

SWEET TOOTH by EFLshorts.com

#1

Wendy gently rubbed the side of her face. Toothache! She hated toothache. She hated it more than anything in the world. Of course, the pain was terrible, but there was something that was worse than that. It was the thought of going to a dentist.

'What is it Wendy?' her friend Tracey asked, between chews of her chewing gum. 'You don't look well.'

Wendy was sitting at the checkout counter in *SuperSave* opposite her old school friend, Tracey. They began working in the supermarket at the same time nearly two years ago after they left Narbury Secondary School. Two years of sitting in a supermarket for eight hours a day, five days a week. But they both knew that they were lucky: jobs were hard to find in a small town like Narbury.

'I've got toothache,' replied Wendy, 'and the pain is terrible.'

'Have you taken any painkillers?' asked Tracey, reaching down and lifting up her small, leather handbag. 'I think I have some.'

'It's okay: I took some this morning and again at lunch.' Wendy replied. She took out a small mirror in her pocket, looked at herself and groaned. Her face was usually thin and narrow, but today it wasn't. Instead, it looked puffy and painful.

'I know a place that can help you,' Tracey said.

'Please don't say 'dentist',' moaned Wendy. 'You know I hate going there. Anyway, the nearest dentist is in Eastfield and that is too far away. Mr. Milligan won't give me time off work.'

'You won't have to go to Eastfield,' Tracey said.

'What do you mean?' asked Wendy. Tracey smiled another of her little smiles. She was always doing this to her. It was like a game. Wendy would have to ask a hundred questions just to get the smallest piece of information out of her friend. But Wendy didn't have the patience today. 'Just tell me!' she said irritably.

'Okay, okay. There's a new dentist here in Narbury,' she said just as a customer came to her till.

'He opened last week.' She began scanning the packets of crisps and cans of coke.

'What, here in Narbury?' asked Wendy, paying no attention to the customer at her friend's till.

'Why didn't you tell me before?'

Tracey gave a little smile. 'He's very good, you know.'

#2

'When did you hear about him?' asked Wendy. 'And how do you know that he is good?'

'Do you know Mrs. Wilson? The old lady with the purple hair?' asked Tracey.

Of course Wendy knew Mrs. Wilson. She was the biggest gossip in Narbury. Wendy nodded.

'Well...' said Tracey, putting the cans and crisps into a bag, 'she was in here yesterday. The dentist's name is Cedric Links. She couldn't stop talking about him...'

'Did Mrs. Wilson get a tooth out?'

'Not just one,' Tracey replied, counting out the customer's change. 'Two.'

'TWO!' Wendy cried.

'See you later. Bye,' Tracey said to the customer and turned to Wendy again. 'I went along and got a check-up too.'

'You didn't tell me.'

Tracey shrugged. 'It's no big deal. Anyway, he was great.'

'What do you mean?'

'I hardly felt a thing when he took the tooth out...' Tracey got up from behind her till. 'Have a look,' she said, taking out her chewing gum and opening her mouth wide.

Wendy did not want to look but she did. There was a gap between Tracey's back teeth.

'You should go to him,' said Tracey.

'I can't...I'm too scared.'

'Don't be silly. Go and phone him now. I'm sure he will see you. He gave me an appointment the same day. It's painless - honest...'

A woman came to Wendy's till with a trolley full of groceries. She started to pile them up on

the conveyor belt. The tins and packets of food slowly moved towards Wendy.

'Hello, Mrs. Morton,' said Wendy and head down, scanning the groceries quickly. Mrs. Morton was a new resident in Narbury. She arrived there about three months ago. She was always very polite and Wendy liked her.

'Hello Wendy,' said Mrs. Morton, smiling. 'How are you, dear?'

Wendy looked up and her eyes went immediately to Mrs. Morton's mouth.

Mrs. Morton's front tooth was not there.

#3

Wendy looked at her watch. The time was just after 5.20. She was walking slowly down the main street of Narbury, one hand on the side of her face. Behind her, Supersave was shutting. Most of the other shops were already closed. Everywhere, people were hurrying home, returning to their families. But not Wendy. She had phoned the dentist, Cedric Links, during her lunch break and now she had an emergency appointment for 5.30.

She looked at her watch again. She was wasting time and she knew it. The dentist was only two minutes away. It lay down a small lane next to the butchers shop. She slowed down and stopped outside the toyshop next to the butchers. 'Come on - be brave. You can do this,' she said to herself. Through the toyshop's window, her eyes followed a toy train on a circular track. She watched it rush past the station with its tiny station master, red flag in hand.

'What am I doing?' she asked herself. 'My tooth hurts and I have to go to the dentist. It's as simple as that!' She took a deep breath and turned down the lane.

It was dark in the lane - tall buildings on either side blocked the late afternoon sun – but she kept going until she arrived at an old door. On the door, there was a name, 'Cedric Links', in gold letters. Licking her dry lips, Wendy opened the door and went inside.

The first thing that she noticed was the smell of disinfectant – sharp and strong. The second thing was the silence. She was standing in an empty hallway. In front of her, there was an old staircase; and hanging above the first step on the staircase, a sign with a red arrow on it pointed upwards. Wendy looked up. The wooden stairs disappeared into the darkness. 'I don't like it,' she said, 'I don't like it at all.'

She had a bad feeling about this place, but the pain from her tooth filled her head and made her want to scream. She began climbing the stairs.

#4

At the top of the stairs, Wendy stopped and listened. Not a sound came from behind the door to Mr Link's surgery. Did she get her times or days mixed up? Was he closed? She opened the door.

Inside, a woman in a white uniform was sitting behind a desk. Her eyes were on Wendy as soon as she opened the door.

'Can I help you?' asked the woman. She had a sharp nose and wore her dark hair tightly pulled back.

'Err...', Wendy said, 'I have an appointment at 5.30pm.'

'Name?'

'Collins,' she replied.

'Take a seat.'

Wendy walked over to a small row of wooden seats and sat down. She looked at the door and had to grip the seat to stop herself from rushing down the stairs and into the street again.

'Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz!'

A loud buzzer rang on the woman's desk. She looked across at Wendy. 'You can go in,' she said. 'Mr Links will see you now.'

Wendy stood up and looked around.

'Through there,' said the woman nodding at a thick, glass door at the other side of the room.

Wendy swallowed. Her mouth was dry and sore. She walked up to the door and stopped.

'Is there anything wrong Miss Collins?'

'I'm a little nervous, that's all,' replied Wendy.

'Why?' asked the woman, her face as hard as stone. 'It will all be over in seconds.'

Puzzled, Wendy turned and met the woman's stare. 'A raven!' thought Wendy. 'That's what she looks like - a big raven.'

'Just relax. Everything will be fine,' said the woman; and, for the first time, she smiled.

Wendy's heart missed a beat. The woman's teeth – all the ones that Wendy could see – were sharp like broken glass.

#5

Wendy stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. A white dentist's chair sat in the middle of the room with a metal trolley next to it. On the other side of the chair, there was another door but it was closed. From the ceiling, a single light bulb shone.

'Where is he?' thought Wendy. 'He's not here.' This was the excuse that she needed! She turned around and reached for the door handle.

'Sit down please,' said a voice behind her.

Wendy turned. A small man with a shiny bald head was standing next to the metal trolley. A white paper mask covered most of his face. He wore a pair of gold spectacles, but the light from the bulb reflected in their lenses and made it impossible to see his eyes.

'Please,' he said in a high voice, '...sit down.'

Wendy looked at the chair. Her legs did not want to move, but she forced herself.

Links was immediately at her side.

'Open wide please,' he said and pulled a bulbous light towards her. It reminded her of a searchlight. Wendy opened her mouth. 'Relax. This won't take long. A little further please.' In one hand, he held a thin metal hook, in the other a small round mirror.

Wendy opened her mouth fully. Her eyes followed the metal hook as it disappeared from sight. In her mouth, she could taste the metal and feel the hook's sharp point gently touch her tooth.

'Goooooooood,' said Links with a long sigh. 'Streptococcus mutans.'

'Whaaa? Wendy tried to ask.

'Tooth decay,' said Links, and moved behind her.

Wendy looked into the bright light that shone on her. She turned her head slightly, just in time to catch a glimpse of a long, sharp needle. She closed her eyes. There was a sharp pain that made her jump then...nothing. She opened her eyes. Links was behind her again, out of sight.

'We'll just wait a few moments for the anaesthetic to take effect,' he said.

#6

Wendy lay in the chair and waited, surrounded by the surgery's blue walls, listening to Links's patient breathing behind her. After some time, she felt her mouth and the tip of her nose become numb.

'Click, click, click!' A metal sound.

Links was beside the chair again. In his hands, he held a large pair of metal pliers, which he opened and closed quickly ... Clickity click, clickity click... 'Now,' he said, his high voice even higher than before, 'open wide please...'

Wendy closed her eyes and opened her mouth.

'Goooooooood,' Links said.

'Clickity click, clickity click...'

Suddenly, Wendy felt the metal jaws of the pliers grip her bad tooth. Her head jerked to one side. She could hear Links breathing in hard, rapid breaths. The tooth was coming out. There was a warm tearing at the back of her mouth. She groaned and opened her eyes. Links's face was inches from hers. A smile! It was a smile. Suddenly her head fell back against the chair and the metallic taste of blood ran down her throat.

'Rinse and spit, please.' Links was standing beside her with the tooth in the pliers. He indicated a paper cup with pink liquid in it and turned away.

As she was picking up the cup, Wendy heard the tooth drop into a metal dish.

'Same time tomorrow?' Links asked.

Wendy emptied her mouth of the rinse. 'What?'

'Same time tomorrow? For the other tooth?'

'What other tooth?' Wendy took another mouthful of the liquid. Her tongue found the big soft hole in the back of her mouth. When she spat, there was still blood in the bowl.

'I will need to see you again tomorrow. Ms Simm will give you a time,' said Links and handed Wendy a paper handkerchief.

Wendy got up out the chair. She felt dazed. She opened the glass door and almost fell out into the reception area.

Ms Simm was still sitting behind her desk. Wendy didn't look at her. Instead, she walked straight for the stairs.

'Excuse me, Miss?'

Wendy stopped at the top of the stairs. She turned. Ms Simm was holding out a little white card between her long fingers.

'Same time tomorrow?'

#7

During the night, the pain woke her up: the pain was coming from the hole in her gum where her tooth used to be. At 4 am, she went downstairs and found an almost empty packet of painkillers. She took the two pills that remained and went back to bed – but she didn't sleep. At half past seven, she called *Supersave* and told Mr Milligan, her boss, that she was ill. He wasn't happy, but she didn't care. She must have slept after that because later, just before nine, she heard the door slam shut when her father left for work.

Wendy rolled onto her back and tried to call Tracey, but her mobile was switched off. With one hand on her face, she checked her mobile. No messages. The pain was even worse now. 'I need something from the chemist, something stronger,' she decided and dressed quickly.

Outside, the cold air stabbed at her mouth. When she saw the chemist shop at the end of the road, she started to walk even faster; and by the time she reached the glass door of Shaw's, she was almost running. 'Here at last,' she thought. She reached for the door handle...and froze. A little white business card was stuck on the glass: 'Cedric Links – Dental Practitioner' it said in gold letters. Wendy tore off the card and pushed the door open, hard.

'Can I help you?' asked Mr Shaw, the chemist. He was standing behind the till in a long white coat.

'Yes, Mr Shaw,' said Wendy, 'you can.' She threw the little business card onto the counter. 'He's the reason I'm here.'

Shaw picked up the card. He frowned, uncomprehending.

'I need a painkiller,' continued Wendy. 'A strong one.'

Shaw slipped the card into the top pocket of his white coat. 'What exactly is the problem?'

'I had a tooth out yesterday, and he,' said Wendy, pointing to the card in Shaw's top pocket, 'made things worse. I can't sleep because of the pain.'

'I don't believe you.'

For a moment, Wendy was speechless. 'Excuse me? What did you just say?' She felt her face go red with anger.

'I don't believe you,' repeated Shaw, evenly. 'Or should I say – I don't believe that is true. Mr Links is an excellent dentist and I am more than happy to display his business card in my shop. It is the least that I can do for him.'

'THE LEAST YOU CAN DO?' yelled Wendy.

Shaw nodded placidly. 'Now what kind of painkiller...?'

'What's wrong with you?' asked Wendy. 'In fact, what's wrong with half the people in this town? Have you gone mad? Are you seriously telling me Links is a good dentist? Have you actually been to see him?'

'Oh, yes,' he replied and with his index finger and thumb, he reached into his mouth. Wendy watched in disgust as he pulled a dental plate. 'Mr Links did all the work in just one week,' Shaw said, smiling.

Wendy stepped away from the counter and began slowly walking backwards...

'Once Mr Links starts pulling teeth, he doesn't like to stop.'

...Wendy bumped against the glass front door.

Shaw put his dental plate back in his mouth. 'But you see, I feel...clean after I see him. Clean again. My wife and I both do. She's there now. She'll be clean. We all will...'

Wendy threw the door open and ran from the shop.

#8

That evening, Wendy waited for her father to return from work. She was dressed and ready to go when he stepped through the door.

'Please dad, I need to borrow the car,' Wendy said.

Wendy's dad sighed. The last time Wendy borrowed it she put a bump in one of the doors. 'Okay, but drive carefully,' he said, handing her the keys from his pocket.

'Thanks, dad. I will,' she replied. She only had half an hour: Links stopped work at 6.00pm and she wanted to be there before he closed.

Her dad was behind her. 'By the way' he said. 'How's your tooth? He's a good dentist, isn't he?'

Wendy stopped in the doorway. 'You've been there?' she asked.

'I went for a check-up.' He looked embarrassed. 'I know you didn't like him, but...'

'Didn't like him?' Wendy laughed. 'That's an understatement!'

Her father sighed. 'But everybody else told me he was great. Your Aunt May went there and she was over the moon. 'Four teeth out and never felt better' she said...' He paused.

'And?' Wendy asked, not really wanting to hear more.

'Links told me I need false teeth - top and bottom.'

#9

Wendy found a space and parked the car opposite the lane. Shoppers and tired staff hurried past. The town centre was emptying, fast. But one kid, in a red hat and gloves, stood motionless. He stared into the toyshop window, watching the train go around and around its fixed route, relentlessly ignoring the stationmaster's command. The child's mother, a bag of groceries at her side, lost patience. 'Come on, you,' she said, taking hold of his hand. 'I've got things to do.' He turned and his eyes met Wendy's.

A scarf was tied tightly around his mouth.

Wendy realized that she was shaking. Was the whole town mad? Was she the only person who could see the real Links? Now even her father was seeing him.

Suddenly, the door of the surgery opened and Links and Ms Simm stepped out into the lane.

Wendy grabbed a copy of The Daily Echo and hid her face in its pages. From the corner of her eye, past the edge of the paper, she watched Links locked the door of the surgery. Then he and Ms Simm walked up the lane. They turned into the main street and walked past her, the butcher and the toy shop without a glance.

In her mirror, she watched the two of them enter a private car park and get into a large, black car.

Its windows were dark and Wendy could not see inside it. The car started up and drove off.

Wendy started her car and followed behind them. She tried to keep two cars between her and them.

The traffic was bad. It was rush hour and everybody was trying to get home from work quickly. 'I hope I don't lose them in this traffic,' worried Wendy. Night was falling fast. It began to rain. Wendy watched the rear lights of Links's car through a sea of water. In and out of traffic the car went, and Wendy went too. She had to focus hard – not too close but not too far away. Mile after unnoticed mile they went. She pulled her eyes off Links's car for a moment and glanced at her surroundings. With a jolt, she realized that she didn't recognize any of the buildings around her. 'Where am I,' she asked herself, suddenly feeling cold and alone.

Just then, an indicator flashed on and off. Links's rear lights blossomed, electronic gates opened and the car swung into the driveway of a private house. Wendy pulled her car to the side of the road and parked. The gates were closing! She reached to the back seat of the car and grabbed her jacket.

Outside, the rain was falling even harder, bouncing off the road and filling the drains with floodwater. With her jacket held like a cloak over her head and the water running down it in torrents, Wendy rushed towards the closing gates.

A moment later, the gates closed and Wendy was inside the grounds.

#10

The dark trees that lined the driveway swung backwards and forwards as the wind roared through them. Ahead, a light shone out across the garden from a front room in the house. The quickest way to the old house was to go straight across its lawn. Head down, fighting the wind and the rain, Wendy pushed her way forward. Every step was a battle, but finally the ground under her feet changed from grass to gravel.

She looked up. Through the horizontal rain, she saw Link's parked car...and a porch. Seconds later, she was below its slender roof. Shelter. She lowered her coat. Her sweater, her blouse, her shoes: all dark and heavy with rainwater. 'What am I doing here?' she asked herself. 'This is mad!' She stood with her back to the door. 'What will I say? What right do I have to be here?'

But then an image of her father flashed through her head. This was her town, her friends and her family. And Links had tried to hurt her, she was sure of that. Looking at the window from which the light came and throwing her coat over her head, she crossed the distance between the window and the porch at a run.

At the side of the window she stopped, took a deep breath...and leaned her head forward. Inside, she saw a large, almost empty room that was lit by a single, central chandelier. Below its sparkling crystals, a small table sat next to two leather chairs that faced a large fireplace with a wooden mantle. There were no pictures, paintings or ornaments anywhere. Wendy turned around. She had a sudden feeling that there was someone behind her. She stared into the darkness that stretched across the lawn. When she turned back, she noticed that the window was not completely shut: there was a gap – a few centimeters – at the bottom. She knelt down just as Links, still wearing his white dentist's coat, entered the room.

Wendy watched the little man. His face was the same: the same hard little eyes that stared out from his glasses and the same little smile. In his hands, he was carrying something - a small wooden box. He walked to the table and stopped. Slowly, he opened the little box, put his nose to it and then closed it again. Wendy heard another voice from somewhere. What did it say? She didn't know, but Links called back: 'Don't worry my dear. They're all fresh today.'

'What's fresh?' Wendy wondered. If she could find out something, then she could go to the proper authorities - perhaps even the police. 'What's in that box,' she wondered.

Just then, Ms Simm entered the room. She wore a long black evening dress and her hair was loose and dark. Around her neck, she wore a heavy pearl necklace. She stepped towards the chairs and the table. Links met her. Still standing, Links opened the little box and offered it. With fingers on either side of it, Ms Simm took the box and slowly raised it. Her eyes fixed on its contents. Seconds past. Finally, she looked up and smiled at Links, who was watching her over the top of his gold spectacles. Then she raised her right hand and for a moment, her fingers hung above the box's contents and wiggled in anticipation. Finally – to the nodding approval of Links – her fingers dropped into the box and took out something small and grey.

With the rain in her eyes and the water on the window, Wendy struggled to see. The two of them

were about fifteen feet away from her. 'What is that?' Wendy asked herself. She watched as Mrs Simm tilted back her head and, with the object pinched between her slender fingers, reached out with her tongue towards it.

The thing was small, it was grey, it was...

Wendy recoiled in horror as she watched Ms Simm push her tongue between the tooth's long roots. A moment later, Ms Simm's fingers loosened their grip and the tooth tumbled slowly through the air and into her open mouth.

An eternity passed before Wendy's scream sliced open the night.