

And The Band Played On...

Sam had had enough of Christmas. For him it served as another reminder of the lonely life he led and it came around with surprising regularity, every year. Not only that but it seemed to last forever before going on its merry way and leaving him in peace. As he drove into town, he stared at all the Christmas decorations and lights already smothering the houses he passed but nothing could ever prepare him for the garish High Street, even though it was the same every year. Why did it all have to start so early? It was only the first week of December and yet all the usual songs were on the radio, tormenting him with every note, shoppers were out in force in the town and the supermarket shelves were heaving with food for Christmas Day, which was still over three weeks away. It was madness and he hated every minute.

He parked his car in the free car park behind the High Street and pulled his coat closer round him as he got out. He was surprised by a gust of wind and, at the last minute, he decided to take his scarf with him too. He plunged his hands into his pockets as he walked towards the dental surgery further down the High Street. He was glad they'd been able to fit him in as an emergency appointment because his tooth really was giving him a lot of pain now and he didn't want it hanging over him any longer. He pushed open the door to the surgery and quickly closed it behind him, anxious not to let the warm air inside escape. He announced his arrival to the receptionist and took a seat to wait for his turn. His tooth was starting to ache again, making him realise that the painkillers he had taken earlier must be wearing off. He hoped he wouldn't have to wait long. He looked around the sterile waiting room, noting the out-of-date magazines and the faded pictures adorning the magnolia painted walls. He didn't make eye contact with any of the other people waiting, in case they tried to engage him in conversation, which would be the worst thing that could happen to him. It wasn't that he didn't like other people, he was just painfully shy and didn't really know how to do small talk, even though he was nearly in his thirties. Fortunately, his name was called a few minutes later and he went into the consulting room to find out what his fate would be.

The dentist was friendly but efficient, dispensing with the pleasantries very quickly and moving on to his aching tooth without wasting any time. He laid back on the elongated chair, looked up into the blinding light and opened his mouth with difficulty.

"Can you show me which tooth it is that hurts?" asked the dentist and he complied at once. "Ah, I see. Yes, your filling has worn away and you're feeling pain because the nerve is now exposed. We'll just need to refill it for you."

Sam sat up slowly, gingerly feeling his jaw after all the prodding about by the dentist.

“Would you like a white filling this time so that no-one can see there’s a filling there? It might need a crown as well.”

Sam nodded silently. “You’ll need to make an appointment with the receptionist, we’ll need about an hour and you’ll have to go straight home afterwards. It would be best if someone else could drive you too.”

He went back out to the front desk and made another appointment for the following morning. He wasn’t sure about getting home afterwards but hoped he could work something out. The wind was biting as he walked back along the High Street and seemed to have its own special route to his tooth, causing him to wince in pain. As he approached the church, he could hear some music playing. It sounded like Christmas carols but there was a lovely sound to it, not the tinny sound he was expecting from a CD or the radio. As he got closer, he realised that it was a brass band playing, right outside the church and he stopped at the back of a small crowd to listen. It sounded so beautiful that he couldn’t help himself and for a moment at least, he forgot the pain that he was in. As he looked at each of the band members in turn, he realised that they were wearing a uniform and wondered if they were a Salvation Army band. He moved round the edge of the crowd so that he could get a better look at the different instruments. Of course, he was knowledgeable enough to spot the trumpets, the trombones and the horns but there was one instrument he didn’t recognise, being played by a young woman. There was a young man playing the same instrument as well and two other musicians seemed to be playing an identical instrument but bigger. He thought the bigger one was a tuba so the other instrument was a bit like a baby tuba.

His attention wandered back to the young woman. He couldn’t really see her face because it was hidden under her hat but she had golden hair tied neatly at her neck. She stood out as the only woman in the band but there was something else about her, making it impossible for Sam to take his eyes off her. He came to a stop right next to her and just watched her long fingers, moving effortlessly over the valves and enjoyed the rich sound the instrument made as she was playing. At that moment, the wind gusted and lifted the music she had been studying so carefully out of its little holder, clipped to her instrument. Sam stooped down to catch it at the same moment she did and their hands grabbed it at precisely the same time. As they stood up, the music tore in two and they bumped heads. Sam was mortified at the disaster unfolding in front of him.

“Are you alright?” he asked her. “I’m so sorry about the music.” A pair of warm, brown eyes looked back at him, so warm he felt himself melting a little under their scrutiny. She smiled and put her fingers to her lips because the band was still playing. She passed him the ripped piece of music she was holding and looked over

her neighbour's shoulder to pick up where she had left off, carrying on as if nothing had happened. For Sam though, everything had happened in that moment, as his loudly beating heart would surely bear witness.

Sam wanted to stay and talk to the girl but he felt exposed and out of his comfort zone with so many strangers around him, watching him. His tooth had begun hurting again with a vengeance and so he reluctantly slipped away, risking one quick glance back at her before he left. She was studying the music once again, oblivious to his departure and that made him feel less guilty for sloping off.

Sam woke early the next morning, as much from the pain as anything else and hurriedly got himself ready for his appointment. His friend, Dan, had agreed to pick him up and take him home again afterwards and they were soon on their way back into town.

"You look terrible, Sam. It's a good thing you're getting this done today." Sam just nodded and prayed that it would all be over quickly.

It was nearly lunchtime by the time they left the dentist and Sam was no longer in pain. He knew from bitter experience though that this was the time when you relaxed, only to find that the pain was excruciating when the painkillers wore off. They were in sight of the church again and Sam cast a glance that way in memory of the lovely young woman he had met so briefly last night. Of course, there was no sign of her today but the memory was still as strong. He wished that he had stayed and talked to her the night before but his nerves had simply got the better of him.

He spent the rest of the day and night in bed, sleeping off the injection, only getting up to take more painkillers. By Sunday morning, he was feeling much better and was able to get up and eat a small breakfast of cereal, which only required slurping and no chewing. It was a nice bright morning so once he'd got dressed, he set off for the newsagent's to buy himself a newspaper, intending to have a lazy day before he had to get back to work tomorrow.

He was nearly at the church when he thought he was hearing things. He could have sworn that he could hear a brass band again but immediately scoffed at the remote possibility of that taking place in his village. As he reached the bend in the road that would take him down to the shop, his mind took over and made him turn left instead, towards the church. The sound of the band was definitely getting louder as he got closer to the church. He squinted to try and make out what was ahead of him on the road and he gasped as he realised that there was a band outside the church gates. In all the time he'd lived in this village, he could swear that he had never heard a brass band before. Soon, he was standing in front of the same

Salvation Army band once again, looking painstakingly for the beautiful girl he had bumped heads with a couple of nights ago. Suddenly, there she was, playing her baby tuba, as before, with her long, slender fingers. He couldn't believe that she was here in his own village. He was the only person watching, which made him feel a bit awkward but his courage had grown since the other day and he desperately wanted to meet the girl properly, introduce himself and talk to her, that kind of thing. He walked round to the church noticeboard as they played and spotted a poster advertising this performance and the rest of their tour of the area. He turned to listen to the rest of their performance and found himself smiling. When they finished, he gave them a round of applause, which seemed to be appreciated, even though it sounded a bit pathetic.

They started packing away their instruments and making their way into the churchyard. He wondered what was going to happen next. He took a few tentative steps towards the girl, hoping she would look up and make his life easier. He noticed one of her fellow musicians talking to her and found himself praying that he wasn't her boyfriend.

"Excuse me, I just wanted to say hello," he began, thinking how stupid that sounded even to his own ears. She looked up and studied him for a moment, with no hint of recognition.

"Oh, you were our audience," she replied and laughed. "Thanks for coming. If we managed to reach out to one person, that's one person more than we'd connected with before."

"I'll see you inside," said her companion as he walked off, leaving the two of them alone.

"Do you, do you remember me from the other night in town? We bumped heads when the wind blew your music away."

She frowned then, trying to recall their meeting.

"Oh, yes, we were playing outside the chemist's. I looked for you afterwards but you'd gone."

"I know, I'm sorry, I'd just been to the dentist's with very bad toothache and the wind was more than I could bear. I'm so glad to see you again today though. My name's Sam, by the way."

"I'm Sarah," she replied and paused for a moment. Listen, we're serving refreshments inside the church. Would you like to join us?"

"Oh, I don't know, I'm not really a churchgoing sort of person." He felt shy again and worried about having to engage with others.

"You don't need to be. Most of us just love playing in the band." She winked at him then and that was enough to persuade him. He followed her into the church and

was relieved to be in the warm again. They went towards the refreshments in the hope of a hot drink and joined the queue of people waiting.

“I know I’m going to sound hopelessly ignorant but which instrument do you play? I can only think of it as a baby tuba but I’m sure that’s not what it’s called.”

“It’s not, you’re right. It’s called a euphonium but a baby tuba is pretty close.” She smiled at him.

“How long have you been playing it?”

“About fifteen years. I love it and the band is the only opportunity I have, now that I’ve finished university.”

We took our drinks over to the far corner of the church and sat down on one of the pew benches.

“Are you musical at all, Sam?”

“Not at all, no, sorry,” he looked apologetic in case his lack of musical talent might put her off. She shrugged.

“What is your talent then? Everyone has something that they’re good at, don’t they?” She stared at me expectantly over the top of her steaming cup of coffee, as she sipped it gingerly.

“I don’t know what the answer to that question is. I work as an IT consultant which doesn’t really require that much talent and is pretty boring, I suppose.” He considered her question for a moment.

“What about hobbies, what do you do in your spare time?”

“I like to take photos.”

“What of?” She looked pleased that he did have a talent, despite what he’d said.

“Landscapes mostly but anything that catches my attention. I’d love to take some photos of your band actually and some close-ups of you, playing your euphonium. It might be good for your PR, if you’re on this tour. What do you think?”

“I think that sounds like a great idea. I’ll mention it to Bob, he’s the band leader and I’m sure he’ll jump at the chance. Hang on though, would we have to pay you because we don’t have any money, I’m afraid?”

“No, of course not, consider it my gift as it would be good experience for me.” She stood up then, taking his cup and making her way back to the refreshments table. He watched her body sway among the pews and felt irreverent for studying her curves as she walked over there. On the way back, she took off her hat and let her long, golden blonde hair fall down her back. Sam’s breath caught in his throat at her beauty and he wondered if he would be able to kiss her soon.