The Dentist
from The Things They Carried by Tim O’Brien

"The dentist couldn’t find any problem, but Lemon kept insisting, so the man finally shrugged and shot in the Novocain and yanked out a perfectly good tooth. There was some pain, no doubt, but in the morning Curt Lemon was all smiles."

In The Dentist O’Brien tells us a story that is simultaneously about courage, cowardice, and Curt Lemon. He writes that “...it’s easy to get sentimental about the dead and to guard against that I want to tell a quick Curt Lemon story,” (86). Is that really his only purpose in telling this story?

• What purpose does this story serve in the novel? In other words, why is it here?
  HINT: Consider the placement of this vignette in the novel, immediately after How to Tell a True War Story.

• Also, does this story serve to paint Curt Lemon as courageous, cowardly, or something else entirely?

• How do the themes of courage and cowardice depicted here compare with other depictions of these themes in other chapters?
  HINT: Consider O’Brien’s statements about himself in On the Rainy River.