

## STICKING MY NECK OUT WITH VAMPIRES

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THE VAMPIRE WALKED out of the elevator dressed entirely in black. He was over 6-feet-tall and weighed close to 250 pounds.

I shook his large hand and cursed myself for not setting up this interview in a public place, like, say, a police station.

My co-workers had urged me not to go alone, but I had scoffed at their concern.

In the 12 years I had been a reporter, I had interviewed killers and ornery politicians, talked with drug dealers and sexual deviants, and visited grieving families. I had survived them all relatively unscathed.

But this was different. I was about to interview a vampire - or at least a man who claimed to be one.

As we walked down the brightly lighted corridor to his apartment, the vampire, who called himself Jeff, whispered, "The things I'm about to show you are very strange."

I nodded and thought of my editor getting a phone call, explaining that his reporter had been dumped lifeless on the side of the road, with two mysterious holes in her neck.

I had always been fascinated with vampire lore and had come up with the story idea after talking to a self-proclaimed New York vampire expert. Florida, according to his survey, had the nation's second-largest vampire population.

I decided to do my own survey and find out how many South Floridians thirsted for blood.

How does a reporter find vampires? Through the classifieds, of course.

I sheepishly asked my editor if I could put an ad in the paper, seeking vampires. I figured he would laugh me out of his office, but he said okay.

Before he could change his mind, I put the ad in the Sun-Sentinel and XS magazine. It ran for two months and read: If you think you're a vampire, have vampire characteristics or know anyone that acts like a vampire, please call.

More than 600 people left messages on my vampire hotline. Many of the messages were obscene - phony vampires telling me what they would like to do to my neck and other body parts.

Others cackled into the phone, giggling at the premise of real vampires. Many gave their best Dracula impersonations, screaming: "I want to drink your blood!" Then there were pranksters who left the names and phone numbers of co-workers or friends. I returned dozens of calls to people who thought I was a lunatic when I asked, "So, tell me why you think you're a vampire?"

One of the strangest calls came from a man in Fort Lauderdale named Tom. He claimed he belonged to a cult dominated by women. Men who joined the group had to dress and act like women, he said. Group members were expected to assault young women on the street, biting their necks.

Tom had just joined the group and had botched his first few attacks.

"I couldn't get any blood," he lamented.

According to Tom, his cult was headed by a woman who organized monthly animal sacrifices.

"I have to get her permission before I can talk to you," he told me.

Tom never called back. I wondered if the chief priestess had nixed the interview or sacrificed Tom for betraying the coven's secrets.

And then there were calls from people like Jeff, who is 35, loves Elvis and craves blood.

A hospital emergency-room attendant by day and self-proclaimed vampire by night, Jeff invited me to his apartment in Fort Lauderdale. When I hesitated, he said his wife and mother would be present. How dangerous could it be?

It wasn't until I was walking into his apartment that it occurred to me his wife and mother might be vampires too.

As we began our interview, Jeff grabbed a green urn from the top of the television. "This is Uncle Oliver," he said. "He is the reason I am what I am today."

The urn contained the remains of Oliver, a Catholic monk. Oliver, Jeff explained, performed exorcisms in Italy, his native country, by drinking the blood of people believed to be possessed by demons. Jeff claimed that his uncle's vampire tendencies had been passed on to him when he was born.

At least twice a month Jeff said he had to taste blood. He hunted for victims, usually women. He had no trouble persuading them to let him drink a small sample of their blood, he said. Sometimes he'd bite their necks. He showed me his fangs, which did look sharper than normal teeth.

When he didn't feel like baring his fangs, he used a small scalpel to nick his victims and then suck blood from their wrists.

Throughout the interview, Jeff's wife sat across the room at the kitchen table talking with a neighbor. Both women ignored our conversation.

But when I asked Jeff's wife whether she thought her husband was a vampire, she fell silent. He frightens

her, she finally said. She refuses to let him feed off her.

"When the moon gets full he goes crazy," she added.

The neighbor nodded and agreed that Jeff was indeed very strange.

Before I left Jeff's apartment I asked him if he would agree to be photographed. He said okay and told me to call him at work.

For the next five days I called him at work and at home. I left messages with his colleagues and his wife. He never called back. Finally, on the sixth day, he came to the phone.

"Jeff, why haven't you returned my calls?" I asked.

There was a brief silence, then a loud hiss on the other end of the line, the kind that Dracula supposedly expels just before he plunges his fangs into a victim's neck. The hiss got louder and louder - and then the phone went dead.

I was rubbing my neck as I walked into my editor's office.

"Scratch the vampire photo," I told him.