

Is There Life After Rehab?

by
Pat Cadigan

Oral sex and *only* oral sex," said a woman's voice somewhere on my right. "Forget beef consommé, forget gravy, forget any of that shit. It's got to be oral sex or nothing."

Now that's one hell of a conversation to wake up in the middle of, I thought, trying to open my eyes. I was slumped on a sofa in some dimly lit place that smelled like a bar. Had to be one of those cocktail lounges that were springing up around the city of late. Trends, eh? You never know what's going to be chic next. Or even *chicy/Mickey*, as we used to say back when the Berlin Wall was coming down. Pronounced *sheeky-meeky*, it meant something was both *trés* chic and Mickey Mouse all at once. Can't tell you who came up with that one, but I *can* tell you that I find myself using it now more than ever, even though no one knows what the hell I'm talking about.

"But wasn't that rather, uh, *awkward*?" asked a different woman, on my left. I struggled to raise my drooping head. With my eyelids fluttering, I could only see what looked like a malfunctioning filmstrip of my own lap and part of two others on either side, both of which were far better dressed than mine.

"*That's* the understatement of the decade," said the woman on my right. I must have passed out during a less interesting conversation, I decided, and my rudeness had driven away whomever had been sitting next to me. Then these two had taken their places. I just hoped they didn't think me rude for waking up uninvited. "But that wasn't the *worst* part," the woman on my right went on. "You know what the worst part was? Nobody appreciated it."

Left: "You're kidding."

Right: "I don't kid about things like oral sex. If I'm lyin', I'm dyin', to borrow a saying from you-know-who."

Both sides laughed together. Obviously, they knew who. I didn't.

Right: "Nobody appreciated it, not one little bit. Not my boyfriend, not my *other* boyfriend, not my *other* other boyfriend—hell, not even my *husband*."

Left: "Okay, *now* I'm shocked."

Right: "Not any more than I was. A *husband* who doesn't appreciate regular blow jobs? How fucked up is that?"

Left: "Fucked up doesn't even begin to cover it. If it had been me, I'd have been looking around for the other three horsemen."

Right: "Damned fucking-A right you would have. And I bet *they'd* have appreciated getting some action." I felt a hard nudge in my ribs. "How about you? What do *you* think?"

"I don't know," I slurred, or I think I slurred, as I tried to focus on her. "I've never tried to blow a harbinger of the apocalypse."

Both women laughed heartily, and one of them gave me an even heartier slap on the back. "Hey, Grace," called the one on the right. "Your friend came to. You maybe want to get her some coffee?"

Someone grabbed my wrists and hauled me to my feet. "Glad to see you're back among the living. If you'll pardon the expression." Lots more hearty laughter as the same someone took my chin between finger and thumb and lifted my head. I found myself staring into the flawless, near-ebony features of my new best friend, Grace Something-Or-Other. Sweeney? Swanson? Swanwick?

"Do you remember where you are, Lily?" she asked me.

"You're assuming I knew to begin with," I said by way of stalling. Things were coming back to me in bits and pieces. Grace *Stone*. Her name was Grace Stone, and she had brought me here, which made her the best and only friend I had in this vicinity. "I don't think you ever actually told me where we were going, just that it was a friendly after-hours club that liked to get started early."

Grace smiled, looking pleased with me. "So you *do* remember coming here?"

"Not exactly. I remember *that* we came here, but I can't even imagine how I was still capable of walking after all those Bloody Marys. You didn't carry me, did you?"

Considering that she was almost a head taller than I was and, though not bulky, definitely more muscled, I didn't think it was such an absurd question. But it made her throw back her head and roar with laughter. "No, I'm not possessed of that kind of extraordinary strength. At the moment," she added, barely under her breath. "Do you remember how you got this, uh, inebriated?"

I tried to think, but strangely, all that came to me was a vague image of someone wearing a white dress shirt and a bow tie putting what seemed to be an oxygen mask over my nose and mouth.

"Did I get CPR from a bartender?" I asked finally.

Grace laughed again. "No, but you did get AWOL."

I had to replay that one a couple of times, and even then I wasn't sure I'd heard her right. "I thought it was 'go AWOL,' and only if you were in the military." My head wavered between aching and exploding. "Please don't tell me I enlisted."

"No, you're still a civilian. In more ways than one." She started walking me slowly through the room. "You can *get* AWOL when AWOL stands for 'Alcohol Without Liquid.' I didn't realize you'd never had the pleasure. Otherwise I'd have ordered you a half-strength shot. One whiff and you were *out*."

"Damn," I said, wondering why anyone had bothered to think up something like Alcohol Without Liquid. "I guess I can't claim I didn't inhale."

Grace sat me down at a small table and someone put a cup the size of a soup bowl in front of me. My stomach gathered itself for a powerful lurch, then relaxed as I registered the aroma of coffee.

"Milk?"

I nodded, waved away an offer of sugar and picked up the cup with both hands, enjoying the aroma again for a moment before taking a large swig. "That's better," I said. "For a moment there, I thought it was, uh—"

"Beef consommé. Or bouillion." Grace nodded knowingly. "Which you loathe and despise."

"Right. Thanks for remembering." I sipped some more coffee. It was not only the best-tasting coffee I had ever had, it also seemed to have the best head-clearing properties I had ever encountered. It was like I could feel myself sobering up, which everybody knew was medically impossible. But then everybody knew it was medically impossible to cure the common cold, AIDS, and vampirism, too. Well, two out of three wasn't bad, as the saying went. And it *was* still two out of three, wasn't it? Sure it was. Vampirism *had* been cured, and the cure was permanent. Therefore, Grace telling me that someone had come up with a way to reverse the vampirism cure, that was just something I'd dreamed while I'd been passed out after going—getting—AWOL. Just an anxiety dream, a sign that I couldn't handle non-wet booze.

"I suppose I don't have to tell you they don't serve that here," said Grace, now sitting across from me with her own enormous cup.

I frowned at her. "What?"

"Beef consommé, or any other kind of broth. They don't serve it here."

"Ah. So this isn't the place to ask for a bull shot." I laughed faintly.

Grace's expression turned a bit confused. "Considering your reaction earlier this evening, I didn't think you would."

"No way. But surely there's been the odd patron with a taste for beef bouillion and vodka now and then?"

"Ew." She gave an elaborate shudder. "I hope *not*. This isn't the kind of place that would attract that sort of element. At least, it's not supposed to be."

I sighed. "Lots of things aren't supposed to be. Like, you aren't supposed to sober up after a cup of coffee, even coffee this good in a cup this big. But apparently I have." I put the cup down and folded my arms on the table. "What's going on?"

Grace's smile was studiedly sunny. "Well, what do you remember?"

"You keep asking me that like it's crucial. Is it?" I looked around, suddenly feeling self-conscious. It had to be drunken paranoia, I told myself; all the other people in the place *weren't* looking at me. There was no reason why they should. Well, none except that I'd made a fool out of myself by passing out, and now they were all probably wondering if I were going to throw up on the carpet for an encore. But I didn't feel even a little queasy, which was lucky for all of us, including the carpet. It was a pretty nice carpet, the color of very expensive red wine. Must have been brand new as well, as there didn't seem to be a stain on it anywhere.

"I just got a little worried after what happened with the AWOL," Grace said. "I want to make sure you're all right." Had her eyes always been such a golden amber, I wondered, or did she have contact lenses? And if so, had she put them in while I'd been unconscious? Or taken them out?

"I appreciate your concern," I said, feeling warier than I wanted to admit. "I haven't passed out like that since I was a college student, and I've never had a memory blackout. Should I be bracing myself for an industrial-strength hangover?"

"That depends on you."

"You're right. I'd better get a pitcher of ice water from the bartender." I started to get up.

"I'll get it." She made a funny little waving gesture with one hand without looking away from me. "You know, we were talking about vampirism before you passed out."

"Were we." The bartender materialized next to the table. He put down a pitcher of ice water with a thump, produced a thick glass tumbler from nowhere like a magician and was gone again before I could search my pockets for a tip.

"Yes, I was telling you how much I still miss it. I was under the impression that you felt the same way. More or less." She tilted her head expectantly.

I managed to pour myself a glass of water with only minor spillage and drank it as slowly as I could. I hadn't been lying when I'd said that I hadn't been that drunk since college. I really hadn't, and I'd really never had a blackout. But I was having trouble remembering everything that had happened between the time I had walked out of the support group meeting to when I had woken up during the oral sex conversation. The support group meeting was where I had met Grace. At the time, I'd been glad to find another person who had come out of rehab with the same kind of bad attitude I had. The culture and vocabulary that come with recovery—excuse me, *Recovery*—rubbed me the wrong way in spite of my determination to stick with it.

This determination didn't spring from any special virtue on my part. I mean, what choice did I or anyone else like me have? Once you were cured of vampirism, that was it—you couldn't be reinfected, no way, no how, no sir, why, Dracula himself wouldn't be able to turn you. The clinic staff would be telling you

that even as they were strapping you down and preparing the injection. Cure and vaccination in one handy vial! Modern medicine, eh? Who would have imagined?

Not me. In the years I had spent undead, I had imagined all sorts of things, including my own destruction, possibly at the hands of some young, hungry zealot with garlic on his breath and a stake he pretended wasn't bigger than his dick, maybe by some rival who would coldcock me and leave me stranded in the desert just before sunrise (you don't know how lethal spite can be till you've met a vampire with issues and a grudge).

I had also imagined AIDS mutating and jumping the natural/supernatural barrier to lay waste to all of us in a way even more unspeakable than it did to humans. There were those who insisted this had already happened, but they could never come up with any solid examples, only vague stories involving the cousin of a daughter of a friend-of-a-friend who overheard someone on an all-night bus telling someone else about it. Which just goes to show you that where urban legends are concerned, the undead can be as gullible as anyone.

And this had to be an urban legend, this notion of there being a cure for the cure, I thought, watching Grace watch me. Her expression was a mixture of fondness and speculation but underneath I was picking up a definite air of urgency. Her eyes were too bright; she was sitting too far forward and looking at me much too intently.

I put the empty glass down and started to pour myself another. Like that, her hand was covering the top of the glass. "Am I right?" she asked. "You miss it as much as I do?"

I pulled the glass out from under her hand and refilled it. "Why do you care so much?" I asked, sitting well back out of her reach. "Is this some kind of bonding stuff or is there more to it?"

She smiled with half her mouth. "You must have heard the rumors."

"I've heard a lot of rumors about a lot of things. You'll have to be more specific."

"The rumors about there being a way to reverse the cure," she said, sounding a bit impatient now. "Did you believe them?"

I shrugged with one shoulder. "I believe there's a sucker born every minute. But *reborn* every minute? *That* I'm not so sure about."

"You're wise. But I know for a fact that in spite of what the medical establishment says, it's real."

I took another long drink of water. "I'm still getting Nigerian spam, so obviously there are still enough people falling for it in spite of the fact that it was exposed as a scam about a hundred years ago."

"In the early twentieth century?" Grace laughed. "Before World War I? The history books seem to have missed it."

"I meant *computer* years. You know, like dog years, only a whole lot faster."

"As opposed to vampire years. Which aren't."

I shrugged again. "Depends on who you ask."

"How many years were you under?"

"More bonding stuff?"

"I guess. Yeah, sure, why not. That and I'm curious."

"How long were *you* under?" I asked.

"I asked you first."

"I know, but you're the one who wants to bond. You show me yours and I'll show you mine. It's the least you can do after getting me so smashed."

"Touché," Grace said, looking a bit embarrassed. "For me, it was about thirty years, and I loved every minute of it. Especially the eighties."

"I can understand that. Back in the eighties, you could hardly tell the difference between them and us." I smiled.

"Yeah. That whole greed-is-good thing." Her smile was wistful. "Okay, your turn. Were you undead longer than that?"

I nodded.

"How much longer?"

"Quite a bit."

"How much is 'quite a bit'?"

"In computer years? Or dog years?"

"Come *on*," she said. I could see she was getting impatient again and trying not to show it. "You said you'd tell me."

"About a hundred years."

For the first time, she looked unnerved. "*Not* computer years."

"Or dog years."

"Christ." She winced, and I couldn't help laughing a little.

"Still get a twinge every time you mention the deity?"

"Don't you?"

"I've been avoiding it for so long that I honestly can't tell you the last time I took the deity's name in vain. Old habits die hard and some don't die at all, even in rehab."

"How polite your conversation must be." She chuckled. "And when did they cure you?"

I leaned an elbow on the table. "Damn, I always have to think about that one. Let's see ... Who's president?"

She mentioned a name that sounded vaguely familiar.

"Right," I said. "First term or second?"

"Are you kidding?" She grimaced.

I shook my head. "About five or six years ago. Maybe seven. Call it less than ten, but more than six. Sorry I can't be more precise than that. I lost a lot of time in rehab. Years, as a matter of fact."

"Really?" Her amber eyes widened. "Why was that?"

"It was a lot tougher for some of us. Past the half century mark, you're what they call an 'urban feral.' I was that twice over."

"What did they do to you?"

"What didn't they do." I gave a short laugh. "Drugs, behavior modification, therapy. Anger management. More drugs. The power of positive thinking. Still more drugs. Cosmetic orthodonture."

"What?"

"Just kidding about that last one." I grinned, baring my teeth and touching each canine with the tip of my tongue. "I used to ask the doctors if they were going to make me wear braces. Most of them didn't get the joke."

"Maybe they couldn't imagine you *could* joke," Grace said, sounding almost formal now.

For over a hundred years, I've been reading people, and although I can no longer do it on the virtually telepathic level the way I did before I was cured, I can still match the indicator to the mood; people are people are always people, and a century of experience will make you almost as virtually telepathic as any vampire. Which is how I knew that my new best friend was thinking that bringing me

here for her sales pitch about the cure reversal was maybe not the best idea she'd had lately. I couldn't blame her. I'd have felt the same in her shoes. Old vampires are trouble for everyone, living and undead alike. They tend to be loose cannons at best and at worst, your, uh, worst nightmare. Poor Grace was afraid I was the latter. I could all but read her thoughts like scrolling subtitles in her amber eyes: if what I had just told her about myself was true, then I must have already been approached by someone peddling the cure for the cure. So why hadn't I gone for it and what was I going to do now?

"You're afraid I'll turn you in. You and all of your like-minded friends." I made a small gesture that took in the whole room. There were considerably more people in it now than when I had first come to. Or maybe I was just more aware of them.

"It did occur to me." She licked her lips. "I've never met anyone as old as you."

"Yeah, I get that a lot." I looked around. At the next table, two couples were openly staring at me with identical hungry expressions, gripping each other's hands so tightly that their knuckles were white. Behind them, a young woman knelt on her chair so she could see me over their heads, while the seven other people at the table with her craned their necks. My gaze traveled on past a number of other curious people and came to rest on the bartender, who paused in the middle of mixing something tropical to give me a friendly wave.

"Is that what you're going to do?" Grace prodded. "Turn us in?"

I turned to look at her. "Sure I will. I'm only too happy to admit that's the plan so you and your fellow wannabes can all jump me at once and squash me like a bug."

"Used-to-bes," one of the men at the next table corrected me loudly.

I gave him my most cheerful grin. "Has-beens."

He actually started to get up out of his chair to go for me, but his partner and the other couple managed to pull him down again. It took them some effort.

"That was uncalled-for," Grace scolded me.

"Sorry, but a straight line like that is just asking for it." I winked at him, which made him angrier.

"What's his problem, anyway," I asked Grace. "Brain tumor? Testicular cancer? Or just HIV positive?"

"Just' HIV positive." Grace made a disgusted noise. "Tell me, would you say *you* were 'just' HIV positive? Or is that all it is when you can afford the drugs?"

"Don't ask me. I'm completely uninsured, and I failed to start any sort of savings plan before I was turned, so I have no money in the bank at all. Which means I can't afford the extortionate fee for this famous cure reversal of yours, either. And it *is* extortionate, isn't it? I can't imagine that it wouldn't be." Pause. "Unless you guys have some kind of major group discount going?"

"It's more of a payment plan," Grace said.

"Turn now, pay later?"

She nodded, looking unhappy at the way I'd put it.

"So why haven't you all just gone ahead and taken the cure already? Don't tell me you've all got cold feet."

"Nobody's got cold feet," said the woman sitting next to the angry man at the next table. "It won't work unless you want eternal life, and we all do." Pause. "But we have to get three groups of thirteen. We've only got two groups of thirteen and one twelve."

I almost burst out laughing. "And why do you need three groups of thirteen?"

"It has to do with our sire's religion," Grace said. "It's a ceremonial thing, I think."

Now I did laugh, though I managed to make it more of a chuckle. "You mean your sire-to-be. Assuming you get your three groups. Which you will if I sign up."

Grace nodded.

"So how much are we talking about per person?"

"Twenty thousand."

I laughed. "You can forget me, then. I don't have twenty, period."

"But it's only five hundred up front, the rest payable in installments."

"Oh, right, I forgot. Turn now, pay later."

Grace made another unhappy face. "For immortality, it's cheap at twice the price."

She really believed it. So did everyone else in the room. It made me want to believe it as well. Hell, I'm only human.

"I'd like to have a word with this sire-to-be of yours before I decide one way or another," I said. "He's on the premises, isn't he?"

"*She* doesn't see anyone," Grace said.

"No? I bet she'd see *me*."

"And why is that?"

"You're forgetting how old I am. She and I are probably old blood buddies. For all I know, I might be *her* sire. Or she might be mine."

Grace drew back, and I could see she wasn't sure how she felt about this possibility.

"Come on," I said, nudging her foot with mine. "I might even be able to shave a few bucks off the price for you."

You could have heard a pin drop—or a heart beat—while Grace thought it over. Finally, she stood up and slipped a keycard out of the back pocket of her designer jeans (she really did miss the eighties). "She's in the VIP room."

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I hadn't really thought I was going to see anyone I knew, but when the door opened and I saw Mistral "Misty" Van Owen, I damn near jumped out of my skin.

"Jesus Mañana!" I blurted, pronouncing the first word 'hay-soos' to undercut the sting (foreign languages are handy in more ways than one). "I thought you were dead!"

Misty didn't so much stand up as she half-slithered, half-levitated from the sofa where she was lounging in full dominatrix drag, right down to the spiked collar around her neck and the black satin corset. Her hair was snow white, tied up with leather strips so it fell around her head at different levels. I think the idea was to evoke the rich grace of palomino tails but all I could think of were scalps, especially with those custom contact lenses—her pupils were as pale and luminous as moonstones—and the blood red lips. It was all a bit much even for a drama queen like Misty.

"Well, well, if it isn't Diamond Lil. I heard you were alive," she said in the kind of deep contralto calculated to make the strong weak and the weak dissolve. "What the *hell* are you doing here?"

"As if you didn't know. Come on, Misty, are you expecting me to believe that you don't have the whole place bugged?"

Misty made a dismissive motion with both hands. Her long nails were a deeper red than her lips, the color of arterial blood (what else?). "Technology disgusts me. My senses tell me what I need to know. The rest is noise."

"I'll drink to that," I said, laughing a little.

"Be my guest. What'll you have?"

"Whatever you're having. As long as it's liquid."

Misty's perfect features puckered with pity. "Darling, I didn't think you *could* drink blood now that

you're cured."

"Oh, I can still drink it," I said, doing my best to sound blasé. "It just doesn't taste very good anymore."

Her laughter tinkled like cut-glass chimes. I swear she must have worked for centuries to get it to sound like that. "Sure you wouldn't rather have gravy?"

I gave her a look and she laughed again.

"I hear that's what they're serving in all the support group meetings now to help recovering vampires deal with their craving for the taste." She glided over to a small but elaborate wet bar crowded with bottles and fancy decanters. Fancy cut-glass decanters; she probably used them to keep her laugh in tune in her off hours. "They say extra salty beef gravy is as close as *you* can get to recreating the savory flavor blood has for *us*. Is that true?"

"Some people swear by it," I said, watching her swan around behind the bar. "Unfortunately, it's also extremely bad for the blood pressure."

"Oh, that's right," she said, holding up a silver gravy boat and looking distressed. She dipped down below the bar briefly and came up with a shiny chrome thermal pitcher. "What about beef bouillion? Or I think there's some half-gelled consommé in the fridge—"

"No, thanks. I hate that shit. No offense."

Now she looked put-upon. "Well, what *can* I offer you? *Besides* blood," she added firmly. "It's not that I don't like to share, you understand, it's just that giving *you* blood is tantamount to pouring it down the drain. No offense."

"I wouldn't dream of wasting your supply," I said. "Do you have any tomato juice?"

She tilted her head, prettily apologetic.

"How about Bloody Mary mix, then?"

She was pleased to serve me a tall, slender glass garnished with a stick of celery and a tiny umbrella. "Extra salt?" she asked. "Or do you need to watch your blood pressure?"

"No, I'm fine and no, I'm fine." I mirrored her I'm-*so*-polite smile back at her as she led me over to the sofa where she had been lounging. "Apparently, I have the blood pressure of a sixteen-year-old girl."

"Oh, but really now, don't you think you ought to let that poor girl go? Her parents must be worried sick about her."

I grinned. "Still almost witty after all these years."

We sat down simultaneously, Misty shifting at the last moment so that she was right up against me, hip

to hip and thigh to thigh. I drew back a little. "Hey, lover, if you're going to get *that* close, I'll thank you to take off that collar. I'm as kinky as the next girl but I draw the line at shish kebab."

Misty's smile intensified. "Oh, no, *lover*. You may be as kinky as the *last* girl but not as kinky as the *next* girl. Not hardly. If you see what I mean." Her pupils shifted suddenly and the black dots in the center of the moonstones elongated to slits. "See?"

"Yeah. Hard to miss." I took a big sip of Bloody Mary mix, positioning the glass so that the bottom rose directly in her face. "What have you got there, animated lenses or the latest breakthrough in vampire plastic surgery?"

"How badly do you want to know?" she asked teasingly.

"I'll get back to you on that."

Misty leaned over and picked up a large chalice sitting on the end table to her left. Misty had always had a real thing for chalices, claimed blood didn't taste anywhere nearly as good out of anything else, even the original vessel. "Can you give me some idea of when you might get tired of dancing around? I mean, time *is* passing. I don't mind so much—*I'm* going to be around forever, but *you're* not."

"You're the one who's dressed to dance, Misty. I just woke up and found me here."

"On the cold yada-yada-yada, yeah, I know that one." She raised the chalice in a toast. "If only we could get to the people who deserve forever before it was too late."

"And if you could, do you really think they'd all jump at the chance to be undead?"

"I think it would be nice if they had the choice." She sipped from the chalice and then licked sticky red-black from her lips. "I was pro-choice before it was fashionable, don't you know."

"Does that mean you're going to give *me* a choice? As to how—or if—I leave here," I added in response to her puzzled expression.

She ran a finger along one of the spikes sticking out of her collar without saying anything.

"Why the hell do you want to reverse the cure anyway? It doesn't make any sense." I took another long drink of Bloody Mary mix. "The more vampires there are, the more competition there is for the food supply."

"We're social creatures," Misty said. "We like being in groups. The more, the merrier. Surely you noticed that during your own time."

"So? That's not exactly a mystery. If you want to eat, you have to go where the people are, and the more, the merrier."

Misty nodded. "Fun, isn't it? The socializing is almost as important as the blood." She held the chalice

under her nose and inhaled with a dreamy expression, like a human enjoying the bouquet of a particularly good wine. And in a way, it *is* a bit like that. If I had still been a vampire myself, I'd have been able to identify the blood group from the aroma instead of steeling myself against the stink.

"Your point?" I asked.

"My *point*—" She caressed one of the spikes again. "My *point* is, that horrible cure spoils everything."

"I guess I can understand that. Having to be around people knowing that you can't turn them—must be very frustrating." I chuckled. "Like being impotent and frigid all at once."

Misty's lips curled with elegant disgust. "When I said that horrible cure spoils everything, I mean *it spoils everything*. Not only can we not turn you, we can't feed on you, either. The blood's no good. *Now* do you get it?"

"Well, yes, I did know that—" I cut off. I had known it, but I hadn't actually given it much thought.

"Worse, now they're giving the cure to people who have never been vampires," Misty said. "We can't reverse the cure on them—it doesn't work. So they're permanently immune to us. The food supply isn't just disappearing, it's *evaporating*, faster all the time. At this rate, we'll be gone in a generation."

Vaccination and cure in one handy vial. "Wow." I frowned. "That fast? Are you sure?"

Misty looked like she wanted to slap me.

"But surely some vampire genius will come up with a way to counteract that immunity, too," I said.

"Not if we all die out first," Misty growled.

"I doubt that'll happen."

"Yeah? Well, some of us don't want to take any chances." She nodded at the glass I was holding. "Now drink up."

I glanced down at the red-brown liquid. "You spiked my drink? I'm shocked. *Shocked*, I tell you, *shocked*."

She leaned into me again. "Feel anything yet?"

I made a thinking-hard face. "Nope. Are you sure you didn't make a mistake and put in vodka instead?"

"What's the *matter* with you? Don't you *want* to live forever?"

"Of course I do. I just don't want to be undead forever."

"Why not?" she demanded.

"I don't know. It's complicated. There are a lot of different reasons." I looked around for a place to put the glass down, spotted a small end table, and set it there next to a replica of Aladdin's Lamp. "I guess what it comes down to is, I'm just *over* it. Besides, who says it's going to be forever? Once the people supply dries up, we'll be forced to prey on each other. And the more of us there are then, the quicker we'll die out. You're really just delaying the inevitable."

"So?" Misty looked offended. "What's wrong with that? Who *wouldn't* delay the inevitable if the inevitable is their own destruction? Who *doesn't*?"

I sighed and stood up. "Look, Misty, we can argue this for hours, but in the end, I'll still be a lost cause. Meanwhile, you've got thirty-eight people in the other room champing at the bit to let you turn them again. Why don't you give them all a break by making an exception to your three-groups-of-thirteen rule? Just this once?"

She folded her arms huffily. "You're so completely secular you can't understand the need someone else might have for spiritual ceremony and ritual."

"Then take *two* groups of thirteen and tell the other twelve they'll have to find someone else."

"Do you not understand how excruciatingly *rude* that is?" Misty said, irritated and incredulous. "Honestly, Lily, who raised you—wolves?"

"No, thank God," I said emphatically, and I didn't feel even a minor twinge for that one, because I really meant it. The cure for lycanthropy makes the one for vampirism pale in comparison; it's like rabies shots, only a thousand times worse. In fact, I knew someone who had had the supreme misfortune to experience both. He told me that if he had to choose between the two, he'd take the rabies shots. Or the silver bullet.

"You really don't feel *anything*?" Misty said again, standing up and turning me so she could look deeply and longingly into my eyes.

"You tell me," I said.

She studied me for some unmeasured amount of time with those moonstone eyes, trying to will a change of heart in me. I found myself almost wishing she could, but that wasn't possible. Once you're immune to a vampire's bite, you're immune to the whole package, including mind control.

Finally she stepped back. "Okay. You're right—it's no good. You can go." She gestured at the door.

I took a step toward it and then hesitated. "Is there some other exit I could use? If I go back out there and tell all those people they aren't turning tonight, they'll tear me limb from limb and make gravy from my bones."

Her mouth twitched.

"Come on. I'd do the same for you. You know I would."

Now she heaved an enormous sigh which, given that corset and the fact that she didn't really have to breathe, was quite an accomplishment. "Oh, all right. I'll let you out the fire exit. *This* time. But don't let me see you back here unless you mean business or I *will* toss you to the mob."

I chuckled without humor. "No danger of that."

"No?" Suddenly she looked sly.

"This cure reversal of yours will be long out of my system before I get within a mile of this place again."

"Maybe." The evil in her blood red smile was sincere. "But if I were you, I wouldn't be so sure."

At least there wasn't any bullshit about how we ought to keep in touch or go out for coffee sometime.

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Grace left a few messages on my answering machine. I didn't return any of her calls, of course, and after two weeks she took the hint and left me alone. I suppose I should have turned them all in, Mistral and Grace and the other thirty-seven, but I really couldn't bring myself to do it. Nor did I feel even the slightest bit of regret over what I had passed up.

I did make a few discreet inquiries about this cure reversal, but no one seemed to know any more about it than I did. One doctor I talked to insisted it was a complete scam—the vampire takes your five hundred bucks, then lets you drink half a cup of corn syrup and red dye #2 spiked with Rohypnol. "It's really awful," she said while she wrapped a blood-pressure cuff around my arm. "You wake up the next day in a cheap hotel room with nothing to show for it except a bad headache and an especially colorful hickey. Completely humiliating. Fewer than half the victims file a report with the police or even go for counseling."

I'd be tempted to believe that, except I can't picture Misty stooping to that kind of low-rent scam.

And then again, if the blood supply really is drying up quickly and permanently, who knows what kind of desperate out-of-character behavior even a pretentious brat like Misty could be driven to?

So I'm still wondering about Misty's claim that she spiked my Bloody Mary mix with this cure. If it really is a scam, I've got nothing to worry about. But if it's real—

If it's real and it hasn't dissipated out of my system, if it's dug in like a virus, biding its time until the day comes when I suddenly catch sight of my own mortality, maybe as a shadow on an X-ray or simply as the unremarkable, oh-so-common feeling of getting older ... well, what then? I was twenty-five for over a hundred years, and right now I'm not really that much older.

But I will be. And when I am, I wonder what I'm going to want then. And where I'm going to get it.

The End

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