

THE BUDDING

By Thekla Kennieson

A Rusty Fears 4 Winning Entry – Read by Fay Roberts

Content Warnings:

- Anxiety & impostor syndrome
- Body horror
- Graphic self-injury
- Self-recrimination & self-doubt
- Occasional second-person POV
- Paranoia
- Discussions of: injuries & pain, medical issues, self-hatred, blood
- Mentions of: nightmares

They say that dreaming of your teeth falling out is a sign of stress. They say that sleeping and seeing visions of enamel and bone landing in your palms means that you're feeling overwhelmed, drowning in expectation or doubt or any one of a hundred things. They say that it's a remarkably common dream, despite its strangeness. That it's normal. That you shouldn't be worried about it.

Aaron has never had such dreams, but his hands are full of teeth all the same.

It first started some months ago now, during a meeting with his new boss that had sent anxiety crawling up his spine like slow-growing roots. It had been a normal meeting, all things considered – they discussed all the standard things that one would discuss when arriving at a new job, ensuring that he was clear on where the printers were, and that he knew who to talk to if he needed to

change his HR details. And then, right at the end of the meeting, the question came: “And how do you feel about your new responsibilities? You know what’s expected of you – do you think you’ll be able to handle it?”

And there it was. Aaron swallows, his throat suddenly tight. He’s always hated this question. He’d felt perfectly confident in the job when he’d first applied for it, but now, standing here, he’s no longer quite so sure. “I— Yes. I-I think so.”

“You *think* so?”

“I-I handled similar responsibilities at my old job.” He laughs, trying to inject some lightness into the conversation. It comes out weak. “I can’t imagine things will be too different here.”

The smile his boss gives is a wide one, but Aaron can still feel her gaze boring into him, stripping away his weak, paltry qualifications like the layers of a cocoon. *You can’t do this.*

“Yes,” she says. “Yes, I’m sure there’ll be plenty of similarities.”

When Aaron smiles back, trying to make it meet his eyes, he feels something sharp press against the skin of his stomach. It feels like a nail digging into his skin, but the direction is all wrong – the pressure that it’s exerting isn’t coming from outside his body.

It’s coming from within.

He tries to keep his smile steady, but he knows that his boss sees the flicker. 'Weak,' she's surely thinking. 'He'll never be able to keep up here. We should have hired someone else.' He can see it. He can *see* it. His boss' eyes flicker over him, taking in his poorly-ironed shirt and his overly-polished shoes and the dark bags beneath his eyes. Taking in all the inadequacies that lurk beneath his skin. Taking in all his failures.

She doesn't say anything, though, and somehow that's almost worse. She finishes the meeting, dismissing Aaron back to his new desk with a smile that feels just as fake as his own. Aaron thanks her, and then leaves her office as fast as he politely can, the whole time feeling the mounting pressure pressing against his skin like a scream. In the bathroom, safely away from the prying eyes of his new co-workers, he isolates himself in a stall, yanking his shirt up with shaking fingers to find...

A spot.

It sits on the skin of his stomach, sullen red around the edges and a smooth, taut white at the top. It looks smooth, shiny, beneath the flat light of the bathroom, and when Aaron draws in a sharp, gasping breath, he swears he can feel it pulse. Slowly, carefully, he reaches one finger towards it, feeling out the shape of the hard object that lies beneath the tight skin. The surface of the spot is cool beneath his fingertip, but he feels it for barely a moment before finding his finger starting to curl inwards, the nail catching on the skin and tugging sharply. It gives far easier than he'd expected, peeling back like tissue paper to reveal what lies beneath.

A single tooth stares up at him. It's a canine, slick and white where it protrudes up and out of his skin. In the fluorescent light it looks almost unreal, like it's some photo-edit or image manipulation, but Aaron can still feel the root of it embedded in his stomach, exerting a dull, faintly painful pressure against his flesh. Numbly, he takes it between forefinger and thumb, grasping it as firmly as he can. And then, with a sharp inhale, he tugs.

The tooth comes free with a soft pop, falling away to rest in the palm of his hand. The surface of it is dry and smooth but the root feels softer, somehow, in a way that Aaron doesn't know how to describe. For a few long, silent minutes he stares at it, watching it shine in the light. He doesn't know what to do with it. He doesn't know what's happening to him. This can't be normal. This can't be healthy.

But what, whispers a familiar voice in his head, *if it is?* He's never heard anyone talk about this before, but what if that's simply because it's so normal that no one *needs* to talk about it. He doesn't want to make a fool of himself. He should just deal with this on his own. It's better for everyone. Maybe if it keeps happening then he'll talk to someone about it, but they'll probably just tell him to ignore it and see if it goes away. He's always worried too much about his health, he figures. This is... It'll be fine. It'll all be fine.

Aaron puts the tooth in his pocket, and takes it home at the end of the work day.

The teeth haven't stopped coming since. They'd been sporadic at first, maybe one or two a week, and always cropping up at the worst possible times, like just before important meetings or during phone calls with his parents.

They're almost daily now, and Aaron swears there's more of them. Each pustule, each growth, there's always more teeth, clustered in gum-pink rosettes like some grisly imitation of a flower.

He always plucks them out. Sometimes they come away clean, falling neatly into his hands to leave pockmarks of skin that heal over in a few days, but sometimes, on his worse days, they're messier. Sometimes there's blood.

Often there's blood.

He's lost track of how many shirts he's had to soak in salt and cold water to keep them clean. He's started keeping plasters in his bag, but even they don't help matters much. He never knows if he's using them right. It's a ridiculous thought to have, if he's using plasters correctly, but it's one he has all the same. Should he be cleaning the spot first? Should he be disinfecting it? Should he be rinsing it with water and dabbing it dry before pressing the plaster down over the top? He can't be doing it right.

You never do anything right.

There's no plasters in his bag today. He realises his mistake almost the moment he arrives at work, and the sickly swell of dread and shame that threatens to overwhelm him makes him... [HEAVY SIGH] makes him miss the

dull pressure starting to press against his hand. Of course. Of course he forgot to bring plasters. That's just like him, isn't it? To forget something that's become such a vital part of his day to day life.

The private embarrassment continues to grow as the day drags on, climbing up his throat to wind, vine-like, around his larynx until he feels like he's choking on it. Can he *really* keep doing this? Other, older, more familiar thoughts follow closely on the tail of the first one. How long will it be until people notice? Not just the teeth – how long will it be until they notice his awful, aching lack of skill? He fooled all these people into thinking that he was capable of doing this job, but that can't last forever.

With every day that passes he feels more nervous, more unsettled, and he's making mistakes almost daily, now. He's sure that he is. No-one's said anything to him, just giving him smiles and faint praise that almost stings with how blatantly false it is, but he knows that they're all thinking it: *You shouldn't be here.*

The growing tooth in his hand becomes impossible to ignore by the time that 5pm rolls around. Aaron can feel it pressing against his skin, eager to break free, but he ignores it as best he can. He grabs the strap of his bag tightly in his hand, squeezing it against his palm as though trying to force the tooth back inside his flesh and muscle.

At the subway station, waiting for his train, he fixes his eyes on the map on the far platform and follows the lines over and over and over in an attempt to keep himself distracted. It works a little bit, but for all the wrong reasons – the more

he looks at the map, the more he realises that he doesn't actually know where most of the lines go. He doesn't actually know where *his* line goes. Is it even the right train, the one that he's planning on getting? It has to be – it's the same train that he's been getting for the last few months, he's sure of it. He knows it is.

...Right?

The doubt coils around his mind like brambles, thorns sinking deep into his thoughts. Against his palm, the spot pulses with pain again. Aaron shuts his eyes, drawing in a breath heavy with the fumes of the subway station. There's no point in second-guessing this. The worst that will happen is that he'll get on the wrong train, realise part way through the journey, and then get off at the next stop and ride back to where he is right now. It's fine. It's all going to be fine.

The clattering of an approaching train startles his eyes open. The swell of commuters pushes him forwards, urging him onto the carriage. The spot throbs once more, dull and insistent, as Aaron takes a seat, tucking himself up against the side of the carriage and grabbing his bag strap tightly with both hands. Will he get off at the right stop this time? Will he remember his bag?

The train starts to rattle and hum around him, metal clattering over metal. He can feel the tooth starting to break free through the skin of his palm, warm blood seeping through his fingers to stain the straps of his bag a deep, rusty crimson. He can't let anyone see. He can't let anyone know. His throat feels thick and tight, choked with the same questions that he's had for what feels

like forever. Has he always had this nagging sense of inadequacy, this lingering impostor syndrome rooting itself deep in his bones? It feels like he has. He can't remember a time before it.

He can't remember a time before the teeth.

Aaron curls his hand tighter, and the blood flows like honey.

His flat, when he finally arrives home, is peaceful and quiet, but Aaron can hardly hear the silence past the clamouring in his head. When he drops his keys into the bowl by the door, a scattered handful of teeth goes with them, and he has to spend a few seconds picking them out before he's able to move through to the kitchen. He pours himself a glass of water with shaking hands, downs half of it, and crosses to the window box that sits on his inside windowsill. The teeth feel smooth against his palm, flesh-warm and tacky in places with drying blood. He doesn't wash them. He doesn't think that it will help.

With steady, methodical actions, Aaron starts digging his fingers into the cool, damp dirt of the window box. He scoops it out in little divots, barely an inch or so deep, and then drops a tooth into each one. This time, he needs five beds in total, three for molars and two for the smooth, sharp canines. They shine dully against the dark soil before he pushes it over them, obscuring them from view.

Aaron pats the soil gently, just once. The teeth are hidden now, safely buried away where no-one will ever see them. No-one has to know. He can rest easy, at least until the next tooth comes. And it *will* come – he knows that. He

doesn't know when, or where, but the next tooth will come, and he will pluck it out, and bury it alongside its brethren in this little, waiting garden.

He doesn't know what will happen to them. Some part of him has been entertaining thoughts of growth, of life springing forth from these strange, unnatural things, but he knows that can't be right, and even if it was, he couldn't do it. He's not skilled enough for that. He can't tend to normal plants, let alone whatever these are. He'll mess it up, the same way he messes everything up.

He pours the last of his glass of water over the soil all the same. He stands there for a few seconds, watching it seep in, and then forces himself to turn and leave. He'll think about this later, when he's better prepared for it. He'll think about this when he feels like he can handle it.

The door to the kitchen shuts behind him with a quiet click.

At the end of the window box, the first of the teeth are already starting to sprout.

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Rusty Fears 4 – E02 – The Budding

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