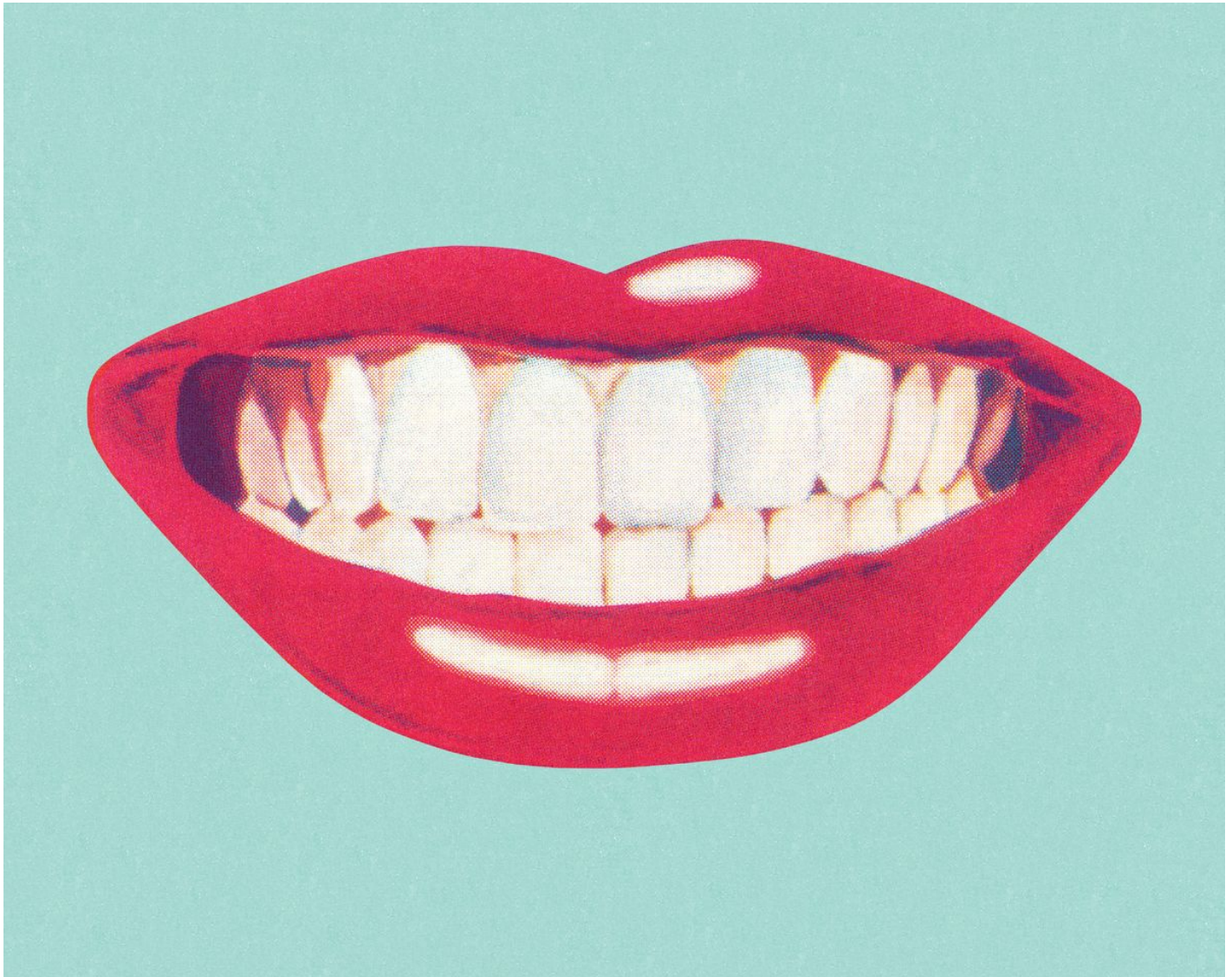


Getting Braces at 50 Straightened Out My Priorities

For decades, I never showed my teeth when I smiled. What else was I repressing?

By Catherine Hong Published: Mar 27, 2023



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As I hit middle age, I'm guilty of wanting to hold back time. I dread deadlines, facial lines, and annual doctor visits. I mourn the days when I could carry my [children](#) on my hips. I don't want my [parents](#), now in their 80s, to get a day older. And if I really must be honest, I'll confess that deep down inside, I wish time

wouldn't speed along quite so fast, because even at 51, I feel like I need more time to accomplish all the other stuff—personal, professional—I was supposed to as a grown-up.

But recently, I've developed a new craving—one in direct contradiction to this yearning. I want time to zip by. I fantasize about [falling into bed](#) and waking up six months, nine months, a whole year into the future. This is because I have braces.

Seventeen months ago, after years of hemming, hawing, and trying to convince myself I should focus on self-improvement of the less vain and superficial variety, I surrendered myself to an orthodontist. The same orthodontist, in fact, who fixed my daughter's teeth when she was in seventh grade and who has probably had his hands in the mouths of a quarter of the kids in our town. I sat myself down across from him, pointed to my teeth, and said, "I need to fix these."

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To put it bluntly, I had some really bad buckteeth. My two top front chompers were pushed so far out beyond my other teeth that they had practically formed their own archipelago, disconnected from the mainland. They also seemed larger

than they had any right to be, monstrous in both height and width. They were like two obnoxious people who showed up to a concert in a public park and plopped a pair of giant lawn chairs front and center, blocking the view of everyone sitting on the grass. I had problems with other teeth, too, including lateral incisors on the top and bottom that jutted out at awkward angles, like cars parked in a hurry outside an emergency room.

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These teeth of mine were the cause of more shame than I like to admit. I grew up comfortably in a nice Long Island suburb, where my parents, Korean immigrants, paid for my first round of braces when I was 12. But I still couldn't shake the feeling that my teeth somehow suggested an ignoble and backward upbringing. In my mind, my mouth conjured every cringe-inducing caricature of a hayseed-chewing hillbilly or, more pertinently in my case, every offensive turn-of-the-century cartoon I had ever seen of bucktoothed coolies in conical bamboo hats.

The few friends to whom I have confessed my hang-up invariably try to soothe me, saying things like "What do you mean?" or "I never noticed anything about your teeth!" These lies only make me even more uncomfortable, because I am

embarrassed for the friend forced to tell the lie. Needless to say, I have no ambitions for dazzling, flawless teeth—all I want are teeth that are perfectly unremarkable.

Sometimes when I scrutinized myself in photos, I would catch the sight of the corner of one of my front teeth peeking out through my otherwise closed lips, like a wayward Tic Tac. I mastered a smile like the kind a child draws in a stick-figure drawing, a single curved line upturned at the ends. And I'll never forget the mortifying moment about a decade ago, when our family had just moved from the city to the suburbs. I was standing by the jungle gym at the school playground when a little boy, not more than 7 years old, looked me squarely in the eye and said, "Why do your teeth look like that?"

Oh, the honesty of youth! Sometimes I see that little truth-teller walking around town (he's in high school now) and still have the urge to push him off the monkey bars.

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It was the pandemic that finally got me into the orthodontist's chair. During that weird time after the first wave when people were cautiously getting together again, we met outdoors, we elbow bumped, we tentatively hugged—but we were always, always masked. And that's when I realized something. Whenever I smiled, talked, or laughed, I felt unfamiliar sensations in the muscles of my face. I sensed a not-unpleasant crinkling in the outer corners of my eyes and a weirdly relaxed feeling in my cheeks and my lips. I felt strangely liberated. Oh my God, I was smiling with my whole face!

My teeth safely hidden behind a mask, I was unconsciously allowing my body to do what came naturally: to spill out big, goofy grins. Smiling so unguardedly, I actually *felt* happier. And though I am usually the first to roll my eyes at such language, I think I understood in that split second what yoga teachers mean when they tell you to "let your body and spirit become one." I recalled once reading an article explaining that the very act of physically smiling has been found to trigger people's brains to release dopamine and serotonin—and lo, I realized it was true. All these years, I had been tamping down my own happiness for my own idiotic vanity. And boy, did I feel stupid about it.

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But at this point, I couldn't retrain my brain to stop worrying about what people thought of my teeth. I couldn't just tell myself, *Get over it!* I needed to fix my teeth. It would be cheaper than therapy, too.

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While Invisalign or other clear aligners would have been so much more dignified, I was told my case required good old-fashioned braces. Evidently, clear aligners would expand my overcrowded arch, testing the limits of my already receding gums (sadly, not uncommon in someone over 50).

So I went all in. I got four—yes, four—teeth extracted to make the requisite room. And in October of 2021, the braces went on, the clunky kind with brackets and wires and little hooks onto which I can attach tiny rubber bands. On top, the brackets are “tooth-colored” ceramic (subtler than metal braces but still in no way “invisible”) and on the bottom, they're metal, just as shiny and unmistakable as I

remember from when I was 12. They give my mouth an incongruous gleam whenever I speak, eat, or laugh, like a shiny new zipper on an old pair of pants.

I faithfully visit my orthodontist every five weeks for tightenings, where I am, of course, always the oldest patient in his wood-paneled waiting room, a humiliation I try to bear by avoiding eye contact with the kids on their way to Hebrew school. Nobody wants to hear someone complaining about getting their teeth straightened, which is about as hard to empathize with as someone grouching about how their ski boots hurt. So I will try to keep this next part brief.

Getting braces as an adult is painful, more so than I remember from childhood. Because the roots of my teeth are in a constant state of shifting, my teeth feel weak and wobbly all the time. The list of foods I now avoid includes everything from whole apples and almonds to pizza crust and the crunchy, sticky coating of Korean fried chicken. Eating in public is a minefield: Spinach gets snagged on the wires like flotsam on a fishing line, tangled in a knot that no tongue can discreetly undo. Certain foods—red wine, coffee, and tomato sauce—stain the elastic ligatures installed along the front of my braces. Worst are curries or anything with turmeric, which leave my mouth with a sickly yellow gleam. The final indignity is one I cannot even hide behind a mask: I now have a lisp, not ideal for someone who cohosts a podcast and fatal for my relationship with Siri, whose invariable reply to my requests is now, “I’m sorry, I didn’t quite get that.”

So each night, as I stand at the bathroom mirror, attempting in vain to thoroughly floss, I wish time would move a little faster. I fantasize about hibernating until the day the braces come off, a gray-haired orthodontics version of the protagonist in Ottessa Moshfegh’s novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. But I am pleased to report my teeth are discernibly much improved. The gaps left by the extractions have closed up. My overbite has scooted back to the front row at the concert. And it turns out that my two front teeth aren’t actually any bigger than they’re supposed to be—as my doctor had promised, they only appeared that way because they were so “proclined” and “procumbent.” Frustratingly, he refuses to tell me when I’ll get the braces off (he says he’s learned not to get patients’ hopes up). This fabled day seems to be still several months down the line.

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So I think about time and how I want it to fly, but also how many years of adulthood I've wasted feeling bad about my teeth, smiling my tight quarter smile and believing I was too old to overhaul something that bothered me so deeply. Getting braces at 50 certainly wasn't too late, but I gained nothing from waiting. The truth is, getting these braces was the easy part. All I had to do was find a good orthodontist and let time do its thing. When it comes to fulfilling life ambitions, however, that's something only I can do for myself. At this point, I don't have time to waste in delaying anything, least of all the goals I dreamt up for myself when I had braces the first time around. I'll be happy when these braces come off, but I want to feel like I've earned this new smile. And for that, I might need just a little more time.

Catherine Hong is a freelance arts and culture writer in New York and cohost of the podcast [K-Pod](#).

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