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I find it upsetting when my mouth goes numb. The lips go like rubber, the tongue to gum. I cannot form words or speak in sentences, only grunts with poking hand gestures. Odd that he understands me, instructs me in my fogged confusion. Like this I sometimes drool. The thin spittle seeps across my cheek, and I, so much in numb ignorance, do not wipe myself. Instead he sees and cleans me, his papered hand delicately at my face. Only then do I realize it, in humiliation. He smiles down, paternally. I smile crookedly, with unresponsive lips.

He says, "This one may pinch now. Open." I open. My eyes roll gratefully up towards him but find only his forehead and eyes which are peering into my mouth. They do not see my eyes. My eyes try to say thank you for telling me beforehand about the pinch. None of this goes noticed. When the needle is in the roof of my mouth, I do not feel it. It is deeply in and

stays for what seems like too long. Even if I do not feel it, the idea is uncomfortable. I am not in pain. The words in my head flow easily by themselves, but I hold everything outside very still while the needle remains in me; he holds it very still also, on his end. I wait patiently for him to pull the needle out of me. I must say that I do want it out but do not make whimpering noises with my throat to make him hurry. He is the doctor. I trust that he will slide the needle out of me as soon as it is the right time. This is why he is the doctor. And I think he may get mad if I try to urge him. He must make the decision.

While I am concentrating for a long time on a small but prominent mole on his forehead, he eases the needle out of the roof of my mouth. I am grateful. I want to close my mouth. I want to say thank you for removing the needle finally. When he says "Close," and I do, I cannot feel my lips touching. In fact, I

cannot feel them when I try to find them with my fingers. This sensation makes me uneasy, as if my face were no longer mine. He has left the room. He hasn't told me what I'm supposed to do, so I sit in the chair. The chair faces the wall. The door is behind me. On the wall at my feet hangs a painting of a cat. It is signed by my dentist. I look at the cat painting and then at my feet. Next time I won't wear open-heel sandals. They are difficult to keep on my feet when they are propped up on the chair. The chair wants to push them off. While I am battling to keep my shoes on, he comes back into the examination room. "I see you are looking at the painting there. Do you like it? I did it myself."

"Yes, I do." This comes out more garbled than I'd expected. The novacaine has been working steadily. He nods, smiling.

I've been three times in this chair with my feet propped up. First I came about something in my mouth I didn't understand: a lump on my gum, as if the shell from a kernel of popcorn were wedged up under my gum. Nothing hurt when he examined it with his angled, tiny mirrors and specialized prods. With my hands folded I waited and watched his looming forehead where inside he was making decisions about my mouth. Inside his forehead he had information about my mouth that I did not have. I waited for him to explain. "An abscess," he said. It sounded unclean

to me, so I asked how to get rid of it. I hadn't known his answer would mean I'd be again and again with my feet propped up and my mouth gone numb. And I am so ignorant for not knowing things of this sort. I try not to let my foolishness show each time he says I'll need to return for another visit; I act as if of course I'll need to return for another visit. Any fool would realize that.

So I return and act as if I understand his procedures. Maybe my feigned nonchalance is what causes him to never say what he's about to do in my mouth. Probably he assumes I'm already in the know. The truth which I hide so skillfully actually unsettles me. I know nothing about teeth. There are so many things I know nothing about. Each day I stumble across others. At my deli the girl always asks me if I want a half a kilo or a quarter of Genoa ham. I always tell her to give me four dollars' worth because I don't understand metrics. I try not to let her see my shame. Being ignorant disgusts me. It makes my stomach throb each time I find myself ignorant. When my face flushes in embarrassment, I try to look down to hide it.

My mouth is open again. He has said, "Open," and I have opened. I respond promptly to him, but I think he wishes there weren't any step in between. For him it would be so much more efficient if he could simply need my mouth open, and it would open by his accord. He would like to have more say in what my mouth does. He would like to skip the part about

telling me. But the truth is, even if I always do as he says right when he says it, I still think I like being the one to do it. I like having that fraction of a second of knowing what will happen to me before I do it, that moment of knowing my mouth will be open right before I open it.

I'd like to have seconds like that more often, actually. The kids call me on the phone saying things like Mom pick me up here or there, Mom buy me studded shoe laces, Mom tell Daddy to quit yelling at me.

And then there's him. "Honey, you don't look good in yellow. You can't really want to leave this house in that get-up, can you? Honey, shut that dog up. He's making me crazy."

And it all has to be yesterday. I'd like to have one of those signs like the school's secretary which says "Lack of planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part." But I could never. Where would I put it? The kids would be too embarrassed to bring their friends home. They'd say I was a radical.

He is stretching a rubber sheet across my mouth. With a very strong thread he is tying it to my unclean tooth. Somehow it is pulled taut over my open mouth and clamped into place. This is very odd. Nothing hurts, but I'm not certain of the sensation. My tongue lies underneath the rubber sheet, my tooth on the

outside. Now with my mouth clamped open and my tooth on the outside, he begins work, much more content than when he had to tell me to open or close. The tooth is his; he does not bother informing me of his progress. He simply works. My arms and legs do not move, as if frozen. I am afraid to move them. It is almost as if they were lashed down to the chair. But they are not. I am afraid. I do not want him fooling with my tooth, clean or not. I just don't want him fooling with my mouth.

My legs twitch. Maybe I've done that. I try now to twitch them myself. Instead they move much more than a twitch. To my mouth he says, "Hold still, now." This makes me mad. As if he thinks he could control my legs too! So I move them again but a bit less this time. More like a twitch. My arms are itchy, so I put them on my lap. Then back on the plastic arm rests. Next to my left arm is a spit sink, which I think is disgusting. My arm doesn't like it either, so it moves to my leg. Now he is annoyed. He pulls out of my mouth and says, "Do you think you can hold still now?" Like I'm a child. Well I'm not. I sit up straight, not exactly knowing what for. "Lie down please." I do not. As I unclamp myself my legs swing around. I stand. He is calling out at my back turned to him. I walk out of his office, the rubber sheet still dangling from my tooth.