

## ANAESTHETIC

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SHORT SHORT STORY NO.24

I've always made it a policy never to operate on family members.

There is a great unspoken secret of theatre: the fact that patients under anaesthetic have a tendency to confess their darkest secrets to an audience of doctors, nurses and assorted brow-moppers.

I recall a middle-aged man who, while being delivered of gall-stones, informed me that he had watched as his wife choked on her steak one night and did nothing to revive her. 'Well, she did my head in,' he explained in the most casual tone as if we were old friends discussing football down the pub. 'It was always *you don't do this* and *you don't do that* so I let the old bag die. I do miss her sometimes though. I can't pretend I don't.'

On another occasion, a nun whose appendix had threatened an explosion recounted a trip she made to Medjugorje to see where the Virgin appeared to the Croats. 'I had a little too much wine,' she confided in me, 'and ended up in my hotel room with a young waiter who did things to me that I never believed possible. You don't get a good servicing like that in Knock or Lourdes, mind you, because I've tried ever since. Medjugorje's the place.'

My favourite moment was when a famous writer, one of those I'm-so-bloody-serious and every-word-that-comes-out-of-my-mouth-is-so-freaking-clever types said that every night at eight o'clock he closed his curtains, dimmed the lights and dressed in full costume and make-up to act out the entire score of *Chicago*. 'I'm magnificent,' he told me. 'Absolutely magnificent.'

So I choose not to operate on immediate family, despite the fact that they ask me all the time because they consider me a safe pair of hands. (When I say they ask me all the time, I do of course mean when they require an operation; they don't ask me when they're healthy, just to fill a lull in conversation.) But I always say no.

However the truth is that it's not because I'm afraid that they once they're under the ether they will tell me something disturbing that will place my relationship with them in an entirely new light, nor is it because I am concerned that one of them might confess to a crime which some busybody in theatre would feel duty-bound to report to the authorities. No, the reason I choose not to operate on them is because I'm not actually a qualified surgeon at all. I learnt it all from a book, applied for the job here with a CV of pure invention, and the damn fools who hired me never bothered to check a word of it. And despite the fact that I am rather good at my job, I'm afraid that something will go wrong and my true ignorance of surgical procedures will cost them their life. And I don't want to do that.

They're quite a good bunch of people, after all, my family.