

# THE TOOTH OF THE MATTER

by Rona Beame

I could have had a much bigger boat, maybe a sable coat, and certainly a fair sized diamond ring. Instead I chose to invest the money in my mouth. My teeth to be exact. To me it was important that they be permanent. If I'd known that this major investment might be threatened by my decision to go cruising, I might have reconsidered.

For the last 35 years many hands have found their way into my mouth. Some created disaster, like the dentist who happened to be a cousin (never go to a relative) who drilled into a nerve and started my downhill slide into caps and implants. Finally, I found a dentist in New York I could trust and my teeth problems stabilized.

But when I left New York for the Caribbean, my dentist, Joel, warned me that I must have my teeth cleaned every three months to avoid further problems. Now that's easy enough when you live in a city, not so easy when you're cruising small islands — even some of the bigger ones.

The first time I had my teeth cleaned in the Caribbean was in Tortola. Clean my teeth he did — with a toothbrush, ignoring my gums. Then he spent a lot of time peering at my implant and caps, making admiring sounds. He even brought in his nurse and receptionist to have a look. His bill seemed excessive for the kind of “cleaning” he did. But he explained I was paying for his time. And it was true. He certainly did spend a lot of time examining my implant.

In St. Thomas, a friend recommended a dentist. I was sitting in the dental chair, draped with the bib and about to open my mouth, when I remembered the instructions Joel had given me before I left. “You shouldn't use a metal instrument when you clean my implant,” I told the hygienist.

“Oh, but all the instruments are metal. I'll have to ask the dentist what to do.” She came back a moment later. “He's out to lunch.” “I'll wait,” I said. The dentist finally showed up. He shook my hand and smiled at me. I could not miss the two gold teeth in front and the two empty spaces next to them. I was incredibly relieved when he told me that indeed they had only metal instruments and I could make my escape.

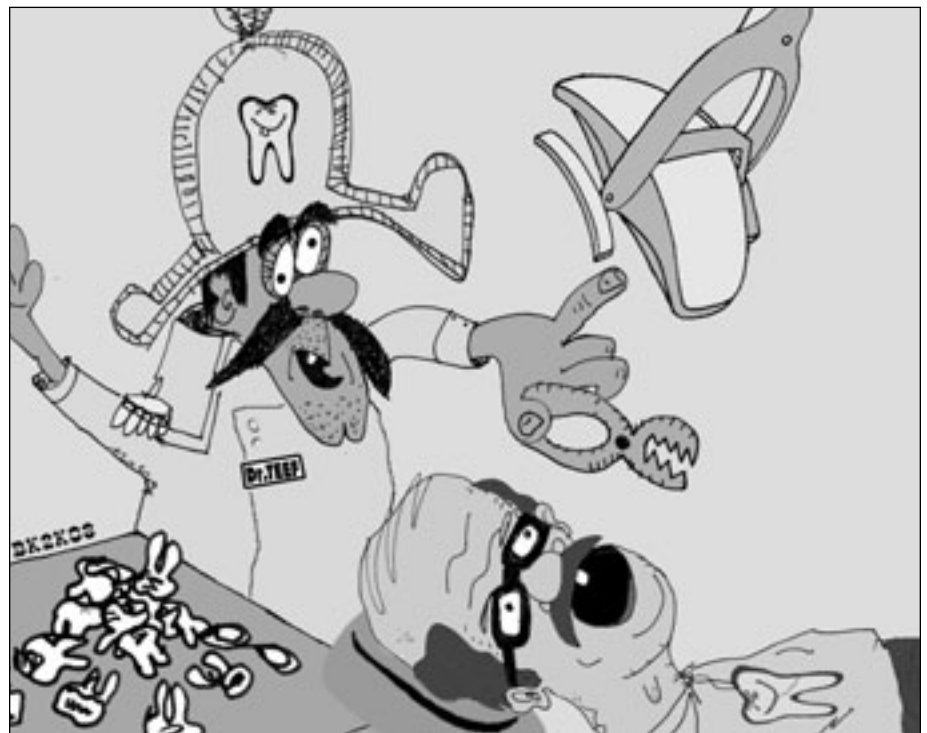
So I went to another dentist with a much fancier office and prices to match. I explained to his hygienist about my implant. To my surprise, she too was stymied. Distressed, she went to confer with the dentist. When she came back she was smiling and proceeded to clean my teeth. When she got to the implant it hurt and my gums bled profusely. I asked to look at what

she was using. To me it looked like a crochet hook.

When I was in Grenada at the dentist's office, we realized that my transplant was loose.

My worst nightmare! I called Joel right from her office. He explained to her what to do, but she had never dealt with an implant before and was not about to touch mine. However, she knew a dentist in Barbados who did implants.

I called to make an appointment. “What kind of screwdriver do I need?” he asked me. What? A screwdriver? I had never watched my implant being put in. What did he need a screwdriver for? “What kind of implant do you have?” he continued. “Each type needs a different kind of screwdriver.” Oh. I phoned Joel and then called the Barbados dentist back. He said he didn't have the right one but he'd buy one. I



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## OFF THE CHART

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wondered whether he'd be going to a hardware store to buy a screwdriver for my \$8,000 implant or a fancy dental supply house.

I flew over to Barbados for the day. Two hundred dollars later, my implant was once again tight and I was the proud owner of a tiny screwdriver that fit the screw in my implant.

Later, I compared it to the tiny screwdrivers in my partner John's electronic kit. It was exactly the same. So much for fancy dental equipment and their fancy prices.

When I was in Venezuela, I went to Caracas to have a cap made by a former student of Joel's (at half the New York

price). A young, friendly man, he spent a lot of time making sure that the cap was perfect for his former boss. Then he invited me to his cousin's wedding that night. Such a nice man.

Trinidad, by the way, has many excellent dentists. We were there for over a year, so I met several of them.

Some cruisers are much more cavalier about their teeth. Di on *Sabaii* introduced me to the do-it-yourself spirit of cruisers. She told me that when one of her caps fell off, she just put back it on with epoxy. Then I met Tommy on *Island Dove*, and he told me he never had a tooth problem. Just before he set out cruising, he had them all pulled out. "I

didn't want to wind up with an abscess in the middle of nowhere," he told me with a grin, flashing his pearly whites. "Come on," I said, thinking he was joking. I was also thinking about the fortune I'd spent on my teeth. "Its true," said his partner, Caroline. "Every single one of them."

Now that's preventive dentistry.

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Rona Beame is a published children's author who has cruised extensively in the Caribbean, most recently in the Bahamas on the yacht *Calypso*.