

Murphy's Revenge

Colin Bateman

1

Dr Jeffers said it was all about demystifying the profession, having a glass-fronted office, rather than just a brass nameplate and a daunting set of stairs. Big, airy, modern, attract¬ ive, no more frightening than a hairdresser's, although three times the price.

Susan, his receptionist, wasn't so sure, even after Dr Jeffers assured her that their clients wouldn't actually have to sit where they could be seen through the glass – that would be a step too far.

There was a comfortable waiting room with a TV and a DVD player out of sight and...well, she would say out of mind, but it was hardly the place. No, Susan thought a psychiatrist was a psychiatrist was a psych¬ iatrist, and if you went to one people still thought you were mental. That's the way it is. She didn't know anyone – apart from Americans – who had reconciled themselves to the idea that going to a psychiatrist was anything other than something dark and secretive. You didn't go to a psychiatrist, as every American TV show seemed to pretend, for a bit of a chat, you went because there was something – well, wrong with your head.

Susan had been in this job with Dr Jeffers for three years now, ever since he had first opened his private practice, and she had every sympathy for the poor creatures who came through their door, but there was no denying that a lot of them were barking. It was just that there were different degrees of barking, the way there were different pedigrees of dogs.

Susan liked her modern office, but she felt like she was on show. People were looking at her all the time. Occasionally drunks would come up to the window and make obscene gestures. Once a junkie with a ghetto-blaster over his shoulder had come in and asked in all seriousness if she sold batteries.

Dr Jeffers might have thought he was demystifying mental illness, he might have thought his patients would just stroll nonchalantly in, have a cup of coffee and a

Copyright © 2005 Colin Bateman
Published by Headline

bagel and chat about their problems while reclining on a soft leather chair, but you only had to take a look out of the window at the poor chap walking up and down outside to know that at least as far as the average Londoner was concerned, the stigma of going to a psych¬ iatrist, no matter what dire strait you were in, remained as strong and widespread as ever. She saw it every day. The pacing. The watch-glancing. The smoking. The move towards the office, the move away. The waiting for pedestrians to pass by, the concern that even a complete stranger would see you entering a psychiatrist's office – the unspoken fear that that same stranger would then wait outside for you to emerge, then laugh in your face and call you a mental case.

Susan sipped her coffee, tried to concentrate on her computer screen, but her eyes kept being drawn back to the man pacing outside. He was of average height, his hair slightly receding, but cut short as well, he had on a combat jacket over black jeans, his face was heavy with stubble and he was chewing gum with a nervous rapidity that couldn't have been good for his fillings – Susan had spent five years as a dentist's receptionist and knew about these things. The man had a newspaper under his arm – then it wasn't under his arm and he was studying an inside page – then it was folded away – then he chewed some more and paced this way and that – then he had the paper out again and apparently opened to the same page. When he held it up Susan recognised the banner: it was the Ham and High, the Hampstead and Highgate Express – the local weekly. The new one had come out this morning and she already had a copy on her desk, but there was a different headline on the paper the man was examining, so he wasn't even reading this week's edition.

Susan checked her appointments book. Mr Marinelli was in with the doctor now, then they'd close for lunch, and Mr Simms was due at two on the dot. And it certainly wasn't Mr Simms outside. The latter was fat and fifty and this guy was...well, he was quite attractive, or might be if he took a little better care of himself.

Right, here he comes. Spitting his chewing gum out on the pavement, the dirty devil. Putting in a fresh stick.

Susan busied herself at her keyboard as the door opened and the man entered. She could hear his gum being worked hard before he spoke. She looked up. He was nervous all right. The newspaper was now rolled up and held tight in his fist, as if he was going to swat a wasp. Susan smiled professionally.

'Good morning. How can I—?'

'Dr Jeffers – is this Dr Jeffers – yes, of course it is...the sign, I mean, I wanted to make an – well, make an enquiry. No – no, I need to see him. Look, I can't sleep, I can't eat...I just can't – do you understand?'

'Sir, if you'll just—'

'I need to talk to him. He's good, isn't he? He can sort me out, can't he? Can't he?'

'I'm sorry, Mr...?'

Copyright © 2005 Colin Bateman

'Murphy. Martin Murphy. Is he here, can I see him?'

'Mr Murphy, you don't have an appointment?' Which was, of course, a rhetorical question.

'No, I...Look, I'm here now.'

'The doctor is with a client, Mr Murphy. You don't have a referral?'

'A what?'

'A referral from your GP. Usually we expect—'

'No – no! Look, I don't have anything like that, but a guy at work recommended him, said he was the bee's knees. I wasn't going to come but I haven't been sleeping, I haven't been eating. It's making me mental!'

'Mr Murphy, I'm sorry, but even with a referral, we don't have any appointments for at least—'

Susan jumped back as Murphy slapped his hand down hard on her desk. 'Please,' he said. It wasn't threatening, exactly. But she'd had enough.

'Perhaps if you leave your number I can get Dr Jeffers to phone you.'

'Do I look like I can wait that long?'

'I can't really tell.'

It was cold and dismissive and slightly demeaning, and she regretted the words as soon as she said them. He looked hurt. He straightened. He had cool blue eyes and they suddenly didn't look as mental as the rest of him.

'Why not?' he said bluntly.

'Why not what?'

'Why can't you tell?'

'Because I'm not a psychiatrist.'

'But you're his representative here on earth. You should be able to tell. A nurse isn't a doctor, but if someone hobbles into Casualty with his leg pointing north and his foot pointing east she can tell that he's prob¬ ably broken his ankle. You're the border guard, you're the Maginot Line, you have to have some fucking idea of what's wrong with someone when they come through that door, or else what's the fucking point in you sitting there?'

Copyright © 2005 Colin Bateman

Susan's mouth had dropped open about halfway through this tirade, and was still gaping like a vandalised drawbridge when the door behind her opened and a tall, bespectacled man in a plain grey suit emerged. Murphy immediately pivoted towards him, extending his hand. The man looked surprised and somewhat reluctantly extended his own hand.

'Dr Jeffers, please, you have to—' Murphy began.

'I'm not Dr Jeffers,' said Mr Marinelli, his face flushing rapidly.

'Do I hear my name?' Dr Jeffers called jovially from his consulting room behind Marinelli.

Murphy held on to Marinelli's hand. 'There's two of you,' he said. 'You're twins. Like that movie with Jeremy Irons.'

Then Jeffers himself appeared in the doorway, and Murphy shook his head and let go of the other man's hand. 'You're not twins,' he said.

Jeffers was a few inches shorter than Marinelli, with dark hair and a sharp aquiline nose; he had the confident smile and eyes of someone perfectly content with himself, his looks and his wardrobe.

Marinelli wiped Murphy's sweat off his hand and sidled past him.

'We'll see you next week, then,' Dr Jeffers called out. Marinelli waved back, but did not look round. He was already halfway out of the door, putting sunglasses on so that London wouldn't recognise him. Jeffers turned his attention to Murphy, who was now extending his hand.

Jeffers didn't take it. 'Now,' he said, over his glasses, 'who are you?'

'I'm sorry, Dr Jeffers...' Susan began.

The doctor held up a pacifying hand. 'That's all right, Susan.' He looked at Murphy again. 'Well?'

'Martin Murphy. I need to see you right now,' Murphy said, 'or I will kill myself on your plush new carpet.'

It was both dramatic and intriguing, and it was enough.

'I wouldn't want to spoil the carpet,' said Dr Jeffers, and invited him into his consulting room.

Susan said, 'But Dr Jeffers, your lunch...'

Copyright © 2005 Colin Bateman

'You run on, Susan. I'll get something later.'

'Can I bring you back a sandwich?'

But he just raised an eyebrow and she smiled awkwardly and picked up the keys to lock the front door. Dr Jeffers had his own set, he could let Mr Murphy out. Damned if she was going to sit there through lunchtime while the good doctor wasted time and money on one of his charity cases. She hated herself for thinking that way – Dr Jeffers worked all the hours God sent him. Half his clients he didn't charge. He didn't eat properly, and he still had that haunted look about him. It was awful, what had happened to his wife. That said, he was probably the most attractive man she'd ever met. Doctors always thought they had a certain charisma that women loved, but in her experience few of them actually possessed it. Dr Jeffers did. He had it to spare. She would think long and hard about how sexy he was while she ate her Cornish pasty in the café across the road. Susan was married herself, but she'd take off to Corfu with Dr Jeffers any time, if she had the chance. Or Rhodes.

Copyright © 2005 Colin Bateman