

# *EXTREME* **DENTISTRY**

## **HUGH A. D. SPENCER**

### SAMPLE

1999

"I can't see a goddamned thing," I said as we squatted behind the sushi counter.

"Don't remove your goggles," Cal whispered. "You're going to need the eye protection."

"From what, bumping into things in the dark?" I never enjoyed using new gear.

Cal put his hand on my shoulder and looked into my eyes. At least I think he was looking into my eyes. The thickness of the goggles and the low light level made it hard to tell.

"I would really appreciate it," Cal said softly but very firmly, "...if you could keep your voice down."

"Sorry."

"I would also appreciate it if you could refrain from taking the Lord's name in vain."

"Jesus, I'm sorry." Oops.

Cal pressed his forefinger to his lips.

Okay, I get it. I will be quiet.

Cal was right to hush me; we heard footsteps.

Sherway Gardens Mall is laid out as a pair of intersecting cloverleaves. This makes it extremely easy to get lost even in daylight hours. It also gives the place some really strange acoustics when it's empty. We knew the footsteps were approaching but we couldn't be sure from which direction.

Cal removed the hypodermic pistol from his holster and gestured at me to do the same.

Whoever was out there was probably looking for us and it was even more likely that he or she was capable of some pretty serious expressions of deadly force.

At least we had our hypos and in our black windbreakers, black golf pants and dark grey baseball caps, we would not be easy to see. They wouldn't take us without some inconvenience.

1984

How Calvin Stewart came to be my dentist and monster-hunter mentor is a long, painful and I suspect sometimes confusing story. Maybe even tedious.

I will, therefore, retell these events in great detail.

One summer, back in the very early 1980s, before we really knew just what a dumb decade it was going to be, I was in between graduate degrees, there was a yet another big recession on and I was seriously under-employed, under-challenged and had way too much time on my hands. I was also involved in a pretty bad relationship.

Inevitable I suppose, given those circumstances.

I will be merciful and spare you the details of the origins of that interpersonal road accident, except to paraphrase W.H. Auden's very wise advice to, "beware of a job that requires a change of clothes or is too easy to get." I would add to this very wise counsel by saying that you should watch out for any romance that gets consummated within 12 hours of your first meeting.

She was a very attractive young lady. She was intelligent (except when it came to me) and I even think she had a generous nature and good intentions (except when it came to me). Unfortunately, once our Spacecraft of Love left the orbit of Planet Lust, it became apparent that we had some big problems:

1. She was probably the neediest person on Earth. According to her, being with me was the only way to fill the infinite void within her. Her way of dealing with this psychological gap involved things like showing up at my part-time job unannounced and asking if I needed a ride home (weird because I always took my bike into work); "bumping" into me every night when I was hanging out with my friends; as well as

showing up at my studio at three in the morning when I was either trying to finish a piece or vainly trying to get some sleep.

The few people who know me well are aware that I have no sense of self-restraint in certain situations and so the outcomes of these early A.M. visits probably never suggested to her that what I really wanted was more time to myself, i.e. if you want someone to go away it is usually a bad idea to have sex with them.

For some reason they seem to think you like them.

2. There was a “ticking clock” in our relationship. I had been accepted in a graduate arts program in Toronto so at the end of the summer I was going to be living a few thousand miles away.

The two problems were definitely connected. For some reason the idea of her coming out with me—even just to visit—was simply inconceivable. Therefore, a separation was inevitable. As my departure date grew nearer, the needier and scarier she got.

What really bugged me about the situation was that I knew that she didn't love me at all. When someone in love is facing this problem, they either know they have to be strong enough to wait things out or they know they have to make some changes and come with you. No, this wasn't love. All this intensity and angst was just emotional economics—the inflation of affection through the perception of scarcity.

If I wasn't leaving, I doubt very much that she would have been nearly so interested. Interested? Try terrifyingly desperate.

The pressure to get me to turn down the university's offer was part of the challenge. If I gave up and agreed to stay, then she “won.” Maybe it's not fair to put it that way, but if I did stay then I would definitely be the loser, twice over; once for losing my position in the graduate school, the second time because I knew that the instant she truly believed that I wasn't going I would become extremely boring to her.

Okay, maybe my logic is cynical and offensive. You don't have to believe it and I sure as hell don't expect you to like me for you to believe any of what I am about to tell you.

But let's re-state the facts given as objectively as I can put them:

1. No matter what, I was going to grad school. I just didn't see a future without it.
2. No matter what, my girlfriend was going to persuade me to stay and not go to grad school. So far, her methods of

persuasion had been either tearful intrusions, romantic outings and/or pretty athletic sex.

I do not have a particularly strong character. (But you guessed that, didn't you?) I wasn't being assertive enough to effectively get my point across and I didn't see how I could do so now. I dreaded the consequences. Things were just not going to end well.

Then, one week before the date on my bus ticket: deliverance! I woke up (blessedly alone for a change) and immediately knew that something truly remarkable had transpired.

I was in a lot of pain.

Near transcendental pain in fact.

It felt like someone was pouring very large cups of lava into the back of my jaw. Both sides of my jaw, actually.

I briefly wondered if I was in the terminal phase of some previously unknown form of 24-hour bone cancer. This was a pretty scary thought but my jaw hurt too much for me to speculate too much on this theory.

Then I wondered if this was some kind of punishment from a puritanical deity for doing certain things to keep my increasingly demanding girlfriend satisfied. That didn't seem very fair, I thought, I was just trying to be nice. (I, of course, loathed every moment of it.)

No, I wasn't trying to be nice, I admitted to myself as I started to swallow generous amounts of blood and pus that seemed to be oozing out of my gums. I was just trying to keep her quiet.

A subtler and more truthful variant of the divine retribution theory came to mind: God was punishing me for having all that sex with someone I didn't love. Worse than that, I was now regularly fucking someone I actively disliked.

The pain was now giving me too much clarity of thought.

I really did deserve this agony!

I sat up in bed.

I immediately fell to the floor.

I barely felt the impact because of the pain from my jaw. Maybe the infection in my mouth was affecting the balance centres in my inner ears.

This was getting interesting.

Then whatever personal insights I was experiencing were swept away by my usual moral cowardice. Something was probably very seriously wrong with my teeth.

Then I realized, yes, I was indeed in a lot of pain, but this was probably the best thing that had happened to me all summer.

I was off the hook!

1999

The footsteps were getting closer.

Although it was very dark, I could see that something, or someone, was over by the HMV Shop and was moving towards the Banana Republic.

Cal, of course, was way ahead of me. He had high-speed duck-walked from the sushi counter over to a crouching position behind the sandwich board sign offering tomorrow's specials in front of the Laura Secord candy store.

The footsteps abruptly stopped and the light from the fire exit revealed that it was a mall cop. No big surprise there. In fact it was the big friendly Filipino guy who had politely asked me to stop taking pictures when I was casing the joint a few weeks earlier.

Maybe this wasn't going to be a particularly exciting night after all.

Can always hope, right?

Cal didn't seem to be thinking along the same lines.

He looked like some kind of suburban ninja as he leaped about twenty feet into the air, did a flying arc across half the mall corridor and grabbed the guard in a headlock on the way down to the simulated marble tiles.

The only sound I heard was the brief hiss of Cal's hypo-gun as it pumped a cartridge of dope into poor mall cop's eye.

1984

"Oh, we've got some serious issues here."

That was the regretful pronouncement of Stan Gibson, who was my dentist at the time. My mother introduced me to Stan soon after we moved back to southern Alberta.

Also known as the Canadian Mormon Colony.

My mom knew Stan's mom through church and so my mom very shortly knew that her son was starting a new practice and needed patients.

I was still in high school and living at home at the time, so very soon I and everyone else in the family were Stan's patients. After all, it was the duty of Church Ward members to help each other out in ways like this. Sure, it was friends of friends stuff, but Stan was actually a pretty good dentist. He didn't cause too much pain when he was doing fillings, he never proposed unnecessary procedures, and he never charged us too

much.

The market place seemed to agree with my family's assessment, because over time Stan got more patients, got one then two receptionists, and moved to a bigger office in a larger building to handle all the extra tooth-needy traffic.

I didn't think much about it. I went in for my seasonal check-ups, brushed regularly and lied about flossing every day.

Like lots of young people when they move out, I stopped going to the dentist as often as I should, but overall, my relationship with Stan and my dental health were pretty routine.

On the morning of the "lava mouth incident" Stan and I were definitely moving out of the realm of the ordinary dentistry:

"You've got massive infections of all four wisdom teeth." Stan set the stainless steel tongs on that little tray that always seems to be hovering next to the examination chair. He briefly looked down at the tongs and his expression suggested that he was going to have the tools vaporized after contact with whatever was growing inside my mouth.

Essence of girlfriend?

I don't think a good Mormon dentist would approve of that.

"H-how—" I was having trouble talking with all the dope that Stan had shot me up with. "How did it happen?"

"Can happen anytime. To anyone."

Stan was over at the sink giving his hands an extremely thorough wash.

"Wisdom teeth can grow out and then recede back below the gum line. Sort of like a trampoline."

"They can?" I had no idea that teeth could bounce around in your mouth like that.

"They can." I could see the back of Stan's head bobbing up and down. "And wisdom teeth don't have the same protective enamel layer as your regular teeth."

"No protection?" That didn't sound very wise to me.

"Yes, so they're prone to infection." Stan turned towards me. "And if one them goes bad and goes back below the jaw line..." Stan shrugged. "...it can be very serious."

I laughed. "So if it happens to all four teeth at once it's a fucking rat's nest?"

Stan nodded and sighed. "I would probably use more polite and scientific terms to describe your condition, but yes, that is essentially it."

"Sorry," I said. "Painkillers must be reducing my inhibitions."

That's it, blame the drugs.

Stan nodded again. "We can schedule you for removal of the first two

teeth on Friday.” He started drying his hands, very carefully. “Then we can do the last two on the Friday after that.”

I shook my head. As well as I could manage. “Can’t do it.”

Stan deposited the paper towel in a stainless steel cylinder.

“That’s okay,” he said. “I can prescribe some pretty powerful medication for you.”

“I’m on a bus to Toronto on Saturday morning.”

Stan folded his arms.

“So what are we going to do?” he asked. “I can’t let you leave town with your mouth in that condition.”

“Can we do all four teeth at once?” I asked, laying there with all that drool and blood and pus all over the little bib they had put over my shirt.

“It’s technically possible,” Stan replied. “But most patients prefer to break the procedure down into different sessions. It’s pretty intense.”

“Let’s give it a shot.” Yeah, it was the codeine talking but it wasn’t going to shut up anytime soon.

Stan’s eyes widened.

“When would you want the procedure?”

“Are you doing anything over the lunch hour?” It was already 11:30 in the morning; I didn’t want to give myself any opportunity to change my mind.

Stan happened to be free.

The experience was extraordinary.

They shot me up with even more drugs and then applied a big hammer and pick to chisel out those bad teeth at the back end of my mouth. At one point the pain was definitely there but it was secondary; I was mostly conscious of the application of tremendous pressure as they systematically tore fragments of tooth out of my jawbone.

The jawbone of an ass?

Yeah, definitely.

“Oh, gosh.”

The above expletive was from Stan. It translates from Mormon speak to: “Holy shit! What kind of mother fucking, god-awful hideous mess are we dealing with here?”

The last tooth had broken into pieces before they could yank out the roots. They had to use a special metal pick to scrape the remains of the tooth out. It took a long time and the associated waves of pain were steadily blasting my nervous system into a comatose state.

I was so happy.

They were going to have to pretty much wheel me onto the bus.

The surgical pressure meant that there was no way for my girlfriend to apply any emotional or sexual pressure.

Thank you, God.

**1999**

“The olfactories aren’t very promising here.” Cal had his face very close to the mall cop’s nose.

“They’re not?” I pulled myself out from behind the sushi counter.

Cal clamped his hands around the mall cop’s jaw and forced the guy’s mouth open.

“Smell.”

The mall cop’s breath was indeed horrific. Sulphurous to be precise.

I blinked back tears and looked up at Cal: “He looked normal enough when I saw him last week!”

Cal’s expression suggested that I had just said something incredibly stupid.

“Cosmetics?”

Another stupid question. Shapeshifters don’t need cosmetics. But I was still relatively new to all this.

“We’d better check.”

Cal took a tiny strip of white paper from the pocket of his utility fanny pack.

“Sure, maybe he just had a lot of bad Chinese for dinner.”

“Hold his tongue flat,” Cal said. “I’ll press the strip up against the roof of his mouth.”

I didn’t know which was worse. The stench of the mall cop’s breath or the fear that he might suddenly bite down and tear a hole in my rubber gloves.

**1984**

My bags were all packed and I was sitting in the big chair by the telephone.

I was waiting for a taxi to come and take me to the bus depot. My sister had come around and had pretty much looted my apartment of all the good furniture. It was very empty but also very peaceful.

The operation had made my face swell to almost twice its normal size. Even in the opiate-induced haze, I was aware that I looked like a giant, neurotic and stoned chipmunk.

My girlfriend and I had decided to say our goodbyes the night before

over dinner.

It was perfect. I could only consume things that could sit in a spoon or pass through a straw and half of that ended up dribbling down my chin.

“We need to talk...” my girlfriend would start.

Which would be my cue to whine (not wine) and complain about how the Tylenol No.3 seemed to be wearing off.

This in turn prevented her from accomplishing any of her goals for our relationship. It was actually kind of fun watching her and wondering if her head might at explode at any moment.

I really don't know why this woman was so obsessed with me, I wondered. I could be a really nasty son-of-a-bitch. But her feelings were the root of the problem.

She was just obsessed.

Period.

It wouldn't matter if I was a movie star, a convict, a comatose toad or an umbrella stand.

I was the one.

Whether I liked it or not, and that was all there was to it.

“Hello.”

Contrary to what I had said at dinner, the Tylenol No.3s and whatever else they had given me were extremely effective. And frankly quite enjoyable. I was dozing away in slight euphoria, so I didn't notice that someone had let themselves into the apartment.

“Hello,” the voice said again.

I opened my eyes.

My girlfriend was standing in front of me. She was also naked.

“Uh... hi?”

“So this is goodbye.”

Then she didn't say much more. Pretty soon she was holding me by my face and kissing me. Repeatedly and very, very hard.

Yeah, it hurt like hell.

She got my clothes open and then she was doing other things to me.

Also very hard.

I did get onto an inter-city bus that day, although it was a later one than I planned. My face, my penis, my body, my everything... were consumed with a raw ache that was probably going to last just a decade or so.

1999

“Gosh,” Cal said with some dismay.

“Purple dot?” I asked.

Cal nodded and folded the slip of paper into a small plastic bag.

“Nothing we can do?”

“Not for him.” Cal sighed and started taking stainless steel tools out of his fanny pack. “Just hold him steady while I put him down.”

Which is exactly what I did while Cal used a compact power drill with a very wide bit to tear open a hole in the side of the mall cop’s head. Then Cal used what looked like a small sharpened ice-cream scoop to remove the main tumour cluster from the mall cop’s brain.

There was a very soft and sticky sound as Cal tugged on the tool slightly and the dozen or so tendrils tore loose from the dead man’s original nervous system. Cal popped the mass of grey matter and green nodules into another plastic bag. Before he clamped it shut, Cal dropped a pinch of a peroxide derivative to sterilize the infected material.

He’d be shipping that off to the labs in Cardston or Provo for further study.

Now I knew why Cal was so insistent about the goggles. We’d been wearing our black surgical masks all through this procedure which protected our noses and mouths from any infection. But we needed the goggles to make sure we didn’t get any blood in our eyes.

1996

After the wisdom teeth incident and my lack of wisdom concerning girlfriends, I was pretty shy on both accounts for a while. However, I got re-engaged with relationships sooner than dentists. In fact it wasn’t until I had gotten married and we had a couple of kids that the dentist thing came up at all.

“We want the kids to have good teeth, right?” my wife would ask.

“Of course,” I would answer, sensing a trap.

“Then we have to set a good example.”

*Snap!* She got me.

It was even more irritating that Sally was completely right. So that meant that I had to start taking the boys in for their regular check-ups. And since I was in the vicinity, the receptionist would ask about making an appointment for me.

Well, what could I do?

I was back in the chair.

For a few years it was okay. Deal with chip or crack here and there, replace an old filling or two, suffer through that pointless lecture about flossing every day. Sometimes, I would even go in for a cleaning and an examination and there would be absolutely nothing wrong!

Even though I had to pay for all this, it always made me happy. It was vindication and maybe it made the memory of my face-rape just a little more distant.

So it became a regular thing for me. I even had one of my quarterly check-ups just before I left on a month-long business trip to Singapore.

"Looks good," my dentist said as he washed his hands. "Just remember to floss every day."

"Absolutely," I lied.

About three and three-quarter weeks later, I was sitting at a large boardroom table with Roger, who was our company's field representative on this project. We were looking at a bunch of engineers and project managers from the Singapore Ministry of Defence.

MINDEF (Singaporeans seemed to love acronyms) was staging a huge Festival of Peace—which was essentially a big song and dance show about the miracle of compulsory national service and why it was essential that 9% of the GNP be dedicated to military spending every year, i.e. a celebration of the possibility of war.

The exhibition installation was not going very well and my assignment since I arrived was to bird-dog everything and expedite solutions to get us through to opening. In this kind of situation the only way to get things to work is to be completely objective and impartial, and since our man Roger had been as much asleep at the wheel as our client, he kind of hated my guts. Every day at this time, 50%-75% of the problems I identified were pretty much his fault.

I was just about through the day's depressingly lengthy list of incomplete tasks when I experienced a flash of bright blue-white light. Then there was a very deep and very sharp pain at the back of my mouth. I whimpered a little and held my jaw shut as I felt a piece of metal laying there on top of my tongue.

One of my fillings had just popped out of a molar.

1999

We dragged the corpse to the window in front of The Body Shop. Cal used an aerosol spray to kill any airborne bacteria.

“Unlikely that anyone will pick anything up from this,” Cal said. “But you never know for sure.”

“I just hope the heart walkers aren’t the first ones to find the body,” I said. “The shock might kill one or two of the old geezers.”

Cal shook his head. “The Hive will come looking for him soon.”

1996

Somehow I managed to get through the rest of the meeting. Probably the infection hadn’t peaked yet.

There really wasn’t any choice. My main client representative was a Brigadier General and I doubt he would have excused me for anything less than a large piece of shrapnel ripping through my brain. As it was, I think he just thought that I was particularly disappointed by his team’s progress that day.

There might have been some advantage to that impression.

Time went geological for a while—but Roger and I did manage to close the meeting and get out of that boardroom. Soon I was groaning quietly in the back of one of those light blue Toyota sedans they use for taxis in Singapore. I wasn’t complaining about the transportation. The AC in the cab was very good and the driver seemed to know where to go.

Roger was scowling. He knew that once I got back to head office, he would be receiving the Screwed the Pooch of the Year Award, ample motivation for ignoring the fact that my hands were trembling and I was almost hyperventilating from the pain.

It galled me that I had to ask this asshole for help but I was starting to taste something bitter in my mouth. Might be pus, might be blood. Maybe both. Circumstances were getting pretty desperate.

“Roger?”

The asshole in question didn’t even look at me when he answered. “What is it?”

“Do you know if there’s an emergency dental clinic around here?”

“An emergency what?” Roger finally looked at me; his expression suggested that I had just asked him if he could kindly bend over and pull the planet Jupiter out of his ass.

Even so, I had no choice but to press on.

“You know,” I gasped. “A 24 hour practice.”

“They don’t have anything like that in Singapore!” Roger snarled at me in disgust. “Bloody government doesn’t care enough about its people

to have anything like that!"

"They don't?" I said rather sadly.

"Not that the fucking robots deserve it!" Just then I remembered one of Roger's main weaknesses as our field agent in Singapore. He hated everybody who lived here.

I looked over towards our driver and noticed the reflection of his eyes in the rear-view mirror: plastic-framed rage.

It didn't seem like a good idea at this point to ask the driver for any suggestions.

I don't know exactly how I got to my hotel room, but after an indefinite time, I was lying on the bed. The pain had spread to include the upper half of my body and there were sharp sensations shooting all the way down to my groin. The room was spinning and I wondered if my brain might burst into flames of agony at some point during the night.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come—" I said feebly, unable to complete the statement.

That seemed to be enough. The door opened and someone from the hotel walked in.

"Sir?" the man asked.

It was very hard to speak at that point. All I could do was breathe and hurt.

The man bent over me.

"Sir, are you all right?"

"I need..." Somehow I found the inner reserves to take a deep breath (which really hurt) and kept on talking: "...I really need a dentist."

## 1999

"Wash up."

"What?" I couldn't believe that Cal was heading over to the men's room. "Do you think we have time for that?"

By the time I followed him inside, Cal had rinsed off his goggles and was using some of those baby-cleaning towelettes to wipe the blood off his gloves and jacket.

"We need to take the time."

"Why?"

Since I was already there, I decided to do what he was doing. But I still wanted to know.

"That operation we just performed probably released all kinds of new

bio-compounds,” Cal explained.

“If you mean it stunk like fuck, you’re right.” I just realized that it was going to take weeks to get this smell out of my action clothes. And I really didn’t think it was a good idea to drop them off at the dry cleaners.

“Ahem,” Cal said softly. Then he gave me one of those disparaging looks.

“Pardon my French,” I replied, not quite believing that I was actually apologizing for my language at a time like this.

“We need to clean up so we don’t confuse the olfactory sensors.”

That Cal.

Always seemed like a dickhead at first, then after a moment of thought, he usually made perfect sense.

## 1996

The bellman from the Hotel Excelsior opened the drawer beside my bed and carefully removed the holy books of three, maybe four, major world religions. After rooting around in the drawer some more, he found the Singapore Yellow Pages. Then he flipped about halfway through the book and showed me one of the pages.

Half of my vision was blocked by a very clean pillow. The other one-third of my vision from the clear eye was obscured by one of those pain-auras; the kind you get when you’re experiencing a migraine that’s 6.5 on the Richter Scale.

Even so, I was able to make out some of the words on the page. Specifically: “Emergency Dental Service. 24 Hours.”

Roger, I thought. You had better hope that I don’t survive this.

## 1999

“Are these new olfactory sensors?”

Whenever I asked Cal where he got his gear, he always gave me the same answer:

“B.Y.U.”

And that’s all he would say.

We were walking towards the food court and Cal was holding out something with a box on one end and a funnel on the other. It looked like a miniature gramophone having sex with one of the tricorders from

the original *Star Trek* series.

We stepped off the immobile escalator and moved deeper into the court.

“Golly, those entities are smart.”

Golly? Cal had to be under a fair bit of stress if he was using language like that.

“Why are they smart, Cal?”

Speaking of tricorders, the olfactory sensor was giving off a series of random beeps and boops.

“They know the residual odours from the foods will give them some cover from our sensors.”

“That is pretty smart,” I said. “Does that mean we can’t find them?”

Cal made a couple of adjustments on the sensors. We started hearing more beeps than boops.

“We’ll find them,” Cal said. “I know how to use this device.”

I stayed close to him as we shuffled past the caged front of New York Fries. I liked their fries but I had to admit, they did give off quite a smell. Once again, Cal’s theory was holding up.

## 1996

A taxi took me to Mount Elizabeth Hospital. The attendant in the lobby directed me to a dental lab on the 8th floor. It was silent and dark.

Waiting for luckless fools like me.

A short, thin man wearing a white coat appeared at the elevator and started turning on the lights. He introduced himself as Dr. Chan, put me into a big padded chair and rolled out a trolley of probing and hole-making tools.

Dr. Chan pried open my mouth, shone a tiny flashlight into that suffering cavity and took a very long look.

“Oh, dear,” he said.

That didn’t sound very encouraging.

Dr. Chan immediately stuck some anaesthetic needles into my gums. That really hurt.

It was a real pity that the anaesthetic drugs didn’t seem to work at all.

Then slowly, always very carefully, Dr. Chan pressed various metal and glass probes into the hole in my tooth. Each time the procedure set off remarkable chains of agony that started at the remains of my tooth and spread out to include every nerve in my body.

“Oh, dear.”

Once again, that discouraging remark.

I groaned.

“You have Hot Tooth Syndrome,” Dr. Chan said.

“*Werf?*” I asked, which is dental patient for: “I beg your pardon?” and, “the pain in my tooth is so intense that I’m really not aware of any change in temperature—hot or cold.”

Dr. Chan was obviously fluent in this dialect because he knew that I needed more information: “Your tooth has become so infected that local anaesthetics simply don’t work.”

At this point the pain and the drugs had put me into an alternate state of consciousness. Even so, a number of questions came to mind:

1. Why was my tooth so horribly infected?
2. Why wouldn’t the local anaesthetics work?
3. Why hadn’t this problem shown up when I’d had my regular check-up two weeks ago?
4. Why was I born to suffer so?

Dr. Chan laid out the options and I soon knew that I was going to explore some new existential realms in the answer to my last question. To enumerate:

1. Because there wasn’t a dental nurse available this time of day (it was just past 01:00 on the day that I was supposed to fly home to Toronto) he couldn’t administer a general anaesthetic and knock me out.
2. He could, however, give me enough morphine to get me through until regular clinic hours and give me a general then.

“Can’t,” I gurgled.

“What?” Dr. Chan didn’t sound very happy to hear that particular c-word.

I took a deep breath.

“I have to get on a plane tomorrow.”

I really didn’t want to change that flight. I had a report to file with head office and if I stayed here any longer I was pretty sure Roger would have to kill me.

So Dr. Chan voiced option #3:

“The only alternative is to carry out a root canal with no anaesthetic.”

There was a very long pause. I had the sense that I was about to pass through a life-changing threshold. Then, perhaps very stupidly, I nodded my head.

“Do it.”

After the Wisdom Teeth Incident, you'd think I would have known better.

It is difficult to describe what a root canal without anaesthetic actually feels like. But since I seem to be in the mood for quantified description, here are a few things I can share:

1. It hurts. Really. Perhaps more than the human mind can possibly imagine.
2. When you manage to open your eyes and see a tiny piece of nerve (freshly cut from your body) get dropped into a little metal bowl... you see it laying there in a little puddle of blood and neurological tissue... and you know that you are seeing a piece of yourself laying there... withering and dying.
3. And to dial back a second earlier, to that instant when the dentist actually rips the nerve out of your jaw... it feels *exactly* like he's ripping tiny little bits of your soul right out of your body.

## 1999

That night in Singapore the pain got so intense that I think I actually saw God a couple of times. As we were doing serpentes in the food court of Sherway Mall, I wondered if I was going to get to meet the Devil.

“We should at least be able to nail a Hive Regional Director.” Cal had explained this when he was outlining the mission plan a few days ago.

Regional Director? It sounded like we were going after the Tupperware Corporation.

But they were much meaner than Tupperware people. Even meaner than Amway.

Cal was getting a steady tone off his stench-o-meter as we got closer to the secondary service exit. It looked like the balloon was about to go up.

“Got your gas cylinders ready?” Cal had removed his air pistol from his holster and I followed. Our tools looked very inadequate, however rules were rules. We couldn't just shoot and torch these creatures

because some of them might not have gone purple yet.

No lethal means until we're sure we can't treat.

Rule One.

I still cursed Cal's ethical sensibilities as he kicked open the service door.

We were in the storage lockers for all the fast foods they used in the mall.

We were alone.

Except for the drained out and broken bodies of three Gap employees.

There was lots of evidence that this had been a pretty sizable hive. Loads of knives and hypodermics and over-priced clothes.

The dead Gappers couldn't have been more than 17 or 18.

"Poor kids," I whispered.

"They would have been fine if they attended church regularly." Cal had his camera out and was taking pictures for later analysis. Maybe his buddies at BYU could get something useful out of all this.

"You can be a real asshole sometimes, Cal." This time I was not going to apologize for my language.

Cal was continuing with Standard Operating Procedures; he had put the phone away and was taking the aerosol cans out of his fanny pack.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That was a very insensitive thing for me to say."

I took my cans out too and we sprayed everything in sight. I don't know if we were using CFC free chemicals or not. Too bad about the ozone layer if we weren't, I thought. What we were doing was a higher priority on the survival scale.

1996

Somehow I was back in my hotel bed.

Pretty sore but reasonably comfortable on my narcotic pillow. I realized that I was awake because the telephone on the bedside table was ringing.

"Hello?"

To my surprise I discovered that I was able to pick up the receiver without too much trouble.

It was Dr. Chan.

"Do you think you'll be able to travel this morning?"

He was checking up on me.

"Yes, I think so." I had to admit that I was a little touched by the concern I heard in Dr. Chan's voice.

“You have just been through rather serious dental surgery and 20 hours on an aircraft is very long time.”

“The medication you gave me seems to be working already.”

“That is good,” Dr. Chan said. “Just be sure to rest for several days when you get home and check in with your regular dentist as soon as you can.”

That I did.

Three days later I was in my dentist’s office, lying back in the examination chair.

“You know that clean bill of health of you gave me?” I asked.

My dentist nodded.

“I just got back from Singapore where they had to give me a root canal without an anaesthetic.”

My dentist gasped in horror. He really did.

I smiled at him.

“You’re fired.”

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