

Cherry Stem

by Michael Seidel

It showed up in the pit of my left cheek. I didn't notice it immediately upon waking, but during my morning smiling exercises my tongue started feeling tickled and raw. Dashing to the mirror, I opened wide and pressed the gummy nub of my key chain flashlight and there it was, about the size and length of a cherry stem with a bulging base like a seed.

First I showed my girlfriend. I opened up completely. She said the light in here's bad. I don't see nothing. It's probably your imagination. Then we went outside—there was a solar eclipse happening, so we had to wait a bit with dark shades on. After the sun regained its rage, I said ah, and she said I'll be honest with you, babe: I see it there.

What should I do, I asked?

Do? She said. Not worry. You always worry too much. You'll be fine by tomorrow.

But I wasn't. The thing persisted, in parallel with my concern.

We called the ER and the nurse who answered said, we can't give advice over the phone but I suggest you come in right away. My girlfriend drove, her cackles like the shriek of a siren. You'll be fine, she said. This is a total waste of our time.

The ER doctor had no idea what to make of it. She released me and said to go right to a dentist, passing over the address of a Ukrainian woman she knew. The office had warped wooden floors. In one corner was a knee-high Christmas tree, still up with its lights and garland on, even though it was early March. We trudged slush in with our boots. She got angry at us for that. Then she took my x-ray and left me sitting there with the heavy mint green jacket on.

She never returned with the results, so after an hour, we saw ourselves out. On the drive home, we wondered if the visit would be reported to my insurance or anywhere else.

I called Mom. She was concerned and said to come back to see Dr. Chu, the Chinese dentist who'd strung braces on my teeth when I was a kid. At the end of each visit, he made me gurggle what tasted like a poisoned version of the bubblegum he forbade me.

Chu and Mom lived one state over. I'll take care of your bus ticket, Mom told me. Get on the next one and I'll pay you back. I'm calling the Doc on the second line right now, she said.

It's like a black hair springing up on the minefield of a teenage girl's chin, Chu shouted. He stuck a quarter-sized mirror past my molars and readjusted the light to deflect glare. He moved his rotten breath closer to my mouth, like he wanted to twirl his tongue around just to see how it felt. It was an oddity he never expected, one never in the books they thrust on him in his continuing ed classes.

But other than that, he explained, I have no idea what to make of it.

Mom was waiting in the waiting room, a good place to wait. She was wrenching on the ends of a rolled up copy of People, like the contents were so good she wanted to make tight sure they'd stay inside.

You need to take him to the ER, Chu said. Mom welled up like she was being punched from inside. I told Chu I'd already been to an ER and they'd sent me to a dentist. That dentist wasn't me, Chu said.

I know, Dr. Chu, but now I've seen you.

And now you need to see a real doctor.

But you are a real doctor.

I mean....I can write referrals, he said.

He handed me a paper. I handed it to Mom. She rolled it up, twisted the ends.

At the ER, I was triaged like a canon to the head. Let's go, said the attending. After a cursory look, she said, this is bad. Are you supposed to say that, I asked?

She called in backup, some guy from out East. This doctor had come to my hometown as a gesture of goodwill to society and ended up finding a woman and an abandoned farmhouse, and was now viewed as a specialist in a number of things, some medical. Entering

the observation room, you'd think he'd opened a wrong door and seen something that was an unexpected mix of perplexing, scandalous, and incredulous. But it was just me, with mom sitting next to me, anxiously massaging my forearm. The doctor hadn't bothered to put on scrubs or even a lab coat. He was brash, had hay in his hair.

Let's have a look, the doctor said.

I was sick of hearing that.

My tongue had begun to bleed. It tasted like metal. Which meant iron. It tasted so good to me.

I told the doctor about the taste and he laid me down. Everything went white. There was a light, white. I didn't need to move toward though it because it was everywhere. It was like smog, thickening on the horizon.

When I came to, I was in a wheelchair at the airport. My left leg was propped out and casted. There were rags wrapped around my head, too, and mom was pushing me, moaning my baby, my baby, my boy, my baby.

Where's my girlfriend, I asked?

How should I know, she answered?

Where's my phone?

Your girlfriend has it.

My papers were sitting next to me in an envelope. There was a long line. We waited. I asked mom questions. She answered, staying behind me. I became convinced that the power of her worry had guided me here. That I was dialoguing with her neurosis. It was flatly Midwestern and pronounced the names of possible diagnoses like they were the excrement that fell from barnyard stock.

I asked about my girlfriend again and the voice said not to worry.

I handed my envelope to the person at the desk. He let me through and said, take off your shoe, put everything in the gray box.

Mom, I need to know where we're going, I said.

She told me about the doctor's old classmate, a guy still back East name Richard who had a certificate in holistic urban remedies.

Doctor told her I just had to go see Richard. Medical science was

wearing a poker face but holding a losing hand, he said. He was sure that Richard's juju of dandelion butter, Indian gum, and rare herbs that grow only in abandoned middle school parking lots in the suburban New Hampshire would cure whatever was wrong with me. He'd seen it work, swore it was probable.

Mom removed my one shoe, put it in the grey box. Do you have keys, she asked? Do you have my keys, I asked her back? I do, she said.

I have nothing is what I said next.

Good, Mom said.

Please step up, the TSA woman said.

Mom rolled me through. I beeped.

It may be your chair, the woman said, but we need you to come over here anyway.

She wanded the chair. Nothing. She wanded my cast. Nothing. My pockets with my stomach swelling over. My shoulder. My bandages. The sound got faster. She came with the wand right against my cheek and it went to crazy.

She called in dogs, guys who handle dogs, guys dressed in suits with shields. They evacuated the airport, pulling burritos from the hands of people half asleep, telling them to go.

They said, open wide and I opened wide. They saw the string, like cherry, like black hair, and said, Oh My God.

They asked me questions about my affiliations, religious, political, and personal. They pulled down their sunglasses and addressed my eyes: we know all about who you are and who you know.

A guy came in wearing Hazmat, holding a needle long enough to stab across a sea. They pried my mouth open again and the needle went in. It had no effect, other than the feeling of a needle going in. There was no numbing, no deadening. They asked if I could still feel. I said I think so. They said think is good enough, please stay open. They were civil. I kept open.

One of the TSA guys had a TSA pocketknife that he held over the flame of a Bic, just for a second or two to sanitize it, then he went into my mouth.

I felt three solid ticks. Whether it was counting upward or downward is still unknown.

