

MARY SLOWIK

Teeth

PRELUDE

I grew up in a place of old crones hobbling in the center of dirt streets, of men so thin their Adam's apples were bigger than their knuckles, a place of broken windmills that creaked water for non-existent cows, but most of all, I grew up in a place of teeth.

My father was the town dentist. The teeth in our family were impregnable. We drank our own iron-rich well water that ministered to the souls of our teeth. We ate apples out of our orchard that burnished our teeth clean. We never brushed. We never set foot in a dentist's office as patients. We never had to open our mouths for any story of our own. And so, Dad felt free to tell the stories of all the other mouths in town.

Most of them were rotten and bleeding. Though Dad did all the routine checking and cleaning that hygienists do these days, it was the teeth that poked slivers of decay into the gums, teeth that festered and puffed and ballooned, that we heard about. Dad spoke of basins draining liquid that made jaws twice their size. He told of teeth that wanted to escape into sinuses and extracted teeth that made grown men faint. And he described the tiny pinprick, the precise lancing that released someone from the misery of pain. No wonder the old man from Poland knelt and kissed my mother's hand over and over. "Thank the doctor, thank the doctor," he said. He would have knelt before Dad except Dad had left the room, and only women could have their hands kissed. But the old aristocrat wanted to kiss Dad's hands. The doctor held all pain in his palms and dismissed it with the tips of his fingers. That was the story the teeth told.

THE HUT OF BABA YAGA

Dad's office hovered above the town on top of the single gas station overlooking Main Street. Most days, there was a slow stream of cars through town on the way to Pontiac or Rochester, on to Mount Clemens or even Canada. Sometimes, a car or two would slide out and swing into the gas station, raising dust up against the office windows. In a little while, the car would bounce through the chuck

holes back to Main Street. Around noon a small cluster of cars would angle out and park, the regulars going to lunch at Stewart's Diner, for dry goods at Short's Five and Dime, for alcohol in the dark of the Old Dutch Mill and late in the afternoon for mail pickup at the rows of small glass windows at the post office.

Every half hour or so, a car would park at the side of the gas station, and someone would climb the twenty-eight steps up to Dad's office. The stairway was enclosed and rose steeply from a doorway in the corner by the air pumps. The steps were varnished and dark with little rubber mats nailed at the center of each. The light from the doorway slowly faded as you ascended the stairs. There was a permanent dusk at the top so that even in the middle of summer, you could not see the steps. You could only feel them against your shins. At the very top, you teetered on a narrow ledge against an upper door. You had to give the door a sharp jab with your elbow in order to enter. The door always stuck. You wouldn't dare look backward at all the dropping stairs behind you.

Inside was the waiting room. It always felt like people had been there and had just left. There were four narrow windows, a small blue leather couch, three chairs with metal armrests, a half table against the wall with a thin sedate mirror above it. The mirror never reflected anything. There was no talking or laughing in the waiting room. Only waiting. It was assumed you would stay alert and attentive. It was assumed you were in pain. It was assumed you never waited long.

People quickly passed through the waiting room to Mrs. Rickner's room to the right. Mrs. Rickner was Dad's office girl, grey-haired, efficient, motherly. She checked patients in and then led them through her room into either the big operating room or the small operating room in the very center of the office. Each operating room had a large chair surrounded by glinting chrome and silver and muttering machines and gurgling water and the cabinets with the thousand tiny drawers, each with its gems and herbs and miracles.

Behind Dad's office were the back lots where weeds and rusted mattress springs and empty oil cans collected around brush and potholes and packed dirt. There were a few single-room houses here and there, nothing more than thin wood boards nailed together with green or brown asbestos shingles tacked to the roofs and walls. The sofas and chairs leaned against the front of the houses and were

almost bigger than the houses themselves, and when the sofas collected in little groups, as they sometimes did in the summer, and a day or two later were strewn about, it seemed that many of the houses had gathered together, then just up and disappeared, leaving bits of furniture behind them.

Every Wednesday night, Dad went home for dinner and then returned to the office to “set up” teeth for dentures. The front door of the office was locked, so he parked in the back lot and climbed an outdoor stairway to the roof of the gas station. The roof was flat and tar-papered. A narrow boardwalk crossed the tar paper from the small open-air landing at the top of the stairway to the back door of the office.

For a while, when my older sister and brother went to basketball practice and Mom to choir practice, I followed Dad up those steps every Wednesday night. The stairway leaned back and forth with each step we took. All of the back lots watched us. They might even peer at the backs of our ankles or the sides of our legs as we moved closer to the top. We stepped off the stairway as quickly as we could onto the boardwalk and crossed the roof. The tar paper steamed around us in the summer and was slick and black with ice in the winter. We had to be careful not to catch our toes in rotted boards or spin on the ice or simply stop to stare at the darkness pinched beneath the slats.

Once inside the office, I followed Dad to a thin yellow room in the very center of the office. It was wedged between the two operating rooms. Few people knew it was there. It had cabinets and shelves banked to the ceiling on one wall and a high linoleum counter on the other. A crookneck faucet bent over a sink cut deep into the counter. Next to the sink were three rubber mixing bowls, the stub of a Bunsen burner, and three metal clamps.

Dad would wash his hands, and I would pull up a small stool to the edge of the counter and pretend I was Baba Yaga’s cat. The Russian witch lived high above the ground deep in the forest; her hut rotated on tall thin chicken legs which only stopped and bent down if she chose to allow visitors to enter. That did not happen very often. So no one knew quite what Baba Yaga did, though strange and magical things took place in her hut every night. Baba Yaga didn’t pay much attention to her cat, and so, if he stayed very

quiet, he could learn a lot about her. So I sat on my low stool, holding my paws and tail carefully in place, and this is what I saw:

Dad would snap on a small fluorescent tube that ran the length of the countertop just above his hands. He would take down one of the many small shoeboxes in the cabinets behind him, place it on the counter, gently pull out a clay mouth and snap it into a metal jaw. Next to the jaw he would arrange a thin spoon, a tiny spatula, a tiny knife and thin sheets of wax, pink as bubble gum. He would open another cabinet behind him, and there attached to small strips of cardboard, like hundreds of button papers, were rack on rack of porcelain teeth. There were tiny nubs of teeth, thin oval teeth, large teeth, small teeth, teeth smooth and round as fingernails, rock-like teeth pitted and grooved all over. There were yellow teeth and white teeth and grey teeth. They were burnished to a soft shine, and row on row glowed like strings of pearls.

Dad would select one of the button papers, place the row of teeth on the counter and then pull out of the shoebox a small X-ray. He would hold the X-ray up against the fluorescent light, which shimmered steadily through its blots and smudges. He would stare and stare at the small square, memorizing the X-ray's every shadow like a recipe. Then he'd set the X-ray down, turn on the small valve of the Bunsen burner, pull out a match, light it, and hold it above the burner's mouth. The burner would suck air. The match flame would lean listlessly to one side and then the other and then suddenly explode into a sharp light. The burner would stutter, then grasp the flame and hold it steady and small, a blue and orange cone, flickering like radio static the rest of the night.

All evening, Dad sat on a tall stool in the narrow room. He hunched over the open jaw, looking long and hard at its full set of clay teeth. One after another, with a precise blow of a tiny chisel, he knocked each tooth out. One at a time, he pinched a porcelain tooth from its button paper and pressed it into the clay jaw. With a tiny spoon set on a long thin handle, he scooped out a nip of wax. He passed the wax on its narrow spoon through the Bunsen burner and deposited it as the tiniest pink drop at the base of the new tooth. He would nip off another speck of wax, pass it through the flame, tip its minuscule drop out against the tooth, tap the tooth ever so slightly with the spoon, and then go for another drop of wax. He would

adjust the tooth, examine it, move it so little only he could see. Then go for more wax. He worked in excruciatingly slow motion.

The new teeth sometimes folded a little across each other, a little to the right, a little to the left, sometimes crooked as a tiny picket fence. They were pearl teeth, but Dad made them into the small and jagged and crooked teeth a person was born with, the teeth a person had lost along the way.

I sat on a small footstool just under his left elbow and stared at the thin spoon passing in and out of the flame. Shadows gathered around Dad's face, hollowed his cheeks, pooled beneath his nose. Tomorrow, he would meet the patient, and with the teeth set in their malleable wax gums, make the final adjustments. Then Mr. Schele, the lab man, would take the teeth and replace the wax with acrylic.

In a week or two, the teeth would be in someone's mouth. The person would smile, and no one would ever know the teeth weren't real, but I would know. The person would chew. The person would spit. The person would swallow. The person's real gums might bleed and swell and even balloon out, but I would know: once in the glow of flame and the long dark flickering shadows, the teeth, in their bed of wax, hung from a clay jaw and glowed like pearls. They were beautiful. They were false. Nothing would ever happen to them.

MERCURY

When most eight-year-olds might have been home watching the *Dick Van Dyke Show* on Wednesday evenings, I was chasing small balls of mercury around a linoleum counter in Dad's operating room. The countertop was fake marble, black with streaks of green and yellow. The edges curled up a little, and the corners were snapped off. I slid the balls of mercury across the linoleum as if they were skaters on green and yellow ice, parting and joining in a Snow Queen's world. They would break at the tiniest touch of a finger and then fling into pebbles, caught by the upward curl of linoleum just as they were about to fall off into the forbidden world of the floor below. Down there, they might shatter and roll under the X-ray machine, or sterilizer, or under the massive dental chair in the middle of the room, where, Dad told me, they would poison everything. I was not sure how this could happen. No one walked barefoot in the operating room. No one would touch fallen mercury, but there was so much danger at the edges of my life, I felt no need to ask questions.

The rips in the linoleum might well be the sharp points of the broken window of our spray shed in our small orchard back home. The office floor might well be connected to the spray shed floor in some strange Auburn Heights way. You could almost taste the warm sulfur dark of the shed in the office at night. You were never to go inside the shed. You were not to climb the shed's two rotted steps. You were not to touch its door. You might be tempted to slide your hand carefully up and over the shards of glass poking from the door's broken window to twist the handle open from the inside, but then, you'd have to turn sideways and face dead-on the wooden doghouse leaning against the spray shed wall.

Inside that doghouse was the fur of the old cat we had all loved. He had disappeared for months, and there he had been all that time—in the doghouse, flat as a rug. “Something had gotten him,” they said. Probably the same thing that had “gotten” the baby chicks that lived in the spray shed when it was still a chicken coop. The thing lived beneath the shed and poked through the holes in the floor and “got” the chicks at night. Even if the thing was only a cute family of skunks that walked in soft black and white lines during the day—at night, the skunks lived beneath the shed; in the morning, the chicks had disappeared. And many years later, “something” had “gotten” the cat. Just cast your hand across any of the window's spikes of glass, barely touch them with your palm as you sweep your hand across, and the sulfur of the spray shed dark could twine about you without you even having to enter it at all.

Sometimes, as I pushed the mercury back and forth across the linoleum counter, I prodded it up to the counter's ragged edge and let it hang there. The mercury was perfect and soft, silver as pearls, impossible to pick up. The linoleum curled, just a little. The mercury stretched itself, a puddle ready to fling into balls. But then, the Snow Queen would call it back from the edge, and I would have to push it to the center of the counter again. And I knew I could never have anything so lovely to have as my own, to wear around my neck, to clasp in my palms, to hide with in the dark.

Only once, the mercury fell to the floor and exploded into a glitter that raced to the farthest corners of the room. I couldn't find the beads anywhere even when I swept my hand under the pedal and sharp metal rungs of the dental chair and around the burly base of the X-ray machine. The mercury had disappeared, and when Dad

looked for it later so he could put it away, even he said it had disappeared when I told him how it fell. He swept out a few pebbles, and the rest was gone.

“Vaporized,” he said. “Probably it’s vaporized.” And I imagined the mercury ascending into the air where it would stay, silver and pebbled and out of sight forever.

THE PINBOYS

There were teeth buried in the dirt behind the bowling alley where the back lots squeezed into a narrow pathway between the bowling alley and the lumberyard. There the pinboys lived. On one side of the path was their lean-to, a tarp and plywood affair attached to the back of the bowling alley wall right behind the pins. The boys would lean into the bowling alley, and with their black gloves on, set the pins up manually after each round. They’d withdraw into the lean-to between sets, mainly for air during the excruciatingly hot summer nights, but also to smoke and swig beer and “hard stuff” from green Coke bottles.

We laughed and called the narrow strip of field behind the bowling alley where the pinboys lived “the alley behind the alley.” There, the ground was trampled into a fine muck between the large burdocks and tooth-leafed dandelions that stood large and stubbornly upright no matter how stamped down or clogged with cigarette butts they were. Perhaps in a strange weedlike way, the burdocks and dandelions called out to the bowling pins, wobbling so precariously on the other side of the bowling alley wall just a few feet away: stand up, stand up, don’t fall, don’t fall. But the bowling balls, heavy and dumb, slammed into the pins anyway and sent them flying about their small black enclosures and ultimately down onto the floor and into the pinboys’ arms.

During the winter, the cold from the pens would seep up along the bowling alley floor, and the bowlers felt it in their calloused fingers, and even Dad’s fluid swing stiffened some, but the pinboys didn’t get too cold. They were kept busy, leaning into the pens with black felt gloved hands, setting up the pins in their wood triangles, lifting the triangles, then waving to the men to start playing again. For us, driving to the store or riding home late on the bus, the pinboys were shadows attached to their lean-to, shadows reaching into the tight black spaces between bowling pins. Sometimes, you saw

the flickering ends of their cigarettes, sometimes their shoulders when they emerged for air, and sometimes even their dark hands about to make triangles over and over in the night.

Boys began their work lives here, close to their fathers, the men with rough hands that threw balls down the alleys at pins that were just inches away from their sons' faces. The sons knew their fathers knew where they were, though it might only be the shadows of the pen and the thin hardwood path of bowling alley floor that connected them. Don Vorst, Vern Bieholen, and Brad Miller were champions in the Auburn Heights style. They fit their large fingers into the bowling ball and with hard, sometimes cruel swings sent the ball down the alley, the pins exploding at the other end, not regularly but enough times in spectacular wild trajectory to keep their scores high.

For a while, Dad joined them on Thursday nights. Dad was meticulous and intense, his squared-off body and muscular arms at last finding moments of grace, even beauty. He would hold the ball up before his eyes, sighting it and the pins along his outstretched arm, then swing back and step forward in a single fluid movement that turned the ball down the alley, holding its "English" for the last strange curve into the pins.

That's when the bowlers got serious and formed a league and practiced on Tuesdays and played Thursdays and even went back to practice on Saturday afternoons. They wore hideous yellow shirts with purple lettering on the back and swore more frequently as they played. The balls thunked harder as they hit the floor, and the pins exploded viciously. The men especially went after the pins that wobbled the most in their tiny clusters of twos and threes. It was a wonder that any pin survived, so much did the men want to see every last one hit and fallen.

About that time, Dad became disinterested. He would go to one or two practices but skip the games or go to a game and skip a practice, and he didn't always remember to empty his bowling bag, so the yellow shirt began to stink every time he put it on. When Mom joined the church choir that practiced on Wednesday nights, Dad quit, and the yellow shirt was washed and hung in the tiny closet he and Mom shared in their bedroom, where it finally made it into a mending pile as rag and patch material.

But our connection to the bowling alley did not quit. One night in December, a police car drove up to our house. I had been sleeping upstairs but awoke when I heard the front door open below me. Through the stairway I heard the mumbled story the two sheriff patrolmen told: Somewhere in the narrow stretch of mud behind the alley, two men, strangers to Auburn Heights, have a fist fight. One runs away. The other staggers down South Squirrel Road, holding his bloody face in his hands. Someone finds him, probably Don Vorst or Vern Bieholen or Brad Miller. The guy ends up at St. Joe's Hospital, and the police go back to find the Doc. They're going to look for two missing front teeth in the pinboy alley. They need evidence. Dad dresses and goes in the police car, and we are left wondering what they can possibly find in the pinboys' mud. How powerful are their high-power flashlights? What will small bright circles swung back and forth in the dark reveal? Teeth don't break clean. They're not neat little Chiclet squares. They can crack lengthwise, slivered thin and ragged, no doubt with pieces of root attached.

Dad and the police search for hours. It begins to snow. Could the man have thrown his head back, the crack of knuckles sending the teeth flying against the lumberyard fence? Or did he just drop his head forward? Dad's eyes, the police man's eyes, probe the shadows that belong to the pinboys. The darkness collects around the burdocks and dandelions and mud. The teeth are already tucked deep within, shoved by a twisting toe under a plate of prickly leaves or maybe even hurled between folds of lean-to canvas where a soft slide of snow will seed them close to the already hardening ground. The flakes are coming thicker, white on white, the teeth wherever they might be, turning invisible. Only if Dad could go on his hands and knees and gently pull aside each broken grass stalk or slide his fingers through the soft gum of mud at the foot of burdocks could he find teeth as he has always found them, dark in the shadows of the mouth, but the snow is glittering many tiny teeth in the air now, and already Dad's and the police feet are crunching. It will be a cold day for the pinboys tomorrow and a colder night to follow.

The word will get around about the fight and the teeth. The next night, for the first few sets, the pinboys will wonder exactly where they should plant their feet in the snow turned into slush. Some will pretend they are working with the police and keep an eye out for the teeth, though the teeth are dead now and wouldn't help the man

anyway who has been cleaned up quickly and released from St. Joe's in a matter of minutes. But the teeth still could be clues, and if a man comes to Dad's office with throbbing open wounds in his front gums, just maybe the teeth may match up to the holes and reveal some kind of real identity. But the ground is fast turning into slush under the pinboy boots, and the pins are being knocked in all kinds of odd ways with more energy than ever. After a while the boys are too busy to think. But something about the shadows behind the alley makes us wonder where those teeth really are, where they are planted. We wonder what might sprout up out of the ground come spring, what we will see when at last the winter bowling season is over.

DRUNK MAN I

One evening, I took over Mrs. Rickner's large oak chair. I jerked it on its casters up to her desk and leaned over the blotter to peruse her large appointment calendar. It was a checkerboard of empty squares with notations here and there in her small, careful handwriting. The office was dark. I could hear the distant static of the Bunsen burner, Dad working in the lab two rooms away. In front of me the waiting room door was open. The blue chairs and mirror were silent, keeping their own company.

I picked up a small pencil tucked into Mrs. Rickner's blotter and gave a square on the far corner of the calendar a small tail. Before I knew it, the tail curlicued into tendrils that twisted up and down Saturdays and Mondays. In the cracks between 1:30 and 2:30, flowers began to blossom. Leaves and vines appeared. The calendar became a wall, green and fragrant. Every other brick darkened into the color of deep stone.

Somewhere beyond the wall, a man began to talk. His voice was soft. There were long pauses between his words. He didn't know what to say.

I looked up. The waiting room was empty. Nothing disturbed the couch and chairs, the table and the mirror. The other door in the far corner of the waiting room was dark and shut tight. Behind it, a steep stairway led down to the office's front entrance by the gas station below. And that was where the voice arose. It lifted high in the stairway, floating up the steps and pressing gently against the door in the far corner of the waiting room.

The words were clear. They were not drooled around an aching tooth. The voice was not pinched in a mouth that also had to support a swollen abscess or a row of bloody gums. I could not make the words out, but they were meant to be heard and answered.

I slid off Mrs. Rickner's chair and ran to the lab, my feet barely touching the ground. Dad was securing a single tooth into a clay jaw with the tiniest drip of wax. The edge of the tooth was so clean and perfect in its wax gums, and the Bunsen burner flickered such soft light against the tiny spatula that spooned the wax, and the shadows fingered Dad's face so gently that the voice on the stairs did not seem to matter. The voice behind the waiting room door would have to be a kind voice, I thought, a voice at ease, saying something you could listen to and answer without having to open your mouth at all, something spoken by pearls and wax and a soft flame that burned quiet and steady.

I went back to Mrs. Rickner's desk and sat in the oak chair. All was suddenly silent. The waiting room did not waver in the dark. I carefully picked up the pencil. From one corner of the calendar to the other, I drew a huge, looping "S" across the vines and bricks. This was for "Simon Sylvester," the biggest patient I imagined we had ever had, a giant whose name was too large even for the spaces of the calendar. The man in the stairway must have heard the soft slushing of my pencil. He must have known Simon Sylvester, for he mistook him for someone else. The man's voice suddenly burst out, insistent and metallic: "Roger, Roger," he called out. And then he began to moan, "You're my brother, Roger. You're my brother, Roger. Roger?"

Then he stopped. He waited. I waited. The leather and chrome chairs and the mirror in the dark waiting room waited.

Then the man's voice lowered. It grabbed the tops of words I didn't understand and spit them all over the stairs. There were no breaths, no pauses, no waiting for answers and rolled through it all came the name, over and over: Roger, Roger, Roger, Roger.

I ran back to the lab and bumped the counter below Dad's eyes so he could see me through the next tooth he was lining up in the next socket. He held his fingers exactly in place as I told him of the voice I heard on the stair. We listened for it. But the voice was gone. Everything was quiet. Only the soft static of the Bunsen burner replied.

“There’s no one there,” Dad said and moved through the pause as if it had never occurred.

I went back to the large desk and with Mrs. Rickner’s small pencil, I gouged the letter S into the calendar. I pushed the S up and pulled it down into skinny ovals taking over Mondays and Tuesdays, 1:30s and 2:30s. I drew fat shadows which began to swallow all the calendar’s bricks. The page darkened. Only the two stacked holes inside the letter S remained. They were tiny and white, one on top of the other. If you were very small, you could crawl into the bottom of the S, curl up and sleep there all winter.

Suddenly, the voice returned. It was loud and crashing. The words fell against each other: “Roger, Roger, you son of a bitch.”

I ran towards the lab, but Dad had heard and was already taking long steps to the waiting room, his lab coat flying at his elbows. He switched on the waiting room’s ceiling light so that all the metal and leather and linoleum and even the sedate mirror bounced a harsh, bright reflection. He swung the door in the far corner open and yelled into the stairwell’s dim spaces below: “Get out of here. Go on. Get out!” He slammed the door shut, all in one motion, and through the reverberation of his words, we heard a quick scuttle and then, the echo of the door below opening quickly, hesitating and then shutting softly.

We listened, blinking in the light of the waiting room. Dad went back to the lab. I climbed back into the oak chair. I stared at the appointment calendar which had tears here and there where my pencil had run deep. I found Mrs. Rickner’s slender letter opener and began to rotate it in large arcs across the many shadings of the letter S. I had always pretended the letter opener was a knife, and now I made it spin in slow motion, spreading the dull light from the overhead fixture in larger and larger circles across Mrs. Rickner’s desk.

Suddenly, I heard the lower stairway door swing open. Heavy footsteps tramped up the stairs. Incoherent curses rolled in front of them. The words were high and throaty and loud. I grasped the corners of Mrs. Rickner’s blotter and plotted an escape route out the back window, across the tar paper roof down the back stairway. But it was too late. The footsteps were almost to the upper front door. I clutched the blotter and willed all the large men in my life to suddenly appear—Dad’s five brothers, big Mr. Juengels who picked apples five and ten at a time, our neighbors who worked

“in the shop,” Mr. Klugman with the huge hands, and all the ushers at church. They would know what to do. They would crowd into the waiting room and begin to talk together in the way they talked. They would not have to do any more than that. The man in the stairwell would hear them. He would grow quiet. And because the large men in my life never said much, he would understand them—the quiet of card games and the mumbled jokes the women weren’t allowed to listen to, the single words they all laughed at. You could feel those large men there even when you couldn’t make out a word they said.

But now, Dad was in the waiting room. He yanked the door open and yelled into the stairwell, in a voice that held the voices of all the large men in my life: “Get out of here! Get out. Get out. Get the hell out.”

Silence slammed back at him from deep in the stairway. It clung to his thick arms and large hands. I crept forward and saw a tall, thin figure leaning against the wall near the top step.

Dad looked long and hard and then turned in the direction of the waiting room: “My brother is up here,” he told the figure. “He’s a really big guy. I’m going to call him right now.”

“Roger?” The man was incredulous.

“My brother,” Dad repeated. “He’s big.”

“Roger?” The voice sounded hopeful.

I stepped backward out of the light.

“Dad,” I whispered. “There is no brother here. There is no brother.”

“Be quiet,” Dad hissed.

“There is no brother,” I announced, but held the words tightly in my mouth like a stage whisper not quite escaped, so that Dad next to me might not hear it, but the man below me would, my voice a ventriloquist voice hovering between them.

“Is Roger there?” the man asked.

Dad turned from me and spoke firmly into the empty space above the steps. “Yes. Roger is here,” he said. His voice turned gentle. “Roger is here.” He hesitated, and then added, “He wants you to leave. He wants to beat you up.”

The silence in the stairway swayed and for a moment filled the stairway, filled the waiting room, filled all the space between Main Street and the office. Twenty-eight steps neither rose nor fell.

Then, there was a creak beneath one stair's rubber mat, a soft clutch at a banister, a shifting of feet, and then the swish of legs turning slowly. They retreated downward, step by step. The lower door opened. I saw the man's shadow step through, the front glass reflecting his dark coat which hung still as he reached back for the door, closing it carefully, delicately latching it shut.

As Dad stepped back into the waiting room, I thought that maybe Dad knew the man, that maybe even Roger was big and really did want to beat him up, that this was a good warning to remember wherever the man should go or be from now on.

"Did you know him?" I asked when Dad began turning the lights off in the waiting room and pulling off and folding his lab coat, getting ready to leave.

"No," he said.

"You didn't know him at all? You didn't know Roger?" I asked.

Dad entered the lab, and closed the clay mouth with its three pearl teeth and set it carefully in its shoe box.

"No," he said. "I don't know Roger, but the man was drunk, and that's the way you have to act with drunk people. They're harmless, but you have to act that way."

I was sure, as we turned off all the office lights and gathered the last of our things, that we would go out the back door and walk across the tar paper roof and down the outdoor staircase to the lots below. But we didn't. We went down the front steps and Dad locked the outside door. As we crossed the gas station to our car, I glanced at the two dark gas pumps in front of the office and squinted at the vague glass windows of Short's dime store and Stewart's diner across the street. They were quiet. No shadow crossed in front of them.

I didn't think I would ever know how to act around a drunk man, but next time, I would hide, maybe in a closet, maybe under a desk. And I would stay so still that no one would find me, not the drunk man, not Dad, and I would not answer them, not even if they called my name, "Mary, Mary, where are you," over and over.

DRUNK MAN II

But Dad had another way with drunks. Again, the mumbling started at the bottom of the office steps. Auburn Heights was shut down for the night, and the first heavy frost had begun to harden the dirt ridges in front of the office door. Dad was in the lab; I was in Mrs. Rickner's chair, working long columns of arithmetic homework. When the wet, indistinct noises started in the stairwell, I knew exactly what they were and huddled down between the oak armrests, sliding the arithmetic paper between my knees, feigning intense concentration and praying for invisibility.

The noises grew louder, a man's rumble, wet and hoarse around missing teeth. I knew that the yellow pool of light above Mrs. Rickner's desk would give me away. I gathered myself for a leap across the room. I would yank the back door open, slide across the boardwalk, and plunge down the back steps, which would sway and creak beneath me, trying to throw me off at every turn. But Dad's white coat filled the waiting room door, and then the stairway door. He snapped on the lights. The waiting room glistened and a dark thin figure leaned forward out of the stairway almost into Dad's arms. I waited for Dad's racetrack-barroom voice to send the man back down the stairs, but instead Dad was hushed. He spoke gently, musically. "Come on up," he said. "Come on up."

The man staggered into the waiting room, crossed Mrs. Rickner's room and slumped into the operating room chair so quickly I glimpsed only his cracked leather jacket, his canvas pants, and the grey towel he wadded up to his face. The man's elbows left small arcs of dust on the armrest, and his streaked fingers and face bumped the sterile instrument tray with its lovely, tiny mirror.

"Dad, won't you make him wash up?" I was indignant.

"No," Dad replied. "He doesn't need to wash, but here"—he gave me a towel and gauze—"you stand behind the chair, hold these, and hand them to me when I ask for them, but first *you* wash up."

Dad was switching on the lights and machines when I returned from the bathroom. The operating room began to hum and gurgle. The instruments glittered. The man sat still and solid in the large operating room chair, a hulk in the center of the room. A spidery drill arm leaned over him. The water in the sink whirlpooled to his left, the stolid compressor and X-ray machine waited silent. I took my place behind the dental chair.

Dad reached down to the man and lowered the dirty towel. He opened the man's mouth slowly—not much, but just enough for the tips of his fingers to move along the man's gum line. "Let me see. Let me see," he whispered over and over into the man's ear. If the man gave way, I didn't notice, but something happened so that the jaw opened a little and began to rest in Dad's hand.

Dad cradled the man's head a moment against his lab coat, the wounded mouth exposed. Then, he stood back and, still holding the mouth gently open, looked directly into the man's eyes: "You have two teeth missing," he said. "One will be all right until you see an oral surgeon. But this one—this other one. There's a nerve here. It's exposed, and I need to fix it."

The man said nothing. His silence filled the room.

But Dad did not notice. He was all efficient motion. He removed his hands from the man's mouth, tilted the dental chair backward, and dampened a washcloth in the sink behind him.

The man groaned. His head rolled a little.

"This is going to hurt," Dad told him. "This is going to hurt like nothing you've ever felt before. It's going to hurt from the top of your head down to the bottom of your toes. You're going to feel it inside you, everywhere inside you. But you'll feel it only for an instant, and then it will be over. Take this. Squeeze this. Squeeze this as hard as you can."

Dad reached for the towel in my hands, rolled it and gave it to the man. One of the man's arms dropped off the armrest. Through a crack in the back of the chair, I could see that his other hand lay loose in his lap, the towel slung across it.

Dad leaned over the man. I saw a slender end of an instrument tucked in the palm of his hand. The tips of his fingers slid inside the man's mouth. The instrument took position. The water gurgled on and on in the sink and the fluorescent light began to hum. "Are you ready?" Dad said.

Dad's hands held absolutely still. Suddenly, they gathered themselves, and faster than the eye could see, they struck. The man's entire body leaped. The chair rocked in a single mighty spasm. A guttural shriek rose through Dad's fingers, twisted around the snout of the X-ray machine, glinted for an instant in the tiny eye of the small, round mirror, then disappeared through the slats of the Venetian blinds out into night.

“Look,” Dad’s voice was hushed. He straightened up and turned to me. On the thin point of a probe, a tiny thread twisted slowly back and forth like a small white worm. Dad bent down to me. We cupped the probe and its worm in our palms, angling it away from the light so it was backlit by shadow.

“It’s a nerve,” he said. “A live nerve.”

“A live nerve?” I whispered.

“It will die almost immediately. But look. Here it is. Still living.”

The nerve waved blindly on the point of the probe. It reminded me of a single larva separated from its teeming kin, the heaving masses in our compost pile, the rows of soft grubs lined up in our beehives at home. And yet, I knew this tiny thread contained the most quivering pain. It jolted your head, your shoulder, your stomach, your thighs, your legs, your feet awake. It touched all the intricate connections of your body. It charged you with your own life. It made you feel it all—this worm, so tiny, so completely powerful. Did Dad’s hand shake for a moment? Or was it my own?

The worm stopped moving. Dad swung the probe up into the instrument tray. He took the gauze from my hands, applied it to the man’s mouth, then touched his shoulder. The man was sitting upright now, his hands moving up to his jaw, his legs crossing.

“I bet you feel a lot of relief,” Dad spoke to him.

The man was murmuring over and over, “Oh thank you, Doc. Oh thank you, Doc. Oh thank you, Doc.”

The clean-up was quick. In a few minutes, Dad was ushering the man to the waiting room door. Mrs. Rickner would set up an appointment with the oral surgeon in the morning. There were pills to take for pain. Dad carefully placed them in the man’s pocket. He called for a cab, but the man refused and insisted on walking out on his own.

“You go home right now.” Dad had on his firm, scolding voice now. “And don’t get into any more fights.”

When the man was gone, Dad shook his head. “Amazing, isn’t it? Normally, a person can’t even stand air moving across an exposed nerve, can’t even open their mouth.”

“But you removed it...without anesthesia.” I was careful to use the correct terminology.

“Yes,” Dad chuckled. “Only with a drunk can you do that. And only when they’re very drunk.”

Dad put a few instruments into the autoclave and shut down the belts and the sink. I wiped the mud off the chair and took a few swings of the rag across the linoleum. We turned off the lights and descended the long front stairway. The streetlight shone into the lower door window. The furrows of mud outside folded across each other, sighed, and waited for the first snow.