

Wampire and the Familiar Feeling

Wampire was a part of the rotating cast of characters that haunted Jane's subway line. Her skin was greyish and blemish-free. On several occasions, Jane debated asking her for her skincare routine, but she was too worried that she would say something unhelpful like *soap* or the dreaded *I don't have one*. She looked as if she was poorly green-screened into the subway, and she had no shadows to support her existence in the world. Whilst Jane saw the ketchup stains of her shirt in the reflection of the windows, Wampire had no reflection whatsoever.

Jane squinted against the glaring white lights and, as her eyes adjusted, searched for the least worn, mystery-liquid stained seat across from Wampire. She was slumped over, and her head was lolled to the side. Her lips were cracked, the flaky flesh fracturing deeper as she parted her lips to speak. Her ravenous pupils consumed her irises.

"I have a present for you," Jane said.

No curiosity swirled in her calcified state. Wampire was like Jane's phone: devoid of function. She produced a small bag tinted with blood from her pocket, which caught Wampire's interest. Wampire slowly sat up, eyes trained on the baggie.

"Kitchen needed help with prep because we had a lot of call-ins today," Jane explained, "and in the rush to get everything done, I cut myself." Wampire wasn't listening. "I know it's not a lot, but it's something."

Wampire snagged the baggy from her hand, tore the plastic bag open, and licked its insides until it was almost clear again. She looked up at Jane with her doe eyes and sheepishly stuffed the baggie into the hem of her skirt.

"Thank you," Wampire murmured.

"No problem." Jane withdrew a borrowed notepad and pen from her work and flipped to the first blank page. "So, what do you miss most about being alive?"

"Whoa." She smoothed her skirt over her thighs, her eyes focused on the wrinkles in the fabric. "Y'know, I prefer to be wined and dined before—"

"And you were," Jane reminded. She gestured to the empty bag, "Wined and dined."

Wampire sighed and continued to fidget with the wrinkles in her skirt. The subway rattled beneath their feet, the car jostling their bodies around. The silence floated in the air between them, sustained only by Jane's intrigue in what Wampire had to say.

"This is going to sound stupid," Jane said, "but I think about you a lot at work. I'll be scrubbing spilled food hardened onto tables or clearing a twelve-top, and I'll think about you here, on the subway, doing your thing. And I'm like, *damn*, I wish I was just on a subway doing my thing. Even if my thing isn't anything. No offense."

Wampire smiled, and relief blossomed in Jane's chest.

"If I were to miss something about being human..." Wampire took a long pause and surveyed the subway before she continued. "I would miss tea. I don't," she corrected herself,

"but I wish I did. I wish I longed for the cup of turmeric tea waiting for me in my apartment. I wish I longed for life the way I did when I was alive. Now, I don't miss a thing."

Without a beat, Jane admitted, "I miss that too."

Wampire tilted her head. "But you're alive."

If only it felt like it.

The automated voice called out the stop before Jane's. Her heart was suctioned to the conversation, though she had little time to deliberate and her rationality took over. She rolled up her sleeve and offered her arm to Wampire. Her starved pupils ogled the blue veins bulging from the thin skin of Jane's forearm.

"As a thanks," Jane explained.

Wampire's cold fingers met her sweaty palm and drew her in. Her breath didn't linger long on Jane's skin before the fangs dug into it. Jane's knees buckled, and her knuckles went white against the pole. It wasn't simply her blood evacuating her body, but motivation she didn't know was there until she felt the emptiness it left behind.

"Thanks." Wampire stood. Somehow, they were the same height. Wampire unwrapped the scarf from Jane's neck and tightened it around the wound on her forearm.

Jane stumbled out of the subway car, and her exhausted legs fell into the rhythm they had sung every night for the past three years. Her thighs protested as she climbed the stairs that led to fresh air. The wind held her face and peppered her cheeks with kisses. When she first moved into her apartment, she sat on her balcony after work and listened to music. It was just her, the grungy baseline against her ears, the contaminated wind she was drinking down, and the uncharacteristically calm neighbourhood.

There were three concrete steps leading up to her apartment door. Jane knew that because she felt each step dig into her legs as her body crumbled onto them.

Jane had peeled herself off of the steps and blinked the sleep out of her eyes. She wasn't sure how long she'd been asleep, but the moon still hung overhead, so she assumed not much time had passed. She slapped the dirt off her jeans and unlocked the door. She unfurled the scarf in the darkness of her bathroom. The scarf was heavy and fell into the sink with a *splat*. Her forearm was slick with a sleeve of sticky red. Her hand skimmed the wall until she found the light switch. With a flick, the room was drowned in sharp brightness. When Jane met herself in the mirror, she yelped.

A thick web of blue veins climbed from her neck, up on her cheeks. Despite the brightness, her pupils consumed her irises—just a throbbing black against the dulled whites of her eyes. Jane opened her mouth to reveal greying, receding gums. *My dentist is going to be so pissed at me.* Her skin tingled from the cold, creating a halo of numbness hovering slightly over her body. She turned the lights back off because she could handle herself better that way.

Jane found an oversized hoodie she stole from one of her roommates' hookups and a pair of *Gap* sweatpants she never had the chance to wear and put them on. And, for some reason, Jane craved tea. A thought bubbled to the surface: *would Wampire like some tea?*

She prayed that her transit card could last her one last subway ride.

It did. Barely. She only had twenty-six cents left on it, but it didn't matter. Her consciousness was a cloud seeping from her ears, ebbing in her peripheral vision. Jane didn't even try to look for Wampire amongst the blurry cars before entering a random one—she simply scaled the cars until she found her. She had her legs folded under her and her head propped up against the back of the chair beside her. Wampire rolled her head up, and once she registered that Jane was there, she beamed.

"Jane," she said softly and patted the vacant seat next to her. "It must have been a few hours since I have seen you last."

"Six, actually." Jane took the spot Wampire offered and rested her tote bag on the seat next to Wampire's legs. "Couldn't sleep."

"Too many questions for me occupying your mind?"

"Not questions. It's just you."

The world surrounding Wampire was fuzzy and indistinct. It rejected her existence, yet she was *there*. Wampire was the only truth in Jane's reality. She never faltered.

"I think we would've been friends in life," Jane admitted.

"Are we not friends now?"

"You know," Jane said, glazing over the question, "if I could get you to my apartment, I'd have a few warm bodies for you to drain."

"Really?"

"Mhm!" Jane wasn't sure if she was giving Wampire a real proposition or whether she was joking. She dangled herself in that realm of unsureness and played along. "You could sleep in my room. We could have movie nights and sit on the balcony to watch over the city together."

"Sounds lovely," Wampire said and opened her arms to Jane. "Hug?"

Jane, without a moment of thought, brought Wampire in. Wampire's scent of gasoline and sweat assaulted her nostrils, but she basked in it because she doubted she smelled any better. Her breath scalded Jane's neck, yet Jane refused to move. She had never held another person like this—she had never found comfort in another.

Her heart fluttered at the thought of stirring honey into turmeric tea while Wampire laid on the couch, nursing a mug of warm blood. If Wampire liked karaoke, she'd finally put the karaoke machine collecting dust in the corner of the living room to use. It only worked with ABBA songs, but Wampire seemed like she wouldn't mind.

"I'm sorry, Jane," Wampire said. Her voice was unlike what it had been before—now sharp and crisp.

What was there to be sorry about? Wampire was the first person to call Jane a friend and mean it. Jane meant it, too. Jane's thoughts swam in the tranquility of their silence. Her

consciousness melted into her body, and for the first time in three years, she was fully present. Goosebumps rippled up her arms and greeted the frigid sweat at the tips of her fingers. Heat blossomed through her chest, and she held Wampire closer to keep it inside. Then, there was a prick at her neck. A small pinch, nothing more. Jane wasn't used to being present in her body—maybe she got pinches in her neck that she wasn't aware of.

The prick evolved into an icy pierce, deepening past the realm of familiarity.

Oh, she's draining me. Fuck—no, she's feeding on me.

Her heartbeat slowed to a euphoric pace, entrapped in honey. Bliss seeped into her honeyed heart and clogged her arteries. It clicked with her last pulse: Wampire was simply another person that relied on Jane.

Jane fulfilled her duty and was rewarded nothing.