

# Pest Control

The first time I was star-struck, the object of my affection was a glamorous Eastern Airlines stewardess. She had towering blond hair, frosted blue eyelids, and was well into her twenties. I was eight. We were thrown together when my parents put me on a flight by myself to Lawrenceville, Georgia, to visit my wealthy grandparents.

“I call them by their first names, Jack and Carolyn,” I told her with pride. “They’re my father’s parents. And my grandmother wears lots of jewelry, just like you.”

“Aren’t you *precious*?” the flight attendant said.

I smiled because I loved the name, *precious*. It reminded me of precious stones like rubies and emeralds and diamonds. And even *semiprecious* stones, like onyx, which was the black stone men wore, and the ugliest one of all.

The flight attendant returned to the kitchen and I looked out the window, happy to see the mundane “North” pass by, far below me.

As the only member of my family for generations born above the Mason-Dixon line, I was fascinated by the impossibly exotic South.

Like, instead of dirty, gray squirrels, my grandparents had Technicolor peacocks on their lawn. And while we got hateful blizzards in the winter, my grandparents got yet more sunshine. I found it impossible to believe that snow did not cover the world but here was proof.

Though this became an annual trip for me, my grandfather traveled a lot, so I never spent much time with him. And he was gruff, so when he was around I was frightened and avoided him.

But my grandmother spent every minute with me. And I adored her.

Carolyn was blond and wore minks. She had gigantic jade and diamond rings on nearly every finger. And a gold charm bracelet that made a soft tinkle sound when she waved her hands in the air. At night, she slipped into a nightgown with fur trim along the neck and at the hem. And even her slippers had high heels. I thought she was beautiful, like a movie star.

Only when she leaned in very close to me and I saw through her thick pancake makeup to the deep lines beneath did I become slightly alarmed. Old people had always scared me a little. And while my grandmother certainly wasn't old from a distance, she seemed brittle when you looked at her very closely. Sometimes when she kissed me on the forehead at night, I flinched, worried a piece of her might chip off and stick to me.

The summer I turned seven the tooth on my upper left side became loose. And I spent the afternoon worrying it with my finger.

"Honey, just let that tooth come out all on its own accord. Don't force it before it's ready," my grandmother said.

"But Carolyn, it's almost ready. It's just about to come out."

"Well, sweetie. Just let it be. It'll come out. And then do you know what to do?" she asked.

We were sitting on iron garden chairs in her glass sunroom. I was watching television and Carolyn was paging through a mail-order catalogue, licking her fingers and then dog-earring the corners of certain pages.

“Do when?” I said.

“Do you know what to do when your tooth falls out?” she asked, smiling at me.

I didn’t understand what she was asking me. Was there something I had to *do*?

“Call the police?” I guessed.

She laughed in her gentle, though somewhat mischievous way. “No, you don’t call the *police*, silly. Don’t you know about the Tooth Fairy?”

“The what?”

“*Honey*,” she said, now concerned. She placed her catalogue on her lap and leaned forward. “The Tooth Fairy? You know about the Tooth Fairy. How could you not? You’re seven years old. Surely, you know about the Tooth Fairy.”

I felt bad, like I’d done something wrong. “No,” I said in a small voice.

My grandmother explained. “Goodness gracious. I knew your mother was an odd bird, but I had no idea she was raising you in a cave in that godforsaken *New England*.”

I wondered if my mother knew about a cave someplace. And if we could go there when I went back home.

“The Tooth Fairy is a fairy, like Tinkerbell? You know Tinkerbell, don’t you?”

I did know Tinkerbell. The irritating cartoon insect. “Yes,” I said. “I know that thing.” I frowned.

“Well, the Tooth Fairy is like Tinkerbell. And whenever you lose a tooth, you place it under your pillow at night before you go to bed. And then the Tooth Fairy slips into your room and takes your

tooth away. And leaves some money in its place, right there under your pillow. Real money, sweetheart. That you can spend on whatever you like.”

I was horrified.

I imagined that creepy bug woman with her devil wand, sneaking into my bedroom at night while I was sleeping, and taking my teeth and leaving things under the pillow that shouldn't be there. Cash, which my father said was *very limited*. And something I knew I shouldn't have.

“Carolyn, is this real?” I asked, because I just couldn't believe it.

She smiled, then laughed as she set the catalogue on the floor next to her feet. “Baby, yes of course it's real. The Tooth Fairy is real for every child.”

And I thought, why hadn't somebody warned me about this? Why hadn't any of my friends ever talked about this horrible bug that comes into your bedroom and takes your teeth?

I immediately stopped fiddling with my tooth. I tried to press it back in place.

That night, Carolyn tucked me into bed. “Open your mouth,” she said.

I did.

She leaned forward. “Oh, you've still got your tooth! That means the Tooth Fairy won't come tonight. But”—and her eyes became wide—“maybe tomorrow!” The skin around her mouth was cracked and her lipstick was bleeding into the lines around her lips. Suddenly, she seemed extremely scary.

After she left, I got out of bed and checked the windows again. They were locked. But could it enter the room any other way?

I went to the bathroom that was attached to the bedroom and I grabbed all the towels, rolling them into tubes and then placing

them in front of the crack under the door. I didn't know how strong the Tooth Fairy was, but I knew an ordinary insect wouldn't be able to move those towels.

Then I climbed back into bed and prayed to Jesus.

At this point, I wasn't sure where I stood, Jesus-wise.

Although my parents never attended church or mentioned Jesus except when they screamed at each other—and then they used his full name, “Jesus Fucking Christ”—they did explain that he was a man who lived in the sky and granted wishes to certain people. People he liked.

So I prayed. “Dear Jesus. Please keep It out of my room. I promise, promise, *promise* that I will be honest and very nice to everybody and I love my mother and my father and brother and all my relatives here and over in Cairo, Georgia, and I love everybody that I know and even people I don't know now but will know someday. And I promise everything. But please keep It out of my room and away from me. Thank you, Jesus Fucking Christ.”

Somewhat relieved, but not altogether certain I was safe, I eventually drifted to sleep.

Only to awaken that next morning seeing a smear of blood on the cream satin pillowcase. And there, right under my shoulder near the pillow, my tooth, bloody and with a horrible dark root-thing attached.

I began to cry. I got out of the bed as fast as I could and looked closer at the pillowcase. It was blood all right. And a lot of it. And that was my tooth. And it didn't look smooth and pretty. But weird and awful and out of my mouth.

I ran into the bathroom to look at my face and there, in the corner of my mouth, more blood.

I cried harder.

I ran back to the bedroom and lifted up the pillow, to see where the money was. But there was nothing, just the tooth and another streak of blood.

I didn't even put my pants on. I just ran downstairs in my underwear, sobbing, looking for Carolyn.

"Baby, baby, what is the matter?" she said. She was in the kitchen, standing at the sink, draping a paper towel over the length of dental floss she had strung between the two cabinets. My grandmother always rinsed her paper towels and used them again. Even though my grandparents lived in a mansion that my mother called "half the damn size of Georgia."

She turned the water off and dried her hands hastily on her apron. She bent down. "Sweetness, what is the matter? You stop that crying right now. What happened?"

For lack of words, I opened my mouth, showed her the black hole. The pit, that ached and tasted metallic, like blood.

She inhaled. "Oh! Look at you! Big boy!"

I said, "It came and It knocked my tooth out and then It left and there's blood everywhere and I don't know how It got in and I prayed to Jesus but It came anyway."

And then I cried some more.

My grandmother stroked my head. "There, there, baby. It's okay, it's okay. What are you fussing about? What came? What *it*?"

"That Tooth Fairy. It came and took my teeth and I looked but there wasn't anything under the pillow, like you said. It didn't give me money. It just took."

My grandmother sighed. "Well, baby. Sometimes, the Tooth Fairy, she gets the date wrong. You know what I mean? You know how sometimes you get mixed up and you have to do something at school? Only you forget which day? And so you don't do it?"

I had no idea what she was talking about. I just knew I wanted to get on the first Eastern Airlines jet home.

“Listen, it’s okay,” she said, leading me by the arm out of the kitchen and into her bedroom.

“You sit yourself right down here,” she said, tapping the soft, thick comforter on the bed.

Then she walked across her room and got her purse. She pulled out her wallet, showing me. “See? See, baby? I think the Tooth Fairy must have put your money in here. By mistake.” Then she pulled out a fifty. “See! Look at this!” she cried, lifting the crisp bill out of her wallet and placing it in my hand. “This was meant for you, sugar. For you! The Tooth Fairy, she made a little error. It can happen to anyone, even a fairy. She made a little mistake and she put *your* money into *my* wallet. Imagine that!”

I took the money and looked at it. It looked just like regular money except something was different.

“It’s a fifty, sweetie. Do you know what that means?”

I did know what that meant. I knew exactly what that meant. I got an allowance and that was a one. This was the same size as the one, but you could buy fifty times more things with it.

“Are you sure I’m supposed to have this?”

“I am absolutely sure,” she said. “The Tooth Fairy just had the wrong tooth. And I think I know what confused her so much,” my grandmother said.

Then she reached into her mouth and pulled out all of her teeth, all at once, even her gums.

And I couldn’t breathe.

She smiled and gummed the words, “I lothed my eeth, ooo!”