

"Don't you worry, miss Basil, this is just a plug. It's perfectly ordinary. Just like the ones for electricity. This one is for oxygen, as it says on the label. And the one next to it, that's for air. Nothing to worry about, miss Basil. And some patients need it, too."

Here they go again. Would this be round eight? Or twelve? The solidly built nurse with the jolly good temper not hiding her burn out has to explain the function of the plug. Whenever she enters the room. For whichever purpose. Miss Basil, the patient in the bed next to the window, is convinced to hear a voice. She identified the oxygen plug as the source. Demands to have it sealed. Miss Chole watches from the opposite bed. She tried and failed to keep count of the exchanges. Her side the room lacks the customary TV. She gets to watch miss Basil instead.

And what a well of entertaining anomalies the lady is. Used to be on antipsychotics. When she arrived on the ward, a young lady doctor tried to talk her into resuming the medication. A non-starter. According to miss Basil, these terrible drugs cause constipation. Makes them contraindicated in her case. She had to be admitted in emergency mode because of an inert bowel. She's certainly not going to swallow anything bound to further worsen her condition. The valiant doctor tried to point out that making do without the antipsychotic didn't exactly improve her gastrointestinal status, meaning resumption of administration might be harmless. Nice try.

Miss Basil didn't even deign reply. Her fierce look signalled clearly enough what would happen if anyone tried to force her ever to take that stuff again. And who would want to send a thin little lady crying? Especially one with a hump. She's enough of a mess already.

The long dark brown hair of a girl frames a greyish-white face so stuck in perpetual resentment you assume she's going to start sobbing any second. Small wonder, with her biography.

Over meals, miss Basil insists on divulging tons of personal details. After an unspecified career as a studied musician she has been on disability benefits for twenty years. Left the work force because of bulimia aggravated by an addiction to tranquillisers. An expensive combination. To make ends meet, she had to develop kleptomania on top. She readily describes how she used to list her food and drug expenses, juxtaposed to the savings generated by her shoplifting. Sounds proud to have been such a bad girl, right until she fell seriously ill.

Her new career as a professional patient started last year. First, she broke a vertebra. The incident left her with the hump, and a catastrophic prognosis. The orthopaedic team told her this wouldn't be her last fracture. Her chronic malnutrition had caused osteoporosis. High time to start eating properly, if she wanted to escape the wheelchair.

Miss Basil dutifully proceeded as told, only to discover she couldn't. Her misused stomach had slipped through a hole in her diaphragm. To get fit for the recommended surgery, she had to wean herself of the tranquilizers. This involved a couple of weeks in a mental health institution, where they put her on antipsychotics. The stomach relocation surgery went well, in principle. She has regained her ability to eat. But her bowels don't move. Hence the readmission.

Having discovered her former way of life harmed her body, Miss Basil currently plans an autobiography. For the benefit of girls tempted by pro anorexia groups. She used to get praised for her nicely crafted letters, she's bound to make an excellent writer. Unfortunately, she's an offline person. Without access to any computer, never mind the internet. When miss Chole suggested to start with a blog, to check if there is an audience for one more bulimia book, she drew a blank.

In the specific context of having to spend three days with three strangers, Miss Basil is a treat.

So was the young lady with the baby. A nurse working at this same hospital, currently supposed to enjoy maternity leave. Stupid timing, to come down with appendicitis when your youngest kid is a mere eight months old. Both fellow patients and staff got enrolled to provide distraction. Making stupid noises and fetching diapers can be quite entertaining, in the absence of any alternative.

The lady with the baby was soon replaced by a half day stand. Miss Dalton arrived at 10 am to be gone again by 11 pm, after a tiny procedure. She's seriously stressed. Not because of her surgery. That's just one more minor inconvenience. Same as the acute hearing loss she suffered two weeks ago. Neither fun nor problem. What really gets her down is trouble with her senile dad. He used to be in a care home. Had to be hospitalised four weeks ago. Now he refuses to be returned to his residence. Insists on living with one of his three daughters instead. They offered to sponsor domestic help. Or a better care home. He turned vitriolic in response. Big mess.

Same for miss Aderbeen. Three tubes connected to her body, as opposed to just one for the other three patients. This makes her the resident intensive care case. But that's not her problem. She would be perfectly able to cope with a little hysterectomy. What stresses her out is her stupid SIM card. The devilish device chose this most inopportune of days to fail her. First her PIN didn't get accepted. Then the husband she called for help failed to find the PUK. When he finally called back, after thirty agonising minutes, the PUK malfunctioned as well. And he's on laxatives because of a gastroscopy scheduled for the next day. He can't drive over to bring the spare phone. Calamity.

"Don't you hear it? I admit it's faint. It's barely audible above the noise from the TV. But it's there all right. It very clearly states 'you should have gotten yourself a family, now you will die all alone and lonely'. Over and over. If perhaps we used one of your chewing gums, to fill the plug? This should shut it up." Miss Basil glances longingly at miss Chole's busy jaws.

One can't just damage hospital property to boost the mood of a roommate. But upsetting someone who insists on hearing voices doesn't feel like a recipe for a peaceful night, either. Miss Chole takes her time to come up with a carefully calibrated response.

"We can't do that. It probably wouldn't help anyway. I can't hear the voice now, whereas you obviously can. Chances are it will stay that way. Chewing gum is supposed to provide lousy sound insulation." That last sentence, uttered with the confidence of a subject matter expert, does the trick. For the moment. Miss Basil discards the chewing gum option and resumes staring at the oxygen plug. The peace won't last. Some sustainable distraction is needed.

Miss Darbun, the late night arrival who inherited miss Dalton's bed, shouldn't be on this pelvic surgical ward. Her migraine clearly identifies her as a neurological case. Officially, she's in attendance because this was the only empty slot available at short notice. Informally, anyone familiar with the concept of bariatric surgery for extreme adiposity assumes her presence is a subtle joke, courtesy of the A&E shift. She's fat. And turns out to be clever, on top.

„Can't you tell the idiot in your oxygen plug a third of women make do without a family? They are statistically more prone to happiness than their more fecund counterparts. I mean, I don't hear that voice. But if anyone dared throw this kind of bullshit at me, I would sure tell him to stuff it. Or go ask my fiancé, about how to lead a happy sex life. Without adding to overpopulation.“

A short period of silence ensues.

Miss Aderbeen is neither used to foul language, nor to speaking up against it. Her husband takes care of this type of incidents.

Miss Basil recalls one of her eating disorder therapy groups. Adipose girls are supposed to use their body fat as a shield, to fend off intimacy. No one mentioned fiancés in their context.

Miss Chole ponders recruiting miss Darbun for a stand against the crucifix on the wall and the big fat black bible in each cupboard. This is a municipal hospital, not some church venue. If the fat lady is as ruthless a feminist as her remark suggests, there could be a revolt in the making.

The silence doesn't last long enough for any of the patients to come up with an initiative.

„Siri would like to meet the oxygen plug. Sounds like a soulmate. And there is no such thing as overpopulation, as far as humans are concerned. You folks just do go vegan, and you'll be fine. What you need to watch is the European anopheles swarms. Don't do anything about that very real overpopulation, you'll succumb to malaria by the millions. Talking of feeding habits: My charger needs to be plugged in. Just mentioning, in case you want to watch the evening news later on.“

Miss Basil collapses in a sob of joy. This voice is much louder than the one from the oxygen plug it just confirmed. A hospital cupboard is an unusual source, but who cares? And all three ladies very obviously heard it. Never again will she get talked into taking antipsychotics.

Miss Chole makes a mental note to discreetly remove her iPhone 10 from the cupboard the next time miss Basil disappears for one of her unsuccessful toilet breaks. The latest Siri version does get a bit uppity, at times. But you have to admit it's far more versatile than its predecessors.