

## **The Extraction** **Stephanie Billen**

There was nothing about the serene Alpine photograph to raise alarm. Certainly it had been placed there on the ceiling in an attempt to offer some kind of distraction or calming influence, a romantic scene of a lakeside castle with a few chalets and snowy peaks in the background. Linda gazed up at it as she sat stiffly in the dentist's chair trying to monitor her breathing in and out in an attempt at mindfulness. She gulped down the odd sour-breathed burp, a familiar physical manifestation of the extreme tension she felt most of the time but particularly here, waiting for the dentist to loom over again with his tools while a high-pitched drill whined menacingly in the nextdoor surgery.

Her tongue slid over the raw, metallic-tasting abscess in her mouth, making her wince at the pain, which was creeping ever higher after she had obeyed the surgery's instruction not to take any painkillers for fear of them affecting the dentist's anaesthetic. As she tasted the silvery crater on her gum she thought for a mad moment that the fleshy-pink water of the partially-frozen lake in the picture seemed to shift, just very slightly. She blinked very deliberately. Her tired eyes needed attention too. There were strange gaps in her vision at times and sometimes she would see zigzags and flashing lights. "Sans eyes, sans teeth, sans everything..." Wasn't that how it went? For the second time that day she felt a frisson of horror. Something seemed to slide down inside her frail body. She caught a whiff of her own stale sweat. "That sense of ruin, which is worse than pain..." She remembered the line from *The Dream of Gerontius*, a choral work that had terrified her when she sang it in the choir as a child.

The dentist was talking to the dental nurse, trying to pull up her records on the computer. 'Be with you in just a mo', he called out cheerfully over his shoulder. Now in her seventies with a variety of only semi-treatable conditions, Linda was used to being putty in the hands of assorted medical professionals, each of them lingering a little too long over her test results before addressing her with the special brand of patronising jollity they reserved for the elderly, the very sick or the very small. Linda forced herself to focus on the picture again. She tried to summon up skiing holidays from her married past - that feeling of crisp alpine air and a sun that could warm your skin even as you stood there cosseted in layers of skiing gear. She attempted to imagine herself standing on the ramparts of the castle. Her blue-veined skin was still prickling with fear and her teeth had begun an absurd chattering that she could only contain by clamping them together. Surely there must be some solidity in those stone walls, some fairytale happiness denoted by its medieval towers? Yet her gaze was being dragged across the picture down into the liquid reflection where each dark tower achieved a new intensity of blackness, creating fathomless depths within that too pink water. But that rosiness was just the reflection of the sunset. It could not be what she was now seeing in the water, now that she had focused in, now that the picture itself had apparently grown larger, dominating her field of vision. She blinked again. Yes, there were speckles multiplying in the lake - ripples surely.

'Is everything all right Mrs Lamb?' Eva the dental nurse had moved closer to her. 'Did you say something?'

Linda realised she had been moaning gently. The picture receded again.

'No, nothing. Nothing at all.'

'That's lovely - do you want to just sit back a little more in the chair and we'll pop you down a bit lower? Mr Abaddon will be with you in just a second.'

'Yes, it looks as if the last X-ray we have for you was a while ago. I think it would be worth doing another one just to see what's going on at the back there', said Mr Abaddon as much to the computer screen as to Linda. 'Then we can press on with the extraction on the other side as

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planned. So nothing's changed in your medical situation since we last met? No new medications, besides what we have on the system?'

He had moved across and was looking at her now, his dark eyes unnaturally large behind his thick lenses. "No, nothing except this faltering breath, this chill at heart, this dampness on my brow..."

'Mrs Lamb?'

She realised she had not spoken.

'No, nothing. Nothing at all.' A terrible numbing coldness had crept over her. It seemed to be all she could say.

She was almost lying down now and her hands had placed themselves across her chest like a corpse. The picture felt bigger and lower somehow and the ripples on the water were growing and moving together, butting up against each other, becoming blobs and now hardening. They were like lumps of enamel, like tiny misshapen teeth each encircled by a barely perceptible smear of red.

'So we'll just put this special vest on you and if you could just open wide and then bite down on the paper so we can take the X-ray. We need to pop out for a mo while the machine is on then we can come back and see what's what'.

She clamped her chattering teeth together, feeling the energy drain out of the room as the door closed behind them. Her face and jaw were fixed in position. There was nowhere to look but up and at the same time nowhere to look but down into the icy water. She felt a fresh wave of panic coursing through her body. She was drowning in the viscous liquid, unable to breathe, her own teeth seemingly growing and choking her.

A new rushing sound, familiar yet unfamiliar in its intensity, suddenly transported her to her 1950s' childhood and visits to the Welsh village doctor with its oak panelling and the naked Bunsen burner flame through which he would pass his primitive, punitive instruments. Too often had she smelled the pungent rubber mask coming closer and closer to her face. She had felt herself gasping for air and disappearing into some kind of darkening tunnel to the accompaniment of a terrifying whooshing in her ears. Next thing she knew she would be giggling and euphoric, the lingering effects of the nitrous oxide engendering a kind of hysteria as she surfaced back into life, the rest of her childhood still there for the living.

But this was different. The noise was vibrating through her body. Tears were racing down her hot cheeks. "Pray for me!" her mind was screaming, even though she had never been a church goer, put off long ago by a particularly fire and brimstone assembly from a visiting bishop at her school. "And needs must sink and sink/ Into the vast abyss. And, crueller still,/A fierce and restless fright begins to fill/The mansion of my soul." Words she did not even know she knew were tumbling through her brain and the roar was pressing in on her skull. Her eyes, dry and locked open were still fixed on the picture while her hands had escaped the restrictive bib and were scrabbling upwards. To her astonishment she felt the sharp rocks of the mountains and saw rivers of blood running through her fingers. Her body grew rigid, a deadly weight settling onto her chest. Blackness assaulted her vision but without the luxury of loss of consciousness. The bellow became unbearable.

The door clicked open. Eva and Mr Abaddon looked at each other.

'Sorry, did you tell her she could go?'

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Mr Abaddon responded testily: 'No of course not. I didn't see her leave. Did you? She seemed a bit het up.'

He moved towards the synthetic leather chair. It was still warm. Mrs Lamb's lonely brown handbag was still on the floor beside it. The noise from the drill next door had abated. There was a chill in the air, a draft coming in from the window where a jackdaw had alighted on the sill. The dentist looked up briefly, drawn by a corner of the picture that was flapping. He must get Eva to pop that up again.

'See to that, will you?' he said, moving across the room and gesturing backwards to her.

She dragged over a chair and stood up on it shakily, fishing for a bit of Blu Tack from one of the corners.

'It's getting a bit dog-eared, this picture, anyway', she said. 'Do you think we need to get something else? Kittens, maybe.'

Mr Abaddon grunted. He was concentrating on Mrs Lamb's X-ray, which had taken OK but was like nothing he had ever seen before.

'Come and have a look at this,' he said.

But Eva was absorbed by something else - something she had never noticed before in the picture, a tiny old woman in the window of one of the castle turrets, laughing or screaming, the toothless mouth open obscenely wide, a small trickle of blood in one corner.