

Fang-Banged

Fiction by Hugh Centerville

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I rode the crosstown bus almost to the end of the line, walked three blocks, and arrived at the demonstration. The demonstration had been going on since late spring, every Saturday for three months, and now, dusk, it was raucous. There were about two dozen protestors, young girls, twenty-somethings, some teenagers, some pre-teens, and some older women, the latter mostly to the side, permissive moms indulging their adolescent daughters' fantasies.

The girls were dressed provocatively, short skirts and tall boots, elevator shoes, low-cut blouses, sexy formal gowns. It was all more like costumes than clothing. The girls were ardent in their cause and each time a passing driver honked in support, the girls cheered, and those girls with signs — *Let Our People Go, Free Them Now!*, *Celebrate Diversity, Their Blood is on You*, thrust their signs into the air.

The only guys I saw were sheepish boyfriends, smoking along the curb or in their cars, bored and probably only there because their girlfriends had insisted. One young man, made up like Dracula, was in a cage, growling and cavorting. The demonstration was confined to the side of the street opposite the cathedral, behind some wooden barriers, and if the demonstrators had been allowed to cross to the other side of the street, would they have dared?

The cathedral, ex-cathedral, if a cathedral can ever be ex-, was stately and old. It seemed appropriate, a cathedral, and was it intentional? Did it have significance?

In front of the main entrance to the cathedral were three bored cops. I walked over to them and explained who I was and what I wanted. The sergeant, an older man, scratched his head under the bill of his cap, kind of pushing the cap toward the back of his head with the scratching.

"You sure?" he said.

"I'm a reporter," I said. "It's what I do."

"Freedom of the press," he said and he laughed. "I can't stop you, not with all of what the liberal courts have decided about the rights of those perverts in there, but let me tell you something, bub. You start screaming bloody murder after you go in, don't expect me and my men to come in and get you. Our orders are to keep the street clear. There's nothing telling us we have to rescue an idiot."

"Fair enough," I said, and I took a deep breath and looked up at the cathedral. The cathedral was on a hill and framed by the stormy sky behind it, a sky like what I would have been tempted to insert into my story even was it not there — dark clouds, jagged lightning, rumbling thunder, a late afternoon, summer storm coming toward us. The cathedral was stone and was all spires and gargoyles and with a halo of swallows circling the steeple. Come darkness, the swallows would retire and it'd be a halo of bats.

The cross, which ordinarily would have been at the top of the steeple, had been removed.

I had come to the cathedral because a couple of recent, alleged incidents had re-ignited the always-simmering controversy regarding the city's vampire policy. Angry groups around the city, groups philosophically opposed to all government handouts, (except their own) were saying the vampires had violated their agreement with the city by taking people in against their will. The vampires had pledged, a few years before and in a midnight signing ceremony at city hall, and in exchange for an uninterrupted supply of free blood, never to recruit or to leave the confinement of their cathedral. If the vampires had broken the agreement, it was time they got off the dole.

My assignment was to investigate the brouhaha, to gauge the vampires' reaction to it, and now and looking up at the cathedral and with the storm behind it, I was having second thoughts about having accepted the assignment. I would have turned around except I couldn't, not if I intended to ever show my face again around the newsroom. That morning, when the metropolitan editor walked in waving a sheet of paper and getting our attention and telling us what he wanted, all the rest of the reporters, veterans, had glanced away. I saw their reluctance as a way for me to ingratiate myself. With just a few weeks to go in my three-month unpaid internship and facing off with another probationary reporter, two rookies vying for one job, I remembered what one of the veteran reporters, Mike, had told me, just before the boss arrived:

"You're a city desk guy, not some heroic war correspondent but don't think you'll not ever find yourself in scary places. You will, a lot. It's not all garden parties and human interest, but if it's what you want, what you really want, the best advice I can give you is to stay eager."

Well, there I was, eagerly grabbing the sheet out of the editor's hand and with some of the men and women snickering.

"Don't come back without the story," the editor said, and something else Mike had told me: "Come back without it or try to fake it and Cravitz won't ever give you another juicy assignment. You'll be a bottom feeder for the rest of your short time here at the paper."

I climbed the steep cathedral steps and one of the doors, massive, arched and blood red, creaked open from inside. A doorman in nineteenth-century livery stepped out just far enough to hold the door for me. He was wearing sunglasses and kind of staring back into the church, averting his eyes from the remaining daylight. The butler was tall, I was short, he was standing at the top of the stairs, I was two steps down, and had either to look straight up, to talk to him, or talk to his knees.

"Hello," I said, looking up.

"No admittance, sir," he said, polite but firm, and I saw the tiny drops of red spittle around the corners of his mouth, probably only noticeable to someone as observant as I, Tim Johnson, cub reporter for the Times-Chronicle.

"I'm from the paper," I said, showing him my press badge. "Here to do a story."

"It doesn't matter," he said.

I pulled a vial of blood out of my pocket and showed it to him.

He sniffed, kind of like a dog, or a wolf.

"Human?" he said.

"Yes," I said, although I had no idea was it human or not.

He glanced behind himself and I saw his nostrils were dilating, his hands shaking, and with astonishing speed, he grabbed the vial and jammed it into his mouth. He chewed

loudly, it was a glass vial, and used one hand to push back in whatever crunched glass and blood was dribbling out. He finished, swallowed, and I thought, if it wasn't human blood, he'd let me know, quickly.

He smiled at me.

"Enter, please," he said.

"Thank you," I said and I stepped inside, into a semi-darkened foyer. There was a faint whiff of stale incense, the only light was from the opened door behind me and off the stubby candles arrayed in medieval tin racks. The foyer walls were dark wainscoting, cherubs, mostly.

The big door closed and now it was just the flickering candlelight. I glanced back and saw the silhouette of the butler, in front of the door, licking his fingers. Directly ahead was a set of interior doors, the same dark wood as the paneling. I went through the doors and into the nave and it was an explosion of light and noise, including a blaring organ from up in the loft, and all those crystal chandeliers hanging down from the tall ceiling. The crowd, more than a hundred, uh, people, was ginned-up. Some of the folks were old, some young, some very young, no more than infants, and the infants weren't being sucked or swaddled. They were chatting and holding drinks, although their glasses were miniature, to fit their miniature hands. I saw some Roman soldiers from Caesar's Palace, the original palace of ancient times, not the glitzy Vegas showplace, and some Marie Antoinette ladies-in-waiting and...cavemen?

Had to be Neanderthals, with their lantern jaws, and did it go so far back as that?

The stately wooden pews that had probably once filled the cathedral were gone now, replaced by rows of portable cafeteria tables and folding chairs. The center aisle was clear and I walked the length of the nave, looking from side to side as I proceeded. The vampires were a rollicking bunch, loudly and thirstily chugging their Bloody Marys. A scruffy, sixties rock band played loud music and some of the tables had been pushed together and up on the tables, dancing, was a nubile Pocahontas in a beaded blouse and an ankle-length deerskin skirt, the skirt with a slit up one side, and a Native American chief, the latter shirtless and with a feather headdress down his back. The two Indians were gyrating vigorously, the girl jiggling her bosom, the chief with a tomahawk in one hand, an overflowing pitcher of vodka and blood in the other. The folks surrounding the tables clapped rhythmically.

A burst of thunder, like a sonic boom just over our heads, rocked the church and brought a round of applause, hooting, foot-stomping and whistling, from the crowd.

I arrived at what had been the altar and was now the bar. There was a row of stools and with just a couple of Old World gentlemen sitting there. The bartenders, there were three of them, were busily filling trays with Bloody Marys; the waitresses, costumed as Merry-Old-England tavern wenches, or maybe not costumed, grabbed the trays as quickly as they were filled and hustled back down into the crowd.

I sat, and one of the bartenders, a body-builder by the look of him, came over. He was wearing a nametag — *Hi, my name is Brett, how may I serve you?*

"Root beer, please," I said.

Brett stared at me.

"What are you," he said. "A wise guy?"

"No, sir," I said, "and if you don't have root beer, ginger ale would be fine."

"Oh, it would, huh?"

“Yes, sir,” I said.

He stared some more.

“You’re not one of us,” he said.

“No, sir,” I said.

“So what the hell are you doing in here?”

“I’m a reporter for the Times-Chronicle,” I said, proudly showing him my press badge.

“And you’re looking for a front page story,” he said, sarcastic.

“I won’t leave without it,” I said.

“You want something for your paper?” he said. “Alright. Here’s something. There was this thirsty vampire-bartender and what he did, he took this little shrimp of a reporter into the sacristy...” He jerked his thumb toward the thick wooden door back behind the bar, “and sucked him until he was nothing but a dried-up husk. It’s a good story, too bad you won’t be around to write it.” He laughed, tilting his head back, enlarging his eyes and showing his fangs, all in an intentionally terrifying manner.

I pulled on my shirt collar, to show him my garlic necklace. He seemed taken aback, then he grinned and laughed, the laugh morphing into a sustained lion’s roar, and with his mouth still open, I saw the bloodstains on his fangs and on the rest of his teeth too, and I could smell the blood on his breath.

He lunged at me and so quickly, I had no chance of avoiding him. He’d have sucked me for sure except he wasn’t going for my neck. He was going for my necklace and ripped it off without even grazing my skin and so quickly, I didn’t see him do it. I only saw the motion, as if I was seeing the wind.

I reached into my pants pocket and pulled out a crucifix. He grinned, and half-turning, he pointed to the back wall of the altar. There had used to be an eight-foot cross mounted to the wall. The cross was gone but they apparently had never bothered to take it down whenever they’d painted back there and had instead just painted around it because it was still there, not the actual cross but a much lighter color of wall than what was around it.

“Are you religious?” he said.

“Not particularly,” I said.

“It’s just as well,” he said.

I was indignant. Scared, too, and I recalled something else from the newsroom. Just after I’d accepted the assignment, I’d gone into the men’s room and while in one of the stalls, I had overheard two men who’d come in a moment later:

“Here you go, fella,” one of the men said. “Twenty buckers.”

“Welcome to the paper,” the other man said.

It was the veteran reporter, Mike, and my competition, Bennett.

I recalled the rest of the conversation between Mike and Bennett, and how they’d laughed while they spoke:

“You gave him the blood?” Bennett said.

“Yeh.”

“Think it’s enough?”

“Enough to get him in.”

“A one-way ticket to hell.”

There was laughter, then:

“What about the garlic?”

“Yeh, and a crucifix.”

“Into the sacristy we go, my sweet aperitif,” the bartender said, reaching out and taking me by the throat and lifting me off the stool. He smiled his fang smile, and holding me in the air with a one-armed chokehold, my feet dangling and kicking: “It’ll be quick, I promise you. Not pleasant or painless, but quick.”

A hand came seemingly out of nowhere and clamped onto Brett’s arm, the same arm that was holding me aloft. It was another of the bartenders, Greg on his nametag, and as big as Brett was, Greg was bigger.

“You’re not going to suck his blood,” Greg said.

“I’ll go halves with you,” Brett said.

“No dice,” Greg said, shaking his head.

“Why the hell not?” Brett said. “We’re vampires aren’t we?”

“It’d be a violation of your contract with the city,” I said.

Both vampires looked at me; Brett smiled.

“I won’t tell,” he said, and stroking my throat with his thumb even as he dangled me: “And you won’t, either.”

Greg smiled now too, condescendingly toward Brett, and to me and with a slight shake of his head: “Newbies.” Then, back to Brett and harshly: “How it works, the scent of this little dude’s blood is different from the scent of our usual blood. It’d be on our breath and the folks would sniff it and maybe try to suck it out of us, same as we sucked it out of him.”

“And what else,” Greg said. “There wouldn’t be nearly enough blood for everybody, and we’re selfish gluttons where blood is concerned. There’d be simmering resentment long after we sucked him dry, folks sulking, saying they didn’t get their fair share or didn’t get any at all, and me and you and Alex here behind the bar, we’re the ones who’ll have to deal with the fights once they start, and I don’t like getting chairs busted over my head.”

Brett shook his head.

“I haven’t had human blood since I agreed to come in here, two months ago,” he said, “and I’m having this shrimp whether you like it or not.”

“When you agreed to come in,” Greg said, “you swore off human blood.”

“Yeh, well, they told me blood was blood.”

“It is,” Greg said, “once your system gets adjusted, and if you’re already adjusted, human blood won’t agree with you and you’ll be vomiting all over the place.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Brett said.

Greg, still with his big hand gripping Brett’s elbow and with me hanging there, squeezed. There was a moment, Greg straining, grimacing, then a loud cracking sound, Brett’s elbow bone shattering. Brett yelped and let go of me and both Brett and I fell, me onto my back, Brett to his knees and clutching his elbow. Greg kicked Brett, hard, and Brett crawled away, moaning and cursing, his broken arm dragging at an awkward angle behind him. Greg lifted me off the floor and held me with one arm, same as Brett had done. Greg smiled at me, the smile on his thick lips and nowhere else on his face, and I thought there was a wistfulness in the smile — the thought of sucking me was running through his mind, same as it had with Brett.

“It’s happy hour,” Greg said, putting aside whatever thoughts or temptations he might have been feeling, and setting me back on my feet. “The folks just woke up and all they’re thinking about is their fix. Once their initial thirst is slaked and they’re sipping, not gorging, well, the nights are long and they’ll be looking for entertainment. Walk, don’t run, to the door, and maybe you’re not the entertainment.”

I turned, looked at the crowd. The people, or non-people, I suppose, were reveling, laughing ecstatically, and not paying any attention to me. I took a deep breath and started back down the center aisle. I looked straight ahead and not to the sides and there was more thunder outside and the crackle of lightning, eliciting more applause inside. Almost to the doors to the foyer, I heard a familiar voice:

“Timmy!”

I stopped, looked back, to an older woman, about my height and with lots of makeup and with eyes made large by thick glasses.

“Mom...?”

“Timmy! Timmy!” she said, hurrying down the aisle toward me. “You found me! I knew you would, someday.”

“Mom, you’re...?”

“Yes, son,” she said, smiling and with her arms wide to embrace me: “Welcome to the group!”

“I’m not like you,” I said. “I mean, I’m not dead...yet.”

“Seriously?” she said, her arms still out but drooping now.

“Seriously,” I said.

Her arms dropped to her sides and she seemed deflated, then what? Relieved? Disappointed?

“It’s better for you if you’re not,” she said, “but if you’re not one of us, what the hell are you doing in here?”

“Being taken for a fool,” I said.

“And probably not for the first time,” she said.

“Thanks,” I said. “I didn’t know you were one of...those.”

“Course you didn’t,” she said, “but you should have figured it out. I mean, did you ever know me to go out in the daytime?”

“You had that rare skin disease,” I said. “From the Peace Corps.”

“Like I was ever really in the Peace Corps,” she said. “Tanganyika was just a name I pulled out of an old National Geographic because I liked saying it. Tanganyika, Tanganyika...Tanganyika! Besides, if you kids had ever bothered to check, and if you’d done the math, you’d have known that Tanganyika got erased from the maps before I would have been old enough to join any Peace Corps.”

“So you didn’t really need to be in your bedroom all day with the shades drawn and a do not disturb sign on the door?”

“Thank god for gullible children, that’s what I always said.”

“We trusted you,” I said. Then: “How long have you been, you know...?”

“Oh, since you kids were little. It’s why your dad disappeared.”

“You eviscerated Dad?”

“I wish,” she said, “but no, I didn’t. It’s how come he ran off, though. When he found out, well, he couldn’t handle it.”

“And all those nights you volunteered at bingo...”

“It got me out of the house.”

“Did you do those nice bingo ladies?”

She sniffled.

“Bunch of bloodless old bags,” she said. “Besides, most nights I didn’t even go to bingo.”

“So you never did any of those ladies?”

Mom smiled.

“Never say never,” she said.

“Mom!” I said.

She shrugged.

“I have needs,” she said.

“So where’d you go,” I said, “if you didn’t go to bingo?”

“To the dump, most nights.”

Something occurred to me.

“What about Bun-Bun?” I said.

Bun-Bun was my sister’s pet rabbit when Sis and I were kids. Sis had awoken one morning to discover her beloved floppy-eared rabbit dead on the living room rug, its fluffy white fur turned inside out and licked clean. Mom told us a wolf had snuck in through the window and she’d beaten it off with a broom but not in time to save Bun-Bun.

“I wasn’t feeling so good and it was pouring,” Mom said. “I didn’t want to go out.” She saw I wasn’t buying it. “Does it make me a monster, really?”

“Yes,” I said. “It does. Poor Sis was disconsolate for weeks.”

“Would it make you feel any better,” Mom said, “if I told you I fed Bun-Bun a juicy carrot and rocked and sang over him before I fang-banged him?”

“That’s what you call it? Fang-banged?”

“Fang-bang is slang,” Mom said. “A euphemism, and kind of a cute way of putting it, don’t you think?”

“Yeh,” I said. “Cute.”

“I’m glad you came,” she said, “and I’m glad you’re not one of us. Honest I am, but how did you know I’d be in here?”

“I didn’t. I came here to do a story. I’m a reporter for the Times-Chronicle.”

“My little Timmy, ace reporter for the Chronicle? Well, doesn’t that give me something juicy to brag about, and without having to make it up.”

“I’m not an ace reporter,” I said. “I’m a cub reporter. A stupid gullible cub reporter on probation for a job I’m probably not going to live long enough to get and which I probably wouldn’t have got anyway.”

“You never did have much in the way of self-confidence,” she said, “but you’re glad to see me, aren’t you?”

“Course I am.”

“And a little surprised.”

“A little, yeh.”

“Well,” she said, “I’m just glad you’re here, even if you can’t stay, and trust me ...” She patted me on the arm. “Someday you’ll be an ace reporter.”

“Not if I don’t get out of here,” I said, “but I have to ask you about Sis and me. Were you ever, you know, tempted?”

“Oh, sure,” she said. “Every night, watching you kids sleep. It was like a cigarette craving. It’s how come I faked dying, when I felt I couldn’t resist the urge much longer. I felt bad leaving you kids with Ditzzy, but I knew how it would turn out if I didn’t.”

“Mitzy,” I said. “Aunt Mitzy, and it wasn’t so bad, getting raised by her.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Mom said. “Even if it’s a lie.”

I didn’t insist it wasn’t a lie.

“It was something I had to do,” Mom said. “I couldn’t stay and risk fang-banging my own kids.”

“So, your death was fake?”

Mom smiled.

“There’s not much good to say about my, uh, condition, no matter what those girls say out on the street,” she said, “but eavesdropping on your own funeral is a hoot. Except the whole time I was displayed there in my box and with the people bending over me, all I could think about was lurching up and putting a lip-lock on somebody’s throat.”

“It’s just as well you didn’t,” I said.

Another jolt shook the church, lightning outside, applause inside. I looked around. A preacher was up on the tables where the Indians had been dancing earlier. The preacher had a toothy grin, gold cuff links and coiffed hair, and was dressed entirely in black.

“We call him the Reverend Mr. Black,” Mom said. “Not his real name. He was a televangelist and one night, after a record-smashing fundraiser and with his bus rolling through town, he came in here all juiced up with the Lord and tub-thumping for lost souls.” Mom laughed. ‘Come to Jesus, ye foul minions of the night, and ye souls shall be the Lord’s!’ Like we’ve still got souls, and what’s the Lord going to do for us? We’re already immortal, and what’s a minion, anyway?”

“It’s like an underling,” I said. “So technically, you didn’t recruit him?”

“It was the Lord sent him in here,” Mom said.

Mom saw how I was staring, not at the preacher but at the aged nun who was getting helped up onto the tables.

“That’s Sister Mary Immaculata!” I said.

Sister Mary Immaculata had been a revered teacher at my parochial grammar school.

“You recruited a nun?” I said. “Oh my god! If they find out you recruited a nun...”

“She was a vampire years before she came in,” Mom said.

“Was she a vampire when she was my third grade teacher?”

Mom nodded — yes.

I couldn’t believe it, and I stared at Sister, who was standing alongside the preacher, both of them tapping their feet and with their hands on their hips, waiting for their song to start.

“Sister remembers you,” Mom said. “She said how she used to smack your knuckles with a ruler and how she’d be thinking the whole time what it was she really wanted to do to you, to all you kids.”

I remembered the look Sister would get in her eyes, anytime she rapped a kid’s knuckles, and how sometimes the ruler slipped so it was the sharp edge hitting, cutting like a knife.

The Rapture, we had used to call the look.

“She never did any of my classmates, did she?” I said.

“Says she didn’t,” Mom said.

I shook my head.

“It can’t be,” I said. “I mean, she was in the school for more than thirty years. How could she have got away with it?”

“The shades were always drawn in Immaculata’s classroom, weren’t they?” Mom said.

“Yeh,” I said, remembering back.

“And you had candles on the corners of your little desks, and the overhead lights were always turned off.”

“The school was on a shoestring budget, and Sister was frugal,” I said.

“Frugal,” Mom said, dubious.

“The candles,” I said, “they, I mean, they imparted a sense of the church’s history.”

“Sure they did,” Mom said.

A song started and the preacher twirled Sister around the tabletops, both of them exuberant, Sister’s long black pleats and skirts swirling around her, her habit banging against her forehead, and I recalled the time in third grade, when Wally Brown cut himself with a pair of scissors. It had scared the hell out of us kids, Wally with blood all over him, and Sister with the Rapture on her more intensely than we’d ever seen it, and what I would never forget — what was coming out of Sister’s mouth. It wasn’t words, or even growls, it was low moans, like Sis and I had used to hear from behind Mom’s bedroom door, before Dad abandoned us. One of the girls had run down to the office and Sister Superior and Sven, our custodian, had rushed into the classroom and dragged Sister Immaculata out. It had seemed odd at the time, how they were so much more concerned with Sister than with Wally, who was bleeding all over himself, and how ferociously Immaculata had fought getting dragged away. A few minutes later, and Sister Superior and Sven came back with the school nurse. The nurse took Wally out of the classroom, Sven cleaned up the mess, and Sister Superior taught us for the rest of the day and sent us home with a stern warning — did word get out about what had happened, we’d all get our knuckles rapped, even the girls.

Sister Immaculata had retired abruptly, just days after Wally’s accident. There was a ceremony in the gym and they gave Sister a plaque — most dedicated teacher. So dedicated, Monsignor said in his speech, she would never even leave her classroom.

“Except sometimes at night,” Immaculata said, winking at us, “when I walked the neighborhood streets.”

Sister Superior interjected quickly: “Walking the streets helped Sister to think up new ways to motivate the kids. That’s all she ever thought about, the kids.”

Mom grabbed hold of both of my hands, she had speed like the bartenders, and strength too. She could have crushed every bone in my hands and without stressing herself, never mind she was mid-forties and dumpy. Come to think of it, she didn’t look any different now than when she died, or when we assumed she had died, years before. And I remembered the talk at her viewing, people saying how she hadn’t aged a bit in ten years. I’d thought folks were just being kind.

“Can you spare your old Mom a kiss?” she said.

I hesitated.

“Promise I won’t suck your blood or anything,” she said.

I thought asking for a kiss was her way of tricking me, so she could get at my neck. Then I figured she was so much faster and stronger than I was, she could have attacked my neck without tricks.

"Alright," I said and I bent forward and down, tense, the nervously throbbing vein in my neck an invitation I was certain she couldn't resist.

"Relax, sweetie," she said, putting her hands on the sides of my face and smiling up at me. "It'll be over in a jiff and it won't hurt. I promise."

She kissed me on the lips and I got the scent of her perfume and briefly, very briefly, I was the little man for whom she'd given so much, not dying, she was immortal, but abandoning what she loved the most, going alive into her casket so Sis and I could live free of her curse. After she kissed me, she leaned her face back just a little and smiled fondly at me. Her lips were a deep red. Mom had always worn thick red lipstick, or had she? She leaned into me again and gave me a flurry of kisses all over my face and ...shudder...on my neck.

"Would you mind doing me a favor?" she said, when she was done kissing but still with her hands on my face.

"What's that?"

"Those girls outside, tell them to get a life."

"They're out there for you."

"Showing up every Saturday morning and staying all day," Mom said, "and that stupid chanting. Hey! Ho! Let them go! Go where? Back to the dump? And don't they know we sleep during the day? I mean, if anybody should know, shouldn't it be them?"

"You don't want to get out of here?"

"Do you think these walls are what's holding us? It's not the walls, and it sure as hell isn't the company." She glanced sideways and over her shoulder, at the folks, none of whom, fortunately, were paying any attention to us. "Bunch of egotistical braggarts." She did a sing-song and with a little side-to-side shuffle: "I've been here, I've been there, I've been everywhere; I sucked this one, I sucked that one." And when she was finished: "Give me a break!"

"So, the blood freebies are enough to keep you here?"

"Well, sure," she said. "What'd you think?"

"The experts on the outside," I said, "some of them, anyway, say your kind is too wild and savage to be content for long in a place like this."

"All we care about is slaking our thirst. Period. And sure, we were savage out there. Living on blood, questing for blood, we had to be savage. But being content with homogenized blood instead of the raw stuff and not having to be thinking all the time about where the next fix is coming from is sweet. Do you know I sucked a snake once?"

"That's gross."

"Gross even for a vampire," she said. "Sucking a cold-blooded reptile, and do you know what happens when cold blood freezes inside of you?"

"I don't know," I said. "What happens?"

"Brain freeze," she said.

"Like with ice cream?" I said.

"Yeh," she said, "except with ice cream it goes away in a few seconds and with frozen blood it stays around. Do you remember the time I almost died, the time I begged to die?"

“I remember how sick you were,” I said. “Those headaches and the convulsions. You were delirious. Aunt Mitzy said it was flashbacks from when you used to do LSD.”

“I almost strangled Ditzzy when I found out she called the doctor,” Mom said, “and I would have strangled her, except my snake-blood sickness helped me realize it was time for me to go, and I knew Ditzzy was the only one who’d be there for you kids after I was gone. And that doctor, he knew. He had his bag opened alongside the bed and he made sure I saw the silver stake in there, right on top, where he could have grabbed it in a hurry.”

“So it’s true, a silver stake can kill a vampire?”

“More likely I’d have killed him if he’d jabbed me, but luckily for him, he was no fool. He said what I had was just a fever and he put me under an electric blanket.”

“Uh huh,” I said, “and Aunt Mitzy gave him hell, told him he was just about the dumbest doctor she’d ever seen, even if he did make house calls.”

“My sister gets some kind of rare sexual disease from running around at night when she should be home with her kids,” Aunt Mitzy said to the doctor, “and all you do is put her under an electric blanket? What the hell kind of diagnosis is that?”

“You had those convulsions a second time, just before you died,” I said. “Guess you didn’t learn your lesson the first time.”

“It’s hard to be concerned with what might come afterward, the consequences, when the blood lust is on you.”

“So you’re OK with being locked up in here?” I said.

She shrugged.

“Hey,” she said, “the blood flows all night, and like I said, nothing matters except the blood. And come the dawn, we’re so exhausted, we’re grateful to just sleep all day and without having to keep one eye open in case some glory-seeking vampire slayer comes along. It’s how come we party hearty, to exhaust ourselves. And the crypt is very comfortable. Everybody has their own personalized coffin. Mine even has a photo of you and Sis taped to the inside of the lid, the photo they placed inside my box just before they closed me up. Your adorable little faces are the last things I see before I go to sleep, and it helps me to dream about what a normal life with you kids would have been like, if I had been normal.” She smiled. “Those dreams are what I live for. I’m more alive when I’m sleeping than when I’m awake. And my coffin, I was telling you about my coffin. It’s mahogany, way more solid and comfortable than that cheap balsawood shoebox Ditzzy stuffed me into.”

“It was pine, not balsawood,” I said, “and it was all Aunt Mitzy could afford.”

“I know,” she said, “and I don’t hold it against her. I can’t hold anything against her, can I, with all she did for you kids?”

“How did it happen?”

“Promise you won’t get mad?”

“I promise,” I said.

It took her a moment to arrange the thoughts into words.

“Your father was a Lothario,” she said. “I knew it before I married him, but he was such a charmer, and after one of his many escapades, I was so mad I went out to a bar and the first guy who hit on...”

“OK, OK,” I said. “I don’t need to hear the rest.” Then: “I’m glad you’re comfortable here, but, what about, you know...life?”

“Timmy, hello, I’m dead. It’s sort of a prerequisite.”

“I know you’re dead, but in all the books...” and there was no shortage of them, the clearance bins in front of the bookstores were overflowing with erotic girl-meets-vampire sagas, the indie publishing industry had its own glut, and was there a girl on the street out front who wasn’t working on a vampire romance? “Your kind has adventures and tragic love and...”

I cringed.

“Sex?” she said.

“Mom!” I said.

“Pshaw!” she said. “We don’t have sex.” She smiled. “It’s funny, isn’t it?”

“What?” I said.

“Those girls out there fantasize about lust and romance with the stud-muffins in here and what do the stud-muffins fantasize about? Same as what the rest of us dream about. Cuddling with a puppy without wanting to tear out its throat, heading out on a sunny summer afternoon for the beach. Immortality doesn’t look so inviting to someone who’s stuck with it. We try not to think about it and for the opposite reason you can’t stop thinking about it.”

“About those girls on the street,” I said. “One of them disappeared last week and some people are saying she wasn’t abducted by aliens. They’re saying the alien thing is a cover-up for what really happened.”

“Sure,” Mom said. “Blame it on the vampires.”

“So it was aliens?” I said.

Mom looked around at the crowd and pointed to a cute girl, late teens and dressed as if for her prom. She was crying softly and getting helped reluctantly up onto the tables, to take her turn dancing, and with the crowd whistling and stomping their feet. Her dancing partner, a vaguely familiar toy-boy pinup from a decade-old teen magazine, was reaching down to her.

“That’s the girl who disappeared?” I said.

Mom nodded — yes.

“That’s Jennifer,” she said. “She was showing up every morning, just as we were going into our boxes, and she kept banging on the crypt windows, begging and demanding we let her in and saying she needed to fall in love with a vampire boy.”

“And you let her in?”

“Now she’s in here, all she wants is to go home to her mommy and daddy. But she can’t go home again, and do you think mommy and daddy would have her back, the way she is now? If mom and dad had maybe paid more attention to what their daughter was up to, maybe she wouldn’t be in her predicament.”

“If you allowed her in and sucked her blood,” I said, “that’s a violation.”

“Technically, we didn’t allow her in,” Mom said. “Somebody accidentally left a side door open.”

“The side doors are all bricked over,” I said.

“That one wasn’t, not that morning, anyway. Look, I’m not saying it was right, what we did, and we didn’t do it lightly but she just got to be so annoying. Nobody could sleep, everybody was on edge, lying there in our boxes with one eye open, waiting for the banging and the pleading to start, and come the night, we were all so tired. I know we

shouldn't have done it and we wouldn't have but, well, she should have left us alone, don't you think?"

"And now she just wants to get out," I said, staring some more at pitiful Jennifer, a reticent dancer.

"You won't put it in the paper, how we let her in, will you?" Mom said. "Because we really didn't, you know."

"I'll word it carefully," I said, "but if your group ever gets taken to court over it, which could happen, you'd have a hard time convincing a judge and jury you didn't violate the agreement."

"We've got a couple of pretty sharp lawyers in here," Mom said.

"And what about the truck driver?" I said.

Mom sniffed.

"It was kind of his own fault," she said.

I waited.

"See," she said, "there's a pipe sticking out of the side of the building, and after the truck gets here and after the driver drags his hose across the lawn and clamps it onto the pipe, he has to stand there while the blood's getting pumped. There's a crypt window right there by the pipe and we always watch him because we can't open the valve on the blood tank downstairs until he's done and puts the cap back on the pipe. The folks get a little anxious, and the driver you're asking about, Al, he was one of the regulars, and what he always did, standing there by the window, he always kidded us, telling us how we were welfare trash and how we should get blood tested because we were probably all filled with illegal human blood. He'd give us the finger and say how if he didn't have a schedule to keep, he'd drive a stake through each of our hearts." She laughed. "Like a stake through the heart could hurt us."

"So why'd you drag him in here and fang-bang him, if you liked him?"

"We didn't drag him in, and we didn't fang-bang him. Well, I guess we did, but not until after."

"After what?" I said.

"We always teased Al, gave the finger back to him and showed our fangs, and one of the newbies, this big jerk named Brett, he put on his cape and went outside and snuck up behind Al. Brett said he just wanted to scare Al but Al freaked. He'd never seen us outside before and he threw holy water at Brett. All the drivers carry holy water, their bosses tell them it's all the protection they'll ever need. The truth is, holy water can't kill us. It stings, though, kind of burns the skin and gets it smoking. Brett saw his chest was smoldering and he kind of lost it, thinking he was maybe going to burn up."

"And Brett fang-banged Al," I said.

"Actually, no," Mom said. "He gave him nougies."

"That's all Brett did, gave him nougies?"

"You ever get nougies from a vampire?"

"No," I said.

"Talk about friction!" Mom said. "First the hair comes off, then the skin and some bone shavings, then, well, there's an artery there by the brain and once the artery is popped, it kind of shoots the blood, and there's no sense wasting it, once it's gushing."

"I suppose not," I said, "but it sounds like poor Al got a raw deal."

“Everybody’s always apologizing to him,” Mom said, “and he says don’t worry about it. He says how it’s way better for him in here than it was on the outside. He says his job sucked, his boss was always screwing him over, his wife was a shrew, his house was under water, and he had credit card debt up the yazoo, and now the wife has to deal with it all. She’s got a multi-million dollar lawsuit going against Al’s boss for having lied to Al about the holy water, so the trucking outfit has to deal with it too, and everybody’s miserable except for Al. Funny how things go sometimes, isn’t it?”

“Yeh, funny,” I said, “and I’m glad you’re still alive, even though you’re not, and I’m glad you’re doing alright.”

She smiled some more.

“There’s a storm coming,” she said, “and when it gets here and drenches everything, I’ll be inside, sated and dry instead of on my hands and knees in the dump and chasing those squealing rats, or sneaking into back yards to filch some other little girl’s precious Bun-Bun. It’s better for everybody, the city putting us up like this.”

“What do you think of the people on the outside,” I said, “who don’t like how the city subsidizes your lifestyle?”

I saw anger flash in Mom’s eyes.

“So, you know about them?” I said.

“We get the paper delivered every morning, something else for the folks on the outside to bitch about, even though it’s a complimentary subscription, tell your boss thanks, and no, we don’t mess with the paper boy, in case you’re thinking we do. Not after what happened to Al, but we read the letters to the editor and all the rest of it. Something you can maybe put in your story, those folks who want to throw us off the dole and back onto the streets, tell them they’re the first ones we’ll go after, if we get tossed.”

“The letters to the editor are always anonymous,” I said.

“Polite, too,” Mom said, “but don’t think we don’t know who they are, or couldn’t find them, if we got loose.”

“I’ll make sure I mention it,” I said, “but you can’t be giving them cause to come after you.”

“We’ve made some mistakes,” Mom conceded, “but we’re getting there.” Then, indignant, and incredulous, too: “Complaining about the cost of providing blood. What about the cost of not providing blood?”

“About the blood,” I said. “It’s not human, right?”

“Course not,” she said.

“Where’s it come from?”

She shrugged.

“From a slaughterhouse, I suppose,” she said. “Those groups on the outside, they say someday they’re going to all lie down in the street so the truck can’t get through. Tell them, bad idea. If the truck doesn’t show up and we find out it got hijacked, there’ll be more people dead than what a convoy of blood trucks could run over in a week’s time. We need our fix. That’s the reality, and there’s no changing it, ever, and most of us feel we’ve got a right to it, and if we don’t get it, we’ll rampage, and whatever comes of it won’t be our fault. Some of the folks are kind of hoping the truck doesn’t show up some night, so they can bust out and secure their own blood, like in the good old days, except the good old days weren’t so good, and everybody knows it, even though some in here won’t ever admit it.”

I looked around some more at the raucousness.

“The party goes on all night?” I said.

“Things quiet down some, after we get our initial fix.”

“What do you do after things quiet down?”

“Read, recite poetry, play rummy, listen to music, argue about whose era was the best for our, uh, kind. Mostly what we do is watch old movies. Tonight it’s a Bogie marathon. I love Bogie.”

“You always did.”

“I could take that gravelly-voiced little hunky by the throat and suck until...”

“Mom!”

“Sorry,” she said.

A Roaring Twenties’ flapper girl with jet-black hair and a feathered headdress and a pink boa came out of the crowd and began circling me, smiling seductively and swatting me flirtatiously with her boa.

“Git!” Mom said harshly and waving her arms at the vamp, who disappeared back into the crowd but not before leering at me and with her fangs exposed in a coquettish way that was darn near irresistible.

“You better go now,” Mom said, “before you’re up on the tables with the little slut. And don’t forget I told you we read the paper. You put anything in there can get us into trouble, you’ll maybe wake up one night to see me there alongside your bed.”

“You wouldn’t, would you?” I said, not sure was she just trying to scare me, or was she serious.

“I wouldn’t,” she said, “but there’s plenty in here who would.”

“Alright,” I said, “and I’ll speak to those girls out there.”

“I know you will,” Mom said. “And maybe you can come back sometime?”

“Sure,” I said.

“And maybe bring Sis?”

I was staring at the flapper girl, who was leering back over her bare shoulder at me. I looked at Jennifer, slow waltzing with her stud-muffin, Jennifer crying softly, her chin resting morosely on her partner’s shoulder. I felt the urge to go to Jennifer, to comfort her, or to be seduced by either her or the vamp, or both of them. It was the fatal attraction that had made my mom’s kind so deadly on the outside, what had convinced the city to just declare victory in the war against them and move on.

Mom got what I was feeling.

“Go,” she said. “Before you decide you don’t want to.”

I stepped toward the door to the vestibule.

“Wait,” Mom said.

I stopped.

“I better walk you out,” she said. “Clarence is working the door tonight and I don’t trust him.”

We stepped through the door, into the vestibule. There was a nasty puke smell and I saw Clarence, on his knees, retching blood and glass. Seeing me, Clarence lunged, hurtling himself through the air like a supersonic spear, fangs bared. I felt a rush of wind over my head and there was a loud bonk up there and on the floor lay Clarence and the bartender, Brett. Brett had been crouched in the darkness at the bottom of the stairs to the

loft and had launched himself at the same moment as Clarence, and with both vampires underestimating my stature, they'd overshot me and collided.

"Are they dead?" I said to Mom.

"Sure they are," she said.

"Seriously?" I said.

"That's a joke," Mom said. "Everybody's dead in here, except for you."

"So they're not, you know, dead-dead?"

"They'll wake up with headaches, which isn't half as bad as the hangovers they'd have if they'd sucked your blood."

Mom gave me a quick kiss and a regretful look, and using her incongruous strength, she opened the big door, shoved me through it and slammed it behind me.

"So long, Mom," I said, standing on the other side of the closed door from her.

I went down the stairs and into the street. The girls were hurrying to beat the rain, stashing their signs and megaphones into the trunks of their cars. The storm was directly overhead and a wind was whipping the street but it wasn't raining yet and not completely dark either, more of a gloaming. The cops were still there, wearing orange slickers now over their blues.

"You still one of us, bub?" the sergeant said to me.

"Yes, sir," I said.

He kind of kept his distance and looked me over carefully.

"Bobble," he said.

"Excuse me?" I said.

"Bobble," he said again.

I hesitated. Could he legally, constitutionally order me to bobble? I decided what he was asking, or telling, was no different from telling a suspected inebriated driver to walk a straight line, and besides, I couldn't afford trouble with the law. I was going to be up all night as it was, putting together the most important story of my short career.

I bobbed my head vigorously, the cop inspecting my exposed neck and without getting too close to me, and with his hand on his pistol, and were there silver bullets in the chamber?

I had thought, when I'd started out earlier, that my job with the Times-Chronicle was riding on my vampire article and maybe it was, but what else was riding now on the article was my life. I thought about the maxims Professor Gillespie, my advisor at journalism school, had driven into our heads — economy of words, make every word matter, and truth and accuracy at all cost. Well, words would certainly matter tonight, and truth? Would Gillespie have sought truth at all cost if the truth could have meant bringing a gaggle of irate vampires into her bedroom in the middle of the night?

I finished bobbling, the cop pulled a pencil and pad out of his shirt pocket.

"Give me your name, phone number, and address," he said, "in case there needs to be a follow up."

I gave him my information. He took it all down on the pad and walked away.

I headed for the bus stop and I remembered what Mom had asked — would I talk to the girls on the street. Yes, I would, I had to, to ensure there were no more Jennifers, but I wouldn't do it now, tonight. Maybe I'd do it in the paper, an editorial or op-ed, if Cravitz would let me. The girls probably didn't read the paper but it might be a way to reach the parents with a message — their daughters' obsessions with vampires was more than a

cute infatuation. It was a deadly business and the girls needed to get over it. Even if I flopped with the parents, flattering the crap out of the vampires couldn't hurt.

And the other thing Mom had asked, would I come back sometime to see her and maybe bring Sis.

Fuck, no!