

The Joy of Diverse Dentistry

Neville woke—regained consciousness, more like it—in a glaringly bright office. He was groggy and nauseated. A diffused spotlight on the end of a sturdy metal arm shone down on him from a few feet away. Some small hand tools were set out on a stainless-steel tray nearby. He recognized the tiny, angled mirror and the curved little doovers used for poking and scraping.

This was no office. This was a dental surgery.

There was a drill and, *gulp*, he didn't even want to look at those pliers. Ugly, creepy things they were. Dentistry was a profession thousands of years old. Given all that time, couldn't they have come up with a less torture-porn way of yanking a tooth? Blow that. Why wasn't there a tablet you could take that would cure (and reverse) tooth decay overnight? No money in it for dentists, that's why.

Now he remembered what he was doing here. He'd rocked up at this surgery because he needed treatment, urgent, desperate, budget-priced treatment, for an upper molar reenacting the Spanish Inquisition in his mouth. He was unemployed and couldn't afford to pay the standard, exorbitant dental fees. This surgery offered its services at a heavy discount. The catch? Its staff recruitment policy was big on inclusion. It employed people who might not be able to get a gig elsewhere, not because they were incompetent but because they were fresh out of dental school or had obtained their qualifications in the Third World. Neville didn't care. He was all for giving people a fair go regardless of who they were and where they came from. Anyway, with the pain he was in he'd settle for someone whose dental schooling was limited to watching how-to videos on YouTube.

He tried to sit up in the operating chair but couldn't. His hands were fastened to the arm rests and his legs bound together all the way up to

his knees with gray cloth tape.

The surgery door opened, and in walked a busty blonde in a nurse's uniform. She looked like a sexy pin-up from one of those glossy illustrated cheesecake books. She wore white silk stockings held up by black garter belts and the reddest, shiniest lipstick he'd ever seen. She closed the door, smiled, and said, "You're awake. Good." Her voice conjured up parting silk in a softly lit bedroom.

Neville struggled to free his arms. "Why am I tied up like this?"

She leaned over him, giving him a spectacular view of the deep valley between her rolling alabaster hills, and hung a dental bib around his neck. "There we go," she said.

He recalled that valley. It was the last thing he saw before unconsciousness threw a black sack over his head.

"You know, this is against the law?" he said. "You do know that? Look, I paid the money up front just like you asked. What more do you want?"

The surgery door shook. Then it opened, just a fraction. Silence plucked on Neville's taut nerves as he waited for the dentist to enter. The dentist didn't. But a white walking cane did. It came tap-tap-tapping exploratively into the surgery. Seconds later the dentist, a 40-year-old white guy with Stevie Wonder glasses and a slicked-back rocker hairdo, bungled after it. "ARE YOU THERE, NURSE?! ARE YOU THERE?!"

"Yes, Doctor. I'm over here with your patient."

"Oh. Good. Keep talking. I'll find you a lot faster."

"No worries. Anyway, you'll be pleased to know he's strapped in and ready to go."

"Excellent. Excellent."

Neville supported inclusion, but this was ridiculous.

The dentist banged into the instruments tray. "Oops. What's that I've

run into?” His hands groped some of the instruments. “Oh. So that’s where they are? Good to know. All right, Nurse, if you’d guide me to the patient’s mouth.”

“It’s on his face, just below his nose.”

“Nurrrrrse.”

“Sorry, Doctor. Here, give me your hand.”

Just as Neville was about to vent his horror and outrage in a spit-ridden tirade, the dentist and the nurse pointed at him and laughed.

Fooled ya!

“Did you really think I was blind?” the dentist said.

“I think he really did, Doctor,” the nurse said.

Neville was bumfuzzled.

Without bumping into anything, save the edge of a bench, the dentist walked to the door and deposited the cane in a chrome umbrella bucket. “What kind of a dentist do you take me for?”

“I . . . I don’t know,” Neville said.

“I want to help my patients, not scar them for life. I’ll have you know I took the Hippocratic Oath.”

The dentist removed his glasses and faced Neville. He was cross-eyed. Not Lucy Liu cross-eyed, cartoon cross-eyed. “And that’s an oath I plan to keep.”

Now it was Neville’s turn to laugh. He did so more out of sheer relief than anything else. The whole thing had been a put-on, one that had been in pretty bad taste if he was going to be honest about it.

“What’s so funny?” the dentist asked.

“You’re cross-eyed,” Neville said.

The nurse gasped as though Neville had said something shockingly offensive.

“I was born this way.”

“Right,” Neville said. “Just like you were born blind.”

The dentist grew deadly serious. "I . . . was . . . born . . . this . . . way."

"Then why did you pretend to be blind?"

"Because it helps my patients relax when they find out I'm not."

Cross-eyed *and* a mental case.

"Look, just let me go. You can keep the hundred bucks."

"You've paid for dental treatment, you're going to get it."

"But I don't want it anymore. I've changed my mind. Seriously. I'm feeling much better now."

Giving the nurse a wink, the dentist said, "We know what he's suffering from, don't we, Nurse?"

"We sure do, Doctor."

The dentist grinned smugly at Neville. "Strabismusophobia, fear of cross-eyed people. Now let's take a look at that tooth." He stepped in Neville's general direction but veered too far to the left, missing both patient and the operating chair. "What's happened here?" A quick look around revealed all. "Overshot."

He sat on a stool. If not for a late course correction, his backside would have missed it entirely. He grabbed something from the instrument tray, had a close look at it. "That's not the mirror." He grabbed something else. "That's the mirror."

Neville's mounting terror had reached critical mass. "Help! Somebody help me! Please!"

"That's it," the dentist said, leaning toward him. "Keep your mouth wide open."

Neville shut it tighter than a bomb-blast door. No way was he letting some cross-eyed whack job in there.

"Sir, open your mouth. Sir, please open your mouth."

Neville shook his head.

The dentist sat back and spoke to Neville as if he weren't speaking

to him but rather to someone lying beside him. “Do you have any idea how childish you look right now?” He sighed. “This is so sad. What you’re demonstrating is the bigotry, the discrimination, I’ve had to endure for years. Has it ever occurred to you that cross-eyed dentists have feelings too?”

He glanced at the nurse. “Nurse, fetch me a cigarette lighter.” She opened a cupboard, took a BIC lighter from a bulk pack, and handed it to him. “Thank you. Now, kindly remove his left shoe and sock.”

“Why do you want her to do that?” Neville said worriedly. “What are you gonna do to me?”

“We have a saying in the dentistry profession,” the dentist said. “No pain, no gain.”

The nurse nodded to the dentist. *Ready.*

The dentist held the lighter an inch from the sole of Neville’s bare foot.

“Please don’t do this,” Neville said. “I’m begging you.”

“You’ll thank me in the end. Won’t he, Nurse?”

“He sure will, Doctor.”

“No, don’t! For the love of God! Remember your Hippocratic Oath!”

“Why does it always have to come to this?” the dentist said with bona fide sorrow. “*Why?*”

Flick.

Flame met foot. Its searing sting opened Neville’s mouth so wide he got a muscle cramp. The roar of pain that raced out vibrated the dentist’s wall-mounted graduate diploma of medicine, which, on closer inspection, may have been just a certificate of participation. The nurse shoved a plastic mouth opener in the yawning orifice. “It’s in, Doctor.”

“Good. See to his foot. There’s some aloe-vera gel on the bench.”

“Owwwmefoo,” Neville said, mouth opener murdering his diction.

“Owwwmefooo.”

“All right,” the dentist said. “Let’s see if we can ID that aching tooth of yours. Nothing worse than an aching tooth.” He poked Neville’s right cheek with the mirror, dismissing the mishap with a chuckle. “Well, at least I know where your mouth isn’t.”

Neville gasped, made a tortured face. The nurse looked up from tending to his toasted foot. “Sorry.”

Having located Neville’s mouth, the dentist searched inside it with the mirror. “Now, where oh where is this sore tooth? Ah! Here they are—*here it is*. Yes. Decay has really gone to town on that.” He poked it with a scraper. “Does this hurt?”

An agonized groan was his answer.

He leaned back. “OK, I have some good news. I think I can save the tooth. Ever had a root canal?”

Neville hadn’t but a mate of his had. His mate said it had hurt like buggery, and that was with a sane, non-cross-eyed dentist doing the work.

“You look worried,” the dentist said. “Don’t be. I’m going to pump you so full of lidocaine you won’t feel a thing.”

“Um, Doctor?” the nurse said.

“Yes, Nurse.”

“We’re all out of lidocaine.”

“We are?”

“You used the last batch on your previous patient.”

“Oh. So that’s why he had trouble walking?”

“And breathing.”

“What else do we have in the way of pain management?”

“I’ve got some Panadol in my handbag.”

“I guess it will have to do.”

She grabbed the tablets. “There’s just two left.”

“Two’s better than none. Administer away.”

“Here, swallow these,” she said, tossing them in Neville’s mouth. He gagged on them until saliva herded them down his gullet.

The dentist reached repeatedly for a drill. Third time lucky. “Panadol isn’t nearly as effective as lidocaine. But don’t worry, I’ll ease your discomfort by working twice as fast.” The drill started unexpectedly, giving him one hell of a fright. “Darn! Must’ve bumped the pedal.”

Neville felt some loosening in the tape that secured his right arm to the chair. If he wriggled his arm enough, he might be able to free it.

The dentist moved in for the drill. “Has the Panadol kicked in yet? Let’s find out, shall we?”

“Stayawayhommayyyy,” Neville warned.

Rrreeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee. The tungsten-carbide drill head began spinning, at 250,000 RPM. Deliberately this time. The dentist brought it closer, ever closer, to Neville’s helpless mouth. His deranged grin spoke of immense job satisfaction. Soaked in sweat, Neville trembled like a field mouse on a freeway.

“Relax,” the dentist said. “*Relax*. We’re in this together.” He misjudged the location of Neville’s mouth (again!) and drilled the flesh above the left corner of his top lip, carving out a semi-circular canal that flooded with hemoglobin. “Hey, that’s not your molar.” Neville spasmed and gurgled in agony.

“Nurse, grab a bandage,” the dentist said. “I can’t see properly with all this blood.” He accidentally nicked Neville’s left nostril. Blood squirted from the wound. “Oh for crying out loud! That’s the last time I buy equipment at an outdoor market.”

Neville wasn’t going to get out of the chair with a face or even a head if he stayed in it much longer. His right arm attacked its restraints.

The nurse pressed bandages against his bleeding cuts.

“Er, Nurse,” the dentist said, “could you move your left breast? It’s

in my way.”

She turned slightly to the right. “Is that better, Doctor?”

“Much.”

The dentist inserted the drill in Neville’s mouth. Its ghastly squeal was firecracker loud. Neville jerked as it biopsied his tongue. “Please keep your tongue still,” the dentist said. “This drill is strictly for teeth.”

Guided by the best crossed eyes in the business, the drill skipped haphazardly across the surface of the tooth in front of the decaying molar, pitting the enamel in multiple spots, before finding its target, and then burrowed deep. Fragments of tooth blasted the roof of Neville’s mouth. The colossal detonation of pain blew him to the edge of unconsciousness. His bound legs convulsed.

Sweat from his right hand had dissolved the tape’s adhesive. He could slide the hand back and forth now. He pulled, twisted, lifted, pulled, twisted, lifted, pulled, twisted, lifted, then finally yanked it free. It whacked the dentist in the side of the head. The dentist lost all control of the drill, which set upon Neville’s teeth and gums like a tungsten-carbide pit bull. Blood and bits of tooth spritzed the dentist’s face. Recoiling in horror, he fell backward off the stool, taking out the instrument tray and bashing his head against a cupboard on his way to the surgery floor.

“Doctor!” The nurse’s breasts rushed to his aid. The nurse followed close behind.

A hemorrhage-red slurry speckled with pureed teeth and shredded flesh ran down Neville’s chin. He whipped out the mouth opener and ripped the tape off his left arm.

“You see?” the dentist said. “You see? That’s why we tape you to the chair, so you won’t hurt yourself. Just look at you.”

Neville lunged out of the chair to exact revenge but, forgetting his legs were bound, slumped to the floor like a duffle bag full of wet

cement. Making feral noises, he scabbled along the surgery's light-gray tiles, toward the dentist. The tape stayed on his legs. He didn't have time to remove it. Not until his hands were done throttling.

"What's the matter?" the dentist asked, genuinely puzzled. "I did my job. I never hit *you* in the head."

"Faaaaaark yoooosh!" The diverse dental work had lumbered Neville with a lateral lisp. He launched himself at the dentist. The latter dove out of the way, leaving the nurse to cop the full impact. If not for the timely intervention of her chest, she and Neville would have been gravely injured.

The dentist clambered to his feet. *Phew, that was close.*

"Come back heersssh," Neville said, crawling after him. "You crosssh-eyed barsshted!"

"I think this hater needs to learn some tolerance, Nurse," the dentist said. "Grab the chloroform."

Neville sprang at the dentist, but fell short. His confined legs were too much of a liability. He sat up, tore the tape off them.

The nurse came at him from behind with a wad of cotton wool soaked in chloroform. Her breasts warned him in advance. "Breathe this in," she said as she tried to clamp it on him. "You'll feel better."

He snatched it off her. "Pissh off, bitssh!"

She was about to get a taste of her own cotton wool when, *berrannng*, the dentist sconed Neville with the instrument tray. "Leave her alone!"

Retaliation came swiftly in the form of a piston punch to the dentist's knackers. He folded over with a constipated "Ooooooh."

Neville laughed snarlingly. Clutching a handful of oily bouffant, he swung the dentist into the nurse. The duo twirled clumsily together like drunken ballroom dancers, bounced off a cupboard, and ended up sprawled on the floor in a Pornhub pose.

A ceramic jar found its way into Neville's hands. Just the thing to brain the dentist with. As he stepped toward the brainless fool, the throbbing pain in his burnt foot spiked, making him drop the jar and stumble, hopping on his other foot, to the floor.

His desire for revenge had been displaced by an urgent need to get himself to hospital before he died of shock or blood loss. He couldn't stand. He was too weak, too lightheaded. So he shuffled hurriedly toward the door, on his hands and knees.

Dripping unabated, his blood polkadotted the tiles and then the hunter green carpet of the corridor beyond the surgery. The reception area lay ahead of him and, farther on, the door that led outside. The door to salvation. He could see people strolling past it, oblivious of the horror taking place on his side of the glass.

The dentist stuck his head outside the surgery. He had to hug the door jamb to stay perpendicular. "Where the hell do you think you're going?" he said. "I haven't done the root canal yet."

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