

Gas Making You Sick?

by Jürgen Fauth

It was a sore molar that was giving me trouble, on the bottom right. The dentist, who had been my parents' dentist and about whose adulterous affairs everybody in the neighborhood knew and whispered about, ts-ts-ts'ed me and murmured "decay" before pulling out the drill. He never wore a mouth guard or rubber gloves, which made me nervous. His helper, a new girl with black curly hair, slipped the purple laughing gas mask over my face and proceeded to line up pointy stainless-steel instruments on the movable tray. I instantly felt the nitrous oxide I was breathing through the purple mask, less in my head than in my limbs, which seemed to gain in weight immensely and drop away from my body, leaving me to float. "Wheee!" went the drill, and my dentist leaned in to remove the decay on my molar. The premonition of pain made me twitch upon first contact, but another breath and I was flooded with peace and relaxed further. And I breathed again, and I relaxed further. And I breathed again, and I relaxed further. And I breathed again, and I relaxed further. Something wasn't right. "Whee!" still went the drill, and "Whee!" went my world. My dentist's helper said something I couldn't make out. How much further would I relax? Now I couldn't hear the sound of the drill anymore at all, but another sound which appeared to me as the basic hum of the universe, a sound that is there all along but which we never hear. My dentist's helper was saying the same incomprehensible thing over and over again; the world was stuck on this one moment, "Whee!", and the base hum grew louder and louder, as if I was approaching it, remembering it: it had been there all along. Clammy, I realized it was the sound of my own death which had been patiently waiting behind the noise of the world. It was waiting for me to notice it--to remember it. Death, I realized, drawing in more nitrous oxide sharply, is like an ugly black puppy that chases you for decades. You forget about it, but when it's time, it's just you and the puppy, and you'll recognize that

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it was yours all along. It's more loyal than anything. Reader, there is one waiting for you, but of course you know that. It's what makes us the same, you and me. If you're quiet, you can hear it pant.

What I had mistaken for the low drone of the world was the static sound of a flat line, the sound of my doom; an eternal noise that means you don't have to care about anything anymore: the time for caring is over. It is infinite, and nothing in it stirs. It is rest, and I was approaching it quickly.

I made out what the dentist's helper was saying: "Are you all right?" The words echoed in my skull. "Are you all right?" And again: "Are you all right?" I just wanted the moment to be over, wanted no fuss over me, regardless if I would live or die. It occurred to me that my dentist had stopped drilling, and now there where his words: "Is the gas making you sick?" And the echo: "Gas making you sick?"

And then I moved. I bucked, jerked the spit tube out of my mouth and pushed the dentist's drill-wielding hand aside, slit out from under the nitrous mask, out of the chair. Everything receded and repeated as if it was a movie that had to be shown over again before a new frame could be added, the world falling away from me like so many strips of celluloid. Seven, fourteen, twenty-four dentists a second, his helper stupidly repeating, "Are you all right? Are you all right? Are you all right?"

The black puppy backed off as things became clearer again. I found myself standing next to the chair, my hand clasped around the pole that held the adjustable overhead light. My dentist was reaching out his hand: "Everything is okay," he said. "Everything is all right."

