

## Lady Chatterley's Root Canal · *Susan Dodd*

MY NAME IS MARGARET CHATTERLEY, so my friends call me Lady, of course. You'd think a person working at the most famous university in the world, even as a secretary—people are always surprised I even went to college, as if I aimed for being a secretary all along—would have found friends with a little more imagination. And this is a story about imagination, really—his, the old man's I mean, and my own. If I hadn't imagined all those heartaches and dreams to fill in the blank spaces in Bailey Randall's clueless blue eyes, I wouldn't have got my heart broken, again. And if that hadn't happened, who knows what the old man—Dr. Scheetz—might have sniffed out in me when I dropped like a pile of dirty laundry into his cruddy little waiting room on the morning my hallucinatory heart had been smashed to smithereens for the fifth and final time.

I woke up that morning wrecked, my heart in shards, redundant. A root canal seemed as good a way as any to celebrate. It was because I was feeling so lousy that I tried to look so good. I admit it. It's always been a kind of fetish with me, since I first came to Harvard—a psych major from Wellesley and a MSW dropout from beyond—to dress as if I don't belong. I spend about a third of my salary on clothes. Cheaper than therapy is what I tell myself, though it's not strictly true. I had slithered into a short suede skirt and the silk blouse that matches it, ankle boots with Cuban heels, and tights with a fine little stripe that makes my legs look longer. Everything was burgundy, a color that, depending on your mood, could remind you of expensive wine or raw meat. I probably don't need to mention which way my imagination happened to be leaning.

As I walked up Mass. Ave. toward Porter Square, I felt needles of sleet stitching lines in my face. I figured in another two blocks I'd look at least seventy. The hem of my dragass black coat snatched at the piles of frozen slush that lined the sidewalk. A homeless woman was standing in front of the health food store, one sleeve gone from her pink parka. I gave her a dollar before she could ask and made sure to look into her eyes and smile when I did it. It's one thing to feel shitty, something else to feel sorry for yourself.

Bailey had told me he was busy the night before, Friday night, reading sophomore tutorial projects. Undergraduate deadlines put a lot more fear and loathing in junior faculty than in the students, believe me. And if poor Bailey was any lower on the Department totem pole, his incisors would be biting dirt.

So Bailey was tied up with a shitload of papers—again. And I’d gone to the Brattle alone to see “Harold and Maude”—again (which should have been enough to tip me off that my life was tiptoeing toward desolation. Again).

It was almost midnight when I got home. The wind was tearing into the trees like a loan shark’s goon. I walked up the driveway to the sound of breaking bones. Before I reached the back of the house where I pay \$850 a month to live in the basement, though, I spotted Bailey’s pitiful Pinto, wedged into the dent in the bushes that, in Cambridge, passes for a parking space. The motor was coughing, the parking lights were on. And Bailey was in the car. Not alone. Waiting for me? Not hardly.

The lights were out in my apartment, of course, and it was so late they must have imagined they were safe, that I’d already be asleep. I wouldn’t have seen them, either, if the car lights had been off, the driver’s window up. I guess Bailey had opened it because of all the steam on the windshield.

Andrea, my landlady, is almost fifty and looks bulimic. She got this house, where she and I and four students live, in a manhandling divorce settlement. Her ex-husband writes about pop culture, screws nearly everybody he interviews, and apparently gets paid handsomely to do it. Being married to him for fifteen years couldn’t have been any joyride.

Andrea, blessed with a steady income, is nursing her self-esteem back to health. She goes to modern dance classes every day, like she’s going to be Martha Graham when she grows up. She flies off to Taos or Sedona for workshops on healing with crystals, deep-breathing, and macrobiotic tacos. She’s invited me upstairs to a few parties—sorry, “salons.” Dinner usually involves tofu in deep cover. She cultivates women who wear what look like wall hangings, batiked and hand-loomed. The men have generally written something about which they manage to be both self-deprecating and pompous. Andrea provides me with xeroxed reviews and contributors’ notes in advance, in case I want to fawn.

The wind was bullying the bushes. They flailed at the Pinto. I walked up to the driver’s side window and just stood there, looking in. A Suzanne Vega

tape was playing, something about domestic violence. Lipstick was smeared past Andrea's stingy lip line and her bony hands were hovering in Bailey's lap like they were working on a broken zipper. My God, the man is *forty*. The first thing I wanted to do was laugh. I imagine that's what it's like to get shot, or stabbed: you'd find yourself having this completely inappropriate reaction before the pain got through to you and you realized you were dying.

"We were going to tell you, Lady." Bailey didn't even try to look me in the eye. Andrea had no such compunction. "I suppose you'll want your security deposit back," she said. Her laugh was brittle, a little hysterical. Her shriveled face and colorless Dutch boy hair reminded me of those Appalachian dolls made of dried apples and cornhusks. I looked at Bailey like there was bound to be a rational explanation and he was the one to give it to me.

"It just sort of happened," he said. Andrea appeared to be doing deep-breathing exercises. Suzanne Vega sounded like she was, too. "Why don't we go inside," Andrea said. "I'll make some chamomile tea."

I remembered a joke one of the grad students had told me the day before, something about anal geodes, crystals you could shove up your ass. But the set-up would have taken too long, the punchline seemed predictable, and I was just plain tired. I turned and walked away without saying a word.

"I'll call you, okay?" Bailey said.

The office was on the street level of a dignified, down-at-the-heels apartment building. A spattered square of glass was lettered in gold: Solomon H. Scheetz, Endodontist. The building had always kind of intrigued me because, though I passed it at least a couple of times each day, I never saw anyone going in or out of there. I imagined a full occupancy of ancient ladies in wheelchairs, their wealth and sanity slowly being pilfered by unscrupulous nieces with lurid fantasy lives and unbridled lust for rent-controlled apartments in Cambridge.

Seeing a wiry old guy in a bloodstained white smock with a drill in his hand didn't do much to temper my own lurid fantasies. He was wearing goggles.

"The drill is broken and I've got a hole in my finger the size of goddamn Fresh Pond," the old man said. As if in corroboration, a drop of blood made a dime-size splat on the algae-colored linoleum.

"Well," he said, "am I going to get some sympathy here, a little goddamn *concern*?"

"I'm sorry," I said, starting to back out into the crypt-like marble lobby.

"We're all sorry," Dr. Scheetz said. "Sick and sorry as sin." He turned around in a waiting room so small that the two of us, both thin, barely fit in there together. Then he disappeared into what I assumed must be his office. "Take off your coat. You can leave it on the chair. Nobody else is coming in until after lunch."

I sneaked a look at my watch. It was two minutes past nine.

He was back in the doorway again, staring at me. "The goddamn coat's still on," he said. "Makes you look like some pathetic widow."

By now, of course, I was afraid to take my coat off—my coat, which by the way was a *Comme des Garçons* I got on sale at the end of last winter and definitely has nothing pathetic about it.

The old man was slumped against the doorframe, a wad of toilet paper twisted around his bleeding finger. He looked avid and impatient. "Let's see what you got," he said.

I looked around the office as if it were considerably more expansive and complex than a double closet. "Where's your nurse?"

"You think you're at the goddamn gynecologist?" Scheetz laughed, a short playful bark. "I had a nurse once. She killed herself, beat me to the punch."

Then it got through to me—he was going to keep this up as long as I let him. "Okay," I said. "That's it. Enough."

He looked pleased and not the least bit apologetic. "You sure?"

I fixed him with the flash-freeze glare I was working on for Andrea and Bailey, who were going to be in my face every day unless I was willing to move, quit my job.

"Goddamn positive," I said. "Let's get on with it."

I unbuttoned my coat defiantly, flung it at the single bent brown chair.

Dr. Scheetz didn't say a word. He just looked at me for the briefest second, then turned away with something on his face that for all the world resembled sorrow, fresh and well-fastened.

The door closed softly. His voice sounded muffled on the other side of it. "Be with you any day now," he said. "Just let me see if I can't get my breathing restarted."

Right, I thought. Me, too.

His office was the color of Band-Aids and had—I swear I’m not making this up—one picture on the wall, the one where a bunch of dogs are smoking cigars and playing poker. I was numb to the eyebrow on the right side and choking on my own saliva, and bleeding internally besides, but I kept wanting to laugh. The unfortunate form my giddiness took, with my lips and throat out of commission, was that my eyes kept filling with tears.

“We’re not even to the part that hurts yet, goddamnit,” Scheetz said.

I tried to nod just as he was jamming the drill into my mouth and the sucking hook that was supposed to keep me from drowning in my own spit slipped onto my shoulder, hissing like a snake.

“What—” Scheetz said. “You want me to ventilate that sweet mug while I’m at it, it’s not enough I’m going after your nerves with a drill?”

I opened my mouth. “I wasn’t—” It came out *ah-wudjun*, or something like that. I clamped my lips together. Why give him the satisfaction. Next thing I knew, tears were streaming down my face and my shoulders were heaving so hard I was afraid I’d break his old dinosaur chair.

Dr. Scheetz just stood there for a minute or two and stared at me. His arms hung limp at his sides, the drill dangling so near his thigh that even in my condition I was worried. “Can’t you be careful?” I sobbed.

The expression on his face was absolutely zip—not surprise or sympathy, not even irritation. It looked like he was off somewhere, having an out-of-body experience.

“Sorry,” I said.

He just kept looking at me.

My mouth felt like sandpaper. “It isn’t you,” I said.

“Goddamn right it isn’t.”

I nodded.

“You know how big those nerves are?” he said. “No bigger around than the finest needle your great-grandmother’d use to sew a baby’s underpants.”

I opened my mouth, docile as a nestling.

“Little bastards,” he said, going in.

After that, neither of us said anything for a while. My eyes felt dry and hard and steady as dominoes. Dr. Scheetz grunted every now and then, and once he muttered, “Where *are* you, you little sonofabitch?” but there was no bite in it.

After about an hour, he looked at his watch. His short-sleeved white smock exposed pale skinny arms, dark veins writhing under tangles of silver hair, like a black-and-white photograph of snakes in weeds. His face was completely hidden by the safety goggles and a sanitary mask, and his hands were coated with thin gloves of yellowish rubber. But there was something about those arms brushing so near my face and neck and shoulders . . . I wondered how it would feel to be held in them, tight and desperate, the way a man would hold on to a woman he feared might disappear on him any second.

"A goddamn whole hour," he said, "and I just got the first one. You want to call it a day?"

He stepped back and I watched his arms falling away from me, letting me go. The drain was still in my mouth, sucking. "Huh-uh," I said.

"A trouper," he said. "Hah."

I think I sort of knew that behind the mask and goggles the old man was smiling.

After another half hour or so, Dr. Scheetz turned on an old Philco radio with a gold mesh front. It sat on a piece of plywood laid across the radiator below the window. A string orchestra was playing "Hotel California"—"you can check in any time you want, but you can never leave." My eyes started to tear up and the corners of my mouth were twitching.

"Easy," Scheetz said.

A glissando into "Peaceful Easy Feeling" saved me.

"I love this goddamn tune," Scheetz said. "What's it—the Pips, some fool bunch like that?"

I tried to say Eagles. It came out EEE-UHZ.

"Save it." Scheetz grinned close to my face. "What do *you* know, anyhow?"

I sighed, then realized my breath must smell like a chicken coop by now.

"Thought I had the little bastard for a second there." He sounded strangely content. I let my back and shoulders relax. He was talking to himself. I closed my eyes.

I was practically asleep when the fuzzy back of his forearm grazed my cheek. I shivered and opened my eyes. His brow, close to mine, was glazed with sweat.

"Almost there," he whispered. "Next year . . . year after that at the latest."

I closed my eyes again. And then what—married to a professor and a couple little prodigies in hand-sewn underpants?

"I've seen you, you know," Scheetz said. "You'd be surprised what I take in from this grimy little goddamn window."

I kept my eyes closed.

"You pass by here at least a couple times most days," he said in a low, distracted voice. "Right?" He was working with some kind of pick now. A twinge shot up the right side of my face. The numbness was running out.

"Those gorgeous legs and always some kind of silly stockings. How old are you, anyway? You look like a goddamn kid."

If I didn't let my expression change, didn't look at him, maybe he'd think I was asleep.

"I figure you to be thirty, thirty-five . . . somewhere in there. But you don't look it. Don't act it, either."

His hand came to rest on the top of my head and startled me into opening my eyes.

"Are you listening?"

I nodded.

"Just wondered. You don't need to look at me. No point. But I want to know if you can hear me."

My eyes must have shown alarm or something, because he touched my eyelids gently with his thumbs, closing them. "You haven't got a goddamn thing to worry about," he said. "I'm all talk."

And maybe I shouldn't have, I still don't know, but I believed him.

"Your life's a goddamn mess, right? Never mind, don't tell me. Maybe you bring it all on yourself, maybe you don't. It's not up to me to say."

The drill made a brief foray back into my mouth, shrieked once, then pulled away.

"You know why I watch you so much?"

I didn't move a muscle.

"It's not what you think, I bet. Doesn't have a goddamn thing to do with those showgirl legs, those Raggedy Ann stockings. That funeral coat blowing out behind you like a set of wings . . . it hasn't got a goddamn thing to do with the price of tea in China, trust me."

He was hurting me now, grasping my chin too tightly, slamming the drill into me like a jackhammer. He hit the nerve. I moaned softly. He was leaning down so close now that his chest was nearly touching mine, he was covering me.

"Don't move," he said.

I thought of Bailey slamming into Andrea, the rustle and scratch of dried cornhusks, her quickened breath reeking of starvation and old bitterness. I didn't even breathe.

"There," Scheetz said triumphantly. "Oh, yes, goddamnit, I've got you now."

I lay back exhausted, spent. My lips felt swollen and parched. It was 11:45.

"Drink this," Scheetz said. He held a tiny pleated paper cup to my mouth. The water was tepid and tasted coppery. "You are really something," he said.

I looked up at him, blotted my caked mouth with the paper bib he'd hung around my neck on a little chain. "Are you done?"

"Three out of four," he said. "Not bad. You got no idea how slippery those little bastards can be."

"I'm beginning to get the picture," I said. Scheetz smiled.

"So," I said, "one more to go?"

"You want to come back next week?" he said. "A little luck, I could finish you off in half an hour." He laughed.

He had taken off the mask and goggles and was wiping his face with a coarse brown paper towel. The man had to be at least sixty-five. His cheeks were hollow and the flesh under his eyes sagged.

"I want you to do it now," I said.

"Goddamn," he said. "You might look like a kid, but you're a woman and a half."

"I'm thirty-six," I said.

He blinked. His eyes were the kind of gray you see on the Charles in early spring, before all the ice has melted.

"You still gotta come back," he said. He tossed the paper towel into a wastebasket. "Another ten days or so, let anything drain that wants to. Then if they're clean I cap off all those pinholes I yanked the nerves out of."

"Piece of cake," I said.

"Goddamn right." He smiled. "You want another shot," he asked, "before we get back to it?"

"Hell, no," I said. "What I want is not to traipse out of here with an exposed nerve, all right?"

He raised his hands in some gesture between surrender and salute. "As you wish, princess," he said. "Open wide."

"Wait," I said. "I want to ask you something."

"It's your nickel," Scheetz said.

I hadn't thought of that. Did he charge by the hour or the nerve? I hoped he took credit cards.

"You never finished telling me," I said.

"What?" he said.

Outside the window a pigeon that looked like it had the start of alopecia was marching in place on the rusty air conditioner that hung out over the sidewalk. It was lunchtime. The traffic on Mass. Ave. had worked itself into a snarl.

"Why you watch me," I said. "What is it?"

"Oh, that." Scheetz slapped on his goggles. "Let me ask *you* something," he said. "You ever hear of crossing at the corner? Maybe *with* the goddamn light?"

He slipped the mask up over his mouth.

"Do I strike you as a cautious kind of person?" I said, closing my eyes.

He leaned down close and peered into my face. I could smell his aftershave—Royal Lime.

"No comment," he said.

It was well after one. I wondered when the next unsuspecting patient would wander in. "After lunch" could mean five o'clock. I imagined my head on an iron spike, mouth open in a permanent soundless howl, in some museum of the freakish. "Scheetz's Folly" would be the caption on the little plaque below my chin.

The radio was still on. Fred Waring's Pennsylvanians were singing the theme from "Doctor Zhivago."

"Goddamn," Scheetz said. It was filler.

Outside on Mass. Ave. there was the grind and groan of metal as a desperate parallel parker miscalculated. I felt like the top of my head was about

to blow off. I wondered how the old man felt. At least I wasn't on my feet all this time. And at his age.

"You've been pretty game," he said suddenly. "Makes me feel kind of guilty that I wasn't exactly honest with you."

He was going to confess that he didn't have a license, had never gone to dental school. My eyes snapped open.

"Still there, huh?" he said.

I nodded.

"You're a fine-looking woman," he said. "But a kid you don't look like." He lifted his chin and looked into my eyes. "No offense," he said.

I yanked the drain out of my mouth. "Since when?" My consonants were sludgy.

He smiled. "You might want to close your eyes for this next part."

I did, then opened my mouth, waiting for the drill.

The rubber-gloved hand was soft and fragrant as talcum along my jaw as he tenderly closed my mouth. A moment passed before he spoke.

"What I think of when I see you is that woman in the movie." The old man's voice sounded impossibly distant in the small cubicle. I opened one eye just a sliver. He was standing at the window, gazing through spattered slush and pigeon droppings out onto the winter-ruined avenue.

"Zorba the Greek," he said softly. "You ever see it?"

I gave no sign of reply. His back was turned to me and I knew from his dreamy voice that he was talking to himself again. I listened.

"There's this woman," he said. "A widow. And it isn't exactly that she's so goddamn beautiful, although maybe she is . . . I'm no judge."

He reached down and shut off the radio. Sleet lisped against the glass.

"There's just something about her," Scheetz said. "Any fool can see it. The other women in the village—they stone her, see, because whatever it is about her, she's the kind of women who can drive a man mad just by walking down the street."

Something unbearably heavy was pressing down on my chest, harder and harder, until my lungs were starved for air. Scheetz was still in front of the window.

"The other women . . ." he said dreamily. "They're all skinny and sour-mouthed and dressed in black." He slanted his head just slightly toward me and smiled. "Just like your goddamn coat."

I waited, not breathing.

"Bunch of goddamn crows." I heard the old man sigh. Then he came back and stood beside the chair, his hands empty at his sides.

"I watch you to make sure nobody's throwing any stones," he said. "So sue me."

I waited a few minutes before I opened my eyes. Then I blinked a few times and made a big show of stretching. I felt my suede skirt sliding up my thighs, my silk shirt pulling taut across my breasts, and quickly pulled myself upright.

"All done," Scheetz said. "Have a nice snooze?"

I tried to smile. "Did I miss anything?"

The old man tossed his mask and goggles into a chipped enamel sink. "Not a goddamn thing," he said.

We could work out the billing at the next appointment, Scheetz said. Not to worry. He walked me to the door, helped me on with my coat. Then, his knotty hands bared, he reached under the back of my collar and lifted up my hair, settling it on my shoulders. "Next time buy yourself a red one," he said.

Out on the avenue I turned and faced into the wind, heading away from my apartment. The weather was vicious, the day was shot and I was too, but I wanted to walk around for a while, stretch my legs, maybe stop for a cappuccino. It was hard to face going home.

I glanced back at Scheetz's office once, quickly. I thought I saw his white smock centered under the curve of gold lettering. But the window was so filthy and the air was full of needles and I was too far away, really, to be sure he was actually there.

Still, just in case, I waited until I got to the corner before I ran my usual ragged line between the wheezing buses and speeding cars, leaping from one pile of ice to another. Like a kid with nothing to lose, like a woman with someplace to go.