

Three Teeth

by Curtis Smith

Three teeth. You can pick them out if you hit pause just right. Probably not a person in the entire valley who hasn't seen that video from the Eastern Cheerleading Finals. They even showed the tape on the eleven o'clock news in Scranton, my face circled and highlighted, the scene slowed into a dreamy rhythm, Tina North's elbow clipping my jaw and three white specks flying like summer moths from my mouth. My head turned for a second, but my clapping hands didn't miss a beat, and when the count came to hoist Tina into Valley High's trademark Flying Angel, I was right there, sucking in the blood already puddling on my lips. They showed the clip at the end of the broadcast, one of those light pieces meant to make people think the world isn't just killing and robbing and whatnot, the slot usually saved for shuffleboard-playing monkeys and toddlers smacking whiffle balls into their fathers' groins. "Ouch!" cringed Allison Davies, the perky eleven o'clock anchor. "That must have really *stung!*" There was this gleeful revulsion in Allison's voice that pissed me off, a "Thank goodness it wasn't me, but isn't it funny?" tone, and as I watched, my bruised jaw just beginning to shade thundercloud blue and my mouth stuffed with sopping cotton wads, I took solace in knowing that, if there was a God, Allison's Mouseketeer inflections and hushed-up DUIs would keep her from climbing too far up the network's ladder.

Valley High brought home best overall honors from Easterns, our first title ever. On the long bus ride home, I put one of my teeth in the big silver cup, and when the other girls passed the trophy around, my bicuspid made the thing rattle like a shook-up spray paint can. The ice bag over my jaw turned the left side of my mouth into a distant place, my eye too numb to blink, the dull, heartthrob pain just beginning to find me, while in the bus's rear, a collective "Oh no!" rose from the Barbie clique as Tina pulled back the gauze on her elbow and showed off her wounds. The Barbies are the squad's stars, the fliers and tumblers, the girls with springy

legs and expensive haircuts and light switch smiles, the ones who break out new panties before each competition so the ass they show is store-bought white. I don't begrudge the Barbies one smidge of their spotlit glory — I could never twist my frame into their basket tucks or gyroscoping cartwheels. They are the spires of this world, the eye-catching peaks, the ever-bubbly news anchors, while people like me, the spotters and the throwers, are the foundation, the ones hunkered down at the base of the human pyramids and smiling through the pain of knees gouging the nubs of our spines.

A week after the competition, Coach Habbershaw took a breather from his phlegm-clearing, collar-tugging lecture on human reproduction and showed the Easterns video. I slid down in my seat, blushing, and cupped a hand over my fat lip. Coach Habbershaw said he'd never seen one of his athletes take such a shot and keep on going, which I guess was as much a compliment as he ever gave anyone. After that, some of his players, the beefy lineman mostly, kind of adopted me as one of their own. "Hey Jonesy," they'd call when they passed in the hallway, nodding their big shaved heads and delivering fake jabs to my arm.

"Looks like you're one of the guys now!" Tina piped one day in the caf line. She was parading by, latched onto the golden arm of Brad Diller, our State-bound quarterback. On the Mondays after Brad had turned in some fourth quarter heroics, Tina made a point of wearing his jersey to practice, the oversized material draping her hundred-pound frame like a little nightie, the shirt's mesh and her blond curls locked in perfect, billowing harmony as she soared above us.

Our advisor, Miss Stallings, organized fundraisers to help pay for my dental bills. We had a bake sale, a silent auction, and when a reporter from the *Weekly Courier* came to cover our pre-prom car wash, Tina made a point of draping her arm over my shoulder and flashing her best Barbie pose just as the shutter clicked. The reporter was some kid fresh out of college, and Tina flirted shamelessly with him, bending his ear with stories of how she was *so* interested in journalism, having edited the school paper *and* yearbook *two years running*, her rubber gloves peeled off and her

sponge drying while the rest of us sloshed suds on the lengthening line of cars. By the time the reporter left he must have forgotten about me because Tina was the only one he quoted: "Today we're here to celebrate our championship Cougar pride and to pull together as the team we are!"

I guess I could have been angry that Tina didn't mention me or the pile of dentist's bills Miss Stallings's fundraisers didn't cover. I could have been steamed because Tina never truly apologized for not tucking right (goodness knows what catty Barbie retribution would have awaited me if I had missed my assignment and dropped *her*). But I had more immediate things on my mind than holding a grudge, and after graduation, while Tina and the Barbie bikini squad splashed in the Senior Week surf, I was sitting white-knuckled in the dentist's chair, my opened mouth cramping through impressions and root canals, a gurgling suction tube hooked over my lip and the enamel-gritty smoke of shaved teeth stinging my eyes.

I've had my new teeth for a year and a half now. I'm almost done paying off the dentist, forty dollars every moth, which is a good chunk of my part-time take home from working the register at Dekalb's Grocery. When I'm not ringing up produce and Pampers, I'm trying to keep up with my classes at community college. Sometimes, when I get nervous about a test or paper, I take a moment and trace my tongue over those false teeth, a gentle, wishful rubbing like the genie's bottle from that kid's story, and I tell myself that I've survived harder things. Next year I might enroll at State, but I won't run into Tina there because she's transferred to a New England school famous for its pottery studios and ultimate Frisbee team. I don't believe the rumors about her getting drunk at some frat party and pulling a train (which, if you're unfamiliar with the term, is too disgusting for me to explain). Still, I know things like that happen — sometimes the weaker ones crack under pressure, the pretty ones like Tina and Allison who tumble hard from their beliefs that what's important in life is a mirror's reflection and

pixie-flying above an adoring crowd. Me, I know differently. And I've got the scars to prove it.

