Bite Shift

By Lena Nazarei

I am like so many women you pass every day. You’ve seen me in the produce section, staring at a pineapple pretending like I know how to tell if it’s ripe. You’ve seen me walking into a fitting room, hoping this pair of jeans won’t make me look like a whale. I’m usually in scrubs since I am a nurse for 40 to 80 hours a week. I am divorced. I live 30 miles from the house I grew up in. I have two teenage daughters. Oh, yeah, and I am a vampire.

I know, you think I am crazy, right? I can assure you I am not. I am a real life, totally dead, straight out of a movie, vampire. For the sake of honesty, I am a pretty new vampire; six months today come to think of it, but a vampire none the less.

I am getting ahead of myself. Let me go back.

My name is Kate. I am 39 years old. My daughters are Olivia and Ellie. They are 14 and 12. If you think the undead are scary try two hormonal teens.

I have been a registered nurse for ten years and every one of those years I have worked at the same Pittsburgh hospital. It’s small but I love the people and you can’t beat the 15-minute commute. My ex-husband lives four houses down from us. Everyone thinks that would be horrible but it works for us. He is a good person; we were just a terrible couple. He’s remarried to the perfect spouse for him. Having them down the street means the kids can have both parents in their lives without disrupting their school or missing their friends.

So, those are the basics. I’m sure that’s not what you want to know. Don’t worry, I am getting to the good stuff. Despite being on this Earth for almost four decades, the real story begins six months ago, a week and a half before my birthday, and the last day I would be alive. It’s funny when your whole life changes and you look back. All the things that seemed so important: mortgage, college funds, if I should get a boob job and whether or not I would share my bed with a man again… now feel insignificant and utterly ridiculous. I don’t care anymore if my boobs sag. I just don’t want the wrong people to find out what I am and drag me outside to meet the sun or lock me in a lab for testing.

Being a vampire isn’t what you think it is. First off, I do not exude sexual prowess and mesmerize beautiful people with my gaze. I can see my reflection in the mirror, can eat garlic and can’t turn into a bat… trust me, I tried. Crosses don’t repel me. Churches don’t repulse me. I will not burst into flames when sunlight touches me… that takes about 20 minutes of full exposure, then you can use me to cook your steaks. That being said, the sun being up does make me sicker than the worst hangover and the most debilitating migraine you’ve ever had with some kicks to the stomach thrown in. It is hard to even think straight by the time Good Morning America is on. Your best bet is to give into the whole dusk to dawn thing.

Of course, there are upsides. I will never age, never get the flu, never have a period and I have never looked better. All my split ends, grey roots, wrinkles, scars and sun spots disappeared when I turned. The workout DVDs were thrown away since I will never gain a pound. Unfortunately, it also means the last 15 pounds will never go away either. Okay, let’s be honest, it’s more like 20 pounds. All my back pain, knee aches, plantar fasciitis and shin splints are gone. I feel like I could run a marathon, swim the ocean and lift a car. Sounds perfect, right? You are thinking you need to cancel that gym membership and know where the vampire signup sheet is immediately. Hold that thought. I will also never lay on a tropical beach under the sun again; never watch my daughters swim and play again. I’ll miss their softball games, their matinee plays, their graduations and the birth of their children. Don’t forget, I will also watch them age, fight disease, take their last breathes and visit their graves.

Still want to join this party?

The truth is, I didn’t have a choice. The person who turned me, did it to save me. It was the heat of the moment and they reacted. Looking back, I still don’t know if I would have chosen differently if I knew then what I know now. Who knows how they will react when it really happens? Everything moves so fast and so slow when your life comes to an end. It doesn’t matter now because the choice was made and it can’t be taken back. I am a vampire. I just have to get used to it.

As far as my kids and everyone else knows, I have developed a rare condition that makes me allergic to the sun called solar urticaria. It just takes a few reports and test results for everyone to believe it. I am on permanent night shift and the girls spend daylight hours with their dad. It keeps people from asking questions or giving me a hard time about not going out. Eventually, it will get a little suspicious that I am not getting older but I have a plan. I am going back to school online. I am working on my Masters in the Science of Nursing with a focus on Education, so I can start teaching online nursing classes. I can leave the hospital and buy myself a few decades of making money without raising any eyebrows.

So, I’ve got the whole “life” thing under control for now. Time to focus on the whole “death” thing next. I still have a lot to learn about being a vampire. The master and my maker have been teaching me some things, when we have time. Yeesh. Still getting used to using words like “maker” and “master”.

To be honest I have all the time in the world now. Damn, it’s a little hard to accept the fact that this is a journal of my life, and not some fiction I made up.

Alright, I am sure you want to get to the good stuff. The big moment, right? You want to hear how I died, how I was turned and what it was like. The juicy bits of the story.

You guys are sick.

2.

Six months ago

All I could think about was my birthday. Should I have a party and invite the girls from work or just go out to eat with my kids like always? It feels like 40 is just around the corner and celebrating birthdays was just getting morbid and sad. As long as I don’t end up drinking a bottle of wine and crying in the shower, like last year, it would be an improvement. I expect a couple of handwritten cards, a homemade breakfast and some original paintings from Olivia and Ellie. I should probably make more room on my bedroom walls.

“Kate.”

The voice pulled me out of my thoughts and landed me hard on Floor 5B-Cardiac Stepdown. I remembered I was working, just as Monica’s face came into focus. One look in her eyes and I knew that she was well aware my mind was halfway gone for a few minutes.

“Welcome back,” she chuckled. “Dr. Boone wants 502 to get two units of O Neg. If you go get it, I will put the order in. The weird one is down there and I am not in the mood.”

“You got it. I could actually use the walk and I don’t mind Rhys. He’s quiet. I like quiet.”

Monica rolled her eyes. “He’s bizarre and you know it. I bet he lives with his Mom and reads comics in a room full of toys that he left in the box so they hold their value.”

“So, should I not have given him your number?”

“Kate!” She made each letter sound like it was written in all caps and bold. “That is not funny”.

I laughed and walked towards the door to the stairwell. I swore I would take the stairs until the last 20 melted off of my hips. Stairs and vegetables. That was finally going to get me to 130 lbs. I just knew it.

The basement floor was so quiet at night. You can’t imagine the silence that falls over a hospital at one in the morning. On the units, you can hear the beeps of the monitors and the subdued whispers of nurses at the station. But places without patients, like the lab or the blood bank, have a stillness that borders on eerie.

I often used my breaks to walk around the parts of the hospital that I don’t often get to see. That’s how I’ve met people like Stewart the night watchman, Camilla the night operator and Rhys the blood bank guy. They move around silently completing their tasks, helping the place run, but rarely getting seen.

Rhys is the most interesting. I would put him at no older than 30 and no younger than 26. He’s probably just under 6’ tall with this reddish-brown hair that’s just a little too long over his ears and often unruly. It looks like he rolled out of bed and went straight to work. I doubt he even owns a comb. It makes me think he doesn’t live with a woman. Whether it is a mother or a girlfriend, a woman would have told him, at some point, to trim his hair and run a brush through it. Sometimes, he says a word with just a little bit of an accent. I can’t place it but it makes me think he is not from here originally. A lot of the nurses think he is weird. Honestly, I think he is just shy.

Camilla is the exact opposite. She’s barely 5’ tall with blonde hair down to her hips and straight ironed within an inch of its life. Her heavy makeup makes it hard to guess her age. If she sees me, she takes a deep breath and I know she’s about to start a story that will last hours, if I let it. Because she is trapped in her little cubby, she is desperate for someone to talk to. I have taken her coffee a few times when I just need to get off my floor and go for a walk. She is the perfect person if you don’t want to talk, but love to listen.

That leaves Stewart. I place him at 60 years old. His gold wedding band is tarnished and looks like it hasn’t been off that finger since the dawn of time so I’m figuring he’s been married since high school. I have never asked details but I think he has a few kids. I would be willing to bet they’re all in the area and probably in manual labor. The silver tag on his uniform says Milano, so I’d wager my paycheck that he is Italian. I can picture Stewart, his plump wife and a table full of grown kids with their partners around a big table having a loud, chaotic Sunday dinner.

I reached the basement level and swung open the door from the stairwell to the hallway. Rhys’s music hit my ears. It is not as loud, in the room, as it seems it would be when you hear it. The sound has a funny way of traveling in these lower levels. The closer you get to the blood room, the quieter the music gets. He must have thousands of CDs. Every time I come down, it’s a different album. Tonight, its Pink Floyd.

“Hey, Rhys”. For four years, since Rhys started, I have started our conversations the same way. He never has the first word.

“Hey Kate,” Rhys jumps up from his desk in the back and I can see his face over the computer monitor. His hair is extra messy tonight. He might have been sleeping at that desk when I called out his name. “Business or pleasure,” he asks and then chuckles at either his idea of a joke or just the word pleasure.

“Both” I quip and immediately regret it as I watch the blush move from his neck to his face. “Kidding! Two units of O neg for 502, please. Dr. Boone is the ordering”.

Rhys’s fingers fly over the keys at a pace that still impresses me. He clearly spends a great deal of time on the computer. I use the ‘search and peck’ style of typing. One finger at a time. Thankfully, my ability to type is not a requirement for being a nurse.

“Got it” he whispers, almost like it is to himself, and then he looks up to meet my eyes. “Is that all you need?”

“Do you have anything other than blood,” I ask, laughing.

“I guess not,” he responds sheepishly, looking down.

“I appreciate you asking but, no. The two units are enough. I will take one now and come back for the other when it is time.” I felt bad. I don’t want him to be embarrassed. Looking again, I guessed that he was younger than I thought, maybe 25. He looked like a young man, still trying to figure out how to talk to a girl. I wanted to change the subject. “How is it tonight?”

The look left his face and he became a little more comfortable in his skin. “It’s been slow. You’re the first person I’ve seen all night. So much for the whole ‘full moon craziness’. I thought I’d be running all night long”.

“Don’t say that,” I shouted. “You’re going to jinx us!”

His hand shot up to his mouth like he wanted to bring the words back and trap them in his mouth. “Dang. Sorry, Kate!”

“No worries. Just know it’s your fault if a ten-car pileup comes into the ER and they all need blood.”

He handed me a bag of blood out of the warmer and I signed a paper for records. Every bag of blood that comes in is kept track of. You would be surprised how many get wasted or are no good. For those of you who don’t give blood, you should. Hospitals are always in need.

“Talk to you later, Rhys. I am night shift all week.”

“Me too” said as he dropped back down into his office chair and became lost behind the screen. As I walked out a thought pops into my head, *I wonder if he is watching porn.*

I swallowed back laughter and hurried to the stairwell door before the giggles fought their way out and I laughed all the way up to the 5th floor.

3.

Monica was at the nurses’ station when I got back. She had an energy drink in one hand and blood tubing in the other. She was in an oddly chipper mood. It made me suspect that she started smoking again. As far as I knew, she had gone six weeks without a cigarette. It is possible, though, that she was hiding her fall off the wagon from me. Her smile, and clearly relaxed body language, seemed to give away a recent puff or two. *Maybe, I’ll confront her later*.

“Ready, toots” she chirped.

“One blood bag, coming up”.

The policy in our hospital states that two nurses must check the blood and hang it for the patient. We went through the process of asking name, date of birth and reading off the information on the IV bag before giving it to the patient. Once the tubing was hooked up to the patient and spiked into the bag, we spent the first fifteen minutes watching to make sure the pale old man in the bed doesn’t have a bad reaction to the plasma. Once we were sure he is fine, we slipped out and head back to the station.

“So”, Monica turned suddenly and locked eyes with me “what is the plan for your birthday?”

*Darn it, I had actually forgotten that I was getting old for a few minutes.*

“Oh, I don’t know. I think I will just hang out with my kids. I feel like I never see them.”

Monica touched my shoulder. “Well, I get that but, you have to have some time for yourself. Maybe we can all do something that is kid friendly”.

“Maybe” I responded, already knowing I would do anything to avoid going out with all of them. Just as I was about to change the subject, Monica zeroed in on something behind me and started to fluff her hair. I didn’t even need to turn around; I knew exactly who is headed our way.

Dr. Kitchner started working in our hospital five years ago. That meant Monica has loved him for four years, 11 months, 29 days and 23 hours. Frankly, I didn’t get it. I mean, I guess he is good looking. He is roughly 6’2” or 6’3” with chestnut brown hair that fell into his eyes when he looked down. As long as I had known him, he looked like he shaved two days ago. It must take a lot of work to look like you didn’t do a lot of work on your appearance. I have blue eyes, that I always thought were pretty. They look exactly like the sapphire in my high school ring. But his eyes are the kind of blue that you can only see in the Caribbean; the blue waters that grace a poster in the windows of travel agencies. It’s like looking into an ocean.

Okay, he is definitely hot. One problem though…. he’s a dick. He was just not hot enough for me to put up with the attitude.

I took a deep breath and turned to smile at Dr. Kitchner. He was reading while walking and was past me before I could say a word. Fine by me. I hated pretending that I didn’t think he was a jerk. I let go of the breath I was holding.

Spoke too soon. He looked up and met my gaze. I wondered sometimes if he had the same reaction looking into my eyes as I had seeing his. Blue eyes just aren’t that common in a city full of Italian and Indian bloodlines. I was always taken aback when I faced someone’s blue or green gaze. It only took a second to realize that he didn’t care one bit. He probably didn’t even notice I was a human woman, let alone blue eyed.

“Kim”.

“Kate”, I retorted.

“Kate,” he responded without missing a beat. “Is the blood running?”

“Yes, Dr. Kitchner”. This was like a chant when he was around. *Yes, Dr. Kitchner.* Every other doctor I worked with goes by their first name with the nurses. Not, him. The most I knew about him is the embroidery on his jacket.

*A. Kitchner, MD - Hematology*

That’s it. In all those years of night shifts and desperate conversations amongst staff to stay awake, he was the only one who stay tight lipped. So, all the nurses respond the same way. Yes, Dr. Kitchner or No, Dr. Kitchner. For all I knew, the A stood for asshole.

“Dr. Boone has consulted me to the case to see if we can figure out why this man needs a transfusion every month. I want a close watch on him. Any change and I want paged.”

“Yes, Dr. Kitchner”. He was already halfway down the hallway before I got the words out. “You’re welcome” I whispered to his back.

Monica rushed over and grabbed my arm. “Oh Kate, I can’t stand it. No man should be that gorgeous. You should invite him out for your birthday. A couple of drinks and maybe I can finally confess my undying love to him!”

“Please! No way would I spend my birthday with him. The only reason they hired him is because no one wants to work nights and they need a warm body in a lab coat. It definitely was not his personality.”

Monica was not listening. She was staring off down the hallway where her dream man disappeared. She was my best friend and I will love her forever, but this one I just don’t get.

“Monica”. I snapped my fingers in front of her eyes and she jumped. “Listen, that blood has a few hours to run, my patients are asleep and I need a break. I’m going to take my lunch and get some fresh air. Please keep an ear open for my people and call me if anything happens.”

“Done. See you in thirty. Enjoy your break but please be careful outside. I hate when you go out there. Just go to the cafeteria or sit in the breakroom.”

“No, thanks and I will be fine. The cafeteria is creepy and the break room smells like Lisa’s salmon. 503 has a bed alarm and 507 is confused. When I get back, you can go.” I handed her a sheet that had notes on each one of my patients, just in case she needed it, and moved quickly to the break room for my lunch box. I was always certain that someone would try to stop me when I went on break so I moved as quickly as possible.

Looking back and knowing what was coming, I would have listened to Monica and stayed in the break room. Salmon doesn’t smell that bad.

4.

 When you walk down the back stairs, past the morgue and out the little door in the back, you’ll find my favorite spot. As macabre as it sounds, our hospital is next to a cemetery. The graveyard has been there for over a century. That means more than one person looked at the land next to it and said *yep, that’s the perfect place for a hospital.* Now, if you’re one of the lucky patients with a back room, you can look out of your hospital bed into a graveyard. I cannot imagine what that is like for someone getting a terminal diagnosis…. “*I’m sorry to tell you that the lump is, in fact, cancer. Try to relax and enjoy the view. That’s where you’ll be soon anyway.”*

 Because of the gravestones, many of the staff would not come out to the rear of the hospital. If they did, they would have found a small patch of grass with a black iron bench. Above the bench is a tree. I couldn’t have told you what kind of tree it was, just that its branches reached out over the little bench, like it was protecting the spot. The autumn was starting to turn the leaves into red and yellow. It really was my favorite time of the year. The smell in the air was a mix of fireplaces and dry grass.

My iPhone was in my lunch box and I checked for messages. None. Everything must be good with the girls at their Dad’s house. I pulled open the music app and hit the Classical channel. The app pulled up music it thinks you may like and that night was a good choice. Moonlight Sonata danced through the night air and immediately my stress melted away.

The last food I would eat on this Earth was packed into one of the few Tupperware containers that I hadn’t lost. It was the spaghetti that was not eaten at last night’s dinner, a slice of wheat bread and cucumber slices. That about sums up my luck…. my last meal as a human was cold leftovers.

I realized that I forgotten to pack a fork and started picking up noodles with pieces of bread. Two bites in and I was telling myself that I would start my diet tomorrow, for sure that time. Along with a fork, I had forgotten to pack a napkin so I wiped my mouth on the inside of my scrub top. *This is why I am single*, I thought.

The spaghetti did nothing for my hunger and I turned to the cucumber. Suddenly, I wished I had packed a few of the girls’ cookies or a soda. The need for sugar was overwhelming but the cucumbers would have to do. I would not slip into my forties with love handles and no one to love them.

Beethoven faded away into the night and Holst took over. A French horn played a few notes that feel like longing for something lost. I recognized the piece. It was one of the planets. The knowledge of which planet it represented was somewhere in my brain but it couldn’t be accessed on command anymore. *Come on, brain, high school band…. We went to the Kennedy Center to hear this performed… you know this.*

“Venus,” I shouted to the air and realized no one is there to hear my genius. Oh well, I knew that I got it right and could be proud. I rewarded myself with another cucumber and laid my head to rest on the back of the bench. The iron was cold but its solid strength felt comforting, like it would hold be all night if I wanted. A violin took up the lead. The notes felt reminiscent of a time when I was full of passion and every moment of life was an experience to be treasured. Suddenly, I felt grief for the girl that I used to be; the girl who felt her future was full of the kind of love that made violins play in your head.

It was hard to believe the stress of my job was only steps away. The bench seemed miles apart from the ringing of call bells. My heartbeat started to match the pace of the movement and swelled with every instrument in the orchestra. The air around me was clear and cool. I was lost in the music. Too lost to hear the snapping of a stick behind me.

5.

There wasn’t any pain. Not really. It happened so fast. I couldn’t tell you if the hand pushing my forehead back was first or the heat in my throat. It was possible it was simultaneous. My first thought was that a large branch had broken off the tree and hit my head, pulling my neck back over the bench. My second thought had been that I didn’t not want to go to our ER and explain to everyone how stupid I had been to sit outside, by myself, in the dark. Those two thoughts came and disappeared in a half a second before the screaming in my head took over.

*Someone is holding me.*

I opened my eyes to realize the hand trying to snap my neck was covering my eyes as it pushed me over the bench in an angle that could not be possible. The other hand was pressing into my stomach, like it was trying to make its way through my abdomen and hit the wood behind me. *Too strong. So strong.* The thoughts should have been coming out of my throat but my voice was gone. My mouth was opening and closing but no sound came out. *He is stabbing my throat. How? Both hands are on me. There’s more than one. One to hold me and one to stab me. No, not stabbing… ripping, tearing. Something is tearing at my spine.*

Then, I was in the air. It was so violent I thought the bench must have snapped below me but I would be going down if that happened. I was being lifted and thrown to the ground. I heard my iPhone crash to the sidewalk and felt soft dirt below my back.

My eyes were no longer covered but it was too dark to see. All I could do was feel and smell. I smelled wet earth, citrus, dry leaves and spaghetti sauce, mixed with something like metal. *That’s blood, Kate, your blood.* I felt more pulling and the sound of torn fabric filled the night. The man was ripping my scrub top open.

It didn’t really matter at this point. I was dying.

The girls commanded my thoughts. I didn’t care what he did, why he did it or where I was. All I focused on was Olivia and Ellie. They would hear the next day that I was dead. They would be spared the details but someday, when they were older, curiosity would overtake them and they’d look for answers.

*Attacked. Topless. Ripped apart.*

My thoughts crashed down around the pain ripping through my body, hot and sharp. I couldn’t breathe. *I can’t breathe. Please let it end.*

I wouldn’t see them walk down an aisle or touch their swollen bellies and try to feel my grandchild kick. Their Dad would have to show them pictures and tell them stories of their Mom- the nurse who was murdered too young. Even with the wet blood drying on my face, I knew the feeling of a tear rolling down my cheek.

*I love you girls so much. I hope I told you enough times. I love you so much.*

The ripping and tearing stopped as quickly as it started. There was movement just above me. His head just to the right of mine and looking up. He was so still. So close. How could I not see someone so close? I’m losing my sight. *Too much blood. I have lost too much.* *No one can survive this.*