

Special Treatment

The check-in screen was covered by a notice in an indecipherable scrawl.

The sign above it proclaimed:

WELCOME TO THE AVENUE MEDICAL PRACTICE
HERE FOR YOUR HEALTH!

Gianni went to the glass window. Reception looked empty. Fighting its way through the static whistle of tinnitus that was his defence against the Alien voices which sought to rule him, the portly elderly man could hear the burble and laughter of friendly banter. He craned his neck to spot a shapely leg bouncing slowly from the other knee. He tapped gently on the glass window.

'Hello, Phyllis, is that you?'

He spoke quietly, as he had been told to do by Rita, in such situations.

The quiet chatter continued unabated. Perhaps he had been taken again, he thought, which made his voice and actions mere figments of his own imagination.

It was then he remembered the bell. This was dangerous territory. He resisted and tapped at the glass again, again gently.

Ignored, again, Gianni strayed over the line, but carefully. He pressed, but only short light "press", not the "PRESS-PRESS-PRESS, PRESS-PRESS-PRESS- PREEEEEESSSS!" that he had been scolded for several visits before.

No reaction.

'press-press.'

No reaction. He lost, again.

'PREEEEEEESSSSSS!'

The clatter of high heels was followed by the slam of the sliding window crashing onto its stops. The sixty-something face appeared, angry, ready for a fight, a face crowned by afro-frizzy purple hair.

'Yes?'

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'Boungiorno, Marigold, how are you today? Your hair looks very nice. You suit that look. Is purple the new black? Is this the new a la mode style that I hear is sweeping the country? Is that toughened glass you use in that window?'

'Look, Signor Bontroni, we are very busy in here, what is it you want today?'

'Just to let you know that I'm here, to check in, for Dr. Levitson.'

'Look, over there, it's all on the notice, over *there*, no *there*, on the screen.'

'What language are we using today, per favore?'

'English, what d'you think! The Doctors have been called away to Convocation on Improving Patient Care, we have a locum, Dr. Fettle, and she's on overload, you'll just have to just take your turn or re-book. Is it urgent?'

'Well, yes, it is actually, Rita is waiting in the car outside, and part of the front wheel is on a double yellow. And we had an incident on the way here, Jane Honda, she of the GPS, was acting up again. You see we went this morning for one of those "two for one breakfasts", at that new place, near Cardross. We checked the postcode twice before we set out, but she took us all the way to Coatbridge, to a Lidl car park. It was then I remembered that we needed Pomodori Pelati, you know, peeled tomatoes. I always buy three trays of twelve tins, to make *la mia famosa Zuppa di Pomodoro di Bontroni*. Did I ever give you the recipe? Its generic, actually, you can add all sorts of things to make variations of the base soup. So it's really Multi-Ministrone, I always say. But anyway, here we are at last, despite the road-works at Hamilton. We told her to take us "Home" but she took us to Holmlea Park first, no idea why. I've written to them several times about the erratic behavior of that Satnav but Honda just say, over and over, that it is working correctly, according to specification and ...'

'Signor Bontroni, please! Now take a seat. Or go online and re-book for another day. We are terribly, terribly busy back here, all right?'

The window slammed shut. A Richter alert at Glasgow University Geology Department registered 3.4.

'Oh, hello, is there a wee space for a big fat bottom to squeeze in there? It's my left knee today, but sometimes it my right one, sometimes my hip, varies. Sitting sometimes helps, walking is best, but standing still, well, that can be agony. My Mum used to say it was the weather, we all told her that she was raving, but do you know, I think she was right all along. And sometimes, in bed,

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when I turn and my foot catches on the duvet, I shoot up in pain, like a Blue Streak Rocket. Ah, those were the days, eh, when Britain led the Space Race. Do you believe in Aliens? Do you ever get "messages" on your hearing aids? Even when they are switched off? I get messages all the time. Sometimes they take control and get me to do things I thought were long gone. One day last week I played three rounds of golf in one day. *Three* rounds! 935 blows at the same ball. I wrote to the Guinness Book people, just to ask if that would have been a record, if it had been verified. I'm still waiting on a reply. But it's so hard to get anyone to cooperate, you know. I find that I'm playing most of my golf alone nowadays. Seems when I go round to the Golf Club everyone is either just finished or only there to pick up their clubs. Pity that.'

'Signor Bontroni, please?'

'Oh, excuse me please, I have to go now, my turn it seems, sorry, what's your name again?'

No reaction.

'Excuse me, what's your name again?'

No reaction.

'EXCUSE ME, WHAT'S YOUR NAME, PLEASE?'

'At last, at long bloody last. I've been here for nearly three hours listening to people talking drivel. Worn out my batteries, it has. Is it me now?'

'Are you Signor Bontroni?' asked the tall, slim dark-haired thirty-something lady wearing tight yellow capris.

'Maybe, I can't remember.'

'No, sorry Doctor, I'm Gianni Bontroni, I ...'

'Come then, please. No, sorry sir, not you yet, we're doing it alphabetically today, Mr. ?'

'Zack Zennet, I'm Zack Zennet. I've been last in every single bloody queue I've been in since I was a child, except one time, in primary three, when the School Nurse decided to do her inspections with an upside down alphabet. I've been here...'

'This way Signor Bontroni, that's it, it's your knee is it?'

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'No, not actually, it's about the voices, the Aliens, they have been upping their game on me during the last three weeks. Rita said I should ask if there is anything you can do to help. She's been speaking to Phyllis in Reception about some new special treatment. They are in the same Gardening Club, meets at the Fraser of Allander Centre, in Milngavie. But I wondered if it was anything to do with those new pills, the ones for my excessive ear-hair-growth, the wee red and yellow ones. They taste just like rosebuds, yummy, actually. Dr. Levitson was so nice about it, said I could eat as many as I liked, gave me a Prescription for 5 kilos, something about a self-limiting effect, impossible to overload the immune system, but...'

'Signor Bontroni, I think...'

'Sorry? I was just saying I wondered if it might be a colour clash that's going on with the dark green and lime pills that taste a bit like that garlic chewing gum I got from my Swiss friend Stef, it's the stuff that's supposed to be good for night-sight, or maybe with the big lemon and white ones that give a bit of extra fizz when you pop a few into a nice white wine, sort of like cheap Champagne. You'll see there from my records that I've have a long history of unfortunate pharmaceutical interactions, like the time my now white hair took on a distinctly orange tinge, as if I'd been "Tango-ed", or the time my toenails started to grow at the rate of six inches a day, that's one hundred and fifty millimeters in metric, just in case you didn't get inches at school, or the time that I could recite the whole of *King Lear*, word for word, all the parts, in caricature voices. *King Lear*, I ask you, a play that I've never seen or studied in my life! But that's all in the past, best not to rake over it again, Rita always says. It's the present or rather the very recent past I'm talking about.'

'Please, Signor Bontroni, please...'

'Sorry? I was just saying that last night is a good example of what they are up to. Rita got me settled, shut the black-out blinds, made sure all the tinfoil screening was in place to cut out their transmissions, set me up with my usual pint of Red Bush tea, cooled to precisely forty degrees Celsius. I know, funny that, I've got so used to working in Celsius now. Then she locked me in my capsule for the night. I'm earlier now, just before EastEnders starts is her target, she always says. And then, just when I thought I was fine, it started again-that same Bloody Jamaican Steel band from the West End Festival playing inside my head all night long. I pressed my buzzer for Rita to come back and unstrap me, but it seems that the battery was down on her end of the Baby Minder and she heard nothing. I am totally, totally exhausted, not a wink of sleep. Can you do ANYTHING to help? ANYTHING?'

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'Well, Signor Bontroni, there is a new special treatment that we have found is about ninety percent successful with males of your age range, but it does mean a wee operation. If you are willing, we could try it. It's a local procedure, virtually painless. I could do it today, if you just sign here. Thanks, and here, oh, and one last time, here. That's it. Now, just duck your head forward, works best inserted just behind the right ear. Now this will just nip a little. There we go...'

'OOO-aaah! That *was* nippy. I was expecting another pill. So what was it you diagnosed again? I like to keep up to date, check up on the Internet, compare myself with the all the others on "HelpYourselfToBetterHealth.com"

'Well, Signor Bontroni, you have what is commonly called C.E.V. but you are at the extreme end of the spectrum. I'm afraid Dr. Levitson may not have recognised it, left it a bit too long for everyone's good. Now this Clicker is for your wife. I'll just buzz through for her to come in now.'

'But Rita is outside, in the car, parked with one wheel on ...'

'CLICK!'

'Ah, Signora Bontroni, Rita, is it not? Phyllis said you would be happy to countersign. Has she explained about this new special treatment? Good, so just here, and here and here, and this last one here, that's for the Clicker, makes you the Authorised User. It takes three AAA batteries, last about a month depending on usage.'

'Thank you so very much, Dr. Fettle, you are so kind. You've no idea what it has been like, no idea. So how does it work again?'

'Careful, don't actually press that "GREEN" button just yet. We can do without any more input from our patient at the moment. The most important one is the "RED" Click for Stop, lasts about an hour. Disrupts the auditory nerve pathway, preventing speech. Two "Clicks" two hours and so on. "BLUE" Click for bedtime, good for about ten hours, and the "WHITE" Click for re-boot, if anything goes badly wrong. If you press "White" he might be a bit sluggish for a while, not necessarily a bad thing during early training. This slider locks it in the "OFF" position, so that it won't Click when it gets jumbled in your handbag. That was a fault with the earlier version, caused mayhem.'

'Are there any side effects, Dr. Fettle?'

'Well, often the patient takes a few weeks of training to accept the new regime. After that he should settle to a pattern akin to nearly normal, for a

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male of his age. However I think *your* life will improve greatly, though. Just one wee thing however - you may find that his story-writing becomes a bit more manic, more bizarre. Nothing we can do for that, yet, I'm afraid. But do make sure you control his access to the Internet, especially that health website he mentioned. This is a *very* new treatment. We expect eventually to have to treat about 800,000 sufferers of Compulsive Excessive Verbosity syndrome. You, Signora Bontroni, must count yourself lucky to be in the vanguard, so keep that Clicker secure and keep your good fortune to yourself. As I said, this is a new treatment and these medical quality microprocessor chip implants are very expensive.'

'Oh, yes, I see what you mean. Thanks again Dr. Fettle. Now, come on Gianni, time to get home now, there's a good boy. NO! "Click!" NO, Gianni, hold the door, there's a good boy, your wife must always go first, remember?'