

Living on the Blood of Others

By Betsy Dornbusch

I don't have the kind of face men notice – not any more. Something mamas don't tell their baby girls is how drinking four or ten Jack and Cokes a day for twenty-five years ruins your good looks.

It used to bug me. All right. Sometimes it still bugs me. But today it doesn't.

Today, I entertain my vertigo by balancing a barstool on two legs while I wait for the bartender to see my fifty sticking to the bar top. Men don't notice my face or my ass anymore, but they sure as hell notice my money. They notice my gun, too, once I grace them with its presence.

But not yet. Not yet. It's too early for killing. I like to do mine in the wee hours. Gives God the whole next day to forget.

The bartender brings me the Jack and Coke I ask for, and it's diet. I push it back toward her. "It's diet," I say, slow so she'll get it right this time. "I want Coke. Classic."

I read her expression before she turns away to replace it: *Bitch should drink diet.*

The bartender's lo-rise jeans hang on her hips and her stomach has a teensy, sexy swell. Sweat curls the tendrils of hair at the nape of her neck under her ponytail. She's too young yet for the alcohol to take its toll.

The bar is dark and the music darker, some 80s b-side satellite shit. Guitarists wail about love and sex, and I wonder how many hair band singers ever killed a man.

I spot tonight's job smoking a cigarette out in the heat on the curb. His name is Harry. He looks a little familiar, like out of an old snapshot or something. Must be the straw hat.

He wears a pit-stained button-down tucked under a Saint Nick's belly. A cracked leather belt strains to hold his khakis up. He ironed them though, so he doesn't look all melted like the rest of us. Got to give him that.

Sweat runs down my back, under my husband Mack's ancient denim shirt. It used to turn Mack on, me wearing that shirt with nothing underneath. Used to take me out on our fire escape and fuck me in that shirt.

One hot August night during the halftime of a Chief's game, some guy stopped to watch us from the alley. He had a big tent in his jeans and a tiny bald spot on his head, the kind guys don't know is there until they catch it in a mirrored elevator.

Mack, he made me scream my finish quick as you please, and whispered, "Keep him there, baby."

So I unbuttoned the shirt and jiggled my tits over the rail at the guy while Mack found his gun. Mack put a bullet right between those two ogling eyes.

"Asshole should mind his own business," Mack said, sitting down to finish watching his football game.

I'll be damned if the dead guy didn't still have a hard-on when the police showed up. Mack went away in the back of a squad car, and I fucked two cops for few weeks to keep myself out of it.

Back then, I thought something like that was a compliment. These days, Mack's old shirt is good for hiding my Ruger snubby.

Harry sits down at the bar, probably clueless that he crossed the wrong son-of-a-bitch. That son-of-a-bitch is Rory, Mack's big brother. I've known Rory since high school. I was a sixteen year-old salad bar girl; he was my twenty-two-year-old manager. Rory didn't like me taking up with Mack so much, but he got over it.

Rory's looks are gone now, like mine. Mine's age; his is from surviving ten at Leavenworth. But he's a nice guy, even running the big-time like he is. He sends work my way. Not the status jobs. He's got suave types to do the Names, to start the wars. Me, I do the guy who glanced at him at the urinal or bumped into his girlfriend at the bar. I do the Harrys in Rory's life.

I look away from Harry, catching sight of the deep red scar across my wrist. I put both hands on my lap. The bartender makes me another drink without asking. Maybe Rory let her know I was coming. I twist my body away from Harry and tuck my chin next to my drink.

And I wonder, for what must be the millionth time, *Why me?* Living month to month on the blood of others is wearing the fuck out of me. I'm getting too old for this shit. And then I tell myself: *Beats waiting tables. Get over yourself, bitch.*

Harry sits three seats away from me, reeking of menthol cigarettes. "Tanqueray and tonic, please," he says.

His voice is rough from smoking, but I know it.

Fuck, I know it.

And his name isn't Harry. My lips silently shape it before I can stop them.

Mack.

I sneak a glance his way. *Fuck*, I think for good measure.

The bartender looks behind herself at the two bottles of generic gin sitting on the shelf and shrugs. Mack makes a sort of sideways nod and says, "Whatever. Make it a double."

He sucks it down and drinks his second even quicker. In the time it takes me to nurse another Jack, he's wobbled outside for another smoke, to the back for a piss, and sat down to finish his third drink. My stomach is churning like a cement mixer.

I close my eyes and wrap my hands around the icy glass, letting the condensation and syrupy smell ground me. I pick up the glass, carry it to the bathroom, and avoid my reflection as I wait out the time it would take for me to do my business. Then I take a seat at a shadowed table at the back. I glance at Mack every now and then, but, like other men, he doesn't show he's noticed me. I'm no longer his type.

The Chiefs are playing, and the fuckers're losing like they always do, in front of the whole goddamn world on a Monday night. The bartender turned down the hair bands to listen to the game, and Madden's about to jack off right there in the booth. Everybody loves to hate Kansas City.

Mack's leaning to one side on his elbow, staring forlornly at the TV, but he doesn't even blink when our receiver fumbles.

I'm guessing he knows what's coming after all.

The night is sultry, which makes it sound sexy, but really just covers everything in stink. Jack Daniels on the table, stale rinse water on my clothes, sour cigarette smoke clinging to the walls.

Mack's half-asleep in his glass, but when the house lights go up, he rouses himself. He doesn't even give me a bleary glance as he straightens his hat and staggers toward the door. I throw down a tip for the bartender and follow him, not too far behind. I hedge he won't look back at me. If he does, he'll fall over.

I remember Mack's bullet pegging that voyeur down in the alley and all the blood spilling around his head like a collapsed balloon. I'm too old for vengeance. I don't care about him, about this, about any of it, I keep telling myself. If Rory wants Mack dead, then let him fucking do it.

But my feet keep following him.

Mack ambles in starts and fits down the sidewalk, occasionally staggering to one side, waving a hand out to catch an imaginary support. He stalls at a street corner and swings his head both ways to figure out where to go next. When he can't decide, he shakes out a cigarette.

I pause in the shadow next to a building to wait out his smoke.

He wavers on his feet, takes his cigarette from his mouth, coughs. He twitches. Then he's on his knees, puking all over himself. I bow my head and say one of Mack's Hail-Mary-Full-Of-Graces to the Porcelain God. I almost laugh out loud, remembering, but then it isn't funny any more when Mack's body falls forward. He lands on his face in his puke. He doesn't move.

I guess I should think this is a lucky break. It's not like I get off on seeing the whites of their eyes. But I can't do him--if I am going to do him--out here on the street. Plus, Mack is not a small man, and my back is stiff and sore from stress. Truth told, I'm half ill myself from too little Jack. My hands tremble.

Mack smells raw with sick and gin. I roll him over. The light catches his slack, fat face, jolting a memory from the darker recesses of my brain. I fumble for his wallet.

A driver's license. Forty-three bucks. A punch card for a restaurant.

What the hell was I expecting? A photo of me?

Headlights wink two blocks down. I tuck his wallet in my pocket, grab Mack under the armpits, and start pulling. His driver's license claims his apartment is three blocks away.

Mack has a basement apartment and I resist the urge to just roll him down the steps. At this point, my trembling isn't just from lack of alcohol, it's from being mad as hell. Problem is, I don't know who I'm madder at, Mack or Rory.

I find the key in Mack's pocket. He's still a dead weight lump, and I have to shove him with my foot to close the door behind us. He's on his side, though, so he's not going to asphyxiate before I can kill him. His hat is still jammed down on his head, despite our trek.

I pace for a second, back and forth, around the threadbare sofa, on the cool concrete floor, and then I stop. Take stock.

Mack's no fun to be mad at. Not until he wakes up. I prowl around and find his phone hanging on the wall over the stove. It's got a cord, of all things. I stretch it to its limit so I can keep an eye on the patient.

"What the fuck, Rory?"

A pause. "You...figured it out."

"Did you think I wouldn't recognize my own fucking husband?"

"It's been twenty-six years. I just thought."

"You didn't fucking *think* at all!" I realize I'm shouting and I stop. No one yells around Rory. Even Rory doesn't yell. You don't have to bark when you keep dogs who bite.

I pace to the end of the grimy kitchen, about six steps, and back. Mack still slumps on the floor, stinking and drooling. I rub my forehead. This cannot be happening. This is not.

"What the fuck?" I repeat, quieter.

"Before he went in," Rory says. "Mack and I did some deals. I had Feds up my ass, even then. He was the keeper."

Keeper. Oh right. Money.

"So then he goes to prison, right?" Rory asks. "Remember?"

How could I forget? I almost spout off with that, but then I realize Rory, he's nervous. Or sad or some shit. I blink down at the floor. Someone made a half-assed effort to lay linoleum decades ago. It's crooked and the black edge curls by the fridge.

"So he took your money," I say.

"Jesus, you were a fucking mess back then," Rory says. "Doing cops to keep your name clear when all you were was a witness and a fucking eighteen-year-old kid with a husband in prison. And then Mack left. I didn't. Well. I didn't think you were coming back from that."

I glance down at the scars, crisscross on my wrists. I open a cabinet. Wouldn't you know. Fucking Tanqueray on the shelf. I start to wonder where he got a taste for it, but smother that line of thought.

Rory's still talking. "Fuck," he says. "I didn't think *I* would come back from it."

I hold the phone between my shoulder and ear while I swig gin. It sears my esophagus. Too early to say if it will stay down.

I hear myself say, "So I'm supposed to kill your brother because he took your money. Because you're too chicken-shit to do it yourself." With gin boiling in my gut, I don't even cringe.

Rory makes a pained noise. "Aren't you listening to me? I don't care about the fucking money. He left us. Me. You." He pauses. "Especially you."

"What if I didn't." I look over at Mack. "What if I don't do it?"

"I figured that was your choice," Rory says. "But you deserve a chance at him. I owe you that much. You wouldn't have ever met him if it wasn't for me. He always was a psychopath, ever since he was a kid. But I thought he was finally real about something. So I let you two go. Against my better judgment, I let it go. And look where it fucking got you, killing losers in alleys, a fucking drunk, harder than any man I know."

"Fuck you, Rory."

"You ever hold a gun before Mack taught you to shoot?"

I drink more gin to warm the chill his words etch on my spine.

“Well? Did you?”

I bite my lip. “No.”

“You were so little. Just a fucking kid.” A pause. “You’re still so goddamned little. I wish...” His voice breaks off.

Little. I know what that means. Pathetic. I set the gin down on the counter. Rust has eaten a ring around the faucet. I turn it on, wash my hands.

“What’s that noise? You there?” Rory asks.

“Yeah.”

“Say something.”

What am I supposed to say? *Mack left me. Oh, waa waa.* Fuck that shit. “I’ll let you know when it’s done.”

I take a look around the apartment. I tear sheets off the stained mattress, looking for I don’t know what. Mack’s stash or something. Nothing. Not a dime or a dime-bag. The bed stinks like the mug filled with cigarette butts next to the bed. I carry it into the bathroom to empty it.

Black mold crawls up the corners of the shower. I dump the ashes and butts in the toilet. When I press the lever the sound jolts me in the silence, like chains rattling through the pipes. I grip the cup with white fingers and then throw it at the tub. But only the handle breaks off.

Out by the door, Mack groans.

I walk over and sit near him on the cool concrete, my back against the wall. On second thought, I pull out my gun and hold it loosely on my lap.

He blinks his puffy eyes at me. “How did you find me?”

“Rory.”

“Fuckin’ Rory.”

I agree, but I don’t answer.

He stares at the gun in my hand. “You gonna point that thing at me all day or are you gonna use it?”

“I don’t know yet.”

He nods, his fat cheek against the floor, and he closes his eyes.

I reach out and nudge the hat aside with my foot. It reveals a big bald head with a few wispy hairs. He’s sunburned on top.

I don’t want to know, but I have to ask. “You come back here to see me?”

“No.” He grunts. “Yeah. Maybe.”

“You going to give Rory his money?”

Another grunt. “It’s gone. Years ago.”

Again, my mouth moves without consulting my brain. “Then I guess we don’t have anything to talk about.”

“You probably want to know what happened,” he says. “Why I left.”

He peers up at me, eyes squinting over puffy cheeks. Parts of me flake off inside, memories thaw. I hate him looking at me, seeing me like this.

My fingers tighten on the trigger. Thank God the gin has steadied my hand.

“No,” I say. “I don’t.”

Betsy Dornbusch splits her time between Boulder and in Grand Lake, Colorado. Her short fiction has appeared in print and online venues such as Sinister Tales, Big Pulp, and Spinetingler. She's an editor with Electric Spec and is currently shopping her first novel to agents. In her free time, she snowboards and pretends to be a soccer mom. (Nobody's buying the soccer mom bit, though.)