

## Peter Brown Hoffmeister

### The Doctor

*He felt the tooth beginning to tear free, a molar pried with a tool like a bent screwdriver. He had no nitrous oxide, only Novocain, and the Novocain in the root did nothing to diminish the pressure on his lower jaw. The jaw popped twice. Three times. Four.*

*The striated muscles rolled in the dentist's forearms as he worked. He was talking about pro-wrestling's old days. "Even when Hulk Hogan was bald it didn't matter. He was a giant. A big, bald, bad giant. That's the truth..." the dentist held his breath as he forced the tool upwards, "...I wouldn't have gotten in the ring against him. No way."*

The tooth came out like a cork easing from an outdated champagne bottle and the smell of rot filled the room.

Daniel was tired. He pulled at the edges of his pants pocket while he drank a Weinhard's Root Beer. He was on his back porch. Sarah wasn't home yet but that was nothing unusual. She said earlier, "I have some teaching stuff to do, Daniel."

Daniel took a drink as he thought to himself that she kept the weekend hours of a prostitute.

Daniel had tried to talk to her. He said, “You look tired. Really tired.”

She had discolorations under her eyes like wet bags of tea. She sighed. “Whatever. You don’t understand. And you never did.”

“Well...the thing is...” he didn’t know what else to say. He could smell Sarah’s restlessness like an awkward conversation with a stranger on a bus.

*At the party, she looked at the cup of juice in his right hand.*

*Him. His big shoulders and his long arms.*

*She stared.*

*He said, “Actually, I’m a doctor.”*

*But she shook her head. “No,” she said. “You aren’t.”*

Daniel stood on his back porch and stared off towards the west where the sun was setting. Down the hill a half-mile the train yard lay with cars rusting red, dying like old people cast aside.

Sarah called at seven. “One of my students needs more tutoring.”

Daniel looked at his watch. “But it’s seven o’clock in the evening.”

“I know what time it is. But it’s not like I can say no. A student needs more help and I’m the teacher.”

Daniel returned the phone to its cradle, walked back into the kitchen, and dumped the spaghetti noodles into the strainer in the sink where they appeared to him like nematode worms.

He ate alone in the white of his own kitchen.

After dinner, Daniel opened the lid to his laptop and pecked away at his book on structural engineering. His hobby. He finished a draft of Chapter 23, "On Choice: The Relative Strengths of Steel Alloys". At nine, he closed his laptop, then got down on the floor to do ten push-ups and ten sit-ups. Afterwards he took a shower.

Wrapped in his towel, Daniel swallowed a multi-vitamin, drank a glass of water, flossed his teeth and brushed his uppers and lowers for exactly two minutes. Before bed, he swept underneath the comforter with the flats of his hands, moving middle out, middle out, brushing across the tight-pulled sheet.

Sarah said, "I have to go in to school." It was Saturday.

Daniel didn't say anything.

"It's perfectly normal for teachers to go in on their weekends, Daniel." Sarah took a gulp of coffee and sucked her teeth.

"I know," Daniel said, and went to kiss her forehead.

Sarah ducked so that his kiss grazed her hair.

"I know," he said again.

After she left, Daniel walked down to the park by the river. It wasn't a nice day, but cold and wet, and the park was empty except for the screaming.

Daniel was drawn to the sound. He found its source at a green-painted picnic table by the water where he'd seen families sit on nice afternoons throwing breadcrumbs to the Mallards and Canadian geese.

Two men occupied the table, one lying on his back and the other standing above him. The standing man was bent over, focused, manipulating something. Daniel was too curious to walk away. He stood and watched, hoping to observe without being himself noticed.

The men appeared homeless. The man who was standing had a dirty beard and glasses that were too small to fit his face. The clips gouged into the bridge of his nose. The glasses didn't wiggle even when he jerked his hands. Those hands held an extractor, and the muscles in the man's upper forearms tightened like guitar strings as he worked a canine tooth from its resting place in the prone patient's jaw. The extractor was one of thirty or so dentists' tools arranged neatly on the wooden picnic bench, in various conditions, some rusted completely, while others sparkled like wet mirrors in the afternoon drizzle.

The screaming was not important. The dentist did not seem to notice. He only recognized the other man's pain when the mouth turned away from the working tool. Then the dentist settled the patient's head back into position like a parent might pet a frightened child back onto a pillow. The dentist leaned over and said something before finishing his work with a quick turn of his tool. The patient screamed one final time and sat up.

The dentist laughed. Holding the tooth. "Here," he said, and handed the patient a plastic half-gallon jug of vodka.

"Thanks," the man nodded, spitting a mouthful of blood into the grass. Blood was still running from the patient's mouth as he started to drink from the jug, and the blood pinked the liquor inside the bottle. After gulping twice, he backwashed a small red cloud.

The dentist took the vodka, shook the jug to dissipate the color of the blood, then tipped and drank. He smiled. "Yep," he said. Then he put the jug down.

The men did not notice Daniel. But Daniel was worried that they might see him if they looked in his direction, so he turned and walked back to his house, considering the tools and the screaming and the whispers and the dentistry as if they were simple acts but sacred. Prayers of the Rosary.

Daniel felt Sarah's shoulder against his ribcage as she slid under his arm and up against him. She smelled like over-applied perfume. She said, "I'm really sorry. I had no idea I would be out this late. I'm really sorry."

Daniel started to sit up to look at the clock but Sarah stopped him the only way she knew how, her hand moving slowly at first, then faster, then holding steady as he exhaled, as a sealed container expels air suddenly when opened.

When Sarah wasn't home, Daniel tried to return to the dentist. He scoured the park, going back to the table. Then he visited each table in the park, all the tables, but didn't find the man he was looking for.

Daniel broadened his search. He opened his circle as he had read in a wilderness survival book. He sounded a radius, then moved 360 degrees as if searching for a lost hiker in the woods. His wider circle was enough to include the Washington Street Bridge where he found two shelter holes, three empty Old English bottles, and a urine-soaked REI-brand sleeping bag.

He returned home.

On another day, he found a person resting under a weave of blackberries, not far from the shelters. The man wore a green coat.

"Hello?" Daniel said.

The man sat up. "What the fuck?"

The man was not his dentist.

“I’m sorry,” Daniel mumbled, “I thought you were somebody else.”

Daniel continued on to the train yard. There, he saw a group of men huddled in a circle as if playing cards. But there were no cards. There was only a box of lemon wine that they passed, each taking five-second pours until the box was empty. Then one of them threw the box behind him, bouncing it off a metal trashcan and up to the base of a tree.

“What do you *want* to do?” Sarah seemed agitated.

“Well, I’ve always had this dream that we…”

“Daniel, not now. Not dreams. Everything’s good right now. We have this house. And I have *my* job. You have *your* job. Everything’s fine right now.”

The next weekend Sarah was out again and Daniel went down to the park with the hope of finding the dentist but was disappointed to find a young family, two little girls feeding ducks out of their hands next to his table as if that park and that table had not been the location of what Daniel had witnessed. The finding had become an obsession and Daniel spent time during the week, in between patients, considering the life of the dentist. The feeling was not something that he could explain to anyone, not even himself, nothing scientific, nothing like the occurrence of natural surfactant in the lungs or the opening of the valves of the heart, but Daniel breathed his new feeling, breathed, allowing himself to think without any real evaluation or organization, and this thinking was something different for him, sitting underneath his daily life like the innards of bruised fruit.

Daniel walked through the train yard each evening, trying to pick out the men who hopped the boxcars as the trains left the changing area. The explosions of the yard no longer bothered Daniel and he went back to his own porch, listening to the cymbals, listening to the long lines adding, the crash of steel against steel, the lengthening of trains.

It was two months before Daniel saw him again. The dentist. In the park at a table, talking to another man, passing a bottle of Wild Turkey.

Then there was dentistry, a full cleaning and extraction, much more wonderful than Daniel had hoped. The experience was like the first night after the introduction to Daniel's cadaver in medical school when Daniel had not been able to sleep but had only thought of his incision over and over, noting that perhaps he had tailed a millimeter to the right at the end of his cut. He could never be sure.

The dentist didn't have as much trouble with this new patient and this new tooth, and Daniel believed he could see the soft brown of rot from his observation point, where he was hiding behind a maple tree, and the screaming was not screaming now but more of a nudging groan at the time when the pressure was the heaviest. Then there was a second patient, after an hour, and a third. Daniel stood, observing the work of the dentist like a small child might watch his father read, not understanding the relationship and the transfers taking place.

Daniel did not think about the night when he was young. Eleven. He did not think about the heavy door and the barn, or how it had sounded. He did not remember all of that moment but he could remember what was important if he needed to. There was the smell of the wet hay in the loft. The mold upstairs. The wooden ladder with the rough rungs, and Daniel had climbed. He had chosen to climb.

The loft was not his fault. The loft with its long-cut planks worn greasy. It was uncomfortable and cold and damp, and Daniel had tried to say no. He wanted to believe that it was not his fault. He had clearly said no.

In the loft, it was rough and heavy, and quick.

Afterwards, alone again, he had told himself that he would be able to control what took place in the future, that there would be none of that smell, the smell of whiskey, cheap whiskey, or any other alcohol. He would be careful and precise now. Inviolable. Measured.

Daniel had begun his control by placing that moment, placing that moment in the barn loft, like shelving a can in a pantry, in a recess, though it was not a simple can he had shelved but something animate, with teeth and claws, claws like the curve of hay hooks. And that thing waited unseen, waited in the charred shadow of time.

Daniel did not think of this.

Daniel was sweating. He had been sweating for days and people had begun to notice at work. A nurse said, “Do you think you might have a fever?”

He was staring at a chart, not writing, and a droplet of sweat slid off his nose and landed on the paper.

She said, “Are you ok? Are you feeling alright?”

Daniel smiled, revealing his teeth that had not been cleaned in a week.

Sarah started to reach across the table but stopped herself. “Daniel, I’m worried.”

“Worried.” Daniel was leaning forward, the white of his head hanging over the table like a lamp. He said, “You know I just can’t control.”

“Control what?” Sarah looked at him with her chin out. Stared at him. His eyes and the new smile. Then she looked down and began to pick at the white paint that was peeling off the corner of the table. “Control what, honey?”

Daniel did not look at her.

He said, “Everything.”

The leaving was not hard. Daniel was alone in the evening again, and it was not hard. He had purchased the coat, the boots, and the large green backpack at the Army Surplus, filling it with what he thought was necessary. He considered writing a note then, something to teach a lesson, but there were no words to tell the story. He knew that Sarah would come home late at night. Then she would learn slowly, as he himself had learned slowly. There was a process, an experience that had to be eaten, like new food, a baby beginning to feed while cutting its first teeth.

The last item was his doctor's bag, an antique country practitioner's satchel that he'd purchased at a garage sale on a Saturday. Earlier in the week, he'd stuffed the bag with stolen surgical tools, syringes, Percocet, Naproxen Sodium, and stitch kits.

Daniel picked up the bag and held it in his left hand. Then he went out the back door, leaving it open, walking across the deck and onto the grass. He stepped over the low fence, picked his way through the new growth of suburban woods, trees five feet high, and slipped down to the muddy creek-bed in his stiff new boots.

Daniel began walking along the gravel road towards the changing yard, trains crashing together, changing tracks like iron dogs. Dogs on the chains of new owners.