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~3990 words

Dentist's Bite

by Dallas Stiles

My teeth chatter as I step out of the car into the business park. It's a brittle November day, one of those bone-chilling, perpetual-gray East Denver days where there are no mountains, no glorious sky. A Kansas day.

I walk towards the familiar building and look for the sign as one might look at their last meal before being executed.

There it is. Third row down. First floor. On the right. *Oh yeah*, I think. *Obviously*. Because this is not my first time here. In fact, I've been coming here for a decade... More or less.

Maybe there's a small gap in my attendance.

Like, a whole pandemic-sized gap. My last scheduled appointment was March, 2020, which was rescheduled. And rescheduled again. And then they told *me* to reschedule.

Like that was going to happen.

Because while there are people that did a great job at taking care of themselves...

Working out. Eating right. Getting enough sleep and taking their Flintstone gummies...

I am not one of those people.

The kicker is that I've never gotten a cavity. And while that wasn't that big a deal when I graduated high school over a decade ago, it's starting to look like it may be the only thing worthwhile to write on my tombstone.

Now even that is in jeopardy. Because today is my reckoning.

Today I visit the dentist.

#

“Hi,” the receptionist says. “May I take your name?”

New receptionist. Doesn't recognize me, nor I her.

I tell her my name. “Jamie.”

She hands me a clipboard. Paperwork. The usual. Except all my info is out of date.

There are eight others in the yellow-wallpapered, windowless lobby. I take a seat six-feet away from them. They are ancient, their skin dour, their eyes sullen. On the small table are an assortment of dated magazines and what looks like a multi-tubed Hookah. Or maybe it's a humidifier. I don't know. The others in the office are staring at me. I avoid making eye contact and fill out my paperwork, hastily returning it to the receptionist.

“Hm,” she mutters, looking at it, then at the monitor concealed by the desk in front of me.

“What?” I ask.

She smiles. Probably. We all are still wearing masks. But her nose droops over her mask, like an old man who forgot to zip his zipper. There's a bulging wart above her nostril. It nauseates me. Or maybe that started when I came in. I think I can feel my tooth wiggle.

“You forgot to list your blood type.”

I'm embarrassed. I don't know it. It's probably B... Something. You know. Generic and non-special. I must be talking out loud as she types something into the computer. I swallow hard before saying, “What do you need my blood type for? It's just a cleaning? Hope I won't need a transfusion? Ha ha?” Laughter diffuses tension.

I am tense.

She is not. Her nostrils flare, the wart wiggles, and her smile, sold through her unwavering, perfectly manufactured eyebrows, persists. “Have you really not been to the dentist in over two years?”

I'm a liar, so I say, “Of course I have. Just not this one. Because of...”

“The change in management?”

“Oh yeah.” I had no idea. “That's right.”

“... We'll call you in a minute.”

I think I'm out of the woods and I retake my seat. One of the elderly men took the seat adjacent mine. He's a skinny thing in a baggy, striped sweater. His breathing is heavy and lopsided which, in this quiet room, I'm surprised I didn't hear. My mind refocuses on my own tensions. Because everything gets quiet again and my heartbeat, fast and anxious, is all I hear, reverberating through my skull.

I checked for cavities before I came. I even flossed for the past few days. Kind of. I chewed off a fingernail and then rubbed it between my teeth. It made my gums sore, so I bought some mouthwash. But I forgot to use it.

Still, no one makes a sound. And as I focus on relaxing, I get a whiff of the room through my mask. It reeks of death.

“Jamie!” the dental hygienist hollers, her voice shaking my core.

The eight rotting souls look to me.

I was right. The room does reek of death. They can smell it.

It’s me.

#

“Please take a seat here, Jamie,” the hygienist says. “My name’s Ana.”

“Hi, Ana. I’m Jamie.”

“... Hi, Jamie. Please take a seat.”

“Oh yeah.”

I take a seat. The arms of the chair are too low, the seat-back stiff and lacking lumbar support.

Ana faces me. She has an attractive frame. Dark straight hair, a sandy complexion. It’s impossible to tell what she looks like beneath the scrubs. And she’s wearing gloves, so I can’t tell if she’s married.

Immediately I envision a life together, away from here, where she keeps me accountable, where she brushes and flosses for me so that what will happen here today never happens again.

It's a pleasant distraction. Then she takes a seat and the terror situated somewhere between my gut and my throat returns.

She's holding the clipboard I filled out earlier. "Brush daily?"

"Yes." Guilt fills me.

"Floss?"

"Oh yeah." Vomit billows in my throat, following hot behind the lie. I swallow it. "At least a few times a week."

"You'll need to take off your mask."

Thank God, I think. Another question and I would've lost this morning's Count Chocula. I take off the mask, lie back in the chair, and breathe deeply.

Ana hits a lever and the chair jerks backwards, my head bouncing against the cushion.

She isn't apologetic as she leans over me, wielding her instruments of torture. In one hand is a pick, the other a small mirror. "Open wide."

I feel my rectum tighten. Force of habit, I think, though I have no idea where this instinct originates. I open my mouth and smell a waft of the bile I just swallowed.

Her expression is hidden behind her mask and opaque goggles. I can't get a read on if she smells it. But she must be used to bad breath. She must.

"Hm," she murmurs, prodding my lower gums with the pick. It's sharp, my gums tender. I instantly taste blood.

Hm? I think. Does she see a cavity? Have I been caught?

“You have gingivitis,” she says plainly. The comment stings. Of course I have to remember this isn’t a school-yard zinger. Yes, I have red hair and indeed am of the sub-racial category “Ginger.” But her statement is factual, purely scientific.

She continues to prod my gums and I taste iron welling around my tongue. I grip the arms of the chair. My chewed fingernails burrow into the thick black leather.

Then—my senses: lo! They sing; nay, scream, *Almighty God!* in miserable agony. *Purveyor of all that is Just! Why hath thou forsaken me?*

She removes the pick from my mouth.

“Are you doing okay?” she asks.

“Oh yeah,” I say. “Totally.”

She continues her butchery.

O, Annihilation! My lie hath tempted you, Lord! My existence forfeit, forgive me—

I black out for a second when she pulls the shiv-like blade from my mouth.

“Hm... Before we get started I need to take some X-rays.”

My heart sinks. I tongue the gum she prodded. My time nursing the wound is brief as she inserts plastic dampeners into each of my cheeks. Still, my backside is clenched liken altar boy at mass.

A giant cannon-like device is placed adjacent to my cheek. Secretly I wish it were a cannon. End it quick. Blow my whole head off.

I see a vision of my past, my lineage. My father switched papers with a kid for the Vietnam draft. My grandfather sold nuclear plans to the Soviets. His grandfather was a slave owner. And his father before that was likely also a little bitch.

I am not of tough stock. And the x-rays finish too quickly for me to regain my composure.

“It looks like your gums are receding,” Ana says. “Do you brush often?”

I still have plastic in my mouth. I garble together some Romanian I learned in school, hoping she takes it as gibberish. “Great steak and victory.”

She replies in flawless Romanian. “That doesn’t make sense.”

I’m shocked. I’ve never met another soul who spoke Romanian. “Huh?” I grunt, pretending I was spewing gibberish.

She squints.

Something is off. Few dentists know Romanian. All know gibberish. She’s on to me. “No cavities right?” I garble.

And that’s when I see something in her yellow-hazel eyes: pity. Suspicion. Rage. Her catlike irises draw me in. I am desperate. I am in love.

Then I see her hand as she changed out a torn glove.

Long, dagger-like finger nails. And, more importantly, no ring.

Well, well, I think, as if this tasty-young-unmarried-Romanian-dental-hygienist would perhaps fancy a date with a gingivitis-plagued-little-bitch-bred-ginger like myself. “Got a boyfriend?” My eyebrows ascend and descend in concert.

She does not answer. “How often do you brush?”

I have never been turned down in such a brutal fashion. My eyebrows cease to gesticulate.

“Jamie,” Ana persists, an accent distinctly forming. “You don’t brush daily do you?”

“I do—”

“You only flossed twice in the past two years. Last night and this morning.”

“Now *that’s* crazy.”

She sighs, then opens a drawer beside her, putting away the pick and drawing forth a larger, more primitive piece of dental devilry. It’s a wide, two-pronged fork, with a miniature guillotine hovering between the prongs.

I predict her to say, “Open wide,” and I feel my rectum invert in on itself.

Instead, she says. “Close your mouth.”

My tension eases. I happily comply and her merciful words make me feel what can only be described as Stockholm-induced love. I am glad.

With a flash of steel, she thrusts the device into the fabric of the chair, the prongs fork around my neck, the razor lingering above my jugular. She taps a button and the chair arms capture my wrists in metal shackles.

My eyes go wide. My gladness turns to sadness. I breathe heavy, the guillotine tickling my stubble. I think I’m still selling my lie, of course, but I worry she’s growing suspicious.

“You need a lot of work and must remain still. Look here.” She holds up a mirror. The backs and tops of my teeth are yellowed with dark spots. It’s worse than I imagined, yet this does not alarm me so much as what else I see in the mirror: a creature with a baggy, striped sweater licking his lips outside my door. He skitters away before I can get a better look.

Ana pays this no mind. She takes her initial pick and begins scratching at my teeth.

The sound makes me shudder. My gums flare in pain as blood bristles forth. She angles a light above me to get a better view for carving. It blinds me. I believe for a moment I am entering heaven.

But the vicious prodding continues. Sweating, my hands tear at the armrests. I try to pass out, but my brain refuses to cross the pain threshold.

Scrape—rip—*tear*. Each tooth feels like its being scooped of its pulp, each nerve sucked of its sensation.

My eyes well with tears. Blood and spit fills my throat. I pee a little, then begin to gag. Ana deftly puts a tube into my mouth, which drains the scarlet fluid, giving me precious seconds to breathe.

“Oh dear,” she says. And I know what she’s referring to, I feel the trickle of hot blood atop my second chin. When I gagged, the pronged blade cut me.

I ask, “Is it bad?” It feels like a nick from a shaving mishap.

She turns away from me as she removes her mask. Then she dips below my line of sight, and I feel a soft, rubbery thing slurp up the trail of blood. Ana sighs, pleased, as the warm saliva on my neck turns cool.

It’s kinda hot. But any semblance of arousal is stiffened by a harrowing realization: *I may have a cavity*. The pain, the repeated grating of her pick... I pray the brown spots on my teeth were leftover Count Chocula.

Ana refastens her mask and says, “Please keep still.”

“Okay.”

She finishes picking and prodding at my teeth, flushing the bloody spittle away with a tube every few seconds. "You're quite the bleeder," she says, "*Ca un porc blocat.*"

Romanian. Something about bleeding pigs. My brain fuzzes and all I can garble together is, "Why thank you," as she continues to ravage my mouth.

Then she stops. Puts the pick away. I realize how rigid my spine is, how every muscle in my body is clenched. I breathe for the first time in what feels like hours. The clock hasn't moved since I sat down.

"You have a lot of bacteria between your gums."

"That's crazy," I say, "Because I brush so much. Twice a day. Some days three times."

She pulls forth a new torture-device. "This is a water pick. I'm going to use it to remove the bacteria. It may sting. If so, just tap my hand and I'll stop."

I rest my hand on hers. Cold. Bony.

"I haven't started," she says.

"Ha ha," I reply.

Our sexual tension is palpable.

She moves her hand out of my reach and the next thing I feel is equivalent to all the planet's military satellites focus firing high-energy, city-destroying laser-beams directly into the tender spaces between my teeth. My eyes roll backwards. The synapses in my mind spark and fizz like stars gone supernova—a scream billows inside me, one that I'll never be able to unleash. I see future children, my children, that I'll never be able to have or hold vaporize into nothingness—

She pauses to insert the tube that drains my blood-filled mouth. Then I realize... The jet propulsion engine of agony has only crested the first tooth. Twentyish more to go. She resumes and life ending pain cascades through my entire body.

A tear rolls down my face, then another—I hope she can't see me weep, because it's so bright—but then I remember it's me who's looking into the light, not her.

Each second is despair. Suddenly, I begin to laugh because I cannot scream.

“Please stay still—” but as she says it, I feel a sharp pinch on my third chin. She stops the laser, her masked face diving toward the fresh cut. She ferociously laps up the blood, and it tickles, which makes me giggle more.

“Buy me dinner first,” I manage to say through my fit of snickering and to this she actually laughs.

The bottom of her mask is stained with my blood, and she says, “Dinner, good one.”

It sounds like she's calling me dinner, but that can't be right, so I say, “Yeah. Let's do dinner. I don't eat any processed or refined sugars or anything like that. Super unhealthy. Bad for the teeth. I'm vegan, actually—” but I'm cut off by the whir of the water pick decimating my mouth's chastity.

I pee again, my parts fragile. This time it feels warm and I know it soaked through my undies. I think up a lie quick, tapping her ice-cold hand and pointing to my shame. “I think you got some water on my pants.” She looks at me how my mother did when I wet myself onstage at my third grade recital. I interpret this as love.

But before we can kiss and run off together, the devastation resumes.

The tube comes more frequently, drawing forth the endless flow of blood that continues to pool in the back of my throat.

Then she stops. Her carving concluded, the pee dried, in that moment I feel pretty good, only slightly raw and unhinged, like I survived a prison gang rape. Then she says, “I think you need to do a better job brushing and flossing.”

And I say, “I think you need to mind your own business—”

And she says, “I’m going to get the Dentist. I think you may have some cavities—”

And I say, “Well would you look at the time—” except I can’t raise my wrist to look at where my watch would be if I hadn’t sold it for bean money because my arm is still being pinned down by the handcuffs.

And she says, “He’ll be in shortly, don’t squirm—”

And I say, “Ha ha.”

And she says nothing because she already left.

So I stay there and feel the tension in my butt hole lessen. I tongue the cavernous new gaps between my teeth. My body feels worn and exhausted. “I work out a lot,” I say but there’s no one there so I don’t know why I say it.

Then someone says in a thin, raspy voice, “I bet you do.” It’s the lanky old man from the lobby. I barely catch a glance of his striped sweater.

He comes over and touches my throat, his hands colder than Ana’s. “Got a couple cuts, huh?”

“Yeah, she wasn’t very good at her job. No cavities though. Pretty neat, huh?”

He nods and begins rubbing my tummy is not very cash-money since I forgot that I ate two or three breakfast burritos before my Count Chocula and things inside are not feeling so good.

I tilt upwards to say, “Hey do you mind knocking that off?” but I lean too far and the guillotine nicks my first chin, this cut deeper than the rest.

The old man’s sullen eyes light up—he slides his hand over my mounds, up my chins, rubbing his fingers in the blood. He tastes it and smiles. His mouth is absent of teeth, only the canines remain. He dives for my throat—

“*Be gone!*”

The geezer stops, hisses at the doorway, then erupts into a puff of smoke. It’s a cool magician’s trick, and something bird-like flaps out of the room. I’m a bit too overwhelmed to think of what the animal is, and the man who shouted takes a seat beside me.

His black hair is slicked back, his nose short and pudgy emerges from atop a scarlet red mask. *The Dentist*. “Hello, I am the Dentist,” says he, “I hear you may have a cavity.”

“I don’t know what Ana told you, but she seems like a liar.”

“Hi, Jamie,” says Ana, from behind me.

“Hi, Ana,” I reply, unable to see her.

The Dentist takes the metal pick and starts rummaging through my mouth. Immediately, my gums gush.

“Very sensitive,” coos the Dentist, his accent thick, almost as if his tongue is cramped in his mouth, pushed against too many teeth. He lowers his mask and my suspicions are confirmed

—behind two dagger-like canines are rows and rows of misshapen teeth. He places his mouth on my own, slurping hard and strong, like the vacuum tube Ana was using.

My fears reach a peak; my lone achievement in this meager life facing its end. His technique is expert, his lizard-like tongue swabbing over my molars, lapping up my bloody gums. I can tell he's an expert dentist.

Then he pulls away, wiping a trickle of my blood from his mouth. "Your blood is B-negative. Your file says B-positive."

"That's cuz that's my life motto," I say. "Ha ha."

"Hm," he says, picking at his teeth.

"Hm," Ana agrees.

"Hm," I concur, eyes squinting, heart racing, my end imminent.

The Dentist pulls something from his teeth. "... Count Chocula."

I try not to yell, "*TOLD YA!*" but I do anyway. Then I say, "So I don't have any cavities?"

"... No."

I squeal.

"Make sure you start brushing and flossing regularly."

"But I already do," I say, which must be true, because I have no cavities.

Behind the dentist's glasses, in his blood red eyes, I see what can only be described as raging *jealousy*.

The Dentist releases the clamps around my wrists, effortlessly pulling the pronged device back through the chair and tossing it to Ana. She licks the bloodied edge like it's a cookie dough beater.

“Would you like an additional toothbrush or some floss for your visit today?” Ana asks.

“Oh, Ana. I don’t need your pity.” I lean in close. “Nnnnno cavitiesssss.”

She then has the same jealous, clenched look the Dentist had and suddenly I feel a little bad scolding her. “I’m sorry. One toothpaste please. Do you have a single tablet I can use?”

Ana hands me a tube of toothpaste.

“Oh, a tube—” I laugh, not realizing that was the preferred means of storing toothpaste, “Of course.”

The Dentist hisses, “Have a good evening.”

I look at Ana, our tension at a peak, and take a sticky note to write down my number. Except as I’m writing I realize that if we start to date and fall in love and she stays over, which is bound to happen, she’ll see that I don’t have a toothbrush or floss, just a moldy Kit-Kat wafer and my trusty fingernail, so I change the last three numbers before handing it to her.

“This doesn’t match your number on file.”

“That’s my private number,” I lie this once. “Okay, bye.”

I hustle out the door, following a small tube along the floor that leads from my room back to the Hookah in the lobby. The older people must have left as instead a bunch of fit guys and gals are in the waiting room, each slurping some pink gush from individual lines. I don’t want my eyes to linger, but it looks like they’re drinking Mountain Dew Code: Red which I thought was discontinued and ask if that’s what it is.

“Oh yeah,” says someone in a striped sweater. “That’s it.”

But I know they’re lying. It’s really easy to see through bad liars.

“Jamie,” says the receptionist, “I’ll schedule you for six months from now. How’s May 5th work?”

“Oh yeah, that’s perfect.”

“...I didn’t list a time.”

“Whatever works. Okay, bye.”

“You forgot to pay.”

“Oh yeah,” I gasp, “I must’ve left my card in the car. Be right back.”

Her eyes flash with rage, her wart-covered nose scrunching in a dog-like grimace. She drops her mask flashing two white fangs, no teeth in between.

“What nice teeth,” I lie, “That must be why you work at a dentist’s office. Ha ha.” I leave and head to my car and begin searching for the HSA card I know I don’t have because I lost my job during the ‘Rona before hitting ignition and slamming on the accelerator, barreling out of the parking lot. It had gotten marvelously dark out since I entered and I look at the clock which says it’s been four hours since I’d gone in. The sun had dipped and snow was falling and the Dentist and Ana and the receptionist and the others all stood in the shaded doorway, that raving, jealous look in their eyes.

I yell, “I left it at home, I’ll pay next time I come in!” Which I know is never going to happen—I’m invincible—but those chumps are none the wiser.

And as I peel out, I chuckle to myself, “Ha Ha.” No cavities. My record remains unscathed.

I tongue the new spaces between my teeth, still tender, still sore.

I don’t like it. The pockets. The emptiness.

My stomach growls. It feels like I haven't eaten in days. I need something. Something sugary or fatty, yes—fatty, meaty—a burger, something to fill the emptiness, to stave my growing hunger.

I whip the car left, down a side street, nearly hitting a flock of winged things following me in the darkness.

Yes, I think, tonguing the voids between my teeth. A quick bite will do me good.