



Die Now
or
Live forever

Vampire
Dawn

ANNE ROONEY

Anne Rooney does not eat meat, in case the taste of blood becomes too appealing.

When not writing books she haunts the cemeteries and catacombs of Paris and Venice and raises non-vampiric daughters and chickens in Cambridge. She studied at a haunted college and her first car was a haunted van; the undead hold no fears for her.

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One

It's not what you expect to see, a corpse nailed to the ground with a tent peg. Finn saw it first.

'What the ... There's some right nutter around here.'

He clenched his fists as he did whenever he felt a fight coming on.

Omar stumbled into him.

‘Whaaat!’ he cried out, feeling his stomach rise. Juliette was just a step behind. She said nothing, simply raised both hands to cover her mouth. Ruby was helping Alistair untangle a bramble that had caught his T-shirt.

‘What’s up?’ she called.

‘There’s a dead guy here.’

‘What?’ she pushed forward, no longer noticing the brambles snatching at her legs. Alistair trailed behind her with his head down, looking at his feet.

Omar’s first instinct was to run. But instead he heaved his backpack onto the ground, the clatter of the tent pegs in it suddenly threatening. He’d never seen a dead person before. He was afraid and disgusted, but also curious – and ashamed to feel curious.

‘Better see if he’s still alive,’ he said.

But he knew the guy wasn’t alive. He was very pale, greyish, and as soon as Omar touched the skin, its cold firmness told him that they were too late. There was blood soaking through the T-shirt around the tent peg. It didn’t look as though the tent peg should have been enough to kill someone – it was so thin, so ordinary.

‘Why on earth did he lie still for someone to nail a tent peg through his chest?’ asked Finn. It was a fair question.

‘Perhaps he was unconscious,’ Omar suggested. ‘Or drunk.’ He leant over the body and sniffed, but couldn’t smell alcohol.

‘Are you seriously sniffing a corpse?’

‘We should call the police,’ said Ruby, coming alongside them and running her hands through her spiky hair, brown prickles sticking out between her chunky rings.

‘Yeah, right. That’ll be easy. You know the Hungarian for ‘there’s a dead guy with a tent peg through his chest’, do you? Is it in your phrasebook?’

‘Well, what *should* we do? We can’t just leave him here.’ It was the first time Juliette had spoken.

‘Yes we can. That’s *exactly* what we can do. We don’t know what crazy did this. We don’t know if he’s still around. We have two bags of tent pegs, we don’t speak the language and we don’t have an alibi. We’re better off pretending we haven’t seen it. We don’t want to get the blame.’ Finn hoisted his backpack and turned back towards the path.

‘But that’s terrible! We can’t!’ Omar said.

‘It doesn’t matter whether it’s terrible,’ said Finn. ‘Haven’t you seen enough CSI episodes? Did you touch him? There’ll be some of your DNA on him. Let’s get out of here.’

But no one moved. It didn’t seem possible, somehow, just to walk back into the forest, knowing there was a dead body there. Not just a dead body – a murdered body.

Because a murdered body meant a murderer, and camping in a scary forest was one thing, but camping in a forest where you know there’s a murderer walking around – well, it’s a different thing altogether. Not even just a normal, run-of-the-mill murderer who might shoot you or something. But a complete freak, who would nail you

to the forest floor while you screamed and flailed and bled, and he just kept on hammering away at the tent peg.

‘Come on,’ said Ruby eventually. ‘Whatever we’re going to do later, we’re not hanging around near this. Let’s go.’ She turned and stalked purposefully towards the trees.

‘Shhhh!’ hissed Juliette. There was a noise. A rustling of leaves, the snap of a twig, then silence.

‘Whoever it was, they’re still here,’ she whispered.

Each of them stood still, hearts beating unbearably fast. Only their eyes moved, scanning the edges of the forest, the short metres the light reached, looking for someone or something but finding nothing.

A crash of wings broke the silence as some bird

flapped into the sky. Ruby stopped breathing. But something else did not stop breathing. Shallow, fast breaths to her left. She didn't dare to turn her head, let *it* know she knew it was there. She signalled to Juliette with her eyes. *Please notice*, she willed her.

The bird rose high, then swooped over the distant lake. Juliette started walking towards Ruby and the others followed, but Ruby still didn't move, expecting at any moment that some madman would leap out at her. She wanted to run, but her legs took no notice. As Juliette drew alongside her, she touched her arm.

'You OK?'

Ruby shook her head and pointed to where the breathing came from.

Juliette signalled to the others. They all moved towards the tangle of bushes, hearts pounding. A shape – small, slender – went crashing through the undergrowth as they approached, blonde hair flying out behind and catching in the branches.

‘It was a girl!’ Ruby said in surprise. ‘Did a girl murder him?’

‘More likely she thinks we did,’ said Finn. ‘No point going after her – even if we catch her, she won’t understand us.’

‘Why do you think she’s not the murderer?’ asked Omar. ‘Just because she’s a girl? Girls can kill people, too, you know.’

Juliette flinched. Omar pushed the bushes aside with his foot. A dropped tent peg glinted amongst the dead leaves.