Call the Vet

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BRUCE FOGLE

Call the Vet

My life as a young vet
in 1970s London

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To the kind staff and volunteers at Hearing Dogs for Deaf People (www.hearingdogs.org.uk) who provide such incredible dog buddies for people, young and old, that find themselves isolated by impaired hearing. And to the diligent, dedicated people at Humane Society International, especially those in Canada (www.friendsofhsi.ca). You operate under the radar, sometimes in dreadful circumstances, but you do brilliant work defending animals worldwide.

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INTRODUCTION

Another overcast, moody, gunmetal grey day. London, 1970. Drizzle. I am a 26-year-old Canadian, fresh out of the Ontario Veterinary College, working as an assistant in a veterinary practice in Knightsbridge in the heart of the city. I'm here because … well, I don't actually know why I'm here.

It's far from home. That's exciting. I speak their language, so I can make my way around, get a job, have fun. I think of myself as British. At home in Toronto I grew up singing 'God Save the Queen' as often as 'O Canada'. The Queen is on my Canadian money. I vote for Members of Parliament, not Congressmen. But three months in London has me questioning that assumption. What I'm learning is that although I share their language, I don't share how they think.

A distinguished looking man in his sixties, in a tailored pinstripe suit, brings in his dog, a sad, grey-faced, female black Labrador, for me to put down. Not a twitch of emotion from him. His mother comes with him. Except it isn't his mother. It's his nanny. Not his children's nanny. *His* nanny. The woman who looked after him when he was a child. Where is his wife? His grown children? Why is there no feeling, no passion?

I am already feeling a bit antsy today, a bit out of place.

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'Bruce, I've received a complaint about you,' my boss Brian Singleton politely but firmly tells me when he arrives at his surgery. 'Meet me in my office at 8.45.'

I can't finish my coffee, can't do anything but go over in my mind all the dogs and cats I have seen in the last few days, trying to work out where I'd made such a grievous diagnosis that the animal's owner had gone out of their way to complain about me. I have limited clinical experience, so my confidence in my ability to diagnose and treat effectively is years away. At that time in my life, I still reacted to events. I didn't yet have the ability, the maturity, to understand that life is more likely to go in the direction you want it to go in if you make things happen, not just respond to stuff.

That's it, I think. *I've killed someone's pet, but if I go back to Canada now, I can start afresh and no one there will ever know what's happened.*

I meet Brian in his office.

'Bruce, the lady who you saw yesterday, Mrs Pilkington, has complained about your attire.'

'My clothes?' I burst with relief.

Brian wears a dark suit and tie to work and expects me to as well. I do. I have no problem with that. The Beatles wear ties. My own father wears a tie when he crawls under our summer cottage each spring to turn the water supply back on.

'She didn't like my tie?' I mock, and Brian replies, 'You were wearing sandals. She doesn't feel, nor do I, that sandals are appropriate footwear at a veterinary surgery.'

This is 1970. In Canada, I had flower decals on my car. My suits are velvet. My trousers have flares. My thick chestnut-coloured hair tumbles down my neck. Of course I wear sandals. How on earth could that be so reprehensible that someone would complain to my boss? And why would Brian agree?

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I don't get it. It is another seed in my mind that although we speak the same language, there really is a gulf between the English and me.

I come from a demonstrative family. The Fogles can be reserved but my personality comes from my mother's side, the Breslins, and they don't do reserve. They can be loud. They laugh outrageously. They question authority. They argue for the simple joy of words. They cry liberally. And when you need emotional support, they're with you, like an infantry platoon of aunts, uncles and cousins.

So when it comes to putting down this Labrador, the dog's sweet, gentle face looking up at me, at her owner and at her owner's nanny, I feel just awful. Why doesn't the owner feel as upset as I do? How can this man be so cold on such a poignant day, when his dog is to die? Why isn't his family with him? *What is it with you Brits?*

I was in my twenties before Canada had her own red maple leaf flag. The schools my brother and I went to in Toronto, Allenby Public School and Earl Haig Collegiate, both named after World War I British field marshals, flew either the Union Flag or the Red Ensign, a flag with the Union Flag in the corner and Canada's coat of arms on its red background. English-speaking Canadians of my era were raised more British than the British. The Queen was my queen. Britain's Parliament was the mother of all parliaments. I read Rudyard Kipling and Thomas Hardy at school. I knew the names of every British prime minister of the twentieth century. That's why when I arrived in Britain, I thought I understood the British.

But inside I really wasn't British and part of me already knew that. My father was born in Glasgow, so I proudly claimed patriality (and I continue to feel a strong affiliation with Scotland). His family emigrated to Canada in 1907 when he was a year old, but enough of Scotland remained in him for him to

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name me Bruce, my brother Robert and our dog Angus. My father's grandfather, a blacksmith, was born in a town with different names in German (Lasdein), Russian (Lozdzee), Polish (Lozdzeije), Lithuanian (Lazdijai) and Yiddish (Lazdei). The Fogles called the town Lazdei because they were part of the great Jewish emigration out of Eastern Europe that began in the 1870s. My mother's family, the Breslins, were also part of that biblical exodus. They came to Canada from what they called in Yiddish Tolotshin, the Lithuanians called Talacynas, the Russians Tolochin. They too were part of the Great Other that arrived in Britain, the United States and Canada at the end of the nineteenth century. And as much as my parents' families had become part of the weft of twentieth-century Canadian life, prominent in medicine and business, I knew I was an outsider, that I wasn't part of Canada's founding British or French heritage.

Seeing this man and his nanny, both seemingly emotionless, the nanny telling the man to go out in the hall while I give his dog a lethal injection, the man doing so without question, hits me like a bolt. I'm not part of them. I don't want to be part of them.

Yet I think I also intuitively understood even then that what I was watching was a performance. An act. A veneer. Learned behaviour. British theatre. I didn't yet fully understand how deep the relationship can be between us and other animals, but I instinctively knew it was impossible for this man not to feel some emotion at the end of his dog's life, or for this woman not to feel deeply for a man she had known since his infancy. There is a common thread of compassion running through all cultures. It is part of all of us.

It would also be years before I understood that the people I was meeting in Knightsbridge were but a sliver of Britain's then class-addled culture, a strand that, but for a few diehards (blowhards?), has now almost disappeared.

During the following decades, like some of Britain's colonial administrators, inch by inch I went native. (I see the same happening today with many of my American clients, posted to London by their financial institutions, initially despairing that Britain isn't America, then never wanting to leave.) It didn't take long, certainly no more than a decade, for me to accept the weather. Accepting the Brits, going whole hog and becoming British, took longer. It was easiest with, I hate to use the term, 'real people'. Almost the first Londoner to invite me out for a drink was Mick, one of the local dustmen. He was someone I could relax with. With other clients I saw at the clinic, it took longer for me to warm to them.

In my first years as a practising vet, I would discover that although I had a good grounding in the mechanics of medicine and how to sensibly diagnose and treat animals, l had no training at all in how to understand either my patients or the people who brought them to me. I didn't yet realise how uplifting pets are, how they make us smile and feel good. This is a story of how someone who was trained that animals have no feelings or emotions, at one of the best veterinary schools in the world, came to understand how dreadfully wrong that part of my education was. This is a memoir of my first years as a vet in what was the most exciting time and place to be one, London in the early 1970s. It is an outsider's view of the Britain that then existed, how that outsider went native and found a perfect home, and how caring for animals evolved from 'make do and mend' to the more sophisticated but not necessarily wholly better level it has reached today.

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There is a rhythm to life that is greater than years. A natural order. We repeat our mistakes because evolution is too foolish to retain accumulated wisdom. But joyously we experience pleasures through ever-repeated personal discoveries: a dog's head on your lap, a cat rubbing against your leg. Life is exciting when we are young because there is so much to find out about. Some of us are lucky enough to continue to feel that way even when we are no longer young.

At the end of my formal education I was in London, embarking on, although I didn't understand it at the time, a transition in life. I could be doing what I 'should' be doing, what my family expected me to do, setting up life as a working vet in Toronto. But I wasn't. I still don't know whether I took the opportunity to come to London because it was an exciting prospect or because it was an opportunity to get away from my family, to be myself, whoever that was. A niggle in me says it was probably the latter.

Through a sequence of chances – a Canadian travel fellowship to work at Regent's Park Zoo followed by an unplanned meeting with Brian Singleton, a vet with a practice in central London – I was now on a two-year contract working for Brian. His surgery, five minutes' walk from Harrods, was from my

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Canadian perspective a tired, old shoebox, although I soon learned it was better equipped than most other London surgeries. On the corner of Pont Street and Cadogan Lane, the only indication that it was a veterinary surgery was a seven-by-nine-inch brass plaque with the words 'Woodrow & Singleton Veterinary Surgeons' on it. That was the maximum size allowed by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS), and as Brian was president of that organisation, he knew and respected the regulations. The RCVS was, in effect, the vet's union. Only union members could practise veterinary medicine and I had become a member, an MRCVS. That was a wonderfully grand way to add five letters after my name by doing no more than pay my union fees.

The reception room's two frontages of ceiling-to-floor shop windows were defended by always closed yellowing Venetian blinds. Marbled blue linoleum covered the floor. Four fluorescent strip lights clung to the ceiling. It never smelled of animals, only of cigarette smoke wafting from the bookkeeper's office to the right of the reception area. Along each windowed wall were four grey plastic and metal chairs. By the back wall was the receptionist's desk, with a passageway immediately to its right to the narrow stairs leading to the first floor 'consultation' rooms. I thought it endearing that we 'consulted' rather than 'examined'. To the right of that passageway were even narrower stairs leading to the basement housing the kennels, treatment and operating rooms. X-ray developing was in a cupboard on a landing going downstairs. The X-ray machine itself was in the bookkeeper's office. When I wanted to take an X-ray, she vacated and puffed in reception.

There is something inherently good about people who choose to spend their discretionary income caring for pets. That too was a discovery that would take time to make. You can rightfully argue that pets parasitise our hardwired, life-

long need to nurture. But if that's your argument, then houseplants and gardens are parasites too. For whatever reason people kept pets, from my first experience in clinical practice I enjoyed meeting owners as much as I did their pets. That doesn't mean I understood them or found everyone easy to deal with.

Appointments were scheduled at fifteen-minute intervals, with the nurse on reception buzzing me upstairs via the intercom phone with who was next. Pat House, Mr Singleton's head nurse, buzzed me. Mrs Wax has arrived.

'Oy vey, those stairs,' Mrs Wax exclaims as she walks wearily into my consulting room, carrying her dogs' medical files, given to her by Pat.

'I'm only seeing you because Mr Singleton isn't here,' she says, handing me the files.

It's true that some people look like their dogs. Dogs are extensions of our personalities, although occasionally they also fill gaps – they behave or look the way we would like to if we could. Mrs Wax is a woman with a shiny helmet of lacquered black hair, not one strand of which I bet is ever out of place. Her three black toy Poodles follow at her heels, keeping her between them and me. They have their hair cut for showing and look like canine topiary. Back then, I thought that a dog's hair coiffed into pom poms and rosettes was no more than just stupid looking. It didn't take much time before I realised those haircuts were demeaning to what is a dazzling breed of dog.

Another thing. Mrs Wax is Jewish. I *know* her, where she is from, how she behaves. I might not understand other people I meet but I understand her. Her home looks like Versailles, except all the furniture is covered in plastic. If she has a daughter, my parents will steer me elsewhere. With their ancestry in the Baltic States, my parents' families pretentiously look down

on '*Fiddler on the Roof*' Jews, the ones with a passion for gold-plated water taps. They are 'nouveau'. That was a way of thinking I hadn't yet completely lost.

'Mitzi has kennel cough,' Mrs Wax tells me.

'How do you know?' I ask, trying to mask the superiority I feel. I am the professional she has come to for advice. She is simply Mitzi's owner and I think she shouldn't make her own diagnosis.

'How do I know? Do you need a veterinary diploma to know when a dog has kennel cough? I showed her last week. There was a coughing dog. She's coughing!'

'Putz!' I hear her mutter under her breath.

'Are they all coughing?' I ask.

'No, young man, but they will be unless you do something.'

'Let's have a look and a listen,' I say, and ask Mrs Wax to lift Mitzi onto the examination table. As she does so, Mitzi produces a soft, moist cough.

I look at Mitzi's file and see she is eight years old and spayed. Her two younger canine companions, also females, are not spayed.

Mitzi's eyes are bright, her teeth surprisingly clear of tartar and her ears devoid of the forest of hair I expect to see. The glands in her neck feel normal, but when I pinch her windpipe she gags and coughs, a cardinal sign of irritation typically caused by one of the bacteria or viruses that, lumped together, get called 'kennel cough'.

I put my stethoscope in my ears and listen to her lungs. They sound moist and fruity. Then I concentrate on her heart, and the valve sounds are muffled and loud. I have a 33 rpm LP of canine heart sounds that I'd brought with me from Canada. This is my cutting-edge continuing education and according to that LP, Mitzi has a grade six out of six heart murmur. The maximum. She is in the earliest stage of heart failure.

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'Let's have a listen to the others,' I say, and when I examine them, their hearts and lungs sound normal and they just look at me querulously as I pinch their throats.

'Mitzi may have picked up kennel cough at the show and the others might be incubating it, so tetracycline antibiotics and honey in their water can help. You should keep them away from other dogs for the next three weeks. No dog shows. But Mitzi has a loud heart murmur. She's coughing because she has heart disease and her heart's not coping very well.'

Mrs Wax looks shocked.

'That's impossible. She just won the Veteran Class. Last week! The judge said she is in excellent condition. Where's Mr Singleton? I want to see Mr Singleton.'

'He's working at the Royal College today, but he's back tomorrow. I'd like to start Mitzi on digitalis and Lasix* now and you can see Mr Singleton tomorrow.'

'Don't you start any treatment until I know what's wrong with my dog!' she warns. 'I want a real vet, not some apprentice who doesn't know the difference between kennel cough and a heart attack.' She lifts Mitzi from the floor and holds her tightly to her chest. I am about to tell her it is important we start treatment today, but when I look at Mrs Wax's face, wet mascara is streaming from her eyes.

'I'll buzz Pat and arrange an appointment with Mr Singleton for tomorrow morning.'

When Brian offered me a job I asked my professor of surgery from Ontario, Jim Archibald, for his advice. Jim was on a year's sabbatical at the Royal College of Surgeons. 'Woodrow and Singleton is the best practice I know of,' Jim explained. 'It's a

* Digitalis is a heart medicine (found naturally in foxgloves) and Lasix was the brand name of the diuretic ('peeing' pill) furosemide. At that time, there was no generic alternative to Lasix.

good place to make your mistakes, four thousand miles from home.' He added, 'You'll establish a good ethical basis for your future.' Of course, I was too green to appreciate that Brian would have asked Jim about me.

Affable, angular Cuthbert Erskine 'Woody' Woodrow, then in his late sixties, godson of Lady Cadogan, was first president of the British Small Animal Veterinary Association, a relatively new organisation of companion animal vets that was less than fifteen years old. Its American equivalent, the American Animal Hospital Association, had been founded far earlier, in the 1930s. Woody had great presence but was also relaxed and approachable. He had just retired but still came in occasionally to do Saturday morning consults. Handsome, reserved Brian Singleton, in his late forties, was its third president, a world-respected orthopaedic surgeon and my boss. Vets in Canada wore white lab coats or green scrub tops when they examined pets. Woody and Brian consulted in dark Savile Row suits.

The following day, Mrs Wax returns and sees Brian, who admits Mitzi for more tests. After I finish my morning consultations, I go downstairs, where Mitzi is housed in one of the recently installed stainless steel kennels, not in isolation.

'Bruce, the patient doesn't have Battersea Cough.'*

Brian never calls pets by their names. They are always 'patients'.

'I've given her 20 milligrams of Lasix,' he says. 'Pat, please walk her in the mews every hour. Bruce, take lateral and VD

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* Dogs taken to Battersea always picked up a cough while there but it wasn't caused by the known cause of 'Kennel Cough', a bacterium called *Bordetella bronchiseptica* (a relative of *Bordetella pertussis*, which causes whooping cough in us). Twenty-five year later it was discovered that 'Battersea Cough' is caused by a canine respiratory coronavirus. Although a vaccine was developed it was never licensed for use in dogs.

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X-rays of the chest.' VD means 'ventrodorsal', with Mitzi on her back. He then goes back upstairs to attend to Royal College matters.

'Did Mrs Wax give you a hard time yesterday?' Pat asks as I carry Mitzi up from the basement to the X-ray room.

'She didn't believe my diagnosis,' I answer.

'That's because you look like you're fourteen,' Pat giggles.

In 1970, the Royal College of Nursing refused to allow the word 'nurse' to be used by anyone other than a member of that association, so ever-smiling, over-permed Pat was a Registered Animal Nursing Auxiliary, or RANA, one of the first, the even-keeled mother-hen of Pont Street. Assisting Pat was Jane, a younger RANA, and Brenda, a trainee.

'You'll look old soon enough after dealing with the people you'll meet here,' she smiles, as we enter the accountant's smoke-filled room to use the ex-hospital X-ray machine.

'Gertrude, we'll just be five minutes,' Pat tells the surgery accountant, who picks up her pack of cigarettes and lighter and leaves to have another cigarette in the waiting room. Gertrude, in her late fifties with skin like cracked china, is also the receptionist when the RANAs are busy with pets. She reminds me of the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*. Throughout my time at Pont Street, I simply avoid her.

We don lead aprons and while Pat holds Mitzi, I place the X-ray cassette on the table then pull on lead-lined gauntlets and take Mitzi back while Pat adjusts the machine's settings. I lay Mitzi on her side, stretching her out, and when the dog stops coughing, Pat, standing behind me, clicks the dial in her hand. I place a new cassette on the table, stretching Mitzi out once more, this time on her back, and once more when her coughing stops, Pat clicks.

Speaking soothingly to Mitzi, telling her what a good girl she is, Pat takes her back to her kennel while I stop off at the

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darkroom, the closet on the stairs landing, and under a red light remove the X-ray film from the cassette, slide it in a hanger, then dip it in developer until it looks developed, then in water and finally fixer. I hang the X-rays over a radiator until they are dry and go back downstairs.

'So how do I make myself look older?' I ask Pat.

She smiles back and after a pause replies.

'Have an unhappy love affair.'

'No. Be serious. What should I do to make people see that I know my medicine?'

Pat pauses once more, then looks up at me and with a seriousness I haven't seen before replies, 'You vets are taught that dogs and cats are cases. Well, they're not. They are family. People's sons and daughters. Their husbands and wives. Don't preach to people. Listen. Then they'll think you're older.'

That isn't the first important lesson I learn from nurses. Long before vets understood what was happening in small animal clinics, nurses knew. My profession is still, by culture, masculine.

The X-rays show typical changes brought on by valvular heart disease, fluid throughout the lungs. After Brian looks at the X-rays, he asks me to join him when he meets with Mrs Wax and a discharged Mitzi.

Pat brings Mitzi to his room. 'Mrs Wax, as soon as you left I immediately gave the patient an injection of Lasix to clean her lungs,' says Brian. 'It would have been much better if this had been done yesterday as my colleague suggested. I asked Dr Fogle to examine her lungs this afternoon, and he tells me the injection is already working and her heart cough will continue to improve this evening.'

Brian moves to the X-ray viewer mounted on the wall, where both X-rays are backlit.

'Mrs Wax, Dr Fogle was able to diagnose the patient's heart disease without the need for X-rays. You will see how large her

heart is,' and he points out the bulge in the shadow on the left side. 'You will also see that the patient's lungs, that should be dark indicating air, are white indicating congestion. Dr Fogle was able to determine this yesterday by listening to your dog's breathing sounds.'

Mrs Wax has taken Mitzi from Pat and is holding her tightly. I say nothing.

'What about her kennel cough?' she asks Brian.

'Complete the course of tetracycline that Dr Fogle advised. If we're lucky, the other dogs won't need any treatment. Pat will give you this, and the medicines for her heart. I would like to see her again in a week. Dr Fogle has experience interpreting ECGs and has recommended that we acquire a machine. He will run an ECG on Mitzi when we see her.'

After she leaves, I turn to Brian. 'Thanks for that. Are we really getting an ECG?'

'We are now. Mrs Wax may be tricky but she's influential in the Kennel Club, and it's best to keep her in the tent. And Bruce, I don't know how to interpret ECGs, but you're a fresh graduate so I expect you do. And if you don't, I want you to know how to by next week.'

I waltz out of his room. I think Brian is scary but know that even though I'm in London, away from my family, at least professionally, I've got my own infantry platoon behind me.

2

There is a lyrical fantasy that vets are more clever than doctors because our patients can't tell us what's wrong with them. That may not be true, but you'll have a hard time finding a vet who will argue against it. Another trope is how we actually use the verbs 'to vet' and 'to doctor'. 'To vet' is to make a careful and critical examination of something, while 'to doctor' is to change something in order to trick somebody, or to add something harmful. What would you like to be known for? As a Canadian vet in London, I was able to have the best of both worlds. While UK vets graduated with bachelor's degrees and so were *M*r, *Ms*, *Miss or Mrs*, Canadian vets graduated with doctorates so I could rightly claim to be a *Dr*. And I did, certainly for a year or so until I realised it created a barrier and I was happier with people calling me Bruce.

A common feature of my extended Canadian family is that we don't swear. None of us: my parents, siblings, aunts, uncles or first cousins. My kids don't either. Swearing was a cop-out. As teenage smart alecs, we sometimes used French-Canadian swear words, *sacrement or tabarnak*, but that was really to show each other how clever we were. When I got frustrated by the antics of my closest cousin, I'd call him a *toton,* a complete idiot, but never a 'tit'. I spent the first 25 years of my life hearing

an occasional 'darn' or 'holy moly' and not much more. Then I arrived in Britain.

Brian didn't like going on home visits so I went on all of them, several each week so early one afternoon on a leaden, monochrome day I am standing on the pavement in Berwick Street Market in Soho, on a home visit to see two Dobermans that have drawn blood from each other in a lunchtime dispute.

After morning appointments finished, I'd exchanged a luncheon voucher, given to me instead of cash as part of my weekly salary, for a Scotch egg from Express Dairy, and with my mock leather doctor's bag filled with what I thought I'd need, I'd walked past the regal Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons headquarters in one of the great mansions in Belgrave Square, up past the ambulance entrance at St George's Hospital at Hyde Park Corner, along Piccadilly to cacophonous Piccadilly Circus. I continued past the theatres on Shafetsbury Avenue until I reached the bustling street market. I love that walk. Still do.

'Woodrow and Singleton' had a cream-coloured Morris Minor estate or 'shooting brake', as Brian called it, that I could use on home visits, or I could take taxis if I wanted. But if I had the time, I walked. That's a habit I haven't lost. I looked at the grand buildings I was strolling past and it was exciting to think they were older than the country I was from. It was like walking through an old black and white movie – recognisable but still alien.

I haven't been to Berwick Street Market before. Awnings from the Georgian shops and houses that line the street overhang the tarpaulins that roof the individual fruit and veg stalls, each lit by one or two naked light bulbs. Dogs – all mutts – lie on the pavement or simply wander around. They probably belong to stallholders. I don't know and don't ask. The stallholders shout out the prices of their produce, although at the

Shaftesbury Avenue end of the market there is one stallholder selling used clothes and another old fur coats and stoles, neither of whom give away their prices. I walk along the pavement until I get to the address I've been given, a tailor's shop, and press the buzzer for Flat Two. I notice the sign beside the buzzer says, '*Cindy – Large Chest for Sale*'. I think to myself that if I had a large chest for sale, I'd make a big, proper sign, glue a Polaroid of the chest on it and have it on my front door at eye level, not little and faded beside the bell.

An elderly Italian woman answers the door.

'Hi, I'm Bruce Fogle, the veterinarian,' I say.

'Meester Veta. You comma with me,' she replies, and I follow her up the stairs. I know from visiting my dad's relatives in Glasgow that the British don't like bright light, but the naked red bulbs in the hallway and landing cast no light at all, and I hope Cindy doesn't have them in her flat too. I won't be able to see which parts of the Dobies are bleeding and which aren't.

She opens a doorway from the hall into a room overlooking the market. I don't see any chests of drawers in that room.

'You waita heera, Meester Veta,' the old woman commands, and of course I do. I've always done what I'm told to do, although with time I've learned to question authority.

Good, I think. *At least there's a little natural light through the net curtains*.

'Miss Sharona!' she calls out. 'Meester Veta issa heera.'

'Thank fuckin' god!' Sharon replies.

'Come in, darlin',' she calls out, and I walk through the door into a tiny, narrow kitchen where two female Dobermans are curled like black commas on blue linoleum floor identical to the flooring at Pont Street. Neither gets up to greet me. Both look sad, some would say embarrassed, as dogs are so capable of appearing.

'I knew when the butcher gave me them bones there'd be trouble. They was real miserable wiv each other, a real cat fight.'

'Hi. What's her name?' I ask, as I lean down by the dog nearest me.

'Joni,' her owner answers.

I say hello to Joni, and when she shows no resentment to my touching her head I feel around her neck for signs of damage. My fingers land on raw flesh on the far side. She'll need a stitch-up.

I move over to the other dog.

'And her name?'

'Jayni. You know what fuckin' sisters are like, luv. Was a real cat fight.'

Jayni is just as calm as her sister, and when I call out her name she gets up, walks over to me and presses her head against my legs, asking to be touched. She limps, and I see two clean, oval puncture wounds on her front leg near the elbow. She flinches when I touch the leg but shows no aggression towards me, only that mournful look. Dobies have an unfair image as aggressive dogs. That's wrong. Many are real mamma's babies. I open my leather doctor's bag, get out my stethoscope and listen to Jayni's heart, then Joni's. Both are fine.

'Sharon, I'm just going to give Jayni some antibiotics. Her wounds will heal. They're easy for her to lick, so they'll stay clean. Joni needs stitches. I can do that here if you like, but I'll need you to hold her firm for me.'

'A proper nurse, I am,' Sharon tells me and I open my bag, take out a glass cylinder of xylocaine and drop the local anaesthetic into its metal syringe gun, then add a needle.

'Fuckin' 'ell! She won't like that!' Sharon blurts out.

'It's a very thin needle. I'll drip local anaesthetic over the wound, then inject around the edges.' I do this, first cleaning the area using cotton wool wetted with disinfectant. Then I

rinse the wound with surgical spirit. Joni flinches but shows no anger.

While I prep, instil and clean, the transistor radio beside the sink plays in the background. In 1970s London I'd expected radio stations to play mostly British songs but Radio Luxembourg, the station Sharon has tuned into and the one I listen to in the sparsely furnished flat above the surgery where I am living, plays mostly American music. Today, it is cringe-making stuff, Lee Marvin singing 'Wand'rin' Star', then Norman Greenbaum's 'Spirit in the Sky'.

'I'm glad she's a Dobie. I don't have to clip any hair. It's a clean, fresh wound.'

From another compartment in my bag I take a spool of black surgical silk, cut off the length I need and thread it on a long needle with a curved cutting tip. I know from the last time I used that needle that it is getting blunt and is due for replacement. I place a long, narrow stainless steel bowl on the floor, part fill it with surgical spirit and drop a pair of scissors, a needle holder and the needle and silk in it. Nowadays, all of these items come in pre-sterilised packets.

Joni is an angel. The local anaesthetic works and she stands stoically, with Sharon on the other side of her from me, one arm around her neck by her head to slow down any snap she might make if I accidentally hurt her, and one arm around her chest. I think of how I love dogs. They're so much more noble than we are.

'That's the singer what Joni is named for,' Sharon says as I sew. Paul Burnett the DJ is playing Joni Mitchell's 'Woodstock'.

'I actually heard her live a few summers ago, at a bar called Le Hibou in Ottawa, with Leonard Cohen,' I comment.

'You finished yet, darlin'?'

The wound is a hanging flap and stitching is simple, first a holding stitch at the apex, then filling in on both sides.

Doberman skin is supple, but with a blunt needle I have to push ever harder with each stitch to complete the job. After I finish, I give both dogs their injections of Pen-Strep antibiotics and fill an envelope with pain-reducing phenylbutazone tablets, bute,* that will last for two days.

'That's wonderful, luv. It starts to get busy here around five. Now I don't have to be away from work. How much is it?'

I answer two guineas for the home visit and five pounds for the stitch-up and injections.

'Fuckin' hell. You make more by the minute than I do!' she replies.

Sharon takes seven green one pound notes and two shillings from a jar in the kitchen cupboard and gives them to me. I thank her and we walk back into her front room where a man is sitting on the sofa reading the *Daily Mirror*.

He looks up, stares blankly at me, then a wide grin bursts across his face. 'Dr Fogle! Fancy meeting you here an' all.'

I have no idea who he is.

'Don't you remember me? I brought the dogs to you to get 'em Epivaxed when Sharon was busy an' all.'

I still don't recognise him. At that time in my career, I was so concerned about the worthiness of my diagnoses and treatments, all I ever saw were the animals, never the people who accompanied them.

'Oh, yes. Hi. How are you?' and I shake his hand.

'Miserable buggers!' he says nodding his head towards the dogs in the kitchen. ''Ad a dust-up, did they?'

'Yes, over a bone. They're okay but they gave each other a chew. Same breed. Same age. Same sex. They tick all the boxes for having fights with each other. Do you know them?'

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* More efficient pain-reducing 'non steroid' anti-inflammatory drugs will not become available for another 20 years.

'They're mine. They live wiv Sharon when she's workin'. They're here for protection.'

What does she need protection from, I think, and only then work out why the lights in the hallway are red. I turn to Sharon. 'If either one of them goes off her food, phone the surgery. They'll need more antibiotics. The stitches can come out in 10 days. I can send a nurse to do that or you can bring Joni to the surgery.'

'Mick'll bring her in for her stitches,' Sharon answers. I shake Mick's hand and Sharon walks me to the door and out into the hallway where I shake hers.

I start down the stairs, then stop and turn back to Sharon.

'Sharon, one more thing.'

'Yes, luv?'

'Any chance you can show me that large chest of yours?'

I'm as pleased as punch that I can do irony too.

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Sensible people get pets directly from breeders and see litters of puppies or kittens with their mothers. In 1970s London, upper-class families often got their dogs from friends, the middle class got their dogs and cats mostly from pet shops, while the working class got theirs from unplanned litters or from Club Row, a Sunday street market at the top end of Brick Lane in the East End. Two pet shops, Town & Country Dogs and Harrods pet department, were vital customers for Brian. There were two distinct types of dogs in Britain, purebreds and mongrels. Although mutts or mongrels made up the vast majority of Britain's dogs, at Brian's clinic well over half of the dogs I met were purebreds. It was an era where 'well-bred' people provided homes only for 'well-bred' dogs.

'Our most important client is Harrods,' Brian explains in my first week working for him. 'You will visit their pet department at lunchtime each Monday, whenever new stock arrives and whenever they ask you to. All new stock gets Epivaxed, and most important, you complete a partial vaccination certificate with the date of the animal's next Epivax with us. Our other important client is Jane Grievson at Town & Country Dogs. Her son Christopher Grievson brings their stock here to be checked and Epivaxed.'

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Harrods was a nearby upscale department store, synonymous with the British upper classes and to my eyes fustier than the people they served. It flaunted its royal warrants, to Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother for china, to Queen Elizabeth herself for 'provisions' or what I called 'groceries', and to the Duke of Edinburgh for 'outfits'. I called outfits 'clothes'.

Brian had an appointment system at the surgery. Most vets didn't.

'Time is important to our clients,' he tells me. 'They are not used to sitting around waiting. And they don't suffer fools gladly.' I don't know what he means by that. The term is too English for me, but I take it as a warning not to waste their time. 'And we don't socialise with our clients,' he continues. 'That compromises our relationship with them. No drinks after work. No dinner in their homes.'

As always, morning consultations started at 9 am and ran through to noon. It was a blazingly sunny and unexpectedly hot and humid summer Monday and I packed my medical bag with what I thought I might need for my weekly Harrods visit: stethoscope, thermometer, surgical spirit, a sterilised glass syringe, twelve needles and twelve doses of the dog vaccine Epivax.* I walked along Pont Street, across Sloane Street, through red-brick Hans Crescent to Harrods.

The pink buff terracotta building itself was so grand. Imposing, bronze-framed display windows and seven floors of expensive shopping, although not so expensive that I hadn't already bought myself a suit at the new, fashionable Way In department on the fourth floor. The dollars I had brought with me from Canada, that I used to supplement my meagre salary,

* The vaccine came with a two-inch serrated saw, to abrade the necks of the vials to make them easy to snap open. I routinely cut my fingers when snapping vaccine vials so I also took finger plasters for myself.

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went a long way back then. I entered by the back door, at the corner of Basil Street and Hans Road, where chauffeurs stood formally by their Rolls-Royces, and took two stairs up at a time to the second-floor pet department and the Manager's office.

The Manager, a bushy-browed, beige man in his forties in a Viyella shirt, green wool tie and tan warehouseman's coat, with a rural accent that I sometimes found difficult to understand, formally greets me with a 'Good morrow, Vet. Do you wish to do rounds?'

With me leading, we systematically walk the aisles of his department, stopping first at the enclosure of baby alligators, where I scan their pen for any that look skinny or have removed themselves from the general cluster.

'The water looks a bit murky,' I comment.

'We are late changing it, Vet. It will be done.'

On their adjoining aisle the parrots, cockatoos, cockatiels and macaws are incredibly noisy. I look in each cage, at the inhabitants, at their food and water trays and at the floors to check the consistency of their droppings. I check the tanks of tropical fish for the health of the inhabitants and signs of excess feeding by the weekend staff, a common problem that might lead to contamination in a tank, and then on to the most enjoyable part of the department, the mammals. There are three skunks, a puma, and kennels filled with pups and kits.

'Where did you get the skunks?' I ask.

'We find homes for surplus stock from zoos,' the Manager explains. 'Three years ago we sold an elephant to the King of Albania.'

'I didn't know Albania had a king,' I say.

'I thought it was a posh area at the bottom of Savile Row,' he replies with a chuckle. A bit of irony there. 'But it's a country, and King Zog or his son lives in Switzerland. I know it's Zog because it rhymes with snog.' He chuckles again.

The skunks looks like they are six to eight weeks old. I am somewhat familiar with them, not just from their odour on my family's Yorkies after the dogs had been sprayed while chasing them, but from one I had found falling over in a creek and had brought home to nurse back to health. 'It probably has rabies,' my father told me when he came home from work, and he phoned Animal Control and had the skunk removed from our backyard.

'Did the zoo vaccinate them?' I ask.

'I will check on that, Vet,' the Manager says.

'What are you feeding them?'

'PAL and vegetables, Vet.'

'Good. Don't give them cat food. It's too rich for their livers. And the puma?'

'It's also surplus. We get them frequently. They sell well. This one arrived with the skunks.'

'What does it eat?' I ask.

'Fresh beef from the Food Halls, Vet.'

'Make sure it's beef on the bone,' I add. 'She needs calcium. And give her a tablespoonful of cod liver oil each day.' I had learned at London Zoo that big cats can suffer from Vitamin A deficiency, and cod liver oil was a well-balanced supplement.

I get down on my haunches, and the puma comes over and rubs her head against the inside of her enclosure. I put my fingers through the cage and feel the silkiness of her hair. 'That's a cat I'd be proud to be seen in public with,' I say.

'We had a lion cub here last year. I sold him for 250 guineas. Mind you, I would have given him away.'

'Why's that?' I ask.

'Sly creature, Vet. He got out one night and I found him over there in Carpets the next day. He'd shredded the goatskins.'

The last part of rounds today is the kitten and puppy kennels. There are no additions since my visit the previous week.

'The Persians sell well, but I am finding it difficult to obtain kittens, Vet. The breeders now want to sell them directly.'

The cat kennels are sparse, with one remaining Persian, two Siamese and two blue Burmese.

'Two litters of Yorkshire terriers arrive today, Vet. I hope they are here before you leave.'

Of the six Old English Sheepdogs I had vaccinated the week before, only two remain. They look surprisingly lonesome without their siblings, and stand on their hind legs wagging and smiling as I visually check them over. Beside them are four Dachshund pups, curled tightly together, and in the next kennel two Pug pups.

'Vet, the Pugs are sniffling.'

I rinse my hands with disinfectant, lift out the first Pug and listen to its chest. The heart and lungs are fine, and I hear referred noises coming from the throat.

'Her nostrils are so tight she has to breathe through her mouth,' I tell him. 'It's causing irritation in the back of her throat, and that's leading to her snorts and sniffles.'

Her littermate also has small nostrils.

'Do breeders send you Polaroids before you buy pups?' I ask.

'No, Vet. I know what sells best and I put in orders, although breeders ring me up when they have surplus stock they can't shift. If they're the right breeds, I'll buy them.'

'Okay, then. That's it?'

'As I say, I'd like you to see the Yorkshire terrier pups before you leave. Would you like a cup of tea? The train is due in at Paddington at half past the hour so they should be here momentarily.'

'Yes, fine. Thank you,' I answer and we walk through the 'Staff Only' door into a corridor leading to his office.

'Where are the pups coming from?' I ask.

'Most livestock comes from Wales, Vet.'

The Manager boils water in a kettle warmed on an electric ring and as it heats he adds several teaspoons of Harrods English Breakfast tea to a white teapot. He swirls the tea in the pot then pours it through a strainer into two flower-decorated teacups, and as he does so one of his shop assistants, a lean woman in her early twenties, with a brown fringe hanging over an intelligent face, comes to his door and says, 'The puppies have arrived, Sir. They're in the corridor.'

'Vet is having tea,' he replies.

'Thanks,' I say, 'I'll come and have a look now.' I pick up my medical bag and walk down the corridor to a large wooden crate with rope handles. There is no door.

'How do you open it?' I ask.

'The top is nailed shut so they can't escape,' the Manager says. He is carrying a claw hammer and, with the claw end, pries off the top. There is silence from inside the crate.

I look in. One pup sits up and unhappily looks at me. Another, with its hair pasted to its face by its own profuse saliva, lies on its side, glassy eyed, panting and drooling. A third pup is twitching and salivating. The rest are lifeless.

I pick up the sitting pup, give it a cursory look and hand it to the Manager. 'Put it somewhere with water.'

Without looking at her I say to the shop assistant, 'Get two of those fabric dog beds from the floor.'

I pick up the salivating pup and with my stethoscope listen to its chest. The heart sounds good. I listen to the twitching pup's heart. It sounds the same. I lift a lifeless pup and listen to its chest. No breathing or heart sounds. Then the next pup. It has a heartbeat. So does the next. So do all the rest. Only one is dead. I guess this is probably a low blood sugar crisis.

The shop assistant returns with the round fabric dog beds. The Manager places the healthiest pup in one of them.

'Do you have any maple syrup or honey for your tea?' I ask the Manager.

'I don't. But they do in the Food Hall. Come with me.'

I turn to the shop assistant. 'As fast as you can, run to the surgery, ask them for a vial of 50 per cent glucose and get back here, to wherever honey is in the Food Halls.'

'The surgery is on Pont Street, the other side of the lights,' the Manager adds.

I pick up the bed full of unconscious or frothing pups and follow the Manager across his department. He quick marches.

'Faster!' I shout and he moves from a brisk walk into a run, down the flights of stairs to the ground floor, through Menswear and into the Food Halls, straight to a selection of honey.

I take a jar from the display, open it, give it to the manager and say, 'Dip your finger in it and smear it in the mouths of the conscious pups.'

I take another jar and do the same with the unconscious pups, applying honey under their tongues and inside their cheeks.

'Animals are not allowed in the Food Halls,' I hear over my shoulder.

'These are not animals!' the Manager barks back. 'They are Harrods inventory!' No one seems upset that I have taken honey from the shelf without purchasing it.

It amazes me how fast sugar gets absorbed from the mouth into the bloodstream. The pups are small. They have little or no sugar reserve. They had been enclosed in a wooden crate since sometime in the early morning somewhere in Wales for a long, hot train journey to London before another hot ride in a taxi to Knightsbridge. I am burning with anger at how these pups have been treated, but I don't say anything.

The shop assistant arrives with the injectable glucose vial. I break it open and fill the syringe I have brought along to give

vaccinations with, add a sharp new needle, place my finger on an unconscious pup's throat to raise its jugular vein, insert the needle and inject one millilitre of the concentrated sugar. Within a minute, the pup is moving and within five minutes sitting up. I do the same with the remaining two pups that have not responded to honey under their tongues. Both come back from the dead.

'Get me a towel, please,' I ask the Manager's shop assistant, and she instantly produces a tea towel. I give the brightest pup a rub then place it on the floor, where it gives a little shake that is too much for it and it sits down. I repeat the rub downs with the other five pups, and when I am convinced that their low sugar crisis is at least temporarily over, I put them in the dog bed and return with the Manager and his assistant to the second floor, this time by the lift.

'Oh, aren't they cute,' the lift operator says as we get in.

We return to the Manager's office.

'I'm sorry, I don't even know your name,' I say to him.

'Grimwade,' he replies. 'And this is Miss Clark.'

'Annabelle,' she adds.

In the corridor, the bed in which we placed the unharmed pup is empty when we return.

'Miss Clark, find that puppy,' Grimwade tells his assistant, and as he does so the pup scampers out from under his desk with a piece of wrapping tissue in its mouth.

I speak to them. 'Annabelle, please give that one a little honey with its dog food. Mr Grimwade, I'm taking these pups back to the surgery for the rest of the day. I want to make sure they're over their crisis. They shouldn't be left alone tonight.'

'Mr Grimwade, if you can arrange for a taxi I can take all of them home with me tonight. I can stay up with them,' Annabelle adds.

'We shall see,' he says.

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'That's a terrific suggestion, Annabelle. Thank you very much. That's what we'll do. Mr Grimwade, considering the amount of money Annabelle saved Harrods with her Olympic-standard run to Pont Street, I think you can afford to provide her with the taxi fare home and back. I'll discuss the events with Mr Singleton, then give you written advice on where Harrods should get its puppies and kittens, how they should get here and what to do when they arrive.'

'I look forward to that, Vet,' Grimwade replies.

I think about asking him out for a drink that evening. I already know what I want to change in his set-up, but remember that Brian has told me no socialising, so I don't.

Back at the surgery, late in the afternoon, Brian calls me into his office.

'Bruce, may I introduce you to Mrs Jane Grievson from Town & Country Dogs and her son Christopher.'

Each has two Shih Tzus in their arms, a breed I have never heard of, let alone seen.

'Good afternoon,' they reply in unison.

Mrs Grievson has immaculately permed, bottle-blonde hair, is petite and vivacious, younger than my mother, an English rose whom I am instantly frightened of. Christopher, my age but more heavy set and a little taller, a man with an artlessly happy face, tickles the pups in his hands as his mother speaks.

'I was just thanking Mr Singleton for sending me to Mr Startup in Worthing. I was considering buying a new toy Poodle as a potential stud, and wise Mr Startup asked me to bring the pup's grandmother for him to examine. He found eye disease in the grandmother that he says is hereditary and leads to blindness, so I did not purchase the pup.'

Brian turns to me. 'There are no eye specialists at the Royal Veterinary College, but Geoff Startup in Worthing is very knowledgeable about eyes and sees referred cases.'

'And I was also telling Mr Singleton that you will be seeing more of Christopher,' says Mrs Grievson. 'My husband Bob and I enjoy dabbling in property. We have an old mill in Italy we are about to fix up.'

'Yes, I'm afraid so,' Christopher adds. 'Mother has convinced me to join her permanently. Bruce, have you visited our shop?'

I tell him I haven't and agree to visit after I finish the afternoon appointments.

'What type of pups are they?' I ask before I return to my list of clients, and I am impressed that Christopher answers before his mother can.

'They are Shih Tzus. Very rare. Oriental. We get them from a breeder friend of my mother's in Trevor Square.'

'We sell oriental breeds but we don't sell breeds to Orientals. They treat their dogs abominably!' Mrs Grievson adds.

Early that evening I walked up luxurious Sloane Street then left onto Hans Crescent. Town & Country Dogs was the second shop on the left, although its address is 35B Sloane Street. I assumed that Mrs Grievson managed to secure a better address because other people found her just as scary as I did when I'd met her a few hours earlier. I felt more relaxed when Christopher told me she had gone for the day and suggested that after a quick look around we go to a local pub for a drink.

The shop was elegant and feminine, with pastel, floral wallpaper, dark wooden floors, hanging lace in the north-facing windows that were set up for litters of pups to be displayed in and a pendant light fitting of smoked glass. Christopher takes me downstairs to see the pups' holding kennels and their clipping, washing and grooming facilities, then we walk over to the Nag's Head on Kinnerton Street, a mews street five minutes away.

'Have you been here before? It seems a suitably named drinking hole for a veterinary surgeon,' Christopher chuckles as he

steps aside to let me enter the tiny, dimly lit, packed pub. The Nag's Head is simply a tiny mews house, no more than 15 feet wide, on a narrow lane, surrounded by private homes. It's like walking into someone's small, dark-panelled living room, 15 feet of standing room in front of a bar with stairs going down to the left and stairs going up to the right. The walls are densely covered in framed cartoons and art. I instantly fall in love with the place and decide that this will be my 'local'. I have a Carling Black Label, and we take our drinks outside and find room to stand between two parked cars in front of the pub. I had already learned during the shop tour that Christopher has the ability to speak so loudly and so fluently there are virtually no pauses where I can ask any questions.

'How did your mother come to set up Town & Country Dogs?' I spot an opportunity and Christopher embarks upon a resumé of his mother's life. Earlier that day, I had pigeonholed him as his mother's gofer. Now I hear the pride in his voice as he tells me the back story of the pet shop.

'My mother is not your typical British dog breeder. Much too glamorous.'

I'm relaxed with Christopher, so I ask, 'What's a typical British dog breeder?' and Christopher says, 'A woman who reached marriageable age just after World War I, found there were no men left to marry and so has devoted herself to dogs. Do you know Betty Conn Ffyffe? Wonderful woman. Enormous. Ever so loud. Only wears tweeds. Monocle. Barks ferociously. If a dog is reluctant to perform she shouts, "Pull yourself together," wanks it until it's blue in the face and two months later Mother has another litter to sell.'

I sip my ale and let his riff roll on.

'Mother has been breeding Poodles and Yorkies for over twenty years. After the War, her family – she lived in Kent – had nothing. She knew dogs and started out making clothing for

them. Very upwardly mobile, she was. Mother saw that no one was catering to the top end of the market. She managed to convince *Tatler* to give her an enormous picture spread. That made her, her shop and her dogs well known to society. That's why we are around the corner from Harrods. Mother breeds most of the dogs she sells. She has an enormous facility in Cornwall. Or she knows breeders personally. But Bruce, you know what has really made the business so successful? Hollywood loves her. Simply adores her. They love her energy, her theatricality. Cary Grant or Ethel Merman or Elizabeth Taylor come into the shop and they think they are in an Edwardian film set, which is exactly where they are. We still can't find enough good Old English Sheepdogs for the Americans.'

'Is that why Harrods always has Old English Sheepdogs?' I ask.

'They get theirs from breed-to-order hill farmers in Wales. Dreadful places. Riddled with parasites. The pups don't meet a soul until they're put on a train to London.'

'Why Old English Sheepdogs though?'

'Because of Doris Day and David Niven and their Old English,' Christopher replies. 'In *Please Don't Eat the Daisies*, the film. It might be ten years old now, but it started a craze in America for Old English.'

'Did your mother supply the dog for the film?' I ask.

'It wouldn't surprise me, but I've never asked,' Christopher answers. 'Mind you, if she did, they would have had to pay for it then and there. Mother has very firm rules. No one is given extended credit, not President de Gaulle, not Princess Grace of Monaco.'

'They buy dogs from you?' I am impressed and wonder whether I'll meet them at Brian's.

'Yes, and they were not allowed to leave her shop until they paid for them. In full. In cash.'

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'I'm trying to convince Brian to accept payment with Barclaycard,' I say, and I pull out of my pocket my Chargex credit card issued by my Canadian bank. 'It's identical to this, right down to the colours. Brian says it's only for shopping in department stores, but vets in Canada get paid this way and the card holder is liable if someone else uses it.'

'Too technical for mother,' Christopher replies. 'Cash rules.'