**Teeth**

Chad V. Broughman

Basil stuffed the pliers deep into his mouth, tried clasping them down on the backmost molars, but the handles were wide for his jaw, stretching and thinning his lips. He paused, looked out of the barn loft. Hundreds of winking stars dotted the sky. The expanse made him feel less alone, connected him to the other deserters, hiding in thickets or cellars or icehouses, pondering ways to mutilate themselves, all of them desperate to side-step Mr. Lincoln’s God-forsaken war.

When the vice gripped, he clamped down fast. A low click. Bone on metal. But he couldn’t pull, just held steady, everything tight as saddle-stitch. He counted to three in his head, pushed against the wood planks and dug his feet into the floor. His eyes darted back and forth, drinking in every detail of the stage he was on. The one he’d still be on after prying out his teeth––an even bigger yellow-belly than he’d thought possible.

Then his mind slipped back to boyhood, the day his softness was made clear. He had walked into the barn as a heifer was being prepped for butcher. Grandpa was hooking the steel gambrel into the tendons of its hind legs while Pa cranked the winch, the hulking carcass raising up like a great spirit. The veins along its neck had been opened and blood soaked the straw beneath, staining it a rich purple. He stared at the thick, matted coat, the hemorrhaging frame, its severed head atop a hay bale––sitting upright, normal as could be, as if cows were made that way––then he met the dead eyes. Big and blank and wet. His heart thrashed against his eight-year old chest and he dizzied, emptying his stomach on the ground. Pa stared him down, shook his head, making several tsk sounds with his tongue before turning away.

That same floating feeling was upon him now, teetering on a tightrope, nothing but air. And a rusty pair of pliers in his fist. “Enough,” he said aloud, then filled his lungs, squeezed the handles, knuckles white, sweat cold on his forehead. Everything stilled. Now. Do it now, you daisy. He cursed the day he was born and wept for his wife, his dead pretty Stella that he couldn’t save after she slipped under the ice. Couldn’t bring himself to go in after her. His brain screamed––jump in, try something, anything––but the ice cracked all around and his feet stayed planted. He stood motionless, calling out her name, his heart hardening to a slab, forever lodged between his soul and someplace else. The gutlessness rang louder than his sobs as he baby-stepped back to shore, fishing creel in tow.

He speaks to Stella’s spirit now, tells her that he can no longer bear to smile. You said you loved my grin, that it gave great light. So when I think of how I’ve failed you, in every way a groom can fail his bride, there’s no other choice. Thought about putting a pitchfork through my manhood like the fella over in Marquette or chopping off my trigger finger, but prying out my teeth feels right, plundering anything good you fancied in me, like my hogwash smile. When I’m done with my chewing teeth, I’ll wrench out the front ones, too.

Basil let the pliers slip from his hand, watched them hit the hay, open like legs. He called himself a milksop, leaned back against the nearest post and tapped his head against it, lightly at first, then harder with each hit. He begged God to strike him down, punish his cowardice. “Lord. I beg you!” Quickly, the pleading turned to fury and threats. “What would it take?” he asked. “Break more commandments? Is that it?” He was whirring too fast to remember all of them, so he spat them as they came to mind. “I’m gonna put other Gods before you,” he said. “I swear it. And I won’t keep the Sabbath no more, either. So smite me, Lord! Please! I’ll start stealing, too. Then I’ll use your name in vain!” He sucked in through his nose, then exhaled, “Damn You! Damn You to Hell!”

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Basil woke to the hiss of a barn owl perched nearby. It turned its ring-shaped head toward him, glassy black eyes, judgment on its stolid face. The space was drenched in the faint blue of dawn. He grabbed his jaw with a thumb and forefinger, thinking maybe he’d gone through with it. A wave of relief tried rolling through, but shame quickly dammed it. He picked up the pliers again, turned them over in his hand, reared them up, chin height. His heart pounded in his mouth as he guessed at the pain, the aftermath. Will his face ache forever? Push and pull like the tide? What does a pile of teeth look like? Broken molars gathered like tiny white stones. Will his words wobble? Then he calls to mind the county commissioner tacking the manifesto to the front of town hall––“Notice of Drafting!”––and he riding past, blocking it from his mind. But now, come morning, conscription will knock at his door.

Basil rolled over, looked up at the ceiling and counted the rafters––twelve in all–– remembering how he hauled them up himself, one by one. And how that night, Stella rubbed her soft palms against his spine until the twinge subsided. He hungered for that moment, yearned to live an eternity with her hands on his body, smoothing out the pain. No diffidence. No filthy war. Still hopeful for children. All his false fronts still intact.

As he moved the pliers toward his face a final time, his chest thumped again, beating his ribs till he thought they might crack. He inhaled through his nose, eyed the tool shaking in his fingers as if someone else was holding it. He opened his mouth wide, slammed his eyes shut––then idled there, trembling forever on the edge of fight or flight––