

One Thousand Incarnations and One Thousand Deaths - Part II

by Savannah Schroll Guz

She relaxed somewhat when he did not immediately descend and question her. She heard him moving around above her, the floor squeaking occasionally. She could tell now where he was standing. Mostly, it was in the kitchen near the sink.

Once more, Loretta considered her choices and reached again for her purse. She left everything in her office and made for the door. When the bell toned as she crossed the threshold, the door at the top of the stairs opened. Light from the kitchen flooded the dark stairwell, and at the top, the dentist turned on a light switch Loretta had not seen. He was holding half a sandwich. "Going to lunch?" he asked. There was no indication of anger, only seemingly curious inquiry.

"Um, no. Well, yes. Yes, to lunch."

"I can make you a sandwich up here, if you like. Chicken salad. The patient's due to arrive soon. I'd prefer if you stayed here to process them."

She could have said she needed to get to the post office or return an overdue library book, or stop next door to ask about car insurance. But she did none of these things because they simply did not occur to her. Instead, she felt trapped. Pressed to think of something, she said only, "Okay," and hated herself for it immediately afterward.

It was with dread that she climbed those stairs a second time.

"When she got to the top, she saw that he had taken two pieces of whole wheat bread from the toaster. He began dipping chicken salad out of a plastic container and smoothing it over each slice.

"Tomato?" He asked, looking at her and raising his brows.

"Sure, yes." Loretta said, absently.

He lay a slice of tomato on top and put the two weighty slices together, pressing firmly. The dentist brought them to her with a smile and said, "There you are. Something to drink? I've got some mineral water here."

"No, thank you," Loretta said blankly, looking at the sandwich.

"You've never been up here, have you?"

Loretta had just lifted the sandwich to her mouth and stopped short. She was certain her face had gone red, but it seemed the dentist had not noticed. "No," she said quickly and bit into the sandwich. Perhaps he'd not been finishing, but had meant it as a purely rhetorical question, was just making conversation.

"Really, Loretta, are you all right? You're usually not so...well, detached."

There was a pause. "I, uh, well, I've had a shock today. That's all."

"Oh?" he said. "Nothing too terrible I hope. Your family's okay?"

"Oh yes, the few I know are all fine."

The dentist sat down at the enamel and chrome table next to Loretta. "Good. You're okay then, I hope?"

She chewed, then cleared her throat. "Yes."

"Good."

There was silence for a moment. The dentist put one hand on the table and covered it contemplatively with his other. He gazed at the table top, not wanting to seem intrusive, Loretta now imagined. He looked at her suddenly, "How's the sandwich?"

"Very good. Thank you."

"Of course. Loretta," the dentist began, "I wanted to ask your opinion on something. It may seem like a bizarre question."

"Okay," Loretta said, slightly wary. Still, she continued eating her sandwich, making purposefully rapid progress so she could get back downstairs.

"If you had the opportunity to live forever, would you?"

She stopped chewing for a moment. She knew, instantly, what he meant and the reason for his question.

"Not if it meant a great deal of pain."

The dentist searched her face to understand her meaning. "What do you mean?"

"You're stuck in one identity for all those years, it would be a relief to finally die."

"But if you could be something you weren't before. More powerful or whatever."

Before she could answer, the downstairs entry bell toned. The patient was probably now in the waiting room, and Loretta wiped her mouth with the paper towel he'd provided, smiled politely at him, and excused herself.

Downstairs she processed the patient's new information, and decided that she would stay the entire day. Her urgency to leave seemed less insistent than the desire to see if Victor would arrive again. When the dentist asked for a package of instruments at 5:00, she knew he would come.

And at 5:45, he was in front of her desk, having seemingly materialized before her unblinking eyes. She had been waiting patiently, her hands on her desk blotter, fingers interlaced. He smiled at her, this time, showing a modest flash of incisors, but not canines. His eyes remained the smooth, impervious-looking light amber. None of the mineral-green veins showed this time. She realized that he seemed to have hidden his hands. She could not see them.

"We need to talk about him," she tipped her head in the direction of the exam room.

He nodded and made his way next door, where he and the dentist exchanged their usual greetings. The dentist then popped over and, again told Loretta he could handle the details if she would head home.

Her cue: she left. Again, she waited in her car a block away until Victor emerged from the brownstone. He turned to look at her, but she did not get out of the car. She merely sat and stared back at him, not moving. "I know what you're capable of," she whispered.

Victor was suddenly in the passenger seat, smoothing his coat down across his knees , "Do you?"

She set her jaw. "Yes." There was a pause. "Did you give that man an iron collar?"

He smiled, "I did."

"Was it from the execution I watched?"

"You remembered."

"Yes! How could I forget!"

"He has a remarkable collection."

"Yes, I saw it today. It's horrific. He's not the man I thought he was," she turned away in disgust, looking at the brownstone through the windshield, which was now lightly speckled with sap from the tree that branched out overhead.

"Very few men are," Victor answered, his hands folded in his lap.

"What else have you brought him?"

"Tonight, a miniature of the guillotine."

"God."

Victor reached over and touched her chin, turning her face towards him, "what is it, Loretta, you wanted to talk about?"

"You cannot make a man like that immortal."

"You're wrong. I can, but I won't."

"Has he asked you?"

"Of course he has. And each time, I tell him I cannot. And, to appease him, I bring him treasures for his collection."

"There's something else," Loretta turned away again, looking at the brownstone. "I want to know how many lives."

Victor dropped his hand, "Your lives, you mean?"

"Yes, how many?"

"Many."

"Why? Why not make me immortal?"

"I thought you understood."

"No," Loretta said, gritting her teeth. "I don't. I don't even know why I even want to know. Or why I'm here right now. Why you pest me. Why you've turned me upside down. I don't even know why I believe any of this!"

Victor put his hands across her eyes, grabbed and held one gesticulating hand and kissed the knuckles before holding her fingers to his cool cheek.

When Loretta opened her eyes, she was in a stifling room with another woman. Neither spoke, but she saw the woman was wearing soiled pearl-colored satin that might have been a fine gown were it not so filthy. The hem was dark brown, and one sleeve was ripped so that the woman's bare shoulder was showing. A broad-brim straw hat with a broad pink ribbon, also filthy, and a crushed crown, lay beside her on the bench. She was gazing at the floor, her hands lying in her lap. Her hair, apparently once powdered white in places, now fell in greasy ringlets at her neck. In the hallway, Loretta heard what

sounded like French. There were loud bellows, violent thumps, and the woman who sat in the corner across from her looked up in alarm. "They're coming for us," she whispered in a breathless expression of terror.

This was French, Loretta realized. She understood it.

The door flew open, hitting the wall, and the woman seated in the corner across from her pressed herself against the bench. Loretta saw that down through her petticoats came a trickle of yellow liquid, which pooled on the floor.

But they did not take the woman, they came for Loretta, whom they grabbed by the wrists and drug forward, nearly pulling her arms out of their sockets. Her natural inclination was resistance, but they pushed her forward among them, so there was no escape. Loretta made one last moment of eye contact with the other woman, who gazed saucer-eyed at her and kept whispering, "*mon Dieu...mon Dieu...mon Dieu.*" One of the men, having seen this, backhanded her, and she fell to the floor. Loretta could no longer see her, since she was being herded out the door and into a long passageway by a half dozen rough-looking, unwashed men. As she moved, they pulled at her hair and kicked hard at her feet and ankles under her soiled gown as she walked. She resolved not to make a noise.

First she was herded down a series of tiled stairs, where her captors kicked her in the bottom as she descended. One put his boot on her back and forced her to stumble and nearly fall, but someone had hold of her hair, so she did not go too far before she felt a white flash of pain at the nape of her neck. When this happened the second time, the hair came right out in the man's hand and she fell forward hitting her chin on the landing and knocking loose one of her front teeth. Someone kicked her while she lay there. "Get up, Princess!" a male voice said in a mocking female tone. Again, another kick.

"Turin-born bitch! Get up!" another voice, this a different one. A man's face got close to hers. She could smell his rotting teeth.

Someone yanked her up by the arm, and she yelped involuntarily. They marched her down the remaining stairs, through another long corridor and into the center of the complex, which was open to the sky. Sun shone down on the cobble stones here. Blood trickled from her mouth, where her tooth had loosened.

Men stood around in pony tails and soiled shirts. They were filthy and soot covered, chests heaving against the heat. Some had knotted tricolor fabric around their heads, others wore muddy top hats. They were all sweating, and grime coated their faces. When they saw her they shouted. She felt a cacophony of rage projected at her.

A man on a wooden platform shouted at her, "Marie-Therese De Savoie-Carignan! You stand accused of improprieties, including sexual relations with the queen."

Another series of shouts issued from the crowd, but they were so muddled, she understood none of them. She also could not see well. Tears stung her eyes. Her body and broken tooth throbbed in time with her heart beat. She could no longer see. But she held her head up. *Keep it up, keep it high*, instinct told her.

"You must pledge a vow of eternal renunciation and hatred of the French monarchy, including the Queen. Will you do this, Marie-Therese?"

Loretta was silent. Tears ran from her eyes, blood trickled from her mouth.

"I repeat, will you pledge this oath?"

Loretta raised her chin even higher, "I will *not!* Damn you all!" With this, she spit her tooth onto the cobblestones. For a moment, it was so still that people in the front row could hear the tooth land and bounce further.

And then, the crowd rushed forward and descended on her. The torment and horror, the cutting and violations went on for some time, enough time to cause her to separate from herself. What brought her back was a sense of physical cleaving, which came veiled by mists of doubtful reverie. Finally, she saw, from a vantage point high above the street, a body in the dress she had worn in courtyard. It was torn to long ribbons of blood-soaked satin. The neck was little more than a stump pooling blood. The body's breasts were gone, replaced by gore. Still, she realized, even though she could not move on her own, she was going forward, away from the body, as if being carried. She looked down, from what seemed like a full body-length above everyone, and saw men with blood on their faces, *on their mouths*, moving below her, still shouting. She looked ahead and saw that she was in the street. She saw the expressions of the women, who gazed up at her with open mouths. One or two of them screamed. Others cheered.

She closed her eyes and met a black and infinite nothingness.

Again, Loretta woke in her own apartment. This time, she was on the chair in her own living room. Her hand went instantly to her neck and then to her breasts. She felt her front incisors, which were still present. She then looked around the room. Victor appeared at first not to be there, but he came walking through the door that lead to the kitchen. They said nothing to each other at first. He, with his hands behind his back, unsmiling, looked down at her. She, hand poised again at her neck, sat unsmiling, looking up at him. This lasted for a full minute.

"What the hell was that?" Loretta finally broke the silence.

"Each time it happens, and so I let you die."

"*What? What* happens?"

"You are unfaithful to me, Loretta."

"Why show me these horrible things? I hadn't remembered them before! I don't want to remember them, and now I can't forget!"

"I don't want you to forget."

"But what purpose does it serve?"

"Because I think you are worthy this time."

"Worthy?" Loretta laughed and turned her head away with disgust.

"You are humble this time, Loretta. You do not have that roving desire or duplicity of your other incarnations. You are strong and principled."

"Get out," Loretta said, standing up. "Get out of my home and don't you ever come back."

"My sweet, lovely Calixte, please..." he reached towards her, suddenly pleading, again affectionate.

"My name is Loretta. I have been Loretta my whole life. I won't listen to you anymore. Get out."

Victor clutched Loretta's hand and reached for her eyes. She pulled away, but was unsuccessful at getting free from his grasp,

which tightened. "I think you should reconsider," he said. "Mortality is such a terrible condition."

Loretta thought she'd freed herself when she realized, again, that she was no longer in her apartment. Loose threads of chestnut-colored hair fluttered about her face, moved by a breeze she hadn't felt before. She understood almost immediately that she was elevated above the ground and was bound to something: a wooden pole, she realized, having moved her arms up and down against it.

She was standing upright, but she could not move. Around her, on ground level, were people, largely clothed in brown dresses or pants of coarsely ticked fabric. The women wore square-shaped white bonnets. The men sweat inside their linen shirts. One or two of them had removed his hat. Her eyes moved over the crowd and finally fell on two young girls in the front row. A woman, who looked like their mother, stood behind them. When Loretta made eye contact with the older of the two, the girl fell to the ground and commenced a seizure of rolling, shaking and yelling. The other younger girl followed suit. Screaming, pleading for help, the mother bent to still them. The crowd began shouting.

A man in a black coat, wide square collar of white cloth and a broad brim hat, signaled to a curly-haired man at the foot of the narrow plinth on which Loretta was perched.

Loretta now saw that she was standing on a wooden ledge above a tee-pee-shaped mound of kindling. The curly-haired man took a torch and lit the stack of wood at each cardinal point and then at each half point. Flames began to crackle and smoke rose, stinging Loretta's eyes and choking her. A minister, holding an open Bible, gave a benediction over her coughing, saying the devil comes in many forms and that they was sending her back to the hellfire she came from. Crackling flames consumed the logs from below and

climbed higher. She began to feel the flames licking at the tips of her shoes.

Loretta shouted, "Victor! *Victor!* Help me!"

Instantly, she was back in the apartment, where it was darker, cooler. Victor was holding her hand well above her head, as if he'd yanked her back onto the carpet of her apartment, into the present. She was on one hip at his feet, where she continued to cough. This eventually gave way to sobs. She put the back of her other hand, which had been supporting her weight, up to her mouth, and she let him hold her weight.

"You see," Victor said, slowly. "how terrible it is to be human."

Loretta looked up at him, tears had made her cheeks wet. Her mouth looked like the Greek mask of tragedy, the corners turned down, but still open as if a wail might issue at any moment. What lingered at the edge of expression was: *how could you?* But the words simply would not come out.

"I have loved you for centuries, Loretta. No, more than centuries. For thousands of years. And each time, you chose a human's companionship over mine." He looked at her: still, that pained expression, the open mouth, the eyes shedding tears.

He took her face in both his hands and kissed her on the mouth. She did not struggle against him.

"You are ready now, Loretta," he said, pulling back to look at her. Her tears had stopped. "You have learned your lesson, and you will not forget. I can see that." He paused, scrutinizing her. "Do you want to be immortal, Loretta? Do you want to live forever?"

Loretta looked up into his aging face and nodded, still unable to speak.

Victor gently bent towards her neck, where he lingered, inhaling her odor. The scent involved nothing gentle or feminine, but rather the animal scent of fear and its related perspiration. He bit her, drinking her blood and releasing his venom. She did not flinch, but had he been able to see her stricken form, her wide eyes, which began to change color, the tendons that tensed in each limb, he might have realized how unprepared he was. They remained in this position for nearly 20 minutes, and when he released her, she fell to the carpet.

The transformation had begun to take place, and as he watched, Victor smiled and made a series of noises that the neighbors below Loretta later described to police as a lion's roar. He lifted his arms up to the ceiling, as in the ancient posture of prayer, and held them in this position for a few moments until he sat back down beside Loretta and watched youth return to her newly ashen features.

As Victor sat beside her, Loretta's heart slowed from a normal human pulse to just two beats per minute. She spun in mists of confusion, slowly tumbling end over end down a well shaft of white nothingness that eventually gave way to a linear chronology. She looked down through time, and fell past the entrances to over 1,000 of her human incarnations. The doorway into each one revealed, she saw as she fell past them, that each life had ended in shocking violence, diseased wasting, or bitter isolation. Some newly acquired omniscience allowed her to understand that, every time, Victor's machinations, his silent manipulation of circumstance, had precipitated her extended suffering.

This realization was made as her heart was re-forming, a heart that was larger, circulated venom rather than blood, and produced no physical warmth. The shock of this revelation caused the poor

formation of an essential valve. And with every successive beat, a murmur of hatred followed. It could be heard without a stethoscope.

When she opened her eyes, which were no longer brown, but the yellow-green of felines, she looked up at Victor. Her pupils narrowed to two crescent-shaped slits.

"Hello, darling," she said to him.

He smiled at her, causing his wrinkles to fan across his cheekbones. "You look no older than twenty."

"You look thousands of years old," she said without expression.

"But I am. You are but a baby in vampire years. Can you live with my grandfatherly appearance? I certainly hope so."

In reply, Loretta gave him a sly, close-lipped smile. She rose and went to the credenza, where she kept the whiskey. Above it was a mirror. Victor misread her intentions.

"There's no use," he said. "You won't see anything there. We don't have reflections, you see."

"I know," she said quietly, "Loretta is not vain. You said so yourself once. I'm simply getting a drink to celebrate."

"Oh, marvelous. I had no idea Loretta would have that here."

"You underestimate Loretta."

"Perhaps so," Victor laughed quietly.

Loretta first got out the Jim Beam and retrieved two coffee mugs from the kitchen. After pouring the drinks, she gave one to Victor,

and then opened the credenza's top drawer. From the felt-lined interior, using a polishing cloth to protect her hand, she pulled a silver carving fork out and laid the matching knife on the credenza top. As Victor was sipping his drink, Loretta turned and lunged at him with the fork. She found that she was ten times stronger than before, and she overestimated the force it would take to stab him. Instead, the fork went through his sternum, broke his rib and pierced his heart. He sat, stunned and wide-eyed, impaled by the fork, which had gone all the way through to the padding in the chair upholstery. He dropped the mug and sat with fingers splayed in a stricken palsy.

"Loretta," was all he said in a hoarse, barely audible tone. When he attempted to pull himself off the knife, the end of whose silver hilt still poked from his satin vest, Loretta heard his flesh sizzling. He stiffened, ceased moving, and looked at her

Loretta took up the carving knife now and went to the back of his chair.

"Loretta," he tried again. He attempted to move his arm to reach out to her, but again, could make no motion without his skin responding to the silver.

Loretta pulled his head up roughly against the cushioned chair back and saw that there was actually a tear in his eye. Seeing this, she felt nothing but arctic. He looked at her, "I am old, Loretta, so old. I can't fight you now. Have mercy. Please have mercy!" His voice left him in raspy croaks now.

Loretta pulled the knife across his throat, at first not truly cutting, but gliding the blade along the porcelain surface of his neck. She watched his skin blister angrily along the length of the path she'd made. Finally, with sudden force, she cut through his neck all the way to his first vertebra. Victor bled venom onto his lovely satin

vest, darkening the fabric. Another powerful backward thrust against the bone caused the blade slip upward and break through at the bone notch. His head unbalanced and toppled forward onto his lap as the chair fell rearward from the force. When the chair back hit the floor, Victor's head rolled back over his chest, over his severed neck, and came to rest just inches from his body. The head lay on one ear, the eyes wide as it gazed at the body it was no longer part of. And then, they closed.

Loretta watched Victor's body lying motionless but leaking venom into the chair upholstery and faux oriental carpet. She looked at her palms, which she knew had been burned by the silver. She had grabbed the blade with her free hand when she had forced it through his neck muscles, both burning and cutting herself in the process. And, having lost the slick polishing cloth she had used to guard against contact with the silver hilt, its shape and intricate decorations had also burned themselves into her palm. Despite her amazing ability to heal within minutes from other wounds, these marks did not close, but remained open, weeping venom for the eternity she lived through. It quickly became a painful reminder.

Almost immediately after killing Victor, she understood something that he had apparently not grasped himself. Still, it explained Victor's otherwise inexplicable cruelty.

By the time her physical transformation was complete, as the newly defective valve in her once uncorrupted heart began leaking venom back into the heart's atrium, she realized that she could no longer experience emotion. She could imitate these sentiments, but she could not genuinely *feel* them. There was no love, no sadness, and there would be, she suspected, no genuine contentment.

Moreover, there were no tears for others' suffering. She was entirely without empathy and wholly lacking compassion. When she examined her inner world, there was only a strong sense of self

where her insecurities had been. This self-absorption became the generator that powered her every action. It made her emotionless and mercenary. And when she fully recognized the loss of her humanity, she found it more appalling than her previous mortality.

