



A Night in Cetatea Poenari

The vivid colored mountains curved up and down and around like a roller coaster. The peaks nearby were tinted dark olive, while in the far distance they hazed to a bluish green, with jade hills in between. The sky changed into a light gray, bringing with it mist and gentle sprinkles. It felt like late September, even though the season was early spring.

“Oi, is it true that some bloke got ’imself killed climbing up here, Laura?” Brandon asked, huffing as he labored up the wide stairs.

“That’s what I heard. Before they built these stairs, a guy was doing research and fell down the hillside, breaking his neck.”

“That’s a bloody horrible way to go, eh?”

They hadn’t seen or heard no other signs of life since they arrived. No birds flew overhead, no insects, not even the mocking crow’s caw. Brandon hadn’t taken notice of the strange absence of living things, though; he concentrated more on his exhaustion. Continuously muttering complaints to himself, he felt he was on the verge of collapse, and wouldn’t have been surprised if a pack of vultures circled above him.

“Bloody hell,” he wheezed. “How many steps are there?”

“I’ve read it’s fifteen hundred,” Laura said. “But then I also read somewhere that it’s eighteen hundred and fifty.”

“Well, which is it?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t been counting them. And honestly, I cannot believe that you’re actually complaining about the stairs after what we just talked about?”

Brandon stopped to catch his breath, bending over and placing his hands on his knees. His heavy camping pack weighed on his back like a boulder. “I need a break.”

“What?” Laura said. “We’re almost there, you lazy cocker. Can’t you suck it up just a little bit further?”

Brandon rose to his full height with a huff. He turned to the young man standing a few steps below her.

“What ’bout you, Fadi? You look tired, eh?”

“Nope. Feeling just fine, mate.” Fadi replied jocularly. “You’re just outta shape.”

“Shut it,” Brandon snapped. “Just five minutes, eh?” He reached into the pocket of his gray denim jacket.

“See, that’s your bloody problem right there,” Fadi said as Brandon brought out a crumpled cigarette pack. “You can’t keep up ’cause you’re infecting your lungs with those bleedin’ things. Aren’t you taking health class?”

Brandon slid a crooked cigarette out from the pack with his teeth as he said, “Just ’cause I smoke doesn’t mean cancer is gonna do me in. I could die at the ripe old age of ninety, or get hit by a bus, or even a nasty fall.” He shoved the pack back into his pocket and retrieved his Zippo. Lighting the bent cigarette, he inhaled and said, “Besides, me bloody health teacher smokes as well. At least I ain’t a hypocrite.”

“Speaking of hypocrites,” Laura tried changing the subject, “why are there Christian tattoo parlors?”

“What d’you mean?” Brandon asked, slipping the pack straps off his shoulders.

“Doesn’t the bible forbid any kind of markings—such as tattoos—to be placed on the human body?”

“You’re talking about Leviticus 19:28,” Fadi said. “*Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the LORD.* Some say that has nothing to do with tattoos. Instead it means God had told the Israelites to stay away from religious practices not belonging to their own belief. The translation of tattoo marks isn’t even about body art, but a link to different religious groups that isn’t the True Faith. Others believe the verse does advise against tattooing. It’s all about how a person *wants* to perceive it.”

Brandon snorted. “For an atheist, you know a lot about the bible.”

“Believe it or not, boy-o, a lot of atheists know more about the bible than most devoted religious sods. And don’t even think about tossing that cigarette butt away. We’re not here to filth up the bloody place.”

“An atheist/environmentalist. That’s a strange match for sure, mate.”

“What? Do I have to believe in God to care about the world we live in?”

“Right, right, you have your mystical monkey theory, eh?” Brandon said sarcastically.

“Mystical monkey theory? You mean *Evolution*, you git?”

Utterly uninterested in the boy’s silly religious debate, Laura tilted her chin upward to the ruins above. She couldn’t believe she was actually looking at it.

Cetatea Poenari, the fortress of Vlad Tepes, known by most as Vlad Dracula, or Vlad the Impaler. Like most of Vlad’s castles and fortresses, Poenari was soaked in violent history. She could feel it all around her in the cold, damp air.

She’d known about this place for quite a while, yet had rarely thought about it until deciding to come here. She had something to prove in this place.

Brushing her damp, brown hair from her face, she turned back as Brandon was speaking.

“I’m not saying being an atheist is wrong, mate—to each his own, if you ask me. Just don’t be calling for my bloody help while you’re burning in the pits of hell and I’m relaxing in the clouds, getting full body massages from Angelina Jolie and Jessica Alba lookalikes.”

Fadi gritted his teeth and made a fist as if to throw a punch. It hadn't been the first time he and Brandon had locked horns over this subject matter. He didn't understand why they always argued about it. Brandon, after all, was hardly a by-the-book Christian himself. Perhaps it was because he'd grown up in a strict Catholic household and after leaving home he had arrived at the decision that it's safer to believe in something rather than nothing at all. Fadi thought of that as ignorant as well as arrogant, and that Brandon was both shallow and ridiculous to follow a religion strictly for the *just in case* reason.

"Stop bugging around and let's get up there and find a place to make camp before dark," Laura said impatiently, bringing them back to the business at hand.

Both ceased arguing. Brandon dabbed out his cigarette and crammed it into his pants pocket. He then hoisted his heavy pack.

"Aye, let's get this torture over with."

As they neared the entrance, Fadi noticed something in a damaged section of the fortress wall where the top had a 'v' shape carved into it as though to represent the first letter of Vlad's name.

"Why are the bricks dissimilar?" he asked, indicating the white and gray bottom stones, while the ones above were red.

"The walls were rebuilt during different periods of time due to war," Laura explained. "This place has seen its fair share of battles and bloodshed."

"And it wasn't just battle deaths, either," Brandon added.

"What do you mean?" asked Fadi.

"Don't you know the history?"

"I'm a Chemical and Environmental Engineer in training. I have no time for history."

"Well, set your eyes down there, mate," Brandon ordered.

Fadi stopped and turned around as Brandon pointed to the road below.

"Down in that valley, hundreds of people were impaled."

Fadi studied the calm and peaceful valley. He tried to imagine it filled with agonizing screams while the ground was being soaked in blood and entrails.

"Come on," Laura called. "The rain is clearing and I want to set up camp before we take a look around."

They entered the ruins and went in search for a decent place to camp. There were no enclosed areas for them to sleep under. Laura explained that the fortress roof had collapsed many years ago during an earthquake, but after further exploration they managed to find a place in a ruined tower in the upper battlements. After setting up camp, the anxious college students split up to explore.

Fadi headed toward the back of the fortress, passing a couple of tourists, leaving. They were the only ones left in the fortress other than him and his mates. Soon the entire place would be theirs for the night.

He continued through the corridors, now opened to the sky, admiring the structure surrounding him.

Brandon slid his hand over the wet, rusty handrails while wandering the maze of narrow corridors and broken brick walls. He remembered how he'd laughed at Laura when she invited him to come with her.

"You wanna go looking for a bleedin' vampire?" he had said to her.

"It has nothing to do with vampires," she'd snapped. *"You're thinking about Bram Stoker's Dracula, I'm talking about the real Dracula."*

She told him to get his facts straight and do his own research on the prince of Wallachia. After he'd done so, he decided to join her, especially since her parents paid for his ticket in turned that he'd look out for her.

A dark room captured Brandon's attention. He jumped the rusty railing to investigate. When he reached it, he discovered the room was actually a pit. Curious to see how deep it went, he placed both hands against either side of the entrance for support and leaned forward a bit.

"Hello," he called out.

His voice echoed back from the black void, giving evidence that it was a very deep hole. Inside, the temperature dropped eight degrees, sending goosebumps over his entire body. The pit quickly bored him, but as he turned to leave he heard something. He became still and listened intently.

It wasn't long before the voices returned.

"Hello?" he said, this time trying to reach someone, rather than just playfully throwing his voice around. "Is anyone down there?"

He listened again, and again he heard them. Crouching, Brandon leaned his head in, cuffing his hand behind one ear, trying to confirm to himself that what he heard was actual human voices. There were many of them, whispering in languages he couldn't translate. Then he noticed among the whispers the low whimpering of a man. It was painfully clear. Steadily, the whimper grew into a heavy sob.

"Who's down there?" Brandon called, now concerned that a tourist had fallen in without anyone noticing. "Do you need help, ole boy?"

The second he asked, an agonizing wail shrilled from the bowels of the pit. The sharp cry startled him so bad he fell backwards, but quickly got to his feet. As he left to find the others, he could still hear the haunting cries from the unknown man.

"There isn't anyone down there," Fadi replied, looking into the hole with his flashlight. "It's deep for sure, mate, but I can see the bottom and there isn't anyone there. I think you've gone mental."

"I'm telling you, I heard 'im," Brandon snapped angrily. "I heard 'im as real as I'm hearing your fat lip telling me otherwise."

"Did the man say anything?" Laura asked, standing beside him.

He turned to her.

"Couldn't understand what they were saying," he explained. "But I heard a man in pain, like he'd fallen and broken every bone in his body."

“What *they* were saying?” Fadi asked, turning away from the hole. “You heard more than one person?”

Brandon shifted his eyes to him, nodded, and said, “Yeah. Look, I ain’t daft. I...I dunno. Maybe they left, or something.”

“There isn’t another way out but up,” Laura pointed out. “I read about this pit. During battles, soldiers put POWs in there to be dealt with later. Some were lowered, others thrown in and left to die if the drop didn’t kill ’em first.”

Her little history lesson did absolutely nothing to ease his tension.

“I didn’t bloody need to hear that,” he said, reaching into his pocket for his cigarette pack.

Twilight darkened the landscape. Before it got too dark, the three went outside the fortress to collect firewood.

On their way up the steps, something caught Fadi’s eye. What he saw almost appeared to be a forest where the valley had been. The evening shadow made it difficult to identify what had seemingly sprouted from the ground. He turned away to say something to the others, but they’d had already gone back inside. To his surprise, when he turned back to the valley, it had become more clear as if the light had faded just enough for him to get a better view. He squinted his dark eyes to narrow slits and discovered that it was no forest but long pikes—hundreds of them, lining the road, and impaled on each of them were live human bodies. Fadi instantly dismissed the sight as trickery of the mind; an optical illusion brought on by awareness that acts of impalement had once been performed down in the valley. He told himself that it could be anything; he was, after all, very far up from the sight.

He quickly headed up the steps to meet with his mates at the campsite.

The fire warmed Laura’s hands. After changing into her University of Nottingham sweater she felt cozy and dry for the first time since that morning.

“We lucked out finding this spot, eh?” Brandon said, lighting up another smoke.

“Actually, we really did,” Laura agreed. “Cause I think we’re near where Vlad’s wife jumped to her death to escape capture from the Turks.”

“Alright, enough history junk, eh?” Brandon complained. “Me nerves are still rattled from that bleedin’ pit.”

“Oh, the little Catholic lad got scared by some spirit voice, eh?” Fadi chimed in. “Don’t you religious folk believe in those fairytale realms called heaven and hell?”

“Shite,” Laura muttered under her breath. “Not this again.”

“Maybe this *is* hell, mate,” Brandon retorted. “Maybe you died while climbing up those bloody stairs and haven’t realized it yet.”

“If that be the case, then why am I talking to you?”

“Cause I ain’t Brandon, chum. I’m really your own personal demon and I’m gonna spend the rest of eternity tormenting you.”

“How? Constantly chattin’ me ear off with your nonsense?”

“Stop it, you two,” Laura cut in. “Brandon, I’m sure all you heard was the wind.”

“Oi,” Brandon said offensively. “Now you both are calling me crazy, are you? Dealing out the ole *it was only the wind* card, eh? Isn’t this exactly what you came for? I thought you wanted to convince yourself that this place *is* haunted.”

“I do,” Laura admitted.

“Why?” Fadi asked.

“My psychologically professor talked about how the mind can physically affect the body. He said that a perfectly healthy person can become ill simply by believing strongly enough that their body had some sort of disease. He touched on the subject of hallucinations and that being in a building or area rumored to be haunted can convince the mind to believe that something is there, when in fact it’s nothing. I can’t explain why, but it intrigued me. I decided that I wanted to test my own mind control by spending the night in a haunted place.”

“You know, love, England is loaded with haunted hot spots,” Fadi pointed out.

“Yeah, but I watched a segment on the History Channel last October about Poenari and it made me really want to come here.” She broke a stick in two and threw one half into the fire. “What about you, Fadi? Besides a free trip, why did you decide to come along?”

“I suppose I do have me own reasons. You both know I’m not a fan of the Creation theory, right?”

Brandon opened his mouth to speak when Fadi cut him off.

“Shut it, wanker!”

Brandon stayed quiet and smoked his cigarette with a little grin on his face.

“Anyway, I want to prove that there is no life after death, *period*. Laura, you told me, Poenari was one of the most haunted places in the world, right? I figured that if I could spend one undisturbed night here without any ghostly encounters, I can comfortably go on with my belief that nothing exists beyond this point.”

“That’s a bloody bleak belief, mate,” Brandon said.

“Yeah, so what’s your big reason for coming?”

Brandon shrugged and flicked his cigarette butt into the fire.

“I’m just along for the ride.”

Deep into the night, the group had fallen asleep. The fire had long died away when Brandon felt something near him.

“Who’s there?” he said, sitting up.

His eyes traveled around in the darkness, seeing only the glowing embers where the fire had once burned. The eerie presence stayed with him as he reached for his flashlight. He clicked it on, shined the light over the campsite, and found nothing.

Typical, he thought.

Trying to convince himself it was just a case of paranoia caused by the voices from the pit, Brandon went out into the corridor to relieve himself. If it was just him and Fadi, he wouldn't have gone outside the tower, but he wanted to be a gentleman and not piss in front of Laura in case she woke up. He kept the flashlight on when he sat it down on the ground, then turned to the wall and unzipped his pants. The only sound was his stream hitting stone. No wind blew, no sound of chirping crickets: nothing.

Then a moan.

It came from down the corridor away from the tower. He heard it again as he turned in the direction the sound had come from. A long, deep moan flowed through the vast darkness, sending icy chills down his spine.

He zipping up his pants and snatched up the flashlight, aiming it down the corridor. The moan came again, followed by rushing footsteps coming towards him.

What the hell is that? Brandon wondered.

A woman appeared in his light. It was only a flash, but he saw her. Her eyes were wide with fear and she let out a sharp scream as she ran straight towards him. All human warmth was stolen from him as the transparent figure passed through his body. His heart thumped irregularly, causing him to become short of breath. Unable to stay on his feet, he collapsed and shivered uncontrollably.

Laura woke when a woman screaming rang into her ears. It only took her a moment to spot a light, shining nearby.

She found Brandon on the ground, white-faced and incoherent. She knelt beside him.

“Brandon? What happened to you?”

He didn't respond, only moved his mouth up and down like a gasping fish. The brightness from his 12-volt flashlight, aiming directly at his face, seemed not to affect his wide, unblinking eyes.

Laura didn't know what to do.

“I'm going to fetch, Fadi,” she said, rising to do so. The moment she did, an agonizing scream came from the tower.

“Oh, god, what was that?” she said. “Fadi? Is that you?”

“She told me that if I do as she'd done, her pain will stop,” Brandon said softly.

“Who?” Laura asked, happy to hear him speak. But her fear returned when Brandon shot to his feet and ran down the battlement.

She started to run after him only to come to a quick halt as he leapt out of what had once been a window. He dropped completely from her sight.

Brandon was gone.

Oh, my god! Laura thought. *Did he really jump?*

Shaking from the shock of witnessing her friend plunge to his death, her terror rose when she heard rapid footsteps coming her way.

The instant Laura had left the tower, Fadi opened his eyes. He sat up and felt something warm and wet on his abdomen. Confused, he clicked on his flashlight and aimed it on himself. His sweater drenched with blood. The cause was a deep, softball-sized hole in his stomach. The shock rendered him speechless, and his situation only worsened when he slid his hand behind him.

“Oh, Jesus,” he said, when his fingers dipped into his moist exposed tissue.

The wound had gone straight through him.

“Oh, Jesus. Jesus, help me!”

If any pain existed, he didn't feel it, but the amount of fear he experienced compensated for it. He had to get out of the tower. He needed to go home.

He flew past Laura in the corridor, screaming.

“Fadi! Wait!” she called to him.

He didn't stop. Instead he ran blindly over the walkways, then into an open space where an image halted him to a complete standstill.

There was no body attached to what he saw, it only hovered five feet off the ground. It was the chalky white face of a man radiating through the darkness. It had no eyes and it showed no expression.

The chase didn't last long, but her terror had Laura breathing heavily. She found Fadi near the exit, pacing back and forth. How he managed to get that far without the assistance of a light was beyond her.

“Brandon is dead,” she informed. “He jumped off the building!”

Fadi stopped. He became perfectly still as he eyed something behind her.

“There's a face over there,” he whispered. “A face, d'you see it?”

Laura craned her neck around to the nothing behind her. Even when panning her light around, she couldn't find anything. “What face?”

“That face wants me to kill you,” Fadi answered in deadly earnest.

His words didn't fully register until she turned back to him. His dark complexion had faded a bit; his eyes were wide and colorless. He was no longer the friend she knew and loved—he was someone else entirely.

“That face wants me to kill you, Laura,” he repeated. *“Painfully.”*

He charged at her and she quickly reacted by swinging the flashlight like a Billy club, striking him across the head. She wasted no time in running away, leaving him to stumble around in the darkness, calling, “Laura, wait! That face! Don't leave me here alone with that face!”

She ran faster, only to halt suddenly at the ledge.

Where's the bloody stairs?

Her friend's inhuman cries convinced her to take a chance; otherwise he would surely kill her. She dropped the flashlight into the forest below, took hold of the edge, and slowly lowered herself

over until she dangled from it. The drop wasn't far, but the steep hillside worried her. Realizing she had no other choice, she finally let go, landing hard on the uneven ground. The fall caused her bones to rattle, but her youthful strength got her to her feet again. After finding the flashlight, she climbed down the hillside, feeling a surge of relief that soon she'd find help.

It didn't take long before the forest closed in around her.

The skeleton-like trees seemed never-ending. Exhausted, she stopped for a moment to catch her breath. Then she noticed the intense silence around her. So silent that it made it seem like nothing could disturb it.

But something did; a loud howl of a man.

Behind her, the loud crashing of something heavy falling down the hillside forced her to whip around. Shining the light towards the sound, she watched as shrubs crushed and twigs broke under the weight of something rolling over them... but nothing could be seen. The frightening wail of the man tore through the air and then silenced with a loud crack that could only be described as a bone breaking.

Laura followed the crumbling dried leaves with her flashlight, all the way to her feet where the phantom stopped. Her frantic breath misted across the flashlight beam. It took her a moment to gather the courage to run again. As she ran, footsteps rushed behind her. She shined the light back, but only caught a glimpse of a figure between the trees before the light flickered off.

Darkness.

She continuously pressed the button.

Click! Click! Click! Click! Click!

The light refused to flicker on.

She stopped and it became quiet once more. She heard nothing but her own heavy breathing for a long moment.

Crunch!

This wasn't part of her imagination—*this* was real.

Laura stopped breathing and listened to the leaves crunching nearby.

The figure was walking toward her.

“Who's there?”

Crunch! Snap! Crunch!

“Who are you!” she shrieked, feeling madness numbing her mind.

The footsteps stopped. Her chest tightened with anticipation. Cold air puffed into her ear as though someone blew into it.

The icy breath caused her to run again.

Laura ran through the blinding darkness with the footsteps constantly at her heels. She never found her way out.