

So, tell me when this started? the dentist asked.

It had started with the slowly dawning recognition of pain, the realization that I'd been chewing on one side of my mouth for weeks. My dentist referred me for a root canal.

"Just a little pinch now," the endodontist said, and it pinched, and then the pain all melted away.

The root canal provided a welcome numbing, but once my tongue shrugged off that thick sweater of anesthesia, it took me a full day to realize that numb quiet had sparked, like a dormant ember, into flame.

So, tell me when this started? the endodontist asked.

It started after the root canal. The anesthesia was slow to wear off; my tongue felt thick and numb. Then the numbness became a burning pain, so back I went to the endodontist, who referred me to an oral surgeon, who told me to wait it out. I sought help from my GP.

So, tell me when this started? the doctor asked.

It might have started a year ago, I say, when my mother died. We ordered little lemon tarts for the funeral reception and I ate one after the other, wondering why they tasted so extra sour. Now all sweets, and tea, and wine scorch like acid.

The doctor nodded, unsurprised. "Things get weird when you lose a parent."

We agreed that there are worse things in life than not being able to eat sugar, but she ran tests, which all came back normal. Still, I was surprised to discover I'd lost seven pounds.

Now it is two weeks after the root canal and my mouth is on fire.

I cry out when a bit of tomato sauce on the pasta sets my tongue ablaze, when the tang of lemon juice in the salad dressing burns.

At night I wake, feverish, until I open my mouth to let the hot air flow out; I picture it scalding a path across my pillow. I take a sip of water to douse the heat and then mouth breathe, letting in cool air.

My tongue feels thick and I wonder if it could choke off my breath while I sleep.

I get up to study it in the mirror. It looks red and swollen, feels ragged on one side. Have I ever taken a close look at my tongue?

The dentist reassures me that my tongue looks fine, that the sensation I feel of its edge fraying against my teeth is “just nerves.” He assures me that it won’t choke off my breathing. Mostly he has answered “I don’t know” to my questions, but I trust this (I don’t have much choice).

The pain is a glowing red coal, a slice of hot pepper, a sunburn, an angry yellow jacket sitting on my tongue and repeatedly stinging.

I return to the endodontist, who prescribes a course of steroids. With the first dose, the burning seems to migrate to my heart and belly, which buzz as I circulate around the house, rearranging piles of books and laundry before drifting on to the next thing.

I go back to the dentist, who says something noncommittal about hormones and women in their fifties, also stress and anxiety. “So, yeah, those can be factors...” he trails off.

He suggests a tongue brush, B vitamins, dexamethasone rinse, antacids.

“But I don’t have reflux,” I protest.

“It can’t hurt,” he shrugs. “It might help.”

The dentist’s impotent sympathy irritates me. By now I have looked up some terms (“tongue fire”) and discovered Burning Mouth Syndrome, which I learn strikes mostly women, mostly in their fifties. Sometimes it occurs after dental work or an injury; sometimes it is idiopathic, which means it arises spontaneously and for no clear reason.

There are two threads unspooling here: one, that the root canal caused nerve damage; the other, that some mysterious stew of hormones, stress, and grief have caused a syndrome that is not well understood. Two intertwined narratives—one of injury, one of inevitability—neither with any treatment.

It is not cancer. It is not a terminal illness. But what is it? Is it just a brief detour from my regular life, or have I set off on a longer journey? Is my destination “managed pain”—which beckons to me like palm

trees and umbrella drinks right now—or am I heading somewhere far less pleasant? And really, when did it start? It seems like being able to answer that persistent question would unlock the key to healing.

I pause to assess: I am healthy. I breathe in the word as perspective and reassurance.

Still. My tongue takes part in every word, every bite, every kiss. For fifty years I have taken it for granted, and now it is asserting itself.

I am exhausted with pain. Also I have exhausted the resources of my dentist, the endodontist, my doctor. I wonder: who is in charge of the tongue? Whose responsibility, whose medical jurisdiction is the tongue?

I browse through the directory of specialty clinics at the local hospital. Ear, Nose, and Throat is in the right physical neighborhood, but my doctor's referral is declined, my file passed on to Neurology, the same clinic where I used to take my mom. I'm offered an appointment in six weeks.

I keep scrolling and come to the Oro-Facial Pain Clinic. I am so excited to find a match that I briefly forget my intense oro-facial pain. They can see me in two months.

So that must be when it starts: the day I make an appointment with the specialty pain clinic.

I text a link to the Mayo Clinic webpage on Burning Mouth Syndrome to a friend who responds a moment later, "That is messed up." She makes me laugh, which makes my tongue spark fire, and I cry out in surprised pain.

I wish for some sign of my burning tongue, to let people know to be gentle with me, so I dig out a bright pink lipstick I bought for an eighties party. When friends comment on my uncharacteristic makeup, I tell them my mouth feels like it's on fire and start to tell the story. It's a messy one still, more questions than answers. The talking makes it hurt; the storytelling makes it better.

My mom never went out without lipstick, and I think of her every time I apply it, but she never showed me how. I don't do a very good job.

By one measure, this all started a couple weeks before a long-dreamed-of trip to Japan, where my mother and I were both born. I haven't returned since my family moved to the U.S. in the seventies.

“How’s your Japanese?” some friends ask, while others insist, “It’ll all come back!”

I wonder. I was fluent; my mom was fluent. You could call Japanese my mother tongue. I don’t remember learning the language—I just spoke it. It strikes me as ironic, now, that my tongue is so stilted. Did I know the difference between my two languages? Did I mix them up? I don’t know, and I can no longer ask my mom.

I think about her, my bright and opinionated mother, whose sometimes sharp tongue was stilled by her long final illness; she searched for words fruitlessly, expressed herself so haltingly, and it was a little death when I no longer glimpsed that spark of frustration in her eyes.

In the event, my Japanese doesn’t come back to me. Trying to wrap my thick-feeling tongue around the long-forgotten strings of vowels, I frequently bite it and slow down even more.

As a child, my tongue moved easily between languages. When we moved to New York and I started kindergarten, I refused to speak anything but English. I’m left with a handful of words—*kizu*, *genkan*, *wasuremono*—that I hardly even hear as Japanese anymore.

I shake a dose of medicine out into my hand and remember when Mom taught me to swallow pills using spicy cinnamon red hots. Was I sick? Or did she just think I was old enough to learn? Regardless, I succeeded only in burning my tongue, leaving it spotted with red dye. I think about the mechanics of swallowing—touch the tongue to the roof of the mouth—noting the ache at the back of my tongue and the fire at its tip. I take another pill.

To distract myself, I take on a cooking project. I make chutney, thinking back to my mom, grandmother, and aunts long ago in the steamy summer kitchen of my grandparents’ house, chopping tomatoes and ginger, canning in a hot water bath. The spice burns satisfactorily, fading from my tongue until my own burn remains.

I discover I can still burn my tongue on hot tea.

I join a Facebook Burning Mouth support group—a sad twenty-first-century milestone—and find that the pinned post links to a suicide

hotline. I sit frozen at my laptop, forcing myself to scroll through posts from women who have been suffering three, five, ten years. I feel like I'm being pulled into a multi-car pileup and can't swerve away.

I start a note on my phone—blandly titling it “Dental Issues”—listing my doctors’ appointments and medications, what I’ve eaten, how I reacted, and describing my daily tongue: scalded, burning, tingling, buzzing, raggedy, sharp, thick, sore. I scroll through it daily, looking for patterns, seeing none. I am trying to be precise, to maintain strict definitions, but I’m not sure my doctors totally appreciate the distinction I feel between Pop Rocks tingle and mad hornet buzz.

I look at the dates on the note, scrolling back past the trip to Japan, past the root canal, to Mom’s funeral and those lemon tarts, thinking I could backfill more dates: her death, her entering hospice, her last doctor’s appointment. I like the certainty of these dates, but they still don’t answer the question: Tell me when this started?

It started.

And now I carry it with me as surely as I do the Japanese words filtering into my conversation, bright lipstick, and ginger chutney.

I wonder how long it will take me to notice when it stops.

I try to say *when*, not *if*.

And I wonder if it will feel like a loss.

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