

I, Vampire

A Novel

By Robert Shuster

Sevenacide
Sarasota, Florida, USA

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To E.D., P.D. and D.G.K. for their support along the way...

"People fear death even more than pain. It's strange that they fear death. Life hurts a lot more than death. At the point of death, the pain is over. Yeah, I guess it is a friend..."

Jim Morrison
Lead Singer, The Doors

"The injustice of it is almost perfect! The wrong people going hungry, the wrong people being loved, the wrong people dying! Was I really wrong to believe that there's a-- a kind of--burning virility of mind and spirit that looks for something as powerful as itself? The heaviest, strongest creatures in this world seem to be the loneliest."

John Osborne, Look Back in Anger

Introduction

Gothic horror in general, and vampire stories in particular, often the product of angst and suffering. In this way, this book is no different than any other. However, beyond this, the similarity ends.

The release of this book has been plagued with numerous delays and false starts. At one point, I rewrote a large portion of the manuscript. This book took on a life of it's own during the process. Plot lines, characters, and situations changed as if they were being manipulated by some outside force. All I could do was hold on and let the creative juices follow their course.

The central theme of this book is the isolation that is felt by people who are different, either by choice or by societal convention. This includes the usual suspects: race, color, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, body shape, hair length, clothes, or any other known or unknown physical factors. But, people are also isolated by politics, economics, geography, profession or because they no longer choose to participate in society at all. In this book, being a vampire is just another reason to be excluded.

This book is also a look an often neglected group in our modern world, the people who work behind the scenes. These people include cab drivers, night clerks, janitors, and of course, convenience store workers. They move unseen, often at night, for little pay and virtually no recognition. Too often, we don't treat these people with courtesy and kindness that they deserve. Just remember that they might be a vampire!

Most of all, I also wanted to write a vampire story that was different. To do that, I employed a term from my

day job era: Thinking Outside of the Box. Vampires have become a cliché in the world of horror and I decided that the image of the vampire needed to be given a makeover.

So, instead of castles and glamorous people, this book is set in the midst of urban decay and people living on the fringe of society. There are no gimmicks, no frills, and no daring flights of fancy. This is a book about what I think a vampire would have to go through to survive in modern society.

Robert Shuster
October 2003

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Chapter One

My name is Jacob Szabo, and I am a vampire. I have lived 457 years under various names in various places. But, I'm not a Bela Lugosi type. I'm not tall, dark and handsome. On the contrary, I'm a short, pale and a rather plain looking guy. By my outward appearance, I'm no different than the typical daylight dweller.

I don't lead a jet-set lifestyle or live in a castle in the mountains surrounded by acres of trees and green valleys. In fact I work, if you pardon the expression, the graveyard shift as a clerk at Speedy Mart, a twenty-four hour convenience store.

The Speedy Mart where I work is not far from the Luxor Arms, the flophouse where I live. The whole neighborhood is smack in the middle of all the best and the worst that urban America has to offer at the end of the twentieth century. There are lawyers and pimps, accountants and hookers, entrepreneurs and street hustlers; sometimes it's hard to tell them apart. As you can see, the life of the modern day vampire isn't exactly glamorous.

There are other vampire myths that I need to dispel. First, there's the cross thing. I'm no more threatened by a cross than if you were to show me a five-dollar bill. You could come closer to scaring me with your driver's license picture. Garlic doesn't do anything to me, but it does make Italian food taste better and make my breath smell.

I don't sleep in a coffin. I can't change into a bat, a wolf or any other animal, and I can't dissolve into mist. I won't burn up if you throw holy water on my face. My reflection shows up in a mirror, so when I talk about my looks, I speak from personal observation.

I do sleep during the day, but as I said, I don't sleep in a coffin buried in my native soil. A comfortable mattress works just fine for me. I don't have to sleep from sunrise to sunset, however I do have to stay out of direct sunlight.

If I'm out after sunrise and I can get, again pardon the expression, the sunburn from hell. I have gotten huge blisters and third degree burns on any part of my body that's ever been exposed to sunlight, even for a moment. Exposure to direct sunlight for more than fifteen minutes would kill me, so I avoid sunlight at all costs.

As far as driving a stake through my heart, yes that would kill me. It would kill just about anybody. A lead bullet can kill me just as easily as a silver one. In fact, I can be killed just as easily as a daylight dweller. I'm not indestructible, but if I've been drinking high quality blood, my bones will heal virtually overnight and a cut or a scrape will heal in a few hours without a scab or a scar. With a proper blood supply, I can live anywhere from 1,000 to 1,500 years. The higher the blood quality, the longer and healthier a vampire can live. I'll explain the whole thing in detail later.

The bloodsucking is one of the few characteristics of a vampire that *is* true. We do suck blood from the living. I have a set of teeth that work like hypodermic needles, fangs for the lack of a better term for them. They don't stick out all the time, but instead are retractable, and are extended in anticipation of bloodletting.

Sucking the blood from a daylight dweller won't turn them into a vampire. It's a way of life that you have to be born into. The only way more vampires are brought into the world is if a male and female vampire have a baby together. A male daylight dweller can't impregnate a

female vampire and a male vampire can't impregnate a female daylight dweller. I don't know why, but that's just the way things are.

There's a lot that people think vampires do or don't do. But trust me, it's all a lot of crap created by Bram Stoker, Hollywood, and religious fanatics. I should know; I'm one of the last of my kind. But enough about vampire lore, let's look at what is happening to me right now.

Vampires are always portrayed as glamorous people, sort of nocturnal social butterflies. The reality is that I have to work for a living, just like anyone else. With my physical limitations, my prospects are limited and the pay is often inadequate. To further complicate things, I have to work a night shift. No employer would like to see a vampire exposed to the midday sun. It's not a pretty sight, not to mention it would be bad for business.

The very fact that I'm a vampire is enough for a prospective employer to reject me outright. Most wouldn't believe me, but I could give them enough proof to convince them. Discrimination is illegal, but vampires are far from being a protected minority group.

The Luxor Arms, Speedy Mart, and for lack of better definition, the rest of my universe, is part of a large city. What city is that? After 457 years, they all fade into a blur of faces and places that short-circuit my memory bank. My room has a bed, a hot plate, a bathroom and a beat up 19" TV with faded colors and a technologically obsolete remote control. The room is livable, but a long way from the castles I lived in when I was growing up in Central Europe.

The job is far from my first choice of an occupation. The work is brainless, with the occasional brush with drunk and/or drugged weirdoes. I do my job without complaint

and with minimal drama. As a vampire, the less attention you draw to yourself, the better.

I haven't always worked the night shift in a convenience store. In fact, I haven't always had to work because my family had a sizeable fortune at one time. Then, after a series of financial setbacks in the late 1800's, my family's financial situation began to deteriorate. So, just before the outbreak of World War I, my family liquidated their assets and moved from Central Europe to the United States.

But the trip cost us more than we had expected, even with the assistance of some resourceful daylight dwellers. The cost of living in our new home was considerably more than we had expected. So, with no new income to speak of and dwindling financial resources, our prospects for survival in the New World looked bleak.

In an effort to slow the downward fiscal spiral, I began to look for work. At that time, there was little call for people who could only work at night. My early jobs were in the criminal underworld that grew out of the Prohibition in the 1920's and 30's.

I made a great deal of money working for bootleggers. They loved the fact that I could stay up all night and never get tired. Not only was the money good, but the growing population and loosened morals of the era gave me a generous supply of blood. Farm fresh young women, the top shelf blood producers, were in abundance. The naiveté of these nubile things made blood letting a simple task, because after all "everybody was doing it". At least that was the explanation that I gave them.

With all of the money and blood flowing, I felt like I could easily live to see my 1,000th birthday. The illicit money that flowed from the bootleggers revitalized the

financial situation of my family. We weren't as wealthy as we once were, but at least we were able to live with some semblance of comfort. Even my parents were beginning to kick up their heels with all the girls I brought home to meet "Mom and Dad". Then came "The Movie".

"The Movie" was *Dracula*, with Bela Lugosi. I remember seeing it for the first time with my parents and a group of newly arrived vampires. We all went to see how far off the mark it would be, and we were not disappointed. Our group laughed and hooted at some of the stupid references that were in the movie. The "horror" on the screen couldn't raise a single goose bump.

The rest of the audience, all daylight dwellers, had a different opinion of what was happening on the screen. They gasped breathlessly every time Dracula appeared. Occasionally, one of the daylight dwellers would let out a scream. A young girl not much older than sixteen fainted from the excitement at one point during the movie. She was helped out of the theater for some fresh air, much to the chagrin of her vigorous, young male companion.

As we left the theater at the end of the movie, our group laughed heartily about the film. This was in sharp contrast to the rest of the audience. They were whispering to each other and occasionally shuddered at the possibility that vampires might exist.

Later that night, my parents and I held a small party at our flat for the group. The discussion centered on how silly the whole idea was of vampires cringing at the sight of a cross and not being able to see their reflection in the mirror. Best of all, was the idea of changing into a bat, which to all us seemed ridiculous.

Our giddiness was dampened by one of the senior statesmen of the American vampire community. He was a

dapper, gray haired gentleman who had lived in the United States for ten years, after living in London for over 600 years. He was a veteran of the theater and had made a living on the stages of London until he came to this country. His acting skills and vampire longevity had allowed him opportunities to work with everyone from William Shakespeare to Sarah Bernhardt. In addition, he had even performed in a few silent films.

“Do you realize” he announced in his best theatrical baritone, “that this means the end for vampires?”

The assemblage fell into silence. What did he mean by that remark?

Now that he had the floor, the elder vampire made his plea. “This movie” he explained, “does more than make a mockery of our world. It has created a fear of vampires that will cause the daylight dwellers to rise up against us. I saw this in London when Stoker’s novel hit the shops. Then, when the stage play opened, the floodgates of fear were let loose against every vampire in London.”

“At first, it was a polite shunning. Then, my offers for acting roles began to vanish. Finally, came the persecution. Hundreds of vampire were murdered by stakes driven through their hearts and by silver bullets shot through their skulls.”

“The same thing was repeated in Germany when the film, *Nosferatu*, came out in ‘22. I escaped to this country hoping for the freedom of living my life as I saw fit. There was no tradition of vampire superstition in the United States. This is one of the few nations on Earth where vampires can move about freely, as long as they harm no one else. But, I fear that America will soon be caught up in the same hysteria.”

I looked about the room and watched the expressions on the faces of those in attendance. Every person had his or her own reaction towards this impending doom. They had lived through this before in a hundred different lands, and now it seemed as if it was time to run again.

But where would any of us run. The old gentleman was right. The United States was our best hope. If his fears were correct, what could any of us do?

Finally, someone broke the silence. A vampire from my own generation smiled and said, "The Americans are too level headed to be turned into a nation of vampire hunters. Come on, let's drink up and enjoy ourselves."

So, that's what we did. The rest of the evening we enjoyed conversations and libations, oblivious to the remarks made by its elder statesman. Only later would we realize that his words would be prophetic.

Six weeks after he made his pronouncement, the gentleman who had tried to warn us of the impending genocide was murdered, a stake driven through his heart. The police report stated that his death was a 'suicide'. Within a year after the screening, there were other unexplained deaths in the vampire community, usually by silver bullets or wooden stakes.

Those that could, kept a low profile. Some even returned to Europe, choosing to hide out in familiar territory. These people felt it was better to deal with old, familiar enemies than new, strange ones. My parents stopped drinking blood, which for a vampire is tantamount to suicide. My connections to the burgeoning underworld kept me supplied with blood, but my parents decided it was no longer worth the risk.

Then my parents passed on, first my father at the age of 944, then my mother at the age of 929. That might seem like a long time for most people, but in vampire years, it's dying a little before your time. They indirectly became part of the vampire genocide, dying within days of each other.

That's when I began to realize that the life span of a vampire correlates directly to the quality of blood. After the first World War, the loosened sexual morality that gave me more access to fresh blood was coming back to haunt me. The increased sexual activity and the accompanying diseases also began to taint the blood supply. Poor quality blood is better than no blood at all, but even with tainted blood, a vampire can physically deteriorate.

Factories began to belch more and more pollution into the air. That, combined with all of the resulting filth that occurs when too many people are crowded into too little space, resulted in a declining quality of blood. Ironically, we came to the United States too late to enjoy the purity that the country once had.

I struggled to keep up appearances as wealthy man about town. But, the meager inheritance that had been passed on to me was being drained away.

The Great Depression, which had held America and the rest of the world in a death hold since the crash of 1929, began to tighten its icy grip even further. What little was left of the Szabo family fortune was depleted. I sold my family's remaining assets, but it was too late. In order to survive, I would have to take some sort of job, any kind of job. But, with Prohibition coming to an end and the rise of the FBI, I needed to take a legitimate job to protect myself from getting caught in the crossfire of the criminals and the law enforcement community. Luckily, the country was

gearing up to fight World War II and companies now had every vampire's dream: The 'Night Shift'.

Until that time, a vampire had a hard time holding down a conventional job. The hours that an employer expected an employee to work were always during the daylight, which made discovery unavoidable. However, because of the war, the United States went from unemployment lines to a 24 hour-a-day economic machine. Though we couldn't fight on the front lines, vampires were ready to do their part, just like everyone else.

Vampires had, if you pardon the pun, a stake in the outcome of this war. The bits and pieces of communication that I was receiving from Europe was that Hitler and the rest of his fascist goons were practicing genocide on the vampires along with the Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and anyone else that disagreed with them. However, vampires weren't being sent to the gas chambers. Instead, they were tied to racks naked and left to bake in the sun. The thought that hundreds of my fellow vampires would be left to scream in agony as the sun rose was more than I could bear. My only wish was that I could drive a stake through the heart of Hitler and each of his henchmen.

I wished I could have enlisted in the military service. However, I knew that the daily life of a soldier begins with rising with the sun, making me a liability for any branch I would have served in. I was able to escape the embarrassment of being drafted due to my age. As far as the Selective Service was concerned, I was 47, only 350 years younger than my real age. I could look even older if I wanted to, just by cutting back a little on my blood intake.

Instead, I decided that I would better serve the cause of democracy by working in the factories that had night shifts. I did everything from working in airplane assembly

plants to packaging ration kits for shipment. Not only could I do my part for the war effort, I could make enough money to live a modest existence.

But, this meant working with other people. Working with other people meant answering questions. Answering questions meant trying to explain things to these people. Explaining things meant trying to conceal vampirism, which over time is virtually impossible. So, to avoid being “outed” as a vampire, I changed jobs often. With the war on, factories were always hiring for the night shift.

After making the rounds of the factories, I began to work the all night diner or “greasy spoon” circuit. At first, I would get a little more privacy. Most people think you’re not going to last very long, so they don’t bother getting to know you at first. But once they see you’ll show up three shifts in a row, then it starts. Once again, you’re back to working with too many people who ask too many questions that I can’t or won’t answer. The only solution for the last few decades is to keep moving, like some sort of modern day nomad.

I’ve done any number of odd jobs over the years: Janitor, gas station attendant, security guard, truck driver, and a number of illegal occupations that I’d rather not discuss until the statute of limitations runs out on them. But as soon as anyone would get too close to the truth, I would disappear under a cloud of rumors and unanswered questions. I would then reinvent myself in another town with another identity.

At first, it was fun. The thought of reinventing one’s self is a dream many people have. The excitement of starting with a clean slate can be enticing. However, it became a way of life for me.

With all of this movement, I kept up a humble existence throughout the years. I changed with the times, using the bohemian culture of the period to make it easier to blend in. In the fifties, I was a beatnik, in the sixties, I was a hippie, and in the seventies, I was a punk. These people never questioned my lifestyle and there was always enough uninhibited people that were willing and able blood donors.

Then came the eighties. Suddenly, things changed, like a cold breeze on a hot summer's night.

The world that I lived in began to get mean and ugly. Vampires and bohemians who had merrily ambled their way through life were being murdered, imprisoned or just plain disappeared. They were being washed away in a tidal wave of crack cocaine, urban renewal, Draconian law enforcement and random violence.

But of all the things that happened in the 1980's, it was AIDS and the HIV virus that changed things for vampires forever. The first time I ever encountered the disease was in the early eighties, just as the disco era was ending. The accessibility for blood was high, but the quality was generally poor due to all of the sexual activity, drugs and pollution in the air. However, I met a young woman who seemed like she would be good company, as well as a good supplier of blood.

She was short with some nice curves on her body. Her look was that of a sweet, innocent country girl in the big city. Her shoulder length blond hair framed a face that was pure peaches and cream.

She had just graduated from college and was on a solid career track. She wasn't a regular at the club where I hung out, but she said she came in from time to time with friends. This night was different; she was by herself and

looking for someone to take home. I decided that I would be the lucky one.

We hit it off immediately. We danced and drank the evening away. Then at last call, she invited me back to “her place” for a nightcap. Not long after we were there, we began to share bodily passions. This was my opportunity to get my own version of a “nightcap”. Being a little tipsy and all turned on, my companion didn’t seem to care.

I knew there was something wrong the moment my fangs broke her skin. There was an unusual flavor to her blood. It wasn’t excruciatingly foul, but the brackish aftertaste was difficult to tolerate. After a couple of draws from her blood stream, I withdrew my fangs from her neck, excused myself, and went into the bathroom. I was feeling extremely nauseous and as soon as I closed the door, I was hit with a simultaneous wave of diarrhea and vomiting. After about fifteen minutes of this, I walked out of the bathroom and told her that I was going home. My ruse for leaving was that I must have had some bad Thai food.

I called the young woman the next evening to apologize. I explained the vampire thing and offered to make it up to her. She declined and made a confession that she was trying to get back at her boyfriend who had been cheating on her. It seemed that he was going to make up with her and she said that we couldn’t be lovers. She laughed, thanked me for sharing my secret with her and said good-bye.

I never thought much of it during that era of one-night stands. Then, several months later, she called me back. This time she wasn’t as cavalier. She told me that her boyfriend had been cheating on her, but it was with a man instead of a woman. Tearfully, she told me that they

had both tested positive for HIV and that I should do the same. I never heard from her again.

I went to a doctor that happened to be a vampire. According to him, the HIV virus can't survive in a vampire's system. However, the blood of a daylight dweller that is infected with the virus will cause diarrhea and vomiting in a vampire, much like what I had experienced that night. This meant another level of caution for vampires and a reduced pool of potential blood suppliers. Even those with pure blood were reluctant to take a chance of contracting the virus from a vampire bite, although it was impossible for a vampire to spread the virus.

The most frightening aspect of this period was the increased government intervention into private affairs that accompanied all of this upheaval. There had been times like this before. I had seen the Inquisition, the Puritans, the Czars, the KKK, and the fascists. They had put their collective thumbs on the spirit of individual freedom, only to watch it spring back with a fervor. This time it was different. The individuals that were coming into power had the technology to crush this spirit for all times, along with the will to use it. In the middle of this tidal wave were vampires, and they would receive the brunt of its fury.

At the time all this was happening, I worked the night shift in the computer room of a large insurance company. Each night I entered data onto punch cards for next day's work. It was a mundane and repetitive job. However, it was one that paid me well. I focused on my job and did as little as possible to attract attention to myself. It was an arrangement that benefited everyone involved.

The recent technological advances benefited my existence. It didn't matter that I could only work at night. The 24-hour a day workplace was now a permanent part of the American economic system. This would allow me to maintain my anonymity.

Slowly, I began to notice changes. At first the changes were subtle, but that's how major shifts occur. In fact, the one thing I've learned in all of my years is there are no big changes. It's really a lot of small changes over a long period of time.

For me, the changes came in the form of brief memos. I would come in for my shift and find a neatly typed, photocopied message from someone in the chain of command. A supervisor here, a director there, the memos were usually terse and demeaning.

The memos would start out with, "It has come to our attention..." or "Effective immediately...". The memo would then state that due to something that the employees did or didn't do, or something outside of their control, that management was "forced" to do something. Most of the management directives were petty, however they began to reinforce my growing paranoia.

Then came the fateful night that would change my life. Our department was scheduled to have an important meeting before we were to begin our shift. The subject of the meeting wasn't mentioned in the memo, however attendance at this meeting was mandatory.

That night, we all gathered in a conference room with a woman from Human Resources, who was accompanied by a burly man in a neatly pressed three-piece suit. Despite his attempt at projecting an air of composure, the man periodically fidgeted like a child waiting for recess. When everyone was assembled, the woman from

Human Resources stepped forward and began to address my department.

The woman, who was in her mid-forties, was bubbly and welcoming. Her voice had a high-pitched tone that was tempered by what sounded like a two pack-a-day cigarette habit. She was smiling so hard that I thought her face was going to split at the seams.

After a canned recitation about following company rules, she proceeded to remind us that there was a policy that forbade the use of illegal drugs. To further enforce this policy, she stated that the employees of the company would now have to adhere to a “drug-free” workplace policy. This meant that everyone in the company would have to pass a drug test or be terminated. She then introduced the man in the three-piece suit to us.

He was a consultant who was an expert on drug issues in the workplace. The man had a look in his eye that showed he would neither give nor ask quarter in carrying out a given directive. Despite his desire to fit into his role, his body seemed to crave a return to army fatigues or a policeman’s uniform rather than the clothes he was now wearing. He was ill-at ease with the protocol of civilian interaction. His eyes gazed upon us as if we were opposing soldiers in another trench on some long forgotten battlefield.

After his introduction, he said if we had any questions, he would be happy to answer them. The Q&A session did more to increase my paranoia than anything else. His demeanor stood in sharp contrast to the bubbly manner of the woman from Human Resources. This man was in charge, no matter what the lady from Human Resources said.

We would all an opportunity to come clean. If we couldn't do it on our own, there would be a one-time offer of drug rehab. From then on, the company could and would test us if there was an accident or in the case of "reasonable suspicion", whatever that meant.

Regardless of my gut feelings, I decided to get with the program. I didn't want to make waves. As a vampire, I could ill-afford my company checking into my background.

Then came the day of my all-important drug test. Somehow, I had managed to convince the company to let me to provide a sample for my urinalysis at night. I went to a creepy clinic in a particularly nasty neighborhood. After going into the restroom and under the watchful eye of a male nurse, I gave the modern equivalent of my pound of flesh.

Despite the de-humanization of the whole process, I was able to relax afterwards. I knew I was clean. I would pass the test and go on with my life. Not even the disappearance of a couple of my co-workers bothered me. I would survive this episode just like all the other ones over the centuries.

Then, one night as I reported for work, my supervisor told me that we needed to talk in private in his office. I knew I was clean, but I had heard of the inaccuracies that had occurred in some tests. I held my breath and followed him to his office.

After he took me into his office and closed the door, he told me that my urinalysis had come back "Inconclusive". In my supervisor's words, it was "the damndest thing they had seen in all of the tests that had been given". He didn't seem concerned, however. Since I was under the direct supervision of a member of the medical establishment and the chain of custody had not

been violated, they felt confident that neither I nor someone else had tampered with the test. Instead of urinalysis, he said that the company would need to give me a blood test to find out if I was “drug-free”.

BLOOD TEST! If they thought my urine was strange, what would they think of my blood! A blood test might tag me as a vampire for sure, if not someone who was from another world. I couldn’t take any chances, so I played it cool. I calmly agreed to get the blood test at the appointed time and the appointed place. At the end of the shift I went home, calmly packed my bags and left that town, never to return.

However, my problems and fears followed. The more I tried to cover my tracks, the tougher it became to reestablish myself. It became harder and harder to be employed with “no questions asked”. Even if I wanted to answer the questions, my response would be too fantastic to believe.

In retrospect, even if I had stayed, there would have been no guarantee that I would have had a job there much longer. The key punching that I did was becoming obsolete, just as so many other jobs have become over the years. The jobs that have been automated the most are usually the night jobs, the very thing that vampires are good at.

Working in the underworld also became too risky. Criminals had become more vicious, if that was possible. The code of honor, if you could call it that, among thieves had broken down. Plus, the risk of being arrested and imprisoned was much greater than it had ever been due to the harsher penalties and mandatory sentences that were being meted out by the judicial system. For me, this would

mean certain death. As a rule, prisons don't make special accommodations for vampire inmates.

Soon, I was on a downward economic spiral, forced to take a dismal array of increasingly demeaning jobs. Each job became harder, while at the same time being less financially rewarding. With a past like mine, it's hard to work at a job with a "future".

Over time, I began to notice an odd correlation. The poorer I became, the more expensive it became to live. Poor people seem to be nickled and dimed into submission by coin operated laundries, overpriced merchandise and shoddy service. So, the poorer I became, the poorer I became.

Accordingly, the less I made at these jobs, the longer and harder I had to work. There is no easy way for a poor person to make a living. Every job they seem to be qualified for requires backbreaking labor, mind numbing repetition, or sub-human working conditions. I soon came to the realization that the hardest work is done by the people who are paid the least and who live at the bottom of the human food chain. As a vampire, I am at the lowest rung of the lowest rung.

So here I am, a 457 year-old vampire working the cash register at the Speedy Mart, your 24 hour-a-day convenience store. Each night, I ask the eternal question that has been the subject of philosophical curiosity for years.

"Would you like to buy some lottery tickets as well?"

Chapter Two

It's 5:00 A.M. on my 7:00 P.M. to 5:30 A.M. shift. I have no problem working those hours. Mr. Aziz, the owner of the Speedy Mart, likes me for that. Since I'm a vampire, I don't have much of a choice; I have to work nights. Besides, I haven't been on the social page of the newspaper lately, so what else do I have to do. I have time to kill. You might say that I have centuries of it.

Mr. Aziz is a small man of Middle-Eastern origin with bad breath, body odor and a couple of prominent warts. His face seems frozen in a permanent scowl. Even when he is freshly shaven, his face has a permanent five o'clock shadow. The rare times when he tries to be pleasant, it sounds like he's arguing with you. Plus, I don't think the man ever sleeps. He's in a desperate quest for more money, although he makes more than he could ever spend.

Because of his attitude and charm, the store is in perpetual employee turnover. Anyone who stays on longer than a few days is considered a long-term employee. If Mr. Aziz doesn't run them off, then the hours, the customers, the low pay or the less than alluring working conditions does.

High turnover and nighttime hours: those are the ideal working conditions for a vampire. High turnover means that the Warm Body Rule is in effect. That means that anybody who is breathing is a qualified candidate to fill the position. The nighttime hours speak for themselves. That's what drew me to the world of convenience store retail sales.

Convenience store employees are on the lowest rung in the employment food chain. The night shift is the lowest level of this pecking order. That's all right with me. I never have to worry about someone taking my job and there's always a demand for someone like me who is willing to do the job. Most people wouldn't do what I do for a million dollars. I do it for quite a bit less.

My typical shift starts with me coming in to the store and being briefed by the people from the previous shift. It's typical blah-blah pleasantries exchanged with the changing of the guard. I step in and begin to satiate the last minute needs of the people of the neighborhood.

I have my share of regulars. However, I try to avoid anything that smacks of being too personal. I only know who they are by my own nicknames. Of course, I wouldn't dream of calling them by these names to their faces. Everybody who comes through the doors is either a sir, madam or occasionally a "hey, you". In my mind, I refer to my customers by such names as "fat-guy-who-loves-nachos", "skate-board-punk-with-no-manners", "woman-who-works-too-many-hours", "man-who-cheats-on-wife", and so on. The names conjure up images of some sort of a futuristic Indian tribe.

I can even tell the day of the week by who comes in. For example, there's "the rugby guy". He usually comes in on Tuesday and Thursday nights, clad in his dirty practice attire. Some Saturday nights he comes in after his games, or matches as he calls them. His body is covered with bruises, cuts and scrapes. One time he came in with an ice pack wrapped around his knee. From the way he looks, I don't see how he could call rugby, "fun".

He often buys odd combinations of things, like beer and granola bars. Sometimes it's girly magazines and dog food. But, despite his appearance, he's never a problem.

One time curiosity got the better of me and I asked him about the sport. The thing that broke the ice was a T-shirt that he was wearing one night that read, "Give Blood, Play Rugby". I nearly gave away my secret when I asked him if they gave out any free samples to the spectators.

He seemed flattered that I asked him about the sport of rugby and my remark was taken as a valid attempt at humor. With the ice broken, the "rugby guy" told me everything I would ever need to know about the sport.

His eyes lit up as he talked about the fun and camaraderie that he experiences with his "mates". I quickly realized that I had broken down the wall between one of my customers and myself. Now I risked the danger of being found out as a vampire.

After that, the "rugby guy" kept me informed on all of the upcoming matches, their results and other pertinent affairs. At one point, he even tried to recruit me to play. I quickly explained that I was too old to be playing rugby. He then switched his tack and he pressed me about coming out to see a match. I invented enough excuses to chill his interest in my being a spectator. If they ever have a night game however, I might consider it.

Then again, there's that wall I keep up. The whole rugby thing seems to have quite a social atmosphere. The less that's known about me the better. Anyway, I would much prefer a pint of blood to a pint of beer any day.

Maybe I'm just a little jealous of the "rugby guy" and his life. He goes out and gets some vigorous exercise, then goes out with some friends and does some drinking. I

sometimes wish that my life were as simple and straightforward.

One day that never seems to change is Friday. Friday means the end of the workweek and is the traditional payday for many people, including myself. The increased foot traffic in the store comes from people with wads of cash to spend. Immigrants, both legal and illegal, rush to buy money orders to send money back to their relatives in their native lands or pay bills. The construction and service people, haggard from a week's worth of physical labor drop in for a six-pack or twelve-pack of beer to anesthetize themselves. They may finish it before they get home, but I'm not one to make judgments. I don't ask questions and I respect my customers' space.

The emotional distance I put between these people and myself is there for our mutual protection. I don't think these people would be too enthusiastic shopping in an establishment where one of the employees needs to have a regular infusion of human blood to perpetuate his youth. Likewise, I would prefer not be drawn into their petty personal issues. After a couple of hundred years, I really have heard it all.

I provide adequate customer service, nothing fancy. No questions asked and none answered. As I said, I don't make any judgments. My customers don't seem to mind either. I guess they probably have stuff that they're trying to hide as much as I do.

Time flies when you're having fun, but when you're not it can drag on for an eternity. On my shift, there are ebbs and flows of customers. When I first come on, the after work crowd is thick, picking up that twelve-pack to sooth themselves after a hard day's work or picking up junk food as some sort of reward. Others queue up to buy

lottery tickets, hoping against hope that they might get lucky and can cash out of the whole pathetic work world.

Then, as fast as it started, it stops. Mr. Aziz is aware of this and has a number of mundane tasks for me to do. So, I straighten up this, clean up that, and rotate merchandise to get it out of the store. But most of the time, I just stand there at the register contemplating life itself. As a vampire, my sense of time is warped. After the first hundred years, what are a few hours?

As the evening wears on, the customers become surreal. The winos, weirdoes, and junkies begin to flock to the Speedy Mart. They come in to spend the spare change they've scrounged on junk food and cheap alcoholic beverages. The majority of my transactions are handled without incident. But, occasionally I have to use my friendly persuader: a baseball bat kept under the counter. Mr. Aziz cut some notches from the times he's used it. I only use it as a prop, since most people get the message.

Around 2:00 in the morning, I get the nightclub crowd. People come traipsing through getting junk food and condoms for the trip home. Ironically, these people can be much more difficult. They're just as drunk and/or drugged, yet they somehow think that their trendy clothes and bad attitudes give them license to behave like buffoons.

Interspersed with all of these characters are the police. They come in for coffee, which is always complimentary per Mr. Aziz. Their presence is supposed to be a deterrent for any potential crime. But their presence is also a double-edged sword. If they discovered that I was a vampire, what would they do?

As the night wears on, the rest of the night people come through the doors. If nightlife were a play, these people would be the backstage technicians. They are the

unsung heroes that make everything possible. They include such people as the hospital workers in their scrubs, bartenders, janitors, and of course the “Ladies of the Night”. These women especially add their own texture to the tapestry of the evening.

I can tell who they are the minute they hit the door. They come in wearing halter-tops and mini-skirts in freezing weather. Their makeup is thick, more like a circus clown’s or a performer in a modernized version of kabuki theater than someone’s potential “date”. They hobble and wobble in shoes with heels like stilts. All the time, they try to keep up the pretence of being respectable. I let them live out their fantasy, just as they let their customers live out theirs. As far I’m concerned, they’re just trying to earn a living too.

To an outsider, you would think that these women would provide an endless supply of blood. Nothing could be further from the truth. Sure, they would be more than happy to allow me to plunge my teeth into their neck and drain a quick pint, just as long as I paid the going rate (whatever that would be for that bit of kink). However, the blood of these women has a vile taste from all of the toxins in their systems, not to mention the amount of sexual contact that they have had. Virgin blood is the best for a vampire and these women have bid adieu to their virginity ages ago.

Their transactions tend to go smoothly for the most part. They trudge up to the counter with snack cakes, coffee, and condoms. The first two to give them the energy to use the third. Their conversations tend to be punctuated with “honey”, “sweetie” and “babe”, as if they were still out on the street trying to hustle. Again, I operate on the

“no questions asked, none answered” policy. It seems to work for these women as it does for me.

Then, at some point in the evening, for no rhyme or reason there is nothing. There are no customers, no noise, except the hum of the florescent lights and the refrigeration unit for the beverage cooler. It gets so quiet that you can hear your own heartbeat. That’s when the fear of robbery hits.

I know if I were shot in a robbery, it wouldn’t matter if it were a silver or lead bullet. Either way it would be catastrophic. Even if I were wounded, if I wasn’t treated before sunrise, I would be as dead if the bullet killed me. So far at the Speedy Mart, I haven’t had a robbery or a shooting. At least not yet.

However, in a convenience store in another town, it *almost* happened. In fact, it was at this same time of night when my life (long though it may be) flashed in front of my eyes as a young man waved a rather large handgun under my chin. With nothing to lose, I looked the man in the eye and said, “Unless you have silver bullets in there, you’re screwed.”

With that remark, I exposed my fangs to him in all of their glory. The man dropped his gun and ran screaming from the store. Of course, I quit my job and left town, never to return. I couldn’t take a chance of getting a reputation for being a vampire. However, I now had the experience to handle my current position at the Speedy Mart.

I am jolted back to reality as the newspaper deliveryman arrives at 4:00 A.M. I know that I have only an hour and a half to go. The crowd that starts coming into the store around this time are the “early risers”. The “night people” have all gone home or to some other reasonable

semblance of a shelter. From now until the end of the shift, two types of people come into the store: those who dread being awake at this hour and those who pride themselves on being up before anyone else.

The people who hate being up at that hour are honest about it. They walk through the store like something out of a B-grade zombie movie. They fight every instinct that their body has to fall asleep standing up. None of them are there because they want to be. There always seems to be some sort of set of circumstances in their lives that put them in the position of having to get up at a time when most humans are enjoying that last bit of REM sleep before they hit the snooze bar on their alarm clocks.

I can sympathize with these people. Being awake in the daytime has the same effect on me. In addition, I have to be careful that every inch of my body is protected with either sun block, clothing or in the case of my eyes, sunglasses. At least daylight dwellers don't have to worry about those kinds of things or at least to the extent that a vampire does.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, are the people who absolutely love being up at this time of the morning. There is a certain amount of machismo in their rationale. They are also recognizable, just like their opposites. They strut into the store with too peppy of a spring in their step. When they come to the counter, they can't let that moment pass without babbling some sort of philosophical wisdom that they think is so important that they want you to drop everything to listen. Inevitably it's something like, "the early bird gets the worm..." or they talk of how they like to get the jump on the day, or how one of the traits of the

successful and wealthy is that they are the first ones to get up every morning.

That kind of attitude has always annoyed me. These people feel that they are somehow superior to the rest of humanity by virtue of the fact that they're awake before sunrise. Just because I sleep during the day and am awake at night, why should I feel like an inferior human being? Is my job any less important because it's done at night?

Before I know it, the time is 5:00 A.M. Sunrise is a little over an hour away. Mr. Aziz will be in any minute. He likes to come in early to find out what happened the night before. I know I can get home before the sun's killing rays can burn my flesh. Another shift has come and gone. One more evening spent looking at the underbelly of society. Soon I will be home, huddled against the daylight.

Then, I begin to wonder why I do it. This job, this life, my whole existence of constant struggle, I keep asking myself why. The pursuit of blood, the scramble for money, and the phony existence that I lead, is this all there is to my life? How much longer can I keep up the charade?

For now, I'm too tired to think about it. I yawn and stretch to keep myself awake. I just need to keep myself awake until Mr. Aziz or my relief gets here. Then I have to hustle back to my room to sleep and then get up to do it all again.

My room, my lair, whatever you want to call it, it's everything except my home. A home is something you have an emotional attachment to, a place where you feel you belong. Where I live is just four walls with cracking paint and a roof that does little to protect me from the sounds upstairs. But with all of its faults, the room is barely affordable on my wages, even with the overtime.

Home is something I left back in Europe nearly a century ago and I doubt I'll ever find another.

Then, there's the blood thing, like some sort of junkie looking for the next fix. I desperately need a dosage of blood, but I don't know where or when I'll get it. I have a connection at the hospital blood bank, but I haven't heard anything in days. Do I dare approach someone or maybe take a chance with a prostitute?

At 5:15 A.M., Mr. Aziz walks through the door. We acknowledge each other with a cursory "Good Morning," the tone of which sounds more like a question than a greeting. He helps himself to a cup of coffee, since after all, it is his store. Then, he comes up to the register and asks me how the night went.

Unless there had been a robbery, murder or caught shoplifter, I give him the standard response, "Fine". Occasionally, I will add a snippet about one of the many machines in the store that have malfunctioned in some way or another. Mr. Aziz then gives me his standard answer: "Put 'Out of Order' sign on it! I fix!"

Our entire employer/employee relationship is built on this verbal shorthand. No touchy-feely psychobabble, just simple and to the point verbal exchanges. Sometimes we don't even have to speak to each other. A single facial expression or hand gesture is often all we need to get our point across to each other.

I don't dislike him, nor does he seem to dislike me. We both know why we are there and there's no sense in getting sentimental about it all. I know as much about Mr. Aziz as he knows about me. I think we both prefer it that way.

Then at 5:20 A.M., just like clockwork, my relief, good ol' Ernie, walks in. Now don't get me wrong, Ernie

is a nice guy. A little too self-righteous and a bit anal, but a nice guy. Ex-Marine Corps, retired after thirty years. If you don't believe it, he'll tell you.

Ernie got bored after he retired, so he took a job at the Speedy Mart. He always talks about how he got tired of "sitting around on his ass doing nothing". Frankly, working at the Speedy Mart isn't that far away from doing that. But, good ol' Ernie likes being up at the crack of dawn, chit chatting with people and spouting his own brand of right wing wisdom.

Luckily, my contact with Ernie is brief, but rarely to the point. He greets me with a hearty, "Howdy Jake, how's it hangin'?" then proceeds to give me his latest theory on what's wrong with the world. He never looks for another opinion, just a validation of his own. I mumble and nod, hoping that I can get out the door before I begin to fry up in front of him like some overcooked hot dog. All this and the hope that I can make my paycheck last until payday on Friday.

This is the life of a modern-day vampire. I'm not much different from anyone; I'm just trying to survive. But my definition of survival is a bit different from most people. In addition to a steady paycheck, I need human blood from time to time. I also have to stay out of direct sunlight. These two things are an additional handicap to a life that is already full of indignities.

I also live with the eternal fear of what would happen if I were found out to be a vampire. After all these years, the reaction of daylight dwellers to vampires ranges from curiosity to outrage. My existence is too tenuous to take any chances. You'd think that after 457 years, this would get easier.

Chapter Three

By 5:31 A.M., I have extracted myself from the Speedy Mart, Mr. Aziz, good ol' Ernie, and whomever else I have to deal with and I begin making my way home to the "opulent" Luxor Arms. It's nothing fancy, but it keeps me out of the sun. Plus, it's only a short walk from the Speedy Mart. With a little luck, I can make it through the front door before the sun does a number on me.

I've often wondered what it would be like to see the sun rise in all of its glory. Just once, I would like to see the blue skies, white clouds and the riot of colors that daylight dwellers boast about and are able to experience. They have the opportunity to enjoy the soft glow of the moon, shimmering star filled skies and the occasional errant comet or meteor, but vampires can never enjoy the beauty of the sunrise.

I try to keep my mind off seeing sunrises as much as possible. I've known vampires that were driven to the brink of madness or even went so far as try to take in a sunrise. Those who tried to do this were left blind or met with death.

As I work my way through the pre-dawn streets, I begin to bead up with sweat. My body is already reacting to the first indirect rays of the sun. Although it's a brisk fall morning, it feels like I'm walking through a sun-scorched desert. I start to squint at the first few rays and I curse myself for not bringing along a pair of sunglasses. I know I have to control my bodily reactions, lest I draw attention to myself. I can only hope that the passersby will think that I'm just looking for a public restroom.

But, as I always do, I make it through the doorway of the Luxor Arms, briefly greeting the desk clerk on duty and make my way to my room. The face at the desk is always different. I suppose they have a hard time finding people to take the overnight shifts. Maybe they should consider hiring a vampire.

The residents of the Luxor Arms are a cross section of the lower strata of society. Though I rarely interact with the other residents, the sampling that I have dealt with gives me a good idea who my neighbors are. For the most part, they operate on the fringes: blue-collar workers, some retail people, and a few people whose occupations have questionable ethical qualifications. There are even some retirees living here. They're the ones that got passed an empty gravy boat at 'Life's Great Sit Down Dinner'.

But everyone here shares the same desire, regardless if they are on the way up or down society's ladder. They want a place to call home, regardless of how run-down it is, and even if it is for only a little while. You could call it a sort of, "quiet dignity".

I make my way to my room, open the door and quickly close it behind me. Finally, I'm out of the direct sunlight. All the windows are covered with thick curtains to keep out what little bit of sunlight the room receives. The woman who first showed me the room forewarned me that it didn't get much sunlight. Little did she know that it was the main selling point for me.

It doesn't matter that the light is minimal. Even in total darkness, I can see fairly well. Part of the vampire evolutionary process has left us with uncanny eyesight at night. I still need to turn on a light or two, but even in my semi-dark room, I can see well enough to get out of my clothes and into my shower stall.

The first thing I like to do after coming home from the Speedy Mart is shower. It's one part hygiene, one part ritual. I not only wash away the smell of grime and microwaved food, but I also put another evening of work behind me. When I'm done, I change into my robe, lay back on my bed and watch some TV.

At this point, I can tell that the sun has come up. Although the windows are covered and I'm indoors, I can feel the warmth of the sun's rays. I can even feel sunlight by touching the wall, particularly here at the Luxor Arms with its paper-thin walls.

The sun may have risen outside, however I'm fine just as long as I stay inside. I've gone out during the day on occasion. But in order to do that, I have to dress up like the Invisible Man: every part of my body covered, my face wrapped up like a mummy and of course, sunglasses. Vampires have been known to go blind neglecting to protect their eyes from even indirect sunlight.

The selection of program on my television is limited. Mostly local stations and a couple of news and movie channels. I lay back and flip through the meager array hoping for something to relax to or maybe something that will put me to sleep. At this time of the morning, there is rarely anything of substance.

The morning news is the litany of death and drama that it's always been. I laugh and think about all of the rhetoric that Ernie spouts down at the Speedy Mart. He likes to talk about how the world is "going to hell in a bucket" and how much better things were in the "good ol' days". After living 457 years, I can tell you that the world may be going to hell in a bucket, but we haven't arrived there, and the "good ol' days" were never that good. Or were they?

I hold that thought as I stumble across a travelogue on one of the public access channels. I see pictures of old castles, mountains and valleys in Europe. Ernie's "good ol' days" might have been in a small town in the Heartland of America a half a century ago, but my "good ol' days" were a continent away and 450 years ago.

The thought of those times makes me smile. I stretch a bit, close my eyes and let the monotone of the television commentator put me into a pre-slumber state. With no commercials and boring commentators, public television is my favorite form of relaxation.

The blurred visions in my mind slowly come into focus. They shift from washed out color to a more vivid collection of black-blue-purples. Then, it all becomes sharp and lifelike. I am back at my ancestral home and a child again, playing with other vampire children in the moonlight.

I was the only child of doting vampire parents. Numerous family friends and relatives also surrounded me. The most amazing of all were the elders, many of whom had a millennium or more of wisdom and stories that a child could draw upon.

Since there were no formal schools that catered to vampire children, my parents relied on the elders to educate me. These elders could trace their educational lineage directly back to the days of the Greek philosophers and the Great Library at Alexandria. They tutored me in areas such as mathematics, science, arts, language and music.

But tonight, all my studying has been put aside. It is an evening for fun and frolicking. Most importantly, this is the night that I met my first, last and only true love: Zia.

Of course, a young boy never thinks that when he first meets a girl of his own age at that stage of his life. At

that point, girls were objects to compete with and tease. Chasing small nocturnal animals, or roughhousing with the other boys were much more important to me.

Zia had come with her parents to one of the many vampire gatherings that took place at our estate when I was a child. There were vampires from all over Europe at this particular gathering, and there were many new faces. One of those new faces was that of Zia.

She was slender and raven-haired, with her tresses framing her alabaster complexion. Her voice was angelic and her high pitched giggle sparkled like moonlight. Everything about her was playful and joyous.

As Zia got older, her features matured and her body began to morph into the shape of a woman. Some women are beautiful as children; others become beautiful later in life. Zia however was beautiful from her first day on Earth and improved every day thereafter.

I wasn't particularly nice to Zia the first time I met her, but she wasn't very nice to me either. We didn't do much to hurt each other physically. Instead, we engaged in the sort of childish back and forth of verbal atrocities. Our mutual animosity was fueled more by our lack of knowledge of each other than any real hatred.

The first spark in our flame occurred when she shared her cup of short blood with me. Short blood is a thinned out mixture of human blood, animal blood, honey and fruit juice. It is a special treat for child vampires, as their systems are not quite capable of handling whole human blood.

At the height of the evening's festivities, my mother brought out child-sized cups of short blood for all of the children. Knowing what a treat this was, all of the children rushed to get their cups of the sweet elixir. I quickly

grabbed a cup and in my haste, I tripped and fell, spilling my crimson treat all over the ground. I doubt if I was physically hurt, but I cried bitterly over the spillage.

My mother gave me a mild scolding. She told me that I needed to be more careful with my short blood. Since there was no more left and making short blood requires a great deal of preparation, I would have to do without my treat for my recklessness.

Then, out of nowhere, Zia stepped forward. “I will share my short blood with Jacob”, she offered.

My mother thanked her and the two of us went and sat down on an old stone bench. There, Zia and I shared her treat, achieving some sort of a truce. From then on, we stopped the hair pulling and insults, developing a sort of friendship that grew deeper in the passing years.

As we approached our adolescent years, our friendship began to evolve along with our bodies. We began to test each other, getting closer, both physically and mentally. It was as if we were engaged in some sort of competition, however it was one without winners or losers. Each time we would come away with a new understanding of our limits and ourselves.

One night Zia and I were chasing each other in the pale moonlight of a summer evening. As was too often the case, Zia had gotten ahead of me. This always made her laugh heartily and fed her giddy emotional state.

However, this night would be different. I heard a crashing sound, and then a scream of pain from Zia. I sped up my pace to find out what was wrong.

I came upon Zia who was now sitting up on the ground. She was rubbing her ankle and groaning softly. As she did so, she grimaced in pain.

“Ow, Jacob. I think I turned my ankle.”

“Well Zia, that will teach you for running from me. Here, let me look at it.”

“Why Jacob” she remarked coyly, “you don’t have university training in Medicine. What makes you think that you can make it better?”

“I’ll certainly try,” I replied with a sense of bravado.

I knelt down and began to feel Zia’s ankle for any sign of a break. I was shocked that I not only felt no break. In fact, the ankle didn’t feel the least bit swollen, despite the way she carried on.

“There’s nothing wrong, Zia” I clumsily replied.

“Oh, but Jacob, it hurts so” she whined in the tone of a much younger child. “Just rub it a bit and I think it will feel better.”

I continued to rub her ankle, not realizing what was wrong but not knowing enough to understand what was going on. Zia would occasionally wince in pain or sigh in relief. There was no consistency to these reactions, but I would soon find out the reason why.

After massaging her ankle for a few minutes, Zia thanked me for my attention. Then, without another word, she drew her lips close to mine and gave me my first kiss. It was as if a thunder bolt had hit me full bore, but without the pain. That first kiss lasted a long time with our mouths and tongues exploring each other in ways we had never thought of before, or at least I hadn’t.

An embarrassing, but vampire-like situation interrupted our kissing. We were both becoming aroused and being equipped with retractable fangs, our young bodies didn’t know the difference between carnal passion and the desire for blood. In the middle of this blissful moment, our fangs began to clack together.

The years of knowing each other made what could have been an embarrassing situation nothing more than a humorous annoyance. We pulled apart, had a good laugh and resumed our kissing as soon as our fangs withdrew to their resting-place.

Kissing quickly became the favorite pastime for Zia and I. We would sneak off at every opportunity, anytime we could. Even if it was for only for a few moments, we would find a little privacy and kiss each other with wild abandon.

Over time, our kissing began to evolve. We experimented with different styles at different durations. We also began to add touching and feeling to the kissing. The more we did it, the more we wanted to do it. But, in addition, we began to develop deeper feelings toward each other. Zia and I began to talk of each other as a “we”. I began to think in terms of our future and spending the rest of my life.

I was beginning to feel different on the inside as well. At first, I thought I was becoming ill. When I explained this to my parents, my mother remarked, “Why Jacob, I believe you are in love!” My father was less expressive, but he nodded in agreement. They both knew the same feelings that I was having. Not only was I beginning to bond with Zia, but also my parents and I began to share the bond of adulthood.

As happens with most couples, our “kissing” reached a decisive point. In the throes of our passion, Zia suddenly said “No.” This was not a playful “no”, but an emphatic and serious, “NO”!

I was shocked. What did I do that would anger her so?

“Jacob, we can’t go any further. I mean, we can kiss and such, but if we want to go any further...we need to be married.”

“Then, in that case, Zia will you marry me?”

“Yes, Jacob, I’ll marry you. But you’ll have to ask for my hand in marriage from my father,” she replied with a smile. We dusted ourselves off and returned to her parents for the formality.

Although Zia lived some distance away, both sets of parents co-operated in making sure we got to see each other as often as could be allowed. Each time we saw each other, our love and affection grew deeper. We both began to look forward to the day that we could be married.

Finally, the night of our wedding arrived. Both sets of parents had long given their blessing to this union. Vampires from as far away as Asia and Africa came to the ceremony.

Even natives from the New World came to see this spectacle. Yes, they too were vampires. They had been brought back as curiosities by an explorer from one of his trips to the newly discovered Americas. Ironically, one of the financiers of the expedition was a wealthy vampire. Fascinated by the prospect of vampires that developed separately from their European counterparts, they had been brought back to meet him. Our wedding would be their chance to experience some of the vampire culture of Europe.

A vampire wedding doesn’t differ that much from a daylight dweller wedding, other than the ceremony has to take place at night. We have most of the same traditions that weddings have, though vampire weddings do have some unique aspects.

One of these traditions is seven bridesmaids and seven groomsmen, all of which are daylight dwellers. The maid of honor and best man assemble them respectively. After the vows have been exchanged, the bride draws blood from each groomsman and the groom draws blood from each maid of honor. This is supposed to guarantee a long life to the bride and groom so that they will always have fresh blood (seven groomsmen/bridesmaids for the seven days of the week). In addition, the bride and groom agree to assist the daylight dwellers and vice-versa during the course of this portion of the ceremony.

Also, other daylight dwellers had come to wish us well. In exchange for their blood and/or assistance over the years, they too receive the wisdom that vampires have accumulated, along with some of the wealth that has been amassed.

After the ceremony in the moonlight, Zia and I, along with everyone else in attendance proceeded to dine on the most succulent of food and the best of drink. Then, all those assembled were treated to music, dancing and entertainment the likes I have never seen before or since. There were musicians of all sorts playing every imaginable instrument. Wedding guests danced alongside people whose whole lives revolved around the activity. Everywhere I looked there were jugglers, acrobats, magicians and any other entertainer that you could think of.

There was a vampire from the Orient who set off firecrackers, something many of the Europeans in attendance had never seen. I was curious to see what these loud things were all about. I left Zia's side, much to her consternation, to get a better look. The man kept lighting these tiny things, and then they would explode with a loud pop.

“Here, take some, they will bring you much luck,” the man said with a playful grin. With that, he presented me with a small box of firecrackers.

Shortly after we returned from our honeymoon, I went away from home on business. I needed to go on this journey in order to be able to purchase some property so Zia and I could build our own home. Zia went to stay with her parents while I was gone, and I bade her farewell. I promised to complete my business and return as soon as possible.

The night I returned to pick up Zia from her parents was the most horrific night of my life. I sensed something was wrong when I smelled smoke coming from the direction of Zia’s parents’ home. I quickened my horse’s pace and feared the worst. My suspicions were confirmed when I arrived at the once opulent manor home of Zia and her parents.

The house lay in ruins. I jumped off my horse and ran to the house calling for Zia. Everywhere, crosses were painted on walls, furniture and belongs had been smashed and looted, and the overpowering stench of smoke lingered in the air. I frantically began to search the home for any signs of life.

Then, in one of the bedrooms, I made a horrific discovery. There, on the bed lay Zia, or what remained of her. A wooden stake had been driven through her heart and she had been left out in the sun to burn to death for good measure. At the sight of all of this, I let out a cry that shook the rafters of the rubble that was once her parents’ home.

Zia’s parents had also met with the same grisly fate. As I looked around, I knew of only one type of person that

was capable of such a thing. This was the work of a Vampire Hunter.

The Vampire Hunter was the latest scourge to hit our world. Through the ages, we had felt the oppression of various kings, pharaohs, emperors or whatever the ruler of the day was called. However, the Vampire Hunter was a particular individual who specialized in pursuing and terrorizing vampires. In addition, those who had co-existed or had provided vampires with blood and daytime support were also targets. They were branded as “witches” or “practitioners of the black arts” and were dealt with in the harshest of ways.

Fearing for my life, I went back to my horse, mounted and rode for my parent’s home. I would be able to make it by daylight, but there was additional incentive to get there. A Vampire Hunter was lurking out there and I needed to warn my parents.

A few miles away, I saw the fires of an encampment by the roadside. Rather than take any chances, I brought my horse to a halt, dismounted and tied him to a tree. I would investigate the camp on foot. I removed my saddlebag and put it over my shoulder. Among its contents was a wheel lock pistol that I loaded and was now prepared to use. Hopefully, the need would be to put a musket ball into the heart of the Vampire Hunter.

I slowly crept towards the sounds of the voices. As I drew closer, I could see the lights of torches and the main campfire. Ahead was a clearing, where the Vampire Hunter and his men had made camp for the night. The men had dismounted and tied their horses up in a makeshift corral. They were all gathered around the fire in various stages of relaxation. The Vampire Hunter had a collection

of hapless stooges who assisted him in his goal of wiping vampires from the face of the Earth.

Some of the men who rode with him were naïve enough to actually believe the words that spewed from his mouth. However, most of the men in his company were little more than thrill-seeking petty criminals, that where involved for whatever booty could be had.

From out of the shadows came the Vampire Hunter. As he reached the center of the group, his cohorts closed ranks around him. I was at a perfect distance: far enough away so that I would not be noticed, yet close enough to look the Vampire Hunter in the eye.

I looked upon the face of the evil that had been visited on the vampires. He was a spindly man, with deep furrows in his brow, which were accentuated by the light of the torches and campfire. The clothes he wore were simple and sturdy, but were too tight or too loose in various places. He pulled his pilgrim hat off and swatted it against himself to wipe the remnants of road dust from his torso. After giving himself his cleansing flagellation, he prepared to address his cohorts.

“Gentlemen,” he shouted in a snotty, omniscient voice, “today we slew near two score of vampires, and have arrested as many witches. The power of our Lord, Jesus Christ will lead us again tomorrow to even greater glory in his name. Likewise, we shall send the allies of Satan to their just reward of fire and brimstone.”

The men who stood around him roared with approval. I found irony in how the Vampire Hunter seemed to match the description of the “pale rider” mentioned in the Book of the Apocalypse. Maybe this is what was meant to “behold the pale rider”.

“Our job will not be done,” he continued, “until the living dead have been destroyed and the Devil’s legions have been punished for their abominations. Even tonight, we must be on guard, for Satan’s evil can take many forms. My lieutenants will be in charge of the watches, and woe be it to any man who slumbers during his watch!”

The men replied with a chorus of “amen” and proceeded to settle down for the night. The Vampire Hunter’s lieutenants began to discuss among themselves how the watches would be manned and by whom. This led to some mild disagreements with some of the less cooperative men. Regardless of the disagreements that the Vampire Hunter and his men were having internally, the camp was being secured and the horde would be on the move in the morning. I now began to worry about my parents and the village near our home.

My parents faced the prospect of having a wooden stake driven through their hearts and the village that had supported us through the years was in danger of being burnt to the ground. I could ride fast enough to beat the Vampire Hunter and his men, but only fast enough to warn everyone of their arrival. They would not have enough time to prepare an escape.

There was no way that I could take on the Vampire Hunter and his men by myself. I was outnumbered thirty-to-one and armed with a wheel lock pistol and a small amount of powder and musket balls. They had muskets, swords and even a few crossbows. I would be no match against them in a direct confrontation.

Then, I remembered that the firecrackers the Oriental man had given me were in my saddlebag. I couldn’t do much damage to the Vampire Hunter and his cohorts, but I could scare off their horses and disrupt the

camp. It wouldn't stop them, but it would keep them from resting and delay their progress towards my parents' home.

I reached in the saddlebag and pulled out the box of firecrackers and my tinderbox. Then, for good measure, I took out my wheel lock pistol and put it in my belt. Little did I know that these firecrackers were going to bring me good luck in a way I had never imagined.

I went over to where the horses were tied and loosened the ropes. I needed to accomplish this before the Vampire Hunter and his men had established who was guarding what. As I quietly loosened each horse, several of them began to whinny in fear, which scared me as much as it had scared them. A couple of the Vampire Hunter's men reacted, but only to the extent of chastising the horses for being stupid animals. Sort of like the pot calling the kettle black, I thought to myself.

Then, I stepped back and with my tinderbox, I lit a punk to set off the firecrackers. I held the punk next to the fuse of a small bundle of firecrackers, and the fuse lit up with a high-pitched fizzle. I held my breath in anticipation and tossed the bundle of firecrackers toward the now untied horses.

The firecrackers went off with a hundred different loud pops. All the horses that I had untied galloped off into the night. The entire camp erupted in an explosion of human voices and animated activity. The men shouted, screamed and cursed in their attempt to find the source of the disturbance.

I had two more bundles of firecrackers in the box and I decided to use them both. With my punk still glowing, I lit up a bundle and threw it in a different part of the camp. It went off much like the first and a new spasm of fear and confusion went through the camp.

I lit the remaining bundle and gave it a toss into the very center of the camp. Much to my disappointment, it landed near the campfire where the fuse fizzled and went out.

In the meantime, the Vampire Hunter walked into the middle of all of this to attempt to establish order to the situation. He stood next to the campfire to draw more attention to himself, shouting orders to various people who followed or disobeyed them in their own way. Seeing that his presence alone would not restore order, he began to recite various biblical passages in attempt to calm his men.

“Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, no evil shall I fear. Thou shall not fear the terror by night; or the arrow that flies by day; or the pestilence that walks in darkness. Though a thousand fall at thy side and ten thousand at thy right hand...,” he shouted over the din.

The Vampire Hunter was too busy reciting his inspirational tracts to notice the bundle of firecrackers I had thrown. However, he looked in my general direction, staring out into the night. With this, I aimed the pistol at his head and prepared to squeeze the trigger. This would be for Zia and her family.

At the same time, an ember must have jumped out of the fire and landed right next to the unexploded firecrackers. That was all it took to relight the fuse. As I was prepared to fire, the firecrackers went off.

The sound was loud enough to make me squeeze the trigger before I was ready. This threw off my aim and my shot at the Vampire Hunter missed wildly. However, the explosion next to him made the Vampire Hunter let out an effeminate scream and he joined his men in the confused frenzy.

I had no time to reload and I didn't want to wait around for a second attempt at the Vampire Hunter. Besides, it would take the rest of the night for the Vampire Hunter and his men to gather up the horses and they would be poorly rested for the next day. I now had the extra time that I needed. I would have to wait for another opportunity to exact my revenge.

I ground out the punk on the heel of my boot, placed it inside the tinderbox and shoved the tinderbox back into my saddlebag. I threw my pistol in the saddlebag and tossed the saddlebag over my shoulder. Then, I carefully made my way back to my horse. I quickly untied him, jumped in the saddle and galloped away.

I rode hard and was able to reach my parent's estate just before sunrise and warn them of the approaching Vampire Hunter. I also alerted our loyal servants, who were all daylight dwellers on had happened. This also gave them time to assist us in leaving the area. They in turn enlisted the rest of the village in the evacuation.

Led by our servants, the people gathered enough provisions to last several months. Most of the people would head up into the mountains to hide with us. There were caves up there that had been used in the past to escape invading armies. The rest of the populace would remain behind to throw the Vampire Hunter and his men off the track by making up outrageous stories to confuse them.

By mid-day, a caravan of people took off for some caves located in the mountains near my family estate. My parents and I rode in sealed coffins that were carried by horse drawn hearses, while our essentials were transported in a couple of carts.

When our coffins were opened at nightfall, we were high in the mountains, far away from the Vampire Hunter

and his unholy, holy legions. We would be safe for the time being.

I grieved for some time over Zia. My parents understood this, but they told me that vampires faced danger from daylight dwellers that feared and hated us. Sometimes people near and dear to us would be hurt or even die because of this.

They also told me that this was the lot of a vampire. From time to time, there would be persecutors and vampires would be forced to flee. In time, the persecutors would disappear, and life would return to normal. They told me that someday I would meet another woman, and that Zia would understand if I married again.

Several months later, we were given an “all-clear” signal from our daylight dweller network. I later heard that the Vampire Hunter who had killed Zia and her parents had made the mistake of frolicking with some local burgher’s young daughter and put her, in language of the day, in a “family way”. This, combined with some of the looting and misbehavior by his unsavory cohorts, led to the demise of the vampire frenzy. Cooler heads and logical thinking again prevailed, so my parents and I were able to return home to live in peace. At least for a few centuries, anyway.

Eventually, like any other human being, I moved on with my life. I’ve had relationships with many women since then, both vampire and daylight dweller. However, I never remarried. I never met anyone quite like Zia. Even if I do live to be a thousand, I doubt if I ever will.

Chapter Four

My nights off are not frequent. Despite the Hollywood ballyhoo, my social life is practically non-existent. Monks in monasteries get out more often than I do. I have almost no friends, and few acquaintances. When I do meet people, I try to keep their information on me on a “need to know” basis. Contrary to popular belief, being a vampire is not a short cut to anybody’s “A” list.

Most of the time, I listen to the radio or watch the television. Little of what comes through on them interests me. It all looks and sounds like the same recycled garbage that was peddled a generation earlier. These appliances only serve to help me mark time in my life sentence as a vampire.

However, there is one pleasure that I do allow myself. That’s my occasional excursion through the world of adult entertainment. To wit, the local strip clubs. There are several within walking distance in my neighborhood. My favorite is The Sweet Spot. The women are relatively good looking, the drinks are cheap in comparison to similar establishments, and the atmosphere is friendly, in a cold, standoffish way.

I generally keep to myself, and avoid any in-depth conversation with the patrons or the staff. Not that I’m unfriendly, it’s that whole vampire thing again. One can never be too careful, even in a seedy nightspot like The Sweet Spot.

As I walk through the door, the doorman grunts and demands a cover charge. I quietly give him the money and I make my way through the club. It’s not very crowded and I take a seat at the bar and order a drink.

I scan the place to see who's here, not that I would know any of the people here by name. It's the usual collection of anonymous nobodies who think they're somebody. They're for the most part temporary millionaires; that is until the women who work there separate them from their money. But you can never be too careful when you are a vampire.

But I know these women aren't going to have their tawdry wages for long. There are drug habits to feed, fatherless children to support, and an untold assortment of people with their hands out demanding to be paid. In my little universe, nobody holds on to their money for long. There's always someone wanting to be paid.

I signal to the bartender to bring me a bottle of beer and proceed to enjoy the entertainment, wherever it might appear. On stage, an inexperienced woman goes through the motions of trying to be a dancer. She wobbles around on a pair of high heels she must have borrowed. Her pasty skin has several poorly drawn tattoos that look like they were acquired during a stay in prison. When she removes her top, her breasts sag like those of a woman ten years older. Her belly protrudes over the top of her bikini bottom in such a way I can't tell if she's pregnant or has the beginning of a beer gut. Maybe both.

The poor thing careens across the raised stage, attempting to keep time with the up-tempo heavy metal song blasting over the club's sound system. Most of the men in the place make snide remarks and hoot in disgust over her dancing. One patron even shouts, "put it back on".

The DJ tries his best to pump the crowd up, shilling her as if she were a men's magazine cover girl. "All right, let's here it for Amber," he shouts. "Dig deep guys, this is her final song." The men in the crowd hoot even louder.

The final song in her set is a sappy country ballad and she nearly falls over trying to take her panties off. She works the meager crowd around the stage as best she can and even makes a half-hearted attempt at pole dancing. This only serves to add to her embarrassment when she falls off the pole and nearly breaks her neck.

“One more time, let’s hear it for Amber!”

As Amber leaves the stage and walks by me, I stop her and give her a five-dollar bill. She brushes her scraggly hair back and grins through teeth that are in bad need of dental work. The five goes securely in her garter and she leans over and kisses me. Then she scurries back to the dressing room.

I figured what the heck; she earned it. It took a lot of courage for her to take off her clothes in front of a bunch of drunks although she was the most unattractive woman in the place.

Another misconception is that a strip joint would be ideal for vampires, either female vampire strippers or male vampires like me. On the contrary, the daylight dwellers that work or frequent these establishments tend to have very poor quality blood. For me, this is nothing more than a form of live entertainment with no questions asked.

With Amber off the stage, I return to my bottle of beer. I let my mind drift a bit, letting the din of the crowd drift through my brain. For now, there are no customers, no pressure, just a lot of background noise and the beginning of a good buzz.

“All right guys, let’s give it up for Misty!”

The DJ’s voice breaks my meditative state. I look up; expecting to see another tired looking woman going through the motions of being turned on by a bunch of

horned-up losers. Instead, my eyes become fixated on the woman on the stage.

Her costume was from another time. The dress she wore looked like something from the eighteenth century. However, the costume had some contemporary features. For example, the dress was held together in several critical spots with Velcro. This feature allowed Misty the opportunity to remove the garment quickly and at will.

The music that began to play had a haunting feature to it. It was Goth/Industrial music, a pulsating combination that spoke simultaneously of ecstasy and angst. She moved in a sensuous synchronicity to the pulse of the rhythms.

Most of the dancers who took the stage at The Sweet Spot were devoid of any sense of rhythm. The music often didn't fit the mood that they were trying to create. They would just show the goods to see if there were any takers.

However, this woman was different. Her movements and gestures burst open a dam that held back my memories of Zia. However, I knew that this was just another flavor in this human meat emporium. But, this flavor was beginning to tempt me.

Her skin was pale like Amber, however it looked smooth and creamy. She started with her hair up, but she removed a couple of pins to let her raven colored locks fall to her shoulders. The curves on her frame looked identical to Zia's. Misty's look was pure Gothic.

Normally I despise the whole Goth scene. The prancing and posing that they put on about a lifestyle they truly know nothing about appalls me. I wonder how they would feel if they actually had to live as a vampire, with no option to quit and become a corporate clone. As her music and stage presence began to mesmerize me, I thought back

to a group of Goth kids who used to come into the store every Wednesday night.

One of the nearby clubs would have a Goth night and the Speedy Mart would be assaulted by legions of these living dead wannabes. Goths need cigarettes, condoms, and snack foods the same as everyone else. As far as I was concerned, their money was just as good.

This particular group seemed to stand out from the rest of the anonymous black-clad groupies. They consisted of two young females and one young male, none of them older than twenty-five or younger than twenty-one. I know that because I used to card them. I didn't bother to remember their names from their drivers' licenses or the pretentious monikers that they referred to each other. I simply knew them as, Skinny Goth Girl, Fat Goth Girl and Wimpgeek Goth Boy.

Skinny Goth Girl was of course, skinny. She wore trendy, close fitting clothes that showed off her lean, angular form. Some nights she wore tight leather pants or close fitting plastic-like mini skirts with thigh-high boots and fishnet stockings. Even when she wore things like long evening gowns, they would have slits that would run up to her thigh. Instead of a purse, Skinny Goth Girl would carry a lunch box that was adorned with some obscure Saturday morning cartoon character.

Fat Goth Girl wasn't fat to the point of being obese. She actually had quite a buxom torso. But, she had a tendency to wear items of clothing that showed off skin as opposed to flattering her ample figure. She often wore a tight black leather corset that was supposed to show off cantaloupe shaped breasts, but instead it made her look like a giant black sausage that was ready to explode from it's casing.

Wimpgeek Goth Boy looked like his name. He was small, skinny, and outlandishly effeminate. He enjoyed attracting attention to himself in every way possible. He wore eyeliner, pancake makeup, and black fingernail polish. On occasion, he would even wear black lip-gloss. His hair was teased out and wild, like some sort of Goth-like Einstein, only without the intelligence. Sometimes he would streak his hair with some outlandish color like hot pink or lime green.

The trio would come into the Speedy Mart drunk only on their own essence. Their visits would last anywhere from fifteen minutes or up to an hour if they were in the mood. I didn't mind them too much. They were more a like floor show, and I was their captive audience.

They would go through the various aisles searching for something that they wouldn't find. Wimpgeek would often hang out at the periodical rack, commenting on the various people on the covers. He would hiss and squeal his response to various fashion statements that were made or lack of taste of the wearer.

Meanwhile, the Fat Goth Girl and Skinny Goth Girl would circle the store like a couple of black clad vultures. They would stop and look at various items, commenting on their potential uses or misuses.

There were some nights when my patience was low and I would ask them the standard retail clerk question of, "Is there something I can help you find?" That would usually garner the response of, "Oh no, not right now." It wouldn't chase them out of the store, but it served to hasten their departure.

Other nights, when my patience and tolerance were both shot, I would drop the retail clerk's equivalent of the atomic bomb.

"Are you going to buy something?"

That remark served as a wake-up call to the three of them to either buy something or leave immediately. They would each hastily grab purchases and scurry up to the counter to pay. Under their breaths, they would make coded, catty remarks about me and my remarks. I didn't care what they thought. I could deal with a few vague insults easier than the extended version of their theatrical performance.

My remarks never seemed to have any impact anyway. They would return the next Wednesday night and do the same routine. Our relationship became a sort of cat-and-mouse game with no winners or losers, merely combatants.

Then, at some point, the three Goth kids stopped coming into the Speedy Mart. The last few times they were in the store, their stays were short and overly business like. I didn't worry after a while though. Customers come and go, so I never try to build up any expectations about them.

One night, a couple of months ago, I looked up and saw Skinny Goth Girl. But she wasn't Skinny Goth Girl anymore. She was wearing a dress-for-success business suit that looked like she had just finished a long ten-hour day. Her combat boots had been traded in for pumps and her Saturday morning cartoon lunch box had been exchanged for an oversized leather purse and a briefcase.

I watched as she darted through the aisles, focused on her mission. She grabbed items, tossed them vacantly into her shopping basket, and moved deliberately to my checkout station.

Her appearance had piqued my normally dormant curiosity. I wondered what sort of circumstances had brought her to her “untimely fate”.

“I think I know you from somewhere,” I asked inquisitively.

She blushed slightly and gave me an embarrassed smile. “You remember me and my friends. We used to come here after Goth Night all the time.”

I nodded and smiled back. As annoying as they could be, I had missed their antics.

Skinny Goth Girl went on to explain that she decided she needed to, in her words, “get a life”. She went to the local technical college and got a certification to be a paralegal. Now she worked in a law firm nearby and was making a good living. She had a nice car and her own apartment in the suburbs with all the trimmings. Of course, she had to work ten and twelve hour days to do it, but she tried to make me believe it was all worth it.

As for Fat Goth Girl and Wimpgeek Goth Boy, they were now a vague memory. Fat Goth Girl had married “some creep”, had a baby and lived in a rundown part of town. Wimpgeek Goth Boy got strung out on heroin and was in rehab for the second time in the last six months.

The former Skinny Goth Girl paid for her items and bade me goodbye. For all of her material comforts, she was more lost than when she was in her “Goth Phase”, as she called it. To me, she seemed more like the living dead than any vampire I ever met.

“Hey, sweetie, would you like a table dance?”

I snapped back into reality. It was Misty. She was standing next to me, smiling wryly as if she had telepathically heard everything in my head.

Now that I got a closer look at her, it became more apparent that she was the image of my long departed Zia. Of all of the places I've been in, I would find her here.

"You look like you want a table dance, honey..."

"Oh," I stammered. "Yeah, sure. But not right now, I mean, not to this music."

The next stripper, Brandi, was gyrating to a hard rock song. I wanted the same music that Misty was dancing to earlier.

"Let me see what I can do," she replied. "It'll cost ya a little extra, 'cus I gotta get the other girl's permission and talk to the DJ. I'll be back."

One thing about this place; if you have enough money, you can get pretty much whatever you want. I wanted to create the illusion, if only for a moment that Zia was alive and with me. Even if it was *only* an illusion and *only* for a moment.

Misty returned quickly with a broad smile on her face. "I've got it all set," she announced. She took my hand and guided me to a set of tables at the rear of the club. This was the designated table dance area.

We worked our way there and positioned ourselves for the song. I could tell that the song was ours from the very beginning. It had an almost baroque sound, yet it had a modern, updated tempo. Instead of symphonic instruments, electronic synthesizers and drum machines provided the musical accompaniment. The song had an intoxicating effect on both Misty and me.

She positioned herself facing me on my lap and began to softly gyrate to the music. Even seated on a stranger's lap, Misty moved to the rhythm of the music. For me, her movements went beyond sexual. They brought

back memories of long repressed passions for a woman who had been taken from me centuries before.

Suddenly, there was movement in my mouth. My fangs were beginning to protrude. I wasn't sure what was causing it, but I was afraid of what would happen once my lap dance partner found out.

"How you like it, Honey?" Misty cooed.

"Fine...I guess."

"Fine...you guess?" Misty seemed a little hurt, but she was still eager to please. "Something wrong?"

I kept trying to work my fangs back into place and still have a conversation with Misty. However, I was struggling miserably in both areas.

"My wife," I blurted. "She passed away a while ago and you reminded me of her and..."

"Don't say any more," Misty gently whispered in my ear. As if she instinctively understood my situation, she pulled herself a little closer and gently bit my ear.

Now my fangs were in blood sucking position. My only hope would be that she wouldn't ask me any more questions. Instead of talking, she moved her mouth closer to my ear continued to nibble playfully at my lobes. She did this well enough to make me gasp. The gasp I made opened my mouth enough for Misty to see my fully protruding fangs.

"My grandma, what big teeth you have!"

Her remark gave me a start. But instead of running off screaming, Misty seemed somewhat turned on by the sight of my fangs, even a bit amused. As she leaned in closer, she simultaneously traced her finger around my mouth.

"Go ahead," she whispered passionately, "go ahead and bite my neck. Make sure you leave a mark."

I wasn't sure about the quality of blood, but at this point, I could no longer resist the invitation. I pressed my mouth against her outstretched neck and gently pushed my fangs into her soft, smooth, alabaster neck. The flow of blood started immediately and I was instantly surprised at the quality. She wasn't a virgin, but she was also not a slut. There were some toxic traces in her system, but not in overwhelming quantities. It wasn't a gourmet feast, but it wasn't fast food either.

Then, just as I was savoring her sweet flavor, I felt a hand reach from behind and it pulled my mouth away from Misty's neck. This abrupt action made a mess of my blood sucking. Instead of allowing me a chance to stop the flow before releasing, my fangs began to spurt blood when they were removed. The result was Misty's neck being covered with blood and blood squirting all over her costume. My mouth was smeared with blood, giving me the look of a man who had just ate a cherry pie without using his hands.

The person who pulled me away was The Sweet Spot's bouncer. He was a big man, well over 6 feet tall and probably weighed close to 300 pounds. His thick arms and broad chest strained against his "The Sweet Spot" polo shirt. The look on his face was one of total aggression. His melon-like head was crowned with a close-cropped hair cut. His tanned skin was a sharp contrast between Misty and me.

"C'mon buddy" the bouncer shouted as he grabbed me to escort me out of the club. He grabbed my arm and wrenched it into a hammerlock. This was a form of persuasion that made me go in any direction that the bouncer chose to guide me.

Misty on the other hand was not happy. I could hear her over the din of the establishment, screaming that I

wasn't hurting her and for him to leave me alone. Upon realizing what had happened to her costume, she shouted and cursed the bouncer even more. No doubt that the costume Misty was wearing, despite its lack of textile properties, was probably quite expensive.

That was not the only financial motive. I very easily could have become one of her regulars. On top of all that, Misty had made the ultimate mistake: she had forgotten to get the money first. Despite all of that, her protests were ignored.

"Get outta here creep and stay out. Don't ever come back. Consider yourself banned for life! We don't need freak shows like you here."

Those were the final words from the bouncer before he threw me against the panic bar of the metal exit door and I tumbled head over heels into the side alley by The Sweet Spot.

I dusted myself off and wiped the partially dried blood from my face. Again, I was kicked out of somewhere. I felt a little lucky though; at least he didn't try to drive a stake through my heart. I let out a heavy sigh and walked out of the alley back to the Luxor Arms.

As I walked, I was angry and hurt. I was, of course, angry at being thrown out of The Sweet Spot. I was angry at being pulled away from Misty, who had given me the first real human touch in years. I was angry that I had only gotten a taste of a possible steady supply of life giving blood.

But, the hurt, beyond the physical hurt that was doled out by the bouncer, there was the hurt of being cast out yet again from the rest of the world. All I wanted was a little companionship, to know what it was like to feel desired by a woman, even if it was bought and paid for and

only for a few moments. The anger and hurt soon gave way to a deeper melancholy. Zia was gone and I would never see her again in this world. I missed her now more than I ever did.

Chapter Five

A few days after the incident at The Sweet Spot, I walked by the front desk of the flophouse and picked up a letter addressed to me. It wasn't the typical piece of junk mail. This was an artifact from another era; it was a hand written and posted letter. I even checked the address twice to make sure it was actually meant for me.

The return address was from someone I hadn't heard from in years. It had been two or three years, but it wouldn't have shocked me if it had been a hundred. Time is as different for vampires as it is between dogs and humans. A century is not all that long not to hear from someone and that someone was Marta Indresian.

Marta was seventy years older than me and lived with her husband Emil in a quiet village in Switzerland. They had been able to survive the turmoil in Europe, in part, to their location. Over the years, their home had become a haven for vampire refugees throughout the world.

When I had settled into the Luxor Arms, I had sent them a letter just to let them know where I was and how I was doing. When I didn't hear back from them right away, I didn't think anything of it. Like I said, a year or two is nothing to a vampire. However, as much as I had been moving, I was worried that I would have a new address before they could reach me. Telephoning would help, but Marta and Emil didn't believe in them. They were old fashioned in that regard.

I could understand their point. Having a telephone is just one more way for someone you don't know to find out who you are and where you live. Besides, all those

annoying calls during the day can interrupt a vampire's desperately needed rest.

In fact, that whole philosophy carries over into other areas. Utility companies need to know a bit of information about you before they can supply you with water, electricity or any other commodity of that nature. That's why I like the Luxor Arms. I pay for my room and all of its modern comforts once a week in cash at the front desk, with no questions asked.

Besides, mail and letter writing have always been the preferred communication method of vampires. If you wanted to maintain privacy, Post Office boxes could let you stay in touch without an established address. This was helpful if you were moving around frequently in the same area. But sometimes you just had to succumb to the snob appeal of sending a well-written letter to someone.

As soon as I opened the letter, I immediately knew there were problems. Marta's handwriting alone told the story. Meandering lines that often bordered on hieroglyphics replaced her steady pen strokes.

The fluid prose that she produced had been reduced to near child-like gibberish. At first, I attributed it to my attempt to translate her letter into English. Though I am fluent in a number of languages, I don't often get a chance to use my linguistic skills. But, after re-reading a few passages, it became clear that Marta was under considerable stress.

Apparently, Emil had recently passed away unexpectedly and all hell had broken loose in the household. Anytime there is a death, there are all sorts of paperwork and official protocol to deal with. Now the local officials were beginning to ask all sorts of questions that Marta couldn't or wouldn't answer.

With the love of her life gone and all sorts of government officials poking about, it would only be a matter of time before they found out she was a vampire. A young English Goth girl (a “Gothic” as Marta referred to her) that lived with Marta and her late husband had already given the local authorities enough information to warrant further investigation. Apparently, in exchange for living in their opulent home, the girl willingly supplied blood to Marta and Emil. After Emil passed away, the girl decided that the time was right to extort money from the grieving Marta. When Marta refused to give in to the young woman’s extortion plan, she went to the police.

But she didn’t stop there. She then went to some of the sleazier tabloids in Europe and began to play up the “vampire love-slave” angle. On top of the grief that Marta was dealing with, she was now forced to confront a made-up scandal that would cost her anonymity as a vampire.

Marta concluded that her only option now would be to “take the sun”. This would mean laying back and allowing sunlight to envelop her body. By doing this, a vampire would most certainly die. With that, Marta bade me farewell and said she would see me on “the other side”.

By the way, vampires have beliefs in the afterlives. Just like daylight dwellers, we have a divergence of views on what happens after death. Some believe in an after life, some don’t, others believe in reincarnation, and there are those who believe that when you die, you die. Contrary to what daylight dwellers have been taught, vampires do have a spiritual side.

I let the letter fall through my limp hands. Another vampire that I knew, was by now, gone. My circle of friends was no longer a circle. Every person that I knew that was a vampire were now gone.

When I first came to America with my family, there was a network of vampires that supported each other, just like in Europe. But over the years, their numbers began to dwindle. Two world wars and communism had all but wiped out the vampires in Europe. In America, technology and political intolerance had done virtually the same thing.

Granted, I didn't know every vampire in the whole world. Vampires had over time, lived in every country and on every continent. As a child, I remembered when a caravan of Oriental vampires came calling. They came bearing gifts of spices and silks, along with a menagerie of exotic animals. In addition, they brought with them knowledge and wisdom gleaned from their many centuries of existence. In turn, we shared our accumulated knowledge and our hospitality.

Because of the distance of their journey, the group stayed in the area for several months. My parents hosted some members of the party in our home. I learned Hindu and Mandarin Chinese, as well as an appreciation of Eastern culture.

This group returned for my wedding. Not only was it a pleasure to have them there to celebrate my special day, it was also a joy to see these long lost friends again. When they departed for their homelands, we all agreed to get together in another twenty or thirty years. Being vampires, twenty or thirty years are the equivalent of saying, "See you next summer". After they left, we never heard from this group again. I often wondered what happened to this Asian branch of vampires, or if they too were the last of their kind in Asia.

Some of the older vampires spoke of vampire tribes that lived in Africa and interacted with the vampires of

Egypt. They became part of the legend of the Dark Continent and inspired fear in the daylight dwellers that would later venture there. The vampires of Africa also gave the slave traders who had the misfortune to capture them a bit of a scare. This eventually became part of the voodoo legends of the Caribbean and superstitions of the slaves in North America.

In fact, vampires seem to pop up in every culture. I was always finding vampires, members of small clans that never went beyond some small town, or like me, were nomads who roamed in anonymity throughout the world. We would meet each other, exchange some grapevine knowledge and go our separate ways. But even these meetings were becoming less frequent. Now, with Marta and Emil gone, I was beginning to think that I was the last of my kind.

Worst of all, I was beginning to feel the pangs of both guilt and fear over my behavior at The Sweet Spot. The guilt was for having the same feelings towards a stripper that I once had for Zia. I think she would understand my need for companionship, as tenuous and morally ambiguous as it was. She would have also forgiven me for trying to satisfy my physical needs both for blood and intimacy. But, I couldn't forgive myself.

The fear though was real. Word on "the street" travels fast. I wondered who else would know about the incident and what the repercussions would be. Quite a few people saw what went on, and they in turn would tell others. The police, with their ears to the ground and watching everything that goes on will probably be on the lookout for "vampire types".

With this fear also came the fear of losing the support of vampire friendly daylight dwellers. These

people could be counted on to run errands during the day, provide an occasional supply of blood and assist vampires whenever needed. But they too had to be careful. There's only so much stuff that they could explain away before they had to tell the truth. But at least they didn't have to worry about being fried in the sunlight or having a stake driven through their heart while they slept.

On top of this was the fact that I only got a taste of blood from Misty. The quality of blood was good enough, but the quantity was inadequate. I needed to find some blood soon, or else, I would begin to physically deteriorate. The years of inconsistent blood taking had already taken its toll on me. This would definitely draw attention to myself and eventually lead to my death.

Rather than take a chance with a live daylight dweller, I decided to call Al, my supplier. Al was an underworld character who supplied me with blood whenever I didn't feel like drawing blood from a daylight dweller. Al would then stop by with whatever I could afford or what he could procure.

I picked up the phone and gave him a call. He seemed a little stressed about the whole thing, but then again, he was always stressed. He dealt with a number of business enterprises, some legitimate, some not so legitimate. With all these operations going on at once, he had to keep looking over his shoulder, just like me. Only explaining to people that you were a criminal was a lot easier than explaining that you were a vampire.

Al told me it would take a little longer than usual, but he would come through. We set up an appointment and agreed he would come by with whatever he could get. I hung up the phone and I felt a little better. Al would be by with some high-test blood that could keep me going.

The thought of Al coming by also gave me a bit of confidence. Maybe the incident at The Sweet Spot would blow over. Sometimes things like that disappeared just as quickly as they appeared. The nighttime world had an ever-changing cast of characters. People came and went, died and moved away, so there was always enough turnover to cause the collective memory to go blank. The Goth Kids who used to frequent the Speedy Mart were proof of that.

The bouncer was probably working his way through college and would graduate in a couple of years, get a real job and the incident at The Sweet Spot would be nothing more than a partially believable story told over a few beers. For Misty, I would just be another in a long line of soon to be forgotten customers. I would probably be an equally foggy memory that would be recounted to a social worker or psychoanalyst.

Being a vampire gave me the advantage of patience. Knowing that I could outlive all of these people, not to mention that the transient nature of everyone involved, gave me some comfort. The whole incident would in time blow over and be forgotten. However, I made a mental note to stay out of strip joints for a while.

This too, I thought to myself, will pass. I've made mistakes before, and I've always managed to cover my tracks. Another advantage to being a vampire who's lived several hundred years is that I'm used to this and I've had experience doing it. Plus, I've always had the advantage of having never killed anyone in my pursuit of acquiring blood. There are a number of things that could be pinned on me, but murder isn't one of them.

I, Jacob Szabo, a vampire and probably the last of my kind, would survive. Maybe I could apply for protection as an endangered species.

Chapter Six

“Jacob, this is Dottie. She’ll be working with you on night shift. You show her how things are done.”

Mr. Aziz had always been able to have two people working on the day shifts, but the night shift had always been difficult to fill. When he hired me, I told him I had no problems working by myself. After a couple of nights training me and deciding I wouldn’t walk off with the store, Mr. Aziz allowed me to work the night shift by myself.

We both preferred it that way. Mr. Aziz was saved the expense of hiring an additional employee and I got my privacy. Unfortunately, a wave of convenience store robberies had pressured state legislators to pass a law that required two people to be on duty in a store after dark.

Mr. Aziz hadn’t bothered to comply with the law, and I wasn’t one to complain. But, after much deliberating, he decided that he would hire the second person. I was upset, but again I wasn’t going to complain. I never thought he would find anybody. But, then again, I would find that Dottie wasn’t just anybody.

Dottie was in her late fifties, a short stocky woman with the figure of a beach ball. She accentuated her unattractive looks by wearing her hair in a close-cropped perm. Her body was encased from head to toe with man-made fibers.

She had been married for thirty-eight years to her husband Earl. He had retired after working forty years with the Post Office, another fact she liked to remind me about. Then there were her kids, and her grandbabies and her mother who was so sick and her sister who’s a nurse who would help out and her sister who wouldn’t help out

because she lived in another town, but could if she wanted to...

By the way, did I mention Dottie liked to talk a lot?

She was as wide open about her life as I was closed. I tried not to let it bother me. Sometimes, when I had my back turned to her, I would close my eyes as her shrill, matronly voice would drone like some sort of industrial hum.

Occasionally, she would notice that I wasn't listening, or at least not picking up verbal cues quick enough by responding with "you don't say" or "that's interesting" to whatever inane comment that spewed from her blubbery jowls. Sometimes she took the hint, and there would be a few minutes of blessed silence.

Sometimes she would ask if I had heard her, to which I would feign concentration on something and reply, "Oh yeah, right..." That would suffice to continue my illusion of interest in her babbling. Other times, she would complain that I was a, "typical man that never listened".

Dottie was also extremely nosey. She wanted to know as much about me as she could find out. Her ear-splitting shrill voice gave me flashbacks of the days of the Inquisition. Every answer I would give her would lead her to another question. Luckily, she would find a reason to bring herself into the story and she would launch into one of her monologues. By the time she was through, she wouldn't remember what her original question was, so I would be off the hook.

I could never figure out why she wanted to work this job. As near as I could figure out, she just wanted to get out of the house for a few hours a week. I guess this was some sort of paying hobby for her.

She definitely wasn't cut out for the nightlife. As the evening wore on, her chatter would become less frequent. One night, when she was in the back doing some paperwork, I caught her dozing off between a couple of crates of bread and some empty milk crates. I didn't have the heart to disturb her. Besides, the silence was wonderful.

She couldn't understand how I could be so sharp at two in the morning. One night, while she was shaking off her drowsiness, she remarked, "Jacob, what do you do, sleep in a coffin?"

My heart froze. What did she know?

"I don't know how you do it," she continued, "staying awake at night and all. You are younger, but still...if I didn't know better, I'd think you were a vampire."

I politely chuckled. I pooh-poohed the allegation with the stock reply of, "Oh, there's no such thing as vampires. Besides, if I were a vampire, why would I be working here? I'd be living in a castle in Transylvania."

"You're right" she chuckled. "I suppose my grandkids might believe in that sort of stuff, but I think we're both a little too old to believe in those sort of things."

We both laughed at the whole thing and went on with our work. Dottie went on to rambling about something that she saw in the newspaper the other day. As for me, I breathed a mild sigh of relief. Another attempt at revealing my secret was foiled.

The next day during the late afternoon, while I was lounging on my bed at the Luxor Arms, there was a knock on the door. Normally I would tell them to come back later. But I was expecting this visitor. It was my deliveryman, Al, right on schedule with my blood.

Al was the last of my remaining underworld connections. He was the son of a friend of a friend who knew me back in the “old days”. When I moved into town, Al was recommended to me as someone who could get the goods. Al was shocked when I first met him and told him first hand stories about the Prohibition era. He had only heard some of the stories and knew the participants as old men. Al was in his late 60’s. Now, right in front of him was a guy who didn’t look much older than forty and was telling him all about it.

For a price, Al would use his skill and talent to procure me a couple of pints of blood from a local blood bank. When warmed to 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit, the blood would be perfect for a vampire to consume. I used Al whenever the need arose or I had the extra cash to splurge.

With my body covered from head to toe, I put on my ski mask and sunglasses to protect myself from any possible sunlight exposure. I went over to the peephole at the door to double check, then I opened the door to let Al in.

Al walked in carrying a brown leather bag that looked like an over-sized doctor’s medical kit. As usual, he was wearing his black suit complete with black shirt opened halfway down his chest and black slacks. The white pointed toed shoes he wore offset this. Dangling from his neck over his salt-and-pepper hairy chest was a variety of gold chains and jewelry.

Al was breathing heavily due to his age, his health, his pendulous belly that was the result of too much good Italian food and the precious cargo he was carrying. He entered the room and closed the door. At that point, I turned on a light to accommodate my daylight dweller deliveryman.

“Hey Jake, ya gonna rob a bank or somthin’ dere?”

I almost forgot my appearance, so I removed my sunglasses and pulled off my ski mask. Al liked to give me a hard time when he could, but he was very reliable. He sat down at the table and I pulled up a chair to join him.

“How ya doin’ Jake?” he asked in a jaunty tone. “I got some stuff fresh from one of dem virgin college gurlies!”

“Virgin college girls!” I laughed, “Before or after Spring Break!”

Al guffawed heartily and punctuated it with a phlegm-laden cough. Al was suffering from a variety of maladies and the cough could be coming from any one of them. Undeterred, Al pulled out his pack of cigarettes and lit one up. I grimaced and waved my hand at the second-hand smoke.

“I know I shouldn’t, but ya gotta die from somethin’!” Al muttered after taking his first drag.

I dropped my hands and began to breathe slowly through my nose to try and filter the smoke. I chastised myself for trying to criticize my lifeline. Al was the one person who I could depend on to deliver quality blood to me. This saved me the risk of going out and trying to select someone to draw blood from.

Al opened his case and pulled six bags filled to capacity with life prolonging fluid. From the color alone, I could tell that the quality was excellent. I had to run my hand across my face to wipe away the drool that was forming in the corners of my mouth. I had to remind myself to be patient. The feast would be in my stomach soon.

Of course, there was always the money thing. Al’s price would go up and down, depending on the quality and

availability. Al was a great negotiator, but I had a few hundred years of experience on him. Nevertheless, we both drove hard bargains for the merchandise.

“So Al, how much,” I asked.

“Nothin’!”

“Okay, Al. Let’s try this again. I ask you how much for the blood, and you quote me some outrageous price. Then we dicker a bit, I give you money and we’re both happy. So, how much?”

“Ya deaf?” Al retorted. “I said nothin’. Gratis, bupkis, nada, zip! Don’t ya understand? Nothin’!”

For a moment, I thought that Al was kidding. But the tone of his voice and the look on his face was serious. Then, Al’s agitated state quickly changed. He slumped back in his chair with a defeated look on his face. He ran his meaty fingers through what was left of his hair and leaned forward to restate his proposition.

“Look, Jake, I gotta level with ya. They been changin’ things with da blood banks. It’s gettin’ real hard to get blood for ya. In da old days, I could bribe somebody or bend a few rules. But now, wit dem high tech gizmos, ya just can’t go in dere witout gettin’ caught. I ain’t no kid no more and I can’t get around like I yusta. I’m sorry, but dis is da last shipment of blood I can getcha.”

My heart sank and collided with my knotted stomach. Al had saved me from a life of foraging for blood. The whole ballet of finding a donor, sucking the blood and dealing with the repercussions was something I didn’t want to deal with. Of course, the danger of not being successful and being arrested or killed for being a vampire was something I didn’t want to deal with either.

“Ah, c’mon Al. You still got the touch. Look, I’ll give you \$100 for...”

“No, Jake, it’s over. I made up my mind. I just can’t do it no more for ya.” With that, Al reached down and closed the case with a snap. He ground out his cigarette in my unused ashtray, got up from his chair with the case in his hand and began to make his way to the door. Al got a few steps from the door and turned back to me. I got up from my chair and went to the door behind him.

“Hey Al, I’ll see you around, okay?”

Al put down the case he was carrying and gave me a hug. For a split second, I thought maybe this was going to be the “Kiss of Death”. Then I remembered that much like vampires, organized crime members have myths that follow them as well. If Al was going to kill me, he simply would have killed me and been done with it.

As he released me from his embrace, Al gave me some final words.

“Take care of ya self, Jake. And by the way, word on da street says dat dere’s some creep down at da Sweet Spot dat was suckin’ blood from one ah da gurls. I dunno if dat was youse, but either way: Watch out! See ya ‘round.”

“Al?”

“Yeah, Jake?”

“Al, I never asked this before, but...does it bother you that I’m a vampire?”

The question caught Al like the proverbial shot you never hear. He fell silent and had an eerie look on his face. “No, Jake” he replied, “it don’t bother me none. Ya always been on da square wit me. Ya ain’t never stiffed me, ya ain’t killed nobody, at least not dat I know of, and ya ain’t never tried to pull nothin’ funny wit me. Ya got more class than most people I come across. Just ‘cause youse a vampire, dat don’t mean ya ain’t a standup kinda guy.”

“Thanks Al.” That was all I could get out without bursting into tears or taking the edge off of his profound statement. Judging from his demeanor, I got the feeling that this would be the last time I would see my blood deliveryman, with or without the goods.

It was also mind blowing that a member of the criminal underworld would tell me I’m a good person. Meanwhile, the rest of the world looks at me as a walking freak show.

Al was ready to turn the knob when he turned back to me. “Ain’t youse gonna put on dat bank robbin’ getup? Ya know, onna count ah da sun.”

The remark broke the tension and was a life saving reminder to prepare for the outside world. I put on my protective clothing and stepped away from the door so that Al could leave without my skin burning off and eyes being boiled out of their sockets.

As soon as Al left, I quickly put five of the bags of blood in my tiny refrigerator and I left one out on the counter next to my hotplate to be heated. To do this, I got out a large saucepan and a digital thermometer.

Taking blood this way is somewhat crude, but quite effective. The blood is heated to 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit and taken in just like soup. Of course, the temperature is important. Too hot, and the nutrients dissipate. Too cold, and the blood becomes difficult to digest. Just like the Three Bears, the blood has to be “just right”.

I slit open the bag, poured the contents into the pan and inserted the digital thermometer. I turned the hotplate on to its lowest setting. Then, I just watched the digital thermometer to see when my supper was ready.

The wait for the blood to hit the right temperature is always tough. My mouth kept drooling in anticipation of

my upcoming feast. I didn't want my desire for blood to distract me from making sure the temperature was correct. I took a deep breath and kept my focus on the digital reading that was slowly moving toward 98.6.

My patience was soon rewarded. As the temperature reached the magic number, I took the blood from the hot plate. I carefully poured the contents into a glass and quickly began to drink the blood before it cooled below a healthy temperature.

Al was true to his word. The blood he had brought me had a snap to it that I hadn't had in years. I would never know if this blood came from a virgin college girl, but judging from its flavor and purity, they were probably a young virgin female who was a health food fanatic. I quickly drank down the glass and poured the rest of the life-giving crimson fluid in the glass for a second helping. I chugged down the rest in a couple of gulps. This second ingestion made my head spin and my ears ring. I put the glass on the table and fell backwards on my bed reeling.

The blood was almost too good. It was so nutrient laden and I had been deprived for such a long time that I wasn't used to such quality. The blood had an almost hallucinogenic attribute to it. The colors of everything in the room became brighter and more in focus, my hearing seemed sharper, and I could feel the gray being sucked out of my hair. But these weren't hallucinations; my vampire anatomy was reacting to high-test blood.

It took almost an hour for the blood to be assimilated into my system. When I got off my bed, I felt like an unleashed bull. The blood had added years to my life and had taken years off my appearance. I was ready to work a month without a day off.

When I bounded into work, the reality of what Al's blood had done became apparent. Mr. Aziz, who was leaving for the night as I was coming in, whistled and rolled his eyes when he saw me.

"You dating some young girl! Or maybe you go a little crazy with your hair coloring, no?"

I have always taken pride in fading into the background. I don't dress colorfully nor do anything else to attract additional attention. But, drinking that quality blood that Al brought had made some physical changes that I should have anticipated. All I could do was smile, nod and hope that my new appearance would fade from his short-term memory.

However, Dottie wasn't going to let up. She spent the evening referring to my appearance every time she talked to me. Did I have a girlfriend, or who was my hairdresser, or was I working out; inquiring minds wanted to know and Dottie was determined to find out.

After a while, I tuned her out much the same way I always did. Maybe she would get bored with the subject and start talking about her "grandbabies" or something of that nature. I could then resume my status as human wallpaper.

However, I couldn't turn off my paranoia. I was now scrutinizing every customer who walked through the door. Were they at The Sweet Spot that night? If they were, would they recognize me? And was I drawing attention to myself by being paranoid?

My paranoia hit a fever pitch when a pair of police officers came in and poured themselves some complementary coffee. Instead of greeting me and leaving, they stayed around. They walked through the store, looked at me, then continued to walk the aisles. Occasionally, they

would stop and say something to each other in hushed tones.

They approached Dottie at one point and began to talk to her as well. Even with Dottie's loud volume, I couldn't make out hushed tones that she spoke in. I watched for facial expressions and hand gestures, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. As quickly as the conversation began with her, the policemen withdrew and Dottie went back to puttering. I guess she knew enough not to bore policemen with her petty anecdotes.

After their conversation with Dottie, the two policemen continued to linger. The longer they stayed in the store, the more concerned I became. My heart began to pound like a jackhammer and was moving from my chest to my throat in that same rhythm. Then, they moved purposefully toward the counter.

"Is there anything I can help you two with?" I asked the policemen when they arrived at my cash register.

I don't know if the tone of my voice, my demeanor or some combination of the two raised their suspicion. Maybe it was just my centuries of hard-wired paranoia kicking in. The police took their time answering me.

"No," one of them replied. "Everything alright with you...Jacob?"

The police officer that broke the silence was somebody I had never seen in the Speedy Mart. When he personalized his reply to me, he seemed to read it off my nametag. At the same time, he and his partner seemed to be sizing me up.

"Fine, gentlemen. Everything's fine."

"Good, glad to hear it. Just checking for suspicious characters. Seen any in here tonight?"

"No, I haven't seen a thing. It's been pretty quiet."

The police officer looked around, looked at his partner, then turned to me. "Have a good night then...Jacob." With that, they turned and left the store.

I breathed not only a sigh of relief, but I began to breathe again. A thousand thoughts went through my head. Did Dottie tip them off? Did Al get busted? Were they investigating the incident at The Sweet Spot?

I spent the rest of my shift in a state of constant panic. I kept waiting for the police officers to come back in and read me my rights. Maybe Al's underworld contacts would come in and execute me. During the slow periods of the evening, the hum of the fluorescent lights seemed to heighten my fear, like the soundtrack of a suspense movie.

Even Dottie was subdued the rest of the evening. She went about puttering around the store and ringing up the occasional customer. She had an aura of unease that was completely out of character for her.

When Mr. Aziz came in, I asked him if I could go home early, telling him I was not feeling well. That wasn't too far from the truth. The events of the evening had made my stomach churn and the sooner I got out of the store the better. Since I rarely called in sick and I probably looked somewhat ill, Mr. Aziz had no problem with me leaving early. Of course, Dottie was more than happy to volunteer to cover for me in order to pick up some overtime.

On the way back to the Luxor Arms, I kept looking over my shoulder. I couldn't tell if it was the high-test blood or the paranoia. But I knew one thing: I was going to have trouble sleeping this morning.

Chapter Seven

I got back to the Luxor Arms out of breath and panic stricken. After my ritual hot shower, I opened a bottle of cheap whiskey I kept around for a special occasion. This wasn't the occasion.

I turned on the radio to a "beautiful music" station, trying to relax myself. The combination of the innocuous music and the hard liquor made me doze for a moment. By late morning, however, I had woken up with a dry mouth and a bad headache.

After a trip to the bathroom for a glass of water and a couple of aspirins, I got back in bed and tried to resume my daytime slumber. However, all I could do was toss and turn.

I lay awake some days wondering why. Why do I exist? Why do I need blood to survive? Why am I hated so much? Why, why, why....

My vampirism is compounded with my existence at the lowest rung on the economic ladder. It always seems that it costs more to be poor than it does to be rich. I guess that's why the poor are poor and the rich are rich. Having lived in both worlds, being a vampire is easier when you have lots of money.

The need for blood is something I've never understood. I remember many centuries ago hearing a vampire that had studied this had concluded that vampirism was merely a quirk on the evolutionary ladder. A genetic mix-up here, a DNA screw up there, and you get a sub-species of Homo Sapiens who need blood to survive and have had their physical make up altered to adapt to this.

I often wonder how it all started. Maybe some caveman accidentally tasted blood from another human being and liked it. Over time, this caveman found that the only way to get the blood would be to drain it from a sleeping donor. This turned the caveman into a nocturnal creature. Succeeding generations would eventually develop retractable fangs and an aversion to daylight. Because of their actions, this sub-species becomes isolated and inbred. A few hundred thousand generations later, you get Jacob Szabo. The human race's equivalent to the dodo bird.

Then again, maybe vampires are the descendents of some sort of space aliens. Eons ago, my ancestors could have come to this planet in search of blood. After living a few centuries on this planet, the vampire population was left here and the mother ship never bothered to return to pick us up.

The hatred, I'll have to admit, is justifiable to a certain extent. First, there's the drawing of blood from people. The whole process is somewhat intimate, best performed on a subject who is willing and able. But blood donorship, even at the hospital, is not always a desirable event.

Maybe it's the jealousy that non-vampires feel about having a life span of only sixty or seventy years as opposed to a life span of centuries. I found it ironic that the "good Christian" people who liken us to the devil's spawn have no problem with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob living hundreds and hundreds of years, yet persecute vampires for daring to have the secret of eternal life.

Over the course of history, everyone from the Conquistadors to the aging matrons of Beverly Hills have searched for the secret to eternal youth. In the meantime,

the vampires had the secret all along. I guess it makes people angry to see someone acquire so easily something they have been striving for all their lives.

When I do take blood, I don't kill the donor or turn them into the "Living Dead". I just take enough to slake my thirst, about a pint more or less. The donor might feel a little dizzy or faint, but I don't kill them.

The deaths that have occurred are the work of blood gluttons. In vampire vernacular, these vampires suck so much blood from the donor that they kill them. After the Black Plague swept Europe, many vampires became desperate for clean blood. It got to the point that when some vampires found a young virgin girl, they would gorge themselves on their blood. The effect on the donor was devastating in that so much blood would be taken from their body that they couldn't recover.

Soon, people began to link the deaths to known vampires. This led to the Age of the Vampire Hunter. They were the bastard offspring of religious fanaticism and political fascism. All of the misery that the political and religious leaders had foisted upon the common people needed a scapegoat. The scapegoat became vampires.

Like dogs, we began to be hunted and slaughtered like the American Bison. Their legacy reduced our human sub-species to near extinction. The retribution for being different was a wooden stake driven through the heart.

There had been others before them. My grandparents told of the persecution by the Egyptians and Romans. After recovering during the Dark Ages, vampires again came under attack from the religious revival of the Middle Ages. Vampires became hopeful during the Renaissance that maybe the superstition of the previous

centuries would be replaced by logical thought. But, hatred doesn't die so easily.

In fact, politicians and other authority figures looking to extend their grasp have always been able to take advantage of long standing prejudice. Religious and ethnic wars tore Europe asunder, eventually driving my family along with other vampires to the United States. In the United States, we found groups that hated us simply because we were from another country. Meanwhile in Europe, the fascists used old anti-Semitic hatreds to enslave entire nations and send untold millions to their death. All the time, these power grubbing individuals never thought of the people that they were destroying.

Then, I think about the death of my beloved Zia. Such a beautiful, loving and caring woman who was murdered in her sleep like some rabid animal. Why, I keep asking myself. If they had only known her, they never would have killed her. Or would they?

The days of my life have begun to blur like the swirling Fruit 'n Frosty machine making another sickeningly sweet concoction. For daylight dwellers, each day is a large portion of their life, while for vampires it goes on and on. Each day begins to look the same as the other. It leads to a monotony that no daylight dweller can ever imagine.

My father once told me that after the first hundred years, nothing would surprise me. After two hundred years, you won't know one day from the next. By the time I will have lived to my first millennium, I'll be ready to leave this world.

I guess that's why a vampire often chooses the time of their demise. At some point when they have decided that they have had enough, all a vampire needs to do is stop

taking blood. The decline is in direct correlation with the age of the vampire. Those who have lived for a thousand years or so quickly deteriorate, while someone my age declines rather slowly. Vampires don't think of this as suicide. With all of the things that vampires are forced to deal with in their lives, eternal life in this world is more a curse than a blessing.

The length of a vampire's life is enough to drive one insane. You meet people, they grow old and they die; yet you remain the same. You constantly have to make new acquaintances, hoping you move on before they realize that you haven't aged a month in the ten years that you've known them.

In recent years, vampires have been forced to cope with the rapid changes that technology has foisted upon the world. The changes my parents dealt with in their centuries of existence are nothing compared to the changes I've been forced to deal with.

During my lifetime, I have seen travel change from sailing ships and horses to spacecraft and automobiles. I have seen advancements like the railroad go from cutting edge to near obsolescence. I have seen nations rise, fall and rise again, and everything that is old becomes new again, as well as everything new becoming old. In the last hundred years, my mind has been in a constant state of upheaval.

The changes in technology are pale compared to the social changes that I have had to endure. I have seen societies go from not allowing women to vote to having women politicians. I have also seen society throw off the shackles of kings only to replace them with the yokes of dictators. The only certainty that I know is that society will not accept me as a vampire. To survive, I have to

constantly adapt. But to adapt, I need to have a consistent set of ground rules to work with.

Just as I get used to the rules of the game, they get changed. My existence is predicated on the fact that I keep my vampire existence hidden. Hiding becomes more difficult the more things change.

Despite what people say, vampires don't live forever. Even with a perfect blood supply, we wear out and get old. Not quite as fast as a daylight dweller, but we still age. It's not that we live forever; it just seems like it.

As I said before, many vampires also believe in the hereafter. Just because we suck blood and sleep in the daytime doesn't mean we can't have a soul. Even with the abuse that we've had heaped upon us over the millennia, there are spiritual feelings among vampires, myself included. Our spiritual beliefs are as varied as those of the daylight dwelling world are. There are Christians, Jews, Moslems, Buddhists, and Hindus. There are also atheists, agnostics and everything in between. With all of this diversity, there are even some Satan worshipers and practitioners of any number of pagan beliefs among us. After all, vampires have been around long enough and have had enough life experience to try any number of religions.

As for me, yes, I believe in a God. I believe in an afterlife. Anything would be better than this existence. The life of running and hiding is tiring.

By mid-afternoon, I finally drift off into something that resembles sleep. The "beautiful music" is normally just background noise, hypnotically keeping my worries and tension at bay. Occasionally the news chimes in to break the monotony, but I don't pay attention.

Then, the news commentator talked about a murder. However, this wasn't just another anonymous, random

victim of senseless street violence. This was someone near and dear to me. In the words of the announcer:

...Alphonse "Big Al" Riglirono, was found shot to death, execution style, in a warehouse on the city's south side. Riglirono was a known crime figure and was under investigation by Federal authorities for interstate transportation of stolen property, racketeering, and wire fraud. He was also under investigation by State and local authorities on numerous other charges.

The police are pursuing several leads in this case and could not comment on when an arrest would be made. In other news...

Damn. That was Al, my Al, and my lifeline. He was always looking over his shoulder. I guess this time he looked over the wrong shoulder, or maybe he didn't look at all. It was an occupational hazard he had to deal with. I just never thought he'd buy it this way. I had always hoped that he would go the way he always told me he wanted to go: in the throes of sexual bliss with a \$1,000 a night hooker.

I laughed and wept at the same time. I also realized that whoever might have killed Al might be coming for me. My paranoia now escalated. It was bad enough to have people in the law enforcement world after you. At least with them, they have to play by a certain set of rules. The police need arrest and search warrants, reasonable suspicion and other generally accepted procedures before they can come after me. Even if they cut some corners, the police have to worry about explaining things like driving a stake through a suspect's heart.

On the other hand, the underworld has no similar rules of law to follow. They can attack any time, without any sort of warrant or approval other than that of a crime

boss. Either way, I now need to be more cautious than ever. I took another shot of whiskey and tried to get some more fitful sleep.

Chapter Eight

I slept through my alarm and was running late for my shift at the Speedy Mart. I have always prided myself on being punctual for my jobs, regardless of how much I may have disliked the job or menial it was. So, I quickly pulled myself together and rushed out the door as fast as I could. I weaved in and out of the early evening sidewalk traffic at a combination jog/walk. At one point, I felt like I was in an action movie behind the wheel of a fast car, trying to dodge other cars and pedestrians.

Al's death was still in the back of my mind, gnawing away at me. I was in too much of a rush now to worry about the implications of his "gangland slaying". Al often remarked about the different people he dealt with on a day-to-day basis. Any one of them would have the means, the motive and the opportunity to commit the crime. I had to focus on the task at hand: getting to the Speedy Mart as close to on time as I could.

As I walked in the door much to my surprise and consternation, Mr. Aziz was there waiting for me. This didn't surprise me; a late arriving employee was one of his pet peeves and he would chastise the offender personally and with considerable vigor. However, the expression on Mr. Aziz's face was completely out of character. He was smiling.

In fact, I had never seen Mr. Aziz smile so much in my life. I couldn't recall the last time he'd smiled, period. I had even come in to work a little late, which generally sets off a major hissy fit, but Mr. Aziz didn't seem to care. So, when he called me aside to speak with him in his office, I wasn't sure if he was going to fire me or not.

The back office at the Speedy Mart was the nerve center of Mr. Aziz and his brother Ahmad's burgeoning empire, though Omar, AKA Mr. Aziz, was usually the only one who used the office. Ahmad would show up occasionally to do some paperwork, run deposits to the bank and occasionally work in the Speedy Mart. He supposedly managed the other stores in the empire, leaving Omar to run the main store where I worked. However, being younger and less serious, Ahmad was a bit of a playboy. Mr. Aziz would shake his head ruefully when he would talk about Ahmad, saying that he spent "too much time in discos".

Though they were brothers and they worked well together, they often fought. Sometimes when they were there together, they would yell and rant in their native Middle Eastern tongue. The arguments wouldn't last long, but in the last couple of months Ahmad had been spending more time in the office and their arguments had been more frequent and vocal.

From here, they ran the five other Speedy Marts, as well as their real estate holdings and import-export business. Though it was a small room, there were two desks, four file cabinets and a couple of chairs. Both desks were stacked high with papers and other clutter. The room reeked of stale cigarette smoke and rancid cologne. I didn't care what he planned to do to me, but whatever it was I hoped that it would be over quickly. The office was the last place I wanted to be.

"Come, sit Jacob" he invited after he closed the door. "Would you like tea?"

I shook my head no and proceeded to sit down on a battered chair in front of Mr. Aziz's desk. Despite Mr.

Aziz's amicable hospitality, I took a deep breath and prepared for the worst.

"Jacob," he continued, "you have been with me long time now. So, I want you to be first to hear good news. Today my brother and I make deal that make us rich. In ninety days, we sell Speedy Mart stores to Nite Owl chain. They own 2,000 stores world-wide, pay us big money for ours!"

My heart sank at those words. Nite Owl was becoming a major player in the twenty-four hour convenience store world. They had even succeeded in exporting the concept of instant gratification on a twenty-four hour basis to thirty countries on two continents.

I may be a lowly nightshift clerk, but I'm not oblivious to what's going on in my industry. A vampire's very survival depends on staying one step ahead of daylight dwellers. Nite Owl had been buying up mom-and-pop chains and individual stores for years. The ones they couldn't buy were run out of business by everything from predatory pricing to market saturation.

There are many obvious benefits to being a part of a larger entity. However, for a vampire, this can lead to certain disaster. Major corporations like Nite Owl want to know all about their employees. Everything has to be verified and put down on paper. After they get the up front information, they keep a close watch on their employees, allowing little wiggle room for non-conformity.

In contrast, to get my job with Speedy Mart, I partially filled out a short, one-page application. I never had to worry about how my job was done; I simply had to do it. I also had some flexibility with my shifts so that I never had to worry about being scheduled to work during the daylight hours. Mr. Aziz didn't know, or if he did, he

didn't seem to care, that I was a vampire. With Nite Owl, this would all change.

I feigned happiness at the whole event. I congratulated Mr. Aziz for his good fortune. Not that I cared, but I had to ask what he planned to do. My curiosity was urging me to find out what a Middle Eastern immigrant and his brother planned to do now that they had hit the Great American Jackpot.

"Who knows," he shrugged. "Maybe I go on cruise and meet women. Go out to disco like Ahmad. Maybe go back to old country and retire!" The last remark made him roar with laughter.

I wished him luck, shook his hand and went back to work. Now, I had to start thinking of an escape plan. I would need to plan my exit, just in case.

Not all of the Speedy Mart employees were as disappointed as I was. Dottie, my nightshift mate, was ecstatic. A big company like Nite Owl was just the type of non-thinking bureaucratic organization that Dottie would enjoy. All she would have to do is show up; Nite Owl would take care of all of the rest.

Likewise, Dottie was the type of employee that Nite Owl wanted. A retired person who was looking for a hobby with a paycheck attached who would obey orders and never complain. She was the poster child of a Nite Owl model employee.

"Isn't it exciting!" she would exclaim. She was poring over the employee literature that Mr. Aziz had received and distributed to all of the Speedy Mart employees. It was typical megacorporation propaganda, filled with empty promises and vague generalities that were meant to hide the true message: Do it our way or else!

“Just think Jacob” Dottie exclaimed, “We’ll be part of one of the largest convenience store chains in the world! Isn’t that exciting! And the employee benefits!”

“Super.”

“Oh, c’mon” Dottie replied, somewhat miffed that I didn’t share her enthusiasm for the impending acquisition. “Big companies know how to take care of people.”

They know how to take care of people all right. Dottie’s naivete was another quality that corporations like Nite Owl liked. Just follow orders and do your job.

Don’t get me wrong; I’m not a rebel or an iconoclast. But if I’m going to be stuck in a job, I at least want some say so in how it’s done. That’s what made the Speedy Mart tolerable. Mr. Aziz didn’t care how you did it, just as long as you got the job done.

Dottie continued to drone on about the joys of working for Nite Owl, but I tuned her out. She never seemed to know when I did that, which sometimes made for some interesting moments. One time, while Dottie was in the middle of one of her one-woman performances, a customer asked me if she was crazy.

But as luck would have it, a person came up to the cash register with a purchase while another customer was asking for assistance. With that, I pulled rank and politely informed Dottie that we had customers. She quickly put the literature down and went about annoying the customers in her own pathetic way.

I knew I had to get away, but I needed time to think. Should I run or could I find a way to work within the Nite Owl system? Maybe I could find another job, one that would be less intrusive? These were thoughts that clouded my mind for the rest of the evening as I sold cigarettes, beer and snacks.

With all that weighing on my shoulders, getting home and going to sleep after my shift was especially necessary. I needed to escape from all of the pressure that was beginning to come from every direction. In the back of my mind, I kept wondering if the people who killed Al would be after me as well.

Al's demise also closed another avenue of escape. With his connections, I could have gotten some fake identification and slipped through the fickle fingers of authority. I had done this frequently in the past and people like Al were important in the process. Now with him gone, I had no more underworld connections. Even some of the people I knew through Al were not people I would want to approach at this point. Any one of them could have been the hit man responsible for his death.

Mid-way through my daylight slumber, I heard someone push something under my door. I thought nothing of it, because I had given the front desk explicit orders not to disturb me during the day unless the place was on fire or some other emergency. I just went back to sleep.

Hours later, when I woke up, I noticed the envelope that had just passed under my door. It was quite a feat since I had put additional padding under the door to prevent any residual sunlight from getting in. I picked the envelope off the floor, opened it and began to read the contents.

The letter was addressed to the "Residents of the Luxor Arms" and it stated that the Luxor Arms would be demolished and that the residents had sixty days to find other accommodations. Along with the letter was a list of other buildings and social service agencies that could assist those that would be displaced. Unfortunately, there were no agencies that specialized in helping displaced vampires.

The Luxor Arms wasn't much, but it was all I had. On what I made at the Speedy Mart, this was all I could afford. I had no idea what Nite Owl would pay me, that's assuming I would be working for them. This would also be a factor in what job I would take next.

There were other places in the city I could live, but I would be at the mercy of public transit. I shuddered at the thought of being at a bus stop just as the sun would rise and frying to death because of its late arrival.

Buying a car was out of the question. Not only was the cost prohibitive, I would also be running headlong into all of the same problems I was trying to avoid. This would be one possible avenue of compromising my anonymity. With all of the paperwork involved, especially with the drivers' license, there would be a number of difficult to answer questions. Besides, I hadn't driven in years.

Maybe I could find a new job next to a new place to live and solve all of my problems with one bold stroke. But I needed to do something soon. Inactivity on my part wouldn't stop the wheels of inevitability from crushing me.

To do that, I needed time to think. That meant time away from the Speedy Mart and all of the accompanying distractions. If I couldn't come up with a solution, then I needed to come up with an escape plan.

Getting the time off was easier than I had expected. Mr. Aziz was happy to give me five days off with pay. He's not a particularly generous man, but he has a soft spot for me. He told me to have some fun, like he was preparing to do. That was evident with all of the cruise ship and assorted travel brochures that were lying in various spots on his cluttered desk.

The first day, or night if you will, of my vacation was busy but fruitless. I checked out other jobs that I could

do that would replace my Speedy Mart employment. Everything I looked at had the same conditions as working for Nite Owl: a mountain of forms and too many questions.

I was having similar problems with my housing situation. There again, lots of paper and lots of questions, on top of the fact that most of what I saw would be well out of my price range. One of the apartment managers politely suggested that I get a roommate. That was good for a laugh. I could see my classified ad now: "SWM, vampire, seeking a roommate that won't be too freaked out". The irony of that is I'd probably be more frightened by the applicants than they would be of me.

The second night started out with some optimism, but it didn't take long for me to come home with my tail between my legs. What few leads I had on housing and employment had quickly turned into dead ends. Besides, going out at night looking for housing and employment was difficult. Most of the people you needed to speak with face-to-face were gone for the day.

Even speaking to these people on the telephone during the day was a challenge for me. I operate as well during the day as daylight dwellers do in the middle of the night. Between my hard-wired vampire penchant for being a child of the night and centuries of conditioning, staying awake during the day is a struggle.

Day two had quickly turned into a bust. I needed to come up with a plan. But I was just too tired to think. After all of my efforts, I collapsed into a heap and into a deep slumber. If I couldn't come up with a plan, at least I could get some badly needed rest.

Chapter Nine

I've had a night off before, but never more than two in a row. This was the third night of my five-day "vacation". Bored and listless, I decided to do the only thing I could think of that was still free. I went for a walk in the night air.

My feet made a rhythmic cadence as I walked past deserted storefronts and establishments that, unlike myself, only came alive during the day. I wanted to go in somewhere, anywhere, just to feel like I belonged. That's the toughest part about being a vampire, not belonging to anything.

My course zigzagged neighborhood in which I lived. I deliberately avoided the Speedy Mart that would soon be a Nite Owl. Mr. Aziz didn't know it yet, but I would not work for Nite Owl. My decision wouldn't affect him, but there was no sense in tipping my hand before I had to. I needed time to figure out how to pull off my next disappearing act.

In my attempt to avoid the Speedy Mart, I traveled a bit off the track. Before I knew it, I was passing The Sweet Spot. I went by, stopped, and turned to walk past the club. My sentimentality was stronger than the lifetime ban that The Sweet Spot bouncer had imposed on me.

My curiosity quickly got the better of me. Like a pre-pubescent youth, I tried to get a glimpse at what was going on inside, oblivious to the blackened windows in front of me. The constant throb of the bass from the music was all that my senses could detect of life inside the building.

"Well, well...if isn't Count Dracula."

I let out a gasp that scared me more than the sound of that voice. I turned and was confronted by the bouncer from The Sweet Spot. He stood there with his arms crossed, poised for the kill.

“What are you doing here?” he asked angrily.

“Where’s Misty?”

It was a stupid question, but the bouncer’s sudden appearance had caught me off guard. So, I blurted out the first thing my subconscious could come up with.

“She don’t work here no more! Why don’t you beat it? You’re banned for life, remember.”

“Life,” I replied, “that’s a long time, but death is a lot longer.”

The bouncer was in no mood for an intellectual debate. He had every advantage on me: size, strength, my ban from the club, and my vampirism. It was time for him to exploit the advantage. He stepped towards me and gave me a forceful shove.

“You know what you are. You’re a creep, a weirdo. It’s guys like you that give the adult entertainment business a bad name.”

Each statement he made was punctuated with a shove. Each shove forced me to retreat just a little bit more. Each retreat forced me further into an alley beside the club.

The bouncer began to smell blood like a jungle carnivore. He could also see my fear; there was no way for me to hide it. The irony of it all: a vampire cowering in an alley in the moonlight at the hands of a daylight dweller.

“You know what?” smirked the hulking bouncer, “I think I’m going to beat you ‘til you bleed, then I’m gonna beat you for bleeding. And since you’re a “VAMPIRE”,

I'll make you lick up every drop of your own blood. Then I'm gonna start all over and do it again."

The bouncer now had me backed into the alley. To my back was a brick wall and to my right and left were doors that, even if they were unlocked, were too far away to attempt to open. In front of me was a bruising bouncer who would show no mercy.

Again, the irony was almost comical. If I were a vampire in the Hollywood sense, I could change into a bat and fly away. Maybe I could use my hypnotic powers and turn this guy into a zombie. Better still, despite being half his size, I could use my vampire super powers and throw him around like a rag doll.

Since none of these options had any basis in reality, I decided to use my slight build to my advantage. I chose a direction and began to run at a sharp angle away from the bouncer. This way I could use my quickness and agility to escape from his clutches.

I nearly escaped when the bouncer's long gorilla like arm reached out and plucked me out of the air by my shirt collar. He hurled me into the wall where I landed with a sick thud. Now, he was moving in for the kill.

"Hey, don't leave so soon. We're gonna have a little party, just you and me. It's an asskickin' party and you're the guest of honor."

Like the shoves, the bouncer punctuated his last statement with a vicious right hook to my jaw. The hit hurt me twice, first by the initial connection with his ham hock like fist and again as I landed in a group of partially filled garbage cans. I cleared my head just in time to be picked up by the bouncer by the front of my shirt.

This time the bouncer went for a body shot by driving his knee into my sternum. I gagged for air as I fell

again into the garbage cans. The garbage cans splayed across the alley, partially emptying their rancid contents. At this point, I was lying helpless on the rough pavement. The bouncer again grabbed me by the front of my shirt and brought me to my feet. I was through, but the bouncer wasn't.

"Don't leave so soon," he taunted. "This party is just getting started."

With that in mind, he wheeled and threw me against one of the metal doors that opened into the alley. Instead of hitting stone, I now had the opportunity to land on solid metal. The sensation was slightly different, but just as painful.

Now the bouncer decided to change his tactics. Instead of his fists, he began to put his martial arts background to work. He brought his right leg around and drove his instep into my jaw via a technically executed crescent kick.

The results were devastating for me. Though I didn't lose consciousness, the kick separated my mind from my body. I was driven into the unforgiving pavement, leading with my shoulder.

Sometimes, in the middle of a calamity, the most unusual thoughts cross one's mind. For me, I was amazed how such a large and bulky man could be so agile. I was also impressed in the diversity of his fighting skills, as he effortlessly switched from boxing to martial arts.

Now, it seemed like my only hope would be to lie there and pretend to be dead. This seems to work in the animal kingdom. I quickly found out that this would only make matters worse.

The bouncer stood over me, shouting and cursing. He demanded that I put up a fight. Since I wouldn't

respond, he decided to continue the physical barrage with several swift kicks to my ribs.

I could no longer ignore his continued attacks. The first kick weakened my ribcage, the second tore ligaments and the third found its mark by cracking one of my short ribs. I gathered what I had left of my strength and pulled myself out of range of the fourth kick.

“C’mon you stinking piece of crap, put up a fight,” he taunted.

Somehow, I pulled myself to my feet. My vision was blurred and sweat poured from every pore in my body. My body hurt everywhere. I decided there was no choice, but to attempt some sort of counterattack. Maybe it was the adrenaline or just some of Al’s Virgin College Girl Blood, but I gathered my wits enough to clumsily charge the bouncer and swing my right fist at him.

The counterattack was worse than futile. The bouncer sidestepped me and I fell again to the pavement. The bouncer reached down, grabbed me by the collar and pulled me to my feet. He then delivered a flurry of blows worthy of the heavyweight champ. Each time his fist hit my face, I heard a loud pop. I stumbled backwards into the alley wall. My legs felt like they were rubber and the only thing holding me up was the wall I was leaning against.

“Please” I gasped, “for God’s sake, I’ve had enough. Let me go.”

“Let you go! I tell you what creep, I’m not only gonna let you go, I’m gonna put you out of your misery. Then I won’t have to worry about you coming around here no more. My dancers won’t have to worry ‘bout you drinking their blood.”

With his final remark, he approached for the kill. However, the last statement served as an inspiration. I had

one chance, provided he got close enough. I began to lick the inside of my mouth and slowly, my fangs began to emerge from their resting place.

“The trouble with you” the bouncer mocked, “is that beating you to death is gonna be too easy. Hell, I’ve had girlfriends that put up better fights than you.”

He was now less than an arm’s length away. Using the wall for support and the last drop of my strength, I flung myself on the bouncer. I wrapped my arms around him and squeezed tight. Then, I buried my erect fangs deep into his thick neck.

The bouncer let out a scream, one more of surprise than pain or fear. He tried to counter with a bear hug of his own. His strength made the squeezing on my broken ribs excruciating. But I dug in with my fangs and began to drain the blood from his massive frame.

The taste of his blood was nauseating. It reeked of testosterone, steroids, alcohol, drugs of all sorts, and traces of sexually transmitted diseases. Now, on top of the struggle with him, I had to fight off my own gag reflex.

As his blood began to leave his body, the bouncer began to lose some of his strength. However, I could taste adrenaline in his blood, which meant he now understood the seriousness of the situation. He relinquished his bear hug and began to pound on my back with his fists.

My fangs and mouth had now formed an airtight suction. The more he fought, the more I drained. I felt like I was trying to eat an entire day’s worth of poorly cooked food in less than thirty seconds. I was now my own worst enemy as I fought to keep myself from breaking the hold I had on the bouncer.

Even as he stopped, I continued to drain his blood. I couldn’t take a chance on him recovering. But his weight

became too much for me to hold, so we both dropped to the pavement with me on top of him. As we landed, I released my grip and used his ample frame to break my fall. My suction released as soon as we hit the ground and I withdrew my fangs from his neck.

It took a few moments for me to gather the strength to get up. I pushed myself away from the body and got to my feet. He was dead; there was no mistake in that. His once tanning booth bronze skin had turned a pale greenish-white. His lips looked like those of a child who had spent the afternoon eating grape Popsicles. The final gruesome sign was wide-open, unblinking eyes that stared up into the night sky.

Just as I had regained my bearings, my stomach began to gurgle. At the same time a wave of nausea swept over my body. I began to gag and cough as a prelude to vomiting. Then, like a volcano erupting, I began to spew the partially digested blood of my victim. At first, it was brief, but soon the deluge of spew exploded out of my mouth and onto the alley pavement. The force of the reflex drove me to my knees. When I was through, a large puddle of crimson foam lay next to the body of the bouncer.

As I surveyed the havoc I had wrought, I heard the distant sounds of sirens. I quickly gathered my wits and left the alley. As I got out to the street, I heard a shout of "Hey you!" I didn't look to see where it came from; I took off running in the opposite direction. I was now a wanted man.

I began to run for my rooming house. My lack of physical conditioning, combined with the consumption of some particularly nasty blood, made it difficult for me to maintain any sort of pace. In addition, my cracked ribs groaned with the strain I was putting on them. All of this

abuse negated my recent consumption of high quality blood. At least I had gotten that blood when I did or my body would be in the alley with the bouncer. Or maybe, I would be lying dead in that alley by myself.

I would run for a few hundred yards and then duck into an alley, behind a car, or some other urban hiding place. I repeated this until I got to the Luxor Arms. Rather than enter running and out of breath, I waited for a while across the street.

When I felt that all was clear, I walked across the street. I even took one last look at my reflection in a store window, just to make sure I looked okay. I mopped my face with a handkerchief to clear the last traces of blood and sweat from my countenance. Seeing my reflection was one Hollywood vampire trait that I was glad was a myth. I was now ready to walk past the front desk clerk.

All my preparation was a waste of time. Manning the front desk was a fat, bloated young man whose pendulous flesh spilled all over his under-sized chair. He was sleeping and snoring so loud that I could hear him through the protective glass that separated him from the deserted lobby. However, I was taking no chances, so I crept slowly and silently by him and went to my room.

As soon as I was inside my room, I stripped down and began to shower. The combination of filth, blood and smell were slowly washed down the drain. The hot water began to loosen my tight muscles and I started to inspect the damage that the bouncer had done to me. There were bruises and scrapes all over my body and my ribs ached from my labored breathing in the steamy air. I opened my mouth under the shower nozzle, filled my mouth with water and spat it out. The water in turn swirled down the drain with a faint crimson glow to it, a combination of my blood

gorging and the facial pounding I received from the bouncer.

I let the water drum against the back of my neck as I began to get my bearings. My body felt lighter and the physical beating that I took began to fade for the time being from my memory. I felt relaxed enough to try and rest. I turned off the shower, dried off and put on my robe to lie down for some rest.

With some old clothing and duct tape, I managed to crudely wrap my ribs. It gave me some relief, but it was only temporary. I would need to go out tomorrow night and get some proper bandaging material. Maybe the local Free Clinic would be open late and I could get a doctor, nurse, or someone with a medical background to look at my wounds. I couldn't take a chance on an emergency room; the old "too many questions thing" again. Plus, there was a dead bouncer in the alley by The Sweet Spot. I was now an official "killer vampire".

There was nothing I could do now. All my worrying could not heal my body or bring back the dead man. I needed to sleep now; everything else would have to wait until tomorrow night.

At first as I lay on my bed, I thought I would fall asleep. Then, my ribs began to twinge at even the slightest movement. My head began to throb with the rhythm of some native drumbeat. Finally, the reality hit me. This was the first time I had killed somebody with my fangs. Although it was in self-defense, it didn't make it any easier to take.

With all of this racing through my head, I decided I needed a nightcap. I would have loved to have an expensive brandy in a proper snifter. Then I remembered I still had five bags of blood left in the refrigerator. I pulled

myself out of bed and cooked up a batch. After making a toast to the now departed Al; I drank down the pan. I didn't get the buzz I did with the prior batch of blood, but my body was in desperate need of nourishment to heal the trauma it just went through.

Instead of brandy in a crystal snifter, I would have to settle for some cheap whiskey in a water tumbler. To top it off, I took triple the recommended daily dosage of an over-the-counter painkiller and washed it down with my swill. This time I lay down with the knowledge that I had some high quality blood flowing in my system, along with copious amounts of painkillers.

I would be able to get some sleep. At this point though, I didn't care if I ever woke up.

Chapter Ten

Somehow, I made it through the rest of the night and the next day. Every time I woke up, I gulped down more whiskey and more painkillers. The combination put me out and kept the pain level down.

I cooked up the rest of the blood Al had brought me. I hated to burn through the supply, but I needed to heal myself as quickly as possible. With a dead man to my credit, I would need to be on the move within the next few days. Besides, even with refrigeration, the blood wouldn't be good for more than a couple of weeks.

Around noon, I turned on my TV to see if the bouncer's death had made the news. Sometimes, deaths like that are given very little publicity. Veteran police officers that have had experience with vampire killings during their career are reluctant to have any questions brought up about the death. Vampirism is difficult for a vampire to explain, and we've had centuries to understand it. I can imagine how hard it might be for the law enforcement community.

When he came to the local news, the commentator made a remark about a "sick discovery" outside a "strip club". They show video footage of the EMS people hauling the corpse out of the alley, the same alley where I was fighting for my life the night before. He described how the victim had apparently bled to death and that police were searching for a suspect.

I turned off the TV and breathed a sigh of relief. Although the crime attracted too much media attention, the police had no suspect yet. At least they didn't have me as a

suspect. I returned to my self-medication and the healing of my body.

I got out of bed at the beginning of nightfall of the next day. My pain had dissipated somewhat, however I felt dopey from all of the medication and whiskey. But I had to get up and go out for supplies, most notably bandages.

I didn't want to go to the Speedy Mart, so I went to a nearby drugstore that had late hours to get medical supplies and a newspaper. Next door was a liquor store where I could get some more of the cheap swill that was helping kill the pain. Above all, I needed to keep as low a profile as I could for the next few days.

As soon as I left the safe cocoon of the Luxor Arms, I felt that every eye was on me. I normally try to avoid eye contact with strangers, but now I was a wanted man. The feeling of paranoia was excruciating.

I made my purchases without incident. I also found out that the Free Clinic wouldn't be open late for another couple of days. I could deal with that. Besides, my ribs probably didn't need anything other than what I had been giving them: bandaging and rest. Although the Free Clinic was protective of people's privacy, there was no need of drawing any additional attention to myself.

As I returned to the Luxor Arms, I noticed another new face at the front desk. Unlike the morbidly obese young man from the previous night, the person on duty was a hard looking woman, who appeared to be in her early forties. As I passed by, she seemed to stare right through me. I walked by her without a word and went directly to my room. I put my key in the lock, turned it, opened the door and gave it a modest slam. However, I stayed out in the hallway. I crept back towards the front desk to see

what the woman was going to do now that I was supposedly back in my room.

A few steps away from the door, I peer around the corner and watch her pick up the phone and begin talking. I wanted to hear better, but she talked in a muffled tone behind the protective glass. There were lots of “yes” and “no” responses. Rather than let my paranoia give me away, I tiptoed back to my room and silently closed the door.

I was scared, but I also needed to get some more rest. The blood that Al had given me allowed my body to not only take a severe beating, but it was also helping my body heal faster than a typical daylight dweller. My ribs, though still sore, felt mended. Now that I had bandages and a reinforcing supply of painkillers and whiskey, I could get plenty of well-needed sleep.

With that in mind, I began to wrap my torso with the newly purchased heavy-duty roll bandage. I poured myself a generous glass of whiskey and dumped out a dangerous quantity of painkillers. I popped the pills in my mouth and washed them down my throat with a gulp of the amber liquid. The burning, nauseous feeling was quickly replaced with a warm glow. I lay back on my bed to let the pills and liquor do their work.

I quickly fell into a deep stupor, driven by exhaustion and despair. Unconscious, it felt like a loving embrace from my long dead Zia. I relaxed and allowed the powerlessness of sleep to cover me like a thick woolen blanket.

In the blackness of my slumber, I saw a light off in the distance. I groped along on all fours, and then I worked my way to feet. Once I was standing on two feet, I tried to walk. My steps were at first shaky, then firm. As I grew more in control of my gait, I began to run towards the light.

As I grew closer, I saw a figure engulfed in the light. It was Zia, I could tell even from a distance. The more recognizable she became, the faster I ran.

When I was within a few yards, I stopped. It was as if I was in the vision of some great spirit. Finally, I saw with amazement; Zia was beaming with radiance the likes of which I had never seen. I walked slowly towards her, trembling not in fear but in reverence. Zia smiled and held out her hand to me. I reached out to her hoping to touch her soft skin after all these centuries.

As my fingertips touched hers, a searing heat ran through my body. The very act of touching her fingertips to mine had caused me to melt. The light that had drawn me was now blinding me with dagger-like pain. The melting spread from my fingers, down my arm and through the rest of my body. Her very touch and the light were turning me into a puddle.

I gasped and gulped, but the melting process was unstoppable. Then, I began to feel a presence surrounding the two of us. It was then that I saw them, the enemies of vampires. There were Roman centurions, Spanish inquisitors, English Puritans, German SS troopers, Russian KGB agents, hooded Klansmen, and a host of ordinary people from a hundred nations and a thousand generations. At that point, Zia began to rise above me, going up into the light that was shining down. She was lifted out of sight as the last of my solid form had liquefied.

Then, the circle of vampire enemies drew tighter. The people in the circle began to chant in unison, "Die vampire, die." The mantra grew louder and more vicious, as they stomped on the puddle of liquid flesh that was once my body. I tried to plead for mercy, begging my attackers to let me live. I yelled for Zia to come back and save me.

In desperation, I let out a loud scream. It didn't save me; it only woke me from my sleep.

I sat bolt upright in bed. I reached over to the empty space beside me and knew that I no longer would have anyone there. The sheets were cold and dry like the inside of a musty casket.

It was still dark, but I could feel the night fading fast. I got up from my bed and walked to the window. I cautiously pulled the thick curtains back and peered out. The sun wasn't ready to rise yet, however the sky had a purplish-blue tint to it. This was the color just before sunrise, before it turned to blue with reddish streaks, before the final streaks of darkness melted away to drive the vampires back into whatever protective shelter they could find.

I let the curtains fall back. There wouldn't be much time. After tonight, I'm due back at the Speedy Mart for my shift. I don't have much of a choice at this point. All I can do is just keep acting like nothing happened and maybe things will blow over. Deaths like the bouncer's and Al's often go unsolved and are eventually forgotten.

But, to be on the safe side, I decided that leaving town is probably my best move. The Luxor Arms is going to be torn down and there's nothing I can do to stop that. As far as the Speedy Mart is concerned, well there's a convenience store in every town. I'll just find another. I'll call the bus station, find out when the next one is leaving town and be on it. I've done it before, and it looks like I'll be doing it again.

I turned on the TV to find out what has happened while I slept. As I go through the channels, I stop long enough to hear an announcer giving the early morning news. He reports about how the gruesome murder that

occurred outside the strip club and Al's murder are probably connected. He commented that, "the police have a suspect in both crimes and expect to make an arrest within the next twenty-four hours."

My worst fears were confirmed. Somehow the police had made a connection in the two murders and they came up with me. It reminded me of a child that connected the dots in a dot-to-dot puzzle only to come up with a three-headed dragon instead of a pony. It looked like I was that three-headed monster.

So much for deciding if I should show up for my shift tomorrow night. If I don't show up, the police will come looking for me. If I show up, the police will be there waiting. Either way, I'm sure I'll be arrested and left in a cell where I'll fry to a crisp in the first hours of sunlight. That is, if the other inmates don't beat me to a pulp first.

All I need to do is wait patiently for the police to arrive. I'm sure that the police will be able to find somebody at The Sweet Spot who remembers me. Even if they don't, they can find someone who would be willing to sign a statement that I was there with Satan himself doing shots of liquor and giving out hundred dollar bills as tips.

Then, I remember the cops that came into the Speedy Mart. I'm sure they were just checking things out before they went back to ask some questions about my adventure at The Sweet Spot. Now, with a dead bouncer in the alley, I was their number one suspect. A disgruntled ex-customer with a fixation on a dancer; that would be all the police would need to get an arrest warrant.

Dottie, in her always-cooperative way, will probably speak volumes about me. She'll probably tell them how odd I am and how distant I act. The people at the front desk generally aren't very cooperative, but the

new woman at the front was probably tipping off the police. Her cooperation, combined with the fact that this place is going to meet with the wrecking ball soon, would make all the rest of the mobile plant life that works here fall into line. Yeah, I'm the guy who never comes out during the day and keeps to himself.

Then there's "good ol' Ernie". I'm sure he'll tell the cops how much of a pinko I am. Kind of an odd guy, probably a "little light in the loafers", if ya know what I mean. In Ernie's book, I'm probably not even a good American. After all, I don't wear an American flag lapel pin on national holidays.

Then, there's Omar and Ahmad Aziz. God only knows what they may be hiding in their background. I don't care, but there are various state and federal authorities that might. Not to mention their pending sale to Night Owl. I can hear it all now: *Just tell us everything you know about this Szabo guy...*

It won't take the police too long to find me. Plus, they would be able to solve two murders for the price of one. It wouldn't take much for them to pin Al's murder on me. Al had been over here a number of times. All the cops would have to do is put two and two together and they could come up with me as the murderer, regardless of the fact that I didn't do it.

Then let's say I survive my holding cell. I go to trial for this whole mess. What chance would I have with a jury? I doubt if it would be one of my peers; I don't even know if there are twelve vampires left on the entire planet, let alone in this city. Plus, the way the evidence is piling up, I would probably sentence myself to death too.

I pull my knees to my chest and tears begin to well up. I'm trapped with no way out. The feeling is worse

than being a condemned man; at least he knows the time and place of his death. But I don't know if it will be here, in the back of a squad car or in the bowels of the city jail. I also don't know if it will come at the hand of a police officer, an inmate, a vengeful bystander or by simply being in the sunlight. I know it will be soon, but how soon.

A condemned man: that's what I am. Then if I'm condemned, then let me have the right to determine the time, place and method of my own execution. I have that right. Some might consider it suicide, but if I can't make a choice with my life, then I prefer the choice of my death.

I felt as if an anvil had been taken off my bony shoulders. I have decided that I will die. This room is as good a place as any other place I can think of. The method; that is still to be determined.

There was nothing in my room that I could throw a bed sheet or a belt over to hang myself. Jumping wouldn't do any good since my room is on the first floor. The painkillers that I have on hand to relieve my aching ribs, combined with the liquor I have on hand might do the job, but I had to be sure. I thought about slashing my wrists, but I felt guilty about wasting all that good blood Al had worked so hard to get for me.

I could tell that the sunrise was coming quickly. It was that sixth sense that a vampire develops, that kind of hair on the back of your neck feeling that something bad is coming and you'd better get ready for it. For me it was the sun and there was no way I could take it.

Take it; take the sun. That's what Marta said. That's what so many vampires over the years have said when cornered in a castle, or a shack. Or in this case, a dark and dingy transient hotel room.

Taking the sun. Of course, it would be painful, but not as messy as wrist slashing or as uncertain as pill taking. While other ways of dying are 70, 80, 90 or even 99.9 percent certain, taking the sun is 100 percent certain death for a vampire.

If there's an "other side", then I'll be in good company. I can rejoin my parents, friends, and even that ham actor that warned of the coming genocide directed at vampires. Maybe I can find out what wiped out the vampires from Asia and thank the guy who gave me the "lucky" firecrackers. Who knows, maybe there's a "vampire heaven"?

But, I can't forget the daylight dwellers over the centuries that helped me and that were a part of my life. There have been so many over the years that I can barely remember them. They put up with as much abuse and hatred as vampires did, and never got the benefit of a long life. Maybe Al, with all of his faults, got in as well.

Then, there's my beloved Zia. After centuries apart from one another, we will be together for all eternity. Somehow, that thought alone brings me comfort and makes it all seem worthwhile.

It won't be long now. The first rays of indirect light are peeking over the horizon. The portion of Earth where I live is slowly turning towards the sun. The rays that give life to this planet will soon bring about my demise.

I take off my clothes and lie naked on the bed. The curtains, once drawn tight, have been left wide open. I stretch out and wait for the coming sunrise. I'm lying on the bed sheets, preparing to face the first and last sunrise of my existence. All the EMTs will have to do is wrap the sheet around me and haul the body out.

It won't matter that I didn't kill Al or my killing of the bouncer was in self-defense. The police will tell the press that I committed both crimes and that I had killed myself in my room. It will also give the developer that tears down the Luxor Arms one more excuse to do it.

The first rays of the sun are now starting to poke through. Each ray feels like a red-hot poker being shoved into my flesh. I close my eyelids tight to keep my eyeballs from melting like a couple of pieces of ice in a microwave. My jaw is clenched tight in anticipation of what is to come. I know now that the pain and agony will be excruciating, but brief. It will also be the last pain I will ever have to feel.

About the Author

Robert Shuster was born in Rensselaer, Indiana. After graduating from high school there, he graduated from the University of St. Francis in Ft. Wayne, Indiana.

In 2000, he published his first book, a collection of short stories entitled Sevenacide and in 2002 a collection of short stories about space colonization entitled, The 13 Colonies. I, Vampire, is his first full-length novel.

In addition to this collection of short stories and other published pieces, Robert has also acted in local theater, performed standup comedy, and has read his own poetry in readings. He is also the host of a classic punk/new wave/alternative radio show called Retrograde. He currently resides in Sarasota, Florida.

About the Cover

The cover art for I, Vampire was created by award-winning artist, author, and poet E.D. Detetcheverrie. The piece is an original created with acrylics on watercolor block.

Her published works include, Trumpet of the Unicorn, the Quasar 169 series, as well as several vampire poems. She is a native of Virginia and currently resides in Central Florida.

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