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Rich Girls

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Vampires

What was he like – neat, messy, did he have any taste? She studied the tall windows, the cloth curtains whose color she couldn't see in the oval beam of light from the desk lamp, maybe orange, yes, the curtains had to be orange, after all the carpet was bright yellow, otherwise it wouldn't go. The leaves of the potted plants cast large shadows on the curtain, whose slight movement made it look as if strange shapes from the jungle were dancing their archaic dances there. Maybe she should draw his attention to the play of shadows. But he had turned away, breathing audibly. She let him be. Now, left undisturbed, she could use the time to let her gaze swerve across the alien terrain; after all, she wanted to make a note of everything. How the bookcase stood, the tray on the floor, a coffee cup, and then, no, that was it, now she had it down, that was his bedroom.

Maybe she would never see it again, maybe it would be hideous, this never-seen-again, or maybe it would be no harm done, but it wasn't for her to decide, she waited to see what he would say when he was finished with his heavy breathing. She had to be careful. Keep her mouth shut and not ask too many questions. Anyway, at some point every one of her victims would realize that she sucked men dry with her love, squeezing everything out of them, wanting to know their stories, their thoughts, go on and tell, go on and tell, it was like an addiction, the three wonderful weeks would be followed by three months in which her lovers, shocked by the extent of the boredom which evidently tormented Natalie, would try to prod their new girlfriend to make some changes, find some meaning. How about art school, for example, the photography department? – but Natalie would just shake her head and turn on the television. Peter had slapped her in the face the time she yawned while he was picturing her a fantastic future, but even if they didn't slap her in the face, the time would come when no man would hesitate to call life with her a disaster for the way she listened to their answering machines and read their letters and obliterated their memories so that the men would belong to her

completely, along with all their ideas, projects and stories. Stephan mustn't be allowed to notice that, not yet. Restraint was crucial now. It had gone too quickly, she had been too quick to go to bed with him – as if for some reason she were pressed for time, as if tomorrow she might be an old woman already, how ridiculous.

It's cold here, she said, and touched him on the shoulder, that ought to be harmless enough, and he replied, I'll turn up the heat, and slipped out of the covers. He brought her a glass of water, that's nice of you, said Natalie, she sat up in bed and the covers slipped down, she pulled them up again bashfully, not knowing herself whether she was just playing the bashfulness or actually feeling it; he laughed, anyway. Natalie stretched, she felt sleepy and wondered whether he expected her to go now. She wouldn't mind going, she was just so tired, tired because they had taken the long way home past the municipal theaters and along the embankment after eating at the Indian restaurant. They had walked around the city for nearly two hours just to finish up the conversation which seemed designed to go on for an incredibly long time. They had groped their way forward by way of favorite foods and movies. As far as travel was concerned, Natalie had little to say, but Stephan made up for it, and the more he digressed, the more his steps slowed, until finally, on the Iron Bridge, he came to a stop. Bali, he said, and his profile craned into the air, Bali is quite impressive. Natalie leaned far over the railing, still farther, recklessly far, she would have liked to have a series of pleasant, orderly memories too, but she couldn't even find her shadow in the water. It was too dark, the river was black with a silver film where the light fell on it. Watch out, said Stephan, as she began to rock, resting her palms on the railing. I'm watching out, she replied, smiling to herself. The wind rustled, the bridge thrummed, and the trees waiting at the other end of the bridge leaned towards them, trees without names. What a beautiful place, she said.

When he asked what she did she replied guardedly, it was boring, she said, her life and her work as a photo lab assistant, realizing at the same time that that was not entirely true. I develop other people's

lives, she tried to explain, I look at them, and you wouldn't believe all the things these pictures say about people, but she had already said enough. She thought of one customer, a slender young man with a friendly smile who had come into the shop one Thursday two weeks ago, probably because of the discounts on Thursdays. The man rummaged in his backpack, the bag with the films has to be here somewhere, he murmured, and Natalie, smiling, took the round plastic containers, filled out the receipt, and later she looked at the finished prints. All three films were filled with pictures of a woman, apparently the young man's girlfriend, photos that showed her swimming in a lake. Something bothered her about the pictures, at first she thought the girl reminded her of her sister, so unnaturally blond and so naturally happy, but that wasn't it, it was just that there were too many pictures, an awful number of them, as if this man were searching the swimmer's naked body for something. When she thought about it more, she realized she was just jealous. What this woman must have had in her to make her boyfriend want to get the camera's eye so close to her, obscenely close, over and over again.

She and Stephan had left the silent black river behind them, turning toward the center of the city, the tops of the skyscrapers were illuminated, seeking something in the sky, and Natalie thought a bird was calling after them, one single hollow bird's voice, but she wasn't sure, and Stephan asked: Daydreaming? He waited, she said nothing, he went on talking. When he talked he looked satisfied, satisfied with himself and the evening. Natalie hated talking about her hometown as much as she hated talking about her job, a small town, yeah, yeah, tiny, you wouldn't know it, and he told her about his childhood in a villa in Wiesbaden. We Ziemers, he said, acting ironic, you see, we Ziemers have been factory owners for generations, and with the words have been Stephan Ziemer meant that he didn't want to inherit the company, that he was a black sheep with his biochemistry, I want to stay in academia, he said, but of course it's a disappointment for father, Natalie nodded, one heard of such cases. She had been in Wiesbaden often, she said then, eagerly, here was a subject she could

talk about, I worked there once, between the State Museum and the Chamber of Commerce, you know the place? A big grey building, that's the newspaper headquarters, I had an internship there once in the photo department, I've always been interested in photos, these frozen, immortalized moments, they don't even have to be good, botched pictures can reveal the most sometimes, I see it with the customers in the store. And doesn't memory work that way too, it's like that with me, anyway, my memory stores people and situations in images, when someone says something I forget it right away, but never the color of the sky on this evening or the chairs in the café. Stephan laughed, he laughed at Natalie, she was actually talking, for the first time that evening. What do you remember when you think back on a situation, she asked, words, dialogues too? Really, you still remember who said what when and where? I forget it, get it confused, I always mix it all up, the words and the people, that's my cross to bear, it can be really embarrassing sometimes, no, for me it's images, always images. And Stephan nodded and squeezed her hand as if he understood. They had walked through the night like that, and then it was natural to end the evening the way they did, after all the words they had used.

Let's have some more to drink, you don't need to bring it, let's go over to the kitchen. But first she had to go to the bathroom. She groped her way naked down the corridor, the bathroom was done in ice-blue tiles, aggressively-gleaming squares in eternal repetition, an aquarium, she didn't like it. Natalie sat on the edge of the bathtub, she'd take a shower, she was dead tired, she'd just sit there for a moment, she either wanted to sleep or go home, her head and her eyes hurt, she looked down at herself, the artificial light made her skin look a strange blue, like the skin of a fabulous animal. Why hadn't he chosen red tile, strawberry red, old rose, blood red, something alive, that would have looked prettier. Natalie ran the shower lukewarm, remembering another bathroom, a guy who'd been just as attractive as Stephan: Matthias, Matt. Hadn't they always taken showers together, no, just once, she had always taken showers with Jochen, he had been

at least as good-looking and friendly too, and very smart. She couldn't complain really, it was just the length of her love-affairs, it had bothered her at first, but now she herself reckoned with short segments. Natalie splashed herself first with warm water, then with cold, until she was shivering, and all the time she thought about another man and yet another; early on she had usually stayed too long, had let them see through her, now she had it down pat. You have to go as soon as the hands, the words stop being uncertain and groping and start being demanding, as soon as someone acts as if he knows his way around; just because this gesture or caress, this phrase or that one seemed to have gotten a positive reception once, you used it again, beating a path of gestures and words and stubbornly using this path despite all the beautiful things hidden at its margins. After Matt, with Reiner, that taciturn North German, it had been a different path, but a path all the same. After that Angelo had actually come close to making her throw all her rules overboard, Angelo's stories were the best, Angelo's stories made her see bright, southern pictures. Often he'd told that one story about his father, Natalie couldn't remember his exact words, but in her mind's eye she still saw Angelo's grandmother selling postcards, and Angelo's father in the back room, studying French and English for his career. Angelo didn't want to become honorary consul, though he admired his father more than anyone else in the world, he did some drug dealing and had too much money and had seen half the world already anyway, so he sat around on the sofa most of the time going to fat from booze, she understood the dilemma. Angelo had had too many women too, and if Natalie hadn't left him first, if she hadn't been the first to go, Angelo had gotten his fill of everyone, he'd sucked them dry and gotten his fill, she couldn't hold that against him, she was just the same, after all. A feeling of panic filled her, she tasted it on her tongue, metallic. Water, she needed water, she aimed the jet at her mouth, swallowed, let the liquid flow down her throat. Most ran down her chin. Stephan called: Do you have everything you need? Frightened, she turned off the faucet. But there was nothing to fear. That was just his solicitude

again, she would enjoy getting used to it, what could she possibly not find in this orderly bathroom? His bathrobe hung on the door: big, lots of material. She was in good keeping.

In the kitchen Stephan pretended to be very busy with the motions required to serve drinks and put crackers on the table. She would have liked to ask: Will you call tomorrow? Or: Out with it, what do you think, was I good, was I able to show you how good you were for me, who will you tell about it tomorrow, do you have a buddy you'll call when I'm out of the house, or will you wait to see how things develop? She took a cracker, and as she tossed back the wine, because her thirst was increasing and she felt the impatience, the craving to ask, to get more out of him, kisses or declarations of love, he chewed with his mouth full, you could hardly watch. Natalie nearly choked, she wanted to store everything in her memory until she was home again in her room, her own dreary life, no, thought Natalie, smiling at Stephan Ziemer, I have nothing more to give, I have to take it for myself. And while Natalie was still wondering whether she should get going, whether he expected her to go now, he stood up abruptly: Music would be a good thing, it was so quiet here. In the next room the parquet creaked under his feet, then she heard a saxophone, growing louder, she saw cigarettes lying on the table and lit herself one. She took two or three puffs as if she'd never had this nutty taste in her mouth that cigarettes always had when you'd gone without smoking for a while.

She stubbed out the cigarette, yawned, he came up grinning and holding a cardboard box: Here's my life, he said grandly, tapping the box. You said you liked photos, and she understood: Rome was in there and the villa in Wiesbaden, his ex Anja was in there, and his ex Mareike, and Stephan was in there, Stephan in front of houses, landmarks, Stephan with girls and Stephan with relatives.

She leaned over the open box, it was stuffed to the brim, there were at least four hundred photos. Stephan took two fat packs of pictures out of the box, looking as if he wanted to give her something, as if he had just taken years of his previous existence out of the drawer just to

hand them over to her now, to give her an idea, as he said. He said nothing, smiling at her, and she thought she would need to use her imagination a little more, but it was easier this way, the two of them could more or less pick up where Nicole and Andrea and maybe lots of others, maybe Jessica too and Ann-Kathrin and Beatrice had left off, they could travel the same vacation countries, or go out of their way to avoid them, and she wouldn't need to make the same mistakes as her predecessors, after all he could use all the pictures to tell her what he couldn't stand, harsh as that sounded. And of course he would notice her specific peculiarity over time, of course, she was there because of her peculiarity. Now he had found what he was looking for: someone who went along with everything with a peculiar humility, and he wouldn't realize that for all her desire to go along with his games, she would be sucking his bones dry. Well, he said, holding several photos in his hand, what would you prefer, chronologically or – all mixed up, Natalie interrupted him, handing the stack back to Stephan, who very deliberately peeled off one picture at a time. For form's sake she let her eyes roam the ravines and gorges that made up the first stack of pictures, she wanted to see people, and there they were, a resolute-looking woman, no longer young, a gaunt man with an aquiline nose, he didn't bear much of a resemblance to his parents, there was the house, how beautiful, and here was a garden party, how old are you there, seventeen, eighteen, funny how you look with long hair, are those dogroses? Travel to exotic countries, meet interesting people, said Stephan mockingly, leafing through the Grand Canyon, then hesitated a moment, those are my exes, he said, she made the obligatory demurrer, he insisted, please, then you'll have an idea. An idea, hadn't he said that before, and already she'd given up and leaned back contentedly. She examined ten by fifteen centimeters of Tuscany, a background of cypresses, and the smiling brunette foreground of Nicole. Nicole was eating breakfast outside. She was eating breakfast with makeup on. There were lipstick marks on Nicole's cup, the photograph was crystal clear, that typical Stephan Ziemer, everything

extremely distinct, and on the left-hand side Nicole's lip had a slight swelling, from that night, or she'd bitten it. She was pretty, much prettier than she'd thought, and her breasts swelled powerfully through the t-shirt. Natalie wondered whether this Nicole wasn't much more his type, but the sense of anxiety lasted only a few seconds; and what if she were, even a Stephan Ziemer needed a change. She glanced at the door, half open, doors were reassuring.

The greed with which she looked at the photos was stronger than ever before, and she wondered if other people would call that being in love. With Nicole, that was nothing serious, he said now. We were both alone, you know how quickly that can go sometimes. She had to laugh, he looked embarrassed, and she felt at a loss: It was true, with them it had gone quickly too. He leafed further, Andrea, that was serious, as he'd told her already, and the picture actually looked more serious, it had been taken in the Black Forest, with dying trees in the background, some of them had tipped over and lay on the ground black as enormous punctuation marks. Stephan put the picture away again, satisfied, even though she hadn't said anything, only nodded, and now, belatedly, remarked, oh yes, near Freudenstadt the forest die-back is also supposed to be up to one hundred percent, only the fruit trees still have a chance. We ought to go there sometime, it's gorgeous, he said, still meaning Tuscany. What she saw here was worth its weight in gold, her boredom would vanish for months, she had Stephan's life to think of. If he gave her his key she could look at the pictures in secret, and maybe, someday, there also would be pictures of her that would end up in this box, then she would be part of his story, let them all talk about her, about her, Natalie, who didn't have the strength for her own story.

This evening – you are staying, aren't you? he asked. She only heard this one phrase you are staying, it hovered there as if written on a blackboard, and she knew that this was not a one-night-stand for him, they had days, weeks, maybe months together, she was furnished with fresh life for the foreseeable future, how happy the prospect mad her. Wait, the last pictures, really the very last pictures, he said, here, here,

but really they're really ancient history. Show me, she cried, almost a scream, show me. For ultimately she saw herself in every woman, in Nicole's, Andrea's, Marie's hungry eyes, she stared at them and saw herself. She didn't see how Stephan was looking at her until he laughed and said, look in the mirror, and she got up and looked in the little mirror at the kitchen doorway: it was true, her face was white and her mouth reddened at the edges by wine, she laughed and couldn't stop, she had never seen herself as clearly as she did today in this mirror, and suddenly he was behind her, biting her in the neck and saying: Vampire, vampire, I'll have to watch out for you, and she said softly, or I'll have to watch out for you.