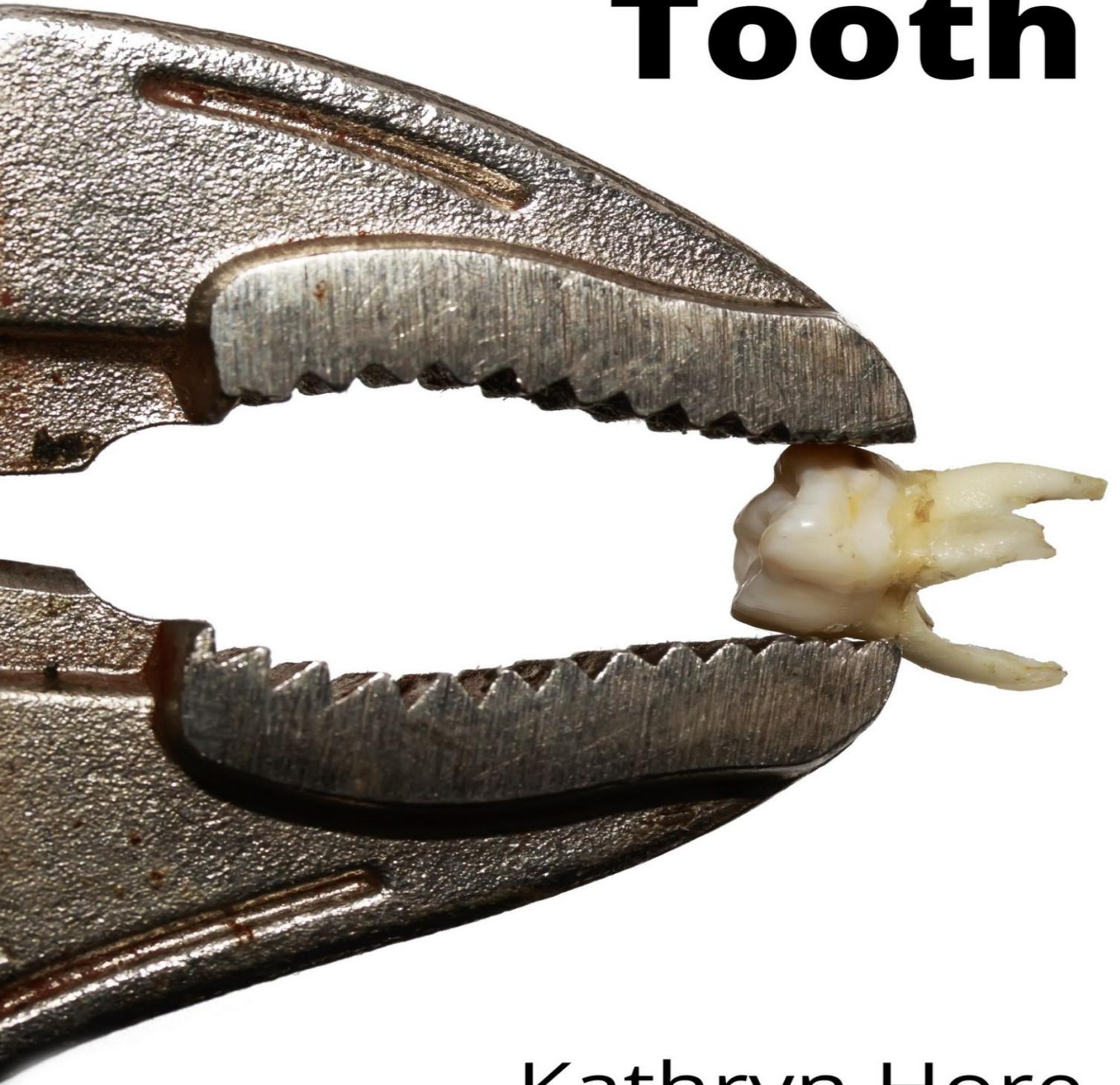


Tooth



Kathryn Hore

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TOOTH

The waiting room was white, quiet and sterile. It smelt medicinal, as such places always did. There was a row of uncomfortable seats, a pile of out-dated women's magazines and, in one corner, some forlorn children's toys. A wooden puzzle with one piece missing. Some brightly coloured blocks, which only served to make the rest of the room seem that much whiter. Along the opposite side was a bench, behind which sat a neatly uniformed nurse clicking at the muted keys of her computer and, occasionally, answering the telephone. Even its ring seemed hushed. Everything here was hushed.

'Miss Smith? Come on through. Dr Malloy will see you now.'

David Malloy watched the young woman walk hesitantly through his surgery doorway. She had long brown hair that fell to hide her eyes, biting at her lip and moving slowly, as if unsure of her physical place in the world. He did not smile, but made his face into something kind, paternal, something he considered she might find comforting. He knew this type of girl, the shy and the naive. He knew what they needed. She was young, couldn't have been more than twenty-two or three, but didn't have that brash confidence so common of young women today. He was glad. He didn't like the

coarseness of modern women. This one was nice. She reminded him of the women of his youth, a kind of *déjà vu*, a fond nostalgia. She was a wee, timid thing not wanting to offend, all nerves and insecurity.

‘Miss Smith?’

‘Janey,’ she nodded quickly. ‘And you are... Dr Malloy? The dentist?’

‘Call me David.’ He tapped the faux-leather dental chair in the middle of the gleaming white surgery. ‘Take a seat and tell me what the problem is.’

A toothache. Of course. A dreadful toothache. She confessed she was scared of dentists. She’d had a bad experience with one once, a long, long time ago. It had left her with a terror of dentistry; it had left her with scars, if only psychological. She had put off coming here for as long as she could, but the toothache was now so bad she just had to do something.

She needed fixing.

She told him her tooth was sensitive to touch, to heat, to cold. Even her tongue moving in her mouth would occasionally brush past it with agonising consequences. She was desperate for help. Could he help her?

Of course he could.

He snapped on disposable latex gloves while calling the nurse to assist. Nurse Osman was a large, stern woman with grey hair pulled back in severe neatness; she would not tolerate a strand being out of place. When she strode in she stood over the girl, peering down without smile or word. Judging, appraising. He was never sure what private criteria Nurse Osman judged the patients against, but he had never seen her find one she deemed worthy.

The girl shrank back in the face of Nurse Osman's stare. He barked a command and the nurse turned away to busy herself with the preparation of three big, long needles, all sharp and metallic. He positioned the equipment tray not quite out of the girl's sight, so its sinister gleam would hover in her peripheral vision, then watched her body tense as the nurse laid the needles down, one, two, three.

He smiled his most comforting smile and told her not to be scared. He would take care of everything. She would not feel a thing.

'Th-thank you, Doctor,' she stammered, worried eyes shifting from the nurse to the needles and back again. She wore contact lenses. Bright blue ones, artificially coloured, like some fashion item. He didn't much care for them. They did not suit her. They were too typical of young women today.

'Now, which tooth is it?'

'Se-second from the back. Up the top, to the right.' She paled as he lifted forceps and placed them on the tray just to the edge of her vision. 'It.. it aches, throbs. It feels like something foreign in my mouth. It feels like its full up to bursting on the inside and about to erupt. Something desperate to get out.'

He nodded, hiding his amusement at her fanciful descriptions of a plain old tooth ache. 'Ah yes. Well, it sounds like an abscess, young Jane. The tooth is probably full of pus. Shall we have a look, then?'

It was an abscess. He knew immediately from the swelling on the side of her gum, from the sensitivity she showed, yelping as he prodded the tooth, not quite so accidentally. Her eyes, around those horrid contact lenses, were large, fearful. But trusting. So trusting. There was just something about the fear of a trusting woman that got him every time. He fought the urge to kiss her forehead. He fought the urge to pat her thigh and enjoyed the way her fingers dug into the

arms of the chair. He lowered his biggest needle into her wide, open mouth.

'I'm afraid, young Jane, that this is going to kill.'

She could do nothing with it already in her mouth, though she uttered a low sound, a strangled moan from the back of her throat. Tears formed, squeezing drops at the corners of her eyes, though she clenched her lids against them, those blue contacts hidden for a moment. There was tension in every limb, every muscle of the lithe young body laid out before him. Her breath kept catching even as her mouth was forced open by the massive needle he stuck hard up into her gum.

He kept the needle there, just a little longer than necessary, and breathed in her pain with quiet enjoyment.

'Right. Now ordinarily it wouldn't hurt when we drill, not after a needle like that.' He smiled his broadest smile. 'But with an abscess, well, you never do know. We may have to inject again. We may not. You just be sure to speak up when the pain starts, won't you?'

Her eyes flicked from side to side, a panic showing in their whites. She was like a trapped creature from the wilds, a sweet thing too gentle to find escape. She tried to look to the nurse for help, but the older woman only stared back with a thin-lipped smile.

'Don't worry, dear,' Nurse Osman said, in that dark, gravelly voice of hers. 'No-one has ever complained about the pain afterwards.'

He let the drill whirr. Held it up high. She flinched. Its high pitch scream never failed to instil the most anxious of expectations. Almost all his patients, even the calmest, the bravest, the hardest to break, fell prey to its shriek. It was like something programmed deep into their instincts. A reaction as primal as fight or flight.

He smiled at her tight-gripped panic and wondered if he should tell her now, or later, that this was only the beginning. She would have to come back for further treatments, in a week, two weeks. Prolong the experience appointment after appointment. Root canal. He decided she would have to have root canal. That would need at least three appointments and then he could x-ray and find other cavities needing urgent fillings to keep her coming back. Pity she'd already had out her wisdom teeth. But he might be able to find something to get her in for full dental surgery, strapped down, a scalpel in his hand, ready to cut her gums to the bone.

He would teach her to look after her teeth. By the time she came again, she would learn what consequences befell modern girls who did not take care of themselves. And those horrid contact lenses, like plaque and forgetting to floss, would simply not be tolerated in his dental practice.

He plunged the drill in, feeling the vibration extend from his fingertips up his arm. This was always his favourite part, with the patient lying rigid before him, mouth stretched uncomfortably open, and that whine of the drill making contact with the tooth. He could sense, without needing to look, when the drill and tooth connected. The patient before him, stiffening, screwing up their eyes, fingers twisted together, wanting it to be over when it had only just begun.

So caught up was he in the sensation of that first drilling that it took him a moment to realise she did not scream. Some did. He would have expected it of her and it disappointed him now that she did not. No matter. This was only the start, there was so much more to go. He was sure he could get a reaction out of her if he put in the time and only a little effort. She did close her eyes and her fingers still clung on to the arms of the chair, but otherwise she lay still, just letting him do his work.

Bits of tooth ground away. The nurse sucked up the debris almost as quick as he could create it, the enamel giving way to his drill, then the dentin, right to the pulp. The instrument burrowed in millimetre by millimetre. Her mouth stayed open and her eyes stayed shut until he had cleared almost all of it out, an empty space inside the rough shell of the tooth.

With an annoyed twist of his mouth, he paused to change the drill head.

Right. That should do it. The high pitch whirr gave way to the low, deep grumbling of the grinder he knew would shake her to the core.

‘Doing alright there, young Jane?’ he asked after inserting that dark rumble deep into her mouth, holding it just above the cleaned out tooth. With his other hand he pushed cotton wool into her cheek, puffing her face out, making it impossible for her to answer one way or the other. Her eyes snapped open, wide and staring. He thought they looked so pretty, pleading with him like that. At least, he read pleading in them. It was hard to tell behind those horrid contacts.

‘Uhhh...’ It was the only sound she could make with his fingers deep inside her mouth.

Something sharp pricked his finger.

He jolted back, an automatic reaction, and pulled his fingers out of her mouth. The pain had been sudden, momentary, but the sharp prick continued to throb. He held up his hand to inspect the finger and frowned to see blood seeping behind the translucent glove, a small dot spreading wider beneath the latex.

Shit. This wasn’t good. They wore gloves these days for a reason. What if she had some disease? What if some of her saliva got into the wound and he caught something bad?

What was it that had pricked him anyway?

He frowned, put the drill down. 'Glasses please, nurse,' he commanded. Nurse Osman handed them to him with her usual prompt efficiency and a disapproving frown for the disruption from procedure. She did like everything to be in its rightful place and in its rightful order. He ignored her, slipping the magnifying apparatus over his head and snapping down the strongest lens, before peering into the girl's mouth.

Maybe it was a sharp edge to the tooth he had caught his finger on. But there didn't appear to be any sharp edges. The tooth was empty of its insides. He scrambled on the tray beside him for the long-handled mirror to get a better view, almost forgetting, for the moment, his broken glove and the spot of blood beneath.

It was black inside the tooth. A black that kept on going. Not the black of decay, but the black of... nothingness. Of empty space. Of hollows.

Suddenly it seemed such a dreadful emptiness.

Maybe the root of the tooth was already dead. That happened sometimes. If so, she must have been in pain for a very long time before coming here, as the tooth died slowly inside her. A healthy root was pink and would bleed a little when drilled. An inflamed root, as he had been expecting, was swollen and red and bled profusely when drilled. Always painful, even with anaesthetic. He had been looking forward to it.

But now he was in there, with the tooth drilled out and open, it just looked... empty. Withered roots no more than dust. There was only hollow and empty space going way back into the root canals and up into the gum. Darkened caverns.

He had the sudden image of her as entirely hollow. As if the blackness inside was contained by this outer shell that only looked like a girl.

And then he wondered where that thought, so unlike him, had come from.

Something moved. Deep inside the tooth.

He pulled back so fast he knocked the tray, needles and equipment crashing and scattering all over the floor. Unwittingly, he glanced at the nurse. She glared her darkest at him, all pursed lips and furrowed brow. On the chair between them, the girl only looked up with wide, trusting, artificially blue eyes.

'Doctor!' the nurse snapped.

'Doctor?' the girl ventured.

He swallowed against a dry throat and made a sharp gesture at the nurse to clean up the mess. She moved slowly, suspicious eyes not liking this disruption, but it gave him time to take a breath, to gather his thoughts. To look back down at the girl.

'Apologies, young Jane, it's just I thought I saw...'

He went back for a second look. The girl opened her mouth obediently. He knew he should wait for the nurse to stand again, to finish gathering the spilled equipment; he knew he should at least re-glove his hands first. But he could not help it, he had to look, even though he wasn't sure he wanted to. He didn't need the mirror this time. He didn't even need the magnification equipment. He reached up with a shaking hand still seeping blood behind the latex glove and pulled the heavy glasses from his head then looked into her waiting mouth.

It came from out of her tooth. A pulsating black thing, long and slippery. As dark as coal, a cartoon black, the absence of all other colour. It was gleaming with her saliva and it was forcing itself out of the tooth.

A worm.

A snake.

A thing, slimy and shining.

It bulged as it squeezed through. Maybe as thick as his own little finger, wriggling around as it just kept coming, pushing, squishing, sliding from the tooth and onto her tongue.

He squealed from behind his own clenched teeth. There was maybe three inches of it now resting on her tongue. Two white spots on the tip of it. The worm creature turned them in his direction.

Eyes. Were those its *eyes*?

He staggered back, tripping over the nurse.

He crashed down, glasses flying from one hand, the equipment the nurse had been collecting scattering again as she was kicked aside with a cry of her own. The side of his head crashed against the bench. As he hit the ground a needle pierced his shoulder. His world flooded with sudden, slicing pain.

Silence.

He gulped back breath, trying to think, to isolate the sensations in his shoulder, his head, his ankle. Trying to decide what it was he had just seen. His eyes met those of the nurse across the surgery. Her glare was thunderous, that stern tut-tutting fury usually kept for the patients now turned his way. She hadn't seen. She didn't know.

'What is going on!' Nurse Osman demanded. It did not sound like a question. And he could only shake his head in soundless warning, the words to explain too impossible to find.

His only answer, in the end, was to look back up at the girl on the chair.

She was sitting straight and watching the ruckus with wide eyes. Even as he turned his throbbing head, she brought one hand up and opened her mouth. First she took out the ball of cotton wool, which she flicked with casual disinterest into the corner of the room, then she cupped her hand beneath her chin and leant over it. Something

black and long and moving dropped out of her mouth and into her hand. It was maybe six inches, maybe eight, maybe more. It moved in her palm, curling up part of its body, but its head – he could not help but think that must be its head – sat up higher and waving, shifting. Looking. Those dreadful white eyes so stark against its black.

And fangs. Sharp white fangs, only visible now it had pushed its way out of her.

‘Oh... oh my... oh my oh my... oh... my... *Doctor!*’

Terror had replaced judgement in Nurse Osman’s voice, but he ignored it, and her. He was too transfixed by the girl on the chair, unable to do anything other than stare at her and at... at that... that *thing* in her hand.

The girl sighed. ‘I’m sorry, Doctor. That must have been a shock, I know,’ she said, then tilted her head back, opened her mouth and dropped the black worm – if such was what it was – back inside. It slipped inside her and she closed her lips. With a single gulp, she swallowed it down.

She lowered her head and looked over to where he was sprawled. ‘I did not mean to scare you. Not after you helped so much releasing the tension in my tooth.’

He tried to push himself away but there was nowhere for him to go. He could not put weight on his ankle and the long needle was still sticking out of his shoulder. His head throbbed. It was all he could do to drag himself backwards by the arms until he hit the wall.

He looked around desperately. Nurse Osman was by the other wall and he tried to catch her eye, use his head to gesture from her to the girl. *Maybe she could jump the girl, maybe...* But the nurse only stared at him blankly for a moment, then recoiled with sudden

snarling refusal. She all but bared her teeth, no more sympathetic to his plight than she had ever been to any of the patients.

The girl stood. In their opposite corners, both he and the nurse shied away. But it was not the nurse the girl turned towards.

'What was...' he began, then had to swallow hard and try again to get the words out. 'What was that?'

The girl's smile was sweet. A little melancholy.

'There's all sorts in the lonely dark, you know.' She waved his question away. 'It's filled with just so many wriggling things.'

As she spoke, she reached up with her hands and held one eyelid open, carefully removing a contact lens. She repeated the procedure with the other eye, then held the lenses in one hand and patted her pockets with the other until she found what she was looking for. A small plastic case, which she flipped open with her thumb and put the lenses into. The case went back into her pocket.

She turned her eyes back upon him. They were a fathomless black.

'Are you alright, Doctor?'

'What are you?' he rushed out. The brow above those black eyes crinkled.

'I am Jane. I am your patient, Doctor,' she told him. 'I have always been your patient. In a way, I am all your patients.'

'But... but...'

'I was your first patient.'

She stepped forward. Stood tall above him. Cool, cold. She crouched and reached out to touch his cheek. He cried out and tried to shy away; her fingers were intensely cold. A frozen touch.

She did not smile, she just brushed his skin with her own and, in that instant, he had a flash of memory, a recall unbidden. A dark haired girl, young and innocent. Crying. Bleeding from the mouth,

from the gums. Teeth missing, clutching onto him. Pleading with him to stop, though whether it was to stop tormenting her, or stop walking out the door as he left her like that, he wasn't sure. She'd been holding him back. Fun at first, but then tiring. Boring. Forgettable. He'd done all he could, she had no more teeth to plunder. That was twenty years ago. More. Thirty. His first patient. And lover. And victim.

'Janey?' he whispered, staring up into the black, empty eyes. Her face, it was the same. He saw it now. Her hair, her clothes

'You left me so hollow, Doctor,' she said, peering into his eyes. 'You left me gutted and empty. But nature, she abhors a vacuum.'

'Please,' he whispered.

'You want to kiss me, don't you Doctor?'

'No.' His breath came out in a rush 'No.'

'You always did before.'

Something moved behind her eyes, a flickering of the black. Like shifting clouds on sped-up film. It continued beyond her eye, a wriggling beneath her skin, down her cheek. Then it was gone. He would have screamed again, if he could, but no sound escaped his tightened throat. He tried to look anywhere but at her; anywhere but into those eternal eyes.

He found the nurse against the other wall. He tried to call out to her, but she was looking to the door. While the girl was focussed on him, Nurse Osman was edging toward the exit.

His eyes widened. She would leave him here. She would leave him to face this alone.

He opened his mouth to cry out, accusations of disloyalty, but ice-cold fingers clasped about his chin and forced his head back to her. Forced him to look into those aching, empty eyes.

'Uhhh...' he uttered, a sound of fear that needed no words.

The girl before him smiled. A row of perfect, perfect teeth. A smile that no longer seemed so innocent.

'In my despair, I made the darkness a deal,' she said, leaning forward so her face, those eyes, were all he could see. 'To fill the emptiness inside, to fill up the hollows. To give a home to all the wee, wriggling things.'

Her lips touched his. The cold chilled him, froze him. He couldn't move, not even as she pried open his clenched lips with her tongue, not even as she forced her way between his teeth, and his mouth opened to her against his will. He could feel her tongue enter his mouth, shoving inside him. It must be her tongue. He hoped it was her tongue. Only it kept on going, long and slim and forcing its way down. Moving in his mouth. Wriggling, shifting. Squirming. He tried to scream, but his mouth was full, his throat, full.

Something began to slide irrevocably down.

Big and thick and alive and choking him, forcing itself downwards, his throat clenching around it. He could feel himself swallowing, an automatic, instinctive, physical reaction.

Swallow it down.

Swallowing the thing.

She broke contact and stood.

He continued to choke, tears dripping from his nose, struggling to breathe. He tried to reach out to her as she stepped away, but he only made it to his hands and knees as the coughing and gasping wracked his body. Something was lodged in his throat, forcing its way down inch by slow inch.

Her black, empty eyes roamed the surgery. They fixed upon Nurse Osman crawling towards the doorway. The nurse froze in the face of that dreadful stare.

'You should be careful when turning a blind eye to the dark deeds of others,' the girl told the nurse. 'It can become a way of life.'

The girl coughed a deliberate cough. Once. Twice. She used a hand to cover her mouth and when she took it away again, it was covered in little black things, tiny and scurrying, all legs and movement. The nurse squealed, a thin sound from behind closed lips. The girl only stepped over to her, holding her hand above where the older woman crouched and wriggling her fingers. Tiny black scurrying dots fell in clumps. Straight into Nurse Osman's upturned face.

The nurse screamed. The little things began running. Dozens of them. Hundreds. All over her face, her head. Across her cheeks. Up her nose. Through her meticulous hair. Into her eyes, worming their way beneath the lids. Nurse Osman thrashed about, slapping at her skin, scratching at her face. Pulling out that severe hold on her hair, yanking the strands, shaking her head.

Clawing at her eyes.

He only had time to glimpse her face once before the screaming woman threw herself at the doorway, staggering hard against the frame before she finally made it out. Blood dripped from where she had torn at her skin, strands of hair sticking to it.

Blood ran more profusely from her eyes.

He tried to reach out to the girl who could stop this. Tried a desperate plea.

'Ja...Janey...'

It was the only word he could force out, after swallowing and swallowing. On his hands and knees, reaching out to her.

The girl just stood in the doorway, looking around as if to check she had forgotten nothing. Then she pulled her handbag over her shoulder and fished inside it. She pulled out a pair of dark sunglasses, which she put to her face.

'Janeeeeeey!'

'Sorry, Doctor, but I made a deal. And you were it.'

The glasses went over her black eyes. The corner of her lip turned up in a twisted smile. Then she turned and walked out. Leaving him there alone, all alone, coughing and retching and shivering on the floor.

His stomach heaved. Something came back up, through his throat. A foreign object his body was trying to reject, his stomach in spasms, forcing it out of him. Coughing and coughing until it landed with a splat on the floor.

A tiny black wriggling thing.

He tried to scream, but his throat was blocked again, and choking took hold now as his body fought, and failed, to rid itself of all that twisted inside him. He could feel it in his gut, squirming, worming, coiling away. Pushing and tearing, finding the hollows inside him and nesting. Now nibbling, now biting. In his chest. Beneath his skin. He tried to crawl forward, but his elbows gave way, his hips, his knees. His bones were being gnawed upon. His bowels released themselves in one final fully-functional act and he barely noticed.

There was no-one to help. He was alone. Alone in his surgery.

Alone except for the things inside. Eating his inside, twisting and wriggling and making room for themselves. Then he looked down and saw his hand and choked on one last impossible scream.

His finger. The bitten finger. It was black. Beneath the pierced latex glove, it was the black of darkness, the black of death, and it was spreading. A creeping darkness taking him, hollowing him out.

Making a home for all the wee, wriggling things.