

A Little Wider

by

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They've got you flat on your back, feet up, like an astronaut waiting for blast-off. The light in your eyes is retina-sizzling. From somewhere beyond the glare, the nasal voice nags: "A little wider . . ."

Your jaw aches as you strain wider, muscles trembling. The examination lamp is partially eclipsed as a head—huge and swollen as a weather balloon—floats over you. Eyes goggled, mouth masked, the face could be male or female, but the hands are hairy-fingered maulers, indisputably male. Sheathed in latex-free gloves, they skitter across your incisors like tarantulas with condoms on their legs.

"I'll just numb you up and we'll be ready to start," the nasal voice intones.

A needle glitters in the light. Your sweat-slick hands deathgrip the armrests.

"Just a little poke . . ."

Every muscle tenses as the needle jabs. You feel it plunge through your gum line, scrape along your sinuses and exit through your left ear. The room prisms in your watering eyes.

"There now. Should be numbing up soon."

But your mouth isn't numbing, it's swelling. The whole right side of your face is tingling, tautening like the skin of a balloon blown too-tight.

"Feel that?" the dentist asks, flicking your lower lip with his fingernail. It makes a sound like a fist thumping a beach ball. By now your lower lip's so swollen he has to lean

against it to peer down into your mouth. You feel sure that if you could only find a mirror you'd be looking at a reflection of the Elephant Man.

He draws the exam light closer, squinting around, breathing warm peanut butter-breath up your nostrils, making you speculate why someone earning a dentist's salary is lurching on PB&J. His safety glasses bowl your fun-house reflection, mouth open in a frozen scream.

“A little wider . . .”

Your jawbone cracks as you strain a millimeter wider. You hear the clatter of instruments being sorted on a table, catch the glimmer of chromed metal before it disappears into your mouth. For a time you lie there, straining to relax your cramping fingers, listening to the patient scraping of a steel tool picking and prying at every filling, flinching every time it finds a sensitive spot.

Finally, the voice speaks . . . and the tone is not cheerful.

“Looks like you need a root canal.”

Most of what happens next you try to screen out. There's an ugly water stain on the acoustic tiles overhead. Leaky roof, most likely. You fixate on the stain, attempting to read Rorschachs as the dentist and his assistant fill your mouth with one hose to drain, another to irrigate. Something like a rubber pup tent is clamped around your tooth and then another hose is jammed immediately under it. By now your jaw muscles tremble with fatigue, but closing your mouth by even a gnat's hair is no longer an option.

Your attention is snatched back to the here-and-now by the snarl of a dental drill boring through enamel. It doesn't hurt yet, but your jaw judders with seismic vibrations. More worryingly, you can see and smell smoke curling out of your mouth. The drill spits

out dust, fragments of tooth and old filling. Grit and debris fall into the back of your throat and you start to gag. A chunk of something hot and sharp drops into your eye and you blink like a seizure victim. The dentist and his young assistant either don't notice or don't care as your face purples and tears stream from your twitching right eye. The drill stutters, barks and shrieks as it punches through into something soft and pulpy. There's a nanosecond delay and suddenly you're plugged into an electric dynamo: two-hundred-and-forty volts of three-phase-industrial agony. Both eyes snap wide. The muscles of your back spasm, arching you out of the chair, hands squeezing permanent grip marks in the chair arms. You try to scream but your mouth is crammed with two pairs of hands, three hoses, a rubber pup tent and the pointy end of a spinning drill. Instead you make a noise like a hemorrhoidal bear shitting pinecones in the darkest part of the woods.

Miraculously, the drill howls to a stop.

"Did you feel that?"

Your throat is so dry your voice is two sheets of sandpaper skimming together:

"Yessssssshhhhhhh."

"Okay, I'll have to numb you up some more. A little wider, please."

Once again, you cringe at the needle's dread descent. You feel its distant sting as your mouth films with bitterness. Within seconds, numbness tattoos your face. Your head feels as empty and rotten as a carved pumpkin two weeks after Halloween. The drilling resumes, but suddenly snarls to a stop. You hear the dentist swear softly under his surgical mask.

Now you are really worried.

The giant head floats away as he mumbles something to his assistant you can't quite make out over the mournful gurgling of tubes trailing from your mouth. Finally, the face looms again.

"I've hit a slight complication. I'm going to ask a colleague of mine to take a look at your tooth."

You don't really have much say in the matter. Here you are, miles from home, flat on your back with a drawerful of metal in your mouth. You can't just get up and walk out, even if you wanted to.

The colleague arrives a few minutes later. Now three people you never met until half an hour ago are spelunking in your oral cavity.

"A little wider . . ." urges the new dentist. You want to tell her that you're not one of those pythons that can dislocate its jaw in order to swallow a baby wildebeest. Instead you strain your aching face muscles further. Right now you'd wish you'd had a photo taken recently, because you are sure your face will never return to its original shape.

Now you've got three pairs of hands tinkering in your mouth. The new dentist asks for some kind of instrument and you feel a pair of metal tongs clamp onto some part of your mouth. You can't tell exactly where—it's all numb down there. Then the new dentist grabs some kind of file and starts filing away at something. Your head jerks with every stroke. After five minutes of this you're dizzy and nauseous. Vomiting is a real possibility and you want to warn them. But how?

Thankfully, the filing stops. The new dentist produces a tiny lamp, which she clamps to your swollen lower lip. The assistant squirts a jet of ice water into your most sensitive fillings, just to make sure you're paying attention. Ominously, the two dentists

step away and whisper conspiratorially. Finally the new dentist announces that she wants an x-ray. Everyone except you flees the room while the assistant—a gum-cracking 18-year old who chews her Bubblelicious like a prize heifer masticating cud—jams a sharp-edged square of cardboard into your sore gums and orders you to bite down. She wheels over a death-ray machine and nestles the muzzle against your right cheek, then runs out of the room like it's about to explode. The death-ray buzzes angrily and suddenly she's back, yanking the saliva-soggy cardboard from your drooling mouth.

You're abandoned in the chair for what feels like an hour. Your throat is as parched as the Nevada salt flats: cracked and arid. Your face is locked in a rictus smile. You're on the verge of bounding from the chair and bolting for the exit when they all surge back into the room.

Only now they've got another dentist with them.

"A little wider . . ." says the third dentist, a man.

You stretch harpsichord-tight jaw muscles to their limit. Your desiccated lips are as tattered as the Dead Sea Scrolls. At any minute the corners of your mouth will tear and your entire face will peel off and flop onto the floor. The three dentists crowd around you. They've developed the x-rays and they don't like what they see.

Defying the laws of physics and the Geneva Convention, more tubes are crammed into your mouth. Your cheeks bulge with enough cotton balls to stuff a fairground prize. Dentist #3 fastens what looks like a medieval torture device onto your tooth while Dentist #2 helps. Dentist #3 wiggles the tool and you hear an ominous crunch. When the tool comes out of your mouth it holds something pink and fleshy that could be a flap of gum

or could be your tongue. He tosses it onto the tray and mutters something about calling in another specialist.

An hour later and there are fifteen or sixteen dentists scrumming about your chair. It's hard to keep track because they all look alike in the safety glasses and surgical masks. Maybe you're hallucinating all of this. By now you've soaked through your clothes and shiver in a film of cold sweat. There are thirty or more hands in there now. That's three hundred fingers, twenty-three tubes, five bales of cotton wadding, a sucker, a blower and various shiny tools you can't begin to identify.

They are wheeling some heavy machine up to the chair as the door opens and yet more dentists squeeze in. The machine looks like something used to bore underground tunnels. The drill bit alone is bigger than your entire head. There's no possible way they're going to get that thing in your mouth. Then someone hits a switch and the drill begins its slow, grinding revolution.

The scream comes from somewhere deep. But by the time it squeezes past all the hands and the tubes and the clamps it's nothing but a mousy squeak. Just before the drill plunges into your mouth, you look up with terrified, pleading eyes at the masked faces crowded around you as a nasal voice intones:

“A little wider . . .”

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