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Opening extract from

Brace Mouth, False Teeth

Written by

Sita Brahmachari

Published by

Barrington Stoke Ltd

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In memory of Cathy Woodman, whose story about a nursing home and lost false teeth inspired this tale.

Cathy is deeply missed, but her spirit of kindness and compassion lives on.

First published in 2014 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

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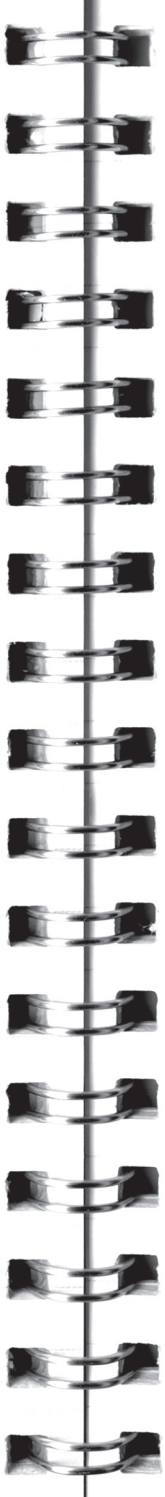
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library upon request

ISBN: 978-1-78112-400-0

Printed in China by Leo

WORK EXPERIENCE DIARY

BY ZENI CARTER



Alice in Wonderland inspired me to write this.

That's what we call poor old Alice because she does live in her own little Wonderland almost all the time. You know the story – Alice falls down a rabbit hole and has all sorts of adventures. But for my Alice it's a bit different. She falls down a memory hole.

Alice has dementia. She forgets where she is, who she is, and who everyone else is too. She can't even remember the people she sees every day. But I prefer to say that Alice is 'in Wonderland', because 'dementia' sounds like a 'dementor' – a kind of torturer like in *Harry Potter*.

I met Alice while I was on Work Experience. I suppose that what I'm about to share with you is more about me than Alice. It's a kind of diary of my time at Magnolia Gardens Care Home.

I've decided to call it, 'Brace Mouth, False Teeth'. I'm the 'Brace Mouth', Alice is the 'False Teeth'. Say it fast and it's a tongue twister.

"Brace mouth, false teeth. Brace teeth, false mouth. Brace mouth, teeth, false, brace ..."

Well, you get the picture!

If you wear a brace, you may already have covered this page with a shower of spit. Get used to it! Gross-out or not, bodily fluids are just one of the things you've got to deal with if you get Work Experience in an old people's home.

I'm going to take you back to the fateful day when I discovered that I, Zeni Carter, age 14, was heading for Magnolia Gardens Care Home for the Elderly.

THE BOTTOM OF THE PILE

I'm sitting in Mr Wood's office after school because I still haven't found anywhere to do Work Experience. I like Mr Wood. He's one of those teachers who always tries to do his best for you. But I can tell that I'm stretching his patience.

Mr Wood says it's getting harder and harder to find businesses who'll take school students for Work Experience. That may be true, but some people in my class are going to really exciting places. Places they want to go.

My friend Amber's working in the stables she goes to for her riding lessons every week. Laura's off to a publisher's because her mum's a writer and she arranged it for her.

A lot of other people have organised things with their parents' work too. But my mum said,

“Darlin’, whatever they give you is going to be better than cleanin’ houses!” I suppose she’s right. I know how to clean already so it’s not like I’d learn anything.

Mr Wood sits behind his desk and turns the pages of a big file he has open in front of him.

“So, Zeni, you said on your form that you wanted to work in publishing, journalism or media,” he says.

I just put down the first things that came into my head.

I mutter under my breath, “I don’t care where I go really.”

“Well, Zeni, if you don’t care, you can’t expect anyone else to either!” Mr Wood says. “But, as we’re talking of caring … how about a care home? It’s a small, friendly place, very well run – I know the lady who manages it.” His fingers trace over a handwritten letter with a pretty logo of a tree at the top. I strain to read the letterhead from where I’m sitting.

It says ‘Magnolia Gardens Care Home’.

My heart sinks. I only half listen to Mr Wood go on about my ‘kind heart’.

Magnolia Gardens Care Home is the house I pass every day on my way to school. The one with – of course – the magnolia tree outside. I’ve often wondered who lives there. The only people I’ve ever seen going in and out are women in clean white uniforms.

In one of my random daydreams I imagined that those women were the perfect clean petals of the magnolia tree.

The magnolia’s just coming into bud. I always think it’s a shame that it flowers for such a short time when it’s so beautiful. And then its shell-white petals fall and go all mushy and brown. Last year I nearly broke my neck slipping over on them in the rain.

Sorry! My mind's wandered. Where was I? Oh yes – STILL sitting in Mr Wood's office.

"Well, Zeni, you're going to have to decide," Mr Wood prompts.

And that is how I ended up stepping into Alice's Wonderland.