrs Braithwaite insisted, refusing to accept the situation. 'I'm not satisfied. I'm going to seek a second opinion'. Mr Toth shook his head helpless in the face of such ignorance and Mrs Braithwaite stamped from the surgery refusing treatment.

'Vot is 'Gum-Gum' I vonder?' Mr Toth searched through his dental journals trying to discover what this magic glue was. After a long perusal

of all literature he gave up claiming that wishful thinking made the patients imagine these magical procedures.

The same miracle was expected when Mr Flanagan crept into the room. His initial smile looked a mite incomplete. A front tooth was missing and before he sat in the chair he removed it from his pocket. Mr Toth stared down at the filthy incisor wondering what he was meant to do with it. 'I tripped and fell yesterday. It got knocked out. Could you put it back please'. Mr Flanagan placed his bald pate on the head-rest, expecting the tooth to be stuck back in the original hole. At that stage it had closed over and Mr Toth had to disillusion the chap. 'I am sorry. I cannot put zat back. It ees too late. Ze toot is lost'. The patient looked more furious than upset, hardly believing that the dentist could not do something so obviously easy. He snatched his tooth back and slithered from the chair. Off he rushed to find a dentist who had that magic wand.

Another group of patients regularly annoyed Mr Toth. People who thought that because a front crown had come adrift the end of the world was nigh. They were a 'lot of hystorics', he opined one day between another squalling outburst. First Mrs Uglow dared to walk in and demand to be seen immediately. 'Vat she vant?' Mr Toth growled. He always refused to see anyone without an appointment and made Annie run to and fro with messages. She had to make sense of some strange descriptions of what was happening in the patient's mouths. Most of the time they did not know and it would have been easier for all concerned had her employer deigned to cast his eye at the damage.

'She's got a front tooth fallen out', Annie wearily explained, showing him the card.

'Vat zee whole toot?' He grumped squinnying at the last appointed entry. 'Zat is wrong. She hass crowns on her front teet. It must be vun of zem'. Annie nodded but elaborated on her already convoluted explanations, attempting to manipulate him into helping the poor woman who stood penitent at the mishap. In the waiting room Mrs Uglow kept her lips pursed over the front gap, embarrassed at her condition, bowing her head before the closed surgery door. She may well have been able to hear the argument inside but gave no indication when Annie reappeared, expressing her regret at her inability to move the mulish dentist.

'But I can't walk about like this. Just look at me. I look a fright. What is going to happen to me'. Mr Toth thrust his head round the door post, beginning to show signs of a temper tantrum.

'Nussing vill happen. You vill not die with a front toot dropped off. Eet iss not a world ending catastrophic. Eet iss not a real emergency. I vill glue it back ven you haf made a proper appointment'.

Mrs Uglow crumpled like a paper bag whilst Annie craftily tried to squeeze her in without her employer noticing. He already knew of his nurse's marauding pencil and glowered at her from a corner of the surgery. Mrs Uglow shuffled out and once the arena was clear Mr Toth grabbed a wet dish cloth and threw it at Annie. Across the room it hurtled before smashing on the wall. Then it slid down to the floor settling at her feet like a fatally wounded bird. She picked it up between disgusted fingers. 'Don't you ever dare do that again', she warned as Mr Toth stood, furious at her retaliation. Minion or not Annie was not prepared to accept being an Aunt Sally.

Things continued as before and bearing in mind the law of statistical clustering another patient entered expressing a desire that the dentist replace an errant crown.

'Vat, anuzer vun. I vill not see him until he makes a proper appointment. It iss not an emergency'. Mr Toth exploded from the lavatory where Annie had sought him out to appeal on behalf of Mr Witherspoon. She could hear Mr Toth spluttering and moaning in the midst of his ablutions on the other side of the door but she could not get him to come out.

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The next patient was Mr Baadenshorst who was a stocky pompous individual. Annie later considered he probably suffered from the short man syndrome as well as having a nagging wife. When he arrived for his first visit he strutted in like a bantam cock whilst Mr Toth puffed out his chest like a peacock in display. They appeared like disparate sized fowl competing for supremacy.

'How are ze teet', Mr Toth asked waiting for glowing words of praise. Instead he got a wounding assessment of his extra expensive work.

'They're awful. My wife hates them. They clack when I talk and she says I look like a horse'. Mr Baadenhorst bared his teeth to demonstrate the fact. Annie didn't agree with his wife. More like a donkey she thought when he would never reach horse status.

Mr Toth looked crestfallen at the news and began trying to appease Mr Baadenhorst. Nothing would placate him and after Mr Toth agreed to remake the dentures another impression was taken. The cocky little chap later strode out censorious of the two dispirited workers he left behind.

Annie soon learned that on many occasions the reality of the dentistry provided did not coincide with the patient's expectations. When this occurred the consequences were dire.

Such was the case with Mrs Verity-Brown. She glided into the surgery on long retired model legs looking to be re-instated to the cat walk. Anyone could see that she had been a model with outstanding assets but they had slipped with the effect of prolonged gravity. The once high cheek boned face had fallen at the jaw line and mouth so that little of her worn prosthetic teeth were evident amid the thin smile.

Mr Toth set about making her happy and studied the photographs of her as a young model. The main problem was that she wanted to look like Grace Kelly (Princess Grace of Monaco). Annie admitted she was possessed of the same basic qualities, slightly fair haired, Nordic looking but even with cosmetic surgery she could not have been fashioned into such beauty. Still Mr Toth accepted the challenge, confident he could achieve the result the patient demanded.

After three Try-In stages where the teeth were set up in wax but unfinished, she was not near to being satisfied. She wanted the teeth bigger, then bigger, then longer and wider until somewhere along the road to the catwalk the miracle worker lost sight of the original plan. At the fourth Try In even Annie began to think she looked like a giraffe with the teeth protruding between her stretched lips which could not close over them. The lady was not happy with that set up which was not surprising but neither had she been satisfied with the three previous versions, the second of which gave the best improvement bearing in mind her slack, cigarette puckered mouth.

‘Look what you’ve done to me. I look ninety not sixty’, she scolded trying to pull her lips over the projecting teeth. ‘Do something. Make them smaller, pull them back. I’m paying you enough for them’. Mr Toth took a couple of deep breaths and began again stripping the teeth from the wax. Another Try In later he handed her a hand mirror. She peered at the result and moaned in exasperation. ‘I don’t look anything like Grace Kelly’. The accusation was evident in the tone of voice as the patient drew her lips over the latest set up. She looked more like a Llama than a giraffe which was an improvement. When she made Mr Toth move the teeth again and looked like a camel he finally lost his temper. ‘I vill never be able to make you look like Grace Kelly, you vill always look like a shrivelled old voman. Vat you expect!’

Mrs Verity-Brown stared silently in disbelief. She then removed the wax Try In denture from her mouth and without comment stalked from the surgery. After the door had closed with an ominous click Mr Toth threw the dentures on the floor and ground them into the linoleum with his foot. Of course Annie had to remove the wax and embedded teeth from the rubber flooring though she did it without complaint. After all what did a

dentist do with a patient who wanted the impossible. The clock reversed and their youth brought back.

The lady tried to take Mr Toth to court but he soon sorted it out before it got further than the solicitor. No doubt the solicitor drew the same conclusion as Mr Toth as to the impossibility of working miracles on Mrs Verity-Brown.

Chapter 4

As the weeks passed Annie began to notice how people employed different coping mechanisms when submitting to treatment. Some like Mr Baadenhorst and Mrs Verity-Brown were demanding but others of a more benign group were exasperating in another way. They were the ones who for various reasons proceeded into the surgery so slowly she thought the film had stuck on the screen. Some were just old and like the tin man in 'The Wizard of Oz', needed a spot of oil to loosen the rusty joints. Patience could sometimes wear thin when not only did they dawdle on the route but they then divested themselves of layers of garments, taking so long they appeared to have nodded off by the light pole. They were mildly annoying but when you combined that with the shedding of various aids en route to the chair, the matter became infuriating.

Annie invited Mrs Wagstaff into the surgery the speed with which she rocked herself from the seated position to upright left the nurse wondering whether the lady might die before setting foot in the surgery. Once poised like a withered question mark she moved at a snail's pace towards the spotlight. At the chair-side Annie thought at last that they might make an impression. The patient was oblivious to the stress caused at her tardy approach. Through Annie's nailed on smile the patient proceeded to hook her walking stick over the nurse's arm. She unscrewed her hearing aides and slapped them in Annie's hand. Next she enquired 'Shall I take my leg orf dear. You see if the dentist tips me back it might lose its suction and fall orf'. The thought of a dismembered patient rendered Annie speechless. The leg was unbuckled and pulled off, then the lady tried to tuck it under Annie's elbow. She must have resembled a coat stand, Annie thought, one of those branched type that invited items to be hooked onto it. With a hopeless sigh she arranged all the paraphernalia in a pile on a cabinet and stood the leg against the wall.

That was not the end for, before she clambered into the chair, the lady's dentures were removed and plopped into Annie's empty palm. That tacky mess did not go down too well and the nurse gave the patient a mean smile as she gerneyed in return. To add insult to injury whilst Mr Toth took an impression for a new denture Mrs Wagstaff's wig fell off and he kicked it across the room. There were bits and pieces of the patient scattered all over the place. Annie began to wonder what other bits might detach themselves.

Unfortunately the return journey took just as long. The lady had to insert, screw, buckle and stick her various oddments back in position before she was ready to face the outside world. Annie was glad to see that patient shuffle off and dreaded the follow up visit.

At that stage Annie had been in the job long enough to realise that the clustering effect was not just a feature of the lottery. If one person scattered personal oddments about the surgery then others would follow.

So when Mrs Wagstaff raised her walking stick in farewell from the path Annie was already preparing for the next member of the statistic. As she ushered in Mr Bittleworry she knew they were in for a protracted session.

He was a middle aged Dickensian character who had never brought himself out of the Victorian era except in one respect. He had not progressed far into the surgery before a contact lens was fished from his eye and laid to rest on the cabinet top. Then he extracted the other and laid it alongside.

The patient apologised, 'I'm sorry, but I can't lie back and leave them in. My eyes get full and they'll float about'. Well that excuse was unconvincing and Mr Toth looked confused as he tried to work out the science behind such a phenomena.

Neither Annie or Mr Toth passed comment as Mr Bittleworry removed his spats and shoes. Those were placed neatly aligned under the foot rest. Next his jacket was removed and draped on the cabinet well away from the contact lenses and he hung his waistcoat from a handle. Finally he stood in his socks with his shirt sleeves rolled up looking like he might be going to start a heavy job. Groping about he felt his way into the chair before primly setting his unshod feet on the rest. Annie noticed one of his socks had a hole which allowed his toe to curl through.

During his treatment the nurse kept away from the cabinet fearful that she might blow the lenses away when she breathed. How would he know which eye to return them to and what about the germs collecting whilst they lay exposed to the air?

Soon his treatment was completed and Mr Bittleworry rose from the chair. Groping about again he located his spats and shoes, jacket and waistcoat and fumbled about searching for his lenses. Annie guided his hand to the two miniscule glass pieces and soon they swam in his eyes. 'Lovely. I can see again now. Mind you, it is better if you can't see what the dentist is doing. Without the lenses I can't see any of those spiked instruments that are used. As they say what the eye doesn't see the heart cannot grieve over. Don't you think?' He smiled at the dentist and nurse but both appeared blank after the strange encounter. That was two down,

one to go Annie thought after the patient had minced away. Would it be that day or the next.

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Within days Annie welcomed Mrs Drummond into the surgery. It soon became clear that the lady could hear little of what was said. Mr Toth became irritated at the situation. He bellowed so loudly into Mrs Drummond's ear that she jumped and hit her head on the light pole. All his instructions were misinterpreted. 'Did you say me tooth'll have to come out?' She bawled at Mr Toth.

'No. He said you seem to have put on weight since your last visit. You've grown quite stout', Annie yelled back.

'No need to shout'. Mrs Drummond looked injured as everyone attempted to out bawl the other.

'I'll have to get a ampleflier', Mr Toth moaned to Annie.

'What's that. Did you say the outlook is dire'? Mrs Drummond looked really affronted as Annie screamed at her that Mr Toth was going to do a filling.

'He's going to give me a shilling. What for. He's buying my favours. I'm worth more than that. Perhaps he should up his ante'. The patient fell about in the chair thinking herself very funny. Annie stared in a bemused silence at the lady. Little did she know that her dentist preferred a more up to date version to those who have passed their sale by date. After the lady had puffed her way out Mr Toth sat and whinged to Annie as he changed the instruments.

'Vat is the matter vith everyone today'.

'The problem is they can't hear us', she explained. They all need hearing aids or something to help them yet none of them bother with such things. Perhaps a megaphone would help?

'Megaphone. Ze vun ve have is good and big. Why I need a bigger phone?' Mr Toth stared at the black phone.

'No I mean an instrument that amplifies speech'.

'Ah yes. Back to zat ampleflier again. I don't need any ampleflying. It is ze patient who needs to get a new ear'.

Annie gave up and invited the next patient in. Mr Toth gave a morose nod when he spied the wires protruding from the man's ear.

Mr Bellingham was shown to the seat. 'If you'll excuse me. I'll take out my hearing aid. It'll only whistle when your arm gets near my ear'. Annie helped the patient unwire his hearing aid. She then laid it on the

bracket table along with his denture which he had removed. Mr Toth glared at the patient.

The treatment was soon under way and a filling completed. An impression was taken for a new denture. At the end of the procedure Mr Toth encouraged the patient to rinse.

Before Annie could correct Mr Bellingham he had picked his hearing aid from the table and tried to insert it in his mouth. That didn't work and the patient became annoyed. Next he picked his denture out from the other impedimenta and tried screwing that in his ear.

Annie shouted at him that he had got into a muddle. She found that useless as without his hearing aid he couldn't hear and just stared at her mouth. 'Can't hear yer. Can't hear'. He looked so woebegone that Annie picked up his hearing aid and screwed it into his ear for him. She handed him his denture. Finally he was reinstated with his various bits in the correct orifice. His smile spread as he heard their muttered asides. Annie clamped her mouth together when she realised he could hear and kicked Mr Toth's ankle to ensure he didn't say anything detrimental about the patient's problem. Mr Bellingham left with a satisfied smile on his face.

Annie prepared the surgery for the next individual. From the surgery door she called, 'would you like to come in please'. The patient remained seated staring into space. Annie repeated the request raising her voice to foghorn level.

Miss Boniface rose from her chair like a somnambulist. She groped about with her hands waving before her looking as though she was going to break into a dance. Annie suddenly realised that the lady was blind as well as deaf.

'I'm so sorry. I didn't know you can't see'. Annie remembered that the patient was deaf as well and bellowed the apology again at her.

'It's OK Me-dear. I can see a bit. I can see through a tunnel. Miss Boniface waddled her way to the chair with Annie guiding her steps. Once seated she explained she had a bad tooth and wanted it filled. Mr Toth asked her questions and the lady leaned forwards cupping her ear with her hand. 'Can't hear you me-dear. I'll tell you what. Give me pen and paper and write down what you want to say. I'll read it'.

'Gott in Himmel', Mr Toth muttered under his breath. Annie was instructed to write down his questions and treatment plan. Miss Boniface peered at the page blindly. 'I'll have to put me glasses on'. Through thick milk bottle lenses she managed to read and write her responses. The treatment proceeded in this staccato fashion, pauses supplied for written questions and answers. The communication was augmented by the occasional bawled verification of a point.

Mr Toth was getting stressed as the patient's allotted appointment time overshot its limit and Annie became worn out with scribbling and shouting. At last the ordeal was over and she helped Miss Boniface from the chair. Mrs Boniface was presented with her bill which brought a crafty expression to her face. 'Oh dear. I don't think I have my cheque book', she advised them, rummaging in her hand bag. Mr Toth looked as though he might murder the patient and Annie felt driven to search Miss Boniface's handbag with her. All she found was a bank paying in book. No cheque book appeared.

'I vill call ze police. You haf come vithout money to pay. Zat is not acceptable. Miss Boniface heard the threat and scratched about in her bag and conjured some cash. She had just enough to cover her treatment. Annie took it and gave the lady a receipt.

The patient was escorted to the exit. Miss Boniface suddenly seemed more confident at negotiating the path. 'Will you be alright going home on your own?' Annie asked feeling concerned at the lady's disability.

The lady could not get away fast enough and scuttled up the path with suddenly restored sight.

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Annie returned to the surgery fairly angry at the deception. Was the patient really deaf as well or had that been a trick to make them feel sorry for her. Who knows she thought and began cleaning the surgery.

Mr Toth looked in a murderous mood and glared at her as she swept around his feet. He refused to move them and Annie began to realise her boss was not happy. Suddenly a major storm cumulated from nowhere whilst they were taking a break. 'You haf stolen my bank paying in book', he snapped at Annie in the middle of tea, banging his cup down with such force that he almost shattered the saucer.

'I haven't. What would I want with that. Of what use would it be to me'. Annie's denial seemed to further inflame him for he leapt the stairs to his flat and began a noisy search. Bellows and Hungarian oaths carried to the basement where she stayed until the squall abated. As suddenly as it had begun it died when Mr Toth found the paying in book. It was in a black Gladstone bag along with forty pound notes which Annie had collected for him from the bank some weeks previously. He was more relieved at finding the paying in book than discovering that he was richer than he thought which baffled her. He had forgotten that he was missing money but delighted to be reunited with the bank book and his temper subsided. Annie was restored in his eyes so that the afternoon session proceeded in

relative calm and she ushered in a Miss Santini who rented a room in the upper regions of Mr Toth's house.

This lady waddled in with all the dignity that her eight month pregnancy allowed. Mr Toth was to give her a final check up and scaling before evicting her from her room for breaking the residency contract. No reproduction of the species was a condition of continued occupation. However Miss Santini had flouted the rules and apparently actively encouraged her live in lover to share her accommodation. Mr Toth had been in total ignorance of her boyfriend's illicit squatting and only found out when Miss Santini's increasing girth inadvertently came to his notice. Her attempts to hide her condition by constantly carrying sacks of potatoes in front of her, when trying to slip unnoticed past him as their paths crossed at the front door, made him suspicious. 'She must be hongry', he rationalised to Annie one day when watching his tenant stagger up the front path with yet another sack.

Annie was as ignorant as her employer of the situation and wondered whether the lady had developed a fetish for the common tuber. Mr Toth's mind niggled over the potatoes, mashed or boiled, roasted or chipped, no one person could consume so much. There must be an army upstairs hiding in her room. 'Under ze bed or in ze wardrobe', he opined before charging up the stairs. After banging on the door he was admitted by a strange man. 'And vat are you?' Mr Toth shouted preparing to defend his territory against intruders. Miss Santini then sidled forwards trying to hide her stomach with a saucepan set in front of it. At that point Mr Toth recognised that she was in breach of contract and gave her eviction orders. However he was prepared to be charmed by her sob story. She explained that her desperation to have a baby fill her solitary existence had overridden the need to retain tenancy of her humble room. Mr Toth was gradually mollified by her stroking hand on his arm and by the fact that she was connected to the royal family. She had made a couple of hats for the Queen Mother and that in his eyes helped him wave away her misdemeanour. Her departure was delayed for a few weeks and during that time she availed herself of his dental services.

They never saw her again but received a letter telling them of the birth of her son. She sounded very happy and Mr Toth was delighted that he had maintained a connection to royalty, however remote.

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Miss Santini's fecund state seemed to set a new fashion as the next patient was heavily pregnant.

Mrs Girton wobbled in and heaved her mammoth abdomen into the chair. Mr Toth began a root treatment without anaesthetic confident that the patient would feel nothing as the tooth was dead. ‘As dead as ze Dodo’, he advised her. However he was horrified when the lady cried out in the midst of his drilling, ‘Oh the pain. The pain’. She clung to his hand and writhed about. He snatched the drill from her mouth, trying to work out how she could be feeling pain when all the text books advised him otherwise.

‘Vat you say. You haf pain in ze toot. Zat iss not possible. Vere is ze pain?’ Mrs Girton mouthed ‘here’ as she bent over her pregnant mound and pressed her fists into it.

‘You haf ze pain down zere. Ven is your baby to come’. Mr Toth stared in horror as a truth emerged from the patient’s panting mouth.

‘Any time now’, she moaned through gritted teeth and clung to his hand like a limpet to a rock.

Mr Toth lifted his eyes in an appeal to heaven but received no assistance as the lady screamed and writhed, her tooth forgotten in the general confusion.

‘Mein Gott. Dont you know you is haffing ze kinder, ze bambi, ze birtting zis minute, Ach no. Haf you no sense, coming to my surgery for ze teet and haffing the pains here. No you cannot haf your baby here. I will not allow it. Gott in Himmel’. He strode about like a caged tiger, wringing his hands at the prospect of being a midwife.

Mrs Girton relaxed as the pain ebbed away. ‘ You think I’m in labour? I was sick this morning and had a vague backache but its not like the books say. I’ve never had a baby before. This is my first and I didn’t know what to expect’. Her explanation succeeded in making Mr Toth leap to the phone.

He requested a taxi and became furious when they refused to send one in view of the situation. ‘Our drivers aren’t trained to deliver babies’, he was told and he spat at them down the phone.

In the end Annie was recruited to bear the lady to hospital on a bus. The idea was that as a woman Annie would know instinctively what to do should the infant make an untimely debut in the aisle between bus stops. In reality Annie new nothing of childbirth and was terrified for the whole journey. The other passengers were subjected to Mrs Girton’s shrieking and depositing the contents of her stomach out the back of the bus. She insisted on clinging to the platform pole and the bus did not have electric doors to seal the exit. Hence she swayed about and aimed her retching onto the cars trailing the bus. Nothing Annie did could budge her charge from her position. ‘I don’t want to make a mess of your bus’, she guiltily explained

to a petrified bus conductor. He nervously echoed Annie's appeals to come into the bus and never mind the floor, it could be mopped. She still would not leave her post and surprised several drivers when a sea of smearing bits splatted on their windscreens, nearly blinding them.

At last they arrived at the correct establishment for the delivery and Annie handed over the woman to the authorities. They whisked her into the hospital interior trying to include the nurse as they thought she was a relative. 'No, no. I don't know her. I was instructed by my boss to bring her here as she is about to have her baby'. Annie explained. The hospital staff looked completely bemused at her reluctance to share the happy moment and reluctantly let her go.

On Annie's return Mr Toth was relieved to have relinquished responsibility for a potential birth. He prattled on, 'I cannot bear to see ze voman suffer. Man enjoys ze making of ze baby when sending in his little ambassador. After zat I don't vant to know'. He handed his nurse a cup of much needed tea. Little ambassador indeed. Annie could have kicked him in the legate area at leaving her to take control though she thanked heaven that she had not been needed to officiate at the baby's debut.

The afternoon proceeded with Mrs Fairbairn insisting on relating the story of her daughter's virgin pregnancy. There was no respite as the statistical clustering effect continued. Birth and pregnancy was the topic of the moment.

'She wasn't actually deflowered', Mrs Fairbairn rationalised to a sceptical Mr Toth when she was intermittently able to surface from the drill. Between the impedimenta clogging her mouth she managed to paint a graphic picture. It seems that her daughter had become pregnant by remote control for her maidenhead remained intact. Annie did not know whether the patient thought the angel Gabriel was the culprit but she refused to accept that her daughter had received a little ambassador into her private palace. At the end of her treatment Annie waved Mrs Fairbairn up the path sending her back to her virtuously expanding family.

'Ach. Ze daughter iss a nymphomaniac', Mr Toth enlightened his nurse as they potted between patients. 'I haf known her since she vas a nun. She loves ze man'. Annie was glad to see the end of that day and very wary of 'little ambassadors'. What havoc they could wreak.

Chapter 5

A few days later a procession of professional boffins imposed and pandered to Mr Toth's vanity.

First a married pair of personal associates deigned to place their knowledgeable heads beneath Mr Toth's honoured probe. Annie thought that as they were doctors of the specialist genus they were made from a different mould. She was gravely disappointed when confronted with their oral interiors. She found they were exactly the same as the rough diamond merchants. Even the scourge of decay dared to eat holes beneath their expensively reconstituted teeth. Bridges and crowns fell off just the same as any one else's and she found they also had to periodically disappear to the lavatory. Annie had expected them to be exempt from the normal functions of other people. In the event she soon learned that those perceived as above human frailty were in fact the same as the rest of humankind.

The source of her disillusionment came in the form of a bantam sized married couple. Dr Feldman and his consultant doctor wife exploded into the waiting room with all the commotion that you might expect from The Crankies bursting onto a stage.

Once before an audience they were in their element and took control of the proceedings. Mr Toth was consulted and his opinion waved away as they knew better. Annie presumed they thought it was a good political ploy to include the dentist in the various plans for their teeth. However she wondered why they bothered when they had no intention of following his advice as they regulated Mr Toth and Annie in their movements. They condescended to include the nurse in the performance but in such patronising tones that Annie felt she contributed nothing to the general multilingual soup which carried their respective treatments along.

Dr Feldman was a strutting man who wore a pencil moustache and very formal dress. He was in character a thwarted dictator who fought with his wife for the spotlight, attempting to wrest the main beam from her. She was an exalted specialist of some esoteric malady and overshadowed her husband with her commandeering attitude.

Whenever they attended the amount of disruption they caused forced Annie into hiding behind the dental unit where she lurked until they slammed their way out, leaving a blessed peace.

Dr Feldman had dentures and so did his wife. As each was fighting for supremacy they tried to outdo each other. So if one took out a denture

so did the other. The dentures would get a good airing under Mr Toth's nose as they each would thrust them out for examination. If one had a tight denture the other's was tighter. If one had a broken clasp, the other had two. If one had a toothache, the other partner's was worse.

Mr Toth did his best to separate their respective treatments and prostheses but on one visit things became a mite muddled. After the impressions had been taken he picked up a denture from the bracket table and tried to insert it in Dr Feldman's mouth. No matter which way he placed it the denture appeared strangely warped. Mrs Feldman stood next to the chair supervising her husband's treatment all the while gnashing her gums. After many confusing minutes Mr Toth suddenly realised that the denture he was trying to insert was Mrs Feldman's. She had stuck it on the table along with her husband's. It was the same when Mrs Feldman clambered into the chair. The thwarted dictator came into his own and stuck his face over the operating site thus obscuring Mr Toth's vision. He playfully butted the doctor forcing him away but it was a case of who could butt the hardest for the doctor retaliated.

How we ever managed to accomplish anything Annie could not imagine for it was a fight with each acting as umpire to the others treatment. Mrs Feldman on one visit spotted a fly buzzing about and watched it land on another. Annie thought she was going to create over the unhygienic little squatters. Instead she decided they were an amorous couple and enthusiastically made the nurse bow her head over them to observe their copulating moment. She gave Annie an intricate account of their sex lives whilst the young girl fixed her bored eyes on the spectacle. Talk about frustrated desires. Annie decided, it must have been wishful thinking on the exalted doctor's part.

Mr Toth loved their double act and would proudly steer the proceedings past every obstacle, contriving to set them up with new smiles which were commendably becoming bearing in mind the problems attendant in their making.

Annie was always glad to see the back of them as they could be wearing on the nerves.

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At about the same time Mr Toth welcomed another friend of long standing for treatment. Dr Eisenstein shambled up to the chair looking as doleful as though he was facing a death sentence and the chair was going to despatch him from life. Annie had already been primed as to the man's

great brain. He was a brilliant scientist who worked for Imperial College in London.

Brilliant scientist or not he behaved in a way that made the nurse think he had suffered a short circuit of his brain connections. He could not understand the simplest request and pushed his tongue up instead of down so that it filled the mouth. Mr Toth could barely gain admittance and with increasing frustration he asked Annie to hold it back with a mouth mirror. She hooked one round the tongue and leaned with her full weight against it. It was like trying to move an obelisk from the centre of the road. Mr Toth became the colour of a beetroot and Annie feared he might suffer a stroke. The thing was, as Dr Eisenstein was a friend, Mr Toth did not feel free to launch Hungarian oaths into the air as he habitually did for this patient would understand them. In any case, 'friends are like lovers', he told Annie, 'zey deserve ze best of your ambassadorial skills'. Ambassadors again she thought, they seemed to feature heavily in Mr Toth's thinking.

Dr Eisenstein tried his hardest, under instructions, to deflect his tongue but always managed to steer it in the opposite direction. His lefts and rights seemed transposed and his general understanding of what was happening in his mouth non-existent.

How Mr Toth managed to do a crown preparation on his friend Annie could never work out as they struggled between them to get instruments in and out. Once inserted they stuck like leeches to the tissues and once out they had to fight to find a peep hole through which to sneak them in again.

In the end a crown was ready to be fitted and the patient arrived in his usual shambling fashion. Again he lugubriously contemplated the chair as though the end of the world had come. He then fell into it and the fight towards his tooth began.

Eventually Mr Toth managed to place the crown for a preliminary fitting. At that point Dr Eisenstein gulped to swallow and Mr Toth snatched his fingers away before being bitten by his friend. A few swallows later Mr Toth grovelled about through the peep hole and exposed the tooth. However no shiny gold met their anxious eyes.

Mr Toth fell back in horror as he realised what had happened. 'You haf swallowed ze crown. Eet is gone down. Ve vill haf to wait until it is passed out ze ozer end and zen I can fit it'. He raised a sympathetic smile to Dr Eisenstein's flabbergasted frown.

'Ich haben nein stomach for zat. To start looking for it is achhh.....' The poor man shrivelled before their eyes, disgusted at the prospect of getting back the crown.

A week later he attended with a triumphant grin holding aloft the newly gleaming item for their admiration. 'It van', he gloated falling into the chair.

This time Mr Toth refused to let him swallow at all and soon had the crown cemented permanently in place.

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Whether or not these incidents provoked her employer into another paranoid outburst Annie never knew but again she was the recipient of his wild accusations.

'You haf stolen my scalpel', he growled one day in between his friends' visits. He was doing a minor operation and wanted to cut a gum flap back. Annie routed through the drawers and handed him a scalpel. After a quick glance at it he threw it across the surgery. 'Not zat vun. Ze ozer vun'.

What other one she wondered as she scabbled frantically trying to find what he demanded and avert the threatening eruption. She handed the only other one she could find to him and that too was launched across the room. He changed the treatment plan, abandoning the surgical procedure and dismissed the patient. Mrs Barrett scampered from his irritable instruments with head down fearing the oncoming cyclone.

'Vere is my scalpel. Vat haf you done vith it'. He threw a threatening look as Annie stood like a terrified rabbit caught in bright headlights. 'You haf stolen it', he reiterated and she shook her head, too paralysed to speak. She started hunting with a vengeance and as a last resort dragged out the instrument cabinet from the wall. There against the skirting board lay the scalpel. She assumed it was the one Mr Toth wanted although they were all identical and puzzled as to how he could tell them apart.

'Here it is', Annie replied, relieved that at last she had found it.

'You put it zere to nip it on anozer day', her employer thundered standing over his nurse with hands on hips in a threatening attitude.

Annie decided she had borne enough. She told him in no uncertain terms that she was not prepared to be called a thief when innocent of all felony. 'What would I want with these items that you keep accusing me of taking?' The logic of her argument robbed him of speech. His eyes burned into hers as he stuffed his fists into his pockets and lurched out into the waiting room. There he set about the furniture, kicking and overturning the chairs all the while emitting a stream of Hungarian obscenities. Annie knew they were not English ones for she recognised none of the gibberish making the air blue about his suffused face. At least the dead wood was

getting the punishment and not me Annie thought. Soon he made a Grand exit leaving his nurse to clear up the mess.

~

Half an hour later the atmosphere was lighter when Mr Toth strode into the surgery and demanded the next patient. An elderly spinster, Miss Maidmont, slipped into the chair and prepared to have an impression taken for a new denture. Mr Toth began taking the usual measurements and when he got to the eyes which have to be level with the teeth he noted something strange. ‘Ze eyes are not level, vun iss lower and ze ozer higher. Zey are tipsy’. Miss Maidmont looked disconcerted at the information as Annie corrected her boss with his English.

‘You mean tilted’, She revised and he gave her a filthy glare.

‘I know vat I mean and I mean tipsy’. Annie shrugged as he continued oblivious to the lady’s lowering expression.

‘Yes, zey are tipsy. Gott must haf lost his spirit level and plump line ven he vas making you’. Luckily Miss Maidmont had a sense of humour for her mouth began to twitch, threatening to smile.

‘And God must have instructed his best sculptor when making you’. Her compliment was well taken and Mr Toth glowed at the accustomed praise, vaingloriously nodding his head in agreement.

After Miss Maidmont they had another elderly spinster. Nellie shuffled in and proceeded to divest herself of multi- layers of liberty bodices. Annie couldn’t believe how many she had on under her coat and cardigan. They were worn over her dress because they kept her warmer that way she told them, pulling each one over her scrappy bun. Once in the chair Mr Toth explained that a loose tooth needed extracting. ‘Oh no. I don’t fancy that. Can’t you do something else like glue it back’, Nellie wailed. There they were again back to the glue.

‘Ze toot iss vaving in ze vind. It might drop out on its own and zat iss not goot. You might choke on eet’. Nellie looked at him with her eyes like saucers, sucking at the tooth, waltzing it between her tongue and cheek.

‘Oh...no....Well.. when will it fall out’, she wanted to know in case she was in the midst of an important event. In the supermarket or the betting shop and nothing must come between Nellie and her flutter on the horses.

‘Vell how do I know ven it vill fall off. I am not a seer of ze future and I haf no crystal ball. It broke years ago’. Mr Toth was trying to be amusing but it was lost on Nellie.

‘No..no... you must have it out now. You might be asleep and it could stick in your throat if it fell out then’, Annie encouraged when her boss had exhausted all the arguments.

Nellie looked crestfallen at the thought. ‘Yes there’s only me living alone. Old Gertie my sister’s dead now. Will I be able to eat tonight?’ Yes Annie reassured the patient vigorously nodding her head. ‘Oh good. Then that’ll be libber and taters for dinner. I won’t have to eat slops will I?’

At the thought of libber and taters she settled to the task and soon put her tooth in her pocket. She made some reference to the tooth fairy but Annie thought she was a bit old for that game.

Once lagged with all her liberty bodices she thanked Mr Toth and Annie and toddled out. ‘Vat iss libber and taters. I haf never heard of zat food before. Iss it goot?’

‘It’s liver and potatoes’, Annie laughed as her boss tried to work out why the corruption of the correct terms. ‘Not so goot. I prefer pumpernickel and sauerkraut’. Annie knew that as she too had learned to love salami and polish sausage, pumpernickel and goulash.

~

During the afternoon of that day a cancellation freed them from the surgery. Mr Toth decided that he wished to go on a shopping trip. Annie was commanded to carry his Gladstone back with the money for the purchases.

Off they went, negotiating the roads in erratic bursts when Mr Toth’s ability to drive left a lot to be desired. Annie was relieved to arrive in one piece at the car park but then she had to guide him into a space. That involved a burst of Hungarian expletives as he fought with other drivers for a prime slot. After releasing his stock of oaths which caused the local populace to scurry off thinking he was a mad man, they left the car and proceeded on foot.

Soon they stepped into John Lewis in Regent street and Mr Toth strode ahead of his nurse. She followed at a respectful distance and he made for the men’s wear department.

As Mr Toth strode past the shoppers they froze in their tracks, gawping at him. The till girl’s movements were arrested in mid monetary exchange as silence greeted their passage through. In the men’s wear department the assistants gathered like moths round a light source. They couldn’t do enough for him. Annie was used to the reaction he provoked and watched, amused at the sycophantic interchanges of the sales people.

They travelled through each department gradually accumulating a wake of shop assistants. They all followed after Annie had paid for the various items of Mr Toth's choosing. Envious eyes diminished her standing as they concluded wrongly that she was a close associate. Annie began to get nervous when a shopper suddenly froze and pointed. 'Look...look', she shrieked as all eyes in the store riveted on them. 'There's that film star...what's is name'. A stampede drove Mr Toth and Annie out of the building and they frantically sought a taxi. There were none to be had.

The mob swarmed onto the pavement as they made their getaway down the opposite side of the street until a policeman halted them with a raised palm. 'What's going on ere. You aven't robbed a bank ave you?' As if they would admit that in the event Annie thought.

They explained that they were being pursued by a mob who thought Mr Toth was a famous film star. 'Yes..well sir', the constable nodded, 'Are you?'. Mr Toth shook his head but the officer was not convinced. 'Are you sure you're not? You look like, you know, what's is name, that star that was in Arabian Nights. What was is name...Ahh...Rudolph Val...en...t.. something like that'. The policeman stared long into Mr Toth's face.

'I iss not him. I iss nossing to do vith ze film vord. I are a dentist'. Mr Toth was so upset that he got his present indicatives of the verb, 'to be' muddled. The mob of women had surrounded them and they listened to the interchange, wanting to believe he was a celebrity. The policeman in the meantime sucked his teeth as though wondering what dental problems he might contribute to the discussion.

'Vill you please send zees people away, zey are spoilink my shoppink trip'. The women stared up at him the adoring looks beginning to fade from their faces as the glow of stardom evaporated. Slowly they broke away and traipsed back to their respective positions whilst the officer of the law decided on a free consultation with regard to a noisy premolar. After the story of the squeaking tooth had been related Mr Toth deflected the man in the direction of a doctor, convincing him that the squeak originated in the head. The policeman began to look a mite worried and soon melted into the crowds.

The shopping trip had been ruined and they returned to the car. On the drive back Mr Toth began reminiscing and told Annie how he nearly got dragged into films as a young man. He had been a close friend of Sir Alexander Korda, the film producer. That illustrious man had wanted Mr Toth to play King Midas in a film of that name. 'What happened', she asked, wondering why he was still fiddling with teeth.

Mr Toth contemptuously waved away the thought. ‘ I liked better ze teet, I haf a better life vith zem zan vith a screen picture. I missed a lot of kissing vith ze active ladies. But if I had been in films I vould not be a free man. Look how even as a not known actor I haf been mobbed because people sinks I vas vun. No zat iss not fun. I am better vith ze teet’. At that stage Annie already knew that he genuinely loved his profession and was proud of his standing in the community. Yet she could not quite understand with her teenage mind how anyone could have rejected the glamour of film stardom for the eccentricity of teeth and the people to which they belonged.

They slipped back into position round the chair and continued with the afternoon session.

~

A young French man attended and for some reason his treatment was undertaken without local anaesthetic. The patient was a handsome edition and Annie began to realise Mr Toth was applying a jealously driven drill which made Mr Flaubert twitch round his eyes. Sweat poured from him but Mr Toth chose to ignore that fact and bored along a whole upper row of teeth as though he was mining the channel tunnel.

The patient sat gripping the arms of the chair as though he was expecting to go into orbit, with his eyes all the while, starting out of his head. Annie watched her employer’s set face register nothing but irritation at the youthful specimen beneath his instruments. Of course that session drove the French man permanently away and ensured that no romantic overtures were directed at the nurse which disappointed her.

Following the departure of the poor Mr Flaubert a very attractive Miss Honeyball slithered into the seat. Mr Toth was a transformed character. Gentle and courtly, leering at the holes in her micro-crocheted dress with obvious relish. She arranged her endless legs primly and succumbed to the injection with apparent pleasure. During the treatment she impaled Mr Toth on her stare and he could not have been unaware of her admiration. That restored him for the moment and his mood was bolstered high when the next patient clumped into place.

Ms Entwhistle was not a female that was likely to draw the eyes of the male. Rather, she had a masculine approach and took charge of the situation as though she was waging a war against an unseen foe. Mr Toth remained courteous but his leering had been replaced by peering. He peered at her manly hair-cut, he peered at her army surplus store combat suit and her practical boots. He peered and steered his instruments into an

abridged retreat, discharging her rapidly into the great outdoors away from his revolted senses.

‘Ach..vat is ze goot of vomen like zat. Zay like not men and zay would not like to haf a little ambassador gate crash zeir party’. Annie smiled in sympathy. A man like him would find no use for them but no doubt she could be a Juliet to someone else’s Heloise.

At that moment the telephone rang and Annie took a call from an Inland Revenue Inspector. Mr Takemore advised her that he was on his way for a visit. They proceeded with the afternoon list until the coffee break.

Annie was still sipping her drink when Mr Toth admitted Mr Takemore into the waiting room. When she wandered back to her post Mr Toth was obsequiously fawning round the chap which made her suspicious. She had never seen her employer crawl to anyone. He drew her forwards and introduced them. Mr Takemore had his hair pulled back into a pony tail which Annie thought too raffish for the job. They smiled at each other and she offered her right hand for the obligatory shake. Instead of a warm touch she received the cold of an iron hook into her palm. Annie wobbled backwards, thrown off balance by the shock. No wonder Mr Toth was fawning round him. One look at that primitive prosthesis in place of his absent hand was enough to make anyone admit to a felony even if none had been committed. She retreated behind the dental unit, not taking her eyes from that lethally gesticulating weapon.

Whatever business the Inspector had in mind was soon concluded. Mr Toth rushed Mr Takemore to the door all the while assiduously avoiding the hook’s menace. Annie wondered if he felt guilt at some secret misdemeanour? Judging by the mesmerised Inspector, Mr Toth’s charm had neutralised any suspicions that might have lurked at the beginning of the interview.

~

After Mr Takemore’s departure a pall fell over the day. Mr Toth proceeded with the next patient, prowling in moments of inactivity. What was bothering him? No sooner had the thought been borne in mind than he turned and glared at his nurse. What was wrong she fretted?

The patient was despatched with indecent haste and Mr Toth then rounded on her. ‘You haf stolen my tie’, he stormed. Annie stood like a statue trying to make sense of the moment.

‘What tie? I haven’t taken any tie. What could I do with it?’ Of course she hadn’t counted on it being a bow tie.

‘You haf nipped it to put in your hair. It would be a bow sittink on your head’. He had stuck his clenched fists into his pockets. ‘You’re sacked. Sacked. Get your bags and go’. His glaring eyes drove her out of the surgery. She scuttled to the office and considered her position. Sacked. Did he mean it?

Whilst Annie contemplated her position a retaliatory tirade formed in her mind. She had done nothing wrong and seethed at the injustice of her dismissal. Would she wear a stupid bow tie in her hair? That was not her style. Her boss obviously had a problem but what that mental aberration might be Annie was too inexperienced to know. Dr Marx had tried to explain about him and tapped her head. She said some medical term of which Annie was ignorant and she should know for she was a psychiatrist. Dr Marx saw the young girl’s bewilderment and continued in understandable English. ‘My husband has a mental chink you know. He sinks people are stealing sings from him’. Annie nodded letting her know that she too had dealt with his foible. So it was not only his nurse that he suspected? Annie made a cup of tea as a balm to her injured feelings. At that stage she divined that Mr Toth did not really want her to leave and so she waited to let the drama play itself out.

Before long she heard him stalking along the passageway looking for her. ‘Vere are you. Vere are you. Come now. I haf a patient to see and vere iss ze patient’s record card’. Just like that his mood had changed direction. Annie obeyed and they continued on with the day by sweeping the incident under the working instruments. Things rapidly returned to normal and he never mentioned his lost tie again.

Chapter 6

The next day Annie overheard Mr Toth discussing an extempore holiday. Could they fit in a four week break he asked his wife? The problem was they each had to make provision for their respective patients. Annie flattened her ear to their living room door, wanting to know her position in his absence. She could not hear but soon learned over the wafting eyes of a patient that her boss and his wife were to depart immediately for a Canary Island beach. Whilst he was away an old associate, Dr Grossmann was to cover as a Locum.

This compromise had been decided on by Mr Toth as Annie did not wish to take a break and lose money. Her newly instituted bank account needed a healthy injection every week. What would happen if she failed to pay in her usual deposit she had appealed to Mr Toth. He was fair and arranged the locum expressly for his young nurse. He could not allow her to become bankrupt.

Annie was grateful even though she was nervous at the thought of working with a stranger.

In the meantime they had encountered a run of young women. Some were so beautiful that Annie felt like an ugly sister beside them. Blondes and brunettes, they all laid their lovely heads trustingly under Mr Toth's probe and drill. One very slender long legged blond lay back and stoically endured a root treatment. Unfortunately when Mr Toth made a thoughtless remark about the pus on an instrument the lady swooned. Even though she was laying with her feet higher than her head she still managed to faint away. Mr Toth jumped into resuscitation mode and when his lips were close to the patient's she woke up. At that point he leapt back afraid of being accused of unprofessional behaviour. The lady was unaware of the near kiss of life and soon was able to totter from the surgery on her shapely legs.

Annie had watched the flirting and enjoyment that both patients and her employer received from these harmless activities. She had soon realised that women expanded in his presence. They gazed at him as though he was the subject of a canvas. A masterpiece that they coveted. However, as Annie had learned, the Masterpiece was prone to act contrary to a one dimensional posing model. In other words he displayed his human tendencies which many women overlooked.

~

That fact had been driven home to Annie when weeks earlier Mr Toth had asked her to stand in for his wife at a Wigmore Hall musical concert. She was to have accompanied him but at the last moment was otherwise engaged with one of her psychiatric patients. The ticket was not wasted when Annie took her seat beside her boss.

The recital began and they settled to enjoy the Mozart. Almost immediately Annie was jerked from her slumped position by Mr Toth's snores. As soon as the Conductor tapped his baton and galvanised his musicians into activity her boss fell asleep. He sat beside her with his head slumped on his chest emitting great rumbling snores. The audience screwed their heads about and directed glares at Annie as though it were her fault. She retaliated and poked Mr Toth in his ribs. The stimulus of her jabs momentarily roused him and silenced the snores but he invariably lapsed into sleep and began again. Throughout the concert Annie worked to keep him awake and he just as stubbornly slept and snored. He heard nothing of the music and at the end sleep-walked out of the concert oblivious to the distress he had caused the audience. Not only that. Annie had seen many women gazing at Mr Toth as though staring at an oasis with thirst.

~

Dr Grossmann, the locum, paid a short visit and Mr Toth introduced Annie to him. He was like a leprechaun. So short that he was a veritable dwarf and needed a large box to stand on when treating patients. Annie was surprised that he and her boss were friends for they were complete opposites in every way.

Mr Toth waved a wistful goodbye with instructions to Annie take care of the little man and Dr Grossmann took his place at the chair. He had completely different working methods with different names for instruments so she was sometimes at a loss when he requested them.

'Can I have a Blomber' left her in a flap as she had not the faintest idea what that was. It turned out to be a plugger, a blader was a scalpel and a Wisp-Air was the high speed drill. Soon Annie mastered his stock of names and grew used to the position of the box. Of course every time he greeted the patients a look of horror briefly clouded their faces as they fancied Mr Toth had shrunk. Once Dr Grossmann had explained the position the horror evaporated, to be replaced by an expression of disbelief. They peered at him as though surveying a creature at their feet and stared askance at the box. It was beyond them that the little man could wrest teeth

from their jaws when he looked as though one nervous breath might bowl him over.

The first few patients entered the surgery with smiles presented for Mr Toth. They soon withered when confronted by the dwarf replacement. Mrs Dermody bounced into place expecting to enjoy her session with Mr Toth. Instead she peered at Dr Grossmann and proceeded to bare disappointed teeth for the unfulfilled injection. Dr Grossmann was sweet, allowing her lots of rinses to compensate for the lack of her idol. That however did not mollify her and she made both Annie's and Dr Grossman's lives difficult. Her mouth would not open wide enough and her tongue flapped in the way of the drill. No matter, she had no heart to place her broken molar under the needle of the little leprechaun when it was the injection of her God for which she yearned.

Dr Grossmann suffered sorely through his baptism but soon won over his own small band of devotees. Mr Prescott thought he was wonderful when the little man extracted a tooth without exerting any force. The fact that it was wafting about like a drunken sailor had somehow escaped him.

Dr Grossmann smiled humbly when the patient expressed his admiration and Annie sighed in slight relief hoping that they would get through the working arrangement without mishap.

~

It took no time before the young nurse began to be vaguely worried at Dr Grossman's disappearances. He would vanish between each patient and she could never find him. Where was he she fumed rushing through the dental suite when Mrs Hetherington demanded reconstitution of a molar. He remained elusive but eventually she bumped into him as he crept into the waiting room from the garden. What had he been doing there? 'I was just admiring the roses', he maintained in the face of the nurse's deliberate probing. The roses? The fact that it was January seemed to have escaped him. 'There are no roses. It's too cold for them. It's the wrong time of year', Annie pointed out.

He stood and rocked slightly on his built up heels, puzzling over his seasonal amnesia. She let that go but watched carefully and began to discern a pattern to each day. In the morning he was bright and alive to the ball bearings in the high speed drill. By lunchtime his faculties had been spun into a dither and were no longer able to appreciate the lethality of the drill. He began to veer in different directions. His conversation was inane and his gait unsteady. The truth was beginning to dawn on Annie as he

swayed near the light pole and grabbed it to retrieve his balance. Plainly by the afternoon he had lost the plot and bumbled about like a direction-less Bee. When he surreptitiously put his head in a cupboard the secret was out for immediately the nurse flung back the door she discovered the illicit whiskey supply.

Annie had no idea how to resolve the dilemma in which she found herself but for starters she confiscated the bottle. With a grim eye she watched the little man as on successive days he brought in replacements and sought other hiding places for them. As the underling in the establishment Annie found herself unable to command the situation and followed him around wide-eyed, fearful that a patient might realise that the dentist was drunk when in charge of a dangerous turbine.

~

They continued working in an erratic fashion, with Annie keeping a censorious eye on his openly engineered little nips. He blandly disregarded the nurse from his hazy but happy position.

One morning he failed to arrive and Annie pacified the gradually accumulating patients. They sat and stared accusingly at her as though they thought she could produce the dentist from a hat with a wave of a wand. Annie remained at a distance, cowering in the surgery trying to look as unconcerned as though a truant dentist was a regular occurrence. The phone startled her from her guilty shrinking. It was Gert, Dr Grossmann's housekeeper. She rattled on at the young nurse as though a round of bullets was being fired. Annie soon understood the truth. 'The little man's ill in a ward of the local hospital. Could you take him some new pyjamas?' Gert appealed and Annie found herself being recruited into a visiting round.

She humbly apologised to the astounded patients who all looked upon the wasted hour they had spent with unforgiving frowns. How dare the dentist be ill. How dare he not attend to fix their teeth. How dare he abandon them to their tooth-ridden problems which was a fate worse than death.

With affronted exclamations they all left with new appointments arranged for when Annie judged the little man would be back. She decided to contact Mr Toth on the Canary Island beach. He would point her in the right direction and advise her on how to deal with the clamouring dentist-less patients. Eventually she secured a line and explained the predicament she was in. Mr Toth listened attentively gave the orders to get a replacement surgeon from a locum agency.

‘How’s the holiday’, Annie ventured before the line was disconnected.

‘Eet iss vunderful. Vere ever my eye vanders zere iss ze voman. So many zat I could haf a harem if I could afford it’. That thought brought a reflective pause. Then he continued. ‘I pity zat in England vun iss only allowed vun vife for I could do vith more’. Annie tended to agree with that idea but at that point he was cut off.

The agency produced a young locum who had a Scottish name and barely acknowledged the young nurse’s existence. Mr McDuff quickly acquainted himself with the surgery layout, inspected the instruments and sized her up and down in one sweeping blink.

In the meantime whilst waiting to reactivate the drill on the patients Annie crept stealthily into the hospital to visit Dr Grossmann. He sat perkily beneath rumpled bed sheets looking like a naughty child who might be rumbled in some terrible misdeed. Gert had visited the surgery and pressed two small bottles of whisky into the folds of his newly laundered and fragrant pyjamas. No wonder Annie felt like a criminal as she sidled along the ward, clutching her illegal parcel whilst trying to avoid a sharp eyed Sister’s suspicious stare. It seems that Gert had already done one whisky run so the Sister must have wondered why her charge needed so many pairs of fresh pyjamas?

After one further illicit run Annie refused to smuggle any more whisky into the ward. It seemed wrong to encourage the man’s bad habit. ‘Oh dear. We can’t deprive the dear doctor of his little tipple. That’s what keeps him alive’, Gert pleaded in the face of Annie’s abstention. Thereafter she visited without supplying any further top ups to him but of course she suspected that he still received his quota from his accomplice housekeeper.

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Back at the surgery Mr McDuff attended punctually and directed the proceedings as though he was a commandant in an army camp. Barked orders paralysed Annie along with his perpetual glower. She suffered as he spoke not a word to her throughout each day. Silence reigned about the stiff patients as they bared their teeth under his nit-picking instruments. Then a day arrived which began as all others. In dour depression when his mother rang. Annie thought he might perk up but when she relayed her message no reaction was evinced. ‘Excuse me Mr McDuff but your mother has just advised me that your wife has gone into hospital to have the baby’. She

waited for some animation. He merely lifted his head, glowered and lowered it again to the mouth.

The day progressed as though the three in the room were in a tomb. Again in the afternoon his mother rang and she conveyed the momentous news. 'Excuse me Mr McDuff but your wife has just given birth to a baby boy'. She held her breath sure he might at least twitch his mouth into a smile but nothing happened. He lifted his head, glowered and lowered it again to the mouth. What an awful reaction she seethed feeling desperately sorry for his poor wife.

McDuff soon revealed his displeasure with his assistant's performance at the chair-side. His methods were thrust on her without ceremony. He advised her that he allowed ten seconds in which to swap a dirty for a clean tray and get the patient into the chair from the waiting room. That meant she had to dispense with the usual polite preamble and hustle them in. In fact she realised that the only way she could comply with his unrealistic expectations was to put on a pair of roller skates and grab the patients by the scruff of their necks. She might just manage the manoeuvre in the tight limits prescribed. In the end Annie compromised around McDuff's supercilious smirk but the patients still reacted like cattle being goaded to the slaughter.

The next thing he insisted on was sterilising small china trays which held surgical instruments. The problem was the method had the risk of grand arson. The nurse had to pour methylated spirits into the china trays and set it alight. The blue flames rose high beneath her nearly singed eyebrows. However when she accidentally dropped some methylated spirit onto her arm it ignited. They stared at the blues flame rising from her arm. Annie grabbed a towel and doused the burn. McDuff was not in the least concerned and they soldiered on until he demanded again that she start the flames in the bowls. Adamantly Annie refused to be party to any further fireballs.

Some days later he asked for a stethoscope. She hunted and found an antediluvian monstrosity in the back of a cupboard. After snatching it from her hand he pressed it to the chest of a petrified patient, not bothering to remove the thick layers of clothing. Moments later he straightened and threw the instrument on the floor. 'That's no good. You can't hear Big Ben through that'. Annie stooped to retrieve it and returned it to its cupboard. Mr Toth had never used it but she imagined that without the wadding of thermal underwear Big Ben might have burst McDuff's ear-drum.

After two weeks of enduring his unpleasant presence Annie received a jubilant call from Gert. Dr Grossmann had recovered. 'The little man's

coming home. He'll be back to work on Monday', she shrieked and the nurse was left with the task of sacking Mr McDuff.

She rang Mr Toth on the Canary Island beach to get his instructions. 'I don't know vat you vant me to do. I am hafing a vunderful time. Teet are out of my sougths. Zey cannot compete vith ze bom-boms of ze ladies'. He laughed like an excited school boy and Annie felt uncharacteristically uncharitable. She was stuck in England trying to keep his affairs in order and there he was playing Don Juan to the idle rich without a thought to his slaves at home. 'Oh let old Potsky Grossmann come back if he vants. He iss my friend. Ze ozer Duff man is not known to me. Anozer two veeks and I vill be back, zo how I vill leave zis island in heaven I do not know'.

Annie managed to get the agency to give McDuff his orders and he packed his bags. Off he marched, his parade ground tattoo sounding delightful in the afternoon's dying light.

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On Monday Dr Grossmann appeared. A little sheepish perhaps but Annie welcomed him with a warm arm about his shoulders.

The little man returned to his box and work proceeded. This time round Dr Grossmann was more circumspect and confined his drinking to the numerous cups of tea Annie served. However she kept a watchful eye on the cupboard but to her relief he paid no attention to it. Neither did he disappear like a genie and she began to relax. She should have known better.

They toiled over the disappointed lady patients who were still mourning Mr Toth. Annie booked in a domiciliary visit for an old chap who was wheelchair bound. He needed a new denture and they could deal with that in the patient's home. In between a run of disgruntled filling cases Annie packed a domiciliary carrier bag and they set forth to brave a strange environment.

On arriving at Mr Sprat's address she knocked. There was no response. The patient's wife knew they were due to attend so why didn't she answer Annie fretted staring at the shut door. Dr Grossmann peered up at the knocker looking more like a leprechaun than ever. The nurse noticed he rocked slightly on his built up heels but paid little attention when her anger was mounting. Why didn't someone admit them? At that moment they heard a lock rattle and the door was flung back. 'No hawkers or circulars today. We don't want visitors. We're out'. With that the door was slammed in their faces. At the bang of the door Dr Grossmann swayed backwards and Annie extended a warding hand to prevent him toppling.

They trudged back to the surgery and Annie telephoned to advise Mrs Sprat that they had attended. That lady bawled that no one had visited. The dentist had been expected but had not arrived. Annie stoutly informed her that they had attended and she blustered for a moment before deigning to make another appointment.

At the next visit Mrs Sprat opened the door and escorted them to her husband on wayward legs. They seemed to have a mind of their own, going in different directions to the general drift of her body. An impression was taken of Mr Sprat who sat glaring through the procedure with malevolent eyes. He did not speak, just sat in a wheelchair in his pyjamas and dressing gown with white knuckled hands gripping the arms.

At the final visit Mrs Sprat opened the door and veered off on another path as they made their way to her husband.

Dr Grossmann needed a box as the treatment proceeded and they called to Mrs Sprat for aid. She sidled in and they asked her for a stool or ladder for the doctor to stand on. She tacked off soon returning with a low foot stool which she plonked down at the Dr's feet. He stepped onto it but found it did not raise him sufficiently. They again turned to Mrs Sprat but she was not going to be of any further help. She had passed out slumped across the arms of a chintzy chair, legs dangling over the side, oblivious to their problems. Mr Sprat looked as though he had murder in mind had he been able to rise from his seat. As it was he strangled the wheelchair arms with his ferocious grip.

Dr Grossmann appeared to accept Mrs Sprat's collapse across the chair as perfectly normal. Of course having witnessed the lady's unseemly position it occurred to him that he ought to be in the same state. However he had learned to avoid Annie's monitoring eye and must have secreted his flask in a pocket. For somehow or other without the nurse being aware he managed to drink himself insensible before she could prevent him.

The first she knew of his transgression was when towards the end of the afternoon he fell off his box. Quite how he did that Annie did not see. She heard the crash and wheeled about to find him on the floor. Luckily the calamity happened when Esme was in the chair having an impression taken for a new denture. She leaned out of the chair with the impression gagging her. What was Annie to do she anguished as Esme showed signs of an oncoming panic attack. A hot flush looked as though it were in full sweat and she flayed arms about, conveying her need to have the material removed from her mouth. The nurse was too busy flapping about the room like a mother bird which has lost its egg to worry about such incidentals. In spite of the rule forbidding non dental personnel to touch the mouth Annie had to pull it out. After applying the maximum force Esme separated from

the set putty with a loud plop and fell out of the chair. There were bodies littering the room but she scrambled up and they set to rousing Dr Grossmann. Three more patients were expected and they worked frantically, slapping him this way and that, pouring water over his head, kicking him about his limp limbs but all to no avail. The Dr refused to acknowledge the world.

In the end they dragged him into a passageway and left him to sleep. Esme donned a white coat, assisting Annie as she took charge. She undertook a denture ease and the grateful patient left pleased with her ministrations. Annie accepted the praise as befitted her maiden voyage into forbidden territory.

The next patient needed a dressing changed and she tackled that. She knew what to do as she'd seen it done a hundred times. Soon the lady's aching tooth felt easier. A crown re-cement was next on the agenda and Annie stuck it back successfully gaining confidence through the procedures. Esme was very good in Annie's job and she considered she wasn't doing too badly in the role of dentist.

At the end of the afternoon Annie phoned Gert and asked her to dispose of Dr Grossmann in which ever way she saw fit. The housekeeper rushed round and was soon leaning over the snoring man looking tenderly at his unconscious face. 'The poor wee man. He'd die without his little nip of the hard stuff'.

'He'll die with it at this rate. His liver must be shot. He'll kill himself and I don't want a dead body littering my clean surgery. Besides Mr Toth won't allow that'. Annie was really angry and wanted the wee man out of there. Gert muttered some incantation over his silly smile and he roused enough for them to bundle him into a taxi. Gert promised that he would be stone cold sober for work the next day and they all dispersed to their respective homes.

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The next day Annie was greatly relieved to receive the news of Mr Toth's imminent return. That was the best news she had received in a month. She managed to keep Dr Grossmann relatively sober under her tyrannical eye. If he took a nip he kept it from her but occasionally he wafted waywardly like a wind blown plant. Annie did not mind as long as she did not have to take the tools from his hand and apply them herself. She drew the line at further encroachment into the nether world of criminal practices.

Soon Mr Toth arrived back and burst through the door. A deal of noise filled the kitchen as he handed out the holiday presents, courtesy of the natives of the island.

‘How has it been here. Did Potsky perform vell vile I was away? Has he taken care of my patients? Annie kept her own council as to the problems created by ‘Potsky’ considering it better for all concerned.

They settled in again to their old routine. Mr Toth was full of tales of his holiday. Amongst them he expounded on a personal mishap. ‘I had an accident vun night’, he delighted in telling everyone over lunch. ‘I Ca-Ca in ze bed ven I vas asleep. I did not know vat I had done. Ze bed-chamber lady vas not finding it fun. She had to vash ze sheets.’ Annie remained silent in view of the besmirched bed linen considering that had it been her incontinent slip she would never have admitted it to anyone.

Chapter 7

Life settled into a more normal pattern or as normal as it was possible to be for Annie bearing in mind the nature of the job. She was growing used to the eccentric people who sought them out and bared their teeth for treatment.

Things were progressing in an unremarkable way when a Miss Tuttlecomb rang to make an appointment. She sounded harassed and had to fit the visit into her diary of clients. It seemed, Annie thought, by the sound of her pressured timetable that she was in great demand. Every slot the patient was offered she rejected because a client got in the way. Annie's patience was wearing thin by the time they had agreed to a mutually convenient time. Even then the lady moaned, 'It'll be cutting it fine. I may be late'.

Annie became curious as to her occupation when she kept interjecting 'her clients' in between the search for a space. 'You're very busy aren't you?' Annie ventured as an opening gambit.

'Yes, you can say that again. Up to my armpits in customers who all need to receive my ministrations immediately or yesterday if you please'. The nurse waited for further enlightenment as her curiosity was piqued.

'What do you do?' Annie asked in a tone that she hoped was not nosey.

'I'm a free lance artificial inseminator', Miss Tuttlecomb answered with a you should know better tone injected in the response. A freelance artificial inseminator Annie thought wondering what that was. Did she work for the local hospital or a fertility clinic? When she put that question to the patient Annie could tell that she fell in that lady's estimation.

'No I don't work in such salubrious surroundings. I work on farms'. At the thought of farms Annie lost the plot and could not understand what fertility rites could be conducted in such an unhygienic setting. Where did the inseminates place themselves for the procedure? In the end she had to ask, 'What do you inseminate'.

'Well cows of course. What else'. Annie gathered from the peremptory voice that she should have known that too, but how do you do that freelance?

The patient must have sensed the confusion Annie felt and so began elucidating on her occupation. 'I buy a tube of frozen bull semen from a supplier, keep it in the deep freeze until I am called upon to dispense it through a large syringe. I defrost it and attend the farms where I serve the

cows'. Annie did not think she could dredge an answer from her numbed brain. It felt as though her big ends had gone. How could the patient have called the cows clients?

With her mind on another plane Annie escorted in a Mr Barraclough and they proceeded with a nasty extraction. So nasty that the tooth refused to be parted from its owner. It was embedded in foundations as unyielding as granite. Mr Barraclough gripped the chair with steely hands as Mr Toth leaned backwards on the forceps with his heels dug into the floor. Annie leaned her weight on the head in the opposite direction as though in a Tug-o-War but the patient rose and was pulled out of the chair. He ended up on the floor, spread-eagled whilst Mr Toth sat astride, maintaining his hold on the tooth. He braced himself against the cabinet with his feet but the tooth was as stubborn as a mule. Mr Toth had gone a nice shade of purple when the tooth broke. He fell backwards shouting some Hungarian obscenities. That was nothing to the invectives issuing from the patient. Four, five, six and seven letter words turned the air blue around the spectacle. Mr Toth gave up on the unequal struggle and scrambled to his feet. He goaded Mr Barraclough up into the chair and continued the procedure. The roots were drilled, separated and finally dug out of the bone with elevators. Mr Toth was sweating at the end and they were all covered in blood. 'Your toot gives me ze vorst fight of my life. I haf never remembered such a wrestle vith vun. It vas like vorld var three. But iss gone now I am joyful to say'. He sat down abruptly smearing blood across his forehead as he wiped his brow.

Mr Barraclough struggled out into the murky day and Mr Toth retired to a chaise longue to rest. That particular job had been exhausting so Annie let him lie there, making excuses to the patients until he was ready to rise and take up his tools.

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Work resumed and she escorted in Miss Smithson. The lady ambled in seeming in a trance. She was so vague that her mind had gone on holiday leaving her earthly body to fend for itself. When she found her way into the chair they tackled her problem. She informed them that a former dentist had supplied a new denture five years previously and she had been unable to remove it. There it had stayed and she had brushed it along with her teeth.

Mr Toth plunged his fingers into her mouth and soon withdrew the denture. 'Vy you not go back to ze dentist ven you found it vas stuck?'

Miss Smithson stared ahead with the light of understanding dawning in her eyes. 'I can't remember. I think I forgot it was there in my absorption with my work.

Mr Toth waved the revolting denture at the nurse, using sign language to galvanise her into activity. Annie had taken root at the sight of the encrusted relic. A shelf of calculus had formed which had grown into a disc shape beneath the patient's tongue. Whilst holding her breath Annie broke pieces off with a pair of pliers and cleaned off the remainder with scaler and pumiced brush.

'Vell you must make sure you now take it out for cleaning. Vork surely cannot take up so much of your attention zat ze basic needs of life are forgotten'. There was an admonitory tone in Mr Toth's instruction as he clearly felt as sickened by the situation as did his assistant.

Miss Smithson smiled feyly. 'I'm a Sculptress you know. I get so absorbed in modelling busts for exhibitions that I forget even to eat sometimes. And now we are on the subject can I ask a favour. Would you sit for me. You have the most fantastic features that are perfect for a bust?'

With alacrity Mr Toth agreed and the sittings were booked before Miss Smithson took her reconstituted mouth out of the door. Mr Toth then decided that Annie was to accompany him on the modelling sessions. She suspected that he thought the lady might molest him. That in itself would not bother him but in the case of a lady who was past her sale by date he would not wish to invite her advances. Hence Mr Toth decided to protect himself and the nurse was recruited as chaperone.

They arrived at the appointed time and Miss Smithson lead them into a large studio. She stuck Mr Toth in a centrally placed carver chair and set about fashioning a facsimile of him. Annie was pushed into a corner where she sat on a bentwood chair like a hand maiden in attendance. She found it boring sitting for an hour doing nothing but watching an absorbed artist fiddling with clay. Soon Mr Toth's leonine head emerged from the red block, his mane of wavy hair surrounding his chiselled features like a crown. There was no doubt the lady was an accomplished sculptress Annie marvelled , and had brought him to life whilst he sat vaingloriously like a King on a throne.

It took two more visits to complete the bust but surprisingly Mr Toth showed no interest in securing the work for himself. The bust was to be displayed in a Mayfair gallery and after the final sitting they never saw it again.

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Annie had learned during the time of her employment that Mr Toth himself was a competent artist and several of his own female nude statuettes were prominently on show in the waiting room. Of course, she calculated, they would be female and nude bearing in mind his preoccupation with that gender. He explained to her that they had been modelled in his small workshop behind the surgery. They cast all dental models in the little workroom but also it contained a firing kiln and a potter's wheel. Whilst demonstrating the turning of a pot he suggested that Annie sit for him. No chance she thought. Sitting or standing, nothing would induce her to strip between patients and present herself naked to her boss. She decided it was better that she retained what little mystery she still had. He would respect her more she thought.

On one particular day when she was helping him fire a series of tiles he had made a patient wandered in. The man said he needed a crown done immediately and would pay whatever it cost. Mr Toth ingratiatingly propelled him into the chair.

'There's just one thing. I won't have an injection. I'm an acupuncturist and want to practice my art on myself'. Mr Toth's arm hung in the air with the syringe poised above the patient, momentarily frozen. Slowly it was replaced on the bracket table as Mr Wingfield-Digby drew from his briefcase a black box with a dozen leads attached to it. Mr Toth and Annie poised on either side of the patient quite taken aback at this development. Without demure they watched as the patient inserted the needles at different points until all were secured in regions on the back of his hands. After checking the amperage of the box he lay back and submitted to the drilling of a front tooth.

The only anaesthetic he had was the acupuncture needles and he turned up the current to maximum as the treatment proceeded. Even then his face twitched and a moist flush developed. Clearly he was feeling the drill, yet he refused to take the alternative injection.

They completed the preparation but such was the pride of the man that he refused to admit to any pain and emerged from the drilling drenched in sweat. He was silent when he packed away his machine and traipsed from the miserable session he had inflicted on himself.

'He was lookink like a hedgehog', Mr Toth sneered not impressed with the technique as they cleared up after the ring sided torture spectacle. The patient had looked peculiar lying there with those needles rising like spines from the back of a hairless carcass. Annie fancied that Mr Wingfield-Digby would not use his machine again in experimentation in view of his obvious pain during the crown preparation. Sure enough at the

next visit he put up no resistance to the local injection and Mr Toth applied it before the patient could change his mind.

After that traumatic session Mrs Philpott came tripping into the room. She needed a denture and soon her garrulous prattling was stemmed by a mouthful of impression material. Mr Toth was singularly solicitous to her in view of her expired display date and Annie was puzzled. After the lady had made a coy exit he began reminiscing, revealing more details of his life.

Mrs Philpott had been his wife. Number four Annie gathered between the sips of tea. She was resident on the top floor of his house, in a bed-sit and rubbed happily along with his latest number five wife. When Annie asked the reasons for the marriage failure she got a terse, 'She was frigid'. That obviously rankled Annie thought for he had told her that before.

Number one had been a ballet dancer. He had been young and when faced with her crippled toes on their wedding night his ardour had been felled. He found he was unable to partake of the marital act and the poor bride had been distraught. Of course in those days the woman was usually a virgin on her wedding night but such was the effect of the ballerina's deformity that Mr Toth had remained a celibate groom and the virgin state continued. It was not long before his bride ran off with the conductor of an orchestra, 'Holding the baton of his passion in her hand', he enlightened. Annie tried not to laugh as her imagination took flight.

Number two wife had been a strange lady. She thought that she was the murdered Grand Duchess Anastasia of Russia. Her peripatetic life had been taken up with trying to prove her origins and she kept abandoning her young husband to the tender mercies of other women. The marriage had soon demised.

He talked again about Giselle the one love who repeatedly was resurrected in his reminiscences. She learned at this sitting that Gisella had flounced off and married a Paraguayan doctor. Mr Toth showed many photographs to Annie who thought that this particular paramour was rather beautiful. A pity that the affair had ended as it had but with a man like her employer she could see life would never be secure and safe. There would always be some woman ruthless enough to take away a husband from a wife. Some seemed to have few scruples.

Another lover he talked of was Anoushka who from the photographs resembled Greta Garbo. She had been Russian with a touch of Hungarian thrown in. This lady had been a trapeze artist. Mr Toth had become immediately besotted when he attended a circus that came to the town. She had captured his heart before she even knew he existed. After the show he

had fought his way past the various minders and protectors who milled about outside her dressing room. Without knocking he had burst through her door and been confronted by a naked goddess in the process of changing. He was from that moment her willing slave.

The lady was wined and dined, dressed at Mr Toth's expense and jangling with the jewellery he bought her. Yet there had been a problem. This lady confided to him one evening during his concerted seduction process that she was a virgin. She was terrified, Annie was given to understand, of the carnal act and although accepting gifts from men she always kept them at arms length. Nothing would induce her to permit a man to enter her secret and private domain. 'I was an emissary with diplomatic impunity. I try to enter her legation only she didn't like ambassadors. She resisted a political coup. I could not win'. Mr Toth looked suitably disappointed at the loss before proceeding to expound on other of his past loves.

Of course it was a real eye opener for a young girl embroiled in the unexpurgated activities surrounding work. Compared with the restrained English behaviour that Annie was accustomed to it was all very romantic, sophisticated and risqué.

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Another patient dragged them from the confessional box. Mr Wakefield entered hauling what looked like a musical instrument case. It was huge and lay on the surgery floor like a beached whale. Mr Toth developed a worried frown when the patient produced a Tuba from its red velvet interior. 'Mein Gott. Vat iss zat'. Their eyes started from their heads when the patient hauled it over his shoulders and blew a rude note. It sounded like a cow emitting wind.

Mr Wakefield then explained that he was a musician and on tour with an orchestra. His recent dentistry had changed his embouchure. His lips would no longer pucker properly because of the new bridge which had altered his playing. The only sounds he could produce were unmusical and his job was in jeopardy if he could not play in tune with the orchestra. He was a very worried man.

Mr Toth began the task of thinning the front surface of the bridge. Not an easy adjustment for Mr Wakefield had to test the result after each reduction. The patient spent most of the time leaping in and out of the chair, hauling his Tuba on and off his shoulders. Each time he blew a practice oompha the sounds emitted were more like the oops of an accidental emission of wind.

With practice the flatus began to change to the proper oompahs and at last the patient was satisfied. Mr Toth polished the adjusted porcelain surface and Mr Wakefield was discharged into the afternoon sunlight.

Later, in the wake of a particularly bloody extraction Mr Chatsworth, a dental representative barged in. He flaunted his latest cheap offers whilst Annie stood in the midst of the surgery which looked like Dracula's cave. They could scarcely attend to the representative but eventually he slowed them enough in the progress of cleaning to gain their attention. Various special offers were dangled like carrots before a donkey but Mr Toth was not Ass enough to even nibble at the titbits.

Mr Toth mentioned transverse drills at that point and Mr Chatsworth's mind must have leapt a dozen steps. He began recounting to them about the time he dealt with a male dentist. The man had bought some product and had appeared with his usual dark chin shadow in the afternoon.

Mr Chatsworth again visited this practitioner and when he walked into the surgery he was met by an attractive woman. Mr Chatsworth asked where the dentist was thinking he had been speaking to a member of staff. The dentist had replied that it was he. Mr Chatsworth had then spied the dark beard shadow through the thickly applied panstick. The dentist thought it prudent to explain that he had changed sex. He'd had the operation and was now to be known by his female name. Mr Chatsworth maintained a grimly serious expression and bade the transvestite goodbye. When he fell into the street he was so hysterical that he had to take hold of a lamp post to support him whilst he laughed until he cried. The spectacle he must have made of himself made him laugh even more. Annie and Mr Toth smiled politely at the story. Best to keep the man happy. Annie tried to relay to Mr Chatsworth that they had to get on.

Not to be thwarted the representative launched further into a chat up line about a dental product that led him on to plastic teeth and technicians.

Mr Chatsworth revealed he had been a technician in his youth and began an expose of his days when he had worked for a Harley Street dentist. As a technician he had worked in the basement. He knew that his boss was having an affair with the nurse and studiously avoided their trysting moments. However one day the nurse burst into his laboratory in a state of shock. They had been engaged in extra-curricular activity. At the vital moment the dentist had slumped over her before they could reach the ultimate moment. She had been left high and dry for he had died on the job. He was at that moment lying naked on a horsehair couch in the upstairs room. Mr Chatsworth launched himself up the stairs and sure enough found his employer to be as dead as the Dodo. They hurriedly dressed him before calling his wife for it would have been cruel to have her dead

husband presented to her naked. She would no doubt have wondered how he had got into that state. As it was she was none the wiser and buried him in happy ignorance.

Of course the funny tale had the desired effect. Mr Toth changed his mind and brought several useless items to please Mr Chatsworth. The clever representative left with the thoughts of the commission earned making him rub his hands together with glee.

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Later in the day Mr Toth's wife was due a hospital visit and he left Annie to her own devices in the surgery. She cleaned everything and dealt with the phone calls. The next day she gathered from the general conversation that Dr Marx was seriously ill. The poor lady had cancer and was to stay at home through her terminal days. That was a harrowing experience for a young girl to witness but Annie did her best along with Esme. They all took turns with the Dr's care and Mr Toth gave her the Morphine injections to help the pain. Annie found it very sad to see that personable lady fade, day by day, but there was nothing anyone could do. Then one morning the nurse arrived to be told of the doctor's death.

It was expected that Annie attend Mr Toth's wife's funeral and she stood in the family line up. The mourners passed before them commiserating with Mr Toth. Mrs Brandt, a mutual patient of his wife and his pulled up and kissed the air on either side of his face.

Over the ensuing weeks Mr Toth began planning his future. Mrs Brandt and Mrs Fairbairn (the lady with the virgin birth daughter) were considered for the vacancy of wife. He talked himself in and out of marriage with each trying to decide which would be best. Neither was aware they were being considered for the post. Mrs Fairbairn was rejected because of the impediment of the virgin birth.

Mrs Brandt stepped fortuitously into place when she arrived for treatment one day bearing a mighty bouquet of flowers. That was a positive sign and Mr Toth jumped into the pursuit but Mrs Brandt hardly needed pursuing. Soon she was safely ensconced in Mr Toth's bed. An edifying spectacle Annie found when inadvertently blundering in on them when in the throes of who knows what? For with the blind arrogance of youth she thought such shenanigans were reserved for the young. Annie had no idea when she caught them and stood surveying the two camel humps under the bed clothes with a censorious attitude, that the elderly could behave like teenagers. Squeals, giggles and all the other sundry sounds that go to make up a mating pair emanated from under the blanket which appeared as

though a dromedary was riding through a desert. She was astonished at the reality of the situation. Later she realised that age is not a barrier to fleshly lust.

Of course the extra activity engendered by a new wife, albeit an elderly one, had its effect on Mr Toth. Whilst Annie was cleaning the surgery she was deflected by her employer who had slumped into a waiting room chair looking ashen. She realised that he was ill and when he staggered to his feet she supported him up to the flat. No easy task when the man is all of sixteen stone and the one providing the bracing shoulder about seven and a half stone. But Annie gave no thought to that for he had to be got away from the patients who might walk into the midst of the crisis. After propelling him up the stairs, with her shouted directions goading him on, he fell on his bed, out cold. Mrs Toth was away at that time on a family visit so Esme, at Annie's instruction, called a doctor who soon assessed the situation. Her employer had suffered a heart attack.

In the ensuing days Annie was recruited as nurse maid and accompanied him to hospital for a check up. They then learned he had to have three months off work and she was rendered redundant. They came to a mutually agreeable solution. Annie would become an agency nurse until such time as Mr Toth was ready to take up the reins again.

Thus the young nurse bade him a temporary goodbye and set off to her first job as stand in for the regular nurse. When she entered a squalid surgery in a suburban town she felt ill prepared for the conditions that she found.

Chapter 8

When Annie stepped into the first premises where she was covering for an imminently expectant predecessor she could scarcely believe the mess the dentist worked in. Mr Fangati was a qualified doctor and dentist who refused to acknowledge his medical training. Hence he had rejected the title of doctor in favour of the plain mister.

There were three surgeries and a vault-like waiting room to his establishment. The waiting room overwhelmed Annie when she set a tentative foot around the door. It made her think of churches. She could almost hear a choir singing as the interview proceeded across the echoing desk. Mr Fangati was an untidy, middle aged, draggled man who looked as though he needed a good bath to start with. In the nurse's opinion he then needed to see a dentist for his gnawed teeth needed something to sort them out. Quite what she couldn't decide but he could dispense with the garlic to start with she decided, for she could smell it across the expanse of oak wood which raised an intimidating barrier. Annie thought he was going to reject her services, an eventuality which terrified her. To her relief he grudgingly accepted her into his domain and steered her to the working arena.

The first surgery he elbowed her into had a wooden spittoon bowl. It was a revolting monstrosity and at the first available moment she set about it with an abrasive cleaner, scouring it as though she intended to erase it from existence.

She surveyed the second surgery with eyebrows rearing. The red velvet chair was of the Queen Victoria Vintage and it would not have surprised Annie to find her Majesty sitting in it. It looked as though it ought to have been in a museum. Reluctantly she had to concede after sampling its softly cushioned seat that it was very comfortable. She thought in a way too cosy, the patients' might have settled in like squatters and have to be evicted by force.

The third surgery had just plain old battered equipment that would have been better placed on a dump. The only thing you could say in its favour was that it had withstood the rigours of time and was still giving service. Utility made, tough and durable seemed to emanate from the base upwards. Not even a good clean altered it one iota, a face lift would not have helped. Throughout the time she worked at this establishment Annie tried to ignore the relics around her, directing her attention to Mr Fangati.

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He was in the surgery on her first morning and although she was early the doctor was wandering about in trousers, his upper regions unclothed. His bare chest was sparsely populated with grisly corkscrews which, Annie thought, was not an edifying sight before you had fully woken to the day. Whilst she pottered about placing sterilised instruments Mr Fangati would gurney at himself in a medicine cabinet mirror picking at his face with what appeared a rusty razor. When he considered he was as clean shaven as it was in his power to be, he donned a shabby grey coat that had been white in its hey day. Annie was prepared when he indicated she should bring in the first patient.

Strange as it may seem she soon found that the patients of this practice were different to those she had been used to. For one thing they were of a financially challenged social strata and clearly exhibited a manner less confident, more in awe of their dentist. However more worryingly they gave an impression of having arrived from another planet.

The first patient Mrs Huffington shuffled in wearing her house slippers and what could have been a night gown doubling as a dress. Did she not have enough money to buy shoes and proper day clothes Annie fretted as Mr Fangati peered into her mouth which was riddled with stumps. Annie thought he might decide on removing them and making the lady a full denture. Instead he ignored the stumps and instructed the nurse to mix impression material. He then took an impression over the stumps and fashioned a denture ignoring their existence.

Annie had not been used to such a dilatory approach and began to reproach him in her mind for his lazy attitude. However when he fitted the dentures they looked good and seemed to have better suction than those made after extractions. Mrs Huffington grovelled in delight at her changed appearance and nearly kissed Mr Fangati. The garlic probably averted that catastrophe the nurse mused. Maybe that was why he ate it for it certainly tainted the air about him.

Annie drew the patients in thick and fast as they turned up in droves, standing patiently like forgotten road obelisks until she called them in. She relegated one surgery as a check up station, the next a denture station and the third a filling and extraction station. In that way Annie organised the proceedings for they would have been there until midnight without some method of speeding the process.

Mr Fangati looked as though he had been reborn and happily trotted back and forth after the young helper like a shadow as she galvanised him to the next job. All day he let her bully him into place, taking the

instruments she shoved at him, sticking the needle in when she slapped the syringe into his palm and stuffing trays and bite blocks into the gaping mouths when she thrust them at him. No one dared to rebel against the agenda Annie had devised and at the end of the first few days Mr Fangati was impressed. They had finished every session on time.

~

Within four days, when Annie was in the midst of sorting through the jumble of xrays which lay on his desk without any means of identification, he hung over her shoulder. 'I've never met anyone like you. Will you stay and work permanently with me?' Annie was as surprised as if he had asked her on a date. 'Well what d'ya say. Please come and work here. I'd let you organise everything'. She turned to look into his earnest eyes and realised that he was really very nice. Soft underneath the ratty exterior but she brushed off the invitation with a laugh and handed him an xray. 'Who's is that. How can you work without at least a rudimentary method of filing?'

He began picking up the xrays, squinting at them against the light. Then one by one he matched them to their owners and Annie put them in correctly labelled envelopes. That was an amazing talent. To be able to mix xrays and then identify to whom they belonged was a new phenomena to Annie. But of course the dental rules prohibited such unprofessional practices.

Annie proceeded to drive each patient to their respective station. During the treatments which rotated with regular monotony Mr Fangati's blandishments continued in his attempt to win her to his cause. She would laugh off the enticements, trotting off to the next station and her shadow would trot close behind almost bombarding concessionary carrots at her resistant back. Annie had promised Mr Toth that she would return to him when the time came and she meant to honour her pledge. Not that the present practice had any features which could draw her from the other permanent home. For Annie had found she missed Mr Toth and the cosmopolitan assemblage.

After a few days Annie grew used to her new surroundings but the patients had plunged her into an acute culture crisis. Miss Broadbent strode into the waiting room dressed in black thigh length leather boots, a short black jacket and one rope of plaited hair reaching to her knees. A white ruff at her throat set the tone of a stage figure. Dandini came to mind Annie thought as she directed the patient to the appropriate work station. The make up on her face ended up blotched and she left a raspberry jam smear

on Annie's meticulously clean rinsing mug. It got all over Mr Fangati's instruments and onto his white coat but he drilled on seeming impervious to the work of art gradually being oiled out beneath the wining turbine. When Miss Broadbent rose from her treatment she looked like an art gallery masterpiece which had been vandalised. She was however unaware of her bleeding maquillage and with all the seriousness of a university teacher conducted her appointment-making with a dead pan face when confronted with the nurse's barely suppressed hysteria.

'What on earth does she dress like that for?', Annie wondered aloud as she tripped between stations with her shadow in close attendance.

'She's a lady of the night', Mr Fangati matter of factly pointed out. That brought Annie up short for a moment having never encountered such a female at close quarters. They had been individuals dimly perceived in the romantic novels that Annie read. Visualised but not real figures. Yet there had been Miss Broadbent, a lady of dubious virtue who looked little different to herself except for the strange clothes. Her name was hardly evocative of deep dark mystery but the thick make up painted the canvas of her face, presenting it in the way she desired. That is until Miss Broadbent arrived one day the worse for running from the bus. Dressed in a sari without the little top she displayed tiny breasts popping from a wonderbra. She had worked up a sweat and it ran in thin rivulets down her face, carrying the Max Factor panstick with it. She began to look like a Madam Tussaud waxwork that was melting in the heat.

Annie could no longer contain her mirth and burst out laughing as the patient lolled across a waiting room chair. She indulged Annie and laughed with the nurse as though at a joke though what that was from her point of view of Annie could not guess.

This lady was always entertaining when she turned up on her numerous visits but Annie could not identify in any way with her. She was outside the young girl's experience.

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Other human flotsam washed up on their shores. Mr Angelini crab-like sidled to the chair and cast suspicious eyes at the ceiling. He informed them that the cornice work had changed since his last visit. Mr Fangati ignored the comment and plunged into the forest of beard trying to find the patient's painful molar. Whilst he foraged through the foliage Mr Angelini rustled a bundle of papers which he was clutching in his sweaty hand. The moment Mr Fangati surfaced for air the papers were thrust at him with an instruction to read them

‘They say I’m mad. But it’s them that’s mad not me’, he opined. They bent over a letter which appeared to be from a court official to a doctor. Annie began reading:-

‘Dear Dr Knutley,
When in court Mr Angelini was deluded and hallucinating. He was receiving messages from telegraph poles and trees and had the Mafia after him’.

‘The Mafia’, Mr Fangati read out sounding impressed.

‘Yes. You see what I mean. I can’t help it if the Mafia send messages along telegraph poles, but they do and they keep following me – in cars that kerb crawl. Every time I go out they’re on my trail from brothels’. Mr Angelini raised his eyes innocently and Mr Fangati nodded as though he understood exactly what the patient was about. Annie stood aside with a strange sense of confusion. It all sounded ridiculous to her but why was the dentist acting as though it was normal to receive messages from inanimate objects?

Mr Fangati plunged back into the whiskers and soon provoked a nice wincing jump from the patient when he drove his probe into the hole. After an injection Mr Angelini was relieved of his rotten stump and soon departed out to the telegraph poles and trees. Just before he slipped from the sanctum he smiled like a choirboy. ‘You meet some strange people in life, don’t you?’ With that parting shot he was gone.

‘You can say that again’, Annie retaliated as Mr Fangati grinned from his wise position.

‘The poor man is obviously insane. I didn’t want to upset the telegraph poles and trees you realize. They might have instructed him to sling a brick through my windows or vandalize my premises. Better to agree with the delusions than oppose them’. Well there was little Annie could say to that so she firmly set her mind on the next patient and brought in a lady, all sixteen stone of her.

Mrs Nethersole barged into the surgery and crashed into the chair. Annie knew she needed an extraction and had placed her in the appropriate station. The extraction was duly undertaken whilst the lady bellowed and pawed the chair. Thank heavens it wasn’t the Queen Victoria edition, Annie thought, for she would have shredded the velvet. Instead the utilitarian version was subjected to her vandalous fighting and it stood up to it admirably. Mrs Nethersole climbed from the spotlight after the extraction but instead of making an exit she hung over the head-rest of the chair, cuddling it as though she had captured a lover. She began scratching

her armpit and moaning, 'It's those men up there. They rape me every night. I get no peace'. She turned her eyes heavenwards and Mr Fangati gestured that Annie should try and remove the patient from their midst.

That was not going to be easy the nurse decided. The patient clearly thought the head-rest was one of 'those men up there', and so was loath to relinquish her grasp. In the end Annie prised her off it and offered an arm for the lady to take.

'No thanks dear. I can manage on my own. The Duke of Edinburgh taught me to walk like this'. She glanced over her shoulder at her hands which were joined behind. Did he walk like that Annie wondered as Mrs Nethersole began again. 'Yes, he taught me...And my psychiatrist is the Queen's psychiatrist'.

Annie almost blurted, 'Don't tell me the Queen's bonkers too', but managed to bite it back. Not very tactful in the circumstances she thought as she escorted Mrs Nethersole to the street door.

Mr Tiplady jumped up when Annie called his name and she directed him to the filling station. The problem was he tried to present his feet for the injection when he scrambled into the chair the wrong way up. It did not suit him hanging upside down like a bat and it did not suit Mr Fangati either. 'I'm not doing feet to day', he snapped at the patient's holey shoes. Mr Tiplady slipped his berth and Annie had to haul him from the floor. She placed him the right way up and they proceeded with the repair of his teeth. However he had tried a DIY job and they were entombed in a cream coloured resinous material. 'Good heavens. What's that?' Mr Fangati asked and they gawped at the mess of his mouth.

'It's plastic padding', Mr Tiplady enlightened. Mr Fangati attacked it with his instruments wanting to see what was underneath.

'How do I get it off?' he wondered aloud. He was rendered helpless in the face of that which looked like a gum shield.

'I'll get it off at home. I can do it. I'll go now and come back on another day'. With relief Mr Tiplady leapt from the chair and made a shifty eyed exit.

'What was the point of all that. Why didn't he remove it before coming here and wasting my time' Mr Fangati moaned. Yes Annie had to agree it seemed stupid but then she was beginning to feel that they were on another planet anyway and you could not expect aliens to think with a logical earth man's mind. Mr Tiplady later attended having removed the plastic padding and what was beneath it was scarcely better than the man made gum shield. They ended extracting all his teeth and making him a full denture.

The next patient, Mr Saxby-Willis wandered in like a heron wading through water. He had the longest legs of any patient Annie had ever seen and they hung over the end of the chair. ‘My name’s David. May I call you Mary?’ he asked with an earnest sideways glance.

‘My names not Mary’, the nurse explained, ‘It’s Annie’.

‘Oh that’s nice. I wonder what planet you came from?’ Well Annie nearly burst her seams with trying not to laugh. Yes she agreed with the other planet theory but she considered she was the one in this dimension and many of the patients in another, Mr Saxby-Willis included. Annie had to admit to herself that she did feel like an alien in that setting.

‘I come from this planet. At least I think I do’, Annie retorted before dashing along the row of surgery’s to assist Mr Fangati. He soon finished with that patient and ran along to Mr Saxby-Willis. The man was lying back looking the picture of happy innocence. He had his hands clasped over his middle region but they were involved in a conversation with someone who was invisible. They danced and wriggled in unison with his umms and ahs whilst Mr Fangati drilled and filled his tooth. At one point the patient might have been conducting the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra the way his finger beat like a baton.

The telephone interrupted them and Mr Fangati went out to talk. In the meantime Mr Saxby-Willis lay with a matrix band wrapped round his tooth which protruded upwards like a radio aerial. It waved in the air as he continued on with the metronomic finger swinging back and forth accompanied by his umms and ahhs. Maybe he was conducting a concert for Aliens Annie thought.

Soon Mr Fangati returned and completed the filling. He then went scuttling along to the next surgery whilst the nurse saw Mr Saxby-Willis out. Before he got to the door the patient knelt on one knee and took Annie’s hand. A sticky kiss was then planted and he asked her, ‘Will you marry me?’ She nearly choked at the silliness of the situation. With great tact she extricated herself by telling him a wicked lie. ‘I’m already married’. She blurted that quickly and the poor man looked chastened. That at least dashed his hopes and he wafted out taking his unseen audience with him.

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Annie was becoming immune to the oddities of the patients but was quite taken aback when a traffic warden blundered into the waiting room, demanding to speak to ‘the owner of the car parked on a double yellow line outside’. He stood in an ugly stance with arms hanging at his side looking

much like a gorilla though he had a Hitler moustache. Annie asked him to wait and sought out Mr Fangati. The menace of the Warden was properly communicated to him and he drew off his rubber gloves, ready for a fight.

‘You must move your car. You’re illegally parked’. The Warden rocked back and forth on his hob-nailed boots showing signs of enjoying the altercation. Mr Fangati hardly had time to formulate a word in mitigation when the Warden forged on. ‘If you ask me. The law is an arse. Don’t quote me but the law is an arse. If you were a builder or a window cleaner you could park anywhere. As it is the law is an arse’. Annie admitted that she thought so too but dared not say so. She might be slapped in jail.

‘Would it help if I carried a ladder on my car and put a bucket and mop in the back?’ That was clever of Mr Fangati Annie thought and looked to the Warden to see what his response would be. Like Queen Victoria he was not amused when he felt they were mocking his position. He had said it not they he seemed to forget. A parking ticket was slapped with ceremony on Mr Fangati’s car and he threw it in the nearest bin when he had finished the session.

What with that and the police who were everywhere in evidence Annie felt threatened on every side. At the end of one day they traipsed down the steps and onto the pavement. Mr Fangati had again parked his car on the usual double yellow line but on that occasion he had avoided a parking ticket. Instead he found two police officers crawling around and under his car. He pushed forward and tapped the one peering at his tax disc. That poor chap received a shock thinking no doubt that it was a criminal about to attack him that he swung round with raised truncheon, ready to strike.

‘It’s alright. It’s alright’. Mr Fangati took avoidance action and fell back.

‘Is this your vehicle’, the officer snapped with glittering eyes set on the next arrest victim. Mr Fangati nodded in the affirmative and the officer pushed him into a squad car in which sat a very attractive blue-eyed officer. Annie stood on the pavement and watched developments. Apart from a lot of animated talking nothing else appeared to be happening. Then Mr Fangati was asked to get his tax disc from his car and he dutifully obtained it and gave it to the pair. In the end they confiscated it and discharged him.

Annie was agog to hear what it had been about. The police had noticed that Mr Fangati’s tax disc related to another car and demanded to know where he had obtained it. He had received it from the DVLA as Annie knew for she had dealt with that. No one had thought to look at the disc which was secured in place and forgotten. He explained that the

officers of the law seemed to think he was part of a gang of criminals who lived in Streatham although Mr Fangati assured them he knew no one in that vicinity. Balham and Fulham he was acquainted with but not Streatham he insisted to the unbelieving pair. When he gave his name as the dentist who owned the surgery over there, he pointed out the premises, they swivelled heads about to look. Their heads soon screwed round as they stared at him. He could not be a dentist, he must be one of the mad ones who was trying to convince them he was the King of England. That was the look they directed at him before releasing him with a caution.

As they drove off Mr Fangati suddenly realised they had taken his tax disc and left him driving illegally without one. No receipt had been offered and Annie had the task of going round to the local police station to obtain one. She soon extracted one from the desk constable and returned the next day with it.

The police then visited and such was their shock when they saw Mr Fangati in his white coat and rubber gloves they could not do enough to remedy the situation. The handsome blue-eyed one came and went several times, personally securing the correct tax disc for Mr Fangati's car. Annie looked into those lovely blue eyes and went weak at the knees when the officer handed the correct disc to her. However he soon lumbered out in his motor cycle gear leaving a very disappointed young girl to hand over the disc. Ah well, he was not meant for me she decided.

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‘That evening she rang Mr Toth to see how he was recovering. ‘I am vell, very vell. I haf been valking and hexercising and am feelink fine. I will be starting again to vork soon ven ze doctor decommissions me. How are you?’ He sounded in fine fettle, bursting with energy which was more than could be said for Annie. She told him of the strange patients and the incident with the tax disc. ‘Och dear. It is sounding a silly place. And ze police. Zey are always a pain in ze Bombom. Vat is ze equipment like?’ he was very keen to hear about the Victorian chair and the austerity units. The wooden spittoon bowl did not go down too well. ‘Mein Gott. Vat he vant with a filthy ting like zat. He should put it on ze compost heap. It can never be un-germinated’. Annie had to agree with him but she did her best with it she assured him before terminating the call with a promise to ring again the following week.

In the meantime Mr Fangati continued to dangle carrots in the hopes that he would break the nurse's resolve to return to Mr Toth. Plainly he loved being organised and Annie, much to her amazement, had found

organisational abilities hitherto undiscovered. In the end she explained carefully that she had to honour a promise to her previous employer. Not only that, she loved working in the cosmopolitan menagerie with Mr Toth. ‘Don’t you like it here?’ Mr Fangati dolefully asked unhappy that Annie might prefer it elsewhere.

‘Yes...I like it, but I must admit I feel as though I’ve landed on Mars. Strange people wander in and out making me feel that I’m losing my mind. I don’t want to lose it but that’s what I fear will happen if I stay’. Mr Fangati’s nod was an admission that he understood her predicament.

The point she had been trying to make was immediately driven home as Mr Hyam-Wather crept into place. He had matted hair which needed a good wash and brush, shabby clothes that had more holes than fabric left and shoes with soles flapping on his feet. He brought in a little stock of personal items and lovingly arranged them in a geometric pattern on a waiting room chair. A tobacco tin, matchbox, two pairs of sunglasses and a tattered wallet. After he had laid them to his exacting standards he drew from his pocket a brown paper bag and ate it. Annie thought she had lost it when she saw him crumple the bag and stuff it in his mouth. Needing reassurance she confirmed with a patient sitting opposite Mr Hyam-Wather that he had indeed consumed a paper bag.

After escorting him to the correct work station he kept her waiting whilst he again laid out his personal cache in the customary geometric pattern. It took an inordinate amount of time and Annie became increasingly pressured as he arranged, rearranged, re-rearranged them oblivious to her standing beside him. Then he tried on the sunglasses, finally selecting the pair with one lens missing as giving the best image of her when tested. Through all of that he kept brushing an unseen particle from his shoulder.

Mr Fangati soon bowed his head over the man’s mouth but failed to insert anything bigger than the tip of the probe. No injection or drill found its way through his pursed lips. Mr Hyam-Wather was irritably despatched without the treatment which he had clearly wanted but ultimately could not bring himself to accept.

Later in the same session Annie sat an excitable Mr Balderskill in the appropriate chair. He was a very talkative young man who looked healthily rosy. When she asked for his medical history the plug to the dyke blew out. A deluge of explanations came rushing at her like a tidal wave. ‘Yes. Yes. I have a medical problem. When I was in Bali a witch put a spell on me. I saw goddesses rising out of flaming grass. The strange thing was it only affected the right side of me. I have a weak leg and arm on that side and

toothache. I can see evil out of my right eye but not my left'. What could Annie add to that. She was on the moon at that stage.

'Did you ever think to get the spell reversed?' Silly question Annie thought but she might as well pretend that she believed him.

'Oh yes... A white witch removed it but I still see evil out of my right eye. The right upper teeth hurt too. Other than that the white witch did a good job'. He carried on babbling about it until My Fangati entered. Annie showed him the notes she had made. With a raised eyebrow he inserted the injection into the spellbound mouth and when it had taken effect drilled out the spirit possessed teeth. Annie escorted the mad man out and commented as she cleared up, 'You see what I mean. Either I'm mad or they are'. Poor Mr Fangati wearily smiled accepting the impossibility of changing the young girl's reasonable mind.

Within days he had found a permanent nurse and the agency propelled Annie towards another dentist who needed help. Let's hope the next practice is more normal she thought as she stood on the threshold ready to meet Mr Savident.

Chapter 9

The meeting with Mr Savident left Annie feeling as though a bucket of water had been thrown over her.

He was a very cold character, precise and supercilious in his manner and yet without knowing the employee he yielded the keys to the practice with instructions to open early the next day. She was to admit his associate with whom Annie was to work. He dismissed her then. Annie walked out of the practice amazed that he had entrusted the keys to her.

On the Saturday she unlocked the front door and crept into the small establishment not knowing which way to turn. With a rapid search she ascertained where most of the materials and instruments were and began preparing the two miniscule surgeries for the morning session.

Mr Savident's associate charged through the door like a bull emerging into a field. He fell back when he saw the strange nurse seated on a chair by a desk. Then plunging forwards he held out his hand. 'Ahh..Good morning. We've not met before have we? My name's Mr King'.

With a smile Annie rose, extended her hand and shook his. 'And my name's Miss King', she countered laughing into his surprised face.

'Well I never', he joked amused at the coincidence. The session began with an extraction. Mrs Worthington had a painful tooth and wanted it removed. Mr King lumbered about like that same bull in a small pen. There did not seem the space to accommodate his bulk and he kept hitting his head on the light pole. The poor patient clung to the chair as he loomed over her with the forceps threatening. Before Annie could place a comforting hand on her arm her namesake had wrenched out the tooth. A loud crack signalled that the naughty molar had broken. Without so much as a flicker of a reaction Mr King launched the forceps and tooth onto the floor, making Annie's job doubly hard as she then had to sink to her knees and wipe the blood from the lino. She was not impressed at the cavalier display especially when Mr King continued in the same manner. Cracking teeth off and launching them across the room. In between these performances he crashed about in the confined space, knocking his head on any medium level projection.

The other problem was he followed the nurse about like a fixated duck. When she went into the darkroom to develop an xray he lumbered behind making to squeeze his way in with her. She halted at the threshold,

not willing to allow him to accompany her into that dark enclosure with the red light.

‘What’s the matter. I’m not going to rape you’, he grumped when Annie tried to shut the door in his face. Well she could not be too sure of that and made it clear that she wished to be left alone to her task. After swearing at her through the door he retreated, confused in the face of the nurse’s refusal to allow him to supervise her.

They continued on with the session and at last it concluded. Mr King lumbered off without even saying goodbye. At that point Annie thought I do not want to work with him again. In the event she need not have worried. He never darkened the xray room door again and she was grateful for that.

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Mr Savident shuffled in on the Monday and Annie traipsed in his wake. He was a very quiet man. Although only in his late thirties he had the gait of Charlie Chaplin’s tramp. He shuffled ahead of the nurse like a piece of abandoned refuse and soon confounded her with his first snapped command. ‘Give Mrs Wanderdown Miller’s Mixture’.

‘What’s that?’ Annie had never heard of it and wondered what it was for. ‘Where do I put it?’

He gave her a withering look. ‘In her mouth of course’.

‘Yes. But to what in her mouth is it applied?’ This is getting silly she thought as he stared at her like a slab of marble.

‘To her lips. She swallows it’. Well you could have fooled Annie. He was determined to make her life hard and retired without further elucidation to his upstairs room where he locked himself away.

Where was this Miller’s Mixture Annie wondered whilst hunting through cabinets and drawers. Eventually she found an old medicine bottle labelled for the mixture. It was amber coloured and contained white bits floating about in it. Miller’s Mixture smelled suspiciously like Whisky she decided after uncorking it and taking a sly sniff. She rang Mr Savident on his internal line and was instructed to administer twenty millilitres orally.

Mrs Wanderdown gulped down the concoction in one go and Annie rang upstairs to inform Mr Savident that the patient had taken her dose. Fifteen minutes later when there was no sign of the dentist the nurse peeped through the circular window of the waiting room door. Mrs Wanderdown was swaying about like a blade of grass in a strong wind. There were several other patients who all tried to ignore her apparent inebriation with studiously polite faces turned to the ceiling. What had he done to her Annie

worried at which point Mr Savident shuffled down the stairs and bade the nurse to bring the patient in.

Annie was not used to helping drugged or drunk individuals but did her best. Mrs Wanderdown hung her arm round the nurse's neck and she staggered into the surgery practically carrying the woman on her back. Annie bundled the lady into the chair where she slumped like a sack of potatoes. They proceeded with the work on her teeth whilst she snored through the process. Very nice for her Annie thought. The patient was so far out of it that Annie had to prise her jaw open and hang on it. Somehow her treatment was completed through the various obstacles. Mr Savident then bade the nurse deal with the financial settlement and the form signing.

At that point the patient was legless and they both had to carry her out into a side office where she was laid on an old brown leather medical examination couch to sleep off the worse of the sedative. She was incapable of signing anything or paying. Mr Savident had obviously miscalculated the dose and they were lumbered with her snoring presence. Later that day Annie managed to contact her brother who came to collect her. She was despatched on his shoulder and tottered out after he had paid and signed on her behalf.

Annie immediately learned that Mr Savident used Miller's Mixture liberally and she became used to the patients staggering in all directions and heaping themselves into corners on the floor.

Mr Savident's girlfriend soon made her presence felt and often had to be tolerated cluttering up the kitchen which was situated on the floor above. She often made the two worker's tea which tasted like poison. Good manners and a certain sensitivity prevented Annie refusing her offerings but the tea was so bitter that Annie wondered if she laced it with surgical spirit. Those drinks however never seemed to have any side effects and she bore with them out of respect for the strange man's choice in girlfriends. Phoebe had been tagging along with Mr Savident for some years so she insisted on telling the nurse. She was a Chemist so maybe, Annie thought, that accounted for the vile tea.

A major contention developed in their relationship and Phoebe took herself off to visit a friend in Little Wallop. Mr Savident became progressively more morose than normal and when Annie swept the surgery floor he would sit at his desk staring at the wall. When the broom approached he never lifted his feet to allow her access underneath them so she swept his shoes. Annie endured his moods duly sweeping his feet if he failed to lift them as she was not prepared to leave the floor unattended.

Within a week of Phoebe having absconded a strange female appeared in the surgery. Annie was informed by a surly Mr Savident that

he was going to train the newcomer as a dental nurse. That seemed sensible to Annie until she found out that Maggie had been given a key to his room upstairs. Annie had never even set foot over the threshold of that rest room above and was surprised at that development. Of course her innocent outlook was immediately shattered when Maggie spent every moment closeted with him. Then Phoebe rang and Annie heard Mr Savident telling her that he was managing alone. Only Annie was in the surgery and all was right with the world. What a liar she thought.

The other problem with Maggie was that she had the worst bad breath that Annie had ever had the misfortune to sniff. The stink would fell you from across the surgery. Also Annie began to realise that Maggie had no intention of learning dental nursing when Mr Savident demanded her presence in his upstairs room. On one occasion Annie kept Maggie by her side going over root canal treatment instruments knowing that he was itching for Maggie to attend to him. That was after Maggie had told Annie that she had answered Mr Savident's advert in a theatrical magazine. The advert stated that a dentist was willing to train ex-cabaret artists or actresses in dental nursing. The whole sordid set up was apparent and Annie felt in a difficult position. Especially knowing Phoebe was regularly phoning and being completely misled as to the position.

Her disgust must have been palpable for after a week of tolerating Maggie trailing about like a lost cow that stunk Mr Savident dispensed with her services.

Of course normal life in due course rolled over the rift and Phoebe returned to her poisonous tea making. But that was infinitely preferable, the nurse concluded, to enduring the foul-mouthed Maggie.

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It became apparent to Annie that Mr Savident had a problem with getting out of bed. He nearly always arrived late. She would keep the patients calm until he slipped through the door and from there took up his morose stand at the chair-side.

The day he was more than half an hour late the patients worked the nurse up to such a pitch that she dared to telephone his home to find out why the delay. Phoebe sounded fraught and whined that she was trying her hardest to galvanise him into action. But he was still cocooned in the blankets and she could give Annie no guarantee that he could be roused before noon. 'What about the patients?' Indignantly the nurse responded, before slamming down the receiver. 'I'm so sorry. Mr Savident is going

to be a little late this morning. His car won't start'. That was a good excuse she applauded herself as the patients glared at her becalming smile.

Half an hour later Annie again rang Phoebe. She had managed to goad Mr Savident to the edge of the bed and was hopeful that with persistence she would propel him to his car. Annie had to be content with that and relayed to the patients that the AA engineer was on the job with his head under the bonnet of their practitioner's car. Their glowering faces made her feel guilty at the deception. After a final phone call she gathered that Mr Savident had been got to his car and was with luck motoring towards the surgery.

That news was relayed to the patients who viewed Annie suspiciously. They wanted to believe her, they had to believe her for otherwise their hour and a half wait would have been in vain.

Mr Savident finally shuffled through the door and set his drill to fast forward. With amazing speed the patients were dealt with, disposed of and soon they were running to schedule.

Then in came Mr Fotheringay. He seemed a pleasant enough chap and the treatment proceeded without incident. He signed the form and paid and strode out humming a happy tune.

They were pottering about when Annie heard the entry door slam. She went out into the hall and found Mr Fotheringay red faced and agitated. 'Is that dentist still in there'. He jabbed a finger towards the surgery door. Before Annie could respond the patient had burst into the surgery. Immediately she followed and stood aghast as Mr Fothergay advanced towards Mr Savident with balled fists at the ready. She grabbed a pair of Cheadle forceps and crept up behind the patient. 'You've given me the wrong change you dirty rotten thieving Jewish git'. Mr Savident went ashen and Annie raised the forceps ready for she knew not what. And then Mr Savident began to talk to the seething patient in a low lulling voice. Soon the chap relaxed and even began smiling. The low monotonous dialogue continued and she lowered the forceps. Mr Fotheringay finally held out his hand and shook Mr Savident by the hand thanking him for the nice chat. He then strode out humming his little tune. Mr Savident then collapsed onto a chair and Annie made him a reviving cup of tea. That was a close shave although what had upset the patient neither of them could work out.

Mr Savident then retired to his upstairs bolt-hole mumbling something about a sleep machine that he was going to plug himself into. Well Annie knew nothing about that and wondered whether it was fact or fiction. She later found out it was fact. He was in the process of developing a machine which mimicked the alpha waves produced by the brain in sleep.

The machine fed the simulated waves into your head when you placed electrodes on your scalp. A friend of his used to attend every week to go over the latest adjustments. Annie had no idea whether it worked for she turned down their offer to sample its delights. How did she know whether it would fry her brain in the process.

Later, after Mr Savident had apparently had his sleep he deigned to come down to attend to a Mrs Albany's child. She brought in her daughter without an appointment and Annie persuaded them to wait until they were in action again. Five year old Letty had an abscess and was in considerable pain. Before long she was settled in the chair and the local anaesthetic syringe brought into her view. With immediate effect she knocked it out of Mr Savident's hand, curled into a ball and refused to let anyone near her mouth. Despite her mother's pleadings, Mr Savident's exhortations as regards his edict of good behaviour and Annie's tooth fairy enticements, the child steadfastly maintained the control of her hands over her mouth.

'Oh no... I can't stand any more nights up without sleep'. Mrs Albany fretted in between prodding and poking her recalcitrant offspring. Mr Savident suggested he give her a general anaesthetic and Mrs Albany readily agreed. In the next room he ordered and Letty was unceremoniously borne to the brown leather horsehair couch.

They laid her down trying to impede her thrashing legs. Mr Savident immediately clapped an old metal face mask over her mouth. He had poured Ethyl Chloride onto a gauze pad lining the Schimmelbusch mask. Letty fought like a wild-cat, screaming and tearing at the impediment to her breathing which was held firmly in place. Her legs kicked up and before she lost consciousness her shoe gouged a great black scuff mark on the wall. Once she was quiet the tooth was quickly extracted. She regained consciousness and was given the tooth with the encouragement to put it under the pillow. The tooth fairy would visit that night. That did not mollify her and Mrs Albany had to drag Letty out promising the earth if only she would stop crying.

Of course the next time Letty needed their services she was not amenable to any blandishments to secure her good behaviour when nothing would erase the last experience. Mr Savident decided on Miller's Mixture and gave her a good swig of the bottle. That sorted her out. She was so intoxicated that she fell asleep and they completed the treatment without interrupting her snores through it. Mrs Albany was so grateful that later that day she brought in a bottle of Whisky as a thank you present. Annie suspected that it would go towards another batch of Miller's Mixture and so was recycled into the system.

A difficult bridge case surfaced from a day of mountainous fillings. It caused a good deal of tooth gnashing for Mr Savident. Even his teeth were subjected to punishing treatment when frustration raised his level of stress to grinding proportions.

Mrs Battersby was a most difficult lady. She was resistant to all forms of numbing and would not bend her mule-like attitude. She was so far up herself that she felt she did not need oxygen like the rest of mankind let alone to have to suffer the indignity of having to accept artificial replacements in her mouth. Mr Savident in desperation suggested a general anaesthetic and she agreed with alacrity. If the treatment was done whilst she was oblivious to it, her notions as regards her higher station in life would remain intact.

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It was arranged and a young practitioner came in to administer the potions. Dr Gassington put her out and signalled that they could proceed. They set to the task and four hours later shut the patient's mouth over her temporary replacements. They had not anticipated that it would take that length of time and even Dr Gassington grew nervous as the minutes turned to hours. But in the event all was well and the patient awoke. Dr Gassington kindly offered to drive her home.

The next time he turned up for a session he recounted his experience with Mrs Battersby. First she had thrown up all over his car. Notwithstanding when he stopped to let her out at her home she flung her arms round his neck and tried to kiss him. The poor man practically threw her from his chest and he sternly marched her to her front door. It was opened by her husband who took her into his care obviously unaware of her amorous excursion.

Dr Gassington attended for further sessions in which they undertook children's treatment. One prepubescent boy caused a problem under the gas which made no one laugh. Little Dennis was a disarming youngster. His mother had been given instructions that he should be starved for the procedure. He entered the surgery with a cheeky grin which worried Annie. He looked too innocent to be trusted.

He was comfortably seated and the anaesthetic administered. He struggled more than normal but soon showed the eye signs that indicated they could proceed. But instead of plunging into the extractions they were stayed by Dr Gassington's warning hand. Dennis's airway was obstructed and he could not breathe. His chest was pumping up and down so the doctor very quickly grabbed his feet and hung him upside down over the chair.

Annie applied the sucker to clear his throat. For her efforts she received the contents of his stomach, splattered on her white coat and the seat of the chair. The naughty boy must have eaten a three course meal before arriving judging by the amount that was ejected. It was a lovely experience for Annie as the task of cleaning the mess was hers. Dennis was a menace Annie later decided as she gagged her way through the sickening cleaning up. Dr Gassington then continued, settled little Dennis and Mr Savident did the extractions.

Dennis the menace woke up without knowing anything of the drama surrounding his disobedient act. He immediately wanted something to eat and was propelled out to the nearest McDonalds to refill his stomach.

Dr Gassington was always a good operator but on one occasion he arrived clearly in a state of disarray. He had been traumatised by the dropping of a bomb. A peacetime offering which was all the news that day. He had been off duty when the call came summoning him to work. A terrorist bomb had been dropped on a public building. The blast had killed many and injured countless more.

Mr Savident and Annie were agog listening to the doctor's harrowing account of the emergency. 'I've never seen anything like it. People were staggering into A&E in evening dress looking as though someone had thrown bags of flour and tomato ketchup over them. It was horrific'. In spite of that trauma he had decided to follow mopping up the bloody mess of the bomb by ministering to Mr Savident's patients.

On that occasion he was not up to scratch and forgot to check his laryngoscope before proceeding with paralysing the patient with a curare blocking agent. The Scoline was injected, the patient paralysed from breathing when he discovered the defunct batteries in his instrument. Dr Gassington could not see to intubate Mrs Winterbottom who lay motionless whilst he grumbled over his useless tool. Panic caused a surge of energy and Annie had a brain wave. She grabbed the nearby radio, smashed it open and extracted the batteries. They fitted and the Dr expressed his satisfaction with the view of the lady's vocal chords. However she began to breath at that moment and had to be paralysed again before the tube was inserted in her wind-pipe. Then Dr Gassington lost a vital connector and could not attach the oxygen and nitrous oxide tube running from the patient's mouth to the machine. She was receiving no oxygen at all. Another surge of panic made Annie grab the tube dangling from her mouth, attach it to the open orifice of the machine and tape it in place with sticky plaster.

Dr Gassington looked relieved at the solution and the patient turned from grey to pink. She lived as Annie intended. The thought of the tabloid headlines, 'Patient dies in dental surgery', did not bear contemplation.

Mrs Winterbottom eventually regained consciousness and was despatched through the door in the hopes that no long term ill effects would result. Some weeks later Annie saw her in the distance mulling over some carrots on a vegetable stall and she seemed as normal a shopper as any other. That was one catastrophe which had been averted.

The next patient obstructed her airway. Lady O'Rourke was an elderly lady who was wife of a local town dignitary. There again Annie could see those headlines threatening, 'Mayor's Wife Dies in Dental Surgery'. To her relief the patient began coughing with vigorous effect and cleared her airway without help. Annie's misgivings evaporated into the lady's trusting smile and she relaxed again.

That session was particularly fraught and she was glad when Dr Gassington packed up his mobile equipment and took himself home to sleep off his horrific bomb experience.

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Mr Toth telephoned Annie that evening, as garrulous as could be. 'How iss ze vork comink along?' His enthusiasm was patent in the excited tone of his voice. Annie recounted the latest dramas which provoked a stream of reminiscences.

'I vell remember ze vomans army camp. I had to put ze ladies sometimes to sleep under ze happy gas. But I much more liked to put zem to sleep under my little Ambassador'. I'll bet he had Annie laughed down the phone. 'Yes, zey vas happy days though I don't vant you to tink I am not happy now. I am very luckful to be vere I am. Dentistry is all I have ever vanted. And I am still able to vork on ze vonderful teet'. Mr Toth sounded very happy to Annie. She knew he loved teeth though it was beyond her understanding why? They were nothing but trouble, in her humble view, from the moment they poked through the gums until the moment each one met its nemesis.

Mr Toth continued with his dialogue and rattled down the phone. Annie dragged her mind back to his news. 'Ze doctor has commissioned me back to vork, so vill you be ready next veek? I haf ze surgery shinink and polished for my resurrection. Can you start next veek ven I haf some patients booked?' Anytime Annie confirmed, glad to be nearly done with strange practices.

Before she left Mr Savident gave her a present. A little figurine of a dentist modelled in clay. It looked a mite like him and Annie, although she did not warm to the dour looking expression on the models face, thanked

her temporary employer. She thanked him for putting up with her and tried not to look too pleased at her release from his surgery.

Annie made sure that she left the surgery as clean as she was able. She was present when a new nurse presented and introduced the new employee to the equipment and the layout. Each surgery, Annie had learned, always had its own persona. Each one a different personality. She felt beholden to help the novice girl in an introduction worthy of a social evening's get together.

Later Annie heard that this nurse absconded to a far flung place with her boyfriend. She had not liked the job nor the character with whom she had to work. Permanent staff were a problem for dentists, Annie knew, but she had no compunction in walking away. Mr Savident watched her from the front door regretfully, knowing she was a gem who could pick and choose her position. It was his bad luck that she had proved loyal to her first boss.

Chapter 10

The following week saw Annie enter again the surgery which was more like home than any other.

Mr Toth threw his arms about her and rocked her head on his chest. He was genuinely delighted to have his young nurse restored to him, with himself resurrected after his heart attack, and to be back in his beloved dental suite. After a cup of tea it was as though the break had never been.

The session began and Annie invited into the surgery a Mrs Fernandez. She waddled in, a little fat mole-eyed woman who spoke no English. When she was seated Mr Toth began asking her of her problem. She said something that sounded like, 'Schmeer, I hab schmeer'. Mr Toth looked a mite nonplussed and proceeded trying to get his instruments into her mouth. In between her looks of complete bewilderment Mrs Fernandez gabbled in nonsensical Spanish and they were none the wiser. She then cast a look that implied she thought Mr Toth was mad. 'Schmeer, schmeer'. She demanded before pulling up her dress.

Annie began to get worried when the patient lifted her legs and made to remove her bloomers. She got them far enough down to reveal a tripe-like stomach criss-crossed with scars and stretch marks. Mr Toth staggered backwards showing on his face distaste at the sight and Annie quickly stepped forwards to cover the woman's modesty. The nurse shook her head and pointed to her mouth. 'Dentist, Dentist'. She tried to explain and the lady finally seemed to understand.

'Ospital...ospital?' She asked shrugging her shoulders into her ears. She had obviously attended the wrong venue for the expected gynaecological examination. 'No.. this is the dentist. Teeth'. Annie pointed at her teeth and the lady hurriedly pulled up her bloomers again. The nurse helped her from the chair and saw her out into the street.

'Vat a sight. Zat belly would make shrink any man's little ambassador'. Not being a man Annie felt she could not comment but he should know. It certainly had not been a very edifying sight and she was glad to have kept the lady's knickers on.

Then another woman patient got her wires crossed as regards the treatment expected. Mrs Crosthwaite rang and wanted to book an appointment for an Episiotomy. 'What's that', Annie asked thinking she had misheard.

‘I have been told by the specialist who referred me to Mr Toth that I need an Episiotomy. Can I book an appointment’. Annie was out of her depth and turned to Mr Toth to ask what the patient might mean.

‘Vat she on about?’ He wondered frowning into space.

‘An Episiotomy she says’. Annie stood waiting for enlightenment and then Mr Toth began laughing.

‘I cannt do zat. It is ven you lady’s haf ze baby. Ze doctors cut ze secret place at ze ozer end. It iss not to be done in ze mouse. Maybe she wants an Apicectomy?’. Annie’s face set grimly at the embarrassing thought. She turned again to the phone and tried to explain to the patient what she had been told.

‘No I don’t want an Apicectomy. I have been told I need an Episiotomy and that is what I’m going to have’. The lady was adamant. Annie handed the phone to Mr Toth and he continued with the argument.

‘Over my body ven it is dead vill I give an Episiotomy to you. We are at the wrong end of ze body. I give you an Apicectomy nor nozing’. The lady slammed down the phone making threatening comments about reporting them for negligence. Of course they never heard from her again.

The phone rang almost immediately and a man asked for Lady Lucas. Annie explained that he must have the wrong number. As soon as she put down the phone it rang and the same man again asked for Lady Lucas. Mr Toth heard her politely trying to deflect the caller. He grabbed the phone and snapped down the line, ‘Zis is ze pork butcher’, before slamming down the receiver. The phone stayed quiet after that.

The weather had been bad for days and then overnight two feet of snow fell. Annie struggled on the journey to work for several days. Before the snow could thaw another fall rendered the roads almost impassable. She set off optimistically to work but found all buses removed from service at the depot. A brave taxi driver was idling nearby and she asked him to help. He agreed to try and get her to her destination and she was carried to the surgery by a taxi that slithered and sloshed through five miles of snow bound roads. Eventually she arrived at eleven o’clock. That night all public transport had been grounded and she had to stay at her place of work.

Mr Toth made up a bed for her in the waiting room and in the evening after watching his television she tucked herself under the blankets downstairs. It was scary sleeping opposite the waiting room as she could see the equipment outlined against the surgery window. It loomed ghostly and malevolent within a few feet of her huddled form. Also the central heating boiler repeatedly burst into activity, rumbling loudly just beyond the waiting room door.

Annie found sleep elusive and proceeded working the next day in a sleepwalking trance. She had to suffer three nights in the waiting room before the roads were cleared enough to allow traffic free access. When she finally emerged into a full-mooned night Annie felt as though she had been liberated from imprisonment and took great delight in the journey home.

Soon Mr Toth was exhibiting his usual volatile explosions and Annie found herself accused of stealing a pair of socks. ‘What would I want with a pair of your socks?’ She dared to oppose him and he blew a fuse.

‘Get out, get out. You’re sacked. Get your bags and go now’. He raved at the same time kicking the waiting room chairs and picking up a glass vase from the table.

‘Don’t even think of throwing that’, Annie warned and stalked out to the coffee room. There she set about making a cuppa to drink. He would soon forget his order. Sure enough before she could take one sip of the steaming drink he was calling her to assist with Mr Betteridge who had lost his dentures. His dog had apparently eaten them and he was in an embarrassing position. Reduced to being unbecomingly gummy until a new set could be made.

It seemed to be a common failing in the canine world. Dogs were always getting hold of dentures and demolishing them. Why they would think to eat a piece of pink plastic Annie could not imagine. Mr Betteridges’ lost dentures reminded her of Mrs Pinkerton and his dog ‘Pickwick’. Pickwick was a squashed faced Pekingese who strongly resembled his mistress. The dear little dog had confiscated Mrs Pinkerton’s teeth. She spent the whole of one day following her beloved pet as he trotted in and out the back door on nature’s little excursions. She spied on him in the hopes that he might single out one mole hill on the lawn and lead her to her dentures. But he remained blithely indifferent to her loss and caused a very expensive replacement to be embarked on.

When the new set was almost finished ‘Pickwick’ innocently trotted in from the garden and plonked the dentures down on his own Auberson rug in front of the fire. Of course Mrs Pinkerton was full of pride for her clever squat faced companion forgetting that he had cost her a pretty penny for the replacement.

Annie had heard once of a Parrot pilfering a denture which was ultimately found on the bottom of its cage when cleaned. That she could understand but a pig filching its owner’s teeth stretched the imagination. She always wondered how the farm animals got into the domestic domain in the first place or had the owners removed their teeth in the pigsty or stable? Why in the first place did they take out their teeth in the presence of a pig or parrot let alone a dog?

At about the same time a Miss Pettimore arrived for treatment and placed her brown paper carrier bag on a hook behind the door. Annie paid little attention to it until it began to creak. It also kept changing shape and she became worried. Between the bouts of drilling the patient surfaced. 'Don't worry about that. It's my pet snake. I don't go anywhere without him'. At that moment a snake's head appeared at the edge of the bag and peered down at the scene. Mr Toth took no notice of it but Annie was perturbed lest it slither from the bag and become tangled in her feet.

Thank goodness, Annie cheered, the lady's treatment was soon finished and before the snake broke free the patient bore it home on the bus. That was the end of that day.

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The next day had been booked out for Mr Toth had decided they were going to view progress in the dental world by visiting an Exhibition at Earl's Court. That would be a diversion for both of them Annie thought, and no doubt he would end up purchasing various innovative items which would either be welcome utilities or useless accessories.

Of course she had to endure Mr Toth's driving and bear with his irascible parking methods. The local populace beat a craven retreat when confronted with his European explosiveness and his tendency to ram the adjacent cars, determined to expand the space enough to admit his Grand car.

At last they entered the exhibition hall and were assailed on all sides by a wealth of manufacturers stands all bent on selling their goods to the shopping profession. They had to develop an Armadillo-like carapace to resist the pleas from the multi-lingual sales-people. From all over the world they had travelled to that central London venue with the sole purpose of earning as much commission as they could pack into three days.

Yet one young salesman managed to charm Mr Toth into his sales net and he enthusiastically bought two gadgets. Mr Partington had applied his inventive mind and designed various little aids to facilitate the dentist's job. Mr Toth had once possessed fifty patents on his own invented equipment. So it surprised Annie that he succumbed to Mr Partington's sales talk but she had to admit the young man was persuasive and from her point of view a very handsome man. Although in his thirties he had a crown of snow white hair. It appeared glamorous in contrast to the golden tan.

Annie regretfully walked away from the prospect of a date and Mr Toth then took it into his head to use her as a guinea pig for a new

anaesthetic needle-less applicator. In the interests of duty to the patients she held her hand out and to her disappointment a bald headed salesman shot her with the machine-like gun. She would have happily offered her poor hand to Mr Partington for the experiment but had to tolerate the unattractive bald headed specimen inoculating her instead. She had to admit the 'Dermo-Jet' as it was called did not hurt unduly but it caused a white bleb to be raised on the back of her hand. Not content with one trial shot Mr Toth demanded that Annie be shot with it again and she had to accept five shots of the stuff before he was satisfied that it was worth buying.

They left after trudging the hall for three hours and Annie buried her head in his car when her boss began another fracas with a motorist who was also leaving. They both wanted to back their cars into the same space in order to leave the car park. Neither would give way but of course in the end Mr Toth exerted his superior temper and the other driver backed away leaving the exit route clear for him.

Back at the surgery they jubilantly tried out the two new acquisitions. One was a magnetic bur stand. A good idea in theory. The diamond burs looked lovely arranged in equidistant circles. But when Mr Toth picked one from it with his tweezers the whole lot became magnetised and formed a long lace joined to the tweezers. The oaths that the magnetized burs provoked were from every language that he knew and a few more besides. That unusable item was tossed out of the surgery window and came to decorate the rockery.

The other item looked more promising. It was a revolving mirror with a light. All was fine for the first five minutes of its use. Then the patients tongue forced the mirror into the back of the drill, gouging a circular mark on the mirror surface. That rendered it useless. The mirror head was changed and the rotations of twenty thousand revolutions per minute spun off the water produced by the drill but caused the bulb to fail. It seemed to Annie Mr Partington had not taken the vibrational aspect into account when designing his instrument. Mr Toth was disgusted and that item too ended up being tossed into the rockery outside.

In that same week Mr Toth had booked for them to attend a Dental Nurses congress at the American Embassy in London. 'You vill enjoy nobbing vith others of your milk', he explained before he booked the outing. Again the nurse endured an erratic journey to that venue. On that trip a lady fell off a bus in front of them. They could not go forwards or backwards and that incensed Mr Toth. Leaping from the car without thinking Annie rushed to the lady's aid. She hauled the victim into the gutter and she soon sat rubbing her elbow. That seemed to be the only

injury and Annie returned to Mr Toth's car just before the traffic was free to move again. The jam and the lady's untimely fall provoked a volley of invective from her frustrated boss. She was not amused as they jerked their way to a parking place in a square near the Embassy.

Once wandering the Embassy passageways Mr Toth cheered up and they soon found the hall where the Dental Nurses were gathered for the meeting. A cold buffet was in progress and they helped themselves to the canapés. Annie studied all the others of her clan but they seemed like Grandmothers to her. Later they were asked to line up and have their photographs taken. Annie sat in the front whilst the taller ladies stood behind.

She was the youngest member of the fraternity and so had no one with which to exchange ideas. Two of the more senior ladies made attempts at conversation but to the young girl they were as alien as visitors from Mars. They seemed threatened by her youth and kept their distance after a few stumbling remarks about drills and probes.

Before the meeting ended a crowd of young sailors appeared from nowhere. What they were doing at a Dental Nurses meeting Annie could not work out but they livened up the proceedings. A couple gratifyingly made a beeline for her and began flirting. Mr Toth stood aside and watched the preamble keeping a proprietorial hand on his nurse's arm when one tried to make a date. She was firmly steered away and returned to the car. There, as they erratically wove a route through the congested roads, Annie contemplated that lost chance. The only consolation was that they were American Naval Personnel and probably would have sailed into the sunset before the sun had even risen on their first kiss.

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After those two little outings they settled again to the mundane jobs in the mouth. Mr Worthington arrived and underwent his treatment without any problem. When his filling was completed he rinsed and bounded from the chair. He was in the waiting room when they heard his wife suddenly shout, 'He's going to pass out'.

'Wait a minute', Mr Toth commanded and ran out just in time to catch the chap as he went crashing to the floor like a felled tree. Annie rushed out and knelt by the man's head. He was making terrible gargling sounds and Mr Toth instructed her to lift up his head. She bowed to the task absolutely terrified at the development. Through sheer panic she found the strength to lift up Mr Worthington's head and his breathing reverted to normal. After a few minutes he regained consciousness and they helped

him up. ‘Haf you ever had an eclectic fit?’ Mr Toth questioned but the patient shook his head befuddled at the question. They all stood around wondering why he had collapsed so abruptly. Soon he was sufficiently recovered to leave and was advised to visit his doctor and have some tests.

A child accompanied the next patient. Mrs Brownlow was booked to have a root treatment and Freddy was to wait quietly whilst mummy’s tooth was sorted. Freddy looked fed up and began throwing himself over the chairs. Not content with throwing himself about he proceeded to throw up the contents of his stomach. All the meals of that day were deposited on the velour fabric of the chair and the carpet. Another horrible clearing up job that had to be done whilst Mrs Brownlow wrung her hands, apologising profusely for her offspring’s little lapse. Big lapse Annie would have called it but Mr Toth told her not to worry. It was alright for him she privately thought. He didn’t have the task of washing away the mess.

One day a beautiful young Japanese woman appeared for treatment. The note that she clutched in her lotus blossom hand was given to them. It explained that she was in pain and that she spoke no English. Also they found that she spoke none of the European languages that Mr Toth tried on her. Between sign language and various farmyard animal grunts Mr Toth narrowed the problem to an upper front tooth. Mrs Au So lay back like an almond eyed Madonna, stoically baring her beautiful snow-drop incisors. Mr Toth held up the injection for her to establish whether she wanted one or not? ‘Non’, she emphatically shook her head. Mr Toth looked perturbed. He knew he had to do a root treatment and he knew the agony he could inflict without the numbing agent. Mrs Au So clearly had no idea or if she did, she did not consider it beyond her capabilities to bear.

Mr Toth began drilling behind the front tooth and exposed the nerve. Not an eyelash flickered on the lady’s lids. Not a muscle twitched anywhere in response to pain. The nerve was prodded, secured with a barbed broach and removed. The patient smiled trustingly and the root treatment was undertaken. Mr Toth had more sweat on his brow than the flower-fresh lady. He was impressed by her stoic acceptance of the situation. She beamed in gratitude as she climbed from the chair. With relief Annie waved her away and prepared for the next individual.

Within days several more Japanese ladies had been booked in. It seemed they were part of an enclave of Diplomatic Service wives and Mr Toth’s fame had spread amongst them.

The next little lotus blossom arrived and was almost identical to the first. Annie called the second one Mrs Au So two for her name was unpronounceable. The second one had a more complex problem and she handed over to Mr Toth the customary letter. That one contained the

telephone number of her husband at the Japanese Embassy. Annie got him on the line and to her relief he spoke excellent English. That was at least an improvement but then of course of what use would he be if he could not communicate with the people of the country to which he was seconded.

The telephone receiver bobbed between the patient and Annie. The lady would explain her symptoms to her husband, he would translate them to Annie and she would recite the commentary to Mr Toth. They bumbled on in that haphazard fashion and her problem emerged from the three cornered dialogue.

She too refused an injection when it was held up and they completed several fillings. She appeared happy with the pain she must have been feeling, borne stoically without fuss.

Each one of the several Japanese wives was a pleasure to deal with and saved Mr Toth money which delighted his Bank Manager. When they left they would bow from the waist at the door. Annie and Mr Toth followed the fashion and bowed in return. That provoked a further bow from them and a yoyo of bowing began. It became quite boring and Annie began to wonder whether they would ever get their heads off the floor when nothing seemed to stop them.

They were puzzled about that procedure until Mr Toth found out that it is the custom in Japan for the person of higher status to have the last bow. The ladies obviously thought they were of inferior rank and kept trying to have the last bow. The dentist and nurse, ignorant of Japanese etiquette, kept on bowing because they were well mannered. Annie thought it was a ridiculous situation.

Soon after a Mrs Shah from Poona squashed her broad rump into the chair jabbering about a painful tooth. She was a completely different character to deal with. The injection excited a scream of pure terror but she insisted on many cartridges of local anaesthetic agent. Mr Toth was getting annoyed that the money he had saved was being eaten up. The mirror going near her mouth so agitated her that her flapping hands got in the way and the forceps poised ready for the job evoked such a rumpus that the casual listener might have thought she was being murdered. And that was before the dentist had even set to the task. What a difference a cultural divide could make to an individual's response to the same situation. The Japanese were infinitely easier to treat but then it takes all sorts to make a world. Annie concluded on her journey home.

Chapter 11

Mr Toth suffered a bad bout of influenza and was confined to bed for several weeks. A Locum was engaged and Annie prepared the surgery for the new operator.

On the first day Mr Everskill arrived late and the patients unused to being kept waiting became restive. They raised disbelieving eyes when he stumbled in, a ragamuffin figure with wild eyes and hair.

The nurse introduced him to the equipment and they began to tiptoe through the teeth. He was a very nervous chap, pussyfooting about, titillating and tweaking but never really getting to the nerve of the problem. Annie grew used to him going round in circles and sending the patients away without work done in their mouths.

That aspect of him she could cope with but she became irritated when he took to kicking the skirting boards should something not go quite to his liking. Annie was used to Mr Toth's brand of temper and should have been able to withstand Mr Everskill's petty outbursts. The problem was he was not a happy individual and when he was not lashing out at inanimate objects he sat lugubriously over the patients singing, 'Poor Jud's dead and lying in his coffin made of wood', in a sepulchral bass voice. It was very depressing and Annie worried about the effect it might have on the patients. What would they think of his morbid meanderings? Apart from the odd wry look directed up at him when he ground out those words the patients were very accepting. It was the fact of being fobbed off without the repair work being done that annoyed them.

One morning Mr Everskill failed to turn up at all for work and the patients were accumulating. As Annie knew where he lived some ten minutes distance she borrowed Mr Toth's car and went off in search of the truant.

Once she had located his address she peered through the downstairs window. The curtains were still drawn although it was half past nine in the morning. In the end she banged vigorously on a cracked pane of glass and succeeded in rousing him. He soon opened the door looking like a tramp coming out from under a bridge. 'Is it time to get up? I must have overslept', he mumbled before disappearing in his dressing gown. Before long he reappeared in his usual crumpled day clothes and fell into the car. Annie drove him to the surgery and pushed him to take up his tools.

A few times she had to rouse him from bed and chaffer him to work and once he knew the nurse would do that he made a habit of oversleeping.

Also Annie learned during moments of shared communication between patients that Mr Everskill was a model railway enthusiast. Apparently one of the reasons he needed her to chauffeur him was because he had blocked his car in the garage by laying a line of railway track across its exit drive. He had become so absorbed one day when placing the track all round his garden he failed to notice that he had carried it across his driveway forgetting the free access for his car. However he wasn't unduly concerned by the situation as he knew the nurse would be forced to oblige otherwise the patients would be left untended. Once Annie began the taxi service the weather was always too bad or he was too busy to get down to removing the track and releasing his car from its enforced idleness. He was a crafty operator.

Annie gathered he took his train all over the country and always donned his train driver's cap for the journeys. Of course he never got further than the privet hedge surrounding his scrubby garden and often broke down in front of the garage doors. That ensured that the taxi service continued and she soon grew used to her twice daily excursions.

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Mr Toth grumbled from his sick bed upstairs, fraught at the locum's lack of professionalism. Annie could not protect him from the knowledge of Mr Everskill's truancy for she had to borrow his car from him. Notwithstanding she had instructions to attend Mr Toth at his bedside every lunch time to update him on the work progress.

On one visit Mrs Toth was wandering about bitterly complaining about 'The Wind'. It was a strange remark as when Annie glanced out of the window the day was calm and still. It soon transpired that Mrs Toth was complaining about her own wind. Flatulence. Annie deduced from the ongoing conversation that the poor woman was plagued by that most embarrassing emission. She walked about bemoaning her plight and asking Mr Toth his advice. What would he recommend to alleviate her distress? 'Let ze vind free. Don't bozzer vith good manners. In Arab countries zey pass ze vind and eet is enjoyed by everyone for it ees considered a happy relief'. He had a pragmatic approach to life and Annie was sure would have happily dealt with a bout of flatus in that manner. Mrs Toth however was not impressed at his solution and grumbled about the medical professions' singular ignorance on the subject, and the general view of society.

'How can I do that. We're in England. Everyone runs a mile when confronted by such an unsavoury act'. She continued her mournful dialogue on the problems of living in a civilised society. Natural functions

had been buried beneath a mountain of decorum and etiquette. She was right Annie thought as she watched Mrs Toth traipse from the room, head hung like an unstrung puppet.

Mr Toth was not really interested. It was not his problem. His problem was lack of contact with his surgery equipment and he leant an avid ear to his nurse as she related the latest escapades of his Locum.

In between Annie's bussing Mr Everskill from his job as a train driver to his occupation as a tooth wrangler, he twiddled and tweaked, playing with the patient's teeth as though he were tinkering with his locomotive engine. All the while he performed his rendering of 'Old Jud's dead and a lying in his coffin', in a lugubrious monotone.

Mr Wynniatt, an ancient Brontosaurus of a man stared with furious eyes when hearing those words, looking as though he feared being despatched through a Sweeny Todd trap door. When he arose from Mr Everskill's ministrations he growled out such abusive language that Annie thought his crank shaft had gone. He was one of the few who did not take kindly to the younger dentist's obsession with Jud in his coffin. After all the poor old man was near enough to occupying a long box and hardly needed reminding of its imminence.

Mr Everskill's tantrums ran to systematically breaking pens and pencils should they be near at hand. One day when the phone would not oblige him with a voice at the other end he slammed it down. The receiver scuttled across the desk and Annie thought the phone apparatus would break. Quietly she replaced the receiver on the cradle and tried to save a pen from him as he broke it and every other in a pot, snapping them in two. Even her explanations of their newly bought condition did not prevent his sabotage. In the end Annie rationed him with one and when he broke that she refused to provide another, telling him that he would have to supply his own. He came in the next day with his own fancy edition and curbed his destructive tendencies. But still Annie had to keep a watchful eye on him and hang her own pen from her neck.

One day Mr Pullman arrived and wriggled his little bottom into the chair with an expectant smile. Mr Everskill actually smiled at the patient which was the first time Annie had seen a light behind his eyes. Mr Pullman was in pain and an injection was administered. Half way through the initial procedure he changed his mind and decided the ache came from another tooth. Mr Everskill followed Mr Pullman's pain about the mouth never seeming to alight on the offending tooth before he was launched off to a different area. At last the various teeth had dressings placed and Mr Pullman made two more appointments.

Mr Everskill was in the best mood Annie had ever seen him in and his mouth actually puckered at the corners for a brief while. 'He's a nice chap isn't he', he opined.

'Who is?' Annie ventured wondering to whom he referred.

'Well that last patient. He's quite good looking don't you think?' Suddenly it was as though a spotlight had illuminated a problem. She knew then what his problem was. He preferred men to women. Yet it was obviously a situation that disturbed him and made him basically unhappy. What a shame that he couldn't accept himself as he was Annie thought whilst cleaning up.

Mr Pullman returned for further treatment, flirted outrageously and finally lived up to his name when he wheedled his way into Mr Everskill's bed. A love affair began and Annie was the reluctant recipient of the night time's activities. These were described in graphic detail usually whilst she was employed in eating her lunch. She could handle a female telling her of their exploits with a male but found it extremely confusing to be told of a man to man connection, especially when chewing her cheese and pickled gherkin sandwiches. Of course good manners prevented her from expressing her repugnance at the expose and she bore with the explanations as best she could.

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The day arrived when Mr Everskill departed to his train and new lover who he took on his garden trips. Mr Toth had fully recovered and presented himself in the surgery for the start of a new week. Annie was glad Mr Everskill was not needed any more for she had grown bored with all his problems and his manipulative approach to life.

The first patient sauntered into the room looking a bit apprehensive. Mr Toth, with a beaming smile, invited Miss Mistlethwaite into the chair. She lifted a warding palm before bowing her head. 'I pray', she enlightened before lapsing into the silence of divine communion.

'Vat you pray for?' Mr Toth asked, standing nonplussed with a deepening frown.

When her prayers were completed Miss Mistlethwaite explained. 'I pray that I am kept safe beneath your instruments. That your hand remains steady and that the power of the spirit guides your efforts'. Mr Toth looked up at the ceiling as though he thought he might spot the spirit approaching, then looked nonplussed when nothing materialised.

After a pause he picked up the threads again. 'No, no. I mean why you pray?' He looked a mite perturbed perhaps worrying that the spirit

might not present for the duration of the treatment. The lady looked at Mr Toth as though he were insane. ‘Well we all pray to be kept safe don’t we. I gain comfort from my prayers, don’t you?’

Mr Toth was lost for words. When the lady had gone he got to musing about religion and faith. ‘I don’t know vat I believe. I am a catolick but sink I like ze Budha vorship better. I gave up ze church ven I discovered ze lovely vomen. But I always put Catolick down on my papers’.

Yes, that figured. Mr Toth had never struck Annie as a devout man, at least not in the religious sense, only in his worship of women. But how did he reconcile catholicism with his complete lack of moral restraint reflected Annie, witness his six marriages and countless affairs. How did he get the divorces that his church presumably denied other people of that faith? There was no logic in it all.

The work routine settled down and Annie forgot Mr Everskill. That is until one day Mr Pullman bounced in and demanded to be seen. He had a bad gum infection and was given antibiotics. Mr Toth began to warn him of his sexual practices and told him to get his girl friend to seek treatment as well. She was quite likely to have caught the infection. Mr Pullman bridled and flitted out with a supercilious grin on his face. Mr Toth frowned. ‘Vat a strange man zat one’. He spat in disgust when Annie explained the situation. ‘Vat a vaste of a man. Ze vomen must get fed up being deprived of a service’. He made women sound like cars in need of a new crank shaft.

~

At about that time the weather was unseasonably hot. In fact so hot the patients dried up like the grass on the lawn. Within the first part of that heat wave when temperatures were topping ninety degrees the patients all decided, as if with one mind, to forget their appointments with the dentist. The phone became silent and they sat unoccupied, not knowing what to do.

Mr Toth finally decided he was going to spend the time sun bathing in his Bermuda shorts. He encouraged Annie to do the same. She was invited to bring her bikini. Annie decided she might just as well enjoy the Indian summer for the arena was empty and there was nothing else to clean. If she scrubbed and buffed the equipment any more it would dissolve in a pool of polish.

So the following two weeks saw her tripping across the parched lawn with only a few triangles of gingham cotton to defend her modesty. Mr

Toth complimented her on her figure but made no further advances other than offering her a deckchair.

And so they passed the time each day lolling in the garden. Only a few patients saw fit to continue with normal living, attending and contributing to the general pool of sweat in which they laboured. Annie left her bikini on and covered it with a white coat for the surgery events. Once the patient ambled out of sight she would toss the coat aside and return to her position in the garden.

It was a lovely time and she was paid for acquiring a tan. But all too soon the clouds appeared and rain drove the summer away. The end of their idyll was heralded by the patients scuttling back into life like beetles coming out of the woodwork.

~

Suddenly the phone jumped to life and a deluge of wet individuals with dripping Macintoshes congregated in the waiting room all wanting immediate attention.

Of course they did not want to be reminded that at the height of the heat they had not turned up for an appointment. Or they had cancelled five minutes before leaving Mr Toth and Annie without work, wandering about like lost souls. 'But it was too hot to come here', Mrs Mornington pleaded in excuse when Mr Toth refused to stick her crown back on. 'But you can't leave me like this. Look at the hole in my teeth. I'll have to cancel my dinner party tonight'. She burst into tears but Mr Toth was so affronted at her ignoring him when it suited her and then demanding his extempore services that her wet face failed to soften his heart. She was given an appointment a week hence and stalked out threatening that she would find another dentist.

'Yes, you do zat. I vill not accept being treated like a sing of no importance'. He shook a furious fist but the lady had gone, disappeared so fast that you might have thought the inland revenue were after her.

Then there was Mr Botskip. He too had failed an appointment and mumbled his apologies telling them that his wife had died. That was why he had forgotten his appointment. Mr Toth with a sympathetic pat to the man's back accepted the patient's excuse and filled his unsightly front tooth. Mr Botskip gratefully made his exit but almost before he had reached the end of the road his dead wife telephoned to make an appointment. Mr Toth was incensed and ran after him. Annie was afraid that a murder might be committed but thankfully her boss soon returned having lost Mr Botskip behind the fruit and vegetable stall in the local supermarket.

Then the patients on the phone wanted to be slotted in immediately and soon they were transported from idleness to conveyor belt repairs. It was like Piccadilly in the rush hour Annie thought, but gradually the pressure eased and the normal pace of working reasserted itself.

Annie escorted in Mr Moorehouse who was to have a bridge preparation. That was a difficult task and they spent the best part of two hours grinding and paralleling before the impression could be taken. Then temporary crowns were fitted.

During the procedure the telephone rang and Annie took a call from a theatre. The manager asked her if the dentist could see one of the leading actors between the matinee and evening performance. She relayed the message to Mr Toth. 'Who ees it?' he wanted to know before giving his nurse permission to book the man in. The manager told Annie who it was.

'It's Jessop Harte', she relayed. Mr Toth nodded his agreement and she fitted the actor in later that day. After, Mr Toth explained that one of the actors in that particular play was grossly overweight and he would not have agreed to see him. The thinner actor was the one Annie had booked in.

'Zat's OK. I will see him between bitings at ze end of ze day. I did not vant to see ze big vun for he vould have bent my chair if he sat in it'. Mr Toth rattled on and Annie began chewing her tongue in anticipation of the forthcoming drama. She had never met a real life celebrity so it would be a novel experience.'

'Stop doing zat vith your tongue. You look like an eed-ee-yot ven you eat yourself', Mr Toth snapped and her tongue got bitten with the shock of quelling the unconscious habit. She had to concentrate hard to keep it still for she knew her employer hated her lapsing into moronic activity when under stress.

Jessop Harte was late and Mr Toth grew restless. 'I vill lock ze door if he does not come in anozer ten minutes. Eet's time to go home'. He prowled in irritable circles and then the bell rang. Annie admitted Mr Harte who strutted into the room as though he were making a stage entrance.

The two men sniffed each others aura's when kissing the air and the actor took centre spotlight, rehearsing a eulogy on his dental state. His long span bridge had come adrift at one end and he was afraid it would fall out whilst he was telling Juliet on the balcony of his great love for her.

'Mein Gott, zis ees vun big mess', Mr Toth opined after examining the damage and Mr Harte glowered at the news. 'I sink zis is not going last, vatever I do ze whole bridge vill be lost. Ze bone has gone from round vun end. Your mouse is a disaster'.

‘What do you mean the bone’s gone? Where’s it gone?’ Jessop Harte demanded but when further elucidation began he clearly did not wish to hear the truth. He angrily commanded, like a film director, that the situation be secured for the evening performance.

Mr Toth worked hard, devising an impromptu repair that would see the actor through the evening. However he could not, he explained, be responsible if it failed in the act. The patient needed further extensive treatment. Jessop tried to block the truth from his rosy view. He dismissed the urgings to see another dentist as soon as possible with a limp wave of his hand.

The theatre manager suddenly burst onto the scene, rushing in and embracing Jessop as though he had not seen him in years. ‘Hello darling...how goes it?’

‘Oh lovely darling. Such a strange dentist’, Jessop retaliated glaring at a frustrated Mr Toth. The endearments continued, ‘Darling’ being the term that fell copiously between every other word. Mr Toth made an angry exit. The theatre manager then departed and Jessop Harte clambered from the seat. He began gushing of his stage appearances and dropping names of his co stars as if he hoped Annie might go green with envy. She had the chance to notice the stage make up and the stage wig which had not been removed for his dental treatment. He mentioned Vivien Leigh and told how he had acted with her in a film. ‘She was such a beautiful lady and so intelligent’, he enthused amid the nurse’s confusion. She had the impression that he preferred men but obviously he was taken with Vivien Leigh.

Then Annie mentioned the fee for treatment and that produced a sidetracking chatter. He stalked around the thought of payment. With a wave of an airy hand he told her to send the bill to the theatre manager. The Actor’s fund would pay. Before she could press the point he skipped from the premises like a mischievous imp.

When Mr Toth came down to turn all the lights off Annie explained that Jessop Harte had refused to pay. The theatre was where the bill should be sent.

‘Ach’, Mr Toth kicked the chair. ‘He vill never pay. He vill be gone like a puff of smoke and I vill never get ze payment’. He was right for he never did get the theatre to settle the account and regretted that he had not stayed to enforce the payment.

Just as actors dominated the picture Annie received from Mr Rickman, their technician, a lower denture that she could not place. ‘Dudley Moore’ was written on the lab docket and she racked her brain trying to match the work to their list of patients. She rang Mr Rickman. ‘Is

this work for The Dudley Moore? The real one I mean'. She wanted to know. It was confirmed that it had been sent to them by mistake and it was the great man's lower denture. Annie was surprised. It was such a cheap little unprepossessing prosthesis that did not tie in with a wealthy celebrity.

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A few days later when she was just clearing up a strange man appeared in the lobby area wanting admittance. He stood dwarfing her as he peered down with his flowery shirt slit to the navel. 'My name's Mickey Most, he explained but in such a way Annie received the impression that he thought she should have known him. She nodded not realising anything. 'My name's Mickey Most', he reiterated as she stared at the gold medallions nestling amongst his chest hair. At that she almost lost it and nearly replied, 'And my name's Donald Duck'. However she managed to repress the impulse and went in search of Mr Toth.

Once she had explained that Mickey Most wanted to see him, Mr Toth sprang to attention. 'Fetch him in. He ees a big man. Ze manager to many famous pop stars'. Annie had never heard of him but went out and ushered him into the surgery.

His crowns were the problem and he spent half an hour holding a mirror up to his face, pointing out what he considered discrepancies which were unsightly. Mr Toth fiddled and patched and then retired upstairs. Mr Most watched Annie sterilising instruments, following her peregrinations round the chair, all the while chatting about his pop star clients. When he mentioned the stars in his stable she should have looked suitably impressed. However she obviously did not give the right reaction and he asked her if she had any of their records. No she explained. 'I like opera and only have opera singers'.

'What's opera', came the answer. Annie couldn't tell whether he was being serious or sarcastic. His eyes followed her about the room as she potted round him. 'I've never met anyone like you', he admitted. Annie smiled to herself. She would imagine he had not when all the world loved pop music except strange people like her.

Chapter 12

The relative calm of the preceding weeks was shattered when Mr Toth began another tantrum just after Mrs Bottomley vacated the chair. The patient gave a gleaming smile with her new dentures and took off with them unaware of the brewing storm. Something had provoked him into his accusation. 'You haf stolen my socks'. As usual the object filched would be, to Annie, a completely useless item.

'What could I do with them, they wouldn't fit me, would they?' Annie retaliated as he glared with nostrils flaring like a furious dragon. Maybe it was full moon she speculated as she had noticed the storms seemed to occur at monthly intervals.

'How I know vhy you steal my tings? But I cannot put on my shoes ven you haf stolen my socks'.

'OK..OK...I won't get involved in an argument. Are you going to sack me? Are you giving me notice'. Annie needed to know where she stood in respect of future repercussions.

'Vat I notice. I see nozing, not even my socks vich you haf put somever'. He looked down at the nurse's feet trying to see if she was wearing them.

'No, I meant are you going to sack me. You know give me my cards?' Annie again asked him knowing that it might take any wind left out of his sails.

'Sack..sack...Who said zat. I haf said nozing about a sack. I said socks. All I ask is you give me back my socks. Zen I can vear my best pair of shoes'. Annie looked at his outstretched hand and felt like slapping it.

'I haven't got your socks. Why would I bother with them. When was the last time you had them on your feet?' She made him think hard and he then remembered.

'I had my shoes tied up on Tuesday. Let me sink. I took zem to the cobble man to fix ze heels'. Well now the truth was coming out and Annie could remember that.

'Well what happened before that? He gave serious thought to the problem. 'I remember. I took zem off to vash my feet before seeing ze cobble man. Zen I would know zat ven I take off my shoes ze smell would not turn ze room to cheese'. That recollection put him in a better frame of mind and he immediately made a phone call to the shoe mender. After searching his premises the Cobbler had found no socks lying around and

received a barrage of Hungarian oaths for his pains. Mr Toth sloped off to find another pair not at all happy at that development.

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Mr Rickman, the dental technician rang later that day and said he was coming over to ask a favour of Mr Toth.

He was invited to join them in the surgery between patients and Annie made tea. They sat in a circle sipping from their mugs with Mr Toth and Annie agog to know what the favour might be?

‘I want you to take an impression of a friend’, Mr Rickman began and squirmed in his seat. Mr Toth nodded encouragingly and waited for further enlightenment. Mr Rickman gulped a mouthful of tea. He seemed to be having trouble swallowing it.

‘Yes, vell zat would be to make a denture for your friend?’ Mr Toth was impatient to have the matter done with. ‘Zat ees right, a denture. Yes?’

‘No a beak’. Annie thought she had not heard correctly. Had the technician said a beak.

‘A beak? Vat your friend vant with a beak’. Mr Toth was as lost as Annie at that point. ‘Your friend is an entertainer, is zat right?’

‘No my friend is a Macaw, a large bird of the parrot family’. Mr Rickman stared at Mr Toth’s frozen face.

‘A vat?’ He looked as though someone had struck him round the head with a cricket bat.

‘My friend is a Macaw. A bird with a large beak. Well that was until he broke it and I thought if you’d take an impression I could make him a new beak’. Mr Toth swayed on his seat which alarmed Annie. It was enough to give anyone a funny turn she thought and was glad he soon regained his equilibrium.

‘You vant me to take an impression of your bird friend’s beak so zat you can make a new vun. A feazzered bird is zat?’ That gave Annie a jolt. Her boss knew slang expressions.

‘Yes, the bird is my companion. I’ve had old Tybalt for years but I won’t have him much longer if I don’t give him a new beak’. Mr Rickman looked appealingly at Mr Toth who just stared, robbed of speech.

Mr Rickman’s pleading tone must have woken a long dormant soft spot in Mr Toth’s heart for to Annie’s amazement he agreed.

‘Oh thank you so much. I’ll bring Tybalt along and we’ll soon sort out his problem’. Annie saw Mr Rickman out and returned to the surgery. Mr Toth was staring at the wall looking as though aliens had landed.

The moment arrived and Mr Rickman carried Tybalt in on his shoulder. It was a large Macaw beautifully coloured but when he set a baleful eye on the surgery Annie knew they were in for trouble.

First Mr Rickman tried to stand Tybalt on the seat of the chair but he was having none of that. In the end he deigned to perch on the head rest and then fixed Mr Toth with an eye that brooked no nonsense. The battle began in earnest. Tybalt could not peck for his beak was much reduced but he could flap his wings and squawk his displeasure, creating a great flurry. ‘You bugger’, he swore and then shouted, ‘Who’s a naughty boy. Naughty boy’, stabbing what was left of his beak at Mr Toth’s hovering hand. In the end Mr Rickman restrained him and Mr Toth managed to get an impression through the cursing and flapping. It was handed over to Mr Rickman.

A week later Mr Rickman brought Tybalt in for them to admire the new beak. It was a good match and the bird seemed proud to flaunt it turning his head this way and that as though he knew they wanted to see it from all angles. ‘Shut you’re beak. Shut you’re beak you bad bird’, he squawked clapping it together. Annie and Mr Toth however kept their distance as the beak looked lethal. It had been stuck on with a dental bonding agent and looked well able to give them a nasty nip.

‘Bugger off...Bugger off’, Tybalt shrieked as Mr Rickman bore him away on his shoulder. No polite thanks from that patient.

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Later that day a patient turned up who taxed Mr Toth’s expertise but after that bird nothing could be quite as difficult.

Mr Gimcrack flounced in looking like a jester from King Arthur’s court. The reason he appeared like that was soon apparent. He was a circus trapeze artist. Before they had gathered their wits a strange object was produced from a pocket. It was a mouth mould from which he hung by the teeth. The mould had been made years ago and no longer fitted. ‘Would you make a new one please?’

‘Vell I vill try but how must I do zat?’ Mr Toth clearly had no idea and the patient began to explain. Under Mr Gimcrack’s guidance a large amount of impression putty was mixed and then the patient took hold of a great ball of it and rammed it into his mouth. He ended up looking as though an egg was stuck in his gullet. ‘How vill I get zat out ven it’s set?’ Mr Toth was worried for it looked as though it was going to be a permanent fixture in the patient’s mouth.

At last it was ready to be removed and Annie was badgered into holding the patient’s head whilst Mr Toth tried to prise the lump from

between the jaws. Just when things began to look a bit dire they managed to edge it over the lower teeth. It emerged with a sudden plop.

The patient directed that the new mouth piece should be made exactly as the impression but a leather attachment was to be incorporated.

Mr Rickman was instructed accordingly and duly returned a plastic model of the inside of Mr Gimcrack's mouth complete with the attached strap embedded in it.

Mr Gimcrack bounced in at his next visit and inserted the appliance. He then tried to hang himself from the light pole to test out the strength of it.

'No, you will break my light', Mr Toth warned and Mr Gimcrack finally gave up and took his mouthpiece to the circus ring. He later rang to tell them that it was fine and he could happily hang by the teeth all day. Well Annie could have thought of better ways of spending her time.

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Mr Rickman again importuned Mr Toth. Because Tybalt's treatment had been so successful the technician decided to bring his dog to them for restoration of a gnawed canine tooth. The animal was having difficulty eating and a gold crown was considered necessary to rehabilitate the masticatory apparatus.

At that stage Mr Toth was game for the challenge and Churchill was brought into the surgery for his first appointment. He was a mighty Bull Mastiff, a slavering hundred-weight with huge feet and teeth. His lugubrious eyes patrolled round the room as he sniffed the antiseptic air. It was not an aroma he had encountered before and he was clearly curious. He pulled on his lead and circuited the skirting boards dragging his restraining owner after him. Mr Toth appeared worried at the spectacle and suggested that they try and get the dog into the chair. Would he stay in place if they managed to persuade him into it?

Well, they all three tried to entice the dog up but he steadfastly held his ground deliberately obstructing them with a furiously wagging tail. It whipped like a demented metronome and his gargantuan size prevented them from man-handling him into place. When Mr Toth tried to manoeuvre him into the chair he received a lick which slavered over his whole face. He was furious and retreated to the sink to wash himself clean with neat bleach. Churchill watched beating the air with his tail thinking it was a game. Mr Rickman and Mr Toth both tried to encourage the dog into the seat but Churchill got the wrong idea and became so excited at the prospect

of play that he shook his head and slavered all over the equipment. Annie concluded it was quite revolting.

In the end the men decided to take the impression with Churchill restrained on the floor. That was successful but strings of saliva ended up on everything.

Of course when Mr Rickman mentioned that he had a pony in need of dental treatment Mr Toth flatly refused further aid.

‘Vere would ve put a horse. It would be too big to sit in ze chair’. Annie had to admit the two men sounded ridiculous roaming their thoughts round a field but finding no way out.

Mr Rickman was despatched with alarm through the door, Mr Toth fearful that an elephant might materialise out of the technician’s menagerie. ‘I vill not do your pets teet any more’. Un-equivocally he stated pushing Churchill and Mr Rickman from the premises.

Of course Annie had to decontaminate the surgery and although it had been an interesting experiment she would not easily relish trying that routine again.

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They returned their ministrations to their human patients and Mr Farquarson tripped in with a grievance. They rarely had to deal with difficult patients but that was one unhappy individual. ‘Look at these crowns that you fitted last week. Yet, at a dinner party which the Bishop and Mayor attended, they came out in a mouthful of Guinea Fowl. The Bishop nearly had a stroke’. The patient looked properly annoyed at his remembered humiliation.

‘Vat is Ginnee Fowl. I haf never heard of zat?’ Mr Toth studied the crowns which the patient had slapped in his palm.

‘What is Guinea Fowl. It’s an exotic bird which I shot in a hunting party at the weekend. It makes a lovely meal. Soft succulent meat, very tasty. Of course my meal was ruined when the crowns ended up in a chewed mouthful which had to be discarded’. Mr Farquarson was righteously indignant at the waste of the tender meat never mind the humiliation of having to spit out the chewed morsel at the table.

‘But zees crowns haf broken. I would haf thought zat ze meat of Ginnee Fowl is soft and would not have shattered ze porcelain from ze base metal’. Mr Toth was clearly puzzled ‘Are you sure you haf not had a knock to zees teet zat might haf fractured ze porcelain?’

Mr Farquarson slid his eyes away from Mr Toth's searching look and shifted uncomfortably in the seat. He remained silent and Mr Toth set about taking impressions for new ones.

A week later they were fitted and a mollified Mr Farquarson left with the free replacements. Weeks later he came storming in again with the same crowns in his hand. 'What a useless Dentist you are', he raved throwing the crowns at Mr Toth who again looked puzzled but made no comment. New crowns were prepared and fitted. Weeks after being fitted the patient burst into their midst ranting and raving that again they had broken and come off in front of illustrious guests, this time in front of a Lord.

'Goot Lord', Mr Toth kept repeating, staring suspiciously at the chap. He had never known such a catalogue of disasters when he knew Mr Rickman's work to be excellent. 'Are you sure you haf not suffered a knock or blow to ze teet?'

'What are you driving at?'. The incensed Mr Farquarson spluttered going red in the face. Mr Toth looked as if he had rumbled the problem.

'How many times have you been hit on ze teet?' Mr Toth probed and Mr Farquarson crumpled in the seat, aghast at the penetrating insight.

'What do you mean?' The patient bluffed but he looked as though he knew the game was up and all resistance had fled. 'Alright, my wife hit me the first time over my Mistress. And the second and third times my Mistress hit me because of my wife'.

'Dear me, it seems you need lessons in how to run a wife and Mistress without bringing such punishment on yourself?' Mr Toth looked as if he might begin to educate the chap in extra curricular activities but thought better of it. He made new crowns and insisted Mr Farquarson pay for each new replacement. It was up to the patient to get his marital situation sorted out. In the event Mr Farquarson attended a few more times to have the latest blow remedied. The visits stopped when his Mistress successfully prised him from his wife and stopped beating him. What a strange way to go on Annie thought but then she knew at that stage that the world was full of such unabridged tales.

Following that Mrs Mitheridge stepped into the lime light. She was an attractive bottle blond, short and curvy and Mr Toth always flirted with her on her various visits. She arrived one day sporting a purple eye and one could guess at the 'accident' that had produced it. 'Dear, dear, vat a nasty eye. Did you valk into a lamp post?', Mr Toth joked whilst he studied her fractured teeth. They were later crowned and Mrs Mitheridge returned to the situation that produced the injuries.

Again her teeth were broken although the crowns that had been fitted remained intact. Whilst Mr Toth was working he put a probe in her mouth and fished out a hair. It curled about the end of the probe and Mr Toth raised a wicked smile as he realised that Annie had worked out what it was. A pubic hair. It was very curly and as black as such a hair could be. It had been stuck between her lower incisors.

When the lady had gone he laughed and explained. ‘Zat is not her husband’s hair. He iss a blond man and zat hair vas vun from an African man’. Mr Toth made a few lewd jokes about the lady’s probably secret lover and then forgot the incident.

Some time later Annie saw Mrs Mitheridge in a café with an African individual. Soon after Mr Mitheridge entered their domain wanting an appointment for his broken teeth. Not another household fracas Annie wondered. It seemed likely by the way the teeth had fractured. It was a common occurrence but they had to keep silent and adhere to the patient confidentiality rules. Not even when a Mr Ponsonby came to pump them about his wife’s possible adultery would they reveal the existence of a lover that Mrs Ponsonby had denied existed but they had treated. Annie was always afraid that she might book them all in at the same time and thus cause embarrassment to the parties concerned. Hence she took great pains to ensure that spaced appointments separated the miscreants in the marital merry-go-round.

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Of course when one patient descended with battered front teeth it started a fashion and they flocked to the surgery with tooth fragments clutched in grubby palms.

Miss Kneebone landed on the front door ‘Welcome’ mat just as Mr Toth was about to close down the proceedings for the day. ‘Oh please can you do something about these two teeth. I’ve just broken them. My boyfriend and I were larking about and I broke them on the bathroom door knob’. She was an attractive young woman who easily melted Mr Toth’s normally resistant heart.

Annie ushered her in and the process of resurrecting the teeth began. She had a purple shiner on her eye and Mr Toth raised wondering eyebrows at it. ‘Zat must have been some lark you vas hafing’. He then proceeded to screw a post into the canal of her tooth.

The next morning Mrs Haybittle tottered in looking the worst for wear. She had four front teeth broken at gum level. ‘My, vat happened to

you. You look as zo you haf been in a riot'. A black eye kept her in line with the trend but the poor lady remained mute regarding her plight.

After Mr Toth had inserted posts and replaced the cleaned out crowns Mrs Haybittle sagged by the desk whilst paying her bill. 'It was my husband you know. He landed me a smacker in the mouth last night when he came home drunk'. She confessed in a whispered aside and Annie made the obligatory sympathetic noises. There seemed to be an awful lot of husbands and wives bashing each other. What an indictment for the married or cohabitive state she thought as she watched the dejected lady drag herself out.

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During that session Mr Toths' daughter arrived to have her scaling. She was married to an English Diplomat who's mother, as earlier explained, had been briefly married to Mr Toth and who still resided in the topmost regions of his house.

His son-in-law, Mr Chamberlain was a pompous individual so far up himself that he felt he did not need oxygen like mortal men. He never let anyone forget his lofty position in life and had affairs with a string of the German Au-Pairs who were all willing to prostitute themselves for an extra helping of trifle at meal times.

Mrs Chamberlain or Zsa Zsa - as she was affectionately dubbed by Mr Toth when her real name was an unpronounceable corruption of Zuzzanah – solicited Annie into befriending the damsels of Dresden who descended into her household with monotonous regularity. The young English girl was allotted the task of teaching them English and could often be found wandering the hallways of the Chamberlain residence trying to locate her German charges. They, in the meantime, no doubt were engaged under the Chamberlain's four-poster blankets. Annie soon learned to ignore the unexpurgated activities and loyally did her bit to expand the vocabulary of those nubile girls whilst hypocritically maintaining her innocent face when confronted by Zsa Zsa's queries as to where was her husband? Annie's eyes stayed unreadably wide at those moments for she knew exactly where Helga, Dorte or Danuta could be found. The girls were singularly loathe to apply their minds to mastering the diorisms of English when the Lord of the Manor was eager to educate them in the niceties of the boudoir.

On that particular day Mrs Chamberlain, as Annie always respectfully called her, arrived for her scaling with a young man in attendance. Annie immediately thought he might be the weapon of

retaliation used to get back at her husband's philandering. The nurse stood silently surveying the handsome visitor before Mr Toth proudly introduced him. 'Zis ees Count Von Ribbentrop'.

The tall, black-haired, blue-eyed nobleman took her hand, bowed his head over it and executed a sharp click of the heels. She nearly laughed into his armorial embossed waistcoat buttons. It was as much as she could do to keep a straight face during the introduction. Mr Toth and his daughter later inveigled her into driving the Count to the Festival Hall to get some tickets for a concert. Mr Toth supplied the car and Annie chauffeured the young man. During the trip she sabotaged her chances of being a guest at the concert by informing Count Von Ribbentrop that he was an outdated anachronism. 'Aristocrats are obsolete in England. They have no status in the general scheme of things'. He threw Annie a furious look, making clear that no invitations were going to be tendered in her direction.

In the event the Count vanished soon enough from the Chamberlain household but the Au Pairs still appeared in cyclical rotation. And of course Mr Chamberlain continued seducing them and Annie was around to pacify should a silly heart get broken. Mr Chamberlain, she knew, was never going to supplant his wife with one of them.

In the midst of her visits to Zsa's Zsa's diplomatic corps Annie was recruited into taking the current Au Pair on trips to show her the sights of London. Annie was most friendly with Helga and it was decided that she would take her to Soho. Annie thought at the time it was a strange choice but when she mused on it she realised that Mr Chamberlain had engineered the venue.

Off they went on buses and trains, two young, exuberant and Annie assumed maidens let loose on the streets of the Capital. From Oxford Circus they roamed into the byways and back alleys of Soho. Soon they were lost and stopped in a doorway to study a road map of the area.

It was getting dark and they moved further under the stone archway of a building where a dim light fell on the spread of the map's pages. Almost immediately a taloned finger dug into Annie's shoulder.

'Eer, gerroff my patch. You're pu-in my customers off'. Annie swivelled her head and stared into the face of an angry female. 'Now move orf. Gerrou of eer. It's my doorway and you're blocking my clients parf'. She jabbed an irate talon again, attempting to drive the girls away. Emboldened by the presence of a friend Annie retaliated.

'It's a free highway. We're as entitled as anyone to stand on this bit of pavement. We'll move when we're ready'. That did not go down too well and the garishly made up woman flapped furious lashes. The mascara was so thick she dislodged a few clumps which stuck to her red-patched

cheeks. Under-worked and over wrought. Not a good combination for an unemployed lady of the night.

She stood glowering beneath her red light which was at that moment casting its rosy glow onto the road map. If looks could kill Annie thought they should have been struck down but as it was they deliberately lingered, ignoring her furious mutterings. Why would they put off her customers Annie wondered. She did not need help, she was frightful enough to repel the entire male population.

Whilst they studied the road map under the venal eyes of that woman Mr Chamberlain suddenly appeared as though by magic. He led them away like two damsels rescued by a Knight in armour. Yet Annie received the impression that the meeting was not by chance but design. Helga walked too close to him along Wardour Street, she flirted too assiduously and hung too hungrily on his every word. Annie felt like a gooseberry. Of course they soon made an excuse to go off together and she was left to traipse home alone. Not one word would she say of the meeting and Helga never offered any insight into their doings that day.

Annie never told Mr Toth of the goings on in his daughter's life for she thought if he knew he might try and murder Mr Chamberlain. In his eyes Zsa Zsa was beyond criticism, if any fault was to be apportioned it would have been her husband's.

Chapter 13

Mr Toth had quite a few service personnel patients. One day Captain Mainwaring marched into place and creaked into the chair. Mr Toth began to explain what might be wrong with his tooth all the while staring at an xray. 'What's that', the snooty officer shouted failing to follow the words. 'Look you'll have to shout. When I went for my yearly medical the doctor told me I had Gunorrsea'. Mr Toth stepped backwards looking apprehensive that he might catch it.

'Gunerrsea. You mean Gonorrhoea, ve vill haf to put zat on your record card for I must be careful to not pass it to any ozer patient'. Captain Mainwaring frowned and strained his ears to the discussion.

'Don't be a fool man. You can't catch that like you can an infection'. The explanation was given as though he was putting an insubordinate sapper in his place.

'Vell, in my manoowell you can. Eet's a nasty disease'. The Captain cupped his hand round his ear, completely perplexed.

'Now be sensible. How can anyone catch Gunorrsea. I got that from firing cannons in the war. Yes...at Dunkirk I was firing bombs and machine guns from the bomb bays of planes. The noise ruined my inner ear'. At that point he began rambling about the war, the trenches and bully beef. Annie decided that it sounded inedible from what he had described. Mr Toth shut him up.

'You said you had Gonorrhoea, not Gunner's ear. Vat vas I supposed to sink'. Captain Mainwaring gawped at them when he heard the diagnosis correctly.

'Come, come man. How would I have got Gonorrhoea? That's out of the question'. The captain was disgusted that anyone would think he might have contracted a disease that in his view would not dare infect a person of his superior standing.

Mr Toth muttered, 'You vood get eet like any vun else', at the Captains deaf ear and luckily he appeared not to hear. Annie was glad when his treatment was over for he was ever a tetchy, irascible patient who was always right.

Wing Commander Felix was another force's individual although a more likeable character. He always waddled in looking as though he'd spent his life riding horses and it had made him bandy. Yet from what he used to tell them a horse never entered his service life. Spit Fires were his thing. At each visit he elaborated on his experiences in the 'Battle of

Britain' and his legs had been done in with the enemies bullets. He had bits of shrapnel scattered all over his body and that part of the story was true. The bits of metal still lodged in his face for ever caused Mr Toth a problem when he was xrayed. Annie heard time after time the routine of his day. Up in the morning at the crack of dawn, breakfast an egg, lunch kippers garnished with butter. In the evening a glass of sherry joined him in front of the television. Every time he attended they were regaled with that story. All the while he was rambling his bony fingers would pluck at his red braces for he always took off his jacket and waistcoat. The red braces made Annie suspicious. They were too flamboyant for the lonely Wing Commander.

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At about that time Mr Toth had a few hiccoughs with his old equipment. First the compressor air line burst. Annie thought she had been shot when a sharp bang like gun fire went off behind a thin partition where the compressor was housed. The retort was so sudden it jerked Mr Toth's hand and the drill slipped cutting the patient's tongue.

'Ach..mein Gott. Eet iss chopped. Ze tongue is now like ze snakes'. Blood welled up in Mrs Wicherley's mouth and Annie worked hard with the sucker, siphoning her life away. 'No. Stop zat. She needs her blood. Sqveeze eet vith a piece of gauze'. Annie cast the sucker to the floor and grabbed a towel. That staunched the flow whilst Mr Toth brought out his embroidery kit from the cabinet drawer. After threading the needle he set about stitching the poor lady's tongue. Annie was amazed at how remarkably sanguine the lady behaved about the whole incident and waved away Mr Toth's abject apologies.

She escorted the lady out, her stitched tongue making her speak as though she had a gob stopper in her mouth. Mr Toth next turned his attention to the blown pipe on the compressor. 'Ach eet gives me a stitch in ze bombom ven somsing goes wrong vith the equipment. Call Mr Bogit. Get him to come and fix eet'.

Annie rang Mr Bogit and expressed their need of his expertise. He was a laid back individual who glued and stuck various bits of equipment which nearly always immediately fell apart. Mr Toth would then do a dance of fury and the repair would be effected properly when sufficient annoyance had been demonstrated.

On one visit Mr Bogit had to fix the high-speed drill. He wandered about the surgery muttering incantations over it but magic did not work. 'I

know. I could fix this with a packet of three. I haven't any. Have you any lying around?

'A packet of three. A packet of three what? Annie stared mystified at the engineer.

'You know. A packet of three'.

'Look if you tell me what you want three of I'll see if there's any in the cupboards'.

Mr Bogit looked amazed at the young girl. She clearly had no idea what he was talking about. 'A packet of three. You know - Durex. You know condoms'.

Annie looked disgusted. 'We haven't any such things here'.

'Well would you go to the chemist for me and get some?'

Annie go to a chemist for such items! Perish the thought. She flatly refused to get Mr Bogit any form of contraceptive. With a lazy shrug he hauled himself off the floor and wandered off to buy some. Soon he returned and drew out a condom. Annie didn't know where to put her face when he flashed it about before cutting it to the required shape. Soon he had sheathed the unit to its former glory and Mr Toth had shoed him away.

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They continued and called in Mr Goodman. He was a pleasant individual and received the drilling with complete calmness. That was until the arm of the bracket table broke and everything fell into his lap. That was not too bad as no damage this time was done to the patient. However Mr Toth was livid for he suspected Mr Bogit of having sabotaged the arm with the intent of effecting repairs to earn more money. Again Annie summoned the repair man and he was soon standing in the surgery peering at the broken arm.

'Vat am I to do', Mr Toth agonised wringing his hands at the situation. Come on. Sink man. Sink. Ve haf vork to do'. Mr Bogit stood for a long time picking at a pimple on his head dredging the bottom of his brain. When Annie thought he had dozed off he suddenly jerked into activity. 'I know. I'll take the arm off and attach the instruments to the light pole'. That sounded a brilliant solution and soon the bracket table and arm had been disconnected. The drills were then suspended from the pole above the patient and they worked very well.

The only problem was they ruined the ladies beehives. When they climbed into the chair the trailing cables tangled in their hair. But Mr Toth

had no time to worry about such trivial inconveniences when he had a living to earn and patients lined up waiting to be dealt with.

The trouble was Miss Waverley did not see it in that light when the drill caught in her hair. Annie extricated it but the bouffant style collapsed sideways looking like melting candyfloss. The patient was understandably upset and gave Mr Toth a piece of her mind. In the end he paid for the cost of a new hairdo and she left slightly mollified.

The next patient to be compromised was Mr De Lullington. Not only did the hanging ensemble take the smoothness out of his gelled hair it actually removed the whole caboodle from his head. He sank into the chair and stared up at his toupee which dangled in front of his eyes. He was so embarrassed that he leapt up, grabbed his hair piece and plonked it on his bald head. Then he made a run for the door and slammed it behind him. He later telephoned to express his distress and Mr Toth agreed to pay for some toupee glue for him. Only then could Mr De Lullington be enticed back to complete his treatment.

The interim solution to the broken arm of the unit had cost Mr Toth in financial settlements and he fumed at Mr Bogit who apparently had once been a nuclear scientist. How he ended up in dental equipment repairs was a mystery to Annie. If his expertise in the atom bomb field bore any relation to his abilities in repairing dental equipment one would worry about the fate of the human race.

After a week of picking his pimple Mr Bogit found a secondhand arm on a dump and jubilantly bought it along. He managed to integrate it with their unit and Annie admitted, apart from the two tone colour scheme it worked as well as the old one. They were then back to functioning on all cylinders until the high speed drill seized. Mr Toth launched it across the room and kicked the base of the chair with a wild foot. That provoked a howl of pain as he gyrated round the room on one leg holding his stubbed toe. Mr Bogit hurtled to the scene, after Annie's desperate phone call, with a replacement hand-piece and they continued working in a fraught silence.

Of course when things were going badly invariably the patients tripped in bright and breezy. 'Lovely day, isn't it? Look out of the window. The sun is glorious', They would cheer, having no idea that Annie and Mr Toth had not lifted their heads from down in the mouth and that is exactly how they felt. Sunny or raining it was all the same when you were always immersed in a black hole. 'Open vider. Eet's like the black hole of Calcutta in zere', Mr Toth would remonstrate and what went on beyond the window was outside their focussed world. They would get more and more irate as the patients trooped in with jolly comments and happy smiles when they

felt like wringing their necks. But of course the mood invariably lightened as the session progressed.

Things were going well when Mr Fosdike entered the room. He was a tardy individual. Whatever he did was always executed at a pace slower than a tortoise. First the top coat was removed and then the little woolly cardigan. In his shirt sleeves he obviously felt better able to cope with the ordeal ahead.

Mr Toth soon had his fingers fiddling in the mouth. He was in the throes of making a post crown and had at the previous visit placed a temporary post crown. Having decided on his course of action he prepared to remove the temporary post crown ready to insert the permanent one made by Mr Rickman. With forceps gripping the temporary Mr Toth began pulling the post, gently rotating it in the direction to undo it.

Annie blinked and in that instant of blindness the whole root must have been pulled from the socket, for there it was taking an excursion into the air. It happened so quickly she had not seen it emerge. Her eyes leapt about from one place to the other not knowing in that shocked moment what was to happen next. She kept them wracked open and glued them on the bloody root protruding from the end of the forceps. Before Annie allowed herself another blink Mr Toth rammed the tooth back into the socket.

‘Vell I’m sorry but I cannot fit your permanent crown. Ze post vill not come out’. Annie stared at poor Mr Fosdike wondering if he had felt any pain when the whole root instead of the post came out. He lay seeming unaware of the drama that had just been played out beneath his walrus moustache. Mr Toth mopped the blood and settled the root back in its bed. Mr Fosdike was then helped into his garments and encouraged out to do his shopping. ‘Ze temporary crown in zhere vill do just as vell as ze permanent vun. Go carefully on it for ze moment. I see you again next week’.

Annie remained speechless for a while amazed that the elderly chap still had his tooth in light of its accidental removal. Mr Fosdike ambled in a week later and again like a tortoise laboriously removed his various layers of knitted lagging. Mr Toth examined the root and crown expressing his satisfaction with the situation. The patient left oblivious to the fact that his tooth had made an illicit foray into the day and been returned to its proper bed. ‘Why did it come out like that?’ Annie wanted to know.

‘Ah vell it iss to do vith collagen. Ven you are old ze collagen becomes brittle and can easily be broken. Ven you are young it vont happen like zat so easily. Ze collagen iss how you say in Eenglish, knacked’. Eet vos vorn out und I broke ze fibres. But eet vill grow back

again. Ze root vill stay zere qvite vell'. He explained further the structure of collagen and Annie was fascinated. He was right. Mr Fosdike did not lose his tooth as she had feared he might. Instead the root remained in place and the patient was none the wiser.

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A strange man entered the surgery looking as furtive as a Russian spy. He refused to give his name and seemed suspicious that they should ask. 'I cannot treat you on ze health service for I must produce a proper identity of ze patient'. Mr Toth explained and awaited enlightenment. None was forthcoming.

'I'll have private treatment then'. Mr X informed them and immediately demanded full mouth xrays. These were taken and developed then he insisted that they label each one and arrange them in correct order. After that he commanded an extraction. The second upper right premolar was 'tickling and whispering'. Well that sounded lunatic for a start Annie thought but Mr Toth set to the task without demure. Anything to get the chap out of their midst.

The injection was given and the extraction embarked on. Mr Toth was having a bad tooth day for her gripped the wrong tooth with the forceps. Before Annie could signal his mistake the tooth was extracted. He stared at it and the pfennig dropped.

That root was stuffed back into the socket before anyone realised what had happened. The correct tooth was then extracted and Mr X sent on his quisling way. Within two days he was back again complaining of a whispering tickle in the tooth that had been reinserted. In this instance it had not welded itself to the fibres in the socket. Mr Toth extracted it for the second time and the patient was despatched.

Annie worried for the rest of the day in case another error in judgement occurred bearing in mind the clustering law of statistics. Thank goodness no more wrong teeth were filled or extracted and she began to relax.

But of course given the nature of the job the clustering effect reasserted itself and a third patient wandered in complaining of pain. Mr Toth followed her symptoms round the mouth until finally the questionable area was located on the lower right side. He gave the local injection and extracted the last molar under Miss Winkworth's guidance. The next day she returned with no alleviation of symptoms and Mr Toth extracted the next tooth in the row at her behest.

Throughout the week she attended each day complaining of pain and the remaining teeth on that side were systematically extracted. When Mr Toth had deprived her of five teeth he became suspicious as it looked as though he might have to work his way round the mouth until she ended up with all lower teeth missing.

‘I cannot take out anymore of ze teet for my instrument is incompetent’, he informed the lady. Incompetent! Incontinent. Annie knew the bracket table pipes were leaking and dripped onto the patients’. He was using that excuse to wriggle out of the baffling pain that wafted from one place to the next. Incontinent Annie felt sure he meant but she would not correct him for she knew too well that he would stubbornly stand his ground.

‘Incompetent’, Miss Winkworth queried looking about the room as though seeking an explanation from an unseen source. Mr Toth gave no further elucidation and explained he could do no more.

The lady was referred to the local hospital as Mr Toth could not work out the problem. Maybe she was enamoured of him and was manipulating the situation to her own ends. Women patients had been known to go to great lengths to get the hands of the dentist roaming round their anatomy. Or she was doing it to get drugs for the pain? Whatever the reason Mr Toth was sufficiently perturbed to want another opinion. She left that day and Annie was instructed not to give her any more appointments.

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Things settled after that into a more normal pattern. A slightly dizzy female clattered into their midst. She was all frothing hair and stiletto heels. Mr Toth flirted with her and she took it as an invitation. Mrs Shalimar clearly was taken with her dentist but they thought no more about it until later.

On her next visit Mrs Shalimar teetered in carrying a single red rose in her hopeful hand. It was offered to Mr Toth who graciously accepted it and her treatment was advanced but not finished. At the following visit the lady brought two sonnets which she had apparently written about her love. These were pressed on Mr Toth who was beginning to show signs of concern at the patient’s behaviour.

The next day Mrs Shalimar entered bearing a whole rose bush which she insisted Mr Toth accept. A box of chocolates and a bottle of aftershave were then spirited from the lady’s bag and pressed into his over-laden arms. Annie had to take the tree into the garden, dig a hole for it and plant it whilst the lady watched from the front door. The situation was getting silly

but she could see it was difficult for Mr Toth to extricate himself without becoming rude. Decorum and a mannerly approach were not going to deter this lady.

A day later another rose bush, more aftershave and sonnets were left outside the main door to the house. Mr Toth showed fear. Annie had never believed he could be fearful of a woman but he was terrified every time he stepped over the threshold of his house. 'I am a victim stalked. She will overflow me and I'll be svamped. Vat vill I do?' He soon contacted the Family Practitioner's Committee as it then was, demanding protection. Mrs Fazakerly the lady who took his complaint showed no understanding of the situation. 'Are you sure you are not misinterpreting the gifts?' She was determined to be difficult.

'I am not misbehaving in my idea of zis voman's head. She is a danger to me. She creeps me on ze phone und I cannot get her away from me. Ze poems are humidifying und I vant help. I vill send you copies of ze poems zen you vill see'.

He sent copies of Mrs Shalimar's sonnets and Mrs Fazakerly conceded that the allusions to Mr Toth's cupid-sculpted lips and bronzed high cheek-boned face was unacceptable within the patient/practitioner relationship. Mrs Fazakerly then wrote to the patient and forbade any further contact with Mr Toth. Mrs Shalimar tried once more to gain access to her idol. She soon grew tired of crouching behind her rose bush in the garden and disappeared like a morning mist, uprooting her gift and taking it with her.

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Mr Toth was relieved at her defection and invited Annie to an opera to celebrate his release from the harassing patient. His wife did not like opera and refused to attend and he hated going to such events without a pretty woman on his arm. Not that Annie considered herself in that light but he obviously found her presentable enough to accompany him.

Annie was a reluctant guest at the Covent Garden staging of 'Der Rosencavalier', when the memory of the Wigmore Hall concert remained. Still she thought snoring would not strike twice in the same conditions and agreed to the treat.

The opera house was humming with enthusiasts and patrons. They settled themselves in their booked seats and Annie prepared to enjoy her first ever opera.

The curtain rose and the singers lead them through the acts as the story unfolded. Annie was just getting into the swing of it when a snore

brought her down from the heights of passion to the earthly reality of more basic human emissions. She turned angrily to Mr Toth, raising her elbow ready for the awakening dig. He was staring raptly at the stage, wide awake and clearly not the culprit. Another snore rumbled and she swivelled her head to discover a middle aged man slumped in the seat on the other side. He was oblivious to his position and continued, his stentorian snores filling in when the singers stilled in moments of repose. Annie did not feel able to dig a stranger in the ribs and so had to tolerate him as did the other increasingly restless audience. Thank goodness his wife prodded him awake and dragged him from the auditorium before the surrounding opera goers could take their revenge.

Mr Toth was enthusiastically regaling a patient with the wonders of opera during the following afternoon when he had a funny turn. Annie didn't know quite what had happened but he absconded from the surgery in the middle of a patient's treatment. She shot after him alarmed at his peremptory exit which was out of character.

He sat upstairs grey faced and clearly unwell. 'Ring Potsky and see if he can come round to fit ze lady's crown. She cannot be left flashing a fang at her husband. Ve vould not know vat it might do to their marryarge'. Annie left him to the tender mercies of his wife and called 'Potsky' to enlist his help. He was a decent chap and immediately dropped his glass of whisky and sped to the patient's aid.

Mr Toth was visited by the doctor and appointments were made for various checks on his heart. It was decided that a coronary artery bypass was needed and he made arrangements to enter hospital. In the meantime a locum was again engaged.

Chapter 14

Mr Toth met the locum provided by the agency. Wat Wisdom was an engaging individual, teddy bear-like with a mop of honey hair. He was offered the post and accepted after Annie had given him a guided tour of the surgery. Mr Toth asked her opinion before employing him and she thought Mr Wisdom seemed a reliable and solid man who would do well holding the fort whilst my employer was absent.

Esme and Annie waved from the front door as Mr Toth was driven off by his wife to the hospital. He smiled wanly and gave a limp wave before disappearing round the corner. That sad image became etched in Annie's mind as she prepared to welcome Wat Wisdom. She scrubbed every shelf and surface in her wish to present the best features of her second home. Mr Toth doted on his kingdom and she too had learned to love its space capsule persona.

Mr Wisdom arrived punctually and settled himself into Mr Toth's customary position. The patients seemed genuinely concerned to hear of their dentist's pending operation and asked that Annie pass on their best wishes. Mrs Gumble and Mr De'ath were remarkably cheerful in their outlook. 'Me old dad ad that hoperation and ee died', they independently informed her with portentous undertones that started her worrying. Where would she be if Mr Toth died? Then she felt guilty at her selfish thought as she began escorting successive patients through the door. Mr Wisdom barely listened to the prattle as he hunched over them and accustomed himself to the vagaries of Mr Toth's loyal clan.

During the first day Annie learned that 'Wat' as he insisted she call him was really called Walter. He hated the name with its rhyming with alter and apparently had avoided being caught before one. That undesirable state was not for him.

It slowly emerged between patients and sometimes when he was poised over their gaping mouths that he was into spiritual matters in a big way. 'I often go and meditate with my Guru', he told a goggle eyed Miss Bretherton. She took in every word and nodded her head, that being the only contribution she could make to the conversation. Wat had rammed so many cotton wool rolls in her mouth the patient looked near to suffocating. She seemed oblivious to her plight when her eyes were glued to Wat's glassy stare. He continued rambling about retreats, Budism, Holy Cows and levitating. Miss Bretherton kept forgetting to breath. Her mind was obviously reeling ahead, retreating with Wat Wisdom into a diaphanous

world of romance. She was completely smitten. When she left she smiled flirtatiously at him with her mouth drooping to the floor on one side.

Mr Vanderpump nodded vigorously in support of having a personal Guru. The two got locked in Spiritual combat between the patient's copious spits, comparing the lotus position with the third plain of transcendence. The third eye came in somewhere but Annie was lost in the midst of an ether that was unknown to her. Mr Vanderpump admitted he enjoyed his visits in which the esoteric thinking of the great Gurus was analysed. The only problem was she couldn't understand the spiritual outlook. Did they seek to contact spirits, reach heaven on earth or prepare themselves for the hereafter?

All the patients were lectured on the benefits of a Guru and being in a vulnerable position none dared to disagree. They all promised to find one at the first opportunity as they stumbled from the chair. Wat's ego was smoothed and he progressed happily through the days.

Mr Aspinal begged to disagree with the gentle Wat which upset him greatly. The patient was a pragmatic man, unimaginative and literal in his approach to the world. He expected the dentist to get on with his work and not waste time with idle chatter. 'Get on man. I haven't time to listen to your blathering'.

Wat went limp like a wilting flower, hurt to the stigma. He repressed the need to spread his gospel but began to slow his movements. The treatment proceeded at a snails pace and Mr Aspinal became progressively fraught when he realised the treatment was so behind he had missed an important business meeting. Wat smiled as he bade the patient goodbye, pleased at the punishment he had exacted. He had evened the score and felt appeased at the outcome.

The next patient posed a problem for Wat that he could not resolve. Mzz Brundle as she insisted on being called presented a bridge that had fallen out. 'Please put it back', she pleaded after Mr Wisdom had inspected her mouth and found no roots visible for its retention.

'But...I don't know...where are they?' he muttered searching long and hard. 'I can't put it back on nothing, can I?' Mzz Brundle was not at all happy.

'The post retainers must be there. They were present yesterday morning when it fell out. Xray me to find them'. She was in a fighting mood and Wat shrank from her theatrical overplaying of the situation. An Xray was taken and the two roots that had held the bridge were so decayed they had crumbled. They were buried under the gum which had immediately grown over them. The situation was beyond remedy.

Mzz Brundle was furious. She directed her vituperation at the dentist as though it was his fault. He was justifiably stricken at her harsh voice and his inability to be of positive help. But Wat found his tongue and spoke wise words. 'It's not the end of the world you know. The mouth can be restored with dentures. It's not as though you have been given a death sentence. You are well and fit. We should all be grateful in those circumstances'. He propounded on his theory that everyone should count their blessings. And he was right Annie thought. Mzz Brundle calmed a little and submitted to having an impression taken for a denture. After she had departed Wat carried on, talking about energy forces, good and bad energy and the need to bend your will to its superior power. He was a very deep man and Annie listened hoping to learn something new from his lessons.

In the midst of his rambling discourses on Buddhism and the benefits of loving all living things Wat received a phone call from his current girl friend. She was still in India from where he had recently returned. They had met on a Meditate with the Guru. Wat had returned due to financial considerations and the girl had stayed on in India. She was however on her way back and he was getting more excited as the moment of their reunion drew nearer. However when she was expected back she failed to materialise. He was beside himself with worry and spent ages on the phone trying to track her down. After a day of nail biting stress he finally located her. She was in Wigan. 'A Chinese laundry', he snapped slamming down the receiver. What is she playing at Annie wondered. Why Wigan?

Wat was not forthcoming on the state of play and spent the week finding and losing her as she absconded to Milton Keynes and later to Eastbourne. Miles away from him. Poor Wat, Annie sympathised, seemed like a man trying to catch and impale a butterfly on a board. The lady was not to be caught.

His love of all living things suffered a setback and he positively hated her as he trailed her on the phone or by letter. Annie could never understand the set up but received the impression that the lady was trying to put as much distance between herself and her boyfriend. That is if he was her boyfriend? Maybe he just thought they had a connection yet she was oblivious to his view of their future together.

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In the midst of this excitement Annie paid her first visit to Mr Toth since his operation. He had survived it in spite of the patient's

prognostications and she gathered he had four new bits of plumbing in his heart. She entered the ward and found him sitting up in bed looking remarkably well considering what he had just gone through.

‘How iss everysing. Are ze patients OK and ze locum?’ Annie sat down and began updating him. She explained that Wat was into Eastern mysticism and that he had just been on a part time course.

‘A part time course. Vat in. Somesing interesting I hope, like root canal treatments or ze crowning of tipsy teet’. He wriggled his toes under the bed sheets in anticipation of the forthcoming dental update. Annie had to disillusion him.

‘He was levitating with his Guru’. Mr Toth’s toes became still.

‘Levitating? How he do zat?’ He sat forwards as much agog for the gossip as you could be with new plumbing in your system.

‘Meditating I mean, though with him it amounts to the same thing’. Yes Annie thought. He had a habit of wandering about as though on another astral plain.

‘Ach...vat a vaste of time. Vat iss happening to my profession. Zey are getting trifled in ze brain’. He slumped back as though the effort had exhausted his energy. Before he settled for a little nap he mumbled something that sounded suspiciously rude in Hungarian. He finished off with ‘Gott Ze Mighty’, before lapsing into sleep. Annie crept away leaving him to his tooth filled dreams.

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Wat started off well. He seemed steady and dependable. Yet when his ‘girlfriend’ finally eloped to John-O-Groats with a Chinese laundry man his character suffered a major change. Without warning he decided to alter all the session times. He was going, he said, to a group meditation meeting with his Guru. The patients had to be reorganised to fit in with the meditation times. Just at the moment when Annie had successfully reorganised a weeks appointments to mornings only the Guru decamped to a travelling circus. She then had to reschedule the patients again before Wat too absconded after the ‘Big Top’.

Each time he arrived back from his meetings Wat wandered around like someone in a dream and took to meditating on the sucker tip. He would stare at it and go off into a trance. He always managed to bring himself half way back from that other dimension but never seemed to be completely anchored to the moment.

In the ensuing weeks Annie had to arrange and rearrange many sessions and she began to hate the Guru. He was from her point of view an

erratic man who seemed to leap from place to place like a demented grasshopper. And of course wherever the Guru hopped Wat leapt after him. It was all very disconcerting.

Then one day Mr Winterbottom's gum was peeled back. Wat had commenced the operation with his mind focussed on the extraction of the tooth. All was going well until he diverted his tools onto another track and sliced the gum before stripping it from the jaw bone. It hung flapping in the vortex created by the sucker which was alarming. Annie was afraid that it might completely disappear into the sewage system, leaving the patient short on his soft tissue. To her relief no such emergency arose. After the roots had been winkled out the gum was stitched back in place. What a performance, Annie concluded, when the same result could have been achieved without raising a flap.

After that little extempore operation Wat had to deal with a very difficult customer. Mrs Hickey wobbled in and before reaching the chair she removed several sets of dentures from a plastic bag. 'I want three pairs of new teef', she announced spitting her requirements out. Wat flinched against the spray created frowning into the lady's furrowed brow with an equally etched furrow on his own.

'What do you mean. Three pairs! You only need one good set'. He looked as baffled as Annie felt.

'No I don't. I need one pair for poetry reading and singing, one pair for the shops and one pair for church on Sunday'. Mrs Hickey stared up at Wat who was standing like a statue, trying to get his head round the pronouncement.

'What do you mean. Why on earth do you feel you need more than one set?'

'Well the performing set must be wiv small teef so I can hannunciate proper in poetry reading and stage parts. The weekday set must av bigger teef to make me look younger. For the men ya know? The Sunday pair must be the best quality teef. I must look my best for God. I'll pay private for em if I ave to'. She waited for the dawning understanding in Wat's eyes. Nothing dawned except a look of horror as he contemplated the nightmare road ahead.

And so it turned out to be. Mrs Hickey was an exacting patient. She was the sort who sucked every gram of professional juice out of the dentist. Trying to fashion sets of teeth in accordance with some nebulous image the patient contains in their head is an almost impossible task. The stage and poetry reading set made Mrs Hickey look as though she had no teeth but she could speak her own patois in them. The weekday set for the men had, as she instructed, large teeth and made her look like she had borrowed a

friends set. And what could one say of the Sunday set. They looked like the worst example of false teeth that could be produced by the profession. They stretched like a white screen across the patient's mouth but Mrs Hickey considered she looked her very best when seated in her pew before God. How her mind had conjured such a picture of herself was beyond comprehension. The only thing that was right was she was willing to pay through the nose for the sets and that mollified Wat.

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Annie paid another visit to Mr Toth. He was up and lurching about like Frankenstein's monster. He lumbered about with his chest stuck out and his legs stiff looking like a stuffed bear who was afraid the seam of his stitching would burst. Yet he braved several little sorties up the ward. After the third in which Annie acted as a crutch whilst he leaned on her, rocking from side to side with his legs seized as though rusty, for he was afraid to bend them. She soon worked out the reason for his enthusiasm. The nurses' station was in the area which he repeatedly made for. He was drawn like a piece of iron filing to a magnet, pulled towards the group of pretty white dressed girls. They loved him even given his age and bantered good naturedly with him, making gentle fun. He needed to walk and with nubile females in all corners of the ward he was galvanised into motion, making a beeline for one or other of them. The girls goaded him into activity for they wordlessly invited male attention and in that situation he could not leave them alone. He was in his element. The only trouble that loomed was would he keep his hands off their bottoms?

After his lumber up the ward he climbed back into bed and prepared for the latest surgery update. What could Annie say? She didn't want to cause him undue concern when to aid his recovery he needed to be carefree. With this in mind she began to fabricate stories of Wat's endeavours, assiduously avoiding recounting Mr Winterbottom's gum flap that was nearly detached by the sucker. She also avoided mentioning Wat's erratic attendance with his Guru being given precedence over the operating lists. Annie painted an idyllic picture, not too embellished in a rosy cloud as that might have made her boss feel redundant. The view was garnished just enough to make an edible concoction of events that could be easily digested. That would sustain the patient through the healing process.

'How iss zat voman. Vat her name. Mrs Faudle-Phillips? Iss she still playing silly buggers vith her appointments?' He obviously had not forgotten that lady and the completely cavalier way she treated her appointments. She would invariably arrive a day early or a day late, in the

afternoon instead of the morning and vice versa. It was a waste of time giving her an appointment card for whatever was written on it she disregarded, choosing to appear like a magician's rabbit from a hat when the mood took her. She drove Mr Toth mad but Wat had not really paid much attention to her tricks for he was consumed with meditating on the sucker in between his forays into the mouth.

'Tell me, did Mrs Ginsberg's bridge fit ven zat fount of Visdom man saw her?' Mr Toth leaned forwards, keen to hear about the outcome of the treatment he initiated. Annie had to think hard on that question for she did not want to tell him the real story, he might have blown a gasket in his new plumbing.

Wat had tried to fit Mrs Ginsberg's bridge but it was too tight and would not seat down. He decided they were going to take new impressions when the lady suddenly announced she did not want a bridge coloured to match her teeth. 'I want a floral pattern. Little pink flowers and green leaves. It should look like Busy Lizzies in the garden'.

Annie could not believe what she had heard and Wat paled at the problems ahead. 'I'll do a painting for you. Then you can copy it onto the bridge'. Mrs Ginsberg was trying to be helpful but that didn't make Wat look less stricken. He had never encountered such an odd request from a patient. A new bridge was made and the flowers and foliage as painted by the patient incorporated into the porcelain outer covering. When Wat seated it in place it looked ridiculous. When the patient smiled into a hand mirror she more than approved the effect. 'Oh I love it. It's brilliant', she gushed, excited at the lovely pinks and greens crawling round her teeth at one side.

'Is it?'. Wat scratched his head in bewilderment. He seemed uneasy at cementing it. What would happen if she grew to hate it in the future? Mrs Ginsberg brushed that possibility aside, assuring him that she would always love it.

'Well there's no accounting for taste', he opined before cementing it permanently in place. Annie couldn't imagine where that lady had dreamt up such an idea. They would never know but soon after a young man attended who wanted a diamond stud placed on the front surface of every tooth. Wat refused to undertake such a procedure and ran off to the Guru to meditate on the oddities of the public.

Annie did not dare tell Mr Toth yet of those cases for he would get upset so she skirted round and told him the bridge had been successfully fitted. She could advise him later of the flowers and leaves, when his plumbing was more securely joined at the U bends.

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In the surgery life was becoming fraught with Wat absconding at the crack of a tooth. After his dealings with Mr Shufflewick he failed to arrive one morning with no call to explain his absence. Annie told the patients he was on his way and hid from them, hoping to get some message. Nothing happened and in the end Mr Theodorakakos poked his head round the door determined to get some action. 'I only want a denture addition. The impression was taken last week and I must take it with me. I'm on my way to the airport. I'm going abroad'. He stood in a threatening posture angry at the possibility that he might miss his plane.

Annie could do nothing but commit a felony and trespass on ground which the law forbade. She fitted his addition herself and prayed that he caught his plane. The quicker he was out of the country the better.

Wat had been upset with Mr Shufflewick who was an elderly patient. Although of an advanced age he still had a full set of his own teeth. Of course he was very conscious of his unusual status and demanded a lot of his dentist. Well the problem began when Mr Shufflewick potted in with a broken bridge. 'I know Mr Toth has a welding machine and I want this welded'. Wat stared with a completely blank expression on his face. He knew nothing of intra-oral welding and thought the patient was confused with dementia.

'There's no such procedure available. The only way to deal with a broken bridge is to remove it and make a new one'.

Mr Shufflewick knew better. 'Yes there is a way of mending this bridge. Mr Toth could do it. He's a brilliant man. What do they teach you in dental school these days. Nothing of use it seems'. Wat blanched at the derogatory comments and refused to have anything further to do with the old man. Annie had to send Mr Shufflewick away with the promise she would let him know when Mr Toth was back at work. He could then have the bridge welded if Mr Toth considered it appropriate when he had seen the damage. The poor man wandered up the path shaking his head at the hopeless training of modern dentists.

Wat sat huddled in a ball, very upset at the patient's attitude. 'What's he talking about. There's no way that bridge can be repaired other than by removing it and making a new one. What on earth is the welding he was talking about. He must have got his facts muddled with something he'd seen from a DIY programme'. Wat sat with the event going in circles in his mind. He would hate Annie when she told him that Mr Toth had himself invented the welding process and it worked. She later explained and showed him the welding machine in the corner of the surgery. Poor Wat. It

was beyond belief and later he made arrangements to go and meditate with his Guru.

When he returned, delayed by vibrations that showed him the light, he announced he had found his Karma.

‘I didn’t know you’d lost it’, Annie answered. He had said nothing of losing anything and she wondered when he had mislaid it?

‘Oh, you are stupid. My Karma is my future, my fate, Kismet. And I now know what the Gods have mapped out for me’. He stared at the sucker tip, glazed eyed and on another planet. Well Annie had to admit she thought he had lost more than his marbles. What future other than teeth had that mad Guru convinced him of.

‘My future lies in The Nat West bank. That is where I am planning to work when my contract ends’. The news left Annie wanting to laugh. What on earth was he going to do in a bank. She suspected he knew nothing of a Tellers trade and he had not the ruthless streak needed to be a Bank Manager. How would he ever say ‘No I can’t give you a loan’, to a tearful and pleading young woman.

In the event he walked in one morning and said he was going to Australia to sit in a field and Meditate with the Guru. What about the Banking job that was his Karma Annie asked? She was advised that his Karma had changed. It resided on the other side of the world. ‘I thought Australia had vast open plains not fields. They don’t sound right for Australia’ she responded. It sounded to Annie as if the Guru was looking for salvation and did not know where to find it. He obviously thought Australia was far enough away from his creditors. So far away he could not be subpoenaed to court. That suited his purpose but of course Wat was like a jumping bean rushing after him and that did not help Annie in running the surgery in a professional manner.

Chapter 15

Things began to degenerate fast from that point on. Wat would sometimes turn up for work and other times absent himself for several days at a time. Annie could do little about it. Patients were contacted and appointments re-arranged amid the patients' vociferous complaints and she feared that Wat was driving them away from the practice.

When he was present and enthusing about his latest retreat or meditating session the patients were happy. Even when he preached a sermon to a Jehovah's Witness, Mrs Redman in moments of respite from the drill managed to advance the doctrine of her group. The Witnesses were the chosen people she maintained. Wat smiled sanctimoniously at her and began to expound his views on spiritual matters to her open mouth. She could make no comment but remedied the omission when she was allowed up for rinses. Quotations from the Bible were thrown into a melting pot of the Guru's mystic meanderings. Neither Wat nor Mrs Redman would concede points but each one remained happily entrenched in their own domain. No ill feeling was generated for which Annie was grateful. She didn't want to have to act as referee between two bigoted individuals.

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In the meantime Mr Toth was making good progress and was able to walk freely about the ward. He still moved a little stiffly but was gaining confidence in his reconstituted heart. He put it to good use for whenever Annie visited he could invariably be found at the nurses' station, flirting with one or other of the young staff. 'Ahh zey are vonderful. I love zere Bomboms ven zey valk. So nice to watch and zay make me better qvicker zan if I vas at home'. He was soon to be discharged and he was not too happy about that. He preferred being in the hospital where he could be cosseted by an army of nubile females.

But for the moment he reluctantly applied his mind to matters financially advantageous to him. 'How iss zat Vise man getting on?'

What could Annie say. She did not want to disillusion him yet. Not until his plumbing had completely welded at the joints. She didn't want him to get a stuck ball cock. So she continued with the deception glossing over the frequently absent dentist and telling him the patients could not wait to have him back. That bit at least was nearer the truth.

‘We had a strange chap in the other day. A man who thought he knew more about dentistry than Mr Wisdom’, Annie began when her boss was briefly settled on the end of his bed. Waiting to launch himself at some passing nurse no doubt she thought but he listened enough to get the picture.

‘Vell if you tell me most patients would know more zan zat visdom fool. He sounds vith his Guru like an eccentuated ee-dee-yot. Vhy he not get some sense from somevere and stop Guruing vith fairies’. Annie supposed that was one way of putting it but where she wondered would Wat get sense. He seemed to have lost that along with his Karma.

She continued with her story determined to get it in before he eloped with a passing nurse. ‘Anyway this patient started to tell Mr Wisdom what to do with his instruments. Mr Wisdom was so angry he handed the mirror and drill to the patient and told him to do his own filling. The patient got frightened then and backed out of the surgery. He went before we could do anything about his pain’. Mr Toth was all for that approach.

‘I too vould haf given ze tools to ze patient. Best vay. Some of zem are so cocky zey sink ve know nozing of ze job ven zey know better. I remember a patient telling me zat dentists are just carpenters. I give him my chisel and told him to put a dovetail lock in his own toot. Zat shut him up.’ He was getting fretful that a nurse had so far failed to walk past his bed and he was getting thirsty. Or so he said as he rang the bell for attention. A perky little nurse waltzed up the ward and brought a wide beam to Annie’s employers face. He never seemed to smile quite as scintillatingly for her.

His order was taken for the drink then the nurse wheeled about. She sashayed down the ward with her buttocks rolling like porpoises under her tight uniform. Mr Toth’s eyes were riveted on those tumbling mounds and nothing Annie said could divert his attention from the display. After the nurse had brought his orange juice and he had gawped at her disappearing rump he managed to focus on the remnants of her tales, the other tail still occupying his mind.

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Annie still kept from him the major problem of what to do with Wat? He was beyond containing in a surgery when he thought his Karma lay in Australia. She thought his Karma entrapped him in practice but obviously the Guru was winning in the fight to snatch him from her clutches. Not that Annie liked him in an amorous way but she needed him wielding the drill behind the chair. He was of more use to her in the capacity of dentist than

as an embryonic mystic. But such was the pull of the East he brought in mystic magazines and devoured them between patients when he realised the nurse was indifferent to his preaching.

When a Mr Pennicat had attended he too had been subjected to a sermon, not on the mount but on the fount of the water that squirted from the drill. Whilst it was busy in his mouth Wat kept up a commentary on the third eye. What that eye did Annie never learned but she gathered they all had one. It was just a question of finding it like Karma and using its mystic qualities. She listened and doubted if she would ever find hers. How could he believe in such a strange concept?

Mr Pennicat however liked the sound of meditation and tried it during his root canal treatment. He soon began to snore and when Wat had finished the procedure they shook Mr Pennicat. There was no response except an extra loud snort. He continued in the trance state and after shaking, shouting and kicking him Wat became concerned that the patient might never wake up. In the end Wat tipped the chair so far back that the patient was nearly sleeping on his head. The idea, Annie gathered, was to get more blood to Mr Pennicat's brain and it worked. He woke and slid onto the floor, his bald head feeling the cold of the lino. That brought him round and they despatched him quickly before he could mesmerise himself again.

Of course when they saw him at his next appointment they asked him to refrain from hypnotising himself for he may stay permanently asleep like Rip Van Winkle. But of course the patient was so impressed with the technique that he went off into a trance as soon as the drill touched the tooth. The treatment was completed and they tipped Mr Pennicat on his head to wake him. On that occasion it did not work and they worked for a few minutes trying to rouse him from his noisy slumbers. In the end Wat filled a mouth wash glass with cold water and threw it over the patient. That jerked him awake and he sidled away looking as though he was pixilated.

Hypnosis became the flavour of the moment and Wat decided to try that technique on patients who were especially nervous. Mrs Brainbridge settled down to the idea and Wat began swinging a medallion in front of the patient's eyes, intoning at the same time a word in a sonorous voice. The lady remained like a bright-eyed bird whilst Wat's head fell on his chest as he hypnotised himself. He tried it once more on a suggestible woman repeating a 'Mantra' and sent himself into a deep sleep which Annie had trouble waking him from. In the end he accepted that it was better for him to use the local anaesthetic on the patients. That way he could at least stay awake for their treatment.

After that Wat disappeared to a retreat for two days, leaving the nurse to sort out the patients in whichever way she saw fit. At that stage she had caved in under their demands and trespassed into that no man's land which was forbidden. Try telling the patients of your criminal activities when they were faced with delay in their denture fittings or the continuance of unremitting pain. Annie knew what to do and she allowed herself to be bullied into those jobs that she felt able to accomplish with the minimum of damage to the sundry mouths which opened willingly and encouraged her amateur fumbblings.

Mrs Marlthorpe came tottering in looking the worse for nerves. 'I'm terrified of the dentist, you will be gentle with me, won't you?'

'Well you're OK. I'm not actually a dentist. My boss is recovering from heart surgery and I'm the only one here'. Before Annie could abdicate from her foisted position the patient patted her arm.

'Never mind dear. You look like a dentist to me and I want this terrible pain sorted out. Don't mind me. The pain is already getting better. One look at your sweet face has eased it. I'm sure you'll do very well'. She wriggled into the seat expecting help. 'Oh don't let me down. I've psyched myself up for this visit and I'm ready now for you to give me the needle'.

Annie drew the line at that but stuck a cotton wool ball soaked in a medicated solution into the hole in the lady's tooth which would numb her pain. She then placed a temporary filling. The patient was delighted. The only problem Annie found with her successes was that those patients went away and recommended her to their friends and neighbours. They rang and all wanted to see the lady dentist. That made the problem worse than it was already.

Annie found the denture work easy and happily proceeded with Bites and Try Ins letting the patients guide her in their requirements. She even fitted a few dentures, occasionally adjusting them if they did not quite seat or pressed on areas of the mouth. She enjoyed the work and it slowly penetrated her mind that she might be good at it. At that point her interest was wetted and Annie began to entertain the idea of training and qualifying as a dentist.

She did not tell Wat when he returned from his retreat for his mind was full of events closer to his heart. He seemed a much happier man. A wonderful woman featured in his recollections though Annie could not judge whether she was enamoured of him or not. But he was really stuck on her and before he had got reacquainted with the dental equipment he was off, back to the retreat to see if the woman was lurking in the bushes in the grounds of the monastery. He soon returned to the fold for she was

nowhere to be found. No mention was made of her again and he got stuck on the sucker tip instead, mooning at it between patients. He would sit miserably as though seeking a revelation which never came.

Whilst in this mood Mrs Urquart came tottering into the room, supported by various members of her family. The surgery was cramped with six people in it but she was adamant that her relatives stayed for her treatment. Wat diagnosed the problem and gave her an injection. Her elderly sister paled when it was inserted but otherwise made no comment. Soon Wat had the patient's head pinioned in the crook of his elbow and the forceps gripping the tooth. Mrs Urquart's sister went a shade paler and fell like timber to the floor. Wat ignored the unconscious lady and extracted the tooth whilst the nurse fanned the swooned woman where she lay. She soon gave a moan and scrambled up, embarrassed no doubt at her unseemly collapse. Mrs Urquart was then supported out and Annie made a cup of tea.

The next day Wat came in and made no reference to meditating, Gurus, Transcendence or love in the monastery. That was in itself an unusual event and Annie felt uneasy at the development. Instead of beginning his sermon the moment his bottom found the revolving stool, he slumped on its edge with an expression that looked like the end of the world had come. 'What's up?' She didn't really want to open his flood gate but good manners dictated that she at least enquire and show some concern.

'I've got tooth ache!'. Annie was as surprised as if he had said he was pregnant. A dentist with toothache. How could that be? She thought they were immune to such distractions for she had never encountered one before. His face looked as distressed as any other victim of pain and Annie briefly felt sorry for him. Her sympathetic feelings did not last long for she had suffered too much at the moments of his truancy and knew that he would all too soon revert to type.

'Well we've got a full book to get through so you're going to have to go to a dentist'.

'I am a dentist', needlessly he pointed out. That was true but he was a dentist with toothache. How was he going to deal with that? Annie stood looking at him feeling useless as he sat, a woeful figure with his hand cupping his cheek.

'I know you're a dentist but you need to find one to sort out your tooth'. Her logical approach made no impact on him and he sat reflecting on his predicament. He even forgot to stare at the sucker tip but instead took up a vanity mirror, pulled his cheek back and peered at the reflection of a back molar. Annie tried to get a look as well but could not see past his white hairy tongue.

He suddenly jumped to his feet. 'I know. You can give me an injection'.

'I'll do no such thing. As you're the dentist patient something is bound to go wrong. I'm not qualified to do such a procedure. Go and find a dentist and get it seen to'. What Annie said went right over his head. He grabbed a syringe, loaded it and directed it into his upper gum. When he considered he was numb enough he dropped into the chair and handed the drill to Annie.

'I've just told you. I'm not touching your teeth. I have never drilled a tooth and wouldn't know what to do'. He began arguing with her and in the end the pathetic looks cast from behind the vanity mirror softened her resolve. Annie buckled and although refusing to actually wield the drill she guided it in and kept up a running commentary much as an air traffic controller trying to talk down a novice pilot lost in the clouds. Somehow between them he managed to drill a hole, expose the nerve of his tooth and Annie placed the dressing as a concession to him. He was mightily pleased with their joint efforts and patted her arm in gratitude.

'I didn't do anything', Annie modestly played down her part as she brought in the next patient. Mr Blenkinsop had no idea what had just transpired but was agog when Wat found he felt relieved enough to begin a sermon on some vague ancient Buddhist rites. That kept the patient's mind off his extraction which proved to be more difficult than anticipated. Wat however was back on form and soon sectioned the tooth in bits and elevated each root but this time he refrained from peeling the whole of the gum back.

But of course Annie's part in his dental do it himself was not over. When out of pain he tried to make her do a root treatment which is no easy feat even when you have been trained to its intricacies. Annie balked and demurred, but she was no match for Wat's manipulative cajoling when he had set his mind on something. Finally she caved in and started poking reamers into the root canals of his teeth. A few times Annie poked them into the gum. He winced and with each 'ouch' she learned where not to direct them. Soon under his tutelage she had located three canals and reamed them. After that he managed to spin the root filling material into the tooth himself and instructed the nurse to fill it. That was relatively easy and she placed amalgam as she had seen many dentists do over a goodly period of time. Her resolve to study dentistry was strengthened by her forays into its practical aspects. But Annie said nothing to Wat for she knew he would warn her off. He hated the job and was unlikely to encourage anyone into it.

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In a relatively happier frame of mind they continued in the same manner as before. That is with Annie standing in when Wat absconded to his transcendental life.

She visited Mr Toth but still dare not tell him of the state of play in his surgery. When Annie entered the ward she found a crowd of people round his bed. What was going on she wondered as she advanced towards his bed? No one took any notice of her when she leaned between two individual's shoulders and peered at the head board. Mr Toth was holding court as though King of the castle and not only that. He had got a betting game going with dice. Gambling in the hospital confines. Would the authorities allow that without putting up objections. How had he obtained the dice. No doubt Mrs Toth for Annie certainly had not encouraged his predilection for cards and dice. She knew he often played in the evenings after she had gone home. Friends would be entertained by him and his wife fighting over the Ante. But a hospital setting was hardly the right venue for gambling and with real money as Annie could see when the money was piled on the counterpane.

She made her presence known and Mr Toth, hurriedly and guiltily, scraped his winnings into one hand. The game was aborted and the other residents of the ward drifted back to their respective beds. 'I can see you're quite recovered'. Annie perched on the bed edge and wanted to laugh at his chastened look.

'How's ze vork. Iss zat Fount of Visdom still behaving? Have ze patients been payink zere money?' That was more like it Annie thought. Back to the real essentials of living.

She related the latest happenings and expounded on a patient who had tried to get away without parting with a penny. Mr Pennycuik always arrived in a Rolls Royce and parked it out the front. Often his dear little white haired mother sat patiently waiting for his release from the surgery. When in the chair he told Wat exactly what to do. He sounded so knowledgeable that at first Annie thought he was a dentist. He was not but such was his range of facts, related in an authoritative voice, that he blinded both Wat and the nurse to his true motives. Wat made a temporary bridge and proceeded with permanent replacements without once getting paid for his efforts.

Annie became increasingly suspicious at the excuses made when she asked for payment. Mr Pennycuik invariably managed to side step the issue. He had forgotten his cheque book. He had rushed out of the house without cash. His credit card had been stolen. His mother was senile and

she had lost his wallet containing his money source. Each attempt to extract payment for the work to date met with a charming smile and abject apologies. However each time he attended Mr Pennycuik directed the proceedings and Wat followed the patient's pointing finger. He was completely under the spell of the man and Annie wondered if he had hypnotised Wat.

Annie became so concerned at the climbing outstanding bill that she tried to find out Mr Pennycuik's situation from his mother. She strolled out to his Rolls and engaged the old lady in desultory conversation. Such a sweet mother. She primped her innocent white hair with fingers that were weighed down with knuckle duster sized diamonds.

'Lovely car isn't it'. Annie enthused, 'Must have cost a fortune?' The lady blithely side-stepped that opening remark and chatted about her lovely country mansion with its palatial gardens. Annie gathered she held garden fetes with Marquees on the front field. She loved plants and had three gardeners to look after the estate. Also she loved going on the yacht to Monaco and St Tropez. Annie listened and built a picture in her mind of a very expensive life style. There should be no problem with the payment so why were they not receiving remuneration for the work Wat had almost completed.

Annie wandered back in and rang the General Dental Council. Somewhere in the back of her mind she had read in one of Mr Toth's dental journals that a man was going the rounds of surgeries getting expensive work done and never paying. She spoke to a young woman who soon told Annie that Mr Pennycuik sounded like the confidence trickster who had got away with thousands of pounds worth of bridges without ever parting with a farthing. He had various aliases and had been to one other dentist using the name by which they knew him.

Wat laboured hard over Mr Pennycuik's teeth and at the end of that session fitted a temporary bridge the permanent to be fitted in a few weeks time. After the rogue had driven off in his probably unpaid for car Annie explained to Wat the dilemma they were in.

Wat could not really have cared less for he received payment for his efforts from the agency who had been paid by Mr Toth. It made no difference whether the patients paid or not.

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When Annie next visited Mr Toth he was strong enough to be told the worse. 'Vat', he exploded when she told him of her trouble in keeping Wat in the surgery when he kept decamping to the Guru. 'A stupid man. I

knew he was no fount of wisdom. He ees an ee-dee-yot. I vill get my money back. I vill wring his neck. I vill report him to the GDC. I vill keel him'. He was furious but on reflection he decided to swallow the situation although it gave him indigestion. As regards Mr Pennycuik and the non payment of fees he insisted that Annie defer the patient's appointment until his return. She promised to alter the date set for the bridge fit which was booked in with Wat who she had to advise. He was not happy with the changed situation but was mainly disappointed that he would not see the final result of his labours. Annie sympathised but she said to him a promise is a promise and her loyalty lay with Mr Toth.

The days flew by with Wat continuing in his erratic meetings with the Guru and meditating on the sucker tip whenever a moment of respite presented. Mr Toth was due home any day and he was looking forward to coming back into the fold. His wife made heroic preparations for his homecoming and even got her wind under control.

Annie paid one more visit to Mr Toth and found him behind the screens in the ward but sounding full of excitement. She waited a moment and from between the folds of the curtains an attractive brunette woman doctor emerged looking slightly flustered. A nurse materialised and drew back the screen. Mr Toth sat smiling broadly. What had he been doing with that doctor?

'Oh she iss lovely. I vill miss her hands on my chest ven she listens to my heart beat. It goes faster ven she iss leaning into me so I don't know how she get a proper measurement. And my little Ambassador loves her'. I'll bet it does Annie thought smiling at him when he was like a little boy who had been given a present. He was going to miss the doctor, he said, and all the 'big bom-bomed' ladies. Yes Annie expected he would but she pointed out the joys of his surgery to him and she left him looking forward to being released from the strictures of the hospital.

Chapter 16

Mr Toth arrived back and settled into his flat above. He was still a little weak and did not expect to start work for a few weeks at least. Wat went up to say hello looking nervous but all was well. Mr Toth was in such a good mood that he chose to ignore his colleague's eccentricities. He was only concerned that his patients were looked after properly.

In the surgery Annie and Wat continued on as before albeit subdued by the presence of the practice principal above them. Then a woman attended who clearly had designs on Wat. He was also smitten and made a date. They began to see each other frequently and before long he was being introduced to Scientology. She was very persuasive and Wat almost got roped into that cult. After Annie had heard what he had to say on that sects beliefs she thought he was better off staying transcendently challenged. However he strove to espouse his new girl friend's group and came in each day with his thinking curdled. In the end that lady too eloped with someone else, abandoning Wat. His Guru picked up the shattered pieces and Wat limped through the patients.

On one particularly grim day when Wat seemed completely lost in a black cloud Annie escorted in a man who seemed spectacularly normal. Mr Nethersweet would not have made you look twice at him if you passed him in the street. He was even featured, of average height and build. What you could call a beige person. He was pleasant, unassuming, quiet in his responses. A thoroughly nice individual who you would trust your family dog with.

He slipped into the chair and opened his average sized mouth as Wat hunched over it, peering into the depths. His teeth were in a terrible state but Wat began there and then to rebuild what looked like a ruined British henge.

Wat then wrote out a prescription for strong painkillers and sent the patient on his way. They gave no more thought to Mr Nethersweet until a pharmacist rang and asked Wat the quantity of the medication he had prescribed. Wat consulted the patient's record card and advised the pharmacist of what was recorded. 'If those figures are correct then your patient has falsified the prescription. There is a lot more of the drug prescribed than you state. I'll have to inform the police'.

They were mildly surprised but again forgot Mr Nethersweet in the stream of toothaches which demanded all of their attention. Mrs Greenspan

hobbled under Wat's ministering fingers with her carer wanting an extraction for her charge.

'She's a undred you know. Very old is Dolly but it's harlright cos she told me she wants the larst toof in er ead pulled and then new falsies'. Poor Dolly curled in the chair like a withered question mark, wondering no doubt what was to happen next. 'She can't ear and can't see too well so you'll ave to shout. Arfter you've pulled the toof art she'd like a denture made. The last set of false teef she ad made was in nineteen toodle oo'. Annie managed to keep a straight face and they all looked expectantly at Dolly. She wasn't saying anything but smiling revealing the gums of her worn out dentures. They were so antiquated and made of Vulcanite. That material had a rubber base impregnated with a vulcanising substance which made it stronger. However the rubber was a brick red colour and looked revolting when visible through a broad smile.

Dolly did not care and Wat set about removing her last wobbling molar and then took impressions for a new set of dentures using her old ones as trays. Those copy dentures were soon fitted and Dolly hobbled off to enjoy the last bit of her long life with nice teeth. Apparently there was another resident who had taken a fancy to Dolly. He thoroughly approved of her appearance with the new set and from what Annie heard they planned to get married. She could not work out what for at that stage of life but people being as they are seemed to forget they are not immortal.

During this time they had all but forgotten the existence of Mr Nethersweet until the police strode into the waiting room. They took a statement from Wat and showed him a photocopy of the prescription he had written. It had been changed and the quantity of painkiller increased a hundred fold. The case would go to court the police advised them for apparently Mr Nethersweet was a big drugs dealer and involved in their distribution in a big way. It was unbelievable Annie thought. He had seemed like everyone's favourite uncle.

After the police had gone she climbed the stairs to Mr Toth's flat and ate lunch with him and his wife. Esme served a wonderful Goulash and an orange sweet that put Annie in seventh heaven. Wat preferred to go out for his mid day meal. He maintained he could meditate on the HP tomato ketchup bottle and he needed that time alone to contemplate his future which he was beginning to think did not after all lie in a bank. He was not sure where his Karma was for he had lost it again. So at lunch time each day in the middle of a Burger Bar he would stare into the Ketchup bottle and seek divine guidance.

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After lunch Mr Toth sat at the window and pulled out binoculars from his side board. 'I vatch birds', he explained when Annie looked out of the window. Across the way was a terrace of houses and facing there were many windows. The thought came, more bom boms or other parts of female anatomy and he must have read her mind. 'I love ze little birds, Johnny Wren, Blue Tit, all the Tits, all of zem are lovely'. Annie must have looked askance at his transparent enthusiasm because he dismissed her looking as guilty as hell.

~

The days progressed with Wat again searching for his Karma. Why he could not just settle to the job he was trained for Annie could never work out. Then he got stuck on fishing and would go off in his free time to catch them from the sea. When he had a few he would bring them in before taking them home to eat. There was 'Bill the Brill' and 'Jake the Hake'. They were deposited outside the surgery in a small lobby area but the smell permeated through to the chair-side.

'Funny smell in ere today int there'. Mr Whiting said and Wat couldn't work that one out.

'What smell?' He put his nose in the air and sniffed. 'Can't smell anything only the garlic that you've had for lunch'. Mr Whiting gave him a sniffy look.

'I can smell fish. It's horrible in ere. Like a fish shop and I hates em'. He went to get out of the chair miffed that he was being blamed for the stink but Wat stayed him. He then dived outside and put the fish on the outside step. Of course he gave no thought to the marauding cats that lived nearby and by the end of the day the fish had gone along with the smell.

When they continued with the patients on the next day Annie hoped Wat would not bring any more fishy friends. He did and she forbade him bringing them near the surgery. She instructed him to wrap them up well in a plastic bag, leave them somewhere out of smelling range and where the local animals could not get at them. He revealed a decidedly dumb streak when he left them on top of the dustbin. The dust men arrived whilst they had their heads buried in some-ones mouth and must have thought it was rubbish. It went in the dust cart. Wat was furious.

The patients were pleased to hear of Mr Toth's progress and some brought in little presents with the entreaty that Annie give it to him to enjoy. Of course as soon as she was freed from surgery duties she would run up the stairs and present them to him.

Soon after that they had a run of patients who had shed a crown or some other restoration from their mouths. Mr Betteridge, Mrs Protheroe and Miss Anaspouse all arrived separately but each one went through the same routine. They stood by the desk and conjured from their nether regions a grubby clump of tissues and told them that somewhere buried in that clot of grey was a crown or other toothsome item.

Wat stood impatiently whilst the process of unravelling the screwed up tissues began. They usually ended up shredded whilst the item sought remained annoyingly elusive.

'I'm sure I put it in there before I came', each independently informed them only to concede on reflection that the shed item was probably in a jam jar or some such receptacle at home. Occasionally the odd patient turned up with the crown wrapped in so many layers of paper, plastic and tinsel that it reminded Annie of that game 'pass the parcel'. The time it took to work with ratty nails through those layers produced in Wat and the nurse the strong desire to snatch the tissues and scatter them to the wind.

Of course professional etiquette dictated that they restrain their baser impulse to push the patient into the chair. They always stood staring distractedly at each performance wondering how it was that people could be so uniform in their chosen method when saving bits of themselves.

Mrs Hollingsworth had the brilliant idea to place her tooth which had fallen in its entirety out of her mouth in a matchbox. She came sneaking in and drew from her nether regions the Brymay container. Before Wat or Annie could gather their senses the lady had thrust the box under Wat's startled nose. She then pushed the end with her stubby finger and it opened to reveal a tooth laid out on a bed of cotton wool. It looked like a corpse in a coffin. She wanted the impossible. The lost tooth re-implanted in the healed over socket. When Wat advised her that it was too late for such a tooth saving procedure she threw the matchbox to the floor and stamped on it.

Then a Mr Puddephat brought in a bridge which had fallen out. He had it in a pickle jar. When he finally managed to unscrew the overtight lid he removed the bridge. 'It stinks of vinegar. Could you wash it before putting it back?' The patient slapped it into Wats' palm and he took it to the sink. It was placed under the cold tap which was gushing a forceful stream of water. The bridge slipped from Wat's hand and disappeared down the plughole.

Wat turned purple and demanded a spanner to undo the U pipe. Annie banged a bucket and supplied a mole wrench and he began unscrewing the nuts. Mr Puddephat stood wringing his hands and pouring

unhelpful comments over Wat's fraught shoulders. The U pipe was released and the usual filthy remnants of instruments fell into the bucket. Rusty muck floated about but no bridge materialised. 'It must have gone down the pipe to the drains', Wat speculated and a great wail erupted from the patient.

'Oh no. You stupid fool. Now I've lost my bridge. What am I going to do?' Mr Puddephat was so distressed that he actually cried real tears which coursed down his cheeks.

'Come come man. Pull yourself together. We'll get it back. I'll call the drain people'. Wat instructed Annie to phone a drain company and at a prohibitive cost they agreed to attend and try to find the missing bridge.

Annie made Mr Puddephat a cup of tea and sat him in the waiting room. Somewhat soothed he settled himself for a long wait, gathering all the magazines round him. His mouth stayed firmly shut as various patients trickled in for their appointments. They all looked to him, hoping he would respond to their nervous coughs and attempts to draw him into conversation. They wanted to talk to anyone who might listen and understand the fears they had over the forthcoming assault on their teeth. Mr Puddephat had problems of his own and studiously avoided eye contact or moving his tight lips.

Soon the drain people arrived and began the process of dismantling the sink, opening up the pipes and drawing back all the effluvium with a powerful vacuum.

Somehow Mr Toth must have got wind (seeing as it featured prominently in his wife's life) of the situation for he appeared at the surgery door in his dressing gown. 'Vat iss goink on here. I haf not given my permission to call ze plumber'. 'Vat hass gone wrong?' He was still a bit weak but game for a fight over his territory.

Wat explained the circumstances of the lost bridge but Mr Toth was not sympathetic. 'You are an ee-dee-yot. You should haf not let it slip through your incontinent fingers. You vill haf to pay for ze plumber. I vill not'. He looked a little pale after that speech and Annie encouraged him upstairs to rest for she was concerned for his plumbing never mind the surgery plumbing. He shuffled off after casting a filthy look at Wat and she assured him that she would make sure Wat paid for the drain buster's visit.

They all laboured over the contents of the vacuum sack and at last the bridge was retrieved. The men packed up and carried off their machines whilst Wat washed the bridge again but this time with a sink trap in place. Finally a relieved looking Mr Puddephat was escorted back into the surgery and the bridge cemented in place. The patient was happy when he left and then Annie advised Wat that he had to pay the drain cleaning bill. He was

not happy but conceded in the face of her arguments that it had been his fault that the bridge had made an excursion into the sewage system.

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Later Annie made a visit upstairs to Mr Toth to see how he was. He had enjoyed a little sleep and was doing a marathon on his treadmill. ‘Has zat ee-dee-yot vise man paid for ze plumber’ he asked. She assured him that the matter had been satisfactorily resolved and Wat would reimburse him when the bill was presented.

‘I should sink so. Vat an incontinent wrangler he iss’. Annie had to agree. Incontinent in his hold on dentistry and the same when it came to mystic matters.

Mr Toth was having a whale of a time for whilst trudging on his treadmill he kept his binoculars trained on the outside garden. He saw her look. ‘I haf seen some luffly Tits. Great vuns , bearded Tits und crested Tits. Sweet zey are’. Yes in his eyes Annie cynically thought they probably were. At least the un-feathered variety that she guessed he was studying.

~

Next a very good looking man settled himself in the chair. Mr Shovelbothom was tall, well built but paradoxically gentle natured and twee. Whilst Annie kept busy sterilising instruments and tidying various pots and potions Wat and the patient exchanged ideas of interest. She could not understand the subject under discussion but heard Mr Shovelbothom bandy the word ‘Fairy’ and what sounded like ‘Omo’ so she surmised they were discussing washing powders.

Work began on the patient though half way through a procedure the phone rang and Annie had to separate Wat from the drill. Some mystical female wished to speak to him. Mr Shovelbothom sat quietly contemplating his manicured nails. Suddenly he turned his head and gave the nurse a speculative look. ‘What’s your orientation then?’

The question gave Annie a funny turn. She had no idea which way she was facing and could not position herself in relation to the poles. ‘North by North West’, she volunteered. ‘Well at least I think it is’. Annie had to admit she was uncertain without consulting a compass but considered that answer the best option. She had mentally aligned herself with the garden fence and the end wall of the building for she knew they were North facing.

‘Oh you’re a card, aren’t you?’. Mr Shovelbothom laughed though she failed to see what was funny. She was trying her best. Wat returned, completed the treatment and discharged the patient. As Mr Shovelbothom stood admiring his cheque book he asked if he could nip outside for a moment to get some air. ‘I’ve come over all queer’, he said before briefly absenting himself from the transaction. Annie thought he had permanently decamped leaving an outstanding bill. However she was glad to have her suspicions proved wrong when he returned and paid. ‘I’m feeling better now. I often come over queer. I don’t know why’.

Later Annie asked Wat which way she was orientated if standing by the chair facing the wall. He looked as though he had lost the plot. When she explained the patient’s strange question Wat actually laughed. He rumbled his normally creaseless face. ‘He didn’t mean that orientation. He was asking you whether you preferred men or women. In other words your sexual orientation. He’s a gay or homosexual and no doubt wondered what you were’. Annie was struck dumb. What a fool they must think her, very embarrassing. Wat actually laughed out loud which was a precedent. He had never done that before.

Annie was still mulling on that faux pass when Mrs Bingly staggered into the place carrying a huge bird cage. In the cage a great black bird perched and eyed the surroundings. The nurse must have looked askance for the lady apologised. ‘I’ve brought Everard here today. I hope you don’t mind but he’s very traumatised. We had a robbery last week and he’s still so edgy I can’t leave him alone. He’ll be no bother. I’ll put him here in the corner whilst I’m having treatment’. Annie did not argue with the patient for she had the manner of someone who brooked no opposition.

Wat briefly acknowledged the creature and asked, ‘What kind of bird is it?’

‘It’s a Minah bird. Poor thing has been suffering post traumatic stress disorder since the break in’. Everard perched with his head shrunk into himself, tortoise-like, almost as though he was ashamed.

Wat hunched over the lady’s mouth and searched for the cracked tooth. Soon he was engrossed in a cavity that looked like the Dartford tunnel. Whilst his head was buried in Mrs Bingly’s mouth a voice spoke. ‘Stop that you blighter. Stop it I say’. The words hung in the baffled stillness which followed. Was that someone in the waiting room? Who had spoken?

Whoever had spoken then stayed silent and Wat resumed his drilling exercise. ‘Shut up. Stop that noise. You’re driving me mad’. Wat and Annie as one lifted their heads and stared at the bird. He appeared to have suddenly come alive and stared at them with a terrible eye. Again when

their heads were buried in the patient's mouth that voice gave vent to a stream of invective. 'You f- -k- -g c - w. You c- -t'. An eerie laugh rounded off that volley. Work was again suspended as they looked at the bird like a teacher might look at a badly behaved child. He was standing proud, wicked and raven-like when he knew the stir he had caused. Wat completed Mrs Bingly's treatment whilst Everard poured forth a stream of oaths some of them quite obscene. Where had he learned such language?

Mrs Bingly paid her bill whilst her pet goaded her. 'You filthy creature. Dirty boy'. His admonishing eye was fixed on her. 'Shut your beak you sh-t- p-t. Shut it. Bad bird'. Mrs Bingly apologised as she took hold of the cage.

'I'm so sorry. He's a terribly rude bird. I don't know where he learned it all'.

She took Everard to the door and innocently smiled.

'Whe're we going. Whe're we going. Shut that door, p- -s off, you bad bird'. He carried on bullying his mistress as they disappeared. Even at the gate he could be heard. 'You b - - -d- -g fool. Shut the door. Do as you're told'. He had found his voice again. He most certainly was not stressed then although that constant talking would drive anyone mad Annie thought. What a character.

~

When Wat next played truant Mr Toth was sufficiently recovered to take up his place, albeit briefly, at the chair-side. Wat had telephoned 'in a bit of a state', as he explained. He was stuck in a belfry with the Guru and other followers. The Guru had decided to meditate nearer heaven. Whatever he was in search of beckoned from that more elevated position. The next port of transcendence was to be Cleopatra's needle. In the meantime he was imprisoned in a belfry with many resident bats. Bats in the Belfry just about summed up the situation. It all smacked of fruit-cakes to Annie and in the event she could not keep Wat's absence from Mr Toth. He discarded his sick-bed clothes and shuffled downstairs to attend to his patients.

'Vat iss wrong with zat unwise fool. He iss chasing after rainbends. He should conjugate on vorking for his daily pumpernickel, not look for ghosts in ze bells'. He was justifiably annoyed at his colleague's feckless behaviour but quietly handled his instruments, overjoyed at being back in his surgery.

Mr and Mrs Abernethy were delighted to see him sitting on the revolving stool and thrust forwards a great bouquet of flowers in

appreciation of his return. 'Vat I do for you today?' He had difficulty reading Wat's notes for the writing was illegible. In the end he confined himself to simple procedures and left the more taxing work to his younger colleague. That was if he was ever released from the Belfry and did not get stuck up Cleopatra's needle.

Wat returned and Annie explained that Mr Toth was almost ready to take up the reins again. He stared and pushed her to sort out a monetary matter. Mr Toth would not be moved. He refused to do an adjustment in Wat's favour to a fee and she had to carry the bad news to Wat. He was furious and argued with her when it was not her place to become involved. They went round the surgery in circles trying to iron out the problem but nothing Annie said would change Wat's view. 'Do you know what. You've got a bee in your bonnet'. He stopped in front of her and glared down into her narrowed eyes.

'And do you know what. You've got a hornet's nest in yours' Annie responded. That shut him up and he gathered his personal belongings together. With his knapsack over his shoulder he turned, gave her a last look that made her think he had tasted vinegar, and stalked out into the rain.

Mr Toth was not worried. He was ready and well enough to work again. The doctor examined him and expressed the view that the sooner he got back to his holy sanctum the better. The Tits in the garden had flown. Maybe they had spied his covert surveillance and drawn the curtains on the screening.

Chapter 17

Mr Toth was warmly welcomed back by the patients. They came tripping in with gifts, rare wines, chocolates, jam preserves, even a giant Salami was tendered. He was delighted and accepted the offerings as though receiving the rightful dues for a King among men.

Mrs Wainwright staggered in and propped a wooden window frame against the wall. Mr Toth very nearly took possession, thinking it was another present. 'That's me kitchen window. Got to get it glazed. I'll do that after you've done with me teeth'. He fell back trying to hide his annoyance at the failed presentation beneath a bluster of inanities.

'Vat ze matter vith you zen?' That opening gambit brought tears to the lady's eyes.

'It's me usband. Ee's playing over the garden wall'. Big tears trickled down her prune-like cheeks. She tried to stem the flow, dabbing at them with a shredded tissue.

'Vat he play over ze garden fence? Iss zere better apples over zere?'

'Apples. Ee don't like apples. Ee likes melons, ee does'. Mrs Wainwright gave a great sniff and withered Mr Toth with a look that cast doubt on his sanity. Ee's playin away. You know? Avin is cake and eatin it'. She sat woefully staring into space.

'Cake..how zey grow cake over ze vall? Anyvay I sink pumpernickel iss better zan cake. He should try zat. Pumpernickel has more body and iss tasty. Cake has no subsidence. Anyvay I sought you said he likes Melon. Melon and cake iss a strange mingle'. The patient was not impressed at Mr Toth's ignorance.

'Your teet. Vat iss wrong vith zem?' he peered into her gaping mouth like a mechanic searching under a car bonnet for a cracked big end. 'Iss zat painful ven I tap eet'. He knocked the tooth with the end of his probe. He applied the instrument with such zeal the patient shot up and Annie thought she had been launched like a rocket. The howl the lady let out left them in no doubt of the trouble and soon she had been relieved of that wretched molar. She gathered herself together, stumbled from the chair and wedged her window frame under her arm. With a tight hold on it she hauled it away.

When she had gone Mr Toth muttered as he wrote her notes. 'Svedes und melons. Cakes und svedes. Vat a funny husband she haf. Pumpernickel iss much better'. So he kept telling everyone. Personally Annie had tasted it and it was a bit like cardboard to her.

He then chivied Annie into activity and she brought in Miss Farthing. She was a funny little thing. Annie considered the word 'little' as being an understatement of her real dimensions. She was so short that Annie appeared a giant beside her, yet she herself could barely muster five foot one on a good day. Annie felt gigantic beside her and such was her pity for the poor woman that the nurse lifted her bodily up into the chair.

That did not help the situation for her head did not reach further than the top of the back support. When Mr Toth leaned over, the headrest dug into his midriff. He hung over the patient like a vulture that had just alighted on its prey. 'Ve must lift her up. How ve do zat?' He gave his nurse a look that demanded she sort out the problem. Mindful of his new plumbing she stood and cast about wildly for an idea.

'I know the telephone directories!' In those days those wonderful public aids were made like door steps, needing a winch to lift them. With three of those in place Annie thought Miss Farthing's mouth would fit into the spotlight.

It took all her strength to haul three from the bottom of a pile (why are they always at the bottom of a pile when you needed them she pondered). She swung them into the chair and they directed the lady to sit aloft. She was an amenable little woman and sat perched on them with her feet projecting over the end. Much like a pixie on a toadstool.

Mr Toth managed to gain access to her mouth and he picked and flicked, mined and shined a filling. Soon the treatment was at an end and Miss Farthing was helped towards the mouthwash. She spat out the debris as was customary and Annie lifted her down to the floor. The lady thanked the nurse and wandered away, looking like a gnome that might be more appropriately placed in a garden.

When the next patient opened his mouth Mr Toth began to enthuse over a strange anomalous structure lurking in the depths. 'Torus Palatinus' was his triumphant cry and in her curiosity Annie poked her head forwards, straining on tiptoes to get a first row view.

'Get out of my vay'. Mr Toth butted her beehive with his head, laughing at her. 'I sought I had gone blind. All I could see vas zis black bush in front of my eyes. I keek eet out of ze vay if your head come between me and ze mouse again'. Annie did not take him seriously for she had grown fascinated over the two years she had worked with him. People harboured some weird oddments in their mouths and she was keen to get a ringside look. So if she heard Mr Toth mutter about some interesting condition, artifact or anatomical landmark she forgot her place and poked her black Madam Butterfly coiffed head over the patients mouth, obscuring

Mr Toth's view. He never showed annoyance when his vision was blocked by that towering confection of hair.

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The desire to go further in her life than a dental nurse had been growing slowly in Annie. Seeded early on and burgeoning like a flower to full maturity. One day when the patients had taken themselves off elsewhere and they were at a loose end she thought finally found expression.

'You know I'd love to be a dentist'. Those words burst from Annie of their own volition. She felt almost foolish at daring to trespass on unattainable territory. It was a stupid fantasy that had grown slowly but surely.

'Well. If you really want something you don't talk about it. You go and do it!' Annie studied Mr Toth for signs of levity but he was staring at her grave faced.

'Do you really believe that you can achieve whatever you want in life?' She felt as though she was poised on the edge of a precipice.

'Yes I do. If you want something enough you will work and get it'. Those words launched Annie off the edge.

'Right then I will go and do it'. That short conversation, those few words altered the course of her life.

She went home and over tea announced to her parents that she was going to become a dentist. Her father nearly spat a mouthful of tea over her mother's Omo white tablecloth. He was as astounded as if his daughter had just announced that she was going to climb Mount Everest. 'You can't do that. You haven't got O levels or A levels'.

Annie knew nothing of those but with questioning her father explained what they were and the requirements to gain entry to university.

'I'll get them'she firmly promised. Her father looked at her not quite believing in her resolve but within days she had started on 'O' level studies. Annie did home study courses and engaged a local headmaster to tutor her in exam technique.

Within weeks she was entrenched in swatting for at the end of the tunnel was the dentist's light and she slaved on a steady path towards it. In the day time she nursed and continued learning from her everyday contact everything she could of teeth.

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On one particular day which had begun inauspiciously a lady arrived and stood in the waiting room looking like Darth Vader on a bad visor day. Star Wars came to Annie's mind which was not far off the mark. Sister Marietta, as she advised them, was wearing a nuns outfit. More to the point she had on a wimple. But it was no ordinary wimple. It was one of those contraptions that has huge wings which make anyone wearing them look as though they might take off. She wanted emergency treatment as she had toothache.

Annie went into the surgery and closed the door between it and the waiting room. Mr Toth looked relieved at being disturbed from the regretful contemplation of his bank statements and agreed to see the patient. Annie thought he was going to recant when she explained that the patient was wearing a nun's habit. When she got round to indicating the size of her wimple he was struck dumb. Not at the size but at what he thought was a part of her anatomy and the size his nurse was indicating it was. 'No, no. It's not that. It's a massive piece of headgear. A hat'.

'A hat. Vat she veer a hat for. It's not raining in here'. Annie knew that and had to explain that the particular order of nuns to which the patient presumably belonged traditionally wore that monstrous head gear. He looked amazed and then was struck with a thought. 'How I get to her teet ven she haf a pair of vings on her head'. That was, Annie had to admit, going to be the hard part.

Annie brought the nun into the surgery. She perched primly in the seat drawing her black habit about her. That was alright but the wimple was another matter. It stuck out on all sides and her head would not touch but hovered above the headrest. Mr Toth strode in and looked mildly bewildered when he saw the apparition in his chair. He plied his instruments as near to her mouth as he could manage but it was like trying to get his arms about a vulture that did not wish to be captured. 'You vill haf to take zat sing off. I cannot see your mouse'. That brought a thoroughly stubborn look to Sister Marietta's face or the bit that peeped out.

'I can't. I have sworn a vow of chastity. I cannot before God remove this'. She glowered up at Mr Toth and he peered at the billowed wings as though he'd like to clip them.

'Sank-you', he said, 'It's nice zat you sink I am Gott.' He looked smugly about the surgery almost as though he believed it.

'I mean I can't remove it before the Lord God, not you', she insisted. Mr Toth shrivelled a mite under her implacable gaze. No doubt on realising his mortal short comings. God or not though the problem had to be resolved.

He walked about the contraption on the nun's head trying to find a way past or through it. There was no way he was going to attempt to treat her with that in place. He could not get near to any of her orifices. They were most certainly barricaded in with habits, wimple's and chastity appliances that left no way to give her aid if she needed it. Not even resuscitation if she died would have been feasible in the circumstances. But then no doubt she left her life in God's hands and did not expect to need human help. God would provide all for her unlike the rest of humankind who had to rely on the vagaries and frailties of mortal beings.

Mr Toth drew himself up to his full six foot two and began a sermon. 'If Gott loves his flock as our religion teaches zen he vould not forbid you seeking help to ease your pain. Surely he vould understand under such circumcsions and allow you to open your head to ze treatment'.

Sister Marietta looked suitably shocked at the malapropism but Mr Toth continued in blithe ignorance. 'Under zese circumcsions he must surely let you haf relief. Now lets be sensitive. I can't get near to your teet vith zat sing on. If you and Gott vish me to take away your pain zen eet must go'. He stood waiting and moments later Sister Marietta obviously saw the logic of the argument, raised reluctant hands and began removing it. It came off in sections, at the end leaving a band round her forehead. When she lifted that off a bald head was exposed. Apart from a few whiffs of fluff her head was like a billiard ball. She looked very vulnerable without her holy shroud. Mr Toth proceeded with her treatment and soon she had one less tooth in her possession.

When the procedure was complete she then had the task of rebuilding her headpiece. The wings were secured last. After proffering her halting thanks she glided solemnly from the room. The wings were carefully eased round the door lintel. She only needed a Light Sabre to resemble Darth Vader cutting a swathe in the Empire strikes back.

Why on earth were they forced to wear such unfriendly garments Annie wondered? As they were married to God maybe those obscuring cloths deterred mortal man's licentious hands. It would take a lot of perseverance to make an assault on such a thoroughly packaged woman.

That made the highlight of the day and the rest of the patients trailed in like colourless snails. All beige and forgettable.

~

The days rolled by and often Annie's head obscured Mr Toth's sight but he was remarkably patient, more often laughing at her than chiding. If

she got really engrossed then her naughty tongue crept to one side of her mouth and there she would be chewing as though she had a sweet in it.

‘Stop zat eating yourself. You know it makes you look like an ee-dee-yot. Ve cannot haf ze patients sinking you are wired up wonky in ze brain’. That was true Annie thought. The patients were most particular over who placed the sucker in their mouths and liked that person to have a few brain cells. With a semblance of intelligence you could get away with poking the sucker anywhere.

It wasn’t long before Sister Marietta had passed word about them round the Nunnery’s and Monastery’s and a stream of Nuns followed by Monks presented for treatment. Mr Toth insisted that the Nuns remove their wimples and the Monks removed their mitres for a few arrived like decorated Christmas trees. They must have been for-warned about that rule for none of them demurred. They even exposed their bald heads whilst they were in the waiting room. That made the processing of them faster and brought no arguments into the proceedings although it brought a few raised brows from the other waiting patients. They didn’t know what to make of it.

‘Vat a vaste of vomanhoods. Zey are not good for anysing ozer zan sqvandering ze breath Gott has given us. He meant for us to enjoy each ozer in ze bed. Zey are perpetrating virgins making men celibate ven zey don’t vant zat. It’s a shame’. Mr Toth felt very strongly about women who he considered wanted men chasing after them all the time. He had no room in his life for women who could not or would not perform the function in bed that he had allotted them.

Along with the stream of holy souls Mr Shufflewick presented and went into a long monologue about Wat’s inadequate abilities as a practitioner. The patient was disgusted at the fact that Wat knew nothing of Mr Toth’s welding invention. After his extended moan the worked his way round to explaining the reason for his visit. He wanted Mr Toth to try saving his broken bridge with his marvellous technique which he had read about in a science magazine. Mr Toth was flattered and soon Mr Shufflewick bared his bridge for the death defying weld.

Annie knew what to expect and prepared for the weld with a crashing heart. The flash of light was emitted and the crackling still made her wince. Then a noisy eruption of steam brought that final performance to a close. In the event the procedure worked and Mr Shufflewick shuffled away a very happy man. He was still shaking his head over the newly trained dentists who he thought were useless. What he did not know was that Mr Toth had been famous in his day and had travelled the world demonstrating his technique. However it was so difficult a procedure to

master that few practitioners had trained and employed it in their surgeries. Those times where Annie was present were the last weldings he undertook using his technique. After that the machine was packed away and his method slipped into obscurity.

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The days drilled by filled with aching teeth and clacking dentures. One old lady drove them mad complaining about her 'falsies'. Not only did they clack they made her speak with a 'Hiss' as she explained. Mr Toth remade the dentures twice but in the end he had to concede defeat. He remained relatively sanguine. Annie had noticed since his operation Mr Toth had been much less irascible. Occasionally at full moon his temper might become uncertain but on the whole he was more restrained than previously.

Yet out of a perfectly calm moment a monumental squall blew up. Annie had no idea what provoked it. Her head had not been obstructing his view nor had she committed any other crime that might have incensed him. 'You haf stolen my vite coat', he bellowed at her as she tripped through the door from the shops after lunch.

'Your white coat? What would I want that for?' Annie froze in her tracks like an animal caught in the headlights of a car.

'You haf taken it. You use it ven you are a dentist'.

'Now how could I wear your coat when I'm a dentist. I'm a long way from that. It would have moth holes in it by then. Besides it's huge. Far too big for me. If I wore your coat it would trail on the ground and my hands would never find their way out of the sleeves. Of course I haven't touched it. It's a ridiculous idea'. Annie was becoming furious but tried to control herself in an attempt to avoid a riot. Mr Toth stood breathing heavily, his eyes sparking with persecuted feelings.

'Remember your operation. You've got to keep calm. Don't let your blood pressure go up. It won't do you any good'. In spite of her reasoning Mr Toth remained visibly seething, throwing open cupboard doors and drawers in his efforts to find the coat.

'You're sacked, sacked', he suddenly roared, 'get your sings and go. Don't come back'. Annie stood uncertainly and then retaliated.

'Alright. I'm going. And this time I won't hang around. I'll go for good'. With that she stalked through the surgery, swiped her bag from its hook and marched out into the sunlit street. Why was it always glorious when her heart was wounded?

The moment Annie stepped into the hall at home her mother pushed the phone into her hand. 'Mr Toth', she advised and left her daughter to deal with him. He needed Annie back at the surgery. Mrs Butterworth was to have an extraction and he could not do it on his own. He had not meant Annie to leave and asked her to come back. It was not an actual apology but the best she could hope for given her employer's larger than life character. She agreed to return and went straight back out of the door to catch a bus. What a wasted two hours.

~

When she arrived at the surgery a contrite Mr Toth drew her in with an arm round her shoulder. She took up her position by the chair-side and Mrs Butterworth wobbled in ready for her treatment. When that was completed and the patient had gone she commented, 'You found the coat then?'

Mr Toth was wearing the missing item so the contretemps over it had been unnecessary. 'Yes. Esme find it on ze compost heap. I must haf taken it off zen forgotten ven I went to poke it'. Well at least that explained the situation though what he was doing fiddling with the compost heap was a mystery. The gardener usually did that?

Whilst they were pottering between patients Mrs Toth sneaked in with a grave face. A tear or two lingered on her cheeks as she leaned to her husband's ear and whispered a message. 'Ach. Mein Gott. Vat a terrible sing'. Annie heard him murmur at her and then she sidled out like a shifty crab. Annie did not need to ask what news had been conveyed because the moment his wife slipped out of hearing range Mr Toth started gabbling.

'Vat a terrible news. Miss Rosenberg, you know, you haf met her. She has died. She vas very lonely and decided to make a departure. She tidy her flat, climbed into bed with a glass of visky and sswallowed a bottle of tablets. Vat a tragedy. She vould haf been better climbing in ze bed with a man'. He looked dolefully at his desk, tutting and muttering at the stupid waste.

Miss Rosenberg had been a mutual friend of the Toth's. A nice little seventy year old woman, mildly eccentric. She had never married and had no close relatives. No doubt the isolation of her position finally overwhelmed her. Mr Toth was still rumbling on, turning the disaster over and then offering a solution to her problem had he known.

'If I had known of her sadness I vould haf offered to be her lover'. Annie had to admit that was magnanimous of him for Miss Rosenberg had been well past her sale by date. 'Yes. I vould haf offered my body so zat

she climbed into ze bed with me and not with a bottle of pills. She might haf been saved'. He had a point Annie supposed but who was to know whether she would have preferred finding a lover to eternity.

Mr Toth rumbled on about the loss of a good friend though Annie had never heard him admit any close alliance with her in the past. She attended the card playing parties but rarely appeared at other times. Later, before she left for home, the Toth's were on the telephone getting information on the funeral venue and date.

Some time after the interment a new patient arrived. Mrs Duckworth-Chad appeared a gypsy figure with a scarf knotted at the back of her head. The romany effect was enhanced by a pair of earrings which brushed her shoulders like the swinging pendulums of ball batterers. As her head was of the more excitable variety they danced a dervish every time she spoke.

Annie was not surprised when she began talking of tarot cards and her crystal ball. They listened until Mr Toth rammed cotton wool rolls and matrix bands into her mouth effectively gagging her. That did not stop her trying to gabble through the impedimenta.

When her treatment was finished she suddenly became silent and her eyes went like glass window panes. She looked like a vacant building that was waiting reoccupation. For a moment peace reigned and Annie began to try and chivy her from the chair. She could get no response when she prodded or poked the lady. At that point the patient began to mumble in a shrill voice which was quite unlike her own foot on gravel tones.

'Does the name Berta mean anything?' Mr Toth staggered backwards with shock and Annie felt someone walk over her grave. They knew exactly who Berta was. Mrs Duckworth-Chad continued. The message when delivered revealed that on the other side Miss Rosenberg was enjoying her existence greatly. The men over there were Angels in comparison to the mortal variety and she was being pursued on all sides. Everything over there was more beautiful and the women were out of this world. She was thoroughly enjoying herself and Mr Toth looked affronted at the news.

When in the next world it seemed he was going to have competition. Mrs Duckworth-Chad came out of her trance and slumped momentarily before emerging as herself again. She seemed unaware of the squatter she had briefly housed and made no allusion to her possession. When she had gone Mr Toth asked for a cup of tea. The experience had left him shaken. It had been a strange afternoon providing much food for thought.

In the meantime Mr Toth had to make do with the beings of this world who no where near compared with the Angels of the next.

Chapter 18

Mr Toth was more irritable after the communication from the other side. Maybe it had made him more aware of his own mortality for every time Annie said, 'see you in the morning', he would reply, 'Yes if Gott iss villing. He might call me in ze night zen I vont see you until you pass over'. That sounded really depressing and she tried to jolly him out of his gloomy attitude. Nothing changed that response until a patient appeared who was going to be frozen before he died. He would pay up front for his resurrection when a further fifty years elapsed after his entry into deep freeze.

Mr Toth fancied that idea and said he was going to make enquiries about the possibility of being considered for that procedure. Annie never knew the outcome of his initial contact with the laboratory who were offering the service except that he thought them tricksters of the worse variety. In the event he soon forgot the thought of Miss Rosenberg enjoying the after life when he was fighting this one to get some satisfying resolution to the prospect of becoming a human ice cube . The long talks and lurid brochures he received took him so much time to digest he cheered up along the way and returned to his usual irascible self.

~

In the midst of his gloomy travels through the ways of keeping on this side of the ether Mr Mumpers slipped into the surgery bearing a most peculiar pot. Not another Mr Earnshaw Annie wondered as Mr Mumpers carefully set his rococo urn on the cabinet. Mr Toth frowned at it. 'Eets not your wife is it?' he asked the patient who appeared nonplussed at the assumption.

'My wife. Are you suggesting I've murdered my wife? What kind of a remark is that. My wife is outside in the waiting room and most definitely not dead'. Mr Toth waved away the remark and invited him into the chair.

Mr Mumpers remained surly through his treatment, no doubt smarting over Mr Toth's precocious comment. He spat loudly at the end and stamped out.

Annie invited Mrs Mumpers in and noticed that the jar was still on the cabinet. Just as the patient went to climb in the chair Mr Toth pointed out, 'Zat jam jar is still on ze vork bench. Your husband, he vont forget eet,

vill he?’ He seemed a mite nervous of it as though he feared a Genie might materialise.

‘Yes – that’s his mistress. At least her ashes. He carries them everywhere’. So a Genie after all might arise from its depths. Mr Toth nearly choked at the revelation and his eyebrows climbed to his hairline. We stood as though arrested in Pompeii lava waiting for further disclosures.

‘Yes. Since Flossie died Sid has carried her or what’s left of her. He was always very partial to her bits and pieces’. Not a Genie then but a Flossie might leap out of the urn.

‘Und you don’t mind. You let him keep her close by without gettink upset?’ Mr Toth was a liberal minded man but that behaviour would not fit into his thinking.

‘Of course I don’t mind’. Mrs Mumpers confirmed. ‘She isn’t a threat to me in the jar, is she? She was a problem when she was alive but how can she be now? I prefer her in there. The only thing that annoys me is I have to dust her every day and she shares the bed. Well, she’s propped up against the headboard. I gets a bit fed up with that but otherwise she’s nowhere near the trouble she was’. Mr Toth stood and stared at the patient looking as though he’d seen a ghost. If Flossie was there Annie could not see her.

Mrs Mumpers cast wary eyes around seeking understanding but neither Mr Toth nor Annie could digest the bizarre story. The lady took possession of her husband’s mistress and tucked her in the crook of her arm. Annie would bet she never did that when Flossie had been a living opponent in the three cornered lodging of their lives. Confidently she walked out safe in the knowledge that her husband’s former mistress was just motes to be flicked with her duster. What would happen if her husband had further mistresses dotted about Annie wondered. If another died would he carry all of them about with him?

They had many patients who were involved in eccentric set ups which they were aware of. How many more might there be of which they were ignorant? The worse to deal with was a young woman who had two live in lovers. They all cohabited together and the men who shared her seemed on the surface to be great friends. Of course who knows what transpired within their ménage walls. No one would ever know. But when they attended for treatment a great deal of hilarity accompanied the shenanigans that went with the drilling and filling of their communal teeth.

Then a group of people one day sidled into the waiting room and asked to have their teeth looked at. Annie gathered they had recently arrived from Qatar and were in the process of settling into Bed and

Breakfast accommodation. Mr Shah was a gentle and charming man, good looking in a dark swarthy way. The women who clustered round him were all lovely, like exotic roses. As they each entered the surgery and Mr Shah gave details, it became clear that four of them were wives. The other three were perhaps fill in entertainment for the times when the wives were on holiday? Again maybe they were concubines or the junior members of his harem? They could not speak English but all details were tendered by the man in their midst. He knew everything about them. They were silent but showed an acceptance of a situation that Annie would not tolerate. Mr Shah herded them together at the end of their session as though he were a shepherd with a flock of sheep. When he made his exit they decorously followed close behind, like children trailing the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

When they had those complicated marital stews to negotiate Annie became very careful not to mix the ingredients in the same appointment slot. That might cause more problems than it cured.

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The next patient appeared looking like the worst kind of scarecrow. He had a luxuriant beard which reached to his patched waistcoat buttons. Once in the chair he opened his mouth but you would never have known. The foliage was so dense it overgrew it and it remained buried in the undergrowth. It might well have harboured nesting birds it was so abundant. ‘Vere are ze teet. Vere haf zey gone?’ Mr Toth repeatedly muttered as he groped amongst the thicket. Every time he created a gap it sprang back in place. Eventually he fell back tiring of the project.

‘I cannot find your teet. Zat iss like a junkle. I would not be able to put my instruments through eet, zey would be swallowed up’. Mr Forester peered up at Mr Toth with scarecrow eyes which failed to frighten him off.

‘Cut it then. I don’t mind. Get some scissors and chop it off’. Annie and Mr Toth jumped when that voice spoke for it was not possible to tell where it came from. Mr Toth found a pair of sharp scissors and after feeling about with tentative fingers, began whittling the beard around where he thought the patient’s mouth might be.

In the end a perfect piece of topiary emerged. A Van Dyke with a sharply pointed end wagged at them when Mr Forester spoke. The beard with finely pointed moustache greatly improved the patient. When shown Mr Toth’s efforts in a hand mirror the patient was impressed. ‘Cor blimey. I’ll ave to come back ere to ave it trimmed. You’ve done han hexcellent job’. With that praise ringing in his ears Mr Toth completed a very difficult

extraction. After the patient had gone Annie began sweeping the dragged remnants of beard from the floor.

She was disturbed from her cleaning by the telephone. An officious voice asked if they could fit in an illegal immigrant who was complaining of pain and had exerted his right to see a dentist. The message was relayed to Mr Toth who agreed to the emergency appointment. Before Annie managed to remove every straggle of beard from the floor she admitted one prisoner flanked by two immigration officers.

They marched the man in with heavy handed authority. One step wrong and the gun that one carried looked as though it would be employed at the hint of a glance out of line. Their boots too looked threatening as they propelled the man forwards. Annie would not fancy getting on the kicking end of them. Nor would she like to cross eyes with the immigrant. Mr Embombo had slunk into this country but had been caught. He was in detention until the immigration authority deported him.

Mr Toth waved him into the chair and encouraged him to describe his symptoms. Mr Embombo kept pointing to a tooth which lay blameless at the back of his mouth. It was a virgin molar and after testing it with various agents Mr Toth professed himself baffled as to the problem. The patient was a tall skinny individual with one normal eye and the other protruding like a randy Iguana's. Whilst Mr Toth had his head buried in that 'black hole of Calcutta' Mr Embombo was casting his periscopic eye about as though looking for an escape route. The Officer with the gun stood on alert at the door and the other was peering into his prisoner's mouth, following what Mr Toth was telling him. Nothing seemed to be wrong and the Officers signalled that their charge should vacate the surgery. They all marched out, Mr Embombo safely sandwiched between the Officers.

'What a strange eye he had. Sticking out like a lizard being throttled'. Annie rattled on until Mr Toth explained the significance of the eye.

'He probably has a Thyroid condition. An over active Thyroid I expect but I would not tell zose Officers in front of ze prisoner. He would demand to see a doctor and would try to escape. Zat is vhy he came here. To try and get away'. That made sense considering the man's behaviour. Annie was glad they had gone. She was uncomfortable knowing a gun was that close.

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When she was completely satisfied that she had cleared every stray hair from the surgery she invited Mr De'Veve into the surgery. He bounced

into the chair and opened his mouth to receive the injection. That evinced a howl of such disproportionate magnitude Annie cringed at the thought of what the neighbours must think. From that moment on through to the end of his treatment he manufactured sounds that brought to mind wild animals calling their mates across a canyon. Some of the howls were blood curdling and the grunts sounded like a pig in its sty rooting for food. Mr Toth ignored the racket, quite unmoved by their primitive quality and Annie did her best not to allow her threatening laughs to bubble to the surface.

After Mr De'Veve had removed himself and his farmyard effects from the room she brought in Mrs Leverstock. She was a tall woman with a Gladiola look. She settled herself in the chair and gave the impression that she had taken root there. Her intentions became clear as she began discussing having all her teeth out. 'Vat all of zem?' Mr Toth rooted round her mouth searching for the reason why she wished such drastic treatment. Her teeth apart from a few small cavities did not need to come out. 'I sink you would be better hafing zem filled. Zey are goot teet and don't need taking out'.

'But I'm terrified of having fillings. I insist on you taking all of them out'. The lady was adamant. Mr Toth balked. He must have felt that was the wrong treatment.

'I vill not take out your teet. Zey do not deserve such an end. You vill haf to haf a full denture and you vill not like zat. Eet is very difficult to get used to a denture ven you haf never had vun before'. Mrs Leverstock was not going to listen. She was determined to have her own way and argued vociferously. It seemed she had a letter from a specialist who had decreed that she should have 'a clearance' and 'immediate dentures. 'Alright. I vill make you full dentures. You can go to ze hospital to haf ze teet out. Zey vill fit ze dentures'. Mr Toth reluctantly made full dentures to be fitted when all the teeth were removed in one sitting.

'I vill not take responsibility for zese teet after you haf zem fitted. I do not agree vith ze specialist'. He wrote those words on the patient's card and gave the completed set of dentures to the lady. She marched out on the last visit, teeth tucked in her bag.

Weeks later Mr Toth received a letter from the Family Practitioner's Committee. Mrs Leverstock had written in a letter of complaint. The teeth had been removed at the hospital and the dentures fitted but immediately she stood up they had fallen out. They would not stay in. What did he intend to do about it? Mr Toth was cross but wrote explaining his position. The patient wrote again and again until the matter ended up with the Home Secretary. He wrote and Mr Toth quoted what had been written on the card. He had not agreed with the specialist and photocopied the notes. The

Home Secretary wrote absolving him of responsibility and the patient was advised there was nothing she could do.

She wrote that she was taking Mr Toth to court and she tried. Eventually after a lot of time wasting correspondence her solicitor must have advised her she would get nowhere with her damages claim. Mr Toth had covered himself and the notes on the patient's record card had saved him from legal action.

Then another lady arrived who seemed very sweet on the surface. Mr Toth made and fitted a crown and Mrs Shillingmore tripped out looking reasonably pleased. She agreed to pay for the treatment within days. Soon she was back complaining of pain in the crowned tooth. Mr Toth xrayed it and found no information on it that was helpful. He concluded that the tooth needed root treated and duly completed it.

The patient came back once more complaining of pain in the same tooth. A prescription for antibiotics was given and she stalked out. At that point she still had not paid for the treatment and it seemed had no intention of doing so.

Next a letter advised Mr Toth that Mrs Shillingmore was going to launch legal action against him for negligence and distress due to the pain experienced after the fitting. He was understandably upset at the outcome when he had given of his best.

In the event the Professional Indemnity Society began a lengthy correspondence with the patient's solicitor. Mr Toth had to waste a day visiting the company's main offices in London and the matter was no nearer to being resolved. His Solicitor made a random run of the patient's financial position and found that she had a list of outstanding debts which had never been paid. She was a bad debtor and used to dealing with her unpaid debts by taking counter action and making false claims.

Mrs Shillingmore's council was advised and immediately the case against Mr Toth was dropped. He next instructed a debt collector to chase the debt. They ultimately managed to get the money from her but not without difficulty. The Bailiffs were turned away at the door. She claimed all of the goods in the house were not hers but her husbands. The Bailiffs were not empowered to remove any goods that were not hers. The debt collectors got her into court to disclose her earnings and the Judge directed she pay. If she failed to do so she would be held in contempt of court. Of course she paid and avoided a jail sentence. Not a nice lady Annie decided but many patients were professional litigation experts. They often knew more of the law than the qualified expert.

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Whilst Mr Toth was in the midst of dealing with the various non payers and litigious individuals a young man barged into the surgery brandishing a gun. ‘Gimme the money, any money you got, let me ave it’. His request was terse and threatening. Annie’s eyes were mesmerised by the gun as he pointed it first at Mr Toth then at her. ‘Got any drugs in that cupboard?’. He jabbed the gun at the wall cabinet which contained a small array of medicaments. Annie shook her head when speech refused to come. Her throat had seized up.

Mr Toth looked more annoyed than intimidated. He was staring at the gun with an intensity that frightened the nurse more than the gun. If they did not give the man the money and drugs he demanded, he would kill them. Yet Mr Toth just stood and waited without either resisting or attacking.

‘Come on. Come on. Gimme all the money you’ve got. You’re bound to ave some. And drugs. Whatever you’ve got I want’. The gun was moved about for backup effect.

‘Vat’s your name. How old are you?’ The young man looked deflated at Mr Toth’s reaction. The gun was brandished with renewed vigour. ‘Give zat to me. You are beink a silly boy. Ve haf only small money. Not big-time. Now be insensible and give ze gun here. Nozing will happen if you do’. Mr Toth held out his hand. The young man stood irresolutely and then slowly dropped the gun to the floor. He leapt suddenly to the door and ran off. Mr Toth followed and Annie found the strength to join the pursuit. They ran to the corner of the road and saw the potential burglar jump on a moving bus. He had escaped but at least they had not been killed.

Back at the surgery Mr Toth picked up the gun and Annie cowered when he held it up. ‘It’s only a dummy gun. I knew zat for I haf a gun in ze Hungarian vars. I saw zis vas a plastic copy. A repticle of a real vun. No need to be frightened of it’. Having said that he pointed it playfully at the corner of the room and shot a hole in the skirting board. That wiped the smile off his face which went ashen. They could actually have been shot and he played about convinced it was a toy. Well at least they had not been harmed so for that Annie felt they should be grateful.

It took a few days to get over the shooting of the skirting board which had to be repaired. The hole was plugged with plastic wood and soon looked as authentically old as it had originally been. No one would have doubted its pristine antiquity.

~

Patients kept arriving, interrupting the police interviews following the attempted robbery. Once the police had taken joint statements they departed and Annie shepherded in a casualty of the pistes. Young Danny Cassidy hobbled in on crutches, his leg broken when skiing.

‘Dear, dear. Vat a silly sing to do. You end up breaking in ze holiday’. Danny was not in the mood to find humour in his situation. He was more concerned about how his thigh high plaster was going to fit in the chair. It was an upright black leather version and he eased himself in leaving his leg stuck out. His position was precarious as with the weight of it he kept sliding to the edge. The problem was ultimately solved by a chair set sideways and placed underneath to support it.

When Mr Toth examined Danny’s teeth he found, after xrays, an extra tooth growing between his upper central incisors. It was well formed and had caused the middle teeth to separate, so he had a Terry Thomas gap. Mr Toth referred him to a specialist to have it extracted.

After Annie had helped Danny out on crutches she was surprised to see a stray person sitting in the waiting room. It was not unusual to acquire a waif or vagrant. They occasionally settled themselves in the chairs with their meagre personal effects arranged around them. It was hard but they had to be ejected, like unwanted waste material and Annie never liked doing that.

Naturally when she saw the young woman seated in a chair Annie worried that she might be orphaned and have decided to adopt them as her surrogate family. However when Annie saw the tiny baby in her arms she thought that unlikely.

After enquiring as to the reason for her visit Annie did not know whether to tell Mr Toth or send the lady away without consultation. ‘I want the dentist to take out my week old baby’s teeth. She has two but they hurt me when I breast feed her. She bites. Will you ask the dentist to extract them?’ Annie stood immobilised at the request.

When she relayed the message to Mr Toth he would have nothing to do with it. ‘I cannot take out ze kinder’s teet. Zey must last until eet iss six years old. Zey help guide ze ozer teet into place. Eet iss not right to interfere vith nature’. Annie agreed, though she was not an expert, as his view sounded reasonable enough to her. Annie went out and explained to the lady that it would not be right deprive the baby of its teeth. ‘What do I do when he bites me with them?’ The nurse had no answer to that and suggested that she consult the baby clinic people to see what they could advise. The lady tearfully arose and bore her bundle out.

Before Annie could turn about and return to the surgery a young girl erupted into the waiting room like a whirlwind on long legs. 'Can the dentist see me. I've just been having treatment at another surgery and the dentist died before he finished my filling. If it's not filled by the time the local wears off I'll be in pain'. Annie asked her to take a seat and ran in to ask Mr Toth whether he would remedy his colleague's omission in dying before the job was complete. He agreed and Annie escorted Miss Summerskill into the chair. The patient explained before Mr Toth started with his plugger that the other dentist had been in the middle of putting a matrix band on her tooth when he slumped over her. The nurse had dragged him off and called an ambulance but it was too late. He had gone to the dental clinic in the sky. Mr Toth finished her filling and she left saying she would never be able to visit a dentist again without remembering her awful experience.

Chapter 19

Of course the fact that Mr Toth's colleague had died whilst working set him on edge. Annie suspected he kept touching his hands and face every now and again to see if he was still alive. 'You're OK. You're still here', she reassured him one day when she felt he was particularly insecure but she brought no smile to his face.

'How do I know I am here. You might be a filament of my machination and not really be zere at all. None of zis might be existing?'

'Maybe we're all a figment of each others imagination. But while I'm here in this figment thinking it's real I'll continue on doing what I'm doing until either the bubble of the figment bursts or expands into a greater universe. In fact I've got some 'O' levels to sit next week and figment or not I'm going to sit them and do my best'. That firmly expressed intention finally raised a thin smile.

'I suspect you're right. Gott has put us here in zis filament and we must do a goot job with zis life'. After that he slowly forgot his colleague's untimely demise and Annie sallied forth to sit several 'O' levels as the start of her journey to that dental light at the tunnel's end.

The first hurdle boded badly for the beginning of her future when Annie could barely stagger to the examination centre. She had a streaming cold and had trouble preventing her nose dripping onto the examination papers. She felt like curling into a corner but instead had to slog it out for three hours on a paper that she scarcely understood. Do or Die Annie thought and woman-fully ploughed through the questions making the best of the situation.

She turned up to work the next day and found Mrs Toth in bed with flu. The wind was worse, a positive gale Mrs Toth confided when Annie took her a tray of food. The nurse did not need telling. She could detect a whiff about the bed and nodded sympathetically. It must be awful to have your life controlled by the vagaries of your bowels.

~

Once Annie had finished her ministering to Mrs Toth she returned to the surgery. They went through a spate of patients who came stumbling in, insisting that their shed crowns were immediately replaced. It was strange how they all managed to concoct the same story to facilitate their passage into the chair.

‘I’m going to Buckingham Palace to meet the Queen’, was invariably the cry as they shoved their bits of tooth-mongery into Annie’s hand.

‘Vat zey vant to see ze Qveen for. She never veer her crown anyway’. Mr Toth was not impressed by the Queen’s hats, only her crowns which she did not wear nearly enough in his view. Also she had failed so far to summons him for an audience and he must have felt a mite jealous when Her Majesty seemed to bestow favours on the world but appeared unaware of his existence.

The omission always annoyed him. Inevitably he was amazed at the number of patients who had been invited to various functions. Garden Parties, the Royal enclosure at Ascot or The State opening of Parliament. Those were the usual venues. ‘Ze Qveen has never invited me into her ballroom for tea so vhy ze patients get to sit on her trone’. He never tired of complaining when yet another patient created a fuss because they wanted to be seen Royal Post haste.

The catastrophes with the crowns always occurred according to them just at the moment when they were due to sidle up the red carpet. The crowns never came off before they were to visit the local supermarket. Annie grew ever more sceptical when, faced with her refusal to accommodate their wishes, the tatting to the tales grew in direct proportion to their desperation.

The patients would plead and Annie would dutifully relay the extent of the tears to Mr Toth. He would cast aspersions on the veracity of the Royal meeting and the nurse would receive the abuse from them when she advised them that the dentist could not see them for a week.

They did not dare meet the Queen with a missing or loose crown, for what would happen if the crown sprang from their mouths at the moment she took their hands. What might her reaction be to a tooth falling like a conker from a tree, they would agonize.

‘Ze qveen would not notice. She would be too busy countink her soldiers. Anyway she haf crowns in her mouse as well as on her head. I know ze royal dentist. No doubt her crowns sometimes come into a mouseful of sauerkraut und schnitzel. Maybe in a banquet for she too iss human. And ze crown on her head. Zat is always slipping’. Annie was not sure how he knew these little details but he seemed adamant of his facts. Annie had never seen the royal crown slip, at least not the one on her head when televised.

In the event she had a difficult time fielding the patients in another direction when Mr Toth remained unmoved by the royal lever applied to make him perform for Her Majesty.

‘I vill not be mutilated by zees people. I am too busy’. That was his stock response when Annie tried pressing him into service. The News was usually more interesting than dealing with hysterical people who were deemed more worthy of treading the red carpet.

You don’t mean mutilated. You mean manipulated’, Annie corrected him one day when the pestering patients were driving them both mad.

‘Don’t tell me vat I mean. I mean mutilated. Zey are like vultures peckink at my feazers. I vill not be pecked’. That shut Annie up. She stayed silent after that.

Mrs Dalglish was a particularly cussed individual. She repeatedly lost crowns which did not just fall out. They appeared to be knocked out by some sort of blow. Of course they suspected her husband but equally it might have been a fall brought about by too much alcohol with her supper. She seemed to be a close Royal acquaintance. She was forever demanding the royal treatment because of an imminent engagement. Her visits to the Monarch became ever more frequent. Annie wondered she did not just ask for a bed in the royal Put-U-Up suite and save travelling expenses. Of course each time the patient conveyed that she had received a further summons and a crown had escaped Mr Toth thrust his head nearer the television screen if he was watching ‘The News’, or double bolted the lavatory door so that no one could penetrate its bastioning safety.

‘But he must help me. What will her Majesty say if she sees me with a hole at the front of my mouth?’ Annie had no ideas on the subject and could offer no comfort to the patient. ‘Tell Mr Toth I’ll get him an introduction to the Queen if he fixes my crown back now’. Annie conveyed the message through the lavatory door. A ruminating silence ensued and she waited with her ear flattened to the wood. The bribe worked for he shot the bolts back and launched himself at the vagrant crown, replacing it in the expectation of a royal audience.

He waited impatiently for the invitation but eventually realised he had been ‘mutilated by ze cunnink lady’. Annie never thought he was going to receive an invitation in the first place but such was his desire to be up with the knobs he believed because he wanted to believe. Annie was always sceptical of the stories told. The patients would go to any lengths to achieve their aim with no thought to anyone but themselves. Of course Mrs Dalglish ruined her chances of future treatment because Mr Toth banned her from the practice. She melted into the annals of history.

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When Annie shepherded in Mr Muirhead he seemed a serious individual prone to peering through his half moon spectacles. He was good looking in a studious kind of way like an absent-minded professor. She enjoyed ministering to him and settled down at the chair side to contemplate his neatly aligned teeth. At one point in the treatment his mouth was filled with water from the drill. ‘Suck him out, suck him out’, Mr Toth goaded as Annie leapt to the task and tried hoovering up the water. The patient’s tongue was one that protruded and arched up like the back of a great fat pig. She poked the sucker at it and Mr Muirhead coughed.

‘Ach gif me zat. You are beink useless. Look at him. He iss like a spouting sperm whale’. That made Annie’s mouth twitch but she had to be careful not to let the smile develop into a laugh. That was not seemly behaviour in a dental surgery. Her smile was soon eclipsed by Mr Muirhead’s laughter. He had such a shrieking bout that Annie thought he might give himself a hernia. Then he could not stop and sounded like the laughing hyena. Mr Toth and Annie sat down to wait for the hysteria to abate, leaving the patient in the chair, convulsed at some aspect of their performance which they could not share. Just as they thought the patient had regained possession of himself he began all over again and they had to let him exhaust his laughter.

Five minutes later Mr Muirhead was sufficiently recovered to allow the treatment to proceed. Even then they still had to contend with the odd geyser rising from his sperm whale mouth. Annie was glad to see the back of him as all romantic aspirations fled in the midst of his spouting display.

The next patient was Mrs Delacroix. She arrived late and hurtled into the chair apologising profusely. Her tardy bus had caused her delay she explained before opening her mouth for the injection. Whilst they were waiting for it to take effect Mr Toth fiddled with the hand-piece. He had been having intermittent problems with it and inspected it minutely through a magnifying glass. He seemed satisfied and indicated that we would proceed with the filling.

Mrs Delacroix confirmed that she was numb and Mr Toth began drilling a back tooth. Half a minute into the exercise the drill seemed to explode, sounding like it was in the throes a death gurgle. Mr Toth snatched it back from the patient’s mouth as though he feared she might engulf it from the inside. He peered at the drill and looked aghast when he saw the back plate had gone. He stood for a moment looking at the floor, expecting to find it there. When he saw nothing he prised open the lady’s mouth and scoured the interior like a plumber searching for a leak.

‘I think I’ve swallowed a bit of your equipment’. Mrs Delacroix looked like a child caught in a naughty act.

‘Oh no... No... Vat I do now if ze back you haf swallowed. I cannot vork’. Mr Toth shook his head in despair.

‘I’m so sorry. I just gulped and I felt it go down’. The patient looked as though she might cry. That impulse soon passed when she gave thought to her insides. ‘Will it harm me?’ She looked to Mr Toth for reassurance but he was more worried about the piece of lost hand-piece. They were expensive items.

‘Of course it vont harm you. But you haf to get it back ven it comes out ze ozer end. I haf to haf it back ozervise I lose money’. Mrs Delacroix looked positively disgusted at the prospect and Annie didn’t blame her. She left after a temporary filling had been placed with instructions to find the piece of equipment at all costs and return it to them. She did as she was told and two days later turned up with it in her hand. She could even laugh at the event although she declined to go into detail on how she retrieved it. They had it back and that should be enough she said. Her treatment was completed at a later date and all went uneventfully.

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Mr Toth was so upset after a patient stole one of his own statuettes from the waiting room that he took up smoking again. He had given it up at the time of his heart attack. Annie had been put through hell for the three months that it took to get him over the withdrawal symptoms. His temper, never the most sanguine at the best of times, became positively volcanic. The eruptions were provoked by quite minor incidents and were out of proportion to the actual event.

‘Vat haf you done’, he bawled at his nurse when she dismantled a hand-piece, repaired it and was on the point of reassembling it when he interrupted her endeavours.

‘You can’t do zat. You haf broken it more. Vat vill I do ven ze next patient comes in. It vill not be doink ze job’. He strode around Annie in circles, with balled fists looking as though he might strike at any moment.

‘It isn’t broken. It was before but I have taken it apart, put the spring in the correct position and I’m just putting it together. It should work perfectly’. Annie fervently hoped it would for she did not fancy her chances in the eye of that storm. She fitted the components together and handed it to him. He snatched it from her and screwed it to the main unit attachment. Annie held her breath as he pressed the foot pedal but thanks be to providence or her technical abilities it worked. That mollified Mr Toth and that squall was swept away until the next eruption.

‘Vat haf you done vith my balls?’

‘Your balls?’ Annie would not have dared to voice her thoughts on the subject.

‘You know’. He stamped his foot at his minion’s ignorance. ‘Zos balls in ze bead sterilizer. Zey haf nearly all gone’. He was peering into the little chrome cylinder searching for the tiny glass beads with which it was filled. ‘Vell vere are my balls?’ Annie almost retaliated by telling him precisely where they were but restricted herself to shaking her head and shrugging, hoping the storm would head off in another direction. It did.

He forgot his balls and veered onto the bald patches on the dental unit. It was old and bore the signs of constant long usage. Up till that point Mr Toth had never mentioned the obvious Alopecia with which it was afflicted but in the throes of nicotine deprivation he was sensitive to the slightest assault on his sense of security.

‘Just look at eet. Bald as a cooty und eet is broken’. He gave it a good kick which might have shattered it but in the event it made no discernible impression on the stolid metal.

During these tirades Annie tried to keep calm and just let him go on until he had run out of steam. Even volcanos rest for a bit after eruptions. Silence might reign for a short while but invariably he would start again on some inane point and he would pursue it to the end.

The unit received a good few kicks when it dared to shed its outer enamel coat but eventually he exhausted its short comings for he knew the answer to that was to buy a new unit. That would cost too much. He whinged about the balls for a while until that subject too was exhausted.

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The nicotine withdrawal phase was accompanied by other more rampant behaviour. Not only did Mr Toth have a temper with such a short fuse that the eruption occurred almost before the provoking event. He also exhibited renewed amorous leanings toward Annie.

‘You look very pretty down on ze floor. It make me vant to kiss you’. He announced that fact whilst she was scrubbing the blood from the floor after a particularly gory extraction. She stopped and rose from her all fours position. Speech failed to arrive through her constricted throat as she stared at him.

‘Vat you sink?’ he smiled winningly but Annie was not up for grabs.

‘You have a wife if you remember. Upstairs, writing romantic novels with you as her hero. How could you do that to her?’ Employer or not he had to be put in his place she decided.

‘I know you could be my Mistress. I would sit you in my flat in Mayfair and dress you in French clothes. You could haf your hair cut in a fringe and I would keep you in ze manner vich you might become to luf’. What an awful thought. Annie looked at him to see if he was serious and concluded that indeed he was.

‘Do I look Mistress material. I’m not cut out for that sort of life. Anyway I hate fringes. Then there’s your wife. I would never do that to her’.

‘Ach..she would not know. Anyvay she is Hungarian and would accept such a menage’. Well Annie could not have guaranteed that. The notion was inconceivable and she told him so. He looked disappointed but accepted her view in a resigned way.

Later Esme got talking when she and Annie shared a cup of coffee in the kitchen. The housekeeper was highly amused by something Mr Toth had suggested. That she become his Mistress in a flat in Mayfair! So even the slightly dubious flattery in the proposition had been tainted with betrayal.

Then the patients became the target for his increased drives. Annie made sure none were left alone with him for she did not trust them let alone him. Also she liked his wife and that lady did not deserve such treatment. But then a man who had notched up six wives was obviously not a good bet for faithfulness.

Next a nasty lady took advantage of Mr Toth’s wayward behaviour and made a play for him. Mrs Dainty batted mascara clotted eyelashes at him and even although she had passed her sale by date he actually flirted back. That in itself was a precedent as normally he avoided women over the hump as though a bad case of flu.

In the end when the Max Factor face was wiped off on his hands and instruments even Annie had to concede he must have gone temporarily out of his mind. The patient looked more like his Grandmother than his real mother would have done were she not dead. He must have felt desperate or gone blind. Sure enough when he managed to get his glasses on between the flirtatious asides he seemed to come to his senses. With corrected eyesight he clearly saw how unappealing the lady really was.

He took a hasty step back from the chair and abruptly retreated from the association. Mrs Dainty was no fool and soon had reported to the police that the dentist had indecently molested her. Two police officers arrived on the doorstep and Annie ushered them politely into the waiting room. They accused Mr Toth of indecent assault but the nurse put a spoke into their charges.

‘He couldn’t have done what he is accused of for I was present at all the patients visits. I am always present when my employer is working and would never leave him alone with a woman patient. Not even a more senior edition and during that patient’s session nothing improper occurred’. The two men retreated and went into a huddle. They mumbled a lot and then made an embarrassed retreat. They must have realised that the patient’s allegations could not have been perpetrated with a nurse present. They heard no more from the police or Mrs Dainty but Annie kept a wary eye on Mr Toth ready to nip any inappropriate behaviour in the bud.

She was glad when she noticed that slowly he was becoming quieter, the effects of the acute withdrawal apparently at an end.

Then with the theft of one of his own created female statuettes he was upset enough to start puffing on those dangerous weeds again. ‘The doctor will be very angry with you’, Annie pleaded trying to argue him out of his grief.

‘Vat I care about ze doctor. He has not suffered a clepto ting vatever on his premises. I vant my Anoushka back. She vas a study of my girlfriend Gisella’. He was clearly bereft even when Annie oiled his vanity by pointing out that it must have been such a good study that an expert appreciated and took it. That mollified him slightly but not enough to stop him lighting up.

She had to do something. If Mr Toth became ill her job would be in jeopardy. Selfish reasons, but the thought goaded her to desperate measures as she fought to get him off smoking. She hid his cigarettes and repeatedly lost his lighter. Of course he would immediately send her to the shops to buy him more matches or another lighter. Annie would wander in much later having been attacked by young boys who took the matches or she had lost the item down a drain. He would send her off to all corners of the local vicinity to buy cigarettes and would be informed that the shops had sold out or had not received their latest order. On those occasions he would look suspiciously at his nurse almost as though he knew she was keeping the evil weed from him.

In the event Annie need not have fought so hard to stop Mr Toth from smoking as he managed to effect a cremation himself.

On one day when he was inordinately irascible he refused to accept her excuses for the lack of contraband and went storming out. Her appeals floated away on the morning breeze as she stood helplessly watching him disappear up the road. She traipsed back to the waiting room where two patients were sitting round-eyed with surprise. She made excuses for Mr Toth’s sudden departure and they settled to wait for his return.

Soon he stamped past the goggling patients who watched his passage through with curiosity. He was bearing a carrier bag full of cigarettes. They had last years date on them Annie ruefully assessed, so all her efforts had been in vain.

He took to lighting up between patients, flicking the ash into the spittoon bowl. Annie's furious frowns were stubbornly ignored as she scrubbed it clean. Her work was made harder with the extra dirt the cigarettes generated.

Then overnight a dramatic climax to his habit doused his enthusiasm. Apparently he had been watching the television News which featured large in his life. A cigarette negligently dangled from his fingers. The News riveted him to the chair and as usual he fell asleep. Mrs Toth was in the bathroom having problems with her wind again. When she finally emerged she found her husband on fire. The cigarette had burned a hole in his white dental coat which he had not bothered to remove.

When his wife saw him looking like a smouldering compost heap she ran to get a bucket of water. That was thrown over him and he woke in a wet shock. He was furious at the incident and vowed he would never touch another cigarette.

The huge stock of fags was thrown onto the garden bonfire which he personally set light to. He supervised the burning to the end and to celebrate his new found abstinence he allowed them all, Esme, Mrs Toth and Annie to stand round the consuming flames with sparklers to add to the effects.

Life settled down and then Annie was invited to one of the family's jaunts to the seaside for a day.

Chapter 20

They set off from Mr Toth's as the dawn sun rose and Annie slept in the back of his car as he drove at break-neck speeds. The depth of her tiredness was such that she did not even care when he overtook a juggernaut on the brow of a hill. It could have been the end of them all but she was indifferent to the possibility and immediately returned to her slumbers.

The air in the car was filled with the excited gabble of Hungarians. When together Annie had found that all Europeans acted as though they had been wound up with a key, like clockwork toys. Once wound up their mechanisms never seemed to run down. The racket they produced made no impact on her sleep and soon they arrived on the outskirts of Brighton.

By that time Annie had woken up and as they edged along the feed road into the town centre she began to recover her senses. Mr Toth nearly skidded into several cars and she had sufficiently regained her faculties to feel a frisson of nerves. Especially when he sprang from his vehicle and remonstrated with another motorist. He was furious at being overtaken in the slow lane by a young man and spent some minutes venting his wrath at the kerbside whilst the chap wilted beneath his wagging finger.

Soon Mr Toth clambered back into his seat and they proceeded into the town centre looking for car parks. There he entertained the local populace when he crossed swords with a parking attendant.

They trooped from the car. Mr and Mrs Toth, Esme, Annie, Zsa Zsa and some stray Earl she had acquired from somewhere. Annie assumed he was a genuine aristocrat for Zsa Zsa called him Earl although he was introduced at the outset as The Earl of Cumberland. Annie could not decide whether he was a real Earl or not when Zsa Zsa kept calling him Earl. Then she wondered whether it was his Christian name. Mr Chamberlain did not accompany her for he was otherwise engaged with his diplomatic tasks. No doubt undiplomatically steering an alien female in the direction of the marital bed.

The Earl or Earl, or whatever he was, seemed delighted at the view of the sea. It became apparent to Annie he had engineered the trip and was in some way connected to the antique trade. He was not far off being an antique himself she thought and looked more like an Edwardian Spiv than the type might have appeared in those days. His handlebar moustache was waxed so far out from his face he might well have taken off and joined the seagulls which were wheeling about like vultures over a carcass.

Zsa Zsa hooked her arm through Earl's and they, along with Mrs Toth, sauntered off. Mr Toth, Esme and Annie straggled at a distance, sniffing the fresh seaweed smelling air.

Soon they found themselves on the Pier and pulling all the handles of every slot machine until they had exhausted their loose change. Earl, Zsa Zsa and Mrs Toth disappeared at lunch time. The remaining three abandoned travellers sat out on the pavement under an awning and ate fish and chips.

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Later they went for a walk along the promenade and Mr Toth became very excited when he spotted a nudist beach. Annie grabbed hold of his jacket as his feet crunched over the pebbles. It was not a nice sandy beach but that did not seem to have deterred the sun bathers who were scattered about on the stones stark naked. 'Look at zat...look at zat..', Mr Toth pointed in every direction swivelling his head about as though he had just discovered heaven on earth. Esme and Annie could not help but follow his stabbing finger and their eyes started from their heads as a male figure strutted past. The vital anatomical appendage was nowhere in evidence but the hairy chest and abdomen proclaimed to the world the state in which it had entered life. Esme stood with eyes like saucers and Annie's were the size of dinner plates. Mr Toth escaped her clutch whilst they were goggling at the body littered beach and careered off towards the sea.

Annie started off after him but crashed into an elderly man. 'I'm so sorry', she muttered trying to keep her disobedient eyes focussed on his face but all that naked flesh drew them down. The rolls of fat flopped over one another.

'It's a lovely day, isn't it?' He smiled into Annie's bowed head and she jerked her eyes up trying to remember her manners. '

'Yes.....Isn't it?' The murmured exchange was not backed up by the young girl's polite gaze remaining on his face. Instead her eyes were on periscopic swivels, trying to see and at the same time blind themselves to the excruciating bobs and knobs dangling beneath them. Time seemed to stand still until the man invited her to undress and join him in a picnic. Annie stammered her regrets at being unable to partake with him and sidled round him, endeavouring to keep her eyes away from his rump. He wobbled off fat rolls colliding against each other as he made his way down to his picnic hamper.

With that embarrassing incident disposed of Annie spent several minutes casting her eyes about looking for Mr Toth. Her town shoes

crunched as she wandered about and then she saw him. He stood between two naked ladies and he was in the throes of removing his trousers. With several lurches over the pebbles Annie found herself at his side.

‘No you don’t. Get them back on again’. He turned astonished eyes to his nurse and the trousers bunched about his ankles. Annie had no wish to see parts of her boss better left out of sight. Especially when she had to work in such close association with him. His ambassadorial elements she thought were best left a mystery.

‘Why I cannot sunbathe without clothes. Everyone else does?’ Annie had to think quickly.

‘What will your patients think if one of them recognises you. Can you imagine how they’d feel seeing their dentist in the altogether. For the sake of your professional standing it is not a good idea’. He stood silently digesting her little speech.

‘Altogether? Who said together. I haf not invited you to come into my nudist party. No not altogether. I vill lie here alone with zees ladies’. He swept an all embracing hand at the two women who were stretched out, their body hair standing out like furry rodents.

‘I didn’t mean that we’d all sunbathe together. I meant that it would not be seemly for your patients to see you naked. It would not be professional’. Mr Toth stood trousers still at half mast and ruminated on Annie’s censure.

‘How zey see me. No patients would be here ven I am naked. Zey would be in London. How zey see me zen’. Annie explained that there was a chance that patients could be around even if from London. After all she argued they had driven to the coast and had found the beach. What was to stop any patient from doing the same.

~

Esme came running from another direction and between them they urged their employer into his clothes. He reluctantly pulled up his trousers and restored his standing in their eyes. Annie was more relieved than anyone would have guessed and prodded him in the direction of the road.

They traipsed up to areas which she could see were civilised. No sooner had they set scuffed shoes on solid ground than an apparition materialised who made Worzel Gummidge look the tidiest scarecrow around. As the man drew level he suddenly let out such a whoop that Annie thought maybe the gulls had attacked his crumpled hat. Before Esme and Annie could protect Mr Toth the scarecrow had grabbed him and he was drawn into an embrace that left the nurse breathless. The air was repeatedly

kissed by both men about each other and about the girls. Mr Toth then released the scarecrow and introduced him to his staff. Annie was as amazed as if Mr Toth had suddenly found the Queen in their midst and was introducing her.

It seemed he was a long lost dental colleague. Dental Colleague? Annie concluded he looked about as professional as a vagrant from the gutter. He had candy striped leggings on, a tattered jacket and a hat that would have looked better on a garden gnome. From under the edges dragged clumps of hay stuck out. However she was assured it was Mr Endermole, an old associate from Mr Toth's early days when first in this country.

Within minutes the scarecrow had asked them all to come to his flat and have a drink. He was good at making omelettes he bragged before dragging them up the road to a Regency Crescent. Here was his home and soon they were all inside and sitting on the strangest seats Annie had ever encountered. Mr Toth was directed to a brown overstuffed leather sofa which creaked under his weight. Annie was pushed onto a stacked pile of paving stones and Esme somehow had to perch on a block of concrete.

Annie sat and allowed her eyes to tour the room. Many male nude paintings were hung in a higgledy piggledy fashion. Then she saw a lamp post arising from the centre of the room. It had been made from old Victorian drainpipes and a car tyre served as its base. At the top of the elevation a modern plastic shade like a Chinese hat directed down a pallid light. It was as though a candle was trying to illuminate a vault. What on earth was the point of it Annie wondered?

When she returned her attention to the men's talk she found the scarecrow extolling the virtues of kerbstones. They were wonderful he enthused and offered to send his old friend a lorry load if he wanted. Mr Toth shook his head not charmed into the ways of the stones he trod on. The scarecrow maintained his eulogy on the wonders of paving stones until they all became glassy eyed with boredom.

Suddenly their host galvanised them into activity and they trooped after him into his surgery. When Annie saw the painting on the wall flanking the dental chair she could not believe her eyes. It was a full frontal life sized nude mural of Mr Endermole, executed by his son when they had been involved in a game of nude squash. The only covering on the painted figure was a cap stuck jauntily on his hayrick head. Esme and Annie stood in little pools of shock. Fancy having a naked picture of yourself alongside the dental chair. What would your patients think?

Her thoughts were sparking in all directions when she was having a bad nightmare day. Whatever would happen next Annie fretted?

Mr Toth looked askance at the nude male on the wall. In his estimation, Annie could imagine, a woman would no doubt have been more desirable than a stripped scarecrow. Soon they were released from the meeting as the scarecrow had some other business to attend to. The two men clasped each other in a bear hug and they staggered out into the evening's dying light.

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'Ve go to ze car'. Mr Toth decided as they walked into a sea breeze which was strong enough to have wrenched their hair from their heads by the roots.

Back at the car Mrs Toth, Zsa Zsa and Earl were impatiently waiting. 'Where have you been?' They chorused. If only they knew. Annie could guess that Mrs Toth would never have believed the trouble the nurse had encountered in keeping her husband's trousers on. They had an uneventful journey back and that night Annie slept the sleep of the exhausted.

She walked around in a daze the next day seeing a full life sized nude picture of Mr Toth on the wall. She retained enough of her sanity to know that it was only in her imagination.

The standard of her work the next day was not up to scratch. She managed to pick up all the wrong instruments and Mr Toth was sorely tried. He was still resentful from having his desires thwarted and grumbled all day about Annie's refusal to support his wish to bare all. She was not going to be so easily forgiven.

As they progressed through the week his memory of 'those lovely ladies on the beach', faded into the distance. Annie had other worries more pressing. Two 'O' levels loomed and she studied in every conceivable place and moment. Her mind was applied with intense concentration and not even the lure of the opposite sex could drag her from between the text book pages.

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When the exams were upon her Mr Toth was accommodating and closed the surgery for the time she was off. Four more exams arrived and after sitting them Annie awaited the results. Months later she received notification of her success.

The next phase of her transformation was provided by a cramming college. Mr Toth was pleased at his nurse's dogged endeavour to raise herself to higher plains and readily arranged his timetable so that she could

continue working for him but with reduced hours. He decided that he would book his patients afternoons only. They would continue as before but work from two p.m. until seven p.m. In the mornings Annie would attend the crammer and take three 'A' levels.

On her first morning at the college she nearly recanted from the project. Her Chemistry tutor escorted her to the library and piled her arms high with books. Suddenly the course loomed so daunting that the prospect of studying for higher exams made Annie tremble in her shoes. Her fears nearly got the better of her. She had to take a strong grip on herself and managed to push them to a back corner of her mind.

Annie worked assiduously and continued with her dental nursing, the proceeds from which paid her tuition fees.

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Mr Toth happily settled to the new schedule and Annie duly arrived at two every day to take up her side of the chair. A young man entered with pain in a back molar. Master Sebastian Wiggleswade was a newcomer to dental techniques when he had never even set foot in a surgery before and was ignorant of the arts of tooth mongering.

The patient appeared happy with the examination and xray and Mr Toth explained the possible treatments with emphasis on the saving technique. Seb, as he insisted they call him, had a back tooth with a crater the size of Wembley Stadium. He made no demure when the injection was recommended and settled to the procedure. All was well until he saw the needle at which point he shrieked and covered his mouth with his hand. 'Come. Come. You're a big boy now, not a childer'. Mr Toth stood waiting becoming increasingly disconcerted as the fifteen year old Sebastian maintained his hands over his mouth his demeanour resistant to compromise.

'Vat you vant me to do? I haf to give an injection. I cannot stick ze needles into ze nerve of ze toot vithout you are numb'. Seb refused to remove his hands as his eyes jerked about in circles. Mr Toth's graphic descriptions of needles in nerves had touched a sensitive spot in the patient. Seb began to cry, the tears running down to wet his tee shirt.

'Vy you behave like zis? You are not a bambi, you should be a man. Ven I vas your age I vas fightink in a var. I had bullets vizzing past my ears ven I run across a field vith a gun, chargink ze enemy. I had to keel ozer boys my own age if zey ver ze enemy to my country. Zere vas no time to cry and get Lilac liveried for life iss full of pain. Ve all must take our

share'. That sermon did not impress Sebastian one bit but succeeded only in making him so furious that his hands fell away from his face.

'You f- - k off. You silly old man. I'm never going to fight in a war, I'm a contentious objector. Anyway there'll never be another war and if there is I'll be right out of it in Wallop Down or somewhere else. And another thing. Who do you think you are speaking to me like that. I'll report you to the social people. Your not fit to be a dentist. You've got a bad attitude'. With that Seb flung himself from the chair and flounced out with his pain. Mr Toth was left standing forlornly with the injection dangling from a limp hand.

'Vat I do wrong. Vat I say. I vas tryink to jollop him along'. He looked upset at the outcome to his well intentioned lecture. Before he could get too despondent at the incident Annie welcomed in Miss Dunwoody.

She tripped into the chair hugging a sack-like bag which she refused to relinquish. No amount of persuasion would entice her to yield up her personal sack. The treatment proceeded with the bag encumbering Mr Toth's working space.

When it came to the end of the drilling Miss Dunwoody leaned forwards. She then extracted from her bag a pudding basin, swilled the mouth wash round her mouth and spat into that. Throughout she spat into that receptacle and at the end directed Annie to empty it into the sink. Having done that she then instructed the nurse to wash the bowl, supervising her task as though she were an overseer in a factory. When it was clean to her satisfaction the patient placed it back in her bag. Why on earth bring your own spit bowl? The mouthwash glass Annie could understand though to bring your own would be insulting to the practitioner. As though you thought he used dirty equipment. But the spit bowl? What was the psychology behind that?

Miss Dunwoody finally left hauling her bag after her like the spoils from a robbery. Annie made a cup of tea for she thought Mr Toth and she deserved one. The last hour or so had been difficult to say the least.

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After their brief rest they resumed work. In the midst of the afternoon the telephone rang. An old patient wanted to make an appointment. Annie asked who it was? 'Mrs Titmus', came the blithe reply. For a moment she was at a loss then remembered. The lady who took off her dress for treatment. Oh no! Annie did not want another display of that withered cleavage for the lady would never achieve what she had set her sights on.

An appointment was made for the next afternoon. All the next morning Mrs Titmus interfered with Annie's studies. She insinuated her chippolata legs and tripe-like breasts between the pages of the nurse's books.

On the journey to her afternoon's work session Annie huddled in the bus seat and worried what would happen that afternoon. At her last visits Mrs Titmus had progressively shed items of clothing until she had ended up in her stringy smalls. Would she go the whole way this time and remove those last concealing remnants in her drive to seduce Mr Toth.

The moment too soon arrived and Mrs Titmus teetered into the waiting room. She was wearing a trench coat with her usual stilettos. Annie was wary of developments and worried about the coat? Did she have clothes on underneath?

In the end she need not have worried. The patient was relatively normal in her behaviour and once the coat had been draped over the desk chair she insinuated herself into the chair keeping on her tight black skirt. That had a slit up the back that made the skirt look a two-piece affair. However the blouse on the top half was a tame scooped effort that allowed only a peep of her shrivelled breasts. So they were spared the spectacle of her parading like a performer going through her routine.

Before Mrs Titmus left a man eased himself round the door of the waiting room. She greeted him with an effusive hug. He waited for her and they appeared on cosy terms. At last she was ready to leave and with relief Annie waved them off. Maybe in the future she would behave herself for it seemed she had found a man at least for the time being.

Ms Fendlesham was next invited into the surgery. She strode into place her position in government evident in the decisive setting of her bottom on the black leather seat and her nose cocking a snoop at the world. All told of an elevated standing in life.

'Minister without portfolio', Mr Toth whispered before Annie escorted the patient in. Apparently Annie should have been impressed. In the beginning she fawned a bit trying to find a favourable feature that might make her warm to the woman. Mr Toth and Ms Fendlesham talked of governmental policies and he buttered her up. Agreeing with her and accepting her viewpoint he acted out of the character Annie knew him to be. Where was her portfolio she wondered? Had she lost it?

At the conclusion of her treatment which was conducted through her suggestions and inexpert professional opinion they stood winding up the proceedings.

At that stage Annie had formulated her opinion. The lady was in her estimation about as genuine as fake fur.

‘What happened to her portfolio’, she asked Mr Toth after the minister had made a Grand exit, like a Prima Donna leaving the stage.

‘Vat portfolio. She never haf vun’. How did he know that Annie wondered?

‘You said she was a minister without portfolio. Where did it go. Has she lost it?’ Mr Toth was being deliberately obtuse. He knew what his nurse was driving at.

‘You are so funny. Zat is her position. She haf a post in ze government called Minister vithout portfolio’. He was openly laughing at Annie and she felt a fool.

‘What a stupid position to create in a government. Whatever does it mean. Without portfolio. How can she do a proper job without a portfolio’. That made him laugh even more and she shut up before she made a bigger fool of herself than she already seemed to be.

Chapter 21

Annie's studies gained momentum and she applied her mind, determined to give the 'A' level examinations the best she was able.

The written test came and went in a fluster of last minute revision. Within weeks the practical examinations arrived. It was her misfortune to have an influenza type virus when she sat Physics but she attended anyway and got her wheatstone bridges muddled with Whimshursts machine and a Van De Graff's generator. But she gave it her best shot in view of her high temperature.

In the practical Biology exam she faired no better. At the end of the practical course Annie's frog had decomposed before she could finish all the dissections. The college tried to obtain a fresh frog for her to do that last dissection of its nervous system. Exam day arrived but no frog had appeared so that one procedure was left undone.

As she walked between the blocks of desks of the examination centre laid out with dead rabbits and other sundry animals the certainty came to her that she would end up with a frog. Not only that. Annie felt absolutely certain she would get the dissection of the nervous system. The one system she had failed to complete. And she did end up with that dissection.

She laboured through that exam. In her mind she held a hazy picture of the frog's nervous system and she improvised the route to it. With correctly labelled structures she thought she had done as well as she could given the circumstances. She came away disappointed feeling that she might fail as did her tutor. However Annie was jubilant when she received notification that she had passed all exams. Not with the grades she might have expected with better preparation but still good enough to try to gain entry to dental school.

Mr Toth was as proud of Annie as she was of herself. In the meantime she continued working with him until she was awarded a place to study dentistry. In the September of that year she was due to take up her studies. Annie was sad at leaving Mr Toth but eager to start her course which would place her in a better position in life.

'Ven you qualify as dentist I vill take you on a world cruise. My wife vill come of course but I vill pay for us all and celebrate your success'. Annie was astounded at his generosity for she knew he meant it. She promised to visit him whenever she had a moment to spare. Every few weeks she turned up to hear his news and update him on her course and college news.

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Each time Annie returned she was given the latest happenings in their household. Mr Toth had not replaced her. Instead he had semi-retired. After all he was nearly seventy he would quickly point out and thought it time he hung up his drill. Any patients he saw he dealt with on his own but they were few and far between. He missed Annie at the chair-side he complained but not too hard. He was delighted that she was to follow in his shoes. Annie gathered Mrs Toth still had wind but the young girl was too happy to dwell on that lady's problem which was outside her experience. Esme had left before the nurse did. She was unhappy for although a catholic she had become involved with a married man. She suffered terrible guilt through the situation and was appalled at her own behaviour in succumbing to an affair which she considered forbidden. So she severed all ties with the man and with a broken heart returned to her native Ireland. She was never heard of again.

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Meanwhile the dental course started in the college bar and for some students it was routinely conducted from that venue. Drinks were denied them on the first day when the bar was secured by a metal grill against being plundered by desperate beginners. Later alcohol would freely flow, enlivening the student's grim progress through, lectures, seminars, practicals, tutorials, clinical assessments and floor sessions. These were interspersed between hospital exams without which they could not enter the university exams. It was a course designed to kill or toughen them for a career fraught with stress.

Anatomy, Physiology and Biochemistry were first embarked on. Anatomy consisted of stripping the corpse to the bone. Before they entered the Anatomy room they were vetted like specimens trying to gain entry to the Royal Enclosure at Ascot. Once deemed suitably attired they were propelled into the dissecting chamber.

Eight students were allocated to one cadaver and soon began the process of following anatomical structures through the mummified flesh, like a gaggle of vultures feeding on carrion in the desert. More squabbles broke out over pilfered scalpels and seekers than work was actually done. Then they had to pretend to the prowling demonstrators that they were enthusiastic about the circulatory and nervous systems which slowly emerged from beneath muscles they delicately prised from fascia.

Physiology and Biochemistry were boring subjects that involved laboratory procedures which they rushed through with the minimum of work.

At the end of that year came part I of the examination leading to a dental degree which was divided into five parts. In the Anatomy oral exam Professor Lewis OJay sat silently whilst a white haired external examiner gave Annie the statutory four minutes allowed. 'Well, I'm quite satisfied. Are you?' He asked of Professor OJay at the end of the grilling on the skull.

'No I'm not'. The professor looked furious. He grabbed a long knitting needle from amongst the bones littered on the table and jabbed it in the direction of the cadaver who had been laying behind Annie during the questioning. The corpse appeared indifferent to the proceedings which was more than could be said of Annie. Aggressively the professor began indicating structures with the needle. She quickly realised that this was a trick body and the structures had been arranged to masquerade as others. Any correct answers fuelled his anger which left her trembling in her shoes. She answered most of his questions correctly but in the end he made them so difficult she faltered. That was enough to make him inflict further gruelling punishment. After thirteen minutes when all the others had been given four minutes Annie was allowed to stumble from the room. The professor's furious gaze followed her out.

In spite of that traumatic oral exam she passed all subjects and was launched on the clinical course.

The first thing the hospital did was distribute wooden dental cabinets containing all the instruments needed to see the group through the entire course. They then had the audacity to demand payment from students so poor that some confined their eating to twice a week. That kit weighed as much as a heavy sewing machine in a case and had to be lugged up and down four flights of stairs. They had to be healthy or die in their journeys between departments.

The following four years were taken up with surgery, conservation, orthodontics, prosthetics, pharmacology, endodontics, dental materials, general medicine and surgery. They each lurched from crisis to crisis, from exam to exam with never enough time between to fit in the studying and revision.

On the surgical floor there was one surgeon who terrorized the nurses and students when on duty. His instruments were repeatedly thrown across the room accompanied by bellows, 'That's sharp. That's sharp. Get me a blunt one'. The scandalized nurses would scuttle off and return with a blunt elevator. He would coo in delight at the instruments that most others would reject and settle to his work. Another conservation demonstrator had

a prosthetic leg which always caused havoc with the foot pedal. He managed somehow but the drill was a mite uncertain in its revolutions.

They were all subjected to consistent ridicule and abuse this being deemed necessary to toughen them to the rigours of their chosen careers.

None of them enjoyed the course. Annie would visit Mr Toth and lament the horrors of the phantom head to him. Or she would complain of the evil demonstrators who took delight in shredding their confidence in tutorials or clinical sessions. Reduced to tears on many occasions Annie would run from the clinic, humiliated at showing weakness in front of the milling patients and patrolling staff.

Mr Toth always managed to lighten her mood by regaling her with some worse story of his student years. 'It vill be alright. Zey are nozing in life just annoying flies. You brush zem away and soldier on. I suffer vorse zan zat but I laugh at zem for eet all ends and you vill haf a degree and be a dentist. Just sink on zat'. He was right of course, Annie knew, but it was easier said than done.

The years slowly went by filled with exams, fights with prosthetic demonstrators, tiffs with office staff and major disagreements with specialists who knew everything better than anyone else. Annie found that her mind had been so trained to complex thinking that one day when a clerk asked her to hang up a clip board on a wall hook she could not for the life of her work out how to do it. 'Come here, Give me that', the clerk snatched the clip board from the girl. 'You students are all the same. Stupid'. What a fool Annie felt yet she could work out the most complicated treatment plans.

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The patients in a dental hospital were unlike those in practice. They had been shunted off to the hospital establishment precisely because they were impossible to deal with in a normal setting. Annie's first patient in conservation fell in love with her and wanted to start an affair. 'Who's to know if we end up in bed together?' His question so shocked her that her hands, which were fiddling in her dental cabinet, nearly tipped it clean off the shelf.

A sweet little old lady patient attended regularly for Annie to make her dentures. She was all of eighty odd years old and used to come with her ninety year old 'sweetheart'. One day when closeted in the prosthetics cubicle which acted like a confessional box, the lady confided to Annie that she and the old man were to be married. 'That's lovely', the young girl enthused, 'When is the great day to be?'

‘Oh we haven’t made arrangements yet. We will one day but there’s plenty of time’. Annie’s acrylic hand-piece slipped and nearly cut her hand. She would have thought at that stage of life, time was of the essence. There could not be much left for an octogenarian and an eighty plus year old. They might meet in the church in their coffins if they did not get a move on.

They had to learn a great deal about general anaesthetics. Those clinic were always entertaining if only for the extraneous distractions that occupied the moments between patients. A bird once got stuck in the extractor fan system. It made a terrible rattling like a stick being pulled fast along railings. They managed to get one of the hospital workmen to stop the fan. Annie thought the bird would have been dead but amazingly it fluttered about when they extricated it and flew off when launched out of the window.

Then a patient removed her knickers for her treatment. Someone had told her to remove her jewellery knick knacks and she thought they had said knickers. Not that they were aware until after when she told everyone of her mistake. They would not have known what she had on underneath her dress. Then an old man thought he had to remove all his cloths for the anaesthetic. They managed to stop him before he got too far for he was in the waiting room and embarrassing other patients with his stripping antics.

One day Annie was giving the anaesthetic to a little girl and she was going nicely off to sleep. Suddenly her mother who was standing watching surged forwards. ‘Is it alright. Is it safe. I’m beginning to panic’.

Annie looked at her in astonishment. ‘Of course it’s safe. We wouldn’t do it otherwise’. The mother subsided like a spent gust of air and they successfully completed her daughter’s extraction. That was one occasion when the doctor in charge actually complimented Annie. It was such an unusual occurrence that she nearly lost her composure.

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During the summer holidays Annie agreed to help Mr Toth with a couple of patients. It was strange going back as a nurse when she had learned so much of the practitioner’s side. One thing that session proved to her was just what a brilliant dentist Mr Toth was. Although he had studied in the nineteen twenties and thirties he knew as much if not more than the demonstrators teaching her.

His surgery had all the latest equipment for that day and the techniques used thereafter never varied from those she had watched at his side.

On that occasion when dressed again in her nurse's outfit Annie escorted in an old patient known to them both. Mr Moriarty was an Irish chap of such a happy disposition he was like a ray of sunshine. The only problem was he had verbal diarrhoea. Nothing could stop the stream of jokes which he directed at anyone who would listen.

They did not want to listen but were forced to because Mr Toth could not get into his mouth. Finally they got his attention and elicited between the jokes what was the problem. 'It's dose teeth. Dey were foin a week ago but when oi put dem in a day later dey wouldn't fit. Oi don't know whoi?' Mr Toth studied them minutely. They looked relatively new. He tried them in the mouth but they seemed somehow too big, like an oversized shoe on a foot. Mr Moriarty squinted into the distance whilst Mr Toth cast his eyes over the vaulted palate like a decorator assessing a ceiling for cracks in the plaster work.

'Zees are not your teet'. He finally advised the patient. Mr Moriarty looked at them with eyes like soup plates.

'Of course dey're moin. Who elses would dey be?'

'Well I don't know. Your vife. Has she false teet?' Mr Toth had examined the site thoroughly, he had even flicked a bit of spinach off the palate but they still would not stay up. He could only assume they did not belong to the patient for they appeared too large and an entirely different shape than the base they should fit.

Mr Moriarty was still ruminating over the conundrum. 'No oi have no woif. The good Lord took her years ago. But wait. I went out wid awld Paddy last week. We shared a point and oi stayed at his place. We bott have false teeth so oi must have taken his and he moin. How he'd get moi teeth in his mouth I don't know. Dey surely would be too toight. I spose it was dat oi left moin in his bartroom. He must have left his dere too. I can't member though cause we had many over de whan point an den oi fell into de spare bed. Well he aint said anyting about his teeth pinchin but den maybe he'd be too shoi'. Mr Toth could not help but smile at the little man's sunny explanation. He handed the dentures to the patient unable to do anything other than direct him to find Paddy and see if they exchanged dentures the problem would be solved. They heard no more from him so he must have found his teeth otherwise he would soon have let them know.

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Back at the hospital Annie happened to be in the crown and bridge department on one busy day. The Professor of advanced conservation had a young woman in the chair with a broken bridge. The patient was a

Television Presenter and desperate to have the bridge at the front of her mouth repaired with the minimum of disruption to her dentition. She was terrified of having to appear to the millions of viewers with less than perfect teeth.

Professor Bracer had his bald head buried in the patient's mouth as Annie stood looking in, noting the fracture in the middle of a long span of the bridge. He muttered about arranging for her to have the bridge drilled off and a new one made. 'Oh no. What will I look like for my TV programs. You know the lights will make plastic temporaries look grotesque.' She had such a beseeching manner Annie intervened before thinking of the consequences.

'I know a dentist who can weld broken bridges in the mouth without removing them'. The words spilled in a cascade of eagerness. Professor Bracer slowly raised his head and fixed his eyes on Annie's. The final explanation died on her lips as his look of disbelief froze her.

'Do you mind not making such idiotic pronouncements. You aren't helping the patient, just confusing the issue'. The tone of his voice withered Annie with its contempt. That stung her into a defensive retaliation and before she could prevent herself she blundered on.

'But it's true. I have worked in a surgery for two years with a dentist who devised a method for welding broken bridges in the mouth. I have seen those weldings and the results. They worked and the patient was saved from the trauma of having the bridges mutilated and new ones made'.

'That's enough', snapped the professor. 'I've never heard such rubbish. Get out of my clinic. Go to the library and read up about broken bridges. Go on. Get out'. Annie fled the eyes that bored into hers. He knew nothing of the process and could not believe such a technique existed.

She did not go to the library. What was the point when she knew she was right. Days later the young woman patient tracked Annie down in the hospital canteen. She asked her to provide the name of the dentist she had talked of in the clinic and Annie gave the presenter Mr Toth's details.

Again Annie attended at Mr Toth's surgery to help out at a mutually convenient time. Much to the delight of the TV presenter Mr Toth's technique worked. She was over the moon and must have told Professor Bracer who avoided Annie like the plague ever after when they met in the hospital environs.

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The demands of the course kept her occupied to the exclusion of everything else. For the next year she was adrift on an ocean of studying

that left her no time for other activities. She spoke to Mr Toth sporadically on the telephone, keeping him updated on the course and her halting progress through it. But Annie never seemed to find the time to fit in a visit.

‘Don’t forget. I promise you a world cruise ven you qualify’. She assured him she had not forgotten and soldiered on, bowed by the weight of academic facts to be learned. She managed to pass each stage of the examinations that combined to make the degree in dentistry.

Annie had executed her allotted number of root treatments, amalgam fillings, gold inlays, composite fillings, orthodontic cases and began the long revision slog leading to the final written papers, followed by oral and clinical practicals.

The world was excluded, pushed to the distance as she progressively withdrew behind the thick folders of hand written notes, carefully accumulated for last minute revision.

The day before her finals papers were to start she sat, legs curled under her, folder spread as she bowed her head to the mammoth task of memorizing as much as she could from the pages.

At one point she was deeply immersed when the thought of Mr Toth drew her head up. She could not concentrate for a moment then bowed her head again, trying to read a sentence. It made no sense as she scanned and re-scanned the line for the presence of Mr Toth intruded to the point where she felt him there. Nothing was visibly evident yet he filled the room. Annie tried once more to ignore the strong impression and bent her head to her folder.

After five minutes of trying to banish the sense of a presence in the room she gave up. Her eyes toured the surroundings looking, but seeing nothing. And yet it was as though he was in the room with her, filling it with his strong personality. The sense grew so strong she got up, impelled by something beyond her will and went to get paper and pen. She began writing, then wondered why she was doing something so out of habit. She always spoke to him on the phone.

Feeling in a trance-like state Annie rose from her seat and went to the telephone. That was more like it she thought as she dialled. She would speak to him and arrange to see him after her exams. In four weeks they would be over and she could tell him she could visit then.

The ‘Au Pair’ answered. ‘Could I speak to Mr Toth please’, Annie asked thinking on the conversation.

‘Um. Who is it?’ The ‘Au Pair’ queried before connecting them as she always had.

‘It’s Annie’. The young girl replied.

'I'm very sorry. Mr Toth died yesterday morning'. Annie replaced the receiver stunned at the news. Turning about she stared at the room but his presence had evaporated. She sat down and found that she could then make sense of the words of her notes. There was no presence then to interfere with her concentration.

The room felt empty as she returned to her chair and continued with her studies for the start of the exams the next day. Sadly Mr Toth never knew of her success, for Annie did pass finals and qualified as a dentist. She proceeded to work in that capacity but that is another story.

The End

