Indentations and Other Stories

Schall, Joe

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Donald David Sandborn read that twelve million Americans feared him so completely that they never came to visit. So he decided to beautify his apartment to attract tourists, to show the world he was a regular guy. Impression trays, he knew, should be the basic décor. Since everyone had a mouth, he reasoned, everyone would respond to impression trays with open grins. He had been taught that you had to appeal to all five of the senses if you hoped to create something aesthetic and alive. If handled properly, impression trays simultaneously activated all five of the senses, and they were set in a perpetual smile.

First, Dr. Sandborn bought forty-six sheets of four-by-eight pegboard at Claster's and ninety-seven packs of curtain hooks at K-Mart. He secured the sheets of pegboard to the walls in his apartment with six-penny nails. Then he gathered up his collection of impression trays, both disposable and nondisposable, and hung them from the curtain hooks in the
pegboard. He arranged the attractive Temrex Rite Bite trays and Caulk Rim-Lock non-perforated water-cooled trays on the bathroom walls, because he knew that discriminating tourists judged the quality of a home by its bathroom. Naturally he hung the standard Super-Dent impression trays with retention rims in the living room, because they were the most pleasing to look at while you sat leisurely on the couch. He realized, though, that tourists were just as likely to be sitting while in the bathroom, so he had an aesthetic decision to make. Finally, he decided on the entire sani-tray assortment of Getz plastic disposables and the newest line of D-P Traten perforated plastic trays, and arranged them strategically across from the toilet at eye level, since they were both pleasing to the eye and had a more sanitary look than aluminum. From varying lengths of unwaxed floss, he tied a seemingly random assortment of F.G.P., Lactona, and Crown and Bridge trays, and attached these to hooks screwed into the ceiling tiles. They served as wind chimes when he opened all the windows or turned on all the fans. He realized that few of his tourists would be into impression trays on such an esoteric level as he, but he aspired to educate them gradually in a sublime manner.

Nine years earlier, Dr. Riddle had taught Sandborn not to take impressions lightly.

“Look at this, Sandborn,” Dr. Riddle said, throwing down the May issue of JADA at his feet. The journal was open to a two-page ad: “Good Impressions: Making Them and Taking Them.”

“This,” said Dr. Riddle, “is your future battle. Taking and making good impressions. Come.” Sandborn followed Dr. Riddle into his office and Dr. Riddle instructed him to sit back
in the Belmont chair with the double-padded headrest.

"Open your mouth and pull your upper lip away from your teeth," Dr. Riddle ordered.

Dr. Riddle opened a jar of Jeltrate, scooped some powder into a wooden bowl, measured and mixed in 1/4 cup of boiling water, spooned the solution into a Baker's Edge-Lok impression tray, and jammed the tray into Sandborn's mouth, pushing up hard with his palm.


"Don't squirm, just watch," Dr. Riddle said, handing him a mirror.

Sandborn held the mirror in his right hand and kept the impression tray in place with his left hand. The mirror fogged up from the mist coming out of his mouth.

"What's wrong, Sandborn?" Dr. Riddle asked.

"Ah cunhh seah woth happena tumme, Dokka Real," he said.

"Then close your eyes and picture it. It's beautiful. You are taking your own impression. For the first time in your life you are taking charge of your own mouth. No instruments needed but your own two hands. No one else's fingers probing your privacy, no plastic gloves, no uv lights, no cotton swabs, no salivation, just your own, pure, steaming impression being taken by you."

"Wehn cun aha shhtop?" Sandborn asked.

"Look Sandborn," Dr. Riddle said, shoving another mirror in front of him. "This is your future. This is the staple of dentistry."

In the mirror, Sandborn's gums bled so badly that he could not see his impression.

"Now, let's do your lowers," Dr. Riddle said, reaching into Sandborn's mouth.
Knowing that mouth mirrors were a dentist’s most basic visual aid, Dr. Sandborn reasoned that he could teach his future tourists to enjoy the sight of mouth mirrors if they got used to seeing them in a homey environment. So he purchased two gross of Autoclavable Reusable Glass Mouth Mirrors with rhodium coated lenses, removed the fiberglass handles with a soldering iron, then cemented the tiny, round reflectors in rows over all the former mirrors in his apartment. The bedroom mirror, shaped like an upside down scallop shell, was tricky, but he conquered the shape by cementing a small arc of mouth mirrors to the top of the shell and underlining it with ever-widening cemented smiles. Now, he thought excitedly, when any tourist looked into the new bedroom mirror, he would see a jagged replica of his own smiling face, and, stepping closer, would watch his face break into dozens of separate faces. Then, pressing his temple and cheekbone against the glass if he wished, he could inspect the image of his own reflection in his eyeball. This way, any tourist looking into Dr. Sandborn’s mirrors secured instant friends. After just one tour, mouth mirrors would become funhouse mirrors.

He thought of everything. He went beyond the normal tour guide’s duties. For instance, he placed a can of Dee Fog Spray on the bathroom and kitchen sinks, in case any tourists showered, shaved, or did the dishes. He supplied empty Starlite and Shofu boxes in the bathroom and bedroom so tourists could deposit their cosmetics, keys, and change in case of an overnight stay. He filled water bottles with Sparkl solution and lined them up on the kitchen counter next to a small cardboard sign: “If you want to have a water battle with another tourist, use Sparkl! It’s safer and more hygienic than water, and it won’t wrinkle your clothes.” He scattered unmailed letters and Christmas cards addressed to patients on the coffee table, covering them with
dentistry stamps, including the famous one depicting Henri Moissan and the two recent sets issued by Kuwait. And finally, for the coup de maître, he casually left Atlas of the Mouth opened to the pages on “Growth and Calcification Patterns of Enamel and Dentin,” and propped the open book up in front of the television screen.

Seven years earlier, Sandborn had sat comfortably in Dr. Riddle’s office chair.

“Listen to me, Sandbo. In one year you will be practicing. In one year I will have to call you doctor.”

“Yes,” Sandborn said.

“So you think you know it all? Now you’ve heard all about fissured tongues and sublingual carbuncles so you think you’re a hot property, right?”

“So they tell me.”

“Who wrote The Talking Tooth?”

Sandborn continued to push the memory buttons on Dr. Riddle’s chair, enjoying the soft, humming whir whenever the chair moved.

“The Talking Tooth. Who wrote it?”

“We didn’t study that.”

“And I’ll tell you why you didn’t study it. Because it’s about pain. The real thing. Pain. You don’t want to know about pain. Only money. I’ll tell you who wrote it: Dr. Jim Cranshaw.”

“The Jim Cranshaw?”

“His first book; a novel. The only real book he ever wrote. Before he sold out and started that chain of roto-dentists in shopping malls. I got a flyer last week about his latest scheme. Founding the first Amway for dentists. Every dentist is a

“Sounds like a good idea,” Sandborn said.

“Exactly. You think it’s a good idea because you still don’t understand what it’s all about. Listen to this passage from The Talking Tooth. It’s written from the perspective of a mandibular lateral incisor:

“The lesion began as a small blister, but soon fine white lacy lines were radiating from the margin. They closed around me like a pillow and whispered promises into the night. Vainly I believed them, ignoring the violaceous papules that subtly crept over my body. I slept most of the day and drank most of the night. Finally I realized what was really happening to me. I screamed to have my entire area indurated.

“Induration!” I screamed. “Induration or death!”

“That’s easy,” said Sandborn. “Wickham’s disease. The lacy lines will soon be—”

“I’m not asking for a prognosis, Sandhead! I’m talking about the real thing! The lacy lines will be your patient’s fingers wanting to close around your throat every time you go into a mouth! The screams you’ll hear at night! The pain you’ll never hear about! Don’t you realize what I’m telling you, boy?”

“No,” Sandborn said.

To appeal to the auditory sense, Dr. Sandborn provided a subtle alternative to elevator music—tapes that would be played suggestively in the background during the tour. He recorded
some of the more popular TV shows with his VCR on the chance that the actors might make dental references, then rerecorded selected bits from the VCR tape onto a cassette tape, then remixed live from the cassette tape onto another cassette tape, dubbing in his own comments when appropriate, with a low-speed intraflex lux drill running serenely in the background. He began the tape with Fascinating Facts They Don’t Tell You on TV. For instance, when Bill Cosby said “There’s something berry crazy in the jello freezer,” the commercial failed to acknowledge that Cosby was sitting comfortably in a dentist’s chair at the time. Dr. Sandborn acknowledged it. When Johnny Carson ridiculed Dr. Mendelsohn’s letter asking for kinder treatment of the dental profession, NBC failed to admit that Johnny’s second wife divorced him because he ground his teeth at night—the real reason, Dr. Sandborn knew, why Johnny never told any bruxism jokes. Dr. Sandborn admitted it. Alex P. Keaton’s comment that he preferred an evening of mime to an evening of dentistry posed problems until Dr. Sandborn simply switched the words “mime” and “dentistry.” Surprisingly, some comments needed no editing, such as those by the dentist on M*A*S*H, who once avoided the latrine for eighteen hours straight and refused to kiss a nurse because of the germs. Of course, Dr. Sandborn excluded some material, such as Dick York’s son boring a butterknife through a piece of toast to mimic a dentist’s drill, and Dick getting his root canal atop a merry-go-round horse instead of in a proper dentist’s chair, with the heavily moustached dentist wearing an absurd purple cape and dressed like David Copperfield. Some tourists, Dr. Sandborn knew, would misinterpret such information if it were included, and his tape would become counterproductive.

For the more hip kids and teenagers, he used Thomas McGuire’s book, The Tooth Trip, reading aloud into a microphone
from select sections of the book such as “A Day in the Life of a Germ,” “The Bad Acid Trip,” “Stimudents,” “Your First Encounter with Chief White Coat,” “Cavitron,” and “How To Tell When You Have One.” And, for the particularly squeamish, Dr. Sandborn read from Stolzenberg’s *Psychosomatics and Suggestion Therapy in Dentistry*, with a Red Wing lathe running in the background to subliminally ease any tourist’s lathe-anxiety.

“Did you ever realize,” he read aloud, “that it takes more muscular effort to produce a frown than it does to produce a smile? The recent war produced many examples of physical disabilities which, basically, were nothing more than the physical expression of the mental fear of being exposed to danger in the armed services. In psychological terms, the suspicion attaches to every dentist, as it does to every surgeon, masseur, policeman, animal trainer, hangman, etc., that he likes his work. The public expects them to hate their work and engage in it with repugnance, or else be tarred with the brush of cruelty and sadism. So smile, it really makes a difference!”

Dr. Sandborn listened to the tapes over and over until they became white noise.

Five years earlier, Sandborn had sat in Dr. Riddle’s dining room, eating the largest meal he had had in years.

“Taste this Sandy,” Dr. Riddle said, shoving a forkful of bouillabaisse in front of Sandborn’s mouth.

The bouillabaisse tasted like white rice with margarine. In fact, everything tasted like white rice with margarine, but there was no white rice with margarine on the table.

“Please dear, Mr. Sandborn looks full enough already,” Mrs. Riddle said.
“So you think he’s fat, do you?” Dr. Riddle said, poking towards Sandborn’s belly. “The wife here thinks you’re too fat.”

“Thanks, I really am full,” Sandborn said.

“You could stand to lose a few pounds,” Mrs. Riddle said.

“Now let’s treat our guest with some respect, dear. Tomorrow this boy graduates and goes into private practice with me.”

“Oh yes,” said Mrs. Riddle, “the great dental profession. Have you told him yet that you’re manning a sinking ship? About the bile taste of bad breath? How you’re going to create him in your own image?”

“Just the ticket Sandy, you and I opening our own office. Like a father and son.”

“Do you know,” Mrs. Riddle said to Sandborn, “why we don’t have any children?”

“Did you know, Sandy, that Mrs. Riddle made this entire meal in the microwave?”

“That’s very impressive,” said Sandborn.

“That’s why it all tastes like white rice with margarine,” Dr. Riddle said.

Mrs. Riddle picked up her soup spoon.

“She’s a microwave queen,” Dr. Riddle said.

Mrs. Riddle scooped her soup spoon into a casserole dish and aimed carefully for her husband’s mouth.

“Have some asparagus puff pie,” she said gaily, sending it across the table and onto his forehead.

“Maybe I’d better be going,” Sandborn said.

“Oh please do stay,” Mrs. Riddle said. “For after dinner treats we have pumpkin bars and asparanuts.”

Dr. Riddle pushed his chair back, squatted down, and lifted his end of the table, trying to slide the entire meal onto his wife’s lap.
In the dining room of his apartment, Dr. Sandborn worked for thirty-seven evenings in a row, making informal placemats for the dining room table that the tourists could enjoy with him while they ate lunch. He laminated them himself. His plan was to serve the tourists in shifts of four to preserve that family feel without crowding anyone at the table. First, he reproduced a pencil sketch of Rembrandt’s *The Charlatan*, depicting a market busker in sweeping criss-crossed and curved lines holding up a crude medicine with which to ease toothaches. This placemat was reserved, of course, for the artsy tourist. On top of it, the tourist might enjoy some cascadiilla soup and perhaps some alsatian cheese salad, served with a tofu and soy sauce side plate.

The second placemat catered to the superstitious and neurotic tourist. It was a pen and ink drawing of Goya’s *Hunting for Teeth*, with a woman standing on tiptoe averting her face and holding a scarf over it while removing the teeth from a man who had recently been hanged. Some women, Dr. Sandborn knew, still retained equally ridiculous superstitions about how to relieve their own toothache pain. One patient had told him that her mother used to make her eat a banana whenever she had a toothache. Invariably the girl would eat the banana and lose a tooth in the process. Any female tourist who might have had similar painful childhood experiences could sit at the Goya placemat and concentrate on the superstitious look on the woman’s face, while sipping a hot soup completely unlike a banana, such as spicy tomato or mushroom bisque or even Brazilian black bean, if Dr. Sandborn had time to prepare it.

However, to show he was giving the ladies a fair shake, and in anticipation of the inevitable feminist tourist, he made a water color of Daumier’s *She Stands Her Ground* for the third placemat, boasting a burly female dentist with her entire hand
hidden in a patient’s mouth, five overly sized molars and a tooth-key at her feet. He added just a touch of ruffle to the woman’s dress at the shoulders, elbows, wrists, and waist to suggest a softer look than Daumier had. For the feminist tourist, Dr. Sandborn would prepare a regular ground beef hamburger on a plain Sunbeam roll with some ketchup, prudently holding the mayonnaise, mustard, onions, pickles, relish, lettuce, tomato, cheese, and salt.

And, for the fourth placemat, geared to the particularly witty and analytical tourist, he pastelled a copy of the controversial 1956 painting by Solot, *The Revolt of the Molars*, using additive colors for the two adult forceps and subtractive colors for the two baby forceps. The forcep family huddled together on their handles behind the wall, terrified of being caught up in the bloody revolt outside, where a mob of molars hoisted some of the forceps’ nuclear family members up onto the gallows, the molars dancing mirthfully. An intelligent eater, Dr. Sandborn knew, would recognize the placemat’s symbolic representations of the crucial odontology issue: radical (tooth extraction) versus conservative (root canal). This placemat would be particularly relevant when serving bologna and cheese sandwiches.

He thought of everything. He decided against reproducing Elgström’s 1945 water color, *The Widow*, depicting an old lady sitting in an office armchair and grinning reminiscently at her dead husband's false teeth smiling up at her from her hand. He even denied himself the urge to reproduce Pieter Breughel’s 1556 *Christ Casting Out the Money-Changers*, completely resisting the temptation to circle the often-ignored dentist on Jesus’s right with red crayon. The religious implications, he thought, would be too controversial. Also, he kept Paul Bunyans, sweet and sour pork, chili, sauerkraut, and pigs in a blanket
strictly off the menu, because he knew what they would do to his tourist's breath.

Three years earlier, the two doctors had worked side by side in the same office.

"Smell this, partner," Dr. Riddle said, sneaking up behind Dr. Sandborn and covering his chin with a nitrous mask.

"Not me, your patient," Dr. Sandborn said, trying to stay calm and guiding Dr. Riddle's wrist to his patient's face.

"I'd rather be having a baby than a root canal," Dr. Riddle's patient said.

"Well here, Gladys, let me just adjust this chair a little," Dr. Riddle said.

Gladys laughed and breathed calmly with the mask over her nose.

Dr. Sandborn returned to the mouth of his own patient, twiddling his instruments like chopsticks, trying to scrape some plaque off a molar without frowning. The patient's breath smelled like yellow ammonia. Dr. Sandborn knew that was impossible. He knew because he had once answered a test question incorrectly: Antibacterial substances secreted in saliva include:

(a) lysozyme
(b) immunoglobulins
(c) peroxidase
(d) ammonia
(e) all of the above

He did detect, however, a hint of a yeasty smell, and he knew that was possible. All mouths, when opened, excreted a certain amount of yeast, merocrine, and something that smelled like vodka. The patient swallowed suddenly and Dr.
Sandborn caught a whiff of sour orange juice as the patient exhaled.

"Do you use mouthwash regularly?" Dr. Sandborn asked.

"No," the patient said.

"How long since you’ve had your teeth cleaned?" Dr. Sandborn asked.

"About five years," the patient said.

"No wonder you had curly little hairs stuck in there!" Dr. Riddle yelled from across the room.

Gladys laughed.

"This gas is great," she said. "I’m on a cloud. Floating down the highway with Frank Sinatra. He’s singing ‘Ring-A-Ding-Ding.’ On a cloud."

"What flavor is it?" Dr. Riddle asked.

"Vanilla, silly, all clouds are vanilla."

"All good clouds are vanilla," he corrected her.

Dr. Sandborn tapped his own patient on the shoulder.

"Your mouth will taste funny for a while after this," he said, "but start using Listermint twice a day and the smell will go away."

"Okay," said the patient.

"Now," said Gladys, "the cloud is angel hair. Like at Christmas. And I’m taking a nap and eating an orange."

"What does it smell like?" Dr. Riddle asked.

"A lemon," she said, delighted. "The orange smells like a lemon!"

Dr. Sandborn had always been bothered by the stench of chicken or fish most people left lingering in their kitchens. He offered his tourists several instructive alternatives. Most dentists typically asked their patients to tap on articulating paper
with their teeth, causing a foul odor of something which reminded Dr. Sandborn of camphor granules. He knew that if he asked his tourists to tap on articulating paper with their teeth at any point during the tour, most would leave. Instead, he placed an ashtub full of water between the stove and refrigerator, with strips of articulating paper floating freely on the surface and emitting a pretty blue bouquet. If a tourist ventured into the bathroom closet, he would find a special olfactory delight—a Baldor lathe running perpetually, with a generous mound of Fasteteeth heaped into the aluminum splash and dust pan. He equipped the lathe with a number 9 acrylic bur and a peach stone for a more complete Fasteteeth circulation than most tours would offer. After a few hours of the lathe running continuously, all the clothes in the closet were saturated with that unique polish and grind aroma.

In the bathroom Dr. Sandborn took special care, since he knew it was the most common room for household accidents. He placed a large plastic spray bottle of Campho-Phenique next to the band-aids and cotton balls and tongue depressors on the aluminum stand. Above the Campho-Phenique, he taped a sign: “Hey Kids! (and grownups too) This special solution smells remarkably like Chloraseptic, but do not spray it down the back of your throat or you will have to vomit and be rushed to the hospital. Do put it on cuts and bruises with cotton balls, then bring the dirty cotton balls to me. Enjoy the tour, Dr. Sandborn.”

In the medicine cabinet, within handy reach of the sink, he planted a jar of orange sherbet-flavored Ultra-One for the kids, and unflavored Sensodyne toothpaste for the adults. On the bottle of Banicide on the bottom shelf, he wrote with a felt-tip: “For those who want to avoid spreading hepatitis, herpes, AIDS, and tuberculosis, gargle with this solution at least once every
visit as soon as you enter the apartment."

In the living and dining areas, he perfumed the environment with open jars of Polyjel impression material and mint flavored Prophy Paste. Few dentists realized that Polyjel, once opened and aged for a few days, retained the scent of various fine cheeses, or that mint flavored Prophy Paste seemed much more spearmint than peppermint when one really concentrated on the fragrance.

Dr. Sandborn strolled around the apartment absorbing all the new smells, swinging his arms like a schoolgirl. Then he stopped, covered his eyes, nose, and mouth, and concentrated on breathing through his ears.

One year earlier, Dr. Sandborn begged Dr. Riddle to reconsider his decision.

"Touch my mind again," he pleaded. "Just hang around the office and do the books. I'll pay you."

"No Sandstorm," Dr. Riddle said quietly. "I've taught you all I can. If I retire now, the Mrs. and me can enjoy the money while we're still young enough."

"But you were right. I still don't understand pain. I don't know how to deal with it. My patients will stop coming if you don't stay."

Dr. Riddle touched his friend's shoulder. He spoke gently. "There's something I've never told you. Remember the year I took the sabbatical? I was ready to crack up. I spent three months just pacing around in a church."

Dr. Riddle had paced the south aisle of the Wells Cathedral in Somerset every day, often with his eyes closed. When he thought that no one was around, he ran to the sculpture that he had read about with such fascination in the
office. He reached up and stroked his fingertips over the capital of the stone column with his eyes shut, memorizing every feature. Years later, at night, he could conjure up the sculpture simply by closing his eyes: curved stone shoulders exploding out through torn concrete curls, framed by an elongated, linear face stretched taut and ragged at the left cheek by a finger, with a precise puncture in the open left eye where the pupil should have been.

"It looks like a gargoyle with a toothache," a woman had said from behind him, startling Dr. Riddle back to his senses.

"I bought a picture postcard of it for two pence at the front desk," she said, trying to put her hand into the sculpture’s mouth.

Dr. Riddle had turned to her violently, thrust out his chin, and yanked the side of his mouth as close to his left ear as possible, closing his right eye viciously and flaring his nostrils like a dragon, looking, for an instant, exactly like the sculpture.

"How cute," the woman had said, snapping his picture.

"My husband will love it."

According to the free tour brochure folded in Dr. Riddle’s pocket, your pain would disappear if you touched Bishop William Bytton II’s epitaph, engraved in the floor of the cathedral, and thought of the sculpture at the same time.

“So what happened?” Dr. Sandborn said excitedly. “Did it work?”

“I was arrested for sleeping on top of the epitaph,” Dr. Riddle said. “Now goodbye.”

“But I don’t know how to act on my own.”

“There’s an old Chinese proverb,” Dr. Riddle said. “If you want to be happy for an hour, take a nap.”
Dr. Sandborn entered the empty spare bedroom of his apartment instinctively, without flicking on the light. This was the room in which his tourists were not allowed. In the middle of the dark floor, he practiced spinning around with his eyes closed without moving his feet, rolling his eyelashes within the perimeters of his head until they were soft as marbles. He clamped his teeth over his tongue so that he could cleanly taste the inside of a green inkpen. With a wallpaper paste brush and without moving his arms, he coated his body with red Eucerin and Neutrogena in the dark. Lacing his fingertips behind his head, he peeled on, one finger at a time, a pair of ambidextrous unisize disposable latex examination gloves, and decided he would never take them off. Then he lowered his body, from the neck down, onto a freshly ironed Kay-Pees professional dental beach towel, with medium-soft trubyte equalizing wax floating down from the ceiling and covering his body in layers of white licorice.

He exhaled silently and pictured his face in the dark. He had chosen his particular face because it had the perfect proportions according to the Greek criteria: five times the width of one eye and symmetrical features when one drew a line down the middle of the nose.

He prayed to Saint Apollonia in the dark, reading aloud from an overdue library book Dr. Riddle had loaned him:

Apollonia, Apollonia,
Holy Saint in Heaven
See my pain in yourself
Free me from evil pain
For my ache may torture me to death.

Apollonia is the patron saint of dentists. The Romans pulled all her teeth one at a time because she refused to
renounce her faith. They broke her teeth with iron points, extracted the roots with tongs, and crushed her jawbone into chalk.

In the middle of the dark floor in the spare bedroom, Dr. Sandborn lay with a rag that had been soaked in chloroform draped around his face. He waited patiently for the tourists to arrive, breathing peacefully through his mouth.