

my father's fear

by M. F. Sullivan

my father has a phobia of dentists.

he also once felt
that if the house ran out of toilet paper
he would lose his job.

growing up, we never ran out of toilet paper,
and i had not been to the dentist
since the age of six
when the toothache began again,
that biannual occurrence,
one side or the other.
the wisdom teeth.

i had some money,
made the appointment,
and eight days later,
art drove me to the dentist.

it was a generic place
a factory dentist,
the sort of place with doctors they rotated
and oral surgeons who came by
once a fortnight.

the first doctor
a tiny asian in a white coat
charged eighty-five dollars to tell me
i needed a cleaning.

sure, after the wisdom teeth.

then after that he'd be able to do proper measurements.

fine. the wisdom teeth?

and they might need to do a deeper cleaning, too.

absolutely. but these wisdom teeth...

we waited twenty minutes,
art with his hand on my ankle,
until a squat latino in black scrubs
swarthed into the room
to tut at my x-rays.

'you should pull all four,' he lisped,
'or you'll have to go through this again.'

but we couldn't afford four,
so we did two,
and after waiting (alone, now)
for ten more minutes
in they came.

'you'll feel a pinch,' he sang
as i saw the glint of the syringe in his hand
and squeezed shut my eyes.

the pain burst through my jaw,
remained an ache,
even as the medication numbed me.

i felt like a rabid dog
being tranquilized,
two men holding me down to give

one, two, three, four shots.

the right side was fine
but i thought when they were gone
that they might not have done
as fine a job with the left.

twenty more minutes.
the clock was loud.
next door he tortured a small child
the same way he had tortured me.

behind me sat the instruments,
silver pliers, platinum needles,
of which, the assistant assured me,
the dentist would use maybe four or five.

i lay back
and thought that i had written scenes
where men killed each other with such devices.

back wafted the surgeon, with another nurse
and he said, 'you'll feel a push
but nothing will hurt.
raise your hand if i'm hurting you'

on the right side, nothing did.
but then the left side
and the squeal of the drill brought soft stinging,
until he made his mistake.

the drill slipped,
banged against my gum,
bounced off of the molar next door.
i squealed.

'am i hurting you?'

i shouted from behind a swollen tongue
and whirring drill
and jaw held open
and breaths taken through nose, not mouth.

'raise your hand if i'm hurting you.'

i raised my hand,
shook it.

the surgeon hummed,
tsked,
turned away,
returned back.

i felt him crack the tooth apart
though without pain now,
and opened my eyes once to see
masked faces inches from mine
and silver instruments,
crisscrossed,
extending from my mouth.

they did not let me keep the teeth.
health hazard.
but they did give me a prescription for vicodin,
and antibiotics,
and instructions to avoid smoking.

art helped me into the car
and took us straightaway to the pharmacy,
because the pain on the left side was blinding.

my father is a man
who is wrong about many things.

but maybe when it comes to dentists
the man has a point.

