

# Tooth Decay

by Garrett Socol

Before the curious series of events that stunned a quiet community, Calvin Flack DDS wondered if he would ever find the perfect dental hygienist.

Two weeks prior to opening his practice in picturesque Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin, the strikingly handsome, soft-spoken Calvin hired Bess Chaucer, a strawberry blonde with a subtle overbite. Bess performed her duties expertly, but one morning Calvin caught her using Novocain for purposes of pleasure. He was so outraged, so utterly offended and disappointed that someone would take advantage of the profession he revered, that he fired her on the spot. The flustered hygienist had nothing to say in her defense; she simply packed her personal items and left the premises as soon as feeling returned to the right side of her body.

Office manager Imogene Jackson assured her employer that she would find the perfect replacement. Imogene took persnickety pride in making sure the highly-respected dentist had every single thing he required. With her ferocious eyes and take-no-prisoners demeanor, the big-boned, gravelly-voiced Imogene was a formidable figure overseeing the office like a modern-day Stalin.

After hiring, then soon firing Donna Waters who refused to wear a standard white uniform because it wasn't "her color" (she dressed in black, which unnerved some patients), Imogene escorted Rosalie Sterling into Calvin's immaculate office. A silky-haired stunner in a peach-colored halter dress, Rosalie reminded Calvin of a refreshing

summer dessert. Not only did she display chalk-white teeth, glowing gums, and impeccable posture (as if she could balance a hardcover copy of *Dental Anatomy* on her head while walking), she boasted degrees from Vassar, the Sorbonne, and the University of Wisconsin at Stout. Calvin offered her the position on the spot.

Rosalie had just moved to Whitefish Bay and didn't know a soul. Imogene hoped to befriend the young woman because she had recently lost her only confidante, Jo Marie Gurwitch, purchaser for a local bread factory. The relationship had ended on a sour note, leaving a bitter aftertaste in Imogene's mouth that even a potent rinse couldn't remove.

At the end of Rosalie's first day on the job, she stopped off at Imogene's desk to say goodnight. "Are you romantically involved with any kind of human being?" Imogene asked. The question squirted out of her mouth like toothpaste from a full tube.

"Uh, no," Rosalie responded, startled to be on the end of such a personal inquiry.

"Calvin is married, in case you didn't know. His wife Hedda is the head of Housekeeping at the Whitefish Bay Elegance Hotel."

"I see," Rosalie said. "Well, have a good night."

"This is Pearl, by the way," Imogene said, pointing to a framed photograph of a Siamese cat displayed on her desk. "She's feline and fabulous."

Late one morning during Rosalie's second week on the job, Wes Codling canceled his noon appointment because of severe food poisoning. The next patient wasn't scheduled until two-thirty. "How does lunch at The Last Resort sound?" Calvin asked. With its spectacular view of Whitefish Bay's colorful lily garden, this restaurant was the most popular in town.

"Sounds perfect," Rosalie said

Imogene wasn't ecstatic about her colleagues trotting off without inviting her, but she was accustomed to being left behind. Six weeks earlier, Jo Marie Gurwitch had canceled their dinner date because a yeast inspector at the bread factory invited her to a performance of the Whitefish Bay Ballet. Jo Marie didn't even suggest rescheduling. A few days later, she was reported missing.

The Last Resort was packed with a well-dressed lunch crowd. Calvin and Rosalie were led to a banquette in a corner of the main room, and a spiky-haired waiter named Finn took their food

order. The cumin-crusteD sturgeon with yucca puree, poached quail egg and banana fingerling potatoes was Calvin's choice. Unfortunately, they were out of that particular dish, so he opted for the orange roughy. Rosalie ordered a bowl of butter bean soup and a hearts of palm salad.

A cloud of unmistakable sexual tension hung in the air. Calvin couldn't deny an overwhelming attraction to his new hygienist. In fact, he didn't recall ever feeling this strongly, not even during the early, heady days with Hedda. "It's astonishing that most people have some form of gum disease, don't you think?" he nervously asked, fiddling with his silverware

"Eighty per cent of the population, and they don't even know it," Rosalie replied.

"Does it amaze you that dentists have such a high rate of suicide? I've never thought about ending it all, have *you*?"

"Why would I want to kill myself when there's so much to live for?"

"Exactly!" Calvin exclaimed. "We're so lucky, to take care of teeth and make a living at it."

"I feel the same way. If the eyes are the windows to the soul, the mouth is the front door, don't you agree?"

"Completely," he said. "I just remembered a disturbing incident. A colleague of mine hung himself. Ty Swain."

"Come to think of it, one of my dental school classmates, Elisa Pearson, slit her wrists during junior year. It was the talk of the campus."

"Well, it's not like dentistry is the only field with a high suicide rate," Calvin said, trying his best to lighten the mood. "I'm sure the textile industry has its share."

"Undoubtedly," Rosalie said with confidence.

Calvin became sullen. "In Fulton County, an oral surgeon jumped off the roof of a downtown skyscraper. Plunged five stories to his death. Believe it or not, his name was Molar. Abe Molar."

Rosalie nodded, mystified and misty-eyed. "I once knew a mortician named Alexander Graves."

By the time the entrée arrived, the mood has taken a steep, irreversible decline. Calvin and Rosalie took small bites of their meals, but their appetites were gone. Neither was in the mood for dessert despite Finn's strong recommendation of the Creole cream cheese pecan pie.

When the couple returned to the office, Imogene was rustling dental insurance forms on her disheveled desk. "How was lunch?" she asked.

"Excellent," Rosalie said.

"I'm glad," Imogene responded with faux sincerity. "My Swiss cheese on pumpernickel was pretty darn tasty, in case you were interested."

The following afternoon, Calvin and Rosalie were performing Myrtle Cash's root canal when Imogene announced she had to scurry home because Pearl had just gone into an early labor. "If anyone wants a kitten, let me know," she excitedly said.

One hour later, work on Myrtle Cash was complete. (Calvin was proud of the job he did, though it wasn't his undisputed achievement. That honor went to his porcelain-fused-to-gold-alloy crown on Smilla Hohenstein.) Calvin and Rosalie found themselves alone in the cozy examination room, each thinking about the previous

day's conversation, specifically how death in dentistry hovered over every cleaning, filling, and wisdom tooth extraction. "Would you do me a favor?" Calvin asked, his heart in his mouth.

"Anything," she replied with searching eyes. "What it is?"

"Floss my teeth."

Rosalie smiled appreciatively, as if *he* were doing the favor for *her*. "It would be my honor."

Calvin stretched out on the leather reclining chair while Rosalie carefully stood behind him. She began to floss, one upper tooth after the next. Then she instructed him to rinse. In order to plunge at his bottom set in the firmest possible manner, Rosalie stepped around the chair, and with the flexibility of an Olympic

gymnast flung her right leg over the dentist's torso so that she was off the ground, straddling him. With the

intensity of a dedicated heart surgeon, she went to work. When the job was finished, neither budged. Surrounded by suction hoses and sinks, shiny metal instruments and flavored mouthwash, the sexual tension that had been building came to a frantic boil as did the desire to drown out their profound fear of death.

The schedule fell smoothly into place: After Imogene went home at the end of the day, Calvin locked the office door, then he and Rosalie marched into the examination room and she flossed him.

A few weeks into the clandestine affair, Imogene felt a change in the air, as if some strange seismic shift had occurred. But it was mystery to her. She couldn't put her finger on what precisely had changed.

One night, a little past eleven, she couldn't fall asleep despite swallowing two tranquilizers with a forty-ounce bottle of beer. A half moon hung in the starless sky like a half-eaten cheesecake, and Imogene gazed at it, trying to see the cake plate as half full. Her attempt was futile; she could only see it as half eaten. Her entire life, she realized,

had been sliced by selfish, insensitive people who couldn't possibly fathom the profound loneliness of a homely, overweight, unmarried sixty-year-old.

The following Friday afternoon, Imogene was exhausted after a stressful day dealing with a parade of prickly patients. While stopped at a red light, she glanced at the newspaper sitting on the passenger seat of her Dodge Avenger and noticed an article on the investigation into the disappearance of Jo Marie Gurwitch. It seemed the police had finally acquired a few leads. When the light turned green, Imogene stepped on the gas and made a spontaneous, dramatic U-turn.

The sun was setting in broad violet strokes when Imogene parked in front of Lupino's Pet Supply (where she had recently purchased a package of catnip sausages for Pearl). Like a warrior heading into battle, she defiantly forged down the street.

The moment she stepped into Dr. Flack's office, she heard muffled, disturbing sounds. Following them down the carpeted hallway, her heart began to race like a blender set on high. Silently, furtively, Imogene let herself back into the office as disturbing sounds floated into her head. Following suspicious moaning down the carpeted hallway, the gasps and groans grew more savage. With quivering arms, she threw open the door.

In two dizzying seconds, three sets of eyes formed a debauched circle of deceit, rage, and abandonment. Everything became startlingly clear. The devastation in Imogene's face, the unbridled anguish, told a tale with one stunning conclusion.

With the speed of a professional, Imogene pulled a shiny pistol from her faux-leather purse. Calvin and Rosalie shuddered with bone-chilling horror as a loud gasp escaped from Rosalie's lips. But Imogene stunned the dentist and his hygienist. Instead of aiming her weapon at the cornered couple, she opened wide and pointed the pistol in her very own mouth. "Imogene!" Calvin shouted. "Don't!"

"Don't?" she asked, her eyes ablaze with hope. "All right, I won't," she said. She turned the gun toward Rosalie, and a booming shot slashed the air. Then she aimed directly at Calvin's chest, and another resounding shot rang out. Blood began to splatter on the plush white carpet which had been shampooed that very morning. Not only was the red on white aesthetically striking (resembling dots of raspberry liqueur on a blanket of snow), it was phosphorescent. Rosalie tumbled to the floor while Calvin collapsed on the actual chair, his head leaning back on the gray leather as if primed for a dental exam.

Imogene realized the colorful mess on the carpet needed attention, but more pressing was her need to rush home. She had five hungry kittens to feed.

