

—TEETH

by A.C. Wise

Sam was twelve when his father first took him to the dead fields. His father's voice was gruff and he avoided Sam's eyes as he pushed a dirty sack and a pair of pliers into Sam's hand.

"Time you started earning your keep."

They went out in the empty hours between midnight and dawn. Sam's father carried a lantern, which he hid beneath a cloth that he lifted for brief moments at a time to light the way. Trees twisted across the sky, and between their branches hung stars and tattered clouds hiding the moon.

"There."

His father's voice was hushed as he pointed to a shape in the darkness. At first Sam couldn't make it out other than as a blot of shadow against the deeper night. It lay on the ground like a bundle of rags hastily thrown onto the stony fields and forgotten. His father led Sam closer, and they stood together looking down.

"Well, get to it, then."

"I don't understand."

Sam looked up. His father's eyes were at once bright and unreadable; holding something like guilt or shame trapped behind their light. He lifted the cloth for just a moment, and let pale light fall on the thing lying at their feet. Sam gasped.

It was a man, or it had been once. Now the flesh was mottled and gray, and blind white eyes stared unseeing at the sky. Animals had already been at the fingers, gnawing them away to bone.

"Take anything you can find—coins, teeth, jewelry, if he was fool enough to have it on him when he died—into the sack, quick, quick."

His father let the cloth fall over the lantern again, and the darkness, when it returned, had thickened. Sam crouched. His father's eyes lingered on him for a moment longer, and then he turned away to find work of his own.

Sam touched the dead man's pockets. The cloth was stiff, as if it had once been wet and dried in the cool breeze. The fabric crackled like leaves brittle with frost, and Sam turned his face away from the blind staring eyes as he felt inside. His fingers closed on something hard and smooth and he pulled it out.

Without his father's lantern it was hard to see, but it looked like a small polished stone. It was worthless, but Sam couldn't bring himself to throw it away. He dropped it into the sack and, still looking away, hurriedly searched the rest of the body.

There was no jewelry of any kind, though Sam checked fingers, throat, and

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wrist. He even pulled the dead man's boots from his feet in case there were any coins stashed in them, but there was nothing.

The dead man's mouth was partially open, and teeth the color of ivory gleamed up at Sam. He had seen the old men and women who peddled teeth they kept wrapped in secret cloth, but he had never until now thought of where those teeth came from. The thought left him cold.

This man's teeth appeared in surprisingly good condition, whole and clean, but Sam couldn't bring himself to use the pliers on them. Instead he quickly closed the man's mouth and hurried to his father, who was kneeling by a second man.

"Look here!"

His father held something up triumphantly, and Sam caught the glint of gold before his father slipped the thing into the sack.

"Damn fool was still wearing his watch. Here, hold the light, boy, I need both hands."

Sam crouched at his father's side. He was beginning to feel the cold seeping up from the ground and into his bones. The man his father was working on was in better condition than the first, but the birds had gotten to his eyes, leaving red streaks like tears on his cheeks. Sam was silent as his father passed him the lantern, and then pried open the corpse's mouth to slip the pliers inside.

Sam saw a second wink of gold, mirroring the watch, but a duller shade. There was a wet sound as his father pulled the tooth free, and Sam turned away, the pit of his stomach filling with a sick cold.

"Most of them are rotten through, but that's more metal for us, eh?"

Sam's father nudged him, and Sam nodded dumbly, not trusting himself to speak. The doubt he had seen in his father's eyes moments before was gone, and Sam missed it sharply. There was nothing behind the brightness now, except perhaps the thought of a hot meal and maybe a little whiskey for the table. Though the same hollow ache haunted his stomach as his father's, Sam felt he would rather starve, and he looked away.

There was a cracking sound, and Sam's father dropped something else into the bag. He was working quickly now, whether against the dawn or the cold Sam couldn't tell. He seemed to have forgotten Sam was still there, and for that Sam was grateful.

"Oi! What are you doing there?"

Sam turned and was blinded by a beam of light shining directly into his eyes. He winced and started back, almost tripping over the legs of the corpse sprawled behind him. Beyond the light he could just make out two figures, their shapes distorted and strange.

When they drew level the figure holding the light lowered it and Sam could see that what he had taken for misshapen heads were helmets. The men were Coppers, and the one not holding the light was tapping a baton gently against the palm of his hand. The one with the light grinned.

"What do we have here, eh?"

"Leave the boy out of it, he didn't do nothing."

Sam's father had not risen, but his voice was surprisingly strong. Sam glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. His father's shoulders stooped inward