



The Spot

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I've never been afraid of going to the dentist.

Can I understand why people would be afraid? Sure. The typical dental visit brings with it the exact mixture of lies, confession and guilt that most people have to drag themselves to church for. And I think all of us can agree the picks used to clean your teeth could be designed to look a little less like something they use at Abu Ghraib to get you to talk.

But overall, the dental check-up is a good thing. You get your teeth cleaned. You get a new toothbrush, free. And if you play your cards right, you can usually talk the hygienist into a "happy ending."

At least, that's what I used to think. Then I went three years without dental insurance. During this time, my only option for teeth cleaning was being a guinea pig for dental students at the graduate school I attended. My response? Let them learn on someone else.

I don't think they even give dental students real equipment to work with. They just have to make do with whatever they have sitting around at home—Phillips head screwdriver, c-clamp, Craftsmen drill. Having already had my dad take a crack at one of my incisors with a pair of needle-nosed pliers when I was a kid, I passed.

So when my new job offered dental benefits, I knew it was time to make an appointment. But something strange happened: I didn't do it. For months the "make dentist appointment" note stared back at me from my computer, and I pretended not to see it.

I eventually realized, with an assist to *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, that visiting the dentist is like sex. At first it doesn't happen, for whatever reason. Then you start to get self conscious that it hasn't happened, making it even less likely to happen. And finally, you're left with a little set of blackened nubs, having to hire a teenager to do your chewing for you. And let me tell you, gone are the days when it was cheap to hire a teenager to do anything. They have iPods now. If they don't like what you're paying, they'll just stay home.

Making things worse is the fact that I have fillings. Four of them. That's not something I normally reveal, as fillings have slipped below STD's on the social acceptability register. If you have an STD, that at least means you have sex, possibly recklessly and with many partners. If you have a filling, it probably just means you were too lazy to floss out that piece of corn that was bothering you.

That's not true, though. I floss all the time, but I get cavities anyway. In college, I had roommates who practiced caveman dentistry, only occasionally picking at their teeth with small bones and twigs they found around our house. They never got cavities. But my trips to the

dentist are like asking a mechanic to tune-up one of those cars that has maroon doors and a blue body.

So what prompted me to finally make my dentist appointment? It was a little black spot on my molar. I was looking at myself in the mirror at work when I noticed it. My first thought was not to panic—the spot was probably just a little food. I tried to pick at it, but that didn't do anything. I moved on to swishing some water around and spitting it out. The spot was still there.

Panic set in.

I ran back to my desk for some sugarless gum to chew, but that didn't work. I sucked at my molar with my tongue; the spot stayed. Entirely ignoring work, I looked up top-of-the-line electric toothbrushes on the internet in the hope of making a retroactive bargain, but the spot didn't go anywhere. It was there to stay.

At my desk, I realized that it was all over. The tooth was just a sign indicating that my slow, inevitable decline had begun. Cancer couldn't be far behind. Next thing you know, I'd be lying in a hospital bed, my limbs shriveled, waiting to die.

Grasping at straws, I thought that maybe there was still enough time for scientists to develop artificial intelligence and then transfer my consciousness to a living computer before I died, allowing me to live forever—teeth intact—in some kind of mental world. At the rate my teeth were going, though, it didn't seem likely.

I called my girlfriend to tell her I loved her. Then I fell into a funk that lasted for the entire afternoon, until I got home and brushed my teeth and realized that the black spot had just been a piece of oregano.

Despite the harrowing ordeal, something good came of it—it got me to go to the dentist. My hygienist didn't even give me a hard time about how long it had been since my last visit. Best of all, I came out of there without any cavities—happy ending enough for me.