

THAT WHICH BITES

CELIS T. RONO

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To Theron

TEN YEARS PRIOR...

A PALLID, MALNOURISHED GIRL of twelve sniffed and blew her nose. It was her second viewing of *Billy Jack*, a tawdry vigilante movie from the 1970s she had come upon in the Flower District. The badly acted and shoddily directed B-movie affected her like nothing else.

“It’s time you took matters into your own hands,” she lectured herself, borrowing from the movie. “You’re out of cereal, Nutella, vitamins, and Cheez Whiz, and you need to get some rainwater from the roof. Don’t just sit here dying of thirst. Be brave for once in your life!”

She kicked a shoebox full of gems, diamonds, and gold jewelry out of her way. They were nothing more than shiny trinkets as useless and garish as Barbie dolls.

The girl named Julia Poe gathered three empty plastic gallons and made her way above ground from the hotel basement. She climbed the stairwell to the rooftop, leaving her winded with a powerful stitch to her side. Eating expired food from tin containers and lack of cardiovascular exercise would do that to anyone. She vowed to get fitter.

Inflatable swimming pools and pails, drably painted to match the nearby mid-rise buildings, littered the rooftop to collect rainwater. She submerged the

plastic jugs until bubbles no longer surfaced. Julia disliked leaving her bomb shelter if she didn't have to. She was developing more phobias as the years slugged on that made it tougher to perform everyday tasks like shopping. Watching movies was the only activity that got her up in the morning.

"Maybe I'll see someone today," she whispered quietly. "I'm tired of talking to myself."

Feeling emboldened by the film, Julia walked to the edge of the roof and peered down. Little Tokyo didn't look so bad with the exception of skeletons strewn like *Dia de los Muertos* dolls minus the *sombreros*. They left it alone mostly. Maybe it was the close distance to Skid Row that made living in the area unattractive. A mere block away, the famous mecca of the dispossessed was speckled with rusty, corroded cars – their owners' skeletal remains still waiting for the traffic lights to change.

While a supermajority had choked and sputtered on noxious gray mist, an inordinate number of Skid Row homeless initially survived. Most likely their constant state of infection desensitized them to the filth that contaminated the lower atmosphere. The new powers-that-be, however, didn't think kindly about the mentally unsound walkabouts, the shake-inducing cheap smack, or the stench. The survivors on Alameda Street didn't make the cut and were slaughtered. Poe witnessed the carnage from the same roof. She could almost hear the screams as they were flushed out.

It was first of many declarations that came to be. Sampling transient blood anywhere in the city was determined unlawful. Not shortly after that, human cattle of darker complexion or pronounced ethnic features were set aside for the dirty jobs. Their blood, slightly higher grade than that of the homeless, was deemed 'for emergency use only.'

“Pay attention,” she told herself. “Don’t think about the bums.”

Everywhere else, rabid dogs that had been lucky enough to dodge vampire fangs now overran the once bustling streets surrounding her hotel. Jagged concrete chunks, tall weeds, and broken glass littered the road, causing a mess during the rainy season when muck ended up in the already clogged storm drains. The filthy infrastructure flooded and emitted putrid vapors that could offend even the toughest of the supernatural.

From the corner of her eye she saw him down Alameda Street.

“A halfdead,” she said, fear catching her throat.

He was chasing after a pack of dogs and flinging rope at them. The white blur wearing a Hawaiian shirt and khaki shorts could outrun the fastest four-legged creatures. He was toying with them, purposely dogging their steps like a gunslinger from the Old West. Only, this guy was no Clint Eastwood. Dry mouthed, Julia watched him lasso in a Rottweiler and bury his fangs into the dog’s neck, tearing its flesh brutally, unnecessarily. Like an empty soda can, he tossed the ravaged mutt over his shoulder.

“Evil son of a bitch,” Julia said quietly, shuddering at what she’d witnessed.

The git was a halfdead, a rare stuck-in-the-middle vampire that could sunbake all day if he wanted. He may not have had the immortality of a vampire, but he had all the other perks. The creature lassoed six dogs and dragged them back to the heart of downtown. The more they resisted, the harder the ropes dug in their necks, cutting off their air. He was the fifth day-vamp she’d seen since the Gray Armageddon.

“This is no good,” she mumbled, swallowing bitter-tasting fear. “Next thing you know, Nosferatu will be knocking on my door at one in the afternoon.”

The silent film had pounded serious fear into her spine a few years back. Just the memory of the strange demonic face of Max Schreck made her nose and upper lip bead with sweat.

Back in the bunker, Julia shoved a seven-inch stake in her coat pocket along with small glass vials and an empty plastic gallon. She took along for safety measures a sharp kitchen knife endorsed by Iron Chef Morimoto himself. It was a mean nine inches in length.

“The mummy can’t hit what the mummy can’t see,” she recited, quoting Muhammad Ali, one of the three people she’d have liked as bunker mates, with Bruce Lee and Gandhi rounding off the list.

After double-knotting her shoelaces, she headed down to St. Vibiana’s, the old cathedral that was replaced by a gargantuan edifice on Temple and Hill. Built in 1880, the original church was two blocks away. It had been gutted and turned into an art center and loft housing for the hip and moneyed. The bug-eyed statues, grotto, and fountain were kept intact for more exotic appeal. The courtyard fountain spouted water considered holy. At least that was what she was told as a child.

“Get outta my way, dogs!” she hissed. Haggard dogs gave her wide berth as she brandished a daunting walking stick taller than herself. With nervous eyes and shaking hands, she walked briskly to the former church. She normally only slinked out like a coward for food. This was her first attempt at vigilantism.

For strength and luck she wore her matching long johns, Adidas shoes, and beanie – all black – that coordinated with her dark hair and eyes. She figured there was no harm in looking like Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon* when he stealthily infiltrated Han’s opium lab.

“Please no halfdeads or regular vampires until I get some holy water,” she said under her breath and looked at her watch. She still had a couple of hours until sunset. “Mom, I hope you’re watching over me right now, ’cause I don’t feel so good. I plan on killing vampires with holy water. If I don’t, might as well give up and join you. It’s no fun being alone.”

The church spire loomed ahead with its moldy, antiquated bell. A compulsion to ring the bell to alert any remaining humans in the city took hold of her. “I won’t do it, Dad. I’m not that stupid.”

Human-size statues of the Virgin and St. Bernadette welcomed her inside. Their painted eyes followed her every step. When Julia looked closely at their faces, she could see actual eyelashes fanning out of the plaster like fly legs. Creeped out wouldn’t have been accurate enough to describe the goosebumps that speckled her skin. Her teeth chattered noisily when cowardice begged her to go home.

It was dark inside the vestibule which she had to cross to get to the fountain in the back garden. Of course, she had forgotten to pack a flashlight. She didn’t waste time in the dark and ran to the garden in triple time.

“Eeesh!” came out of her mouth. “Goopy and green!”

The three-tiered fountain bubbled to life on occasion like the tar pits of La Brea, emitting raw gaseous smells. The water had the consistency of NyQuil, and baby aquatic mosquitoes swam around like royal sea monkeys.

There was nothing for it. Julia submerged her hands and began filling the small bottles and a dented gallon. Chipped stone angels fit for decaying cemeteries surrounded her. She focused her eyes on St. Francis in a cassock followed by his animal entourage.

She didn't mind him at all. Without much notice a familiar voice in her head told her to buck up. It was then that she sensed them.

Eyes were boring down. She could feel them. The hairs darting straight up on the back of her neck proved it. Slowly she eased the plastic milk gallon from out of the water and waited. She remained still for what seemed like centuries. A small frog jumped from one lily pod to another, believing the still girl to be part of its world. Julia nearly screamed.

"Just a frog," she said in a low voice instead. "Nothing to worry about."

Before she could draw another safe breath, "Fudge!" escaped her lips. From behind her, a gigantic raven swooped down and captured the little frog in its beak. Julia's heart hammered so hard she saw spots.

Bracing her hands on the fountain seats and the gallon container, Julia rebuked herself out loud. "Bad time to lose it, Julia. Think of Ali. Think of—"

From the reflection of the swampy fountain water, she could see the garden wall where a row of ravens chattered and took it easy. The sun was almost down. "I've changed my mind," she whispered to the thin, wide-eyed girl staring back at her. "I can't kill vampires. I'm not ready—"

She saw him on the watery reflection, eclipsing the image of the birds. She tried to blink him away, but the new image stayed. The immense creature opened his arms wide like he was going to scoop her from behind. Her only lasting memory was of her throat itching something powerful. The irritation triggered Max Schreck in her mind. Before the reflection touched her, she turned around quickly and whacked the looming vampire with the gallon of holy water, crying, "Die!"

There was no acidic hiss upon contact. Unlike the holy water sprinkled on Christopher Lee, the damp vamp before her was neither melted nor singed. The voluminous undead from the reflection in the fountain water was quite manageable in size, only a few inches taller than her.

Pausing in disbelief, the creature looked from the scrawny girl and back to the fetid water on his coat.

“What the—” he began, wiping the swampy liquid off his black Mickey Spillane coat and Jesus and Mary Chain t-shirt, appalled for even daring to touch it. “You stupid kid. This shit is disgusting!”

Julia’s jaw dropped as the youthful undead wiped away the stagnant water from his person. Realizing that cleaning the coat was futile, he trained his eyes on her.

“You’re dead, kid. You know how hard it is to find a trench coat in this town? It’s on every dead’s list. The newly turned have claimed them all. I’ll to have to walk to the Americana in assfuck Glendale to scrounge up a new one!” Like most ordinary vampires, the young dead had the strength of three strong men and the inability to die the easy way. He, however, did not have the skills certain powerful vampires possessed, like the ability to fly or walk under the sunniest of skies without getting incinerated.

“Maybe you can w-wash it?” suggested the scrawny girl.

“I don’t do laundry,” the smallish, whacked-out version of a young Christopher Walken spat. “I’m a vampire.”

With wounded aplomb, the Walken look-alike took a predatory step toward her and bared his fangs. She watched his incisors elongate into two-inch carvers. His hand reached behind her head before she had time to blink. With her eyes still focused on Cujo teeth, Julia dug for the stake from inside her jacket.

Because the vampire was so close to her, she couldn't hit anything other than the side of his neck. The stake plunged a few inches in his neck but the wood was too stout to lodge any deeper. Cartilage and vocal chords barred any further progression.

Enraged, the vampire slashed Julia's face with his middle fingernail, the only one that grew long and solid as petrified wood. Poe hit her head on the side of the fountain from the impact and couldn't quite get herself to stand up. She was dizzy, and blood oozed from the diagonal wound from her forehead to cheek. From the feel of the scratch, the vampire must have scooped at least half an inch of flesh.

The smell of her blood and the darkening of the skies brought intense panic as she watched the vampire extract the stake from his neck. The infuriated undead fixed her with fevered eyes.

"We've been feeding on rationed refrigerated blood for years now 'cause there ain't enough breathers to go around," he gasped, holding on to his throat. "You're going to be my first human kill, and believe me when I say you're going to suffer for the privilege."

"Mom and Dad, help me," Julia whispered as the vampire lunged for her. Before he could lay a hand on her, the ninety-pound girl reached from behind and brandished the kitchen knife she'd brought. With a powerful sweep, Julia Ginsu-chopped most of his left hand's fingers.

Ignoring the hair-raising scream that came out of his mouth despite his vocal chord damage, the girl lunged at the vampire, and he fell on his back.

"Quit moving around, asshole!" Julia screeched from atop him. She took advantage of his temporary shock at losing his fingers and pinned his good hand with her knee. At several attempts later, she finally

succeeded in slicing off the remaining fingers of his right hand as well. His oozing limbs pushed off her bucking body.

With the memory of her parents' very violent end from the fangs of a gang of young vampires, Julia found the strength to straddle Christopher Walken's youthful doppelganger once more. Blinded by her own blood and pounded by his stubby hands, she concentrated on stabbing his heart nearly a dozen times and ending the massacre by hacking off his head. The feel of bone getting severed by a sharp knife felt right to Poe.

The youthful vampire, no more than eighteen when he turned, stopped moving. Bloodied and shell-shocked from her first kill, Julia made her way back to her hotel without further attack. Living near Skid Row had its advantages.

As she locked the hotel door carefully behind her, she whispered, "Thank you, Mom and Dad." Then and only then did she allow herself to collapse in a faint.