

Black Light

By Sheila Kelly Green

Stop me if you've heard this one before: it's 3:21 am and I'm thinking about vampires. Not the real ones, gimme a break, no such thing, I'm not even talking about the people who think that they're vampires. You know the type; even in August they're draped in black velvet and they wear eyeliner to bed. They think that just because they've read way too much Anne Rice that they've become allergic to sunlight, crosses and nice pointy sticks. No, it's 3:26 in the morning, and I'm thinking about a genuine honest to goodness fake vampire straight from TV.

Nick Knight, vampire cop.

You can catch him on channel 33 at two in the morning Mondays through Thursdays. But you might want to check your local listings to be sure. Look for Forever Knight, tell them Casey sent you. Good old Nick Knight has a problem, besides that he's only a fictional character of course; Nicky boy wants to be human again. He wants to be real, see the sun, and maybe even have a nice little fling with his coroner friend without leaving her running on empty. That's why I like the show, even though I don't really believe in vampires. It's all about longing.

It's finally 3:33. I make my wish and roll out of bed. I'm dying for a cigarette, I can't smoke inside and I didn't want to miss any of Forever Knight and I definitely didn't want to miss my chance at a 3:33 wish.

I believe in the power of wishes, of clocks reading all the same number, of the first star of the night, of the hidden powers in soda cans; I never stopped wishing on my birthday candles. I know every stray penny is a gift from God and a chance. And a chance.

I really need that cigarette.

I've been nic-fitting real bad all night. My mother was up till about twenty minutes ago and she still checks on me before she goes to bed. I can just picture the scene if she ever caught me hanging out my window to smoke. I don't think I'd ever recover from the death rays that would shoot from her eyes. Just one more year and I'm legal and out of here. But for now, 'night mother, that's right you go to bed now and Casey can indulge in her secret little rebellion.

I take the screen off my window and grab the Altoids tin from my purse. I even have to hide my cigarettes from her because she snoops. Curiously strong indeed.

I balance on the windowsill and light up, greedily pulling the smoke into my lungs. You know I have to be addicted to go through all this shit. I hide my cigarettes and I perch like a fucking cactus wren on my windowsill while the runners make nice graffiti on my ass and thighs. Even sitting at a desk in school I can still feel those marks.

I guess it'd be easier if I'd just bite the bullet and jump outside, but I'm trying to avoid the scorpions. I've grown up here listening to desert lore about the guy who didn't check his sleeping bag, and everybody, it seems, has an aunt Judy who put on a pair of slippers complete with scorpion stowaway. The funny thing is, I used to just laugh at these stories, the people in them seemed so far away, like irrational numbers, real and unreal, just a concept. But one day I asked my dad why that big house off the Greenway-Hayden Loop had blacklights on its porch. He told me it was because of the scorpions. He said that the blacklight made the scorpions glow in the dark, and you could actually see them running across the sand. Did you know that scorpions can have up to 16 eyes? From that moment on I could feel them all watching me.

I'd like to get a blacklight to hang outside my window. But I always imagine my parents discovering it and my nasty habit. It's impractical, of course; dangerous, and then there is always the problem of extension cords.

It's nearly 4 am. There's no way I'm getting any sleep tonight. I reach inside my room and take the Midol bottle out of my purse. I open it with my teeth and pour a dozen or so Sudafed into my hand. To be honest, I'm not stuffed up or anything. The pseudoephedrine in the Sudafed is the best way to pretend I don't have a problem with speed. I pick the pills out of my hand with my tongue; the sugar coating is sweet on my lips and sticky on my palms.

I'm crucified by my addictions. Bleeding a red sugar stigmata. No matter how I lick, the stain will be there all night. But I still try.

I can't see Grey until he walks out under the street light outside my window. I wonder how long he's been watching me. I want to flick my cigarette at him, punish him for staring, catching me unawares. Grey strolls up to my window. Caught red handed.

I'm not really all that surprised to see him. He's always leaving bad poetry and little presents outside my window. But he is surprised to find me awake. He's carrying a note and my stomach rolls to think of his new poetic masterpiece. I wish he would just copy something like everybody else, but no, he has to fancy himself a tortured artist. This poetry and the other little things are like the dead offerings of a cat. "Here," they say, "in my own way, I love you."

These stupid gifts are what made me fall for him in the first place. Chicks go for that sort of thing and I'm no different. A couple of flowers, some stuffed animals, nothing all that special and I'm on the floor. I know it's silly but these things made me believe he loved me. I saw what I wanted to see, and don't you dare tell me that you're any different. Never mind the girlfriend he won't break up with, or the fact that we're a secret, or the stale chocolate bruises on my shoulders and wrists. The sneaking around, the hiding, the secrets only make him more attractive. We are tragic lovers.

Okay, what's really tragic is that even after all this time and even though I'm sitting here making fun of him, I'm still involved with him. I like that word: involved. It reeks of euphemism, of cheap playground code words, to say that we are "involved" instead of dating, or going out, or even screwing, only adds another layer to our denial.

"Hey," he says, with the studied elegance of the twenty year old male. I imagine the happy ending if Romeo had stood under Juliet's window and wooed her with "Hey."

But I'm not Juliet.

"Hey," I answer, ignoring the oddity of him here at my window at four am. I finger the cross around my neck, go away, I tell him silently, go away.

"Can I bum one?" He motions to my Altoids tin and I hand it to him. He fidgets looking uncomfortable. What am I supposed to do? Invite him in?

He lights up and finds his groove, giving me his best James Dean, which isn't even a good James Dean cause he learned it from Keanu Reeves. But I smile anyway.

He's wearing his trench coat, he thinks it makes him look good. And it does. This is all it takes: the hour, and the coat, the sand in my mouth, the way he glows in the streetlight and I'm thinking about Nick Knight again. Grey looks nothing like the baby-faced actor who plays Nick. Grey is all whipcord and bone; he has a hard thick shell, nothing can pierce it. And tonight at this moment I am terrified of him.

Despite the nicotine and speed in my blood I am tired. All of the sudden I could sleep if I could just lie down.

I want nothing more than to go back inside my room and curl up. I check the clock, but 4:10 doesn't have enough power to banish him back under the rock he crawled out from.

He moves closer without sound, I don't think his feet even touch the ground. With his free hand he traces patterns on my leg. I don't know how he can do that, it feels like he has too many fingers, each impossibly long. The space between each heartbeat is drawn out, as though I've been unconscious a long time, or as though I'm moving through water. His hand moves up my leg to keep time on the inside of my thigh, three fingers find their way under the edge of my pajama bottoms. I'm not here anymore. I'm off somewhere else taking notes watching his fingertips play connect the dots with my freckles.

His head moves almost imperceptibly, he wants me on the ground with him. I have no intention of leaving my perch, after all I have no shoes, there is a danger of scorpions, but he is so dark and solid. He takes up my whole field of vision. He has gravity and I find I am following him before I've even made up my mind.

"C'mere," he drawls.

I hold out my hand and his fingers close on it with a pincer-like grip as I jump out of my window. The small landscaping rocks that take the place of grass here in the desert are hard against my feet. I can feel each pebble separately.

"So," he says, fingering my tank top, "that's what you wear to bed."

I nod.

"You should wear something, you know, sexier."

"It's too hot," I tell him with my best sleepy smile. I lean into him to show that I'm joking and also to steal some of his strength. I can barely stand.

He pushes me away, only half kidding. "Don't. It's too hot."

We walk in silence for a while. He kicks stones and I keep an eye out for stray pennies. It isn't long before I find one, it's even face up, but I have no pockets, so I let it go.

It's becoming obvious where we are going. This city is growing, expanding, it's moving deeper and deeper into the untouched desert. Forcing the coyotes, the scorpions, and the jackrabbits to walk among us. There is construction everywhere; none of it carefully guarded. The place he takes me will be a medical complex soon. Now it is the perfect place to avoid prying eyes.

"Do you love me?" he asks seriously and suddenly. He gets like this every once in a while. I used to find it endearing, knowing that he was just as unsure as everybody else in the world. But now, hearing the question so many times, it sounds canned, rehearsed. I picture him asking his steam soaked reflection, "Do you love me?" It occurs to me that this question, like the gifts, is a trap. That it is his way of keeping score, of making sure I'm still hooked.

"Yes." I tell him. I don't think I am lying.

He takes my hand, finally, and pushes the paper into it. As my fingers close around it the world disappears. It is not merely bad poetry. The paper is intricately folded like the notes we used to pass in sixth grade. I know that folded within the paper is a small plastic bag filled with crystal meth.

I open the bag and measure some out with my fingernail. I put it under my tongue and it dissolves instantly; the sharp bitter tang brings me back to the world. And I am back. Everything pops into focus like a bone being snapped back into place. The stars are bigger, brighter, closer; I can almost taste them. I want to scream. I want to bring the sky crashing down with just my name, and I can do it too.

Fingertips bruising, he pulls me into him, his hands on my waist. When he kisses me his mouth tastes like anise. This is the part I like best; the part I will forget about when he's not kissing me. My blood is all warm champagne racing through my body to disappear out my mouth, my hair, my ears, and finger tips, a cloud of bubbles that softens me around the edges, like Vaseline on a camera lens. I am evaporating.

It's all too easy I'm sure. His hands on my hands on his body; the whole world is warm and wet now, even here in the desert. But my head is still light from the champagne in my blood and I can't quite grasp the fact that it's over for now, that it's time to go home.

He goes one way. I go the other. We say goodbye without words, without touching. He avoids my hands now.

The boundaries between us are blurred. I look down. Are those my hands or his? I can't tell anymore. I have no strength of my own. He has pulled all the iron from my blood, like a magnet. And now, I am exhausted. I want to be real, to be human; at this moment I would give anything for the sun.