

The All-Night Dentist

By Vincent Kovar

Working nights is one of the many things I did to make my marriage work. The money is exceptional, it's why Antonia was with me in the first place, and once I started there was no stopping. I see a few patients in the late afternoons, mostly to keep my tax returns from sending up red flags but my business, like my clientele, is largely nocturnal.

You've probably heard that dentists have the highest suicide rate of any profession. No one is quite sure why but we do seem to be a depressive lot, even those who get out into the sunshine with greater regularity than me. Still, as long as I had my clinic, I didn't have much to whine about, except my ex-wife.

I had her dead to rights for marital infidelity. I came home one morning and found Antonia honking like a goose under the undulating ass of our accountant. He blurted out the usual line, "This isn't what it looks like," while she, crisp as a credit card, just said, "Don't stop."

She said it to him. Antonia had already stopped speaking to me directly and all subsequent communication during the divorce was transmitted through her wooden faced lawyer. After those two words, "don't stop" she became the greatest ventriloquist alive. Her lips never moved.

Still, I let her take almost everything. I handed over the house, my BMW and virtually all of our liquid assets, just so that she would leave my practice alone.

I don't whine about driving a Chevrolet Citation two decades old or living in a cramped apartment where the hallways smell of cabbage. Especially not to my patients. However, sometimes when they're on the chair, I do describe how nice it would be if they took care of Antonia for me.

"Ihh hoo essy", my patient says, his mouth full of my fingers. Too messy. Too many deaths. Too close to me.

He should know. Underneath the pretentious black leather and crushed velvet, this guy wearing the blue paper bib is a predatory killer, darker and more voracious than any twelve Dahmers or Bundys put together. He killed my former accountant while I was at a conference in Wichita. At least I'm pretty sure it was him. They are all pretty tight lipped about this sort of thing. The body turned up burned to ash in a car fire. The murder wasn't any great favor to me. My night clients count on me and since the accountant was the one cooking my books, they figured he had to go after the divorce. Good dentists are hard to find, especially ones who are open all night.

Both of his canines have cratered brown patches along the first inch, but the left also has a crusty mush of black, gingival decay nearer to the gums. It's a form of meth-mouth particular to my clientele. Even undead enamel can't take the toxic traces of sulfuric acid, phosphorus and lye that lace the veins of nearly every junkie in America.

"You have to lay off the meth-heads" I say, though I know it will do little good. Telling a vampire to stop feeding on drug addicts is like telling my day patients that they

need to stop eating fast food. Everyone knows it's bad for them, but like fast food, junkies are on every corner, easy to pick up and ultimately, disposable.

From the chair, the blood drinker hoots his contrite agreement, "Ay-oe, Ay-oe..." I wonder if they get something out of it, some second hand high tinged with lost mortality but such questions cross the boundaries of our professional relationship. Besides, what am I supposed to say? 'It might kill you?'

I'll bond some Optec HSP onto his right cuspid (I refuse to call them fangs) but there isn't much to save on the left. It looks like it's been soaking in battery acid so I'll have to pull it. I finish the right onlay, clean him up and make an extraction appointment for Tuesday night. We'll start the implant procedure immediately after.

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Getting into undead dentistry was easy. They'd been watching me for a long time. I think they were watching Antonia too. I was a plain but upwardly mobile, yuppie mercenary with a wife way out of his league. She was an insatiable swamp leech - bloating herself on the hemorrhage of my affection and fortune. I lost so much of both, I was dizzy, intoxicated. It felt like love.

Getting that first "special" patient made me feel the same way. Each time I work on one of them I still get it. Learning how the supernumerary cuspids fold down from the palate. Watching them stack up piles of cash, sometimes even gold, on the tray when I'm done. It all pushed me up higher toward the rarified air where I was good enough for a woman like Antonia.

Once I had enough, I figured I'd be out and breathing that same air before my hands got too dirty.

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My apartment is close enough to walk, but I usually drive to avoid the near constant drizzle of Seattle's weather. The place is on the third floor, with no elevator, above a Starbucks and across the street from a Thai restaurant that doesn't serve breakfast. I'm too tired to climb the stairs and too jazzed up for coffee so I follow the tail end of rush hour traffic out to the suburbs.

Antonia's new place in the suburbs is in one of those endless, curving rows of white tract mansions chewing up the landscape, crammed in with the smallest possible interproximal space. Its only advantages, from my perspective, are that one: most of her neighbors are double income households with both spouses off to work. Two: Antonia's house is mostly glass, devoid of secrets and affording ample vantage points for me to look in on her.

Some days I stay in the car, jerking off and waiting for her to walk past the windows. Other times, I sneak into her bushes for a closer view. I'm looking for a flaw, some crack in the surface of her that reveals some humanity, some regret or some weakness.

She has an affinity for white. Even after the charred body of her lover was pulled from the wreck of his Lexus, Antonia never wore the widow's weeds. Someone told her once that black was slimming, so she forever after referred to it as "the color fat people wear to fool themselves." She even wore white to the funeral.

The place is white on the inside as well, so minimalist and clean it is almost featureless. I gave her an expensive set of porcelain tooth veneers about halfway into our marriage. Her décor reminds me of those veneers - unstainable, artificial and nearly unbreakable.

She's bright and shining and perfect. And I want her dead.

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The obvious question is, when did I become such a loser? Was it before our divorce or am I suffering through some kind of emotional and financial aftermath? Was I always such a putz, such a balding, paunchy freak vainly attempting self pleasure in my ex-wife's manicured bushes? Maybe.

I live in the times when normal folks are asleep, tucked safely in with lovers or spouses. By contrast, my world is populated by drunken college kids, by hospital shift workers and, of course, by vampires. We see things differently at night, floating through a sea of alcohol, fatigue or undeath.

Basically, I'm only a little pilot fish, swimming alongside sharks and cleaning the leftover bits of life from between their teeth. Someday I'll have enough stored away to retire. Someday Antonia will be gone and my world will be white and shining and perfect. I'll spend half the year in Alaska and half in Tierra Del Fuego, following the midnight sun and living where it's never night.

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At two the next afternoon, I get a call from Antonia's lawyer, or more precisely, his paralegal, Chet. I don't rate a call from the big dog. I get the guy who cleans up after him. I wonder if Chet has his own Antonia somewhere. Somebody he is trying to win over by going for the big bucks. I feel a strange bond to Chet. This is a guy like me - a remora swimming alongside sharks trying to get by.

He is as cheerful as an exposed nerve. "I need to have a cleaning. When is your next opening?"

I start thinking about crystal meth again. Wondering if this kid is smoking it or snorting it or shooting it directly into his veins. What kind of masochist wants a dentist from the wrong side of a messy divorce? Chet usually calls to have something signed, sent, or paid for but is never actually rude. So I tell him the number of my service and hang up. I give money to Antonia, she gives some to the lawyer, the lawyer pays the Chet and he dribbles the last of it to me. It's life's trickle down theory and somehow I always end up at the end.

After I fall back asleep I have that dream where all my teeth are falling out. Freud wrote that this was one of four basic dreams that all humans have. I wonder if vampires have it too.

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My neo-Gothic tooth extraction shows up early, so I don't have time to check to see if Chet is scheduled. The vampire looks nervous and vaguely hostile so I talk him through the implant procedure one more time. After removing the rotten tooth, I'll drill a titanium screw up into his jaw and attach the new porcelain cuspid. Dentistry has totally changed for this type of patient due to the advent of ceramic and titanium. During the decades we used silver, vampires avoided the chair.

His tooth is so corroded I'm afraid it might break, but it pops out on the first yank. That's when he rears up, eyes blazing, and I am pretty damn sure he's gonna bite me. I wait a few, long minutes before picking up the drill.

This is not the night to lobby for an undead cadre to exterminate my ex-wife or quibble over my fees. The patient depends on those teeth. Even a partially edentulous vampire will have trouble getting the right incisal occlusion and therefore enough blood flowing to feed. He'd end up gumming at food that someone else has cut open for him.

That's when I hear the outside door. I turn up the gas and quickly excuse myself to the front.

It's Chet.

He spells out the deal a little too quickly and it spoils his tough guy routine. He's found my off-shore account in the Canary Islands and now wants half or he turns me over to Antonia.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" I ask and he looks confused, not realizing I am trying to give him a way out. He pulls on the best mobster face a skinny, twenty-five year old paralegal can muster and says,

"Are you sure you don't?"

Then he sweeps out with a flourish of his coat. He probably thinks it's impressive, but I get that sort of thing all the time. I've seen it done by the best.

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It's reasonable to assume Chet is having me watched, so I decide to stay away from Antonia's house. Getting caught in her bushes with my pants down would be the final indignity.

The office is closed on Friday nights, so I wolf down some triple garlic chicken at the Thai place across the street.

While I eat, I ask the waitress to bring me a phone book. Chet is listed. So is his address. Amateur.

I take half my order in a to-go bag and drive over to my blackmailer's apartment. He lives in an expensive building in the gay part of town. The art in the hallways is screwed to the walls but the orchids are fresh and the carpets are clean. Chet answers the door in a track suit.

"Hi Chet, can I come in?" I walk in without waiting for his answer. He went to a lot of trouble to bring our lives together. If he is real, real nice, I might try to save his.

I let him talk his shock out of the way. During the speech, I look around his apartment. The place is huge and crammed with expensive, no-credit-check-to-buy kind of stuff: plasma television, leather furniture and a dozen small speakers dangling like dead bugs off the glittering spider web of a stereo system. Chet is in debt. Chet is in a lot of debt.

I say, "Look kid, whoever you're spending this on, whoever you're trying to impress, it's not worth what you're getting yourself into." Then, as he eats my triple garlic leftovers, I give him version number two, the one about how my night patients are actually members of a Italian fraternal organization. It's a good routine; clean, seamless, polished.

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Monday afternoon, the woman calls from my appointment service to tell me I have a string of cancellations. It's a bad sign. A really bad sign.

There's a knock at my door a few minutes later and two men are standing in the cabbage stench outside my apartment. Neither of them are neo-gothic types like my implant patient. They are not a type at all really. No capes or accents; no renaissance collars or monochromatic black. They are dressed in grays and browns; average men of an average height and average build. They're the type who can kill a hundred people in a park, rob a bank and then fade into a crowd.

I pat the folder of papers that Chet gave me; even show them the hard drive I took from his laptop computer. They're not reassured.

"It's a good story you told him," says one.

"But it's also too interesting," adds the other.

"That type is attracted to danger."

"He likes to see how close he can get to the edge of the cliff."

"It makes him feel alive."

"He's like you."

For a minute I think they are considering adding a paralegal to their stable of help. If vampires need a dentist, surely they also find occasion for legal advice. Is there a secret phone book of night plumbers, furnace repairmen and barbers? Are the undead ever hunting around for a late night back waxing?

They're afraid Chet knows too much. Getting the file and the hard drive was a good start, they say, but my would-be blackmailer is too unstable. Chet is about to go the way of my former accountant, minus the goodbye screw from Antonia.

Let's face it. I'm a bottom feeder and Chet is higher up the food chain. We both may be remoras or pilot fish or whatever but in the descending order of Antonia-Lawyer-Chet-me, the paralegal is an obstacle to my getting a bigger chunk of life. I should feel crappy for what I do next. But I don't. Whatever nerves inside me which might register such subtle regrets are long gone. The betrayal is like meth, a corrosive acid eating away whatever enamel is left around my soul but the euphoric rush of it keeps me from noticing. Almost. With four little words I go from being a sucker fish to something with teeth.

"Antonia's in on it."

They stare at me a long time. My macabre obsession with gruesomely killing off my ex-wife is famous among my special patients. They've always denied me the pleasure. Too many bodies equal too much attention equals substandard dental care for the living dead.

So I do the routine again, version three. I do the routine with my testicles clamped up tight next to my body. I do the routine thinking that at any second they're going to smell bullshit.

My story goes that both Antonia and Chet are going after my Canary retirement account. They might even go after my practice next and my patient records. They might even find the vault where I keep x-rays of my patients who happen to have two inch canine teeth. Chet backed out, I tell them, but Antonia... Well, she is turning out to be a bit of a problem.

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Antonia and Chet are already dead when I pull the teeth from their corpses. I didn't see the killing. The two nondescript vampires showed up at my office each carrying a body.

"No one will find them," One of the vampires says, "But let's be sure."

Their story, version four, goes like this. Antonia and Chet were embezzling money from me for years. The police would figure my ex-wife and her new, incongruously gay lover murdered me in my office and disposed of the body before fleeing. Chet's homosexuality doesn't seem to concern anybody. For enough money, they figure, anybody will fuck over anybody.

There is no midnight sun for me, no Alaska or Tiera Del Feugo. Handing over my retirement fund is the price for holding Antonia's twenty eight, flawlessly white, veneered teeth in my hand.

The vampires decide to bring me on full time, citing both the increased occurrence of meth-mouth and their need for long term stability. They really don't give me a choice. They do me right there in the office.

I'm still only a sucker fish. My new two inch canines get pulled a few minutes after they make me. They don't want another shark swimming in the ocean. They want an undead, after-hours dentist in a very small bowl.

So I try not to whine. Instead, I work through every night dreaming about the suicide I can't commit and a midnight sun that never sets.

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