

The Joanne Harris Website – Online Stories

A short story for visitors to Joanne's website.
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Never Give a Sucker an Even Break

I'll tell you this for nowt. The vampire business is dead and buried. Not just back in Whitby, though that's where the rot started, and not from lack of public interest - quite the opposite. They tell me it's because demand exceeds supply. At last we've fallen prey to market forces, given in to pressure on us to conform, to modernize, to present the right kind of image to the customer. Take me. Reggie Noakes. Seventy-five years in the trade and ousted by market forces. Nothing personal, Reggie old love, they tell me. You don't fit in any more. You're just the wrong sort of vampire.

Take my face. Round and ruddy, the face of the Grimsby fishmonger I once was. Take my short legs, and the fatal sag of my gut. In the old days none of that would have mattered. You were glad to go unnoticed. But these days we've got to fit in with the image. The Victorian streets. The fog. And with the new generation of punters walking about in black lipstick and leather, lurking around graveyards in the hope of a glance at one of us, you can't even tell the difference any more between the living and the undead. It isn't healthy.

All the same, everyone can't be poncing about in black capes and fangs ranting about unholy ecstasies and nameless dreads. Look bloody funny if they did.

I'm making no apologies for going native. It's easy in this place. Lots of people passing through. No-one asking questions. Still, even when I retired here I

sometimes wondered whether Whitby wasn't a bit upmarket for me. It should have been Blackpool right from the start. Noisy, jolly Blackpool, with its arcades and fish-shops (I still enjoy a bit of breaded cod once in a while) and its pleasure-beach cramp-packed with lovely warm sweating bodies all sweltering happiness and rage and jealousy and hunger just like mine. Well you know, it's never been blood that really counted for me. I've never liked it that much, to tell the truth, and it's a bugger trying to get any when you're fat and balding and no virgin would look at you twice. But get me in a crowd and I'm happy. A touch here, a taste there. Nothing much. Not enough to kill. Skimming it off gently, like froth from a pint. Some girl screaming on the Big Dipper. Her boyfriend, all itchy fingers, his mind elsewhere. Two lads fighting outside a pub. It's all of life out here, teeming life, and that's why I'm here now on the pier, sipping my frothy lager and waiting for a nice warm family to drain of their life, their energies.

I can see one coming now, a foursome. Two kids with round, healthy faces, one eating a chip butty, the other an ice-cream. The parents; her peeling and pink with sunburn across plump shoulders, him in string vest and baseball cap. They can spare a bit of that for me, I tell myself. They've got plenty.

It's an old drill and I've got it pat. As they pass by me near enough to touch I half-turn, overbalance and drop my can. The frothy lager splashes Mother's shell top and Father's trouser turn-ups.

"Sorry love. I'm sorry." I make as if to pick up the can and get in range of the two kids. I can smell them; chip-fat and chewing-gum and life. Mother brushes herself off.

"Yer daft bugger," she says.

I pretend to steady one of the kids. He's warm and squirming. I try for a bit of the old avuncular and nudge in closer.

“Don't you fall over that rail, me lad. Sharks'll have yer!”

Spot on. I should be able to feel it now, the rush of energy from the kid, the life racing into me through him. Instead, nothing. I feel strange, suddenly tired. It must be the lager. Unsteadily I pat the lad's head, feeling the sunny curls beneath my fingers.

Concentrate. It's life I need from him, hot life, marbles and bubble-gum, conkers and cigarette cards. Secrets whispered in alleys to his best friend. His first bike. His first kiss. I brace myself for the rush.

Nowt.

Mother looks at me sideways. I try to smile but it comes out lopsided and I almost fall over. It feels like drunkenness, a drained feeling, as if the expected charge has turned against me, sucking at my bones. The lad smiles and I see him clearly for a moment, lit up by a red slice of neon from a nearby arcade, his face glowing, his eyes huge and luminous.

Mother bends over me and I can smell her scent, like roses and frying and the stuff she uses to keep her hair in place all mixed up together and hot, hotter, hottest.... I can't help it. I reach for her, gasping, starving, breathless and suddenly freezing cold.

“Help me,” I whisper.

“Yer daft bugger,” she says again. Her voice is light and without sympathy.

Father is coming to join her, his shoes ringing slow, effortless strides across the pier. Her arms are soft and scented, tiny beads of sweat caught in the peachy hairs on her fat pink forearms. The world greys out for an instant. Her voice is thick and treacly, like a woman speaking through a mouthful of cake, and I now think I can hear amusement in her flat tones.

“Leave him, Father,” she says. “This un’s no bloody good.”

As I watch their retreating backs the cold begins to recede. The world brightens a little and I can sit up. I feel as if I’ve been punched in the mouth. But the four of them are shining, haloed by the pleasure-beach lights. A plump child holding an ice-cream cone looks at me as she skips by. I can smell the same hot reek from her skin; the same promise of life. Looking at her from the boards I try to reach out, feeling my fingers tingling at her closeness... Heat bakes from her. Life. I’m faint with the need for her. And yet I withdraw in spite of my hunger, suddenly scared by her vitality, her innocent greed. In my weakened state I feel she could freeze me bloodless without even knowing it. Punters pass me by without a glance. They are wholesome, noisy, redfaced, parting around me to merge again into a hot river. In my time amongst the narrow streets and the Whitby fogs I’ve almost forgotten how healthy the living can be. And yet there’s something about them all, a kind of family resemblance.

Something a little too bright, too glowing to be real. I remember the old familiar holidaymakers in Whitby, the thin young people in black, their sad, strained faces, their greyness, their dull expressions. None of these people are dull, all of them touched with a lustre I begin to recognize.... The ruddy complexions. The sagging waistlines. The open faces. The brimming illusion of life. So this is where they go, the wrong sort; pushed here by market forces. This is where they belong, among the bright lights and the arcades, the fish-shops and roller-coasters. Indistinguishable from the real thing. Better, some might say. Never dying, never changing, cheery holidaymakers on a trip which never ends. Slowly I pick myself up and head back through the crowd which gluts the pier. Heads turn to follow me. Delicate fingers flutter against my skin. Dimly I wonder how many of them there are, by how much they outnumber the living. Ten to one? A hundred? A thousand? Or are they now so

many that they prey on each other, bloodlessly, greedily, shoulder to shoulder in rough, grinning comradeship?

The lights of the pleasure-beach are gaudy as a fisherman's lure skipping across the dark water. Life, they promise. Heat and life. Too weak to wander far from that distant hope I make my way wearily towards them, trying not to meet myself along the way; another sucker slouching back down the long dark road to Bethlehem.