FOREVER, OKAY?

by

Sandra de Helen

You needn't look at me like that. I never ASKED to be a vampire.

I don't know anybody who ever wanted to grow up to be a vampire. Not a real one.

Little children generally want to grow up to be cowpokes or astronauts, or to be underwriters like their mothers.

Not too many kids sit around imagining what it would be like to live on blood, and to live forever.

Forever, okay? It's not all that great actually.

Oh sure, it's fun not having to worry about where your money will come from – but that next meal is always a challenge.

And there are some people you would prefer to be friends with for a few years, and then one night you get hungry – well, there you are, that's life.

The worst part of that is, then you have their money, and I always end up taking some little trinket to remind me of my friend, then the guilt sets in.

It's a lot like being a vegetarian.

Well, it is. Think about it, most vegetarians are opposed to eating meat, not because it isn't good for them, because that's debatable, but because they're opposed to killing.

So then, they have to pretend that they don't have to kill in order to eat.

But do they eat only nuts that fall on their sidewalks in October? Do they eat only fruit after it hits the ground?

And if they do, do they carefully take out the seeds from the fruit and scatter them around as the trees intended?

OF COURSE THEY DON'T! THEY FEEL GUILTY!

See, everybody has to eat. Or we die. The instinct for survival is just as strong in vampires as it is in humans.

For one thing, vampires all start out as humans.

Didn't you know that? Pretty scary, huh? That means you could become a vampire – even if you don't want to. That happens about ninety-nine times out of a hundred, because as I said, not too many children sit around planning for the day when they grow up to be a vampire.

For example, my own childhood was perfectly normal.

I was born in Virginia, when Virginia was the West Coast.

My folks had a little piece of land, raised vegetables, a few chickens, a couple of cows, and several hunting dogs. And kids.

I had six brothers and six sisters. I was the thirteenth child.

Unlucky number? I didn't think so at the time. My family all took care of each other, especially me. I was coddled as far as chores went.

Compared to the others, I had very little to do: just gathering eggs, cooking, baking, cleaning, and washing up, and about nine thousand hours of needlework by the time I turned ten.

Idle hands, you know.

We were a god-fearing bunch, puritans really.

Church was painful in every way. Children were to be seen and not heard, except when the grownups weren't around – which they mostly weren't in our family because they were always working outdoors.

My older sisters ran the house, and everybody else ran the farm.

I went to school to the eighth grade, which was quite a lot for a girl in those days, but as I said, I was privileged to be the baby of the family, and my folks were quite advanced in their thinking about education. For puritans.

Nevertheless, my childhood was relatively short, especially when you consider how long my adulthood has been!

I married Mr. Withers the day I turned thirteen. He was an older gentleman of twenty-six.

Mr. Withers owned 180 acres a few miles down the road, and had already buried his first wife when she died in childbirth. The child died as well, so at least I didn't have to start married life as a stepmother.

On our wedding night, Mr. Withers bit me on an artery. I fainted. No one had prepared me for this kind of wedding night!

When I came to, I was no longer a virgin, and I was no longer a simple human being. I had the hunger.

As I said, my childhood was awhile back. Mr. Withers moved on to another country about 150 years ago. I decided to stay and watch this country grow.

I like the more heavily populated areas myself.

I make occasional trips to Asia, to Europe, to India, but mostly I stay right around here.

What do you do all day? Do you have some sort of job that takes you out of your house five days a week? Do you go to school? Do you work in your home?

I don't do any of that stuff myself. I can't go out during the day you know.

Daylight and fire are the two things that could kill me.

So, I take night classes. I once took every class at Harvard that was offered after dark.

Even though I don't have an actual diploma, I tell people I went to Harvard. Very impressive.

You might remember reading about that period in history? Cambridge had a lot of unexplained disappearances while I was going to night school.

When I get worried about getting caught, or when I get bored, or I just can't find anything to eat, I bury myself in the ground for a few years and take a nap.

Every now and then humans remember that vampires are real and they start hunting us. Most of the time I'm careful to destroy any evidence. But every few years I get careless, and then I have to move on or go underground.

Humans are pretty funny about vampires, you know that? You do all sorts of things to try to ward us off. Like wearing crosses, or garlic. Crosses! What's scary about crosses? They SYMBOLIZE immortality for Christ's sake.

As for garlic, I love it! My favorite aroma is the smell of fettucine with clam sauce made with fresh garlic. And not crushed! It should be sliced finely or left whole, simmered in butter – hmmm that smells good!

Of course, I don't eat it. But I find I'm very attracted to people who do.

Catching me on fire would work, if you were really bent on destroying me. No one has ever tried that yet.

But why would you want to? Destroy me, that is. I am simply culling out the population.

Don't you believe that you go when it's your time? I do.

I don't seek out the desperate and depressed, but when I have the hunger, I believe I am guided to those whose time has come.

Anyway, when I get THROUGH with them, their time has come.

I don't get hungry all that often, you know. I go as long as I can. I'm not greedy. I'm not a glutton. In fact, when I first became a vampire, I was somewhat anorexic, because I was so squeamish. But there comes a time, when the hunger just takes over. Again, I think vegetarians can relate.

You've seen vegetarians in McDonalds chowing down on a Big Mac and fries, right? They don't even see you, their eyes are glazed over and they are trying desperately not to believe they are eating meat.

They are justifying it in every way they can. Later, they slink out and hope no one has seen them, and then go home and feel guilty until they can forget about making that little trip to Mickey Dee's.

Well, being a vampire is nearly the same thing.

Other than eating, my life is really good. In a way, it's like having an eating disorder. I wish I had known about eating disorders two hundred years ago. I could have gone to a group.

Maybe it's not too late, maybe I'll join a group yet. It might make me feel better about my eating habits.

I'm not much of a joiner though. I'm more of a loner. It's a rough life. And, it's forever.

Sometime when you are thinking of your own death, and being afraid of it, not wanting it to happen, just think about me for a minute, will you?

Not that I want your sympathy. But I would like even a glimmer of your understanding. Just think: forever.

****