

# VERMILIA

Tanith Lee

He wrote, “She is a vampire. Now I know. I thought I was alone.”

He felt the inevitable amalgam. Shock and excitement, jealous resentment, unease.

He would never have said, “The city is mine.” How could it be? There must be several others, like himself. But he had never met one, here. Not here. And, otherwise, none for half a century.

They kept to themselves. Like certain of the big cats, they did not live easily together, the vampires. They drew together for sex, sometimes even for love. Then parted, eventually.

And if any were sensed, then generally, they would be avoided—by their own kind.

But now, now he wondered if he had wanted—? The one who said no man was an island was quite wrong. Every man is, every woman is, both prey and predator. Alone.

And she was an island lit by gorgeous lamps, smooth and

lustrous in her approach, her hidden depths and heights alive with unknown temptations.

Of course. She was a vampire.

Flirtatiously he wrote, “What now?”

The first time he saw her was across a crowded bar. It was just after sunset, vampire dawn. She had that fresh look a vampire had, waking to the prospect of a pleasant “day.” Obviously, there were others who had it, too—certain night workers who enjoyed their jobs. But vampires *loved* their employment. Most of them. The stories of guilt and angst were generally spurious—or poetic.

She moved about the bar, sometimes sitting, crossing and uncrossing her long pale legs in their sheaths of silk. She had black hair with a hint of red, and a bright red dress with a hint of blue, sleeveless and body-clinging, the sort that only a woman with a perfect figure could wear. And her figure was perfect.

The face was something else again—sly and secretive, with elusive eyes. The mouth crayoned the colour of the dress. For this vermilion colour, he coined a name for her almost at once: Vermilia.

She would be pleased, he later thought, once he had seen her at work. Vampires tended to obscure their true names, at least from each other. The invented name he would offer her, like a first gift.

Why she had initially caught his attention he was not so sure. Possibly vampiric telepathy, empathy... For there were other attractive women in the bar, even with perfect forms, and faces that were actually beautiful, if only in the synthetic contemporary manner.

Naturally, she did not look like that. She would have appeared as well in a sweeping Renaissance gown, or corseted crinoline.

From involuntary observation, he began to watch her. It was

soon apparent she was there to secure company. But, she was selective. She would speak to men, engage their interest—even allowing a couple to buy her a drink—but then she would drift away. Not for a moment did he take her for a hooker. She was not—businesslike. You could see she liked what she was doing. For her, it was foreplay.

That night, himself, he had no rush. He had taken rich sustenance for three consecutive nights, draining his source with civilized slow thoroughness. She had died, happily, in the hour before sunrise. Tonight, then, was a leisurely re-connoitre, no more. He would not need blood again for seventy-two hours at least.

He felt nothing for his prey, or very little. He was seldom rough or cruel—there was seldom any need. To seduce, to entrance, was second nature to his kind. Was he thinking Vermilia might be a worthy successor to the last dish? Probably not. After someone so lovely as the last young woman who had died, he would have preferred a very different type, perhaps even ugly. You did not want always the same flavour.

Besides, he soon began to realize about Vermilia.

She was drinking red wine. It was a human myth that vampires could not eat, or imbibe any fluid save one. They did not need to, certainly, but they could. He himself disliked alcohol, and drank mineral water, but that was his personal taste. He understood also she did not favour red wine because it reminded her of blood. What else was ever like blood?

Finally, she was with a boy, standing right up to the bar now, across from him as he watched her. For a second even, her eyes slid over his face. Did she see him? Sense him, as he had begun to sense her? Maybe not. She was intent on her prey.

The boy—he *was* a boy, though probably forty years of age, arrested in some odd gauche slim adolescence of human immaturity—was fascinated at once. He bought her another wine.

Then another.

“Yes,” he wrote, “right then I did truly suspect. I was sure she was not a professional. Therefore, and in any case, why fasten on this oddball character, plainly not rich, not handsome, and not wise. A new flavour?”

They were there for about twenty minutes more. He even caught phrases from their conversation. “You do? Wow.” And she, “Let me show you. Would you like that?” They were not talking about sex. It was a building, the building where she lived. Some old-style architecture, that had been used in a movie, she said. He did not catch the name of the director or actors in the movie. Conceivably she made it up. He was almost sure by then.

When they left the bar, he left also, sidling out into the hot night, to follow them unseen.

The city was black, jeweled but not lit up by its coruscating terraces of lights. Humanity idled by, skimpily clad, drinking beers and snorting drugs from cones of paper. Police cars shrilled through the canyons, rock music thumped.

They reached the famous building. It rose high above and did look extremely gothic, with some sort of gargoyles leaning out from the fortieth floor.

The foyer was open to anyone, at least to any vampire, dim and shadowed, with carven girls holding up pots of fern, and the doorman watching a TV. Either he waved to Vermilia, or thought he waved to some other woman he knew to reside there. To him, the doorman said, not turning, “Hot night, Mr. Engel.”

“It is.”

Vermilia did not turn either. She was showing her boy the statues and the cornice, and summoning an elevator.

He got in with them. Vermilia did not glance. The boy looked slightly embarrassed, then forgot, the way a vampire could always

make a human forget.

*They* got off at the fifty-first floor. He rode up to fifty-two. When he came back down the stairs, they were still outside her apartment.

The corridor was dimmer even than the foyer. The doors were wide spaced and no one was there. He stood like an invisible shadow by the stair door, and looked.

“Oh—I forgot my key. Or I lost it.”

“Maybe I can pry it open with this—” The credit card twiddled in boyish old fingers.

“Honey,” said Vermilia.

It occurred to him she did not live here at all, liked the chancy stuff of doing it right now, in the corridor.

She had her arms round the boy’s neck. The boy kissed her, sloppily, the way you would expect. Then she put her face into his neck.

He gave a little squeal.

“Ssh,” she said softly. “It’s sexy. You’ll like it.” Then a pause, and then, “Don’t you like it?”

“Ye-aah, I guess...”

It did not last long.

As she pulled away, a vermilion thread was on her chin. It might only have been smeared lipstick.

The boy breathed fast. He turned to try to open the door.

She said, “Oh, leave that. Let’s go out. I’d rather go out.”

“But I thought maybe—”

She was already by the elevator again.

The boy shambled after her, pressing a surprised handkerchief to his bleeding neck. “Hey—you drew blood—”

“Sorry, honey.”

The elevator came.

He knew she would lose the boy somewhere in the crowds. He let her go.

He went back to his living space, and wrote about it in the book he kept. He wrote, “She did not relish his blood. She only took a little. Must then have gone looking for someone else.”

And then, flirtatiously again, “What now?”

But he knew. He would go after her. As no one else could, he could find her. Hunt her down. Oh, Vermilia...

He had never thought of them much as victims, the ones he took. Some he even allowed to recover and forget him. The best, he drained over three, four, five nights, at the end eking it out. There was no other pleasure in the world like it. Sex, the closest, was anaemic beside it. He would never have tried to describe the delight, the power and the glory. There were no words in any language, or from any time.

The night after he saw Vermilia in the bar, he took a girl off the sidewalk near the park. Perhaps it was Vermilia’s fault, in some incoherent way. He did not control himself, and drained the girl, among the trees. Her passage from slight surprise to thrill to ecstasy to delirium and oblivion was encompassed in two hours. Because he had been incautious, he had then to obscure her death, to cut her throat—almost bloodless—and roll her down the 3 A.M. slope into the kids’ wading pool. One more puzzle for all those whirling car-bound cops.

The next night he began the hunt.

He was very perplexed not to find her at once, Vermilia.

But the reason he did not was very stupid. He had never thought she would return instantly to the bar, and do exactly the same there as before.

When she left with her new beau, a muscled moron, he let her have him. Did not even bother to go in the building with them—the same building.

Presently, about half an hour after, the moron came plunging out, looking both smug and unnerved.

He went up to him. “Say, are you OK, son?”

“Sure, sure—some weird babe.”

“You gotta be careful.”

“Yeah, old man, I guess you do.”

He knew that the moron, who had a surgical dressing now on his thick neck, saw him as some cobwebby, bent old guy, leaning on a cane.

The moron swaggered off, proud of his youth. She must have let him have some sex, in payment. Perhaps the blood had been good, he looked strong. But it was not always that way; sometimes the puny ones had the nicest taste.

He went in, and the doorman, watching TV, called out, “Mind the floor, Mr. Korowicz. Woman spilled the wash bucket, still damp.”

The elevator took him up to fifty-one, and he walked along to her door. Presumably it was her door. Of course, she might have taken the stairs, as he had last time. But why would she? Unless she had seen him—there was always that.

He tried the door.

He was thinking, she might assume it was the moron back,

angry maybe, or just wanting another helping.

Or she merely might not answer.

Then the door opened.

She looked right up at him in a cool still amazement that made him aware she had, somehow, not sensed him at all, not properly *seen* him, until that moment.

Later, he wrote, “Should I have been more careful? I? I was innocent after all, worse than the ‘boy’ in the bar. How could I guess?”

She said, “Who are you?”

“A... kindred spirit.”

“Really?”

She looked glad enough to have him there. But that was usual. To the one he focused on, he was everything, a prince among men. With his own kind, it was not quite the same. Even so. He was all her conquests had not been, and more. What struck him was that she did not seem at all wary. No, she was inviting—if not exactly yielding.

“May I come in?”

She laughed. “I see. I have to ask you over the threshold.”

“I think you know better than that.”

“Do I?”

“We,” he said, peremptorily, “decide. Asked or not.”

“My.” She pivoted. “Come on in, then.”

As he passed her, she ran her hand lightly along his arm. Even through the summer jacket, he felt the life of her.



The apartment was in keeping with its grand façade and foyer, and just as dimly lit. What startled him was its total ambience of cliché. Velvet draperies hung, and tall white candles burned, dark perfumes wafted, Byzantine chant murmured, stained glass obscured the windows. There were no mirrors he could see. This room was exactly what *humans* expected a vampire's apartment to be. Yes, even to the skull on the real marble mantel, the ancient dusty books, and the chess-set in ivory and ebony standing ornately to one side.

He had never come across, on the rare occasions that he met them, any vampire who lived like this, and he himself certainly did not. His room was inexpensive and plain, without curios. Without, really, anything.

She had a piano, too.

Now she walked over to it, and ran her fingers over the keys, clashing with the chanting. He could tell from the way she did that, too, she could not play the thing at all. Show, then. Just for show.

“Like a drink?” she said. “Or am I being forward?” And she snapped her teeth.

He smiled. Grimly. Her vulgarity—he would have preferred to leave. But something—herself, obviously—held him there.

A drink... She was perverse, kinky, a freak. Vampires did sometimes like such games together. He, too, had done so, long, long ago. Acting prey-predator, drinking each other's blood. It could be amusing, as a novelty. But that was all it was. She, though, he could tell from some infinitesimal quivering in her, found the idea a turn-on.

Was it just possible she did not believe he was what he was—one of her own kind?

He walked over to the sofa and sat down, sinking miles deep. She moved about him, round the room, prowling like a cat, and

now, to his disgust, lit some sort of incense. She must be very young. She looked about twenty-five—maybe less than a hundred, then. For vampires, though immortal, did age, in their own way. No sags or wrinkles, but something in the line of the bones, the way they *were*.

“But tell me about yourself,” she coyly said.

And she came and sat down beside him, leaning back a little, displaying herself, her eyes gleaming now, yet still elusive—*reflective*, like the mirrors she did not have.

“Nothing to tell,” he said. “You know that. Our lives are all very much the same.”

“Why are you here?” she asked.

He looked at her. Why was he?

“You,” he said.

“I’ve put my spell on you. I did that the other night, didn’t I? Across the bar. I thought, my oh my.”

“Did you?”

“Yes. I bet you spied on me with Puddie.”

“With whom?”

“Puddie. That guy.”

“Which one?”

She smiled, and her teeth glinted. He could see their sharpness. She was not being careful. Of course, with him, that would be a futile precaution.

“You know what I do. And I know what you do,” she said. “Come on, let’s do it.”

“You want that with me?”

“You bet I do. Oh, yes. So much.”

He did not want to drink from her. Later, he wrote, “I wanted nothing less than her blood. That was my fatal mistake. But she had—as she said so naively, fooling me further—cast a spell on me of some sort. And for me, Vermilia was the first of my kind for all that time.”

He lay back, almost bored. “Ladies first.”

“Oh, how sweet. Yes, then.”

As she leaned over him, he had—he afterwards told himself—a premonition. But he was too indolent to heed it.

She smelled wonderful, too, new scents: fresh-baked bread and fresh-cut melon, and this perfume, and the incense smoke which had caught in her hair.

Her bite was clumsy. She hurt him and he swore.

Why put up with this? He was thinking, he would give her one minute.

He wrote, “Suddenly something happened to me. Unprepared—how could I be otherwise—I was flooded, overwhelmed. The—no other word is legitimate—*rapture*.”

He did not, writing, compare it at all to sex. But again, probably, that was the nearest comparable thing. The tingling, surging, racing— And presently, the pleasure-gallop exploded as if it hit some crystal ceiling of the brain—a kind of orgasm. He blacked out.

When he came to, which, that first time, was only a few seconds later, she was sitting back, looking at him, licking her lips.

“Sorry I hurt you,” she said. “I need them sharpened again. The teeth, I mean. But my little Chinese guy, who does it for me—he’s off someplace. He’s a great dentist, too.”

He was thinking, *Is that what they feel, when I*—dizzy and wondering, when she put her hand up to her lips. She slipped the

two eyeteeth out of her mouth. They were removable caps. Her own teeth—were blunt, ordinary.

“Did you like that, honey?” she asked, needlessly. “I’ll make some coffee.”

While she was gone, somehow he found the strength to get up and get out of the apartment.

In the elevator, he almost passed out a second time.

As he wandered across the foyer, the doorman said, “You don’t look too good, Mr. O’Connor.”

He thought doubtless he did not.

Having no intention of going back, the next night he hunted among the bars many blocks away from the Gothic building.

He took three women, and each time found he had killed them, which was a nuisance in the matter of disposal. The last one he did not bother to hide, leaving her among the trash cans in an alley. Despite the excess of blood, he felt enervated, and depressed.

The following night he overslept, waking two hours before midnight. This was not unheard of for a vampire. But it was rare.

Vermilia.

He found himself in some nightclub, sipping a mineral water that cost seven dollars, saying her name in his head—the name he had given her.

He kept thinking about what had happened to him, with her. He was pretty sure he had also dreamed of it. Again, vampires did dream. But not much.

He wrote, “I am like some little virgin bride after her first night. I infuriate myself.”

He discovered that now, when he took the blood from his prey, he did not enjoy it so much. At first, desperate for the blood, he had not noticed.

Did he, then, want the blood of Vermilia? Somehow, that thought revolted him. Almost made him, in fact, retch. Why was that? The blood of another vampire could not properly nourish. But, it was not repulsive, or poisonous—

He thought of her leaning to him, and piercing his throat with the peculiar caps she needed because somehow her teeth had grown deformed and useless. He thought of the rhythm beginning, and his head went round.

He bought a bottle of Jack Daniel's. Drank some. Threw up.

The next night, he threw up the blood he had taken from his prey. Twice.

He lay in the dark of his bare room, cursing her.

What was it? What had happened to him? A human might have feared some disease, but he, a vampire, was immune to such diseases. And she, a vampire, would not carry any disease.

The *next* night, he went to the Gothic building. And in the foyer the TV-doorman turned morosely and said, "Hey, bud, who the hell are you?"

He stood there, made stupid. Never before had he been seen like this, when he had not meant to be.

He mumbled, "Number fifty-one. The lady."

"Oh, who's that?"

Who indeed.

"She knows me."

"OK, bud. No funny stuff. Get outta here."

He walked out, and there was Vermilia, like in the best movie,

dawdling towards him up the street. She wore black tonight, but her mouth was still the proper colour.

“Honey!” she cried. She ran and hugged him. “You look beat.”

They walked by the doorman, who now seemed to see neither of them.

In the elevator she jabbered about some idiotic thing, he did not grasp what she said. Why was he here—with her?

In the apartment, she lit the candles, the incense. He stood coughing and trembling.

“Like a beer?”

“I’d like you to do what you did last time.”

“Oh, sure. But let’s get in the mood.”

He fell down on the sofa. She caressed him. He writhed with need and dragged her mouth to his neck. “Do it. For God’s sake—”

She did it.

It was the same as before. Ecstasy, racing, explosion. Out.

This time he was unconscious for an hour. She said so anyway, shaking him. “Come on. You always fall asleep. If you weren’t so beautiful... I need my bed. I have to be at work in the mornings.”

New stupefaction hit him only as he reeled towards the elevator. Mornings?

Three more times he went to her. Between, he was able to take a little blood, here and there. It was no longer easy to do this. Partly because he did not properly want it, and, besides, sometimes got sick when he had taken it. Also partly because his ability to

seduce seemed strangely less. In the past, he had needed only to look, perhaps to touch or speak. That was enough. Even at the moment of impact, if there was a struggle, his great strength could subdue at once, but, more likely he could still them with a brushing of his lips, a whisper.

Now some of the prey got cold feet. Some fought with him.

And he did not have the energy to pursue these ones. And anyway, he knew, he was losing it. Losing it all.

He thought he had said to her, the third time, “What have you done to me, what *are* you?”

And she had said, “I’m a vampire, honey. Just like you. Only you just like to play it one way, don’t you? But that’s fine by me. I like it best this way. Sometimes.”

More than the terrifying pleasure, it was something else that brought him back, and back. The spell. But what *was* the spell?

“How old are you?” he said.

“You’re no gentleman,” she said. Then she said, “Oh, hundreds of years, of course.” She lied. He knew she lied.

It was worse than that. She was losing interest in him. She had by now told the doorman to let him up, but when he was with her, now, she said, “You might do something for *me*.”

What was she talking about? Exhausted, he closed his eyes. Exhausted, he begged her to do what she did.

That time, when he came around, he knew she was killing him.

It had to stop.

But he was hooked.

“OK,” she said. “Come tomorrow. I may have a friend here. You’ll like her.”

“Will you—?”

“Yes. Go on now. It’s so late. You were asleep for *four* hours and I couldn’t wake you.”

“You have work in the morning,” he drearily remarked.

“Sure do. My stinking job.”

“But the sun,” he said.

“Oh, get out of here,” she said, laughing and impatient.

Outside—he leaned on her door and then he began to see. Swimming down in the nauseating elevator, he saw more.

The doorman glared. “Hey, you on drugs or something, mister?”

He got to his bare room and lay down.

Tomorrow night. He would go. He could not help himself. No one could help him. But he thought now he understood. And tomorrow, before he left, he would write it in his book. In case, in the future, to some other this same thing might happen, as well it might.

As well it might.

“This is Raven,” she said.

Raven had long black hair and a face made up white as a clown’s. At the corner of her mouth she had painted a ruby drop, but her lipstick was black.

“My,” said Raven, and she curtsied to him, leering. But Raven was the same as Vermilia—the same kind and species.

Tonight it was to be different, Vermilia said. They would take off all their clothes. They took them off.

He stared at their bodies, Vermilia’s perfect, Raven’s not, both



irrelevant.

In turn they ogled him.

Then they all lay down on the wide sofa. The girls drank wine, and tongued him, and all he could smell was hair and flesh and perfume and wine, and all he wanted was for them to have his blood, and he knew this time would be the last, and he cursed himself and them and the world and all his hundreds of years that had not saved him. Consumed with fear, he shook with desire.

“He likes to be the subserve,” said Vermilia. He hated her accent. Hated her. “Go on, Rave, he’ll like it.”

Raven picked up his wrist. She sank in her teeth, also caps, he supposed. The pain was horrible. He wished he could kill her. Then, it began, even so, began—

And Vermilia’s lips were on his neck, and then the bite, sharper, better—her dentist must be back in town.

Like an express train, a locomotive of fire, the surge rose up in him. He forgot he would die. Forgot he had been alive.

The fireworks erupted through gold to red and white, and to vermilion.

As his brain and heart burst, he screamed for joy.

Leaving him, Raven and Vermilia, whose true name was Sheila—but who called herself, on such nights, Flamea, which he had never bothered to learn—turned to each other.

When they were through, they got up. “He sleeps for hours.”

“He’s great-looking. But what a drag.”

They left him, and went to get some chocolate cake.

While they were in the kitchen, since he had died and was a vampire, he disintegrated quickly and completely to the finest white dust, which presently blew off through the air, coating the

apartment lightly, and making Sheila-Flamea sneeze for days.

Some human myths of vampires were true.

When the girls came back, they commented on his absence, and that he had rudely got up and gone.

“But look, he left his clothes.”

They raised their brows and shrugged.

Earlier, he had written in his book:

*I know now. She is no vampire. She is a human. A woman playing at being a vampire. This is how she has her fun. Pretending she is our kind. Acting it out.*

*But why it should do this to me, I have no notion. Perhaps it is only me, but such a scenario may affect others of my kind in the same fashion, and to them I leave this warning.*

*We have taken the blood of humans all these millennia. Now, unknowing, they are prepared to take ours—by accident, thinking we are the same as they—or not recognizing us—or not thinking there is any difference between us and them. And when they do take our blood—this may be the result. I have no answer as to why. I have no resistance to it. Perhaps it has evolved, this power, naturally. Like some virus or germ. Perhaps this is now their natural means of protecting themselves against us.*

His last lines were these:

“Her kind have always killed my kind. That used to be with stakes and garlic, honed swords, sunlight and fire. Now, is it this way? Her kind kills my kind with... kindness.”

