

The Accidental Agony Aunt

I've always believed that nurses are the only good fortune about being ill. I've met very few who I wouldn't want to care for me. Even in emergency situations, like my appendix going rogue in 2007 and threatening to burst while I was in the departures lounge about to board a flight to Crete. My nursing colleagues were fabulous, with careful hands, extra jelly, and a magazine supply I couldn't possibly get through. Doctors, though, are a different beast altogether. This one especially. I give him a good glare now. His eyes dip towards the digits on the pulse oximeter clipped to my middle finger. He's at least twenty years my junior, his face is narrow and stern, with a deep crease between his eyebrows, and a coal-black moustache that slopes at an odd angle, framing his mouth and doing nothing to hide the small dark mole peeking out from the left of his chin. 'All fine,' he says, pulling the clip off and reaching for his keyboard. He doesn't look up as he says it, instead turning to robotically type the little he's discovered. There's no cursory glance to gauge my response or offer any sort of reassurance. And if I was in a good mood, I'd reason that he knows I was a nurse—not that nursing ever really leaves you—and therefore he knows I know those numbers are fine. But I'm not in a good mood, and any healthcare practitioner worth half their salt can interpret and relay them with an iota of humanity to the person they're caring for. He leans back in his chair. 'So, how have you been feeling? Last time you were here, you saw my colleague, Doctor Remy, and he had some concerns about your mood. Have you given any more thought to the prescription he suggested? If potential side effects are bothering you, I could...'

I stop myself from rolling my eyes. 'For the last time, it's not side effects or remembering to take them, or whether they'll give me adult acne or piles. I'm not depressed, and I don't need any of your pills.' He sighs—quietly, but I have the hearing of a bat. Another thing that hasn't

failed me at the grand old age of sixty-eight. 'There's no shame in admitting it, Mrs Fairweather. Given the circumstances...' I grab my bag. 'What circumstances? It's life. Bad things happen, and you just get on with it. Not everything is a condition you need to remedy. Now, if there's nothing else, I'll see you in a year's time for my next check-up.' He clears his throat and leans across the desk, plucking a folded sheet of paper from a tall pile. 'There is one last thing. We're asking all our patients to fill in one of these. It's a new initiative. The surgery is piloting a more holistic way of working.' I take the paper from him and scan the questions, trying to ignore the disappointment of having to spend longer in this cell than is strictly necessary. 'You'll find clipboards and pens in the waiting room,' he adds, much to my relief as he stands to open the door, probably grateful he's moving on to his next, more compliant patient. I don't need to be told twice. I'm out of the stuffy room in a flash. The hallway is starkly lit with fluorescent lights that hum relentlessly, like tinnitus. The walls are a bland beige, the lino floor a dull ivory that's probably seen more vomit than the bumper cars at Weymouth pier. There are a few faded, peeling health posters on the walls that look like impetigo plagued skin, and the air smells faintly of antiseptic, with an undercurrent of stale armpits. It's the kind of place that makes you feel ill even when you're not.