

One Thousand Incarnations and One Thousand Deaths - Part I

by Savannah Schroll Guz

He stood in the shadows for some time, inconspicuous to Loretta, who was arranging paid invoices in the corner file cabinet. She had lit only her desk lamp, largely because it offered the kind of womb-line darkness she found so comforting at the end of the day. Morning, she felt, was more appropriate for the tactless overhead fluorescents, which chased away drowsiness, but also intimacy.

Loretta, her backed turned, her head nodding from side-to-side in a metronomic response to some internal soundtrack, did not register the man's presence because she had not anticipated another patient. Not at 5:45. There was no entry in her book. The dentist had said nothing to her about an evening appointment, yet she had seen him carry a package of sterilized instruments past her office, humming an aria of Rigoletto and then switching to his piercing whistle. She could hear him arranging and re-arranging implements on the metal tray in the exam room next to her office.

Standing politely near the room's periphery, where shadows met at right angles and pooled their darkness, the man stepped into the diffuse sphere of light that radiated from the Loretta's desk lamp.

"Please forgive my intrusion," he said.

Loretta looked up, stumbled backward against the file cabinet, and clutched her chest with one hand. She exhaled loudly, "Oh, good Lord. I'm sorry. I didn't realize anyone came in. Our entry bell must not be working. It rings, you know, when someone comes in." She straightened, pulled self-consciously at the hem of her white skirt,

and moved toward her scheduling book, "Did you have an appointment? I don't see anyone down for this evening."

"I believe the dentist knew I would be coming," he smiled. Loretta noticed a fine tracery of wrinkles fan outward across his pallid cheekbones. She saw that the man's eyes were a brown so pale they bordered on yellow, and the pupils narrowed to the size of a nail trimming, more feral and feline than any human's she'd ever seen. For an instant, she saw pockets of emerald flare out around the tiny black slice of pupil, like the momentary appearance of malachite deposits, or the incendiary spark of fireworks. And then, they disappeared just as quickly as they revealed themselves. The hair on Loretta's arms lifted.

"Ma'am?" he looked at her, still staring.

They had not broken eye contact. And Loretta still felt incapable of answering. It took a concentrated force of will for her to look away. But she did finally break free and focused then on the loopy scrawl in her appointment book. "Go ahead then," she said, gesturing towards the wall. She refused to look up at the man again.

"Doctor...Doctor...uh," Loretta could not, for the life of her, remember her employer's name at that moment. "Yes," she said finally. "He's in the next room."

The man glided out. She did not even register his foot steps. And she was too muddled to pay attention to any of these details. What had burned itself into her brain was the suggestions of the hidden recesses in those eyes, which remained—although she could not see it—upside down on her own retina for several seconds after she looked away. When he was finally over the threshold and out of her office, she fell into her desk chair and tipped her head back to gaze at the ceiling. And when she closed her own eyes, the image that

greeted her consciousness was comprised of two slender feline pupils.

Drifting now, she was anchored to each moment by the conversation emanating from the next room.

“Hello, Doctor.”

“Ah, Victor. Hello. Please come in and sit down in the chair.”

The door closed, an unusual act in this office. Dr. Klein never closed the exam room door when a patient came, even for the most difficult cases. She believed it was because, like medical doctors, he desired witnesses. With open doors, there could be no ‘he said, she said’ should someone cry foul, should someone sue him for a broken root or a developing infection--or worse, for sexual misconduct, like the dentist in New Athens who had lost both license and practice.

She could hear voices, but she could not determine what was said. Loretta opened her eyes. The building they were in was an old brownstone residence whose first floor had been converted into an office that suited the practice's needs. Dr. Klein lived on the floor above. Loretta's slender office space and the more expansive exam room, with its matching check floor, were separated by a temporary plasterboard wall. Loretta had discovered, shortly after she had begun working for Dr. Klein, while she was redecorating her space, that behind a framed print of crude Victorian dental tools, was a hole in the plaster board approximately an inch in diameter. She removed the print and replaced it with a much friendlier-looking cat calendar, an act she repeated every year on January first. The print of Victorian dental instruments disappeared, she assumed, somewhere upstairs.

Loretta went to the wall, and slid her calendar aside. She was greeted by darkness mitigated by pin-thin shafts of light. The hole,

which traveled through the wall to the exam room side, was covered by Dr. Klein's framed dental school diploma. Still, the voices were more distinct. She put her ear against the hole and breathed shallowly.

"Of course," she heard the doctor's voice, "some things are simply more valuable than money."

She waited for the man's response. Instead, she heard the door to the exam room open. Loretta allowed the calendar to swing closed, and she quickly moved to the corner of her desk, where she shuffled the remainder of paid invoices she'd been filing earlier.

The doctor stuck his head around the door jamb and looked in at her. "Loretta, I'm sorry. I should have told you that you can go. I'll take care of the details tonight."

"Oh? Okay, that's alright," she replied, feeling her heart thudding against her ribs. "You're sure you'll be all right then?"

"Positive," Dr. Klein replied, heading back to the exam room. "See you tomorrow."

The door closed once more, with quiet finality. Again, there were voices, but Loretta did not attempt to listen at the wall again. Instead, she turned off her desk lamp, picked up her jacket and bag, and left. As she exited the offices, the entry bell toned, as it had apparently failed to do when the patient arrived, and confirmed her departure. Perhaps they had been waiting for that. She did not disappoint them.

Instead of going home, Loretta got into her car and parked along the street approximately a block away, where she could see both the dentist's exam room light as well as the front door. She turned off the motor, but the radio continued to play a scratchy 1942 recording

of Chopin's complicated *Maiden's Wish*, performed by Rachmaninoff. She turned the volume down when it began to rain.

The man, whom Dr. Klein had called Victor, emerged from the dentist's brownstone just as the last notes of Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody* concluded WHSG's Rachmaninoff hour. The light in the exam room went off as the man named Victor cast his face skyward and appeared to blink with bewilderment into the rain. In the street lights, he appeared entirely white, almost ghoulishly so. Although it might have been Loretta's imagination, he seemed to illuminate the space around him with his cool phosphorescence.

There was a quickening in Loretta's chest. She could feel her blood moving through her, a vitality she had not experienced before.

She got out of the car.

"Victor!" she called out to him, closing her coat around her and ducking her head against the rain.

The man turned. The rain was pelting him, and his steel-colored hair formed a geography through which rivulets of water coursed. She could not see his eyes now, they were hidden in the shadowy recesses under his brow, which was starkly lit from above. She could not even see a sheen of lid. The man's hands were in his coat pockets, and as she moved down the sidewalk towards him, half running, he opened his coat wide, exposing a scarlet satin vest she hadn't noticed before. He kept his dark trench coat open, his arms wide apart in a way that made it look like he had developed jet-colored wings. She did not think now. She hurried forward and stopped only when her cheek was against the cool scarlet fabric. The black coat closed around her, covering everything but the very top of her head.

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Loretta stood in a room packed with desks, at which women in trim uniforms sat typing. None of them looked up, their concentration was complete, despite the noises outside, noises that Loretta could not initially identify. She realized that she was holding a sheet on which read the words "Special Communiqué". She did not have a chance to read what was written below this heading. She heard mortar fire, whose percussive power rose above the tapping typewriter keys. A perspiration of terror broke on Loretta's brow, under her arms. Then suddenly, the whistling of shells. She heard their approach and tried to navigate her way through the typing pool, a pool of human automatons. None of the women appeared to respond, until she saw that one young girl—her hair rolled under as was the fashion—was also perspiring and hiccupping with sobs as her fingers moved across the keys. When the shell hit, it shook the building at its foundations. Plaster cascaded from the ceiling and all the girls dove for shelter beneath their school-sized desks, Loretta (whose nametag said Guste and whose close-fitting uniform was Wehrmacht grey) lost her grip on the "Special Communiqué". It left her fingers and floated with an air current towards the door, until it was punctured by rubble, and Loretta's cheek fell hard again the cold flagstone.

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Loretta started awake at 2 a.m. She was in her own bed. Her cat walked over her body with his uncertain, padded steps. Lying on her left side, she moved her arm behind her to feel the vacant space beside her body. There was nothing there. She had been sweating. Her hair stuck to her forehead in sticky strings.

Turning the light on, she reached for her glasses, which lay on the nightstand. Outside, wind caused the leafless branches to scrape against the window glass. She could not remember how she had gotten home or if she had been anywhere at all after pressing her face against a strange man's satin vest. This behavior, which she

could not account for, much less recall clearly, filled her with a strong sense of humiliation. What had happened after all that inexplicably provoked proximity? Her consciousness searched her physicality, seeking some sense of what might have happened next, but she felt nothing violated or otherwise damaged. In fact, she felt as if nothing had happened at all.

Looking out the bedroom window, she saw her car was in the driveway. And she realized she was in her nightgown. Still, she had no memory of how she had spent the night, only a vivid dream in which her name was Guste and she had become pinned like an insect by falling plaster and granite. After that, nothing.

Loretta got up and padded in sock feet around the house, looking for something, although she wasn't entirely sure what that was. She found confirmation of the life she knew in the den, where her knitting lay, and in the bathroom at the mirror. There was her brown hair, her flat grey eyes behind lightly fingerprinted corrective lenses, the dim puffiness that cradled them, the familiar and unattractive lines that spanned her neck. Now 45, she was developing vertical creases above her lips, marks into which her lipstick regularly leeched when she wore it. She did not like the way she was aging, but then she had never felt particularly sanguine about her looks. However, she was smart enough to realize that probably no one did. She rubbed her forehead with her left hand to chase off the encroaching headache, and went back into the den. In the long walnut credenza she had inherited from her mother, she found her lone bottle of Jim Beam and a single, chipped shot glass. She filled it full, drank it down, and went back to bed.

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Loretta's day was uneventful. She opened at 9:30 and spent most of the day making appointment confirmations, greeting patients, filling out insurance paperwork, and making entries in Dr. Klein's ancient double-entry ledger, a necessary task she only tolerated. She

did not have an accountant's soul. She hated the precision it required, its forced repetition, and its demand for infinitesimal organization.

What the numerical tedium did force from her mind were the question marks that the previous night repeatedly posed in her mind. Obligatory concentration shut a steel door against the dreamy and speculative portion of her brain, and for this, she was somewhat gladdened. She still had the nagging fear, or perhaps visceral intuition, that something significant had happened to her, but that she was not aware of its particulars so she could identify symptoms...whatever they might be. In the bathroom, she examined her flat gray eyes for evidence of the furtive geological recesses that had so fascinated her in yesterday's patient, although she found none. They were the same slate color they had been yesterday. She put her glasses back on.

When Dr. Klein came into her office before lunch with paperwork from his morning patients, she took the handful of files and asked, quietly, "The man that came last night..." she hoped she might prompt the doctor into providing more information.

"You mean Mr. Iblis?"

"Oh, Mr. Iblis. Victor Iblis?"

"Yes, Victor is his first name."

"Is he a friend?"

"Well, in a manner of speaking. We share a love of the antique. We are both," the doctor paused, seeming to reflect, "collectors." He looked down at the clip board he held, and nodded once, as if determining whether this was the correct expression to use.

“Oh,” was all Loretta could muster at first, and then, “collector of antiques?”

“Pardon?” Dr. Klein looked at her, as if she'd woken him from some deeper consideration.

“Do you both collect antiques?”

“Well, we appreciate them, of course. Now, I must go back in and get ready for the next patient. Would you kindly switch out the head rest cover, rinse cup, and all that, please?”

“Sure.” Loretta followed him out, looking at the wreath of salt and pepper hair that extended in one long sweep from temple to temple. Having long since rejected taking up residence on the top of his head, where liver spots had already begun to appear, his hair had compromised by allowing several longer strands to bridge the broad gap in one long, product-hardened arc. More hair grew at his neck than on his crown. He seemed not to notice, but allowed it to grow to an unhygienically wooly length.

Hours passed, with patients coming and going. And around five-thirty, Loretta looked up from a long row of numbers, removed her glasses and put her thumb and index finger to the bridge of her nose. She pressed at the pressure that was forming there. But when she pulled them away and opened her eyes, there stood Mr. Iblis. Loretta sat upright, stunned.

“I didn't hear the door.”

Victor smiled, “Hello, Guste. So nice to see you again.”

“My name is Loretta,” she blurted out mechanically, not thinking.

"Afterwards again, then?" the man asked, making no reference to what he meant.

Again, Loretta responded without thought, "Yes."

He moved into the next room, and she listened to him greet Dr. Klein and to Dr. Klein's cheerful response. Then, "Let me shut the door, Victor."

There was a pause, and she heard Dr. Klein call into the hallway, "Loretta, I'll see you tomorrow morning, all right? Good night!"

"Good night, Dr. Klein," she called back.

She went immediately to the cat calendar, lifted it aside and listened. She could only catch snippets of their conversation. The doctor spoke in an uncharacteristically low tone.

"Well, of course," she heard the doctor say, "you were a lizard king!"

Loretta stepped back from the wall, cocked her head sideways and considered this. She was not entirely certain she had heard this correctly.

Consistently, she could hear only the doctor's voice, not Victor's.

"Well, thank you," Dr. Klein said, "I have a key place for this in my collection. You bring me such marvels! Shall we begin then?"

Apparently, Victor assented because she heard the sound of water beginning to circulate in the rinse bowl, and she recognized the sound of Dr. Klein picking an instrument off the stainless steel tray suspended at his side.

Loretta picked up her coat, bag, and scarf and left, making the door tone behind her.

Instead of going to her car, she went to the side of the brownstone, which was on a corner lot. She stood on the sidewalk, but realized that Dr. Klein had drawn the shade. She moved closer, squeezing between landscaping to reach the tall first-floor window that looked into the exam room. With the assistance of the broad stone molding at the building's base, she stepped up and peered through a slender, unguarded space between the window frame and the drawn blind.

Although the frayed edge of the blind made the image uncertain, she saw that the man on the chair had unusually protuberant canines. But they had a dark color that, to Loretta's half-trained eye, suggested decay. Loretta lost her uncertain footing and fell into the mulch with a soft thud. She was unhurt, but got up, reclaimed her coat and bag, and went back to her car, where she waited for Victor to appear on the front step.

When Victor emerged from the brownstone, there was no hesitation in his step, no uncertain loitering. Instead, he moved to the sidewalk with an ease that suggested levitation and turned in Loretta's direction, facing her car without expression, his hands at his sides. Again, Loretta could not see his eyes, but she knew they had found her.

She got out of the car and stood on the thin strip of grass that separated the curb from the walkway. She smoothed her skirt, pulled at it, felt for any remaining mulch, pressed the place where a tender bruise was forming. She waited. The light went off in the exam room inside the building. Neither of them moved.

"Look at the sky, Guste," a voice close to her said. She flinched and drew in a breath.

It was Victor's voice, she realized, but she saw that he still stood nearly a block away. She cast her eyes upward. There were no clouds, and despite the light from the city, which stood less than half a mile away, she could see the stars.

"There's Cassiopeia, Guste," the voice continued. "Above you, see the 'w' composed of five stars?"

Loretta looked up, searching the sky.

"That is her crown. Her pride and vanity were her downfall, Guste."

There was silence. Somewhere a car horn blew. Loretta looked down at the sidewalk and saw that Victor was gone. There was nothing there but the trees that divided the dentist's property from the insurance agency on the next lot.

Loretta felt a presence at her left. Victor stood there quietly, waiting.

"Pride and vanity," repeated Loretta, looking at Victor. "I have none."

"I know," said Victor. "And look there," Victor pointed again at the sky above them. He pulled Loretta towards him with his free arm, so that their jaws and cheekbones touched. Loretta felt how cold he actually was. And she noticed, for the first time, that he seemed to have no native odor, no cologne, no residual smell from the doctor's office. "That, Guste, is me," he said, still looking skyward.

Loretta now looked, too, focusing in order to figure out what he meant. She knew little about astronomy. She turned to look at him. He met her gaze and the malachite-colored muscles of his eyes flashed open like gussets and instantly closed, leaving nothing but a

uniform yellow-brown iris. Now, too, his pupils were wide and round, like human pupils should have been.

“People have said this is Ganymedes or Decaulion or simply Aquarius, but no. This figure—see the shower of stars that fall from one side? This is Cecrops, understood by humans to have been half snake and half man, founder of Athens and the institution of marriage—a ruler predating the discovery of wine. We had only water to slake our thirsts, you see.”

Loretta looked at him blankly.

“Ah, Guste,” Victor shook his head. “We have known each so long, but you forget. I must remind you every time.”

“But I don't know you. At least, not before yesterday.”

“Of course you do. It will come back to you. Eventually.”

Loretta thought very hard. “But why tell me about these stars?”

“So you will remember.”

“But remember what?”

“Who you really are, Guste. Really, it is so sad to be mortal. To die and lose your accumulated knowledge. Here you are, rolling the rock back up the mountain again.”

“Sisyphus,” she said quietly.

“Yes, Guste. Sisyphus. But that's not who you were. He was not real. That was a fable to demonstrate the plight of mortals. You were once a queen. A queen, Guste.”

“And you are not mortal then?”

“No.”

“Who are you?”

“In time, Guste. You will remember in time. It took me longer to find you, and now your reeducation must begin once more. It becomes more difficult to wipe away the veil of this life and find your essential identity now that it has gone this long.”

Loretta looked at him, searchingly. Something inside her vibrated with unexpected certainty. She did not doubt him, although in any other situation, she might reasonably have run from the man and reported him to the police. But reality seemed less real to her now, less convincing than the riddle that stood before her, this self-proclaimed immortal, who was again opening his arms so that she might disappear beneath his coat.

“Are you ready, Guste?”

Loretta looked at his face, at the marble coolness of it, its fine tracery of lines that suggested advanced age and became apparent only when he smiled with that beneficent tenderness that at least appeared many emotional degrees warmer than his skin.

Willingly, she stepped into the embrace of his dark coat, and again he covered her to the very top of her head. And as before, they were instantly gone.

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When Loretta opened her eyes, she was not on the darkened street. In fact, the light was blindingly bright, and she quickly registered the sun's heat. Victor was nowhere near her. There was no shadowy embrace. She put her fingers to her eyes, trying to

adjust to the light's intensity. Pulling her hands away, she saw her forearms were ringed by wide gold bracelets, as were her upper arms. She looked down and saw her white uniform was gone, and in its place was a long, brick-red linen gown, cinched at the waist, with flowing pleats that nearly touched the earth. It was fastened by golden broaches at each shoulder. She could still see her feet below the hem, although just the tips. These, however, were not the feet she was born with. The second toe was longer than the first, as her own was not. Still they were elegant, narrow, sandal-clad, and clean, if coated with a fine film of dust.

Despite her shock, she quickly registered that she was on a dais, but no one was looking at her. Instead, they were gazing intently at the platform opposite hers. There, a man was shackled to a board. The iron collar around his neck was being tightened with a crank. There was complete silence except for the sounds of, first, gasping and then, the wet noises of strangulation. The man's face was purple, his eyes had begun to protrude from their sockets. His tongue involuntarily ejected from his mouth. Loretta turned her head away and suddenly sick, held her stomach, retching. People turned away from the spectacle to look at Loretta.

“Calixte!” A young man, came up the platform's stairs, put his hand on her back and another on her shoulder. He looked into her face with a brow furrowed by sincere concern. She wiped her mouth as gracefully as she could. He reached for this hand, clutched it tightly and led her off the dais. She remained silent and allowed herself to be led away.

When she was under the portico, out of the sun, she wiped away the eruption of sweat—both from nerves and heat—that sparkled on her forehead. The man, whose hair lay in little curls around his brow, who many have been in his late teens or very early twenties, brought her water in a golden cup whose thick stem was embedded with ruby cabochons. Loretta took the opportunity to feel her hair,

which she could sense was pulled up. She, too, had tiny ringlets that trembled at her temples and tiny braids that ran beneath a cascade of curls that hung from the crown of her head like an overflowing cornucopia. She longed to know her age, which she could not determine from looking at her hands or feet. Yet she knew she was younger than she had been. She was just not certain by how much.

She gratefully took the goblet. "What did that man do? The one who was being choked." She was again startled by the fact that what came from her mouth was not something she understood, but sounds that bore no relation to English. Still, she seemed to speak without uncertainty.

The man in front of her considered her carefully, "You don't remember?"

Here, too, she realized she understood, although the phonic sounds were entirely unfamiliar to her ear.

"No," Loretta said hesitantly.

"He tried to seduce you. You were his accuser. And he lost his case. A jury of 500 pronounced him guilty."

"Such a horrible way to go," Loretta turned her head away and covered her mouth with the back of her hand.

The boy, crouched before her, looked down, "I thought you'd be relieved."

Loretta look at him again, "But to *see* it. To see it happen is different than wanting it."

"No one would pay for the hemlock for him," not since Cecrops' wife was involved.

Loretta was quiet. She did not know what to say to this. Did this mean, she thought suddenly, that I'm Cecrop's wife?

"I think I'd like to lie down now," she said. She feigned weakness when she rose so he would lead her back to her quarters, since she did not know where they were.

But he did not hesitate, and when they reached her room—whose walls were a mosaic of sea creatures composed of mint green, white, and brown tesserae—he entered along with her and closed the door behind him. She waited to see what he would do. He lay down on the wide cushioned chaise and put his hand on the area where she might lay. He stretched an arm out to her.

"Victor?" she chanced.

"Yes, you were the champion today." The boy said.

This was not Victor, but she lay down beside the boy, slowly. "Where is Cecrops?"

"Sleeping," the boy answered. "You know that. We have hours to be together."

She lay with her eyes open, tracing the patterns in the mosaic. She was uncertain what to ask next. The boy propped himself up on one elbow and looked down at her profile.

"Really, are you all right? You don't seem like yourself."

"Yes, I'm fine."

She searched now for a mirror and saw none, except for a highly polished bronze disc that hung on one wall. She got up and moved towards it, abandoning the boy on the couch.

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She woke with a start and was again in her own bed. However this time, Victor was sitting in a chair beside her. He was holding her left hand in both of his.

"You see, Calixte darling. This is why I let you remain mortal. I let you experience the sting of losing your looks and then eventually die because you were unfaithful. You were so beautiful. It was no wonder." Victor looked up wistfully at the Thomas Kinkadee print over Loretta's bed.

"What about the boy?" she asked.

"What about the boy." he answered, casting his amber-toned eyes on Loretta again.

"Yes, what happened to him?"

"Killed on the battlefield, where I later drained his blood."

Loretta sat up quickly, yanked her hand away, and drew back against the headboard.

"He made me ill, Loretta, if that's any consolation," Victor smiled.

"Ill?"

"Our kind cannot drink blood of the dead."

"Your kind? What do you mean 'your kind'?"

“Loretta, I think you know.”

Loretta crawled backwards on the bed, crab-like. She moved even further away from Victor, who still wore his black overcoat and red satin vest. She realized that she'd never seen him in anything different.

“Who is Guste, Victor?” Loretta said, panicked. “What did *she* do?”

But Victor was gone. The window was open and her long sheer curtains were billowing inward.

“What did *she* do?!” Loretta yelled into the empty room. “*What?*”

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The next morning, the dentist gazed at Loretta for a few moments. “Are you feeling sick today, Loretta?”

“No,” she said with a curt smile that she hoped would halt any further inquiries. In reality, her head ached. She had not slept, but instead got out the single bottle of Jim Beam from her inherited credenza, and this time, put back two shots. Afterwards, she watched infomercials for hours, barely registering what was said.

Loretta knew that the dentist had a spare key to his apartment taped inside the door of the fusebox in the kitchenette just off Loretta's office. Often, the dentist went upstairs to eat his lunch and, she suspected, nap in the afternoons when he did not have appointments. Today, however, he went out at lunch with a small package, giving no indication of where he was going other than a brief, “I'll be back around 1:30 for my 2 o'clock appointment, Loretta.”

When she heard the door tone and confirmed that he had exited the outer vestibule, she went to the kitchenette and retrieved the key. She stood looking out the front window of the waiting room for some five minutes to be sure he did not return. Finally, she went through the door, which toned, and ascended the stairs to his apartment, her heart pounding against her ribs. Nervously, as her gum-soled shoes sunk into the heavily padded carpet on his stairway, she clutched the key against her chest in one fist, which she shielded with her other hand.

In all her years working for the dentist, she'd passed them on the way in every day. At the bottom of these steps, coming in from the outer vestibule, she'd shaken her umbrella (which she never left out where a patient might—however innocently—swipe it). For her, the dentist's apartment was an unknown, a dark conglomeration of shadows at the top of the staircase: someone else's private space. Because the stairwell was dark and there appeared to be no light switch, she had difficulty getting the key in the lock, and had to do it solely by feel for the opening with her fingertips. Still, the area just outside his door was warm and strangely comforting. It smelled vaguely of what she imagined had been the dentist's breakfast hours earlier. There was the pungent, smoky scent of bacon.

When she got the door open, she stepped right from the staircase into the yellow and white linoleum of the kitchen. It was bright, airy. Across the room, diagonally from the door, there was a large window over the sink, which looked out onto the cross street. Sun shown evenly on the remnants of his breakfast dishes, which were upside down in the plastic drainer. The kitchen fulfilled every expectation she had of the dentist: his optimism, his mundanity.

Still clutching the key, she walked with light steps into the next room, which was dark and somewhat forbidding. Here, she was uncertain of what to expect. Would there be long walls of shelved

books, a mish-mash of antiques, strange didactic prints like the one that she had taken down in her office?

It was, at first, so dark that she feared she would not be able to find her footing without knocking something over. She felt along the walls, which she realized were paneled with wood, smooth, cool with a glossy-feeling finish. There was no switch, and probably no overhead light. Finally, after some fumbling, she found a table lamp, whose dangling chain she pulled out. A modest illumination made it possible to see why it was so dark: heavy, hunter green velveteen curtains blocked the light of every window. They seemed to groan under their own weight against the brass rings that held them to the curtain rod. Not a shaft of light made it through.

The room, she realized, was lined with prints. The closest bore the engraving of a man who wore a collar. Attached to the collar, Loretta saw, was a two-pronged fork that had penetrated both the man's chin and also his chest. She gasped and stepped back. She thought for a moment that this image—in the living room of a man with whom she had worked for nearly a decade—*this* did not align with her concept of the dentist, who hummed arias, who gave Snoopy toothbrushes to children, who brought her a cupcake with a candle every year on her birthday.

She moved on to the next print, which was, like all the others, opulently matted and framed in gilded wood. It held the image of a naked figure strapped to a giant wheel with a hooded figure standing at its side cranking the handle that apparently made it move.

The next print was labeled and read “Inquisitional Chair.” Its seat and back were studded with spikes and outfitted with shackles at the foot end, on the arm rests, and at the back. When Loretta got to an image of the naked figure mounted on the so-called “Spanish

Donkey," she turned away, covering her mouth with the back of her hand. She felt sick.

She looked around the room, searching for some other image that might redeem her shattered image of the doctor. There were indeed books, and a small television on a collapsible wooden stand in front of the sooty fireplace. However, the TV's dials looked so old, that it might well have been a black-and-white. There was stereo system and significant space allotted to records and CDs nearby.

In the corner nearest her, Loretta considered an impressive dark wood highboy, which she originally assumed held the dentist's stereo system. Since she saw that the stereo was elsewhere, and its speakers were mounted near the crown molding in the room's corners, her curiosity renewed, but was tinged with a sense of hope and dread. She went to the cabinet and opened the top set of tall raised panel doors. A light came on automatically. It shone through three trapezoidal glass shelves. And on each shelf were implements of a strange and alarming appearance: little saws, pliers-style devices with sharp blades, iron claws attached to a piece of disintegrated leather, a fist-sized pear with a screw-style stem. Loretta's eyes rested on a rusting iron collar with a small threaded opening into which a crank could have been fit. Her mind fled to her dream, to the man whose eyes threatened to burst forth from their sockets, who choked and suffocated while held in a collar, just like the one that lay before her now.

Loretta's stomach turned. She closed the cabinet quickly and ran from the apartment, slamming the door behind her. It seemed she could not get away fast enough, and she moved down the stairs so quickly that her feet did not stay beneath her. On one step, her ankle turned, and she stumbled down the last few, landing on her hip near the vestibule door. She lay there for a few seconds, considering whether she should simply leave. She felt the undeniable desire to get away before the dentist came back.

She raised herself up and made for her office. There, she had her purse in her hand when she heard the outer door close and the entry bell tone. Someone had crossed the threshold. The dentist came in, moved quickly past her office, looked in at her briefly and nodded, but said nothing. His Hamburg-style hat was still on. His hands were in his pockets. Meanwhile, Loretta was still bent at the waist, arrested in motion, holding the straps of her purse. She had nodded in reply but said nothing either. The straps finally fell from her hands, and she reached for the closest bit of paperwork she could find.

Within seconds, the dentist came back around the corner, his jacket still on, his hat in his hand. "Loretta, can you change out the rise cup and put out a packet of instruments? I'm going to go upstairs for a quick bite.

"Sure," she said, not looking at him.

Fear prickled across her scalp and traveled down her back. She had not been careful when she left the apartment, and she knew she'd left the lamp on. His apartment door might even have remained unlocked when it slammed behind her. She hadn't checked. As her mind ran quickly through her options, she moved towards the kitchenette. She put the key back under the tape where she found it, smoothed it over with her thumb several times, closed the fusebox, and readied the items the dentist had asked for. All the while, she waited, her flesh prickling, for the dentist to confront her about the unlocked door, the lamp still burning in the living room.

Story will continue....

