

How Filthy the Human Mouth

by Steven Gowin

My arm's still bleeding, and it's pretty cold. But I'll wait out here for a car, I guess.

Before someone had ordered me out of that house, I could see that they, the invitees, wanted to name me something dirty, something repulsive, but what? Child molester? No.

I'd traveled for business and through some online friends had been invited to this party. They'd driven me the four or five miles out from town. And now, some ways off, the village lights are twinkling. But hell, I don't know where I am. No idea.

The other invitees, much younger than I am, had laughed and teased and discussed music that I don't know and don't understand. They'd swapped stories about their toddlers and kindergartners. But my own boys are all grown, all gone.

My Dad said that when he died he hoped he'd be with his Father, my Grandad, again. I don't know why I'm thinking of that now. Sometimes in dream though, I want my father. He's dead these 12 years, but when I awake, weeping, I understand that I am the father now.

Here's all that happened, though, nothing more: When I ran out of party conversation, I'd wandered back into the house, down towards the bathroom. I'd stopped at one of the bedrooms whose windows ran along the hallway, curtained on the inside and open, like a hospital nursery.

Inside, a boy, 10 or 12, was jumping on the bed. Jumping. Jumping. When he saw me, he jumped faster and faster, wild like something rabid, leering at me, pointy teeth glistening behind his open mouth. His nurse, seeing me and frightened, hurried to close the curtain. I turned back and found a seat in the living room.

In a few minutes a woman, the mother I guess, charged towards me. I don't know where the husband was. But before I could stand, she began threatening me loudly, spitting a little. What had I been doing in the rear of her house? What had I done? Who was I anyway? Who knew me? How dare I have entered that space?

Then, chased by the nurse, the jumping child streaked towards me. Red-faced, sweating, reeking of boy, and uncontrollable, he screamed, "Papa, Papa," and lunging, bit my forearm, bit it deeply until it bled and bled a lot.

They ordered me out, so here I am now. In the freezing air. In the dark. Alone, because I have committed some horrific act.

And the ragged wound is already festering, a kind of brownish ooze. I'm afraid. How filthy the human mouth. Dad always said so.

