

WEAK TEETH

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

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Weak Teeth

Lynsey May

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For Alison Thirkell and her magnificent bedtime stories

‘To be born with teeth is to be born with either
a curse or a blessing to mankind’

—Jeri Tanner, *The Teeth in Folklore*

Ellis is home first. She considers a shower. Maybe a bath. Instead, she sits at the kitchen counter in her work clothes and mindlessly scrolls through the headlines, waiting for Adrian to reply to her text. He's not much of a texter, but he's normally punctual.

She's in the mood for a quick and comforting dinner, pasta with capers and olive oil. Adrian prefers something more substantial. There are beef strips in the fridge. She's been avoiding them to spare a tooth recently turned tender. The meat is about to pass its sell-by date and she has the dentist tomorrow. Ellis takes the packet out so it can come up to room temperature. Blood swirls into the tray's plastic corners.

She reaches for the rice. At the team meeting she's just come from, no one commented on her spreadsheet. That could be a good thing. Or not. She's still so new at TravelOn she spends every day trying to be bright and helpful. It's exhausting. The work itself isn't demanding: Ellis is practised in the filling in and organising of things. There'd been plenty of that at Tee Zone and she'd been happy there, especially when they let her try her hand at the odd bit of copy. Redundancy hit her hard.

It was one of those things, obviously. Nothing personal. Except they only let go of her and Geoffrey, and nobody liked Geoffrey. Just because she's capable of everything TravelOn has for her doesn't mean she can relax.

Her phone buzzes. It's Lana, messaging about the weekend for the third time already. Adrian will not want to go. He finds her family tiresome. Ellis doesn't completely disagree, but spending time with Mum, her sister and the twins is the right

thing to do. After dinner, she'll try to persuade him to come with her.

Lana would immediately have identified and befriended the office alpha. She's always been the more outgoing one, which is unfair, seeing as Ellis is the eldest.

She's choosing an emoji when the front door opens. She ditches her phone and starts preparing the rice for washing.

'In the kitchen,' she calls. Adrian doesn't reply. The regular, gentle thud of his shoes being removed and pushed into the rack is absent. She stands, listening. Nothing. She puts down the rice to investigate.

It's him, of course it's him, but he doesn't look right. He's facing the front door. Ellis stops, alert to his posture and the bad tidings it brings.

'Hey,' he says, watering down the worry trickling through her. People don't say 'hey' when there's an emergency.

'You gave me a fright. You okay?'

'Yes, well . . . not really. I need to talk to you.'

She nods, a fresh spurt of adrenaline cutting off her reply. He's been fired. He's got a gambling problem. He's been told one of the mean things she's jokingly said about him to Becca or Zoe.

She follows him into the living room. He takes the chair, leaving her the sofa they normally share.

'I didn't mean for it to happen,' he says.

'What?'

'But it has, and you need to know. I've met someone else.'

The world shifts; Ellis shrinks inwards.

'No,' she says.

'I'm sorry.'

'You . . . what? Who?'

'You don't know her. She's called Sally. We work together and, honestly, Ellis, we didn't set out to hurt you. We didn't even mean it to happen.'

‘You’ve slept with her?’ Ellis is gripping the back of her neck, fingers working against the muscle like she could tear the thought away. It won’t go. ‘You have, haven’t you?’

‘Ellis.’ He shakes his head, but in a way that means he’s sorry.

The room crumples around her.

‘But I love you.’ Pathetic.

‘Don’t do this.’

‘We can work it out. Whatever you did, you didn’t mean it.’

‘It’s over.’ His voice crimps in the middle as if he might cry. Instinctively, Ellis steps towards him. He recoils. Her heart cramps, and she stands wringing her hands and saying he can’t be telling the truth as he walks out the room.

He returns before she can catch hold of a single thought, a bag in his hand. He must’ve packed it already. A tiny part of her brain wonders when. The rest is a cacophony of panic. She can barely hear him speak over it.

Leaving. He’s leaving and saying she’ll be fine.

‘You can’t. Where? Hers? Oh God.’

‘Don’t be . . . Sally would never. I’ve got a room at the Premier Inn.’

‘No.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he says.

She’s desperate to rewrite what’s happening. Her shoulders ache to be hugged, her ribs need to be pressed to his. It can’t be true.

He won’t even look at her.

‘How could you?’ she says.

‘You must’ve known something like this was coming.’

‘When was the last time we even had a fight? We went and bought cushions last weekend. Cushions!’

‘There’s more to life than cushions, no matter how much you pretend otherwise.’

‘What are you even talking about?’

‘You know how secretive you are. How hard it is to get through to you.’

‘Me? Secretive? You’re the one who’s been cheating.’ Her voice rises to a pitch she barely recognises.

‘I’ve got the room booked till the weekend, so if you could send me a message when you’re–’

‘You’re throwing me out.’

‘That’s not fair. It’s my place.’

Anger sweeps over her, cold and disorientating. It is his place, but it’s her home. They’ve shared it for almost ten years. It’s filled with things she chose for them both.

‘But you’re the one that–’

‘Look, I’m not talking to you when you’re like this.’

‘You can’t go.’

But he can. He does. Ellis stands alone in the living room, hyperventilating. The anger is gone, leaving a mudflat of desolation. Behind her is the bookcase she filled, under her feet the rug she chose to hide the worn carpet they kept talking about replacing. The very air is scented with candles only Ellis ever buys. She can’t stay here. She won’t.

Becca’s? No, Scotty has an ear infection. Zoe or Charmaine? A meeting in London and a family holiday, respectively. Lana? Never.

There is only her mum.

Adrian doesn’t deserve the satisfaction of thinking he’s giving her a ‘few days’. Ellis is going now. She grabs the ratty spare rucksack. He’s taken the good one. She barely knows what she packs. The door slams behind her. The twinge in her tooth has turned into a howl.



Ellis rings the bell. It takes ages for her mum to answer the door, and when she does, her muzzy hair and crumpled jumper makes it look like she’s been dragged from halfway through a film. Except she’s still holding her phone and the screen only darkens as she says hello.

‘Sweetheart.’ Her expression switches from bemused to concerned. ‘What’s wrong? Come in.’

Curled into one end of the couch, Ellis stutters through the events of the last few hours. Her mum’s hand flies from her mouth to Ellis’s knee and back again.

‘Oh God, I can’t believe it. Are you sure? Of course you’re staying here. I’ll make up the bed. Have you told your sister?’

Ellis shakes her head. They go through the disaster again. Finally convinced it’s true, her mum moves into coping mode, pushing wine on her, fetching sheets, offering to order food. Ellis lets her bustle.

Devastation circles her and she’s too weak to do anything more than let tears fall down her face. She’s back where she started and her mum’s trying to make space for her where there is none. Ellis’s room was relegated to the spare as soon as she moved out. Lana’s is still Lana’s. She even sleeps over occasionally, saying it does Grant good to manage without her.

Ellis can hear her mum calling for a takeaway. The gesture brings about a fresh round of tears. Even in her gratitude, she longs for her dad. He was the sort who read stories and pulled pigtailed. He bestowed nicknames that none of them have uttered since. Even just being near him made Ellis feel settled. His death plunged everything into cold, dark chaos. It was Lana, tiny and ferocious, who turned on all the lights and forced their mum to switch on the boiler.

The house is hot now, and cramped. Ellis doesn’t want to be at her mum’s, but the place she’s put so much effort into making her own is gone.