

Somewhere Between TMI and TMJ

written by Guest Contributor | March 2, 2017



1. I have spent the last month in pain. Thinking my teeth were rotting out of my mouth, I went to the dentist only to be told that I have TMJ (Temporomandibular joint dysfunction). He recommended ibuprofen and icing the area.
2. My father often tells me that I should write a book about him. "It'll be a best seller!"
3. One of the causes of TMJ is stress. After my diagnosis, I noticed just how often I clench my teeth: when I'm grading papers, when I'm writing, when I'm focusing on something, and when I'm experiencing frustration or anger.
4. Everyone seems to love my father, especially because of his sense of humor. And he is funny. But he's also the man who sexually abused me from childhood until I was a teen.
5. For the last four weeks, I've spent my time clutching an ice pack to the left side of my face, downing ibuprofen, and trying to figure out ways to make myself relax. Anything to make the pain stop.
6. We're having a conference this weekend at my school. On my way to a reading tonight, I called my mother's cell. When she didn't answer, I tried my father's. Neither of them answer, but before I reach the end of my street, my father rings back. "I couldn't get my hands in my pants fast enough. (Pause.) You know, so I could get my phone," he says when I pick up. I freeze. My hands on the steering wheel, the turn signal ticking, I make myself respond to him. "Uh, yeah. Right."
7. For four weeks, nothing was helping the pain for more than an hour or two. Not the Prednisone I'd been prescribed, not the Orajel I kept slathering on my gums, not consciously trying to relax my jaw every time I clench my teeth, which is often.
8. I hate that I don't stand up to him. That I don't call him out on his bad behavior. But I never do. Just like I never tell him how awful it

makes me feel when he sends me a check that has the word "Alimony" in the memo section. Like I'm his ex-wife. Like he's giving me back pay for services rendered.

9. Every time I called the dentist or the doctor to ask about some other treatment, I was treated like I was seeking pain medications. I wasn't. I just wanted the pain to stop. There's a difference.
10. For the last five years, I'd been writing a book of poems about the abuse I experienced as a child from both of my parents and the battles I've fought with mental illness. My parents have no idea that I've written this manuscript. I think they think I write about nature and my grandparents.
11. I've spent a lot of time over the past month wondering at the connection between keeping silent about the abuse (and the things my father still says and does) and the problems I've been having with my jaw.
12. Pain is exhausting because it demands your complete attention. Because it feels like it will never end.
13. Earlier this week, I received an email from one of my father's new clients:

"Subject: your dad gave me a lift
To airport He talked about you and your travels and writing and
i just thought i would tell you that he is very very proud of
you.
Ira kaplan
Sent from my iPhone"

14. I felt violated by the email. Horrified that my father said enough about me that someone felt comfortable emailing me to tell me how my father feels. And did my father provide this stranger with my email address?
15. Tonight, the pain is lessened. I started a new anti-inflammatory yesterday, Mobic, and for the past 24 hours, except for a few twinges here and there, my jaw has stopped hurting. It no longer feels like I'm having half a face worth of tooth pain.
16. On Monday, I'll send my poetry manuscript out to three contests that would result in it being published if it is chosen as the winner.
17. I can tell I have a long way to go before I stop clenching my teeth. It's going to be a hard habit to break.
18. I look forward to my father's reaction when he learns that I have written that book about him, after all.



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