

Doctor Wong

Hippy health food. It all began with Hannah's homemade granola. Hannah was Derek's wife. Derek was the leader of the ethnographic expedition and Hannah was the nutritionist and statistician.

I bit down on a spoonful of Hannah's granola. I heard a sharp sickening crack and felt a molar crumble. Not much I could do, we were 100 miles from the nearest town, living in a camp on a tributary of the Amazon. My job was audio recording engineer and general factotum for an ethnographic expedition to the remotest regions of the Peruvian rain forest. We traveled from place to place by boat. Our boat was an underpowered native barge with four cabins. It was dry and comfortable, if primitive.

—I broke a big molar, I told Derek

—Oil of clove, he replied. See Jerry, he controls the first aid kit.

Oil of clove worked for a few days, but my cheek swelled up big as a softball. It hurt like a son-of-a-bitch.

—We will arrive at a small village in a week, said Derek. If I remember correctly, there is a doctor there.

—I hope so, I replied, otherwise you'll have to pull this tooth.

Over the next week, I chewed coca leaves and dabbed clove oil on my tooth. There was no alcohol in our provisions. The Peruvian government did not permit outsiders to carry alcohol into tribal areas. One of our native guides gave me a leaf to chew that kept me drowsy.

We finally arrived at the little village of Chochocoloo, named after the call of a resident bird. There was a Chinese man there who ran the local store. His name was Wong. Wong served as the resident doctor, dentist, veterinarian, postman, and representative of the Peruvian government. He was not a missionary and did not proselytize.

Derek explained my problem to Wong. Wong was a tall thin man with scraggly long chin hairs and thick round rimless glasses. He had worked in a Chinese restaurant in San Francisco on his long journey from Qinghai Province, China, to Amazonian Peru, and he spoke pigeon English. In China, he had been a doctor of traditional medicine.

—I fix, said Wong.

—When? asked Derek.

—Now, Wong replied.

—We'll wait, said Derek.

Derek and the rest of the expedition trooped back to the boat and had lunch. Wong stuffed a wad of leaves and flowers in my mouth.

—Plant makes sleepy. Fix infection, Wong said. I give you whisky.

I don't know what kind of whisky it was, but it was the foulest tasting distillate ever concocted by man.

—You help with drill, said Wong.

We pulled a nineteenth-century treadle-powered dentist's drill out onto the baked mud in front of Wong's store. To my drugged eyes, Wong weaved about like a stalk of grain. I sat on a wooden stool.

—You hold mirror, ordered Wong.

I held up a woman's dressing mirror that reflected light into my mouth. Wong moved my arm and hand until the sunlight illuminated my broken molar.

—Don't move.

Wong began drilling. The drill turned so slowly, that I could count the revolutions. It was beyond painful.

—Spit, he ordered.

—I expectorated an unsavory combination of saliva, tooth and blood onto the packed mud.

—Water, I croaked.

—No. Hold mirror, ordered Wong.

My teeth and jaw rattled from the thump of the drill in the chasm of my fractured molar.

—Don't move mirror, ordered Wong, moving my hand to the correct position.

—I'm trying, I mumbled.

Wong looked up. I followed his eyes. There were a dozen naked native children watching him torture a gringo.

—Katchu, you come, Wong ordered in Spanish.

A beautiful brown-skinned pre-pubescent native girl with budding breasts approached us. Wong told her in Spanish to hold the mirror. He pointed to my destroyed molar and told her to aim the light at it. She stood, naked, a few feet from me. I closed my eyes and suffered the horror of the drill.

Wong finally stopped drilling. He told the girl something in her native language. She flashed a big smile and the children laughed. My face was in a grimace that made additional rivulets for the sweat to escape into my beard.

—Now fill hole, said Wong.

—No more drilling? I asked.

—Now, I scrape, replied Wong.

—More whisky, I demanded.

Wong gave me the bottle. I took a big swig of the vile liquid.

He asked a small boy to hold the mirror. The boy was so short he had to stand on tiptoes to hold the mirror so that the light reflected onto my excavated molar. Wong packed it with amalgam. After he checked my bite, he took the mirror from the small boy. The boy strutted back to the group, swinging his arms and thrusting out his chest.

—You finished, said Wong.

—Thank you, Dr. Wong. How much do I owe you?

—50 *soles*. You need haircut.

I couldn't tell if he asked if I *wanted* a haircut, or if he was telling me I *needed* a haircut.

—What did you ask?

—You want haircut. Same price as tooth.

—Too expensive.

—No, haircut included in tooth.

—Okay.

Wong went back into his store and returned with a scissors and comb. I was bald on top and had long flyaway dark hair on the sides. Most of my face was covered with a heroic biblical black beard.

Wong kept up a dialogue that had the children laughing about the paradox of cutting a bald man's hair. He made a big show of cutting the few stray hairs on my crown. The children had big thatches of healthy black hair.

—Beard? Wong asked.

—Sure.

Wong sheared my glorious beard down to a bristling three-day growth. When he finished barbering, I helped him move his antique drill back into the store.

Outside, the children gleaned the dried mud for locks of my cut hair. One small boy asked to touch my shorn beard. Soon all the children were touching my newly coiffed hair and beard and asking to look at my new filling. I was uncomfortable being in such proximity to that many naked little people, but I was plenty drunk and would cry out like a howling wolf, or pretend to sob if they pulled my hair too hard. The children would scamper away squealing and laughing. I got on all fours so youngest ones could inspect my new filling. Derek returned and asked Wong, if I was fit to travel.

—He go now, said Wong. Derek marched as I stumbled drunkenly behind him back to the expedition boat.

—What happened to your beard? asked my companions, nearly in unison.

—A bad tooth, a Chinese dentist, whisky and a naked girl, I slurred.

Yesterday, forty-five years later, my high-tech dentist painlessly drilled out Wong's now cracked and worn filling in less than two minutes. He replaced it with a modern composite. The assistant was a fully dressed fifty-something Peruvian woman.