

## Ahematolazaria

The average U.S. vampire lives 10 to 15 years after being bitten. My councilor, Lisa, promises I can make 20 years as long as I manage my blood allowance carefully and "keep the sun alive inside of me." I used to snicker whenever she said that, but I got tired of the lectures. "The sun is a symbol of hope and happiness," or "the sun is the source of light and life." The woman is a savant at pithy alliterations and trite rhyming. "Hey Shay! How's today?" I just smile it all off, imagining what her trachea tastes like. The programs and books all agree that it's healthier to avoid such "predatory" thoughts, but I let myself think what I want. It's the only way to endure the rationing.

For the past three days, I've been getting by with only an ounce of blood. My fangs keep slipping out and my mouth is thick with my paste-like saliva. I'm twitchy and ravenous. I can smell the salty, over-caffeinated blood of the college boys in the apartment next door. I can smell them so hard I can almost taste them, and they taste good.

My blood voucher became valid almost a week ago but I've been holding out. Like most terminal patients, I have tried to become an expert on my disease, Ahematolazaria Stokera. At least, Stokera is the doctors' best guess. There are several recognizable strains of vampirism but even those vary to some extent from patient to patient. The infection itself is supernatural. It bends and warps natural laws in ways that math and microscopes can't make sense of. We know that the infection is usually passed by bite, and that it causes a host of physiological changes in the victim. Beyond that, things get pretty dicey conceptually. But one of the few things that all the studies conclusively agree on is that drinking less blood now means needing less to stay alive later.

Today I get to indulge. I'm heading to the clinic as soon as the goddamn sun sets, and after an excruciating session with Lisa, I get to have a full glass. Then I'm driving to Chelsea's place and Bryce is going to do a shoot. After that, we're hitting a club. Maybe two if it's not too early. For at least a day, I'll be full and happy and pretty again. As soon as the goddamn sun sets.

I woke up early today, from the thirst. For almost an hour now, I've been sitting on the couch trying to sketch my cat, Oliver, who has fallen asleep pressed up against the living room window. You'd be able to see Berkley if it weren't for the decal covering the glass. It's a special material designed to filter sunlight, at the expense of making the glass an ugly tan color, like a piece of old parchment. In one of my more inspired moments, I decided to paint the bottom-half of the decal with a pattern mimicking Hokusai's Great Wave of Kanagawa. The project took me nearly four months and it's still not perfect, but it's something I can appreciate and be proud of.

This sketch of Oli looks like crap, however. Having no pulse gives me remarkably steady hands, but I'm too distracted today. Too thirsty. I rip the paper out of my notebook and toss it at Oliver. He looks up at me with bewildered indignation, and meows as I make my way toward the bathroom through the bedroom. I can smell his cat blood and hear the tiny throbs of his little heart, but he isn't a temptation.

Warm people always ask me about animal blood. Yes, we can drink it, but it tastes awful, and drinking too much of it ruins our ability to think and speak. We are what we drink.

I retreat to my bedroom and drop my pencil and notepad on my nightstand before continuing into my bathroom. It's absurd how infrequently I go into this space. Toilets and toothbrushes are strange idols for the post-living. I try to keep eating, even though I never really feel the need to, because the books all agree that eating helps retain our sense of self. Some of them suggest that eating may influence the way we metabolize blood, and curb the thirst, though I have yet to notice much of a difference.

The mirror over the sink greets me with an unobstructed view of the doorway behind me. Call me vain, but I don't miss the sun half as much as my reflection. I don't know how I'd live without my laptop's webcam. I strip off my mint colored tee-shirt and white panties, watching them pop into the reflection as soon as they leave my body.

Being naked sucks. It always reminds me how still my body is. What I wouldn't give for a goosebump, to say nothing of a pulse. My hair still grows, which is more than you can say for some strains, but my skin and flesh stays the same. I consider my slightly smaller-than-average breasts and wonder if they would have grown larger if I had not been bitten. I step in to the shower and turn the heat all the way up. My skin doesn't burn or turn red. The water doesn't really feel warm. It just tingles and tickles my head in a way that reminds me of heat. At least I got bitten when I was young and slender.

It was happened a year and a half ago, when I was a senior in college. Winter semester was about to start and Chelsea and I had just come back to our apartment after going home for the holiday break. She had hardly stepped in the door before I begged her to go to a bar with me. I was so happy to be done with the forced cheer of the holidays that I literally wanted to skip. So I talked her into walking instead of taking my car. We could have left by four thirty, with the sun still in the air, but I wanted to show Chelsea the outfits mom bought for me. I can't help but feel haunted by all these stupid little choices that might have saved me.

We were waiting to cross at Shattuck and Cedar when a white Escalade ran the light a full five seconds late, broad-siding a green Honda Accord. There was no horn or screeching tires, just an explosion of glass and metal. The Honda spun into the traffic pole on the opposite side of the street from us. Chelsea screamed. I could only stare. There were no other cars at the intersection. Some people watched from the café on the corner, but nobody did anything. The only other person there was a teenage boy wearing a gray hoody and jeans standing on the opposite diagonal. He looked between me and the cars before cautiously crossing the street to see the Honda. I told Chelsea to call 911 and made my way to the Escalade. The air bag had deployed and the driver was stunned holding his face. I asked if he was okay.

"I thingg I brogg my nose." He muttered through a bloodied hand.

I looked over at the Honda to find the hooded boy pulling at the car door. I asked if he needed help, but he wrenched open the concave front door by himself. My head didn't register how much raw strength that required. I was more concerned about the driver.

She was a young woman with tan skin and dark brunette hair in a blue and white shirt. Her airbag had deployed, burst and was stained red. She was moaning softly. I abandoned the Escalade and jogged toward the Honda. The hooded boy was leaning into

the car, lowering his face to hers. At first I thought he was doing first aid, but when I got closer I saw that he was licking the blood off of her.

“What the hell are you doing!?” I shouted and tried to shove him away, without really thinking about it.

He turned around and bit me on the wrist.

It was such a simple thing. Nothing sexual or ritualized. Just an angry animal lashing out. It hurt like a bitch and I shouted at him. He suddenly looked scared. His fangs retreated into the top of his mouth, and then he turned and ran. I walked over to Chelsea and tried to dress the wound with her scarf. It seems obvious in retrospect but at the time it didn't really occur to me that I had been bitten by a vampire.

I started sweating almost immediately, and shortly after that I felt high. Everything got bright, and soft, and then I blacked out. I still remember the smells though. The cheap beer on Escalade Guy's breath. The lilac and jasmine in Chelsea's perfume mixing with her nervous sweat. But more than anything, I could smell Ms. Accord's blood. It was very sweet, and almost fruity, but also enticingly metallic. I remember thinking how odd it was that I never craved that taste before.

The paramedics arrived minutes later, strapped me onto a gurney and took me to a hospital. I remember being stuck with needles, an excruciating pain in my mouth, and some pretty bizarre dreams. When I woke up, a man in a white coat told me that I had contracted vampirism. The doctor said it was important for me and my family to acclimate to the change, and I spent the rest of the semester in Orange County with mom.

Chelsea had to find a new roommate. Escalade Guy got a DUI. Ms. Accord went into intensive care, but came out okay. She'd never been bitten. My hooded assailant turned himself into the cops later that night. He pleaded temporary insanity to attempted manslaughter and is currently serving the second year of a five year sentence. Hopefully he'll make parole.

At first I was happy he was caught, mostly because mom was so hungry for somebody to blame, but now I almost wish he got away. He was a college student like me, and he really was just trying to help the woman in the accord. When he saw all the blood, he couldn't help himself. I like to think I'd be able to resist biting the poor bitch who tried to pull me away from my meal, but I honestly don't know if I could do better.

The water has fogged up my pointless mirror, and my walls are practically dripping wet. I twist off the knob, step out and start to dry my hair.

I had to enroll in Lessons for New Life, essentially a twelve step program run for fledgling vamps. We shared our struggles and our “unique transformation stories,” and learned the ins-and-outs of the blood clinics. We also did exercises that were supposed to help us control our blood thirst and retain our “sense of personhood.” Some of the stuff was actually useful, like learning to retract our fangs at will and how to practice focusing our enhanced sense of smell.

Our main instructor was a middle-aged-looking vampire of seven years named Joel. He was a devout catholic family man when he got fanged and his entire family abandoned him. Most religions don't publicly condone vampire hunting anymore, but the general consensus is that we're still going straight to hell, along with the wizards, lycanthropes and anybody else who had ever been touched by the wyrd. Some people thought it was inspirational that Joel started teaching but to me it just seemed sad and manipulative.

No matter how bad our problems were Joel had risen above worse. When I “shared” the fact that I missed Chelsea and Berkley, he started talking about losing his daughters and how Job also lost everything and how it was part of God’s plan. He actually convinced himself that it had all turned out for the best. I promised I would never let myself become so deluded.

Mom agreed that completing college would be good for me. At the very least, I would die a graduate as well as a vampire. I moved into this apartment and picked up my studio art degree and graphic design minor where I had left off. Berkeley was very understanding of my condition, which translated to a lot of well-meaning condescension. They set me up with a night class system. Note-takers would attend my classes for me, ferrying tests and assignments between me and my professors. Most of my grades followed an odd pattern. My teachers would go easy on me at first and then they would grade me harshly to convince me they weren’t going easy on me, and then they go back to grading me lightly. A lot of the time, they would have me skip exams just to avoid the hassle of arranging them.

Now, I work from home as a web-designer. I do decent business, but I’m still cutting into my savings to make rent. Staying away from people makes it easier to control my thirst though, and I have plenty of free time to practice painting. I’ve even sold a few pieces online.

I spend a lot of time online, and I’ve developed a low-grade addiction to a couple online games. Nerdy I know, but it lets me feel like I’m getting out in the open, and I can shop and play dress up with my character. There aren’t many stores that keep vampire hours.

Back before the bite, I was a bit of a fashionista. I even had some promise as a model. It seems kind of petty now that I can’t see myself in a mirror, but I miss it. Hence tonight’s photo-shoot. Chelsea wants to be a fashion designer, and she actually has a lot of promise. Her boyfriend Bryce is a photographer, and whenever our schedules allow it, we get together and demo her clothes.

Having dried my hair and body, I head to my dresser and extract a black thong trimmed with lace. I haven’t had sex in over a month, and if the prospect presents itself, I’m going to run with it. My strain isn’t transmissible by sex, but I always feel compelled to tell guys about my condition before we get to the bed. It hasn’t turned anyone away, but it made the last guy nervous as hell. I don’t want nervous sex tonight. I want to be fucked. Maybe I’ll keep the fangs to myself.

I put on a black push-up bra, a short black skirt, and a turquoise blouse. Where are my wayfarers? A minute of searching produces nothing. I’ll do without. Phone, wallet and keys go into my black clutch. I slip on a reliable pair of strappy black pumps. I go back to the bathroom to comb my hair, looking in the mirror through force of habit. I’m too thirsty to boot up my laptop and use it as mirror. Oliver is in the kitchen, demanding food and water. I finish with my hair and appease the little dictator.

Before heading out, I extract a bright red auto-injector from my otherwise barren fridge. The injector is filled with a mix of blood and some very powerful sedatives. My last line of defense against the thirst. And it looks like an obese magic marker. The clinics jokingly referred to them as ‘stakes.’ I’ve never had to use mine.

I could smell one of the college boys in the hall as I stepped out of my apartment. Old Spice, citrusy laundry detergent and surprisingly fruity conditioner for a guy. It’s

the newest of my three neighbors, a skinny Indian guy with curly black hair and dark skin wearing nerdy glasses of ironic thickness. I've seen him in the laundry room a couple times before. He's holding a basket now, in fact. He smiles as he sees me.

"Hey! It's Shane right?"

"Just Shay, actually."

"Shay," He repeats and closes his eyes in a "How could I fuck that up?" sort of way. "I'm Amir. I live next door."

"Oh yeah, we met in the laundry room."

His veins are broad, dark and healthy. I raise my hand to my face as I feel my fangs slipping out. Bad fangs. People are not for drinking. But I can tell that his blood is leaner than his roommates' and sweeter too. I imagine his skin giving through to my teeth and the blood gurgling around my gums.

"So, do you go to Berkeley too?"

"Used to. They gave me a diploma."

"Oh, wow. Uh, congratulations, I guess?"

I smile and give him a polite chuckle. I'm far too thirsty for polite chuckles.

"Anyway, I was wondering if you'd be interested in getting a bite sometime."

"Is that a pun?" I ask.

"What?" He has no clue what I mean.

"I'm a vampire." I show him my fangs.

"Oh," His eyes widen, not in horror so much as surprise. "Oh. I didn't know! I didn't mean to offend you or anything. Mark and Eric didn't tell me. I had no idea."

"Don't worry about it." I say with a smile and start to turn around.

"Well, all the same, if you want to get some coffee sometime...I'd like to get some coffee too."

He's asking you out, blonde.

I suck in my fangs, before turning to face him. He's a bit skinny for my tastes, but tall. His face is kind of cute, and I can tell that he bathes regularly. The wardrobe could use some work. I swear I saw the same brown plaid shorts and gray graphic tee in Urban Outfitters back when I still had a tan. I look at his face again. Nice jaw line, strong nose and decent eyebrows. His smile is a bit too bright though. A little too eager and a little too happy, like a puppy. I get the sense he wouldn't have a clue of what to do with me if I was his to do stuff with. Next door is awful close to home. Any degree of clinginess would be a major problem.

"Uh, maybe some other time? I'm sorry. I'm kind of running late..."

He gets the message and takes it like a champ, nodding like he should have known better.

"Hey, it's cool. Just thought I'd ask."

I give a small bow of thanks as I turn to leave. Part of me feels sad for him. All of me is flattered. I'd be blushing if I still could.

I thought I left this shit behind in Orange County. I *do* still live in Berkeley, right? My clinic is surrounded by 'God Hates Fangs' types. There must be at least thirty of them, chanting and waving their goddamn signs like flags. They're wearing garlic too. The

stench spreads through my face, burning my nose, eyes and throat. A counter protest is setting itself up across the street, painting signs on the spot. A couple of bored-looking cops are standing on the corner to make sure things don't get out of hand. Oh great, now some asshole is pulling out a megaphone.

"If any one of the house of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people..."

I pick up my aging iPod and dial through the albums until I find Spamalot. I start "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life," roll down the windows and turn up my Focus's speakers as loud as they will go. The song takes it sweet time getting started.

"...For the life of every creature is its blood: its blood is its life! Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood. Whoever eats it shall be cut off!"

"Fuck you!" one of the kids across the street shouts.

"Alwaaaays look ooon the briiiight side of life..." my car sings.

One of the cops smiles at me and I smile back, whistling along with the song. Time passes a little quicker. I pull into the parking lot, step out of my car and take stock of the mob. Back home my clinic got picketed at least once a week, but this is the first time I've seen hellfire and brimstone in Berkeley. The mob is dressed in tee-shirts full of scripture and pocked with cowboy hats, giving it a folksy Midwestern flavor. Irvine had a posher brand of bigotry. I put on a little smirk and walk past the mob, ignoring the caustic garlic.

I walk into the clinic, greeted by elevator-grade smooth jazz and an offensively inoffensive color scheme. I can smell the blood room beneath the scent of stale Fabreeze and a tingle shoots through my spine. Won't be long now. The young brunette receptionist gives me an apologetic frown.

"How long have they been at it?" I ask

"They started just before sundown." She says wearily.

My nose tells me she's on her period. It's not hard to ignore it. I will never be that thirsty.

I take a seat in one of the twelve or so chairs spread out around the waiting room and glance over the other wyrd-clinic clients. There are two others vampires, a preppy looking Asian chick texting on her cell and a thirty-something business guy pawing through an old copy of Esquire. A soccer mom who has seen too much sun is sitting next to her morose elementary school-aged son. Probably a little wizard drugged to the eyeballs with magic suppressants. Normally I'd be able to tell by smell, but the garlic fried my nose. I'm not sure if it's them or the drugs they take, but their sweat always has a hint of ozone to it.

There's one more guy, a nervous looking twenty-something wearing a beat-up army jacket several sizes too big. A lycanthrope maybe? They generally come in all at once though, whenever the moon is right. He keeps glancing between the clock and the receptionist. Maybe he's waiting for somebody.

Outside they've started chanting.

"No blood for Demons! No blood for Demons!"

Hard to tell which church they're from. The demon-theory is a popular one, easy to understand and elegant in its convenience.

I actually considered it once for the sake of argument. I guess it is possible that I am a demon who woke up in Shay's dead body with all her memories, but what's the point? Shouldn't I have some infernal agenda? Maybe I missed a crucial memo. I wonder if the real Shay is in heaven, watching me run around in her hijacked body. Hope she's not pissed. Actually, I don't give a fuck. If she's in heaven, she's got no right to be bitching at me. If she's in hell, she should have other shit to worry about.

A teenage-looking vampire in a jersey and basketball shorts steps into the waiting room holding a freshly stamped blood-voucher. He is followed by a slightly heavy, brown-haired female vampire wearing brown slacks, a cream colored shirt and a pink knitted sweater.

"Hey Shay! How are you today?"

"Hi Lisa." I stand and follow her into her cramped office.

She's got a big L-shaped desk decorated with pictures of her dogs; both of them shaky little lap-sitting shitters. She shuts the door behind us, muting the chanting and the jazz. I take a seat on the leather chair, and once again I am surprised by how uncomfortable it is.

"Did our fine friends out front give you any trouble?" She asks sweetly.

"Nah. The mobs were worse back in Irvine." I hand her my blood voucher.

"Well, that's good I suppose. So I see here that your voucher was valid five days ago. Did you have to reschedule?"

"No. I'm just trying to do more with less."

"I'm proud that you're challenging yourself, but Patrice really should have called you three days ago. Waiting any longer than three days can be risky."

So stamp it and let's be done here.

"I'll be sure to schedule my next appointment earlier." I concede

"And I'll be sure to get you out of here lickity spliticky so you can have a drink."

'Lickity spliticky?' I would honestly prefer twenty minutes with the protestors.

"So where did we leave off last time..."

A knock on the door saves us both.

Lisa gives me a look of exaggerated surprise and goes to answer it. The receptionist is standing on the other side. She looks like somebody drowned a baby.

"We have a situation!"

Lisa steps out of the tiny room and closes the door behind her. The nurse mutters something and Lisa answers with a "What!?" and the two of them walk away. I am alone in the awful little room. I flick my fangs in and out and stare at the clock. Minutes tick by harmlessly at first, but they start adding up to real time. 7:05. 7:10. 7:15! What the fuck? My appointment is supposed to end in five minutes. If she expects me to wait while they un-fuck the printer or whatever, they've got another thing coming. I stand up and walk out of Lisa's office.

It's quieter. The smooth jazz is still playing and there's still a crowd of voices out front, but they aren't chanting anymore. The smell of blood is much stronger. It's oxidized now. Drying and dying. I walk into the waiting room and everybody is standing. One of the cops from outside is talking notes and talking to the receptionist. There's a track of blood on the carpet. Lisa is standing next to another councilor, a skinny middle-aged vampire. I catch her eye and she remembers leaving me to rot in her office.

"Oh god, Shay!"

“What’s going on?” I ask as I walk over.

She licks her lips nervously. “One of the protestors made it into the blood room. He slashed the bags and poured ground holly and garlic on the blood. Patrice called the cops and they caught him, but we’re out of blood.”

My body gets colder somehow.

“What? I only got an *ounce* yesterday—I need blood now!”

“We’re contacting the clinic in Sunnyvale. You’ll have to fill your voucher there.”

“I won’t make it. It’s all I can do to keep from...” I catch myself. They’re supposed to hold me if I express the intent to harm. “I have a stake. I can use my stake.”

Lisa gives me a hard look. I’m not sure she’s going to let me go.

“Use it. Give me your voucher and I’ll stamp it so you can get on your way.”

“Thank you.”

I hand her my voucher and she walks briskly to her office. I go to the bathroom, step in the stall and pull the stake out of my purse. I remove the cap, pull down my shirt and steady the needle over my heart. I hit the plunger, gasping at the sting and its sudden warmth. I mourn the untasted blood, knowing full well that it would be stale, plastic and choked with chemicals. I want to baste my tongue with it and bathe my throat in it. But it’s already swirling around inside of me. I swallow a mouthful of my infected saliva and it goes down like paint.

My night is dead. Sunnyvale is a two hour round trip at best. I won’t make it to the shoot. Maybe we can still make it to a club. Maybe something else totally fucked won’t happen. How the fuck did she let somebody into the blood room? It must have been that asshole in the army jacket. Did it not occur to the fucking receptionist to ask why he was there when there was a protest going on outside?

I walk outside the bathroom and find Chelsea holding my voucher. I thank her again and she tells me to call when I arrive at Sunnyvale. Outside, the protest has been cleared away. I climb into my car, turn it on and my iPod picks up where it left off:

“Life’s a piece of shit, when you look at it. Life’s a laugh and death’s the joke it’s true...”

Chelsea was painfully understanding. She always is. She offered to move the shoot to my place, but I could hear Bryce bitching about set-up in the background. She tried to convince me to come out to a bar, but the sedatives in the stake had me feeling leaden and witless. We agreed to reschedule instead of actually rescheduling. I barely made it back home from Sunnyvale, but now the drugs are starting to wear off and I can tell sleep won’t have me for hours.

After going on only an ounce a day for so long, the blood in the syringe is enough to fill me for a night. Besides, if I have a full glass now, half the high would be wasted on daylight.

I check my miscellaneous websites and email addresses before retreating to the couch. I call Oli but he refuses to give up his perch on my computer chair. I hate my apartment, almost as much I hate how things turn to shit whenever I leave it. I walk up to my painted sliding glass door and open it for the first time in months. It’s cool outside.



Vampires used to be about living forever instead of dying with dignity. Throughout history, despots and tyrants have turned to vampirism whenever their lives neared an end. It never ends well, of course. They always go mad with bloodlust, eating virgins by the boatload until their followers turn against them. But most of those assholes were arguably mad to begin with. They don't know how to hold back. If anything, I know how to hold back. I know how to scrape and how to hide. But I don't think I could live with the guilt. Then again, I don't expect to patiently starve to death when my blood allowance doesn't cut it either.

The sliding door on the patio next to mine whooshes open and the neck of a guitar emerges followed by Amir.

“Hey.” I say, surprising him.

“Oh. Hey! Do you mind if I practice out here? My roommates kicked me out.”

“Go ahead.”

He strums a few chords and starts to sing along, shyly and self-consciously. The company is still nice. I wait for him to finish his song, and then ask him if he wants to get a bite.



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