

*Decisions, Decisions*

I stare at the box that holds the tube of Crest. Tartar control. Tartar. Tar Tar. Double Tar. Tar Tar must be twice as bad as regular tar. I try to decide if it's important to me to control my Tar Tar. There is a non-Tar Tar control variety as well, for those folks willing to throw caution to the wind and let Tar Tar overrun their teeth like an invading horde.

Beneath the Crest is Colgate. Colgate is good too. Colgate has the seal of the American Dental Association. This is a crucial detail which I must take into consideration before making any rash decisions.

My other choices are Aqua-Fresh and Close-Up. What to do.

I'm going to have to make a decision. What is it she says? "It's like living with a slug! Why can't you ever make up your mind!" Exclamation point!

No that's not it. She never said that.

Crest would be good. I could control Tar Tar and fight cavities simultaneously. This could be a valuable time-saving technique in the Fast-Paced 90s.

There's always Colgate, though. Nine out of ten doctors stranded on a desert island prescribe Colgate when that little itch should be telling them something. No, that was something else.

Close-Up. If I used Close-Up I could fall in love again and a beautiful woman would kiss me while we fell into a pile of leaves.

Yes. Yes, this appeals to me. I reach out to clutch the aphrodisiac. On the protective box that shields the tube from harm is a photograph of a woman smiling. It is a close-up photograph. Close-Up. Oh, I get it. I open the box and slowly remove the tube. I squeeze it and it retains its shape. I uncap the tube and squeeze a worm onto my finger. It is a red worm. No, this will not do. It's a trick. This toothpaste is red and I do not want red teeth. People would think I was a vampire with blood on my teeth. Even if they saw me in the daytime.

I return the tube to its home and start over. Okay. Crest. Good. Colgate. Good. Close-Up. Not so good. Aqua-Fresh.

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I know of Aqua-Fresh. I do not understand the concept of Aqua-Fresh. It is three, three, three toothpastes in one. However, I know no one with three mouths. I know that cows have four stomachs, but you cannot brush stomachs and besides, cows do not use toothpaste. At least—not while anyone is looking.

I squeeze this tube and the serpent is striped, red, white and green. Nonsense.

I put the tube back and notice that I have two fairly large globs of toothpaste on my finger. What to do. I could wipe them off on my coat. Or I could eat them. Never. I have one mouth with white teeth, and I have grown used to this. I could wipe them on the shelf. But a store employee may spot me and report me to the authorities. I will leave them on my finger for the time being. They are not hurting anyone.

Now, where was I? Toothpaste. Toothpaste. I simply must have toothpaste. She has always complained about my halitosis. I must remedy this. I have narrowed my choices down to two. Crest and Colgate. But which one? How does she ever make these decisions?

A-Ha! A childhood memory returns to me, and I pull a coin out of my pocket. On one side is the profile of a dead leader, on the other, a bird of prey in an unnatural pose. I will toss the coin into the air. If the profile comes up, I will choose one brand. If the bird comes up, I will choose the other. Perfect!

Now. If the head comes up, I will purchase Crest.

No. Colgate.

No, Crest.

Colgate.

Crest.

Oh, dear.

I can't decide which toothpaste to assign to the face of the coin. I must be rational about this. Which brand would the dead man have preferred, Crest or Colgate? Well, from what I have read, he probably used neither, his teeth being made of wood. I briefly consider moving to the furniture polish aisle.

This is a problem. To err at this juncture could be disastrous. But I must decide soon and that stockboy is staring at me.

I pull out a second coin, identical to the first. I will toss this one into the air. If the head comes up, I will assign one brand



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of toothpaste to the head of the first coin, tails, the other brand. Okay. Heads—Crest—no, Colgate—Crest—Colgate— I am unable to choose. This grows frustrating.

I consider pulling out another coin to settle the matter when the stockboy approaches me. "You okay, man?" He looks nervous. Long hair, uncombed. Drugs, obviously. Still, maybe he can help me.

I take a deep breath, let it out. "I'm trying to decide which toothpaste to buy."

The boy looks relieved. "Oh, zat all. Hunh. Well, I dunno, man, I usually get Crest. I mean, that's what my mom always gets." The boy looks sheepish now, embarrassed to admit dependence on his mommy. "It's no big deal, man. Crest, Colgate, all that shit's the same."

"But it isn't! If it was the same, my choice would be easy! But it isn't!" My frustration's starting to show, I can see. The boy is tweaking his earring between thumb and forefinger, a half-smirk, half-frown on his pale, pimpled face.

"Hey, man, don't freak out or anything. You were flippin' a coin, right? Didn't that work?"

"Welll, I couldn't decide whether the head of the coin should stand for Crest or Colgate."

The boy's face is a silent, "Ohhhh, I see. . ." He looks down, purses his lips, furrows his brow. "Crest," he finally says, "Definitely Crest. I mean, what else could it be? Y'know? It's gotta be Crest." He looks at me, head cocked to one side, eyebrows raised, then returns to his duties.

And a weight is lifted from me. The boy is right. How could I have missed it? With a sigh of relief, I toss the coin.

It comes up heads. Crest it is. Oh, thank God! I did it! I showed her.

I smile as I reach for the tube of Crest, the symbol of my victory.

The smile nose-dives into my pancreas as I remember that there are two varieties of Crest, regular and Tar Tar control. I have not yet resolved that conflict. Do I want Tar Tar? Does she want Tar Tar? For that matter, what the hell is Tar Tar?

I am close to weeping. I had it. I had it! My vision of her as I came home, successful in my quest, a look of shock and surprise on her face, vanishes. It is replaced by a nightmare:

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another tirade, another tearful apology, another night of silence.

A hand is on my shoulder. It is the boy. He looks concerned. "You all right, man? Somethin' wrong?"

I am unable to speak. Everything blurs as I point to the shelf and a low moan escapes me.

"Aw, shit. Dave. Dave! C'mere, man, gimme a hand."

"What the hell, man. This guy okay?"

"Dunno. Let's get him in back. I think he needs to sit down."

I allow myself to be led. My eyes are squeezed tightly shut, my feet move without me. I am lowered into a hard chair. I hear whimpering, and realize it is my own. This is not good. This is about the worst yet. I realize I must try to collect myself, but I can't. So close. . .

The boy is asking me for my phone number. I manage to mumble it out. She'll be here soon. The other boy is wiping the toothpaste off my finger with a damp cloth. I suppose there's nothing I can do about that.

I try to think up some kind of story, something to save myself. I was confused, I didn't have enough money. . . No. She won't believe me, whatever I say.

She's here now, standing in the doorway. She doesn't say a word. She doesn't have to. She'll say more than enough when we get home.

I rise and follow her out of the store. The boy pats me on the side and says, "Take it easy, man." I try to let my eyes show my gratitude, too scared to speak. We walk out to the car. It is cold and windy. I shove my hands deep into my coat pockets. Find something, a box. The boy. . . I pull it out.

I stare at the box that holds the tube of Crest. Tar Tar control.