

# Cheers, mate

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**'Good health' you say, chinking your glass of orange juice against that held out by one of your best mates from dental school days. 'I'll drink to that,' he smiles a significant smile and so do you as you recall a particular Wednesday morning.**



You knew you shouldn't have done it. In fact, you knew you shouldn't have been doing it while you were doing it, or at least just before you did it. That extra drink. Still, it was only occasionally that you went out for the night with one of your best mates from dental school days so where was the harm? No harm as such but why did he choose a mid-week evening for such a boozy session? Come to that, why did you agree? And there you were with the damned alarm clock reverberating itself to pieces and the prospect of the day ahead in practice. But hey, that's life. Oooh, why did lifting your head off the pillow hurt so much? How did 'best mate' manage to do it as often as he obviously did?

'Well, don't expect any sympathy,' came the tight-lipped riposte above the Rice Krispies, snapping, crackling and popping more loudly than they considerately might have. 'It happens every time you go out with him, you know it does.'

'Yes, all right,' the cacophony from the cereal subsided as it drowned in semi-skimmed. 'It was never like this as students. I could take it then, but not now.' A grunt from across the table, so loaded with meaning that it should have won an acting award for 'best monosyllabic significance in a non-Pinter production', conveyed everything you knew to be true. Which was why it hurt so much.

At work, about three patients had passed through the haze of gradually-working aspirin before you had realised. Amazing what you can do on autopilot. In fact, that's a point, how did you get to work? Remember driving in? Actually no. Scary, huh? In fact, so remarkable in terms of human behaviour that you mentioned it to your nurse. About the first thing you did mention to her that morning.

She smiled, rather too knowingly for your liking, and then asked if this 'best mate' was the one that practised over the other side of town. When you confirmed that it was, she nodded, again rather knowingly, and said she thought so.

'We've had quite a few patients from his practice coming here lately,' she had informed you. 'They say he is always running late and cancelling appointments. Apparently he often just doesn't turn up in the mornings.'

You were just about to say that you were not in the least bit surprised if he felt every morning like you did that day when an awful thought rekindled in your slightly less fuzzy mind. But you crushed it as ridiculous.

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Sure, he'd always enjoyed a drink hadn't he? As a student he had been the life and soul of the party, the prop at one end of the Union bar. When he first came to practise in the area you were delighted, and so was he, someone who remembered his glory days. The dinner parties were good too until, well, until he did start to get a bit out of hand and often before the main course had been served. Pity it had all stopped really, never seem to see his wife any more.

Lunchtime had afforded a fortuitous opportunity to chat to Anne, the receptionist, whose daughter was working as a dental nurse for 'best mate'. Anne, usually very chatty and communicative about anything that could pass as gossip but not be classified as confidential was strangely short on the subject of her daughter's ex-

employer. When you expressed surprise that she had left and asked why, Anne seemed uncharacteristically reticent and had replied that because he was a friend of yours it made it difficult.

'Makes what difficult?', you asked, that nasty feeling you had dismissed early looming up again. Anne had smiled a sad sort of smile and suggested that it might be diplomatic to say only that the atmosphere at his practice was not what it might have been and added, kindly but in a way that set bells ringing, that as a friend and colleague there might be something you could do to help.

A horrible, no, a grotesque and growing realisation had dawned. Over the next few weeks you chatted to other colleagues who knew 'best mate' and, feeling a bit like a cross between a school-sneak and a private detective, tried to add pieces to a jigsaw, the ultimate image of which you suspected you knew but had hoped and wished and prayed might manifest itself differently.

Finally you knew the time had come to make 'that' phone call — the one to the scheme advertised in the dental press for helping addicted dentists. Something Anne reported clinched it. 'Best mate' had had 'another' car accident, writing off his new BMW.

The confidential, anonymous call had been less painful than you thought and the action that followed was mercifully swift, efficient and discrete beyond belief. It was something to look back on now with relief and not a little satisfaction.

But supposing, through some misguided sense of loyalty to a friend, you hadn't been brave enough to make that call. Supposing something dreadful had happened. The possible consequences could have been so much worse.

All of which made the presently shared smile and orange juice a lot more meaningful than any by-stander could possibly know. 'Cheers, mate'.

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