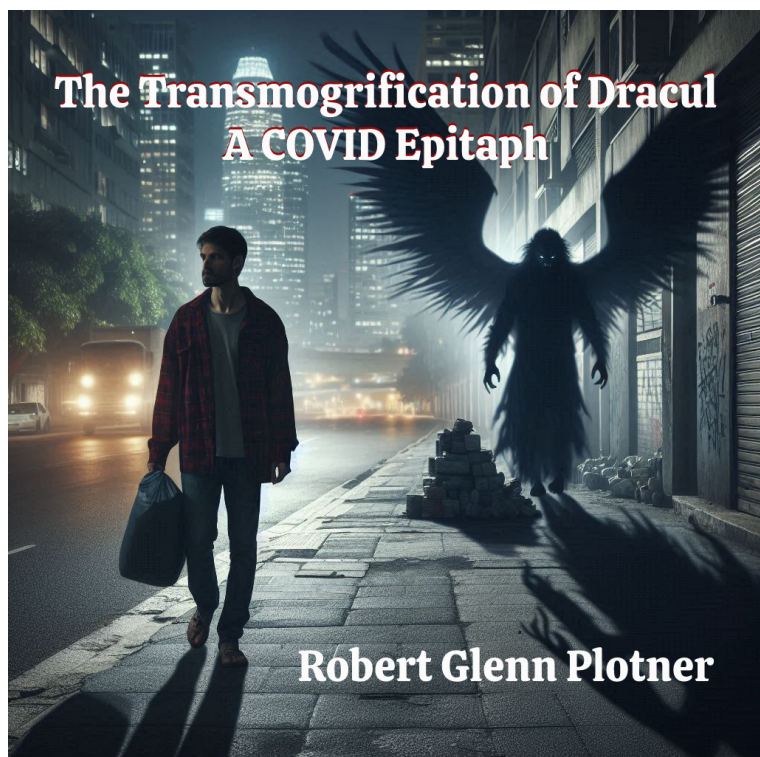




The Transmogrification of Dracul: a COVID Epitaph

by Robert Glenn Plotner

Chapter 1

pervasive fog was the vampyr's earliest calling card, a clammy, putrid fog, humid, almost cool but somewhere between winter and spring. It clung to the skin, corpse-like. There was no refuge from its sickly caress. I drew a finger across my forearm and tasted the beading droplets.

Water recycled throughout time, circulating through epochs and histories and bodies distilled a sense memory of the vampyr's purpose, foreboding panic in his prey, terror-stricken serfs, streetwalkers, housemaids, sailors on night patrol. This water coursed through their lives in the moment they fell victim and resonated now to his call. Apprehension overwhelmed me. I sensed a hastening approach, travelers from an unfamiliar shore, hoofbeats, masts, roaring engines, his unwitting accomplices disembarking.

From the overlook, I could hear the morning commute, an interstate highway packed and pressed against the city's clock, but it was all invisible, cloaked within the fog. Only the nearest headlights materialized, ghostly bulbs, before succumbing again. Thousands passed as invisible to me now as I was always to them, a transient in the untamed undergrowth. The difference was that I could hear their urgency, smell the burn of their gasoline, their endless pace, and I knew Dracul was in their tailwinds waiting to replace their fever with one of his own.

Perhaps I knew because I existed in the ruins, the ruins of a life, sifting through the rejects of their endless hustle. I camped in thickets, safe from condemnation, outrage, tidy world, my trails covered, a shanty placed in the steep, tree shrouded embankment. Perhaps I knew because he sought to cripple them, to force the passing world to serve him, to break them by his venom. I recognized the playbook because I served another fanged master, the death lure of the needle.

The convulsions, the stabbing stomach, begging for life in a twisted shape of something less than human—it entangled me, outcast and alone. I knew what he intended, but I was not his surrogate. I had foresight that they did not possess, and it paralyzed me. I formed a conceit that I alone could find him, Dracul, wherever he took sanctuary and destroy him. I could be the hero in this saga of death, rescue my fallen life and be reborn as a savior. The homeless man rushes into the burning apartment and carries out the lifeless child.

But such a path might as well be unthinkable. It was terrifying. The scale. The foe who could silence nations and worlds and crush all vestige of human peace. Easier to watch the fall from my hermitage. I set aside the thought and inoculated myself. Suck the blood into a sweet parfait and plunge it back again. *Whoosh. Pain killer... World killer...*

Numbed, I found myself falling into the little grains of my coat, its stiff canvas comforting me as a loyal friend through all. The coat had carried me through weariness and weather. It smelled of me. It

would hold me in death and take me to Valhalla or hell or nothingness. I walked through its hatches as through valleys of a promised land, and I left my troubled thoughts to blank bliss.

Sounds telescoped into a hum. Think no more. Think no more. Surrender time. Away. Then as I plunged, my emptiness was suddenly riven, shattered, and I was falling into terrors that left me without words, trapped by my own drug of escape, unable to wake, called by him to some unformed confrontation. As if sniffing my self-damned blood, the vampyr gained entrance by the very vein that had floated me. He pried open my mind and discovered my ambition. He commanded the dream fog toward his dormant cove, hidden seemingly forever from the modern. There, I drifted at the feet of the fool who dared creep into the vampyr's centuries long slumber and disturb his rest. Men will pay a vicious price for this torment. Throughout humankind's saga, he found familiars, loyal outcasts among the mistreated and despised species, to bid his will. I saw rats swarm by the millions, pigs screaming under the knife, mosquitos hungrily feasting at human veins, birds fallen and puss filled.

And the fog carried me yet further along unfamiliar mountain paths, the air thick and putrid, as if a thread tied and pulled by his calcified finger. A black fissure into which no man should venture, the air glueing to the throat, the lungs drowning to extract any sustaining oxygen, vomit inducing, chill demanding pain by each racking step. Deeper into blackness, a bottomless hole beneath jungle tangled roots, the fog brought me into a chamber so distant from light that I was blind and deposited me as for dead. I knew I was in Dracul's presence. I could sense it. There. Somewhere above me. Watching. Breathing. Grooming himself to walk among the living again.

The fool had been here collecting the vampyr's chattering children from the cave walls, plucking them like fruit by the dozens, caging them in a bamboo coop. Claws clung to prison bars as the weakling trudged the corridor back into mountain daylight, a muddy journey to the executioner. Crated into market, a chorus of strange noise buffeted the bats blue veined ears, twitching here and there in the membranes, fearful and frantic.

The human dipped in his hand and clutched one bat around its neck, tugged until the winged finger unfolded and yanked free. Its snapping head cleaved on a wooden block and plopped into a waiting broth. One. Another. Another. Their faces curled in the boil, tongues askance, sharp teeth baring as if mad in their skulls. Weaker men would falter at the demonic scene, but those who passed the test would gain power. So they thought. *Drink the forbidden fruit. Sip. Give you stamina, libido. Sip if you dare. Ignorance is strength.*

In every drop the vampyr had ruthlessly implanted his viral seed. One transaction for all mankind. He wanted me to understand. Sins demanded atonement. An apple in the garden, a bat's brain in a kettle. It was the unchecked consumption of the world itself that was the sin and in the fall, every vice would shake out and lie exposed. Oceans and lands and forests and mountains and air and waters, animals, plants, insects, fish, human consumption carrying the entire planet to the brink. Nothing forbidden. Nothing sacred. All men drank from that cup. *Was it good? Did it give you power?*

Lesson delivered. The sun's ascent burned off the remaining fog, and I began to recede to the material sheen again. My jaw clenched and ground. Words and visions flashed upon each other, memories and dreams mixed and licked my cheeks. This was the downside of escape, the coming down, the gnawing pain and disfigured reality of rebirth. I dreaded this to my core, but now I welcomed it to escape the vampyr's hold. I became aware of my body's autonomous cycles again, breaths drawing and exhaling, pulse thudding, the slump of time surrounding me. Once again, I had not slipped away into the magician's cabinet.

I landed yet alive in my coat, in this precarious shelter, the peeling boards, urine drying in my britches. Wrens hopped on leaf litter. A breeze rustled over the hill. A hornet visited the curious groaning human clump and then flung away again on sunset light. I sat up, stiffened in my tendons, unable to smell my own stench in the crisp air. I pressed a reclaimed milk jug to my lips and let the water unstick my gums. There I waited for the night.

Chapter 2

My nightly trip to the grocery store would begin in due time. Wait for the closing. The last stragglers. The conclusion of the restock and the expired bounty to be discarded. I spit on freegans. I am a hardened, starving dog, opportunistic, rustling in your garbage to survive. Expose me in the light, and I will take wild flight, my eyes reflecting toxic green, fierce and fury, but I will return and drag your spoils across the ground. I will make myself strong for the fight. Damn your HOA.

I walk my wooded trail by night. I am exposed without the emerald greenery of later spring, am careful to camouflage lest some art school clown come to commune with nature and stumble upon a startled recluse in the woods. Days are perilous, so my hikes to the world remain in the shadows while the busy people sleep. I know the trip roots and jagged stones by heart and make my way to the four lane. Loners pass, their cars on some dumb mission. I wait and then cross in quiet toward the warehouse entrance behind the shopping complex.

Bleached amber light fans out around the loading docks at the rear entrances. I turn several asymmetric corners, but as I approach my target dumpster in half shadow, a chill runs through the hairs on my neck. A cough, slight but earnest, in the dark divide beyond the landscape hedge. A woman is here, strained and unwell. I halt my quick quiet steps. Freeze. Listen. A double cough, a moan mixed in the finish.

Who you? I whispery call.

Keep your distance. She squawks.

Why you here?

Stay back you devil.

Don't want nothing with you. Just heading to my dumpster. That all. I say back.

Your what? She coughs something loose, hucks it out. *You get the hell out of here.*

I see the edge of a shopping cart where she's perched. I can't see her. The dim outline of a hand heavy in layers of clothes and coats brings a rag toward her hidden face. She's wearing her belongings. I identify her as a street person and realize she may have already dived and raided my pantry. I call her bluff and hasten toward the dumpster.

You ain't no business here! I told you to leave! She snaps.

I fling the side latch and open the loading window. A dank cabbage beet root scent flushes out, cheap and unwanted, culled and discarded. There are packaged items strewn among the wilted leaves. These are my prize. She hadn't touched them. Crazy woman. The metal top gate is heavy but is the surest way in. It will hammer and bang and echo across suburban blocks if I'm not careful.

I ease it over and crouch on the lip, steady to choose a landing that won't twist an ankle, and at once I freeze. Something is moving in the mountain. I never knowingly cavort with rats, smart, aggressive little monsters, but this isn't a rat. In the speckled light cardboard appears to be splashed, spotted, and bloody. Then, in a valley, I see a tiny, pudgy leg extruded, struggling upside down and sideways in the muck. A baby, a newborn child!

Get out of there! The faceless woman croaks.

You did this! Oh my god! You! I stammer as I leap.

I flounder atop the uneven boxes and trash and bang my back against rusted walls. I fish out the baby, cradle it to my chest, shield it within my coat. A little boy tries to cry but only clucks

his throat, cold, shivering. Infuriated, I wedge my other arm over the green metal ridge and hoist myself up upon tumbling, crunching cardboard. I haul myself over, baby nestled, my arm wounded by the dumpster rivets.

It's okay, baby. You're okay now. I pat the newborn. *What have you done?* I scream into blackness toward the fingering hand on the buggy.

Leave it. The witch commands.

What are you? I cry. *I would never leave a child.*

I start toward the road. Perhaps I could flag down a good samaritan or even a cop.

Leave it! She's rising as if to block my way.

Her shape, large, gaunt, is too tall for the voice, and then she emerges from the night into the blanched throw of the street light. It's him, Dracul, shapeshifter, eyes lowering in their sockets to take the measure of me.

Defy me at your peril, he hisses.

Whose child have you thieved? I demand. *Fresh from the womb! Devil!*

Whose child? The vampyr scorns me. *Ask yourself!*

He recoils into the absence of light and at once springboards somewhere away, the high branches of trees agitated, leaves gossiping and confused. I tenderly pull back my coat and find I have not cradled an innocent to my breast but to my horror find a foul, peg-toothed possum, false smile ready to spit and mince. At once, I drop the imposter. It lands, penile worm of a tail accusing me, and scuttles away into the dark hedge.

In the moonlit skies, the vampyr laughs from on high.

Hero! Savior! Hero!

The laughter fades, and I am left standing, admonished, mocked and toyed with so effortlessly that I am more terrified than ever, the witless chump, all bravery shredded. I grab a box, toss in some store discards, and slink back to my patch.

Chapter 3

Days pass. I am resigned to spectate the vampyr's trial of humanity. Prosecute my death sentence while you're at it, specter. I'll arc the circuit before you reach me. I tap a leg vein and am gone. Suddenly, I dream my body is resistant to death. The overdose that never comes.

Never a hard freeze to huff out my last breath. No skinheads to curb-stomp me into the street litter. Overpasses lined with suicide proof fencing. This is the invincible fever where morning and night become meaningless. I transfigure dimensions.

When I awake I prepare myself for the performance. Every habit is attached to a price. Steal, beg, or whore, it demands to be fed. There is a spot nearby where the interstate exit ramp meets a traffic light at the local road. I stand with my sign and beg for money from the trapped vehicles. The poorest people give without regard. Appalachians out of the sticks, Mexicans in painters trucks, black moms working three jobs will almost always deposit mercy dollars. God love them all, but they are rare here.

The well-to-do become rigid and avoid eye contact — perhaps they might see a human. I present a ripped piece of cardboard scrawled with "Homeless Vet. Please HELP." or "Cancer.

No insurance.” or “Lost job. Need food.” or any of a number of lies. Lies do not matter in the game of survival. They hurt no one. The game is really about them, a means to make them feel enough empathy to toss coins at it. Give themselves a gold star for the day. I provide them this gift.

The first day of the performance, I netted nearly fifty dollars. I would need more to see my habit through the month, and then get off the radar as soon as possible. But something curious happened. With each successive day fewer and fewer cars traveled down the ramp. The drivers that did visit began making eye contact but with a sort of contempt as if to steer me away with their will. Several gestured me away. I became the unclean leper.

After the sun set on the fifth day, a police cruiser intercepted me before I could flip my body over the guardrail and take flight. A short siren click and blue disco light caught me drowsy. A cop in rubber gloves and a face mask stepped out, weaponized flashlight blinding me. I am accustomed to the gloves. The mask feels ominous. He’s hiding his identity. Blue asks if I am aware of the curfew.

I am sorry, sir, I am not, sir. What is that, sir? Sir is prostrate language, subservience intended to lessen authoritarian sadomasochism.

Are you homeless? We want to get you off the streets. We’re going to shelter you in a hotel.

I’m flummoxed. I’ve fallen into an alternate universe. He calls someone on his radio. A wagon shows up, transport to the afterlife where I am to be fed, clothed, bathed, and bedded. I was baptized at six years old. A secret pool opened beneath the choir where the turkey-necked pastor dunked away my six year old sins in chlorinated water. The apostate cashes in his golden ticket.

There are two others inside the wagon. I’ve seen them at shelters, pilgrim soirees at Thanksgiving. Late middle-aged, arthritic, they cling to each other against the world, support each other beneath judgment, weathering within parking deck stairwells, hungering in the shadows of plenty. Their bond is beautiful, haunting like a tragic poem. They seldom speak to others.

It’s the virus, son. Don’t you know about the virus? The man tells me from the back corner seat.

His companion’s gaze lowers in a nod as he speaks, her hands clutched together. She exhales a wheezy breath chucked into a cough.

Ah yes, devil of his word, Dracul has unleashed pestilence upon an unprepared world. I am not dead. I am meant to witness the dying, meant to watch the clarity he brings to the fetid social order. Why is this important to him? The cryptic twine unravels and reveals dependencies, connectedness, where privilege stumbles out naked into daylight, exposed as a fraud. Those who scrounge a living beneath your class are now your lifeblood. The desperately ill without care walk among you, infect your houses. Now, we must provide. House the homeless, sweep away their noxious vapors for the greater good. Caring is another word for nothing left to lose.

Death washes your shoreline, leaves its foam on your sandy feet.

The wagon turns and rumbles. His woman nestles upon his shoulder. He grips her hand.

They giving us a place, Lily. We getting a place.

I sip the bottled water I was provided. I have a flush of jostling motion sickness. There are no windows in this cage, but I close my eyes and read the movements, highway stretches, exit ramp, traffic lights, and turns. We are at destination. The engine stops.

Hi there. I'm Linda. How are you feeling? A pleasant woman, face hidden behind a mask and goggles, says when the door opens. She is round with a large bosom that I associate with a nurturing soul, a personality that cultivates familiarity. I would willingly marry her on sight, make my life over.

Before I can step out, Linda sees the couple. Lily tried to grind some poison out of her stomach, retching out only a small bubbly spot on the floor. She's shivering in her companion's arm, waiting for the next trigger of nausea. As he wipes her mouth with a rag, she hovers unable to move or speak.

A giant man in hazmat gear calls for an ambulance. Lily's rock amid suffering is separated from her. From the gurney, she tries to reach for him but only her fingers twitch a last goodbye. He feels it, tucks it into a place in his heart that he doesn't share. She will have a lonely, antiseptic death, deposited into an anonymous box and an unmarked grave.

In a week or two he will follow, but cruelly they will be socially distanced in death, stacked among strangers in a mass cemetery for the lost and unbelonging. Their souls will search for each other for eternity. He accepts this without protest. His mouth purses and quivers as his sole bearing in the world is driven away, but he is resigned as if this is the last indignity he must bear in a life which gave him nothing.

Linda jams a long swab deep into my nose. Not so bad, dear, she reassures me. I think you'll live.

Chapter 4

I cross into the hotel lobby and am directed to a delousing room. I am to shower, place all of my clothes into a garbage bag lined bin, and don new duds before being assigned a room of my own. This means surrendering my coat, the hide of my memory, shelter and lover. I place it in the bin. When confronted with it, nothing in this life is worth remembering. I cleanse myself of the elements and adorn new skins, odd fitting jeans, sneakers, a tee shirt emblazoned with a cartoonish sports mascot. I've been reborn as a dork obsessed with a sport and an alma mater I cannot fathom.

Within my laundered body there is a distant sizzle of cold sweat, the first hint of a round of the DT's. Hell, I'm coming down. With my stash lost to the flotsam of my abandoned shack, I need to find a dealer in this motel of hell, but I know there will be no mark to be found. The diver will soon face the bends.

An attendant leads me to my room on the 5th floor. He slaps a cellophane spun sandwich into my hands, calls it tuna fish salad. Meals will come later. Dishes not to be retrieved for two weeks until a quarantine and several negative tests have been observed. Call the desk if I feel sick or believe I am feverish. If I feel sick.

The door shuts. A strange friction between clamminess and comfort wagers me. A bed, dear god not a shelter cot, but a bed. I stretch my palms across the blankets. My head plummets a down pillow. The television is unbearable. My mind is shaped by long shadows and aimless wind through rippling leaves. Television is a mad, broken, face punch of reality in which cannot orient myself. I switch it off.

As the TV discharges its electric spit, I enter the sound of my own breath. I drift on the raft of bedding, and only then am I aware of a running faucet. On and off and on again and behind that the soft shush of the shower and drain.

Damn you. I wasn't aware that I had a roommate, and yet the room contains two beds and a bathroom visitor. Trouble presses into my meditation. This could mean anything from harmless

annoyance to criminal schemer to unpredictable schizophrenic attacks. The bathroom door cracks. The visitor speaks while still completing his preening.

Television is an ugly noise, isn't it? Disruptive to thought. I prefer the fog on the mirror. I brace and worm upward for I fear at once the air of the vampyr, the phrasing, the measure and tone of words, the dislocated voice that caterwauls through my lobes. Has the hungered pulse of my veins given him scaffolding again?

You wish to know who I am. Once I was called Dracul. Now they call me Covid. You've heard this no doubt. But I caution you, I do not exist in a name. I am a projection of human form, not a demon nor an alien nor ancient species. I have been with humanity since the primate cut its teeth.

A dread crawls out of my belly, twists me to spy the fissure and stare frozen upon the terrible augur. I slide from the comforter and stand ready.

Now imagine there is an image projected from a dimension that you cannot perceive. I am contained in that image, dormant, emergent once the reflection is complete. I myself have no reflection for I am the reflection. Mankind calls me forth without knowing that I am within. A painting of your depravity, the pigments drawn from centuries of human disease and desire, until the image is filled in, and the vampyr walks again. I am the leveler. Do you understand?

My life is worthless. I chatter.

You believed your life had worth. You wished to destroy me. Is this not the greatest love? That you would give your life to save the world? Hero. Savior. Hero.

The door swings. A step. The spindly yet powerful creature emerges. At first, I see only his eyes, weary, so ungodly alone. They are searching me. It wasn't the needle that assimilated him, revealed him. Yes, he entered lapping through the prick stain of blood, but it was the commonality of absence, the negation of self, that sought acknowledgement. *I am real. Acknowledge my suffering. Touch me.*

He takes my shaking hand, steadies it within the cradle of his pink, soapy paw. The cuff of his garment brushes my knuckles. It appears identical to my precious coat, yet laundered and new. My clothes. My boots. All clean and unworn.

Suddenly, I am unable to draw breath. My mind takes on the fog of his mirror, the crawling whispering river fog. The vampyr is taking on my reflection, ordered and reborn. He has touched a stillness inside me, turning a beguiled whetstone, tracing my face, learning my manner, my human haunch, crafting it as his own. *Is this my end?*

It is your beginning.

Leaders of nations, powerful men, bend to his will, arrive to ravage their lands, enact the harvesting. A hard freeze quickens through the garden stems, blackens them to sludge. The fruits drop and rot. Life after life after life, offerings to him. And he wishes to take my beggared form.

These Lucifers are not my lieutenants. Stupid men, puffed on vanity and self-importance. They are distilled from your own greed, manifest of a world corrupt and gluttonous. They are scavengers of destruction, pickers of the wasteland. Heaven expels the false, sends them somersaulting and yet this lost world embraces and exalts them. I come to follow that which is spent, not to feast on it. This purpose I extend to you.

My mouth lilts, creasing with his smile. I'm mesmerized by the subtle nostril flare that syncs my own. The gaze. His vessel is empty. I discover only myself in it. It is inviting me in, commingled in the vampyr's strange mirror world.

Something within me resists. A tiny door within my mind he hasn't entered, the recursive self that endlessly recedes, unreachable. That door opens and guides my hand. The slatted chair upon which I steady. A sudden violence lifts it air-ward and then down, hammered upon the heavy composite table to which it belongs. I wield a broken jagged slat, a stake that I drive two-fisted toward his bestial heart!

Dracul utters a frightful wail in the timbre of my own voice, his hands breaking from mimicry, his freakish face laden with betrayal and panic. The stick has cracked into his lungs but missed the abscess of his heart. He staggers back and flees, unnaturally swift, throws open the door and careens wheezing down the hotel hallway.

I stumble behind, kick across the dropped stick, mind swimming back to me. *Dracul! Vampyr! Stop him! I screech to the alarmed others in their doorways. Stop the vampyr!*

He's down the stairwell, floor upon floor of rubber stoppered marble steps. I slide through the spew of his blood on a turn and knee into the cinder block wall. I'm down, shouting into the vacant shaft with hysteria. As I stagger hoarse gulping for air into the lobby, Dracul is free into the night breeze, aloft. Buffeted by the air currents, his coat unfurls into demonic wings. He navigates away, riding the winds like a map. I only glimpse his escape as the fat muscled attendant awakens from his sentry.

Stop! Stop him! Quick! The vampyr! It's Dracul! Listen to me! Help me!

The attendant's latex hands grapple me, attempt to crush me to the floor, but I am filled with mania. I twist and tear loose beneath the ripping mascot of my shirt and scamper willy nilly into the night.

Chapter 5

I run desolate roads amid the sickly perfume of Spring, tree pollen heaving on roiling branches before an approaching squall. A mockingbird, mad and aggrieved, scorns the clatter of his day. I am disoriented. I have no sense of place except to know I am among city dwellers, high condos, street lamps, boutiques and offices and stores stacked atop each other, all quiet and bolted. I am simply running toward a feeling, a bloodhound chasing the convict into the swamp water. Dracul is near, perched in some shadow of this deserted city. We are yet connected, and he is curiously incapable of shutting me out.

Find me, abomination. It will be your final deed. Hollow threat.

A transit bus maintains its route at the crossroad, drawn through deserted streets as if the vampyr willed an abandoned whaler into port, the plague hiding in its planks. Another uninhabited bus steams in the opposite direction, insistently thrusts against a traffic signal, air brakes spewing, its turning momentum held for the dumb mechanics of a green arrow.

In places, the city yet harbors the charm of night romance. Sidewalks beneath lighted marquees. Iron scrolled park benches, an invitation for couples to brace together in overcoats and create origin stories. A soft breeze searches for the town's missing complexity, the scent of restaurants, bars, perfumes and garbage, taxi exhaust. It only finds a lost and solitary soul, unloved and undeserving of anyone by his side. The backdrop disclaims me as I resent it.

A tiny bat flutters in the light cone of a Londonized street lamp. It is collecting moths, chomping musky thoraxes in its razor teeth. This a signpost. I recognize it, stop and watch and wonder. The vampyr resonates an unnatural meter, drawing those creatures tuned to his weary cry.

I hear you, too, wretch. Do you not feel the press of my steps? I shed false romance, stalk tacitly, measured, listening, smelling the humidity for your catacomb scent.

A floodlit city church, First Something or Other, imposing in its vertical facade, built by

clustered money, city founders, men of authority not charity. Its boxwood hedges hide basement walk-downs, partition Sunday parishioners from informal weekday gatherings. This is would-be contested territory for the wandering homeless, shielded, away from the occasional passersby. Leave at daybreak to panhandle the city, the caretaker will hose away the reek of urine by mid morning.

I lean into the corner where shadow cuts the weathered steps. Careful, there is a presence. My heart thumps heavily in its cavity, strained at the muscular edges for fight, for flight, for knowing the difference. A guarded rasp. Imperceptible brush of trouser against the resting step. I'm not here to beat you out of your fix, my friend. Preach to me. My eye slowly enters the plane. Yes, and before me sits Dracul, sewing his punctured lung with his own hair. Busy medieval beast.

Without hesitation, I lunge, presenting him no chance to turn, and bust him from behind. Tumble with him down to the landing, rip my coat from his shoulders as a restraint over his arms, and punch, punch, punch into his head. Again and again. The vampyr squawks, spits a tooth, wrestles me around.

I've miscalculated his strength. There are freakish bony joints within the hide of the coat. They crack and flex against me. His grotesque wings have taken on this disguise. *I do not surrender face nor body nor self nor soul! Bear your curse in your own name!*

He lifts me with the maw of his wing. I dangle by the throat as he draws me to the mask of my own face. I gave you eternity and you chose death. The soil is flush with anonymity, nameless lives. *Maggot fodder. You've learned nothing. The toll has begun. Let it deafen your ears.*

The vampyr leaps the steps, tosses me backward to the concrete crypt, and he is gone. I churn in the darkness, my knee ground through frayed jeans, burning, scraped bloody raw. My shoulder drummed and beating has taken the brunt, the pain cowering in the blade.

Help!

The word is a shiv in my side. There are cracked ribs on the right side. I rock in this black absence, heard by no human nor dog nor god. The brownstone arches and spires stare dumbly to the heavens, are cold to mere mortal suffering. I must move or I will die in the grimy void. Crawl, crawl, brace and claw the length of the stairs. Topside, I tilt and lift my torso into standing pain.

I feel a tepid moist cloth wipe across my face. Clothes become damp, extrude a pheromone of fear. Consciousness has an autonomous shutter the self cannot avert. It closes in upon the psyche. Hold fast against the shock. Steady, let it pass, don't fall. Breathe and reclaim the surroundings.

Eyes part as a silent flash of lightning flickers across the sky. Unfelt rain rivulets my face, dilutes and drains my sweat, slides me back into my pores.

Chapter 6

Around me, the eerie shush shush of soft rain is only displaced by a distant hunched figure hobbling along a far city block. Dracul, still here? He too is injured, on foot, his maimed wing scratching behind on the cobbles. Oh monster, let my agony reflect in your agony. Let my broken body resound in your body. Capture my visage and reflect my suffering to your deepest core. I creep in your wake, step in your labored steps. Straight shot. I will destroy you with my last shallow breath.

I gather myself on limping knees and grinding spine. I tail him six wet blocks distant. As I pass, blue light bounces inside darkened rooms where TVs ferry apartment dwellers into sleep. Dry on their couches, oblivious to the rain, oblivious to the peril that passes beneath them. Why am I entrusted with their cause? A world of strangers, arrogant and innocent alike, no kin to me. Would you have been my brother in another life? Does any of this matter? Keep walking.

As I crest a hill, I spot the vampyr at a cross street. He's cat-licking the membranes of his wing, biting the bones to clip them in, and tucking its expanse back beneath his coat. He shakes the rain from his back, presses the water out of the oils of his hair, and then hastens through the crosswalk. He's headed for a hospital curled into a dip in the terrain. He can't possibly hope his mimicry could fool them. Why is he there? Has he come to reap the gasping breaths from the weak? To sear his plague into wax shined floors? Does he seek morphine?

He passes unseen past triage tents and two night shift technicians in full protective gear. They are bewitched. I try to shout as the automatic doors admit him to the emergency room. *Stop him! Dracul!*

There's a catch in my vocal cords that I cannot shake, pain within rain soaked chills. I make no sound, mummied like a nightmare, sound capped, unable to upend the dream. I stealth the outer roadway, turn past the tents where I am met by a small girl in the entryway. Lost, she reaches for my hand, looks up at me, pitiful, frightened.

Can you help me find my father? They took him in. There is a terrible familiarity in her little face, my child whose presence I've never touched, a life rejected for addiction. I left her in the cradle. *Can you help me find my father?*

I stare into the baby-skinned face. It's one of Dracul's tricks conjured from my mind. The phantom girl sees me recognize it.

You're my hero. She mocks me with tear filled eyes.

I throw back her hand and turn through the emergency room doors.

Please send my daddy home! The child shrieks behind me.

Inside, the reception area is curiously vacant. Yellow tape lines off the seating area. The air is laden with the scent of antiseptic and the dead. A heavy, middle aged security guard steps into my path. His white hair sits like a whisk atop his head. A white undershirt bulges through where his blue shirt tugs against industrial buttons.

This is a containment area. He says. *You have to wear a mask.*

Did you see anyone come in? A vampyr! Did you see him? I beg.

No one living, he replies. *They'll start coming again at daylight.*

A green line on the floor leads to double security doors.

He's in there! He has to be! I exclaim as I head toward the restricted entrance.

You can't go in without protection. He sees my distress. pities me. *Take mine,* he says.

The guard unlatches his face mask and hands it to me, abnormal behavior that speaks of a reconstructed reality. It's a false response, quantum emptiness with a sprinkling of stardust staged by Dracul for our final confrontation. The guard's lips are rigidly parted in his jaw. He has the drooping cheek musculature of a cadaver. This is a ghoul, another mirage, summoned or controlled on the edge of living. He waits for me, accommodating. So be it. If I am wandering through Dracul's phantasm, then I shall play by his pretense. I deliberately position the mask over my face. *There you go, pal.*

Good. Let me get that for you. The guard depresses an intercom button adjacent to the steel doors. *This is Deakins. We have a visitor. He's looking for someone.*

The doors swing open, inviting me. *Straight ahead, sir,* says the security guard.

I enter a hallway lined with triple stacked gurneys, body bags, tags, names, DOBs, men and women. Bag upon bag, numbers turning on a human odometer, lives and loves and heartbreaks, dreams and demons, all zippered into tarps to be buried or burned away, ash or dust as your final wish. Such is the mortar of the vampyr's castle.

At the corridor's end, a petite nurse greets me. She is only a presence inhabiting an oversized gown and protective gear. I can see nothing of the person inside, and yet she softly grips my wrist with her blue gloved hands.

He's ready for you.

Tender illusion, why am I charmed by this cold vessel? I am being groomed for the final challenge. It's better if you don't resist, you know. Take the negotiation, not the confrontation. You can yet escape death, wander eternally detached, a bloodless relic. Will is overrated. She turns and directs me through another hallway, yellow line painted on the floor.

Do you serve him? I ask her directly.

I serve, she sighs.

What choice did this poor creature face? A suspended life for a vial of tears, trading despair for the forever fallow field? Did he drink her spirit cocktail, swallow her volition to feed his might? I covet this moment. I march toward it. A vampyr's virtue is but a rationalization for mankind's mortality. He trades in a false premise. The necessary reaper. I will strike him down with the truth or accept the nil and void. My heart brims with compassion for the lost guide; my soul fills with contempt for her master.

Another set of double doors. I.C.U. Isolation Area, red line on the floor. I'm suddenly overcome with a head rush as if too quickly standing, the brain desperately trawling for oxygen in the blood, dizzy and distancing, hummed in the ears, until my senses return in a flutter, awakened and invested in a new hyper-reality.

Around me, I am suddenly aware of bustling activity, rooms of fighting and dying patients behind partitions, nurses moving solemnly between them, attending doctors. This is a sacred space, hushed, reverent, the air composed of last breaths.

To the end, says my escort.

She directs me to the final room. As I enter, I steel myself at the terrible sight of Dracul held in a stupor so profound and penetrating that he seems to have no faculties, no presence nor thought. The vampyr is wrapped to his neck in hospital linens, pillows shrouding his head like fancy casket trim, attended by nurses and doctors. A ventilator pumps oxygen and sucks at his lungs. He is unconscious or acting unconscious, but to my horror he has completed the canvas of my face, my body and identity. They are performing rites upon him as if he were human.

Now I know his mad game! The ruse is clear. The undying beast is trading for death! End time's loop and rest in mortal decay, relieve his centuries old burden, escape as martyr by my coil.

I hasten in, furiously shouting.

That isn't me! It's Dracul! A vampyr! Can't you understand? He wants to die in my place! You don't know what he's doing! Stop this!

No one reacts.

You, damned soul! I plead to my guide. *You can stop this! I will not become him! I will not!*

She draws me back.

There is no bargain, she says. No trade. No vampyr. You must understand, you've been here for weeks.

The nurse at his bedside presses his hand, a last human touch at death's door. This is the leaving. She holds a cellphone to his ear.

Daddy, I want you to come home. Please come home, says the tender voice of my daughter.

She's been speaking to me. Send my daddy home, please.

Immediately, I fall from the lucid dream, plunge like a boulder into soft earth, weeks of bone ache in the bed, an I.V. stinging my vein, feeding a coma. There is no bargain. No bargainer. No escape from the magician's cabinet. My lungs have drowned me, deeper down in the dark airless sea. I can give nothing to my daughter, not even a sound nor the weakest mouth parsing love.

He sends his love, says the nurse.

Grant her life strength. Give her passion and courage.

My daddy. I love my daddy, my daughter cries. I hear her, slip it over my arms, cradle it over me as a coat to carry me through the sunlight fading. Switches are flipping, mechanics power down, drip no more. I am untethered.

I need you to put your mother on the phone now. Can you get her, please? The nurse asks.

My forever love. Give my name to our unborn. I will dwell in the minim for your hour. She comes to the phone, weeping.

Linda, says the nurse at bedside, her voice catching. I'm sorry. He's gone. We couldn't save him. He fought hard. I'm so very, very sorry.

Do not be sorry, answers my wife. Her throat reflexes for air. You can't be saviors, but I want you to know this, you are heroes. Thank you. Thank you for everything you did for us.

A last breath exhales into the room, meets me, heals my suffering, removes the fog from my mind. Wings unfurl and lift me from the floor. I hover above my body, forgive him. The recursive reflection retreats to its door, enters, on and on, deeper down.

The self discontains into another dimension.

The narrative decoheres. I become the dormant seed in fallow ground.

The end.

© 2024 by Robert Glenn Plotner