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THE VAMPIRE LESTAT

Anne Rice



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**DOWNTOWN
SATURDAY NIGHT
IN THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY**

1984

I am the vampire Lestat. I'm immortal. More or less. The light of the sun, the sustained heat of an intense fire – these things might destroy me. But then again, they might not.

I'm six feet tall, which was fairly impressive in the 1780s when I was a young mortal man. It's not bad now. I have thick blond hair, not quite shoulder length, and rather curly, which appears white under fluorescent light. My eyes are grey, but they absorb the colours blue or violet easily from surfaces around them. And I have a fairly short narrow nose, and a mouth that is well shaped but just a little too big for my face. It can look very mean, or extremely generous, my mouth. It always looks sensual. But emotions and attitudes are always reflected in my entire expression. I have a continuously animated face.

My vampire nature reveals itself in extremely white and highly reflective skin that has to be powdered for cameras of any kind.

And if I'm starved for blood I look like a perfect horror – skin shrunk, veins like ropes over the contours of my bones. But I don't let that happen now. And the only consistent indication that I am not human is my fingernails. It's the same with all vampires. Our fingernails look like glass. And some people notice that when they don't notice anything else.

Right now I am what America calls a Rock Superstar. My first album has sold 4 million copies. I'm going to San Francisco for the first spot on a nationwide concert tour that will take my band from coast to coast. MTV, the rock music cable channel, has been playing my video clips night and day for two weeks. They're also being shown

in England on 'Top of the Pops' and on the Continent, probably in some parts of Asia, and in Japan. Video cassettes of the whole series of clips are selling worldwide.

I am also the author of an autobiography which was published last week.

Regarding my English – the language I use in my autobiography – I first learned it from the flatboatmen who came down the Mississippi to New Orleans about two hundred years ago. I learned more after that from the English language writers – everybody from Shakespeare through Mark Twain to H. Rider Haggard, whom I read as the decades passed. The final infusion I received from the detective stories of the early twentieth century in the *Black Mask* magazine. The adventures of Sam Spade by Dashiell Hammett in *Black Mask* were the last stories I read before I went literally and figuratively underground.

That was in New Orleans in 1929.

When I write I drift into a vocabulary that would have been natural to me in the eighteenth century, into phrases shaped by the authors I've read. But in spite of my French accent, I talk like a cross between a flatboatman and detective Sam Spade, actually. So I hope you'll bear with me when my style is inconsistent. When I blow the atmosphere of an eighteenth-century scene to smithereens now and then.

I came out into the twentieth century last year.

What brought me up were two things.

First – the information I was receiving from amplified voices that had begun their cacophony in the air around the time I lay down to sleep.

I'm referring here to the voices of radios, of course, and phonographs and later television machines. I heard the radios in the cars that passed in the streets of the old Garden District near the place where I lay. I heard the phonographs and TVs from the houses that surrounded mine.

Now, when a vampire goes underground as we call it – when he ceases to drink blood and he just lies in the earth – he soon becomes too weak to resurrect himself, and what follows is a dream state.

In that state, I absorbed the voices sluggishly, surrounding them with my own responsive images as a mortal does in sleep. But at some point during the past fifty-five years I began to 'remember' what I was hearing, to follow the entertainment programmes, to

listen to the news broadcasts, the lyrics and rhythms of the popular songs.

And very gradually, I began to understand the calibre of the changes that the world had undergone. I began listening for specific pieces of information about wars or interventions, certain new patterns of speech.

Then a self-consciousness developed in me. I realized I was no longer dreaming. I was thinking about what I heard. I was wide awake. I was lying in the ground and I was starved for living blood. I started to believe that maybe all the old wounds I'd sustained had been healed by now. Maybe my strength had come back. Maybe my strength had actually increased as it would have done with time if I'd never been hurt. I wanted to find out.

I started to think incessantly of drinking human blood.

The second thing that brought me back – the decisive thing really – was the sudden presence near me of a band of young rock singers who called themselves Satan's Night Out.

They moved into a house on Sixth Street – less than a block away from where I slumbered under my own house on Prytania near the Lafayette Cemetery – and they started to rehearse their rock music in the attic some time in 1984.

I could hear their whining electric guitars, their frantic singing. It was as good as the radio and stereo songs I heard, and it was more melodic than most. There was a romance to it in spite of its pounding drums. The electric piano sounded like a harpsichord.

I caught images from the thoughts of the musicians that told me what they looked like, what they saw when they looked at each other and into mirrors. They were slender, sinewy, and altogether lovely young mortals – beguilingly androgynous and even a little savage in their dress and movements – two male and one female.

They drowned out most of the other amplified voices around me when they were playing. But that was perfectly all right.

I wanted to rise and join the rock band called Satan's Night Out. I wanted to sing and to dance.

But I can't say that in the very beginning there was great thought behind my wish. It was rather a ruling impulse, strong enough to bring me up from the earth.

I was enchanted by the world of rock music – the way the singers

could scream of good and evil, proclaim themselves angels or devils, and mortals would stand up and cheer. Sometimes they seemed the pure embodiment of madness. And yet it was technologically dazzling, the intricacy of their performance. It was barbaric and cerebral in a way that I don't think the world of ages past had ever seen.

Of course it was metaphor, the raving. None of them believed in angels or devils, no matter how well they assumed their parts. And the players of the old Italian commedia had been as shocking, as inventive, as lewd.

Yet it was entirely new, the extremes to which they took it, the brutality and the defiance – and the way that they were embraced by the world from the very rich to the very poor.

Also there was something vampiric about rock music. It must have sounded supernatural even to those who don't believe in the supernatural. I mean the way the electricity could stretch a single note forever; the way harmony could be layered upon harmony until you felt yourself dissolving in the sound. So eloquent of dread it was, this music. The world just didn't have it in any form before.

Yes, I wanted to get closer to it. I wanted to *do* it. Maybe make the little unknown band of Satan's Night Out famous. I was ready to come up.

It took a week to rise, more or less. I fed on the fresh blood of the little animals who live under the earth when I could catch them. Then I started clawing for the surface, where I could summon the rats. From there it wasn't too difficult to take felines and finally the inevitable human victim, though I had to wait a long time for the particular kind I wanted – a man who had killed other mortals and showed no remorse.

One came along eventually, walking right by the fence, a young male with a grizzled beard who had murdered another in some far-off place on the other side of the world. True killer, this one. And oh, that first taste of human struggle and human blood!

Stealing clothes from nearby houses, getting some of the gold and jewels I'd hidden in the Lafayette Cemetery, that was no problem.

Of course I was scared from time to time. The stench of chemicals and petrol sickened me. The drone of air conditioners and the whine of the jet planes overhead hurt my ears.

But after the third night up, I was roaring around New Orleans

on a big black Harley-Davidson motorcycle making plenty of noise myself. I was looking for more killers to feed on. I wore gorgeous black leather clothes that I'd taken from my victims, and I had a little Sony Walkman stereo in my pocket that fed Bach's Art of the Fugue through tiny earphones right into my head as I blazed along.

I was the vampire Lestat again. I was back in action. New Orleans was once again my hunting ground.

As for my strength, well, it was three times what it had once been. I could leap from the street to the top of a four-storey building. I could pull iron gratings off windows. I could bend a copper penny double. I could hear human voices and thoughts, when I wanted to, for blocks around.

By the end of the first week I had a pretty female lawyer in a downtown glass and steel skyscraper who helped me procure a legal birth certificate, Social Security card, and a driver's licence. A good portion of my old wealth was on its way to New Orleans from coded accounts in the immortal Bank of London and the Rothschild Bank.

But more important, I was swimming in realizations. I knew that everything the amplified voices had told me about the twentieth century was true.

As I roamed the streets of New Orleans in 1984 this is what I beheld:

The dark dreary industrial world that I'd gone to sleep in had burnt itself out finally, and the old bourgeois prudery and conformity had lost their hold on the American mind.

People were adventurous and erotic again the way they'd been in the old days, before the great middle-class revolutions of the late 1700s. They even *looked* the way they had in those times.

The men didn't wear the Sam Spade uniform of shirt, tie, grey suit, and grey hat any longer. Once again, they costumed themselves in velvet and silk and brilliant colours if they felt like it. They did not have to clip their hair like Roman soldiers anymore; they wore it any length they desired.

And the women – ah, the women were glorious, naked in the spring warmth as they'd been under the Egyptian pharaohs, in skimpy short skirts and tunic-like dresses, or wearing men's trousers and shirts skintight over their curvaceous bodies if they pleased. They painted, and decked themselves out in gold and silver, even

to walk to the grocery store. Or they went fresh scrubbed and without ornament – it didn't matter. They curled their hair like Marie Antoinette or cut it off or let it blow free.

For the first time in history, perhaps, they were as strong and as interesting as men.

And these were the common people of America. Not just the rich who've always achieved a certain androgyny, a certain *joie de vivre* that the middle-class revolutionaries called decadence in the past.

The old aristocratic sensuality now belonged to everybody. It was wed to the promises of the middle-class revolution, and all people had a right to love and to luxury and to graceful things.

Department stores had become places of near Oriental loveliness – merchandise displayed amid soft tinted carpeting, eerie music, amber light. In the all-night drugstores, bottles of violet and green shampoo gleamed like gems on the sparkling glass shelves. Waitresses drove sleek leather-lined automobiles to work. Dock labourers went home at night to swim in their heated backyard pools. Charwomen and plumbers changed at the end of the day into exquisitely cut manufactured clothes.

In fact the poverty and filth that had been common in the big cities of the earth since time immemorial were almost completely washed away.

You just didn't see immigrants dropping dead of starvation in the alleyways. There weren't slums where people slept eight and ten to a room. Nobody threw the slops in the gutters. The beggars, the cripples, the orphans, the hopelessly diseased were so diminished as to constitute no presence in the immaculate streets at all.

Even the drunkards and lunatics who slept on the park benches and in the bus stations had meat to eat regularly, and even radios to listen to, and clothes that were washed.

But this was just the surface. I found myself astounded by the more profound changes that moved this awesome current along.

For example, something altogether magical had happened to time.

The old was not being routinely replaced by the new anymore. On the contrary, the English spoken around me was the same as it had been in the 1800s. Even the old slang ('the coast is clear' or 'bad luck' or 'that's the thing') was still 'current'. Yet fascinating new

phrases like 'they brainwashed you' and 'it's so Freudian' and 'I can't relate to it' were on everyone's lips.

In the art and entertainment worlds all prior centuries were being 'recycled'. Musicians performed Mozart as well as jazz and rock music; people went to see Shakespeare one night and a new French film the next.

In giant fluorescent-lighted emporiums you could buy tapes of medieval madrigals and play them on your car stereo as you drove ninety miles an hour down the freeway. In the bookstores Renaissance poetry sold side by side with the novels of Dickens or Ernest Hemingway. Sex manuals lay on the same tables with the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.

Sometimes the wealth and the cleanliness everywhere around me became like an hallucination. I thought I was going out of my head.

Through shop windows I gazed stupefied at computers and telephones as pure in form and colour as nature's most exotic shells. Gargantuan silver limousines navigated the narrow French Quarter streets like indestructible sea beasts. Glittering office towers pierced the night sky like Egyptian obelisks above the sagging brick buildings of old Canal Street. Countless television programmes poured their ceaseless flow of images into every air-cooled hotel room.

But it was no series of hallucinations. This century had inherited the earth in every sense.

And no small part of this unpredicted miracle was *the curious innocence* of these people in the very midst of their freedom and their wealth. The Christian god was as dead as he had been in the 1700s. *And no new mythological religion had arisen to take the place of the old.*

On the contrary, the simplest people of this age were driven by a vigorous secular morality as strong as any religious morality I had ever known. The intellectuals carried the standards. But quite ordinary individuals all over America cared passionately about 'peace' and 'the poor' and 'the planet' as if driven by a mystical zeal.

Famine they intended to wipe out in this century. Disease they would destroy no matter what the cost. They argued ferociously about the execution of condemned criminals, the abortion of unborn babies. And the threats of 'environmental pollution' and 'holocaustal war' they battled as fiercely as men have battled witchcraft and heresy in ages past.

As for sexuality, it was no longer a matter of superstition and fear. The last religious overtones were being stripped from it. That was why the people were around half naked. That was why they kissed and hugged each other in the streets. They talked ethics now and responsibility and the beauty of the body. Procreation and venereal disease they had under control.

Ah, the twentieth century. Ah, the turn of the great wheel.

It had outdistanced my wildest dreams of it, this future. It had made fools of grim prophets of ages past.

I did a lot of thinking about the sinless secular morality, this optimism. This brilliantly lighted world where the value of human life was greater than it had ever been before.

In the amber electric twilight of a vast hotel room I watched on the screen before me the stunningly crafted film of war called *Apocalypse Now*. Such a symphony of sound and colour it was, and it sang of the age-old battle of the Western world against evil. 'You must make a friend of horror and moral terror,' says the mad commander in the savage garden of Cambodia, to which the Western man answers as he has always answered: No.

No. Horror and moral terror can never be exonerated. They have no real value. Pure evil has no real place.

And that means, doesn't it, that *I* have no place.

Except, perhaps, in the art that repudiates evil – the vampire comics, the horror novels, the old gothic tales – or in the roaring chants of the rock stars who dramatize the battles against evil that each mortal fights within himself.

It was enough to make an Old World monster go back into the earth, this stunning irrelevance to the mighty scheme of things, enough to make him lie down and weep. Or enough to make him become a rock singer, when you think about it...

But where were the other Old World monsters? I wondered. How did other vampires exist in a world in which each death was recorded in giant electronic computers, and bodies were carried away to refrigerated crypts? Probably concealing themselves like loathsome insects

in the shadows, as they have always done, no matter how much philosophy they talked or how many covens they formed.

Well, when I raised my voice with the little band called Satan's Night Out, I would bring them all into the light soon enough.

I continued my education. I talked to mortals at bus stops and at gas stations and in elegant drinking places. I read books. I decked myself out in the shimmering dream skins of the fashionable shops. I wore white turtleneck shirts and crisp khaki safari jackets, or lush grey velvet blazers with cashmere scarves. I powdered down my face so that I could 'pass' beneath the chemical lights of the all-night supermarkets, the hamburger joints, the carnival thoroughfares called nightclub strips.

I was learning. I was in love.

And the only problem I had was that murderers to feed upon were scarce. In this shiny world of innocence and plenty, of kindness and gaiety and full stomachs, the common cut-throat thieves of the past and their dangerous waterfront hangouts were almost gone.

And so I had to work for a living. But I'd always been a hunter. I liked the dim smoky poolrooms with the single light shining on the green felt as the tattooed ex-convicts gathered around it as much as I liked the shiny satin-lined nightclubs of the big concrete hotels. And I was learning more all the time about my killers – the drug dealers, the pimps, the murderers who fell in with the motorcycle gangs.

And more than ever, I was resolute that I would not drink innocent blood.

Finally it was time to call upon my old neighbours, the rock band called Satan's Night Out.

At six thirty on a hot sticky Saturday night I rang the doorbell of the attic music studio. The beautiful young mortals were all lying about in their rainbow-coloured silk shirts and skintight dungarees smoking hashish cigarettes and complaining about their rotten luck getting 'gigs' in the South.

They looked like biblical angels, with their long clean shaggy hair and feline movements; their jewellery was Egyptian. Even to rehearse they painted their faces and their eyes.

I was overcome with excitement and love just looking at them, Alex and Larry and the succulent little Tough Cookie.

And in an eerie moment in which the world seemed to stand still beneath me, I told them what I was. Nothing new to them, the word 'vampire'. In the galaxy in which they shone, a thousand other singers had worn the theatrical fangs and the black cape.

And yet it felt so strange to speak it aloud to mortals, the forbidden truth. Never in two hundred years had I spoken it to anyone who had not been marked to become one of us. Not even to my victims did I confide it before their eyes closed.

And now I said it clearly and distinctly to these handsome young creatures. I told them that I wanted to sing with them, that if they were to trust to me, we would all be rich and famous. That on a wave of preternatural and remorseless ambition, I should carry them out of these rooms and into the great world.

Their eyes misted as they looked at me. And the little twentieth-century chamber of stucco and pasteboard rang with their laughter and delight.

I was patient. Why shouldn't I be? I knew I was a demon who could mimic almost any human sound or movement. But how could they be expected to understand? I went to the electric piano and began to play and to sing.

I imitated the rock songs as I started, and then old melodies and lyrics came back to me – French songs buried deep in my soul yet never abandoned – and I wound these into brutal rhythms, seeing before me a tiny crowded little Paris theatre of centuries ago. A dangerous passion welled in me. It threatened my equilibrium. Dangerous that this should come so soon. Yet I sang on, pounding the slick white keys of the electric piano and something in my soul was broken open. Never mind that these tender mortal creatures gathered around me should never know.

It was sufficient that they were jubilant, that they loved the eerie and disjointed music, that they were screaming, that they saw prosperity in the future, the impetus that they had lacked before. They turned on the tape machines and we began singing and playing together, jamming as they called it. The studio swam with the scent of their blood and our thunderous songs.

But then came a shock I had never in my strangest dreams anticipated

– something that was as extraordinary as my little revelation to these creatures had been. In fact, it was so overwhelming that it might have driven me out of their world and back underground.

I don't mean I would have gone into the deep slumber again. But I might have backed off from Satan's Night Out and roamed around for a few years, stunned and trying to gather my wits.

The men – Alex, the sleek delicate young drummer, and his taller blond-haired brother, Larry – recognized my name when I told them it was Lestat.

Not only did they recognize it, but they connected it with a body of information about me that they had read in a book.

In fact, they thought it was delightful that I wasn't just pretending to be any vampire. Or Count Dracula. Everybody was sick of Count Dracula. They thought it was marvellous that I was pretending to be the vampire Lestat.

'Pretending to be the vampire Lestat?' I asked.

I looked at all of them for a long moment, trying to scan their thoughts. Of course I hadn't expected them to believe I was a real vampire. But to have read of a fictional vampire with a name as unusual as mine? How could this be explained?

But I was losing my confidence. And when I lose my confidence, my powers drain. The little room seemed to be getting smaller. And there was something insectile and menacing about the instruments, the antennae, the wires.

'Show me the book,' I said.

From the other room they brought it, a small pulp paper 'novel' that was falling to pieces. The binding was gone, the cover ripped, the whole held together by a rubber band.

I got a preternatural chill of sorts at the sight of the cover. *Interview with the Vampire*. Something to do with a mortal boy getting one of the undead to tell the tale.

With their permission, I went into the other room, stretched out on their bed, and began to read. When I was half finished, I took the book with me and left the house. I stood stock-still beneath a street lamp with the book until I finished it. Then I placed it carefully in my breast pocket.

I didn't return to the band for several nights.

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