The Toothbrush

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Lately, when I examine myself in the mirror, I see signs of aging. Crow’s feet have begun digging their ditches underneath my eyes. Strands of gray hair dot the side of my head and my teeth show significant discoloration. I need to stop smoking.

Obvious years of neglect have soured my appearance. My pecks are laughable, wilting, and mushy. They could easily fill a small A-cup. I assume my fourteen-year-old girl breasts are from neglect, but I can’t justify going to the gym for self-righteous activities like lifting weights. *Even my arms have begun turning a bit flabby. I hope I don’t end up with bat wings*. 

I continue with the rest of my morning regimen: brushing my teeth, then going number two. But during the course of wiping, I’m reminded of a lingering problem—my chapped baby ass. The tube of prescription strength Zim’s Crack Cream was bone dry, so I applied a heavy coating of Johnson and Johnson’s baby powder. Joanna walked in and without asking proceeded to use my toothbrush.

“That’s disgusting. Why wouldja do that?” I asked, sitting up off the commode and shaking off white remnants.

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2 The extra skin left under the arm after gastric by-pass surgery like that of Jackie from the Discovery Channel program *627 Pound Woman.*
“Do what?” she questioned.

“Brush your teeth with my toothbrush!”

“I thought it was mine.”

“Well it wasn’t, and I haven’t brushed my teeth yet either.”

“It’s no big deal, Malik...I share my toothbrush with my brother all the time,” she said.

“Yeah, but you could get hepatitis or AIDS that way.”

“I don’t believe that. Sharing toothbrushes and drinking after people makes my immune system stronger,” she replied.

“Well I like to keep my germs to myself and would prefer it if others kept theirs.”

“That’s why you’re sick all the time. Your immune system is innocent.”

Joanna exited the room right before I tossed the infected toothbrush into the tiny, yellow-stained trash can next to the toilet. Her voice fading, she suggested we go to Fred’s to buy art supplies. The timing of her announcement couldn’t have been better. “Sure, I need to refill my prescription and get a new shower curtain liner anyways,” I replied.

Inside Fred’s, Joanna took off toward the stationary aisle in search of paints, brushes, and markers, while I went to inquire about my prescription. Questions
of egotism filled my head as I impatiently stood at the elevated counter, waiting for the pharmacist to acknowledge my existence. Why do pharmacists feel the need to stand on an elevated slab of floor? Do they get off on the high altitude? Thankfully an attractive young pharmacy tech came to my assistance and typed my pertinent information: name, date of birth, and insurance. “Mr. Albatross it looks like you have one refill left. If you don’t mind waiting, it’ll be just a few minutes.” I hate waiting, but it comes with the territory, and her sensuous foreign accent could have convinced me to do almost anything. So, temporarily under her spell, I filled out a customer survey in exchange for a free mail-order toothbrush and Colgate coupons. She thanked me for participating, and upon completion, I went in search for a new shower liner and toothbrush.

During the walk down the home accents aisle, I was intrigued by a loose copy of the National Enquirer lying in the middle of the aisle. The March issue contained a confession from Whoopi Goldberg entitled *Whoopi’s Wetness Woes*, where she addresses the American taboo of openly discussing LBL (Light Bladder Leakage). After finishing the article, I grabbed a shower liner and trudged to the hygiene aisle. I browsed the toothbrushes until I came across the exact toothbrush I had at home, a green Colgate medium bristle with a tongue scraper on the head.
Joanna rounded the end cap on the neighboring aisle as I slid the toothbrush inside the left sleeve of my pull-over. I knew if she saw the toothbrush she would get upset and cause a stink right in the middle of the store over my anal retentiveness toward germs.

“Malik Albatross, your prescription is ready,” called out from the speakers overhead, interrupting Toad The Wet Sprocket’s soft rock hit *All I Want*. “Are you ready?” I asked. She nodded, but on the way she was distracted by *Rocket Power* and *The Angry Beavers* themed coloring books. I knew if I didn’t get her away from the crayons and watercolors soon, we were bound to be in the store longer than necessary.

“Joanna come on, let’s go!”

“Hold on a second. I can’t decide which one to get.”

My claustrophobia ballooned as the narrow aisles slowly began closing in tighter and tighter. It was as if I was a piece of pipe in a vice stand and God was

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3 If the name doesn’t ring a bell then maybe the lyrics to the chorus will help: “All I want is to feel this way to be this close, to feel the same, All I want is to feel this way the evening speaks, I hear it say.” If this still wasn’t enough to jog that memory of yours, then consider yourself lucky. But if you love a good laugh, then immediately STOP reading this and run to a computer. Log on to Youtube and search for Toad The Wet Sprocket All I Want. This delightful little ditty, which obviously influenced the Goo Goo Dolls, is sure to repress any anger, frustration, and disappointment, to help rekindle that fading romance.
turning the lever squeezing me.

“Joanna, I’m not kidding, let’s go! I can’t take it in here anymore!”

The toothbrush, holding its ground in my sleeve, could not have been the furthest thing from my mind. At the exact moment I nervously bit the nail on my left index finger, the toothbrush dropped to the floor, directly in front of Joanna. She looked at it and said nothing. Her silence during checkout and the entire trip home made it known that she was disappointed. I pretended it didn’t bother me, tuning the stereo to iPod, and selecting Pere Ubu’s *Non Alignment Pact.*

**One Week later.**

After a week of the shower liner collecting dust, unopened, on the rack behind the bathroom door, I decided to hang it up before I did anything else. It was morning and Joanna was still sprawled across the bed. As I finished hanging up the shower liner my stomach began to growl. I promptly went to the kitchen, poured a bowl of Cheerios, and sat down on the couch to enjoy *Seinfeld* when Joanna called out from the adjacent room.

“Come lay down with me.”

“Hold on a minute. I’m in the middle of watching *Seinfeld.*”
“They’re just reruns. Pause it and watch it later.”

“They’re not reruns to me, and by now, you should know that I can’t pause a video right in the middle of it. I have to finish it!”

Living as a financially unstable college student I didn’t have cable, but fortunately an unsecure wireless network emitted enough signal on a daily basis, enabling me to use a torrent based website to download all nine seasons of *Seinfeld*. I finished eating my Cheerios and completed the last minutes of episode 51, “The Fusilli Jerry.”

Amid returning to bed, Joanna threw the covers over us and slid her cold alligator hands across my belly. Her worn and rugged hands made me feel weak and frail like she was the breadwinner of the house, roping cattle all day, while I attended some second-rate university, aspiring to be a writer. But her hands weren’t in this condition because she labored day and night. They were in such bad shape because she had ichthyosis. Without hesitation, Joanna stuck her hand down my pants and whispered, “We didn’t get to have sex last night.”

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4 I watch Seinfeld every day, sometimes even two or three times a day. Some may consider this odd or a bit obsessive, considering the final episode was in May of 1998, but as a kid my parents would hog the TV, watching Touched by an Angel and Coach.

5 The skin is usually rough and scaly. Often times referred to as Fishskin disease.
“I know. I was too drunk and tired.”
“You shouldn’t have taken that Xanax.”
“Well, you gave it to me.”
She took hold of my hand and shoved it between her legs. We fooled around for a bit each giving the other hickeys; she on my neck and me on her breast. The foreplay got dated after a few minutes, so we just did the damn thing. Afterwards, we lay in bed smoking cigarettes.
“Malik, what do you think the future will be like?” Joanna asked.
“Oh, I dunno.”
“Come on Malik, tell me. I’ll tell you what I think.”
“All right, if it’ll shut you up. I believe all this talk of chips implanted in human heads is completely misguided. Instead, I think it’ll be cow tags on our ears and people will be branded with a number. The government will halt production on all scissors so humans can’t cut the tags and there’ll be no sharp edges. Triangles, squares, and rectangles will all be eradicated from the English language.”
“That’s ridiculous. Why can’t you ever be serious about anything?” she asked.
“Oh and I forgot, bluegrass will be banned from the air waves, because it distracts farmers from their work,” I said.
“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about complete and utter mind control. I’m talking about the human race becoming a bee hive. We’re moving towards a day when people will know nothing but work. In the future, if the government catches you out drinking, dancing, and not producing goods, you’ll get arrested.”

Joanna blew a cloud of smoke in my face and put out her cigarette in the frying pan ash tray I had stolen from Waffle House. “I’m taking a shower,” she said, crawling across my abdomen to the edge of the bed. She grabbed a half empty can of beer sitting on the night stand and poured it on my head. “You bitch!” I screamed, picking up *War and Peace* off the floor. I threw it at her as she rounded the corner, but it missed its target, striking instead, the dead end road sign hanging from the wall just above the Abbey Road poster. I chased her down the hallway and just as I stepped on the paisley patterned rug, it surfaced me across the hardwood floor. I maintained my balance until I reached the linoleum kitchen floor, where I tried stopping myself by grabbing the door frame. But the momentum of my lower body went forward and I crashed flat on my back. I could hear Joanna slam and lock the door to the bathroom.

I’ve never hit a girl. I was raised not to, but I wanted to this time—something fierce. I banged and pounded on the door, nearly busting a hole in it, but
Joanna wouldn’t budge. We barked and yelped at each other for nearly fifteen minutes, trading petty remarks about each other.

“Your teeth are crooked and your armpits constantly sweat,” Joanna said.
“"I can’t help it... Proctor & Gamble has yet to develop a strong enough deodorant to cure my wetness problem. At least my ass doesn’t look like the foundation of a house that’s been picked up by a tornado and shifted about fifteen degrees!”

“Fuck you, Malik. You’re self-conscious, obsessive compulsive, and freakin’ crazy.”

She wasn’t the smartest girl I had ever dated, but in one aspect, she was right. I was self-conscious about my appearance and maybe a bit OCD, but I was not crazy by any stretch of the imagination. It was then I realized I didn’t want to be alone, that I needed turmoil, violence, and regret. I needed her. I gave her a simple half-hearted apology, and that’s all it took for her to open the door.

“You know, I still got an hour left until work, if you wanna go again,” she said. I didn’t really have the desire to, but I thought what the heck, it’s only three minutes of my life.

“Hey, let’s do it in the shower,” she said.

“Okay, but let me brush my teeth first. I got cigarette and Cheerio breath.”
“It doesn’t matter. Just brush ‘em afterwards.”

We went into the bathroom, and immediately upon turning on the bath water, I was doused with cold water.

“Dammit, Joanna, you left the freakin’ diverter knob up, and now my hair is wet.”

“What does it matter? You’re about to get in the shower anyway,” she said.

“That’s not the point. I hate surprises.”

We both undressed. Our flaws were completely exposed under the bathroom light—the stretch marks on her breast and my chapped baby ass. We were leaving nothing to be desired. No imagination needed. Stepping into the shower, Joanna hiked her leg up and propped it on the tub’s edge and clutched my left thigh, pulling it toward her. I almost slipped and fell but managed to catch myself, grabbing the window ledge above me. We readjusted and tried again but our heights didn’t match. She’s about 5-foot-4, and I’m 6-foot-2. I had to bend my knees in a squatting position and pretend as if I was sitting in a chair. My knees trembled and hurt from the awkward positioning. Meanwhile my pickle struggled to find the jar, slipping and missing, poking her in the belly button.

“Malik, if you can’t get it right, then let’s just lie down in the tub and try it,”
she said.

“I’d love to do that, but there’s one problem. I can’t fit lying down either, my legs are too long.”

“Well what are we gonna do?”

“Just turn around. It’ll be much easier from behind.”

Joanna repositioned herself, but there was a new problem: the newly acquired shower curtain liner was a piece of shit. It flapped in the water’s breeze like a square of Saran Wrap and stuck to my hip, wrapping itself around my leg. I peeled it off, but it latched on to my back like a sweaty t-shirt during a dog day summer in Alabama.

“That’s it. Later on this afternoon, when I get outta school, I’m gonna buy a new liner. I’m gonna buy one that’s heavier and has suction cups on the bottom,” I said.

Joanna looked at me with a scowl, and I could tell in her eyes she was livid with me.

“What the hell is your problem?” she demanded.

“My problem is that damn...”

Joanna put her hand over my mouth.

“For one moment will you let me talk? Why are you busy complaining about
the freakin’ shower liner when I’m basically throwing myself at you? Can’t you see that?”

“So what? You’re always throwing yourself at me. Later tonight, you’ll be shoving your hand down my pants and biting my ear,” I said.

The water began to turn cold, so I turned it off. I had successfully wasted gallons of water. And for what purpose? I had neither bathed nor came.

“But you like it when I do that, don’t you?” she said.

“Not particularly. You do it so often that it’s become somewhat stale.” Joanna’s eyes lit up, and she pushed me over the tub’s edge. I tumbled backwards carrying the shower curtain, liner, and rod with me. I landed upside down in some contorted yoga position with my feet propped against the bathroom door. I was a little woozy but managed to untangle myself from the wreckage. Joanna screamed and threw the toilet brush, striking me square across the face.

“Jesus tap dancin’ Christ Joanna. You go and push me out of the tub and then have the audacity to throw the disgusting fuckin’ toilet brush at me!”

“Well, sometimes you piss me off with your snappy little remarks,” she said.

“You asked me if I liked it when you nibbled on my ear, and I said I didn’t. If you don’t wanna know what I really think, then don’t ask,” I said.
“Fine then, I’m not gonna tell you anymore who flirted with me at school.”
“Good, I don’t ask you to discuss that with me anyways.”
“You know what, Malik? I could kick your skinny ass, but I know a better way
to get back at you.”
“Whatever, you’re not clever enough to get back at me.”
She shoved me aside on her way out the bathroom, knocking my elbow into
the towel rack. I dropped to my knees grimacing in agony, massaging and
flexing my elbow. But the sound of Joanna’s inelegant strut quickly returned.
She was holding my large drawing pad and snickered, “Watch this.” Puzzled, I
followed her into the bedroom and noticed a toothbrush and a tube of paint in
her hands. Before I could stop her, she dipped the toothbrush in the paint and
went Jackson Pollock on one of my charcoal drawings.
“Joanna, please tell me you’re not using my toothbrush to spatter paint
on my drawing.”
“I sure am,” she said.
I sprinted back to the bathroom, hoping and praying to see my toothbrush
behind the faucet of the porcelain sink. It was gone, and I heard the front door
open and shut.
“Joanna, where the fuck do you think you’re going!” I yelled, storming into
the bedroom.

“Nowhere dear, the mailman just arrived.”

“Oh great, did he come bearing gift wrapped doctor bills?”

“Nope, it’s a Colgate toothbrush and coupons.”

Joanna thought it would be cute to play carrot-on-a-stick by waving the toothbrush in my face.

“Give me that damn thing!” I called out.

Joanna and I wrestled around the apartment, banging into the beige walls and knocking over the frying pan ashtray. Trading the upper hand, we rolled around on the hardwood floor covered in cigarette butts and ash. One moment Joanna would have control, the next, I would. We tugged and pulled until our momentum flung our bodies onto the bed. The morning sunlight cut through the blinds, illuminating a halo around the toothbrush. Both of our hands firmly gripped the toothbrush as if it was a holy sacrament raised in matrimony to God. Gasping for air, on both knees, we rested our foreheads together. We had come to a stalemate.

“Look at us. What are we doing?” Joanna asked, her breath next to mine.

“I dunno. What are we doing?” I questioned, returning the favor.

“Eww, your breath does stink.”
“I told...”

But before I could finish, Joanna once again interrupted me. This time, however, it wasn’t to yell at me. It was so she could lay me on my back and straddle my torso. Her long straight black hair tickled my bare chest as she teased me with soft wet kisses around the naval. Commence make up sex. Amid the mechanical back and forth thrusting, the forgotten toothbrush appeared just out of arms reach. Joanna had her eyes closed, so I made quick of it, extending my right arm to near dislocation. Luckily, my fingertips made enough contact to move the toothbrush into arms reach, before Joanna re-opened her eyes.

“Malik, what are you doing?”

“Nothing, sorry. The comforter was rubbing my knee raw.”

“Okay, but please don’t stop. I’m almost there,” she requested, closing her eyes again.

It was now or never, so I made my move. Stretching my arm out, I seized the toothbrush and shoved it in a random pants pocket around my ankles. When we finished I rolled over and proudly blurted.

“I told you so.”

“Whadja tell me?” She asked.
I reached into my pants pocket, retrieved the procured toothbrush, and showcased it like Vanna White. “I toldjah you’d be throwing yourself at me.”