

## Pulp

Her tooth throbbed.

Back home, where Nicole's parents had footed her bills, she'd seen only the most prestigious physicians, but she was yet to find healthcare professionals here. A few weeks earlier, she'd taken a drunken stumble at a coworker's thirtieth and had to check herself in at one of those emergency care facilities for an x-ray and splint. Besides that, though, she considered herself pretty healthy. Or pretty lucky. Was there really that much of a difference?

Either way, what was the rush? Why did a young and healthy thirty-something need to charge full-speed ahead in pursuit of doctors and dentists in a new city when there were so many people and places, so much exciting newness, to pursue first?

*Well, this, for one*, she thought to herself, delicately massaging her gums through her cheek, counting the seconds until lunch.

She grabbed her phone and held it between her knees. They liked her here, but she was still low man on the totem pole, and couldn't afford to rub anyone the wrong way. She pecked *dentist* into the screen, but then thought better of conducting a personal search on work time. She slid her phone back into the purse under her desk, defeated and in pain.

Moments later, she let out an involuntary yelp, though whether it was from how terribly the throbbing intensified when she lowered her head, or from the unexpected rapps on her cubicle wall that startled her, she could not say. She could have kicked herself when she looked up and saw Steve, her painfully handsome office mate, frowning down at her with an equal mix of sympathy, confusion, and concern, like one might give a wounded puppy. The only saving grace of that sloppy, drunken fall at their colleague's birthday had been Steve's early departure. She'd been able to make the scene sound a lot more sympathetic than it truly had been when she showed up the following Monday in a sling.

Since then, Steve had appeared at her desk regularly. Initially it had been to grab her a coffee or make some copies for her, given the one-arm deal, but the sling had been off for weeks now, and he was still making his presence known.

“Ordering out?” he asked, nodding towards the purse where she had just stowed her phone, apparently not quite as discreetly as she’d hoped. She considered lying, trying to maintain what she hoped was a cool, polished allure, but what would be the point?

“Honestly, I don’t even think I can eat,” she said instead, holding back tears.

He stepped into her cubicle, faint worry lines forming between his thick brows. “You okay?” He pressed the back of his hand to her forehead, a gesture that made her heart race while simultaneously making her feel like a little kid. “You don’t feel warm.” He stepped back to assess, looking her up and down.

“It’s my tooth.” She pointed towards her cheek, feigning a smile. The pain was ramping up by the minute. “I don’t have a dentist here, and I’m not sure how much longer I can wait to see one.”

Steve pulled out his phone and began typing away. Was it the fact that he was a man that made it so easy for him to break the rules or simply the fact that he’d worked here much longer than she had? She didn’t care. Feminism be damned, if he could find her a dentist. “Give me your number,” he said coolly. “I’ll send you my guy’s info. Doctor Clay’ll get you fixed up in no time.”

*Silver linings*, she thought as she gave him her number. It wasn’t exactly the stuff romantic comedies were made of, but it could be worse.

“Why don’t you take the rest of the afternoon off,” he suggested. “You’ll feel a world of difference tomorrow if you go see him right now.” He mapped out the way to the practice for her, reassuring her that it would be not only faster, but cheaper to walk. “Seriously,” he added. “It’s not far. I’d take you myself, but I have a call I gotta take in twenty. Sure you’ll be alright? I could put you in a cab ...”

She didn’t want to be weak. She didn’t want to be helpless. She smiled and nodded, and Steve retreated. She fired off a quick email stating that she would be taking the afternoon off, hoping that was acceptable for someone so green, then she slipped her purse over her shoulder and headed out, the pulsing in her jaw throttling her nerve endings with every step. She swore her phone felt heavier now with the weight of Steve’s number, but tried to remind herself that he was just being polite. A bit heroic maybe, the handsome hometown co-worker helping out the

pitiful little new girl, but nothing more than that. She parroted the words back to herself with each stride, *nothing more, nothing more*, a trick she had used when running to distract herself from cramping muscles and exhaustion, but nothing could tear her focus from the pain, jabbing at her jaw, her cheeks, her skull, with each step towards this savior, Doctor Clay.

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Being a small-town girl in a new city was far less romantic than she'd hoped it might be. She had never once twirled in a busy intersection, arms thrown out wide and a gleeful grin stretched across her cheeks, as she had seen girls do in movies. All the charming cliches had skimmed right over her, like flat rocks across pond water in her parents' backyard. Instead, she just struggled. A lot. She struggled navigating this place and its busy streets. She struggled, now, to follow Steve's directions, too embarrassed to ask for help, ashamed to label herself a newbie, or worse, a tourist. She struggled trying to decide what to do about her struggles. She was struggling just to think clearly.

At a busy street corner, she paused to get her bearings. People and cars were whirring past. Jangling bike bells rang in her ears. Bits of disparate conversations were melding and blurring together into an intense soundtrack blaring far too loudly. Steve had said she didn't feel warm, but maybe it had just been the office AC that had made her seem cool to his touch. She was almost certain she had a fever. Her blouse clung damply to her shoulders. She wiped her palms on the thighs of her skirt.

She pulled her phone from her purse. Her first thought was to call her mother, something she still did almost every time she didn't feel well, despite being too old and too far away for her mom to be able to do a thing but speak in that soothing southern drawl that still somehow managed to work wonders. Then she thought about texting Steve, but decided against it. She would be tough! Afterall, she was holding a veritable computer in the palm of her clammy hand, and felt a renewed sense of appreciation that her parents had insisted she finally upgrade to a smartphone before her move.

Pain or no pain, she would navigate this city on her own. She typed *Doctor Clay* into the search bar, where an endless string of names and pages appeared. She clicked on a few and brought up the map view, trying to situate herself, but everything seemed foreign. The streets

were vaguely familiar, but she could not orient herself to them. She felt like she were living a nightmare, or taking a pass through life in someone else's skin. Noises sounded too loud. Lights glared too bright. Her breath quickened in her chest, and she felt like she might faint.

Hands shaking, she realized her error. The map settings on her phone were still defaulting to home. She had been meaning to change that. Redirecting the app, she found Doctor Clay's address. Confidence renewed, she returned the phone to her purse. She sucked in a gulp of air, the cold burst searing her aching tooth, and headed out into the intersection.

A few steps in, something grabbed her elbow, yanking her back fiercely enough to cause whiplash. A horn blared, and an expletive was shouted through a lowered window. A fist shook. A bird was flipped. At her? She looked down at a wrinkled, sun-spotted hand gripping the crook of her elbow, then up at the withered body it belonged to.

"Be careful, dear. Almost got yourself killed!" an older woman with a gummy grin smiled back at her. Nicole yanked her arm away. She needed to get to the doctor.

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"I need to see Doctor Clay," she said, desperate not to sound desperate.

"Sorry, he doesn't work here," an overly-coiffed receptionist replied without even bothering to avert her attention from the screen in front of her. Her fingernails, long and talon-like, clacked away noisily, leaving Nicole hoping she'd misheard.

"What? But ... my tooth," she whimpered, tears betraying her and sliding down her cheeks.

"Well, like I said," the receptionist began again, pulling her eyes from the screen now and popping a bubble of pale pink gum, "he don't work here." Before Nicole could protest, the receptionist began again. "However," she continued. "You're in luck. Someone just canceled. Doctor *Dennis* can get you in right away!" A smile spread across the receptionist's lips, pulling her face and cheeks too tightly, reminding Nicole of a fish.

"But," Nicole began. She stopped herself. She knew Doctor Clay exactly as well as she knew Doctor Dennis, and the pain in her jaw was blinding. She'd see Doctor Dolittle right now, if that's what it took to get it fixed. She smiled despite herself at her little joke, then dug in her

purse for the paperwork she was sure she'd be required to provide. Insurance card. License. Whatever.

The receptionist reached across the counter, crossing that invisible, but sacred customer-employee line. Her arms were thin and pale and covered in dark freckles. She had produced a paper cup of water from somewhere, and was cradling a small blue pill in her palm. "For the pain," she offered.

Nicole swallowed eagerly, wincing as it glanced her gums. "He'll see me soon?"

"Very soon," the receptionist nodded, her head blurring, bright red hair smearing through Nicole's line of vision as if being shot with a slow shutter speed. *Strange*, Nicole thought.

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She was in a hard plastic chair. The rough surface bit into the back of her legs below the hem of her tailored pencil skirt. Her eyelids, heavy and tired, hung as if weighted.

She was in a new room, though she couldn't remember how she got there. She was reclining. Her feet were level with her head, which seemed funny, and she couldn't remember why she was sitting that way. She could see the sensible flats that had dug horrible blisters into her heels before she wore them in. She had purchased them to fit the part of a city girl, but nearly wore holes through the soles walking herself in circles in the foreign streets her first weekend here.

She felt warm like she was laying at the beach. But that wasn't where she was. Then there was a man. Was it Steve?

The man stood over her, a waxy paper mask pulled taut across his nose and mouth. She stared up at his wiry eyebrows. She wanted to touch them. Then she remembered. *He must be Doctor Dennis!* She should introduce herself. She should thank him. She dozed off.

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Her eyes fluttered open. Time had passed, though she had no idea how much. Her tongue crept along her incisors, caressing the bumps and grooves that were no longer causing her pain. In fact, there was no sensation at all. How wonderful!

Then her tongue slipped into an unexpected void. Sticky, fresh, tender. Metallic and tangy. That didn't belong there. Continuing on, her tongue found another. Another. Craters

ringed her mouth in places they shouldn't have been. There must have been a mistake. Her lips, dry as cotton, parted in protest as Doctor Dennis came back into view.

“Shh,” he stroked her hair. “They had such deliciously healthy pulp ...”

Bloody spittle seeped from the corners of her lips, pooling in the crease where her chin met her neck. She wanted to wipe it away, but her arms were leaden. They would not move. Was she restrained? She tried to turn her head to see, but lacked the strength to do even that.

The receptionist appeared again, cupping something in her palm. Was it the missing tooth? Teeth? The woman approached quickly. It seemed like warp speed. Her hair was so bright and her skin so fair. It hurt Nicole's eyes, which already felt raw and sandy. The receptionist dropped another small pill dutifully down Nicole's throat but it was too dry to swallow. She started to cough. It was unbearable, and she couldn't stop. She couldn't breathe.

Doctor Dennis came back into her line of vision. “Please --” she tried to speak. He pressed a gloved hand over her mouth and nose. It smelled like mint. It felt like drowning. But then, it felt like nothing.

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Steve knew a call would be too forward, but now that he finally had her number, he thought a text might be acceptable. He'd just check in and see how the procedure had gone. He'd confirm that she had found Doctor Clay alright. Maybe he'd even bring her some soup or pudding or whatever people with toothaches ate. He was chicken shit though, so he deleted the text just before he hit send. He did nothing.

The next day she didn't come in to work. Steve chalked it up to needing some extra recovery time. She had been in pretty rough shape the last time he'd seen her. So again, he considered calling or texting, but again, he was too chicken shit to do anything.

He ate lunch alone in his cubicle, again, on the third day, his mind reeling and unspooling with worst case scenarios. He decided to call Doctor Clay. He would play it cool and put out some feelers to see how Nicole had been in his care. He could chalk it up to wanting a referral discount.

The receptionist calmly stated, again and again, that the doctor had accepted no new patients in months, and definitely no patient named Nicole over the past week.

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Steve threw himself into the case as an armchair detective, determined to find Nicole. He tried to reassure himself that there were dozens of completely plausible and not at all suspicious reasons why she may have disappeared, but his mind tugged him back to worst case scenarios whenever he let it wander. He conducted countless late night web searches, perusing accounts of horrible crimes, exploring gory and grisly terminology, and following up on downright sickening cases, pushing past his own disgust and unease in attempts to locate his officemate. The head of the human resource office had been very tight-lipped about Nicole's absence, even when he directly inquired about her whereabouts and voiced concerns for her safety. When he finally got the courage to call, Nicole didn't answer. When he came in to work one morning to find, in Nicole's former cubicle, an older gentleman with tufts of thin white hair poking out from his nostrils and combed across his spotty head, he took the hint to stop asking. He didn't know where she was, but he knew she would not be back.

Time seemed to move slowly at first, and then it moved all at once. The man who had taken over Nicole's cubicle left after a while. It could have been weeks; it could have been months. Nicole's cell number was eventually disconnected, and a fresh-faced intern, straight out of college had taken up the chair a few days later. The world kept spinning as if she had never been there at all.

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He'd been held up at the office with a call, and knew he wouldn't feel like cooking by the time he got home. There was a strip of fast food and chain restaurants a few blocks from the office, and it was there that he saw her.

He saw Nicole. It wasn't as though he hadn't had these sightings before, especially when she first disappeared, but it had always ended up being some other brunette with a similar height and build. But this time he was certain. It was her.

Without thinking, he called her name. Across the street, she paused, pivoting on her heel. Confusion spread across her once-familiar face as she surveyed the surroundings for the voice she had heard. Then she saw him. He knew she saw him, though she made no gesture to acknowledge his presence.

Steve's eyes lingered on her, drinking her in, horrified. She was like a poorly-drawn caricature or a funhouse version of the woman he had known. His attention pinballed back and forth from one horrible aberration to the next. Her skin was sallow and thin, pulled tight over her cheeks and brow bone, but drooping around her jaw and mouth as though it was trying to pull away from the rest of her. Her once-bright eyes were sunken and dark. Her hair, the thick chestnut locks so often twisted up to expose the nape of her neck, looked matted and straw-like, even from a distance. He tried to convince himself that this was yet another case of mistaken identity. This wasn't Nicole, just like all of his other sightings hadn't been her either. But a look of recognition flickered across her surreal features. She recognized him. Her mouth contorted into a sickening approximation of a smile. Her lips, paper-thin and dry, curled inward around her gums. Her mouth was a gaping, empty hole. He recoiled, repulsed, and her hand flew to her face, covering her mouth, erasing her smile.

He wasn't sure how long he stood there before a horn blared, snapping him back to reality. He was blocking rush hour traffic, standing stark still in a busy intersection with a greasy bag of fries and a soggy burger clutched in his fist staring at this unrecognizable woman. His eyes darted back and forth from her face to the car headlights and he made a choice he still wasn't sure was the right one. He stumbled backwards towards the curb, away from her and to the safety of his own side of the street. She was already gone. He opened his mouth to call out to her once more, but stopped himself, swallowing her name. When the light changed, he flew across the four lanes to where she had been only moments before, smiling a ghastly, toothless smile.

He knew it had been her.

He would not look for her again.