

Richard the Vampire

He'd been trying to get his memoir published for fifty years now. Back in the Sixties a human editor at a sci-fi publishing house had urged him to write it. The man knew what he was and thought he could market the book as a novel.

Unfortunately he'd had a lot of ground to cover and wasn't all that literate. He'd been nearly 200 before he'd learned to read and write and had all the same difficulties with it as anyone who'd been uneducated most of his life. Eventually he sped things along by hiring a writer and dictating, but not long after he did his editor friend dropped dead of an aneurysm, probably related to his cocaine habit. No one else at the small sci-fi house wanted to continue the projects that editor had left behind. The vampire spent more money than he'd ever have thought possible on postage to send the typewritten manuscript to one publisher after another, and each time it came back in the big manila envelope he'd prepared and pre-stamped, he lost a little heart.

Twice now, in the years since it was first finished, he'd had to hire new writers to overhaul the thing, since even he could tell that the style had gone stale. Both times when they finished he ate them.

It seemed to him that his book really should be drawing more attention by now. Novels about his kind sold quite well; his story ought to be as appealing as *Twilight* or *The Southern*

Vampire Mysteries, or whatever. He'd listened to parts of these on audiobook and thought his most recent writer matched up against them just fine.

He wasn't sure why he'd attached himself so persistently to the idea of publishing a book. It hadn't even been his idea in the first place and he hadn't done the writing work to realize it. He supposed that after so many centuries of simple survival he'd grown hungry for significance, the kind of hunger humans sated with family or religion. He wanted that experience of touching something more important than himself, and he thought he could get it if people read his history and loved him for it.

Or maybe he'd just fixated on it as something to accomplish in a long, otherwise dull existence.

One day he saw online the photo of another novelist, and recognized him as a vampire. He had written exactly the book Richard had been trying to sell for years, his own memoir passed off as fiction.

Richard knew him mostly by reputation, though they'd met three or four times over the years. He was an aristocrat who'd gone by various names over the years, and aristocratic vampires like him in any years had been no likelier to mix with common ones like Richard than mortal aristocrats had been to mix with commoner humans. They hadn't even come face to face until the late 19th century, in America, when such a thing became conceivable. The aristocrat had expressed surprise at how old Richard was. He'd never known a vampire of base birth to last so long, he'd said. Gentlemen vampires could hide indoors for months, even years, without being bothered, but others tended to be found out and destroyed.

That was one major difference between their tales, anyway. The first centuries of Richard's story were about survival. He'd skulked in the wilds between villages and hidden in attics when he did come to town, held out against his hunger until it became unbearable and then struck quickly and furtively. Meanwhile the aristocrat had written about entertaining Mozart, Samuel Johnson, Moliere, and drinking from Marie Antoinette just before her beheading. Richard didn't know whether any of it was true—he doubted, for example, the anecdote about a fourway with Benjamin Franklin and two courtesans at Versailles—but even if the aristocrat had done none of what he'd claimed he had been around those people and knew enough details about how they'd lived to make it all seem plausible.

The aristocrat had published his book under the utterly ridiculous single name of "Cain." Richard went to a reading of his at a bookstore downtown. He wasn't entirely sure why he went—no, that wasn't true, he knew why he was going. He wanted Cain to help him get a publisher, or at least an agent. He just wasn't sure he wanted to acknowledge that reason or act on it. It might not be shameful for someone of this century, since no one had shame about anything today, but for him it meant begging a nobleman for help, abasing himself before a vampire who'd had everything he'd always wanted—peace, security, and food—and now taken this too.

On purpose he arrived late, five minutes after the event was scheduled to begin, and slipped into an open seat in back. These things never started strictly on time, and all around him humans were buzzing, meeting, feeling out their neighbors to see what use they could make of each other. Half the people here, it seemed, were trying to sell "dark fantasy" novels, to use their term. Being there for the same reason as everyone else only made Richard more ashamed.

A pretty young woman from the bookstore introduced herself and told them they could buy copies of this remarkable book after the reading, there it was stacked by the registers near the exit. Then she read Cain's bio off a sheet of paper, and Richard was surprised to hear the real history of Cain's life, perhaps slightly embellished, rather than a made-up history of himself as a human author. Of course, she did read it with an ironic expression that implied they were all in on the joke, were merely going along with the conceit that the author was a vampire.

Then Cain took the podium. The last time Richard had crossed his path had been in Los Angeles in the 1950s, when he'd had his hair cropped close and wore a sport jacket and checked shirt like a beatnik. Here he'd affected a preppie author look, growing his hair to his collar and wearing an unnecessarily bulky scarf.

He opened a copy of his book on the lectern and cracked the spine. "The Summer of 1816," he declaimed. "Lake Geneva. The Year Without a Summer, when it rained nonstop. Percy, Mary, George, John, and I were at the Villa Diodati, taking laudanum. We'd been doing it for three days. Mary was gorgeous, a delectable, languid, opiated creature whose veins pulsed slowly in the lamplight and firelight. I had been trying to break myself of the habit of falling in love with mortal women, especially young married women, yet between us there was quickly growing a heat that could not be denied. More than heat: under the influence of the laudanum I felt I could sense her great soul, all the immense potential the world and her dissipated poet of a husband had yet to see, and I wanted to experience that greatness as long and as deeply as she would allow it."

It went on like that. Cain was in love with Mary, who was pretty without being stereotypically beautiful. He loved her for her soul. He thought Mary could love him too. One scene where he caught her alone on the stairs went on for nearly five minutes of body language and significant looks, with little actual dialogue.

Eventually the fivesome, drugged out of their minds, decided to write each other ghost stories to pass the time. Cain didn't write anything, he said, but talked about the legend of vampires, what they were capable of doing, and so intrigued Mary that he managed to lure her to the kitchen and sip her blood. He described the puncture wounds he made on her neck as "delicate, barely noticeable, only deep enough to bring to the surface a few precious drops of her—through which I fancied I could taste a deep, powerful essence, a spirit that would soon change the world." He was so overcome by that essence, he claimed, that he restrained himself from drinking any more and rushed into the Swiss rain to feed on the first shepherd he encountered. When he returned the others were reading to each other, Mary Shelley from the story that would become *Frankenstein* and then George, Lord Byron, the fragment that would later be finished by John Polidori, his doctor and laudanum supplier, as *The Vampyre*, the first such story in English. He didn't say it outright, but Cain strongly implied he'd inspired both.

"Mister Cain—" ventured a slightly overweight, freckled young woman during the Q&A that followed.

"Just Cain is fine." Cain beamed her a smile so benevolent it verged on creepy.

"Ah." The woman gathered herself. "Yes. Ah, what would you say are the similarities between Byron's time and today? That is to say, ah, why were vampires so big then and why now?"

"Excellent question." The smile never wavered. "Over the years it's something I've had a great deal of time to think about, of course. I would say that vampires flourish when empires are tottering and about to fall, or when they've just fallen. You don't see them bubbling to the top of the popular imagination when a society is expanding, unafraid of anything. It's only when everything seems insecure, then people start looking for enemies among their own elites to

explain why what used to be great is in danger of falling, and that's vampires. So after the fall of Napoleon you get *The Vampyre* from the Continent, even if it sold in Britain, and in the waning days of Queen Victoria you get *Dracula*. The Weimar Republic is responsible for *Nosferatu*. For a long while, perhaps, you Americans were only aware at the back of your minds that your empire was failing, and from that cultural subconscious came vampires, the shadowy elite powers that repel yet fascinate you. Now, of course, it's become so obvious what's happened to your empire that you have protests against elites occupying all your cities."

Afterward Richard couldn't bring himself to go to the podium to have his book signed. Yet he still felt he needed to stay, because he'd come, shown himself, and gotten nothing. He helped the bookstore staff fold chairs and lean them in stacks against the wall, hoping that Cain would notice him and at the same time that he wouldn't.

He did. After the signing line was through and most other people had left, Cain and a few others remained in a knot at the front of the room, putting on their coats. All the chairs were folded and Richard now merely stood uncomfortably by the door, pretending to scan the magazine rack. Cain looked straight at him, so it was clear he'd known Richard was there all along, and beckoned.

"We're going to a restaurant," he called. "Why don't you join us?"

If Richard had been capable of blushing, he would have.

They sat at the back of a tiny bistro, nearly a dozen of them around a single long table made of several smaller ones pushed together. All the way there Richard had trailed the rest of the

group, not sure how to engage any of them in conversation. When they arrived, though, Cain made a point to introduce him to everyone.

"Richard is a vampire too," he announced. Reactions were split. Half seemed entertained by the extension of Cain's gimmick, the other half tried to hide their annoyance at it. "I've known him for just around a century now."

"Do you have a memoir too?" asked a woman from the entertained half. She had the slightly overfed look of those whose career required professional lunches. Maybe an agent or a publicist.

Richard nodded. "It's pretty different from Cain's. We've led very different lives."

"You'll have to send it to me," the woman said, but did not volunteer her name or mailing address before turning to the man sitting to her opposite side and striking up a conversation about some editor or other who'd just been fired. Richard didn't care. He could find those things out; he'd follow her home later if need be. No, this meant he'd done what he'd come for. He'd gotten a referral without humiliating himself. He could relax.

"Let me ask you something," he said to Cain three glasses of wine later. He'd begged off ordering food, claiming a "special diet," and the same half of the table had been amused. "What you said about empires, is that why you think your book sold now? Because I've been trying for a really long time."

Cain laughed. "No, that was bullshit. I just looked at all the books out and saw they're all about vampires in love with human girls, so I put in a bunch of that. Teen girl fantasy, Richard: an older sophisticated man who's also a pretty, protective, strong bad-boy type wants her more than anything, and he doesn't care about looks, unlike guys her own age. He appreciates the depth of her soul, that secret specialness that no one else in her life seems to understand. That's all it is."

Yet Richard remembered the Year Without a Summer. In 1815 he had been trailing Napoleon's reconstituted army, hoping for a return to the fat days when he could sneak onto battlefields after dark and feed on the wounded and dying. He'd eaten well during the Napoleonic campaigns. In fact he'd eaten well for many years, going all the way back to the French Revolution. But there was no sustained return to these happy times. There was only the single feast of Waterloo, and then a few months later a bitter cold autumn. Clouds shut out the sun and dirty brown snow fell early, making it possible for him to go outside many days before dusk.

He'd headed south, for Italy, where he hoped it would be warmer. Not that the cold bothered him directly, of course, it was just that French peasants had an inconvenient habit of staying indoors and sleeping nearly all day during the winter, leaving him nothing to eat. He only made it as far as Zurich, though, before snow blocked the passes.

That was all right at first. He'd spent some time in Switzerland in the previous decade, when it had been a battlefield between France and Austria. The Swiss had been delicious. He thought he could wait there until spring, meanwhile feeding rarely as possible to avoid raising suspicions, sometimes even eating dogs he caught in the street.

Only spring never fully came. The temperature rose above freezing, yes, but clouds continued to block the sky, and cold rain fell endlessly, day after day, into May, into June. When the city expected farmers to bring their spring produce few came and they had little to sell. Worse, they brought worry about the grain harvest, far more important than the fruits of their market gardens. The corn and wheat were rotting in the fields. The cold and rain had to stop soon. If it didn't ... it simply had to.

It didn't stop. It rained through July and August, dreary endless rain that turned the whole city into a single giant muck puddle, a cold soup of animal shit, human shit, drowned mice, and mud. It was good hunting again. No one investigated a corpse too closely when it was face down in that mire.

In late August and early September it became inescapable: the harvest had failed. Last year's grain and flour were running low and this year's wouldn't be nearly enough. Ten years of war had emptied all the stores that might have saved them. The price of bread rose to seven cents a pound and long lines formed outside bakeries before dawn; Richard would see them on his way home.

By December there was no bread and people were starving. The canton government bought grain from Italy, and while some was stolen en route, much of it did arrive. It was far too little, though, as hungry country families had come streaming into the city, doubling and tripling the need. Churches made thin soup of whatever they could buy and hundreds of gaunt people fought over it.

There was an outbreak of typhus. Richard glutted himself on the dying, who tasted rancid.

Over the winter they learned of a new prophetess traveling the countryside in the northwest, close to the Alsatian border, preaching about the duty of the rich to help the poor. At first they heard her name, Barbara-Julie von Krüdener, only from the burghers' newspapers, which labeled her a socialist trying to incite the poor to riot. After a while, though, they began to hear good things about her too: she was a baroness who'd sold all her lands, rights, and jewelry to buy food for the poor. She set up soup kitchens wherever she went, preaching the love of Jesus Christ. In the spring of 1817 a pamphlet she'd written to the poor, the *Gazette des Pauvres*, arrived in Zurich, telling them that even though Satan had taken hold of the rich and induced them to neglect their duties of charity, Jesus had never forgotten them and would bless them doubly for

all the injustice they suffered in life. The burghers' papers denounced her as a revolutionary, but the poor only loved her more and clung to her as their sole hope in a world falling apart.

When she herself came to Zurich in June, they packed the Lindenhof square to hear her and the canton government was petrified. Richard couldn't be there during the day when she preached, naturally. But when he got there at dusk a massive crowd was still there waiting for her to reappear, or else perhaps waiting for a portion of soup. Thousands of hungry, desperate people, wearing the remnants of what had once been sturdy workingmen's clothes, all now spindly and weak. They weren't so different from the masses of poor in the streets of Zurich every day, except they held themselves straighter, looked you in the eye and asked for nothing rather than crowding around and begging. Some had arranged themselves in family groups under the trees and rolled out what bedding they had, preparing for dark. Richard couldn't imagine that all of them had heard one woman standing on a table, or whatever they'd found to serve as a podium. Many must be there simply to be part of this community and be valued despite their poverty.

He envied them. Here they were, fallen from the social order and barely clinging to survival, and they'd found their self-respect and built a provisional new society. As someone who'd clung to survival for a hundred years, that whole time beneath normal social and economic life, he understood deeply how good it must be to find a place that respected and valued them even in their misery.

Yes, he envied them, and envying them hurt. When the fires in camp died, he thought, he'd tear through here like a wild dog. It had been a long time since he'd killed for any reason but hunger. These people made him itch for it.

He noticed, though, that gendarmes were forming ranks on the edge of the square nearest the river, at least two or three companies in full uniform, muskets standing up in rows like the pikes of their Guard ancestors. It was already dark enough that few people in the square noticed them. Richard did only because his night vision was sharp as any nocturnal hunter's. He was the only one to see them shouldering their muskets, too. They tried to aim over the crowd's head, but they couldn't see where they were shooting any better than the crowd could see them, and weren't close to a precise formation.

At the first volley some people in the encampment merely looked around, confused, while others—Richard guessed veterans who'd been following Frau von Krüdener awhile—began gathering their few belongings at once. Close to him a young mother folded a pot, a spoon, and half a loaf of bread into one half of a blanket, then wrapped her year-old son in the other half so only his head stuck out, tying all of it into a single bundle. A man just beyond her set his rough clay bowl upside down on his head like a hat.

At the second volley the crowd nearest the gendarmes broke and fled, smashing into chaos the ranks of their slower-reacting neighbors as they ran through them.

In the third volley some gendarme's muzzle must have dipped too low, because under the tang of gunpowder Richard smelled blood. He made his way toward it, starting and stopping, dodging sudden rushes of panicked people and then racing across open ground in the moments he found it clear. The gendarmes were no longer firing: now through roiling people and smoke he saw glimpses of them advancing with clubs or the butts of their muskets, forcing the crowd away bit by bit.

Then he located his victim, a middle-aged man shot in the back, high up. He wasn't dead, and groaned in pain when Richard slung him onto his shoulders. He carried the man to a nearby alley, deposited him behind a carriage house, tore off his shirt, and drank from his fresh wound.

So that had been 1816 and 1817. It had felt like civilization was falling apart, that there might never be enough food for the poor again, and that the revolutions of thirty years before would begin all over. Europe was tired of bleeding and tired of going hungry, and yet it seemed like it might never have peace and plenty again. Cain might claim he'd been bullshitting his audience, but he wasn't wrong, and he might even have been aware enough of the poor of 1816 to know it.

He stayed late at the restaurant, drinking wine with Cain long after his human entourage had left. With them gone Cain could drop the pretense of pretending to be a vampire, and the two of them exchanged gossip of mutual acquaintances from a hundred years before. Richard grew drunk and sentimental. He told Cain they should make more of an effort to be close, since there were so few of their kind left. Cain agreed but Richard couldn't tell if he was being sincere, and he knew that tomorrow he'd analyze his memory of the exchange carefully, trying to decide if he'd been groveling before the prince.

They emerged from the restaurant into a crisp fall night, just cool enough to make the air seem clean. A block away policemen had massed, their uniformed backs all in a row, and from beyond them rose the rhythmic shouts of protesters enacting a People's Microphone. Together the cops and Occupiers blocked the way to the nearest subway. Richard and Cain turned away from them and headed uptown.

"Did you really have an affair with Mary Shelley?" Richard asked.

"No," Cain said. "I was there, I was the one who really brought the laudanum, but I could never get a taste for those straitlaced rich English women. Give me a fat peasant wife any day."

"But what do I do?" Richard demanded. "I never even knew anyone like that. Is that why no one wants to read my story? Because I'm not an aristocrat like you?"

"Probably. These are days of blue blood again," Cain told him. "But haven't you noticed that the more you strive for something, the less likely you are to get it? This isn't a virtuous life, Richard, that rewards hard work and perseverance. That was a dream Americans had for a while, that they could become their betters, but they're waking up. You're one of those betters now, and you've been around too long to stay asleep."

On the news when he got home, Richard watched scenes of the clash between cops and protesters he and Cain had just avoided. There had been similar run-ins all over America that day, and even in Zurich, where Occupy Paradeplatz had been encamped at the heart of the Swiss banking industry, in that very same Lindenhof Square. One young man they interviewed spoke about the indomitable sense of community they'd forged in their encampment, a feeling of belonging to an important cause in a world whose elites had turned their back on them, and Richard saw the same fresh dignity he'd seen among the disciples of Frau von Krüdener two hundred years ago.

He hated that young man, and kept on hating him while he printed out a fresh version of his manuscript, prepared a cover letter, and stuffed both into a 10 X 13 envelope. Cain had given him that woman's name from dinner, and the internet had served up her address.