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# Two for Confidence

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TWO FOR CONFIDENCE

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
Antonio Maurice Shaw  
May 2012

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Accepted by:  
Keith Lee Morris, Committee Chair  
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## ABSTRACT

In this comedic short story, Jamez Wythazee (pronounced “James With-a-Z”) has just left a house party after being rejected by his dream girl, Monique Nettles. Lost in his thoughts of inadequacy, jealousy, and intra-racial conflict, he does not notice that he is being followed. Before he knows it, Jamez finds himself attacked by a mysterious assailant who possesses razor-sharp claws and inhuman speed. Even more amazing, Jamez somehow survives the assailant’s attacks with little effort and completely unscathed. The mysterious attacker turns out to be a desperately hungry vampire named Maximilian Marvis. After a humorous exchange of insults and a bus ride that brings the unlikely duo to a mutual understanding of each other, the two make an agreement to help each other with their respective plights. Meanwhile, back at the party, Monique has an encounter with the host, Jeremiah Beam, which forces her to reconsider her romantic choices.

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout my life, I have found myself drawn to movies, television shows, and literature that dealt with the fantastical. It was, of course, expected for me to gravitate towards such stories when I was younger; imagination is, arguably, a young child's most powerful source of entertainment. Like any child, I was drawn to that which fueled my imagination. Tales of whimsy, adventure, fantasy, science-fiction, and the supernatural provided me a respite from my less entertaining reality. It was fortunate that most of the children's literature I read had this fantastical element to it. As I grew older, I found that my proclivity to select literature that required a willing suspension of disbelief branched out to include new, darker genres, particularly the American Gothic genre. At the same time, I also became exposed to the contemporary British humor genre. Under the influence of these two distinct styles of writing, I began to write stories that melded elements from both. It was in this hybrid genre of dark humor that I crafted my thesis, "Two for Confidence," which was originally entitled Long in the Tooth. This story deals with identities, challenges racial and social conventions, and pays homage to American Gothic and contemporary British humor.

I have attempted to write this introduction multiple times. I wanted to frame my thesis around the literary traditions of Oscar Wilde and Edgar Allan Poe. However, each time I began down that path, I found myself diverging towards the topic of racial identity. It seemed as if the story I'd written was demanding that I devote more time to that element of its composition, one that I honestly planned on glossing over. I have always

been resistant to being labeled a black writer. The immediate implication of that label is that the most important factor about anything I write isn't whether or not it's any good, but that it was written by a black person. It has always struck me that African American authors are segregated in bookstores the nation over; walk into a Barnes & Nobles, Books-a-Million, or Borders and you'll see sections of those stores that are set aside exclusively to showcase (segregate) books by authors of African descent. I understand categorizing books by genres—comedy, horror, young adult, self help, religion—but why is it acceptable to relegate race to a convenient genre, stripping millions of writers of their complexity by defining them primarily by the color of their skin? And why is this only done to black writers? Kazuo Ishiguro's books aren't displayed in a Japanese authors section. Jhumpa Lahiri isn't segregated into an Indian American section. If you wanted a copy of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, you wouldn't find it in the Spanish European section; you'd find it amidst all the other canonical works in the classic literature section. But there is no getting around the fact that the story I wrote is partially about race, and in America, such a heavy topic is hard to gloss over.

At first blush, "Two for Confidence" might seem to be little more than a story about a humorous encounter with a vampire. Jamez Wythazee, having been rejected at a party by the girl of his dreams, is on his way home when he is accosted by Maximilian Marvis, a desperately hungry vampire who is intimidated by men. However, this story is much more personal to me than its premise suggests. Like so many fiction writers before me, I tend to put elements from my real life experiences into my writing. In this case, I quite literally project my own opinions and issues with race and gender into the story by

way of the main character, Jamez. He expresses sentiments that I had from as early as my 7<sup>th</sup> grade year in school, which, incidentally, is when I developed my first major crush on a girl that was out of my league. Jamez finds himself in the difficult position of not fitting in with his most immediate social group, urban hip-hop culture. His problem is further compounded by the fact that his love-interest, Monique Nettles, is only interested in the very type of guys that Jamez loathes. His hatred of thugs exacerbates his unrequited love for Monique because, while he believes himself to be far superior to them for various reasons, he is nevertheless rejected by Monique, which contradicts his supposed superiority.

Jamez is very much concerned with reclaiming America's perception of black people from those that portray his race in the most negative and stereotypical means possible. In essence, he is trying to take what it means to be a black man in America out of the hands of the very thugs and hoodlums that white Americans consider the de facto representation of the black race. In doing so, he may come across as an Uncle Tom. I am reminded of Jean Toomer and his conflicted racial identity. In a 1922 love letter to his black girlfriend, the biracial Toomer stated, "We who have Negro blood in our veins, who are culturally and emotionally the most removed from Puritan tradition, are its most tenacious supporters." Unfortunately, that would be one of the last times Toomer ever referred to his African heritage.

Jamez, while he may seem to echo the sentiments of Toomer, is actually very different. Jamez isn't ashamed of his blackness; he is ashamed of the embarrassing and

detrimental behavior of certain black people. He does not strive to be like white people, as Toomer implies, but instead to shatter and disprove the perception of blacks as ignorant, violent, social degenerates. So, this story is, in part, engaged in a conversation about race in America. However, I choose to conduct that conversation by way of humor and pop-culture. Race is a very uncomfortable subject for many Americans, and there are lots of people who would rather avoid the topic altogether. However, I have noticed that if you make people laugh then you can have just about any discussion imaginable with them, and they will be less inclined to judge you harshly for your thoughts. As Oscar Wilde wrote in *The Nightingale and the Rose*, “If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh, otherwise they’ll kill you.”

Like Wilde’s most famous work, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, “Two for Confidence” is a comedy of manners. Characters in a comedy of manners traditionally engage each other and the audience in an exaggerated discourse on sex. By the second page of “Two for Confidence” we know that Monique opts to offer Jeremiah Beam—Jamez’s romantic rival—oral sex in a futile attempt to maintain respectability. While musing to himself on page six, Jamez goes off on an expletive-laced tirade that assaults the intelligence of Monique and all other women who pick bad-boys as romantic partners, labeling them as whores to assuage his hurt pride. In addition to flamboyant discourse about sex, characters in a comedy of manners struggle to uphold the social mores of their immediate socio-economical group, despite the fact that such an endeavor is at odds with their true desires. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde’s main character, Jack Worthington, adopts a dual identity as a man named Earnest in order to give himself an

occasional reprieve from his responsibilities. Likewise, Jack's (Earnest's) friend, Algernon, creates the fictional character, Bunbury, to serve as an alibi whenever he wants to get away from the constraints of proper society. Three of the characters in my story, Jamez, Max, and Jeremiah, play with identity, though not in the exact same manner that Jack and Algernon do.

Jamez finds it necessary to fit into urban society even though he has an intense dislike for many of the people and norms of that group. In a final act of desperation, he is even planning on playing the role of a thug in order to win Monique's affections before Max talks him out of this course of action. Max, a centuries-old British vampire, is so intimidated by men that he can only feed on female victims. Even though he is physically more than capable of killing a man, his dandy mannerisms are such that he is repulsed by the idea of using brute force to kill his prey, making him an oddity among other vampires who have no such reservations. In spite of his aversion to violence and reluctance to feeding on men, Max nonetheless assaults Jamez in an attempt to satiate his hunger. When this course of action fails, Max is left to the mercy of Jamez's keen perception and sharp tongue. Finally, Jeremiah Beam, a small-time dope dealer, adopts the persona of a well-endowed, hardened street thug in order to gain favor with women in urban society. Jeremiah pulls off this rouse so convincingly that he piques Monique's interest, much to Jamez's vexation, who knows that Jeremiah is actually a Canadian citizen whose parents are a pair of upper-middleclass dentists.

While “Two for Confidence” is a comedy of manners, the humor at play in the story is predominantly inspired by the British comedy troupe, Monty Python, and comedic author, Douglas Adams. I was first exposed to contemporary British humor by way of the movie, *Monty Python and the Quest for the Holy Grail*, a cult classic for its absurdist approach to comedy. A few years later, I discovered Douglas Adams, whose brand of humor differed from Monty Python’s in that it was moderately more cerebral while being every bit as absurd. The five books that make up Adams’ popular *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* series left an indelible mark on me when I first read them as a high school student. Adams’ influence on my comedic writing style is readily evident in the frivolous discourse between Jamez and Max.

Like Jamez and Max, Adams’ main protagonist, Arthur Dent, and his best friend, Ford Prefect, make for an unlikely pair. Arthur is an endearingly bumbling Englishman who is perpetually ill at ease, and the frequently inebriated Ford Prefect is an eccentric intergalactic field researcher and alien who is originally “from a small planet somewhere in the vicinity of Betelgeuse and not from Guildford as he usually claimed” (11). My protagonists, Jamez and Max, mirror both the bumbling incompetence of Arthur and the uniqueness of Ford. Jamez is incompetent when it comes to approaching women (especially Monique) and Max is incompetent at feeding on men. As a well-spoken, well-to-do black man with a spotless criminal record and a penchant for preppy clothing, Jamez is very much an oddity in urban society. Max is even odder by virtue of being a prim and proper English vampire. Together, they make for a proverbial odd couple.

The decision to write a story involving a vampire was partially influenced by the resurgence of vampires in pop-culture. Western society has been infatuated with vampires since Bram Stoker wrote his classic novel, *Dracula*. Anne Rice brought vampires back to the forefront of the American conscious in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but the recent entertainment explosion around this most favored of supernatural monsters is largely the direct result of Stephanie Meyer's inexplicably popular *Twilight* vampire novels and the widely popular HBO television series, *Trueblood*. Vampires are our favorite monsters because they are the most like us; they display all the emotions, attributes, and flaws that all humans have, just in an exaggerated sense. Whereas Meyer turns vampires into sickeningly romantic beings who sparkle in direct sunlight (instead of bursting into flames as traditional vampire lore dictates), *Trueblood* shows vampires in a more carnal manner—blood lust, power lust, sexual lust—that resonates more with a larger demographic of fans. For my part, I decided to portray a humorous vampire, something that we very rarely see.

While vampires aren't an American creation—legends about vampires predate the United States by many, many centuries—as an American author who has written a story with a supernatural element, I am a direct descendent of Edgar Allan Poe, the undisputed progenitor of the American Gothic genre. Poe's dark writing style that focuses on the supernatural and the macabre has fascinated me for nearly twenty years. He took the Gothic genre and added a distinct American flavor to it, even when his stories were set in decidedly European locales like *The Cask of Amontillado*. Despite the heavy influence of British humor in my story, I am confident it reads like American literature, similar to the

way Poe composed stories with European themes that, nonetheless, distinguished themselves as American by way of their concise language. No fan of allegory, Poe was very opposed to didactic writing and transcendentalism. Like Poe's works, my writing avoids overt sentimentality. The comic undertones at play in "Two for Confidence" serve as a means for addressing race and self-esteem without stating those topics directly; when you read "Two for Confidence," I hope that it makes you laugh, and I hope that it makes you think, but I hope that you enjoy it first and foremost as an entertaining story.

## TWO FOR CONFIDENCE

Jamez Wythazee couldn't understand his shitty luck with women. Around three days ago he'd decided that he was finally going to ask Monique Nettles out on a date when he saw her at Jeremiah Beam's party tonight. Earlier on the day of the party it took him roughly three hours to figure out just how he would ask her, three long indecisive hours of staring in his bathroom mirror and alternating between his voice and a comical impression of Monique's. When he arrived at Jeremiah's party, he pretended to mingle with some of the other partygoers for nearly two hours before the alcohol lowered his inhibitions enough for him to approach Monique through the crowd of bodies and loud rap music. She'd seen him coming a mile away; she always did. Tonight wasn't the first time she'd shot Jamez down, and she didn't expect it would be the last, either. Once Jamez was standing in her presence, all the liquid courage didn't matter at all, because he was immediately stupefied by her beauty, as always. This amounted to him tripping all over his words like a baby while Monique looked on with an expression that was paradoxically annoyed and amused at the same time. He was painfully aware of how lame he sounded which only served to send him into a panic. While he'd spent three hours planning what to say to her, it took Monique precisely one second to turn him down and only an additional three seconds to inform him that she wouldn't go on a date with him if he was the last mother fucker on the planet.

Immediately sensing that Monique probably needed more time to warm to his proposal, Jamez thought it would be in his best interest to leave the party at once and give

her the adequate space she needed to reconsider his offer. Unfortunately for Jamez, he would later find out that it hardly mattered how much space he gave her because as soon as he stepped back out the door into the frosty, lonely night, Jeremiah Beam—the dirty, opportunistic vulture that he was—swooped in for the kill. And it didn't take him long to convince his prey, either. A scant five minutes of frivolous flirting and Monique agreed to go upstairs with him. Jeremiah wanted the whole shebang, of course, but Monique was far too respectable to give it up to a guy the first time around, so she gave him a blowjob instead.

Jamez couldn't have known any of that was taking place as he walked back to the bus stop in the freezing January night air. He was too preoccupied with his feelings of inadequacy and resentment—so preoccupied, in fact, that he didn't realize he was being shadowed, which was very much out of character for him. Jamez possessed uncommonly astute perception that only seemed to fail him whenever a pretty face was involved. So, all that he realized while leaving the party in embarrassing defeat was that he kept getting rejected by every girl he showed an interest in. He couldn't understand it. He was smart, he was attractive, and he had an impeccable personal style that combined New England prep with an urban edge. But even as he counted off the reasons why he was such a great catch he was also painfully aware of why he kept getting turned down by girls: Jamez, unfortunately for a young black man, lacked street credibility. He hailed from Scarsdale, he used the word “summer” as a verb rather than a noun, his mother was a department chair at Harvard, and his father was CFO of an international software conglomerate. While these all should have been seen as good things, Jamez had learned very early in

life that being privileged was one of the quickest ways to get people to hate you, other than playing D&D or being a fan of Phish.

“Dammit,” he sighed, his breath trailing up and behind him like the smoke from a Swisher Sweet that he would never actually smoke. “Is it too much to ask for to be wanted by someone? To be desired?”

Incidentally, someone did desire him, and very much so. Someone had the kind of desire for him that drove people to kill—a blood lust so strong that it wouldn’t be denied. Maximilian Marvis had been trailing Jamez since he first left the party. Maximilian had arrived outside Jeremiah Beam’s party not too long after Jamez had initially arrived. He never went inside, though—not because he didn’t want to, mind you. He very much wanted to go inside. However, he couldn’t. Had he tried to step foot inside Jeremiah’s residence without being invited in, it would have been like trying to walk through a brick wall. Maximilian Marvis, you see, was a vampire, and due to that rather annoying and inconvenient vampire convention, he couldn’t cross someone’s threshold unless he was invited into the home in good faith. So, being unable to enter the party, Max simply waited outside until someone left. He was starving and was hoping that a tender girl would come outside so that he could feast on her, but for many long minutes no one came out from the party. When someone finally did come outside, it wasn’t a young, nubile girl, but instead a rather despondent-looking fellow in surprisingly dapper clothing. This was a bit of a problem for Maximilian since he always had trouble trying to feed on men. As a vampire, he was more than capable of doing so, but he always had to resort to brute

strength to do so, and he much preferred the sensual manipulation method that vampires were equally known for. As a vampire, he had absolutely no qualms with seducing men, but he found that his methods were too gender specific to work on most modern day men. But he hadn't fed in days and was so desperate for a meal that he decided to follow the fellow who'd just exited the party. Besides, the young man was so well dressed that Maximilian was sure he wasn't heterosexual, which he wagered would make his task significantly easier.

Jamez was steadily making his way through the ten city blocks it took to get back to the bus stop. Lost in his despondency, he initially didn't hear the voice behind him. He mumbled to himself over and over, cursing his bad luck, Monique Nettles, and Jeremiah Beam. He'd known all along that his chances of scoring a date with Monique were minimal at best, particularly because she had a crush on Jeremiah, and what girl wouldn't? The guy had a reputation as a well-endowed ladie's man and he threw amazing parties. He also had street credibility. He was a small time dope dealer, mostly just pot and low-grade pharmaceuticals that he sold to the college kids that showed up to his parties. However, even more than being a dope dealer, the thing that Jamez felt worked most in Jeremiah's favor was the fact that he had cultivated a pretty convincing thug persona. Jamez knew it was all for show, of course. Jeremiah's parents were dentists, for crying out loud. Dentists' kids weren't allowed to be real thugs; genuine hoodlums would spot their perfect, pearly smiles—the results of a strict lifelong regimen of brushing and flossing twice a day with regularly scheduled bi-annual check-ups—and immediately curb stomp them or something, of that Jamez was sure. Besides all that, Jeremiah was

originally from Canada. Nobody truly hard ever came from Canada. Canadians were just too wholesome to be hard. Maybe it was the cooler weather, or their deeper connection to nature, perhaps it was all the maple syrup, Jamez couldn't be sure. But what he was sure of was that Jeremiah Beam—who quite irritatingly insisted on being called J-Boogie—was about as hard as a soggy hotdog bun.

Of course, none of that really mattered. Whether or not Jeremiah was the roughneck he presented himself as, people thought he was. More importantly, girls thought he was—girls like Monique. With her blonde highlights, buttery brown complexion, and caramel colored eyes, Jamez thought she was a dead ringer for Beyoncé Knowles. Monique, for her part, was fully aware of how attractive she was. She possessed what was known as an SBF—Stupefying Beauty Field—which granted her formidable power and influence over certain people's composure and mental faculties. She secretly delighted in the way most men—and a fair share of women—stumbled all over themselves in her presence, making complete idiots of themselves in order to accommodate her or win her favor. She was especially aware of how desperately in love Jamez was with her, and it became something of a game for her to see how many ways she could reject him.

It wasn't that Jamez was a wholly unappealing romantic prospect; she recognized that he was attractive, intelligent, and a good, safe pick. But that was precisely the problem; Jamez was safe, which Monique equated with boring, as billions of girls have been wont to do since the beginning of the human race. Had Eve been presented with

another option in the Garden of Eden—say, Joey or Raul—she likely would have left poor Adam to name all the plants and animals of the world by himself, along with whatever other tasks they were supposed to complete while in paradise. Monique also came from a similar background to Jamez, the only child to a pair of lawyers from Manhattan who had her attend one of the most prestigious private schools in the country. But despite being smart and well-to-do, she had issues with her self-esteem. Like so many pretty girls, she was innately insecure, which is why she always went for guys like Jeremiah. Possessing a Stupefying Beauty Field offered Monique absolutely no protection from making horrible romantic choices.

Jamez was particularly vulnerable to Monique's beauty, however. He knew that he frequently made a fool of himself where she was concerned, but he couldn't help himself. It was as if some invisible force compelled him to repeatedly go against his better judgment. He was also convinced that Monique would gladly date him if only he were more stereotypical, more like Jeremiah. He pondered all of this as he sulked his way toward the bus stop, his emotions all tangled. He very much hated Jeremiah and those similar to him. As far as Jamez was concerned, Jeremiah and those of his ilk perpetuated negative stereotypes about black men. They eagerly promoted the idea that black men were barely literate, hyper-sexed, semi-feral individuals with an adverse reaction to wearing clothing that actually fit. What really irritated Jamez was that, except for being hyper-sexed, Jeremiah Beam was none of those things, yet willingly pretended to be. Jamez shivered, half from a sudden gust of cold air and half from his cold contempt of Jeremiah and thugs the world over. The shivering must have triggered his body's natural

self-preservation response because he felt a sudden surge of boiling hot rage as he thought about what Monique and Jeremiah might eventually do, or even worse, what they might have been doing at that very moment.

“Stupid girls! Dumb whores! Always running after the *bad boy* and then crying like little bitches when their hearts get broken. ‘*Oh, I can’t believe you’d do this to me! Why would you fuck my best friend? And my sister? And my Aunt Maybelle? And my fucking cousin twice removed?*’ Yeah, why indeed? Dammit, Monique . . . damn whore . . . she’s probably back there swallowing his DNA right now.”

And actually, she was. But that was hardly important right then and there because at that very moment Jamez was startled to hear a voice behind him.

“I’d like to swallow your DNA,” said the voice.

Jamez spun on his heel and came face to face with nothing but the cold night air. He stared for a few seconds then looked to his right at the towering evergreen bushes that lined the sidewalk for as far as the eye could see in either direction. He peered into the depths of the glossy green leaves that reflected some of the pale yellow glow of the lantern-styled street lights that also lined the sidewalk. After a few tense moments of abated breathing, his heart settled a bit and he turned to continue toward the bus stop. He must’ve imagined it. He only took two steps before a figure came dashing out of the bushes at an impossible speed to stand before him.

“Holy shit! What the hell, man?” Jamez shrieked, jumping back three feet. Before he could even land, the figure advanced on him at blinding speed, talon-like hands swatting at him multiple times in rapid succession. He should have been ripped to shreds, but instead he dodged every single slash with a shockingly controlled speed and grace that Jamez was completely unaware he possessed. While his assailant swung at him with increasingly desperate and inefficient swipes, Jamez’s moves were remarkably more reserved and efficient, wasting absolutely no more energy and movement than necessary to evade each attack. As quickly as the assault began it was over. The attacker, who had previously been a blur of motion, regarded Jamez with, ironically, bewildered suspicion.

“Impressive reflexes; how the hell did you do that?” asked the figure in front of him, a slender and pale man with dark hair and icy blue eyes who, Jamez noted, looked remarkably similar to Ezra Koenig, the lead singer for Vampire Weekend.

“Look man,” Jamez started, his eyes wide and his heart in his throat. “I don’t know who the hell you are or what the fuck you want but you’d better get out of my damn face right now before I break my foot off in your ass!”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time. And that’s an unbelievably nasty mouth you’ve got there,” said the Ezra Koenig look-a-like.

“Don’t you worry about my mouth, you gayblade. I’ve already sized you up and I outweigh you by at least fifty pounds, and I’m clearly faster than you. So, just run along and no one’s blood will have to be spilt tonight.” Jamez could tell that his bluff wasn’t working, particularly because he always sucked at displays of bravado. It was his voice,

he told himself. His voice lacked the adequate amount of bass needed for his threats to be taken seriously. It wasn't necessarily that he couldn't be an imposing figure, because he certainly could. Jamez had a very thinly veiled superiority complex that was born of his intelligence, razor sharp tongue, and brutally keen perception. Ever analytical, once Jamez focused his attention on people for the purpose of critiquing them, they often fled from the encounter feeling completely exposed, dissected, and somewhat desecrated. His reputation preceded him and people in the know were usually very much disinclined to engage him in any type of argument or battle of wits. Despite his mental intimidation, though, Jamez was only physically intimidating in his wildest dreams. Otherwise, he was no more threatening than a girl scout. Furthermore, as aware as he was of everyone else's shortcomings, he was far more aware of his own. For instance, he cringed on the inside when he threatened to spill the strange man's blood, chastising himself for sounding so corny and disingenuous.

For his part, the creepy little man smirked at Jamez and his threat.

"Interesting that you should mention spilt blood, mate." The guy tilted his head to the side and stared creepily at Jamez in much the same way that a wolf ponders its cornered prey just before it strikes.

"I can't help but notice that you're pondering me in much the same way that a wolf does just before it strikes," Jamez said. "Look, dude," he continued, "I really don't have time for this. I just got rejected, some asshole is probably banging the girl of my dreams right now, and it's cold. Please just move out of my way, you vampire-wannabe."

The pale man immediately straightened his head and glared at Jamez as if he wanted to punch him in the face instead of devour him, a change that Jamez was happy to accept. When the man opened his mouth two long fangs popped into place, making a noise similar to a switchblade.

“My name,” the suddenly fanged-man hissed, “is Maximilian Marvis. And I’m hungry. Sucks to be you, hey mate?”

Jamez, rather than being shocked, simply raised an eyebrow and stared at the man in front of him as if he’d just let rip an embarrassingly large fart. “Your name is *Maximilian*? Seriously?”

Maximilian looked confused. “Yes. And what of it?”

Oddly enough, Jamez felt himself slowly losing his fear of the weird guy in front of him. He couldn’t really explain why, but something about a vampire named Maximilian was just too funny for him to be sufficiently terrified for his life.

“You’re a vampire . . . and your name is *Maximilian*? What’s wrong, were all the other played out vampire names like Vlad and Lestat already taken?” Jamez asked.

“Are you . . . are you mocking me?” Maximilian asked.

“Look Max—I’m gonna call you Max, by the way—you can’t go around announcing yourself as Maximilian Marvis, dude. It’s not a good look.” Jamez was looking at Max the way school kids throughout the generations have looked at the ubiquitous “dirty boy” in class.

It was at that point that Max realized he'd lost the element of surprise and the supposedly paralyzing effects granted to vampires by their will to kill. Without that, Max felt weak and unsure of himself. This always seemed to happen to him when he tried to prey on men, which is why he hunted women whenever he had the choice. Women were much more susceptible to his powers than men. He was still fully capable of killing men, but it always involved him using his supernatural strength and, more often than not, that made a mess that he didn't like to deal with afterward. Though he was a vampire, Max was also a prude and tried to avoid unnecessary violence as much as that was possible when you made your living by drinking other people's blood. His enhanced speed and strength had already failed him, though. What was he to do?

"Oh, bollocks!" Max said, obviously perturbed.

"I'm sorry, did you just say *bollocks*? What are you, British or something? You are, aren't you? You're a British vampire! How the hell would I ever be able to live down being eaten by a British vampire?" Jamez demanded.

"Well, that's kind of the point, wouldn't you say? You wouldn't be alive, period," Max said.

"No," Jamez said suddenly.

"I beg your pardon?" asked Max.

"You heard me. No."

"No what?" Max asked.

“No, you can’t eat me. I’d never be able to show my face in the hood again,” Jamez said with the sort of finality that a father has when he tells his little son that he can’t have any soda before bedtime. Unfortunately, Max was in no mood for finality.

“For crying out loud,” Max shouted, flailing his arms about, “You wouldn’t be alive a’tall, aren’t you listening to me? Do you not understand the gravity of the situation you’re in? And not to be rude, but you don’t really strike me as the type of person who hails from the hood in the first place.”

“How’s that?” Jamez asked. “What is it about me that makes you so certain that I don’t fit in with the hood crowd?”

“Well . . . I mean, look at you! I’ve never seen anyone from the hood dressed like you. You’re wearing a scarf, a pea coat, and tailored jeans.”

“And sneakers,” Jamez indignantly pointed out. “Air Force Ones, to be precise. They’re standard urban issue, in case you were unaware.”

“Yes, and sneakers, but still, you don’t seem very hoodish to me, that’s all I’m trying to say,” Max said.

“So now you’re stereotyping me?” Jamez asked.

“You stereotyped me! You don’t take me seriously as a vampire because I’m British—“

“And your name’s Maximilian,” Jamez said.

“Yes, and my name is Maximilian! Don’t interrupt me! Back to my point, you don’t take me seriously because you’re an arrogant, prejudiced Yankee!” Max said.

“Oh, I take you quite seriously enough, I think. It’s not every night that someone leaps out from behind some shrubbery and attempts to eat me. You have no sense of propriety, Max, I’ll tell you that much,” Jamez calmly replied.

“Propriety? You’re the one that has no sense of propriety! I’m a vampire! I feed on human blood! You’re a human, presumably bursting at the seams with blood. You’re supposed to shriek and beg for your life—perhaps run around a little while imploring the Lord to save you—and then be drained of your life’s essence by me. That’s the way it’s always been for centuries on end now.” Max was taking deep, quick breaths.

Jamez pursed his lips and regarded Max for a few seconds before finally saying, “Well, I’m certainly not going to run from you. After that little dance we just did I’m far too tired for all that. Besides, I just bought these sneakers—I’m not about to scuff them up running away from an ineffective vampire who couldn’t even land a single hit on me.”

“Ineffective? You miserable little . . . you’ve got a lot of . . . I could end you, right here, right this instant!” Max yelled as he jumped up and down, stomping his feet like a child having a temper tantrum.

Jamez started laughing uncontrollably while Max looked on in complete disbelief. Max had had just about all he could take of this indignity. He wondered what kind of world he lived in where a lowly mortal could dare laugh in the face of a vampire.

“Do you mind telling me what’s so bloody funny?”

“Ha! Bloody! What are the odds that you would actually say that? And right after that first thing.” Jamez was bent over with laughter now, his hands on his knees, trying to regain some sense of composure.

“Oh yes, well, about that . . . what the hell are you talking about?” Max demanded, crossing his arms across his chest like a child whose favorite toy had just been taken from him.

“Dude, you said you could *end* me. I mean, really? Someone’s been watching way too much *Trueblood* or something. Anyway, this has been infinitely fun and all that jazz, but please just leave me alone. The last thing I need after being rejected by a girl is to be eaten by a vampire.” Jamez turned to face the curb after he said that, trying his best to pretend that Max was no longer there. Even while his life was very literally in peril, Jamez still couldn’t take his mind off of Monique. She’d long since taken her mind off of him, though.

Back at the house party, she and Jeremiah were just putting the wraps on their oral transaction, although *transaction* was perhaps not the most apt word choice since it implies a mutual exchange of goods and services. This was no transaction. It was a free give away, Monique freely giving away her dignity for the promise of a jaw-dropping sight. Under normal circumstances, she would never have given a blowjob to any man that she wasn’t in a committed relationship with. Even then, standard procedure dictated at least a three month waiting period before offering him oral sex, even though it was

very much expected that he would have done the favor for her innumerable times within that same three month period. If Monique was ever pressured to break protocol, she always circumvented the situation by responding as demurely as possible, “No, boo, I’m not ready yet.” One look into her mesmerizing eyes and even the horniest of perverts would submit to her coy will. Such were the benefits of being stupefyingly attractive. So, it was no small matter that she’d compromised her standards in order to slob Jeremiah’s knob, and all while he had a house full of partygoers, no less.

It was very unfortunate, then, that Jeremiah’s mythic proportions were just that, a myth. Or, more accurately, the gossip concerning Jeremiah’s penis size only told half the story. Two weeks prior to attending his party, Monique and some friends of hers were out at a night club when they noticed Jeremiah come in with a small entourage of his trashy looking friends. Being surrounded by such undesirables made Jeremiah seem more impressive by comparison. This was a strategy that Monique was intimately familiar with; she frequently surrounded herself with a retinue of girlfriends who were decidedly less attractive than she was. This amplified her already potent SBF. One of her girlfriend’s proceeded to tell Monique and the others about Jeremiah’s large dick, which she had first-hand experience with almost two years ago.

“And girl, when I say *thick*,” the friend had explained, “I mean *THICK-K!*” It’s an oft stated fact that it’s not so much the length of a man’s penis that is really important to a woman’s sexual pleasure, but instead, the girth of his penis. At least, that’s what *Cosmopolitan* said.

When Monique inquired why her friend was no longer with Jeremiah despite his prodigious member, she quickly responded, “Oh, um, he has a short attention span,” and then quickly excused herself to go get another drink. Monique felt that was a rather odd reason to stop seeing someone, but she didn’t linger on the thought for very long; she resolved to experience Jeremiah’s big dick for herself. That, along with his swag and street cred, made Jeremiah a very desirable love prospect for Monique. But any notions Monique had of the two of them becoming a happy couple shriveled up after the blowjob. Every pair of eyes at the party was on the two of them when she followed Jeremiah upstairs. It bothered Monique, but she felt it would be worth it in the end. Once they’d entered his bedroom, Monique made sure that his door was locked. Jeremiah wasted no time while her back was turned to him; when she turned around, he was lying on his bed with his pants pulled down around his ankles. Monique was briefly taken aback when she noticed that he was wearing tightie-whities. Who the hell still wears those? She soon made a more startling discovery.

As she approached his bed, Monique noticed that Jeremiah’s penis was barely visible amidst his bushy pubic hair. Panic began to sink in. Had she compromised herself for this? No, it couldn’t be that small. Maybe he was a grower, not a shower. That had to be the case, she convinced herself. But it wasn’t. She went through with the act hoping that Jeremiah would actually prove to be a grower. When he’d reached full mast, Jeremiah did live up to the description Monique’s girlfriend had given. He was, indeed, incredibly thick. Unfortunately, he was also incredibly short. Jeremiah Beam had the world’s thickest chode. Its dimensions were comparable to a bottle of headache medicine.

Monique now understood what her friend really meant about Jeremiah's "short attention span," but why hadn't she been more forthcoming? After the whole ordeal was over, Monique received her answer. Like he did with every girl he had sexual encounters with, he offered her a "lifetime" 75% discount on any drugs she'd be interested in buying from him. Was this guy serious? Perhaps all the other women he'd slept with (or received blowjobs from) were willing to be bribed into silence with dirt cheap weed and Adderall, but Monique wasn't remotely interested in the offer. To drive her point home, she slapped the hell out of him and turned to storm out of the bedroom. But when she reached the door, instead of storming out, she stopped and paused. She turned around and calmly regarded Jeremiah. He must have thought she had a change of heart because a cocky smile spread across his face and he tilted his head to the side, slowly nodding as if to say, "That's right. Come to daddy." Monique smiled as sweetly as possible then casually walked back over to where he was standing and slapped the fuck out of him again. Then she left. She went back downstairs and scanned the crowd for signs of the friend that had given her a ride to Jeremiah's party, but couldn't spot her. A quick glance at her cellphone revealed that she had absolutely no reception. She was stuck at the party. Thinking about the capricious and often spiteful way she manipulated scores of people prior to this night, she realized that she had this coming to her.

"Karma really is a bitch," she thought out loud, "just like me." She was suddenly surprised to find herself wondering where Jamez Wythazee was, and what he was doing, but even if an answer had been forthcoming she wouldn't have believed it.

Back outside in the stinging winter air, Jamez was freezing his ass off while desperately trying to ignore Max, who, in turn, was desperately trying not to be ignored. If he didn't feed soon, his hunger would send him into a supernatural rage that would expose the existence of vampires to the unaware human populace. Despite his best efforts to seem menacing and predatory, Max found himself practically begging Jamez to be his willing victim.

"Must we go through this?" he asked Jamez.

"Yes we must! Are you freaking kidding me? I feel like I'm taking crazy pills right now! You're trying to eat me and I don't really appreciate that shit!" Jamez said.

Max couldn't believe his slightly pointy ears. Never in all 357 years of his afterlife had he ever heard a victim tell him how much he or she didn't appreciate being feasted on. It went against all predator-prey protocols.

"What? You don't *appreciate* it?" he asked Jamez.

"I'm sorry, do I have a stutter? Or some other type of speech impediment that hinders you from understanding my answers the first time I give them? Considering your abnormally large ears, you should be able to clearly hear everything I'm saying. But, since you insist on me reiterating myself, *you're trying to eat me and I don't really appreciate that shit*. It's not very courteous, you know, jumping out from behind bushes, startling someone half to death, trying to maim him with those unkempt talons of yours, all in a rather disgusting attempt to try and make a meal of him," Jamez said.

Max was stunned. He started massaging his temples to try and clear his mind. What was he doing wrong? Why wasn't this guy cowering in fear before him? This fellow he was trying to make a meal of had clearly been ill-informed about the dangers posed by vampires. That's it, Max thought. Perhaps this guy doesn't really believe I'm a vampire. Max stopped and poked at his fangs with his index finger then looked at Jamez with one raised eyebrow. Jamez rolled his eyes but acknowledged with a curt nod of his head that he, too, saw the fangs. This only added to Max's overall confusion, though. Perhaps the mortal didn't think the fangs were real? Max leaned towards Jamez and tilted his head back, inviting Jamez to test the veracity of his prodigious dental work.

"Seriously?" Jamez asked. When Max nodded a little too enthusiastically, Jamez let out a frustrated huff of air and tapped on each of Max's fangs with blatant annoyance.

*"Ooh, yes, so pointy, so sharp, so real. Anything else then?"* Jamez asked, mockingly affecting a British accent.

"So you know they're real, then?" Max asked, privately impressed by how spot on Jamez's accent had been.

"Yes, I'm quite convinced that they're real," Jamez said.

"Which means you also know that I'm an actual, honest-to-goodness vampire?" Max continued.

“Yes, goddamit,” Jamez said. He clenched his eyes shut and took a deep breath. After a long sigh, he turned and placed his hands on Max’s shoulders, leveling himself until they were eye to eye.

“Look, Max, I’m not going to let you eat me. I’m not sure how or why, but I know you’re incapable of it anyway. You and I both know that if you were ever going to do it, I would be dead by now. You lack the necessary confidence. You weren’t even able to put me in a trance, dude. I mean, isn’t that supposed to be one of a vampire’s main abilities? I suspect that’s why you tried a physical assault, and you weren’t even able to pull that off. I mean, I’m as surprised by that as you obviously are but whatever. You should definitely work on that. Now if you’ll excuse me, here comes my bus.” Jamez was extremely relieved to hear the familiar roar of the bus’s diesel engine.

The bus was rounding the corner at the top of the street and Jamez moved closer to the curb, waiting for the bus to stop and open its doors so that he could be rid of Max. Surely the creep wouldn’t follow him onto the bus. When the bus finally did make its stop, Jamez quickly dashed through the doors before they were even fully open. He stopped just short of the bus driver who immediately asked for bus fare.

“\$1.50, exact change only, sir.” The bus driver was a plump, middle aged black lady who looked as if she really hated her job and lot in life. Jamez noticed that she was wearing a particularly unflattering shade of lipstick—fire engine red, he guessed—and it almost seemed to glow as it contrasted against her extremely dark skin.

“No problem, just a second,” Jamez said as he fumbled around in his pockets for some loose change. It took him a few seconds to realize that he was completely without money. All he had was his debit card and license. When he looked back up at the bus driver, she was staring at him with pursed lips and a look that revealed that she thought Jamez was going to be yet another jack ass without fare who tries to argue with her and ride the bus for free. Jamez was starting to feel terribly uncomfortable as she glared at him.

He looked at the passengers on the bus to see if there might be someone he could possibly ask for fare. There was an elderly Jewish couple who were arguing with each other as if they were the only two people on the bus, a drunk blond kid with bloodshot eyes who was wearing a ripped Hollister t-shirt, a weird looking red-headed chick who had her hair in pigtails and was picking her nose, a clearly homeless guy wearing standard homeless-guy attire in earth tones—how the hell did he manage to have fare?—and a girl who looked to be about Jamez’s age, but who was also obviously a hood rat. She was bobbing her head to whatever tune was playing through the ear-buds of her mp3 player. She had golden bamboo hoop earrings, hair weave that was done up to look like a waterfall with bright blue streaks, and long neon orange fingernails. Her black and gold Baby Phat t-shirt was noticeably too small for both her ample cleavage and her ample waistline, and her jeans were so tight that they looked like they might explode off of her at any moment. She completed her look with a pair of black-and-white high heeled shoes that were fashioned to resemble a pair of Chuck Taylors. Monique would never wear

anything that tacky, Jamez thought. None of the people on the bus looked like they were willing to give him the fare he needed.

“Look,” the bus driver started, “the fare is \$1.50, exact change. If you don’t have it, then I’m going to have to ask you to exit the bus immediately.”

“But wait, I can get the money if you’ll just—“ Jamez wasn’t allowed to finish his sentence.

“Sir, get off the bus,” the bus driver said.

“But I—“

“Sir! Get-off-of-the-bus . . . now!” The bus driver was reaching for the CB radio on the dashboard in front of her, clearly about to call in a complaint.

Jamez threw up his hands in surrender and was about to exit the bus when he heard Max say, “No need for that, ma’am. I’ll pay his fare along with mine. Here you go, \$3.00, exact change. That is an amazingly flattering shade of lipstick you’re wearing. Is that fire engine red?” Max smiled broadly at the grumpy bus driver and Jamez was surprised to see her demeanor completely change.

“Why yes it is, sir. Thank you kindly. Please enjoy your ride,” the bus driver said.

“I’m sure I will, ma’am. Thank you so much,” Max replied.

The bus driver beamed at Max as if he were the most adorable thing she’d ever seen in her life. Then she looked at Jamez and her face instantly reverted back to its

previous look of annoyance. She rolled her eyes at him and closed the doors of the bus. Jamez took the seat furthest away from the sour-smelling homeless guy, which was the one right across from the hood rat. She sized him up instantly and Jamez could tell that she wasn't the least bit impressed by what she saw. Even though this girl was in no way, shape, or form the type of girl that Jamez would ever have an interest in, it still bothered him that she was so blatantly disinterested in him. I bet if my pants were three sizes too big and hanging off my ass, and if I had a disgusting golden grill in my mouth, and excessive amounts of tacky blingery she'd be falling all over herself to birth my children out of wedlock, Jamez thought bitterly to himself. Considering how politically incorrect the vast majority of his opinions on urban culture were, it was a very fortunate thing that his thoughts were private affairs. On those occasions when he actually vocalized his thoughts about hood life and ghetto individuals, it was equally fortunate that Jamez was African-American, otherwise he would surely have been branded as a vicious racist. There was nothing, however, that prevented some in the black community from labeling him an Uncle Tom. It was all pretty formulaic; the embarrassment Jamez felt due to the stereotypical behavior of thugs and hood rats sparked his contempt for them, and his condescending air of superiority fueled their resentment of him. This phenomenon was currently at play between him and the hood rat. Max, who had taken the seat right next to Jamez, noticed the silent exchange between the ghetto queen and Jamez.

“So, you have trouble with girls, do you?” Max asked.

Jamez sighed as he closed his eyes and tilted his head back. Then he immediately realized that exposing his neck to a vampire who was hell-bent on eating him probably wasn't the most prudent thing to do and straightened back up.

He turned to Max and asked, "Do you even know my name? You've been hounding me for a long time and now you're asking personal questions about me?"

"Very good point," Max replied. "So, then, what's your name? Considering that I formally introduced myself to you back there at the bus stop, it's really only due to rudeness on your behalf that I don't already know yours."

That was perhaps the most ludicrous thing Jamez had heard Max say the entire night. How often was it that someone was accused of being rude by his would-be killer?

"I'm rude? If that isn't a case of the pot calling the kettle black, then I don't know what the hell is. You've been trying to eat me all night, which—in case you were previously unaware—isn't at all polite, you bastard. And anyway, my name is Jamez. Jamez Wythazee," he said.

Now it was Max's turn to laugh. And so, he did. Quite a lot, actually. Cackle-cackle, chuckle-chuckle. He laughed so much, in fact, that the elderly Jewish couple momentarily ceased their bickering in order to cast irritated and inquiring glances in his direction. The bum was too drunk to notice, the blond kid only spared a brief glance before staring back off into space, and the girl with the red hair was still too preoccupied

with the booger in her nose. The hood rat simply increased the volume on her mp3 player.

“Wow, you’ve got the nerve to bust my balls about being named Maximilian Marvis and you’re running around with a name that preposterous?” Max asked.

Surprisingly, Jamez laughed with him. “Yeah,” Jamez said, “I never understood why my upstanding, highly respectable parents would name me ‘James’ and then actually spell it with the letter Z. It’s unique, though, I’ll give them that. And you have to admire the pun,” he finished.

“No . . . no I don’t, actually,” Max said, laughing even harder.

They both chuckled about that for a few more seconds before Jamez finally turned to Max and answered his previous question.

“To answer your question, though, yes. I have trouble with girls. They’re always shooting me down, if they even notice me at all,” he said.

Max pointed to the hood rat sitting across from them and said, “Let me show you something.”

He waved his hand out in front of him to get the girl’s attention. “Excuse me. Excuse me, miss?”

The girl looked over at him and pulled her ear buds out. “Yeah?” she asked.

“Excuse me, my dear, but would you mind if I asked your name?” Max asked, smiling at her.

“Nah, I don’t mind. It’s Quasha,” she replied.

“Ah, Quasha. Such a charming name!” Max said.

Quasha grinned from ear to ear, obviously flattered by the interesting little guy with the British accent.

“Quasha, my dear,” Max continued, “Would you mind telling me what you think of my friend here?”

Quasha looked over at Jamez, who had an embarrassingly vulnerable look on his face.

“He’s alright, I guess. Not really my type, though. I can tell he ain’t got no swag. I couldn’t really bring him back to my borough, y’know? He seems too uppity. Like he’d get shanked for coming out his mouth the wrong way to someone, y’know what I mean?” she said.

“Yes, I know exactly what you mean, my dear. I, too, was thinking he’d be a prime candidate for a shanking. Anyway, thank you for your time, so sorry to have bothered you,” Max said.

“Oh, no problem, baby. You cute anyway.” Quasha winked at Max and then put her ear buds back in.

Max looked over to Jamez, whose left leg was vigorously bouncing up and down, the heel elevated slightly off the dirty floor of the bus.

“Why did you just do that?” Jamez asked him.

“I did it to point out something to you,” Max said. “You mentioned back there on the street that I lack confidence, and you’re right. I’ve always had that problem. Men have always somehow been immune to my charms, but even with that I must admit to you that no one has ever thrown me as far off my game as you did tonight. To be quite honest, I think I was a bit intimidated by you.”

Jamez stopped bouncing his leg and surveyed the passengers on the bus.

“So, I lack confidence with women, but you’re clearly a lady killer . . . God, that was a horrible pun—I guess it runs in the family—anyway, let me ask you something. If you knew you could get away with it and no one would hear you, would you be able to feed on a guy?” Jamez asked.

“Well, yeah. Like I told you, I am a vampire. I am far stronger than any human, and faster too, *except for a very select few*,” Max said, eyeing Jamez with the briefest accusatory look. “I just prefer not to use those methods because it draws too much attention in a crowded or public space,” he finished.

“What if I could get you in a room with a guy at that party I just came from? He wouldn’t think anything weird was going on if I told him we were looking to score some drugs,” Jamez said.

“You must really hate this guy if you’re willing to offer him up to me on a silver platter like that,” Max said.

“Let’s just say that with him out of the way, my chances with a certain lady would go up,” Jamez said. He then brought Max up to speed on his numerous failed attempts at winning Monique’s affections.

Perhaps because he was a centuries-old sentimentalist and it was the oldest story in history, but Max genuinely sympathized with Jamez and his tale of unrequited love, even if it was a bit maudlin. He looked at Jamez and finally accepted that he wasn’t going to be able to feed on him. Somehow, Max had become rather fond of this guy, too fond to persist in eating him. And beyond that, there was something very peculiar about Jamez—the ease with which he accepted the existence of vampires, his strange lack of fear when faced with one trying to feed on him, and the way he evaded every single one of Max’s attacks . . . Max only knew of one type of human being that could do that, the hunters. Those humans who, through either sorcery, science, or evolution, had long ago acquired the ability to not only defend against vampires and other creatures of the night, but to hunt them down, as well. But that simply couldn’t be the explanation for Jamez; the last hunters had, themselves, been hunted into extinction a little over a century ago. Still, every fiber in Max’s cold, undead body told him to flee from this quaint young man, yet he was also inexplicably intrigued by him. Max felt strangely familiar with him, like they’d known each other for hundreds of years. Whatever it was that set Jamez apart and made him so interesting, Max resolved to figure it out. Besides, he was a vampire; he had

nothing but time on his hands. Like all vampires, Max was exceptionally aware of the passage of time. For instance, he knew that it had been exactly 15 minutes and 36 seconds since he and Jamez first entered the bus. What he didn't know, however, was how long it would take him to solve the riddle that was Jamez Wythazee. But he'd just been given the perfect opportunity to spend more time figuring it out, so, he agreed to the offer.

“Okay,” said Max. “Take me to this party and invite me in. Then show me to this guy you're talking about, so long as he's not a virgin.”

“What? But I thought vampires loved virgins? Sweeter blood and all that stuff,” Jamez asked, genuinely surprised.

Max curled his lip in disdain and scoffed, “Yeah, that's a myth. It would be like you eating boiled chicken with no seasoning. When a vampire drinks a human's blood, he tastes that individual's very soul. Your experiences are very literally the seasoning to our meal; the more you've done, or have seen, or have been through in your life, the richer the flavor of your blood. There are some vampires that love the taste of virgin blood, to be sure, but they're kind of like the food purists or vegans of your society—everyone in vampire society regards them as oddities.”

“Hm, that's a very interesting way of putting it all into perspective,” Jamez said. “But anyway, don't worry about that. Jeremiah isn't a virgin, I'm pretty sure of that,” Jamez continued.

They stayed on the bus as it completed its route. During that time they made an informal agreement to help each other out with their respective problems—Jamez would help Max work on his confidence with men and Max would help him have more confidence with the ladies in return. After about thirty minutes the bus looped back to where they had originally gotten on.

“So tell me,” Max said as they walked back to the party, “how do you plan on approaching this Monique lass this time around?”

“I’m simply going to give her what she wants,” Jamez said.

“And what might that be?” Max asked, his face alive with curiosity.

“Simple; she wants what all girls want—or at least what they think they want—a bad boy, a hard ass, a roughneck. She wants a dismissive, abusive, disinterested, manipulative, asshole who treats her like dirt and couldn’t care less about her as a human being as long as she puts out,” Jamez said.

“Well, I don’t think that’s what she really wants at all,” Max said. “It seems to me that what she and most women who fall for badboys really want is a man with confidence, which most assholes are full of, however misguided they may be.”

Jamez thought about that for a bit. It made sense. There really was no other reason for why Monique would prefer Jeremian “J-Boogie” Beam to him other than the fact that Jeremiah was confident in his approach to women. But if being confident was that easy, James thought, then I would have won Monique over ages ago.

Max could see the insecurity springing to life behind Jamez's eyes. "Look, Jamez, you are stressing this way too much. You're definitely a confident chap. I mean, you fought off a vampire, for the love of God. Do you really think that fake thug, Jeremiah, can lay claim to something that amazing?" he asked. Jamez slowly shook his head; Jeremiah certainly couldn't have fought off a vampire, hell, Jamez was still unsure how he did it.

"You don't need to pretend to be something you're not when what you already are is far better in the first place," Max continued. "A mortal's life is too short to spend it trying to be someone else; you can't expect Monique or anyone else to have confidence in you unless you have it in yourself first," he said, poking his finger into Jamez's shoulder for emphasis.

Jamez was silent for a very long time before he let out a heavy sigh. "You're right," he said, "you're absolutely right. I guess living for a few hundred years grants a certain bit of wisdom . . ." A devious grin spread across his face as he stared at Max from his periphery. "And about that *mortal's life* comment of yours, you are aware that you're only conditionally immortal yourself, right? I mean, a well-placed wooden stake, or an impromptu sunbath, and you're suddenly as mortal as the rest of us, Mister Marvis. You're only lucky you can't starve to death." Max snorted in response and they argued all the way back to the party.

When they got back to Jeremiah's house, the party was still raging on and even more people had shown up. Jamez walked up the stairs and was just about to cross the threshold when he stopped and turned to Max.

"Can I even invite you in if this isn't my house?" he asked.

"As long as you were invited into his home in good faith, you can extend the invitation to me," Max replied.

"Good. Well, do you see that douchebag right there?" Jamez asked. Max peered through the door to the fellow that Jamez was pointing at.

"Who's that chap spitting the awful free verse rap?" asked Max.

"That, my friend, is Jeremiah Beam, the owner of this decrepit apartment, and if all goes according to plan, your meal for the night. He looks intimidating, but trust me, he's the biggest pussy you'll probably ever meet," Jamez said.

Max started to protest, pointing out that the house was crawling with people who would see. "Don't you think all these people might notice me plunging my fangs into his neck?" he asked.

Jamez gave him a reassuring look and said, "Remember all that stuff you told me back there about confidence? It applies to you, too. You're simply going to walk up to him, tell him that you'd like to buy some candy, and he'll lead you upstairs thinking that you want to buy some Xanax or something from him. That's when you work your charm on him the way you did those two gracious and charming ladies on the bus. If that doesn't

work, who cares? As loud as this music is, no one will hear you if you need to resort to more physical means. Now,” Jamez said as he stepped through the door of Jeremiah’s apartment, “would you like to come in and have a drink on me?”

“I don’t mind if I do, mate. I don’t mind if I do,” Max said. He passed through the doorway slowly, crossing the threshold with his right foot first. Before he completed that first step he paused a few seconds for dramatic effect, letting his foot hover an inch or two above the floor adjacent the entrance. When he’d finally finished entering Jeremiah’s house, he visibly shivered with delight and then let out a disconcertingly creepy giggle. He saw the incredulous look that Jamez was giving him and explained, “We vampires so rarely get the opportunity to enter mortals’ homes; the feeling is simply exquisite. For us, it’s not unlike the feeling a closeted frat-boy experiences when he wakes up in the middle of the night to discover that all of his frat-brothers are still passed out and half-naked from a night of binge drinking and shenanigans.”

“God, once we get you fed we’ve got to work on your gayness,” Jamez said.

“I appreciate the offer, but shouldn’t you be trying to seduce Monique instead of me?” Max asked, looking past Jamez as if she was right behind him.

“What’s this about seducing seducing Monique?” Jamez heard someone ask over his shoulder.

He was immediately frozen with fear until he looked at Max and saw him silently mouthing the words, “Be confident, dammit.” Then Max spun on his heel and walked in

Jeremiah's direction. Jamez steadied his racing heart, gathered his wits about him, and finally turned around to face Monique just as the delay was becoming unbearably awkward.

When Monique looked into his face, her eyes registered shock. Something about Jamez Wythazee had changed and he no longer regarded her as sheepishly as he had before. He held her gaze and engaged her in a fairly casual conversation about identity, self-esteem, and the importance of being true to oneself. He was witty without being corny, intelligent without being arrogant, charming without being disingenuous, flirtatious without being crude. He was everything Monique wanted in other men yet never seemed to find. She looked at Jamez as if she'd never truly seen him before, and then it happened: Monique was stupefied. Having wielded a Stupefying Beauty Field her entire life, Monique had naturally assumed that she possessed an immunity to being stupefied. Yet she suddenly found herself stumbling over her words and unable to maintain eye contact with Jamez. Poetic justice sure was found of her tonight.

Jamez, of course, was beside himself with excitement, though he was careful not to let it show. He didn't want to inadvertently spark Monique's ire by gloating. He would really have to thank Max for his advice. Where was Max, anyway? Jamez scanned the scene and found him just in time to see him following Jeremiah upstairs. Good luck, he thought. He returned his attention to Monique and saw that she'd regained her composure. For the rest of the night the two of them talked and laughed, frequently making fun of all the times he'd made an ass of himself while in her presence.

The next morning, Jamez rose earlier than he expected, considering that he and Monique didn't leave Jeremiah's party until 3 o'clock in the morning. She never found her friend so Jamez called her a taxi and waited with her until it arrived. Before she got in the taxi, she handed him a napkin with her number scribbled on it, 777-9311. There was no kiss, but there was the promise of something more, and that was more than adequate for Jamez. Now, as he sat on his sofa watching the local news, he saw a story about a death that occurred the previous night at a house party at 1331 Ronson Blvd. Jeremiah's house. The victim, said the news anchor, was found completely drained of his blood. There was no sign of a struggle, she continued, and the only marks found on the victim were two puncture marks located on the left side of his neck.

Jamez laughed in disbelief. "Score two for confidence," he said, and turned the TV off.

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