

Toenails adapted from Richard Selzer, M.D., *Letters to a Young Physician*

**Narrator 1**

**Narrator 2**

**Narrator 3**

**Narrator 4**

**Neckerchief**

**Doctor**

**Nurse**

**Man 1, Man 2, Man 3**

**Woman 1, Woman 2**

**Narrator 1: It is the custom of many doctors, I among them, to withdraw from the practice of medicine every Wednesday afternoon. I urge you, when the time comes, to do it too. You will, of course, have secured the availability of a colleague to look after your patients for the few hours you spend grooming and watering your spirit. It is wrongheaded to think of total submersion in the study and practice of Medicine. That is going too far. And going too far is for saints. I know medical students well enough to exclude you from that slender community.**

**Narrator 2: Nor must you be a priest who does nothing but preserve the souls of his parishioners and lets his own soul lapse. Such is the burn-out case who early on drinks his patients down in a single radiant gulp and all too soon loses the desire to practice Medicine at all.**

**Narrator 3: Some doctors spend Wednesday afternoon on the golf course. Others go fishing. Still another takes a lesson on the viola da gamba. I go to the library where I join the subculture of elderly men and women who gather in the Main Reading Room to read or sleep beneath the world's newspapers and thumb through magazines and periodicals, educating themselves in any number of esoteric ways, or just keeping up.**

**Narrator 4: At any given time, the tribe consists of a core of six regulars, and a somewhat less constant pool of eight others of whom two or three can be counted on to appear. On very cold days, all eight of these might show up, causing a bit of a jam at the newspaper rack, and an edginess among the regulars.**

**Narrator 1: Either out of loyalty to certain beloved articles of clothing, or from scantiness of wardrobe, they wear the same things every day. For the first year or two this is how I identified them. Old Stovepipe, Mrs. Fringes, Neckerchief, Galoshes – that sort of thing.**

**Narrator 2: By the time I arrive, they have long since devoured the morning's newspapers and settled into their customary places. One or two, Galoshes very**

likely, and Stovepipe, are sleeping it off. Mrs. Fringes, on the other hand, her hunger for information unappeasable, having finished all the newspapers, will be well into the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, the case histories of which keep her riveted until closing time.

**Narrator 3:** As time went by, despite the fact that we had not exchanged a single word of conversation, I began to think of them as dear colleagues, fellow readers who, with me, were engaged in the pursuit of language.

**Narrator 4:** Neckerchief is my favorite. He is a man well into his eighties, with the kind of pink face that even in July looks as though it has just been brought in out of the cold. A single drop of watery discharge, like a crystal bead, hangs at the tip of his nose. His gait is stiff-legged, with tiny, quick, shuffling steps accompanied by rather wild arm-swinging in what seems to be an effort to gain momentum or maintain balance. For a long time I could not decide whether this manner of walking was due to arthritis of the knees or to the fact that for most of the year he wore two or more pairs of pants. One day, as I held the door of the Men's Room open for him, somewhat to my surprise he pointed to his knees and announced, by way of explanation for his slowness:

**Neckerchief:** The hinges is rusty.

**Doctor:** No hurry.

**Narrator 1:** From that day, Neckerchief and I were friends. I learned that he lives alone in a rooming house eight blocks away, that he lives on his Social Security check, that his wife died a long time ago, that he has no children, and that the *Boston Globe* is the best damn paper in the country. He learned approximately the same number of facts about me. Beyond that, we talked about politics and boxing, which is his great love. He himself had been an amateur fighter sixty years ago – most of his engagements having been brawls of a decidedly ethnic nature.

**Neckerchief:** It was the Polacks against the Yids, and both of them against the Micks.

**Narrator 2:** One day I watched as Neckerchief, having raided the magazine rack, journeyed back to his seat. As he passed, I saw that his normally placid expression was replaced by a look of someone in pain. I waited for him to take his seat, which he did with a gasp of relief, and then went up to him.

**Doctor:** The hinges?

**Neckerchief:** Nope. The toes.

**Doctor:** What's wrong with your toes?

**Neckerchief:** The toenails is too long. I can't get at 'em. I'm walking on 'em.

**Narrator 3:** I left the library and went back to my office.

**Nurse:** What are you doing here? It's Wednesday afternoon. People are just supposed to die on Wednesday afternoon.

**Doctor:** I need the toenail cutters. I'll bring them back tomorrow.

**Nurse:** The last time you took something out of here I didn't see it for six months.

**Narrator 3:** Neckerchief was right where I had left him.

**Doctor:** Come on down to the Men's Room. I want to cut your toenails.

**Narrator 3:** I showed him my toenail clippers, the heavy-duty kind that you grip with the palm, and with jaws that could bite through bone. I gave him a ten minute head start, then followed him downstairs to the Men's Room. There was no one else there.

**Doctor:** Sit there.

**Narrator 4:** I pointed to one of the booths. He sat down on the toilet. I knelt and began to take off his shoes.

**Neckerchief:** Don't untie 'em. I just slide 'em on and off.

**Narrator 4:** The two pairs of socks were another story, having to be peeled off. The underpair snagged on the toenails. Neckerchief winced.

**Doctor:** How do you get these things on?

**Neckerchief:** A mess, ain't they? I hope I don't stink too bad for you.

**Narrator 1:** The nail of each toe was the horn of a goat. Thick as a thumb and curved, it projected down over the tip of the toe to the underside. With each step, the nail would scrape painfully against the ground and be pressed into his flesh. There was dried blood on each big toe.

**Doctor:** Jesus, man! How can you walk?

**Narrator 2:** It took an hour to do each big toe. Someone came and went to the row of urinals. Twice, someone occupied the booth next to ours.

**Man 1:** Oh, excuse me!

**Man 2: What the ....?!**

**Man 3: Bunch of perverts!**

**Narrator 2: I never once looked up to see. They'll just have to wonder, I thought. But Neckerchief could tell from my face.**

**Neckerchief: It don't look decent.**

**Doctor: Never mind. I bet it isn't the strangest thing that's happened down here.**

**Narrator 3: I wet some toilet paper with warm water and soap, washed each toe, dried him off, and put his shoes and socks back on. He stood up and took a few steps, like someone who is testing the fit of a new pair of shoes.**

**Doctor: How does it feel?**

**Neckerchief: It don't hurt. That's a Cadillac of a toe job. How much do I owe ya?**

**Doctor: It's on the house. What kind of guy do you think I am?**

**Narrator 4: The next week I did Stovepipe. He was an easy case. Then, Mrs. Fringes, who was a special problem. I had to do her in the Ladies Room, which tied up the place for half an hour. A lot of people opened the door, took one look and left in a hurry.**

**Woman 1: You should be ashamed! At your age.**

**Woman 2: This is disgusting. I'm calling the police! Don't you two have anywhere to go?!**

**Narrator 1: Now I never go to the library on Wednesday afternoon without my nail clippers in my briefcase. You just never know.**