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Pets in a Pickle

Written by Malcolm D. Welshman

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1

Vet in Prospect

I'd been whistling a tune from *The Sound of Music* when I left Prospect House the previous week: '*Odl lay ee … Odl lay hee hee …*'

How foolish. How naïve of me. What a silly little goatherd.

Now here I was, the following Monday morning, with the waiting room (not the hills) alive with the sound of … dogs snuffling and whining, cats miaowing and yowling and several budgerigars chirruping and screeching. Hardly Julie Andrews with her von Trapp family. But then I was hardly Julie Andrews, even though I had a gold stud in each ear lobe, hair – brown, not fair – down to my collar, and a voice which would rise an octave or two when provoked.

No – I was a vet, a new graduate. And this was my first day in practice. To think I was about to unleash myself on someone's unsuspecting pet. Quite sickening really – well, for the pet anyway. If he wasn't already ill he soon would be if he knew this novice vet was about to prod and poke him. 'Now, my lad, get a grip,' I said to myself. 'You've spent five years getting qualified for this moment. Now go for it. Show them what you're made of.'

So I got a grip. Only the door knob in my hand at that precise moment failed to turn as my palm was too sweaty. I gripped harder, turned it and pushed at the waiting room door; it gave way and I tumbled into the room like a startled stoat. There was an immediate hush.

An aged spaniel gave me a rheumy-eyed stare. A chihuahua disgorged a lump of yellow froth on to its owner's shoe. Two cats bared their teeth in silent hisses. Then the chihuahua, his throat unblocked, broke the silence with a barrage of staccato yaps. Taking this as his cue to join in, the

elderly spaniel lifted his head and started howling at the fluorescent light above him; he was accompanied by a chorus of cats whose plaintive wails rolled round the room like a Mexican wave.

My feeble ‘Mr Kingston?’ was drowned on its first syllable.

I tried again, louder, flapping my hand as if trying to summon a taxi, not someone’s pet. ‘Mr Kingston?’

The spaniel stopped in mid howl, wagged his tail and pulled eagerly forward on his lead. His owner yanked him back. ‘Not you, stupid,’ he said.

A diminutive lady cowered in her chair, engulfed by a large wicker basket that wobbled on her knees. ‘Don’t worry,’ she crooned through the bars. ‘It’s not us. We’re going to see that nice lady vet, Dr Sharpe.’

A woman in the far corner poked the youth sitting next to her. ‘Hey, Darren, it’s us ’e wants.’

The youth continued to sit there, eyes closed, head swaying rhythmically from side to side, plugged in to an iPod clipped to the belt of his jeans. The woman pulled the plug out of one of his ears and smiled across at me. ‘Coming,’ she shouted.

The spaniel cocked his head and, with a grizzle of expectation, lunged towards her. The owner pulled him back with another ‘Not you, stupid’.

The woman kicked the youth’s shin and he shuffled to his feet with a scowl. Between them, they manoeuvred a large metal cage past the opaque-eyed spaniel who scrabbled forward again with an eager ‘woof’, only to be yanked back. Once in the consulting room, they heaved the cage on to the table. The youth quickly plugged himself in again and stood there sashaying from one foot to the other as rap music hissed faintly from his iPod.

‘Tell ’im, Darren,’ said the woman giving him another prod in his ribs. The teenager continued to nod his head and jiggle his hips.

I felt myself beginning to sway and nod in unison with him while at the same time giving him an encouraging smile. Maybe he thought I was taking the mickey because he suddenly stopped jiggling and spoke. ‘It’s Fred. He can’t eat proper.’

I pulled myself together. ‘Right. Let’s take a look at Fred then. See what the problem is.’ Whatever Fred was, he was going to be small fry. No big fish for me. But then perhaps I was expecting too much on my first day. Rather like last week.

My expectations when I’d turned up for the interview at Prospect House had been high. I’d felt in fine fettle. Full of the spirit of youth. Well, at least as much as a 25-year-old veterinary graduate can hold, with a large overdraft burning a hole in my pocket – reflecting the knee-holed jeans I normally wore – remnants of my cool image. Much better dressed that day, of course – open-necked white shirt, linen jacket, cream Chinos. I felt a bit Noël Cowardish. A mad dog? No. An Englishman? Yes. And certainly one out in the midday sun.

It was a glorious June afternoon. Everywhere, roses were in full bloom, though those in the front garden of Prospect House looked rather tired. Distressed even. Straggly stems, leaves pitted with black spot, a pink scattering of isolated blooms, but nothing a good dose of manure couldn’t put right.

The taxi driver from Westcott-on-Sea’s station knew Prospect House well. ‘Ah, yes, the veterinary hospital,’ he declared. ‘Had my Billy Boy’s bits removed there. They provided a good service. Something he can no longer do.’ There was a great bellow of laughter as he slapped the steering wheel. When he dropped me off at the gates of the hospital, he leaned out of the window. ‘Good luck. But watch your step,’ he warned. ‘That Dr Sharpe in there, she’s a formidable lady by all accounts. Wouldn’t want to needle her. Get it? Needle her! Sharp, eh?’ With another loud guffaw, he tooted his horn and sped off.

His warning about Dr Sharpe blunted my spirits somewhat. As I climbed the short flight of stone steps to the front door, the austere portico cast a deep shadow over me, depressing me even further. Ever the one with a highly developed imagination, I felt as if I were about to enter some Doric temple and be sacrificed at the feet of the omnipotent Dr Crystal Sharpe. A gambolling tryst of nymphs and satyrs on the frieze would have restored my lighter mood. But no, not a bit of it. The Victorian Worthy who had built this house had decreed the lintel be carved with a plain inscription: 'Prospect House'. I wondered just what my prospects were likely to be as I took a deep breath and stepped inside only to collide with the stooping figure of a girl wiping the floor with a mop.

'Whoops. Sorry,' I spluttered, recovering my balance to edge round her.

She looked up with a shy smile on her freckled face, her hazel eyes full of apology. She was about to speak when a voice cut in from the reception desk.

'Can I help?' The tone was brisk and demanding.

I tiptoed gingerly across the wet vinyl. 'I've come for an interview.'

The woman behind the computer screen twisted her head to one side and fixed me with a beady eye. She had bottle-black hair which was so stiffly permed and lacquered it gleamed like a polished nugget of coal. A loosely cut black jacket over a roll-neck black sweater hung round her shoulders.

'I see,' said the woman, pecking at her lapels with long, claw-like nails. 'Well, I'm afraid Dr Sharpe has had to dash out on an emergency visit. But Mr Sharpe is around somewhere.'

'Eric's in the second consulting room,' volunteered the girl who'd been mopping down the floor. 'Shall I go and get him?' She stood up and pushed back a wisp of blonde hair.

'OK, Lucy. Tell him Mr …'

'Mitchell … Paul Mitchell.'

‘Tell Eric Mr Mitchell’s here about the job.’ The receptionist waved a vermilion painted nail at Lucy who then hurried off down the corridor. ‘We’re all called by our Christian names here,’ she said on the assumption I required an explanation. ‘Makes for a more friendly atmosphere. I’m Beryl. Beryl Wagstaff.’ Again, she fixed me with her right eye while the left one seemed to be focused on a spot above my head. Friendly? There was nothing friendly in the eye staring at me. Cold … glassy … very unnerving.

Seconds later, a short, rotund figure bounced into reception, white coat open, flapping round his ankles, both arms flexing and extending in front of him as if juggling imaginary balls. The ‘Pleased to meet you’ faded rapidly from his lips as he skidded on the wet vinyl and careered into the desk.

‘’Struth, Beryl, this floor’s lethal!’ he exclaimed.

‘Blame it on that last client of yours, Eric,’ she replied. ‘The poodle cocked his leg while Mrs Pettigrew paid her bill.’

‘Typical, eh?’ grinned Eric Sharpe turning to me. ‘And to think she was complaining the dog hadn’t peed for two days.’ He extended a hand and warmly shook mine. ‘You’ve come about the job.’

I nodded.

‘Good … good. Let’s go down to the consulting room and have a chat.’

I followed the bobbing figure down the corridor into a room equipped with a gleaming, stainless steel trolley, glass-fronted wall cabinet and spotless, white-topped consulting table.

‘Now then,’ Eric said, drawing a stool from under the table and perching himself on it, his legs swinging freely beneath him. ‘Are you any good with the knife?’

I hesitated. What could I say? I’d very little opportunity to do much surgery during my training.

But he didn't wait for a reply. 'Plenty to get stuck into here. Like a good hack myself. But it's just finding the time.'

I was puzzled. Stuck into? Hack? Hardly scientific jargon.

Eric flashed me another smile. 'Before I forget, must apologise about the wife.'

Ah yes. Here we go … the indomitable Dr Sharpe.

'Had to go out on an emergency call to the Richardsons. Very fussy clients. Won't have anyone except Crystal. Typical horsey types. Keep a couple of ponies. Very handy, though, if you do take the job as there'll be bucketfuls of manure to be had.'

What planet was this man on? Had he been at the ether? Eric must have seen the bewilderment etched on my face.

'Muck's good for roses,' he said as if this explained all. It didn't.

Eric charged on. 'Well, no doubt you saw those roses out in the front of Prospect House.'

I nodded weakly.

'Not much to write home about, are they?'

I shook my head in despair. He took that as my acknowledgement of the fact.

'Once you get a few shovel-loads round those, there'll be no stopping them.' He flashed another smile, bouncing energetically up and down on the stool.

I intervened. 'Er, I'm sorry, Mr Sharpe. But I'm here about the assistant vet's post.'

Eric jumped off the stool, his face turning crimson. 'Oh, I do apologise. I thought you'd come about the gardening job. Crystal's trying to persuade me to take someone on to help in the grounds. Bit of a passion of mine, gardening. But can't always find the time.' He ran a hand across his balding head. 'You must think me a complete idiot blathering on like that about the roses.'

‘No … no … not at all.’ Indeed, I felt sorry for the poor man. He did seem the friendly sort and was trying to put me at my ease.

Eric took a deep breath. ‘OK, Paul, let’s start again. Time’s a bit short as I’ve got more appointments coming up soon. So how about you fire questions at me as I show you round?’ With that, he shot out of the door.

As I chased after him, I learned that Prospect House had been converted into a hospital by his wife some 26 or so years ago. Very front-line, state-of-the-art stuff, he told me. But then that had always been Crystal’s style – dynamic, keeping abreast of the latest developments. And she always expected the best of her staff … wouldn’t stand for any nonsense. And that included the vets.

Eric curled an eyebrow at me. ‘But then I expect you know that anyway.’ He shrugged. ‘I’m well aware people know of Crystal’s reputation for being a stickler. After all, the veterinary profession’s a small world. But don’t let that put you off,’ he added in a reassuring tone.

I suddenly found my teeth were gnawing at my lower lip. Ouch.

I learned that Eric was one of the early assistants who’d been subjected to her exacting standards. ‘Must have done something right,’ he said with a chuckle. ‘We’ve been married now these past 22 years and we still get on like the proverbial house on fire. Though we do have the occasional flaming row.’ He gave another grin. ‘You know how it is.’

I didn’t. But had a sneaking feeling I’d find out soon enough if I took the post on.

As a demonstration, a small conflagration occurred when Eric confronted Beryl in reception over the mix-up around the interviews. It seems the gardener was due to be seen tomorrow and not today as Eric thought. Beryl’s feathers were clearly ruffled at the suggestion it may have been her fault; but I could see Eric was a master at calming the old bird down and soon had her

eating out of his hand again when he turned and said to me, ‘We couldn’t do without Beryl, you know.’

A crimson glow spread up her scrawny neck to lose itself in a heavy pan of make-up. ‘Well, I do my best,’ she croaked.

‘Of course you do, Beryl. You’re indispensable. The place couldn’t run without you.’ He gave her another reassuring smile. ‘Now tell me, what’s tomorrow looking like?’

Beryl tapped a few buttons on the keyboard, her nails clicking across them. ‘The computer says …’ I waited, unaware that this phrase, and the inevitable ‘no’, would eventually trip off millions of tongues thanks to *Little Britain*. Her good eye looked at the screen while the other stared blankly at me. ‘… Crystal’s booked solid. As usual.’ The good eye wandered back up to me. ‘But that’s no surprise. She’s so … so popular with the clients.’

Eric cleared his throat quietly. ‘And my list? What’s that like?’

‘Oh, you’ve got stacks left.’

‘And ops? Any booked for me?’

There was a sharp intake of breath. ‘Not tomorrow, Eric. It’s Tuesday, remember? Crystal’s orthopaedic morning. She’s got two pinnings, a cruciate and a patella luxation to deal with. Mandy’s already got the theatre set up.’

‘Yes, of course. Good of you to remind me.’

Did I detect a note of sarcasm there? A bit of irony?

Whatever, Eric turned to me, his baby-faced features still wreathed in smiles, his eyes twinkling. ‘The wife’s a dab hand with the scalpel. Cutting-edge surgery and all that.’ I quickly found myself being shunted into the operating theatre. ‘It’s not really my forte,’ he went on, ‘so I’m happy to leave all the complicated stuff to her. But I don’t mind doing the odd spay or castration. Just to keep my hand in.’

We were now standing in front of a very complicated-looking anaesthetic machine. As if reading my thoughts, Eric said, ‘Looks a bit of a monster, doesn’t it?’

I nodded and fiddled absentmindedly with one of the knobs. There was a sharp ‘pfss’ and the needle on the nitrous oxide cylinder gauge shot up.

Eric appeared not to notice. ‘But don’t worry. Mandy, our senior nurse, is in control of all the anaesthetics. Knows what’s she’s doing. Got high standards. But then, of course, she was trained by Crystal. So it’s what you’d expect.’

The needle on the nitrous oxide gauge continued to register escape of gas despite my furtive efforts to turn it off. I began to feel light-headed. Funny. Very funny. What a laugh this all was.

The theatre door suddenly swung open and a head popped round. ‘Everything all right?’

‘Ah, Mandy,’ exclaimed Eric. ‘Let me introduce you to …’

‘M-M-Mitchell,’ I interrupted, my voice high and squeaky as I tried to fight back an attack of giggles. No use. ‘P-P-P-Paul Mitchell?’ I squealed, feeling my lips crease back in an idiotic grin. ‘Pleased to meet you … hee … hee ... hee …’

There was the sharp click of heels across the polished floor as Mandy marched over to the anaesthetic machine and snapped off the valve I had been playing with. A plump, round-faced girl, she looked a picture of prim efficiency in her starched green uniform and bob of neat, auburn hair. She arranged her generous lips into a thin smile before turning to rearrange the endotracheal tubes with which Eric had started to nervously play, placing them back into their neat rows, graded in size.

‘Anything you’d like to ask me?’ she queried, giving me a hard stare that said, ‘This is no laughing matter, mate.’

My lightheadedness evaporated in an instant.

Eric came to my rescue. ‘Thanks, Mandy. But I think we’ve dealt with everything now.’

He and I tiptoed out of the room leaving Mandy minutely checking the anaesthetic machine for signs of further tampering. I half expected her to whip out a duster and start polishing its knobs.

Eric rolled his eyes up as the theatre door swung to behind us. ‘Don’t be put off. Mandy’s excellent at her job. Hopefully, she and our new recruit, Lucy Gentle, should make a good team.’

I remembered the blonde-haired girl who’d been mopping down the reception floor and the shy smile she’d given me.

‘Lucy’s just joined us as a trainee nurse,’ explained Eric. ‘Pleasant enough girl … just a bit reserved. But with Mandy’s help, she’ll no doubt find her feet.’

Back in the office, I had just taken a mouthful of lukewarm tea when there was the swish of tyres in the drive; the deep growl of an engine cut out, a door slammed; a voice vibrated through reception, the tone pitched to shatter a decanter at 40 paces. ‘Have I missed him?’

There was a murmured response from Beryl.

‘Sounds like Crystal’s back,’ said Eric.

The mug in my hand jumped as the office door swung open and in swept Dr Crystal Sharpe BVetMed, BSc, PhD, MRCVS.

Although I had never met her, I had, of course, already formed a mental picture of this formidable lady. Her impressive qualifications alone made her worthy of the title of ‘Doctor’. But not a Dr Dolittle … definitely not. I was thinking more in terms of an Agatha Christie sleuth. A tweed-clad, brogue-shod, veterinary Miss Marple, black bag in one hand, stethoscope swinging in the other, ready to track down and treat illness in any cat or dog that dared to cross her beastly path.

How wrong I was.

The woman who swirled to a halt in front of me in a cloud of delicate perfume was far removed from that crusty old image. I was drawn to Crystal Sharpe immediately. In fact, if this Julie Andrews lookalike could have taken me by the hand, whisked me out of the office and up on to the Downs with a burst of 'Climb Ev'ry Mountain', I'd have been a very happy goatherd.

'You must be Paul Mitchell,' she said in a clipped, mid-shires accent.

I found my hand clasped by hers – slim fingers, short, well-manicured nails, devoid of varnish. Her face, too, was unblemished by make-up. Laughter lines sprang from the corners of intense, steel-blue eyes, eyes which at that moment were boring uncomfortably into mine. Dainty pearl studs adorned petite ear lobes below fringed, short tresses of copper curls. A perfect English rose? Maybe. But would there be a thorny side to this lady?

The hand unclasped itself and an apology made. 'Sorry I wasn't here to meet you. But I'm sure Eric was able to give you some idea how we operate.'

I felt myself blush, remembering my giggling fit in the theatre.

Her husband's face lit up with another cheery smile. 'We covered most things,' he said, putting a finger to his lips and giving me a conspiratorial wink.

'And, of course, we've studied your CV very thoroughly,' added Dr Sharpe. 'So …?' She was again scrutinising my face. 'Are you prepared to take the post?'

My mind was still leaping goat-like over alpine meadows. I should have been asking more questions. What happened to the last assistant? Why did he leave so quickly? Why were they so desperate for a replacement? But my head was up in the clouds. And mesmerised by Crystal's piercing blue eyes, I said, 'Yes,' without thinking.

Minutes later, I found myself skipping down the drive of Prospect House whistling 'The Lonely Goatherd' having promised to start the following week.