

Blood of the Sacrifice

Mike Phillips

After watching the house for only a few moments, the man in dirty jeans grew impatient and crossed the street. As he went, his hand tapped an empty rhythm on his side, the animal part of his brain playing out some dull melody to quiet his fears. He was trying to affect carelessness, but even before he had taken two steps, the man let out a great breath of air and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

The house looked deserted, abandoned. The paint was sun bleached and peeling, weathered to a dull shade of what might once have been green. A window was broken, the remains of the glass hung in the frame like teeth. The grass surrounding the house spread threads of seed like the soft antennae of a moth, testing the night air for a mate. Flowers were crowned with dried blooms that dipped toward the earth, heavy with the reward of springtime romance. Trees grew jealously toward the sky, their leaves casting wild shadows that seemed to bode danger in the play of sun and cloud above.

When the man in dirty jeans knocked on the front door of the house, a car started its engine. The Buick was parked down the street, hidden behind the gnarled bones of an overgrown lilac bush. Exchanging a wad of cash for a small package in a plastic bag, the

man in dirty jeans turned and started back toward the street as the Buick came to a stop in front of the house.

An old woman turned the corner, pushing a shopping cart down the sidewalk toward the man in dirty jeans, the house, the Buick. She was grossly overweight, with a massive bosom and rear which her floral print dress did little to hide. As she came, the old woman hummed a tune and complained to herself about the state of the neighborhood, how much things had changed since she was a girl, how bad things had become since the Delphi plant closed.

The car door popped open and a man jumped out, his face covered in a mask, his hands clutching a shotgun. The masked man ran toward the man in dirty jeans, crossing the unkempt lawn in moments, shouting orders in an almost girlish wail. The man in dirty jeans dropped to the ground, covering the back of his head with his hands in practiced quiescence. The masked man struck the other man on the base of the skull with the shotgun, knocking him unconscious.

Slinging the shotgun over his shoulder, the masked man lifted the man in dirty jeans into a seated position and began dragging him back to the car. The masked man was tall but gangly and it proved a difficult job for him. Before long, he began puffing in deep breaths and could only go a short distance before needing rest. After a great effort that brought him to the sidewalk, the masked man stood, bending over at the middle and breathing hard.

“Carl Jenkins, you naughty little boy, what do you think you’re doing?” cried the old woman. She slammed her shopping cart into the masked man, sending him sprawling to the ground.

The old woman smashed the shopping cart into him again, saying, “You wicked little monster, now get out of here or I’ll beat you within an inch of your life.”

Carl Jenkins, the masked man, screamed in agony as deep gashes tore his flesh.

“Tell that master of yours that he’ll find no truck here. No sir, he will not!”

Rolling over onto his side, Carl upended the cart, spreading its contents over the sidewalk. The old woman shouted all the more as her groceries were ruined, but Carl had made his escape. He ran to the car, hopped inside, and sped off.

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“Where is the sacrifice?” asked Master Lefebvre. He spoke with the French accent of the Louisiana bayou, anger thickening his words until he was difficult to understand.

“I have failed you master,” Carl Jenkins began, dropping to his knees in supplication. “My life is forfeit in exchange.”

Master Lefebvre put a thick hand on Carl’s shoulder, the muscles in his arm tense and bulging, his skin damp with sweat. “Tell me what happened. How did the plan go wrong?”

“Missus Parker, she came from nowhere.”

“You let that old hag humiliate us again?”

“My sincere apologies, Master,” Carl whined. “She must have used some hex to weaken me. I barely escaped with my life. I’ll try again right away.”

“Yes you will. Our time has arrived. The signs say it is so. The nation is in chaos. Banks and factories are going bankrupt. No longer are there enough police to keep the streets safe. People come and go looking for any sort of work and no one notices when

they disappear. Now is the time for us to take what has been promised us. We have but to claim our rightful place in the domination of humanity.”

“But what about Missus Parker?”

“She can do nothing to stop us. I have magic of my own to use against the old witch. But we have to make an offering first, something powerful. For small magic small things, a chicken, a dog. But for magic like this it must be a human sacrifice.”

Master Lefebvre laughed, his handsome face ugly with malice. “But there is another magic, a deep magic from the old times. Make an enemy your victim, take that life. It is the most powerful magic of all. That is what we must do.”

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The pot was an ancient thing of stainless steel, battered and dented over long years of hard use, but Mrs. Parker couldn’t bear the thought of replacing it. The pot had been a wedding present, not the most expensive one to be had in the big department store on Saginaw Avenue, but it was well made. The pot had been used for everything from the washing of her husband’s work shirts to the cooking of her daughter’s wedding soup, as much a part of the family as an object could be, an heirloom of inestimable worth like a grandfather clock or a dining room table.

The lid of the old pot rattled noisily, settled in a precarious balance of imperfections, moving in time with the slow boil of the broth within. Using a dishrag to protect her hands, Mrs. Parker lifted the lid, a cloud of steam filling the room with the wonderful aroma of herbs and garlic. From the counter nearby, she took a whole chicken and settled it inside the pot, replacing the cover and turning down the heat.

“That smells good,” said Mrs. Parker’s granddaughter Nellie as she entered the kitchen. “What’s the occasion?”

“Sale down at Kroger,” Mrs. Parker replied. “Your homework done?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good.” Mrs. Parker smiled. “My granddaughter, third year at the University of Michigan, going to be a nurse. I’m so proud. The whole neighborhood is proud.”

“Grandma, stop saying things like that. It’s embarrassing, and it’s not like I’m really going to U of M.”

“It certainly is. Just because you’re taking your classes here in Flint doesn’t mean that the degree you’re earning means any less. That’s why the university came here, for people like you and me, regular people who don’t have the money otherwise. You remember that and hold your head high, sweet girl.”

Nellie edged her way around her grandmother. It was a small room, and with the kitchen table, there was only just enough space for her to pass. They were of a similar build, Nellie and her grandmother, strong women that could have been mistaken for sisters if not for the disparity in age.

Thinking to pour herself a glass of lemonade, Nellie opened the refrigerator door only to find a plate covered with a clean dishtowel. “Not this again.”

“You can’t learn everything you need to know from school. You’ve got to have some practical knowledge too. You’ve got to know about the old ways. Nellie dear, you are a woman now, and soon you will be tested, soon you must prove your worth.”

“Like my sister, the voodoo queen of ‘Naulins?”

“Your sister doesn’t have the gift like you, but she found a good way to make a living. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“But Grandma,” Nellie protested.

“No, sweet girl, these are troubled times, dangerous times. Old scratch will be granting favors to his servants. Now, I trust in my Savior, but that doesn’t mean the knowledge of our ancestors has no value. That’s our heritage. Those folks from olden times had to protect themselves from wickedness too. We can’t forget that.”

Resigned, Nellie said, “So what do you want me to do?”

“Just tell me what you see, just like reading a book.”

Nellie set the plate on the table, pulling away the dishcloth to reveal the entrails of a chicken. “Oh my, would you look at that? The man of my dreams will come to rescue me from my chemistry test this Thursday riding a white stallion.”

Mrs. Parker and Nellie shared a laugh. “All right, sweet girl, that’s enough of that. Time to get serious.” She handed her a meat fork.

Lifting the offal, making an inspection of the convoluted folds of the gut, Nellie began to distinguish a pattern. “A dark wizard seeks to make a blood sacrifice to the evil one. He will capture his worst enemy, stealing the woman away from her home. It looks like it will happen this afternoon. What do you think?”

Mrs. Parker frowned, an expression Nellie failed to notice. “I think I’d like a man on a white stallion better.”

“I did my best.”

“I know, sweet girl. You have a lot on your mind.”

“I sure do.”

“Then what you need is some fresh air and a little exercise to clear your head. Now, they had a limit of two chickens per customer, and you know how that Mister Fredericks is a stickler for the rules. Can you go down to the store?”

“You know I’d be happy to.”

Mrs. Parker’s tone was stern. “You have your Tazer in your purse?”

Nellie’s face went red. “No. You know how I hate carrying that thing around.”

“Come on now, it’s not like it’s a gun. It won’t kill anyone. You may need it to protect yourself some day. A pretty young thing like you has to be careful.”

Nellie wasn’t about to argue. She knew arguing was pointless. “I’ll get it.”

“Good. Dinner should be ready by the time you get back.”

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Dogs barked. They paced their yards, restrained by fences or chains, going wild as two men stepped from a Buick and worked their way into Mrs. Parker’s backyard. The boxer next door, always unruly and mischievous, excited by base instinct into strength beyond its usual abilities, pushed under the fence and raced toward the strangers.

The smaller man, stinking of fear and indecision, was the nearest and the boxer lit into him, sinking its long teeth into the man’s arm as he tried to protect himself. Carl Jenkins cried out. He tried to pull his arm free, but the dog held on, ripping through his denim shirt and into his flesh.

Master Lefebvre kicked the dog savagely in the ribs, but the boxer did not release its grip. Instinct sharpened over countless centuries was telling the dog that the pain was nothing. An enemy striking back was an enemy about to lose.

Drawing a pistol from the waistband of his trousers, Master Lefebvre shot the boxer in the head. The dog fell limp to the ground. He handed Carl his handkerchief to tie around the wound, already starting toward the back porch.

“Hurry,” Lefebvre said to Carl, “she’ll know we’re coming now.”

But Mrs. Parker was asleep. When Master Lefebvre and Carl opened the back door, unlocked and unguarded by magical wards, they could hear her snoring away.

They found Mrs. Parker in the living room, lying back in a recliner, at peace with everything around her, oblivious. With a wicked smile, Master Lefebvre took a leather pouch from his pocket. He poured a small amount of white powder into his hand and blew it into Mrs. Parker’s face. She started only for a moment before returning to her blissful slumber.

“Take her legs, Carl. Let’s get her out of here.”

Master Lefebvre leaned Mrs. Parker forward, getting a grip around her chest. Carl took her around the knees. As they lifted, straining against her considerable bulk, Mrs. Parker let out a great rumbling flatulence.

The smell was awful. Carl began to cough and gag, having received the worst of it. He turned his head away, sinking to the floor, his eyes watering as he gasped for air.

“Stop that foolin’,” Master Lefebvre said savagely.

Carl straightened his back and lifted Mrs. Parker. Together, Master Lefebvre and Carl carried Mrs. Parker out of the house to their waiting automobile. They set her in the back seat, but they didn’t notice her smile, or that she occasionally opened one eye to see what was going on.

A chicken in each hand, Nellie heard dogs barking in the distance. She was only a few blocks from home, and wondered what all the fuss and noise was about, not that it took much. It seemed like everyone in the neighborhood owned a dog. At the slightest provocation, and at any time of the day or night, every last one of them would rouse into a fury of noisy barking.

Squealing its tires, a rusted old Buick turned from one of the side streets, coming toward Nellie with engine roaring and gears whining. Even though it was a residential area, the car must have been doing fifty by the time it passed her.

Nellie fixed the driver with a scowl, but he didn't seem to notice. He just kept on going. A woman was in the backseat, her head propped against the window. She was sleeping, iron gray hair framing her peaceful face.

With a start, Nellie realized who it was. She dropped the chickens and ran after the car, but it was useless. The Buick turned onto the main road and was gone.

"Man on a white horse, my behind," Nellie said as she arrived home. "What trouble have you gotten yourself into this time, Grandma?"

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Going to her grandmother's bedroom, Nellie said, "I need something personal, like hair or nail clippings, or maybe clothing that hasn't been washed."

The dresser was near the bedroom door. The top was usually barren, with everything neatly in the drawers, as well ordered as the rest of the house. But now there was something shining in the light from the window. It was her grandmother's wedding ring. Nellie had never seen her grandmother take off the ring. The flesh of her

grandmother's finger was so thick that Nellie couldn't imagine how it had been removed beyond cutting off her finger. It was there all the same.

"Soon I'll be tested," Nellie said in disgust. "Soon I must prove my worth. So now she's going to sit back and wait for me to rescue her?"

Nellie went to the backyard, finding a bag of coin sized rocks her grandmother used for drainage in the bottom of potted plants. Taking a bucketful of the multicolored stones, river rocks the bag named them, Nellie returned to the living room.

"For Grandma," Nellie said, taking the ring into her hands. She paused, at last deciding on a pin from her hair. "For me."

With the personal objects and as many of the rocks as she could hold in her hands, Nellie began thinking about the world around her, the city streets, the houses, the businesses. She breathed on her hands, letting her will and the objects unite, asking them to show her what she needed. At last, Nellie threw it all into the air.

The stones flew up and away, turning in a slow arc as the irrepressible pull of gravity had its way. Her grandmother's ring seemed to glow with fire as it flipped end over end, sending rainbows in every direction, a star in the mundane. It all happened so slowly, like time needed to lengthen to get it right, but then everything came to a rest and Nellie went to find what she could learn.

On the floor was a depiction of the world around her. A large green rock was set where the park would be located. A white stone was the church. The pin from her hair was at one edge, more colored stones marking the homes of people she knew. And there, at the far end of the room, almost to the sofa, was her grandmother's ring.

Water was running in the kitchen. Carl Jenkins was cleaning the wound from the dog bite. It was a painful ordeal. The tooth marks were into the muscle. Carl knew he needed stitches, but there was no way Master Lefebvre was going to let him go to the emergency room until the sacrifice had been made. He turned off the water and dabbed his arm with a towel. The bleeding was not as bad as it had been. Placing a few pieces of gauze over the holes, Carl began wrapping a bandage around his arm.

“Hello, Carl,” a woman said.

Looking up from his work, Carl was shocked to see Nellie Parker. She was holding something in her hand. He couldn’t tell what it was at first, but then he realized it was shaped something like a gun.

Carl swore and reached to the small of his back for his pistol. The Tazer went off before Carl’s hand was halfway there. Trailing two wires, the probes struck his chest. Carl screamed and shook and fell to the floor and soiled himself.

“You were a jerk growing up in the neighborhood and you’re still a jerk.”

Having never read the instruction manual, Nellie had no idea what to do with the Tazer next. She feared removing the probes, thinking maybe the effect would wear off all the sooner because of it. Carl was beginning to show signs of recovery and Nellie wasn’t about to take any chances.

With thoughts of a police investigation nagging her, she had taken the precaution of wearing gloves and wiping everything she carried clean of fingerprints. So she discarded the Tazer and went to Carl as he lay on the floor. She hadn’t thought to bring anything to tie people up, but Carl had a pair of handcuffs in his pocket.

“Sorry, Carl,” she said, striking him smartly on the back of the head with a metal flashlight. “Get some rest now, would you?”

Drawing her grandmother’s Tazer from her purse, Nellie was on her way again. Rounding the corner from the kitchen, she passed through a short hallway and entered the living room, only to find Master Lefebvre standing there waiting for her.

Shocked, Nellie raised the Tazer, but Lefebvre held out his open palm and blew a cloud of white dust. The cloud surrounded Nellie, enveloped her, turned all her senses against her. Nellie pulled the trigger, but the shot went wild. Her vision blurred. She couldn’t think. She sank to the floor and went into a deep sleep.

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Nellie awoke tied to a chair, her mouth taped shut. Slowly she opened her eyes, hoping that her lashes would obscure the deception if she were being observed. Her grandmother was in a chair next to her, snoring away like a machine, a very loud and annoying machine. Nellie pretended to sleep also, carefully testing the bonds that held her. The ropes were tight, but not impossible to move.

“At last you awake,” a man with a thick accent said. He was tall and muscular and his skin was so dark that in the blackness of the room he almost seemed to be a shadow.

“You and your grandmother are my honored guests. I bid you welcome.”

Nellie ignored the greeting, feigned as it was. She knew pretending to sleep wouldn’t get her anywhere, so she opened her eyes and took a good look around. She was in a basement with a low ceiling and a dirt floor. The only light was from candles on the floor. There were five, so Nellie supposed they had been placed in a pentagram.

How pathetic, caught by a moron.

The man said, "I shall now make my preparations."

Nellie wondered if this man expected her to cry out like some horror movie starlet. He seemed disappointed when she failed to make an appropriate show of fear.

Standing at a table nearby, the man lit a gas burner much like the ones Nellie used in chemistry lab. He introduced himself, saying, "I am Master Lefebvre. You bested my novice, but you have lost, and I will have two sacrifices instead of one."

Nellie tried to listen, but the chair was decidedly uncomfortable. As Lefebvre went on, talking, talking, talking, she shifted her weight, trying to ease the pain in her back. She knew she had to do something, but right then she was at a loss.

"It starts with the blood of the Master, used to brew a potion to mark the victim as his own," he explained, placing a black cauldron over the burner.

As the cauldron began to heat, Master Lefebvre found a knife. He held up the knife so Nellie could see it. Intricate patterns etched in the metal flickered in the candlelight, serpents seeming to slither across the blade.

Taking the knife, Lefebvre slit open his palm. The blood ran fast into the cauldron, sizzling on the hot metal. A look of pleasure on his features as he judged Nellie's fear and disgust, Lefebvre let the blood run a long while.

"I must consult the ancient text," he said, turning a page. Sighing with satisfaction, Lefebvre retrieved a glass bottle from his stocks and opened it. "Now for the acid, water from the devil's land."

Nellie wasn't paying attention. Her back was on fire. She tried to stretch, to ease the cramps in her back, but the chair began to weaken under her weight. She could feel the metal giving way as she moved, screws loosening, welds cracking.

In middle school, she had leaned back too far in a chair once. Nellie had been heavy even then. The chair had collapsed under her weight. Her face growing hot, she remembered the laughter of her classmates, the people she thought were her friends. Nellie held herself still, enduring the pain, avoiding the shame of breaking a chair for the second time, determined not to give this wicked man the pleasure of a laugh at her expense.

But then Nellie realized she didn't care. She needed to rescue her grandmother, needed to put a stop to this man. Slowly, carefully, she worked the already stressed metal, exploiting the weaknesses, making ready.

While Nellie suffered in the chair, Master Lefebvre had been working on his potion. Now finished, he used a rag to grasp the handle of the cauldron, lifting it from the fire. Stirring the potion with a wooden spoon, he walked around the table to the place Nellie sat.

"First I must mark my victims. Then I must set them on fire. By the potion and the flame, the servants of the underworld will receive my sacrifice. Then I will have power beyond imagining." Chanting in some strange language, Master Lefebvre leaned forward to daub Nellie's head.

Nellie pushed backward with all her strength. The metal frame of the chair bent and then broke. The chair collapsed. As she fell over backward, Nellie kicked up, striking the cauldron. The potion splashed into Lefebvre's face and eyes, spilling down his front, smoking as it burned his skin.

Crying out in pain, Lefebvre stumbled backward, crashing into the table, knocking over the gas burner and setting everything ablaze. The flames spread quickly,

seeking their prey, finding Lefebvre. Impossibly fierce, the flames enveloped him, making him a living torch, casting deep shadows about the room.

The shadows grew darker and darker, joining together until the room was naught but shadow and flame. A howling wind swept up, the opening of some secret door. Swirling darkness, reaching tendrils, the shadows seized him, possessed him. Master Lefebvre screamed.

“Close your eyes, sweet girl,” Mrs. Parker said gently. She was standing next to her granddaughter, free of her bonds and unharmed. Taking Nellie in an embrace, Mrs. Parker said, “Hush now. You don’t need to see this. Evil receives its own.”

The End

BIO: Mike Phillips is the author of **Reign of the Nightmare Prince** available in bookstores, online booksellers, Kindle and Nook. He has published several short stories both in print and online, including ParABnormal Digest, Sinister Tales, Dark Horizons and many others. He is best known for his Crow Witch and Patrick Donegal series.