

An illustration of two young women in profile, facing each other. The woman on the left has long, straight, light green hair and her eyes are closed. The woman on the right has short, spiky black hair, red lipstick, and a purple hoop earring. The background is a gradient from light blue at the top to dark red at the bottom, with numerous white snowflake-like particles scattered throughout.

Touched by God and Monsters
Part 1

Don't Play With Death

Kristina Post



"Never, in the nearly four hundred years now since I was born, have I ever seen anything to make me doubt whether God exists in some form or the other. Not even the reflection in the mirror. I'm sure all this sounds a little bizarre, coming from a vampire. But I'm hoping that there is still a point to this life, even for us. It's a long shot, I'll admit. By all accounts, we're damned regardless. But I hope, maybe foolishly, that we'll get some measure of credit for trying."

So says the vampire Carlisle Cullen in the book *New Moon*, Chapter 2, p.36, by Stephenie Meyer. It made me wonder how it would be if I could become his friend. He could use some hope, someone ought to tell him...

Johanna makes a decision with unforeseen and drastic consequences. It leads to a breathtaking friendship with life and death at stake with a lot of reflections upon life's big questions. The book rapidly takes the reader into burningly serious circumstances, all the time with death as a dark shadow hovering in the rear.

"Don't Play With Death" is a self-contained tale with the Twilight-quote above as a starting-point.

"Thrilling, a really good read!" / Reader feed-back.

Kristina Post is a music- and math-teacher in the Swedish small town of Motala. She is also a choirmaster and engaged in the local politics. To reflect upon all issues life brings together with friends and try to put the outcome into practice is one of her bigger interests. She regards herself as a creative maniac, who rather likes to see possibilities instead of problems and problems as challenges, carrying an indomitable belief that love in the long run will overcome evil. A trusting relationship to God is her source of strength in life.

"Don't play with death" is her debut as an author, the first part of a planned trilogy.

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Touched by God and Monsters

Part 1

*Don't Play With
Death*

Kristina Post

”Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

/Jesus (John 14:27)

Introduction

Midlife crisis or something else? At least a great need to write about death, life, love and everything that is important in life. So, I have in my book put myself into a really odd situation. What would give a bigger motivation to question ingrained beliefs and confront both life and death than to suddenly find yourself among vampires, that both threaten your life and care for your existence? Near death, questions become crucial. How inclusive can our love be? How do we deal with questions like guilt, forgiveness and reconciliation? Is there a predestined meaning to everything, or have we been given the possibility to *create* meaning regardless of what conditions we are confronting, however strange we may find them?

The Twilight Saga by Stephenie Meyer forms the background to this reflective book. My novel is self-contained, although some issues in Twilight have inspired my thinking.

The Twilight Saga speaks of great love, courage and sacrifice. The value of trust, even if it costs. They challenge power by thinking in new ways. The novels play with the question of whether different ethnic groups can peacefully coexist. These are very relevant questions in our world today. Integration is a heartfelt issue for me. Every living, thinking creature has an equal right to exist and participate in our society. In a fairy tale, you can bring matters to a head and experiment with them. Where are the limits of what is possible? Most limits are self-imposed. Where do we draw our boundaries? Do we dare widen our horizons? Upgrade our perception of the world? And our image of God?

This novel's starting point is a quote from Twilight part II, New Moon, by Stephenie Meyer, in Chapter 2, where the vampire Carlisle Cullen says:

"Never, in the nearly four hundred years now since I was born, have I ever seen anything to make me doubt whether

God exists in some form or the other. Not even the reflection in the mirror. I'm sure all this sounds a little bizarre, coming from a vampire. But I'm hoping that there is still a point to this life, even for us. It's a long shot, I'll admit. By all accounts, we're damned regardless. But I hope, maybe foolishly, that we'll get some measure of credit for trying."

This made me wonder how it would be if I could become his friend. He could use some hope; someone ought to tell him...

I believe in God and have a fairly solid image of the world. What would happen to that image if I suddenly realized that vampires exist; that we humans are in fact not the top predators of the world but are instead prey? Is there room for vampires in God's creation? If they exist, God must have a plan for them and proffer an attitude that makes love possible in some way. After all, they have been human beings... And – God allows both predatory animals and ticks to exist, whether I understand this or not. Some things are beyond human understanding... This has to be investigated! Accordingly, I have to meet vampires in one way or another. Well, that was fairly simple, it was just to write a story about them and me.

Be prepared for vampires to be gifted with a lot of impossible skills. They are normally very secretive about their existence, hiding behind fairy tales and myths, and they're experts at concealing their leavings as accidents or unexplained disappearances. They suffer no natural death, and they are extremely fast if they want to be.

I have chosen to let the geography be a bit vague. The imagination may well move freely! At the same time, there are great similarities between the fictive little town Bergfors in Jamtland and the little town in Sweden where I live. That the story takes place in Jamtland is still important as there are

Samis* in the cast, and Jamtland is situated in the Sami region, Sápmi.

Which Norwegian skiing resort we go to at the end is up to the reader. The world of fairy tales provides a pleasant freedom.

* Samis are the Scandinavian native folk group. Read more about Samis at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sami_people

Thanks

I have intentionally kept my family in the background as much as possible. This is not a book about you. But as you are important people in my life, you have to be part of this story to a certain degree. My heartfelt gratitude to you for meaning so much to me! Thanks also for feedback and wise input in my writing process. Thank you, Signe, for your help with the cover picture!

Thank you, Lars Gimstedt, my publisher and friend, for all of your support and encouragement.

Also, many thanks to all my relatives and friends. Without you, I would be nothing.

And – a special thank you to Stephanie Meyer for all the inspiration you have given me! I happily encourage my readers to read your books as well.

Lastly, I'd like to send a big thank you to my English-speaking friends who unselfishly have helped me to improve my English. Especially, I want to express my gratitude to Edward L. Thomas, with whom I have spent many, often nightly, hours reading and discussing. It's not easy to express oneself in a foreign language, myself being Swedish. I have done my best and learned a lot in the process, but all help I have received has been invaluable.

If anyone would like to discuss the contents of my story, please contact me at kristina.mailme@gmail.com. I'd appreciate it!

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<http://psykosyntesforum.se/bookshop.html>.

PsykosyntesForum.se offers Life- and Leadership coaching, couples coaching, psychotherapy and assistance with issues about spiritual development with Jesus as the prominent figure, as well as e-courses and e-books, both in Swedish and English.

Everything begins

Zacharias Corell worked as a surgeon at the hospital in Bergfors and was highly regarded. He had worked there as long as I had lived in the town with my family, if not longer. We had moved there some fifteen years ago because my husband had been relocated by his company. I had learned to like the little town and had got a job at Bergfors High School, a very nice school, as it turned out. We had found a congregation, which had become like a second family to us, and now I directed the choir there, much to my enjoyment. Although I originally had been terribly worried about the move, I was now very pleased with how well everything had turned out. Our youngest son had been born in Bergfors. The oldest, who had recently moved out, was studying to become an engineer. Our daughter would soon be leaving too; we didn't see her much as she spent most of her time in the stable, full of dreams of becoming a riding-instructor. I had a life with which I was very content.

Why did I go bicycling without a helmet that night? I was tired on my way home, and a car passed me too closely. I must have lost my balance, because the taxi driver in the car behind who witnessed what happened said that I had bumped the side mirror, which caused me to fall headlong into the street. I myself had no memories at all of what had happened. The taxi driver had enough wits about him to call an ambulance; the driver who hit me was too shocked to do so. Luckily, I got to the hospital in time, with a serious internal bleeding in the brain. Some days later, I woke up with a very strange feeling in my body. Everything was so well. I felt so embraced; as if I was being carried. It felt so right; things were exactly the way they should be. Very puzzling. They told me that I was half an hour from death; that I was lucky to have gotten to the hospital when I did. I could easily have died. Did I feel scared? Nope, not a bit. Remarkable... I wasn't even shocked. It must have been much worse for my family, who faithfully and lovingly took turns sitting by my bed until I was discharged. How happy I was to have them! I just felt that it wasn't my time yet. That I had been given some additional time to live in this world. That God held

me in his hand and gently brought me back to life. Joy, I think, was the emotion in which I landed. Strange.

It was Dr. Corell who performed the surgery and he was able to stop the hemorrhaging in my brain. When I had regained consciousness, he came to my bedside and asked me how I was feeling. He was always so caring. I liked the sympathetic doctor very much, and I had met him many times as his three adopted children and two foster children had been my students in school. He and his wife, Ester, were as dedicated to their youngsters as Dr. Corell was to his work, even if they were otherwise rather low-key. With my newly awakened eyes, newly saved to life, I became aware of some strange things about him. He was amazingly handsome, almost preternaturally perfect. His eyes had an unusually beautiful golden nuance. His skin was extraordinarily white, almost a marble white. And his hands were so cool, almost cold, when he took my hand to feel my pulse. He still looked young; he didn't seem to have changed much during the years that we had been living in the town. Remarkably well-preserved, to be honest. What was the matter with him; what kind of superhuman was he? I didn't mention anything of this to him; I just thanked him for saving my life, and a few days later I returned home. Slowly, the thought of how close to death I had been dawned upon me, along with the realization that I was still alive. It was as if life had been given to me once again. If I had regarded life as meaningful before, I now did so even more. I was *meant* to be here a little longer. My sense of being in God's hand was stronger than ever, and my gratefulness, which had always been an important part of my talks with Him, overflowed.

The thought of the extraordinary doctor didn't leave me either, and I had plenty of time to ponder during my recuperation. His characteristics didn't fit in to anything that made sense. I, who always read a lot of fantasy, came to think of *vampires*. They are long-lived and cold according to all the stories I had come across. But – these legendary beings actually drink blood and are not exactly known for saving people's lives... I laughed at myself and my vivid imagination. Could vampires *really* exist?!

I thought about Zacharias' and Ester's teenagers in school. Three adopted; Hjalmar, Emmanuel and Agnes, and two foster children; Esmeralda and Jacques. All of the strange things that I had noted about Doctor Corell also applied to them. In addition, they never used to eat anything in the dining hall. They just sat there, at a table by themselves, away from the others. I had always regarded them as very special, but amazingly well-behaved and nice students. Hjalmar was a very talented pianist, and Agnes sang beautifully. The brawny Emmanuel was a genius behind the drums, even though he had a habit of breaking the skins by accident – he was always so embarrassed when it happened. But vampires?!

Well, I eventually regained my strength and returned to my job. It was some years ago the Corell's children had finished school, and now I had no students that resembled them. Anyway, the thought wouldn't leave me. As if it was important for some reason. Urgent. What if it wasn't my imagination? I didn't tell my husband (as I didn't want to make a fool of myself), but finally an idea came to me. I would write a nice letter to Dr. Corell and tell him about my thoughts. At most, he would have a laugh at my expense. Right? After all, he had saved my life. How dangerous could it be?

1

I had twisted and turned my expressions around. Polite. Respectful. Thankful – seriously, he had saved my life after all. I was worried anyway. I would without doubt make a fool out of myself, and I didn't like the nice doctor to think badly of his children's teacher.

And – just think of it... What if it was true? If it was something so tremendously secret that I immediately would have to be eliminated? If one part was true, I had to take the other into account as well; I wasn't that stupid to think otherwise. At last I gave it a try.

“Dear Dr. Corell,

I would like to start by thanking you for saving my life last spring, after my accident with the bicycle. I don't think I was able to thank you properly at the time; I guess I was a little bit too dizzy at the start of my convalescence. But the thought of your skill and gentle care hasn't left my heart, and now when I'm fully recovered and have been able to regain my work at school, I'd like to turn to you with a letter to express my gratitude.

There is another matter that I've been pondering about, which I have not been able to let go of.

Firstly, I'd like to apologize for what I'm about to write. I so hope that you will not be offended, but maybe just laugh at me. It is as if I got to notice you at the hospital with newly opened eyes when you came to my bedside showing me such gentle care. I observed details about you that made me wonder. You seem to be extremely superior to everyone else I know. So perfect in every way, and so remarkably well preserved – there is no way of noticing that the years would have had any effect on you in any way; your unusually white marble skin; your hands so cool, almost cold, when you gently felt for my pulse. I felt very well taken care of and safe with you, but there was something I

couldn't get a grip on. The only ones that really resemble you are your children. After all, I was their teacher a few years ago. Very well-behaved and nice students, but very special. They always kept by themselves, and never seemed to eat anything in the dining hall; they just sat there at their own table enjoying their own company. You are also all of you so inhumanly handsome; excuse me for mentioning it (or accept the compliment).

I couldn't let go of the thoughts, and during my recuperation I had plenty of time to ponder. It was nudging me, as if it was something very important. I still feel that way, or else I wouldn't write this letter and risk making a huge fool out of myself. I have no choice other than sharing my thoughts with you, in the hope of getting the opportunity to discuss some of these things with you.

I'm trembling as I write this, but the only reasonable explanation I have come up with, is that you are vampires? Long-lived and cold, fits in well – but most of the other things that people imagine about vampires seem to be far from the truth. Vampires drink blood and are not known to dedicate their lives to saving people. Now there are three possibilities.

1) I have got hold of the wrong end of the stick and have really made a fool out of myself. You will think lowly of me and laugh at me for the rest of your life. If that's the case I will have to live with it; I choose here and now to take this risk.

2) It is true, and I have thereby found out a secret so immense and so impossible to let anyone into that there is no other alternative for you than to kill me. Which probably would be very easily done if you really are vampires. I guess that is why I have hesitated and taken my time with getting this letter done. Am I really prepared to take such a risk? Laughed to scorn, yes, but... killed? I don't know why this has seemed to be so vitally important to me. But it is,

there is no escape. So, yes, I've decided to take this risk. According to my outlook on life death is not the worst thing that can occur. The worst thing is a life without love. And that, I've never had. I've had 50 mostly fantastic years; surrounded by great amounts of love, which I have been given and have had the possibility to give. If my time has run out right now, I have nothing to complain about. And I feel quite sure, that you who so recently saved my life, in that case would carry out the execution in a merciful and painless way. Anyway, this seems rather improbable. How would you firstly want to save my life, only to a short time later want to take it from me?

3) The alternative I'm mostly hoping for is that you would be willing to spend some time with me to talk about it. I'm very inquisitive, and I think very highly of you and your family. Of course, I would never reveal your secret, I realize it would bring you a great deal of trouble, and I wouldn't want to expose you to that, after all you have done for me.

Yours gratefully / Johanna Larsson”

I thought a great deal about how I would get the letter to him. To send it by post didn't feel right. I was all too nervous to sit at home waiting for the answer, whatever it would consist of. In the end, I reckoned I should go to the hospital and hand him the letter personally and wait there in the waiting room for his answer. I knew I was taking a great risk; yet when the letter, at last, had painfully been brought into existence, I felt a great peace inside. And this peace grew when I thought of the letter being delivered. “There are things you have to do, even if they are dangerous, because otherwise you are not a human being but just a piece of dirt,” I said to myself, quoting Astrid Lindgren, one of my favorite authors* .

I didn't say anything about this to my family. Somewhere deep down in my heart I couldn't believe anything other than that this

* Astrid Lindgren: The brothers Lionheart

would end well. I felt in some way “protected”; that what I did was perfectly right. That God for some inscrutable reason wanted this, even though He hadn’t explained why. That this was the path I would follow, and that He would be with me every step of the way. Mmm. So, I said bye, as usual, that morning going to my job, with the letter in my knapsack; planning to visit the hospital on my way home. I had a totally normal and pleasant school day, and thought, as I very often did, how fortunate I was to have such nice students and flourishing job. Half past three I headed for the hospital and asked in the reception if Dr. Corell was on duty. He was, and I was shown to the correct ward. After a while, he turned up in the corridor.

“Sorry you had to wait for me, I just had to finish a consultation,” he said hurriedly. “Nice to see you again, it’s been a while since the last time we saw each other. How can I be at your service? Are you feeling alright since the accident?”

I thanked him warmly for his great work and told him that I was back at my job with regained strength.

“That pleases me,” he said kindly.

And then I said that I had been having some thoughts, that surely must be nonsense, but if he would take some time to read a letter, I’d appreciate it.

“I guess it’s just foolish,” I said and looked him seriously in the eyes, “but this has been haunting me ever since you operated on me, as if it’s something very important. I don’t understand it, but maybe you do?”

He looked at me both friendly and searchingly. “Of course, I will read it. Maybe, together, we can reach some clarity as to what this is all about. I have a break in a while; then I will be able to read it. Maybe if you have time, you could wait here, then you’ll get your answer as fast as possible?”

“Certainly. I’m on my way home from school and have nothing in particular to do this evening, so I’ll just sit down and read my book in the meantime.”

He nodded kindly, and I sat down. But the book was only an excuse to make it look natural when I sat there. Not that it was needed – the waiting room was soon empty this late in the afternoon. My thoughts raced wildly. What if I had only minutes left to live? I focused on thanking God for all the good things He had given me in life; I went systematically through everything important; my family; the kids; my parents and brothers and all other relatives; my job with all my nice students and colleagues; the congregation and all the good things we were doing together; the choir that I wouldn’t do without, and...

An hour later the doctor came back. As I looked at him, I felt that I wouldn’t be able to get up, so I remained seated, and completely silent. He looked at me with his marvelous golden-brown eyes and looked both serious and kind.

“The first I want to say,” he said, “is that alternative number two is out of the question. You have absolutely no reason to worry. And you haven’t made a fool out of yourself. I must say you have my high esteem for coming to me with this. It is really remarkable. I think alternative number three sounds like a good idea. When would it suit you?”

I only kept looking straight into his beautiful eyes, which never seemed to lose that warm friendliness, while a lot of contradictory emotions rushed through my body. Immense gratefulness. Bewilderment. What did this really imply? A sinking feeling submerging ever deeper made my knees tremble. It’s true! *What* will happen now?

“I don’t know if I will manage to wait very long,” I said weakly when I at last got my voice back. “Is there any possibility to talk as early as tonight? When you have finished your shift?”

“I finish at seven o’clock,” he said. “Of course, that would work. Where do you think we should we meet?”

I did some quick thinking. “I’m a member of the congregation that has the church in this block. Nothing happens there tonight, and I have a key. Would that be okay?” I thought that if they were vampires one could as well try to see what prejudices one could get rid of. According to the tales, vampires can’t stand crucifixes. Easily tested.

“And I wonder if you could possibly bring your wife, Ester? So that no one will jump to the wrong conclusion that I’m making a pass at a married man...” Suddenly a smile emerged from my body and broke out on my face.

He smiled back. “I’m sure she’d be happy to come along. Then what about eight o’clock, so I have the time to go home and get her?”

“Sure.” I shook my head a little. “What have I gotten myself into? Well, see you later then.”

“Let’s do that.” He came closer. We were alone in the waiting room; still he lowered his voice.

“Don’t be afraid.” And he was gone.

I stared emptily after him and tried to make my heart slow down. Suddenly I shook my head and pulled myself together. What else could I do? Nothing had changed, after all. The doctor was still the nice Dr. Corell who had saved my life. So, I quickly made my way home and, as usual, fixed things in the kitchen and made supper. Said to my husband that I would be off for a talk in the church, also a very normal thing, and then I was off; though I didn’t say anything to him about the butterflies that were swirling in my stomach... I had been there only a minute before they showed up. I opened and let them in. The church was like home to me, the best setting I could think of for a talk that presumably could become rather upsetting.

“Please come in!” I said kindly.

2

They said hello and very kindly smiled back at me. We peeked into the church hall – they had never been here before, they said. Well, there the prejudice about vampires and crucifixes disappeared, that didn't seem to be a problem at all. We sat down at one of the tables in the fellowship hall.

“I don't know where we should start,” I said cautiously. “Maybe it's best if you just tell me?”

Just as cautiously, they looked at me nicely and searchingly.

“Well, yes,” the doctor said. “We are vampires. That was really insightful of you to come to that conclusion. Or maybe we have been getting careless of late? We usually try to move out before anyone gets any thoughts of that kind. We have stayed here a long time, it's a good place, and we wouldn't be happy about leaving it.”

A shiver passed through my body and landed in my knees. At the same time, I felt the peace in my heart not leave me but grow. I observed them with a smile that deepened when I realized that they were actually being completely honest with me. It felt like a really great thing to have their confidence. And so, they started sharing. Respectfully and carefully. Sincerely and gently. Anxious not to scare me while still answering my questions.

“You see,” Zacharias said (he told me he wanted me to call him by his first name), “for us to live together with humans is not that easy. But we dearly want to. In a good way. Maybe you'd like to ask some questions? What would you like to know about us?”

“Well. I have to start by asking what you eat. We can't evade that issue,” I said firmly.

“The normal vampire diet is to drink human blood,” the doctor said quietly and looked at me somewhat sadly. “But we who live here aren't really normal. We look upon ourselves as vegetarian;

that's like an internal joke... You know our recurring hiking trips? We hunt wild animals in the forest. That's one of the advantages of living out here in the wilderness."

The number of butterflies in my stomach increased. I remembered my students' recurring leaves of absence and other uncalled for absences. I understood this better now. Not that it ever seemed to disturb their studies – they were always doing well, as if they already knew it all by heart. But that also had its explanation, I realized.

"So, it's no use asking if I could offer you a cup of coffee?" I asked.

"Nope," Ester said smiling even bigger, "but thanks for your kindness. Have a cup yourself if you want to."

I let it be.

"Then I'd like to know how old you are," I continued, "if that's not regarded as ill-mannered to ask? One of the myths about you says you are long-lived..."

They threw a hardly perceptible glance at each other.

"I was born in 1608," Zacharias admitted.

"And I, in 1895," Ester breathed. "Does that feel awkward?"

Her words made me smile once more. It was somewhat shocking, but then I was prepared to hear strange things. "Noo," I said slowly and shook my head, "but rather weird. You don't look a day older than thirty-five, any of you. But it's rather amazing. Think of what you could tell about the past, as eyewitnesses!"

"Well, I don't think we have been eyewitnesses to very much, we have kept by ourselves as much as possible," Zacharias remarked. "But we could talk about the history some time, if you feel like keeping up the contact with us."

“What’s it really like to be a vampire?” I asked impulsively.

“Very different, in many ways,” Ester said gravely. “You get a lot of things when you are transformed. Very sharpened senses. Strength and speed. Very effective weapons. We can be very dangerous if we want to. But we still have our humanity left at the bottom of it. It’s a weird combination. It takes a rather long time to learn how to handle it. You should be happy we are this old. We’ve had time to practice.”

I couldn’t comment on that. I just put it away in my mind to reflect upon later.

“What about your adopted children?” I asked instead.

“Emmanuel and Esmeralda are the youngest, Emmanuel was born in 1915 and Esmeralda in 1913,” Zacharias answered cautiously.

I couldn’t help but laugh a little. “And they have been my students! How daft,” I said. “It’s good that I teach music and that there are always new songs to learn. I hope they didn’t find it too miserable...”

“There are always new things to learn if you’re open for it,” Zacharias said kindly. “And they have always appreciated you as a teacher; I can tell you that. As a matter of fact, I went home a short while during my break and talked with them about you, and if you forgive me, I let all of them read your letter.

I stared blankly at him. Had he been home?!

“I’m fast,” he said cautiously. “One can get a lot done in half an hour, and this was something we had to agree upon.”

That they had appreciated me in school warmed my heart, but I trembled nevertheless.

“I’m still rather uncertain of what we’re doing right now,” Zacharias said slowly. “We’ve put a great burden on you by letting you know this. Can you bear the truth? What will you do

with it? It's extremely vital that word about this doesn't get out, which I hope you can understand. Just consider the panic that it would generate?"

I could well imagine that. I sure felt the lump of panic growing in my own stomach. I shuddered, but not only because of the vampires. I shuddered when I thought of human fear and the hideous consequences it can have.

"Yeah, really," I said. "I wrote that in my letter too. This must absolutely be something totally private for me. I wouldn't even be able to tell my husband. I'm sure he'd be very upset and would want to take measures. But it seems to me as if the only measures that would do any good have already been taken." I smiled shakily. "Vegetarian..."

"It was a good thing to involve the youths," Ester said. "They know you well from school, and Zacharias asked what they think of you and your ability to handle such knowledge as this. They all agreed that you are very open-minded and take things for what they are and are not easily worried. If we'd like to reveal ourselves to anyone, you would be a good choice. They even found it to be a little fun, that their music teacher of all people... We're all worried about you, though. Some of us so much that they voted against that we should expose you to this. You're playing with death when you're together with us, you understand that, don't you?"

"Mmm," I mumbled, and briefly thought, "...otherwise you're not a human being but just a piece of dirt..." But I didn't say that. "I choose to keep to what I see in front of me," I said instead, and felt my determination increase. I had chosen this. To take the risk – just because it, for some inscrutable reason, seemed to be so infinitely important. "I see two very nice people in front of me, who in a kind way tell me about their lives. I see a doctor who has saved my life. I see the parents of five of my nicest students whom I taught for several years. One has to take that into account as well."

I saw a flash in Zacharias's eyes, as of some kind of weird combination of relieved appreciation and humor. He looked at me intensely.

"Maybe I should try to make your picture of us a little more complete," Ester said quietly. "Don't be frightened; I won't do anything awful."

All of a sudden, she wasn't sitting opposite of me anymore. I looked around. She was standing in the back of the room as if nothing had happened. "Don't be frightened," she repeated. The next moment she held me in a firm grasp with her lips against my neck. "So easy," she mumbled. "Try to get loose."

I realized her arms were like iron. She didn't hold me forcefully, but there would be no way to break away. I took a breath and relaxed. What else could I do? She released me and sat down with an apologetic look in her face. "Sorry if that was scary," she said. "But I felt I had to show you something of what we're capable of."

It took me some time to regain my ability to speak.

"You can be very dangerous," I quoted her. "But do you want that? That's something you have repressed very well. I have never ever felt threatened by any of you. I have only met care, kindness and happiness from you Corells. You Zacharias saved my life. And the last thing you said to me at the hospital was that I shouldn't be afraid. How does this work out, really?"

Zacharias still watched me with the same intensity.

"It's an idea I've had a long time," he said slowly. "I don't want to be a monster. Those who have chosen to join me think the same way. We can fail, because our instinct is strong. But we are doing our best to avoid situations where the temptation can overcome us."

A gush of conflicting emotions ran through me. I shivered at what the temptation meant. I was deeply impressed by the

goodness that seemed to be so strong among them. I felt such compassion for them because of the awfully difficult situation they had gotten into when they had become vampires. How had that happened? I didn't want to know that, at least not now.

"Why have you told me?" I asked gently. "Is it just because I asked? What do you want from me, really?"

"I'm not quite sure," he mused. "This came a little sudden. I hope you understand this is something very unusual. Humans are really not at all allowed to know anything about our existence. But there is something I've been longing for from the moment I was transformed into a vampire. I've been wishing that vampires shouldn't need to be such a disaster for the human race. That there could be some kind of purpose even for our lives as well. But what would I be able to do about that? So, I've found my own way in want of something better – to feed on animals and use my abilities for the benefit of people at the hospital. And I have got some friends to follow me on that way. It isn't much, but it is something. When I got your letter today, I had the feeling that an important piece of the puzzle was falling into place. You said you don't understand why this should be so important, and I don't think I know that either. But I've got the same feeling you have, that this *is* important. In what way will become obvious, I guess. To start with it's truly good not having to keep up a disguise. To let you be yourself, be seen as what you are, and hopefully not be judged overly harsh. You are doing something great for us, I tell you, by regarding us with such kindness as you have done."

His expression took on a tone of sadness and pain.

"I really don't like what I have to say to you right now," he said. "That you have sought us out, all of your own accord, must mean that you in a fashion are ready to risk your life for our sake?"

I looked at him earnestly and nodded slowly. "Mmm. I think so. Otherwise I wouldn't sit here, right? But it feels right. And you have never threatened me, have you?"

“Maybe we have to, a little bit anyway. You must seriously understand how important your silence is. If you, disregarding your intentions, even with a word mention this to anybody, no matter who, we have no choice. We have to do away with you – and the person you have been talking to as well. Nothing would sadden me more. But maybe you understand from Ester’s demonstration how easy that would be for us. And don’t doubt that we would know about it. Instantly. But it would be so quick that you would hardly notice it, don’t worry about that detail. We don’t like to torment people.”

I looked at him quietly and meditated on his choice of words. The nausea came and went in my stomach. “Do away with” – that was what one said about old pets that had to be put down. Maybe that was how our relationship really was. Predator and prey. I should be happy if they would regard me as a house pet. I kept silent for a long time while my new insights sank in. Finally, I nodded slightly to show that I accepted what he had just said.

“I am sitting here pondering about how scared I am,” I said. “You have overthrown my image of the world. I feel the instinctive flight reflex of the prey, and yet I want to stay. Because what is it I see at the other side of the table? Monsters or goodness?” I regarded them silently for a while. They looked back at me with unfathomable eyes. “Monsters *and* goodness,” I continued. “And the goodness is predominant. This has been a marvelous conversation. I don’t have words enough to thank you properly for being so honest with me. I regard it as great trust and reliance; I feel more honored than I deserve. Yes, I would really like to keep in contact with you. Could it be, that we might be friends? I would really like that.”

And I felt deep inside how true this was, what I just said. I liked these creatures. A lot. Whatever they had been transformed into, and how weird everything might be, I didn’t want to lose this good feeling. In spite of the fact that I couldn’t deny my fear.

They looked at each other once more, and when they turned to me again the warm, gentle smile was back.

“We’re happy you can take it like that,” Zacharias said. “And we are very interested in keeping in contact with you. It would make us happy to regard you as our friend. Who knows what good may come of this? But, how do we go on from here? Is there any more question you have for us before we leave?”

I smiled. “No, really – you have told me more than I can digest on a single occasion. My “box of questions” is depleted. Well, just one thing. Just to make matters totally clear. There *are* vampires out there, drinking human blood? But you don’t?”

“No, we don’t,” Zacharias answered calmly. “And, yes, there are vampires out there drinking human blood. But not in our territory. You are all totally secure here.”

I just nodded a little. What could I say? “Thank you” felt too inadequate.

“How will you be able to sleep tonight, I wonder,” Ester said. “And what will you say to your husband when you get home? You’d better figure that out before we leave.”

“Ha ha,” I said. “That’s easy. I thought about that before I came here. I’ll tell him that I went to see the doctor who saved my life, to thank him; and that he was very interested in my trust in God that seems to have carried me through my recuperation, and that he wanted to talk about it. Existential questions, simply put. That’s close enough to the truth to be easy to say. But if I’ll get to sleep is another question... Anyway, I feel safe that you won’t come and bite me to death. One doesn’t bite one’s friends... And if you had wanted to you would’ve already done it.” I tried to give them a little smile, but it mostly turned into a wry face at the thought of what they could have done with me. “I’m right about that, aren’t I?”

“Yes, you are,” Zacharias said gravely. The next second he was smiling again, and we got up. I realized how shaky I was and

took a few breaths before letting go of the tabletop. They looked at me a little worried.

“Should we give you a ride home?” Zacharias wondered. “We can take your bike on our car’s rear bicycle rack.”

“Yes please,” I said, feeling suddenly relieved. “I don’t think I need another bicycle accident, even if the doctor is close at hand.”

Which put us laughing, all the three of us. How nice. “Crazy, that’s what it is”, I said, “but fantastic!”

Everyone had gone to bed when I got home.

“You’re late,” my husband mumbled.

“Yes, sorry, we had an interesting conversation. You know I met Dr. Corell this afternoon. Now I had a talk with him and his wife Ester – you know they are parents to former students of mine, don’t you?”

I noticed that I babbled nervously, so I stopped. “Anyway, we talked about existential matters and faith; it gets crucial when one has been so close to death as I’ve been. His wife Ester is really sweet,” I said firmly when I thought of her lips touching my neck.

I got into bed, and my husband, almost unaware, put his hand on my hip when I fell asleep all worn out. What I didn’t know until later was that Hjalmar Corell sat on our porch keeping watch, listening to our conversation through my thoughts. “So, Ester is sweet, *that’s* what she chooses to see...” he thought. He would follow me like a shadow the next few days. I didn’t know that either.

3

The next day, I went to my job as if on autopilot, grateful to God that my lesson plans had been finalized since long ago. I just needed to be present and meet the students in what we were doing. And I quickly decided that they would surely reach their goals without any exercises that I would have to spend time correcting tonight. Because in parallel to the lessons and contacts with the students I was wildly mulling over what happened yesterday. They exist. Vegetarian. Monsters or goodness? Goodness, beyond doubt. That was all they had ever shown in all years past, Ester's demonstration included; after all she never bit me. Monsters? I hadn't asked how many human lives they had taken. What a terrible thing to ask... Zacharias? Ester? My students?? They *had* taken human lives, hadn't they? Before they turned vegetarian? And – their death threat against me? Well, that wasn't so bad; I had always known that this must be kept secret, for everyone's sake. These vampires, specifically, didn't want to kill me, I was totally sure of that. But, God, how did You think here? Have You really created vampires?! For what reason, exactly? How can I make any sense of this?

My belief in God as the origin and source of the universe was firmly rooted. I'd had my periods of doubt, but He always remained, whatever I did. Incomprehensible, maybe, always greater than I could fathom, but undoubtedly there. And when I calmed down and accepted, it felt like He was smiling a little at me. "There now, welcome back! It's not intended that you should understand everything. Maybe it's good enough that *I* do..."

And creation – in the scientifically oriented circles where I had been brought up it was completely natural to believe that the stories of creation – the two you find in the Bible – were allegories. They told of something important and so they were true, but it wasn't the details that mattered. The Bible is not a manual of Natural Science, I had thought many times. If God

created the world in seven days or by setting up the rules for evolution was of minor importance. It is a text that tells of our relation to the Creator of the universe and to each other. And it is completely obvious that we human beings are very important in the eyes of God. So important that God could choose to become a human being and take on death. Well, He arose again, but still... How would I get vampires to fit into this? Vampires eating humans?! I wondered...

I wondered how long vampires had existed. One didn't seem to be born a vampire, but some people were transformed into it, in one way or another, so Ester had said. Could it be a punishment from God? If so; for what? God's plan is to forgive sin, not to punish, neither with vampirism nor with anything else. God's tool for vengeance, then? No, unthinkable. Vampires struck at random, I figured; how would they know what victims would pass them by when they were out hunting for food? And God as the God of revenge? No, I didn't know Him as that. The fact that vampires are never mentioned in the Bible must come from their great need to keep secret. I wondered how many vampires there were in the world? If there were as many as seven of them just in this little place? Or how many they actually were. Not even that I was sure of. I sighed. Vampires were a cause of death; that was mercilessly obvious to me. But people died all the time, for a whole lot of different reasons. To be killed by a vampire would be very unusual indeed. And these specific vampires, who didn't drink human blood at all; well, at least they said so – I had been together with them. They had been so nice. Kind. Sweet. Considerate. Zacharias had saved my life.

A sense of determination took hold of me.

If there are vampires, God has to be involved in one way or another. There must be a meaning. My experience was that an occurrence either had a totally obvious meaning – or we had the opportunity to take part and create meaning, even out of the most incomprehensible. God's meaning with His creation is love. It's the all-pervading theme through the Bible, and Jesus is almost over-explicit about it. *How* could vampires add to the

amount of love in the world?! Well, these vampires had shown me an overwhelming love; that was very clear to me.

When I got home after work, I sat down with my Bible and started to check things out. God loves all His created beings; thus He has to love the vampires too, I reasoned – He won't go against His own nature. All vampires have at one time been human beings. Accordingly, the teachings, deeds, death and resurrection of Jesus have to count for them as well. I started to read more important passages with regard of vampires. If the authors of the Bible had known about vampires, how would they have described it? I suddenly wildly wanted to laugh. What was I doing?! Preparing a Bible study about vampires? Of all the weird activities one could think of, this one ranked close to top position.*

That God loves everybody and doesn't want to exclude anyone I found everywhere. In the Book of Romans, it said:

“If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, *“Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.”* For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, **Man and Vampire**—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, *“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

That part in bold letters was my addition. I had to test it. Well, why not? If God loves all of His created beings, it should be like that. Had the author known about vampires he might surely have written like that. But this thought came with a defiant heart. How great is the love of God? Why had He created beings that had humans for dinner? Could He really love them? Was it

* All quotes from the Bible in this novel come from The New International Version, NIV, see Appendix 1.

alright to eat human beings, or did He want them to learn how to restrain themselves and desist from it?

I kept on like this. At the end, I had one and a half pages of Bible quotes that I printed out and thought I could bring with me to our next meeting, if a chance to talk about it would turn up.

I browsed Psalms 121:7–8 and was struck by doubt.

*”The LORD will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life;
the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.”*

Would that really apply if I bumped into a vampire on the hunt, I thought sarcastically. If a vampire took a victim God wouldn’t stop it. He doesn’t usually protect from natural disasters... And what else could you name a vampire other than a natural disaster?! I had to get used to the thought that they were deadly predators. Deadly to humans. Deadly to me. But, I thought, as so many times before, that God seems to have another perception of death than we do. That death is not the worst that can happen. And – He will meet you on the other side. Death is drastic, but not gruesome. We will be met by something well-known. God’s preservation is something other than sheer survival.

We are supposed to love our enemies and forgive our debtors.

”Forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

That’s how God wants things done. God’s forgiveness has no limits; there were many more Bible quotes about that. Where did I set my limits?

Among the fruit of Spirit self-restraint was one, said the Book of Galatians. Well, the Corells had that one, undoubtedly. The Spirit worked His deeds in them also, whether they believed it

or not. God has no limits for His actions. The limits are our doing; that was obvious. What God does to us can cost. I wondered how much the self-restraint cost the Corells. I felt so deeply for them.

I got stuck at 2 Cor 5:14.

“Christ’s love compels us...”

That stopped me dead in my tracks. That was Paul’s thinking; that he had gotten so much of God’s love that he couldn’t keep it back but just had to share it. How had I been thinking? Well, I hadn’t been thinking of God’s love when I thought of Dr. Corell and his children. I had only been thinking that it was something odd about them and that I liked them. And that this in one way or another seemed to be important. Maybe it was about love, after all? Did I love them, no matter what they had done and could do?? I must confront God with this. The verse went on:

”If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.”

To take in that you are a new creation. That must be a possibility for vampires as well, wouldn’t it? And *“the ministry of reconciliation”*? What if that was what God wanted us to do? My mind reeled. Could this be possible?! The thought was too big for me, so I put it aside. Decided that it would be ample enough for a start that God’s love is for everyone. Vampires included.

The wholeness of it all hit me. This was what an answer to prayer felt like; I recognized it. But this I hadn’t prayed for; it had come to me anyway. I was overly convinced; there was no way out of it, however utterly weird it would seem to human eyes. I felt stubborn. Defiant. Completely stupid... I would stand up for this, no matter what. I shook my head at myself and

stopped. I could have kept searching... But what I had found was more than I needed and more than I could absorb.

In the car going home, we had talked a little bit about when we should see each other next time. Weird – I felt calmer having them in front of me... Thursday night, we decided. That meant tomorrow. “Maybe you would consider coming to our place?” Zacharias had asked. “Maybe you would like to see some of your former students again? Some of them might be home at that time.”

I hesitated only for a moment. Exactly how wise would it be to go straight into the den of the wild beasts? But I realized that my life was in real jeopardy wherever I went. It wouldn't be worse to visit them than to meet them anywhere else.

“You could tell your husband that we want to continue our conversation about faith and existential matters and that your former students will also join us,” Ester suggested. “That's something your husband would like, isn't it?”

Well, he would, I knew; there shouldn't be any objection to this.

“I can pick you up on my way from the hospital,” Zacharias said. Agreed.