The Vampyr’s Story

Tad Williams

The tale I will tell is of a child, a child born of an ancient city on the banks of a river. So long ago this was that not only has the city itself long gone to dust, but the later cities built atop its ruins, tiny towns and great walled fortresses of stone, all these too have gone beneath the millwheels of time—rendered, like their predecessor, into the finest of particles to blow in the wind, silting the timeless river’s banks.

This child lived in a mud hut thatched with straw, and played with his fellows in the shallows of the sluggish brown river while his mother washed the family’s clothes and gossiped with her neighbors.

Even this ancient city was built upon the bones of earlier cities, and it was into the collapsed remnants of one—a great, tumbled mass of shattered sandstone—that the child and his friends sometimes went. And it was to these ruins that the child, when he was a little older...almost the age of your young, romantic companion...took a pretty, doe-eyed girl.

It was to be his first time beyond the veil—his initiation into the mysteries of women. His heart beat rapidly; the girl walked ahead of him, her slender brown body tiger-striped with light and shade as she walked among the broken pillars. Then she saw something, and screamed. The child came running.

The girl was nearly mad, weeping and pointing. He stopped in amazement, staring at the black, shrivelled thing that lay on the ground—a twisted something that might have been a man once, wizened and black as a piece of leather dropped into the cookfire. Then the thing opened its eyes.

The girl ran, choking—but he did not, seeing that the black thing could not move. The twitching of its mouth seemed that of someone trying to speak; he thought he heard a faint voice asking for help, begging for him to do something. He leaned down to the near-silent hiss, and the thing squirmed and bit him, fastening its sharp teeth like barbed fishhooks in the muscle of his leg. The man-child screamed, helpless, and felt his blood running out into the horrible sucking mouth of the thing. Fetid saliva crept into the wounds and coursed hotly through his body, even as he struggled against his writhing attacker. The poison climbed through him, and it seemed he could feel his own heart flutter and die within his chest, delicate and hopeless as a broken bird. With final, desperate strength the child pulled free. The black thing, mouth gaping, curled on itself and shuddered, like a beetle on a hot stone. A moment later it had crumbled into ashes and oily flakes.

But it had caught me long enough to destroy me—for of course I was that child—to force its foul fluids into me, leeching my humanity and replacing it with the hideous, unwanted wine of immortality. My child’s heart became an icy fist.

Thus was I made what I am, at the hands of a dying vampyr—which had been a creature like I am now. Worn down at last by the passing of millennia, it had chosen a host to receive its hideous malady, then died—as I shall do someday, no doubt, in the grip of some terrible, blind, insect-like urge...but not soon. Not today.

So that child, which had been in all ways like other children—loved by its family, loving in turn noise and games and sweetmeats—became a dark thing sickened by the burning light of the sun.

Driven into the damp shadows beneath stones and the dusty gloom of abandoned places, then driven out again beneath the moon by an unshakeable, unresistable hunger, I fed first on my family—my uncomprehending mother wept to see her child returned, standing by her moonlit pallet—then on the others of my city. Not last, nor least painful of my feedings was on the dark-haired girl who had run when I stayed behind. I slashed other throats, too, and lapped up warm, sea-salty blood while the trapped child inside me cried without a sound. It was as though I stood behind a screen, unable to leave or interfere as terrible crimes were committed before me....

And thus the years have passed: sand grains, deposited along the river bank, uncountable in their succession. Every one has contained a seeming infinitude of killings, each one terrible despite their numbing similarity. Only the blood of mankind will properly feed me, and a hundred generations have known terror of me.

Strong as I am, virtually immortal, unkillable as far as I know or can tell—blades pass through me like smoke; fire, water, poison, none affect me—still the light of the sun causes a pain to me so excruciating that you with only mortal lives, whose pain at least eventually ends in death, cannot possibly comprehend it. Thus, kingdoms of men have risen and fallen to ashes since I last saw daylight. Think only on that for a moment, if you seek sad stories! I must be in darkness when the sun rises, so as I range in search of prey my accommodations are shared with toads and slugs, bats, and blindworms.

People can be nothing to me anymore but food. I know of none other like myself, save the dying creature who spawned me. The smell of my own corruption is in my nostrils always.

So there is all of my tale. I cannot die until my time is come, and who can know when that is? Until then I will be alone, alone as no mere man can ever be, alone with my wretchedness and evil and self-disgust until the world collapses and is born anew...

The vampyr rose now, towering up like a black sail billowing in the wind, spreading its vast arms or wings on either side, as if to sweep us before it. “How do your stories compare to this?” it cried; the harshness of its speech seemed somehow muted, even as it grew louder and louder. “Whose is the saddest story, then?” There was pain in that hideous voice that tore at even my fast-pounding heart. “Whose is saddest? Tell me! It is time to judge...”

And in that moment, of all the moments when lying could save my life...I could not lie. I turned my face away from the quivering black shadow, that thing of rags and red eyes. None of the others around the campfire spoke—even Abdallah the clerk only sat hugging his knees, teeth chattering, eyes bulging with fear.

“...I thought so,” the thing said at last. “I thought so.” Night wind tossed the treelimbs above our heads, and it seemed as though beyond them stood only ultimate darkness—no sky, no stars, nothing but unending emptiness.

“Very well,” the vampyr said at last. “Your silence speaks all. I have won.” There was not the slightest note of triumph in its voice. “Give me my prize, and then I may let the rest of you flee my mountains.” The dark shape withdrew a little way.

We all of us turned to look at one another, and it was just as well that the night veiled our faces. I started to speak, but Ibn Fahad interrupted me, his voice a tortured rasp.

“Let there be no talk of volunteering. We will draw lots; that is the only way.” Quickly he cut a thin branch into five pieces, one of them shorter than the rest, and cupped them in a closed hand.

“Pick,” he said. “I will keep the last.”

As a part of me wondered what madness it was that had left us wagering on story-telling and drawing lots for our lives, we each took a length from Ibn Fahad’s fist. I kept my hand closed while the others selected, not wanting to hurry Allah toward his revelation of my fate. When all had selected we extended our hands and opened them, palms up.

Fawn had selected the short stick.

Strangely, there was no sign of his awful fortune on his face: he showed no signs of grief—indeed, he did not even respond to our helpless words and prayers, only stood up and slowly walked toward the huddled black shape at the far edge of the clearing. The vampyr rose to meet him.

“No!” came a sudden cry, and to our complete surprise the clerk Abdallah leaped to his feet and went pelting across the open space, throwing himself between the youth and the looming shadow. “He is too young!” Abdallah shouted, sounding truly anguished. “Do not do this horrible thing! Take me instead!”

Ibn Fahad, the vizier, and I could only sit, struck dumb by this unexpected behavior, but the creature moved swiftly as a viper, smacking Abdallah to the ground with one flicking gesture.

“You are indeed mad, you short-lived men!” the vampyr hissed. “This one would do nothing to save himself—not once did I hear his voice raised in tale-telling—yet now he would throw himself into the jaws of death for this other! Mad!” The monster left Abdallah choking on the ground and turned to silent Fawn. “Come, you. I have won the contest, and you are the prize. I am...sorry...it must be this way....” A great swath of darkness enveloped the youth, drawing him in. “Come,” the vampyr said, “think of the better world you go to—that is what you believe, is it not? Well, soon you shall—”

The creature broke off.

“Why do you look so strangely, manchild?” the thing said at last, its voice troubled. “You cry, but I see no fear. Why? Are you not afraid of dying?”

Fawn answered; his tones were oddly distracted. “Have you really lived so long? And alone, always alone?”

“I told you. I have no reason to lie. Do you think to put me off with your strange questions?”

“Ah, how could the good God be so unmerciful!?” The words were made of sighs. The dark shape that embraced him stiffened.

“Do you cry for me? For me?!”

“How can I help?” the boy said. “Even Allah must weep for you...for such a pitiful thing, lost in the lonely darkness...”

For a moment the night air seemed to pulse. Then, with a wrenching gasp, the creature flung the youth backward so that he stumbled and fell before us, landing atop the groaning Abdallah.

“Go!” the vampyr shrieked, and its voice cracked and boomed like thunder. “Get you gone from my mountains! Go!”

Amazed, we pulled Fawn and the chief clerk to their feet and went stumbling down the hillside, branches lashing at our faces and hands, expecting any moment to hear the rush of wings and feel cold breath on our necks.

“Build your houses well, little men!” a voice howled like the wild wind behind us. “My life is long...and someday I may regret letting you go!”

We ran and ran, until it seemed the life would flee our bodies, until our lungs burned and our feet blistered...and until the topmost sliver of the sun peered over the eastern summits....

Masrur al-Adan allowed the tale’s ending to hang in silence for a span of thirty heartbeats, then pushed his chair away from the table.

“We escaped the mountains the next day,” he said. “Within a season we were back in Baghdad, the only survivors of the caravan to the Armenites.”

“Aaaahh...!” breathed young Hassan, a long drawn-out sound full of wonder and apprehension. “What a marvelous, terrifying adventure! I would never have survived it, myself. How frightening! And did the... the creature...did he really say he might come back someday?”

Masrur solemnly nodded his large head. “Upon my soul. Am I not right, Ibn Fahad, my old comrade?”

Ibn Fahad yielded a thin smile, seemingly of affirmation.

“Yes,” Masrur continued, “those words chill me to this very day. Many is the night I have sat in this room, looking at that door—” He pointed. “—wondering if someday it may open to show me that terrible, misshapen black thing, come back from Hell to make good on our wager.”

“Merciful Allah!” Hassan gasped.

Abu Jamir leaned across the table as the other guests whispered excitedly. He wore a look of annoyance. “Good Hassan,” he snapped, “kindly calm yourself. We are all grateful to our host Masrur for entertaining us, but it is an insult to sensible, Godly men to suggest that at any moment some blood-drinking afreet may knock down the door and carry us—”

The door leaped open with a crash, revealing a hideous, twisted shape looming in the entrance, red-splattered and trembling. The shrieking of Masrur’s guests filled the room.

“Master...?” the dark silhouette quavered. Baba held a wine jar balanced on one shoulder. The other had broken at his feet, splashing Abu Jamir’s prize stock everywhere. “Master,” he began again, “I am afraid I have dropped one.”

Masrur looked down at Abu Jamir, who lay pitched full-length on the floor, insensible.

“Ah, well, that’s all right, Baba.” Masrur smiled, twirling his black mustache. “We won’t have to make the wine go so far as I thought—it seems my story-telling has put some of our guests to sleep.”