



Word of Mouth

Scare Story

Malvin E. Ring*

We look across the Atlantic for the latest literary extract in this series. Both the author and the commentator are American. Dr Malvin E. Ring, who has become a regular contributor to this newsletter, has selected a passage from "0 is for Outlaw" by Sue Grafton, first published in 1999. This book is the latest in a very popular series of mysteries featuring a private eye named Kinsey Millhone. A former police officer, she is tough, resourceful and generally fearless but not where dental treatment is concerned. In this passage her 86-year-old landlord had asked her to drive him to his dental appointment, his car being away for repair.

"Great. This is great. I really appreciate this, " Henry said, his tone completely false. I glanced over at him, making note of the tension that had tightened on his face.

"What are you having done? "

"A crown 'ack 'ere, " he said, talking with his finger stuck at the back of his mouth.

"At least it 's not a root canal. "

"I'd have to kill myself first. I was hoping you'd be gone so I could cancel the appointment. "

"No such luck, " I said.

Henry and I share an apprehension about dentists that borders on the comical. While we're both dutiful about checkups, we agonize over any work that has to be done. Both of us are subject to dry mouth, squirmy stomachs, clammy hands, and lots of whining. I reached over and felt his fingers, which were icy and faintly damp.

Henry frowned to himself. "I don't see why he has to do this. The filling's fine, not really a problem. It doesn't even hurt. It's a little sensitive to heat, and I've had to give up anything with ice. . . "

"The filling's old? "

"Well, 1942. . . but there's nothing wrong with it. "

"Talk about make work. "

"My point exactly. In those days, dentists knew how to fill a tooth. Now a filling has a limited shelf life, like a carton of milk. It's planned obsolescence. You're lucky if it lasts long enough to pay the bill." He stuck his finger in his mouth again, turning his face in my direction. "See this? Only fifteen years old and the guy's already talking about replacing it.

"You're kidding! What a scam! "

"Remember when they put fluoride in the city water and everybody thought it was a Communist plot? Dentists spread that rumour. "

"Of course they did, " I said chiming in on cue. "They saw the handwriting on the wall. No more cavities, no more business. " We went through the same duet every time either one of us had to have something done.

"Now they've cooked up that surgery where they cut half your gums away. If they can't talk you into that, they claim you need braces. "

"What a crock, " I said.

"I don't know why I can't have my teeth pulled and get it over with, " he said, his mood becoming morose.

I made the usual skeptical response. "I wouldn't go that far, Henry. You have beautiful teeth.

"I'd rather keep them in a glass. I can 't stand the drilling. The noise drives me crazy. And the scraping when they scale? I nearly rip the arms off the chair. Sounds like a shovel on the sidewalk, a pickax on concrete. . . "

"All right! Cut it out. You're making my hands sweat."

By the time I pulled into the parking lot, we'd worked ourselves into such a state of indignation, I was surprised he was willing to keep the appointment. I sat in the dentist's waiting room after Henry's name was called. Except for the receptionist, I had the place to myself, which I thought was faintly worrisome. How come the dentist only had one patient? I pictured Medicaid fraud: phantom clients, double billing, charges for work that would never be done. Just a typical day in the life of Dr. Dentifrice, federal con artist and cheater with a large sadistic streak. I did give the guy points for having recent issues of all the best magazines.

From the other room, over the burbling of the fish tank, which is meant to mask the shrieks, I could hear the sounds of a high-speed drill piercing through tooth enamel straight to the pulsing nerve below. My fingers began to stick to the pages of People magazine, leaving a series of moist, round prints. Once in a while, I caught Henry's muffled protest, a sound suggestive of flinching and lots of blood gushing out. Just the thought of his suffering made me hyperventilate. I finally got so lightheaded I had to step outside, where I sat on the mini-porch with my head between my knees.

Henry eventually emerged, looking stricken and relieved, feeling at his numbed lip to see if he was drooling on himself.

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Comment

It is not so strange that dentistry, profession dedicated to the prevention of pain, has been thought of for so long as a "causer" of pain. This attitude naturally springs from the fact that in the millennia before the advent of anaesthesia, dental treatment was a painful ordeal. Except for a small amount of restorative dentistry being done by the Chinese, the Etruscans - and the Romans who copied from them - and the Arabs, treatment almost wholly consisted of extractions, done under the worst of conditions, with no anaesthetic or some opium, at best. But how to explain such fear of dentistry today, where excellent local - or general - anaesthetics have eliminated almost all pain?

The answer ties in with the individual's unconscious perception of his mouth as being separate from his body, and this can be traced to his or her infancy. An infant cries with its mouth and receives sustenance and comfort through its mouth. Its demands for necessary care by a parent are uttered with the mouth. And sucking, even on a pacifier, is so satisfying to the infant, so psychologists tell us, in order for an individual to mature, and not remain in permanent infancy, he or she must push the primacy of the mouth into the background. And this subconsciously leads to the individual thinking of two entities, viz. his mouth and the rest of his body. Every dentist has heard a patient explain "I don't mind having any other part of my body worked on. I just hate to have anyone fool with my mouth!"

Readers are asked to give their own views on this touchy subject for publication in the next Newsletter.