

Interview With the Vampire (Short Story)

This short story was written in 1973, and later adapted into novel form.

"Do you wish to record the interview here?" asked the vampire.

The boy had drawn the small tape recorder timidly from his briefcase. He hadn't expected this response. "You don't mind . . . that I record the interview, possibly broadcast it on FM radio throughout San Francisco?"

"I haven't the slightest objection," said the vampire. "I was referring to the room." He gestured now to the small round oak table, the straight-back chairs. In the rhythmic flashing of a neon sign beneath the window, the boy saw these, and a door that was not the hall door, partially open.

"O, it's fine," said the boy, and quickly he checked the batteries of his recorder, lifted its clear plastic lid to start the tape, and looked timidly at the vampire. "Is this . . . your room, then?" he asked.

"No," the vampire smiled. "Just a room." He was standing at the window and the red light shone on him at intervals of three seconds. Then there was only the dim light from Divisadero Street and the passing beams of traffic. The boy could see a washbasin and a mirror, and again he stared at the partially open door.

"Do you want the light on?" asked the vampire gently.

"You mean you don't mind?" asked the boy.

"No, of course I don't mind," said the vampire, walking slowly and silently to the center of the room. His long cape flared around him. "I know that you did not have a close look at me in the bar. It was very dark. I don't want you to be nervous, frightened."

"Thank you," said the boy. And then the vampire reached above the center of the round table and pulled a cord, flooding the grim narrow room with harsh light. He looked down at the boy, and the boy could not

repress a gasp. His fingers danced on the table, backward, to grasp the edge. The vampire was utterly white and smooth, as if sculpted from bleached bone, but in his handsome and seemingly inanimate face burned two magnificent green eyes. He smiled at the boy and the chalk-white flesh moved with the infinitely flexible but minimal lines of a cartoon.

"You are frightened," he said gently. "Don't be."

"No," said the boy, clearing his throat and loosening his tie.

"Only amazed." He studied the vampire's high cheekbones, his long slender nose. The clothes, as he had seen in the bar, were magnificent, a tapered coat of the last century, collar stiff and white as the vampire's flesh, the large silk tie perfectly folded and knotted, the cape velvet. He lowered his hand now slowly from the light cord and the cape fell gently over his arm. On the hand with which he barely touched the table now he wore an emerald ring, the only color in his total makeup other than the brilliant green of his eyes. Now he sat down in the chair opposite the boy and the boy could see no evil in his face, no menace. He might have been a man of thirty-five if such a man could have ever existed.

"Shall we begin, then?" asked the vampire in the same gentle manner. He laid one hand over the other.

"Yes, yes, of course," said the boy, his voice hoarse as if he were out of breath, and he punched the button of the recorder. He set the microphone on the table between them and he said, "One, two, three," adjusting the dial until the light on the recorder gave an even glow.

"Well," he rubbed his sweating palms. "We're ready. Shall I ask you... anything?"

"Absolutely anything."

"Well, then, I'll just ask you anything at all."

"Yes, anything." The vampire laughed. "Anything at all." And he smiled at the boy as a father might smile at a son, the laugh lines like pen strokes at the corners of his eyes.

"All right. . . . right!" said the boy. "Well." And then he swallowed and stared at the plastic lid of the recorder and only slowly lifted his eyes again to the vampire's. "Ok. Are you really a vampire?"

"Yes," said the vampire, with just a touch of a frown.

"When did you start being one?" the boy asked.

"In 1791," said the vampire.

"What were you doing then?" asked the boy, as if the precise date had surprised him.

"Running an indigo plantation in Louisiana," the vampire explained. "I had come there from France."

"Oh, then you were born in France?"

"I was born in France," said the vampire. "Of a noble family tracing its ancestry to the time of St. Louis. Now, except for me, the family has entirely died out. The name would mean nothing to you."

"Did the whole family move to Louisiana?" asked the boy.

"No. There was a tragedy," said the vampire, his speech suddenly a little slower. "My brother died then and I felt responsible for his death. I was not a vampire then, of course, and did not dream of ever becoming one. I loved my brother and when he died . . . I felt it was my fault."

"Would you like to elaborate on that?" asked the boy. "I mean if you'd like to go into it."

"I don't particularly mind now," said the vampire. He put one of his beautiful white hands out flat on the table and looked at the hand thoughtfully.

"It's not painful . . . ?" the boy asked.

"No, it's merely something I haven't discussed in so long," said the vampire. "I couldn't say the story brings me pain anymore at all. My brother saw visions," he said and he looked off when he spoke now as though he had become absorbed in memory as he spoke. "He'd always been different, unlike the rest of us, unlike other boys his age. But I had always been very fond of him. As a matter of fact, I protected him. I remember I wouldn't allow the others to make fun of him, and if he didn't want to do certain things, I insisted he be left alone. He was gentle, loving by nature. He wasn't any older than you are now." He looked up at the boy. His eyes were huge and serene. "But something happened. I'm not sure when it began, but my brother began to see himself as a saint with a mission. He saw a vision in his oratory in which St. Dominic and the Virgin Mary both appeared to him and told him to sell all our property and to use the money for God's works. He was to be a great saint and save France from the rising tide of atheism."

The vampire stopped, extremely thoughtful. "I haven't discussed these things in years," he said softly.

"But did you believe him?" asked the boy.

"No," said the vampire, gazing off again. "I thought he was mad. The day that he came and told me about the vision, I laughed at him. But actually, I was bitterly disappointed. I thought he was mad."

"But that's understandable," said the boy agreeably. "Who would have believed him?" he asked.

"Is it so understandable?" asked the vampire. "I think perhaps it was vicious egotism. Let me explain. I loved my brother as I told you, and at

times I did believe him to be a saint. I fully expected him to ask for my permission to enter the priesthood. I had wanted this since he was a small boy. And if someone had told me of a saint in Ars or Lourdes who had had this vision a hundred years before, I might well have believed that. I was a Catholic, not such a bad one for the times. But I didn't believe my brother. Not only did I not believe him, I never even entertained for a moment that he might be telling the truth. His faith I never doubted, nor his love for God. I was simply convinced that no brother of mine could be a saint. That's egotism. Do you see?"

The boy thought about it before he answered that yes, he thought he did. "He might well have seen this vision," said the vampire.

"So you never found out?"

"No. He died within minutes after telling me. He just walked out of my study, stood for a moment at the head of the stairs and then he fell. He was dead when they found him at the bottom, his neck broken, and I was suspected of having told him something that made him fall. Everyone blamed me."

"But how could they?" asked the boy. "Had anyone seen him fall?"

"Yes, two of the servants saw him fall. And they said that he looked up as if he had just seen something in the air. Either that or he had something on the tip of his tongue. He was about to speak and then he fell. But this didn't matter. It was indirect, all that was said against me. I was blamed for not having understood him, for not having cared for him. He was very much loved and people wanted to blame someone. No one said to me to my face that I had killed him. And of course I never told anyone his story of the vision. But I couldn't bear to be in that house after that. I was a very emotional young man, then, you see. And I, too, had loved him. I sat in his room for two days and two nights after he died just staring at him. I was obsessed."

"This must have been dreadful. But you did find out finally... didn't you?"

"Find out what?" asked the vampire, with a slight rise of his eyebrows.

"What made him fall. I mean, after you became a vampire, weren't you able to know?"

"No," the vampire shook his head. "Nor did I ever find out if he truly saw visions. I'm a creature of this world, not the next."

"Not the next!" the boy repeated, astonished. "You mean there is a next?"

"I don't know," the vampire smiled. "As I said, I'm a creature of this world." He studied the boy for a moment, then smoothed a rough place on the table with one of his white fingers. "But we were talking of Louisiana, how I came to be a vampire, weren't we?"

"Yes, how did it happen?"

"Well, I wanted to get away from my family estate. I sold it to a cousin and brought my sister and my mother to Louisiana. They were furious about it, but they didn't have any choice and when they discovered we owned an immense plantation and three houses in the city, they were satisfied. I saw little of them then and could think only about my brother. I went out up the river to see the plantation about twice a week, left the slaves to an overseer and spent my time walking about town. I thought constantly of my brother, about his body rotting in the ground in France. I could think of nothing else."

"How awful for you," said the young man.

"Yes, it was," said the vampire. "And it inclined me to be care- less. I walked in alleys and black streets at night; I drank too much in cabarets; I cared about nothing, really. And consequently, I was at- tacked. It could have been any type of person really, a sailor, a thief, anyone. But

it was a vampire. He caught me just a few steps from my door one night and left me for dead in the mud."

"You mean . . . he actually sucked your blood?" the young man asked.

"Yes," the vampire could not repress a slight laugh. "He sucked my blood," he nodded. "That is the way it's done."

"But you lived," said the young man. "You said he left you for dead."

"Quite right. And I remembered nothing, only that a man had approached me, caught me about one arm, and then blackness. I was weak and dazed and lay in bed unable really to answer the doctor's questions. Then a priest came. I told him about my brother. I told him for the first time about my brother's visions, how I had not listened and how my brother must have seen something before he took the fatal step at the top of the stairs. I remember I was feverish and it was important to me that the priest understand my guilt and my love for my brother. I remember I made everyone else leave the room and I clung to his arm telling him everything, even the details of the vision, such as the color of the Virgin Mary's veil."

"Did he believe it?" asked the boy.

"No," the vampire made a short laugh. "As a matter of fact, he scoffed at it. He said my brother was probably possessed of the devil, if he'd seen anything at all, and might even be in hell. As a matter of fact, he said the French Revolution was proof of it. France was possessed by the devil as a country. Probably all of Europe was possessed. There would be another great plague."

The vampire shook his head, his lips forming a slight smile, his eyes moving over the surface of the table as if he were seeing these things spread out before him. "Remarkable," he mused. "But of course at the time, I was furious. I went wild."

"Went wild? What did you do?"

"Well, I wrecked the room for one thing and nearly killed the priest. I think it took two men to tie me down. Then my sister kept trying to feed me soup, and some doctor suggested they bleed me. The fools. I nearly died. But I didn't care. I said life was over for me and death was what I wanted and they didn't dare to bring the priest back to my room. Had they bled me again, I very probably would have died, but that night the vampire came. It was after my sister had fallen asleep and I remember he laid a silk shawl over her face right where she sat at the table with the damp cloth for my forehead and a basin of water. She never once stirred from under that cloth and by morning, I was greatly changed."

"How did he change you? Did it happen that night?"

"No, not that soon. I remember that sunrise distinctly, as a matter of fact. It was the last one I ever saw. And I knew it would be. I can remember it so distinctly, better than any sunrise before it ever. I remember seeing the light at the tops of the French windows, a gleam behind the lace curtains, and the gleam grew brighter and brighter in great star patches among the leaves.

"Finally the sun came through the windows themselves and the lace lay in shadows on the stone floor, and all over the form of my sister who was still sleeping, shadows of lace on the shawl over her shoulders and head. As soon as she was warm, she had pushed the shawl away without awakening and the sun began to make her eyelids tighten. Then it was gleaming on the table and in the water in the basin. And I could feel it on my hands on the counterpane and then on my face. I lay in the bed thinking about all the things the vampire had told me and then I made up my mind that I would do it, become a vampire. It was the last sunrise I ever saw." The vampire was looking at the window now. And when he stopped, the boy heard the noises from the street. It seemed unnaturally quiet in the room suddenly and the sound of a passing truck was deafening. Then it was gone. The tape rolled.

"Do you miss it?" the boy asked timidly. "The sunrise."

"Not really," said the vampire. "There are other things. But where were we? You wanted to know how it happened."

"Yes."

"I left New Orleans and went upriver. The other vampire had a house in St. Jacques Parish. A huge house, as I recall, built by his own slaves. They did excellent brickwork, I remember, and the place was kept by the vampire's blind brother who never knew he had a vampire for a brother. He was the strangest old man, he talked to slaves who'd been dead for years, and kept telling us to eat everything on our plates. I became a vampire there in that plantation house and was fully experienced in killing swamp animals before summer. I remember the first human. It was a runaway slave; he was massive, the man, and wild with fear. They'd been hunting him with dogs and when I came on him at the very middle of the night, he had just fallen asleep. I remember my friend, Lestat, was telling me I had to kill him, no way out of it, a human being at last. I had hardly become accustomed to the swamp myself; the snakes, the stench, all these things aroused in me fear for which I no longer had any real use; I was like a man with a lost limb who insists he feels the limb, feels pain in it or cold. And then, with Lestat just a few feet away, I bent over the sleeping man. He was still wet with perspiration, his torn pants drenched, and when my teeth went into his throat, the throat tensed like a massive arm muscle. I can remember that well, and those eyes glinting for an instant as the breath went out of him."

"My God," the boy said.

"Don't be frightened," the vampire turned away from his thoughts and looked at the boy. "I should imagine this is difficult for you, interviewing a vampire. You've never done such a thing, have you?"

"No," said the boy. He stared as if he'd lost the power to speak. His face was drained and he couldn't take his eyes off the vampire's eyes. "And you mean it . . . every word of it," he murmured.

"What did you say?" the vampire leaned forward politely.

"It's a completely new experience," the boy stammered quickly.

He checked the tape and the light on the recorder. The tape turned and turned as it did all the time. "Did the black man die?" he asked, clearing his throat and repeating the question again immediately in a stronger voice. He looked up at the vampire.

"Black man . . . 0, you call them blacks again. I forgot this. They were blacks then. Then they were Negroes. And now they're blacks."

The vampire laughed. "Yes, he did die. As a matter of fact, I rather overdid it. He had more blood than I really needed and I wasn't particularly comfortable after the feast. But it was the first one, and I could feel him dying as I drank, and with my new vision, my new awareness of things, I simply couldn't pull away from him. I think Lestat forced me finally to go back to the house. It was as close to morning as we dared stay out."

"Your new awareness?"

"Yes, things looked considerably different," said the vampire. "I haven't thought about the difference for years. We become accustomed to things so easily, don't we? I remember that first night when the vampire, that is Lestat, of course . . . when he came to me in New Orleans and I told you we talked the whole night. I was on the other side of the world then. I could only dimly imagine seeing the world as he described it. And now if I speak to you about it, you can only dimly imagine you see what I see. I remember Lestat told me the whole history of the world that night, or so it seemed to me as a human. Time stopped. The night was infinite as if the span of hours had begun to curve, to encompass the entire shape of recorded time like a balloon, swelling slowly without end. World without end . . ." the vampire's voice trailed off, and then he looked at the boy. "Do you understand?"

"I'm trying," said the boy. "You said you see things different now."

"Yes, completely different. But it's no real use trying to tell you about this. It's the story you're after for this radio station, isn't it? You want to know what happened, how I came to be here."

"Yes," said the boy, but he said it so softly he might have said it to any comment the vampire made.

"Well, I stayed on that plantation for years. Lestat left after a while. He really always wanted to be in Europe, and I cared nothing about Europe at all. I saw Louisiana in my new vision and New Orleans was becoming a metropolis. It was a reckless, charming city and I could roam it for hours every night never causing the slightest bit of unwanted attention. I liked the crowds after the opera, the women getting into carriages, and the slaves . . . they were always easy when I had to feast and was ready to go home. They had to stop for me, show me some humility simply because I was a white man, and I had them without the slightest struggle, usually leaving them dead. One did live once and went crazy. They called her Loony Lucy Locket all her life after that, and whenever she saw me she'd scream, but she screamed at all kinds of gentlemen and no one paid her the slightest attention."

"Did anyone put two and two together? Figure out that you were around?" the boy asked.

"I beg your pardon? Oh you mean talk of vampires, suspicion. Not for a long time. There was so much voodoo then, and so many unexplained murders. The fleet was always in there, sailors roaming the streets, women for any price to a fortune. Even when I took young men of property, the victims were often buried without anyone noticing the marks. Of course, I might have made my presence known just for the fun of it. But then I was watching things, seeing things, experiencing my new vision, and I had no desire for personal fame whatsoever. I still have little, really. I don't think I've ever even considered an interview of this type before for that reason. I prowled New Orleans and the swamps

around it for years without there ever being a whisper of vampire. And when Lestat's brother died, I buried him in the night and let the old plantation house go to ruin. I liked watching it go to ruin. Some evenings, I sat for hours in one spot and watched it decay. I could hear the termites eating, watch the spiders in the moonlight. I could hear the water rising around the foundations. There was no darkness that wasn't alive with sound, or impenetrable to my eyes. And occasionally I had the opportunity to frighten someone there and that delighted me. I chased two men for a mile through the swamp one night and one of them nearly drowned. And not long after that a group of Negroes came out there at sunset just to see the haunted ruin and I could hear them as I was getting up. I came out on the upper gallery and they went wild. I wish more people had come. But no, there was no talk of vampires. And I decided to go back to France in 1863."

"But how could you do that? How could your friend do it? You can't stay up in the daytime, can you? That's what I've always heard..."

"And you've heard correctly," said the vampire with a nod. "But I travel the way vampires always travel. I have my body shipped. I made all the arrangements one evening at the Hotel St. Louis through an agent. Bought his dinner, gave him an enormous dinner, and had him arrange to pick up my coffin in a suite I had rented the following night. I believe I shipped myself as myself that time, my deceased 'uncle' by my own name. My family was long dead, of course. I was sending myself home for burial at the family estate. And I had no intention of staying around to watch the South lose the war."

"You knew the South would lose?"

"My dear boy, everybody knew the South would lose. On the ship home, I dined on rats, and finally awoke one evening as planned in a Paris apartment I'd rented months before. Everything had gone perfectly. If Lestat had been around, I might have had an easier time. But I'd lost Lestat. I never saw him again."

"Do you suppose he's still alive?" the boy asked, and then he swallowed as if the vampire might be angry.

"I imagine so. There are so few people who even believe in vampires, I can't imagine anything really happening to him. But then that depends on where Lestat went. And Lestat was theatrical. He liked people to know he was about, to frighten ones he had no intention of killing, and acquire a reputation. But even so . . . the truth is, I just don't know. I wanted to see the whole world then, and Lestat would have only been a bore. I'd been a vampire for only a few months when I knew how little Lestat had used his powers, how little he cared about what he could come to know with immortality and vision. He was a prankster, and if I had told him the things I saw or wanted to do, he would have laughed. I suppose the type of vampire a man becomes depends on the man really; it's the way it is in life. I remember, for example, that I was still completely fascinated with animals after years. When I fed upon a new animal, it was a new experience. I worked up from rats, which had never much bothered me, all the way to magnificent horses. Of course, I enjoyed occasional people then for a variety of reasons, but there was so much to be experienced just with animals. I can remember the first time, for example, when I killed a panther in a zoo in Germany. What an experience that was, lying beside that enormous cat, sinking my teeth into the back of its neck—which was by no means easy—and hanging on to the beast as I fed. It was still heaving with breath afterward. And I lay there warm and full beside it—why, it was as long as I am when it stretched out—and I lay there just resting as it died. And the smell of it, such a smell."

"Then you do smell things," asked the boy, after a slight pause.

"Ah . . . yes, but not as you do," the vampire commented. "I mean I am not repelled by odors as you might be." Then he touched his chin with one of his long fingers and his brows met for an instant, making two fine lines in his smooth forehead. "Of course, I'm not attracted by fragrance as you would be either. But I am certainly aware of an odor."

"Did you . . . finally become interested in people? The way you were in animals?" the boy asked. And now he could not help doing what he had almost done several times in the past—that is, looking more carefully at the vampire's mouth. He could see the white lips were of a different texture, like silk, and now as the vampire smiled and said nothing, he glimpsed the white teeth. He swallowed, trying not to show his reaction, because he couldn't see the tips of the upper teeth, and he looked down. When he looked up again, he was aware of the vampire's fine eyelashes, like fine black wire in his lids, curling just slightly at the ends. The boy was staring blankly at the top of the tape recorder at once and he could feel his heart against his shirt.

"Yes, I did," the vampire was laughing. "But I was patient, moving up to it slowly, more slowly than most. And seeing the creations of people all the while. Greece, for example. I spent years in Greece just roaming the ruins. Night after night I went alone to the Acropolis, not caring if I was to feed on field mice afterward. But there were always people, and I came finally to think only of people, to meet the greatest richest part of my experience. I think the first real person I truly appreciated was a young woman in Greece. She was unquestionably the most beautiful woman I'd seen at that time. Mortal men would turn and stand dumbfounded when she passed. And she was reckless. She had a little bit of English money and she cared about nothing, really, an unusual Englishwoman for those times. In her youth, she'd known Keats, I believe it was, and she always carried a little velvet volume of his poems with her. She wrote herself then, too, and kept everything locked. I remember one evening I persuaded her to read a poem to me and I thought it was rather good. She said it was shocking and I believe she was right."

"You knew her . . . as a friend?"

"Well, I told her what I was," said the vampire. "But she didn't believe me. I'd come late in the evening, never see her in the day, and I didn't

drink tea. But I don't think she believed me even for an instant. Until the night I killed her."

"You . . . killed her?" the boy asked.

"Yes," said the vampire simply. "I told her I was going to do it. She said I was the most peculiar man she'd ever met, and she couldn't have felt any safer on the Acropolis in the moonlight with anyone else she knew, even her own father. Then I showed her my teeth and I prepared to kill her. It was the most thrilling kill I'd made up till that time, easily the most thrilling kill. The experience with the panther was nothing compared to it."

"But she must have gone crazy!" said the boy.

"No," the vampire said calmly. "She was too surprised. 'Then you've been telling me the truth,' she said with amazement. Then she simply closed her eyes. If I hadn't felt her heart beating, I would have thought her dead already. She never opened her eyes. I know she didn't suffer at all. I must have held her there for the better part of an hour and when I left her, she looked as if she'd been made of wax. She was like an enormous old doll. I put one of her gloved hands into the other, arranged her parasol right beside her, and her little velvet book, and smoothed her petticoats and her skirts just as she wanted them. It was as different from the panther as it would have been to have spoken with the panther. How else can I say it to you so you'll understand? And your FM radio audience, so they will understand?"

"O, you're doing beautifully," said the boy, but it was time to change the tape. The vampire rose and walked on the creaking boards to the window, and the boy hurriedly replaced the cassette with another, his hands wet and trembling so that he had to fumble with it, which made him all the more nervous. From the back, the vampire looked quite ordinary; and the boy swallowed and drummed his hand nervously when the vampire turned around, stepped into the light again, and looked down. He could see the Adam's apple move slightly under the smooth

white skin of the throat above the vampire's stiff collar. "She was a very old woman," the vampire said, just touching the boy's shoulder now with a firm hand as if he meant to calm him. "I'm sure," said the boy, clearing his throat and shifting in his chair as the vampire sat down. The vampire sat back now and crossed his right knee over his left and rested his long slender arm on the table.

"Was it . . . was it always people after that?" the boy asked, his voice barely audible to himself. He leaned over his own little microphone and started to ask again, "Was it . . . ?"

"They became the main interest," the vampire nodded, glancing just for a second at the recorder's light. "All manner of people. All manner of emotion. I spent considerable time in all European countries, before I came back to Louisiana. And, of course, I was disappointed but not at all surprised to see how it had changed. My mother's and sister's graves were still being tended by a niece there of whom I'd never even known. My sister had apparently married quite late, had two daughters and one of them had left this young girl. She was the only one of my family that I was able to discover and she kept the graves beautifully, even though her husband made almost no money as a grocer. I started a romance with her on the evenings when she ran the little store. He did something those nights, bowled or played cards or some vulgar thing, leaving her alone with the cash register and the late customers who wanted liquor. So I began to come in on those evenings and buy magazines. I bought cigarettes once and she saw me throw them away. I had to tell her then that I came to see her. And she fell completely in love with me. Of course, I never told her what I was or who I was, but I did give her money, a good deal of it, and the last time I saw her, I told her to leave that husband of hers for good. She wouldn't. It was the Church, she said, she went to Mass every morning at five A.M. So I took care of it for her. Of course, I never told her. And I loathed the man. I could hardly bear being around him on general principles, let alone locked to him for fifteen minutes, sucking his sap and listening to him curse. He was drunk, the blood was what you'd expect from a lizard. I was infuriated

by him. And then he lay there in the alley breathing like a snoring dog. I had to break a bottle, and cut his throat with a piece of glass. Then I took his wallet so she'd think it was a robbery. I threw that away in a field and put all the money in a poor box outside a church. Of course, she never knew I was her ancestor. . . ." he sighed.

"Did you ever see her again?"

"No, there was no reason for that. It was just a family obligation. All I could do for her. I had some other things to do which were fun. Somebody had restored Lestat's plantation house, put screen porches on it and rebuilt the old cistern and cemetery. I wanted to see who these people were and have a talk with them."

"You mean you went to see them at night?"

"Exactly, and what a bunch they were. They had faked everything, including a name that no one would have known in Louisiana in two hundred years, and a completely false coat of arms. They had old land grants they said came from Louis XIV and a map of the original plantation which almost made me laugh in their faces. There wasn't a mention of Lestat's family, of course, and a phony monument, cracked and distressed to make it look real, had been put over the grave of his old blind brother whom I had buried myself before I left. They wined me and dined me, though I never really touched anything of course, and told me all of this while I talked of visiting the house in my childhood, of the ruins, and of the old story of ghosts. Yes, they'd been in the North then, aunts and uncles living here apparently or in New Orleans, they lied, and they wanted me to know that their oldest girl, who was at the Sorbonne, was to be the Queen in one of the Mardi Gras clubs this spring. I hated them. The air conditioners were droning and the children were brats and the woman's accent was utterly false, and the husband didn't know what to do with his fork or his knife and never blotted his lips once before taking his wine so the glass was murky and ugly before the meal was half over, and I could see it was all lies. Finally, when they got to talking more of their times in Brooklyn, New York, it was clear they'd come

from there, and were trying desperately to hide it, and the family money was invested in a chain of dry cleaners, and the great old house was an obligation, something to live for, the past not allowed to die, the great South they must desperately try to preserve. You get the picture?"

"Yes," said the boy. "What did you do?"

"I killed them all," said the vampire with a smile. He showed more of the teeth now than ever before, and the boy just stared at him, his own mouth slack, his hand fluttering for a second by the recorder.

"One by one," said the vampire. "I was furious. Besides, I sensed something else about them, but this is hardly something I can use to explain my actions to you. I know you'll be glad to hear it, though, when I'm finished. Death is something so different to you, I would imagine. Unless, of course, you've been a soldier."

"No, nothing like that ..." the boy nodded weakly.

"Well, to be quick about it, I killed one of the men first. I told him who I was, what I was, and just how I had left the house in 1863. I told him who was buried in the cemetery and demanded to know how he had gotten the house, the stack of forgeries and what he was up to. He went through the gambit of emotions from A to about M and then emptied a gun into me. After that, he was quiet. He offered me everything, deeds, money, even said he would care for me himself, my coffin if I wanted it, and see I was safe. He said he had connections, he could do things I didn't even know about. I killed him. But what he'd said intrigued me. All this happened in his study. I was supposedly in bed for the night, and I just took him out with me and got rid of him on the way home. The next night, he was just 'missing' and I had ample opportunity to kill the woman. I frightened her deliberately and she also went for the gun, but couldn't get a grip on it. Apparently, when they found her in the morning and didn't find their 'guest' in his bed, the police were called. But it was a quick examination, I must say, considering the state in which I left her, blood all over the room; and that was when I began to see there was

something strange. There weren't any police around the next night when I came back, but all sorts of other men. And such men. They all came from Brooklyn, New York, or some place like it, and they prowled around as if they could see in the dark. The children were absolutely gone, of which I wasn't glad really, as I didn't see why they should have been involved in the first place . . . that's something we haven't spoken of yet, children... you won't forget to ask me ..."

"No . . ." the boy shook his head, his eyes wide, his lower lip slack as he stared absorbed at the vampire.

"... and the man was alone in his study, with two of these creatures from Brooklyn, New York, outside the door wearing their hats as if they were walking about in downtown Manhattan. They had found the body of the other man in the swamp where I left him, and the only fellow I had left was saying into the phone that something was very wrong, and the man to whom he was talking wasn't going to live till tomorrow night if something wasn't done. At least, I think this is what he was saying. When he saw me in the room with him, he dropped the phone and fired at me with a small handgun. Then the two New York fellows came in, firing at me, and all three men just fired for quite some time."

"What did you do?" the boy asked anxiously when the vampire stopped.

"I was trying to describe it. I suppose it's best to say I picked one of the men and approached him steadily until he was forced to drop his gun and to stare into my eyes, unable to move. He could have avoided this, had he known what to do. But then people rarely do. I then went for his jugular vein at once to kill him. The blood was of no consequence, I wasted it. When he fell on his knees, the other men had already run away. I was alone then with the owner of the house. 'You killed my wife!' he shouted as if it had never occurred to him. I told him I had, indeed, 'and I told him precisely why . . . about the house, about my living there and all his papers being fake. But he was frantic. I doubt he heard or understood what I was saying. The strange thing was, he was not really frightened for himself. He was trying to make a deal with me.

The fellow I'd bitten was completely dead now, and he bent down to check his heart two times. Then he told me that he and I could make millions of dollars.

" 'For what?' I asked. But he was so thrilled with this plan of his that he had forgotten all danger. He asked if I minded if he had a drink and said I could have the house, the house was the least important thing in the world, and then he poured himself a glass of Wild Turkey bourbon.

" 'Not to me, it's not,' I said indignantly, explaining that though I had no intention of confiding anything to such a person as he, this was the house in which I had become a vampire. But he was like a person possessed of a grand passion. He was mumbling to himself about the opportunity of a lifetime, and he kept looking at the dead man and laughing. Then three of his other New York friends stormed the room, emptied their guns, and tried to back out, nearly knocking each other down. I killed one of these in the hallway while the others watched, then fled, and the owner just sat there at his desk laughing. 'This is marvelous,' he kept saying. 'No one can stop us,' and this sort of thing.

" 'What do you mean no one can stop us!' I demanded, thoroughly annoyed at this point. I wanted to kill him and I wanted him to know why and be frightened. I wanted him to realize what a vulgar stupid man I thought he was with his false documents and coat of arms; but he didn't even care. He said that I had to listen to him, it was only fair. He had listened to me, after all, when I told him a long and preposterous story and I owed it to him. 'You bored me for two nights as your guest,' I said. I nearly went mad. I owe you nothing. And look what you've done to the house,' but nothing upset him. He was convinced that when I heard what he had to say I would be as delighted as he was. He checked the new body now and clapped his hands like a child. 'This is fantastic!' he whooped, and when I reminded him I had killed his wife in the same way, he just brushed that off, saying this was business.

"I think I listened to him for about a quarter of an hour before I finally understood. He was a gangster which didn't surprise me or mean

anything to me one way or another. I read the papers. These things have little interest for me at all. But when I realized that he wanted me to be a gangster with him, I was dumbfounded. And I haven't been dumbfounded in a century. But he had it all planned. And he meant every word of it. We were to be partners and I was to kill people simply when he pointed them out. No one would ever catch me. They wouldn't even know who sent me or why I had committed the murder. And through this, he, my partner, would become the richest man in the world. He could ask as much as one million dollars for a single murder; and there wasn't a 'contract' as he called it that we couldn't handle. I could even kill the present premier of Soviet Russia, or Red China, he pointed out. It would be a 'snap.' You understand I'd heard all these words before and could follow him completely; I just could hardly believe he meant it. I could hardly believe that he knew what I was, had seen what I was, believed it, and still wanted to make this proposition. But it was the only thing on his mind. When I said I had no interest in it at all, he just stared at me. For a moment, I thought his heart had stopped.

" 'Why not?' he asked. Now he was dumbfounded.

" 'Why should I?' I asked.

" 'But you can have millions, anything you want! Don't you believe me, haven't you been ...'

" I don't need them. Of course, I've been listening. What would I want with anything you've mentioned?' I asked.

"He shook his head. But I could see he was beginning to understand. But then his eyes brightened. 'You need someone to take care of you!' he said. 'Your coffin. You need a partner to look out for that thing in the day,' he cried. 'You never thought of that, did you?'" I take excellent care of it, myself,' I told him. 'And you would be the last person I would trust it to, besides.'

" 'But we could be partners,' he said. I got men working for me, and I wouldn't let anything happen to you any more than I'd kill the goose that laid the golden egg!' he pleaded. He went on and on about what a nice room I could have, and how he'd get me whatever vampires want. 'You can't shop around in the day, for instance. I could go to stores for you, get you stuff,' he said.

" 'Thank you, but I can get everything I need at night,' I said. He was reaching the end of his rope. Finally, he began to threaten me. His men wouldn't let this happen. They'd find me, kill me, no matter where I tried to hide, New York, Paris, Rome . . . the whole world was nothing to them, they had men everywhere, did I know what they were called in the underworld, would I like to hear it with my own ears?

" 'Why don't you call them now in one of these places and give them a description?' I suggested, handing him his phone. It was making noises on the carpet. 'Just tell them that I'm a vampire with a coffin somewhere in Louisiana. Tell them how I dress, how tall I am, and that when they find me, it ought to be in the day, and they can find out what to do from any twelve-year-old boy who's been to the pictures.'

"He was enraged. 'You're crazy to do this!' he shouted, hurling the phone across the desk. He swept papers and glasses and guns to the floor. He began to curse. 'A cross!' he shouted suddenly and began to look around.

" 'That's foolishness!' I scoffed. 'Children make that up when they're frightened at night.' I couldn't help but laugh."

"Is it foolishness?" the boy asked, now leaning over the table.

"Yes," the vampire shook with laughter. "So is the nonsense about mirrors," he shook his head, and just smiled for a minute before going on with his story. "Where was I? He was properly frightened and outraged, as I'd wanted it. But he wouldn't give up this scheme. He kept insisting there must be something in the world I wanted, something

worth it for me to become his partner. And then came his final plea. Did he have to die? Why couldn't he be a vampire like me?

"Well, this was the last straw!" said the vampire. "I was exhausted, it was nearly morning, and the man had alternately infuriated me and bored me for hours. I personally detested him. 'You become a vampire like me!' I almost spat in his face. It would take more than that to close the gap between us!" I was trying to restrain myself. I dragged him by the collar down the hall and into his wife's bedroom where the blood still stained the wallpaper and the chair. 'Don't you have a particle of feeling for your own wife!' I demanded. 'For your own men? They tried to save your life and you stare at their bodies and clap your hands . . . and you're asking me to make you immortal, to have a thing like you around until the end of time?' I was thundering at him as he hung there by his collar. I can't stand having you around for another five minutes!" I told him. I'm not even going to drink Drop One of your miserable blood!" I rammed him neatly in the throat with both teeth, withdrew and watched it flow over his open shirt. He just stared at me for a few minutes and then passed out. When I dropped him on the bed, I knew he would be dead in a matter of seconds and I had to hurry to get back to New Orleans. But then he said something. As spent as he was, he managed to ask me one favor. If you like to kill people,' he was moaning '... there's this guy in Jersey. I wish you'd get him .. .' Then I slammed the door on him in disgust."

He folded his fingers now and looked at the boy. "Don't you think that's remarkable?" he asked. "The idea!"

"But what about the henchmen?" asked the boy. "The other men in the hats? Did they try to stop you when you had to get back to New Orleans?"

"No, not a one. As a matter of fact, there was no one around outside the house at all. I took one of the cars, a Cadillac, I believe it was, and taught myself how to drive on the way home. I almost always hire a

chauffeur, you know, but this time I was really in a hurry. And I wanted to do it. Cars had begun to interest me. It was fun."

"But what about the newspapers? Did they say anything about the man?"

"Yes, apparently they said things which had to do with the things the man had been saying, these people he knew in other cities, gangs, mobsters. It was all blamed on them. I remember it distinctly, because I was in a bar the next night when I read that he had been stabbed with an ice pick and I laughed out loud. People were staring at me. An ice pick, can you imagine? They were searching the grounds for the murder weapon until dark." The vampire smiled. "I don't often read the papers really, but that whole family had been so remarkable. And the children. I wonder what became of those children."

The vampire stopped. He was looking off out the open window. The neon light was flashing at the same regular interval. And now, at the mention of children, there was a pause, the boy apparently on the verge of moving his lips several times, but not doing it. Finally he said, "You said . . . not to forget to ask you . . . about children."

"O, I did, didn't I?" said the vampire, and now he studied the small cassette. "But this is all the tape you have left, isn't it? And I don't know the time for sure ..."

Quickly the boy drew back his shirt cuff and looked at his watch.

"It's after nine!" he volunteered.

"And I have an appointment . . . we don't have much more time," said the vampire. "Perhaps you should ask me now what is most important to you, best for your interview," he said graciously.

"Well," the boy coughed and shifted in the chair. "This family you mentioned in Louisiana . . . all this happened not so long ago, right? Then you came to California shortly after?"

"Yes, just after. I like California," said the vampire. "I like San Francisco, in particular."

"Yes, it's my favorite town, too," said the boy. "I came here one summer right out of school and I just can't leave it."

"It's beautiful," the vampire agreed, smiling as if he saw the pleasure and sincerity in the boy's face when he spoke of San Francisco. "You relaxed there for a moment," he said. "I wish I could put you at ease. You've only relaxed when you were thoroughly absorbed in my story."

"O, I'm all right," the boy said at once. "But how do you live in San Francisco?"

"I have a house," said the vampire. "And a suite at a downtown hotel. It's no problem really. I get home before sunrise. My coffin locks from the inside. There are messages there for my houseboy, or the maids. I've had many houses since I came, it's the simplest thing in the world. There's nothing that can be done in the day that one cannot do at night. It's a matter of persistence."

"But what if. . . ?" the boy hesitated, looking down at the turning tape and up at the vampire . . . "but what?"

"But what if what?"

"But what if I do take this tape right to the studio and broadcast it here in the city?" he asked.

"But what if. . . why, young man, that's why I granted you the interview. You told me you were going to do just that when we met in the bar," said the vampire. He shrugged. "You puzzle me. I thought that was your purpose."

"But then everyone will know," said the young man, amazed.

"But no one will believe you," said the vampire as casually as before.

"But I have it . . . all here on tape."

"Still," the vampire shrugged again, "who is going to believe you?"

"You're right!" the boy's face colored. He stared helplessly at the cassette. The tape continued to turn. "Quick. Tell me anything. What you do here. How you kill people. Now," he said, flustered, his hands moving wildly in the air.

"I roam around as you saw me tonight, visit bars like the Pink Baby on Chestnut and Union Street and talk to young men and women who go to bars alone. Then I go home with one of them, a man sometimes, other times a woman, and then I kill them. I don't always kill them, you know. It's possible to feed without killing. Killing is more of . . . well, should I say, an event?"

"But how do you get them to go with you? What's your pitch? What do you say, romantic things? What do you say to the men?"

"Pitch? I don't follow you."

"I mean, what do you tell them to get them to invite you home?" the boy asked.

"That I'm a vampire," said the vampire.

"But you're not serious. You don't tell them that!"

"Of course I do," the vampire gestured with his open hand. "I just answer the questions they ask me about it, tell them things they want to know about living forever, what fun it is to wear a long black cape, the places I've traveled, whatever they wish to talk about. Generally, we're on our way 'home' in a matter of minutes. And then I feed upon them. They rarely remember anything in the morning, if they live."

"But they don't believe you," said the boy.

"Of course they don't. They don't believe me at all," said the vampire. "I tell them the same thing I told you tonight in the bar, and they don't believe me any more than you did when you came here." The boy stared at him, aghast. It was as if he were frozen, that his hands could not move off the table beside the recorder and he couldn't ask any more questions.

"Well, you didn't . . . did you?" asked the vampire, folding his arms.

"No," the boy confessed, his eyes fast on the vampire's eyes. "It must be simple for you, very simple."

"Simplest thing in the world. They're all egotists, just as I was when my brother told me he was an elected saint. They might believe in me if some good friend of theirs told them with his hand on a Bible he'd seen me roaming a Transylvanian woods, but no man or woman out there in San Francisco tonight is going to believe I'm a vampire simply because no one they know in San Francisco could possibly be one!" he smiled.

The boy smiled slowly, tensely. "You're right."

"Is there anything else?"

"Yes," the boy said, with a glance to see that the tape was nearly out. "Is there anything you regret?" He studied the vampire more intently now, his own eyes narrow as if he were trying to see through the vampire's calm. The other did not change, however.

"Regret?" His eyes moved slowly over the dreary little room.

"Not really," said the vampire. "I don't think the world's about to end. I can't imagine boredom. I suppose that will be when I begin to regret. If such a time comes, a time of boredom," he said. But he looked as if he wasn't telling the boy everything and the boy saw this. "I suppose I could say something about love now, something 'good' for your radio audience, edifying, you know . . . but when I think of how much I love what I see and hear and understand now, I can't say I truly miss love." I

suppose I'd have to say that as a human I did miss it, then. Never knew it, then. But that was another world," he said.

"Would you have it over, if you could?" the boy ventured. The tape had only a few more minutes.

"There's no way," the vampire said quickly as though he had thought this out a long time ago. "And if you mean would I take that miserable life I had then for this again, the answer is no. I want this. I like being immortal, to put it in your terms, though it makes me laugh. But we have to go now. The owner of this room will be coming back, and I don't want you to be seen here or get into any trouble," said the vampire, rising.

"I don't know how to thank you," said the boy. He pushed the button. The tape was finished. He was keenly aware of the vampire's towering height, of his white fingers barely touching the top of the table. A breeze stirred from Divisadero Street. "I don't know what to say . . ." He realized that he was backing away from the table.

"I don't think it's going to be much use. They won't believe it," the vampire said calmly. "But I've enjoyed it as much as you have."

"I'll go right now and put it on the radio," said the boy, reaching behind him for the doorknob.

"By all means," said the vampire.

"Do you think . . . we'll meet again?" The boy felt the knob and turned it slowly. The door opened with the pressure of a draft.

"Look for me in the Pink Baby, where you saw me tonight," said the vampire with a gracious gesture of his outstretched hand. It was as if he were waving good-bye. "I'm frequently there. And I'll look for you."

"Great, great . . ." said the boy. "Are you coming?" he said awkwardly as he stood in the hallway, his eyes glancing at the dim red lightbulb over the stairs.

"No, I'm going to wait for the owner of the room," said the vampire.

"All right, then. Thanks again," said the boy. "I'll look for you."

"Fine!" said the vampire.

The boy took one last look at the white-faced figure smiling at him across the table and ran down the stairs and out of the building, across the pavement to his car. Then he drove full speed to the FM radio station with his tape, nearly running a red light.