

Tale about the Vampireling Who Fed on Human Will

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There once appeared among the vampires a fledgling so puny, tiny, and feeble that its parents worried greatly whether their long-awaited offspring would ever succeed them in carrying on the fame and honor of the vampire race. For when it came time for the vampireling to try its wings, it became apparent that the young thing was not only too weak to attack humans but was scarcely able to maintain its balance. Its spine, arms, and legs were so soft and light that the slightest wind or even a draft through a house was enough for the vampireling to fall to the ground like an old rag doll, unable even to lift its head on its own. But what caused its parents the most travail was the terrible, inexplicable fact that even after their child lost its baby teeth and the permanent ones grew in, these were more like gelatinous scales filled with grayish fluid than teeth. Such teeth could not scratch, let alone pierce the skin of a human.

The claws on the vampireling's front legs were no better. Instead of being able to help the jaws do vampire's work, they grew as tender cartilage, resembling rose petals. Looking at them caused the parents to suffer as though an ashen stake were being driven through their hearts.

But even this did not cause the hapless parents the most anguish. Their deepest grief and disappointment sprang from the fact that from birth the vampireling could not bear the sight of, let alone drink, the human blood that its soft-hearted parents initially brought the sickly child in a pouch made from a pig's bladder. At the very sight of even the freshest human blood, the vampireling immediately suffered terrible cramps that threatened to bring its life to a close. Lest they lose their only offspring the tearful parents, gritting their teeth, were forced to feed their child not healthful and nourishing human blood but porridge cooked from dandelions and juice squeezed from daisy petals.

Finally the vampireling's parents, who, like all loving parents, had tried every means to remedy the great affliction, lost hope that their child would ever find its way to being a true vampire. With grieving and breaking hearts, they began to consider whether to abandon their degenerate offspring to humans, so as not to bring ultimate disgrace to the vampire race and clan.

But one very old, toothless vampire, living out his days in the chimney of a stable that had burned to the ground, to whom the despairing parents

had turned for some word of wisdom as a last resort, persuaded them to wait a little longer, and meanwhile to find some decisive and fearless man to serve as nanny to their child.

The parents decided that his was wise advice. Barely able to wait until the break of dawn, they immediately set out among humans. But no matter whom the vampires approached, no matter how respectfully they asked, everyone they turned to, resolutely refused to undertake any such task, crossing themselves as they spoke.

Then, in a wood, the vampires chanced across a man whom misfortune had dogged so long that he had lost any fear of them. Shunning needless hesitation, the vampires talked the man into taking care of their only child for a small remuneration, having also vowed that he would be inviolable to any other vampire. The requirements were that the man carry the vampireling out on walks—in several years it had not grown even an inch, so even now its legs folded together under it like string—and that he cook porridge of dandelions and squeeze daisy petal juice for his charge—the only food that did not bring on its cramps.

They came to terms, and the man began to care for the vampireling. Fate had not been kind to the man, and he rejoiced that things had at least taken a somewhat better turn. Now, at last, after long toil and much disappointment, the man had a roof over his head, even if it was among vampires, and he was even eating normal human food, which the vampires brought him, instead of the roots and moldy husks he had serendipitously found.

At first, truth to say, the man was wary of the vampireling, for he remembered that the acorn does not roll far from the oak. But once he became convinced that the child did not crave human blood, and that it was indeed puny and feeble, the man let down his guard. And because nothing much needed to be done for the child—after eating it usually sat quietly in a corner, rather than go to play—the man relaxed completely. And having relaxed, he grew lazy and careless.

So whereas earlier the man had fed the vampireling three times a day, now he decided that twice a day would suffice, all the more because the child never mentioned being hungry. Then, noting that it did not cry, the man began to prepare its food just once a day, a meal that seemed of no great interest to the child. And then somehow it happened that one fine day, the man just forgot to feed the vampireling altogether. Earlier that day the man had lunched especially well, for the vampireling's parents, believing that the man was caring for their child conscientiously, had brought a basket loaded with foods and wine filched from their victims. And since he who is sated never thinks of one who is hungry, the man, having eaten and drunk

well, forgot about the vampireling, and soon he was overtaken by the urge to sleep.

Until then the man had taken care not to sleep in the presence of his charge. But now, deciding there was no danger—as things always seem to the satiated—and feeling his eyelids grow heavy, he made himself more comfortable, and he fell asleep.

That is when the vampireling first saw a human asleep.

If the man had fed it, perhaps the vampireling would have paid no attention. As things were, it felt hunger and began to look around to see if a daisy petal might be lying about somewhere. Laboriously it made its way out from the corner and closer to the table, where there still lay remnants of the food the vampireling could not eat. Then it was struck by the discovery that a human sleeps totally differently from the way vampires do.

For when vampires slept, there arose from them a heavy stench of blood, which made the vampireling's extremities grow numb and took his breath away, making it feel ill. During the day, when the man was active, he smelled like an old goat. But now, as he slept, there wafted from him a pleasant aroma that tickled the nostrils.

The vampireling, intrigued, came up close. It did not yet realize, of course, that what smelled so sweet was human will, which during sleep rises up from man's flesh and floats above him in a soft, round, and aromatic biscuit.

And because the vampireling was hungry and had found nothing it could eat, it nipped at this aroma. Slowly consuming a bit of human will, it was astonished to find that nothing in the world tastes as sweet as this nourishment.

The more the vampireling ate of this new food, the more it gained strength from it and the tastier it became. The vampireling was so taken by this new food that it ceased to eat only when the man stirred heavily and began to regain consciousness. Grasping his chest with his hands, the man felt a strange languor and lethargy throughout his body, unlike anything he had known before.

The man peered about on all sides but he did not realize what had happened. And how could he have realized anything, when, even before he sat up and rubbed his eyes, the vampireling, to whom the new nourishment had brought previously unknown strength and agility, had quickly scurried back to a corner and in no way betrayed that it had just been feasting on human will.

For the very moment that the vampireling tasted human will, not only strength but intellect awakened in it, as well as cunning and caution. The vampireling now resolved resolutely that from then on, human will would

be its only food. When the man occasionally remembered the vampireling's existence, it still pretended to consume the dandelion porridge and daisy petal juice, but when the man slept it was sure to feast on its incomparable new nourishment.

Thus, before long, the vampire child consumed all of the man's will, for a person lacking will never notices that he is a living corpse. And when it had satisfied itself that all this precious food had been eaten, the vampireling asked its parents to give the man a reward and let him go, and then host a lavish banquet before it set out to go among humankind. The time had come for the vampireling to make its parents rejoice at the realization of their dreams.

At that banquet, when the vampireling proclaimed not only to its parents but to all vampire kind that from that day forward they would feed on human will exclusively, the vampires, wonderstruck, unanimously agreed: the small, puny vampireling was the mightiest and most fearsome vampire of them all.

Translated by Uliana Pasicznyk

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