



INTERVIEW WITH A VAMPIRE



When Robert Smith* was 14, a transformation took hold of him that he couldn't explain. He would lie awake every night until morning, plagued by insomnia. And during the day he felt weak and drained of energy. He suddenly lost his appetite for food, which tasted like sand on his tongue. Most strangely, Smith began to crave something he couldn't put his finger on. He thought he was going insane.

Over time, his cravings grew stronger. He tried to quench his thirst, but nothing helped. Then one day in class, a classmate cut himself and started to bleed. And it instantly clicked. That was what he needed – the metallic, red substance oozing from his classmate's wound. Smith was thirsting for blood.

Now, Smith knows he was awakening as a vampire.

Vampires – real vampires – live among us. They suffer from a strange condition which prevents them from gaining energy from regular food. Instead, they need to drink the blood of others to sustain themselves.

Vampires also suffer from an aversion to sunlight and often display nocturnal behaviors. These symptoms

often emerge during puberty, as in Smith's case.

The Atlanta Vampire Alliance has conducted surveys that found that there are at least 5,000 people in the United States who identify as real vampires. Most don't tell their doctors in fear of being ridiculed or institutionalized.

Smith was the last person you'd expect to come out as a vampire. "I was never into vampires or horror anything like that," he says. He grew up in Chicago, preferring football and baseball to monsters and the occult. His parents, he says, were plain, religious people.

His awakening, the term used by real vampires to describe the process through which their symptoms emerge, was confusing and disorienting. Smith was a self-described "normal teenager". The realization that he wanted to drink blood filled him with immense shame. Smith spent hours researching his condition, hoping there was a logical explanation, that he wasn't having a psychotic break. Eventually, he stumbled across an online community where he first learned the term vampire. As he dug deeper, he found a mentor who taught him all the basics, like how to feed. Most importantly, Smith's mentor reassured him that he was not insane.

* Name has been changed to protect the subject's identity.

But it wasn't until Smith first fed that Smith learned to embrace who he was. After feeding, the shame fled, and a strong sense of identity bloomed in him. "I felt fixed in a way, like I was broken before," Smith says, "And I knew then that I was definitely a vampire- no more question. I wasn't crazy. This was what I was."

Now, Smith is unrecognizable from that scared teenage boy. Like some sort of Giles character, he works the night shifts at a university library in Chicago. "I'd love to be completely nocturnal but it's hard to do and still be able to live in our society," he says. On average, he'll start his day around 3 pm and go to sleep around 6 am.

And, like many other real vampires, he's embraced the vampire aesthetic. He prefers to dress in all black, and will occasionally don small protruding fangs. "I love what I am — how it feels, everything about this," he says. For him, and for others like him, it's more than a medical condition. It's an identity. A way of life.

But his identity still remains a secret to most. "Back then, my parents would've put me in an institution," he adds, "Or have me exorcised." Today, his parents still don't know. He's only out to a few select friends.

"It's a double life," he says. He feels that most people would ostracize him if they knew. And like most vampires, Smith hasn't told his doctor about his condition. But this pains him. He hates that he has to hide it from people, and that if he were to reveal it to certain people, he would be called crazy.

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For now, he finds solace in other vampires. "There's kind of this attraction to darkness and the occult," Smith explains, "But [the community] is also a kind of support group in that there's people who radically accept what you are. All of us have to hide this from at least one person in our life." With each other, the vampires can step into the light.

In 2016, I talked to John Browning, an international vampire expert. In 2015, he finished a five- year ethnographic study of the vampires of New Orleans. From his time spent with them, he believes he understands why they choose to call themselves vampires in the first place.

"They began coming out of the coffin, so to speak, during the 70s, when vampires were changing, when they were becoming more sympathetic," Browning explains, "They became characters that were more beautiful and accepted. But they were still outcasts." The real vampires identified with the beautiful outcasts they saw on screen.

In his ethnographic study, Browning calls real vampires a "defiant culture". Belief in the supernatural is itself defiant, because it has persisted despite the enlightenment and increasing scientific advancements. By choosing to call themselves vampires, real vampires are intentionally defying scientific thought and the norms of the societies they live in.

"The only continent that probably doesn't have real vampires is Antarctica," Browning says.

There's an inherent power in vampirism. At a literal level, Smith gains power from blood. If he doesn't feed for a long period of time, the weakness of his awakening returns. He can't focus, taste food, or be outside in the sun without becoming extremely irritable. And the cravings become torturous.

"If someone has a cut, I'm not going to lunge at them, but I'll be staring at someone's neck and watching the veins pop and wishing I could get a taste," Smith says.

“That’s the beauty of the vampire,” Browning says, “it’s probably the most porous creature we have. It’s like a bare frame on which we can stick whatever we want, what frightens us, what repels us, what we’re not supposed to like, and what we do secretly.”

But the highs, Smith says, are incredible. There’s a pure euphoria, a crazy energy that rushes through him right after he feeds. “I feel so incredibly alive. Almost like I can do anything. I can feel the person’s energy flowing through me, rejuvenating my body.”

There’s something magnetic about vampires that draws us to them, time and time again. Almost all mythologies across the world have some sort of vampire creature. Lilith of Jewish folklore, the vetalas of ancient India, the vrykolakas of Greece, and the tunda of Colombia are just a small fraction of the wealth of vampire folklore spanning thousands of years. And there’s no shortage of them in pop culture, popping up when a societal fear of death, disease, or sex arises.

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“If you look at vampires in the 30s, like Lugosi, they’re frightening because of how foreign they sound. In the 60s and 70s, if you think of Chris Lee, that Dracula was sexual liberty. He liberated women from domineering husbands.” And if you go back before that, Browning argues, vampires were used to explain sickness and death in Eastern European villages. Vampirism is the perfect scapegoat.

But the real power of the vampire lies in the transformation aspect of the myth.

“Vampires can be a potential catalyst for change, and a visual way of expressing change, either in the body or the mind,” Browning says. Vampires are not born. They are made. Like the awakening that Smith endured, mythological vampires must transition from living to undead. The transition is almost always painful, sometimes horrific. But at the end, the new vampire emerges truly transformed. They are a different beast, no longer the human they once were.

As Smith grew more and more into his identity, he became entranced by the strange beauty of the vampire. “It’s hard to explain how what I am exists,” he admits, “There’s something at least a little otherworldly about it.”

When asked if he ever wondered about supernatural vampires, he laughs. “I would love to find an immortal vampire. That’d be a very interesting conversation.”