

Tooth Decay

Before the curious series of events that left his quiet community stunned, Calvin Flack DDS wondered if he would ever find the perfect dental hygienist.

Two weeks prior to opening his practice in picturesque Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin, the soft-spoken dentist hired Solange Chaucer, a strawberry blonde with a subtle overbite. Solange performed her duties expertly, but one morning Calvin caught her using nitrous oxide for recreational purposes. He was so outraged and disappointed that someone would take advantage of the profession he revered, he fired her on the spot. The flustered hygienist had nothing to say in her defense; she simply packed her personal items and left the premises, laughing all the way.

After hiring, then soon firing Donna Zeigdansky who refused to wear a standard white uniform because it wasn't "her color" (she dressed in black, which unnerved some patients), Imogene Jackson, office manager and drill sergeant, escorted Rosalie Sterling into Calvin's immaculate office. A silky-haired stunner with voluptuous breasts, Rosalie reminded Calvin of a refreshing summer dessert. Not only did she display chalk-white teeth, glowing gums, and impeccable posture (as if she could balance a hardcover copy of *Dental Anatomy* on her head while walking), she boasted degrees from Vassar, the Sorbonne, and the University of Wisconsin at Stout. Her vast knowledge of periodontics was as impressive as her ability to speak fluent French, German, and Farsi.

"I like your office," Rosalie said. "And your teeth."

"Thank you. The style is New England," he told her. "The office, not my teeth."

"Yes," she said with a sparkling smile.

He scrutinized her, silently auditing her flaws. There were none. “When did you first become interested in dentistry?”

Rosalie explained that she had always enjoyed putting her fingers in people’s mouths. As a young girl, she giggled at the warm, wet feel of teeth and tongue. As a teenager, a human mouth was a mysterious cave, a complex, intriguing region begging for exploration. Even as an adult, she loved to slip on a plastic glove and probe inner cheeks. Overwhelmed by Rosalie’s interest in all things oral, and ecstatic that he found someone as fascinated with tooth care as *he* was, Calvin offered her the position on the spot. He missed her already, and she was still there.

Imogene was proud of herself for discovering Rosalie. She’d perused more than two hundred resumes of recent graduates of dental schools before scheduling appointments with just three candidates. Of the three, Rosalie had the most thorough training. Plus, she had just moved to Whitefish Bay and didn’t know a soul. This worked in her favor because Imogene desperately wanted to forge new friendships after ending her ten-year association with Jo Marie Gurwitch. Jo Marie had accused Imogene of harboring romantic feelings for Dr. Flack, and this was simply not acceptable.

The first question Imogene asked Rosalie on her first official workday was an unexpected one. “Do you have a boyfriend?”

“Not at the moment,” she replied. “I just moved here from Ipswich.”

“Calvin is married, you realize,” Imogene stringently stated. “His wife Hedda is the head of Housekeeping at the Whitefish Bay Elegance Hotel.”

“Any children?” The question squirted out of her mouth like toothpaste from a full tube.

“They’ve been trying and trying, but so far no luck. They’re giving it another six months before resorting to radical fertilization procedures.” Rosalie was startled to hear such personal, unrequested information. “Hedda took me to lunch last month,” Imogene announced with a peculiar sense of pride. “She was impressed that I carried a bottle of mint flavored mouthwash in my tote.”

“Who *wouldn’t* be?”

Imogene flashed Rosalie a wide grin. “Would you like to smell my breath?” she asked.

“Could I take a rain check?”

“You betcha,” Imogene responded. “It rains around here a lot, you know. That’s Roxanne,” she announced, pointing to a smudgy framed photo of a Siamese cat displayed on her desk. “She’s a little bit pregnant.”

“Sweet,” Rosalie responded with a strained smile, concluding that this woman was a strange bird, one that should probably be extinct.

To Imogene, Dr. Flack was a pure-bred, perfect-toothed prince, but she considered her feelings strictly platonic. She also knew the dentist didn’t think of her in any way except as a loyal office manager, and he *wouldn’t* think of her in any other way until she lost sixty pounds, did something with her mess of red hair, and had the oval mole on her neck removed. Sometimes Imogene would think about her dentist-prince as she drifted off to sleep, and he would invariably make an appearance in a dream, often in his crisp white uniform, sometimes only in sky blue boxers.

“When’s the next appointment?” Calvin asked Rosalie late one morning during her third week.

“Not till two-thirty,” she told him. “Wes Codling cancelled.”

“How does lunch at Gopher Bar & Grill sound?”

“Sounds like a plan,” she purred. Gopher Bar & Grill, with its gorgeous view of Whitefish Bay’s colorful lily garden, was one of the top two restaurants in town. The other, Dipsy Lime, only served dinner.

At Gopher, smartly-dressed patrons crowded the hostess stand, eagerly waiting to be seated. The scent of sizzling pork permeated the place, making mouths water and stomachs gurgle. Calvin and Rosalie were led to a deep leather banquette next to a pink fabric wall where two menus and tall glasses of water were waiting. After perusing the specials, a spiky-haired waiter named Finn took their food order. The cumin-crusting sturgeon with yucca puree, poached quail egg and banana fingerling potatoes tempted Calvin, but he went with the T-bone steak. Rosalie was in the mood for the veal shank with saffron cream sauce but opted for a small cucumber salad.

When the waiter left the table, a cloud of sexual tension hung in the air. Calvin couldn’t deny an intense attraction to Rosalie. He could hardly wait to arrive in the office every morning and watch her float from room to room, performing her job duties with the utmost of professionalism. Rosalie’s smile was infectious, and her mysterious scent intoxicating. Sometimes Calvin actually envied his patients, able to sit back in the comfortable chair, open their mouths, and let Rosalie’s fingers in. He was beyond smitten. He’d never felt this way, not even during the early, heady days with Hedda.

“It’s astonishing that the majority of people have some form of gum disease, don’t you think?” Rosalie asked as she fiddled with her silverware.

Calvin nodded. “Eighty per cent of the population. Imagine.”

“I know.” Her eyes grew wide. “Not sixty, not seventy.”

“Eighty.”

They contemplated this astronomical number, allowed it to sink in. “You know what irks me?” Rosalie asked. “Most people don’t realize that inflammation of the gums due to plaque can lead to a build-up of plaque in the arteries.”

“Which can obviously lead to a heart attack.”

“Exactly.”

“Do you know what they say, whoever they are?” Calvin inquired. “Dentists have the highest rate of suicide of any profession. I’ve never thought about ending it all, have *you*?”

“Oh no. Never understood that. I’m having a great time.”

“Me too. We get to take care of people’s teeth and make a living at it.”

“I feel the same way.”

“We should count our blessings.”

“Absolutely.”

All too soon, the dentist’s expression turned serious. “Come to think of it,” he said, “a dentist friend of mine hung himself. Dean Crookshank.”

“Oh my God,” Rosalie gasped. “That’s awful. Actually, one of my classmates in dental school slit her wrists during sophomore year. It was the talk of the campus.”

“Did she die?”

“Yes. She lost gallons of blood. But it’s not like dentistry is the only field with suicide. I’m sure the automotive industry has its share.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Want to hear something wild? In Kale County, an oral surgeon jumped off the roof of a building downtown. Plunged five stories to his death. Believe it or not, his name was Laszlo Molar.”

Rosalie merely shook her head, mystified. “Molar,” she whispered.

The entrees were delivered, and the duo immediately dug in. They devoured their lunches in record time. Almost as soon as their plates were empty, Finn appeared with dessert menus.

“No dessert for us,” Calvin announced without conferring with Rosalie.

“Coffee?”

“Not for me,” Calvin replied. “Stains the teeth.”

“I’ll pass, too,” Rosalie said.

When they returned to the office, Imogene was rustling dental insurance forms on her disheveled desk. “How was lunch?” she asked perfunctorily.

“Excellent,” Rosalie said.

“Their food is to die for,” Calvin added as he hurried down the hall.

“Well,” Imogene barked, “my Swiss cheese on pumpernickel was tasty, even though I was so frantic to get out of the house this morning that I forgot mayo, and I love mayo. I should’ve asked you to bring back a small tub.”

“I would’ve been happy to,” Rosalie said. “Why didn’t you call my cell?”

“Didn’t want to disturb you,” Imogene explained, cold as ice on room temperature teeth. “May I ask what you had for dessert?”

“Skipped dessert. We didn’t want to be away from the office for too long.” She paused, noticing a half-eaten piece of peach pie sitting on a napkin. “Plus, I’m on a diet. Four’s the new six, you know.”

“Then you should’ve ordered *in*,” Imogene suggested, ignoring the last comment, having been a size twelve most of her life. She grabbed her fork and jabbed the peach pie as if poking an eye. “I have menus from everywhere,” she said around a mouthful of pie. “Look.” She grabbed a half dozen paper menus from her desk drawer and brandished them in front of Rosalie. “Piero’s Pizza, Burger Haven, Crab Palace. Olive Garden too.”

“I’ll remember that,” Rosalie responded before vanishing down the hall.

The following afternoon, Calvin and Rosalie were performing Myrtle Cash’s root canal when Imogene gently knocked on the door. “Roxanne’s gone into labor,” she said in a loud whisper. “I have to rush home. If anyone wants a kitten, let me know.”

Twenty minutes later, work on Myrtle Cash was complete. Calvin was proud of the job he did, though it wasn’t his greatest achievement. That honor went to his porcelain-fused-to-gold-alloy crown on Smilla Hohenstein. The next patient wasn’t due for a half hour, so Calvin and Rosalie found themselves alone in the cozy examination room. The previous day’s conversation, specifically how death in dentistry hovered over every cleaning, filling, and wisdom tooth extraction, hung in the air like a bad case of halitosis. “Would you do me a favor?” Calvin asked.

“Of course,” she replied.

Calvin hesitated momentarily. Then he blurted, “Floss my teeth?”

Rosalie lit up. “It would be my pleasure.”

Calvin stretched out on the dental chair while Rosalie stood behind him. She flossed carefully, one upper tooth after the next, dislodging all unwanted food particles. Then the dentist rinsed. In order to plunge at his bottom set, Rosalie stepped to the side of the chair. With Olympiad flexibility, she flung her leg over Calvin's torso, straddling him off the ground. He held his breath. Then she went to work on his bottom teeth as the blood tingled through both their bodies.