



# The Dracula Crest

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The Indian summer we had all enjoyed vanished on that gray October Saturday afternoon in a sudden, heavy gust of wind. The trees instantly surrendered half their cover instantly, showering the sidewalks in a brown and orange cascade. Vito, Tommy, and I, our stomachs swollen with prosciutto and fresh mozzarella sandwiches my mother had layered like an expert mason, knelt on the concrete playing another game of scully within the confines of my front gate. Its black, wrought iron ribbons emerged from the cracked sidewalk, rising and crossing in an unbreakable, geometric lattice that had framed my immediate world for all my eight years.

My chilled finger stung as I flicked my bottle cap a little too hard, trying to make the long diagonal shot from 3 to 4 across the scully board Vito had sketched in yellow chalk. The cap skidded past its target, stopping just short of my landlord, Mr. George, who, as usual, was napping in a wide aluminum and plastic folding chair. He reclined undisturbed, head hanging off one shoulder, mouth agape, his thin hollow cheeks and sparse, perennial stubble, like tiny cactus needles, remained eerily still, not betraying evidence of air flow. Sometimes I'd stare at the prominent blue and purple veins that snaked up and down his face, neck, and hands like the routes of a subway map. When I asked my mother why he looked like that, she said, *the old have no blood*. She also said that, when the rent was due, the bastard could dance up the steps like Jimmy Cagney.

Suddenly, we heard a loud, grating screech coming from up the block. We jumped up and ran to the gate. Climbing up the first wrung, I craned my neck to pinpoint the source of the horrible noise. An immense

silver truck, ribbed like a prehistoric reptile, had ground its brakes to stop in front of the old Guttilla house. The home's "For Sale" sign, like its former inhabitants, had recently vanished, sparking speculation from the adults on our block. When the realtor, a bone-thin woman who wore a black blazer and slacks, was asked for details about the new owners, she remained suspiciously silent.

"Let's go check it out," Vito, who lacked what would later be referred to as "impulse control," was the first to speak. He wiped his nose, runny from the growing nip in the air, and then leapt down and bolted to exit the gate. My mother's shout, emanating from the front window of our second-floor apartment, stopped him dead in his tracks, his right foot dangling over the threshold. I turned to look up at her, leaning over the windowsill, cigarette in hand—ever vigilant of my movements when I wasn't completely sealed within the confines of our rent-controlled four-room apartment.

"Where the hell are you going, Vito?" she shouted, exhaling trails of white smoke from the most recent in a steady stream of Pall Malls. She was in a worse mood than usual because my older brother was away on an overnight trip for a baseball tournament. She had seen him off early that morning with the solemnness of a mother sending her son off to front lines, likely never to return.

"Ma, someone's moving into the Guttilla house across the street," I explained. Quickly, I hopped down from the gate before she had a chance to remind me that I could easily be impaled, or have my eyes gouged from their sockets by the pointed tops of its iron bars. "Can I go see?" I pleaded.

"What's there to see? There's nothing to see, Alex," she rasped.

"Pleeeeeease. I'm just going up the block."

Vito, who still stood with one leg dangling forward, looked up with his toothy smile stretching across his narrow face. He balanced on his one planted foot while trying to brush away strands of his slick black hair that had fallen into his eyes. Tommy carefully took his final step down from the gate. If Vito and I were rolled into one, we would still disappear behind Tommy's girth. Tommy looked up at our window. "Please, Mrs. A." My mother had a soft spot for Tommy, him being a better eater than me. The sandwich he'd devoured at lunch was twice the size of mine.

"Don't cross the street. Stay on this side," she relented. Vito was halfway up the block before my mother added, "I'm watching."

I sprang after Vito, running past the steady row of three family homes, all aluminum sided clones of my own except for color. I flew past the black cardboard cats, witches smiling over cauldrons, and skeletons bent in sharp hieroglyphic angles, all taped to the inside of windows in anticipation of Halloween, barely two weeks away. My sneakers plopped loudly as I raced across Mr. Volaro's freshly hosed sidewalk—the cleanest on the block. I followed the trail of wet footprints Vito's sneakers had made until I caught up with him. Vito had climbed atop the hood of an orange Buick, parked directly across from the now former Guttilla house. We watched two black men; large and thick muscled as circus strongmen, emerge from the front carriage of the truck. The driver was bald, and his partner had a tall, wild Afro. They reached into their back pockets and pulled out gloves which, when unfolded, seemed larger than my baseball mitt. While forcing their fingers and hands into the strained fabric, they took measured, deliberate paces toward the rear of the truck. Once there, the driver reached into an unseen crevice and pulled out a long metal ramp, letting it slam hard into the ground on a steep angle. We jumped at the noise despite watching the action unfold in front of us. Tommy, breathing heavily, finally caught up as they began carrying, what I imaged to be, immense pieces of furniture, wrapped in pale blue, quilted padding. I climbed up next to Vito on the Buick.

“You guys getting hungry?” Tommy asked behind us, standing on his tiptoes, with both hands on our shoulders trying to peer over us. We struggled not to tip backward from the pull of his weight.

“You just ate lunch, you fat fuck! Get off,” Vito shouted over his shoulder.

“Tommy, c'mon,” I pleaded. It was like trying to shrug off a grizzly. Vito, being both fast and wiry, curled into himself and slid out from under Tommy's grasp. Freed, he glanced back down the block.

“I don't see your mom,” he said.

Tommy and I looked back to confirm.

“Maybe she's making dinner,” Tommy added hopefully.

“Probably went to get another pack of cigarettes,” I replied.

“I'm going for a closer look,” Vito said in a hurried whisper and, before I could raise an objection, he darted across the street and disappeared under the metal ramp that descended from the back of the truck to the asphalt. Tommy and I frantically turned our eyes to the house's

open front door. The movers, carrying what looked like a sofa, had just disappeared into the hallway's shadows. We stared into the deep darkness of the doorway, fearful of the mover's imminent return.

"Coffin!" Vito shouted. Tommy and I jumped, again, startled both by Vito's sudden reappearance and his exclamation. "There's a coffin on the sidewalk." Vito continued, his eyes wide with alarm. We looked back with an equal mix of incredulousness and wonder. Risking significant punishment, I followed Vito across the street. Tommy followed. We ducked under the ramp, following Vito's initial path, pausing to peek around the thick tires to make sure the movers had not returned. Vito and I emerged, urging Tommy to hurry. Tommy glanced up from his knees, red-faced, his outstretched hand pleading for a boost. Our legs and backs strained as Vito and I pulled him upright. Vito then silently turned and directed us to the far corner of the gate where a large rectangular piece of cargo rested suspiciously apart from piles of cardboard boxes and wrapped furniture all carefully stacked close to the front door awaiting further transport.

"It's probably just a dresser," I said.

"Oh yeah," Vito quickly retorted, taking short deliberate steps and urging me to follow with a flick of his hand. Again, Vito pointed down at the top of the mysterious object. Tommy and I both gasped. The two blankets that swaddled the long object split apart briefly down the center as if someone had sliced a delicate incision. A thin ray of sunshine pierced the clouds and glistened atop the dark brown, almost black, polished wood, and there, as if floating on a deep ebony sea, lay Vito's cause for alarm. I squinted to be sure, not daring to take a step closer. Despite the desperate hope that our eyes deceived us, we stood paralyzed by the realization that this wasn't just an ordinary coffin. We stared deeply into the dreaded script capital D flanked by two leaping dragons all centered within the gold shield that branded this dreaded parcel. It was the Dracula Crest.

"Holy shit," Tommy said. Vito and I silently concurred. Just a few steps from where we stood lay Count Dracula himself, shielded from the light of the sun, sleeping, waiting to rise. We knew all too well what was to come—our knowledge recently fortified by Universal Monster Week on the 4:30 movie the past five days. The coffin's arrival would be the foul harbinger of the terrible events that were sure to follow—strange, wild animals prowling about, mysterious disappearances, a series of violent murders. We were all in great danger. I turned toward Vito who slowly

reached for the crest; one finger extended, just a few inches from it, then to Tommy who was scratching his stomach. Suddenly I was yanked backward, almost falling if not for the same grip which held me up.

“Alex! What the hell’s wrong with you?” my father’s face screamed inches from my own. “If your mother sees you crossed the street I won’t hear the end of it.” I tried to motion toward the coffin, the crest, but my father was already dragging me down the block as I stumbled to regain my balance. “Your mother wants to make soup tonight. We gotta go to the chicken market.”

“But, but...” I stammered, trying to blurt out that we were all in grave danger, but to no avail. I turned back, searching for Vito and Tommy but saw only the two men carrying the coffin down into the cellar. The man with the wild hair turned and spotted me staring back. His icy gaze froze me in my tracks. My father dragged me for several steps before I regained my stride. We turned onto New Utrecht Avenue, under the elevated train that lorded over an almost fifty block span like a monstrous steel insect. Pale sunlight cast thin shadows through the twin vertebrate of tracks above us. From behind us, the thunderous pounding of the approaching B train grew louder and louder, rising in pitch until finally culminating in the screams of metal grating on metal as the train stopped at the 79th Street station.

The faded black letters of the Dyker Chicken Market sign signaled we had arrived at our destination. The storefront consisted of an oversized, weathered wooden door with one square recessed window behind thick iron bars. A frayed yellow rope knotted in a noose served as a doorknob. My father reached for it, then paused, noose just slightly out of reach. I gazed upward to find him regarding me with an odd expression—half condemnation, half-pity. He released his firm grip and sank his hand deep into his pockets, searching.

“Here, wipe your face,” he said. “You got snot hanging out of your nose.” He handed me his hanky while shaking his head. I wiped my nose and returned the hanky. My father grimaced before stuffing it back into his pocket, then he pulled the door open. Entering, we were immediately assaulted by both the fowl stench and cacophony of desperate clucking. Three halogen tubes flickered above the market’s front room. The slab floor was matted in an uneven layer of broken, trampled feathers. One small counter jutted out from the opposite wall. Atop it rested an open, yellowed

ledger and an antique brass cash register. I gravitated to the center of the room away from the stacks of over-stuffed cages that lined the other walls. The chickens seemed more agitated than usual, wrestling past one another against the cage walls to press their beaks between the thin metal wires in dire gasps for air.

The proprietor emerged. Unconsciously, I whispered his name, or rather the name assigned to him by every child unfortunate enough to be dragged into this place— Eggman. Even though I was sure he hadn't heard, and I surely had not meant to speak it, the slap of my father's hand upside my head served as a reminder. I'm sure Eggman had a real name, everybody does, but I had never heard my parents address him by one, which was odd, as every other store we shopped at had a Mr. or Mrs. this or that who was properly addressed during commerce. He wasn't called Eggman because he worked with chickens, though I wish that were the case. No, he had earned this designation because his head didn't so much look like a head as it did a bulbous tumor bulging upward from where his neck should be. His eyes were barely visible below an extra layer of skin that folded atop both sockets on either side of his nub of a nose. He was completely bald save for a small tuft of white hair lodged behind each crumpled ear. All things considered, Eggman wasn't the worst thing he could have been called. He wore a gray and black flannel shirt beneath his long apron, smeared with red and brown streaks and smudges. Eggman informed my father in some mumbled language that our chicken was not yet ready. My father immediately threw up an arm in frustration.

"Wait here," he barked. "I'm going across to OTB to check the exacta in the third race." He turned back again before exiting. "Don't go anywhere with anybody. Wait for the chicken." The door slammed shut and the chickens momentarily grew silent. Eggman vanished down a long dark corridor.

I turned back to the chickens, stirring once more, their guttural belching clucks quickly climbing to previous volumes. They knew. They knew I had come for one of them—just as the lord of the vampires had come for some unlucky soul. Possibly mine. One chicken seemed to return my gaze, its eyes little more than two tiny, punctured orange circles. My stare fell to the plump white plume of its breast. I reached for the warm, naked flesh of my own neck and quickly spun away from the pens. I watched the front door, eager for my father's return for several long minutes

until a heavy plopping sound atop the counter commanded my attention. The Eggman scribbled \$2.79 in black magic marker on the folded brown paper bag and turned to me with hidden, pale blue eyes expecting payment. The front door slammed open as my father returned, muttering something about forgetting to box an exacta. He fished out three singles from his worn leather wallet, grabbed me by the collar, and we were on our way once more. I glanced back at the chickens, as the door closed quickly behind me.

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Later, while the soup simmered, my mother perched herself back at the open bedroom window inhaling another cigarette, the strong breeze blowing half the ashes she flicked away. I sat beside my father on the sectional my parents bought as newlyweds years ago. He held the folded *Daily News* close to his eyes, scratched his chin with a blue Bic pen, then dropped the paper down to his lap to circle his picks for the late daily double at Aqueduct. I gazed out the backyard window, ignoring Bob Hope and Bing Crosby, on the road to somewhere, singing and dancing across the Sylvania. White sheets fluttered like ghosts, pinned to the web of clotheslines suspended above the array of small gardens and patios below. My worry increased exponentially as each minute passed, only a few precious hours of daylight remained. I wished my brother wasn't away at some stupid baseball tournament. Though, like my parents, I doubted he'd believe me. In the movies, no one ever believed the person that tried to warn them that a monster was on the loose. That something terrible was about to happen. I closed my eyes, summoning the image of the mover, certainly already in the Count's thrall, staring back at me when he'd descended into the cellar carrying the coffin, carrying Dracula. I imagined lying in my bed, my room pitch black, sheets clutched to the edges of my chin. Would I even hear footsteps before my throat was torn open? I reached up and wrapped my hand protectively around my neck.

My father glanced up at me from his scratches and circles. "What's wrong? You cold?" he asked. Before I could respond, he shouted inside at my mother, "Close the goddamn window! Your son's freezing."

"I like the fresh air," she screamed back.

"Then go outside and smoke," he volleyed back as usual. To which my mother then replied that my father was worse than a woman, followed



by mutual grumblings and obscenities that sailed over the apartment's familiar air currents. To conclude, my father muttered, "I should nail the fucking window shut."

*Nail it shut!* I smacked my knee for not thinking of it sooner. I could just nail the coffin shut, with Vito and Tommy's help, of course. I just needed to get down into that cellar. And I needed supplies.

For the next hour I sat on the sofa staring blankly at the television, spinning plan after plan that failed to get me across the street away from my mother's constant vigil, let alone past neighbors that would be lurking about.

"The soup's on the table. Eat it while it's hot," my mother barked, and we all sat.

After sprinkling grated Pecorino Romano into our still steaming bowls, my father and I began devouring generous scoops of the rich broth and Ronzoni egg bows. My father looked annoyed when I finished the pot's contents with my third helping. When we were done, I rose from the table and went to the bathroom. I relieved myself quickly, washed my hands, but left the water running. I crouched down and reached under the bear claw tub for my father's red toolbox. Finding the cold tin with outstretched fingers, I slid the box over the checkered linoleum just as my father began pounding on the door.

"Hurry up. I gotta take a crap," he shouted. Besides being delicious, my mother's soup was also a powerful, fast-acting laxative.

"I'll be right out," I shouted. "I just gotta wipe." Quickly I snapped open the lid, reached for the wooden handle of my father's claw hammer and slid it down the length of my tube sock under my dungarees. I pinched a few loose nails from the small trays that folded down from the lid, then closed the box and slid it back under the tub. I flushed, shut the water, and opened the door, barely dodging my father's charge into the bathroom. The door slammed shut behind me. Step one completed.

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Soon after, I sat on the wooden bench inside our gate with my parents as the last of the day's sunlight faded. Mr. George remained collapsed in his chair. Our next-door neighbor Mario sang in Italian inside his gate while he sipped a glass of his homemade red wine and smiled up at the sky. My mother insisted I wear my green winter coat, even though it

wasn't that cold yet. I kept my legs bent under the bench to better conceal the hammer; its iron head felt like a block of ice against my skin. This subterfuge unfortunately also resulted in my mother shouting at me every fifteen minutes, "Why are you sitting like that? Go pee if you have to pee." I kept gazing over my shoulder, looking for Vito and Tommy then back across at the Guttilla house. Time was running out. I felt my stomach churn, unsure if it was the anxiety or the third bowl of soup. My father stood up and walked over to the gate. He was about to say something to Mario when a deafening explosion, louder than a dozen M80s, roared from around the corner and startled us all. Screams followed.

Someone shouted, "They blew up Big Sal's car! They blew up Big Sal's car!" Of late, an exploding Cadillac belonging to certain neighborhood gentlemen was not an altogether uncommon event.

My parents sprinted past Mr. George, out the gate toward the corner. My father stopped, turned and shouted, "Alex, stay in the gate," before rejoining the stream of neighbors rushing to the scene. Now was my chance. As soon as I saw them turn the corner, I rushed out the gate and up the block.

Just as I was about to cross the street, I saw Vito running towards me, Tommy trailing behind. I threw up my hands and yelled, "Stop!" Vito paused for a moment and grabbed my arm yelling, "C'mon, let's go see if there's a head rolling around the sidewalk."

"No, Vito—the coffin. Dracula," I reminded him. Vito squinted for a long, silent moment before his eyes widened.

"Dracula..." Vito repeated to himself, then after a short pause, "right."

"I have a plan. Follow me."

Tommy ran toward us, then stopped to lean his hands on his knees and suck in several wheezing breaths. He looked up to see Vito and I rush across the street. "Wait. Where are you going?" he gasped. I shouted for him to follow. When Tommy finally caught up with us on the other side of the street, I quickly shared my plan—Vito and Tommy nodded their heads in agreement.

We ran to the Guttilla house and inside its gate. I reached down for the cellar handle and lifted the cold metal loop from two slots on the right panel, but the heavy slab budged only a few inches. I tried again, this time with Vito and Tommy pulling at my arm. My fingers strained, but the door lifted and lay open before us. Carefully I stepped down onto the

narrow concrete steps, pausing to quickly scan for water bugs—my cellar was crawling with them, slimy black shells darting across the dusty floor. The coast clear, I continued down the first few stairs, my palms sliding against the cold, uneven stone foundation from which the entrance had been carved. Vito trailed close behind, followed by Tommy. The wooden door, soft from decades of water rot, creaked open and I took a deep breath before stepping inside.

We paused at the threshold, reluctant to leave the narrow beam of pale light shining through the narrow opening of the cellar door. But I knew that, within moments, the sun would set and then nothing could stop Dracula rising. Slowly, I stepped forward. I felt around for a light switch but found none. I could barely make out the shadowy shapes of furniture and piled boxes scattered in front of us.

“One of you should watch the door,” I turned and whispered over my shoulder to Vito and Tommy. They looked at each other for a moment then back at me. Both shook their heads no.

We took measured steps, crawling forward like a three-headed caterpillar. An icy current of air emanated from the black abyss that lay before us. With no sign of an open window, I shuddered, imagining its unnatural source. Vito’s hand gripped my shoulder and Tommy’s heavy breathing loomed over us both. Our sneakers scraped over the dusty slab, as we summoned courage for each step. I glanced back for the cellar entrance, it too almost lost to shadows. Turning forward, I reached out with my left hand, testing the limits of my vision, my slowly vanishing fingertips leading us deeper, one arm length at a time.

“There it is,” Tommy shouted. His thick arm plopped across our shoulders, like a heavy fallen branch, as he jabbed his index finger toward the dark right corner. I had to squint to see it, but he was right. Dangerously close to the rear wall laid Dracula’s coffin. We approached slowly, cautiously. Its wrappings were off and discarded in a pile beside it. The coffin was higher, wider than I expected. Even in the murky cellar, the dark wood still gleamed as we neared, as if some uncontainable energy illuminated it from the inside. With a few steps, I stood directly over it and stared deeply into the emblazoned gold crest, enthralled, until Vito poked me sharply in the back.

“Hurry up,” he whispered desperately. I nodded and bent down to roll up my pants. I reached down and, from my tube sock, withdrew the

hammer like the sword from the stone. I glanced back one last time to the front of the cellar. The crack of pale light thinned like a fading horizon. My free hand fished deep into my back pocket for a nail. Finding one, I placed it between my lips, holding it like a cigarette, just as I had watched my father do, and then I ran my hand softly along the length of the coffin. I placed the point of the nail close to the lid's edge, lifted the hammer, and turned to Vito and Tommy in a final moment of solidarity. I raised the hammer high and swung it down with all my strength. Having never hammered a nail, I missed the head by several inches, striking the lid in a loud "thunk." A wedge of polished veneer split off and careened across the floor. I stared down in horror at the yellow gash of splintered wood my faulty swing had exposed.

"We should go," Tommy said, turning back towards the front steps. My knees felt weak, but I knew there was no turning back. I reached for another nail, again felt for the edge and raised my hammer when I heard a muffled rattle. At first I thought it was just the pipes or vents, hidden in the shadows, circulating their contents. But the sound grew louder, clearer, solidifying into an unmistakable roll of footsteps above us. Vito screamed and in a blink sped across the floor, out the cellar door, and vanished up the stairs. I rushed to follow; Tommy close behind.

As we bolted for the exit, we heard a hard thud followed by another roll of unseen footsteps growing louder, closer. Panicked, I almost ran straight into a steel support pole but sidestepped it at the last second and bolted for the cellar door still half-open from Vito's flight. I was just a few feet away from leaping up onto the first step when I heard something slam behind me. Instinctively, I spun around and was almost blinded by a sudden flash of bright light. Along the sidewall, a crooked silhouette materialized inside the frame of newly revealed doorway. The shape bent forward, stretching towards me. A pale, narrow face emerged with wide, crazed eyes. I stood paralyzed with fear as a bony hand reached out for me.

"Who are yooouuuuuu!?" it howled. The world swirled and I felt the vague sensation of falling, then floating, and then nothing. The world went black.

Afraid to move or open my eyes, I awoke feeling the cold pavement beneath me. Was I dead? Undead? I lay still until, hearing a familiar voice I slowly opened one eye. Tommy's face, huge, hovered directly over mine. Above him the stars sparkled against a blue-black sky.

“Thank God. I thought you were dead,” he said and made the sign of the cross.

“What...happened?” I struggled to fit the words together.

“You fainted; I think. I carried you out of the cellar.” Still trying to gather my thoughts, I gasped spotting the skeletal man from the cellar as he came into view above Tommy.

“Dracula!” I thought I shouted, but it came out as garbled gibberish.

“You OK, kid?” the man asked, his accent sounding more familiar than ominous. I blinked several times, trying to refocus my eyes. The man seemed...fleshier now. He wore dark blue jeans and a loose gray shirt. He was old, older than my father. Next to him then appeared another thin man who looked almost identical, but much younger.

“I’m pretty sure he’s not Dracula,” Tommy spoke slowly and reassuringly. I was about to try and lift my head when Vito appeared followed immediately by my parents. I closed my eyes, hoping to black out again, but no such luck.

Still somewhat dazed, the next few moments seemed like the choppy bits of half-remembered dreams. My parents were yelling at me, at the strange men, at each other, then back at me again. Gradually, I began to process the conversations swirling around me as the neighbors had migrated from one spectacle to the next.

“My son’s a good boy. He wouldn’t steal anything,” my mother pleaded while holding my head in both hands, examining its integrity like she was buying a melon.

“I didn’t say he stole anything,” the younger man said while scratching his head. “He did put a nice gash in my wife’s antique chest.”

“You mean coffin,” Vito accused, his courage returning.

“What?” everyone seemed to shout.

“Dracula’s coffin. Down in the cellar. We saw it.” Vito continued.

“The crest—Dracula’s crest. We saw it. On the coffin,” I somehow managed to spit the words out coherently.

My father looked down at me. Momentarily, I spotted a glimmer of relief in his eyes from hearing me speak, but that look soon curdled into one that strongly suggested that I should take an immediate and lifelong vow of silence.

“Dracula’s crest?” the younger man replied. He furrowed his brow, tilting his head. He lifted his hand over his mouth for a moment, and

then removed it trying not to betray a strange grin. “No,” he shook his head. “Not the Dracula crest.” He chuckled some. “That’s an Irish crest—the Dooley Crest.

“You’re Irish?” My parents asked. A few neighbors repeated the question.

“Me? No,” he pointed to himself and shook his head. “My wife is. I’m Italian. John, John Bonetto Jr. My pop is John Sr., but he goes by Giovanni.” He held out his hand and my father quickly shook it with several neighbors repeating the gesture. Some greeted Giovanni in Italian. I heard my father rattle off a series of apologies, blaming my over-active imagination, Halloween, and too many comic books. He took his wallet from his pocket, reaching for cash to offer as compensation, but John Bonetto shook his head and waved him off.

“Please, no. I’ll tell my wife the movers chipped it. Gives me an excuse to keep it in the cellar and out of sight. I hate that thing. Eyesore.”

My mother, still mortified, came alive upon hearing that his wife and daughter wouldn’t be arriving from their prior home upstate until the next day.

“C’mon, you got no food in the house yet. I’ll make a nice lasagna and some eggplant parmigiana,” my mother insisted until John nodded in acquiescence. My father told me to apologize to Mr. Bonetto, which, robotically, I did.

Through the crowd, I heard Vito’s voice proclaiming, “I told him it wasn’t a coffin.” People laughed and my face flushed, first with embarrassment then with anger and I turned to look for Vito or Tommy, but then felt a tug at my collar, my father’s signal that it was time to go home. My father steered me across the street.

Our neighbor, Mario, still cradling his glass of wine in one hand, said in a low voice, “Irish, huh? Probably better off with vampires. At least they just drink at night.”

My father made a snorting sound and chuckled, but I didn’t understand the joke. I squeezed my eyes closed for a moment as if staring into the void could undo the past minutes of my life. *Dracula*, I thought to myself. *Why would Dracula move to Brooklyn?* I opened my eyes to glance back. Neighbors continued to buzz around the Bonettos. Some still stared back at me like I had wet my pants. I turned away and sank my head as my father marched me down the block, into our gate, and up the stairs to our apartment.

I wanted to crawl into bed and fade away, but my mother was sure I had a concussion, despite my unblemished scalp. She also insisted I go to confession the next day after mass. “You tell the priest what you did,” she said. But by nine-thirty she had retired to the bedroom, leaving my father to continue the observation.

I sat on the sectional staring at the TV as *The Love Boat* departed port. At each commercial break my father would poke me in the shoulder and ask if I was okay, then turn his attention back to the screen. I felt stupid and embarrassed. I let my fingers crawl between threads of the brown and yellow Afghan that draped over the sofa cushions as I tried to hold in the tears welling in my eyes. From her bedroom my mother shouted, “It’s late. Shut the TV. Put him to bed if he’s fine.”

“Looks like it’s bedtime, Alex,” my father said, rising and walking slowly to the television. Instead of flicking it off though, he squatted down to survey one final channel rotation. Static hissed and buzzed as the knob clicked from one channel to the next. On the fourth click, spooky organ music rang out over a black screen that suddenly crackled with lightning bolts. The deep voice of an unseen announcer bellowed, “...And now back to *Dracula’s Daughter*.” My eyes widened. I had never seen this movie, didn’t even know *Dracula* had kids. I stayed seated, staring into the black and white screen, until my father turned his head back to stare me in the eye and firmly repeated, “Bedtime.” I quickly acquiesced.

As I marched toward my bedroom, I glanced back one last time. My father remained in front of the television, his hand still on the channel knob. On screen, one woman—tall, older, her dark hair and strange eyes suggested a relation to the Count, appeared about to sketch a much younger woman, almost a girl, who wasn’t wearing much. Both women stood silently facing each other until the young model asked, “I suppose you’ll want these lowered?” And she let the thin straps from her slip fall away from her shoulders. The older woman’s eyes widened further, almost glowing. *Weird*, I thought as I hurried to bed, smart enough not to make my father repeat himself a third time, *my father doesn’t even like scary movies*.

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