**A Cleaning**

Steve Gergley

Aside from the life-size sticker of Dora the Explorer clinging to the wall on his right, Todd was alone in the waiting room. A flat screen TV hung from the ceiling in the corner of the room, and from it came a man’s voice speaking quickly yet clearly about the weather forecast for the next few days, the last few in October. Though Todd loved the outdoors, and hiking in the woods especially—the crisp, woody smell of the air between the trees, the feel of the cool autumn breeze on his face—he had long ago grown tired of doing everything on his own, so he ignored the weatherman’s words and banished from his head all thoughts of going on a hike this weekend. This was the first time in eight years he had been to a dentist, and he felt nervous and foolish in this place designed to comfort frightened children.

A few minutes later, a door opened behind him and a woman’s voice called his name.

“Todd?”

“Yes,” he said to himself, not loud enough for the woman to hear, his heart thudding heavily against his ribs, his mouth suddenly as dry as the dusty gravel in the parking lot outside. Before he even saw her, he knew it was her voice that had done this to him, her voice speaking his name.

Now Todd stood up and walked to the door leading to the back part of the office. Here he came upon a pretty young woman wearing turquoise scrubs. Her blue eyes seemed to shift hue with each small movement of her scrubs, and her long brown hair was tied up into a messy ponytail, the end of which was slung over her right shoulder. From a quick, darting look Todd could tell that she was older than a part-time high schooler, but she seemed to be younger than his thirty-three years. It made him uncomfortable to think things like this, but there was nothing he could do to stop it. His mind did the math whether he wanted it to or not.

With a smile the woman shook his suddenly damp hand, introduced herself as Jan, and led him down the hallway to an examination room.

Upon seeing a pair of stickers of the Hakuna Matata creatures from *The Lion King* on the wall, Todd suddenly felt a strong need to explain his presence in this place.

“This is the only dentist in town that my insurance would cover,” he said, as he sat down in the scrunching leather chair. “So sorry about that.”

Jan clamped a ridged paper bib around his neck and looked at him from the sides of her eyes, her lips curled into a wry smile. Then she scoffed at his comment in a conspiratorial way, a way that made him believe she was on his side in things.

“It’s fine, Todd. We accept patients of all ages,” she said, disappearing behind him, her voice making a sweet, musical melody of the words.

An icy squirt of adrenaline chilled his veins at the sound of her voice speaking his name again, the second time in less than three minutes. This was always how it happened, just as easy as that. Years ago, back when he still allowed himself to think about these things, he had always marveled at the laughably complicated love stories he’d see in movies and TV shows. Though he knew that those stories were exaggerated for dramatic effect, it seemed that for normal people, falling in love was as difficult and complex as winning a medal in the Olympics: subjective criteria had to be met, impressive skills needed to be displayed, and breathtaking feats needed to be performed, all with precise timing and flawless execution. But for Todd, falling in love had always been the easiest thing in the world, like gliding soundlessly into a pool of warm water. In his case all it took was a single look or a few words, a brief reminder that someone else knew he was a living thing that existed in the world. The hard part for him always came after: the anxiety, the longing, the fumbling of words; the ache of unending failure. When he thought about this stuff in terms of his gunked-up teeth, eight years of no cleanings was nothing compared to the sixteen years that had passed since he’d last been touched by a woman.

Minutes later Jan leaned over his open mouth and went to work on his tartar-crusted teeth. For a moment her pretty face and gem-blue eyes loomed huge above him, her warm skin hovering just inches from his, but he quickly looked away and pressed his eyes closed. He knew how dangerous it could be, to get an image like that stuck in his head. From here he tried to breathe easy, slow the slam of his heart, and concentrate on the tea kettle screech of Jan’s water pick blasting the calcified junk from between his teeth, but then the shadow above him shifted and he felt the soft, tickling flutter of Jan’s pony tail brushing against the bare skin of his neck. A small, helpless sound escaped his throat at this touch, an animal groan of surprise and resistance, and soon his closed eyes began to burn with the collection of sour tears.

“Sensitive there?” Jan said, pulling her water pick from the painless gap between his bottom right incisors.

Eyes closed, heart smashing, Todd nodded.

“Sorry about that, Todd. I’ll try my best to be careful, but this might take a while,” she said, her shadow once again darkening his world, her warm hair pooling on his neck.

“That’s okay,” he said, croaking through the roaring suction of the vacuum tube hooked around his lip, his nerves crackling from the soft touch of her hair on his skin. “Please take as long as you need.”