

## Vanilla Blood

### S. P. SOMTOW

IN A PROFESSION *filled with colorful authors*, S. P. Somtow is one of the most colorful. Born in Bangkok and related to the royal family of Thailand, he has written many highly regarded fantasies and works of science fiction, notably *Vampire Junction*, *The Pavilion of Frozen Women*, *Starship and Haiku*, *Mallworld*, and *Light on the Sound*. He is also a musical prodigy who has conducted several of the world's orchestras, and is an avant-garde composer whose music has been performed in more than a dozen countries on four continents. Now if you've been keeping count, it's been a close race in *The Vampire Sextette* between sympathetic and diabolical vampires. "*Vanilla Blood*" closes the tally with some particularly nasty bloodsuckers!

WELL, THEN. WE might as well begin in the middle. Because the beginning has been done to death, hasn't it? The discovery of the bodies, the cross-country chase, even the allegations of police brutality... you've seen it on CNN. *60 Minutes*. *20/20*. *Hard Copy*. Graphic detail. You saw it all.

You saw her face. Pale as Ophelia in the bathtub of blood. The half-formed smile. The eyes, wide, emerald green, the soggy blonde hair that wound about the corpse like a seaweed garnish; the skin, luminescent, of a piece with the porcelain she lay in; naked, of course, but they didn't show that on TV. If you were lucky, you caught the nudity when the camera lingered on the photos that first day on Court TV, marking the exhibits one by one, starting with the crime-scene photographs.

You saw it; we can dispense with it.

You saw the perp on the cover of *Newsweek*. How young he looked! Anyone's kid, really—a nice southern boy. Tried as an adult? You didn't really want to agree with the prosecutors—he seemed so good-looking, so vulnerable, so... in need of a friendly social worker. Stared right through the camera and into your eyes... and into your heart.

Even the Pope sent a letter. As if that would have done much good here, right in the heart of Catholic-hating Klan country.

And then there was the lawyer. Pro bono, of course. A man who had been on every dream team in every high-profile trial in the last ten years. A talking head on Court TV. Once rendered Pat Buchanan speechless on *Crossfire*. He, too, had made the cover of *Newsweek*. But that was the "Superlawyers" cover story last year.

The prosecutor. An ice queen. Considered more robot than human... at least until Flynt released the nude pics. You know this. You've spent whole watercooler breaks discussing her anatomy. Oh, yes, she was a natural redhead all right. Unless, of course, she had taken the trouble to dye... down there.

What a bitch! But an appealing one.

And the judge. He fumbled his way through the last big one, an eighteen-month soap opera of celebrity murder, money, and sex. Now he had learned his lesson, and he was breathing fire, not taking any shit.

You are familiar with all these figures, I'm sure—there aren't many people in America who aren't. The *Saturday Night Live* parody alone said more than this brief memoir ever could.

So, instead, we'll start in the middle... just seconds after Judge Trepte kicked the cameras out of the courtroom.

We'll even go so far as to begin in the middle of a sentence.

—gone yet? Good, good.

—Sir? Get that thing out of my courtroom. Thank you. All the way out. When I kick out the cameras, sir, I kick out the cameras; I don't mean to have them lurking about in the anteroom. I mean, out, out, *out*.

—But, Your Honor, we've paid generously for the broadcast rights to—all right, Your Honor. Yes, sir. Good-bye, sir. Thank you, sir.

—and now, Counselor, you will reveal to this court exactly why your next witness is arriving in so remarkable a fashion.

—He always travels this way, Your Honor.

—Objection! The defense is attempting to offer a *corpse* as a defense witness!

—You must admit, Counselor, that the prosecution does have a point.

—He's not exactly *dead*, Your Honor. He just travels this way.

—In a *coffin*.

—Yes, Your Honor.

—Well, I'll be damned. Strike that. I think you will all agree that I made the right call in getting rid of the press. We can all relax now and get to the bottom of this nonsense, without getting yet *another* lead story on the CBS *Evening News*. Miss Anderson, strike all that—all of it. This is not going to be a trial for the TV trial junkies. No. This is life and death... some would add even undeath. Don't expect me to run this courtroom like Judge Itoh. More like Judge Dredd. Strike that, too, Miss Anderson, strike, strike, strike, strike. Now I'll stop pontificating and turn things over to you overpaid lawyers.

—The prosecution continues to object, Your Honor.

—Sustained.

—Your Honor, we cannot present this case without this witness's testimony.

—Then I will reconsider the objection when the witness deigns to get out of the coffin.

—He can't yet, Your Honor. But I believe he will be able to in about five minutes...

—Five minutes you may have. The court will recess for five minutes... no, let's say ten. Some of us still smoke.

—Well, Counselor?

—I don't understand it, Your Honor, but the witness doesn't appear to have stirred.

—Does the defense counsel propose to attempt to resuscitate the witness? We do have paramedics on call, do we not? Or will smelling salts do the trick?

—Your Honor, this has gone on far enough. Defense's sense of the theatrical is a little ill-timed, don't you think? I mean, they defend a few big-name actors, they think they're Perry Mason. Can I continue to state my objection?

—Your objection stands. Bring on your next witness, Counselor.

—We confess, Your Honor, we're sort of at a loss. In view of the apparent immobility of our star witness, we'd like to... ah... may I look at my notes?... Jeremy Kindred. Yes. He's on the list.

—Very well.

—State your name for the record.

—Jeremy William Kindred.

—How old are you, Jeremy?

—I'm... I don't know exactly. Fifteen, sixteen.

—Are you a vampire?

—Yes.

—Are you a member of the group variously known as the Brotherhood of Blood, the Cult, the Vampire Society?

—I was, sir.

—You were?

—I was for a while, sir, but it was just what you'd call peer pressure, and no sir, I didn't kill nobody, didn't drink nobody's blood.

—Just answer the question, young man.

—Uh, sure, Your Honor.

—Tell us about it... in your own words, if you'd like.

—Objection! This is all irrelevant. The witness wasn't even *at* the killing. He's just wasting the jury's time.

—I think it's important to my case, Your Honor, that we clearly illustrate the circumstances under which these kids could come to believe that these crimes were not only acceptable, but desirable.

—Listen. The cameras are off, Counselors. There's no more need for posturing. The jury is going to zone out completely unless you entertain them with a good story. So, kid, let's have it.

—Uh...

—You may proceed, Jeremy.

—Well, sir, I really joined it for the sex. I mean, there was a rumor that the Brotherhood had these orgies in the old Hanson house.

—That's an abandoned house?

—Yes, sir, by the cemetery. I don't know why it ain't been tore down yet; it's kinda an eyesore. It's condemned, though. I always used to walk past it on my way to school. It's a big old place, creaky doors, peeling paint, scary statues of devils with leathery wings... and the big angel with the bronze sword... not shiny anymore, green mostly... not since the ringleaders of the Brotherhood was all put in jail. But that used to be the weirdest thing about that place. It was all crumbling and dirty except for that sword. That tall angel stood next to them wrought-iron gates and it held its sword high in the air and the

sword was all polished... and you know, walking to school in winter, with the sun just rising, you could of swore that thing was on fire. The way it caught the sunlight. So the kids called it the Flaming Sword, like the preacher says about the Angel of Death. Anyways... there was this rumor that someone had wild parties there... you might call them raves, I guess... lotta E, lotta dope, lotta loose wenches, if you know what I mean. So when Cat Sperling kept looking at me from the other end of the hall, she was a senior and all, with tits like balloons, you could say I was interested. Everyone knew that Cat had something to do with them parties. And everyone wanted that bitch, shit, even the girls wanted her. But there's something weird about her that you need to know. It wasn't no big Hollywood special-effect kinda thing but... she carried the night around with her...

—Could you explain that a little more clearly, Jeremy? Take your time.

—Well, sir, it didn't matter if the sun was out, or if all the lights was on inside that school room. She always had like a shadow on her. Her skin was real pale, and it glimmered... well, like the moon was shining... but just on her, you understand, just on her. There was a silvery thing about her eyes, too... you know like when you're in the woods all alone at night and you catch the moonlight dancing amongst the leaves... you catch my drift, sir?

—You're saying she was attractive. She had a unique look. Some kind of makeup, perhaps.

—Yeah well, it was like on no infomercial about pearly essence face cream... a lotta girls use that shit... she was different. It was like she was the real thing, and the others were all just imitating her. Did I tell you about the black hair? It was long, all the way to her waist. And she wore black lipstick. It matched.

—A Goth, then.

—More than that. Like I said. Not a wanna-be. The real thing.

—Objection, Your Honor, I fail to see how this catalog of feminine charms has any relevance whatsoever to the defense's case!

—Stop posturing, Counselor. I've sent away the cameras; and the jury looks awake for the first time since this sorry spectacle began. I'm going to allow it. You may proceed, Mr. Kindred.

—Just tell the story in your own words, Jeremy.

—Well, I still think he's fishing, Your Honor.

—I've already overruled your objection.

—Jeremy?

—Yes sir. Cat Sperling, sir.

—Cat Sperling let you know, through some kind of sign language or eye contact, that she had something to discuss with you.

—Not exactly, sir.

—What did she let you know?

—She wanted to fuck me, sir.

—Watch your language, young man! Try to act in a manner consistent with the dignity and majesty of the law— what's left of it!

—I'm sorry, Your Honor; I don't know no other word for what she was trying to say.

—Very well, then. The court will take into account the deprived environment you clearly come from.

—I ain't no trailer trash, Your Honor!

—Quite so, young man, quite so. Why don't you finish telling your story to the court?

—Sure, Your Honor. Like I said, I got the Look from her. There ain't no mistaking the Look, sir. From all the way across the hall, and I knew she wanted me. Well, so there's a place you go to when you give someone the Look... at least that's how it works at Edward Kramer High. The place is up on a hill, you know, the hill just north of the cemetery. There's a road that winds up, and a hiking trail as well. At Kramer, we don't need to pass notes; it's a tradition; you get the Look, and if you give the Look back, then you go meet on the hill. If you hold up one finger, it means *tonight*, two fingers means we'll set a time later. Well, Cat held up one finger; everyone saw it, even if they didn't say nothing; Kramer ain't a kiss-and-tell kind of a school.

—It's an ancient tradition, then.

—I'd say so, sir.

—One that your parents would know about. That even a few members of this jury may well have experienced, if they happened to have gone to your high school.

—Did Cat Sperling meet you on the hill that night?

—Yes, sir.

—Did she then proceed to initiate you into the Brotherhood of Blood?

—Oh, no, sir. You can't get in just Like that.

—Tell the court what happened, Jeremy.

—Well, that night, I went up to the hill. I borrowed my mom's Malibu. I don't have a license, but you said I'd have immunity, right?

—This is a multiple-murder case, Jeremy. I don't think the court is too worried about your license.

—Okay, okay. Well, she was waiting there all right. She was every bit as enticing as the rumors said. It was windy and her hair was flying every which way... and catching the moonlight. She leaned against a tree with a joint in one hand... I can say that, can't I?... and her eyes were wild. I couldn't believe my luck. I mean, to tell you the truth, I'd never done it before. Unless you count, one time, in summer camp—

—That's all right, Jeremy. I don't think the court needs an exegesis of your sexual experiences.

—Okay. So she says to me, Jeremy Kindred, I've had my eye on you. You're a good-looking kid. And I says, Yeah, they say that. I'm tall for my age, almost six feet already. And she says, You got that unplucked look. Like a glistening round apple in a tree... a fresh smell, apple-scented shampoo maybe, a little-kid smell in a big-kid body... and I know how much you want me, seen how you stare at me—across the hallway or last week when we had that big assembly with the Yankee AIDS speaker. Here, take a drag of this, it'll relax you; I know your heart's pounding, boy. Really pull on it, hard, I mean hard. Come closer. You always wanted to touch them, didn't you? Here. Put your hand on them.

Through the sweater for now, I ain't no whore... I know you like it, Jeremy Kindred. S& well, I felt them titties, and they were fine. Firmer than I thought they'd be. Fairly straining against the wool they was. Got a rise out of me, lemme tell you. It was something to be alone on the hill with Cat Sperling. It sure turned my head. I didn't even think nothing of it when she asked for a drop of blood.

— So let me get this straight, Jeremy. This woman, this older woman—

—She won't but three years older than me, sir, if that!—

—Well, for the sake of argument, a slightly older and certainly much more sophisticated woman... lures you to a well-known trysting spot... gets you all hot and bothered... and suddenly asks to drink your blood?

—She didn't say drink, sir. You're jumping the gun on the story. She just said, Jeremy, you cute-as-a-button boy toy, let me have a drop of blood. The drinking didn't rightly occur to me, not at that moment... I don't know *what* was occurring to me, really, excepting I wanted to get inside her jeans something fierce. I knew she was a member of that Brotherhood thing, so blood had to figure in it somewhere... like swearing blood brotherhood with your best buddy in junior high or something. Well, she asked for a drop of blood, and by now we were in the backseat of the Malibu, I forgot to say that, didn't I?... and I was reaching into her jeans... it didn't feel down there like I thought it would... more leathery... and slick... like a beat-up old wallet. And she was all, I have a needle here, and I just need a little bit, just a thimbleful would do the trick right fine. And she reached into a back pocket and pulled out a hypodermic. The needle glinted in the moonlight that reflected off the real-view mirror and you know what, it made me mighty hard, more than I'd ever felt before in my life, 'cause I guess there was something dark about it, something forbidden... and this was how she did it... she yanked my pants down to my knees and kinda crouched down and pushed me up into her, and at the same time she jabbed that needle into my chest, like she was fixing to impale my heart. Well, I can't tell you how that made me feel, I mean, I just about burst right then and there, after being inside of her only a minute... and then I thought, well, I'm screwed for sure, because Cat Sperling ain't gonna want a green kid who can't last but a minute inside the famousest pussy in town.

—Your Honor, I simply have to object. I just don't see how this catalog of adolescent fumbling can possibly relate to the defense's case.

—If you'd bear with me for a second, Your Honor, I believe the witness is about to reach a crucial point of evidence in the defense's case... the blood.

—All right, Counselor. But if you don't reach some kind of relevance within the next two minutes—

—Jeremy, tell the court about what happened next.

—Well, sir, she didn't seem to pay no mind to the fact that I come inside her. She was only interested in the blood. When she saw that stream of red gushing into that syringe, she started thrashing and heaving and carrying on something fierce. She was all moaning, too... and shrieking... like a passel of cats in a back alley. I never seen anything like it, sir, and I've watched a lot of pomos. And then she's all shuddering to a climax right there in the backseat of my Malibu. And the blood's dribbling from her lips... but it's not a scary thing... it's warming her, lighting up her face... her cheeks were pale before, but now they're all blushing just a bit. And then she says to me, I want you to join. Join what? I asks her, but I already know what she means. I said, I heard there's a lotta parties, and in them parties you all get down, if you know what I mean. Parties right in the cemetery's what I heard. She smiled. You're coming to the very next one, she says, and it's on Friday the Thirteenth... next weekend... but it'll probably last until Sunday morning... when some of us, the ones that aren't in too deep, who can still stand the vibes, why,

we go to church. I'm thinking that it can't be *that* bad if they go to church af-terwards. So I say, Sure, I'll come. And she says, Be sure and bring your best friend Jody.

—Who did she mean by that?

—Jody Palmer, my best friend.

—The defendant?

—Yes sir, he sure is.

—I trust the prosecution is now satisfied as to the relevance of this witness?

—We continue to object, Your Honor. All this is fascinating in a prurient sort of way... I can see the reporter from CBS in the back there, desperately looking for an opening to demand the cameras back... but the fact remains that Jody Palmer killed several people, including his mother... and that he's being tried for murder.

—Your Honor, we must have some latitude here. The prosecution's perfectly aware that we're trying to establish that the defendant was under such crippling social and emotional pres-srac 'thaX Yie be'tieveu Trie no 'tonger had a choice. You must allow the witness to—

—Your Honor! The coffin lid is shaking!

—Well, hold it down, Bailiff!

—I can't! There's something inside... struggling to get out!

—Jesus Christ, I forgot daylight savings time! Sunset's an hour later!

—Cut the profanity, Counselor.

—I'm sorry, Your Honor, but—

—I'm fining you a thousand dollars for contempt. Get your checkbook out this minute, Counselor. Bailiff! Control that coffin!

—Blast! The lid's off!

—Well, put it back on.

—It's fighting back! Someone's inside—and he—she— it's trying to sit up!

—Well, restrain him, Bailiff.

—It's a woman, Your Honor... a young woman.

—Cat!

—The witness will refrain from speaking unless it is in response to a question from counsel, or from myself.

—Oh. Yes, Your Honor. Yes, *sir*. I didn't mean to—

—Counsel for the defense... you've been referring to this witness in the masculine gender from the beginning. And now that your witness has deigned to emerge from her... ah... conveyance, she appears

to be very, very feminine indeed. Exceptionally so, and flaunting it besides. Do you always instruct your witnesses to appear in court in flimsy negligees? Is this a courtroom or a Frederick's of Hollywood catalogue? For God's sake, madam, cover yourself! Bailiff... a cloak for the witness. I won't have the jury distracted by her endowments. In fact, I won't have the jury distracted at all; Counsel, I want an explanation.

—Your Honor, could we have a brief sidebar? This isn't the witness we had in mind for this portion of the testimony. There appears to have been a... misunderstanding.

—Oh, Jeremy... you sure are a sight! You look real small and scared and powerless up there in that witness box. But it's okay, baby. Cat's here now. Cat will hold your hand. It's gonna be all right. You didn't do nothing wrong... and it's not you that's on trial.

—But Cat... you're *dead*! I saw you die!

—Death ain't nothing, baby. Just another kind of doorway. And there's more than one way of going through that doorway... you can let them shove you through, and you can let them flush the key down the toilet bowl of eternity... or you can wrest that key out of their hand and take it with you... so they can't slam the door in your face... so you can live forever on the edge of life and death... I did it, baby, just like I said I would... I did it, baby. Oh, yes, I crossed over, and I crossed back. Just like the Duke said. And you can do it, too. Don't be afraid, Jeremy. Oh, and Mr. Counsel... the Duke says he's sorry, but he can't be in court tonight. Something's come up. He sent me instead. I can give all the evidence you need.

—The Duke, as you call him, Miss... Sperling, is it?... is under subpoena.

—Subpoenas don't work too good on dead people, Mr. Judge. If the Duke wants to come to your court, he'll come; but your laws don't really apply to him. The undead have their own laws. There's nothing in the constitution about them.

—On the contrary, Ms. Sperling. Just because creatures you're calling the *undead* are not specifically mentioned in law doesn't make them outside the law at all. Anyone who is evidently capable of rational discourse and capable of appear-ing here and making remarks, relevant or otherwise, is *aprima facie* candidate for personhood, and I can damn well hold them in contempt if I so choose!

—Your Honor, the witness is... well... she's sort of swirling, melting into some kind of mist... and now there's a black cat running around the courtroom... it doesn't seem very friendly, sir... in fact, it's got poor Mrs. Coates trying to climb up one of the pillars... it could be rabid, Your Honor.

—Shoot the critter! I won't have any more disruptions!

—Sir, the cat appears to have leapt out of the window.

—That's four stories, Bailiff! Surely even a *cat* can't leap four stories and survive... now what? It's flying into the night? You see great leathern wings against the face of the full moon, Bailiff? Is this *Batman* or is it a court of law? Put that camera away, Mr. Prinze, or I'm kicking CNN out completely. And I'm hereby instructing the jury to ignore all of this—the woman climbing out of the coffin, the soap-opera dialogue between Ms. Sperling and the witness, the bizarre metamorphosis from female to feline, *and* Mrs. Coates's screams. None of this ever happened, do you hear? *None of it!*

—Your Honor...

—What is it now, Counselor? My patience is wearing pretty thin.

—In view of the fact that we have let the wrong... ah, cat out of the bag, and in view of the fact that the witness currently on the stand hasn't yet completed his testimony...

—Quite, quite, Counselor. I think there's been quite enough claptrap for one day. Court will reconvene tomorrow at nine o'clock sharp, corpses and all.

—The corpse... and I will try to make sure we have the right one on hand tomorrow, Your Honor... will not actually be able to *say* anything until sundown... might an allowance be made? Please don't consider it contempt; consider it rather to be a medical condition that prevents the witness from testifying during daylight hours.

—All right. I'm going to give you a lot of leeway, Counselor. But any cats, bats, or talking corpses are going to have to abide by my rules. Court will reconvene at three P.M., then—we will allow the current witness to finish his touching story—by which time sundown will have arrived and we will be able to continue with your key witness—assuming him, or her, to have completed his, or her beauty sleep at that time.

—So, Jeremy... having had your blood sipped by the sexiest girl at Kramer High in what can only be described as a somewhat erotic experience... did you then accept Ms. Sperling's invitation to an event which you believed would be some kind of wild, gothic orgy?

—Yes, sir.

—And did you bring the defendant with you on that occasion?

—Uh, yes, sir.

—And did you and the defendant drink blood at that event?

—Yes, sir. Vanilla.

—Vanilla?

—When the new ones drink blood for the first time... they mix it with vanilla syrup. Kinda kills the taste. Gets you used to it. It's like, uh, you wouldn't give your kid brother a straight shot of JD the first time, not without mixing it with a Coke or something. He'll get just as drunk, but it won't burn his throat as bad.

—What did you tell the defendant to get him to come to this event?

—Oh, that was easy. Jody's a big vampire fan. He watches vampire movies all the time, and he plays role-playing games, live-action ones, too. Last year, we hitchhiked down to some sci-fi convention in Chattanooga, and he got into a live-action vampire thing that lasted the whole weekend, 24/7. He didn't even try to pick up no bitches or get fucked up, he was so caught up in the game. See, when it came to Cat Sperling's big event, orgy, whatever you wanted to call it, I was just looking to get laid, but Jody wanted something deeper. When I told him that she'd asked me to bring him, asked for him by name even, he got all glassy-eyed and weird, and he was all, "Finally. This is it. The call. The embrace of ultimate darkness." Which sounds like the script of a video game, but he said it all like it was for real. Jody has these deep eyes, that cornflower blue color, you know, that the bitches like so much; he could have had bitches, except he wouldn't play any of the games they wanted him to play. So when he starts talking about *ultimate darkness*, and he puts on this weird, toneless kind of voice, like he's, I don't know, *possessed* or something, it gets creepy. That's why the kid had no friends. He scared people. Even so, I wouldn't exactly call him guilty of murder.

—Objection! The witness is speculating wildly about the defendant's guilt... even without counsel calling

for such speculation. He's not here to speak to these issues.

—Yes, yes. The jury will disregard that, of course; the defendant's guilt is for the jury to decide, not this benighted young man. Please confine your testimony to the facts, Mr. Kindred... if any.

—All right, Jeremy. You do understand what the judge is saying, right? Just tell us what happened. No opinions, just facts.

—Yes sir.

—You passed Cat Sperling's invitation on to the defendant.

—Yes.

—How did you convince the defendant to attend?

—I told him it was the wildest live-action role-playing game of all time.

—You didn't mention the... erotic element?

—Oh, yes, sir. I told him there would be an orgy.

—And how did he react to that?

—He said, you can have the sex, Jeremy, long as I can have the violence.

—So is it fair to say that the defendant had a tendency towards violence?

—He was just kidding, sir! I never knew Jody to harm a flea, except in some fantasy or game, and then, of course, he'd go crazy... ripping off heads or wrapping himself in entrails... you know, movie-special-effects kind of shit. But in real life, no sir, Jody was gentle. I've seen him walk sideways so he wouldn't step on a bug. Most guys kinda enjoy stepping on bugs... taking a life, you know, even if it's just a bug's life. Jody wasn't like that. Loner, though. At lunch, he'd always be by himself, because even though I'm his best friend, you didn't want to be seen hanging around with a loser; he understood that; we only hung together after school, or at the mall. But even sitting by himself, munching on them Power Bars which was all he ever had packed for his lunch, he had an audience... there was always bitches eyeing him from a distance, wanting him. I guess it was the eyes. That's why he was on the cover of *Newsweek*, wasn't it? The eyes. I assumed that's why Cat wanted me to bring him. And I know he's been getting a lot of mail from bitches all around the country, since that magazine cover; he told me that one time when they let me visit him in jail. I thought he'd be more, you know, fucked up by jail, what with all them big dudes named Bubba, but he says ain't none of them touched him; they're all scared of him. It's been put out that he has powers, you know, going through keyholes, transforming into bats, and all that vampire-movie shit; but what I wanna know is, if that's true, why hasn't he escaped from jail? Well okay, I guess I'm getting off the subject again. You wanna know about the party in the cemetery, the Friday-the-Thirteenth thing... and how my friend Jody come to be accused of wiping out his family and a passel of his friends.

—Yes, Jeremy. Take your time. I know some of this is painful. But the jury needs to get the whole picture.

—Where was I?

—Perhaps you could go back to the vanilla blood.

—Yeah. It was like a cocktail almost. They served it in tall cone-shaped glasses, flutes they called them; champagne comes the same way, I heard tell. When me and Jody got there, it was close to midnight. That's because Jody took some convincing, even though he loved vampires; these weren't his kind of people. Leastways, we assumed that it would be mostly the school Goth crowd, the Nine Inch Nails types, the Anne Rice readers; actually it was kinda surprising who *was* there. It wasn't even confined to kids from Kramer High. I mean, Miss Higginbotham, the social studies teacher, was there... and she was bare-ass *nekkid*, and lying on top of a big old gravestone with her hippo-sized haunches in the air... and moaning. And this... well, this *black* dude was all on her shit, and he won't wearing nothing but a pair of black leather Pampers, and a nose ring the size of a golf ball, which must have tickled old Higginbotham's clit something fierce... well, she was moaning every time his head bobbed up and down, and her titties were flapping around like a couple of beached flounders. Shit, she was a sight, all moaning and wet in the moonlight like that. And there were other people scam-ming against grave markers; some guy was even trying to pork the stone angel that guards the cemetery gate. And there was this girl I'd never seen before, passing around the glasses, I

mean flutes, filled with vanilla blood, and that was the only food they had at the whole party, if you can call it food. Well, just about everyone seemed occupied with someone else, and no one paid much mind to me and Jody, and the only one who said anything to us was the girl with the tray of blood; she stopped to ask us if we were new, and when we said yes, she told us drink up, it's real important for the new ones to drink up, can't really be part of the action until you've taken the first step; so we did.

—What sensation did you associate with drinking this, ah, "vanilla .blood?"

—Hey, I don't rightly know if I should tell you what it was really like—this being a court of law and all.

—You're under oath, Jeremy. And also, you have immunity.

—So you can't use *nothing I* say against me? Nothing at all?

—Well—no.

—Objection! The witness only has use immunity.

—I'll sustain that, but I want to hear the witness's answer.

—Jeremy, the judge isn't going to do anything to you for what you say. **He** just wants to hear your answer.

—Well, sir, did you ever try **E**?

—Are you saying that the effects of this "vanilla blood" **were** somewhat akin to the drug **E**—Ecstasy—a drug popular among the "rave" segment of the student population?

—Well, if I answered that, I'd have to say that I'd *used E* before, and the judge just sustained that mean-looking bitch's objection. So I'll just say it gave me a boner the size of a baseball bat, and I wanted to screw the first thing I saw.

—Which was?

—Objection! Irrelevant.

—Actually, Your Honor, this answer speaks directly to the defendant's motivation.

—All right, I'll allow the question, but you'd better proceed very quickly to something important. Or the

gentleman from CNN is liable to wet his pants.

—Jeremy, and what was the first thing you saw that you wanted to, as you so delicately put it, screw?

—Well, this is kinda embarrassing, **sir**. I mean, I wouldn't want you to think I'm gay or nothing, but I was so horny I

wanted to do Jody... well, okay, there was something about him, the eyes, or whatever, anyway, on Brother Thompson's Christian summer camp last year, we all learned about circle jerks from the brother himself, so it wasn't like...

—Order in the court!

—And I mean, people were going crazy in that graveyard. I swear, I saw Mr. Smith, the football coach, getting boned up the butt by Mr. Oliver, who's like a police sergeant down at—

—Order in the goddamn court!

—Your Honor, we're not here to discuss the sexual antics of half the town. Could the witness confine himself to—

—Brother Thompson was even there, and he was handcuffed to a gravestone, and these motorcycle bitches were prodding him with cigarettes, and he was all moaning.

—That's enough, Mr. Kindred. Counselor, instruct your witness to get to the point.

—So, Jeremy, you, ah, made a pass at your best friend.

—Well, not exactly. It was more like this: I swallowed a couple of mouthfuls of that blood-cocktail thing, and everything went all misty... well, okay, and I felt like my veins were on fire... like this burning sensation, this tingling, everywhere, especially, you know, down there... and the next thing I knew, I was on Jody's leg, like a dog or something, rubbing myself up and down on it. But he wasn't getting horny off that blood at all. It wasn't affecting him the same way. Even though there was couples, threesomes, getting down every which way, in the light of the moon, with a dark, pounding music pouring out of a ghetto blaster somewhere... like one of them imperial orgy scenes in *Caligula*, you know?... Jody wouldn't have none of it. He shook me off of him like you'd shake off, well, a dog. "Don't," he said. "You're like all them others. To me the blood feels different. I think maybe I ain't the same kind as you, maybe I don't belong with the likes of you. What you're all doing seems so empty to me. Blood sings a different music to me. When I look into the dark, I look right past all of you and all your sleazy thrills, your wanna-be games, I see you all just flirting with the darkness... not willing to embrace it... to become a part of it... no, you're not like me after all, and it makes me sad because you've been a good friend to me, Jeremy, all these years when no one would talk to me because I'm like the school outcast, the mutant in the hallway... today I'm starting to learn who I really am."

—So the defendant had, as it were, an epiphanic moment from the drinking of human blood?

—I don't rightly know what that means, sir.

—Doesn't matter. That evening changed him, didn't it?

—Maybe so. What he said to me, though, was he found his due self.

—And his true self was what? A vampire?

—Won't that simple, sir. But anyways, I didn't have time to listen to him ranting on at that point, because, as I said, I was thinking with my dick. And soon my dick found something to play with. There was this mousy girl, no one anyone would look at twice in the daylight... her name was Constance Thorpe... and the only time I ever spent more than five seconds in her company was when me and her was paired off cutting up rats in biology lab one time. You know, she always used to make me nervous. She had nerd glasses, and she had a way of pulling out them rat intestines that made it look like she was enjoying it too much. And she dressed like a refugee from the sixties, parents must've been hippies or something and she forgot to rebel. Well, I saw her leaning against a tombstone, and she wasn't the same bitch at all, lemme tell you. She'd lost the glasses and she even had a spot of makeup on. But I didn't really give a shit, because of whatever it was in that blood; all I cared about was that she made a beeline for me and kinda nose-dived toward my crotch. Before you knew it she'd unzipped me and she was all up on me like a noisy old vacuum cleaner. I mean, I wouldn't have been seen dead with her normally, but you should have seen her suck, I mean, that girl could suck. She was wild, too, licking up a storm on my balls and even thrusting down past them, I think she'd have stuck it up my butt if my pants had come all the way down, but the zipper was all tangled in her hair. Must've hurt, it yanking on that hair like that, sir, but she sucked with a will, like her life depended on it. So I sorta leaned back against a gravestone, closed my eyes, and slipped into like a kind of trance, just letting myself go with the flow of it... then I sort of came to with a shock because I could feel this pinprick, this sharp pain that wouldn't go away. I looked down and she had pulled out a syringe and she'd stuck me right in the shaft, and you know how much blood gets down there when you got a boner. I guess I kinda panicked, even though I knew that these people have a thing about blood, and I drew back, and well, I knocked the syringe out and I jizzed at the same time, and there was blood and cum everywhere... well, Constance was going crazy now, lapping up everything, sperm, blood, sweat, I could have pissed on her face and she'd've drunk it. Holy shit! I didn't like it. The high of the vanilla blood was coming down now. I was all dizzy. This wasn't how I thought it would feel. I felt all dirty inside. That's when I decided to go looking for Jody. I sorta pushed Constance out of the way. She was on all fours, the fucking nympho bitch, and already sniffing for a fresh piece of meat to chew on. I kept calling Jody's name, asked a couple people where he was, and they kept shrugging or being too involved with their own shit.

—And where did you **in** fact discover the defendant to be?

—Well, I'm getting to that, sir!

—Good. I see that the prosecution has become too, ah, involved in its prurient fascination with the material to object any further...

—There's no need for the defense to snipe, Your Honor, when it is clearly burying itself with every word this so-called witness utters.

—**Be** that as it may... Mr. Kindred?

—Okay. Well, there's this big old structure bang in the middle of the cemetery, see, and it's the oldest monument there. I think it dates to long before the war.

—You mean the Civil War.

—Yes, sir.

—I think most of the jury are familiar with the monument you're referring to. It's the Forbin-St. Cloud Memorial, right? Built by a prominent French family, in the days when our little city was booming. Which times, since the banning of hemp cultivation, are long past. A bizarrely incongruous Gothic monstrosity, surrounded by a wrought-iron fence with strange-looking gargoyles on top, rumored to have

underground passageways, under whose sheltering eaves the homeless of this town often rest, as the local police force rarely bothers to kick them out, rarely even patrols this area because of the mysterious death of Police Sergeant McKinley, found garroted **and** disemboweled and spread-eagled over the—

—Why is the defense now regaling us with a history lesson, Your Honor? Objection!

—I'll stop, Your Honor. I just thought the local color would be helpful. The Forbm-St. Cloud monument has... *vibes*. I want the jury to understand that. Since all of them heard the ghost stories when they were kids, and few were brave enough to go there. I know the prosecution is anxious to get back to the dirty bits. So how about it, Mr. Kindred? Let's have 'em. The dirty bits.

—Like I said, sir, I thought I saw the back of Jody's head, and he was squeezing through the iron bars into the Fo-for-... well, we "don't call it that, sir.

—What *do* you call it?

—We call it the Hellhouse.

—Why?

—Well, sir, on account of... it's big enough to be a house, what with all the underground passages it's supposed to have... and it's got this entranceway... well, a *fake* en-tranceway... that looks like the mouth of hell... a big old demon's jaw in stone with a stone door that can't be opened. Well... I didn't *think* it could be opened. But then... I saw Jody sort of standing there... at the stone mouth... you could see the sculpted flames of hell there... and he was just standing there. Just staring. Like he'd seen something... supernatural. Well, I kind of snuck up behind him. I guess I startled him because when he felt me breathing down his neck he screamed up a storm. I mean he had like a panic attack, and I hadn't *never* seen him lose his cool before. I got him calmed down. I kept saying, It ain't so bad, Jody, nothing bad's happened yet, maybe we just lost a bit of blood is all. Maybe we're a bit weak from that, you know, dizzy, seeing things. When you lose blood you see things. We learned that in school. But he was all, I saw what I saw. I said, What did you see? and he said, Nothing. Fucking nothing, and don't ask me again. I ain't crazy. I said, Nobody said you was. Just tell me what you seen there.

—And did the defendant respond?

—Yeah.

—What did he say?

—He more than said, sir. Well, at first he just murmured, They went through the doorway, they just up and walked right on through there like it was air, I can feel them inside there, feel the heat of their souls inside the dead, empty space... but pretty soon he was a-banging on that stone with his fists, like he should have been able to melt right through it. Well, what do you know? The wall started to give.

—He shattered a mausoleum wall with his fists?

—Not hardly, sir. I mean the wall and him seemed to kind of meld together, and he was sort of sinking into it.

—What did you do, Jeremy?

—I thought he was going to die. I mean, getting sucked into a Jell-o kind of a wall, it was one of them *Poltergeist-style* special effects, like you see in movies. So I guess I grabbed on to him, and that's how I ended up getting pulled inside, too. The stone felt mushy. Oily, you know. It made my flesh crawl. But

the wall closed right up again as soon as we got through, and it was dark as shit in there, and won't no way to get back out. I almost shat my pants, I don't mind telling you, sir, it was that scary. The air was all moist and stale-smelling. I don't know how dead people are supposed to smell, but I could *feel* death there. Well, after a time, you could start to see a bit of light. Water was dripping. Where we were was a kind of corridor leading downward. And we heard voices. From down below. I was shaking, sir. And then Jody said the strangest thing. He said, Jer, we been buddies for a long tune, but there's places you weren't meant to go... places I have to go alone. You weren't meant to pass through to this place, but you held on to me, and maybe that's good, because if anything ever happens to me, you can bear witness one day, you can speak the truth about me, shout it out, even if nobody ever believes you, or even understands what you say. I ain't long for this world, Jer, but I'm meant to go out like a comet, not like a lit old candle. You know that, don't you? I've always been different... like everyone's born facing the same way, their butts to the past, their faces to the future, but not me, I go sideways, past and future are a sidestream to me, a path I can never tread.

—Quite a speech for a teenager, don't you think?

—Objection! Calls for speculation.

—Ah, I see that the Madame Prosecutor has awakened. Sustained.

—That's all right, Your Honor, I was only being rhetorical.

Mr. Kindred... Jeremy... I'll say it a different way. Did your Mend, the defendant, often make long speeches like that?

—Not often. But more than any other kid I knew. If he got going, he could talk up a storm. Almost like a preacher, except it would be all about violence and death and dark things.

—Are you aware that the defendant hasn't said a word since he was taken into custody?

—I've heard that, sir.

—So he's definitely changed.

—**Yes**, sir. **He** ain't human no more.

—Literally?

—Well, sir, I was getting to that.

—Proceed.

—Well, like I said, there was voices. And the corridor leading downward. And the light, you see, the light came from down below. A flickering, red light, kind of like the flames of hell, I guess. And even though Jody told me, No, you stay up **here**, this is for me alone... well, I guess I couldn't help following him down there. I was curious, sure. But it was also creepy **as** shit, and I didn't want to be alone.

—Did the defendant know you were following him?

—Sort of. But you see, he was like in **his** own world. **He** really didn't pay me no mind at all. I was like a puppy dog or something... no, a shadow more like, a nothing.

—To whom did the voices belong?

—Well okay, we kept going down deeper and deeper, because the corridor ended in steps, and the

steps led us deeper and deeper underground. Maybe we were going into the hillside, I don't know; I lost my sense of direction. Because now there were steps going up, and passageways leading sideways. It was like that story we learned in Mrs. Seymour's class one time, the one with the maze and the bullheaded man and the hero with his ball of yarn. The walls glowed. It was a cold light, millions of dots of light, you know, like you get in caves sometimes, phosphorescence I think it's called. I followed. After what seemed like a long time, it widened into a cave. I, think it was part natural, this cave, but there was also a bunch of marble columns and statues of weeping angels and other cool gothic shit. The light came from flaming torches on the walls. Some parts of the walls had paintings, Egyptian stuff, guys with dogs' heads, other parts had been painted over. It was all coated with soot, and when the torches flickered, it looked like them pictures was moving. And at the far end, there were niches in the wall, and in the niches were dead people. I mean some were long dead, like skeletons, but some were fresh... and some of them I recognized. I mean, they went to my school. I mean, they weren't supposed to be dead at all. I mean, I would have heard of it if they'd died, I was in some of the same classes. Well, I wasn't that sure. Like I said, I was dizzy. And the sex thing hadn't totally worn off. I hid behind a big statue. An angel. The Archangel Michael, I think, with a flaming sword. The sword was metal and sort of attached to his hand with a leather thong. And a bronze cross around his neck. His wings were wide enough that I could crouch down and peep through a little chink where his elbow lifted up against his robe. Apart from the sword and the cross he was all marble, and cold. And, well, I wasn't dressed for the cold, so I was shivering as I huddled there, trying not to breathe too much.

—What did the defendant do at that point?

—He stood there, in a semicircle of light, facing all of them dead folks, and I saw there was three coffins laying there, fine old coffins made of carved wood with all gold on them. The coffins are just laying there, and the middle one, the grandest one of them all, is closed, but the other two have their lids on the ground next to them, and they're empty, you see. And there's people here. They're hard to see at first, because they're all blended with the shadows, and it takes me a while to make them out. They ain't the same kind of people as the ones in the orgy up there in the cemetery grounds. They're, well, pale-looking. What was that word for the way the walls was all glowing? Phosphorescent. Yeah. That was in their faces, too. When you looked at one of them a long time you could see the cold light clinging to their faces. They all wore black. I don't mean all Dracula capes and stuff. I mean, some of them had capes, but there were clothes from olden times, and clothes you could see down at the Goth coffeehouse over in the next town. There was leather and fishnet stockings. There was black lipstick. Sunken eyes. Some had sweeping robes, you know, the kind that rustle when you walk. And, well, standing next to one of the empty coffins was Cat Sperling, and she was totally naked. And by the other coffin was

... shit man, it's weird to think of it now, but it was Constance Thorpe, the little geek that done went down on me next to that gravestone up above. She was naked, too. She looked better than I thought she would. I couldn't believe it. The only two bitches I'd ever really messed around with, and they were standing around bare-ass naked in front of a bunch of ghouls in black. I gotta admit, it was making me, you know, all hot down there all over again. I watched my friend Jody. They didn't seem to notice him at first, them two girls, because they were busy staring into each other's eyes. I mean, I thought I was trapped inside of a lesbo porno. I mean, this was fucking wild, f never dreamed them two would have a thing for each other, I mean, the sexiest girl at Kramer High and some gap-toothed nerd with a thing for cutting up mice and frogs... secretly wanting to dyke it out?... I could see it in their eyes. Cat went without saying, but Constance looked different. A glow in her flesh. Gleaming. Maybe it was sweat. She had hard little nipples. They were inching toward each other. I was all, Holy shit, they're gonna get it on right here, in *front* of all these people... if they even *are* people. Cat's upper lip was quivering. The sweat was beading up on it. I could barely look at their pussies. I'd glimpsed pussy before, and in pornos you watch it all you want, but it's on a TV screen. This was different. I was afraid if I stared too long, I don't know, I was gonna have an accident.

—Your Honor, could the witness get to the point already?

—Sustained.

—I'm afraid he's right, Jeremy. The jury doesn't really need to know about your... accidents.

—Well, I didn't have no accident anyways, sir.

—Why?

—Just when I thought the two of them were going to really, you know, get down, the lid of the coffin in the middle started to creak open.

—A little like yesterday's little incident?

—Oh, no, sir. It was real slow, like. And then all the people there fell on the floor. I don't mean they tripped, I mean they fell to their knees, faces in the dust, even the two naked bitches. It was like, you know, I seen this movie about an ancient Chinese emperor, it was death to look him directly in the face. I could feel... fear in the room... and power. Real power. I was scared. I narrowly avoided one kind of accident, and now I was fixing to have another kind. Well, the lid was creaking open. Dust was flying. The lid swung up, and this old man was sitting up slowly. He was old, real old. Okay, he didn't *look* that old, but you could feel it in him. And he spoke. Slowly. Like he was having trouble remembering how to speak. Later they done told me that his kind don't have much use for talking amongst themselves; it's chiefly for the benefit of the ones that are still human. Oh, it won't English, neither. But one of the guys in black got up off his knees and crept up closer, and he translated everything in a flat, echoey voice. The first thing he says is, The Duke asks what new creatures come before him today.

—Meaning *the* two girls?

—Yes, sir, I guess, because the sex goddess and the geek stand up, and they're all coily looking at the floor and half smiling, and their nipples are still hard. And they both say, Your Grace, we humbly beg for the honor of attending you. Well, His Grace mumbles something, and the translator says, How may you prove your worthiness? And they answer, We are yours entirely, body, soul, in life and death and undeath. We wish to become consorts of the darkness. We wish the everlasting night. We pine for the sunset. We abhor the light. We have listened in the wilderness and heard the music of the night.

—The sex goddess and the geek, as you call them, said all that? In those precise words?

—I reckon it was learned from a book or something, sir.

—So this appeared to be some kind of ritual?

—Yes, sir.

—Your Honor, I thought that this trial was about the defendant, not the erotic fantasies of some disturbed adolescent. I must continue to protest this undignified latitude in allowing endless filth to spew forth from the witness without any real connection to the defendant's guilt or innocence!

—Yes, yes, sustained, sustained, though I'm sure the lurid details will all be in your next book, Counselor!

—I resent that, Your Honor!

—Be quiet and let the kid tell the rest of his story. If the defense would care to continue... I'm as anxious

to get to the relevance of this as anyone else here.

—Yes, Your Honor. Mr. Kindred... Jeremy... go on. Go easy on the sex. Unless it specifically concerns the defendant.

—All right, sir.

—Tell us about the defendant and his role in all this, then.

—Well, the translator guy, he says to the two girls, You know that before you can cross over, you must bid the flesh farewell... and you must find a willing lamb... a sacrifice. And Cat Sperling said, We have such a lamb, Your Grace. We've tracked him, we've lured him, we've cornered him, and we have him.

—And by "him," they meant the defendant?

—I guess so, sir, cause Jody done stepped forward.

—What was the defendant's demeanor?

—Huh?

—How did he look?

—Pale, sir, real pale. But determined, too. Whatever was about to happen, it looked like he'd thought it over and was gonna do it, no matter what. Grim, sir, real grim. It's amazing to me how young he looks at that moment. I know he's really older than me, but he comes off like a little kid. Scrawny. And so pale. Maybe that phosphorescence shit was rubbing off on him. He looked back only once. Looked me right in the eye. *Knew* I was there, *knew* I was watching. No one else saw, no one else knew. I thought about what he said to me earlier. *7 ain't long for this world, Jer, but I'm meant to go out like a comet, not like a HI' old candle*. Jody was fixing to die. I realized that. All of a sudden. Something had happened between him and Cat Sperling. Something that had pushed him over the edge. Like the preacher says on *Hour of Power*, into the abyss.

Well, the translator dude says to Jody, Do you come here of your own free will? And Jody's all, I do. Then the guy says, You will lose a lot of blood. Perhaps you will even die. But if you survive this ritual, you will be on the way to a different plane of existence. The one who brings you to us, the woman formerly called Cat, she was once such a lamb. To surrender yourself to the dark, to let the undead feast upon you, is to step blindfolded off the edge of the bottomless pit. You must trust. You must believe. Darkness will love you. Darkness will enfold you. Darkness will shield you. Do you accept such a destiny? If you do not, speak now, and in the morning you will wake up in your own bed, and remember nothing. But if you say aye, you will never again know where you will wake up in the morning: in your own bed, on a bed of thorns, in a coffin, in the wormy earth. Think carefully before you answer, Jody Palmer. It may be that you will never again see daylight. Some who have a special affinity for our kind... make the passage in a single night... and wake to eternal darkness. For most... well, for some there is the true death... but they would never have made the crossing; anyway... it's a talent you're born with. And for some, a slow, agonizing sickness that may or may not lead to death and the crossing into undeath. We cannot tell. There is no science of vampirology. Do you understand what we are telling you? And Jody was all, Yes.

—And?

—I'm sorry, sir. I was just trying to remember the details. After this it gets kinda all confused.

—Take your time, Jeremy.

—Yes sir. Thank you, sir.

—You're telling us that these... creatures... made an offer to your friend, and he accepted it. An offer that, he believed, would bring about his death and transfiguration... his metamorphosis into a creature beyond life.

—I reckon so, sir. I mean, there was nothing for him in the real world anyways. He was always kind of a throwaway kid.

—Did he give any impression of having been coerced into this choice?

—Maybe he didn't feel he *had* no choice.

—What did the defendant do next?

—He stepped forward. And the translator guy said, First comes the consummation of all carnal pleasure. Then comes the drawing of the blood. The first is your farewell to the flesh, you candidates for initiation into the Brotherhood of Blood; the second is your salutation of the spirit.

—So the defendant believed he was being initiated into some kind of vampiric existence?

—No, you got it all wrong. Them two girls was the initiates. Jody was the lamb, the offering, the sacrifice.

—He was willing to die for mis?

—I reckon so.

—What happened next?

—It gets confusing, sir. Because the first part of the ritual, that was the "farewell to the flesh" thing, slowly shifted into the second part... the blood ritual. It started with the two girls undressing Jody, slowly, sexily... for example, Cat would undo one of his shirt buttons with her teeth, then Connie would do the next one down, while Cat was sort of sliding her tongue in and out between the buttons, teasing his chest. And they were all rubbing their titties up and down him. Now I knew that Jody really had never had no sex before, well, no more than third base, anyways. But when they finally got the pants off him, he wasn't even hard. He just stood there, with a faraway look, fixing on some dark future he had always dreamed about. But the two girls were at him like there was no tomorrow. I guess, for them, in a way, there wasn't. They surrounded him. They were a blur of arms and legs and lips and tongues and gleaming pussies. I couldn't believe it, but mousy Constance was the wilder of the two bitches. She was squeezing Jody's scrawny ass, pumping against him, even thrusting her tongue in his butt hole. But Cat was more playful. She skimmed her tongue along his arms, his fingers, and when she reached his balls and started flicking at them, he finally started to get aroused. I think he was holding himself in, trying to resist, thinking to himself that giving in to sex was some kind of weakness, that he was there for the violence, not the sex... but no red-blooded guy could stay soft forever with them two working him over. And now they were taking turns, one holding him upright while the other slid up and down on him, spinning him around, making him dizzy, and he was moaning now, I couldn't make out all of it but it was all sick, private stuff, about his childhood, his parents, I don't know... and then it started to turn toward violence... first one girl then the other was raking at him with her nails, nails that seemed to get longer and sharper... nails that seemed to curl up, tighten, into claws... the girls were bucking and heaving as they pushed him down against the middle coffin, where the vampire master dude was still sitting, watching, his eyes slowly reddening... or was that just the flickering of the torches?... I don't know... and the crowd in black was hemming in closer... making it harder for me to see... and I knew they weren't noticing me any more, I

even felt safe creeping out from behind the statue... keeping low to the ground... peering through the sea of legs and cloaks... glimpses now... the girls licking their lips... their eyes slitting... bending over him... slicing at his chest, his abdomen with their animal claws... and biting now... I could see fangs. They all had fangs. All them black-clad people with them glowing white faces. Their fangs glistened in the dark like a thousand stars. And there were other sharp things. I saw spikes... razor blades... pocket knives... hypodermics... all ready to harvest my best friend's lifeblood. The girls were still all over him... pleasure transforming into pain... but the others were moving in now... I could see a razor slice just beneath his nipple... I could see a delicate mouth close in on his ankle... and Jody was all convulsing now, I couldn't tell if it was from like an orgasm or whether they was *killing* the fuck out of him. Jesus, I was scared. I wanted it to stop. Me against a hundred bloodsuckers, what was I thinking? But that was my best friend out there. But did you ever see a pig that's been hit on the head in the slaughterhouse? That's how it looked. I mean, he was shaking like a fucking pile driver. I couldn't stand it. I mean, Jody, you know? Friends since the sixth grade. Camp outs, swimming holes, dirty websites, all the shit young guys grow up together doing. Well, what I done was dumb.

—What did you do, Mr. Kindred?

—Well, I ripped the cross off the Archangel Michael's neck, and I pulled off the sword, and like a wild man I charged.

—You attacked a crowd of... sadistic vampire cultists?

—Cultists? Hell no, sir, these people was actual vampires. 'Cause when the shadow of the cross fell upon them, they started screaming. And scattering. And I was screaming, too, a pretty damn impressive scream for a kid, a scream like a banshee, and swinging that big old heavy sword like it was nothing more'n a letter opener. Shit, I *scared* the fuckers. I think. There was this big flapping noise. Dust everywhere. Swirling. Mist. Everything was whirling, and there was this roar, like a tornado or something. I don't think I actually hit anything with the sword. Everything was dissolving before I could smash bronze against flesh. I saw Jody on the ground there in front of the middle coffin. He was naked, and I swear to God he was half drained already. There was so much blood, just sluicing from a hundred cuts on him, pouring out onto the rocky floor. I knelt down and tried to lift him up, but he was heavy, there won't no *give* to him at all, it was like he was already dead. I was still all crazed and I shook him, I was all, Wake up, Jody, this is your buddy telling you, come out of it, you ain't dead yet. And then the weirdest thing of all happened. You know all that swirling mist I was talking about? Well, it seemed to gather up the coffins and the cave walls and even the sword-less St. Michael over there, and even the dirt beneath us, and it was all billowing about us and darkening, and the torches were blowing out one by one, and my friend was stirring a little, and I was all, Jody, don't die, don't die, don't die, when all at once the world seemed to melt around us... like a dissolve in a movie... and we were somewhere else. I smelled a fresh wind. Flowers. Old trees and rotting leaves. We were in the hills. The cemetery was way below us... and the moon was shining through the treetops. What happened? When I arrived at the cemetery, there'd been cars everywhere, pickups, Mustangs, a Mercedes, a police car... now I couldn't see a one in that parking lot... and the graveyard was deserted. Jody was still lying across my lap... still bleeding to death... or was he? In the bright moonlight I saw... the wounds closing up... the scratches fading... the blood sort of evaporating, melding into the night mist... I didn't understand. I knew it won't no dream. I knew it had to be real... but... Jody was moaning now. I was all, Wake up, wake up... and, slowly, he did.

—I see. *And I awoke and found me here, on the cold hill's side.*

—Yeah. I guess so.

—You saved your friend's life.

—Maybe, but he sure didn't thank me for it.

—No?

—Shit, no, sir. When he come to, it was just about twilight, and I'd been watching him, and I'd covered him with my own jacket, and I was trying my ass off to make him come back into the world... and when he finally opened his eyes, well, he didn't look like he was fixing to thank me at all. He looked at me with slitted eyes, and I saw *hate*. Pure, naked hate. I sure was shocked. I said, Jody, it's me, your best friend, Jer. They were gonna *kill* you in there. I don't know what happened, but I got you out... somehow. And he whispers to me, gasping for breath between every word, like he's struggling to keep from slipping back into darkness, Jer, I wanted it. That was my chance. I'm nobody in this world. I was about to *be* something. Let go of me, Jeremy, and don't come near me again. And he shook off my jacket... stood up... just as the first rays of sunlight were breaking over the gravestones below yonder... he stood up, naked as the day he was born, stood up and walked away from me. He was so frail and thin he was almost like a little kid. But here's the weird thing... the scars was all healed. There won't a scratch on that boy. The sun painted him a golden sort of color, and he didn't hardly seem human. And he walked away. Away from the coming light... into the thickest part of the wood... like he was afraid of the sun.

—Did you speak to him after that?

—Not really. I think he tried to go back to one of their cemetery parties... they usually had them on the full moon... but I know he never was able to get back inside that monument. That stone carving of the jaws of hell... well, stone was all it was to him. He had lost the key. I took it from him. I was stupid, I guess. I really didn't understand him after all. He fell in with other kids. Started a new "secret society" of some kind. A wanna-be vampire society. I heard about it mostly from—

—Your Honor, this is all hearsay now.

—Sustained.

—Your Honor, we have already heard evidence about young Jody Palmer's secret society... from all sorts of expert witnesses as well as from the ex-members themselves. I'm not seeking to add anything to the record on that matter from this witness. In fact, I'm going to excuse him now. Perhaps my opponents would care to cross?

—Yes, we would. Just a couple of questions, Jeremy Kindred. You're still under oath.

—Yes, ma'am.

—Isn't it true that no one has related any of these outlandish incidents... except you? I'm not referring merely to the supernatural events you claim to have seen inside one of the town's most famous landmarks... but to these very .imaginative orgies you describe as having occurred regularly at the cemetery. If these things were true, don't you think others would have reported them to the authorities?

—Hell no, ma'am. Half the authorities were *in* them orgies.

—So it's a kind of... ah, conspiracy? Half the town involved in dark goings-on, and covering up the mess from the other half?

—You tell me, ma'am. After all, you were there, too.

—Well!

—Your Honor, the witness has just claimed that the state's prosecutor was present at those proceedings,

in the light of which—

—Oh, nonsense, Counselor. The boy's a raving lunatic.

—Your Honor, comments like that would tend to throw some doubt on your own impartiality—

—Shut up, Counselor! I'm running a courtroom, not a voodoo seance. If the prosecution would care to continue the cross—

—Ah... no further questions.

—The witness may stand down.

—I would like to remind the defense that this evening's extraordinary timing was designed to let us hear from whoever is supposed to be inside that coffin of yours, and that we are now ten minutes past sundown. And no one has been banging on the lid from the inside. Is that particular bit of nonsense over with?

—I don't think so, sir. At this time I would like to ask the bailiff to remove the coffin h'd and invite the next witness to the stand.

—All right. Bailiff?

—There's nothing inside of here, sir, except a headless cat. And a large quantity of garlic.

—That, Counsel, is in very poor taste.

—I don't know *how* that could have happened, Your Honor! Our resident vampirologist assured us that—

—Ew, Your Honor! It's stiff.

—Dispose of it, Bailiff. So what is the meaning of this, Counsel? Vampire hunters been calling, I suppose?

—I have no idea what's happened at all, Your Honor. We'll have the witness for you tomorrow, I promise.

—Don't make promises you can't keep, Counselor; I'm told that the dead are notoriously inept at keeping their appointments.

—Your Honor is pleased to joke at my expense.

—My Honor has had enough for the day, and we'll reconvene tomorrow morning at... let's say ten o'clock.

—Dr. Shimada, you're a vampirologist.

—Just an avocation, actually. My day job is psychiatric resident at the juvenile division of the state hospital for the criminally insane. My study of vampires, real and imagined, grew out of the ramblings of a patient I have in my private practice; I can't elucidate further without breaching confidentiality, of course.

—And you've studied the defendant at some length.

—Oh, yes. Fascinating boy. Very disturbed.

—The defendant is not, however, in your professional opinion, a vampire.

—No.

—Nor any other supernatural creature.

—Well, I would take issue with the choice of "supernatural," sir, since, as a scientist, I would prefer a rational explanation for any phenomenon, however *supernatural-seeming*. But no, Mr. Palmer is by no means undead. He is quite, quite human. He's just like you and me.

—Except that he hasn't talked since... the events that have brought us all here for this trial.

—That is *almost* true. I was starting to make some progress with that. I think he needs a few more months before he'll actually... be able to say anything to shed light upon this case.

—You were making progress?

—He grunts now, sometimes. I even detected a whimper once. And one time, on my way out, in the doorway, I heard a distinct, if sotto voce, utterance of the phrase, "Fuck off."

—I see. Will he ever talk?

—Everything he wants to say is caged up inside him. It only needs... a key. I've been considering the possibility of circumventing the lengthy period of therapy and just jumping to pentothal.

—Sodium pentothal? The old "truth serum," that cliché of fifties B-grade detective thrillers?

—The very same.

—How many sessions did you have with the defendant?

—I've seen him twice a week since the arrest.

—In your opinion, is the defendant insane?

—I think that would be obvious even to a layman.

—Was he insane at the time of the crime?

—Clearly he was unable to distinguish right from wrong at the time of the multiple murders.

—What is the nature of the defendant's mental illness?

—In Freudian terms, his superego, the inner voice we often think of as our "conscience," weak to start off with from inadequate childhood reinforcement, has disappeared entirely. It has been replaced by what he perceives as supernatural "beings," creatures who control him. He has experienced a transference of the normal youthful libido... the sex urge... in the direction of violence and bloodshed. The weakening of the superego causes him to be unable to control his beast within, his id. That, of course, is the basic reason for all crime, but in his case the weakening of the ego is clearly at a pathological level.

—I see, Dr. Shimada. I'd like to move that Dr. Shimada's entire report... some two thousand three hundred ten pages of it... be admitted to the record as Exhibit, ah...

—Defense Exhibit QQ.

—Yes. Defense Exhibit QQ.

—I hope you're not expecting our benighted jurors to make head or tail of it, Counselor. Even the last few minutes have been a little, ah, dry.

—Dr. Shimada's learned testimony merely adds to that of seven other psychiatrists, Your Honor, who have all agreed that the defendant is hopelessly, irretrievably insane.

—Quite so.

—Dr. Shimada, if you would state again, in simple layman's terms, the defendant's state of mind before, during, and after the crimes were committed?

—In layman's terms, Jody Palmer was stark, staring bonkers, Counselor.

—No further questions.

—Cross?

—Well, yes, I do have a couple of quick questions. Dr. Shimada, in this two-thousand-page document which, I admit, I haven't read, although my researchers have combed through it pretty thoroughly... do you not basically say that the defendant had no conscience?

—I suppose you could put it that way.

—Well, well, well. No conscience. And for that, we're gonna let him off after he mutilated his parents, disemboweled his sister, devoured his two-year-old brother's liver, and led a gang of hooligans on a rampage that culminated in several more people becoming... unwilling blood donors... not to mention... necrophilia.

—Your Honor, the prosecution's grandstanding.

—Sustained. Just ask the questions.

—Right. Well, I really have just one more question. You say the defendant has retreated behind a wall of silence.

—Yes. It's called hysterical mutism. It's one of the ultimate defense mechanisms of the paranoid schizophrenic.

—So you compiled a two-thousand-page report about this patient... without exchanging a single bit of dialogue with him?

—As I spoke to him, I monitored his vital signs, his brain waves, the surface electrical activity of his skin.

—But he didn't actually *tell* you any of this.

—Scientists can read a great deal from—

—He didn't actually *tell* you. Answer the question, please.

—Ah... no.

—No further questions.

—Natalie McConnell, you've been given immunity because you appear not to have participated in the actual killing. But you saw everything, and your insight into the defendant's state of mind is vital to the

court's understanding of his motives.

—Yes, sir.

—Are you currently enrolled in Kramer High?

—No, sir. I dropped out. I had to go to work in my dad's doughnut store.

—So you never knew the defendant until a few months before the incident.

—Yes, sir. I met him at Cat Sperling's funeral.

—You knew Cat Sperling, then.

—Oh, sure, sir. Everyone did. She was the town slut.

—How did you come to be aware of that?

—My daddy always said that if I behaved anything like her, he'd whup my butt till it was bloody.

—What kind of behavior constituted "behaving like Cat Sperling"?

—Um... too much lipstick... wearing leather... standing a certain way... talking in a sexy voice...

—Your father ever carry out his threat?

—Shit, yeah. He wore me out all the time. When he wasn't making me go down on him.

—Order in the court! Order! Order! Counselor, tell the witness to stay on the topic.

—Your Honor, the fact that the witness was one of the disenfranchised, the violated members of society... is not entirely irrelevant to this defense... although I did not intend to have the matter raised quite this abruptly.

—That's enough. The jury will ignore the witness's life story, and concentrate only on those facts she raises that bear on this case. Meanwhile, I'd like the bailiff to make a note of the girl's remarks and pass them on to the district attorney; we are state employees here, and there are mandatory reporting laws.

—Well, Judge, if you're gonna turn in my dad, you might as well turn in the pastor of Hillside Baptist Church as well. And the vice principal of Kramer High—he got me in the closet one day. Oh, and—

—Miss McConnell, enough of that. When your testimony is through, you are to report to Detective... ah... who's on duty out there?... Detective Arnold. He'll take it from there. Meanwhile, if the court would care to turn its attention back to the case... Counsel? Counsel?

—Oh. Yes, Your Honor. So, despite Cat Sperling's reputation, you went to her funeral?

—Yeah. Her dad had ordered ten dozen doughnuts, you see, for afterwards, and I stopped by to get directions to the house. And that's when I saw Jody... the defendant. He was standing in the distance... in the shade of an oak tree. He was all in black. Trench coat and all. He looked lonely. Not like he was really invited. He was staring at all the relatives, at the coffin, at everything. With a kind of longing in his eyes. The guy seemed so sad. I wanted to talk to him. So I did.

—What did you converse about?

—Well, at first, I was all, like, questions, how did she die and such. And he said, *Anemia*. Which wasn't

what I heard, I'd heard it was from something to do with sex, AIDS or such. It didn't matter nohow, 'cause she was gone no matter how you looked at it. I got him to give me directions to the Sperling place, and then he got to staring at me in a way I never been stared at before. Like he could see right into my mind. And he said to me, Are you afraid of the dark? And I said, Yeah. And he said, Very afraid? And I said, Yeah. And he said, Why? And I said, Because things come to me in the night. And he said, I can take that fear away forever. I can take you on a journey with me. Across the river of death. To the farthest shore. To the kingdom of ultimate darkness. I look into your eyes and I see you're like me, you don't got nothing to lose. I said, You sure are right about that. He said, I'm garnering a group of people to take with me on this journey. It's a quest, you see. Like searching for the Holy Grail. The cup of blood. I just know you want to come with me, Natalie. I can see it in your eyes. One time, I met these creatures from a place beyond our world. They called out to me. But I stayed behind. I had work left to do in the world. I wanted to go, but I thought of all the dispossessed of the world, all the young ones crying out for release, and I knew I had to bring a few with me in order to be worthy of my place among the dark ones.

—Did the defendant mention Jeremy Kindred at all? The fact that his friend physically prevented him from being sucked into the vampire world?

—No.

—So you had no idea there was any side to the story other than what you were being told.

—That's right, sir.

—Did you believe him?

—Not really, sir. I thought he'd lost it. But there was something real hypnotic about his voice and such. He was sexy, too. In a scary kind of way.

—Sexy and scary?

—He was pale and thin. His cheeks were all sunken and his eyes, too. He looked like he hadn't eaten in days and he'd stayed out of the sun... well, like he was dead, really. Dead but beautiful. I guess what was exciting about him was... there was a wrongness. About the way he moved. The way he smiled. Like they weren't *his* lips, *his* limbs. Do you know what I mean? Like something was animating his body and such. Possession or something. I touched his shoulder.

Flinched from it. It was cold as ice. But then again I felt I wanted to warm him up all over. I wanted to give him what I'd denied all those other men who took what they wanted from me. He was different. I wanted to make love to him. And later, we went back to the doughnut van, and, in the back, I did make love to him. I think of it as that, though he didn't really do much. I did all the moving. I'd never used Dad's van for that before, and it was sticky on account of all the bits of custard filling and the little patches of spilled powdered sugar and all. He sat back against a pile of delivery boxes and I didn't care that they were getting all crushed. I just ate him up, impaled myself on him. rode him up and down, wrapped my titties around his face, but all the while he was muttering about other things... about banging and banging on the gates of hell till his fists were raw and bloodied from the rough stone... I didn't know what he meant until that night, when I met him again at the Forbin-St. Cloud monument and saw him kneeling at the carved mouth of hell and beating his fists against the granite... but I didn't care, you see, because I'd found someone as lost as me, maybe even more lost, someone I could give to freely, someone I could love.

—So you became a member of his... secret society.

—If you could call it that. It was just him and three of us girls. He called us the Brides of Dracula. He drank our blood. He mixed it with vanilla syrup and ice in a blender. Said he needed the ice because the heat of the blood would send him straight to the other world, and he wasn't ready yet, he still had things to do in the human world. The other two girls were Ramona and Chastity. They're dead now. He found Ramona lurking outside a homeless shelter over there in the city. Chastity was a runaway. I know what we done was wrong, but Jody, well, he had a vision and such. When he talked, we felt we belonged to something big. He gave us a structure, too, our nightly hunts. He taught us to pounce on alley cats and bite their necks and slurp down the gushing blood. That was disgusting, but it was kinda thrilling, too. And now and then as a really special treat he'd fuck us. But it was always with us doing all the work, and him staring off into space, thinking I guess about his great vision. Which he finally explained to us. The day before... you know.

—**He** told you ... what? That you were going to go on a killing spree?

—Not exactly. **I** remember it perfectly because we were having another meeting in Dad's van. We always used it for meetings now, because I could always get the van between deliveries, and now, behind the smell of apple-cinnamon and chocolate, there was also a permanent smell of sex. Because the three of us... the girls **I** mean, not Jody .. we'd do stuff in there while we were waiting for him. Thing is, you know how it is when us girls hang out together all the time ... our periods kind of fall into sync. And so all three of us were on the rag at the same time. And we were all laughing about it, how it had gotten closer and closer in the last two months and now, this time, third time lucky and such, bang, same day, same second practically. And we were all idly fingerbanging each other while we talked about our fucked-up lives. So finally he shows up. And he's all, 1 smell blood. God, **I** smell blood! It makes me feel all... oh, I want it, I want it. And since we're all already with our panties down, and all moist from playing with each other, he's all over us, pulling out our tampons, lapping at us like a cat cleaning its ass. God, it was hot! I never felt that way before. The way he flecked my clitoris, the way he tickled my lips, teasing out every last flake of coagulating blood...

—Your Honor, spare us this pornography! Objection, objection!

—Your Honor, this evidence speaks directly to the nature of the defendant's mental illness ... his delusional obsession with the, ah, sanguinary aspects of the human body.

—Young lady, get it over with, and proceed to the question at hand.

—Yes, Your Honor. **Um**... what were you going to ask me, sir?

—Well, Natalie. You've just explained that Jody became unusually animated as a result of the smell of blood.

—That's true, sir. **As** I say, usually he would just lay there while we rubbed up and down on him, but that day he was excited. He even came. **I** mean, he just *spurted*.

—I don't think we need to know all that, but did the defendant then say anything about his grand vision?

—Oh, yes.

—What did he say?

—Well, as we all lay there in the back of the van, there was this good, warm feeling, you know, us against the world and such, a little tiny piece of heaven. But then Jody begins to talk about the dark path we have to trod. I had my foot in the door, he said, and I was pushing my way in, and they sent me back out into the world. They didn't think I was good enough. But I'm gonna show them. I'm the king of the

vampires. No dead dude in a coffin is gonna be badder than me.

—Did this statement contradict previous statements of his to you, and your group of followers?

—Yes, sir. He always told us he was sent up here from the other world, that he had given up the world beyond so he could find disciples and teach all of them the dark path before he went back. Now he sounded bitter and angry, and we didn't know what to do.

—What did he say next?

—We're going to do something really big, he said. An orgasm of blood and pain. We're gonna kill, maim, disembowel, decapitate, swim in the lubricous life force that spews from the veins of the dying. The way he said it, you gotta believe, it sounded... poetic... beautiful... I could feel the blood rushing joyfully from my pussy to meet his eager tongue... I could think about nothing but all that blood, swirling over me, carrying me toward the final climax in waves of crimson passion, oh God, Jody made me feel that good, all of us, he made us want to kill and to die the way we wanted his arms around us, his cock inside us and such.

—And how do you feel about Jody now?

—I love him, sir.

—Do you think he hears you, hiding as he does behind his wall of self-imposed silence?

—I don't know. Yeah. Maybe not. Maybe he doesn't hear any of us no more, maybe he's listening to a different music, the rushing of the river of death.

—I want to spare the jury yet another description of the crimes themselves... the slashing, the torture... all the things you witnessed but did not participate in... because you... had a twinge of conscience.

—I chickened out. I shoulda done them things. Like all the other girls did.

—Then you would be in trouble, Natalie.

—I don't care! Do you understand? I love him. I want to go with him! Into the ultimate kingdom. Into the dark country. Jody, listen to me, you motherfucker... I didn't mean to betray you... I'm here because I want them to know the truth... what you mean to me...

—Your Honor, the witness isn't supposed to be talking to the defendant.

— Sustained. Kindly confine your comments to the questions asked of you, Miss—

— Your Honor! The coffin! It's busting open! The lid is sliding again!

—Got a stake handy, Bailiff? You can use my gavel as a mallet, you superstitious nincompoop. You people are... screw it, let whoever it is come out. If the ladies and gentlemen of the jury would refrain from panicking—and just what the hell do you think you're doing in my courtroom, young lady, in the nude? Have you no sense of propriety at all? Bailiff, fetch the witness a damn cloak.

—Jody.

—Young lady, you're not on the stand yet. Go and sit down right this minute or I'll cite you for contempt.

—Be silent!

—How dare you!

—In this human world, you may be a judge of men, Mr. Trepte, but there are darker courtrooms, and there are punishments more dire than death. I stand before you, a naked woman, whose flesh is colder than the grave. Touch me if you dare.

—Madam, there is no higher authority present in this chamber than this jury and this judge. If you have anything to say, you will have to wait your turn.

—So what do you plan to do, asshole, cite me for contempt?

—Bailiff, cuff her!

—Your Honor, she's just ripped off the bailiff's head!

—Sobering isn't it, Mr. Kangaroo Court, to see your enforcing officer's torso twitching on the carpet. I'm sorry that I won't be paying the dry-cleaning bill. Where I come from, we don't have money... or credit cards, for that matter.

—Uh—uh—

—Speechless, at last, Your Honor! Give me a minute while I take a sip from this poor man's gushing jugular. Excuse me while I wipe my lips clean with his matted hair. Where shall I throw it? You have a basket? Thanks. Now... where was I? Oh yes. The defendant. The silent one. You who heard voices in the night, who were labeled a paranoid schizophrenic by Dr. Shimada over there... you who have been true to your deep dark self, all this time, you who have kept the faith... I've come for you. I ain't Cat Sperling, the town slut, no more... I've worked on my accent some... you learn a lot when you hang with the undead... plenty of sixty-four-dollar words in *their* vocabulary when they've been around a couple of centuries. Look at me, silent boy. I like that you kept silent after it was over. You betrayed no one. Oh! Bullets! My, my. They go right through me. I feel nothing. No feeling, you know, when you cross over the river. No mortal feelings, anyways. Look at me, silent boy. I'm still beautiful, ain't I? Beautiful as the day you saw me. My body is as firm as when you first touched it, but now it's cold as marble. It's a dead body, Jody, a corpse. But oh, a corpse that everyone in this room wants, man *and* woman, a corpse that exudes a sensuality that the living can't match, a corpse that breathes *eternity, eternity*... Oh, Jody, you don't know how long you were watched, how long you were "groomed for that moment of sacrifice that your friend ruined for you. Oh, he meant well. But he's just an ignorant human being. And human beings are just cattle. They're here to serve us. Their Uves are over in an instant. I watched over you... saw you grow up alienated... knew you were marked to become one of us. In this world a throwaway, one of the disenfranchised... in the world beyond... a prince. When you had your fantasies of death... when you dreamed of death and woke up with a stiffie in the night... one of us was watching... perhaps in the shape of a mist, coiling about the keyhole of your bedroom door... or a black rat, sniffing its way along the floorboards... smelling the crimson of your dreams. Oh, Jody, it was all meant for you... my seduction of your dumb, sentimental friend... the party at the cemetery... partly real, partly a fabric of hypnotizing illusions. Do you understand that? Oh, your doctor noted it all down as a dementia—delusions of grandeur—megalomania—paranoia—when it was all nothing but the truth. You heard the music or the mgnt when others neara omy wma, rain, me rustling of leaves, frightened children murmuring in their sleep. Oh, we were disappointed when you didn't die the slow death that night! You have always been special to the dark ones. All your life you've heard that whispered in your ear, you've wondered if you were going mad. Those whispers were all true. You have been anointed from birth, Jody. I wasn't kidding when I called you a prince. That's exactly what you are. The Duke couldn't welcome you into the kingdom himself. His coffin has been taken faraway, for safekeeping. It's getting dangerous for us here, with all these movies and role-playing games. Lies, but

flirting with the truth. He's sent me to fetch you, Jody. I told you we were all sad when you didn't come to us. Some of us wanted to fetch you by force. But the Duke said, in his wisdom, Leave him be. The darkness is strong in him. If he cannot find the true kingdom right away, he will strive to build his own kingdom... he will mirror our world in his own world... and he will make himself worthy... and when he is ready... we will bring him in. That's what I'm here for. To finish what we started. Look at me now. Look at me, translucent as alabaster, pale as moonlight; come to me. That's right. You don't need that ugly orange prison suit any more. Those cuffs are useless now. Come to me. I twist them off with a flick of my wrist. The undead have great strength. They draw their strength from the womb of Mother Earth herself. Oh, Jody, come, come. Unzip that uniform and stand before me naked. Touch me. Look at the horrified faces of the judge and jury. They are so unimportant now. Slide your finger against the bailiff's blood, congealing on my breasts. Lick them. Lick the blood from the areola. Slow now, slow. I kiss you now. My teeth meet soft flesh. I taste blood. Give me your blood. Warm my stone heart with your last life force. Oh, Jody, Jody, you are beautiful. Give me all of you. I bite your chest... your abdomen... my fangs tease at the sensitive tip of your penis... blood engorges it... blood stiffens it... blood that will soon run gushing down my throat... oh, Jody, Jody, this is the end for you, the end and the beginning... drink me now... as I drink you... the cold of death is absolute... the warmth of life is but a shadow... and now... come... come into my coffin... I don't want to sleep alone any more... come into the coffin... into the womb... into the tomb... oh, Jody, this is love... this is death.

The transcript ends here. At least, the decipherable portion of the transcript. What follows on the tape is chaos. Screaming. Here and there a single word: blood, shit, fuck, no, no, no.

There was also the fire. The courthouse razed to the ground, the judge, the superlawyers, many others hospitalized for third-degree burns. There was also the complete disappearance of the defendant. Not a charred husk of him... not a bone... not a tooth.

There was also the silence. Not a word in the press. Not a picture in the paper. Not a clip in the news.

But you know all that. You follow the media.

Perhaps you even know about the transcript, which has been pronounced a hoax by almost every expert who has been given the privilege of examining it.

Does it matter? As a certain Roman procurator once said to a certain rabbi, in a courtroom not unlike this courtroom, two thousand years ago... *What is truth?*

It really doesn't matter to most of you. So stop reading now. Close the book. There's nothing to be gained from idle speculation about the nature of light and darkness... about the relationship between love and death... between desire and self-destruction. Get on with your lives. Go on. Do it.

Unless, of course, you can hear the music of the night...