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The Root of the Problem

Jerry Zezima

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The Root of the Problem

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Monday January 15, 2024

By Jerry Zezima

Word of mouth has it that on a pain scale of 1 to 10, the bad tooth that recently made my jaw feel like it had been hit by lightning was a 47.

That's why, far from home and without dental insurance, which only compounded the agony, I needed an emergency root canal.

Fortunately, I got one from a great endodontist who once gave himself a root canal and lived to tell about it.

My tale of misery began when my left lower molar — tooth number 18 if you are scoring at home — began to be sensitive to cold. Since my mouth produces nothing but hot air, I didn't see how this could be possible.

But sure enough, cold water and, yes, cold beer nearly sent me ricocheting off the ceiling.

So I called my dentist. Just my luck, he was on vacation. Even worse, my wife, Sue, and I were leaving on a 300-mile road trip to see our older daughter and her family.

I figured I could tough it out for a week until we got back. My molar had other ideas. It was some nerve.

The pain intensified daily until I woke up in the middle of the night feeling like someone had jackhammered my tooth and poured molten lava into it.

My daughter, taking pity on me, asked friends to recommend a dentist who was not on vacation and could see me immediately.

Thus did I end up in the office of Dr. Candice Turpin, a friendly, gentle and exceptionally capable dentist who said my molar was cracked and asked about my level of pain.

When I told her it was a 47, she said, "You're very pleasant for someone who's in so much pain. It's amazing that you're cracking jokes."

"It's better to crack a joke than to crack a tooth," I responded.

"You've done both," said Dr. Turpin, who suggested I see an endodontist. "You may need a root canal," she added.

Mercifully, Dr. Kaveh Zand was in the same building, wasn't on vacation and could see me right away.

Sure enough, he said I needed a root canal.

"Don't worry," said Dr. Zand. "It won't hurt. In fact, I once gave myself a root canal."

"Who held the mirror?" I wondered.

"I did," he replied.

"How did it come out?" I asked.

"Great," the good doctor said. "And I didn't feel a thing."

Then, as I reclined in a chair, he produced a needle that looked like it could be used for spearfishing and said, “This is the only part that’s not fun.”

After he numbed my gum, which conveniently rhymed, I said, “That was fun!”

Next, Dr. Zand took me to another chair, told me to open wide, put what looked like a plastic tarp over my molar and got to the root of the problem.

When the half-hour procedure was over, he said, “You have three canals under that tooth. One is infected, but it’s not the one that was giving you trouble.”

“It sounds like an eerie canal,” I remarked.

“You’re going to need a crown,” Dr. Zand informed me.

“Because my tooth was a royal pain?” I said.

Dr. Zand flashed a dazzling smile and replied, “I see the anesthetic has worn off.”

A few days later, I was back in Dr. Turpin’s office.

“How did the root canal go?” she asked.

“Fine,” I said. “Dr. Zand and I bonded.”

Dr. Turpin smiled and said, “You’re still joking. I’m going to numb you now.”

After she crowned me, she put a filmy material on my tooth and said, “Grind for me.”

I shimmied in the chair.

“No,” Dr. Turpin said. “I mean grind your teeth.”

With that, my torturous experience was over. Or at least I thought so. Because I don’t have dental insurance, which is said to be not worth the cost, the total bill came to \$7,000.

“That’s a lot of money,” Sue noted.

I nodded and said, “You took the words right out of my mouth.”

— Jerry Zezima

Jerry Zezima writes a humor column for Tribune News Service, which distributes it to newspapers nationwide and abroad. He is also the author of seven books, *Leave It to Boomer*, *The Empty Nest Chronicles*, *Grandfather Knows Best*, *Nini and Poppie’s Excellent Adventures*, *Every Day Is Saturday*, *One for the Ageless* and his latest, *The Good Humor*

Man: Tales of Life, Laughter and, for Dessert, Ice Cream, all of which are “crimes against literature.” He has won eight awards from the National Society of Newspaper Columnists for his humorous writing.