

Molly Edmonds

## The Third Root

---

What are your goals for your teeth? the dentist asks.

Goals for my teeth? I think. My new boss has given me goals at work, the trainer at the gym has given me goals for fitness, and my parents, along with society, have given me the goal of getting married and buying a house and having 2.5 kids and taking three vacations a year, but this is the first I'm hearing that my teeth need goals.

Uh, well, I say, I guess my goal for my teeth is that they don't fall out.

Oh, the dentist says, and there's a lot of meaning in that *oh*. Does tooth loss run in your family?

Actually, it does, I remember. I tell the dentist that my grandmother lost all her teeth and wore dentures, and sometimes I'd spend the night with her and watch her put her teeth in a glass by the bed.

The dentist takes notes. Was she ill? the dentist asks. Did she sustain an injury? Do you know the age at which she received the dentures?

Oh, I say, remembering more about my grandmother, who has been dead for many years now. She was an orphan, I tell the dentist, and no one in the orphanage reminded her to brush her teeth. I'll probably be fine. I brush my teeth. I pause. Though I do have recurring nightmares about tripping and falling and knocking all my teeth out. As I finish saying this, I realize the dentist probably just wanted to know if I wanted straighter teeth, or whiter teeth. Those are the goals most people have for their teeth, I imagine.

The dentist is still writing, and I wonder if I should mention that while I do dream every now and then about my teeth getting knocked out, it's not the most common dream I have. I also dream about not being able to find a bathroom when I really need to pee or being granted access to my ex-boyfriend's computer so that I can see everything he's been up to since we broke up or that it's time to take a final and I don't even know where the classroom is, even though I've been out of school for a year and I have a real job now. She is getting so much out of me, this dentist, Dr. Lowe, and I remind myself that I need to be careful, that this is the dentist of my boss and all my coworkers. When I mentioned casually that I needed a dentist, one of my coworkers told me I had to go see Dr. Lowe, that everyone loved her, that she sent our office a basket of pears every year to thank us for our business. I don't like pears, and I don't like the idea of the same person looking in everyone's mouths [...].

Apparently, they all use the same gynecologist as well, but I'm determined to find my own.

Speaking of which, Dr. Lowe is very, very pregnant.

Our preinterview complete, Dr. Lowe waddles off to see another patient and I am passed along to the dental hygienist. I sit in a vibrating chair, which is much fancier than anything my hometown dentist had. I am an adult now, I think. Seeing a new dentist in the big city, recommended by my coworkers at my first job, paid for by my own insurance. I make small talk about where I work – the hygienist knows all my coworkers, of course – as my teeth are x-rayed, scraped, and polished. [...]

Dr. Lowe returns and pokes at my teeth. The hygienist puts the X-rays up on the screen. The dentist studies them and then turns to me.

Do you see this? she asks. She is pointing at a few of my teeth, and she is excited. These teeth all have three roots, she says. This type of tooth usually only has two roots.

Oh, I say.

It means that these teeth will probably never fall out.

Oh! I say, more enthusiastically. I'd forgotten about my tooth goals.

That's the good news, she says. The bad news is that you have four cavities. Two on each side of your mouth.

Four? I say; I'm horrified. I've only ever had one cavity in my life, I tell Dr. Lowe, and that was a

baby tooth. I brush twice a day!

Flossing could be improved, says the hygienist.

50 This happens a lot in young women, the dentist says. You graduate from college, you start a new job, you eat differently. It's a lot of change, and it can hurt your teeth. Plus, I happen to know that office of yours has a pretty big candy jar.

This is why you should go to dentists who don't know where you work, I think.

55 And are you aware that you grind your teeth? the dentist asks. I'd recommend a night guard. Donna at the front desk can give you an estimate. A lot of your coworkers paid for theirs out of their flexible spending account<sup>1</sup>.

I'm new there, I say. I don't have anything in that account yet.

Well, you can wait a few months on the night guard, if you want, the dentist says, but you really can't wait on the fillings. I'm about to go on leave, she says, pointing at her belly, but you're the last patient today, so if you have time, we could take care of this now.

60 Before I know it, there's a piece of plastic in my mouth, holding it open, and I hear the dentist telling the hygienist that maybe they should just numb one side at a time, she's having a few contractions and there's no sense numbing the second side if they won't be able to get to it. And then she and the hygienist have a long conversation without acknowledging me.

65 I've decided that I hate this dentist, that I'll never go back to her, no matter what the people in the office say. I'd prefer to go to the dentist in my hometown, the one who always just smiled and said my teeth were movie-star beautiful, though now I wonder if he saw these cavities forming and just passed me through like a teacher does with a student who really should fail. As the dentist works, her giant belly touches my arm and my head, and I think the baby kicks me. [...]

I'm pretty sure we can go ahead and numb the second side, the dentist says.

70 Just pretty sure? the hygienist asks.

I'm definitely having contractions, the dentist says. But they're not too close together.

I can't say anything because of the plastic in my mouth.

75 They numb the second side. They wait a few minutes and then start to drill on the other side of my mouth. I can see Dr. Lowe grimacing every now and then, and I don't know if it's because she's in labor or if it's her reaction to my teeth. [...]

Oof, Dr. Lowe says. She has turned off the drill. Paula, can you ask Donna to call my husband? He has my car because his is being serviced today.

80 Paula the hygienist leaves the room, and Dr. Lowe removes the plastic torture device and slides a piece of paper between my teeth and tells me to bite, bite, bite. Both sides of my mouth are numb, so I can't tell if I'm biting correctly. Oof, Dr. Lowe says as she inspects my mouth. Oof. She grimaces but tells me everything looks good, and I'm all done. Tells me to floss more.

Paula returns. Your husband's about thirty minutes away, she says. [...]

Can you drive me up to St. Joe's<sup>2</sup>? Dr. Lowe asks Paula.

I took the bus in today, Paula says. Donna took the train.

85 Oof, Dr. Lowe says.

I can drive you, I say, or that's what I try to say. I feel like saliva must be dripping out of the corners of my mouth, but I touch my face and don't feel anything. I don't know why I say it, because I'm still mad at this woman, but now I really want to. It would be exciting to be a part of this.

90 I couldn't possibly ask you to do that, Dr. Lowe says, but then she grabs her belly and moans.

St. Joe's is on my way home, I say, which is sort of true. It's on my way home if I take a completely different and longer route, though it is in the general direction of my apartment. But this is how I was raised – to offer help to people. It's not something people do in big cities, but it's important.

95 Okay, says Dr. Lowe. I really appreciate it.

---

<sup>1</sup> *flexible spending account*: a company account used for healthcare costs

<sup>2</sup> hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan

We walk down a hall of dental marvels, pictures of other patients with lofty goals for their teeth that they achieved with the help of Dr. Lowe. I wonder if they'll add my picture, as the generous person who drove Dr. Lowe to the hospital. Helped her meet her goals.

100 My car is parked in a garage under the building, and as we get in I realize the entire dashboard is covered with dust, there's a can of flat soda in the cup holder, and I am showing my dentist what a poor patient I am. She'll think it's completely my fault that I had four cavities. But Dr. Lowe is moaning almost continually now, so maybe she doesn't see.

105 It's five dollars to exit the garage. Dr. Lowe is bent over her belly, breathing with short, staccato inhalations and exhalations, like in the movies, and she's not reaching for her bag, so I reach for my own purse and pull out my last five. I wonder if I should say something about validating<sup>3</sup> parking, because we left the office so fast I didn't have a chance to ask the person at the front desk, but I don't. I wonder if her water breaks<sup>4</sup> in my car if I will get free dental care for life.

110 Normally I am nervous in downtown traffic, but with this very important passenger, I glide through the cars, looking for the slightest opening to pass and get ahead. I'm not speeding or driving recklessly. The GPS says it will take twenty minutes to get to the hospital, but I think I can do it in fifteen. [...]

I pull up to the hospital having only had to slam on my brakes once. Dr. Lowe didn't seem too bothered by it. I navigate to the maternity entrance, and Dr. Lowe says she can't thank me enough.

115 I can park and come in, I say. As I say it, I realize it sounds a little awkward. On the one hand, it's not my place to be with this woman while she's in labor, but on the other hand, this has been an adventure and I don't think a woman in labor should be alone. As someone in a new town, I know how hard it is to do things alone.

My husband should be here soon, Dr. Lowe says. Thank you again.

120 Are you sure? I say. The thought of returning home to my empty apartment after all this excitement seems depressing. My mouth is still numb. I poke it again.

My office will call you, says Dr. Lowe, and then she disappears through the doors.

\*

I wait all afternoon and evening, but there's no call. It must be a long labor, I think. Finally, the next day, there's a call on my cell phone.

125 We're calling to schedule your next cleaning, says the voice on the other end of the phone.

But the baby, I say. Did Dr. Lowe have her baby?

Yes, a baby girl. Iris.

I want to ask, Did she say anything about me? but I don't. The voice on the other end makes a date for an appointment six months in the future. [...]

\*

130 Two months later, I'm in the grocery store. It was a bad day at work; my boss told me I seem stuck in my head, overwhelmed by all the options, and that I tend to focus on the least important task. She's worried about my ability to get my work done on time, so my cart is full of ice cream and chocolate and beer and soda because now I am worried too. I am trying to think of something I want for dinner, so I can pay and get out of there, but, well, there are a lot of options.

135 That's when I see Dr. Lowe, at the far end of the aisle. She has the baby strapped to her chest. I smile and wave, but I don't think she sees me. I push my cart toward her. Dr. Lowe! I say. I'm so happy to see you! I look down at the baby. Iris looks great!

Yes, it's nice to see you too, Dr. Lowe says. She smiles. There's a long pause. Well, we have to be on our way, she says, pushing her cart. Hope to see you in the office soon!

---

<sup>3</sup> (here) refunding

<sup>4</sup> *water breaks*: the water that passes before a baby is born

140 I stand there, speechless. I drove this woman to the hospital, and this is all I get? To be barely  
acknowledged in the grocery store? To receive a bill, a few weeks after my good deed, for the  
percentage of my dental work that the insurance didn't cover? The very least she could do is send  
that basket of pears.

145 I take a deep breath and remind myself that you shouldn't do nice things in expectation of a  
reward. And that's when I see my cart, full of junk that will rot my teeth. Maybe Dr. Lowe was  
embarrassed for me, or disappointed in me, to be choosing things that go against my stated goal of  
keeping all my teeth in my mouth. I pick up all the bags of candy and put them on the nearest shelf,  
which holds *Minute Rice*. She can probably tell that I've fallen off with my flossing. [...]

150 I think about going after her and reminding her that I'm the one who is worried about losing my  
teeth, that I'm the one with all the third roots in my teeth.

Then I think about how roots can be in your teeth, or in your hair, or in the ground, or in a place,  
and that my roots are in a very small hometown with a very kind dentist, one who remembers me  
when he sees me in public. You can root<sup>5</sup> around in the dirt. [...] The square root of sixty-four is  
eight, and the third root of sixty-four is four, and I have some teeth with cavities but also some with  
third roots, and those teeth are never, ever falling out.

(2021)

---

<sup>5</sup> (here) dig