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Opening extract from

Sugarcoated

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crumblies ahoy!

There I was, slumped over Dad's appointment book. Doodling speccy faces to match the names in it. Trying not to die of boredom. Thinking nothing *ever* happens round here . . .

Next thing, four palms thudded flat against Dad's shop window. The racket jerked me so rigid the castors of my chair shot from under me. I landed on my backside behind the reception desk, legs in the air. OK. Soft landing. But hardly a flattering pose for a Big Girl. By the time I scrabbled upright the same four palms were splutting along the glass. Leaving smeary pawprints.

'Crumblies Ahoy,' I hissed; although to anyone looking in, my eyes were crinkled into crescents of joy. My expression was totally phoney, though. Forced. Because Dad insisted patients must be greeted with a friendly face.

'Go away,' I waved out at these two cotton tops,

who were now peering in at me through circles they'd made for their eyes with their thumbs and index fingers. To watch me smiley-smiling, you'd think seeing old Mr and Mrs Mullen had made my day. Would never guess I was growling through my grin, 'Just shuffle off and die you ancient –'

'Yoo hoo, hen,' Mrs Mullen's quaver misted Dad's glass. 'Where's the opticians? Canny see it.'

I showed all my teeth.

'Can you see *this*?' I flicked the Mullens a vicky with the KitKat I'd be guzzling as soon as my dad toddled himself off for lunch.

'Oi, behave yourself, Clod,' Dad said to me.

Shucking off the sad white coat he felt he needed to wear for staring into milky cataracts all day, Dad put himself between my scowl and his shop window. He kept his voice low. Finger a-wagging.

'Let the old souls have their joke and keep smiling out till they bugger off,' he told me. 'Then clean my window. All *righty*!' Putting on his professional smile and his outdoor jacket, Dad twitched the Mullens a palsy-walsy wink.

'Mum leaves glass-wipes under the till,' he instructed me with the same cheesy smile. 'Make sure you lock the shop while you're out cleaning. And no playing with my phones or breaking my computer. See you at two.'

As he spoke, Dad was flinging the door open, his tone morphing from Claudia Quinn's Bossy Pa to Mr Friendly Local Optician.

'Well LOOK who's here again! Always a sight for sore eyes. Get it? Sight? Sore eyes? Going my way?' he boomed at the Mullens, steering them well clear of his shop. They were too busy beaming back at him to notice his pernickety head-jerk from me to the dirty window: *Get cleaning, Clod!*

'Yeah. **See** you, Pa. Get it?'

Before Dad was out of sight, I'd two KitKat fingers rammed into my mouth whole.

Didn't a gal deserve *some* pleasure?

'Working here all sodding Saturday for twenty-five quid,' I chewed. Where Dad found patience to deal with doddery gits like the Mullens I DID NOT KNOW. And my mum? She was even better. *Always* charming

managing Dad's practice and his brigade of blindos for more than twenty-five years. Grace itself.

'By name and by nature,' as Dad liked to wag about Mum. Always up for a bit of banter, she was. Always ready with a tasteful joke . . .

Unlike me: Grace and Sean's Utter Lost Cause Of A Daughter. Who frankly, could not be *assed* trying to be civil to folk so past it they didn't even bother to switch their hearing aids on, let alone put in their false teeth.

'Frigging twilight zone this place, so it is,' I was muttering while I scuffed out the shop with glass-wipes in one hand and a second KitKat poking out my mouth. Naturally, I didn't bother locking up like Dad warned. Get real.

It wasn't like some joker was going to make off with the till in the next thirty seconds. Not when the handprints I was wiping away counted as High Drama in Greenwood Shopping Centre.

Deadsville, I scowled at my freshly gleaming reflection. Beyond myself I could see Dad stepping out in front of this big black off-road car thing. You know the kind yummy-mummies like to park on zigzags?

D'you call it an SOB or STD or SUV . . . *I* don't know, do I?

Whatever, Dad made it brake hard so the Mullens could shuffle across the shopping centre car park at zero miles an hour. Dad, like he was their personal lollipop man, stayed with the Mullens till they reached the pavement. Whenever they said something, Dad threw his head back and roared and laughed. You'd think he was enjoying a private audience with Billy Connolly, instead of tolerating a couple of oldies drabber than their tartan shopping trolley, whose idea of hilarity was groping up to the window of Quinn's Eyecare with their even drabber joke:

'Help. I've lost my guide-dog.'

For a change it wasn't crumblies who mucked my Mr Sheeny window next. It was 'yooths' as the Mullens would say. And what's really galling is that while I was out wiping off traces of the Mullens' pawprints I *thought* I heard sniggering nearby. A voice snorting, 'Check the state of that big lassie's muffin top, man!'

Being stupid, it didn't cross my mind that *moi* could

possibly be the source of mirth wafting from this trio whose white tracksuits glowed in the shadows of Gluehead Alley along from our shop.

Stoners, I decided. Crackheads.

Wrong.

No sooner was I back behind reception tucking into a sultana scone than the white tracksuits lined up outside. I assumed they were showing off their combined mathematical skills to each other when they counted to three in turn. But then they gobbed. Smeared their tags in the dribbles:

Big Eck. Rotty. Blotto.

And skedaddled.

As I belted out with the wipes again, taking a few token steps in pursuit then stopping to hurl a fruity mouthful of abuse instead – 'Ya shower of trolls!' – one of Dad's more intrepid narcotic-dependent patients seized his moment.

Six Armani frames for sale in the *entire* shop. This waster trousered them all.

Dad would dock my wages for that one. To teach me a lesson: *'What d'I tell you about leaving the practice*

unattended, Clod? Can't you pay attention to one simple instruction?'

Man, I was totally *seething* while I dabbed the window this second time. Manky it was. Never mind giving ASBOs to the white tracksuits. With phlegm that colour, at least two of them needed antibiotics.

'Crap day. Only half over,' I complained while I disinfected my hands in Dad's back shop. Outside someone was trying the door.

'Locked. Saturday. Ridiculous!' A woman's voice exclaimed. 'Mr Quinn's lassie phoned to say my specs were in. Never said Mr Quinn shut for lunch.'

'Just scram, missus,' I sniggered into the mirror at the round-faced ginger girl with a set of shop-keys between her teeth.

I took my time – brushing my hair, checking for dandruff, dealing with a couple of blackheads – before I slipped back behind reception. Coast was clear outside. I'd peace to finish my scone.

'Take five,' I chuckled, keeping hunkered down, head tucked below the desk so the shop would look deserted to passing trade.

As a thick layer of butter yielded to my teeth I dislodged a cluster of sultanas. Before they hit the floor I dived to save them.

And for the third time that morning Dad's window was walloped.