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The Waiting List

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The Okolo family had settled quite comfortably into the run down housing estate in West Lewisham. Compared with their modest living accommodation in Nigeria, their three-bedroom semi-detached was palatial in standard, and they decorated it accordingly. Their mostly English neighbours, not to be outdone, followed suit, and one might observe that a spirit of friendly competitive aspiration replaced the downtrodden, pooling of misery that had previously reigned. It was this same spirit that drew several neighbours into their driveway to welcome the black Mercedes that had been provided, at the government's expense, to escort the youngest Okolo to one of the top private hospitals in London for a tonsillectomy. Mrs Okolo, in her Sunday best, gave a victorious wave to her friends as the car sped off on its journey.

In an attempt to shorten waiting lists before the upcoming election, the government had introduced an initiative whereby patients waiting six months or longer on the National Health Service could have the work done privately, that is, immediately. The government would arrange everything and, one could almost say, such was their rush they would even supply transport to and from the hospital for the initial consultation and the operation itself. The consultants were employed at a rate slightly reduced from their normal private fee, but such was the volume of work promised and the enormous ensuing profit, that they eagerly agreed to it, each vying for their own private vineyard in the South of France, the mark of a truly great surgeon.

Mr Taggart was a grumpy old bastard and no one liked him. It was difficult to fathom what exactly the source of this misery was. He had one of the most successful private practices in London, a true lady of a wife whom he didn't deserve and three daughters whose first and last words every day were 'Daddy, Daddy, Daddy'. It would be

too easy to say it was innate. He came from a medical family and had entered the profession with all the goodwill in the world thrust on him; and in his naivety he believed what they told him about the merits of a comfortable life, his future guaranteed. Yet there was always something else – what, he didn't know, what now he might never know, but he hadn't been brave enough to stand his ground and seek his individual path. If anyone had the time to look at these things, one might say that the life he had created was a lie to himself, and some part of him, his truth, would ultimately try to destroy it.

The first part of this demolition involved his evolving relationship with his secretary. Deborah Giles was a hard bitch who didn't take any shit. This was the first rule she had learned in life. It began at home under the guidance of her mother in her spats with her brothers; this extended to the playground, the teaching staff, local shopkeepers, anyone she had contact with. In short she was always ready to stand her ground, fight if necessary and could always rely on her mother's support and tongue and her brothers if it came to it.

Everyone was afraid of Deborah. With below average intelligence but with a monster wave of self-confidence beneath her ignorance, she set sail into the workplace. With little hope of scaling the corporate ladder and with no artistic talents such as hairdressing or fashion, she took the secretarial route. This was in response to reading the salaries that executive personal assistants were attaining in newspaper advertisements, which were often higher than that of management. It seemed like the fast route to the top. It also didn't escape her notice that medical secretaries were earning more than ordinary ones, and this she felt would give her a head start. In her interview with Mr Taggart she

laid down the conditions on which she would be prepared to work for him, and it gave him a secret sexual thrill to give into the cheeky little bitch's demands.

She possessed the will he lacked and soon he was bending to that will like a child under the influence of a domineering parent. He jocularly complained to his colleagues that his secretary would kill him if he was late for a certain case, that he was at sea as his secretary was on annual leave and that he didn't know what to buy his secretary for Christmas, any ideas? To the more observant of his colleagues it was noted that the lovely Deborah had injected a spring in his step and a few were reading between the lines before they had actually consummated their relationship with sex. Deborah wanted to delay this as long as possible, knowing full well the power of titillation. When they finally fell into a passionate embrace on his examining table, she had him moaning like an infant for her breast, and then on all fours.

Mrs Okolo was the kind of person whom Mr Taggart never wanted to cross his surgery door. Instead of having the grace humbly to accept this great gift she'd received, she set out to prove, in a reaction to her pride, that the wealthy world of private healthcare was unworthy of *her*. While waiting for her first outpatient appointment, she was informed by Deborah that Mr Taggart was dreadfully sorry but the appointment would have to be rescheduled, due to an emergency in a hospital. Mrs Okolo, to the embarrassment of her son, went off on one, her big African voice booming through the atmosphere, almost breathing the heat of that continent on the cool English. Deborah and the other secretary, who were themselves covered privately as part of their salary packages, remarked that one wouldn't expect any other kind of behaviour from the NHS patients and their parents.

When the rescheduled appointment took place, Mr Taggart who liked to spend approximately 5–10 minutes for each NHS consultation, was cross-examined by Mrs Okolo for half an hour. As he related to Deborah, when – after they had sex – they enjoyed a good bitch about their patients, he just couldn't move the woman. Her mouth was about twenty foot wide, her body a ton weight, her hands like shovels. She looked like a gorilla!

Mrs Okolo was also unhappy with the hospital room, which had satisfied Saudi princesses, daughters of earls and heirs to business dynasties. The staff's eyebrows were permanently raised by her demands, which included a special diet, softer pillows and the lowering of the TV in the next room. They'd never seen anything like it. Who did this woman think she was? You'd think the bitch would be grateful, getting the treatment for nothing – so the coffee room chat went. When her son was finally called for surgery, one of the African nurses, who was embarrassed for her race, remarked, "If we have any luck they won't come back." The others simultaneously laughed and scolded her for her wickedness.

It was this same nurse who was about to sign off duty later that evening when the light flashed from the Okolo suite for assistance. Knowing the mouthful she was going to receive if she answered, she decided she'd pass the message on to her relief, who was just coming up the stairs anyway. It was a crucial delay; and after the girls had exchanged pleasantries, the relief entered the Okolo room to find the mother fainted on the floor and the child's face covered with his own blood. He was immediately returned to the operating theatre where the resident doctor stabilised him. Post-operative bleeding wasn't

that unusual, but it was decided to call Mr Taggart to have him assess the child, who had reacted rather badly to whatever had occurred.

As Deborah later told a tabloid newspaper, they were speeding to the airport for a supposed ENT seminar in Genoa - which the doctor had invented as his cover for a dirty weekend - when she saw the number of the hospital flash up on his car phone. She, who had never been to Italy before, informed the doctor that it was probably the Okolo child. Her tone implied that if Mr Taggart answered the call, he could find someone else to spank him black and blue in the hotel room. He had received his first payment from the government that morning and was secretly piqued that someone with his great talents was giving his services at a reduced rate, so he decided to give the 75% service he was being paid for and allowed the on-call consultant for his practice to handle it.

This consultant who had three years experience in the speciality, as opposed to Mr Taggart's twenty-five, panicked when the child began violently haemorrhaging. Ironically it was the same black Mercedes, at the hospital's expense, that pulled up outside the Okolo household to transport the occupants to the funeral, as their neighbours came to their gates once more.