

Lifeblood

By J. O. Quantaman

I crouch behind shrubs, my limbs taut with eagerness, my mouth waters. No sounds can be heard in the darkness, save the faint warble of crickets. No footsteps. My adrenalin drops a few levels. My thoughts wander...

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Eating habits. There are countless examples since the dawn of history. Folks who lived in the semiarid lands of the Middle East proscribed pork. Why? Because pigs didn't stop at chewing sprouts above the soil. Porkers snooted out the roots of plants. Pigs turned lush meadows into barren deserts. They destroyed forage for other ungulates. Porkers were bad news. Tribes who raised herds on marginal lands wanted nothing to do with pigs, so they banned pork from their diets.

On the other hand, Roman farmer/warriors savored pork as if it was ambrosia from the gods. Salt pork took a long time to spoil, so it was carried on military campaigns, as an additive for the main staples. Imperial legions conquered the world because their commanders understood logistics. The rankers marched 50 kilometers per day alongside mules that hauled packs of whole wheat, chickpeas, olive oil and salt pork. At evening camp while the cooks baked fresh bread, foragers would gather wild onions, berries and local greens. A bland stew, you say, but it gave everyone enough vitamins, minerals and energy to defeat formidable foes.

Nowadays there are folks near the Arctic Circle who favor meaty diets of caribou and seal, while south-sea islanders climb trees to harvest ripe coconuts.

Japanese are fond of uncooked fish. Buddhist monks content themselves with a steady diet of brownrice, whereas gourmet aficionados seek forever after exotic taste treats. There are fruitarians, vegetarians and fiber-mad fanatics who fart as often they speak. Some folks partake of white bread shorn of crusts, while others munch whole-grain biscuits. Some gorge on chocolate, and others disdain sweets altogether. Some sip coffee till their ears wiggle at the slightest sounds; others glug alcohol till they slide under the table in loud-snoring stupors.

You shouldn't be surprised to find folks like myself who thrive on fresh wholesome blood.

I make no apologies for my kind. Did you choose to be born? Of course not, you had no say in the matter. Nor do vampires, nor did I. Vampires can't reproduce, so you needn't fear us overtaking the human race through sheer numbers. A world populated with vampires would soon bleed itself to death.

I seldom injure and almost never kill. I take but one-liter of blood and leave two puncture wounds at my victim's throats. Thanks to hypnotic powers, most victims aren't even aware of such petty thefts. My canine incisors are as hygienic as any surgeon's scalpels. The saliva on my teeth bequeaths a potent agent that heals the puncture wounds within a week or so. I take no more than some folks give voluntarily at blood banks.

Popular media's take on vampires has me laughing out loud.

How could 80-kilogram hominids turn into four-kilogram bats and fly away? That strange switcheroo defies several laws of physics, including the conservation of mass.

Sleeping in coffins? That's ridiculous. It's true that vampires are more lethargic and vulnerable in the full light of day, but I've handled daytime jobs, such as fisher, shopkeeper, peddler, vocalist for a musical troupe and mayor of a small town.

Believe me; you don't need to shoot me with silver bullets. Regular bullets will do just fine. If your gun is jammed, the hard swing of a lead pipe will crush my skull and kill me dead.

Forget about urban myths. I look the same as any man in the prime of life. I have two ears, two eyes, a mouth, two arms, two legs. I can breathe, eat, piss and shit. I'm as normal as any human with an added urge to sup a liter of blood two or three times a-week. If pressed I can abstain for ten days. In dire circumstances I've made do with animal blood, though it makes me queasy.

My eyesight improves in the dark haze of shadows. My biorhythms rise and my pulse rate quickens after sunset. My hypnotic powers are reinforced when humans start groping, half-blind with uncertainty. These quirks work to my advantage. How else have I gone undetected for so many lifetimes?

New problems have emerged with the advent of electricity. Artificial lights have vanquished the urban night, causing me to take way more precautions. Even the headlights of speeding cars can be a nuisance.

Once I've aroused suspicions and drawn attention to myself, it's time to move to another neighborhood or another country. Over the years I've had to learn thousands of languages and dialects. I've had to pay dearly for new credentials: passports, fake work histories, health bona fides...

I wish I could find comfort with other vampires, but we seldom cross paths. At one time in the distant past, vampires may've numbered one in 10,000 humans. Nowadays I'd guess we number less than one in 50 million. I haven't rolled in hay with another of my kind for ages.

When two vampires connect, they merge like nuclear fusion. Imagine two healthy bodies who've experienced more passions than humans have ever thought to try. We consume ourselves in athletic bouts of violent tiger sex. After a week or so, we're played out and saddened, for no child will ever come of our efforts. We go our separate ways and promise to keep in touch, though

such heartfelt gestures seldom survive the many changes of address.

Intimate relations between vampires and humans are far more tragic. The fruits of these couplings aren't hybrids; they're all-too-human children. It's hard enough for males; I can't imagine what it must be like for female vamps who must watch their partners aging before their eyes. Worse, they know their offspring will grow old and feeble as well. It's a bitter pill to swallow. Better to abandon our erstwhile families before the sorrow unfolds.

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Aha! Footsteps approach. Just a bit closer now, and I can extend my hypnotic powers of suggestion, freeze this woman into docile trance.

I see her fleeting bloom of youth: the sway of hips, the curve of breasts, the color of eyes, the smell of fragrant hair. She lures me away from the task of drinking blood. If I hesitate for one instant, all will be lost.

Should I, instead, plant a notion in her mind to find me attractive?

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I could take her for a sweetheart to ease my loneliness, though I know it won't last. One day she'd hear the neighborhood gossip. She'd complain about my nightly forays. She'd accuse me of double timing, though I only crave a sup of blood. Or else she'd wonder why I never get sick, why I don't grow older. She'd force me to pack my suitcase and retake the open road.

Dilemmas, dilemmas... I wander like a drunken boat adrift on the eddies of time.

The deities above must've hatched us to see what we'd do, how far we'd go. They must've longed for creatures who weren't obsessed with the curse of dying. Long-lived creatures like myself don't need religion as a placebo for death. I treat the gods like the blind hands of fate. I've never groveled or pleaded for special favors as humans do. I've never practiced rituals that condone murderous sacrifices, scapegoats or abject slaughter of nonbelievers.

How long do you think the deities listen to such prayers of righteous mummers before they plug their ears?

Some early morning you may awake from an unlikely faint. Consider yourself fortunate if you find two marks on your throat. They'll heal and vanish within a week or two.

Don't forget I could've cherished you for months or years before leaving you with a hole in your heart.