

Wiring

*On the pleasures of
orthodontics*

Sydney Spiesel

When I was maybe fourteen, our family dentist told my parents that I needed braces. He was a small, wizened man, generally pleasant, who kept his radio tuned to Chicago's FM classical music station. The only time he seemed irritable was when the radio played something composed after the middle of the nineteenth century. He wasn't irritable for long since he would immediately reach over and snap off the radio, no matter what I said. I think he was a pretty good dentist, though, so I'm not sure why he didn't tumble to the trouble with my teeth earlier, when I was younger.

There I was, a very old kid compared to everyone else brought to the orthodontist's office.

I don't know how my parents found that particular orthodontic practice—probably the dentist recommended it—but it was horrible. It was a factory practice with many small machine shops (disguised as dental offices) scattered over Chicago's South Side. The ham-handed orthodontist, one of about six who came in rotation to the office I went to, would pry my mouth open, excoriate me about the shreds of chewing gum on the wires or my inadequacy with a toothbrush and start saying things out loud for an assistant to mark down. Things like "tighten A9; loosen B7." (I am, of course, making this part up: I have no idea of what he actually wanted written down.)

Then he would take out some wrenches ordered from Sears Roebuck, put his foot on my chest, and start to tighten. Now, that, you might think, would have put me off dentistry forever. And perhaps it would have, except for what happened at the next few visits, when the orthodontist wasn't there at all, just the dental hygienists, following the directions to "tighten A9 and loosen B7."

I guess it's possible that those women weren't as intelligent, kind, beautiful, sexy, or fragrant as I remember them, but I can only tell you that that's what still comes to mind when I think of them. It

may well be my fantasy life—certainly then and maybe now—speaking, but I always felt as if I did have a little bit of a special relationship with them. You know, the suave, debonair fourteen year old. Really just a few years younger than the hygienists were, and surely much more interesting and sophisticated than the other kids seen in the office.

Anyway, I was in love with each of them and I can't tell you how thrilling it was when they would talk with me about something really interesting—well, to me—and then lean over and tighten A9 or loosen B7.

Like most teens, I caught on fast. I learned the way the office worked and could easily read the appointment book upside down. So I never, ever made an appointment when an actual orthodontist was going to be in the office. I know I was supposed to be seen about every third visit, but I only saw the orthodontist about every six months, and only when the schedule changed unexpectedly. In between those undesirable visits, I'd just show up and A9 would be tightened and B7 would be loosened week after week for six months.

I still smile—perhaps with less than perfectly aligned teeth—every time I think about their delicate and careful work on my wiring.

