My mother’s smile is white as the picket fence from a Norman Rockwell painting, and she blazes it at my daughter as we enter her house. It’s late, and I just drove four hours after working all day to bring my daughter by for a weekend visit. Mom never fails to give my daughter such a smile when she arrives. It’s a much better smile than any smile my mother gave me at that age. She raised me as a single mother; I am her eldest, youngest, and best all rolled into one. Still, I never got a smile like that. My mother did a lot for me, even though I always wanted impossible more. My father was never around when I was growing up, so I had to extract everything I needed from a parent out of her. Her parenting seemed to my naiveté agonizingly deficient in ways I couldn’t express in childhood. Yet even though she was cursed with a resentful ingrate for a son, she smiled a lot. I understood much better why she smiled after my daughter was born. Truth told, however, that my mother’s smiles from my youth were enough to make small children cry, and wracked with sobs they would beg my mother to purse her lips, lest her grotesque, gnarled, nicotine-stained teeth haunt those innocent toddlers’ nightmares for all time.

I remember always having to brush my teeth growing up. Every night before bed, in a bathroom so small I couldn’t lie flat on its floor as an adult, I would manipulate that vinyl tube until a tiny, iridescent glob made its way onto my toothbrush. Some months it went on a Kermit the Frog toothbrush. A few weeks later, the gelatinous teardrop of gel would go onto a Scooby-Doo toothbrush. But every night it went onto the bristles, and into my too-smart-for-its-own-good mouth the brush, bristles, and blob of toothpaste went. A scrub by the molars, a polish for the incisors, and away down the drain went my tiny mouthful.

“Did you brush?” my mother would shout down the six-foot hall from the living room.

“Yes, Mom, geez, I brushed.”

“You’d better,” she’d say ominously, puffing away on her never-ending supply of Virginia Slims. “You don’t want teeth like mine.”

“Mom, there’s no way I’m gonna have teeth like yours.” I’d have to smoke a half-pack a day to even get the color right.

“Oh no?” she’d respond, and exhale a thin stream of smoke down the hallway. “Just you wait.” And the smell of low-tar cigarette exhaust and her perplexing threat would follow me into my bedroom, over the carpet with its top layer of Legos, and into my soft, cold bed.

I remember my mother coming to pick me up after grade school one fall day from my cousin’s house. “You have to be nice to me today,” my mother told me.

“Why?” I asked, always needing a reason to justify such a ridiculous demand.

“I had four root canals this afternoon.”

“How long did that take?”

“A couple hours.” Her voice was uneven, and she seemed out of breath.

“They let you go from work?”

“I took a half-day.”

She got a half-day off work and I was supposed to be nice to her? Why are things never fair for kids? I asked myself. Why are things never fair for kids? I asked myself. Wait ’til I’m the grown-up.

“Does it hurt?”

My mother made a weird guffawing sound and looked at me like I was the one stupid enough to neglect my teeth for the better part of my life. “Yeah it hurts.” And then impatiently, in a single gasp: “C’mon; get in the car.”
Then there was a day in high school when she and I were eating a rare meal together at home. It was sunny out, and I stared out the window directly across from my place at the dinner table. I couldn’t tell you what we were eating, but I’m sure now it was soft food. I turned to say something nice to my mother – another rarity – and noticed her chewing her food slowly with a hand over her mouth for the entire duration of her mastication. *What the hell is this about?* I asked myself.

“Mom?”

“Hmm?” with a mouthful of food.

“Why are you eating like that?”

“Like what?”

“With your hand over your mouth like that.”

“I don’t want you to look at my mouth,” came her hesitant reply.

“Why?”

In retrospect, I think she felt close to me right then. I was taking a genuine interest in her, not treating her like the unique and persistent annoyance I saw when I looked at her. That’s probably why she foolishly answered honestly.

Slowly, quietly: “Some of my teeth fell out today.” It seemed to pain her to say it, but that sure as hell didn’t soften my enthusiastic response.

“No way…. No way! Let me see! You have to let me see!” Obligingly she turned her head so I could see the left side of her mouth and the yawning gap three of her top teeth left.

“I know it looks bad,” my mother said, fighting off tears.

“Bad? Mom, bad doesn’t even begin to cover it. What are you going to do?” Accusatorily, I continued, “You’ve got to do something. You can’t walk around looking like that.” I mean, she went to things like my band concerts, and sometimes to my friends’ houses to pick me up. As if there wasn’t enough humiliation packed into those acts?

She called me one day at college. Miraculously I found time to let her bend my ear, and for some reason I didn’t hustle her off the phone. After a few minutes, she dropped this bomb: “I got dentures the other day.”

“What? What do you mean you got dentures?” I gripped the phone tightly, like I wanted to make sure it wouldn’t lie to me.

“Well, ya know,” she rambled, “my teeth weren’t getting any better.” I could hear the sucking sound of her nicotine fix over the connection.

“Well no shit, Mom, but seriously? You’ve been saying how dentures are for old people for years.”

“I know, I know. But it just made sense.”

“So… do people notice?” I felt like I noticed over the phone.

“Jim, I’ll tell ya,” she shot back, her voice suddenly full of uncharacteristic purpose. “I went in to see my boss, you know, the young woman they hired? Well, I’m all the way across the room – and her office is big, now – and she takes one look at me and says to me ‘Ellen? Did you get dentures?’ And I said to her, (in a quiet voice now), ‘Yes, Cathy. Yes I did.’ “

I was riveted. “So what the fuck did she say to that?” I hollered over the phone, overtaken by this story for reasons I still can’t name.

“She said, ‘They look good, Ellen. They look very, very good.’”

I was flabbergasted.
A few months later, when I finally see her, I confirm the report: her dentures did look good. I couldn’t stop staring. My mom couldn’t stop smiling.
“And get a load of this,” she tells me. “They asked me if I wanted to keep my teeth. Can you believe that?”
“Did you?” I asked, about to jump out of my chair.
“Of course not! Why?”
“I would have taken them,” I tell her in a small voice.
“What on earth would you have done with my old teeth?” She was genuinely baffled. I may as well have told her I’d like to try to get myself pregnant.
“I just always thought of them as my birthright,” I told her shyly. “I had to live with them too, you know.”

And now, when I carry my kid in my arms through the doorway, my mother sits her granddaughter at the kitchen table and offers her cookies. We laugh, all three of us, and I can’t help but stare still at my mom’s teeth, so long as she hasn’t taken them out of her mouth for the night.

Before my kid heads off to bed, I tell her, “Hey now. You ate sweets and you’re going to go straight to bed? Brush those teeth. Grandma has a toothbrush for you in the bathroom. “
Then my mother, her jaws lined with man-made teeth, calls out to me, “Oh, Jim! She’s here for a visit! Lighten up with the rules! One night of not brushing her teeth won’t kill her!”
And at once a bad father and a good son, I obey my mother and let my exhausted daughter toddle off, teeth unbrushed, to my old soft, cold bed.

The End