

THE TRAVELING VAMPIRE SHOW

COME AND SEE—

That VAMPIRE in captivity!

VALERIA

GORGEOUS! BEGUILING! LETHAL!

This stunning beauty, born in the wilds of Transylvania sleeps by day in her coffin. By night she feeds on the blood of strangers.

SEE
WATCH
TREMBLE
SCREAM

VALERIA rises from the dead!
as she stalks volunteers from the audience!
as she sinks her teeth into their necks!
as she sips their blood!!!

Where: Jordan Field — 1000 — 1000 — 1000
When: 10:00 PM — 11:00 PM
How much: \$10

(Solicits under age 18 allowed)

"A horror tale that's not only emotionally true, but also scary and, above all, fun."—*Publishers Weekly* (Starred Review)

RICHARD LAYMON

Internationally Bestselling Author of *Among the Missing*

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Come and see—
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—VALERIA—
Gorgeous!
Beguiling!
Lethal!

*This stunning beauty, born in the wilds of
Transylvania, sleeps by day in her coffin. By night she
feeds on the blood of strangers.
See Valeria rise from the dead!*

Watch as she stalks volunteers from the audience !

Tremble as she sinks her teeth into their necks!

Scream as she gulps their blood!

Where: *Janks Field, 2 mi. south of Grandville on Route 3*

When: *One Show Only—Friday, midnight*

How Much: \$10.

(Nobody under age 18 allowed.)

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ONE RAINY NIGHT

BITE

THE TRAVELING VAMPIRE SHOW

**RICHARD
LAYMON**

LEISURE BOOKS



NEW YORK CITY

*This book is dedicated to Richard Chizmar,
owner, manager and coach of the CD Team.
You took us to the show.*

March 2001

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Chapter One

The summer I was sixteen, the Traveling Vampire Show came to town.

I heard about it first from my two best friends, Rusty and Slim.

Rusty's real name was Russell, which he pretty much hated.

Slim's real name was Frances. She had to put up with it from her parents and teachers, but not from other kids. She'd tell them, "Frances is a talking mule." Asked what she wanted to be called, her answer pretty much depended on what book she happened to be reading. She'd say, "Nancy" or "Holmes" or "Scout" or "Zock" or "Phoebe." All last summer, she wanted to be called Dagny. Now, it was Slim. A name like that, I figured maybe she'd started reading westerns. But I didn't ask.

My name is Dwight, by the way. Named after the Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces in Europe. He didn't get elected President until after I'd already been born and named.

Anyway, it was a hot August morning, school wouldn't be starting again for another month, and Dad was out in front of our house mowing the lawn with a push mower. We must've been the only family in Grandville that didn't have a power mower. Not that we couldn't afford one. Dad was the town chief of police and Mom taught English at the high school. So we had the money for a power mower or even a *riding* mower, but not the inclination.

Not Dad, anyway. Long before anyone ever heard of language like "noise pollution," Dad was doing everything in his power to prevent this or that "godawful racket."

Also, he was opposed to any sort of device that might make life easier on me or my two brothers. He wanted us to work hard, sweat and suffer. He'd lived through the Great Depression and World War Two, so he knew all about suffering. According to him, "kids these days've got it too easy." So he did what he could to make life tougher on us.

That's why I was out there pushing the mower, sweating my ass off, when along came Rusty and Slim.

It was one of those gray mornings when the sun is just a dim glow through the clouds and you know by the smell that rain's on the way and you wish it would hurry up and get here because the day is so damn hot and muggy.

My T-shirt was off. When I saw Rusty and Slim coming toward me, I suddenly felt a little embarrassed about being without it. Which was sort of strange, considering how much time we spent together in our swimming suits. I had an urge to run and snag it off the porch rail and put it on. But I stayed put, instead, and waited for them in just my jeans and sneakers.

"Hi, guys," I called.

"What's up?" Rusty greeted me. He meant it, of course, as a sexual innuendo. It was the sort of lame stuff he cherished.

"Not much," I said.

"Are you working hard, or hardly working?"

Slim and I both wrinkled our noses.

Then Slim looked at my sweaty bare torso and said, "It's too hot to be mowing your lawn."

"Tell that to my dad."

"Let me at him."

"He's at work."

"He's getting off lucky," Slim said.

We were all smiling, knowing she was kidding around. She liked my dad—liked both my parents a whole lot, though she wasn't crazy about my brothers.

“So how long’ll it take you to finish the yard?” Rusty asked.

~~“I can quit for a while. I’ve just gotta have it done by the time Dad gets home from work.”~~

“Come on with us,” Slim said.

I gave a quick nod and ran across the grass. Nobody else was home: Dad at work, Mom away on her weekly shopping trip to the grocery store and my brothers (one single and one married) no longer living at our house.

As I charged up the porch stairs, I called over my shoulder, “Right back.” I whipped my T-shirt over the railing, rushed into the house and raced upstairs to my bedroom.

With the T-shirt, I wiped the sweat off my face and chest.

Then I stepped up to the mirror and grabbed my comb. Thanks to Dad, my hair was too short. *No son of mine’s gonna go around looking like a girl.* I wasn’t allowed to have much in the way of sideburns, either. *No son of mine’s gonna traipse around looking like a hood.* Thanks to him, I hardly had enough hair to bother combing. But it was mussed and matted down with sweat, so I combed anyway—making sure my “part” was straight as a razor, then giving the front a little curly flip.

After that, I grabbed my wallet off the dresser, shoved it into a back pocket of my jeans, hurried to the closet and pulled a short-sleeved shirt off its hanger. I put it on while I hurried downstairs.

Rusty and Slim were waiting on the porch.

I finished fastening my buttons, then opened the screen door.

“Where we going?” I asked.

“You’ll see,” Slim said.

I shut the door and followed my friends down the porch stairs.

Rusty was wearing an old shirt and blue jeans. That’s pretty much what we *all* wore when we weren’t dressed up for school or church. You hardly ever caught guys our age wearing shorts. Shorts were for little kids, old farts, and girls.

Slim was wearing shorts. They were cut-off blue jeans, so faded they were almost white, with frayed denim dangling and swaying like fringe around her thighs. She also wore a white T-shirt. It was big and loose and untucked, so it hung over her butt in the back. Her white swimsuit top showed through the thin fabric. It was a skimpy, bikini type thing that tied behind her back and at the nape of her neck. She was wearing it instead of a bra. It was probably more comfortable than a bra, and definitely more practical.

Mostly, in the summer, we all wore swimsuits instead of underwear. You never knew when you might end up at the municipal pool or at the river... or even when you might get caught in a downpour.

I had my trunks on under my jeans that morning. They were sort of soggy with sweat from the lawn mowing, and they clinged to my butt as I walked down the street with Rusty and Slim.

“So what’s the plan?” I asked after a while.

Slim looked at me and hoisted an eyebrow. “Stage one’s already been executed.”

“Huh?” I asked.

“We freed you from the chains of oppression.”

“Can’t be mowing the *yard* on a day like this,” Rusty explained.

“Well, thanks for liberating me.

“Think nothing of it,” Rusty said.

“Our pleasure,” Slim said, and patted me on the back.

It was just a buddy-pat, but it gave me a sickish excited lonely feeling. I’d been getting that way a lot, that summer, when I was around Slim. It didn’t necessarily involve touching, either. Sometimes, it could just be *looking* at her and start to feel funny.

I kept it to myself, though.

“Stage two,” Slim said, “we see what’s going on at Janks Field.”

I felt a little chill crawl up my back.

“Scared?” Rusty asked.

“Oh, yeah. Ooooo, I’m shaking.”

I was, but not so much that it showed. I hoped.

“We don’t *have* to go there,” Slim said.

“I’m going,” said Rusty. “If you guys are chicken, I’ll go by myself.”

“What’s the big deal about Janks Field?” I asked.

“This,” said Rusty.

The three of us had been walking abreast with Slim in the middle. Now, Rusty hustled around behind us and came over to my side. He pulled a paper out of the back pocket of his jeans. Unfolding it, he said, “These’re all over town.”

The way he held the paper open in front of me, I knew I wasn’t supposed to touch it. It seemed to be a poster or flier, but it was bouncing around too much for me to read it. So I stopped walking. We all stopped. Slim came in close so she could look at the paper, too. It had four torn corners. Apparently, Rusty had ripped the poster off a wall or tree or something.

It looked like this:

The Traveling Vampire Show

Come and see—

the one and only known VAMPIRE in captivity!

—Valeria—

Gorgeous ! Beguiling! Lethal!

This stunning beauty, born in the wilds of Transylvania sleeps by day in her coffin. By night she feeds on the blood of strangers

See Valeria rise from the dead!

Watch as she stalks volunteers from the audience!

Tremble as. she sinks her teeth into their necks!

Scream as she sups on their blood!!!

Where: *Janks Field. 2 mi south of Grandville on Route 3*

When: *One Show Only-Friday, midnight*

How much: *\$10*

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Amazed and excited, I shook my head and murmured “Wow” a time or two while I read the poster. But things changed when I got toward the bottom.

I felt a surge of alarm, followed by a mixture of relief and disappointment.

Mostly relief.

“Oh, man,” I muttered, trying to sound dismayed. “What a bummer.”

Chapter Two

A bummer?" Rusty asked. "You outa your mind, man? We've got us a traveling *vampire show!* A real live *female* vampire, right here in Grandville! And it says she's *gorgeous!* See that? Gorgeou Beguiling! A stunning beauty! And she's a *vampire!* Look what it says! She stalks volunteers from the audience and bites their necks! She *sups* on their blood!"

"Bitchin'," Slim said.

"Might be bitchin' if we could *see* her," I said, trying to seem gloomy about the situation. "But there's no way we can get into a show like that."

Eyes narrow, Rusty shook his head. "That's how come we're going over there now."

"Oh," I said.

Sometimes, when Rusty came out with stuff like that, "Oh" was about the best I could do.

"You know?" he asked.

"I guess so." I had no idea.

"We'll look the place over," Slim said. "Just see what we can see."

"Maybe we'll get to see *her*," Rusty said. He seemed pretty excited.

"Don't get your hopes up," Slim told him.

"We *might*," he insisted. "I mean, she's gotta be around. Somebody put all those posters up, you know? And the show is tonight. They're probably over at Janks Field getting things ready right now."

"That's probably true," Slim said. "But don't count on feasting your eyes on the gorgeous and stunning Valeria."

He blinked at Slim, disappointment and vague confusion on his face. Then he turned his eyes to me, apparently seeking an ally.

I looked at Slim.

She raised both eyebrows and one corner of her mouth.

The goofy expression made me ache and laugh at the same time. Forcing my eyes away from her, I said to Rusty, "The gal's a vampire, moron."

"Huh?"

"Valeria. She's supposed to be a vampire."

"Yeah, so?" he asked, as if impatient for the punch line.

"So you think we're gonna maybe sneak up on Janks Field and catch her sunbathing?"

"Oh!"

He got it.

Slim and I laughed. Rusty stood there, red in the face but bobbing his head and chuckling. Then I said, "She's gotta be in her casket, right?"

"Right!" Slim and I said in unison.

Rusty laughed pretty hard about that. And we joined in. Then we resumed our journey toward Janks Field.

After a while, Rusty drew out in front by a stride or two, turned his head to look back at us, and said, "But seriously, maybe we *will* catch her sunbathing."

"Are you nuts?" Slim asked.

"In the *nude!*"

"Oh, you'd like that."

"You bet."

Scowling, I shook my head. "All you'd see is a little pile of ashes. And the first breeze that comes

along ...”

Slim started to sing like Peter, Paul and Mary, “The vammmpire, my friend, is blowwwwing the wind

“And even if she *didn't* bum to a crisp at the first touch of sunlight,” I said, “she'd sure as hell know better than to put on her vampire show with a *suntan*.”

“Good point,” Slim said. “She's gotta look pale.”

“She could cover her tan with makeup,” Rusty explained.

“That's a point,” Slim agreed. “She probably uses a ton of makeup, anyway, to give her convincing palor of undeadness. So why not a tan underneath it?”

“An *all-over* tan,” Rusty said, leering.

“We've gotta find you a girl,” Slim said.

I suddenly wondered how *Slim* would look sunbathing in the nude, stretched out on her back with her hands folded under her head, her eyes shut, her skin slick and golden all the way down. It excited me to imagine her that way, but it made me feel guilty, too.

To push it out of my mind, I said, “How about Valeria?”

“There ya go,” Slim said. “I hear she's stunning.”

“I'll take her,” Rusty said.

“You haven't even seen her yet,” I pointed out.

“I don't care.”

“Don't believe everything you read,” Slim told him. “Valeria might turn out to be a pug-ugly hideous hag.”

“I bet she's incredible,” Rusty said. “She *has* to be.”

“Wishful thinking,” I said.

Smiling as if he knew a secret, he asked, “Wanta put your money where your mouth is?”

“Five bucks says she's *not* gorgeous.”

“I haven't got five bucks,” Rusty said.

Which came as no surprise. His parents gave him an allowance of two bucks a week, which he was always quick to spend. I did better, myself, getting paid per chore and also doing some part-time yard work for a couple of neighbors.

“How much?” I asked.

“Don't bet, you guys,” Slim said. “Somebody'll end up losing....”

“Yeah,” Rusty said. “*He* will. You wanta go in with me?”

“You've gotta be kidding,” Slim said.

“Come on. You're always loaded.”

“That's 'cause I don't squander my money foolishly.”

“But this is a sure thing.”

“How do you figure that?” Slim asked.

“Easy. This Traveling Vampire Show? Valeria's the main attraction, right?”

“Sounds like she's the *only* attraction,” I threw in.

“And we all know it's bullshit, right? I mean, she's no more a vampire than *I* am. So she has to be gorgeous or you'd end up without any customers. I mean, you might be able to get away with having her be a fake *vampire*. Nobody's gonna expect a real one of those, anyway. But.

“Some people might,” I broke in.

“Nobody with half a brain,” he said.

“I'm not so sure of that,” Slim said.

We both stared at her.

“Maybe vampires do exist,” she said, a sparkle of mischief in her eyes.

“Get real,” Rusty said.

“Can you prove they don’t?”

“Why would I *wanta* prove that? Everybody knows they don’t exist.”

“Not me,” said Slim.

“Bullshit.” He turned to me. “What about you, Dwight?”

“I’m with Slim.”

“Big surprise.”

“She’s smarter than both of us put together,” I said. Then I blushed because of the way she looked at me. “Well, you are.”

“Nah. I just read a lot. And I like to keep my mind open.” Smiling at Rusty, she added, “It’s easy to have an open mind since I’ve only got half a brain.”

“I didn’t mean you,” he said. “But I’m starting to wonder.”

“To set *your* mind at ease, I doubt very much that Valeria is a vampire. I suppose there’s a remote possibility, but it seems highly unlikely.”

“Now you’re talking.”

“I also agree that, since she probably isn’t a vampire, she’d *better* be beautiful.”

Rusty beamed. “So, you want to back my bet?”

“Can’t. You’ll need someone to take a good, objective look at her and decide who wins. That’d be better be me. I’ll decide the winner.”

“Fine with me,” I said.

“I guess that’ll be okay,” said Rusty.

“Don’t look so worried,” Slim told him.

“Well, you always take Dwight’s side about everything.”

“Only when his side is the ‘right’ side. And I have a feeling that *you* might win this one.”

“Thanks a lot,” I told her.

“But I promise to be fair.”

“I know,” I said.

“So what’re we gonna wager?” Rusty asked me.

“How much money do you want to lose?” I asked him.

I wasn’t very confident about winning, anymore. He’d made a pretty good argument; if Valeria isn’t a vampire, she has to be beautiful or there’d be no show. But I saw a hole in his case.

Valeria didn’t have to be a real vampire for the show to work. She didn’t need to be incredibly gorgeous, either. The Traveling Vampire Show might be successful anyway ... if it . was really and truly exciting or scary.

“Let’s leave money out of the wager,” Slim suggested. “Suppose the loser has to do something gross?”

Rusty grinned. “Like kiss the winner’s ass?”

“Something along those lines.”

I frowned at Rusty. “I’m not kissing your ass.”

“It doesn’t have to be that,” Slim said.

“How about the loser kisses *hers*?” He nodded at Slim. *Her ass? The loser?*

Slim’s face went red. “Nobody’s kissing *my* ass. Or my anything else, for that matter.”

“There goes my *next* idea,” Rusty said, and laughed. He could be a pretty crude guy.

“Why don’t we just forget the whole thing?” I suggested.

“Chicken,” Rusty said. “You just know you’re gonna lose.”

“We might not even get to *see* her.”

“If we can’t see her,” Slim said, “the wager’s off.”

“We don’t even *have* a wager.”

“I’ve got it!” Rusty said. “The winner gets to spit in the loser’s mouth.”

Slim’s mouth fell open and she blinked at him. “Are you brain-damaged?” she asked.

“You got a better idea?”

“Any idea would be better than that.”

“Like what?” he asked. “Let’s hear *you* come up with something?”

“All right.”

“Let’s hear it.”

Frowning as if deep in thought, Slim glanced from Rusty to me a few times. Then she said, “Ok

The loser gets his hair shaved off.”

In that regard, Rusty had a lot more to lose than I did. He had a head of hair that would’ve put Elvis Presley to shame, and he was mighty proud of it.

Nose wrinkled, he muttered, “I don’t know.”

“You said it’s a sure thing,” I reminded him.

“Yeah, but ... I don’t know, man. My hair.” He reached up and stroked it. “I don’t wanta go around looking like a dork.”

“It’ll grow back,” I said.

“Eventually,” added Slim.

“Anyway, I’m not gonna let Dwight anywhere *near* me with a razor.”

“I’ll do the shaving,” Slim said.

Hearing that, I suddenly didn’t want to win this wager. I hoped Valeria would be the most amazingly beautiful woman in the world.

“How about it?” Slim asked.

“Count me in,” I said.

I could tell by the look on Rusty’s face that he wanted to back out. But honor was at stake, so I sighed and said, “All right. It’s a bet.”

Chapter Three

The dirt road leading through the forest to Janks Field was usually unmarked. Today, though, posters for The Traveling Vampire Show were nailed to trees on both sides of the turn-off. And a large sign—the side of a cardboard box nailed to a tree—pointed the way with a red-painted arrow. Above the arrow, somebody had painted VAMPIRE SHOW in big, drippy red letters. Below the arrow, in smaller drippy letters, was written, “MIDNITE.”

“Nice, professional job,” Slim commented.

“We probably aren’t dealing with mental giants,” I said.

“WHY ARE YOU TALKING SO QUIET?” Rusty boomed out, making us both jump.

We whirled around and watched him laugh.

“Good one,” Slim said, looking peeved.

“A riot,” I said.

“YOU TWO AREN’T NERVOUS, ARE YOU?”

Slim grimaced. “Would you pipe down?”

“WHAT’RE YOU SCARED OF?”

I wanted to bash him one in the face, but I held back. I don’t think I’ve mentioned it yet, but Rusty wasn’t exactly in the best of shape. Not a total lardass, but pudgy and soft and not exactly capable of fighting back.

Which might seem like an advantage if you want to slug a guy in the puss. But I knew it would make me feel lousy. And he was my best friend, after all—other than Slim.

Grinning, he boomed, “CAT GOT YOUR TONGUE?”

Slim pinched his side.

He gasped, “OW!” and twisted away. “That *hurt!*”

“Keep it down,” Slim said.

“Jeez.”

“We’re gonna have to be sneaky going in,” she explained, “or they’ll toss our butts out and we’ll never get a chance to see Valeria.”

“Or don’t you *want* to see her?” I asked Rusty.

“Jeez, guys, I was just screwing around.”

“Let’s hope nobody heard you,” Slim said.

“Nobody heard me. We’re *miles* from Janks Field.”

“More like a few hundred yards,” I told him.

“And sound really carries around here,” Slim added.

“Okay, okay, I get the point.”

The dirt road wasn’t as wide as Route 3, so we didn’t walk abreast. Slim took the lead. Rusty and I stayed pretty much beside each other.

There was no sunlight. Of course, there hadn’t been any sunlight *before* we entered the woods—just a gray gloom. But now, with trees all around and above us, the gloom was deeper, darker. Things looked the way they do when you’re out after supper on a summer night and you can see just fine, so far, but you’ve only got maybe half an hour before it’ll be too dark for playing ball.

“If it gets much darker,” I said, “Valeria won’t need her casket.”

Rusty put a finger to his lips and went, “Shhhhh.”

I gave him the finger.

He smirked.

After that, I kept my mouth shut.

~~Our shoes were almost silent on the dirt road except for sometimes when one of us stepped on a twig.~~ Rusty was breathing fairly hard. Every so often, he muttered stuff under his breath.

A very quiet tune seemed to be coming from Slim. “De dum, de doo, de do-doo...” It blended with the sounds all around us of buzzing flies and mosquitos and bees, bird tweets, and the endless flutters and rustling scurries of unseen creatures. “De-dum, de do, de doo.”

Rusty made no attempt to shush her.

But suddenly he said, “Wait up.”

Slim halted.

When we caught up to her, Rusty said in a hushed voice, “I gotta take a leak.”

Slim nodded. “Pick a tree,” she said.

He glanced from Slim to me. “Don’t go anywhere, okay?” “We’ll stay right here,” she told him.

I nodded.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll be back in a minute.” He stepped off the dirt road and made his way into the trees.

“Do you have to go?” Slim asked me.

“Nah.”

“Me neither.” She pursed her lips and blew softly through them. Then she said, “Sure is hot here.”

“Yeah,” I muttered. I was broiled and drenched and itchy, my clothes sticking to me.

Slim’s short blond hair was matted down in coils against her scalp and forehead. Sweat ran down her face. As I watched, a drip gathered at the tip of her nose and fell. Her white T-shirt was clinging to her skin and I could see through it.

“This vampire better be worth it,” she said.

“Too bad we won’t get to see her.”

Slim gave me half a smile. “If she’s in her casket, we’ll have to bust her out of it. We’re not gonna put ourselves through all this and not get a look at her.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Don’t know what?” she asked, and peeled her T-shirt off. In spite of her bikini top, she seemed to be mostly bare skin from the waist up. She wadded her T-shirt and mopped the sweat off her face.

I looked the other way.

“What don’t you know?” she asked.

For a moment, I wasn’t sure what we’d been talking about. Then I remembered. I said, “She isn’t gonna be by herself. I don’t think so, anyway.”

“You’re probably right.” Lowering the shirt away from her face, she smiled and said, “She needs casket-handlers.”

“Right.”

“Probably has a whole crew.” She wiped her chest, her arms.

“And they might not be model citizens,” I said.

Laughing softly, she lowered her head and began to wipe the sweat off her belly and sides. I sneaked a glance at her breasts. The thin pouches of her bikini top were stretched smooth with them. Around the edges of the fabric, I glimpsed pale slopes of skin.

“We’ll have to be careful,” I said.

“Yeah. If they look *really* scurvy, we’d better forget the whole thing.”

Hearing footsteps, we both turned our heads and saw Rusty trudging toward us.

Slim continued to rub at herself with the balled shirt. I wanted her to put it back on, but I didn’t say anything.

“All set,” Rusty said. I saw him check her out. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing much,” Slim told him. “Just waiting for you.”

“We’re thinking we’ll have to be really careful,” I explained. “Valeria’s gonna have...”

“Casket keepers,” Slim threw in.

Rusty smiled and nodded.

“No telling how many people might be with the show,” I said.

“And it’s likely a scumrvy lot,” added Slim with a bit of Long John Silver in her voice.

“They go around with a traveling vampire show,” Rusty said, “they’ve gotta be at least a *litt* strange.”

“And maybe dangerous,” I said.

Rusty suddenly frowned. “You guys aren’t gonna chicken out, are you?” Before either of us had a chance to answer, he said, “Cause *I’m* going irregardless.”

“Irregardless ain’t a word, Einstein,” Slim told him.

“Is too.”

She wasn’t one to argue. She just gave him a funny smile, then pulled her T-shirt on. “Let’s go.”

After that, none of us said anything. We weren’t that far from Janks Field, so I think we were starting to get more nervous.

Janks Field was the sort of place that made you nervous no matter what.

First off, nothing grows there. It’s a big patch of hard bare dirt surrounded by thick, green woods. But it’s not bare on purpose. Nobody *clears* the field. As far as anyone knows, Janks Field has always been that way.

I’ve heard people say the dirt there is poison. I think they’re wrong about that, though. Janks Field has more than its share of wildlife—the sort that lives in holes in the ground—ants, spiders, snakes, and so on.

Some people say aliens landed there, and that’s why nothing will grow.

Sure thing.

Others say the field is cursed. I might go along with that. You might, too, after you know more about it.

The reason they call the place Janks Field isn’t because it belongs to anyone named Janks. It doesn’t, and never did. It’s called that because of Tommy Janks and what he did there in 1954.

I was just a little kid at the time, so nobody told me much. But I do remember people acting funny the summer it all happened. Dad, being chief of police, wasn’t home very often. Mom, usually cheerful, seemed oddly nervous. And sometimes I overheard scattered talk about missing girls. The talk went on for most of the summer. Then something big happened and everyone went crazy. All the grown-ups were pale and whispering and I caught bits and pieces like, “Some kind of monster ...” and “Dear God ...” and “their poor parents ...” and “always knew there was something off about him.”

As it turns out, some Boy Scouts had hiked into the field and found Tommy Janks sitting by a campfire. He was a deaf mute, so he never heard them coming. They caught him with a gob of meat on the end of a stick. He was roasting it over the fire. It turned out to be the heart of one of the missing girls.

Must’ve been awful, walking into a scene like that.

Those Boy Scouts became instant heroes. We envied them, hated them, and longed to be their friends. Not because they captured Tommy Janks (my dad did that), but because they got to see him cooking that heart over the fire. Those scouts were legends in their own time.

One of them, years later, ended up committing suicide and another...

That’s another story. I’ll stick to this one.

After my dad busted Tommy, he led a crew out to the field and they found the remains of twenty

three bodies buried there. Six belonged to the girls who'd disappeared that summer. The rest ... they
~~been there longer. Some, for maybe five years. Others, for more like twenty or thirty. I've heard th~~
several of them might've been in the ground for a hundred years.

The field apparently hadn't been a cemetery, though; nobody found signs of any grave markers or
caskets. There were just a bunch of bodies—a lot of them in pieces—tossed into holes.

Tommy Janks got himself fried in the electric chair.

The clearing got itself called Janks Field.

Chapter Four

There hadn't been a road to Janks Field, dirt or otherwise, at the time Tommy got caught cooking up the girl's heart. But Dad managed to drive in with his Jeep. He made the first tire tracks into the awful place. By the time the bodies and bones had been removed and all the investigations were over the tracks were worn in. And people have been driving out to Janks Field ever since.

First, it was to gawk at where all those bodies had been found.

Before long, though, teens from Grandville and other nearby towns realized that the field was perfect for making out. At least if you and your girl had the guts to drive in there at night.

Not only did people go there to park, but some pretty wild parties went on sometimes. A lot of booze and fights and sex. That's what we heard, anyway.

We also heard rumors of witches and so on meeting at Janks Field to practice "black magic." They supposedly had naked orgies and performed sacrifices.

I sometimes thought it'd be pretty cool if they were sacrificing humans out there. I imagined bonfires, drums, nude and beautiful and sweaty girls leaping wildly around, chanting and waving knives. And a lovely, naked virgin tied to an altar, her body shiny with sweat, terror in her eyes as she waited to be sliced open in a blood sacrifice to the forces of darkness.

The whole notion really turned me on.

Turned on Rusty, too.

We used to talk about that sort of thing in hushed, excited voices. Not in front of Slim, though. *couldn't* have said any of that stuff with Slim listening. But also we figured, being a girl herself, she might not want to hang out with us if she knew we had fantasies like that.

Whenever I imagined the Janks Field witch orgies, I always pictured Slim as the virgin tied to the altar. (I didn't mention that part to Rusty or anyone else.) Slim never got sacrificed because I came to her rescue in the nick of time and cut her free.

I don't know if any humans actually *were* sacrificed at Janks Field back in those days. It was fun to think about, though: sexy and romantic and exciting. Whereas the sacrifice of animals, which apparently was going on, just seemed plain disgusting to us.

The animal sacrifices disgusted and worried just about everyone. For one thing, pets were disappearing. For another, people going to Janks Field for make-out sessions or wild parties didn't appreciate tripping over the dismembered remains of Rover or Kitty. Also, they must've been worried that they might be next.

Something had to be done about Janks Field. Since it was outside the city limits of Grandville, the county council chose to deal with it. They tried to solve the problem by installing a chain-link fence around the field.

The fence remained intact for about a week.

But then a concerned citizen named Fargus Durge entered the picture. He said, "You don't have orgies and pagan sacrifices going on in the town squares of Grandville or Bixton or Clarksburg, do you?" Everyone agreed on that. "Well, what's the difference between the town squares and Janks Field? The *squares're* in the middle of town, that's what. Whereas Janks Field, it's all by itself or there in the middle of nowhere. It's isolated! That's how come it's a magnet for every teenager, hoodlum, weirdo, malcontent, deviate, sadist, satanist and sex-fiend in the county."

His solution?

Make Janks Field *less* isolated by improving access to it and making it a center of legitimate activity.

The council not only saw his point, but provided some funding and put Fargus in charge.

~~They threw enough money at the problem to bring in a bulldozer and lay a dirt road where there only been tire tracks before. They also provided funds for a modest “stadium” in the middle of Janks Field.~~

The stadium, Fargus’s brainchild, consisted of high bleachers on both sides of an arena.

A very *small* arena.

The county ran electricity in and put up banks of lights for “night games.”

On a mild June night a little over two years ago, Fargus’s stadium went into operation.

It was open to the public unless otherwise booked for a special event. Anyone could use it day or night, because the lights were on a timer. They came on at sundown and stayed on all night, every night, as a deterrent to shenanigans.

Fargus’s “special events” took place every Friday and Saturday night that summer. Because the arena was so small, there couldn’t be anything the size of basketball games, tennis matches, stage plays or band concerts.

The events had to be small enough to fit in.

So Fargus brought to the stadium a series of spectacular duds: a ping-pong tournament, a barbershop quartet, a juggling show, a piano solo, a poetry reading, an old fart doing card tricks.

Even though the events were free, almost nobody showed up for them.

Which was a good thing, in a way, because Fargus’s big plan for the stadium hadn’t included a parking lot. This was a major oversight, since most people drove to the events. They ended up parking their cars every which way on Janks Field. Not a *big* problem if only twenty or thirty people showed up.

But then one night toward the end of that summer, Fargus charged a five dollar admission and brought in a night of boxing and about two hundred people drove in for it.

Things were so tight in Janks Field that some of them had to climb over the tops of cars and pickup trucks in order to reach the arena. Not only did the field get jammed tight, but so did the dirt road leading in.

Regardless, just about everyone somehow made it into the stands in time to see most of the boxing matches.

They *loved* the boxing.

But when it came time to leave, all hell broke loose. From what I heard, and my dad was the one trying to keep order (not on duty, but moonlighting), the logjam of cars was solid. Not only were there way too many cars in the first place, but some of them got flat tires from the broken bottles and such that always littered the field.

Feeling trapped, the drivers and passengers, in Dad’s words, “went bughouse.” It turned into a combination destruction derby/brawl/gang-bang.

By the time it was over, there were nineteen arrests. countless minor injuries, twelve people who needed to be hospitalized, eight rapes (multiple, in most cases), and four fatalities. One guy died of a heart attack, two were killed in knife-fights, and a six-month old baby, dropped to the ground by its mother during the melee, got its head run over by a Volkswagen bug.

After that, no more boxing matches at Janks Field.

No more “special events” at all, duds or otherwise.

The stadium became known as Fargus’s Folly.

Fargus vanished.

Though the “night games” were over, the huge, bright stadium lights continued to remain on from sunset till dawn to deter lovers, orgies and sacrifices.

And the grandstands and arena remained in place.

The Traveling Vampire Show would be the first official event to take place in Janks Field in almost two years—since the night of the parking disaster.

I suddenly wondered if it was official. Had somebody taken over Fargus's old job and actually booked such a bizarre event?

Didn't seem likely.

As far as I knew, the county had abandoned Janks Field. Except for paying the electric bills, they wanted nothing at all to do with the scene of all that mayhem.

I doubted that they would even allow a show to take place there—much less one featuring “vampire.”

Unless maybe some palms got greased.

That's how carnies got their permits, I'd heard. Just bribed the right people and nobody gave them trouble. A show like this would probably operate the same way.

Or maybe they hadn't bothered.

Maybe they'd just *shown up*.

I must've let out a moan or something.

“What is it?” Slim asked, her voice little more than a whisper.

“What's a show like this doing at Janks Field?” I asked.

Looking puzzled, Rusty said, “Why do you care?”

“I just think it's weird.”

“It's a great place for a vampire show,” Slim said.

“That's for sure,” said Rusty.

“But how did they even know about it?”

Grinning, Rusty said, “Hey, maybe Valeria's been here before. Know what I mean?” He chuckled. “Maybe she's done some prime sucking in these parts. Might even be the one who put some of those old stiffs in Janks Field.”

“And she likes to come back for old time's sake,” Slim added.

“But don't you think it's odd?” I persisted. “Nobody just stumbles onto a place like Janks Field.”

“Well, if you trip in a snake hole ...”

Rusty laughed.

“I mean it,” I said.

“Seriously?” Slim asked. “Somebody came out in advance to set things up. Don't you think so? And he probably asked around in town and found out about the place. That's all. No big mystery.”

“I still think it's weird,” I said.

“Weird is what you want,” said Slim, “when you run a Traveling Vampire Show.”

“I guess so.”

“The only thing that really counts,” Rusty said, “is that they're here.”

But they weren't.

Or didn't seem to be.

We followed Slim out of the forest. The dirt road vanished and we found ourselves standing at the edge of Janks Field.

Way off to the right across the dry, gray plain stood the snack stand and bleachers. Overlooking them, gray against the gray sky, were the panels of stadium lights.

We saw no cars, no trucks, no vans.

We saw no people.

We saw no vampires.

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