

“Basic Black”

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winning 5th Place entry

"Basic Black" by Ruth R. Greig

Category: Genre Short Story

The car door flew open and a girl plunged into the empty seat. “Drive,” she said. Black did no such thing. But next time, he decided, he would definitely run the red. A poke in the ribs pushed his foot to the gas. The Maverick bellowed and jumped forward before the light had changed. Black jerked on the wheel to get around a corner he hadn’t intended to take. “I’ve got to get that lock repaired.”

The second poke was more insistent. “Just drive, okay?”

He slipped a sidelong look at the girl huddled in the passenger seat. She was young, hardly out of her teens and in way over her head. She smelled of blood—among other things. Good thing the window on that side was broken, too. In an enclosed cockpit, the reek of garlic would have sent Black into an asthmatic seizure. “Does your mother know where you are?”

“My mother’s dead. Shut up and drive.”

“Any place in particular? Hospital? Cop shop?”

The third poke almost hurt. He swerved into the first space that allowed him to twist in his seat and grab the barrel of the weapon.

It was a compact umbrella. He forgot about lambasting her in favour of an incredulous gape. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I have a gun,” she warned.

“So have I.” And he showed her.

She drew back. “What the heck is that?”

“A flare gun. Want to see how it works?”

She fumbled for the door release, but the handle was missing and she found herself trapped. Black caught the flash of light on a wet darkness near her throat. Hoping that his instinct was way off base, he slid the gun back beneath the driver’s seat. “Did a vampire get you?”

Her eyes narrowed. “You believe in vampires?”

“Don’t you?”

She cast a furtive glance through the back window and fidgeted in her seat. Black

understood immediately. He drove away from the curb.

“Are you hurt bad?”

“I dunno.” She fingered her bloody t-shirt. “I think I’m okay. It’s just a scratch.”

“Teeth or nails?”

“Nails. He grabbed me from behind. I threw garlic oil in his eyes and he let me go, but I felt something rip . . .” She paused to get control of a quavering sob. Black turned left at the next light.

“Does it hurt?”

“Stings.”

“You should get it looked at.”

“Why? It was nails, not fangs.”

“It doesn’t make a difference. You’ll need a tetanus shot.”

She began to shake. Shock was setting in, not from the wound, but from the cause of it. Stupid kid; why the hell had she been carrying garlic oil?

“What’s your name?”

She paused. “Jane.”

“Okay, *Jane*, you weren’t by any chance hunting this vampire, were you?”

Another pause. “What do you mean?”

“You said your mother’s dead.”

“She died years ago, when I was little.”

“Littler than you are now, you mean. Did a vampire do her?”

“No, it was cancer. Why do you care?”

“I don’t. You’re the one who jumped into my car and threatened me with an umbrella. Do you want my help, or don’t you?”

“I just want you to take me home.”

“You can’t go home. Garlic oil didn’t kill the vampire, it only made him angry. If he’s got your blood on his nails, he can track you from here to Hell’s half-acre—and he’ll do it, too, because you’ve discovered his secret. What sort of gun have you got?”

“It’s my dad’s. It’s—in the bag I left at the home.”

“*The* home? Where did you meet up with this guy?”

She took a steadying breath. “He’s been preying on the residents at my grandmother’s nursing home. Nana told me that a man has been sneaking into her room at night. At first I thought it was her dementia, but a few of the other ladies on the floor have said the same thing. And people have been dying on a regular basis.”

“Kid, it’s an old folks’ nursing home.”

“I know that,” she snapped. “I dismissed it in the beginning, then I saw him myself. He’s working the night shift, posing as a nurse.”

“ ‘Posing’?”

“I know what a vampire looks like. And even if I didn’t, what happened tonight only proves my point. He *is* a vampire and he has to be stopped.”

Black was this close to being amused, but the kid’s naivete was no laughing matter. “So you took it on yourself to stop him.”

“I’ve read the books. I know what I have to do.”

“What books? Myths and legends? Pop fiction? Jesus Christ.”

She heaved a deep sigh, resigning herself to lack of experience. “There’s truth to most myths.”

Black shook his head in grim amazement. He couldn’t up and leave her. If she had run afoul of a vampire—and he had no reason to believe she hadn’t—she was in trouble up to the eyeballs. She was so green that she glowed, and if she came to a bad end, a species just starting to accept the reality of vampires in their midst would go completely nuts. It was already happening in pockets all over the world; hardly a day went by without CNN reporting a vampire killing somewhere in Europe or North America. The tragedy was that not all suspected vampires were the genuine item. Some were mortals who liked the idea of playing at vampirism, and these unfortunate souls were not helping the cause at all. Vampires were dangerous and, as young Buffy in the seat beside him had discovered, peasant lore did not always apply. Some vampires cashed in on the publicity and used it to their advantage; others cowered in fear, skulking through the shadows like convicted criminals without having been tried. Though they were best approached with caution, not all vampires were evil. But try and tell a mortal that—especially a mortal whose life had been altered by an immortal’s touch.

Jane’s shoulder started to ache and he decided they had better seek medical attention. He drove her to the hospital emergency room, steeling his nerve against the onslaught of noxious odours waiting beyond the automatic doors. “Don’t tell them a vampire got you,” he advised.

“Don’t worry,” Jane replied.

He hated hospitals. For all the antiseptic and antibiotic progress mortals had made, nothing could be done to quell the stench of imminent death. Jane was signed in and sent to wait for a doctor; bothered by the harsh light and the smell, Black retreated to the parking lot, where he sank back on the Maverick’s dented fender and swallowed great, cleansing gulps of brisk autumn air.

A vampire posing as a night nurse at an old folks’ home. Give the guy credit, it was a plausible cover. Not much better than bargaining with junkies for a pint of their best, though. He

sparked back to the bright, hot smell of Jane's blood drying on her t-shirt, and a brief vision of himself with the cotton in his mouth flared before his mind's eye.

And she thought she could spot a vampire at fifty paces. Oh, sure.

* * *

Jane's father worked the night shift himself, as a janitor in the court building. It was easy to see how the kid had felt capable of offing Nana's vampire without Daddy being aware—what was it with this new generation of mortals? Black had never believed he was invincible. He felt the fragility of his existence more acutely than ever these days. As with wildlife in the woods, vampires were being forced to integrate with humans as the mortal world expanded into their territory. He had known some pretty arrogant vampires in his time, but none of them beat humanity for being pushy.

The kid really wanted to go home. Black relented without a fight. She directed him to a tiny bungalow on the south side of town. Upkeep on the house and garden was minimal—the siding needed paint and the grass needed cutting. The windows were covered with plastic to ward off the increasingly bitter wind; double-glazing was too far beyond their means. Black pulled up to the curb and made Jane sit tight until he had checked the place out. Satisfied that her vampire had not yet appeared, he returned to the car and pulled out the flare gun. “Okay,” he said. “It's clear.”

“Then what do we need that for?”

“Protection.”

“But you said it's clear.”

“It is for now, but you left your gun at the home, kiddo, so this is all we've got.” He tucked the gun into his belt at the small of his back.

Jane led him to the stoop. A pair of rats scurried across the yard. Next door, a domestic squabble raged.

“Nice neighbourhood.”

Jane unlocked the front door. “It's rough, but the people aren't bad.”

He said nothing. His own haunt down on the docks had a similar sense of downtrodden community. It was not for him to judge people trapped by circumstance. He wasn't any different from them.

The stale smells of beer and cigarettes met them at the threshold. He nudged Jane ahead of him and locked the door from the inside. It wouldn't stop the vampire, but it would let them know when he arrived. The living room was tidy but not clean. The carpet needed a vacuum and the worn upholstery was tan-coloured under the dirt. Jane led him through to the kitchen, where he checked the lock on the back door while she pulled a bottle of Coke from the fridge. “Want

some?”

He shook his head. “Can I see the rest of the place?”

“There’s not much to see. The bathroom is there, and my room is next to Dad’s.”

“Is there a crawlspace?”

She put the Coke, untouched, on the chipped Formica counter. “Are you a cop?”

“No. I just know how vampires work.”

“How?”

“Personal experience. What about the crawlspace?”

She took him around the back. The crawlspace was tiny and floored in dirt. Rats had set up house in the furthest corner; he smelled them in the close, damp air. The two he had seen, probably, on their way out for dinner.

“Well,” he said, emerging from the claustrophobic depths and inhaling a grateful breath, “he won’t camp out down here, that’s for damn sure.”

Jane looked alarmed. “Would he try?”

“He might do, if he meant to nab you right at sundown. You did a stupid thing, trying to take him yourself. You know that, don’t you?”

“I do now.” She shivered in her thin jacket, her arms clamped across her chest. Black softened a little.

“It’s okay. We’ll get him. Any idea when the shifts change at the home?”

“Seven and seven.”

“He can’t have been on staff for long, then.”

She shook her head. “He started at the end of September.”

That made sense. A smart vampire would wait until he was guaranteed at least twelve hours between sundown and sunrise; this guy had to feed on the residents at the home because he had no time to feed before his shift started. And, since work doubled as the wet bar, Black figured that he was either lazy or a glutton.

“How many deaths have there been since he started?”

“A couple a week.”

Definitely a glutton.

They went back into the house. Jane poured herself a Coke and offered Black a beer. He declined. She said her dad would be home after sunup; he usually went for breakfast with his buddies before coming home to sleep. Black wasn’t sure if the information helped. It all depended on how long the vampire took to come for Jane.

Because he would come. He had to. His cover was his salvation, one of those instances where discovery meant death. Ironically, Jane had blown her own cover by trying to take him

alone. It was now a matter of who died first.

* * *

She fell asleep on the couch, curled into a fetal ball beneath a tatty patchwork throw. Black flipped TV channels from the old man's easy chair. If Jane's vampire didn't show by dawn, he would have to find shelter in record time, which was more daunting a task than confronting one of his own. He gave his head a shake. How he managed to get into these scrapes was beyond comprehension. He shouldn't have cared about Jane or her demented grandmother—but he did. The kid had recruited him without either of them knowing until it was too late. The problem was, what was he going to do when the vampire showed up? He disliked killing as a rule. He tried to limit them to self-defense, but that would not apply in Jane's case. Killing a vampire in defense of a mortal would see him condemned by a jury of his peers—and rightfully so. Vampires did not kill vampires. They didn't have to like each other—few did—but murder was an unpardonable sin. It was akin to mortals monkeying the apes. Vampires were superior creatures. Killing their own lowered them to the very level they had supposedly risen above.

Black was not an intellectual. He wasn't much into ethics and morals, either. He did what he had to do within the confines of his own conscience. But accepting this did not solve the problem of what to do when Jane's vampire appeared.

Time ticked on. He watched old reruns until his eyes ached. Then he scented something new in the air; something lush and luxurious. It wafted toward him on snaky tendrils that encircled his head and squeezed. He was staring at Jane before he realized that his gaze had wandered from the TV screen.

She had grown hot under the throw. Her throat was pink and moist. Her entire body would be just as pink and just as moist, pulsating with the rhythm of blood through her veins. The lush scent intensified as Black absorbed each facet—smoke and sugar and a sizzling snap of ginger. He swallowed once and made himself look away, regretting that he had not pushed his donor for two pints earlier in the evening.

The sky beyond the plastic-sheathed window had deepened to a robust, pre-dawn violet. It was too late for revenge. It might be too late for Black to find shelter; would he have to find room in the crawlspace?

He glanced again at Jane. Young, naive. Stupid, but good-hearted. He related to the stupid part. Heaving a sigh, he got up from Dad's chair and went out to inspect the crawlspace as accommodations for the day.

The rats had returned. They nested in the corner furthest from the door, the safest spot for rodent and vampire alike. He didn't want to bed down with roommates, but he had slept in worse places. He should move the car before Jane's father came home and demanded to know what—

or who—his daughter had been doing all night.

Then he heard her scream.

Shit.

Something crashed overhead and he knew she was struggling. *Good girl*, he thought, pulling the gun as he raced from the yard to the back door. Jesus, he had left the vampire an open invitation?

The smell of raw blood reached him before he hit the living room. He shouted, “Drop her!” but he was too late.

Jane was dead. Black couldn’t save her from lungs stifled by crushed ribs. The vampire was still on her, sucking hard to catch what he could before her heart quit pumping. He was a young one, too; so young that he wasn’t threatened by what he thought was a mortal bearing what he thought was a regulation handgun. Jane’s body hadn’t hit the floor before he launched himself at Black, hissing blood and saliva in an impressive show of fangs that failed to impress the elder. It was easy to derail the lad with a one-handed block to the chest that threw him hard against the wall. The plaster cracked behind him; dazed, he blinked in astonishment on realizing that Black was one of his own.

“You’re—”

“You bet.”

“Then you understand.”

“I understand that you’ve been shooting fish in a barrel.”

The vampire laughed. “Is that what you think? I’m doing them a favour. Those old people, they’re not living. They’re taking up space, and there’s more of them coming. You don’t know what I see in that place. You don’t know how many of them want to die.”

“Neither do you,” Black said sharply. “You’re not their god. It’s not for you to say who goes when. We don’t have to be killers.”

The vampire jerked his head toward Jane. “She tried to kill me.”

“She was a stupid kid. What’s the matter with you? Scared of old people and children. What kind of a vampire is that?”

“I’m not scared. I’m a preferable alternative. If you do it slowly, they fall asleep first.”

“Mercy kill,” Black said.

The vampire grinned. “Now you’ve got it.”

Black shot him. The flare hit the vampire with a solid *thunk*, sending him to the wall again. Eyes wide, he looked in disbelief at the smoke writhing from his chest, then looked aghast at Black. “We—don’t—kill—”

“Helpless old folks and stupid kids.”

“—each—other—”

Black stuffed the gun into his belt and grabbed the vampire by one arm. Jane’s father would have enough to handle without his house going up in flames as well. He hauled the vampire into the kitchen and shoved him through the door to the back yard. The cartridge began burning in earnest, charring the vampire from the inside out. When the magnesium flared bright behind the staring eyes, a strangled scream broke the pre-dawn silence and set the birds to rustling in their nests. Black watched the body collapse upon itself in a blaze of light to rival the sunrise; even shaded by Ray Bans, his eyes smarted. He decided against using the garden hose. The cops would find enough to piece the puzzle together. CNN would have another vampire murder to report. Jane might be remembered as a courageous kid who died saving the lives of others, but Black wasn’t worried about the outcome of the investigation.

He was more concerned with getting the lock on his car door fixed.

THE END

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