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## A TOOTH STORY

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*The first day in a new school or place of work can be unsettling, especially because you're unfamiliar with the people and the routines. You don't know what to expect and sometimes there can be a surprise or two. This story takes place in a smelter where a man enters the lunchroom for the first time to wait for his future boss to tell him what his work will be.*

Imagine this situation. It's a workplace for heavy industry. There are masses of metal moving all around the place, furnaces of fiery hells spitting up magma near and far away. The men who work there get injured, if not immediately, then in the long term. No-one escapes the toxic dusts and fumes permeating everything. They sit on the long wooden benches in the lunchroom, exchanging stories before returning to that violent workplace. Then a creaky door opens inward, slowly & hesitantly as the fresh green university student checks to see if this is indeed the place to wait.

In I go with my nice clean new work clothes and brilliantly shining white helmet. This entrance stops all conversation and everyone is curious about the newcomer.

I see some hooks on the wall and taking example from the others nearby, hang my helmet up on a vacant one. What a contrast to the dirty darkened neighbours surrounding me.

It isn't so much the clean vs the not. It's much much more than that. It's the innocent entering the den of the seasoned. They have been through that unknown that the newcomer is concerned about. They have lived it, it is familiar to them. He, I, have yet to wade into it.

I find an empty space and sit myself down. The bench scrapes the cement floor a bit despite the heavy weight as the experienced ones shift their positions to better get a handle on the new guy.

I shyly glance around the table to see all eyes focusing on me. I'm not sure how to react and in that silence an adventurous one sitting in a far corner breaks the ice. He takes his teeth out of his mouth and slides them over the dusty dirty table, making it as far as the centre. He lets out a toothless chuckle and another guy feels inspired to remove his as well. Somebody not much older than me but with a few years into the job joins the first two and soon I see a pile of dirty teeth in the centre of the table, a hodge-podge of partial plates.

I'm the only odd one out. As yet I am powerless to join them in this most unusual ritual. People look at each other and laughter breaks out, guffawing, loud, side-splitting laughter.

This was my first day of work in the **Smelter**. I had to admit, even though I was confused at what was really happening, I got caught up in the laughter too.

I supposed, should I choose to stay, it wouldn't be long before I too would be sliding my false teeth into the centre of the table when a fresh new green guy sits with us for the first time.

Years later I figured a little bit more of it out. It wasn't so much the toxic gases and dusts that ate away at your teeth. They did eat away at a lot of things, but the teeth were not the primary victims. No, it was because of all the soft drinks these guys put away each shift. That sugary cold liquid temporarily quenched their thirst from the incredibly hot working conditions and replaced some of the liquids lost through all the exertion and sweat. But it also did wonders for the teeth and it was that more than anything that caused these hard-working guys to seek out new dentures after a while.

*It wasn't long before my helmet became as seasoned as the others. While I never needed the dentures, I did fit in more and more with the working conditions and the people who dealt with them. That first day was a remarkable one, but so were many that were to follow.*