

The Mercury

The Student Art & Literary Magazine of Gettysburg College

Year 2014

Article 2

5-2-2014

Teeth Grinder

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Class of 2017

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Grow, Carley M. (2014) "Teeth Grinder," *The Mercury*: Year 2014, Article 2.
Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2014/iss1/2>

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Keywords

creative writing, fiction

Author Bio

Carley Grow is a first-year student from Horsham, Pennsylvania who plans to major in English with a Writing Concentration. She is involved in the Live Poets' Society and enjoys being a staff member for the fiction and poetry sections of The Mercury. After a long struggle with skepticism, she is finally learning to trust in her own voice.

Teeth Grinder

Carley Grow

Right now I'm sitting in the pediatric dentist's waiting room and nobody can figure me out. I'm nineteen and I don't have baby teeth and Dr. Alexander will be seeing me shortly, could I please initial the bottom form.

In the waiting room I look at everyone. Probably they are all noticing me. I want to hand out explanations like business cards, especially to the boy making a mess of the magazines. He seems like the kind of kid that wrecks sand castles and breaks bones. Mommy, what's that old girl doing here, he would shout because he can't whisper. Mommy would shush him because he's not at the age where she can tell him to shut up. I would put a hand on his shoulder and say, I'm here because the dentist for old girls is all booked and life's a real tragedy.

The boy doesn't ask any questions. After a while one of the hygienists calls my name and leads me to the first room. She waits until I'm in the chair to joke about the situation. She's laughing and laughing like she just had her wisdom teeth removed and the anesthesia is making everything ridiculous. Maybe I am ridiculous but I am also desperate so I give her all of my reasons. I tell her my teeth have been sensitive since August. It's November now and I still can't drink cold water without feeling the flame of every nerve in my mouth. Well that's no fun, she says, and then she asks me if I'm in college. I tell her where I go and she says she has a nephew there, do I know a Benjamin Reed. There are twenty thousand undergraduates at my school. I don't know any Reeds but I do know a few Benjamins. She says Benjamin Reed is a junior and he's going to be an aerospace engineer. His G.P.A. is 3.8. I ask her if my teeth are always going to hurt like this. She asks me if I've decided on a major yet. I can see we don't understand each other.

When she leaves I look at everything. There's a certain madness in this office and it's in the sucking straws, the bins of sticker prizes, the psychedelic ocean mural on the walls. The sea turtles have braces and an octopus is holding a toothbrush with its tentacle. It's a room of all my old decisions. Would it be the bubblegum or grape fluoride, green floss or pink floss, the easy way or the hard way. In the dizziness of cavities and toothpaste I could only say, I don't know, I don't know. I'm nineteen and I'm still dizzy but now everyone needs answers.

In the distance a tantrum is born. I can hear a child boxing the air

in agitation, a hygienist exhaling into a mask. Then Dr. Alexander enters the room and I shift my focus to a handshake. He doesn't ask me if I know Benjamin Reed or to calculate the square root of my career path. Instead he offers me a temporary tattoo of a lizard from a prize bin. He tells me Dr. Lee sent over my X-rays and we'll see if we can fix me up. I'm thinking help me, it's November and it's been a year of hurting too much. I stretch back in the chair and Dr. Alexander turns on the light. I'm flossing here but not there. There is a little cavity on one of my back molars and if I don't wear my retainer more often I'll need a wire on the bottom. He recommends a special toothbrush from Canada for the tricky spots.

But what about the pain? I ask.

It's nothing catastrophic, he says.

Dr. Alexander gets up from his chair and I'm wondering if that was the grand conclusion. He picks something up by the sink and suddenly there's a Teeth Grinding and Your Child pamphlet in my hands. You're grinding your teeth at night, Dr. Alexander says. Have you been anxious lately? Repeat after me: boys are pond scum.

I don't know, I say. Actually I'm grinding my teeth over a girl, I don't say, because people have their own languages like they have their own toothbrushes and they only understand yours when you translate. In the grocery store there's no words for it's been four months of bad days so instead I ask where I can find the string cheese. I want to tell the pastor I'm questioning Adam and Eve but I can only drink the wine and bow my head. I tell the dentist my teeth have been sensitive since August. What I mean is I fell in love with a girl in a parking lot and in a Providence bar she fell in love with someone else. It's not only my mouth that's all wrong. It's the inadequacies of X-rays, it's the D.M.D.s who can't see the trauma in the grooves of your teeth.

I've decided the appointment is over because I'm crying and I need anything but mouthwash. I get up and I don't look at Dr. Alexander even once. Probably everyone notices me walk out of the building. I tell myself I don't care about anything anymore but I'm thinking about boys being pond scum. I wonder if girls are pond scum, too. No, they are the pond lilies, the shells beneath the edge of the water, a thousand creases in the waves.