

...And Nail

by Jarrid Deaton

His back against the mildewed wall of the bedroom, Cochran Baines lifted the dented clay pot to his mouth and poured the contents down his throat. Sixty years of life was plenty, he reasoned. No need to keep heading toward an increasingly flawed future.

They never caught Cochran in the act of placing his collected items in the pot. As a funeral director, his work was a private affair. There were rumors, always mutterings that opened the same perverted discourse that tended to end with the mention of bluish nipples.

"Too many repeat listens to Alice Cooper belting out his ode to Cold Ethyl," Cochran would say. "Not all of us are interested in really loving the dead."

Cochran's compulsion wasn't sexual, in as much as things that aren't blatantly related to sex are, but it would seem disturbing to much of the morning coffee and evening easy chair populace.

For twenty-eight years, Cochran Baines removed a tooth from the mouth of every dead child that spent time on his table.

If they knew, people would search for a reason behind it. They always do. Things like this, all of the shadow-quirks, need a concrete explanation. Something to do with a father, perhaps, or an overbearing grandmother. Maybe Cochran had three of his teeth jerked from his jaw at the age of nine by an elementary school janitor afflicted with acromegaly, but maybe not. Nobody ever questions stamp collectors, or people who really like owls. Maybe it was caught in his brain the second he rocketed out of the embryonic fluid and into the vast open space filled with electronic devices and scared eyes.

Twenty-eight years of the little pop and crunch that accompanies the removal of a tooth. Twenty-eight years of dead bodies in front of him, a lineage of real and ultimate truth. So many opportunities for souvenirs. But only the teeth of children interested him. The adults had made good use of their incisors and molars, but the children, there was so much more for them to taste. Such a loss, those beautiful misshapen squares and triangles. Pop. Crunch. The clay pot was always waiting, ready to accept a new offering. When Cochran found himself wishing a child would die, he knew he had to go. It took so long. He was fine just waiting for a car accident, or cancer, maybe a pit bull attack, but he started to want them more and more. He needed them.

The teeth clogged his throat, some of them white, some brown, some gone to black. No need for sugar, this was the rot of time immemorial. Cochran continued to pour. Then his throat constricted, forcing teeth back to the tongue they slid down, but he kept pouring. As the air stopped, blocked by these small instruments of evolutionary survival, Cochran let the years of lost childhoods fall from his mouth and to the dark carpet of the floor, circling him like satellites orbiting a dying planet.

