SHORT STORY NIGHT

Kate Petersen's fiction and essays have appeared in The Kenyon Review, New England Review, Iowa Review, ZYZZYVA, Brevity, The Collagist, The Millions, Paris Review Daily and elsewhere.

Virtual Interview!!!

Kate Petersen

"The Iowa Tooth Fairy"

Read this story and join Neenah Public Library staff at Lion's Tail Brewing Monday, October 13th at 7:00 pm for a one-hour discussion featuring trivia, laughs, and other surprises.
21 and older.

Kate Petersen

The Iowa Tooth Fairy

Donna Banister would never have called herself Tooth Fairy material: not motherly enough, or pillowy enough, and not enough pockets she assumed such a being would need for all those teeth and quarters. It was lucky for her, then, that that part of the job description arrived later. All Grady Becker was looking for, when he found her name under Nursing Students in the University of Iowa Medical School directory and called her that night in March of 1962, was a good nurse.

The principal investigator of the Midwestern Environmental Health Study, "Ronny Somebody," Grady said, had disappeared in the night without a word a week before the second collection phase was slated to start. So the Division of Radiological Health had called Grady up, "involuntary leave from Harvard," as he put it (which they could do since they were funding his PhD), and he didn't know up from down in Iowa. "I'm hoping you do." Donna hadn't even said anything yet, but she appreciated his vote, the admission of her expertise. If she liked it, Grady went on, and was as wildly proficient as her instructors had said she was, he would recommend her for a Commission in the US Public Health Service.

"I don't want to oversell the thing," Grady added. "There's no clinical component, and not much analysis, either. You'd basically be in charge of collection."

"Collection of what?" she'd had to ask.

"Deciduous teeth. Baby teeth. The kids are eager to trade them in, actually."

"Trade them?" she asked. "How many?"

"As many as we can possibly get," he said. "Probably somewhere north of four hundred, total. Luckily, we have the teeth from last round. And you'll be second author. Third, maybe, depending on whether Ronny slinks out of exile to claim his glory."

"I've never expected to publish," Donna said. She nearly added that she liked children but caught herself. He might hear in it longing to be a mother (longing she didn't have) and choose someone else. Wildly proficient, she reminded herself. That's why he'd called. Yes, was all she said.

Once they had the study up and running again, reporters from the *Register* and *Gazette* and *Quad-City Times* appeared on campus, filed stories. The reporter from the *Register* dubbed Donna the Iowa Tooth Fairy and it stuck; mostly because Grady declared it stuck.

"But I don't know what the Tooth Fairy does," Donna said when she read it.

"Collects teeth," he said like the scientist he was.

"I mean, how one behaves."

"So, decide," he said, patting the newspaper in her hand. "You're her now."

Donna reasoned the Tooth Fairy ought to appear tidy, not unlike a nurse, so she wore her ward whites on collection days under a blue cardigan. She bought costume jewels for the first time in her life, bulbous things that rang against doorknobs and faucets, surprising her. At a secondhand shop she found an old veterinarian's traveling bag: sturdy and benevolent-looking and betraying no sign of its original use but a small monogram on the lining: *JM Wilmot, Livestock and Small Animals*. She grew skilled at estimating children's ages and could tell from a poked-out cheek at the Starlite café who was working on a loose tooth. A loose tooth which, in all likelihood, would sooner or later end up, sealed and labeled, in a box on her desk in University of Iowa Medical Building A.

Now, six months into the job, the study was running out of time in four different ways. They'd collected 320 teeth between the first and second phases, but the lab at Farmington estimated they needed fifty more from towns high on the curve to get enough ash for a statistically meaningful line. Farmington closed the first week of December, and the schools soon after; the Committees on the Biological Effects of Atomic Radiation—or, BEAR, as they called it—which had requested their data, convened in Geneva on January 12. At the present rate of tooth loss, they'd be close, but short.

So Grady had called a meeting.

Besides several bookcases and a hopscotch-size path to his desk, his office was crammed, floor to ceiling, with boxes of death certificates. He waited in the center, reading: crew cut, maybe thirty years old, with pocket protector and glasses big as shop windows. The underworld's accountant, Donna had thought once, unkindly.

"Look," Grady said when she sat down, flapping open an army-green folder, "half of Ames were out-of-staters, which we weren't expecting and didn't account for, so we're short on teeth from towns at the top of the curve. Especially molars. I'm saying things you know." Donna had been the one to fill out the charts, but she hadn't come up with a solution. "We're going to have to collect extra teeth in this next month."

"You mean build in other participant towns?"

"Not enough time," he said. "Even if we discovered a new town with similar levels tomorrow, hidden in a cornfield or something, there's no time. Geneva's in three months. Got to find them in the schools we've got. Light a fire under those kids."

Donna laughed. "I don't think you can just will kids to lose teeth faster," she said.

Grady flapped the folder closed again. "What if we sweetened the stakes? Not just a button, but a field trip to Swann's creamery. I'm sure I can get Rad Health to divert a little from the beagles."

"And will it be you or Rad Health answering the phones when parents call because their children tied their mouths to doorknobs?"

"Don't they already do that?" he said.

Donna turned to their methods write-up and read aloud: "Strictly non-compensatory."

Grady sighed. "I know. But I got a call from Henry asking how our line was looking and I said, *Good*. No—" he said as if he'd just remembered. "Not good, I said, *Solid*. And the only solid things are these big white splotches saying DATA GO HERE."

"We can try Davenport again soon."

"Tomorrow," Grady said. "Great. I need to stop by the Cedar County records office anyway." Eight o'clock, they agreed.

Grady was waiting for her the next morning in the lobby of Building A, tapping the glass display case where polymer brains of various sizes were lined up apes-to-man. "Forty minutes as the crow flies, but an hour ten for us mortals." He tapped once more for emphasis.

Donna looked at her watch apologetically: twenty-three minutes late. "Won't happen again." She usually took her time getting ready in the morning, put on a Maria Callas record as she washed and dressed, fastened her various bangles. But this morning, she hadn't had time for ceremony, just dressed in rushed silence because her mother had called. Not that anything was said, not that Donna didn't know better than to answer, especially when time was short, but it was the first and last duty of a faraway daughter, wasn't it, to answer a ringing telephone early in the morning?

When Donna got in the car, Grady passed her the newspaper he'd been carrying, back page up. "Dew point, high. Cesium, not so bad."

"Phew," she said. The radioactive fallout reports had been appearing beneath the five-day weather forecast for a while, which Grady found charmingly absurd since, despite the fact they were folded back on everyone's breakfast table, no one, scientists included, knew what the values meant. When it came to health outcomes, the scientific community was playing catch-up to Defense. That's why the new Division of Radiological Health was charged with studying short- and long-term consequences of fallout on the general population and its food supply.

Donna had arranged with the teachers at Oak Hill Elementary to leave the teeth for her in a cabinet in the nurse's office. Donna ran in while Grady waited in the car, only opening the batch envelope once they were on their way again. Seven teeth: four incisors, two cuspids, and a molar. She shook the molar into her palm.

Grady glanced over. "Look like garlic bulbs, don't they?"

She hummed, not knowing. Radium or no, it weighed nothing.

Schoolteachers and parents in the selected towns had received a letter describing the study as a regional drinking water survey and inviting their participation.

When a child lost a tooth, the letter requested that they bring it to school instead of leaving it under their pillow. In exchange, the student would be given a badge reading, "I Gave My Tooth to Science," which could be left beneath their pillow in place of the lost tooth. The Tooth Fairy, seeing the medallion but being fundamentally uninterested in such trinkets, would leave the badge along with coins. Science would get the teeth.

The study, Grady had explained at their first meeting over lunch at a fast-food place near campus, was actually two studies under the auspices of one. The first—the teeth—sought to determine the rate of radium uptake to bones of residents of the St. Peter Sandstone aquifer, a groundwater source naturally high in Ra-226 that ran from Wisconsin down into Iowa and Northern Illinois.

Radium 226 settles in hard tissue (as he was sure Donna knew) and looks a lot like calcium to forming bones. Theoretically, you could measure radium in the bones of unclaimed cadavers in the same region, but you couldn't know whether the bones had formed elsewhere or in Iowa, ingesting the elevated-radium water. But baby teeth begin developing *in utero* and finish in the third year of life, making them good hard-tissue samples whose geographic origin is traceable.

"So first question is: under constant low-level exposure, do bones"—Grady tapped one of his front teeth with a fork—"gobble up radium as eagerly as other radionuclides?"

With each test bomb detonated in the Pacific, radioactive strontium and a huge array of other fallout particles were being released into the environment. Finding the rate at which forming bones took up naturally occurring radium in the drinking water in places like Iowa, far from the detonation site, would help them recommend a proxy number to keep radionuclides in the water and milk below. Plus, Grady said, it might create some drag on the plan to test-nuke everything four times before we really go at the Soviets.

"And the second part of the study—" he took a bite of his sandwich—"is determining whether that exposure has long-term health effects." Which was why he was neck-deep in death certificates, looking for a correlation: cause of death (Osteosarcoma) and place of birth (one of the thirty-four study towns).

"Do you have a working hypothesis?" Donna asked.

"Well, yes, to the first part. And as to the second, we don't know. There's a lot we don't know, which is how it goes in any field of the future. I'm using 'future' here loosely. But Miss Banister, think about it. What better time to involve yourself in the study of prevention?" He popped another clump of French fries into his mouth and looked at Donna expectantly. She could not deny it: these were preventive days. Khrushchev and Kennedy were out-preventing each other test by test. Bikini Atoll, Siberia. This man went to meetings with Teller and the Atomic Energy Commission, and he ate like a teenager. As Donna met his colleagues in the Public Health Service, the discovery opened before her like a map drawn on a napkin: the country was being saved, if it could be saved at all, by boys. Boys with

crew cuts and security clearance, old letter jackets still in the back seats of their cars.

Because Roosevelt's second grade classes hadn't yielded any teeth in several weeks, Donna had planned to visit each class there unannounced.

"It's tonight, right?" Miriam in Ms. Palvano's class asked, her tongue bossing into its new window. She handed an envelope soft from folding to Donna, who held out a badge in trade.

"Just put this under your pillow, and remind your parents before you go to sleep, so they know to let me in."

"Are you going to ring the doorbell?"

"I like to knock," Donna said, "so I don't wake anyone up."

Seeming satisfied with this, Miriam nodded and hurried back to her desk.

Outside Mrs. Richards's room, Donna found a note on the door. RECESS, it read, and below, *(*NO TEETH*)*.

"One," Donna said when Grady returned to pick her up.

"One?"

"Miriam. Plus the seven from Oak Hill. Eight more than we had yesterday." Donna tucked her bag in the back seat. "My mother mentioned the Berlin Wall on the phone this morning. Did something happen?"

"It's still there, if that's what she meant. I told you about my cousin Joe, didn't I?" Donna shook her head. "Flies F-105s out of Luke? He came through last month to see me on his way to Germany. He's about as humble as fighter pilots come, so when he tells me what they've got strapped underwing at Spangdahlem and everywhere else is bigger than anything they used in Japan, that's saying something. He's over there now, all tanked up and bored out of his gourd at the end of the runway. Says his whole squadron just sits out there all day smoking cigarettes, pointed at Moscow, waiting for someone to say when. Your mother didn't mention Cuba?" Grady asked.

Donna shook her head no. "Cuba?"

"Soviets got missiles down there pointed at us. Here." He turned on the radio for her and offered her a cigarette, which she waved off. The fields lay fallow, ready for snow, and as she listened to the broadcast, Donna watched them swim past. Near the road on her side, a flag had been tacked to the side of a barn that some storm or time had opened to the sky.

At her desk, Donna set each school jar on its side and spilled the contents. She removed the teeth from the pouches they'd provided the children and affixed each to a square of cardboard labeled with the child's name and age. She filed these in

boxes and checked each tooth against the participant surveys submitted with the permission slips. Though all students were encouraged to participate, only those belonging to children who'd spent their entire lives in a town fed by the St. Peter's aquifer were of use to the study. Teeth from children who'd moved around or were born outside Iowa went in a jar Donna had labeled SPARES. She'd thought it funny when she wrote it and by the time she realized it wasn't, the tape had set.

Beneath the jar she kept a picture of Jack Kennedy her mother had clipped from the newspaper and sent to her. He'd taken the family to the Berkshires the summer before, and Jackie must be in the general store too, but there is the president, looking at a shawl Donna's old neighbor Ms. Hamm had made. Donna had pasted the whole clipping on cardboard and wrapped it in packing tape, to laminate it.

She'd left Western Mass three years ago for nursing school, though at the time, the *left* was bigger than the *for*. Left daughtership. Left her mother with a half-built bomb shelter.

Before she left, Donna had helped with the construction. Driven to Springfield with the trailer for shipments of special carpeting, joists. Provisions for a year, went her mother's plan, a desk, a military surplus cot, board games and a tape deck, because she'd read an article that said one could prevent stultification below-ground using recorded sounds of everyday life: traffic, birds chirping too early, a bicycle whizzing by.

Though Donna wouldn't admit it to anyone, since the Berlin standoff she'd been using the photo like a believer might, turning it over on the most dire news days in a sort of prayer. Here was a man who held shawls, therefore . . . what? Gentleness would prevail? Reason? The world, because the President had visited the store where she'd bought milk growing up, would go on? Nonsense thinking.

She held Miriam's tooth up under her desk lamp. It was run through with translucent channels, clotted where the root had been. Grady was right, it was a little like a garlic bulb. She felt the strange verve of voodoo come over her, something closer to power than wish. Nothing was visible at this point, but with the care she took, she was willing each tooth to be chock full of radium. She pictured (though she knew how the assay really worked) a blanket of radium glowing at the base of the chamber, the ugly baby teeth shedding themselves, frog to prince, into a gorgeous deadly mass.

She loved the kids. But she needed the levels to be high, for the mortality Grady was calculating to be off the charts, *because* she loved those kids, and big numbers were the only way they could even nudge Defense to stop testing. Hoping, she knew, was not good science. And this was Donna's secret: She was a bad scientist. She was a hoper parading in scientist's clothes.

Donna closed and sealed the box to Farmington, then reviewed the charts. Even in the raw data, a strange pattern appeared: all the second-grade teeth from Roosevelt had come from Ms. Palvano's and Mrs. Bell's classes. None from Mrs. Richards's.

She left the charts on Grady's desk with a note about the aberration. Then she hung her lab coat and put on her real one, and walked home, going the long way by the river.

In her apartment, Donna turned on lamps and took off her shoes. She stood at the kitchen sink, holding on, just watching the space between her building and the one in the next street. The wash line had been taken down and the poles stood empty, like winter masts. It was the blue hour, when everything seemed done. The refrigerator, minding its own funny clock, clucked its tongue at her for having such useless thoughts.

"Okay," Donna said, setting the chicken out on the counter. "Okay." Then she went in the other room to turn on the news. President Kennedy said more weapons being brought to the island or any interference with the quarantine would necessitate American action. More ships were apparently on their way from the USSR.

For months the word had been *escalation*, but it was clear the definition was narrowing. With each move, it could mean fewer and fewer things.

Donna arrived early the next morning to find Grady waiting at her desk.

"What?" he said. "See a ghost on the way in? I looked at the numbers you flagged. Statistically, it makes no sense that one group of second-graders at Roosevelt would be losing teeth at a significantly slower rate than the class next door, or than any class in Galesburg."

Donna rattled the spares jar, as if it might yield more teeth with a little shake.

"Don't do that," Grady said.

"They're just teeth." But she put the jar down. "So where do you think they are?"

"I mean, statistically speaking, the kids have lost them. So they've either stopped donating and we haven't been told, or someone in the school is hiding them."

"Hiding them? Grady. How do you even know they've lost them?"

"Do you have another theory?"

Donna's whole character was an overgrowth of belief, wasn't it? It wasn't her job to doubt. "They must have just been misplaced," she said.

"Kids don't just stop wanting to do good. Or get quarters. Someone's interfering." He touched the corner of the clipping, but Donna kept her hand on the jar.

"We have every consent letter, though." He just stood there. She said, "I'll ask again."

"Good. Because if the US shows up at BEAR with a half-finished data set, it's not just that we're going to get a call, it's going to be field day for the Soviets. American science, dead on—"

"I know."

Donna called Roosevelt. Ms. Davis checked the cabinets where collections were stored between visits and with the school nurse, but no one knew of any extra teeth.

So Grady canceled his morning meetings and they drove back to the school. When they got there, they agreed Donna would go in first and Grady would wait in the car, join her if she needed help.

Donna checked the collection cabinet in the hall once more (no teeth) then went directly to Mrs. Richards's classroom and knocked. Ralph let her in. The teacher was pointing at the Great Lakes on a map taped to the chalkboard. When she saw Donna, her arm fell. "We're in the middle of a lesson, Miss Banister, if you don't mind."

"Please forgive me, Mrs. Richards." Donna addressed the children. "I just need to see, did anyone have any teeth for me this week?"

"They do not," Mrs. Richards said. Several students raised their hands anyway.

"You do?" Donna said, lifting her cheeks to put smile in her voice the way her singing teacher had taught her to do. "Wonderful."

Eleanor brought her collection envelope forward, clutching the hem of her green skirt like she had a train. Donna thanked her and reached for a badge, but Eleanor shook her head. "I don't need one." Donna dropped it back in to her bag. "I wrote you a note," the girl said, tapping the envelope she'd handed over.

"May I read it?" Donna asked.

"Not now."

"All right." Donna held the envelope close to her chest. "But as soon as I get home."

Daniel stepped forward. "I gave my two teeth last week, Miss Donna, but you weren't here that day."

"You did—" Donna nearly made it a question before remembering she was omniscient. "You did perfectly." She tried to call up her collection chart.

"Can I have one?" Daniel said, reaching into the envelope of buttons.

"Oh," Donna said, distracted. "Of course."

When no one else came forward, Donna stood and smoothed her skirt and asked the class who had lost a tooth since the start of the school year. Twelve children raised their hands; Ralph raised both. She'd not recorded any before today. "Okay," she said, patting her vet's bag as if she had everything. "Thank you all." Ralph left his hands in the air. "May I speak to you in the hall, Mrs. Richards?"

"Please read pages fifty through fifty-three," Mrs. Richards told the class.

Donna waited for her in the hall outside her classroom. Deer fencing had been affixed to the ceiling and from it hung chains of paper leaves crayoned and threaded with string, which dangled like moss near their heads.

The teacher closed the door behind her.

"Mrs. Richards," Donna began in her tooth fairy voice. "We're missing a significant quantity of teeth we believe students brought in for the study."

"What, so they get sent to Washington and implanted in chimpanzees to study obedience in seven-year-olds? I won't see it."

Donna tried to hide her shock at the admission. You are a public health officer, she thought. And this is data. "Nothing goes to Washington, Mrs. Richards."

"Then where do you take them?"

"We assess them as part of a regional drinking water survey, as stated in the letter you signed."

"That wasn't in the letter."

Donna knelt, filed through her bag and retrieved a copy, but Mrs. Richards refused it. "What are you assessing them for?"

"Good question." Donna dropped her voice into its most soothing register. "Think of it like chemistry lab. We are measuring femtocuries of Radium 226 per gram of tooth matter. And your students, America's future scientists, get to participate firsthand in making important safety guidelines." One of the buttons on the stomach of Mrs. Richards's dress had come open, and Donna could see a flash of pink, skin or slip, beneath. "They are going to need these numbers to keep us all safe."

The teacher shook her head as if keeping any logic Donna spoke from worming its way in. "Just tell me what happens to the teeth."

Donna felt the slide of truth-telling like one feels certain gradients of doom—too late. "We ash them for radium."

"Ash! As in, you *burn* them?" The teacher shuddered. Donna saw a twitch catch the corner of her lip.

"There's no flame," Donna said. "Ashing is only a term for the extraction of inorganic materials. It's a standard scientific process."

"It's how we obliterated those poor people in Japan."

Though not strictly true, Donna knew explaining otherwise would not get her anywhere. And, if they were going that route, it was how a lot of people had been obliterated, those years.

"Shame on you." Mrs. Richards started down the hall. Donna followed. "Selling this to the parents as science. Do they know that their children's teeth are being *burned*?" Mrs. Richards rapped on the principal's door. When the secretary stood to help her, she blurted, "Did you know that they *burn* them, Miss Davis?"

Principal Koe emerged from his office. "Nancy, Miss Banister. How can I help?" He was tall as a man in funhouse glass, but he had the kind of voice you wanted to read you books, Donna had thought when she first met him.

"They burn them, sir. And I won't stand for it," said Mrs. Richards. "It's—heathen."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Nancy," the principal said, "but it's not yours to determine. The parents have all been notified and signed permission waivers."

Donna spoke. "And the children in your classroom told me they've been complying." She was calm again, her most nursely, dispassionate self, serene in her quest for a constant.

The principal looked at the teacher for confirmation. She looked stricken. He twisted the ashtray on his secretary's desk like a stereoscope, a little pause between each turn. "Mrs. Richards, what have you been doing with those teeth?"

"Sir, burning teeth—it's godless." With the force of the last word the button

beneath her brassiere kissed open again.

Donna waited in the hall. The teeth, it came out behind Principal Koe's office door, were hidden somewhere in Mrs. Richards's house. That was all she would say. When the two emerged again, Principal Koe said that Mrs. Richards would be happy to return the missing teeth to the Midwestern Environmental Health Study, and he would teach her class for the rest of the day while she went to retrieve them.

Donna thanked them both, pulled her collar up, and followed Mrs. Richards out into the parking lot. "Thank you," Donna said again, embarrassed, but the teacher ignored her. Grady pushed the passenger side open.

"She better have twelve teeth in there," he said when Donna related what had happened, "and six of them better be molars." He turned the engine, and steered the car behind Mrs. Richards's Pontiac, where he idled.

"Grady," Donna said. "She's coming back with them. We can't chase a public schoolteacher into her home."

"Of course we can't. But we can at least follow her to make sure that's where she goes."

"Grady! No. We'll add a school from the surplus survey. Can't we? Combine the molars and bicuspids to get the mass we need?" The fate of their paper lay in the hands of this poor woman, but maybe it didn't have to. "Or add molars from the spares."

He turned and looked at her. "The *spares*? You're testing me, right? This is a riddle? Because if you think I'd falsify data, international audience or no, then we didn't have enough meetings before I hired you."

Stung, to be looked at, regretted. "Grady."

"Those badges you give to the children, Donna." He turned onto the street behind the teacher's car. "What do they say?"

"I'm not playing this."

"You don't have to. Because I'll tell you what they say. They say: I gave my tooth to science. What they definitely do not say is I gave my tooth so my nutball teacher could squirrel it away in her home in some cracked-up one-man—"

"One woman."

"Whatever." Grady ceded the point though. "One-woman cracked-up puritanical revolt." He rolled down his window. "They could be anywhere. If she hasn't destroyed them by now."

"That's why I thought we should wait for her at Roosevelt." The teacher drove up past the cemetery then turned. Too far away to see any expression in the mirror, she was just the back of a head, wheels.

"You are an optimist, Donna, which I appreciate. It's a fine thing to meet a competent optimist in one's line of work. But as an optimist, you may not have had as much experience with these types as I have, so let me assure you: they do not tend to bring back the thing they stole to the place they stole it from." He tapped his cigarette out the window. "Where do *you* think they are?"

She changed her tack. Maybe she could convince him it was a lost cause. "What if they're in the toilet tank?"

"Perfect. We want exposure to city water."

"Ingestion is not equivalent to submersion, Grady."

"I was joshing," he said.

"The butter dish. In the butter." Donna was talking her way into Nancy Richards's head. She could almost feel the power of stealing the students' crummy teeth, deciding where to stash them. There was something magnificent in the gesture—Iowa schoolteacher stands up to science—a magnificence plotted somewhere on the line between brave and deluded.

At the top of the hour, said the radio*, an update on the US reconnaissance plane that was shot down over Cuba this morning by Soviet ground to air artillery. President Kennedy has not commented publicly, but we're standing by. Sources close to the White House suggest he warned Premier Khrushchev that such an act of aggression against the States would not be tolerated. The naval blockade remains in place. More at the top of the hour.*

"Do you think this is about God?" Donna asked. They were there.

"I don't know," he said, cutting the engine. "But if so, he's too late."

The house was on a street behind the Winn-Dixie, a handsome enough house, but one which seemed to have lacked attention for years, as if no one in it had realized there was an outside. Donna wondered if her mother was already in her shelter. Grady adjusted the mirror needlessly. "I'll wait in the car."

"Oh, nunno." Donna turned the mirror so she could see him in it. "You are the principal investigator. You're coming in."

Mrs. Richards emerged from the carport. She looked unsurprised to see them there. Grady pressed his tie against his shirt and stepped out, buttoning his blazer.

"Mrs. Richards," he said.

Donna waited, but no one said anything else. Silently they followed the teacher to her porch, where she turned to them. She touched the yoked-again button. "So you'll come in?"

"We could just wait out here," Donna said.

Mrs. Richards seemed to consider the idea then dismiss it. She held the door for them.

Inside, a boy was propped up on one side of the sofa, listening to the radio. Twelve maybe, at least in the face, which seemed too big or too old for his body. A wheelchair stood beside the arm. He was dressed in a baggy green sweater and a white Hawkeyes cap, its bill gray with use. "Why are you home early, Mom?" A slight wheeze hung on the end of his question.

"Max, honey." Mrs. Richards sounded no longer scared but tender. "Don't worry. Come tell me how school was."

"It was fine. Why are you back early?" Looking at Donna and Grady this time. Mrs. Richards turned off the radio, kissed him on the cheek, then moved his chair

in front of the couch. He hoisted himself over. "Will you excuse us?" she said. The boy began to push himself down the hall, but his mother took the handles of the chair. A door closed.

Donna didn't want the teeth anymore. She wanted to be back in the lab, considering the slope that they had been working on, that nice linear K. Or she wanted to be handing a button to a cute gap-toothed kid who would go back to his desk, and then when the bell rang would go kick a ball, jump rope. Never again would she pretend that the Tooth Fairy entered houses. How had she considered only the magic of that, and not its violation?

She glared at Grady and whispered: "Polio?"

"Ten weeks till Ge-ne-va," he mouthed.

It was dark inside, and Grady's face was a sort of illumination, everything else washing into the curtained colors of the room. There was a dull antiseptic smell to the house not unlike the lab, and holes in the carpet by the door, as if something had tried to tunnel out. Donna swirled the bracelets on her arm. Twelve teeth. For twelve teeth they came like debt collectors, like evictors, and for what—so that the molar curve could show indeed, for certain, yes, a boneseeker is still a boneseeker? They'd known Radium 226 loved bones before they started this; the Dial Painters had shown that. How vertical did K have to be, how hugged to that line, each aliquot of ash, before they'd stop testing? Down in the Caribbean, ships were watching the horizon, waiting for orders. Grady's cousin was lined up at the end of the runway smoking his German cigs. Khrushchev might say go any day. Then where was their line?

"Let's go," she whispered. But Grady just shook his head. These boys, Donna thought. The dexterity their single-mindedness granted them, the cruelty. She envied it. "Then remind me how we need these."

His voice went soft and important, like the dangerous part of a bedtime story. "The osteosarcomas are higher in St. Peter's towns," Grady said. "We're seeing that. We are about to know it for sure. If these kids' teeth are even thinking about glowing at age six, then we've got a nice case to recommend lower levels of radium in drinking water."

"And to stop testing."

Grady looked at her as if she had misunderstood something all along. At last he said, "That too."

Donna noticed a corner of the sofa's armrest cover was flipped open like a dog's ear. Science was slow to stack up. And what good was it to this woman, who had needed science in the form of a vaccine twelve years ago, when it wasn't ready? No wonder she didn't want to give to science now. Let her keep those healthy kids' teeth. Donna went to the armrest and smoothed the corner down. As she did, she saw Mrs. Richards standing in the hall behind Max. Donna felt her face go hot. She hoped the woman would kick her out, but Mrs. Richards only smiled and said, "I'm so sorry I forgot. Would you care for coffee?"

"No, thank you," said Donna.

"Sure," Grady said, staring intently at a painting of a barn in snow hanging by the front door. Mrs. Richards left for the kitchen.

Max wheeled toward Donna. "Hello," he said. "So why are you here?"

"Nice to meet you." Donna offered her hand. Max, right?" He lifted his right one and she shook it lightly.

"That's right," he said. "And you are?" Remembering some rule, he reached up and ticked the visor so that his cap fell into his lap.

"The Tooth Fairy."

The boy's demeanor, wary before, relaxed. He smiled like the joke was on her. "No, you're not."

But she felt sure, now. "I am."

"Then who's he?" Max looked toward Grady.

"My understudy," Donna said. Grady nodded and gave a little wave.

"I know I don't look that old, but I'm thirteen," Max said. "It's impossible for someone to collect teeth from all the children in this country, when you consider that only what—one in three?—American families believe."

"One in three?" Donna said. "Is that right?" She was suddenly aware of perilous contingencies they had not considered.

"Well, that's the number for Santa Claus, but I bet it's close."

"He's right," Grady said, as if they'd been found. He crossed the room. "The Tooth Fairy, as she is known popularly, does not exist. It's a ruse." Fear whistled through Donna's system. "In fact, there are a great number of us, assigned at the local level to make collection easier." Max listened, his smile gone. "We're really more like a tooth fairy bureau." From the pocket of his sport coat Grady removed a badge and handed it to Max. Donna looked over the boy's shoulder. It was the photo of Donna the *Register* had run months ago, and typed beneath her name: *Tooth Fairy, Iowa*. In the corner, the US Public Health Service seal had been stamped. Official-looking. She'd never seen it before.

Grady added, "We're just members of the Tooth Fairy Bureau of Iowa City."

Max laughed, turning it over. "So do you work with my mom?"

"Yes," said Donna.

"No," said Mrs. Richards, returning with small cups of coffee. "Don't listen to them. Sweetheart, I need to know where you put those teeth I gave you." She looked at the tray. "Oh. Do you take cream?" Grady nodded.

When she was in the kitchen again, Max pointed to a tall amber vase on the sideboard. "See that?"

"May I take it down?" Grady said.

"It's my dad," Max said, a dare. "But you can if you want." In the other room, something clattered and fell.

"We don't want," Donna said.

Mrs. Richards appeared again holding creamer and a dishtowel, her knuckles

white. Donna knew she could lose her job for this.

"Thank you, Max," Grady said, already standing proprietarily near the hutch. "As principal investigator, I really appreciate your cooperation."

"Cooperation?" Donna asked, but Grady ignored her; she had been cast out.

"He wanted a Viking burial, didn't he, Mom? Which was crazy." Max looked at Donna, inviting her back in. "You know what a Viking burial is, don't you?"

"Max."

"Sea, right?"

"Burned on a pyre at sea," Max confirmed. "But tell them what you said, Mom."

Mrs. Richards held out her hands between Grady's and the floor as he moved the urn to the table. Grady set it down, and the teacher turned it half an inch before speaking. "I said, 'This is Iowa, George.'" She said this not meanly, but with the loving exasperation accorded to someone still in the room.

"George, this is Iowa," Max repeated, "and in Iowa Vikings get vases."

They all stared at it.

Donna winced. "Grady, could I speak with you?"

But he looked at her blankly, as if he couldn't hear her. Mrs. Richards tried to top up the full cups but the pot rattled in her hands and she set it down again. "And you're sure you dropped them in there?"

"Sorry, Mom." He pulled at a corner of the tablecloth. "You didn't tell me you wanted them back. You said you didn't want to know where."

"We don't have to take them," Donna said. "The study can find workarounds."

"You're here, aren't you?" Mrs. Richards said, accusation back in her voice. "Why would you be here if you didn't need them?"

"It would be helpful," Grady said to the table. "Since we know whose they are."

Mrs. Richards left again, and Max touched the urn gingerly. "He'd never been on the sea. Just Lake Michigan. I think that's probably why." He took a breath. "His grandparents were from Norway."

"Have you?" Grady said. "Been to sea, I mean."

"I haven't been on it. I've seen it, though. We went to Boston to visit my aunt and she took us."

Grady really smiled then. "I came here from Boston," he said. "That's real ocean up there. Whereabouts is your aunt?"

"Revere," the boy said, "but she took us to one north. Mom?" he called. "What was the beach Aunt Mary took us to?"

Mrs. Richards ignored the question, returning with a dustpan and broom. But he was waiting. "Singing Beach," she said finally. Seeing the urn again, a tracer of some feeling Donna had never felt traveled the teacher's face, blurring it. She released the dustpan into Donna's hand.

"Grady," Donna touched his elbow like they were man and wife in a play, "why don't you hold the vase?" Donna nodded at the newspaper at the end of the table. "May I?"

"The paper, you'll ask for." But Mrs. Richards folded it and passed it to Donna. Grady lifted the urn and Donna unfolded a sheet onto the table. Max wheeled back and Donna stooped to unfold another on the floor. "Okay," she said, mostly for herself.

Slowly Grady tipped the urn. Mrs. Richards started to laugh, but it turned to a cough and she covered her mouth with her handkerchief.

"Mom," Max said.

"Max," she said back, wiping at her eyes.

Donna had seen how-many cadavers during her training, but never ashes. She'd been picturing sand, something like wet beach sand, and not what spilled out onto the table: a whitish char finned with fragments of bone. Mrs. Richards lowered her hand over the ashes as if testing a hot burner. Time stuttered and held. Then Max said, "I see one, Mom," and, as if it had only been awaiting instruction, Mrs. Richards's hand went to work, combing through her husband for those precious foreign teeth.

She placed them carefully aside, like apple pips, suggested Donna's brain, but she refused the vision's solace. Instead she thought of the inoculated mouths they came from, the dead father they were covered in—a hoper, like her. Coroners used teeth to identify the unclaimed dead, and she was fairy of that now too, the calcite margin between the nameable and nobody. The Dial Painter who'd gone in to have a tooth pulled and her whole jaw came out with. Her mother sitting in her chair underground, passing peaches and pills into her mouth, chewing nothing to the sound of long-gone birds, as strontium and cesium and ruthenium crept toward her from above, through the ash and soil. All of this was her provenance now. And then Mrs. Richards was taking the whiskbroom from her, she was sweeping her husband's ashes into a wide-mouthed jar.

"Are some of those teeth his?" Max asked Donna.

His mother lifted the sides of the paper to make a funnel as she spoke: "There weren't any left."

"See how small they are," Donna said, "and these roots? That's how we know they're baby teeth."

Max touched the one Donna held out for him. She counted six molars. "I hated the sound of mine coming out," he said.

"I did too," Donna said, remembering it suddenly, the terrible wait, not wanting anyone to help pull. She'd had long, painful roots. And afterwards, the bloody troughs her tongue wanted to deepen.

They finished sweeping the ash in silence. There were things you could not apologize for, and others you could not forgive. Max wheeled back so Donna could pick up the newspaper from the floor.

"Thank you," she said, her own voice a foreign object catching briefly in her throat. ■