

J'll Send You The Bill

Smithy was the only dentist in town. As he was the only dentist within more than a hundred kilometres, most locals had opened their mouths for him at some stage. In many cases it was not a pretty sight.

Smithy was not his real name – his brass plate proclaimed: *Dr Ivan Gregorovich, BDS, Dentist*. The nickname was given to him by John ‘Sparky’ Manors, the local electrician. He reckoned that he, Sparky, was too old to get his tongue around a Russian name and, as he told his mates in the pub one night, “That new dentist is no better than the blacksmith. Just because he’s been to some fancy university somewhere doesn’t make him that special. We should call him ‘Smithy’ to stop him getting any airs.” Sparky’s mates nodded, and ever after Dr Gregorovich was known in the town as ‘Smithy’.

To avoid confusion, the blacksmith became known as ‘The Doc’. It took a while for the townsfolk to deal with the new confusion this then caused, but it was decided to refer to the MD, Dr Stephen Ericsson, as ‘Old Misery Guts’, which suited the impression many had of him.

These three professional men, along with the motor mechanic, the gravedigger, the lawyer, the vet and the plumber, were essential to the townsfolk’s wellbeing; The Doc not least, as many still rode horses or drove horse-drawn contraptions.

Smithy soon learned of his new moniker and its origin and laughed inwardly; one day he would have an opportunity to show Sparky which of them was the better man. When Sparky eventually needed his services, Smithy was elated. He made a point of personally going out to the waiting room to accompany his patient into the surgery.

Sparky looked around the shiny room. “You’ve made changes since you took over.”

“Yes. It was necessary to make it more modern. My predecessor’s equipment was not what I was used to in Russia. I have had some trouble finding the correct tools in this country. I hope you will find them an improvement.” He indicated the reclining chair. “Please sit down.”

Sparky gingerly let himself into the chair. He gripped the armrests tightly and closed his eyes. “I don’t like dentists.”

“Oh, why not? We are quite harmless.” Smithy made his way to the back of the chair and with surprisingly deft movements, quickly tied Sparky to the chair with a thick rope.

Sparky’s eyes flew open. “What the bloody hell...?!” He twisted his body back and forth and tried to raise his arms, but Smithy had been thorough. His eyes expressed his bewilderment and fear.

Smithy moved back into Sparky’s view and proceeded to lay out some rather large, rusty tools he had borrowed from The Doc. Sparky’s eyes opened even wider with fear and he started making primitive, guttural noises. He made another attempt to squirm out of his restraints.

“Open wide please, Mr Manors.” Smithy was holding a massive pair of pliers and was waving it menacingly. Sparky shook his head and pushed it back harder into the headrest of the chair, pressing his lips hard together and clamping his jaw.

“Come now, Mr Manors, it will not hurt much.” Smithy moved closer, the pliers wide open.

Sparky’s screams were clearly heard in the pub and by those in the El Hombre Café further up the road. Smithy allowed himself the pleasure of a hearty laugh at the sight of the old man.

While Sparky had his mouth open, giving vent to his outrage, Smithy took the opportunity to fill the patient’s cheeks with cotton rolls and nearly had his finger bitten.

Smithy stepped back. “Okay, okay Mr Manors. Enough joking.” Smithy slowly untied the terrified man and brought the chair upright. “Maybe you would like a drink.” He held a metal bowl in front of him as Sparky removed the wet cotton rolls from his cheeks. Sparky didn’t bother with the bowl, dropping the objects onto the floor and then he drank from the glass of water being offered.

As Sparky leaned back in the chair, Smithy reclined it again. He held up a more conventional dentist’s mirror and a metal probe. “Open wide, please.”

Sparky eyed his tormentor with suspicion and squinted at the tools. He shifted his gaze to the dentist and decided that the joke was indeed over.

“I have had my fun. No more prank,” Smythy told him.

Sparky gripped the armrests tightly again, closed his eyes and opened his mouth; he allowed Smythy to minister to him and do something about his aching tooth.

When Sparky could speak again, he threatened, “You just wait, you bloody mongrel!”

Smythy chuckled as Sparky left the surgery. “I will send you the bill,” he called after him.

Sparky had to weather many months of ribbing from his drinking companions, in the nature of: “Had yourself re-shod, did you?”; and “I had a horse once who screamed when anyone tried to get his mouth open – always had to tie him down.”; and “You would have been better off going to The Doc.”; and “With a voice like that, you should be in the opera.” Sparky just groaned in response and occasionally ventured a surly “I’ll get the mongrel back one of these days, you just watch me.”

Whenever the two met in the street or in a shop, Smythy said a cheery “Hello” and Sparky muttered, “Bloody mongrel!”.

Eventually Sparky did get his own back. Smythy’s ’fridge stopped working one hot day and he called Sparky to ask if he could have a look at it.

“They only ever break down on a hot day. Can’t figure it out,” the old man said, scratching his head. He opened the ’fridge door. “I don’t know why you bother with a ’fridge, mate. You don’t keep anything in it.”

“I have moved everything into the refrigerator at the clinic, where I keep the anaesthetics.”

“I see. Well, you’ll have to help me. I’ve got to look underneath, so you’ll have to tip ’er on an angle so’s I can get under.”

Smythy pushed the heavy appliance over on an angle and Sparky lay down and slid his head and torso under the back of the ’fridge.

“Don’t you go dropping the bloody thing!”

“I won’t,” Smythy replied, smiling at the thought of doing just that.

Sparky prodded with a screwdriver and did some tapping with a spanner, before sliding out and standing up. “You got a torch, mate?”

“Yes, in the laundry. I will get it.”

“No, don’t you move. I’ll find it.” Sparky went into the laundry and came back a few moments later with large torch. He lay down and slid under the ’fridge again. Smythy could hear more tapping and some scraping, interrupted from time to time by choice language.

Eventually Sparky stood up again. “Have to pop back home and fetch something. Won’t be long.”

Smythy started letting the ’fridge come upright again.

“Oh no! You can’t do *that!*” Sparky barked at him. “Got to hold it at an angle like that until I fix it. If you don’t, the compressor’ll lose it’s gas up the heat exchanger, if I don’t see to the regulator grommet and I can’t do that with the tools I’ve brought.”

Smythy grunted as he brought the heavy ’fridge back to its previous tilt. “Are you sure about this?”

“Bloody positive, mate. I know what I’m doing when it comes to ’fridges, trust me.”

Sweat had formed on Smythy’s brow and his shirt was starting to stick to his body.

“Won’t be long.” Sparky smiled as he left.

Being such a hot day and the pub being on the way home, Sparky popped in for a cold beer. And then he had a second one, as he was already there. Almost half an hour later he picked up his multi-meter from home and on his way back to the dentist’s house stopped for another beer and a chat with one of his mates at the bar. His friend noticed the meter sticking out of Sparky’s pocket.

“Going to a job, are ya?”

“I’m in the middle of one but had to fetch this,” indicating the meter. “Better get back to it. Can’t leave Smithy waiting too long.”

Several people at the bar smiled at this, knowing Sparky was up to something.

Sparky sauntered back to Smithy’s. He found Smithy still holding the ’fridge at an angle, red in the face and sweating profusely. His breathing was laboured.

“You evil man... You have left me here... in this heat... holding this wretched...” He didn’t have the energy to say more.

Sparky smiled. “No worse than me sitting with my mouth open for almost an hour while you poke away and drill and prod. Not to mention tying me down to the chair and frightening the life out of me.”

Smithy was finding it increasingly hard to hold the ’fridge. “Can I let it down now?”

“No! As I said, the compressor and all that.” Sparky pulled the power lead out of the socket behind the ’fridge and stuck the probes from his meter in.

“Hmm,” he said. He changed the probes around and turned the dial on the meter. “Hmm. Back in a minute.” He left the kitchen.

“Come back here you...” Smithy did not have the energy to say more. He could hear the electrician doing something on the verandah. He sighed. Tears were welling up in his eyes with the heat and the effort and the feeling of helplessness. And the growing suspicion that something was not quite right.

Sparky returned and plugged the ’fridge’s power lead back into the wall socket. The ’fridge grunted, gurgled, shook and then hummed into life. Smithy looked at Sparky in disbelief.

“Just as I thought,” Sparky said with a grin. “The fuse in the power board was blown. You can let it down now,” indicating the ’fridge.

Smithy groaned as he eased the appliance back into its’ normal vertical position.

“I’ll send you the bill,” Sparky called over his shoulder as he left.

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