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# A Theory of Dentistry

Peter LaSalle

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## A Theory of Dentistry · *Peter LaSalle*

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE LATE December afternoons when you first remember how yellow and special and sad winter sunlight is. It came through the twelve-paned window of the converted clapboard house that was my dental office; it painted a parallelogram of watered-down bright on the blue-green tweed of the indoor-outdoor carpeting.

I was looking down the mouth of an old man, waiting for the Novocaine to take and for my assault at trying to save the front lower one. I was thinking that in a few hours I would be in Montreal, trying to make one last pitch to return home to—how should I say this?—my child bride? I walked over to the window. The Connecticut trees were coat-hanger bare, the grass dead amber.

The old man in the chair had lost most of the use of his right arm and leg due to a stroke a couple of years before. He lived nearby, and his son had brought him in once before for some emergency patch work. The son sold radio advertising, I think, and in the course of that travail he had affected a broadcaster's way of overmodulating the voice, as when he told me, pushing up his tinted, wire-rimmed glasses, "Don't knock yourself out on it, man. He's lucky he's got any of them left at this stage." I wanted to save that tooth, just to show that clown—what, I'm not exactly sure. Melissa, my hygienist, looked at me, and she probably wanted to know what the hell I was doing agreeing to see this guy at all on an hour's notice halfway through Friday afternoon; that was her day to go to the happy hour at Clover's, the singles' bar in the far end of the new shopping mall. There she could listen to guys tell her just how much her hair looked like Farrah Fawcett's frosted shag. And she could tell her girlfriends again that I wasn't the suave and handsome young professional in the black Porsche that they all thought I was, and would they believe that I was going all the way to Montreal to talk to *her*. Though she wouldn't use the pronoun—she would say something like "the little bitch."

"How does that feel?" I asked the old man. He groaned, and that seemed indication enough that the drug was dulling his responses in those loose pink gums. His white forelock fell to his white brows. I pushed it back.

"Relax now. I'm going to drill. The cavity is pretty big, and the tooth

itself isn't entirely solid in the gum. But it's worth a try at filling."

I didn't ask Melissa to get me the drill. I got it myself. I pulled the chrome key chain to take one more look at the x-ray, checking what I was up against. The cavity was a big spot of whiteness on the skeletal image—the whiteness of Nothing, with a capital letter, or of Mortality.

"Here we go." I depressed the pedal of the new Ritter for a sustained whine. Melissa dabbed at the drool on his chin with the light-blue clip-on bib. My hand wasn't entirely steady, or maybe the angle wasn't the best. My first contact was off to the rear of the cusp, not where I wanted it, and that first contact is important—where it nicks, so goes the rest of your boring. That high whine, then the burning smell, then the perfumed blast from Melissa's Lavis solution spray. I told him to "Spit," and I knew at that stage that I was in trouble. I also knew I better not think about it too much.

"OK, head back, please," I said.

The whole thing detonated, split up into a puff of discolored porcelain fragments.

I told him it must have been cracked before he came in. "We'll have to extract."

Melissa looked at me as if to say that she could have told me that twenty minutes ago, and we all would have been out of there by now.

With a hotel room like that you only could end up getting philosophical, saying things like, "Well, at least the location is good," or "You *can* get tired of the too-newness of those chain places after a while." The travel agent in Connecticut said the word on it was "Cozy."

I had left behind the soft water colors of southern New England in December. Montreal that night was frigid and blue; there was snow. I functioned reasonably well with my college French in talking to the woman at the bell desk downstairs. But I had thought that her repeated apologies for the room being on the top—fourth—floor had to do with the long climb to get there. I guess I wasn't giving the "chauffrage" business she kept repeating enough emphasis, and now I knew what she had been getting at. It was an old steam system, which meant that most of the stuff in the place rose to the top. The problem was more a matter of noise than overheating. The radiator, a high iron implement with cast flower patterning along its slabs, whistled and coughed. My palms behind my head,

I was stretched out on the nubbed yellow bedspread, looking at how the dresser lamp sent twin parabolas of light far across the cracked blue walls. The room had three framed pictures, paper lithographs with that kind of wash they used to use to tint old postcards to make them look colored. Each was a different view of the domed church on a hill; I knew, from a couple of other visits to the city, it was St. Joseph's Oratory, a landmark on Mount Royal. When I looked through the window I could see flakes falling in slow motion. When I looked against it, at my reflection, I could see somebody who supposedly was me in corduroy slacks and a red crew-neck sweater, a yawning suitcase beside him, like the idea for a gag line for some joke about a bachelor. I listened to the rhythm of the heat pipes' clanks, the way the two loud "gongs" repeatedly trickled off to a staccato of little piano "tinkles."

I knew I should call Hopey, but I wasn't up to it just yet. I lay there for a good hour, wide awake and still staring, before I decided that a shower was exactly what I needed to perk myself up. Immersed, I tasted some of the water, as you do in other cities, and concluded it wasn't in the least bit over chlorinated. I felt fit afterwards. I also admitted to myself I had been stalling—after all, I was there to see Hopey, and not to count heat pipes' clanks or pass judgment on area water chlorination.

In my robe and with my hair still tingling after a vigorous bout of towel drying, I got my wallet from the back pocket of my corduroys, found the page from an office pad on which I had put down her address and phone number and remembered that I also had written them on the inside flap of the paperback I had been reading on the plane. I had done that to be safe; I knew there certainly was no listing in her name for where she was living, and what if my wallet were picked? I felt stupid now for having gone to such trouble. I spoke to the woman downstairs in French, asking her to dial the number from the desk. The stuttering clicks that were the ringing on the other end repeated themselves in six sets. I gave the woman my token "Merci, madame," trying hard to get that full roll to the "r" right. I dressed. I switched on the black-and-white TV—it was some ridiculous American made-for-television movie about the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders, dubbed in French. I lowered the volume to try calling Hopey again, and before hanging up that second time, I think I was better on the "r." In the movie the girls were all in toreador slacks and blouses unbuttoned halfway to their navels; they walked out to the stadium parking

lot after an apparently hard session of cheering practice. The French syllables didn't match their lips moving, nor did the very tone of the Gallic female voices—so lilting and sexy—match the hardness of the Texas sun on the big Firebirds and Corvettes they were getting into. This fantasy was more farfetched than “2001,” when you thought of it.

I knew that the worst thing I could do was to hang around this hotel, either staring at the lithographs of the Oratory on the walls or at the flickering dream light of the movie, and hounding the woman downstairs every ten minutes to call Hopey. I would get a meal. The travel agent had given me an information packet, and a quick check showed there was a Canadiens hockey game that evening. It was only seven-thirty. A cab ride to the Forum to try for a ticket would be worth the few bucks.

A game would kill a few hours.

I never had the meal. I shouldn't have had the two double scotches—all right, the three of them—at the restaurant bar across from the Forum. I had downed them quite fast before the game, not even noticing I had ordered that third, as I admired the way the entire bar itself was constructed of hockey sticks, varnished and fitted together for a long smooth counter. That started it.

Now it was between the first and second periods. I was out in the second-level lobby with the rest of the crowd. I had a cup of Molson ale in each hand. I honestly was wondering if I downed those fast enough, could I slip a couple of those Canadian dollars across to order “une autre” before the siren sounded for the return to the seats. The husky old French ushers looked like they had been around since the days when the truly legendary Canadien squads, pictured in glassed-over team photographs on the glossy buff walls, had ruled in their successive dynasties, and they obviously were tough indeed in their field orders to make sure that nobody passed through the tunnels and into the seats carrying a beer cup. I had some modicum of resolve left; I went back to my seat.

The purchase of that single seat had been negotiated by the cabdriver. A Belmondo look-alike in a black leather jacket, he chatted chummily with the scalper stamping his feet on the shoveled snow to keep warm out on Ste. Catherine Street. It was on the upper deck, behind one of the goals, high enough to deal me a little vertigo when I returned. It passed quickly. Also when I first returned, I was hit with that fragrant refrigeration smell

that took me back to my own second-team play in high school, and then intramural play in college—when I was the *top* honors student and I had no doubt I would be a surgeon some day. That was well before I flubbed the medical boards and was turned down by twenty-three medical schools, including two in southern Italy.

The ice-making machine was finishing up; there was only one word for that freshly glossed big flatness of grey-white—“ghostly.” The organ player started thumping out “Alouette,” and I tried to lose myself in details, like the way that there were two Province of Quebec flags with their fleur de lis over the scoreboard, but only one Canadian national flag with its maple leaf. When play resumed, the Canadiens continued to have an easy time of it against the Minnesota North Stars, and I was still trying to lose myself in details. I was noticing how Guy LaFleur was one of the last of the old breed not to wear a helmet. In his Canadiens blue, white, and red, he was like a knight, his swept-back hair flowing and, admittedly, almost entirely gray.

I left my seat before the final siren to signal the end of the second period. I sat on a bench alone in the second-level lobby during the rest of it and well into the third, drinking more Molson. When I did return to the stands something strange happened.

The two men and the woman who had been sitting to one side of me surely had decided that with the hometown Habs up by six they could get a jump on the sell-out crowd and the inevitable traffic jam afterwards. That left three empty blue seats, sculpted fiberglass. Crooked like that, I seemed to see that trio of fold-down slabs as waiting for the three sons I never would have, because of the three times I had talked whatever current girlfriend (so many before Hopey) into having an abortion. I am not the newly pious sort who you will find marching in front of a statehouse, linking arms with a crew of Irish Catholic nuns and priests on anti-abortion protests. On the contrary, I am Jewish. I doubt I even had given much thought to the issue before, though now I had a great sense of missing something. A token fight broke out on the ice, a lackluster exchange of blows with each of the two principals pulling the other’s jersey over his head for some awkward waltzing. The referees stepped in sluggishly. The organ played Olivia Newton-John’s “Physical—Let’s Get Physical.”

This is how bad it got. I started talking to those “little guys,” my sons in the seats who I had taken out for a night of hockey. I started telling

them that I always liked games where the colors of the uniforms contrasted well, and the North Stars forest-green get-ups, with that gold star hovering atop one upright of the “N” on their chests, made a pleasant contrast to the Canadiens’ tricolor.

“How about some ice cream?” I said to them. And I bought three of the chocolate-covered bars in silver wrappers, one for each. I sat and watched the gooey things melting on my lap. The colors of the uniforms didn’t contrast as sharply anymore. Everything bleared by this point. I missed Hopey so much.

Hopey had gone pretty punk. Of course I knew that from her phone calls to me in Connecticut and from the two letters she had sent in her boxy girl’s script. But maybe I wasn’t quite ready for the corporeal evidence. We were at a cafe on St. Denis. I had called her that morning, and we had planned to meet for lunch at one. But I had called her back around noon to confess that it was going to take me longer to “get organized.” “I went to the hockey game last night. I boozed. I should never drink like that, I usually don’t.”

And there across from me in the cafe, sipping on a “Sprite à la Cérise,” was Hopey. She was 20, I was 35. We had met sailing about a year and a half before in Little Compton, Rhode Island, where she had been working as a waitress after her freshman year at Mount Holyoke. We married that fall. About a year later I came back to our apartment one Tuesday to find she had already packed up all her things and was planning to move to Montreal with her old college roommate, Andrea. It really wasn’t a surprise. She had been talking about doing it for weeks.

I suspect that she had toned down her punk attire to meet me that day. Hopey was so pretty, of medium height and skinnily athletic too; she had captained her girls’ lacrosse team in high school. She had honey hair, and her big two front teeth had led the guys in her high school to nickname her “The Beaver.” The name was something she disliked, saying, “You know, they just wanted to say the word ‘beaver’ in front of me and other girls. It got pretty sick and all.” Her accent was almost Brooklynish, and who knows how she got it in suburban Saratoga Springs, where she had grown up in a neighborhood with other WASPy kids, whose fathers were mostly execs and top engineers at the General Electric home office in Schenectady.

Hopey had had her hair cut short, combing the sides back in fifties “fenders” and the front up in a cascading pomp—not exactly the classic poodle motif, but close enough. Her lipstick was very read. She wore a black motorcycle jacket, a ribbed turtleneck, black jeans, and high-cut olive-colored sneakers.

“You think I look stupid, don’t you?” she said.

“No. I mean, I guess punk is still strong. And I see a lot of it up here.”

“Most of the time I think I look stupid. Honestly. I’m still worried about this ear thing.”

“I noticed that.” When I had met Hopey by the ocean that first summer, she usually wore Cos Cob shirtdresses and, when more casual, a polo shirt, tennis shorts, and one of her elasticized belts with maybe sailboats or tiny whales embroidered into the fabric. The Hopey presently before me had added another pierce mark to each downy lobe of her ears. There were two cheap red rhinestone studs on one side, two green ones on the other.

“Andrea talked me into it. It was just all spur of the moment. She had three done on each, and I know she did it just to impress Jean-Claude. That’s her boyfriend, the guy in Pinhead.”

“The band. I remember. Yes, you told me about them on the phone.”

“Well, what are you going to do.” Hopey’s beaver teeth and dimples really showed whenever she said that. It was her catch-all phrase, spoken declaratively, the rough equivalent of “Crazy world, ain’t it.” It was something so much “Hopey” that I wanted to hug her right there. The cafe must have been a sidewalk affair in the summer. Outside the iced-over glass panels, put up for winter, it was still snowing heavily. I had an untethered, hungover feeling, like a phantom flu, and I doubt I ever before had noticed my hand rattling like that; possibly the clink of china cup on china saucer was exaggerating it. I started into the spiel I had come to deliver to Hopey. (She hadn’t been surprised when I had called her earlier, and she said she knew I would be up sooner or later. We had been apart three months.)

I tried to tell her that a marriage sometimes takes time to work out. I tried to tell her that I knew most of our problems were my fault. I confessed I didn’t know what had gotten into me when I started seeing Catherine again, before Hopey and I had even celebrated our first anniversary. Catherine worked at the Pan-Am check-in counter at Bradley International Airport in Hartford; I had dated her often before meeting Hopey.



“Believe me, it was just a matter of our going out to dinner a few times, for old time’s sake. That was all.”

“You don’t have to lie to me, Kenny.” I looked at those dual red earrings on the left side.

“OK. I am lying. But believe me, it was nothing.”

“I know. I mean that wasn’t it, or all of it. It was just. I don’t know.”

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on, I mean you were going to say something.”

“Well, maybe I never was right for you.”

“Don’t say that.”

“You’re a doctor, and you’re so handsome, with all the girlfriends you had. You’re successful, and . . .”

“Wait a minute. I’m not a doctor. I’m a dentist. A tooth carpenter. I mean, I couldn’t get into medical school. And I don’t think I even would have gotten into dental school, if I hadn’t done so well on that dexterity part of the boards. Remember, I told you about that, the part where they have you carve up a block of chalk.”

“I first knew how smart you were, how you were so observant, when you told me that story about the dental drill graveyard in Arizona, the time you bicycled there.”

“Come on, let’s be serious. You were Merit Scholarship finalist. You were dean’s list without even trying—isn’t that right?—dean’s list for your year there at Mount Holyoke, a famous school, not some dump like Central Connecticut State.” I usually was kinder—even proletarian proud, in a way—about my alma mater.

She put her hand on mine. Her nails were nibbled to the quick.

“You’ll always be my dear Kenny. But I’ve thought a lot about this. I’ve decided. You can do better than me, Kenny. The fact that you had to fool around convinced me of that.”

“Look, let’s be logical.” And I started with my supposed logic again. The rap was boring me as well by that point.

I finally had to say that I thought I needed to get back to my hotel room, to get more sleep.

When I didn’t get into medical school in 1969, I lasted for about six months on the “outside,” before I was drafted. That was long for that sad

stage in American history—those days when the teetering helicopters (of the stock televised footage) poured out more and more of the scared kids in Army T-shirts, holding their dog tags to their chests and running crazily across the flattened paddy grass to seek cover that never seemed to be there. Somehow I was lucky enough to have served out my two years as a clerk with an air unit on a base outside of a reasonably large Arizona city.

The whole deal was enough to make me believe in the Military/Industrial complex. The base had two aqua pools surrounded by tall Washington palms. I bought a ten-speed bicycle. I spent a lot of my free time pedaling through the Chicano barrios, with their mariachi music leaking out of sleepy stuccoed bars and their laughing men hanging around customized cars on street corners. I spent a lot of my free time pedaling through the Sun Belt suburbs, long stretches of flatness and lanes winding by sleek houses under overhanging roofs, most of the lawns simply carpets of Astro turf. One Sunday afternoon I headed deep into the industrial end of town. There were warehouses, dozens of little machine shops for rebuilding truck clutches and the like, and the yellow-brick single story place, with sun-reflecting mirrored windows, where I stopped and just gawked.

In a yard of dead grass rose thousands of old dental drills. There at the edge of the desert, the casings' once-dark maroons, greens and browns had sun bleached to pastels. The place was ill-kept, and there was deep litter and the scrub growth of prickly pear cactus and octotillo. The drill units obviously had been salvaged from old dental offices, and on most of them the innards (motors, pulleys, etc.) were skeletally exposed. It was late afternoon—in March, I think—and while the sun got lower in that massive Arizona sky, the drills shed longer and longer shadows. I walked around in the utter quiet. To this day I have no idea how long I was there; it could have been fifteen minutes, or it could have been two hours. And to this day I have no idea exactly what they were there for. I told the story to a supplier who came to sell me when I set up my office in Connecticut. His theory was that somebody probably had the plan of reconditioning the drills, then selling them to those supposedly qualified “dental surgeons” who crowd into Mexican border towns, along with terra-cotta peddlers and bargain car re-upholsterers. Anyway, the Monday after the bicycle ride, I arrived at my job at the base typing pool and started writing letters to dental schools asking for catalogs. I suspect that I must have been the only repeated med school reject in recent history who hadn't thought of

dentistry as a back-up all along. For a while I dated a psychology graduate student, and she once listened to me tell her the tale while we lay in bed. She began analyzing it with regard to the rest of my life. I almost had to put my hand over her mouth. I told her I didn't want any deep explanation; I was content simply to know that I had been there in Arizona at that junkyard that afternoon.

The heatpipes clanked, anvil-chorus style now.

I doubt if I was fully asleep. I was on the bed again. Maybe Hopey's mention earlier that day of what she called the "drill graveyard" had started me thinking about it again. I was still dressed. I could hear snowplows snoring along outside. The room was all shadows, with the scattered gloss from the framed pictures of the Oratory. I had a new digital travel alarm clock, battery operated, on the tortoise shell night table beside the bed. I reached over to shut the sandwich cover of it, without letting myself notice what time it was. I knew that it was no use calling Hopey to confirm the fact that I would meet her and Andrea at the punk bar on La Montaigne at ten. Feeling as I was, I knew I just couldn't take the squeeze of the place, which she had said was a cellar setup. Plus, what would I look like there with my lie-down haircut, corduroy trousers, and crewneck, amid so much top-grain cowhide and bondage paraphernalia—maybe even the occasional lime or day-glo purple Mohawk. Pinhead was playing, and Hopey had said that she just had to see them, with Andrea being her roommate and all. Hopey had said there was a danger of Pinhead breaking up, and they were getting fewer and fewer gigs: "They have songs that I think are funny. 'How Come You Left Before You Came' is one, another is 'Kill Your Parents, Then We'll Talk.' But they're the kind of things that just don't hold up, I guess, once you've heard the gag lines." Actually, the titles alone sounded damn funny to me, even on reconsideration.

I wondered how much snow had accumulated in the last twenty-four hours. A foot? A silent foot and a half?

I knew then that I eventually would call Hopey's father in Saratoga Springs. At first, when Hopey had left me in Connecticut, he had encouraged me to go up to Montreal to talk to her right away. The man was a GE engineer. He seemed shy, and he probably was the sort who wore, all through high school and college, a slide-rule holster attached to the beaded Indian belt he had made in camp as a kid. I imagine that Hopey's parents

always had been very pleased with her marriage to me, even if she had dropped out of Mount Holyoke to do it. The verdict on their part appeared to be: How could they go wrong with their daughter settled down with a high-earning spouse, complete with a house he owed nothing on (where his office was), a forty-thousand German sports car, and a share in a lovely summer place in Rhode Island? But later, after Hopey herself had taken a bus down to Saratoga Springs from Montreal to visit them for a weekend, her father called to say that he was arranging for a lawyer to handle Hopey's end of the separation and inevitable divorce, and he politely suggested that I should engage one to handle mine. There was no animosity. "There's always been that something in Hopey," he said, "and once she's made up her mind, even if her reasons aren't the best, there's no changing it." Yes, I knew now it was time to get on with the split-up.

I slept uneasily for a couple of hours more. Again, having shut that clock, I was outside time, but that was OK; I hadn't been doing too well when I had been back in it. I had been dreaming about Hopey. In the melting metamorphosing that can happen in such night imaginings, I would be in a scene with her — was there something about the inner city Hartford neighborhood I had grown up in? — and she would be Hopey of Cos Cob dresses for a couple of frames, and then Hopey of the punk leather and gloss lipstick for the next couple. I got out of bed. I went to the little pink-tiled bathroom for a cold glass of tap water, returned to the bedroom, and got back under the covers, for what I hoped would be some real sleep. Then I thought of it: *Hopey wouldn't end up a dentist's wife for the rest of her life, and what in America can be sadder than being a dentist's wife?*

After that the radiator's racket didn't have a chance. I slept well. The snow accumulated.

The sun reflected brightly off the new fallen snow up there on Mount Royal, atop the city. Or it was much more than that — the white itself appeared speckled with mica, and the glare under the enameled blue sky all but blinded you. Above me — who knows exactly how many shoveled steps — was the massive granite dome of St. Joseph's Oratory, a rise even bigger than that of St. Paul's in London, according to the brochures the woman at the hotel desk had pushed on me. I started my ascent. The middle lane of the steps was railed off, reserved for those who wished to make the climb "Aux genoux," on the knees.

I must say that I had had no intention of visiting the Oratory when I had come to the city. And when I had been feeling good that morning after a solid brunch at a restaurant in the Queen Elizabeth Hotel, I had returned to my hotel to begin packing for my flight back to Connecticut that evening. I had asked the woman at the desk if she could recommend a sight for me to see. Before I knew it, she was going on in her French about the Oratory.

In my room I looked at the brochures she gave me—half to work on my reading skills in the other language, and, before long, half out of genuine curiosity. Brother André had been a lay brother, and that meant a working brother. He wore a black cassock, but his chief duties were to wash floors and act as a porter at Notre Dame, a boys' school at the base of the wooded mountain. He started climbing the mountain to bury little crosses on the slope and pray, gradually bringing more of the faithful to join him. Finally, the bishop gave him some property to build a small rustic chapel there, and he prayed downstairs and lived upstairs—when he wasn't hiking around town and tending to the sick and the needy. And soon there were healings and miracles and finally the massive international drive to construct the edifice as big as most medieval cathedrals, for more prayer to his patron saint, Joseph. Brother André died in 1937. I must admit that as a Jew I always envied Christians having their modern-day saints. I mean, I had real pride in the heroes of the Six Day War naturally, but to make the lame walk and the dumb speak—let's face it, that's tough to compete with.

Due to the cold, there weren't many visitors or tourists at the Oratory that day. I had a map of the entire layout. I entered through the underground chapel and crypt. I saw the hallway there with the discarded crutches of the cured and Brother André's tomb. I went outside again, along a path to Brother André's original chapel. In a grove of pines, the miniature steeped place had a facade sheathed with embossed tin, which was supposed to look like fieldstone. There was an altar thick with gilded angels, and in the loft, behind glass, you could examine Brother André's room exactly as he had left it—a cubicle with a crucifix, a wood stove, a porcelain chamber pot, and a neatly made hard cot. Back at the Oratory proper, I was ready for the museum and its life-sized wax depictions, one showing Brother André on his porter's job and another showing him ashen, but smiling, on his death bed in a convent hospital. I even was

ready for the display cases with his overshoes, cloaks, and hats, all tiny, as it happened, and black. I don't think I was ready, however, for the alcove and the encased vial, lit redly, that held Brother André's pickled heart. Getting tired of the climbing, I took the elevator past the exposed masonry and steel beams—in truth, the place was like all bona fide cathedrals and still under construction—to the cavernous uppermost main basilica itself. Huge and surprisingly modern stone pillars swept up past contemporary stained glass to the dome, which surely did look as gigantic as that of St. Paul's—at least. I think I was the only one there just then.

Back at the crypt, that base camp, I went into the hallway again; I wanted to take another look at those crutches on the walls. Votive candles flickered in front of a row of little altars to St. Joseph, each for a particular purpose—Purity, Work, and so on. I was glad I had come to Montreal, and what I had thought about when I had been half asleep the night before made even more sense now. Sweet Hopey would *not* end up a dentist's wife, and if she were lucky, in a few years the fact that she had been married to me at all would be as distant as a dream, just another blurred metamorphosis, like her going punk for a while, maybe. It was good to know that Hopey, so intelligent, could become (metamorphose into?) anything she wanted in the world. I suddenly had no doubt that she would go back to finish at Mount Holyoke. And after that, who knows what—become a doctor herself, write superb novels, or possibly marry a dedicated selfless man, and together they would go to some place like Honduras or tragic Mali . . . and I was getting off on romanticizing all of that, and at the same time watching a skinny black man in a tan imitation leather coat; he was filling out the little slips of paper at the counter beside “La Bassine de l'Huile,” the holy oil pan. I had seen the slips earlier. The idea was that you penciled in your request to Brother André, then slipped it in a mail slot below. But this guy wasn't simply filling out his request; he was filling out dozens of them, stuffing the ballot box. He looked Caribbean.

A few tired-eyed women were kneeling at the various altars. I knew I looked out of place as I stood there. So I kneeled too. The red candles dappled their shadows on my hands. The place smelled of paraffin and snow melting off galoshes. It felt weird, and right as well, to be a Jew who had received a twelve-inch Sylvania black-and-white TV set for his bar mitzvah and to be kneeling, now, in a Catholic church like that. And I did feel good about Hopey, and I did feel good about myself for once. And I have

no clue where I came up with it, but it seemed that I should be saying something.

I will try to save the teeth of old men,

I will try to save the teeth of old men . . .

Over and over, I repeated it, basking in the simple cadence. I honestly never noticed myself whispering it loud enough to be audible, and I had my eyes closed. I heard a voice beside me. The accent was one of learned English, and it reminded me of what I had heard on reggae albums. The skinny black guy, so many veins visible on his ginger-brown bald head, was kneeling beside me, doing it along with me. I couldn't have stopped then. Together we went on, saying "I will try to save the teeth of old men" for five minutes or more. Praying, I suppose.

When I did stand, I groped in my pocket for my wallet. I passed him a twenty in U.S. dollars, and he tried to push my hand away. But I wouldn't let him. Hell, I felt good.

At the Montreal airport, I called Melissa, my hygienist. We had dated when I first hired her, and with Melissa I always knew where I stood. I knew that she loved her figure and that frosted shag of her hair, and I knew that she liked to be complimented on them. Things like that. The situation never had been smooth around the office with her after Hopey and I had become serious.

"What happened to her?" She never could bring herself to say Hopey's name.

"It's a long story. Let's have dinner tonight. That Mexican place."

"What's up, Doc? Why this sudden interest?"

I had long since skidded down from the crest of my high that afternoon. I knew I had enough energy to attempt mustering a line for her, about her hair or something. But I didn't. For the first time in a long while, me, the Man of a Million Girlfriends, straightforwardly said, "I'm lonely, and I'm always comfortable with you. I don't want to have to eat alone tonight."

"If that isn't one for the books." Her tone changed. She was understanding. "I'll pick you up. Don't take a cab in. What's the flight number?"

"It's been a weird weekend. You wouldn't believe some of the stuff that . . ." I started mumbling incoherently. There could have been something about the dubbed Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders' movie, and there could

have been something about the skinny black guy.

“Hey, are you OK?”

“Sorry,” I said. “Ah, let’s see. The flight number. The ticket is here somewhere.”