

The Recovering Vampire: A Journey to Vegetarianism

By: Helen Wright

Non-Fiction

Graduate First Place Non-Fiction Prize Award Winner

I. The Vampire Baby

My food fascination begins the day I crash into the world. In my mother's womb, my first nourishment comes in blood through my umbilical cord. In blood, I leave that source of nourishment, tearing a dangerous episiotomy and setting off a near-fatal hemorrhage in my mother. Not that anyone blames me - I know not what I do. Nevertheless, the consequences will shape my lifelong relationship with food.

My mother asks the nurse about the bleeding. The RN ridicules her concern, accusing mom of selfishly monopolizing the nursing staff with so many newborns and mothers to attend. If that nurse would actually lift the sheet, the blood-soaked mattress might change her mind. My father then demands the doctor see her, threatening not to pay if he doesn't. The doctor saves my mother from bleeding to death. Mom survives, but the damage is done: the doctor insists that her first priority is to regain her strength. Breastfeeding is out of the question.

Mother and child, we each open a new chapter in our relationship with food. She struggles to rebuild her body after massive hemorrhaging; I struggle to overcome the colic from my new food source.

The new formulas turn my own body against me, delivering gut-wrenching torment along with food. My body writhes and contracts, mostly in pain, partly in shock at this betrayal that renders even my devoted mother helpless. Days and thoughts revolve around spitting up formulas rancid with bile, thrashing my arms and legs and always, screaming. Looking back, I wonder about cosmic payback: was that early agony punishment for shedding so much blood? Can I ever wash myself clean of the accompanying guilt, or is that my fate as a born vampire?

Then they give me Nutramigen. The soy formula smells like curdled milk to my parents, but it untangles my intestines so that they can digest nutrition peacefully. Within eighteen hours, my body uncurls, and my mind comes alive. Suddenly, I notice the bobbing birds on my mobile, Winnie the Pooh, the clown on the wall.

Years later, the tofu I try for the first time feels comfortably familiar. I wonder, did tofu trigger that early taste of soy? Did vegetarianism come easily to me because soy was the first food I learned to trust?

II. The Transformation

I develop a fascination with vampire legend, and especially the vampire transformation. Most accounts agree that the creator vampire drains a victim to near exsanguination. The victim must drink from the vampire or die as a mortal. The body writhes in the throes of human death, but the victim transforms into a newborn vampire.

Strangely, the plight of the Undead begins to resonate in both my conscience and consciousness, although my journey went the opposite direction - from feeding on blood to a vegetarian existence. I will never feed on blood again, yet I underwent the same torment these modern myths describe. I identify with the remorse of Louis in *Interview with a Vampire* every time he kills to feed. I share the self-loathing of Edward in *Twilight*. I worry that my survival depends on the suffering of others. I worry every time an angry, vicious thought crosses my mind.

I worry that a vampire lurks inside me.

III. The Compassion Component

I grow from that fussy baby into a willful toddler. My favorite words are “no” and “mine.” My mother reads *Dare to Discipline* and *The Strong-Willed Child* and prays that I’ll grow a conscience. She restrains me in my tantrums. She punishes me when I pick on my baby sister, Susan. Dad comes home from work, finding me asleep, Susan sucking her thumb, and my mother crying. He reassures her that in all probability, I’m not a sociopath.

One ray of hope shines forth: I love our cat, Twiggy. My mom builds on that foundation. She teaches me how to pet Twiggy, play with Twiggy, and feed Twiggy. I begin to care for someone outside myself. She sets boundaries and holds fast.

Her friends chuckle at her methods, but Mom has a ready defense. “Before we can learn right from wrong, we have to learn compassion. If we don’t care how others feel, why should we try, to be honest or fair - or even loving?”

IV. The Vegetable Garden

Sprouting tomato stalks rise to my knees as I sit in my Grandma Wright’s garden as a three-year-old. Lacy carrot tops tickle my bare feet. Smells of fresh, growing vegetables, herbs, and damp earth fill every breath. I don’t

mind the mud on my blue-checked sundress and bare feet. What I do care about is taking in the sunshine, the crickets chirping. I bask, surrounded with growing things. I may not like all these vegetables cooked, but here in the garden, I long to nibble on them raw.

V. The Huntsmen

Dad is an ecologist and a hunter. He sharpens knives, cleans guns, and leaves early Saturday morning to hunt deer and rabbit. He harvests meat on site, leaving the carcass for scavenger animals to eat. He believes the remainder decomposes back into the earth. He packages the flesh into Styrofoam trays wrapped with plastic wrap, just like those of the supermarket. Susan and I have no clue that dead animals enter our kitchen.

Mom reads us chapters from *Bambi*. We fear the hunters but love the story - until *Bambi's* mother dies. We cry ourselves sick. Mom returns that book to the shelf for until we are older. We never request that book again.

Two years later, the Disney movie *Bambi* comes to a local movie theater. Mom, Susan and I go with another mother and her children. I am fine until the Great Prince announces, "Your mother cannot be with you anymore." I try to stifle my sobs, but I have to leave the theater for the rest of the movie. I go home with stinging eyes and a pounding headache. I am seven and Susan is six. She makes it through the whole movie.

VI. The Repulsion

"Eat your spaghetti, Helen! Children are starving in China. They would gladly eat that food." I am six now, and my parents are cracking down on waste big-time.

I wish for starving children to come and eat the squishy noodles. We could solve two problems: they would live, and I would be spared. Worms, blood and dirt - that's what I've seen since the spaghetti slithered off the spoon onto my plate. I can't unsee that vision in my head.

To make matters worse, it's Saturday night. Dad insists that we watch Mutual of Omaha's *the Wild Kingdom*. Susan and I used to enjoy watching cute, furry animals. Then larger, stronger animal ripped them to shreds and ate them without any of the manners Mom requires of us. Dad sees the sanctity of the food chain and nature. I see violence and cruelty. I shudder to think of myself as that vicious lioness with her blood-smeared mouth. Is that what I essentially am inside? Do I have another choice?

I feed as much of my spaghetti as possible to our cat, Twiggy. Dad only has eyes for the *Wild Kingdom*. Mom looks the other way.

VII. The Revelation

We visit Chinatown on a visit to San Francisco when I am five. To my parents' chagrin, I hold my nose and declare, "It smells bad!"

My father tries to distract me, pointing out a live chicken in a cage. "Mmm, it looks delicious."

"No, silly," I giggle. "That's the wrong chicken." I think chicken has two meanings, like light means "lamp" and "not heavy." He enlists mom and Aunt Daryl to convince me the chicken I eat comes from the dead bird. My lurching stomach sets off my gag reflex, but I swallow back the vomit. My parents are good people. How could they let this happen, this killing to eat?

At an elegant Chinese restaurant, we sit behind a folding screen. I refuse to eat anything but rice.

VIII. The Resignation

Mom can explain everything. Compassion flows in her veins and truth echoes in her words. She explains the basics of survival. Human beings cannot survive without protein, and protein comes from animal products. Yes, milk and cheese help, but we must eat meat to grow strong. Think of all the good I can do while I'm alive. Doesn't that good outweigh any sacrifice of animal life?

Dad tries rational approaches. He explains the essential balance of nature between predators and prey. If we don't shoot and eat enough deer, many will suffer an excruciating death of starvation. He proposes a concept of "contract cows." Farmers agree to give cows a wonderful life with food, fresh air, and lodging until the contract expires. The cattle pay with their lives, and we get their meat.

Every day I swallow these precepts down with fish sticks, chicken chunks or hamburgers. I brainwash myself that cows and chickens are ugly and stupid, they deserve to die, except that I don't quite believe it. Every fleshy bite leaves a bitter aftertaste of guilt because I know the truth. I draw life from the death of weaker creatures. I am still a vampire.

IX. The Scarcity

My father goes to New Orleans for a new job. We will join him later. Until then, Mom devises a new plan to cut out waste. We will eat out of the freezer. She pulls out turkey legs and vegetables, adds white rice, and voila! -

Turkey vegetable soup. We like it for the first month, eating it for lunch and dinner. Susan and I swallow it down mechanically as our palates dull with the taste. We're doing our duty. Waste not, want not.

By mid-August, our stomachs recoil at the smell of the reheated soup that we've dubbed "Green Goop" in revenge. Once in a while, Mom pulls something else out of the freezer. We savor those respites, finding the return to green goop all the more depressing. The turkeys avenge their murders in my revulsion, in the nausea I feel in each bite.

By September, Susan is ready to rebel. She comes to me one evening as I do my homework. "What are we gonna do about the green goop?" she demands.

"Finish it up. It can't last forever, and it's going down," I reply without looking up. Susan presses her pouty lips together. "Follow me." She's the little sister, but her voice carries such a commanding tone that I obey her without question.

She leads me to the pot of green goop cooling on the stove. To my horror, the level has risen! "It can't be! How can there be more?" I'm startled, disgusted and frightened all at the same time.

Susan nods. "She's been adding to it, and there's more turkey in the freezer. We'll be eating this until we move to New Orleans." I shudder, knowing she may be right.

The next day, Susan confronts Mom with her culinary cunning, but Mom takes it as a compliment. She beams, rhapsodizing about how God provided for Elijah and the widow, how God has provided us with enough turkey and vegetables to survive. For Mom, this is a miracle story. For Susan and me, it's a horror story. Maybe someday the Green Goop will overflow that pot, flooding and taking over our house and everyone in it.

Years later, I learn that my father sent no money to us. What he did send were his credit card bills. My mother protected us from the truth with thrift and cunning. We ate that soup because that was all she could afford to give us.

X. The Withering

At thirteen, I lose most of my appetite. Sitting at a table with Dad ties my stomach up into knots. I have swallowed too much bitterness and resentment to digest much of anything else.

One night, he actually takes a hunk of meat off my plate. "If you're not gonna eat it, I may as well," he shoots back as I gasp. His psychiatrist calls this hostility a symptom of Dad's depression. I don't stay long enough to call it anything anymore. I get as far away from him as I can and pray that I don't grow up to be like him.

He sees nothing in me except what he hates about himself - fear and

weakness. Food tastes caustic and bitter like detergent. Every bite feels foreign in my mouth. My first impulse is to spit it out. My second is to check my gag reflex, the only bodily function flourishing. I eat as little as possible and escape to my room.

I can count my ribs, and my waist is shrinking. When I exhale completely, my stomach bloats out. I sneak safety pins from Mom's sewing area to pin pleats into the waist of my school uniform skirt. I don't want her to worry. I forget that she does the laundry and finds them, anyway. She begins offering us after-school snacks. I nibble at them, but swallowing down the nausea is too much of a chore for more.

Part of me wishes I were dead, but I'm too scared to kill myself. Looking back, I wonder if I hoped that nature would do the dirty work. I had given up on life getting better with Dad.

Dad, who quarrels with everyone. Dad, who can no longer hunt but insists on sharpening hunting knives and glaring at me as I wash the dishes. Dad, who has become the monster inside the home.

XI. The Revival

Helen doesn't starve to death. Church people call for intervention. My safety pins in my sagging skirt aren't fooling them. Our pastor arranges for Dad to go to a mental hospital. They get a lawyer for Mom to get a separation. Dad no longer lives with us.

Within a week, my appetite returns. My stomach has shrunken along with my appetite, so I have to build up again. I begin eating like a typical teenager. I want to live.

XII. The Cure

A college project on animal rights triggers a self-study of vegetarianism. I'm tired of the latent guilt, of my survival depending on killing sentient creatures. A vegetarian diet can save animal lives, human lives, and even the planet. I can change the world for the better with what I choose to eat. I can rid myself of vampire guilt.

I begin experimenting with meatless meals. Susan rolls her eyes, retorting that I'm "going to the extreme." Mom worries whether I get enough protein, but she's also intrigued. She believes in the saying, "Live simply so that others may simply live." She and I experiment with tofu, with beans, with nuts and cheeses and yogurt. I still eat meat but increasingly replace meat with vegetarian dishes.

I check out library cookbooks and experiment on my own. The creativity with tastes, textures, colors and shapes fascinates me. Broccoli-Cashew

Stir-Fry, Tofu Balls, Zuni Stew, Lentil Soup, Zucchini-Chickpea Curry, and Hummus - my repertoire slowly grows from those hours of invention.

I hand-craft a regular treasure chest of recipes. I cast off memories poverty, desperation, and helplessness along with meat. I take charge of my emotions as well as my diet.

XIII. The Creativity

The telephone bles and shakes my tiny Japanese apartment nearly every evening. I teach English by day. I have no computer, so everyone contacts me by telephone. By 10:00, the apartment settles into constructive quietness. Now I can give my cooking my full attention.

I never cook meat anymore. Japan has more vegetarian options than I have time to explore. Sesame seeds, adzuki beans, miso, tofu, and natto work their way into my kitchen and my dishes. Western foods like cheese and yogurt cost a lot, so I use them sparingly. I blend the ingredients. The Japanese green, mitsuba, goes beautifully with my tomato-bean soup. I consider adding it to spinach lasagna.

I return to America, but the Japanese influence lingers. Why would I give up something so delicious?

XIV. The Twin Soul

The telephone bleats one cold November morning around 8:00 a.m. My sister is in labor. Once again in our family, a child is rushing into the world. My brother-in-law rushes Susan to the hospital before my niece can rip her way into the world as I did. Like me, she is born in haste, born a Scorpio, born in the Chinese year of the dog. Two hours later, the smiling work-study receptionist brings me a telephone message during class. My niece, Sophia, is born, and both mother and daughter are fine.

I meet my niece a few days later. I see much of myself in her wrinkled, red face - curiosity, bonding - but more than seeing, I feel. This child and I will share connections that will keep unfolding throughout both our lifetimes.

XV. The Encore

My premonition about Sophia comes true. She grows into an animal lover, an avid reader, and even an impassioned writer. We write and send stories back and forth via her mother's email. And somehow, although I never

preach vegetarianism to her, she never quite takes to meat. Then, she learns meat comes from dead animals.

Her epiphany inspires a confidence like no girl in our family has ever shown. She sits down both parents, explaining firmly that no more animals are going to die so that she can eat. This time, my sister doesn't roll her eyes at this sincere declaration; she grabs a notepad. Together, mother and daughter make a list of all the foods Sophia will still eat. They stick to it.

During our visits, Sophia and I share veggie smoothies, popsicles, and honey wheat rolls. Two recovering vampires learn to live in harmony with what we believe.