

PORLE JOEN

The Dentist

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the Dentist

It was not an extraordinary day. The books were sparsely filled with appointments allowing an adequate days earnings. He liked it that way. He was not in need of the finest clothes, a mansion or a fancy car – his little Ford Festiva was functional.

He much enjoyed these lazy days. Rushing only made his stressed. The last time he had a rushed day, he almost pulled a perfectly healthy adult tooth out of the mouth of a twelve-year-old boy. His focus and nerves definitely liked these lazy days. Yes, it was much safer for all involved.

Today, there were only five appointments on the books. The first two were simple routine cleans and the third was a rather minuscule filling. Minuscule, yet painful. Not painful for the patient, indeed, she would not have been able to feel a thing. Dr Roberts knew that, yet, the young lady whined, cried and screamed as if he was pulling a molar without anaesthetic. She did not even require numbing, the damage was a superficial surface chip, nowhere near any nerves. Still,, he remained patient and gave her a very low dosage of gas to calm her rather than ease the pain. Her adrenalin was high and the gas had little effect but he was not the kind of doctor who administers stronger drugs just to appease a psycho systematic dentistry fear. If he did that, most of his patients would be knocked out.

Indeed, the girl had brushed his nerves but it was quick and the young lady left with a glowing smile. Now, it was past mid-day and his next appointment was not for another two hours. Ivan decided a stretch was in order. He would take a stroll and find a lovely cafe at which he could enjoy his lunch. He would sit in the calming breeze of the open and enjoy all that life offers. It would be perfect and restful and exactly what the Doctor ordered.

Ivan washed his hands with disinfectant, and washed them again. His line of work had presented him with a mild though rather annoying case of germ phobia. It was nothing he could not handle yet he greatly despised the multitude of elderly people who visited him. They came for the comfort and the bedside manner but all he saw were old, rotting, gnarled and stained teeth and gums wanting to expel their halitosis as he forced himself to have a closer expectation of their festering mouths.

As a shiver ran along his spine, he wondered if perhaps he should consider a new line of work. He laughed aloud to himself; how ridiculous. At sixty-seven, what was he going to do? Start a carpentry apprenticeship? Over forty years of dentistry had provided all he needed and more, he had a nice nest egg and retirement was definitely a safe and considerable option. Yes, it was definitely an option. Quite a damn good one really. He pulled up the appointments file on his laptop. It was linked to the front desk computer where Sara was always vigilant about keeping his schedule up to the minute. He looked forward in time. Appointments were randomly dotted throughout the coming weeks. He clicked into the following month. Sixteen appointments booked already. He sighed. He clicked ahead another three months and found three pre-booked appointments. He sighed heavier. Six months into the future...

“Who the hell books 6 months ahead?” Well, looked like retirement was out for at least another six months. It was only one appointment but Ivan had only ever missed three appointments in his entire career, he prided himself on reliability. Three appointments... when his beloved Cheryl passed. He shook the thought away before he could dwell. And that was his reason to keep working. In the two years since she passed, he had not allowed

himself to fall into the deep darkness of grief that he could feel playing with the edges of his mind. He knew that over time, if he held it at bay long enough, it would dissipate. It had not done so yet. He would work until it had. It was settled. He would never retire.

He flicked back to today's appointments to reconfirm what time Charlie would be in. Ivan liked Charlie, he had exemplary hygiene for a gentleman in his fifties. Charlie had all his original teeth and not a single oral disease or infection in the twenty years Ivan had been seeing him. Excellent. Another simple clean, good old Charlie. Ivan smiled with the knowledge that his afternoon would be relaxed and enjoyable.

Ivan clicked the intercom to reception.

"Sara, I'm heading out to lunch. Would you like me to bring you back anything my dear?" He picked up his coat.

"Oh, ahhh. Hang on," Sara said through the intercom. That was odd. Sara was usually highly professional and rarely sounded so absent. The door to his office opened. Sarah looked concerned. She closed the door behind her and leaned against it. She was a gorgeous girl, in her early thirties. Ivan had dreamed of her in a way he should not. It was just a dream though, he had no control over his subconscious thoughts or desires. No, not a desire.

"Ivan, a young man just presented with a rather urgent broken tooth." Oh great, so much for his relaxing lunch. Sara's face was unusual. She seemed pallid and somewhat disturbed. Ivan became worried. She knew his aversion to dental disgust and his first thought was that this young man was going to push his limits. A 'young man' with an urgent broken tooth could mean three things. Either the boy was in a fight and had broken it on a fist, or his lack of hygiene has left his mouth slowly ridding itself of those pesky pearly whites, or he was a drug addict with broken down teeth and a mentality to match. He hoped it was a fight – blood, he could handle.

"Let me guess, another fight in town. Should I expect another boy to arrive shortly?"

"No Ivan, no fight." Damn! Sara was holding her cards close to her chest. She was giving nothing away and that did nothing to alleviate his concerns. She stared at him. It was unexpected and unusual.

"What is it, Sara? What's wrong?" She shook her head slowly. It must be bad. Definitely a drug addict. "OK, is he in a lot of pain?"

"No, none," Sara said. She was not making this any easier. No pain. Strange. Normally the drug addicts and hygiene haters would not come to him until their pain was unbearable. But no pain was good. The surgery had a general rule that drop-ins would only be seen in cases of emergency and extreme pain. Perhaps he could see this boy another day. Sara knew that and it annoyed him a little that she had not already booked an appointment for the boy. It annoyed him and worried him. She was usually very efficient.

"If he is not in pain, can't he book in for an appointment?" Sarah shook her head. "Sara, why not?"

"Because he hasn't been able to eat anything solid for over a week and he is hungry."

The boy must be in pain. Why else would he not be able to eat? Sara was not making any sense. He put his coat down.

"Send him through." Sara nodded slowly and made a quick escape out the door. 'Maybe she needs a day off' he thought to himself. Perhaps he had not been paying close enough attention to the poor girl. She works hard.

He sat down at the laptop and tapped in his password to access the patient information screen. Very strange, Sara had not entered the boy's details. He hit the intercom again.

"Sara, can you please enter the patient's details."

“Ummm, yes, Dr Roberts. Doing it now, sorry.” Yes, he would tell her to have tomorrow off. This was so unlike her. He sat back and waited for the information to come through. After less than a minute, the computer beeped quietly to let him know the updated patient information was reloading.

“Good girl, Sara,” he said to his screen. He clicked on the patient details and loaded the personal information. Zach Booth. Born... He sighed again. What was going on with that girl?

“Sara,” he said as he clicked the intercom.

“Yes, Sir?”

“You have put the date of birth in incorrectly. Could you please fix that.”

“Sir, that is the date the patient gave me.”

“I thought you said it was a young man.”

“Yes, Dr Roberts. He looks like a young man, but that is the date he said.”

“Well, did you confirm it with identification?”

“He doesn't have any. Sorry, would you like me to change it still?”

He sighed again. OK, so the boy was perhaps mentally ill. It did not matter. Ivan was the kind of man that would do what needs to be done to help this boy in any way he could. He knew that he was probably working for free on this one.

“No, it's fine. Thanks.” Sara did not reply. She was not at all herself today. Never mind, he may still be able to get an hour for lunch. He stood slowly and walked to the door that joined his office to the surgery. He put a smile on his face and affirmed to himself that once he was in there, he would again remember why he does this. It was always the way. He loved being able to help those who needed it. Yes, it occasionally got him down, but in general, he enjoyed his work and he knew he was the best dentist in this town or the next. He opened the door and stepped through.

“Good afternoon, Master Booth. Can I call you Zach?”

“Of course, Sir,” the young man replied. He was definitely not the forty-year-old man his date of birth claimed. He was perhaps, twenty. He was clearly a polite young man so Ivan saw no need to be concerned that this boy was obviously hiding something, whether that be mental illness or something more sinister.

Ivan sat on his stool and pushed himself over to the boy. The wheels squealed in defiance. He should have a look at that. It was the same thought he had with every patient for the past six weeks. He accepted that he was probably not going to have a look at it any time soon.

“So, I hear you have broken your tooth. That was a bit silly, how did you manage that?” he asked with a smile. Zach laughed lightly.

“I'm not sure, Sir.”

“Please, call me Ivan.” Such a polite man showed respect and Ivan was always willing to offer the same in return.

“Thank you, Sir, but I cannot. That would be rude.” Ivan was a little taken aback. This was not a level of deeply held respect that he expected from a young lad of his years.

“How about, Dr Roberts then? Sir makes me sound so old,” Ivan said with a laughed. Zach laughed softly in return.

“Yes, Sir. Dr Roberts.”

“So, you are not sure how you broke your tooth?” It clearly can't be too bad. He had another stab of annoyance at Sara. Well, it was too late now. The boy was in the chair and Ivan would complete his job with attention and care. At least it meant he may get time for his

relaxing lunch. He had a stab of guilt at the thought. While the boy was there, he would come first. "When did you notice it was broken?"

"About 8 days ago, Sir. Sorry, Dr Roberts."

"OK, well let's have a look, shall we?" Ivan turned the overhead light on and grabbed his oral mirror. Zach nodded and opened his mouth obediently. Ivan did a quick scan and could see... nothing. Zach's teeth were immaculate. There was not a single filling, not a single chip, not even a crack. They were bright white and perfectly straight. Confusion set in.

"Zach, which tooth is having the problem?"

"My right canine."

Ivan had a closer look. Nothing. The tooth was fine.

"Are you having any pain, Zach?"

"No Dr Roberts, never." Was this a joke?

"Zach, your tooth looks fine. There is no damage." Zach sighed. Oh, so he is a hypochondriac. These situations were always difficult. Like old Mrs Winters. She was in his office every few weeks and it had not escaped his attention that she had appointments booked for the next six months. She was personally preventing his early retirement. Lovely old woman but she would come in complaining of a new ailment every time despite her pre-booked appointments. Ivan often wondered if perhaps she was just lonely. Mrs Winters would become highly agitated if he told her there was nothing wrong. He had to offer her medical terminology that basically meant, "There is nothing wrong with you," but sounded like, "There is definitely something wrong with you, you are NOT insane". Sugar pills and other placebos were his only defence. He often wondered if he was contributing to her psychosis but it seemed to make her happy and really, he believed that that was all she wanted. He would have to tread carefully with Zach.

"It's okay Zach," Ivan reassured the boy. "We'll see what we can do to fix any issues. Perhaps you should tell me a bit more of the background. Let me know how you first noticed it and what you noticed, okay?" Zach nodded. Ivan would listen carefully and find something to grasp on to. He would need to investigate to find out if a physical placebo or a harsh sounding medical terminology placebo would be the key for this boy.

"Yes, Dr Roberts. Well, I was out for dinner. My girlfriend and I were quite hungry so we went out for a bite. Everything was fine, but when I tried to eat something, I could not get my right canine in. The left one was fine and I thought that was quite odd, but the right one would not behave. I could not eat properly and I was forced to go home and have something from the refrigerator through a straw."

'What an odd boy,' thought Ivan.

"What were you trying to eat?"

"Rabbit." Unusual. Perhaps this would be usable.

"Well, Zach, Rabbit is quite tough if cooked incorrectly."

"Oh, it wasn't cooked."

"Sorry?"

"It wasn't cooked. That would be pointless." Raw rabbit? Ivan was starting to getting a better overall picture of this boy and his mind.

"Perhaps that is why Zach. You need to cook a rabbit before you eat it." Ivan spoke gently and calmly. Everything was becoming clearer but he would still tread very carefully through the conversation on the off chance that he was wrong.

"I can't eat cooked food, Sir." The way Zach said 'Sir' did not seem quite so respectful this time and his use of the term as opposed to Mr Roberts seemed like an attempt to show a clear swarm of disrespect. Ivan would need to be gentle.

“Okay, Zach, perhaps you should try something else, like Chicken.”

“I hate Chicken.”

“What do you like, Zach?”

“Rat.” Dr Roberts heard the word and continued without reaction.

“Have you tried eating Rat?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“It didn’t work.” Zach’s voice had become deeper and he was clearly becoming frustrated with Ivan. Suddenly, Zach pushed the light aside and sat up. “I think I have come to the wrong place. Sorry, Dr Roberts, I should go.” Zach pushed himself halfway out of the chair then stopped, frozen. Ivan wondered why until he noticed his own hand on the boy’s chest, holding him in place.

“Zach, I will help you. Sit back.” Zach relaxed back into the chair.

“Yes, Sir. Dr Roberts.” Zach’s voice sounded meek. Ivan was mildly proud of his assertion and his regain of the boy’s confidence. Right, now to help the boy.

“Open up again, Zach,” Ivan ordered and the boy obeyed. Ivan could still see no damage but this boy undoubtedly had a problem. Ivan snapped on a pair of disposable gloves. “Zach, I am going to have a feel around your canine tooth, is that okay?”

“Uh-huh,” Zach responded through his open mouth. Ivan felt the gum around the boy’s tooth looking for any signs of unusual growths or swelling. Nothing.

“Does that hurt at all?”

“Uh,” Zach responded in a tone that suggested a no.

“Good. Everything feels fine.” Zach squirmed. “Calm down Zach, I’m not finished,” Ivan reaffirmed. The boy needed him to find something, so he would, real or not. Ivan pushed on the end of the canine and Zach flinched. Ah, perhaps there was something. “Did that hurt?” Ivan removed his hand and sat up to let Zach respond.

“No, Dr Roberts, I felt nothing at all. That’s the problem.” Ivan finally understood and all doubt was gone. Zach had no feeling in his right canine at all. That was not a good sign!

“Zach, I’m going to check your other teeth, okay?” Zach tensed. His hands gripped the armrests and his back straightened. “Zach, I need to. It’s okay, I will be careful. Do you understand?” Zach nodded and took a deep breath. He forced his body to relax and leaned back into the chair again as he opened his mouth. Ivan needed to be careful now. Extremely careful.

Ivan moved in again, close, but not too close in case the boy overreacted. He pushed up on the base of Zach’s front teeth, just gently. He pushed on the teeth either side of his right canine. The boy did not react.

“Could you feel that Zach?” Zach nodded slightly. “Okay, I am going to push on your left canine now. I will be gentle. Just try to relax.” Zach closed his eyes and nodded again. Ivan gently touched the end of the boy’s left canine and the reaction was instant. The boy jumped so high that he flew out of the seat and across the room knocking over Ivan’s instrument tray. Zach hit the door with such force that the top hinge cracked. The boy stayed against the wall, his nails biting into the timber. His chest heaved with fear. Ivan sighed. He kicked his instruments out of the way as he slowly walked to the boy. Ivan placed a hand on Zach’s shoulder. “Open your mouth son.” Zach obeyed. Ivan pressed against his right canine. “Still nothing?” Zach shook his head. “Sit down, please. I can fix this for you.” Ivan slowly picked up his instruments as Zach settled back into the chair and forcibly calmed himself.

“Zach, I’ll give you a few minutes. I’m going to go into my office to get you something that will help, do you understand?” Zach nodded. Ivan sighed again.

He walked back through the adjoining door to his office. Ivan clicked on his intercom.

“Sara, are you there?”

“Yes, what the hell happened? What was that bang? Are you alright, Ivan?” Dear Sara. She was such a caring soul.

“Yes, I’m fine Sara. Young Zach is a little bit nervous. I’ll need you to come in to help with an extraction. Please just be careful with the boy, he is very fragile at the moment. I will be back in a few minutes. I just need to get a few things organised in the office.”

“Of course, Ivan. I’ll just lock up and head in.”

“Thank you, Sara. You are truly the best receptionist I have ever had. You do a great job, I don’t tell you that enough. By the way, I want you to have tomorrow off.”

“Oh, ummm, thank you, Ivan.” She sounded surprised. He definitely did not tell her enough. She had only been with him for just under a year, but she was the most efficient and professional person he had worked with. He would miss her, tomorrow. The intercom clicked off. Ivan went to his laptop and re-placed the advertisement he had used so many times before.

The door opened and he heard her soothing voice as she spoke gently to Zach. He sounded fearful. Poor kid. He went back into the surgery with another sigh. Sara was holding the boy’s hand gently. He looked terrified.

“Dr Roberts,” Zach started. “I can’t do an extraction.” So Sara had warned him. That was good.

“Of course you can, Zach. It’s the only thing that will help. Trust me.”

“No, I can’t. I mean really. I can’t do it.”

“Zach, if you don’t, it will never get better. I understand how you are feeling, but it is the only way.” Ivan knew that Zach would have to accept this fate or flee the office. Either way, he had done all he could to help the boy. Ivan just hoped the boy was smart enough to see the truth and understand.

“Is there no other way?” Zach asked with sorrowful eyes.

“No,” Ivan replied bluntly. Sara leaned in close to Zach. Her bedside manner was something special and she would be able to comfort the boy.

“It’s alright, Zach,” Sara spoke softly. “I am right here. It won’t be that bad, I promise.” Zach looked at Ivan questioningly. Ivan smiled in encouragement.

“Zach, trust me. This is what you need.” Zach breathed deeply and nodded. He would accept the extraction. “That’s a shame,” Ivan thought to himself as he pulled his instrument tray in close. “Are you ready?” he asked.

Zach shook his head, took three deep breaths and then nodded.

Ivan chose the best tool for the job. Blood splattered across Zach’s face as the scalpel sliced through Sara’s jugular vein. Her hands grasped at her throat as her eyes bugged out. She could not scream. Ivan grabbed the girl’s hands and pulled them out of the way. She was already too weak to struggle.

“Zach, don’t waste her,” Ivan warned. Zach snarled and locked onto Sara’s throat where Ivan had made the cut for him. He licked at the wound as he took the precious food into him. Sara’s heart began to slow as her eyes locked on to Ivan, searching for meaning.

“Sorry, Sara. You have done an awesome job. This is your promotion. Excellent job my dear.” Ivan pulled the limp and barely alive Sara away from Zach.

“Open your mouth son.” Zach obeyed. Ivan pushed gently on Zach’s right canine. It descended and he snarled loudly before sinking both teeth into the dying Sara. Ivan removed his gloves and threw them in a nearby bin.

“Zach, don’t go so long without human blood again.”

Mrs Winters was nothing. The real reason he could not retire was all the damn referrals from the Vampires.

THE END

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This is not the start of Zach's story.

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