

THIRSTY

MATTHEW T. ANDERSON



WALKER BOOKS

AND SUBSIDIARIES

LONDON • BOSTON • SYDNEY

*To S.G.
Fangs for everything*

First published 1997 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 1997 Matthew T. Anderson
Cover illustration © 1997 Les Edwards

This book has been typeset in Sabon.

Printed in Great Britain

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

ISBN 0-7445-4071-2

CONTENTS

Prologue	7
Chapter One	10
Chapter Two	23
Chapter Three	50
Chapter Four	81
Chapter Five	108
Chapter Six	123
Chapter Seven	170
Chapter Eight	211
Epilogue	229

CHAPTER ONE

It is English, and I am watching Rebecca Schwartz's head.

It tilts down ten degrees and rotates slightly to the left. The sun catches it and turns her hair a more lustrous brown. Her hand is moving across the page, and loopy letters are following her pen. I am transfixed by this, even though I am supposed to be charting the syntax of a sentence about why people become flight attendants.

I think I have a crush on Rebecca Schwartz.

I haven't spoken to her much. I am in awe of her. It would be like Moses speaking to the burning bush. Whenever I go to speak with her, I feel like I should take off my shoes. I guess I am also pretty timid. I imagine speaking with her. Sometimes I construct whole conversations where we say unusual things to each other.

I picture us walking through the forest in the spring. This is not a particularly original fantasy, I

know. For one thing, it is in about every personal ad Tom and I have ever read. "SWM," they say, "seeking SWF, non-smoker who enjoys long walks in the forest, quiet evenings by the fire and strolls by the sea." People are not very original when it comes to romance. I think that's too bad. Sometimes you want to see a personal ad that says, "SWM seeking SWF, non-smoker who enjoys flailing in pig poo, puking, and honking on bagpipes."

But I am not in the mood for pig poo today; so instead, I kiss her in the forest. There is sun and lots of mosquitoes.

I look up from my diagram and see her face rotated at one quarter as she looks towards the clock. I feel awful for having thought about kissing her. It is after the time when the bell should ring. I tap my pencil three times on the desk impatiently. I write down the phrase: "too many satisfied airline passengers".

Then the bell rings and we are going out of the room into the hall, where there is banging and shouting. I quickly try to manoeuvre towards Rebecca and her friends because she is talking to Tom, who knows her better than I do. I angle a few steps in that direction. They are heading for the lunch room. I wade towards them. Suddenly Jerk appears at my side. He is as big as a roadblock. His hand-me-down jeans are too short for his legs.

I am thinking desperately of things to say to her.

Jerk is in repellently high spirits. "Chris! Hey,

Chris, I thought that would never end. I thought – did you get number four?” He squints. “That was the one with the guy who had a stopover in Newark. It was real hard.”

I say curtly, “The hardest.” Jerk is unwelcome right now. I am considering my conversational options with Rebecca.

“It was so boring!” Jerk is still exclaiming. “So boring! Boring, boring, boring!”

“Let’s go over and talk to Tom,” I say carefully. I push in that direction. They are moving down the hall. I am keenly aware that, conversationally, appearing with Jerk in his happy-to-see-you mode is like taking a dead moose as carry-on luggage.

“More boring,” he adds cheerfully, “than a very boring thing from the planet Tedium.”

Tom, Rebecca and the rest have reached the stairs. They are going down. I am estimating whether I can reach them in time. Jerk keeps pace with me.

“Hey, Chris!” exclaims Jerk. “Isn’t that your brother? Waving to you?” He gestures down the hall away from the stairs. My brother is there, waving to me.

I swear and move in the opposite direction. No time to lose.

“Chris!” I hear my brother shouting over the din.

“It’s your brother!” Jerk says, tugging at my arm.

“Really, Jerk? I guess that would explain why he

sleeps and eats in my house.” Rebecca and Tom and the others have disappeared down the stairs.

My big brother, Paul, works his way through the lunchtime crowd to me. He is short for his age, so he has to bounce up to see me over everyone else. “Chris!” he says to me.

“What do you want?” I say.

“Tonight,” he says. “What we’re doing is going to the lynching.”

“What?” I say.

“The lynching,” he explains, shifting carefully to let someone bigger pass. “A vampire. I’m going over to Bradley tonight to see them, like, stake the undead.”

“You aren’t.”

“After Mom and Dad leave.”

“Chris –” Jerk begins, turning towards me.

“Where are Mom and Dad going?” I ask Paul.

“Out to dinner. And I have to keep you with me, slimestick. Mom said that I do. We’ll go out, and if she calls, we went to Mark’s house. We’ll be gone for maybe, like, an hour.”

“Chris,” says Jerk, “come on, all the French fries will be gone by the time we get there.”

“You’re going to drag me over to Bradley to watch a lynching?” I say hotly. “It’s not like they’re going to do it out in front of everybody. It’ll be in the court house.”

He shakes his head. “I’m there, Chris. All the media and everything are going to be there. Some girls from school are going to be there. I will be

there. And so you will be there.”

“You are just trying to assert yourself because you’re only half an inch taller than I am,” I say.

“I am not.”

“I’ll get a ruler.”

“Asserting myself.”

“I just don’t believe you,” I say, disgusted.

Paul shakes his head. “I am not going to argue about this.”

I shrug my shoulders. I head towards the lunch room.

He’s been a pain to me and to everyone since his girlfriend figured out that he is a geek and dropped him like a tarantula casserole.

When I reach the lunch room, the others – Tom and Rebecca and her friends – have already found a table and have sat down. They are talking a lot and laughing at Tom’s jokes. He gestures as part of some story and makes a face like a Gila monster.

I pass by their table and look for a way that I might be able to slip in on the end or maybe on one of the corners. I am about to set the tray down in a cramped space when Jerk says over my shoulder, “It’s too crowded. There are some seats over there.”

Rebecca looks up at me and has heard it. She elevates her slim neck.

I am feeling guilty for having tried to ditch Jerk, so now I can’t. We go and sit together, far away from the others. You have to feel bad for him, after

all. I feel bad because we all call him Jerk and he is not the person with the highest self-esteem in the world.

“Wait until Tom hears you’re going to the lynching,” says Jerk. “He’ll be so jealous, he’ll be green.”

“Green?” I say, staring at my fries. “I’m not sure I follow you.”

A year and a half ago my mother and father informed us that as soon as we go away to college, they are getting a divorce. They are waiting.

After their big fight they avoided each other. My father worked late nights at the Staticom laboratory. My mother watched television or called her real-estate clients. Things were very bad for a year. Now, though, they are eating dinner at the same time and sleeping in the same room again, and they recognize each other by sight. They do not like to fight in front of Paul and me. Now they go out to dinner alone once a month to fight.

Paul is a year older than me, so he can drive. He and his friend Mark are both into video and the media, so they jump at any chance to try and be on TV. Mark was in a crowd on the news once before, after the street near the dam flooded. You could distinctly see him behind the police cordon, waving.

They are in the front seat, and I am in the back seat. I can’t hear much of what they’re saying over the radio. It’s techno talk about the lighting booth

in the school auditorium. While they talk Mark keeps on idly making zoom-lens motions with his hands, testing out angles and shots for the camera of the imagination. As usual, Mark's hair is everywhere and curly. Paul is driving. He got his driver's licence recently, so he is at some stage where he constantly talks to people driving around him. "Uh-dur, ma'am!" he says. "Right of way?"

We pass along through the avenue of pines by the reservoir's edge. The evening has not turned the sky dark yet. The trees stand out against the clouds. We are almost out of the town. We pass a series of slanted fields.

Because I cannot hear Paul and Mark, I sit back in the seat and think what if I were going to the lynching with real friends, really cool ones who don't necessarily exist. I picture us taut with excitement and dressed in black. We are talking about the meaning of oppression; my twenty-five-year-old girlfriend is staring moodily out of the window. One of my friends has brought his sketch-book because he wants to catch the lineaments of human depravity and also pain and suffering. This is what artists do sometimes.

We are on Route 495. Mark is flipping between radio stations.

"Look at this idiot!" says my brother. "It's often customary to drive in a lane."

"Where did they find the last body?" Mark asks, focusing his invisible camera on his reflection in the darkening windows.

Paul stops for a red light. "I think on the roof of the hardware store over on the other side of town. Nice turn signal, dork-wad."

We go to McDonald's. I order a double hamburger, six-piece McNuggets and a medium fries. I have been very hungry lately. We drive into the centre of town. We go past the parking lot, because it is full. People are already clustered around the court house, yelling and shouting. Police lights are flashing in the gloaming.

We park in front of the Bradley House of Pizza and get out. Paul starts to feed the meter and Mark reminds him that it is after six and that he is a moron. I feel stupid carrying my McDonald's bag, and my fingers are all sticky from the fries. I shift from foot to foot and chew.

We head down to the mob. Everyone is still relatively pleasant. The police are putting up barriers to keep a clear path up the steps of the court house. People are chatting. A woman who dressed in a sleeveless pink top when the sun was up is rubbing her upper arms and shivering. "Oh god, I know," she says to her friend.

Vampires are lynched, traditionally. It is too costly to hold them for trial. A full-grown vampire is immortal if well fed, but can't live long without human blood; and it is tricky to get donors. There's no need for a trial, I guess, because there's not much doubt about vampires. There are, after all, the pointy teeth and the mirror problems. Whenever their blood-lust is upon them, their fangs slide

forward, and they have no reflection to speak of. And once people find those signs, it's all over for the vampire. If you are a vampire and still alive, people know you must be guilty of murder. There's no other alternative – no other way you could live. So sometimes they will burn you. Usually they will drive a stake through your heart.

We wait. As the evening grows darker, the crowd gets larger and sounds angrier. The police who are waiting look round nervously and occasionally consult one another. One of them is sitting in the squad car, muttering into the CB.

People stare at me as I dip my McNuggets into the barbecue sauce. The pieces keep sticking in my throat. I want to finish them as quickly as possible.

I crumple the recycled bag and throw it into a rusty barrel. Mark and Paul have made their way through the crowd to the news vans, where technicians are setting up lights and a camera crew is connecting wires.

We hear sirens a long way off. Everyone starts to fall silent. I scuffle my shoe on the pavement and look for something to stand on. A father has picked up his little daughter and perched her on his shoulders. The police are walking up and down, asking people to step back from the barriers. The news cameras are ready and technicians are squinting into the viewfinders.

The police escort arrives, sirens blaring. Everyone is staring.

The doors open and police hurry out, sur-

rounding the car. Some hold pistols aimed at something inside. A cluster of officers surrounds the back left door, and they are taking someone out.

The vampire is a young woman, or at least she looks young. She is fair-haired, and her hands are bound behind her by cuffs on a heavy metal bar. The crowd moves forward to see; she glares sideways at them. They press against the barriers. The police run up and down, motioning them back. People are screaming foul names at her, calling her a murderer and a witch. Some high-school kids are holding up a little mirror, slanting it, ducking to see if they can catch her reflection. "You bitch!" one man is screaming at her, bellowing so loud he leans across the barrier. "You bitch!" On the other side, an old woman is crying, sobbing – "My baby! My baby!" Two police officers are holding the old woman back and I do not know whether her baby is a victim or the vampire herself.

The vampire stumbles up the steps of the old court house. She is being pushed by one of the policemen. Someone throws an empty Coke can and it bounces softly off her head.

She turns on the highest step and looks at us. She gazes across the crowd, her mouth tight and closed.

Then she looks at me. She is staring at me.

I turn round to see if there's someone gesturing or someone who's caught her attention, but she is staring just at me.

She knows me.