



# **Death Of A Tooth** by Pamela Light

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Two weeks ago, I found out that I needed a root canal, although it all really started on a cruise ship three months ago. My husband Ron and I were walking around the photo gallery with my parents, deciding what to buy, when my mom stopped me in shock to ask if I knew I had a black tooth. I was instantly mortified. A black tooth?

Where? When did this happen? Ron and my father talked me down from my suicidal perch, straddling the handrail on the deck of the ship with one leg flailing out over the turbulent water. They convinced me that it wasn't really black and maybe it was just bad lighting. That didn't stop me from cutting the evening short, rushing back to the room to stare at the tooth for thirty minutes in the mirror, and then brushing my teeth until six bristles fell off the toothbrush.

The tooth wasn't black, but it was noticeably grayer than the others, which tended more toward the yellows. I spent the bulk of that week checking the tooth in the mirror at every opportunity and molding a piece of whitening gum around it whenever I had the chance. Over time I forgot about it.

A few months later it was time for my twice yearly cleaning. The scraping and polishing was going along like normal and the hygienist asked if I had any concerns about my teeth. I said, no everything's fine, since that was what I was used to saying about my teeth. Then I remembered to casually mention that I thought my right top canine was darker than the others. She called the doctor in to take a look.

The doctor said that the tooth looked dead. How can that be? I hadn't treated the tooth different than any of the others. It was fed and watered, brushed and flossed, along with the rest of them. Why would it be dead? Had the tooth hated the way I ate cereal three times a day and decided to take its own life rather than crunch through another mouthful of Corn Pops? Had the tooth suffered? Did it die a slow painful death while the teeth around it were forced to watch and cry little saliva tears as they lost a friend?

The doctor said that teeth could die from trauma in early childhood or from a bacterial infection that randomly invades the tooth at no fault of your own. I breathed a sigh of relief. I couldn't remember any trauma, so I was happy to believe that the tooth just died, at no fault of my own. But the information scared me at the same time. If tooth infections like these were unpreventable, what if all of my teeth fell victim to the bacteria? What if they all turned gray and need root canals? In ten years, would I be thirty-six years old and have a full set of dentures?

In order to confirm that the tooth was dead, the dentist tested to see if it had any feeling. He dipped a q-tip in a freezing solution and touched the cotton to one of my other teeth so I could see what it

should feel like. As soon as the solution grazed my opposite canine, my pain-indicating hand flew up so fast I almost knocked out the dental hygienist who was lingering over my shoulder and sadistically watching closely as pain was inflicted upon me. It was like pouring ice-cold water over an exposed nerve. He then placed the q-tip on the black tooth. I didn't feel anything. It was officially dead.

Two thoughts popped into my mind. First, I wondered if the dead tooth needed to be mourned in any way. Like maybe I should bite directly into an ice cream bar to honor the way it could no longer feel the cold.

Second, I realized that Mom hadn't been trying to give me a complex by nitpicking the shades of my teeth: she had actually been right. I thought about apologizing to her for the three days of silent treatment, but then remembered the way she licked her finger and rubbed my face raw trying to get off a "little something" that was stuck to my cheek. She didn't stop until I started to bleed and she realized it was a pimple that she had managed to pop in the cleaning process. She dabbed at it with a tissue as I stood there mortified and the crew member told us to smile for our commemorative Ahoy! Cruise ship photo.

Then I started to get angry. Not at Mom, at the tooth. Why the hell do teeth need nerves anyway? It's not like they need to feel anything. It doesn't feel good to have your teeth rubbed after a long day of chewing. The flavor of food and enjoyment of eating isn't enhanced by the nerves in your teeth. Basically the nerves just cause trouble if you ask me, like the pain you feel when someone sticks a freezing cold q-tip on one.

So the appointment was set for two weeks later. I was going to have a root canal. There was no getting around it. I had exactly fourteen days to get ready. To be more exact, I had 336 hours to become a hypochondriac with insomnia.

I really don't hate going to the dentist. I don't harbor fears about drilling and I generally trust in the person behind the goggles. But then again, I have never even had a filling. A root canal sounded twice as scary and that morning I braced for the worst.

What if they started drilling and the tooth just crumbled leaving a gaping hole in the upper right side of my mouth? What if the dentist over-drilled and made a hole in my jaw. Maybe I wouldn't feel it because I would be numb and I would go home, still numb, then later the Novocain would wear off and I would be in a red-hot world of pain.

Needless to say, as I lay in the chair with my fists clenched and my eyes tightly shut, these were the things that I was thinking about. An hour into the procedure he said that the root canal was done; he just needed to take an x-ray to check everything out. I was sure he was lying. It seemed to take forever for them to return with the films. I was convinced all the dentists in the office were back there huddled around the photo of my tooth, horrified that it all went terribly wrong and trying to figure out how they were going to tell me.

When they came back in, the dentist said that everything went perfectly and that we were ready to close it up. I didn't believe him at first, but it was true. Even to this day my super-sensitive tongue still can't tell that there was once a gaping hole in that tooth. The color is lighter too. I might not have to get it crowned unless it starts to get brittle.

Now, there's something new thing to worry about. Now that I have the root canal behind me and I managed to come out with my tooth intact, I can start worrying about biting into an M&M one day to have my tooth crumble into my frozen yogurt. Of course it would happen on a weekend and there would be no one to help me for days. I would have to walk around with bits of tooth and a gaping hole....