

## OUT OF TRUE

There were exactly twenty little teeth in the plastic box he discovered in the back of what had once been his father's sock drawer in the master bedroom of his childhood home.

He was now parentless, and that bureau, a rocking chair, a queen-sized bed, and a tall plastic wastebasket were the only items not bought during the estate sale. Even the modest artwork on the walls was taken. He did retain a few of his mother's kitchen items but had long since thrown away the baked dishes she kept in the freezer, all neatly labeled with a black sharpie marker in her delicate cursive on white sticky notes over clear plastic cling wrap. The frozen kugel dated from his thirtieth birthday, six years earlier. He figured it was what she had been cooking that day when she had called to say that she had given birth to him three decades before. He had always told himself that he should annually give his mother flowers on the day he was born, as he had read to do in the men's magazine he subscribed to, but he had never done so when she was alive. Aside from the items in this room, everything in the house was his, remaining mostly in tape-sealed cardboard moving boxes.

This was the only home he had ever known, the place he was brought to after his arrival into the world, was raised in, and continually returned to as mostly a visitor after he had departed for college. The day following their mother's funeral, his younger sister declared that she would never set foot inside the house again for reasons she wished to not discuss. She received the entire gross of the estate sale and he took ownership of the home located on the cul-de-sac where all of the neighbors they had once known had either left or died. That was the arrangement now concluded one year following their mother's death, and he assumed he would never see his sister again. They did not hug when she had departed for the last time to the seaside city she had escaped to some seventeen years before, but the shoebox she left on the kitchen counter with random personal items of their mother's still contained the scent of her berry-fragranced perfume. When people asked what his sister was doing with her life, he would say, "She made the hippie thing work for herself." Because their parents had not believed in capturing moments and, instead, had preferred to move swiftly to consecutive ones, there were no photographs in existence of any of the family, so he had to imagine in order to remember that his sister was cursed with the look of their mother. Their father had been dead since the

Thanksgiving holiday of his sophomore college year as a then-undeclared major.

He had been unwilling to sleep in the master bedroom, but once the estate was settled he finally decided to do so. He went about dusting as he listened to an old vinyl record album, going through paper towel rolls by economy bundles. Then he opened the sock drawer of the bureau where his father had once concealed a roll of twenty-dollar bills, a roll held together by a rubber band that he would pinch from in high school to purchase dope, something he had long since stopped using. This time he had found the box containing the teeth. A strip of clear office desk tape secured it shut, with his own name in the possessive and the word “primaries” written in thick pencil across the top in his father’s undisciplined handwriting. There was no companion box present labeled with his sister’s name.

He spread the teeth atop the bureau shelf and tried to imagine that all twenty were once a part of him. He could not recall when the last of them had fallen out or been removed—only the first when he had awoken the following morning with a silver dollar inside his G.I. Joe pillowcase. Now he could sit and touch what had once been a part of him but had not been for some time. And it made him think of the woman he had briefly dated in college whom he had not loved who was coming to town for a business conference in a few weeks and planning to stay overnight in this room while he took the living room couch, since there was no other bed in this place where a family had once tolerated one another. She had never loved him either, but she was the cause of the end of his marriage four years before when she had been diagnosed with breast cancer and given a prognosis of no chance for survival.

“You don’t have to make love to me,” she had then pleaded over the telephone.” He had known her from the time in his life when he could still spend little money and in doing so meet more interesting people than if he had spent more. They had not spoken a word to each other in well over a decade, and he had wondered which men she had contacted before him. “Just let me be fucked one last time before I leave the world.”

For several days he had contemplated her request and finally it was his then-wife who had said, “I think you should do this for her. It’s the noble act.”

He spent a considerable amount of time making sure this would not bother his then-wife, and she assured him it would not, and the following week he traveled to the city of the woman he had once briefly dated but had never loved and honored her request.

She did not die, though.

A last-effort double mastectomy followed by intense

chemotherapy treatment eradicated the disease in six months. When his then-wife learned of the woman's survival, she no longer believed he had been honorable. He was convinced that, had the woman died, to this day his then-wife would see what he had done as noble and he would not suffer from heart swallows every day as he continually missed her.

He had seen his ex-wife only once since their divorce, at the wedding of an acquaintance. Assigned seating put them at separate tables for the reception. When he asked if she would like to dance, she replied, "I wish you were not in the world." He thought then that it might be easier to hate her instead of missing her terribly but could not bring himself to despise what he still cherished.

Now he looked to his little teeth and thought of the removed breasts of the woman he had never loved. He wondered if she thought of those as he thought about the baby teeth before him, and then he quickly told himself to not consider such cruel thoughts.

He became aware of a series of knocks.

He made his way through the unopened moving boxes he had packed from his apartment—the only room already arranged here was his special basement music spot with all his vinyl records lovingly categorized—and opened the front door at the center of the living room.

Before him on the porch was a child, maybe ten years old, dressed proudly in a dark blue Cub Scout blouse tucked into scuffed jeans. He was wearing one blue sneaker and one brown one. His lemon-colored scarf seemed the only clean item about him. He peered upward. "Hello, sir. I'm from troop six eighty-five of the Cub Scouts of America, where future eagles grow from. We're selling beautiful Christmas wreaths to raise money so we can make the journey to our nation's capital for the annual Boy Scouts of American Jamboree. I'm a Cub Scout Webelos, and I'll be entering Boy Scouts next year. This trip will mean a great deal to me, God, and our country. Would you like to buy a wreath?"

Behind the child was a red Radio Flyer wagon filled with fir wreaths, each adorned by berry clusters and a red six-loop velvet bow.

He had always had a slight distaste for collectiveness of any kind and still resented his own scouting days, forced upon him by his father. He politely told the child that he did not celebrate Christmas and, when the boy said that this did not matter and that the wreaths were beautiful decorations and made any home welcoming, he just shut the door as the scout was in mid-speech and returned to the little teeth.

He wondered if his father had ever taken the teeth out and arranged them in a half circle as he was doing now. He counted twenty in all once again. Then, with his tongue, he tapped twenty-eight in his mouth. He remembered having four wisdom teeth removed when he was

in college and concluded that the twenty teeth before him had eventually been replaced by thirty-two permanent ones.

He tweezed one of the baby molars between his thumb and forefinger to examine it closely. But he was instantly startled. His fingers slipped together hard, and the smooth tooth jettisoned to his left, bouncing off the wall and then descending into the wastebasket like a perfect backboard basketball shot. Only instead of what he expected to hear—the tooth rattling about the plastic walls of the wastebasket until it became still—there was a sinking blop of a sound.

He paused to catch his breath, to allow his heart to beat slower again, because he had been startled by seeing what he thought was his own facial image at a young age engraved into the tooth before it slipped away from him. But he told himself that was silly, that it must have been the result of the lighting of the room.

When he peered over the basket he was startled again. Its bottom was filled with at least two inches of water. He did not recall having emptied water into it, although he had consumed many beers the night before and such things were possible. Still, he did not want to lose the tooth—again. He reached his fingers into the wastebasket but could not locate it. Casually, he took the wastebasket to the kitchen and found the same colander he remembered his mother using for spaghetti nights when he and his sister were children. He held the basket over it in the sink and emptied the water.

There was no tooth.

The next morning he awoke to find that the wastebasket was once again filled with water. He looked into the hallway, suspicious, then to the window sashes of the room. He took another of his baby teeth, this one slimmer and sharper than the molar from the day before. He saw engraved into it yet another facial image of himself, this one from a different younger age he had tried to forget. Fearfully, he threw the tooth to the wastebasket and, as before, heard a sinking blop. Once again, straining the water with the colander produced nothing.

This was all very strange, so he contacted the one strange person he still knew, now that he was in an ordered period of his life.

His old friend remained strange almost two decades after the day they had met in a record store that no longer existed because few people bought records anymore. They had known each other for some time when they had both worked jobs where they served patrons who referred to them as “Dude,” only he no longer had such employment and his friend perpetually did. They had not spoken since he had lent this friend money because his old friend’s apartment landlord had evicted him after finding

the broken glass pieces of the busted bong he had conscientiously placed in the complex recycling bin. To his credit, his old friend had repaid him, even though he had said it was not a loan, by writing out twelve checks in equal amounts, all dated the first of each month until the following year. The last installment had bounced like a tennis ball onto a driveway, but he had never mentioned this.

When his old friend arrived to the house, he had just gotten off from work and was still wearing his black slacks and white dress shirt waitering uniform, along with a “#1 Dad” necklace medallion resting atop his open collar chest hair and an imitation gold band snug upon his wedding finger. His old friend was not married and certainly had no children, but the two decorative items increased his tips substantially.

“Bro,” his old friend said, after being briefed about the teeth and the wastebasket, “maybe it’s a ghost.”

He told his old friend that he did not believe in spirits.

“Okay, bro, just take me through the past two days, we’ll figure it out, together, as comrades.”

He relayed all the details he could recall, right down to which vinyl record he was listening to as he drank beer from a can and dusted. The only thing he withheld was seeing the facial images of two of his almost forgotten younger selves etched into the teeth.

“Well, bro, you really should have bought the Christmas wreath from the kid, totally bad karma on your part. Now he might go through life with Marty McFly Syndrome, afraid of rejection and all. You could have just passed of the wreath to me, and I would have given it to this new girl I’m trying to nail.”

He had not considered that as an option but it made sense.

“Have you tried talking with the wastebasket, bro? Reasoning with it? Maybe the wastebasket just didn’t like *The Dharma Bums’ Welcome* album, so play it something else.”

He was beginning to think it had not been a good idea to mention this wastebasket water and baby teeth dilemma to this particular old friend he had not seen in some time.

“Bro, maybe we should burn sage, you know, smudge the whole house. Or, I could get some super-hot curry from the restaurant—our sous chef is the bomb—and we could, like, spice the ghost out of here by putting a bowl of it beside the wastebasket. If that doesn’t work, you might want to bring a psychic in to do an evaluation of the premises. I can recommend a good one I used to fuck. Hey, you look distraught. When I’m down, I like to do something crazy to get my mind off things. Want to go get crazy together, bro?”

He asked what his old friend had in mind.

"I don't know, bro." His old friend then entered silent contemplation for a moment. "Hey, I got it. When I was a kid this neighbor dude and I used to ride our skateboards to the drugstore all the time and when nobody was looking we would press sewing needles through boxes of condoms, right in the center of each. We always got a big kick out of that. You want to do that today, make you feel like a kid again? Oh, by the way, I'm sorry about your mom; I should have come to the funeral, but I had a double shift. It would have been nice to see your sister again. Is she still sexy in that showerless way?"

He had been planning to tell his old friend about the woman he had briefly dated in college and her cancer survival and see if he wanted to have coffee with them when she visited, since he also had known her. But at this moment he decided that their friendship had now run its course and informed him that he did not believe the ghost would like the condom idea.

For the next week and a half, the water reappeared in the wastebasket each morning, and in the early evening he would toss one of his baby teeth into it, after seeing another of what he thought was an etched facial image of one of his almost forgotten younger selves. He would watch it disappear, then strain the toothless water through his mother's colander. And he was now down to only three remaining teeth. Tonight the woman he briefly dated in college whom he never loved was arriving on business and planning to stay in the wastebasket's room. He tried to forget that a request of hers had led to the end of his marriage to the woman he still loved.

On his way home from his after-work Jewish Community Center exercise routine, he passed a church with an electronic billboard in its front lawn bearing the illuminated words "God Loves You, No Exceptions, LGBT People of Faith Welcome to Worship With Us." At the corner he saw several prepubescent children holding hand-painted posters over their heads advertising a car wash. He impulsively swung his rusting fifteen year-old Chevrolet into the lot, handed a twenty to an astonished young girl who had only asked for a five-dollar donation, and skipped to the church doors as a dozen young boys and girls in matching youth-group tee-shirts attended to his vehicle.

Inside, after he found the church's gift shop, he approached a middle-aged woman who had kept a nice figure and asked to see the crosses they had for purchase.

"So nice," the woman said. "What's the special occasion? A baptism, perhaps?"

He said he wanted the largest one they had. When informed it

would be quite expensive, he said money was not an issue and handed over his one credit card that was not maxed out.

Once home he nailed the eighteen-by-twelve inch cross above the wastebasket at the height of his belly. He then went to the shoebox his sister had left with random personal items of their mother's. In it he found the mezuzah that had hung slanted on the frame of the front door of this house and turned it over in his hand. It no longer contained the rolled scroll of parchment proclaiming two passages from the Torah, probably thrown away when his sister had removed it from the front doorframe at the shiva an hour following their mother's funeral. He shrugged, took a piece of paper towel from the countertop, and with a pencil wrote a stern message to the wastebasket. He slipped the note inside the back of the mezuzah and, using a hammer and nails, mounted it to the frame of the doorway of the wastebasket's room. As he finished doing so, there sounded a single thud upon the front door.

It was the woman he had never loved who almost died but did not.

The last thing his mother had ever said to him in her broken English regarding his divorce from the woman he still loved—the details of which she had never been provided—was “You committed great badness, a big terrible.” After that, until she died, his mother never mentioned again that her son had once been married. But now, seeing the woman he never loved before him, he no longer felt he had done anything wrong at all.

The woman was the exact opposite of his former wife, with her small chest and boyishly cropped wheat-toned hair that had returned since she had completed the chemotherapy treatment. Her lips were barely more than thin, wiry lines to her face above a cleft chin, and her round eyeglasses made her cheeks seem larger than they were. She was precisely five-feet tall wearing one-inch heels. And she had been at the heart of his divorce for a request that had seemed reasonable at the time, but because she had not departed from the world, she was in the end looked upon differently. The only good was that she had not become pregnant four years earlier, having said when they had been together for one night that protection did not matter.

She smiled, moved nearer to him, and wrapped the twig-like arms protruding from a sleeveless white blouse around his waist, pressing the left side of her face to his chest. He looked over her shoulder and saw that she had brought only one small travel bag, the rolling kind just stewardesses used in his childhood before they became fashionable.

He did not know what to say, so he told her he was happy she was still in the world.

In a leathery voice she said, “Me, too,” and relaxed into his arms, like a child landing a crippled paper airplane.

He showed her to the wastebasket's room so she could unpack her one small travel bag. The bed sheets had been changed, and he told her that he would be sleeping on the living room couch. He had not set foot in the wastebasket's room in several days and did not do so now. He cringed when she looked to the bureau and said, "What are these three little white stones?"

He told her about everything, even the etchings of his almost-forgotten younger facial images on the teeth.

After pastrami sandwiches at the delicatessen where they had met half their lives ago when he had been a customer and she a hostess, they walked the riverfront with the urbanscape behind their silhouettes and sipped coffee from recyclable to-go cups. They had never technically had a first date, unlike with his ex-wife, who had been the one to ask him out after meeting at a mutual friend's birthday party. They had seen a comedy movie about the Holocaust and afterwards both had similar opinions about comforting depictions of genocide.

This woman he had never loved spoke positively about being cancer-free and noted that she had embraced activities she never thought she would enjoy, such as joining a cyber mahjong club. When she said she was training for a triathlon, he refrained from mentioning that their freshman year of college she had regularly worn a figure-tight tee-shirt with the slogan "Want to be an idiot? Play sports!" lithographed in gothic lettering across the chest of her now-removed breasts. The new ones from the reconstructive surgery, he thought, appeared smaller than the originals.

"Maybe the water is your wife's energy following you," she said, as they turned and walked to the river landing that had been black tarp and abandoned tires when they had been in college and was now where luxury boats docked. "To be honest, this isn't the kind of thing I ever thought you would experience, because you're such a young coastal soul still living landlocked in the flyover states and all, not an old soul like me. I didn't personally see your face in the three teeth on the bureau, but I totally believe you did in the others the wastebasket ate up. You know, I've occasionally thought about what might have happened if I'd had actually fallen head over heels for you back in school instead of just being a friend with benefits. I once thought if I'd settled down with you I would have lived a far less interesting life because you've always been kind of a regional racist. Maybe I was wrong."

He tried to consider what she said as a compliment but was having difficulty. He chose not to have her clarify what she meant by "regional racist."

"Now that's interesting," she said, pointing to two Girl Scouts seated in full uniform at a table stacked with rectangular boxes. Behind



them were enormous glass doors with a sign above reading “City Sailing Club Entrance – Members Only.” She gave an irritated sigh. “Rich parents could more easily teach those children capitalism with a Monopoly board instead of embarrassing them like that selling cookies.”

He thought of the scout whose wreaths he had rejected and immediately took the woman he never loved by the elbow. He insisted she pick which cookies to purchase, the way his mother always had his sister decide what type of bread loaf to buy at the bakery when they were children because in the country their mother was from bread was just bread and in this one too many choices made life more complicated.

“Definitely the Samoas,” she said. “Those were always my favorite when I was a Girl Scout. Vanilla crackers smothered with caramel, topped with chocolate and coconut. Can’t go wrong with that.” She had never given him the impression that she had ever belonged to anything organized. Her training for a triathlon now made sense, since it was an activity that did not require cooperation.

He was informed that there were fifteen cookies in a single seven-ounce box. When asked how many boxes he would like to purchase, he said he would take all of the Samoas they had.

They left with two full cases of Samoas, each containing twelve boxes of cookies at a total cost of one-hundred and thirty dollars, bought with a spare check he kept in his wallet. He let the woman he had never loved eat all she liked but did not have any himself. He did not care for sweets, never had.

On the way home she asked if he still spoke with his ex-wife, whom she had never met. He said that people know they are adults when they do not feel the need to be friends with their exes, not telling her that he had read that in the men’s magazine he subscribed to. She remained silent until they reached his house. He mentioned that she could take the cookies to her conference and give them away to colleagues. She declined, saying that, unlike him, she was not a goldfish who had a new experience every ten seconds but was instead cursed with elephant memory.

That evening after brushing and flossing his permanent adult teeth, he stepped out of the bathroom and saw the door to the wastebasket’s room open. It was candlelit, but he did not own any candles. The woman he had never loved was wearing only a bath towel—her chin-cropped hair still damp from the shower she had recently taken. She stood just inside the room, bending her head downward, her eyes to his, letting him know he could have her if he wanted.

And he did want her. But then he saw the wastebasket and looked to the three remaining teeth on the bureau. Instead, he leaned his head

through the doorway, gave her cheek a chaste peck with his lips, and went to the basement by himself.

As a teenager the basement room had been where his sister confessed to him the two abortions she had had before graduating from high school when he had still remained a virgin. It now served as his personal music room. He had never acquired albums on anything other than vinyl, and his Ikea-bought wood cube holders filled completely with his records now lined all the walls of the ten-by-fifteen foot space, with a single-record machine and two analogue speakers in the corners. The room had no furniture, only a beanbag in the center—a holdover from his college days.

He decided to play a record that he might have bought—he could not be certain—at the time he had met his former wife, perhaps something that would appeal more to the wastebasket. A minute into Heatmiser's *Cop and Speeder* album, the woman he still did not love stepped barefoot down the wood stairs of the small basement room. He wanted to protest as she slipped her still damp bath towel off and dropped it to the jacket sleeve of the Heatmiser album. But instead they did it atop the beanbag, just as they had in college, this time with protection she had brought that he examined the packaging of with great scrutiny.

Afterwards, they sat cross-legged and naked on the floor and played multiple games of Rummy King, he eating Amish cheese on salted crackers, she nibbling Samoas, and both drinking light beer from cans. As he set down a run of the hand-finished game tiles, he thought of asking if she had been able to feel his fingertips and tongue when they were on her newly reconstructed nipples and slightly smaller breasts. Instead, he tried to at least win one game of Rummy King against her, which he could not, and finally offered her another beer, which she accepted.

It did not bother him that he lost every game because he believed she deserved her current victories with a terrible vengeance. But he was positive she possessed all the jokers, even if she never played them. It concerned him that she might have left lit the candles she had arranged in the wastebasket's room, but he assumed she was a safe individual, at least as an adult. And maybe the wastebasket had issues with darkness. Plenty of others in the world did.

“I think you should sell this house,” the woman he had never loved told him before she departed the following morning for her business conference. “If not, at least take down that cross. It's really not you. I'd have all the locks in the place changed myself, but you're a man so I know you won't.”

Once she had left, he entered the room with the bed neither of

them had slept in the night before and found that the wastebasket was again filled with water. He took one of his three remaining baby teeth, did not panic when he saw that this one appeared to have an etching of his facial image from a time when he still believed his parents loved one another, and tossed it.

Vanished, as expected.

It was a Saturday morning. He decided that his fireman neighbor who had not lived across the street when he had been a child might know a thing or two about water since he worked with hoses, and so he invited the man to the house with the coaxing of beer to discuss the wastebasket situation.

The fireman neighbor, who kept his Christmas lights up year-round, took one look at the water and said, "It's probably just condensation, the air doing whatever it does because of the shape of the room, something like that. I have a brother who teaches ninth grade science; I can bring him by for a second opinion, if you like. But it's really nothing I'd worry about."

He then told the fireman neighbor about the disappearing teeth but not the etched facial images of his almost-forgotten selves.

"You on drugs?" the fireman neighbor asked factually. "You seem a bit out of true right now. I work with a guy who smokes the happy leaf when he's not at the stationhouse, and you're sounding like him."

He said that he did not do drugs. Then, he asked if he could borrow some of the fireman neighbor's Christmas lights in exchange for beer, which was agreed to. His neighbor suggested he just throw away the wastebasket and buy a new one. He had not considered this, but he did not like the idea of forever losing all of those teeth the wastebasket had consumed.

That night he—now ritually—emptied the wastebasket water. He then hung a strand of the fireman neighbor's Christmas lights over the doorway to the room, thinking that he really should have bought a wreath from that scout.

The following evening he was convinced his home had been burglarized while he was out seeing how much money a pawnshop would give him for a very expensive pocket watch his ex-wife had presented him with on the day he had finished his final graduate school exam.

The supposed intruders were gone when he returned home. He saw that the front door was wide open, all of the lights were out, and the entire house was empty. Everything was missing, even the plastic utensil holder in the kitchen drawer. All of the edible items were gone as well, only a half-empty jar of kosher pickles remaining in the refrigerator. Samoa

crumbs littered the kitchen countertop, and the empty boxes had been broken down, folded, and placed neatly in the recycling bin.

His little basement music room where his younger sister had once revealed her secrets was stripped of all the many vinyl records he had been collecting and cherishing since a special cousin had given him a copy of KISS's *Destroyer* album to play and wear out on his first music player, a 1978 Fisher Price Child's Record Machine. The room still smelled of recent sex, though. Only now his albums had disappeared forever. He remembered how mortified his mother had been when, as a small boy, he had begged for her to paint his face in replication of KISS drummer Peter Criss' cat-like stage persona instead of dressing him as Haman for an annual Jewish Community Center grade school Purim parade. His younger sister had willingly costumed herself as Queen Esther because back then she was still a daughter who had wished to please. He had later shamed his parents even more when his high school guidance counselor said during one of his many disciplinary conferences, "Your son is the type of boy who discovered Rock 'n' Roll far too early."

When he went into what had been his parents' master bedroom in his childhood, he saw that the wastebasket had not been taken by the supposed thieves and that his two remaining baby teeth were resting on the hardwood floor where the bureau once stood.

He tossed one of the teeth to the wastebasket after noticing that its facial image etching was of him painted feline-like as a child.

Blop.

The next morning he told his fireman neighbor what happened to all of his belongings and asked if he had seen the supposed culprits in the act. He mentioned that he had not unpacked most of his moving boxes, so they would be easy to recognize.

"Listen, buddy, I was drinking wine and playing cards with my brother on my porch until three in the morning. I can see your place right across the street, and the only person we saw was you when you came home. You sure you aren't firing up the hippie salad? Maybe you should talk to somebody. I think the stationhouse shrink does private sessions. She's hot, too, probably a good time in the sack. Or, maybe that's not what you're looking for right now."

He said he would consider it.

The pickles were now gone, all of them inside his tummy and the jar recycled.

As he walked from room to empty room of the house drinking beer from the can, having turned on every single light of the place, he wondered if this was how the home had appeared when his parents had

first seen it with the intent to purchase, decades before. He imagined his mother holding his seven-month-old tiny body, cradling his not-completely-hardened head that did not yet have all his baby teeth grown in. He envisioned her being unhappy that she was already five months pregnant with his younger sister and praying it would be a girl because his father had insisted that they keep trying until they got a daughter, not knowing that the daughter they were going to get would escape to a seaside city of her desire and for their remaining years only be in the same location as them a number of times they could count on one hand, including their funerals. He could picture his father irritating the real estate agent with inquiries about every detail of the home and its condition and sporadic restorations over the years since its original construction.

He fingered the last of his baby teeth in the pocket of his khakis the way a coworker of his would never leave home without the cork from the final bottle of merlot he had drank before going sober four girlfriends ago. He wanted to think of the tooth as a good luck charm, but that did not seem right since this last one bore a facial image etching he did not recognize at all. He drank more beer and wondered—if he swallowed that last baby tooth down his throat with a gulp of the water from the wastebasket, would he disappear, too?

He sipped more beer.

He had always preferred drinking in airports, but since his divorce he did not travel much. He wondered if his sister also enjoyed drinking in airports, because she still traveled quite a bit. No longer pretending to enjoy going to new places and being exposed to different cultures instead of staying put might have been the only aspect of his former wife's absence in his life that he did not lament. When they had visited other countries, she had always returned despising the fact that she was from theirs—and he had come back grateful that his family had left the Old Country and had ended up where he was born.

He slurped his beer.

He took note of things in the house that once were one way and no longer were that way, at least those he remembered, such as the fact that his father, whom he had known to be cheaper than ice water his entire life, had finally installed central air less than a month after his younger sister had declined a college education and left home for her adopted seaside city on her eighteenth birthday, precisely eighteen days after her high school graduation.

He could remember a time when every room of the house was covered with wallpaper. Most of it had been removed throughout the years, with the exception of the country-themed flower print in the breakfast nook because his mother had been sentimental about it, claiming that it

had been the first real luxury expenditure made on the home and that his father had put it up himself, a claim he found impossible to believe because he had never seen his father so much as change a light bulb.

There was a great stillness in the house. It was as if all of the improvement projects any of its occupants throughout the years had ever considered enacting were discarded and the domicile was finally accepted as the only non-combatant, as families consecutively fell apart within its walls.

Then the telephone rang four times, and from the answering machine he heard the voice of his sister, wishing it was that of his once wife, and finally not answering because he felt no inclination to speak.

He swallowed some more beer.

He decided to turn off all of the lighting except his fireman neighbor's loaned Christmas lights. Sitting cross-legged on the original oak hardwood floor of the room his parents once slept in, he held his single remaining baby tooth as he finished the last of another beer with the opposite hand. Again, he did not know the face etched into this final one.

The empty can crumbled and dropped like an afterthought to the hardwood at his side, a trickle of beer dripping to the floor.

He took the tooth and underhanded it to the wastebasket near the door to the hallway, a hallway that was lit by the glowing Christmas lights framing the door to the room. The tooth collided with the cross that was nailed above it and bounced downward.

The sound was a clink. There was no blop-to-water sound. He stood and stepped to the wastebasket, took it by the rim, shook, and heard rattling—like twenty gravel pebbles keeping something lost grounded.

Peering over the rim, he looked inside and saw a dark other twenty times over—multiple faces of his many almost-forgotten pasts. Only he could not decide which one of his former and discarded selves he wanted returned to the world.

Instead, he emptied the trash, then dimmed the Christmas lights—low.