

# Greg Egan

## MIND VAMPIRES

There are moments when my mind misses a beat. I find myself, in mid-step or mid-breath, feeling as if delivered abruptly into my body after a long absence (spent where, I could not say), or a long, dreamless sleep. I lose not my memory, merely my thread. My attention has inexplicably wandered, but a little calm introspection restores my context and brings me peace. Almost peace.

I suppose I am a detective, a private investigator, for why else would I be prowling the corridors of a posh girls' boarding school, softly past the doors of the dark-breathing dormitories?

I suppose the headmistress rang me, hysterical. I'm sure that's right. She was sixty-two and had begun to menstruate again. What a surprise for her, what a strange shock. No wonder she went straight to the telephone and dialled my number.

She was calm in her office when I arrived in person, if a little embarrassed. Women have problems, she said. These things *do* happen, she explained. Rarely, but one cannot attach any significance. I find it very irritating to be told one minute to hurry and the next to get lost; I could have shrugged and walked out, abandoned her right then, but I have my code of ethics. My reputation. My pride. For her sake, for the sake of those in her charge, I frightened her into hiring me.

I described the next few stages to her. Prepubescent girls, even infants and newborn babes, would also start to menstruate. Sweat, tears, saliva, urine, mother's milk and semen would all turn to blood. Dead rats and birds would be found everywhere. Water pipes would issue blood, and every container of any kind of fluid, from disinfectant to dye, from vinegar to varnish, from wine to window-cleaner, would be brimming with blood.

There is definitely no semen on school premises, she said. I think she was trying to make a joke. I showed her a colour photograph from a previous case, the kind the police don't like me carrying about. She turned pale and then wiped the perspiration from her face with (oh yes) a white lace handkerchief, which she carefully examined for any trace of red. Then she signed.

New England. Connecticut? How?

Young soldiers come home with bad dreams.

Atrocities in a muddy trench, a bloody trench.

Young soldiers who would rather be dead than return to their friends and families bearing this European curse. A horrible embrace, a horrible feast. Much better to feed the rats and the worms.

The smell of the trenches drawing them for hundreds of miles. They devour the gangrenous parts. Later the healed will attribute this to the rats. Struggles in the mud, the blood rains down. Screams are natural enough. Nobody will ever guess, they'll be lost amongst the shell-shocked.

“I'm responsible for the girls. You must be discreet.”

“Discreet? There'll be no discretion when the snow turns red.”

I may be wrong. Sometimes there is no carnival of horrors; fear of detection dampens their natural flamboyance, their love of dark theatre. But it's a new moon tonight, the nadir of their strength, and already they have announced their presence. Whatever shows so little caution is afraid of no one.

“You mustn't cause a panic.” Her chin trembled, she pleaded with her eyes. “You know what I'm concerned about.”

I knew, all right.

“If there were nothing to fear but fear itself,” I said, “wouldn't life be sweet?”

So I prowl the corridors, watching for signs, preparing for the fight. My reputation is the highest, I have never lost. My clients shake my hand, hug and kiss me, shower me with gifts and favours. No wonder.

A thin young girl, a somnambulist, wanders past me and my heart aches at her vulnerability. In my mind her swan neck becomes a giraffe neck, a single throbbing artery tight with blood ready to gush and sate the hugest appetite. How sickening, when the skin of her neck is so pale and delicate and, I am certain, cool as the night.

In the prisons, where they mutilate their limbs with razor blades, there is feeding every month. The gatherings in the alleys of abortionists are indescribable. The torture cells; well who do you think runs them? I stay away from all of these. I am no fool. Large old families in large old houses, the better schools, the quieter, cleaner asylums call for me. My reputation is the highest.

The gardener's apprentice, a quiet young lad named Jack Rice, disappeared two days ago. The headmistress thinks it's just a coincidence

(such a helpful boy). Nobody knows his family's address, but his father is said to be a veteran and to shun the light of day.

A legless spider moves its mandibles in distress.

A girl cries out: "Whoa, nightmare!"

Strange, dark flowers appear in the fields. They open at midnight to send a sickly sweet narcotic scent to corrupt the most innocent of dreams.

Fear comes to me, but only as an idea. I think about terror, but I do not feel it. Fear has saved my life many times, so I do love and respect it, when it knows its place.

I enter the dormitory itself, I walk quiet as a nightgown between the tossing beds. Over one bed, two heavy men in dark coats shoulder a fluttering kinematograph machine with the lens removed, while a third man holds open a girl's right eye. The pictures flash into the empty spaces of her brain. Fear will not save *her* life; it has seduced her, possessed her, paralysed her, as it has done to thousands, sweeping the countryside like fire or flood wherever that one dread word is whispered. Even far from the sites of true danger, men and women hear that word, form that image, and choke on the terror that rushes up from their bowels. It is a plague in itself, a separate evil with a life of its own now. I nod at the men, they nod (so very slightly) back at me, then I walk on.

I find Jack Rice easily enough, his hobnailed boots protruding from the end of the bed. I call to the men in dark coats to come and hold him still, for that is what they do best of all. His girl's disguise fades as he struggles. I wonder what revealed the boots. Perhaps his guard was down as he slept. Perhaps he dreamt he was discovered, and so blurred the borders of the dream by bringing on its own fulfilment. I smile at this idea as I drive in the stake.

The tales they later tell me are familiar: the girl he killed, the girl whose form he took, had mocked him cruelly. We find her body, the lips and tender parts consumed, in one of the many damp basements, crawling about gnashing its fangs, but very weak. A matchstick would do for a stake. I hope her parents will not be awkward.

The headmistress tries to thank me and dismiss me with her chequebook, but the ink of her fountain pen has changed colour, and she cannot sign the cheque with her trembling bony hand. Oh dear. Jack's father will be angry. Jack's mother will be grieved. I hope he was an only child, but the odds are against it.

The dark-coated men, unperturbed, move from bed to bed with their

sawn-off projector. Their enemies are different, but sometimes they will pause to come to my aid. They're fighting mind vampires.

Breakfast is dismal the next morning, for all the milk had to be thrown out. The heated swimming baths are closed, but the cloying odour escapes from the steam-dampened, padlocked wooden doors.

I ask around the village (of course a village) for word of Jack and his family. Oh, the young vampire lad, they say merrily. He never gave an address, of course. Hardly the thing to do. I mean, would you?

I hunt the old, dark-hidden, overgrown houses as the fortnight slips away from me. Jack's walking in sunlight and feeding so far from the full moon are disturbing. What will his father be like when he decides to strike? Every cellar I breach nearly stops my heart, but they are all empty and peaceful; cool air and silence protest their pure innocence to me as I scour cobwebbed corners with lamplight. I smile at the unfairness: I *cannot* rejoice that a place is clean, that I smell no evil, that I will face no risks for a few kind minutes, for every safe house is a failure, every moment without threat only postpones the danger I must face in the end. I'd rather not be who I am, but my reputation is the highest.

Bloody pigeons, headless in the snow, unsettle the girls. There are more nightmares, more night walks; a warm, damp, unnatural wind blows an hour before dawn. I fortify the windows with steel bars, garlic and crucifixes, but there is always a way in left unprotected, it is inevitable.

Perhaps it is my weariness, but the shadows I cast seem to follow me with increasing reluctance. Indeed they conform to my movements, but I swear that they do so an eyeblink too late. My reflections do not move at all: they stare, transfixed, over my shoulder, fascinated by that empty space, hypnotised by its potential occupants.

The headmistress complains, she expected so much more of me. The strain is becoming too much, she sobs. Her weeping blinds her, and when she smells why she falls screaming to the floor.

I continue to search, but I fail for the first time ever to locate their hiding place. They will only face me when they choose to do so, at the very height of their powers.

I leave my room at the inn and sleep in the attic of the dormitory building. From my bed I hear the girls swapping secrets, and through my window drifts the stench of the dark buds which break through the snow.

I dream that I lie naked in the middle of the moonlit fields. My eyes are

closed. I feel sharp snow against my back. Footsteps, girls whispering. I recall walking past two students, overhearing: "Oh, much handsomer than Jack!" When they saw me they blushed and turned away. A warm, wet tongue slides across my eyelids, my lips, down my chin and throat, awakening each tiny point of stubble it brushes. Between my ribs, across my stomach, it leaves a snail track of sticky, moistened hair. Soft lips enclose my penis, the warm tongue wraps and caresses it. A young voice: "You didn't! You *can't* have! With him? Oh, tell us!"

As I shudder and struggle to prolong the pleasure, a phrase enters my mind and jolts me into awareness: "the erect penis is engorged with blood." Engorged. Engorged with blood.

Suddenly I have vision: I see the scene from above. My hands are behind my back, my legs splayed, my back arched. I am utterly naked and defenceless. A glistening streak of red bisects me, and a giant she-vampire clad in black iron armour sucks at me noisily, an animal sound.

My view expands, and despair takes hold of me: ringing us is a circle of her kin, some fifty feet across. Each one bears a poison-tipped sword and a grievance against me for their friends that I've dispatched.

The tongue works frantically, and I understand that she had been forbidden to strike with her fangs until the instant of ejaculation. My concentration falters, and I feel the lips draw back.

Awake, shaving, I cut myself in three places. In the shaving water I find a swollen leech; I slice it open and the water turns black and foul.

A serving girl discovers the headmistress; she has hanged herself in her Sunday best (now who will sign my cheques?) after writing the word with lipstick and rouge upon every surface of her room. The servants leave to cross the ocean, and the teachers run away to marry their sweethearts.

I must defend the girls alone.

As if in an instant, the moon is full.

The lights of the village go out.

The snow turns to putrid flesh, blood creeps across all floors and up all walls. The girls huddle stickily in clots of terror, but I scream at them to master fear, to use fear, never to let it cripple them and conquer them. And they are strong, they do not succumb.

Jack's family come up from the basements, where they have been, no doubt, for months. Four tall brothers, three hissing sisters first. The iron

cross, the mallet, the stake: all grow slippery in palms sweating blood. Yet I will defeat them, I will not lose my nerve.

I gather the uneasy students into a single room and ring them with a fence of crucifixes. The Rices are cunning, they taunt me from a distance, speak of the siege they will subject us to which will turn us into cannibals. The school girls plait each other's hair for comfort; the brothers, more handsome than Jack, flirt brazenly with them, drooling out romantic nonsense. One girl's yellow eyes unfocus, and her hand flies to her neck. I am already behind her as her skin blooms with grey. She takes two steps towards her lover, then vomits insect-riddled blood as my stake crashes through her heart from behind. Her friends desert her, and she told them such pretty tales.

I venture out with my own protection and corner them one by one. They are far too proud and foolish to keep together for safety. Two of the brothers grow bored and visit the village tavern. One sister wanders alone through the empty dormitories in search of a new pair of shoes. It doesn't take me long. I feel some hope.

Jack's parents come next, dressed plainly, their fangs concealed. They talk of the terrible loss they have suffered. They slander me in front of the girls, telling them that I killed both Jack and the girl he loved (how can I refute that?) and that I will kill them all. They urge the girls to expel me from the room for their safety's sake: they need not leave the room themselves, but they must not let me stay or they will all die in agony to satisfy my craving for blood.

In their fervent, pleading seduction they come a few feet closer than wisdom would have decreed, and I spring my trap: a wire net in which two dozen crucifixes are embedded. They crawl and writhe as I smash in the stakes. Their hearts are like granite but I am strong and purposeful and I do not flinch.

I catch my breath. Hunched over the pair of corpses crumbling into dust, I feel a slight vibration through the floor. Before my reason has grasped its meaning I find myself, incredibly, weeping with terror.

I turn to a roar louder than thunder. Jack's father, it seems, smuggled home a friend, ancient and powerful. For a moment I cannot move: enough, surely I've faced enough! Splintering the old stone floor, red chips flying. So fast, and I have hesitated, there is nothing now that I can do. All the girls are gone, down into the very oldest basement, when I skid into what remains of the room. I grab a cross and try to leap into the hole in the floor, but blood spurts from it with such pressure that I cannot even

approach it. I roar useless curses at the thing which has defeated me, as the red tide sweeps me from the building and dumps me, a helpless insect, upon the rotting snow.

The dark-coated men, unperturbed as always, press their projector to my tired right eye, and their soothing pictures flash into the empty spaces of my mind.

My reputation is the highest, but they're fighting mind vampires.

**The End**