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Class of 2022
“Cheshire”
Fiction
Cheshire

I kept all your milk teeth in an old jam jar, you know, after taking them from underneath your pillow. Over the years I paid you twenty dollars in singles and collected an ever-increasing rattle, holding you while you cried and bled and healed and teethed again. You never lost your faith in the Tooth Fairy or Santa or the Easter Bunny, even when you were ostensibly too old not to wonder, and I had to fill you in over steaming bowls of pho at the corner store on Second and Main and you did your best to fight the tears but they came strong as ever.

You were a late bloomer, a real shrinking violet when it came to speaking up, and the other moms would always tell me how to fix you with honey in their voices and arsenic in their eyes. Don’t you think he’s a little strange, they’d always ask, and haven’t you tried music therapy or tae kwon do or did you give him the MMR vaccine before he started to talk? It was that sticky smile in the asking, the way their questions sounded like accusations, the pseudoscientific bullshit they’d shoot me with until I stopped showing up to parent functions.

So bright, you always were, though, and curious, but your fear grew in lopsided like your upper left canine. You gave no thought to reckless things, stepped into traffic to see how headlights look up close, but shrank at little things like raising your hand or talking to the boy next door. I always told you life was a fragile thing like the little glass doll you used to love that fell and lost her head. You never listened.

Rough and tumble, you racked up scrapes and bruises faster than I could count, but as you aged the nature of them changed. Your eyes grew purple underneath from late nights studying, your wrists callused from resting against the keyboard. Your teeth straightened out on their own, almost like you’d willed them to when you found out how damn much braces would cost. You were always stubborn like that.
Anyway, all this is just to say that I still had your teeth rattling around in my bedside table when you graduated, and I still had your teeth when you moved away to college on the opposite coast, and they sat in the jar still rimmed with residue of age-old peach preserves when they became all that was left of you.

They kept you in cold storage for almost a month while I made up my mind because I knew you couldn’t bear the thought of being chewed by worms, but I couldn’t let them turn you to dust. *Those are your options, they told me, take your time (but not too much).* I could hear the parentheticals, and I could hear the tick-tick-ticking as the clock wound down. I didn’t know what they’d do to you if I couldn’t decide. But I couldn’t decide.

You’d never believe it if I—no, you would. Only you would, because when I was talking to you with my mouth half-full of noodles you stopped me with watery eyes and made me promise never to lie to you again. I held fast to that promise just as soon as I gulped down the broth and we were always straight with each other. You used to tell me things, but you stopped. Sometimes I wonder if…

But you were cold and hard and smooth, like a diamond in one of those fancy steel drawers, and I was hours away because I couldn’t afford the plane ticket out with all the cost of the funeral I was delaying. I slept with the windows open like always, letting the sound of rain on rustling leaves try to steady my breathing. I was curled into myself beneath the blankets and I remembered the way your hair used to smell when you were little, sweet and clean like day-old shampoo and a hint of sweat and fabric softener and vanilla. I couldn’t cry.

But something scuttled at the windowsill and when it wouldn’t stop I looked up. In the dim illumination of the city’s light-polluted glow, there was just the fuzzy outline of a squirrel, slick aerodynamic body belied by a bloated silk-spun tail, perched and staring with glassy eyes. I
froze, a shiver sliding up my spine, and could only watch as the squirrel leapt down to the
nightstand and bent over, its small busy hands tugging at the drawer.

Everything that followed was sounds. A whoosh as the drawer opened, a thud as the
squirrel leapt in, and the sound of rustling as it burrowed, searching, searching. The rattle of teeth
as it found its mark.

It lifted the jar and leapt out of the drawer holding it, though by all odds it shouldn’t have
been strong enough to do so. And it shook the jar some more, scampering back to the windowsill
on two stubby legs, and in a last brief flash of lightning before it jumped away, it smiled, and that
squirrel had your teeth.

I called up that minute when a gunshot thunderbolt swept the squirrel away and no one
answered, of course, because it was the middle of the night, even in your time zone. But the next
morning I looked out at the little mound of overturned dirt beneath the roots of that oak you used
to play by, and I called them and told them to bury you in the ground before winter because that
wasn’t you anymore, not really. You were a beautiful boy, you were, and now you are only a
smile.