

**DENTIST**  
by Nancy Branka

No, I would not be accepting the hygienist's rather strong recommendation that I schedule my cleanings every four months instead of the insurance-approved six. I tell her this politely but firmly.

Behind the reception desk, Jeanette mutters, "Good decision," without looking away from her computer screen as she processes my invoice. I'm pretty sure she has just confirmed my skepticism.

Unruffled by the failed upsell, the hygienist hands me a peace offering, the goodie bag that serves as a marketing arm of Colgate. I have no need for a miniature tube of toothpaste, a fresh toothbrush, and a dwarfed floss box. She apparently did not remember my rebuke six months ago when I rejected the bag with my little speech about waste. Tired, I accept it.

I walk through the waiting room and out the door, invoice and appointment card in hand. When I reach the parking lot, a wave of relief wraps my anger. Relief that I've safely made it out of a hostile Covid environment. For now. I make a mental note to mark the incubation period off on my calendar with a red Sharpie over the next two weeks.

At home my husband asks, "How was your dentist visit?"

I grunt a nonanswer. Why call it a visit, as if it's a pleasant meetup with an old friend? As if there were tea served. And sugary treats. And an hour of delicious gossip. No. I toss the Colgate gift bag into the trash.

There was no conversation at this "visit." Instead, there was me on my back for an hour with the hygienist's manicured hands in my mouth. Me, silenced and vulnerable, as she

cheerfully critiqued my flossing flaws and receding gums. Occasionally I squinted my eyes or forced a guttural sound to hold up my half of the conversation.

I say none of this to my husband. He does not deserve my bile.

I retreat to the patio and the netherworld of Twitter. Doom-scrolling feels just right today. Stupid president. Cowardly senate. Insidious hygienist. And don't even get me started on the dentist himself.

More scrolling. A political video that makes me smile. I feel understood. Like there's hope. Even if my dentist has no empathy for me, at least @justicewarrior does.

I sigh, knowing it's time to go about my day—writing, phone calls, a webinar on Zoom. I do it, but everything lands flat. Between each task, I return to my seething, my ruminating. If I needed extra cleaning, why did she say to Dr. Brown—as if I weren't in the room—that my plaque was light-to-medium?

Later, I sit in the kitchen and eat a tomato sandwich that drips with mayonnaise, scrolling. My husband looks at me across the top of his reading glasses. “You seem down,” he notes.

Down? Down? Can't he see I'm pissed? I sigh. No one really gets me, except maybe @justicewarrior. We're all so polarized.

I chew. I think about all that is wrong. I imagine myself telling my friends, “The hygienist told the dentist my plaque was light-to-medium. Yet she urged me to get an additional cleaning!”

In my mind, my friends' heads are nodding, eyes rheumy with empathy.

I slip earbuds in, searching for a podcast. Something to redirect my thoughts. My plate is empty, sandwich gone too soon. I wet my finger and run it along the porcelain to catch the crumbs.

My mind wanders. Is Dr. Brown married? I surmise yes, but no children. I'm not sure how I know this. Over the years, he has attempted the most gratuitous small talk. "Any trips ahead?" is his standard opener. His manner is as bland as his name. And all I really know about him is that he scuba dives.

This year, of course, he has new, sanitized banter. As the vacuum-like HEPA filter hovers over my mouth like a gigantic open-jawed sea monster inhaling any viruses, he asks, "Staying healthy?"

I know no answer is required, it's performative conversation. The question amuses me since Jeanette already put a thermometer wand to my forehead, and I practically had to swear on a bible that I had not been sick in the last two weeks. I am relieved when the good doctor lowers the chair into position so that all blood rushes to my head. Small-talk time has officially ended.

Now I give up on podcasts, plop myself onto the sofa, and pick up the remote. Disney+ is my streaming comfort food. When the opening scene of the animated film "Coco" begins—the colors, the sweetness of the vibe, the scruffy dog, and of course the grandma—I sink back into the cushions. Everything will be okay.

Then suddenly, in the middle of one of the best songs—Miguel just met his father—it occurs to me I can take revenge. The thought sucks me in, like heroin to an addict.

I can overperform on dental care. With a mouthguard. And floss. Miguel is still singing. If done right, I can hurt Dr. Brown where it matters. His wallet. I can wear my mouthguard every night. Religiously. My molars will never grind again. I will never need another crown. Miguel is hugging his father, and now it's a duet.

No longer will I be subjected to semi-annual pleas for my dental health: "We are following several cracked teeth here. They really do need crowns."

I will put behind me the fact that I have just paid Dr. Brown \$1500 to finance his scuba trip to Aruba again this year.

I click the remote to pause. My head cocks like a cartoon detective who just figured out who did it. Wait. Wasn't my crown \$1000 just last year?

I smile. I nod. Yes. There it is.

Tomorrow I will call and say politely, "Jeanette, I was just checking my records, and it appears the cost of a crown has risen 50% in one year." The guilty silence on the other end of the phone will be juicy. I will have caught them.

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