## Dayblood

Roger Zelazny

Vampire stories have always bothered me because the creatures go about biting people, who then turn into vampires who go about biting people, who.... There’s a geometrical progression here, and if you stop to think about it, pretty soon we’d all be vampires with no civilians left to bite. The situation always struck me as ecologically unsound, too. There are natural enemies and other limiting factors which control population explosions in other species. If everything were as given in the tradition, there would have to be something else as well Hence, my modest contribution to the canon of the undead....

I crouched in the corner of the collapsed shed behind the ruined church. The dampness soaked through I the knees of my jeans, but I knew that my wait

was just about ended. Picturesquely, a few tendrils of mist rose from the soaked ground, to be stirred feebly by predawn breezes. How Hollywood of the weather....

I cast my gaze about the lightening sky, guessing correctly as to the direction of arrival. Within a minute I saw them flapping their way back—a big, dark one and a smaller, pale one. Predictably, they entered the church through the opening where a section of the roof had years before fallen in. I suppressed a yawn as I checked my watch. Fifteen minutes from now they should be settled and dozing as the sun spills morning all over the east. Possibly a little sooner, but give them a bit of leeway. No hurry yet.

I stretched and cracked my knuckles. I’d rather be home in bed. Nights are for sleeping, not for playing nursemaid to a couple of stupid vampires.

Yes, Virginia, there really are vampires. Nothing to get excited about, though. Odds are you’ll never meet one. There just aren’t that many around. In fact, they’re damn near an endangered species—which is entirely understandable, considering the general level of intelligence I’ve encountered among them.

Take this guy Brodsky as an example. He lives— pardon me, resides—near a town containing several thousand people. He could have visited a different person each night for years without ever repeating himself, leaving his caterers (I understand that’s their in-term these days) with little more than a slight sore throat, a touch of temporary anemia, and a couple of soon-to-be-forgotten scratches on the neck.

But no. He took a fancy to a local beauty—one Elaine Wilson, ex-majorette. Kept going back for more. Pretty soon she entered the customary coma and underwent the nosferatu transformation. All right, I know I said there aren’t that many of them around—and personally I do feel that the world could use a few more vampires. But it’s not a population-pressure thing with Brodsky, just stupidity and greed. No real finesse, no planning. While I applaud the creation of another member of the undead, I am sufficiently appalled by the carelessness of his methods to consider serious action. He left a trail that just about anyone could trace here; he also managed to display so many of the traditional signs and to leave such a multitude of clues that even in these modern times a reasonable person could become convinced of what was going on.

Poor old Brodsky—still living in the Middle Ages and behaving just as he did in the days of their population boom. It apparently never occurred to him to consider the mathematics of that sort of thing. He drains a few people he becomes particularly attracted to and they become nosferatu. If they feel the same way and behave the same way, they go out and recruit a few more of their caterers. And so on. It’s like a chain letter. After a time, everyone would be nosferatu and there wouldn’t be any caterers left. Then what? Fortunately, nature has ways of dealing with population explosions, even at this level. Still, a sudden rash of recruits in this mass-media age could really mess up the underground ecosystem.

So much for philosophy. Time to get inside and beat the crowd.

I picked up my plastic bag and worked my way out of the shed, cursing softly when I bumped against a post and brought a shower down over me. I made my way through the field then and up to the side door of the old building. It was secured by a rusty padlock, which I snapped and threw into the distant cemetery.

Inside, I perched myself on the sagging railing of the choir section and opened my bag. I withdrew my sketchbook and the pencil I’d brought along. Light leaked in through the broken window to the rear. What it fell upon was mostly trash. Not a particularly inspiring scene. Whatever ... I began sketching it. It’s always good to have a hobby that can serve as an excuse for odd actions, as an icebreaker ...

Ten minutes, I guessed. At most.

Six minutes later, I heard their voices. They weren’t particularly noisy, but I have exceptionally acute hearing. There were three of them, as I’d guessed there would be.

They entered through the side door also, slinking, jumpy—looking all about and seeing nothing. At first they didn’t even notice me creating art where childish voices had filled Sunday mornings with off-key praise in years gone by.

There was old Dr. Morgan, several wooden stakes protruding from his black bag (I’ll bet there was a hammer in there, too—I guess the Hippocratic Oath doesn’t extend to the undead— primum, non nocere, etc.); and Father O’Brien, clutching his Bible like a shield, crucifix in his other hand; and young Ben Kelman (Elaine’s fiance), with a shovel over his shoulder and a bag from which I suspected the sudden odor of garlic to have its origin.

I cleared my throat, and all three of them stopped, turned, bumped into each other.

“Hi, Doc,” I said. “Hi, Father. Ben ...”

“Wayne!” Doc said. “What are you doing here?”

“Sketching,” I said. “I’m into old buildings these days.”

“The hell you are!” Ben said. “Excuse me, Father ... You’re just after a story for your damned newspaper!”

I shook my head.

“Really I’m not.”

“Well, Gus’d never let you print anything about this, and you know it.”

“Honest,” I said. “I’m not here for a story. But I know why you’re here, and you’re right—even if I wrote it up, it would never appear. You really believe in vampires?”

Doc fixed me with a steady gaze.

“Not until recently,” he said. “But, son, if you’d seen what we’ve seen, you’d believe.”

I nodded my head and closed my sketchpad.

“All right,” I replied, “I’ll tell you. I’m here because I’m curious. I wanted to see it for myself, but I don’t want to go down there alone. Take me with you.”

They exchanged glances.

“I don’t know ...” Ben said.

“It won’t be anything for the squeamish,” Doc told me.

Father O’Brien just nodded.

“I don’t know about having anyone else in on this,” Ben added.

“How many more know about it?” I asked.

“It’s just us, really,” Ben explained. “We’re the only ones who actually saw him in action.”

“A good newspaperman knows when to keep his mouth shut,” I said, “but he’s also a very curious creature. Let me come along.”

Ben shrugged and Doc nodded. After a moment Father O’Brien nodded too.

I replaced my pad and pencil in the bag and got down from the railing.

I followed them across the church, out into a short hallway, and up to an open, sagging door. Doc flicked on a flashlight and played it upon a rickety flight of stairs leading down into darkness. Slowly then, he began to descend. Father O’Brien followed him. The stairs groaned and seemed to move. Ben and I waited till they had reached the bottom. Then Ben stuffed his bag of pungent groceries inside his jacket and withdrew a flashlight from his pocket.

He turned it on and stepped down. I was right behind him.

I halted when we reached the foot of the stair. In the beams from their lights I beheld the two caskets set up on sawhorses, also the thing on the wall above the larger one.

“Father, what is that?” I pointed.

Someone obligingly played a beam of light upon it.

“It looks like a sprig of mistletoe tied to the figure of a little stone deer,” he said.

“Probably has something to do with black magic,” I offered.

He crossed himself, went over to it and removed it.

“Probably so,” he said, crushing the mistletoe and throwing it across the room, shattering the figure on the floor and kicking the pieces away.

I smiled, I moved forward then.

“Let’s get the things open and have a look,” Doc said.

I lent them a hand.

When the caskets were open, I ignored the comments about paleness, preservation, and bloody mouths. Brodsky looked the same as he always did—dark hair, heavy dark eyebrows, sagging jowls, a bit of a paunch. The girl was lovely, though. Taller than I’d thought, however, with a very faint pulsation at the throat and an almost bluish cast to her skin.

Father O’Brien opened his Bible and began reading, holding the flashlight above it with a trembling hand. Doc placed his bag upon the floor and fumbled about inside it.

Ben turned away, tears in his eyes. I reached out then and broke his neck quietly while the others were occupied. I lowered him to the floor and stepped up beside Doc.

“What—?” he began, and that was his last word.

Father O’Brien stopped reading. He stared at me across his Bible.

“You work for them?” he said hoarsely, darting a glance at the caskets.

“Hardly,” I said, “but I need them. They’re my life’s blood.”

“I don’t understand ...”

“Everything is prey to something else, and we do what we must. That’s ecology. Sorry, Father.”

I used Ben’s shovel to bury the three of them beneath an earthen section of the floor toward the rear—garlic, stakes, and all. Then I closed the caskets and carried them up the stairs.

I checked around as I hiked across a field and back up the road after the pickup truck. It was still relatively early, and there was no one about.

I loaded them both in back and covered them with a tarp. It was a thirty-mile drive to another ruined church I knew of.

Later, when I had installed them safely in their new quarters, I penned a note and placed it in Brodsky’s hand:

Dear B,

Let this be a lesson to you. You are going to have to stop acting like Bela Lugosi. You lack his class. You are lucky to be waking up at all this night. In the future be more circumspect in your activities or I may retire you myself. After all, I’m not here to serve you.

Yours truly,

W P.S. The mistletoe and the statue of Cernunnos don’t work anymore. Why did you suddenly get superstitious?

I glanced at my watch as I left the place. It was eleven fifteen. I stopped at a 7-11 a little later and used their outside phone.

“Hi, Kiela,” I said when I heard her voice. “It’s me.”

“Werdeth,” she said. “It’s been a while.”

“I know. I’ve been busy.”

“With what?”

“Do you know where the old Church of the Apostles out off Route 6 is?”

“Of course. It’s on my backup list, too.”

“Meet me there at twelve thirty and I’ll tell you about it over lunch.”