

The Tooth Fairy.

[A later offering, based on my wife's recollection of an incident in which she was involved as a young child. A runner-up in the *Wollondilly FAW Literary Competition*)

Dad was always going on about the old days, about how tough things used to be when he was a kid. If it wasn't how far he and his brothers had had to walk to school every day, it was having to eat bread and dripping for tea, or only having enough water for a bath once a week, or some other memory of hardship.

The trigger for these recollections was usually a complaint by one of us kids about something trivial like having to go to the local store for milk and bread, or taking a shower, or turning our noses up at something on the dinner table. Dad's intention was to make us appreciate what he considered a life of relative opulence; but the effectiveness of his strategy decreased with repetition, so that after a while his stories tended to be taken with a grain of salt. His credibility, too, was in doubt. The distances he'd had to walk grew inexplicably, the evening fare became increasingly meagre, and the availability of water more critical with each recollection. We suspected that history was being distorted in its telling, but Dad's eyes would always challenge us to dispute with him at our peril, so we generally sat in frustrated silence as each more incredible version of the past unfolded. As if to challenge us, he would punctuate his accounts by turning now and again to our mother and saying: "Isn't that right, Thel?", in response to which mum would smile enigmatically and reply: "Yes, that's right, Ted," in a quiet, slightly mischievous tone that served only to deepen the mystery.

One evening at the dinner table I was carrying on about a loose tooth that was giving me a bit of trouble, a big molar at the back of the upper jaw that had reached the stage where it tingled whenever I nudged it with my tongue. I must have been about seven at the time, because I remember I was later than most of my classmates losing my milk teeth. The tooth wasn't *really* a major problem, but I'd found it served well as a handy excuse to get out of eating things I didn't like, and on this occasion it was cabbage, a vegetable for which I had a particular distaste. Finally Mum suggested perhaps I ought to go and see the local dentist.

The ends of Dad's knife and fork thumped on the table hard enough to make the salt and pepper shakers rattle. "What's she need to see a dentist for?" he blurted. "Never heard such a load of rubbish!" He waved the tip of his knife in my direction. "You kids've got no idea! When I was your age we didn't have a dentist; nearest one was a couple of hours away in Maitland." He plunged back into his meal. "Course we didn't have a car in those days; no phone, either, so you'd have to go in on the sulky, a full day's trip. You couldn't afford to go running to the dentist over a loose tooth!"

My brother Barry, my elder by ten months, had been listening to Dad's account with keen and unusual interest. It was easy to tell when Barry was interested in

something, because his eyes would sort of glaze over and his nostrils would flare a little, so that the shape of his nose would change. Usually he only got into this state of excitement when someone was talking about the War, or when Dad brought home news of some accident at the pit. Barry grew up okay, but as a kid he was always a bit of a wheeler-dealer. Even at eight, he was adept at sniffing out opportunities, and getting someone else – often me – to do the dirty work. His interest in anything to do with my tooth made me slightly apprehensive.

“So what *did* you used to do, Dad?” he asked.

My father’s eyebrows lifted and his gaze drifted in Barry’s direction. I think he was surprised anyone had actually been listening to him. “Do?” He thought for a moment. “Well, I dunno; it depends how bad it was, I suppose. Most of the time you just put up with it. Wasn’t much point going to the dentist anyhow; there weren’t any anesthetics in those days. If the pain got too bad, you’d just have to pull the thing out yourself.”

Barry was transfixed. “Wow! How’d you do that?”

I could see Dad’s mind at work. “A loose tooth? Well, ... you’d get a bit of string - good stuff, mind, nothing flimsy - and you’d tie it around the tooth, see; one end round the tooth, the other round a door handle. Then you’d just stand back a bit and kick the door, pull the thing straight out. Worked every time!”

My brother’s eyes met mine. Barry wasn’t normally the pensive type, but he was pensive now, studying the terrain of my jaw in a way that increased my discomfort considerably. We finished the meal in silence.

When I got home from school next day, Barry sauntered across to my bedroom and propped himself jauntily in the doorway. “So how’s the tooth?”

I’d forgotten about it; the tingling had subsided, and when I ran my tongue over the molar there was no sensation of movement. “It seems better.”

Barry’s dissatisfaction with this response was immediate and apparent. “I thought you said it was loose? It can’t suddenly get un-loose, can it? Give us a look.”

I hesitated and drew back, but Barry gripped my jaws and prised them apart. He peered into my mouth and stuck a salty finger inside. “Which one?”

I indicated the offending molar. “Ah un.”

Barry squinted and roughly manipulated the tooth, until the familiar tingling sensation returned. “This one?”

I nodded. Barry wriggled the tooth again. “Feels loose to me. Does it hurt now?”

I shook my head. “‘Ot mussh. Ti’gles a vit, vat’s aw.”

Barry withdrew his slimy digit and wiped it on his shorts. “It’ll get worse,” he declared. “Sometimes they get infected, you know.”

I didn’t know. “What’s ‘infected?’”

“Germs get into them. It’s like a toothache, only much worse. Joey Johnson’s brother had one like that, and he ended up in hospital for weeks. His whole face got infected. He looked like a cane toad.”

I tried not to let my panic show, but Barry must have seen the uncertainty in my eyes. “It’d have to be worth at least fifty cents from the Tooth Fairy, a tooth like that.”

We both knew what he meant. The Tooth Fairy was one of those myths that neither of us really believed in but that we periodically resurrected, like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, for purely pecuniary purposes. Belief still had currency, especially when gifts and money were involved. Barry knew I was still thinking about the money when he said: “You still owe me twenty-five cents, anyway.”

I was instantly on my guard. “What for?”

“For last week, when you sneaked across to Trixie’s instead of going to piano class. You said you’d pay me twenty-five cents if I kept my mouth shut.”

I must have paled visibly, because I saw a glint of triumph in my brother’s eyes. I well remembered the incident he was talking about, and the numbness of guilt that had made my feet stumble as I hurried across the paddock to Trixie’s. We’d spent a miserable afternoon of truancy together, brooding on the prospect that, sooner or later, Sister Agnes would remark on our absence to one of our parents, bringing sure and swift retribution - a good belting, public humiliation and the agonizing penance that the nuns seemed so good at devising. Barry had caught me halfway across the paddock on the way back, and had been grinning like a monkey as he’d watched me approach. I’ll never know how he found out where I’d been – Barry had an intelligence network that would put the CIA to shame – but he definitely *knew*, and twenty-five cents had been the price for his silence. It was obvious from the look on his face as he stood in the doorway that the time of reckoning was at hand.

He moved in quickly to close the deal. “Tell you what,” he offered, “I’ll let you off the twenty-five cents if you let me do it now, the way Dad said.”

He produced a long, waxy piece of string from his pocket. I pulled back, my mouth firmly closed. Barry’s face took on a wounded, piteous expression. “What’s the problem?” he said, wrapping one end of the string around his upheld forefinger. “It’s not going to hurt. We just tie this end around the tooth, see, then we tie the other end to the door handle. No worries; it’ll be over in a second.” He looked at me a little slyly. “Anyway, better than getting it infected, I reckon, or something worse...”

I opened my mouth reluctantly. Barry seized his opportunity and stepped forward, hurriedly slipping the prepared noose of string about my tooth. He worked like a mechanic, wedging the twine deeply into the gaps between the molar and its neighbours then tying a tight reef knot in the string, so that the tooth, when I stole a glance at it in the mirror, had the appearance of being gift-wrapped. The shorter end the string hung from my mouth like a piece of spaghetti.

Barry took the end of the cord and led me across the room to the door. I looked at the handle and shook my head. "I's doo high," I protested, slobbering a little, "Ou'll rit my 'ead oth."

Obsessed though he was with seeing the procedure through, Barry finally conceded that connecting me to the bedroom door would be little short of an act of homicide. He surveyed the room and soon brightened. "How about this?" He stepped over to the heavy, federation-style wardrobe, and without waiting for my consent looped the string around one of the large polished handles, double-tying the knot. "Okay," he said, leading me back a couple of paces and placing me carefully in position. "Ready?"

I nodded and braced myself, catching a glimpse of my imbecilic face in the wardrobe's mirrored door. I looked like a tethered mule.

The crash of the slamming door and the shrill wail that followed brought my mother rushing in from the garden. I'll never forget the look of horror on her face as she stood slack-jawed in the doorway. My tooth swung loosely from the doorknob, the gory fragments of jelly-like flesh that had accompanied it on its departure splattered all over the mirror. I stood nearby, my hands clasped over my mouth as I screeched in pain and terror. Every time I blubbered, bright red bubbles of blood and spittle erupted through my fingers. I remember being fascinated, in a detached sort of way, by the heavy scarlet drops falling onto the carpet, wondering where on earth so much blood could be coming from.

Barry was nowhere to be found. He didn't even turn up when Dad came home, but nobody seemed all that worried about it; everyone knew that, unless he wanted to spend the rest of his life in exile, his eventual submission and return was inevitable. Dad just sat there in his lounge chair, reading the paper. Occasionally he'd glance up at me, propped miserably on the sofa opposite, and shake his head.

When Barry finally came through the door, the knowledge of what was coming was already imprinted on his sickly face. He copped a belting for – as Dad so succinctly put it – 'being so bloody stupid'. I'd already copped one, for the same reason. The Tooth Fairy vanished from my life, ever more a symbol of misery and pain. My jaw eventually healed, but it took several visits to the dentist before the damage was repaired. At one point the wound even got infected, and I had to spend a night in hospital.

I don't think Mum ever really got over it; she always had a thing about teeth after that. As for Dad ... well, he was pretty sensitive about it, too, for a while, at least when we kids were around. The stories about the bad old days didn't stop, exactly, but they were told with more restraint, as if the implications had to be carefully thought through. Often there was a bit of a cautionary note at the end, along the lines of "Of course, things've changed since then", or "Of course, you don't have to do that nowadays".

But the walls of our small house were thin, and I can still recall, as I lay awake late at night nursing my aching jaw in the days that followed the incident, hearing the muted conversations and chuckles emanating from my parents' room; my mother's whispered appeals to my father to be quiet, and the low, reassuring rumble of his laughter rumbling through the silent rooms.

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