

**RUSTY FEARS 7**  
**“THE TOOTH FAIRY’S TALE”**

**BY BEN FOLK**  
**PROMPT: FORENSICS**

**[Music]**

**ANNOUNCER:**

**The Tooth Fairy's Tale by Ben Folk**

**[Music]**

**NARRATOR:**

**Screams of pain. Sobs of children. Voices raised in grief, anger, and consuming fear. Stepping through the ER of the Morcris Family Hospital is like diving headfirst into the raging depths of a storm-swept ocean. Small, unassuming, and woefully understaffed, it is not used to such strain.**

**The quick strides of my clogs, cement boots squeaking across freshly-mopped linoleum, are the only thing that keeps me from being swept away by the torrent. There - the front desk. I rap my knuckles across wood, but her back is turned, a phone pressed to her ear. Her tone is low and assuring, but beneath the table, fingers tug and tug at a loose string. An ever-increasing stack of intake forms sits waiting for attendance.**

**“Emily,” I call, then again, louder. The chair swivels, and eyes barely register my presence before a clipboard is thrust into my hands. I don't look at it - not yet. Time to continue onwards. Squeak, squeak, across the floor. I quicken my pace to avoid a sliding trolley. Its occupant, an elderly liver-spotted man, grimaces in pain. Bubbling red burns curl up his limbs, practically spelling out the hiss of flames.**

**I drag my eyes away. *Onwards.***

**Head down. Eyes forward. One foot after another. I reach the elevator. A doctor rushes out, a resident scrambling to follow suit. I step past them and inside to tap the button marked 'B.' The metal cage shudders, then trundles downwards at a shaky pace.**

***You can do this.***

It is only once I push through that final heavy door and into the cold, steel coffin of the morgue that I breathe. A deep, shuddering breath that reminds me all too much of the storm upstairs. I take the liberty of another. Then - gloves on, face shield up - I get to work.

*You can do this.*

### The First Body:

You must understand, when I say that this was my first day on the job I do not in any way mean that I didn't know what I was doing. No, years of training, toil, and sweat had led up to this moment. I had certainly done a couple of autopsies before - always accompanied by an attending physician or a team of other students, of course, but I knew what I was doing. *I was a forensic examiner fellow, I told myself, and I knew what I was doing.*

I opened the freezer door and slid out the first body. The tray it lay on clicked smoothly into the transition cart, which I then wheeled over to the central examination table.

What had Dr. Balefas said before he'd left? *It's just a one-night conference. Remember: stick to routine. It's a good opportunity to get practice in, for when you take over. There's a first time for everything. Maybe take another look at the Caldwater case. Just do three inspections and call it a day. I'll be back in the morning.*

Well here was my opportunity, laughing me in the face.

Only three autopsies. Only three bodies.

I looked down at the corpse.

The flesh on its face was cracked and sunken, twisted from the heat. Blood pooled under blackened cheeks, but freshly shaved sideburns indicated that there had been life just days, hours before. I had never been good with the freshly dead.

His eyes were open, glassy and staring. The surrounding skin, shrunk by the heat, was pulled taught across bone like a shoddy taxidermy display.

The worst part was that he looked familiar.

Morcris was my hometown. The house was sold and the parents were gone, but my memories still pocked the streets. The streets that now burned from that horrible fire. I wondered how many of those memories were left. The public library. My favorite ice cream shop. The restaurants, the pie place, the school. Had the corpse worked there? Why couldn't I place his face? What did that say about me? Why couldn't I- ?

I stomped on the weathered rubber pedal by my feet. There was a click and a whir as the overhead mics began to record. I began to cut.

First, the shears. Each article of clothing, one by one. The trousers and undergarments came easily, but the shirt - the shirt was melted and fused to the flesh, so caked in ash that the simple Bigfoot and Comic Sans "I believe in you" was hardly visible. My fingers tore at both flesh and fabric as I pulled, so I gave it a rest.

"Male sex, appears to be in their late forties," Good. My voice was steady. Good. "Signs of hypoxia - mottled skin in the less charred areas, soot around the nose and mouth, fixed and dilated pupils."

Unblinking, dilated pupils. They looked at me. I shook my head.

"Cause of death: likely smoke inhalation. Obvious second and third-degree burns across the body." I examined the discarded, mangled trousers, and fished out a twisted pile of leather.

"A wallet... name- yes, name legible as Alexander Goodkins." The name didn't ring a bell. Why didn't it ring a bell?

"Identification concluded. Will return to gross and histologic examination for further findings." Quick, thorough, and to the point. I scratched the name off the clipboard list of reported missing persons. More bodies would be coming in, and thus the priority

was to identify, not examine. A much simpler task. Involved less elbow-deep digging. I could do the more taxing parts when I wasn't alone.

The staring, dead-eyed pupils reminded me I wasn't alone.

I took a deep breath, slid it back on the cart, into the freezer, and shut the door.

One down. That wasn't too bad, was it?

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*I remember the times when the world moved slower. It felt like a dream then, and feels like a dream now. Small pockets of dream, in between the nightmares.*

*"Mom! Dad! My tooth is loose!"*

*Nothing but laughs and blue glare from the TV. But I know they heard. I know they heard because the Tooth Fairy comes when I lose a tooth. Well, not the Tooth Fairy, but I let them think that I still believe that kid's story. I let them think and I leave the window open for her to flutter in. It's like a game. And when I hear their footsteps across the carpet, feel their hand slide under my pillow to collect the little pearl, trying not to giggle and close my eyes shut the whole time, it reminds me that they hear.*

### The Second Body:

Everyone thinks forensics is just dusting fingerprints and catching the criminal. But more often than not, it is about reading - reading the story of a corpse. The angle of a wound: was the gunshot homicide or self-inflicted? The contusions on their head - a slip and fall, or a hammer to the head? Obviously, some corpses have simpler stories to tell than others, especially when I'm only looking for the exposition.

The second corpse isn't as lucky as Mr. Goodkins. No wallet or other form of ID, but her face again feels familiar. There aren't even fingers to go off of - at least from what the first responders recovered. A simple mangled, shrivelled, rotting corpse, buried and suffocated and peeled out from under rubble. I wonder if it left a shadow behind - like the nuclear outlines in Hiroshima, but stained of grease. Sizzling, dripping grease. I don't have to imagine the stink. Maybe the corpse is lucky. Lucky that they don't have to smell it, see it, *feel* it-

I jolt as the heavy steel door clanks open. Someone comes in and slides a new body onto a freezer tray. I don't look up, don't pay them any mind. I'm only going to do three bodies. No more, no less. I've already decided on which ones. Mr. Goodkins, the mystery woman on the table right now, and either Deceased #3 or #4. One of the less burned ones. Or maybe Deceased #8? So charred that it was more of a skeleton - surely that'd be easier than all the meat.

I realize I'm stalling.

Everyone thinks forensics is about fingerprints. But more often than not, it's about the teeth.

Morcris being a small town, there was only ever one dental practice: Smiley Buds Dental. It made things simple enough for freak events of mass casualty - not that such things had ever happened here before. Even if they had, only the charts of specific individuals would be pulled. Those missing or obviously deceased. But with the fire still burning its way through the surrounding forest and a body being found every hour... well, it was better to be safe than sorry.

Over thirty years of smiles, all pulled and waiting in a dusty paper box for my examination. Crowns, jaw deformities, fillings, teeth loss, teeth shape, X-rays, root structure - hell, I even saw a before-and-after braces pic in there. Thirty two fingerprints for each corpse.

The corpse.

I move my gloved hands towards the corpse's droopy, gloopy mouth and prod it testingly. Jaws fused together, as I thought. I take a deep breath and pick up the scalpel.

The lips cut astonishingly similar to the clothing. The flesh stretches and peels ever so slightly before giving way to the cutting blade. Letting flakes of air-fried skin blossom down the back of the throat, I grab the oral retractor. One prong under each jaw, to pry the lips open - only the mouth is too tight to get a good angle. I pick the scalpel back up and carefully carve open the corpse's cheek. One prong under each jaw, and elevate the tissue. I crank and crank and crank, staring at the widening mask of grinning, blood-and-soot-stained enamel. Why does this bother me tonight more than any other night? Why did he have to leave me alone? Who am I kidding?

I lean forward, towards the grin. The blood is almost gone now. Something doesn't look right. The smile looks too... small. The teeth aren't connected to the gums, their roots hanging, suspended midair. Glints of wire, sticking and lacing through gaping holes in the gums. Crimson droplets stick to it, like dew in a spiderweb.

"Abnormal metal obstruction in the mouth. Thin, floss-like strands, piercing through the gums in multiple areas, wrapping around the-"

It hits me.

Baby teeth. I am looking at baby teeth.

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*I remember being so proud of my loose teeth. I would tell everyone about them. The head librarian, with her shrewd glasses but kind smile. The ice cream scooper, with his youthful face and crooked grin. The principal, even though he would just press his mouth tighter and tell me to hurry on. Everyone.*

*Soon my friends joined in. A bragging competition, of sorts. They laughed and called us cute, but I prided myself on being a trend-setter. The tooth fairy's apprentice, they called me. Who called me that?*

*Soon my entire class joined in. We just wanted to share our smiles with the world.*

### **The Third Body:**

It is long into the night before I return to the examination room. Hours. Hours of talking to police, phoning in the homicide division, explaining the situation to prying, curious staff. But mostly, hours sitting in the dark hallway of an empty wing. Away from the storm, away from the fire, but most importantly, away from the teeth. Blood still speckles the blue rubber of my gloves.

The bodies are right where I left them. The woman, on the table. Mr. Goodkins, half hanging out of his homey freezer, mouth wrenched askew and teeth glinting. It was the first thing I checked.

The same as Corpse #2. Teeth gone, ripped forcibly out, likely by pliers. In their gaping blood-dried holes, a tasteful reconstruction. Metal fishing line and hooks, thoughtfully wrenched this way and that, around a central hidden pearl. Baby teeth.

Baby teeth. I bet if I check the other freezers, I will find the same.

I take the deepest breath of my life, eyes tightly shut. One more body. One more body. My feet drag me to Freezer #8. It slides open, wheels screeching like nails on a chalkboard. The most charred body of them all. At the heart of the flames, where it all started, barely recovered by the firemen.

They're investigating for potential signs of arson now.

What story does this corpse tell?

Do the worn, torn fingernails speak to insanity? Do its wide, yawning eye sockets whisper of a watchful, patient gaze? An

artist's appreciation? Effort spent, positioning the corpses *just* right, as to look like an accident amidst the blaze?

Does its grinning, skeletal, too-small smile greet an old friend? The tooth fairy's apprentice, they called me. Whose grin is that?

I look at the baby teeth. Tiny and innocent despite their yellowing tinge. I look down at the dental record in my hand. My dental record, pulled from the files.

I do all the measurements. All of the testing. But I already know. A footstep on the carpet, a hand under my pillow, an open window.

They're my teeth. He has my teeth.

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*Your smile lit up the room. You were always beaming, no matter the circumstances. My little trend-setter.*

*I'm so glad I could be your Tooth Fairy.*

[Music]

**ANNOUNCER:**

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Thanks for listening.