

## "A Tooth Story"

*There is nothing more disagreeable than teeth*, Laura thought, brooding in the back seat as her mother drove her to meet yet another orthodontist. Teeth grow where they want. They come and go when they want, and they are too lazy to even clean themselves. She wondered what the point was of having them, besides making food smaller. If only they would listen...

Today was their seventh attempt at finding the right orthodontist to fix Laura's teeth, but Laura already decided this orthodontist would not be the right one. Neither would the next. Or the one after. Or the one after that. Now, as her mother dragged her across the city on unfamiliar streets, down strange back roads, and through bizarre back alleys, Laura regretted telling her mother she would try. Wherever they were going was not going to be good. Wherever they were going was not going to work. And when they finally squeezed into a parking spot in front of a single-door shack on an unlit street, Laura crossed her arms and refused to get out of the car.

Unbuckling her seatbelt, her mother turned around and spoke softly. "You promised you'd try," her mother said with a smile that mothers used to convince their kids to do things they knew were terrible.

"Not here," Laura argued. "No way."

"Dr. Amazing is...well...amazing," her mother said. "I've heard good things about him."

"Dr. Amazing?" Laura blinked, unconvinced.

"That's his name."

Laura looked outside to the sign above the door. "It says Mortin's Music and Lou's Lighting," she pointed out.

"Yes," her mother said, "but there's an orthodontist office in the back."

Laura tightened her seatbelt. "I'm not going in there."

Her mother looked around, where there were strange people on the shadowed sidewalks. "I'll have to go in to cancel our appointment, then. I'm sure you'll be fine out here, in the car, *alone*. I'll just be a minute." Her mother's door swung open and Laura rushed out of the car to hold her hand.

"Just a minute," Laura said, and they went inside.

On the right were light bulbs and lamps. On the left were pianos and pan flutes. The room was partitioned in the back by an office the size of a doghouse. Laura's mom dragged her to Dr. Amazing's door, a cage-looking thing that had a sign that read *Dr. Amazing, Tooth Appearance Engineer*. Laura rolled her eyes. "Be nice," her mother instructed, and knocked three times on the cage door.

A squat old man in a rainbow suit appeared at once. "Well, well, well!" the man squeaked in a high voice. "Wipe your feet and come on in!" He pointed to a small rug that was made to look like the top of a toothbrush. Laura and her mother wiped their feet once, twice, three times for good measure and lowered their heads to fit into Dr. Amazing's office. "A bit cramped in here, but we'll get that fixed

up in no time, no time at all. Come, sit.” He ordered Laura into a chair more appropriate for a doll, it was so small.

“We’re cancelling our appointment,” Laura said crossly and did not sit in the chair.

Dr. Amazing gave the reluctant patient a sympathetic smile. “Cancellation requires foresight. Do you know what that is, young miss?” Laura said that she didn’t, so Dr. Amazing explained. “It means you need to look into the future and know what’s going to happen based on the decisions you’ve made. Do you know what will happen if you cancel this appointment like all the others, Laura?”

She nodded and gave Dr. Amazing a smug smile. “I won’t get braces.”

Dr. Amazing’s finger shot high above his short head. “That’s exactly what it means. And do you know what happens if you don’t get braces, Laura?” Laura didn’t answer, so Dr. Amazing retrieved a large photo album from the top of a dusty bookshelf. “Pardon the mess, most of my patients are quite willing so I don’t need this very often, but sometimes I do. Here, take a look at these.” Dr. Amazing opened the book and flipped through forty-seven terrible pages. In it, there were pictures of teen goblins and young vampires. There were children that looked like trolls and children that looked like ogres and children that looked like llamas and sharks and tufted deer and even parrotfish.

Laura grunted. “These aren’t real. You’re just trying to scare me.”

“Suit yourself,” Dr. Amazing said. “But you’ll miss out on the dance party. Thanks for coming. I hope you enjoy your day.” He opened the door for them.

Laura raised an eyebrow. “Did you say dance party?”

“It’s nothing,” Dr. Amazing waved a hand in the air. “But if you sit, I can tell you all about it.”

“Promise you won’t touch my mouth?” Laura asked skeptically.

“Promise.”

Laura’s mother found a stool and sat, watching with interest as Laura wiggled into Dr. Amazing’s tight chair. Then Dr. Amazing drew from his desk the smallest piano Laura had ever seen and a violin the size of a fingernail sliver. “Here, hold these,” he asked and Laura held out her hand as he deposited a guitar, a drum set, two tambourines, six lamps, two spotlights, and a coil of neon LED lights. “If you get braces from me, this comes with it.”

“Like a prize?” Laura asked.

“Like *equipment*,” Dr. Amazing said. “They go in your mouth and when I’m done installing them, you’ll have a dance party every time you open your mouth. Like this, see?” He pointed a remote control at the ceiling and the TV came on. Then Dr. Amazing played a video of one, two, fifty, a hundred children opening their mouths. Out came symphonies and rock concerts and country music and pop music and many kinds of rap. Lights flashed from tongues, beamed from cheeks, glimmered between gums.

Laura’s mother frowned. “Is it always this loud or can the sound be turned down?” she asked.

Dr. Amazing laughed. “Just a tap of the tongue turns it off.” Then he whispered to Laura, “And a whistle blasts it like a concert.” He winked.

“That’s impossible,” Laura said, though she really wanted it to be true.

“How do you think I got my name?” Dr. Amazing asked, and Laura was stumped, for she had no answer.

Two hours later, Laura left Dr. Amazing’s office with a concert in her mouth and played it for everyone at school. By the end of the week, every kid in Laura’s class had braces and their teacher had invested in the world’s best noise-cancelling headphones.