

## First Tooth

You see the little boy raise his hand. He is squirming in his seat next to all the other first graders squirming in their seats. He waves his hand, too, in case you're not noticing him right there in the front row.

You search your memory for his name. The first week of your first job teaching – really teaching – your first grade class. “Freddy!” You are as excited as he is to call out his name.

“What is it?”

Freddy flaps his hand in response. “Miss Kay! I lost a tooth!” He – and all his neighbors – look down at his fist, sitting there like a nest on his desk.

You stretch your lips across your teeth. You smile at him. Your tongue flicks inside your mouth, searching.

“Freddy! That is wonderful!” you say. Your lips work to keep your tongue inside.

All of your tiny first graders look first to Freddy, then to you. What do we do now, Miss Kay?

What do they do now, Miss Kay?

“Freddy, please come here. Show me!” Your cheeks twitch. Your nostrils flicker, black slits against milk-white skin. You’re lucky the kids are so young, so self-centered. They don’t know you very well yet. They don’t know how first grade teachers’ eyes are supposed to look. They don’t know that first grade teachers blink, at least on occasion.

But Freddy watches you. He cocks his head. He doesn’t move to your desk like you instructed him to do.

You stand, and now all the kids – you’ve been told to call them “friends,” but this is not a word you use – fix their eyes on you.

“Freddy, I want to see your tooth!” you declare. You aren’t sure Freddy believes you. But he shuffles to you, his smile fading like you wish yours could.

He holds his free hand over his clasped hand, protecting it. He presses both hands against his chest.

You sit now. You think this is more inviting. You unfurl your hand, fingers – long – lengthening one by one, until your black nails – why you chose such a color is beyond imagination – rest on the desktop. The first grade class is as quiet as it’s ever been. Even Cheryl – the little girl with the runny nose whose name you remember simply for that reason – doesn’t sniff up her snot like you expect.

Your tongue stills in your mouth. Your eyes are unblinking. You can see Freddy’s first grade heart beating in his chest, just behind his fisted hands. Blood oozes from the newly vacated pocket in his gums, mixing with the remaining fruit snack that was indeed the excavating force that occasioned this event.

What do we do now, Miss Kay?

Your index finger twitches. Freddy squeezes his treasure one last time, sighs, and releases his grip.

You peer into his sweaty palm. No blood. A shame. A tooth quivers there, a newborn naked after his first bath.

You look from the tooth to Freddy to Cheryl in the back to the others staring – now they’re the ones unblinking – back to the tooth.

You pluck the tooth from Freddy’s hand and pop it into your mouth. Your waiting tongue lurches and the tooth drops down your throat. You gulp, and now your smile is genuine.

One beat. Two beats.

The whole class – as one – roars to its collective feet (only one, maybe two of the friends have conquered shoelaces, but those particular friends are not thinking about whether said shoelaces are tied or untied at this point) and screams.

Cheryl pulls at her hair. (You can’t hear over the noise if she’s sniffing up her snot.)

Amanda – the redhead with pigtails who was busy stabbing an eraser with the sharpened tip of her pencil – drops the pencil on the floor, soon to be trampled by first grade feet.

Charles – “Chubby Charles,” you call him (in your head; to say that aloud would make you more of a monster than you actually are) – stamps his feet like a tantrumming toddler.

The twins in the back look at each other. Probably, they’re speaking in their own twin language, puzzling out what they just saw.

And then there is Freddy. He is still, silent, while a tornado smashes behind him.

Someone finds the door. She spills out into the hall. Others follow. Soon, only Freddy is left, now crying, alone with you in the room.

Satisfied, you gather your personal items – only a handful of things, really – and dump them into your bag. Ah well. The year is young. The news will float through the school, then the community. Maybe farther.

They will look for you.

You’ll move on, move out. You’ll have another first day. There are so many schools out there. So many first grades. You’ll have to wait, be patient, yes. But you will have another class. If you’re lucky, you’ll have another first tooth.