

Blood Tastes Better That Way

By Robert Rinne

Bruno walked into the restaurant and took a seat furthest away from the front door, at a booth right up against the curved glass that looked out to the parking lot. He sat with his back against the window and one foot up on the bench seat. He looked across to front door, looking to see if anyone followed him in. The lights were all on low and he wouldn't have been able to make out the faces of anyone coming in anyway.

"Hey, man," a voice called out from his right. Bruno shot up in his seat and put his arm across the back of the bench seat, as if he were to launch himself over it.

"Hey, big fella," the voice said. "Easy there."

The voice belonged to the owner of the restaurant, Billy Van de Camp. He wore blue jeans, a black tee shirt with a large, distressed and silk screened skull on it. Wrapped around his waist was what Bruno thought was a cliché ; a grease stained apron – the kind you would see on a guy on television who ran a diner.

"You look like a hunnert bucks," Billy said.

He stepped back and wiped his hands on his apron, appraising Bruno. New jeans that didn't cut beneath his guy and create a dickiedo – which meant that he didn't have a belly that stuck out further than his dickie do ; Billy Van de Camp had a million of em, he did. Clean white sportshirt and a sport coat. He looked down to see that Bruno was wearing black dress shoes and

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black dress socks.

"Jee-suss," Billy said. "Suit and everything. Whyn't you take of your jacket and stay awhile."

"Naw, I paid good money to look this good. I'll keep it on."

"You'll need a fuckin bib, if you don't wanna get dirty the way you eat and drink."

Bruno smiled and Billy stepped back to take a second look.

"Holee shit, you look like two hunnert bucks. You got colour in your cheeks and everything."

Bruno smiled a little and nodded. "How can you tell in this shitty light?"

Billy shrugged. "Half as many lights means half the Hydro. Whatcha been doin? You got my message, hunh?"

"Had to take some time off, you know? Wasn't feelin all that great. Doctor told me it was stress."

"It worked, man," Billy said. "You look great. I'm happy you got my message, though. Thought summint happened to you, you know? You hungry or thirsty?"

"Yup. Guys at work passed it on. Still on the house?"

Billy nodded. "My treat to my favourite customer."

"Then whaddya got?"

"Dunno. You hungry or thirsty?"

"Both," Bruno answered.

Billy's bought the restaurant attached to the hotel after he won the lottery. He had fancied himself a decent home chef, making dinner for family and friends and the odd dinner party. He thought that it wouldn't be all that

hard to cook dinner for a few people at a hotel and maybe provide after hours room service and stuff like that. By the time he lost his lottery winnings, to the restaurant and his divorce, he got good enough at his business so that it could provide a decent living for the rest of his life. He went from a ten page menu of appetizers and main courses and desserts to a single page menu.

"Breakfast, Lunch, or Dinner and I got Canadian and Blue on tap. Couldn't tell you what I've got in the bottle in the fridge."

Bruno thought about it. He had got up that morning at four, ate breakfast and pattered around his townhouse, looking at the clock, waiting for twelve thirty, so he could get ready and leave for work to be there for a one thirty start. He washed the dishes from the dishwasher by hand, scrubbed the kitchen floor with a brush he found under the sink, mopped the floor, moved all of the furniture from his living room, dusted the furniture, wiped down all the baseboards and vacuumed the carpet. He took a long shower, took the long way to work, stopped for a coffee, went to work and didn't stop moving until the bell rang at eleven thirty. He didn't feel the least bit tired and his body couldn't figure out what it wanted.

"Surprise me," Bruno said. "But bring me a Canadian draught, please."

Billy nodded and went back to the kitchen.

"But tell me when Teddy gets here, okay?" Bruno called out. "I haven't seen him for a bit."

"He'll be in," Billy said. "Teddy is always in."

Bruno returned to a more relaxed position on the bench seat. He looked out the the parking lot, watching to see the cars pass by on the street but none of them come into the hotel. The soft orange glow of the sodium arc lights, standing at the top of tall poles all around the lot, didn't give

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much illumination and casted odd, furry shadows on the pavement. Clouds filled the night's sky completely but the glow behind them hinted that the moon might make it's way out. Bruno hoped for a good moon. Orange made the world looked spoiled.

He checked out the cars, all shapes and sizes and types and years, and thought that if Billy had of spent one evening here, looking around like Bruno was just now, he would ask himself if all of these people were in the hotel, why was he the only one in the restaurant. Billy could have saved himself a whole world of hurt and heartache if he had of just stopped to have a look.

"Hey, Bruno," called out a voice.

Bruno shot up again and looked around the restaurant.

"Teddy," Bruno said. "Man, I've missed you. How you been? Take a seat. Billy! Billy!"

Bruno looked across the restaurant to the bar and the small opening and ledge that was there. Beyond that was the unnatural, bright white light of the kitchen. Billy's head popped up.

"Hey, Teddy," Billy called out. "Howya been? Whaddya want?"

Teddy raised a hand in hello. "Hot coffee and Frangelico," Teddy called out. Billy gave a thumbs up and disappeared.

"So, how ya been?" Bruno asked.

Bruno didn't want to say out loud, but Teddy didn't look too good at all. His black, greasy, tangled hair looked to be days since it had been last washed. His skin was puffy and doughy. His clothes looked like they might have been clean but had been left in the dryer for a week before taking them out and putting them on. The only thing that looked any good on him was the

leather jacket he wore. Clean, slick and shiny. Teddy offered up a wan smile and slid along the bench seat opposite Bruno. He reached up and twisted the bulb loose in the overhead fixture, wincing against the brightness when he did. Bruno looked and saw that Teddy's fingernails were torn and jagged. When Teddy leaned forward, Bruno got a whiff of him and smelled shit. Like Teddy had gone for a crap and either could reach all the way around to wipe properly or didn't bother at all.

"Missed you," Teddy said. "Where you been?"

"Home," Bruno answered. "Sick. Went on a trip. Doctor's orders. He said I was stressed and I needed it. Maybe he was right. Getting off the midnight shift because of it. Going to be on days in three weeks."

"Really? No more midnight shift? Why? Tell me why?"

"Not good for my health," he said. "Doctor's orders. Same as the trip. Went hiking, of all things. Apparently, I needed for exercise, he tells me."

Billy came around with a tray carrying a plate of food, a pint of Canadian, a white mug of steaming hot coffee, and a brandy snifter, half filled with a caramel coloured liquid. He put it down and served out the food and the beer to Bruno and the coffee and the Frangelico to Teddy. Teddy immediately put the bell of the snifter glass over the mug of coffee and started to spin it around, heating the liquer. He held the other side of the mug while doing it and switched hands. Bruno turned his plate around to get a look at everything on it.

"I don't get it."

"Eye of round steak, grilled to perfection, I might add – most people don't like the round steak but if you do it right, it comes out good. Hope you don't mind, I took the liberty of leaving it a bit pink in the middle."

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"It's all pink in the middle," Bruno said.

Billy laughed and went on. "Sunny side up eggs. Organic eggs, you know. I get them from a farmer every day. Garlic mashed potatoes, half an orange, and skillet fried green beans tossed with bacon."

Teddy went on spinning his liquer and warming his hands.

"Wow," Bruno said. "Just, wow."

"You're welcome," Billy said. "Now what's this with you no longer comin in to my bar just before closing?"

Bruno dug into his steak and eggs and nodded. He spoke through the corner of his mouth, trying to to spit on anyone. "Yup. Nummore minnights."

"Doctor's orders," Teddy said, not looking up, spinning his drink.

Billy patted Bruno on the back, "Good on ya, pal," nodded his head and walked away.

"You want any of this? I can get Billy to whip something up for you. My treat."

Teddy shook his head. "Nope. I'm good. You dig in. I'm good for now."

Bruno went on eating, not looking up from his food. Eating a little bit of each selection at at time, mixing the flavours on his fork to get some variety and sample the flavours. He ate cereal and toast and tea at home mostly, some peanut butter on bread and 2% milk for variety. The hospital food was cleverly disguised cardboard and the hiking trip was rations, rations, some water and coffee, and then some more rations. Billy's offering tasted divine.

"You ever had a ration pack of swedish steak with mushrooms?" Bruno asked, finally looking up at Teddy.

Teddy smelled the Frangelico now but did not so much as sip it. All of

the warmth had left the coffee and gone to the liquer and Teddy took heat from that. He didn't look at Bruno but raised his eyebrows wide to indicate that he had heard him.

"Army rations," Bruno went on. "They must have been surplus, I think. I had to squat every six hours for almost two days."

"Squat?"

"No shitters in the bush my friend," Bruno explained. "You find your nearest tree, squat in front of it to find out where to dig your hole, dig your hole, squat back down, reach around the trunk of the tree and let it all hang out. Swedish steak, though. Sometimes, there's a splash if you aren't careful. This, though. This is heaven compared to that."

"Thanks," Teddy said.

"Thank Billy," Bruno said. Then he burped. He took a sip of his beer. It had gone warm because all he did was eat but it tasted good nonetheless. He felt a little light headed after. It had been a long time since his last beer.

Teddy finally looked at Bruno. "Aren't you going to go for a cigarette?"

"Hell, no," Bruno said. "Quit that shit."

A plate dropped in the kitchen. A damned heavy one by the sounds of it. Bruno could hear Billy curse. Teddy leaned forward, almost spilling his booze.

"Beg pardon?"

Billy came out from the kitchen, wringing his hands on his apron. He looked at Teddy first before looking to Bruno. He stood at the table and glanced at his hands, making sure that there was nothing on them.

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"No one told me you quit," Billy said. "That's great."

"Why did you quit, Bruno?" Teddy asked, looking at Billy.

Bruno smiled and sipped at his beer. "See, funny thing. I kept on falling asleep at work, you know? Thought it was the midnight shift and all, fucking with my system. Now me, I been on midnights my whole life. Whole life. Since I was nineteen. You know, you can get a long weekend every weekend, if you can just stay up? Anyway, I'm thinking that it's caught up with me and I'm just too fucking old. My mom tells me that it's just as well – what kind of people can I expect to meet, working on the midnight shift. 'It's like you're a vampire or sumthin,' she tells me. She's happy, by the way. Thinking I'll meet a nice girl and all."

"You quit because of your mom?" Billy asked.

"The doctor told me to quit. Mom? She smokes a pack a day. She can afford it. She gets those, whatchamacallems, the injun smokes from up north. Some guy comes by the house and sells her a baggie of two hundred of them for thirty bucks or so. So long as the mother of her grandchild don't smoke for the pregnancy, my mom is okay with that. No. Mom didn't make me quit.

"Do you know how much better your food tastes? I mean, not just your food. When I was smoking, your food tasted great. Now, it tastes like you are some kind of cook from God or something."

"Taste is important," Teddy said. "One could get addicted to the taste of something, couldn't they?"

Billy put his hands in his pockets to stop himself from wringing the skin right off of them. Bruno looked out into the orange soaked glow of the parking lot and did not see any difference in any of the cars. A soft rain had started to fall. There were no prints in the pretty little droplets to

tell him that someone had come or gone. It was just the three of them.

"But that's enough about me and my anemia, Billy. I told you I was anemic, right? Not enough blood in the old system. What about you, Billy. How's money been for you? Making enough?"

"Shu-uuur," Billy said. "Everything is fine. Just fine."

"Because it's eleven at night on a fuckin Friday night and all you got here is me you and this fuckin vampire sittin across from me and last I checked, you told me this was a free meal."

Bruno had saved up money for the suit coat that he refused to take off. He paid money because it was custom made just for him and how he wanted it to look. And how he had wanted it too look was so that no one would suspect that he was holstering a concealed Colt Anaconda, chambered for 44 magnum ammunition, on his left side and a Zigana M16 9mm pistol on his right. He knew that Teddy was tired and hadn't fed in a good long time, and not the way that he had wanted to feed. He had never been pretty, the real vampires, the fucking junkies, they never are. They can hypnotize you into looking at them any damned way they pleased, but for real, they were like any other addict. They needed their fix. And the doctors had told him that Bruno was Teddy's only fix.

Reflexes honed to a razor's edge the breadth of a hair, Bruno drew on Billy and Teddy before they could move. Billy, only human, had managed to get only his hands out hsi pockets and, Bruno could smell, a rosebud in his drawers. Teddy, on the other hand, was nearly across the table.

Teddy's face had contorted in rage, losing some of it's form. His nose had panned out and flattened, his nostrils had grown and flared, looking more and more like the muzzle of a vampire bat. His eyes had pulled back at the

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edges, almost asian, and they went completely red. Bruno leaned forward.

"Teddy," Bruno said. "Or Edward, if I may call you that. Edward of Seville. Oh, I know. Traces of your DNA were in my bloodstream and I paid good money to trace you back. Did you know beggars in Seville in the 18<sup>th</sup> century used to go around, picking up and smoking the dead end butts of the noblemen who could afford cigarettes. That's probably what happened to you. And don't you go fucking anywhere."

Bruno fired a round of the Anaconda into the floor in front of Billy. "I'm not done with you. I still want to know how much you got paid to fatten me up."

"I can find another," Teddy hissed.

"If you could have you would have, Teddy," Bruno said. "You're hooked through the bag on what it is I've got. My blood, laced with nicotine, is all that keeps you going. The rest is just food, right, Billy?"

Billy swallowed hard. Bruno could smell the man's fear and it was good. Bruno wished he could have bottled that up, and mix it with an nice vinaigrette and make a salad. An entree before the main course.

"Can you take him?" Billy asked. "You got silver bullets in that thing?"

Bruno shook his head and Billy's face drew.

Bruno pulled the trigger of the 9mm Zigana in his left hand and exploded Teddy's face. He got out of his bench seat, pushed Billy out of the way, and pumped all seventeen rounds into Teddy, his face, his chest, and his crotch, making especially sure to vaporize every tooth in the goddamned bloodsuckers mouth.

Billy fell on Bruno on tears, dropping to his knees and clutching at

Bruno's thighs. Bruno let him go on that way, holstering both of his weapons and tousling Billy's hair. He looked out into the parking lot to see that the clouds had cleared and the world didn't look so off after all.

"You know something, Billy," Bruno said. "You know what the doctor told me, though. This special doctor that specializes in anemia. The quickest way to get over a vampire bite is the same way you get around smallpox. You get yourself the chicken pox, but in this case, the chicken pox is a werewolf bite."

Billy stopped weeping and looked up into Bruno's growing canines being licked by a sinister whipping tongue.

"Did you actually think I went hiking, you idiot?"

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