

Dentistry

On More Highly Evolved Teeth

I am twenty-three years cavity-free, and proud of it.

Though I don't always treat myself especially well - sometimes (and sometimes more than sometimes) I eat too much, I drink too much, I don't exercise, and I don't get enough sleep; and to pay the price, my skin breaks out, my hips flare, my eyes get bloodshot, and I get winded walking up a flight of stairs - the one area of my body that's been good to me, until recently, has been my teeth.

Well, to be honest, they're not naturally perfect. I've whitened them, which I think shows dedication. And I've had braces, but, in a way, that makes my pristine teeth something to be even prouder of. As your metallic mouth strains food, essentially the way a whale's baleen does plankton; it's harder to keep clean. As a child, I suppose I bought into those dental videos (you know, where plaque's a bad guy and it's defeated by toothpaste and fluoride and their sidekick dental floss). After eating a sweet, I'd run - yes, run - upstairs with my hand over my mouth (for some reason...not to let potential cavities fly in?) for a good ol' fashioned brushing session.

You may make jokes at my nerdish expense, but my reward for my meticulousness is that I have lived a life oral surgery-free. My dentist and oral hygienist have made me feel like a prodigy, constantly praising my perfect teeth and cleaning habits. During appointments, the entire dental office, and anybody who might be walking by at the time, would gather around my mouth and admire my exquisite pearlys. At one point last year, my dentist even told me that I was "more highly evolved" than most people, because I possessed only two wisdom teeth.

Some people fear the dentist, but I loved him. I always walked out feeling, for the time being, that I was on the right track in life; that my hard work had paid off; and, best of all, that I was superior to most human beings.

I think the "more highly evolved" comment jinxed me; I had flown too close to the oral sun on waxed dental floss wings.

I knew something was wrong when my usual hygienist, Shirley, wasn't there for my last cleaning. I had a new hygienist, younger than Shirley, who didn't even tell me her name. Her office was devoid of most of Shirley's colorful decorations, and on bachelorette Shirley's behalf, I almost resented her show-offy pictures of her husband and child.

Shirley had been my hygienist for years; she knew my mouth and knew what kind of toothpaste I like: cinnamon. This new woman worked silently and methodically, not rinsing my mouth as much as I would have liked, continuously pressing against my sensitive gum line. I missed Shirley and her chatty-chat.

Things had gone awry. My dentist came in for the final checkup, overly cheery and jokey, as most dentists are, and greeted me by asking me when I would graduate.

"Two years ago," I responded peevishly. He laughed awkwardly, and then examined my mouth, pressing against my sensitive teeth to the point that I cried out. Then he gave me the bad news:

"Your teeth are worn down on the front to the gum line, which is why they're so sensitive; they're exposing nerves. We have to give you fillings in the front to strengthen the teeth and cover the exposure. Then you won't be so sensitive."

"Let me get this straight," I said, disbelieving the unfairness of it all. "I have to get fillings even though I've never had a cavity?"

"Yup!" he said merrily. "We're gonna have to give you novocaine, too."

I felt light-headed. Only once in my life have I had to have any kind of anesthetic; I had received three stitches in my pinky after a clumsy moment with a knife, and the needle in my finger had hurt

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A literary journal for flying aquatic fowls. (Penguins not invited.)

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A (new) literary journal.

ten times worse than the actual injury. I was terrified; a needle was going to go into my *face* ?

"We'll just put a little numbing goo on your gum before you get the shot," he said reassuringly. *Goo* does not sound like a reassuring medical term.

"What about my wisdom teeth?" I asked with growing dread. Would my pride and joy, the two teeth that differentiated me from the rest of the apes on this earth, let me down as well?

"Oh yeah," said Doctor Bob breezily. "I saw one coming in. They'll probably start overcrowding the other teeth soon and we'll have to have them out." I clamped my mouth shut, determined not to let these so-called wisdom teeth cramp my style, or my mouth.

For the first time ever, I left the dentist's office a miserable wreck, despite the goodie bag of toothpaste, new toothbrush, dental floss and fluoride. Almost immediately, my gum began to sting on the left side. The tiny beginnings of my evil, insidious wisdom tooth were beginning to poke through my gums. My mouth had turned against me.

Of course, people get oral surgery every day and it doesn't seem like that big a deal, but the worst part is the anticipation of what it's going to feel like. It could be not a big deal at all, or, like the shot in the pinky, it could be much worse than what I expected.

So, for some research, I looked up on *Google*, "How much does a shot of Novocaine hurt?" The results were murky. I found results on Novocaine shots to aid hair removal, wart removal and vasectomy, and several about the movie flop by the same name. So, I did research by an even geekier method; I asked acquaintances on an electronic message board.

One response didn't make me feel incredibly great: "A shot of novocaine hurts for a few seconds; don't look at the needle, ever." How can you not look at the needle? It's going into your face.

One person gave me a response that put me at ease, even though it sounded a bit odd: "Depends on the dentist. Mine shakes my cheek while he's administering said shot, and, for some reason, I can't feel a thing."

Somebody else added, "He puts some numbing crap on the site of the shot and it doesn't hurt one weensy bit!"

Finally, someone put in their two cents: "Oh yeah, the numbing goo helps, although it tastes awful."

I felt a little relieved, but, then, shutting my mouth protectively, I wondered, *how* awful does it taste?

So I went and ate some Jolly Ranchers. And I didn't brush my teeth.

If my mouth was going to repay years of meticulous care with oral surgery, then I didn't have to care anymore. You know what they say, "An eye for an eye..."

Claire Zulkey was recently arrested at Heathrow Airport for being verbally abusive to the cabin crew on a flight.

No, wait, that was **Courtney Love**.