

The Doctor's Visit

Mum didn't let me out to play on the day of the doctor's visit. Instead, she did my plaits, told me to put on my gingham dress and then go into the kitchen and lay the tea tray. It would keep me occupied. Mum wasn't happy about the visit, it was all very well the doctor coming out this way but she'd seen enough doctors when Timmy went down to London the first time. While I prepared the tray she went round the front room in her pinny, polishing and dusting everything. Dad was sent out for extra coal, this made him grumpy as he thought the house was quite hot enough already.

I was happy preparing the tray. It was a treat to handle the bone china that was normally kept away in Mum's cupboard. It was the first time I'd been allowed to touch the best set with its red and yellow roses and real gold rims. After carefully wiping the cups and saucers I warmed the teapot, leaving it to stand on the draining board while I boiled the kettle.

Dad was first to see the visitor's car coming down the lane. 'The buggers in a Rolls Royce,' he said.

I could see the black car bumping across the ruts with two men sitting behind the chauffeur. Running around the kitchen table to get a better look I bumped into the tray and in an instant the teacups slid over the edge and tilted the tray, sending it crashing down. As the cups hit the floor, I could only watch helplessly hoping that they wouldn't break but the china was delicate and the quarry tiles were hard. The cups became fragments of flying roses.

Mum dragged me away from the kitchen and across the room to stand by the front door. There wasn't time for her to say anything, but from the way she pinched my arm I knew that I'd hear about this later.

'Don't offer them any tea,' she said to Dad, pulling the kitchen door behind her to hide the smashed china.

Through the front window I could see the car arriving and was cross to see Andy, from next-door, run up as the car stopped outside our house. You would have thought they were visiting him, not us. He ran up just like he lived here and stood to attention as if the King was in the car.

Two men stepped through the front door filling the whole room as they arrived. I felt I had to stand against the wall to give them space to move. They took their hats off, but the smaller man kept his coat on. The bigger man had a fat tummy, and I could see that under his jacket he had braces that curved around to be able to meet his trousers.

'Now, where's the patient?' the big man asked. He smiled but his loud voice frightened me, like it was too large for the room as well.

Mum brought Timmy across to him. Our little lad was wearing his red dressing gown, the one he'd been given in the hospital. The big man, who must have been the doctor, removed the gown and Timmy stood before him shivering in his woollen underwear. Pulling the vest up the doctor took a stethoscope in his fat white hands and placed it against Timmy's chest. The doctor listened to Timmy's left side and then moved the stethoscope over to his right.

'Well, I say.' He smiled over to his companion. 'Have a listen to this, *situs inversus viscerum*. Doctor Smithson was correct it does seem to be the inverted position of the internal organs.'

The other man stepped quickly over to Timmy. He had a funny sort of smile, his lips were pursed up, as Dad would say 'like he'd swallowed a bee'. He still hadn't taken his coat off and had to remove his gloves and rub his hands before he took the stethoscope. Timmy flinched as he was taken by the shoulder.

'Sorry old chap, a bit cold in here. Sorry about the cold hands. Stand still a minute.'

I looked over at Dad. I was surprised that the man was cold after Dad had been saying all day that the room was much too hot. He kept looking straight ahead of him, as if he'd rather be outside, perhaps in the garden or on the farm.

'Good Lord,' said the man smiling at the doctor. 'Astonishing.'

He turned Timmy and started to push his sides and then placed his hands against Timmy's ribs.

He looked at the doctor and continued speaking to him, 'Pity you missed seeing him when they brought him down to London you know. Good thing you were coming over to Newmarket to see the races.'

'D'you know, I think we'd like him to come back down to London,' said the doctor, speaking to Dad now. 'He really is an interesting case. I wonder if all his organs are round in reverse. Remarkable.'

'And what would you do there?' asked Dad in a low voice. 'Operate on him?'

'Well quite likely, yes, but not that we can do anything. We'd be able to see if it is just *situs inversus with dextrocardia* or perhaps *situs inversus with levocardia*. You see sometimes it's just the heart that's on the right side of the body and sometimes it's all the organs are reversed.'

'Oh, very interesting. And just what good would that do?' Dad's voice was muffled. He had his chin pressed almost against his chest while his eyes were looking down at the floor.

'Well just sometimes, when it's the heart only, we find other things that are wrong, other congenital defects.'

Dad looked up sharply. 'And what would conning whatsit defect be when it's at home?'

'There from birth,' said the doctor, standing up. 'Of course we wouldn't be able to do anything, can't change something like this old man.' The doctor gave Timmy's head a pat.

Mum was crying and I rushed over to pull Timmy close to me, to put his dressing gown back over his shoulders. I looked at Mum, but she just kept on crying, rubbing her hands over her apron. I looked at Dad to see if he might speak but he didn't seem to want to say anything either. For a horrible moment I thought of them taking Timmy away and of him lying alone in a hospital. This time no one would be able to afford to stay.

'You're *not* to take him,' I shouted. 'You're not kind and you're not nice. You're *not* to take him.'

Dad looked so mad I thought he was about to come across the room and thrash me for that and I knew he would still be cross about the tea set. I wasn't half going to catch it in a minute. Instead, he turned to face the doctor.

'I think she's right, don't you? You haven't come here to make him better, you're just curious nosey parkers. My son's not going off to be a peep-show freak and he certainly isn't ending up on your slab. Just a bit of entertainment after your day at the races. You might be offering free treatment, but I don't think we need it thank you. You're not going to make him any better. So, we'll stick with what we've got here if that's all the same to you.'

He bent down and picked up the doctor's hat and passed it to him, then walked across the room and opened the door for them both to leave. The doctor waved his hat at Mum as a farewell and walked to the door with the other man following silently.

As they got in the car, I saw the doctor give Andy a coin. The car drove off and Andy had to jump out of the way as a spray of muddy water splashed out from under the wheels.

I looked at Mum to see what was coming, but she seemed to have forgotten me, she was sitting on the armchair cuddling Timmy. Dad was already at the back door pulling on his work boots. I ran up to change and then outside to play. When I was out playing, I asked Andy about the coin I'd seen the doctor give him.

'It was a tanner,' said Andy. 'But me mum took it, said she needed it more'n me.'

He smiled, showing his little gappy black teeth. Sixpence, that was a lot. I was glad they'd got something; they were a poor and dirty family. I wouldn't have wanted that doctor's money in any case. As Dad said before he went back to work, we were all well shot on 'em.

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That's a long time ago now, before the war and the National Health Service. Despite what the doctor said our Timmy grew up to be a fine young man. When war came, he was quick to sign up. How it broke Mum's heart that day. But Tim said to her, 'you can't stay at home while other men are fighting'.

He was away a long time, he saw action in the desert and Italy, and he returned home to us injured. The sniper that shot him had a good aim, but you see, he didn't know what the doctor had told us that day, so he accurately hit Tim's left side. With his heart on the other side of his body this was a serious injury for Tim but not fatal. He was saved for us by a miracle. Back home with us he recovered, in time, and went on to have a good life.

As Dad would say, saved for us by that there congenital whatsit.

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