

fantasy

FEBRUARY, 1953

Volume 1, Number 1

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\$2.00 per year in U. S. A.

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

173

85¢ per copy

THE NIGHT SHIFT

BY FRANK ROBINSON

ILLUSTRATED BY SMITH

Werewolves are supposed to haunt lonely, back-country roads. That seems a little silly, when you consider that most beasts of prey go where the game is thickest. Now at night, in the larger cities. . . .

I sat there letting the smoke drift out of my nostrils and running my fingers idly over the typewriter keys. The ideas weren't coming tonight; I couldn't concentrate. I'd start to think and my mind would twist away, as if it was tired of working and wanted to relax and think about the movies or what was on TV or what I had for supper that night.

The paper in my typewriter was discouragingly blank except for the heading: *The Night Shift, by Nick Golata*. There wasn't anything underneath it and I didn't have any idea of what should go there.

I took another drag on my cigarette, opened the window a little, and flicked it out, watch-

ing the tiny red ember fall through the night to the empty streets twenty stories down. The column was usually a natural for ideas. What goes on in Chicago after dark, when all the eight-to-fivers have gone to bed and the rest of humanity congregates in small, neighborhood bars or the big movie palaces downtown or scrubs its lonely way down the miles of corridors in deserted office buildings.

I filled my lungs with the cold, clean air and looked out over the city at night, a sea of blackness spotted here and there with the glare of neon and threaded with shining catwalks of strings of street-lamps. The city grows on you, like an old typewriter or a faithful automobile. You fall in

love with the bright lights and the rumble of the ancient elevated and the characters who work the night shift downtown.

It was mine, I thought, all mine. The darkness and the shadows and the few people on the deserted sidewalks.

I took one last look and then closed the window. This was going to be one of those nights when I had to call Sammy Baxa for material. I dialed his number and listened for the whirr and the clicks and the tinny silence when he picked up the receiver at his end.

"Hello, Sammy?" I said. "Got any news for the big city's Boswell?" His voice crackled back and I reached for a pencil and wrote down an address. It sounded like it was going to be serious business this time. "Sure thing, Sammy," I said soberly. "I'll meet you there, then."

I got my hat and coat and locked up the office for the night. That was one of the nice things about the column. If I ran out of items, people like Sammy could always furnish me with some.

I didn't even mind going to the city morgue to follow them up.

There were two of them waiting for me outside the ugly, brown structure on Chicago's west side. Big, blunt Sammy

Baxa, captain of the downtown district, and a sharp-faced detective lieutenant named Rezabek.

We shook hands all around. "What happened?" I asked.

"A girl," Sammy said shortly. "Killed on her way home from work."

We went in to look at her. She was cold and hard as alabaster, lying on a slab in a room that smelled of formaldehyde and Lysol.

"She had her throat torn open," Sammy said.

"Knife or razor?"

"I said it was *torn*," Sammy repeated. I leaned closer. It didn't look neat, as a razor job usually does.

"Any relatives?"

Sammy shook his head. "None that we can trace. Just one of the anonymous army of file clerks, Nick. She lived in a cheap walk-up by the University, complete with hot-plate and bathroom-down-the-hall. Apparently she belonged to nobody and nobody belonged to her."

The thin and angular type, I thought, who keeps the confession magazines in business and writes fan letters and dreams of a home and husband in suburbia. One of the eager, pathetic, homey girls who are never noticed—and never missed.

"How did it happen?"

"Like you would expect. She



was working late at the office. She left it a little before midnight and Ed here found her about half an hour ago. She was really working, too, Nick."

I nodded. She wasn't pretty enough to be anything but a work-horse. "How about her boss?"

"Claims he knows nothing about it. He's staying downtown and the night clerk at his hotel has alibied for him. He'd checked in at the time she's supposed to have been killed."

"You don't have any idea who did it?"

"I'm not so sure it's a *who*," Sammy said. "Take another look."

I took a closer look at the body. There were teeth marks in the cold, firm flesh under the chin. Animal teeth marks.

"I think I get it," I said. "A public indignation piece. People shouldn't let their dogs roam Jackson Park or the University midway at night."

"She wasn't found in Jackson Park or on the midway," Reza-bek cut in softly. "She was found downtown, in the heart of the Loop. Huddled in a doorway near the corner of LaSalle and Adams."

I had heard that Sammy had added a new man to the force but I hadn't really noticed Reza-bek until now. He was a gaunt,

thin man, with a chisel-shaped face, and I sized him up as being coldly competent. I resolved to get to know him better.

"I thought you ought to know about her first," Sammy said. "She should be good material for your column."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll use it as Chicago at night stuff—a killer with a trained dog stalking the canyons of LaSalle Street after dark."

Sammy jerked his thumb towards Reza-bek. "You can prowls the Loop tonight with the Hungarian here, if you want to. She didn't have any relatives to push us, but we have to put a man on it for a little while anyways."

"Okay, Sammy," I said casually. "And thanks a lot for the information."

It was snowing out—the light, soft kind of snow that sifts inside your collar and freezes the back of your neck—when I met Reza-bek about half an hour later. He was standing under one of the street lamps in front of the Board of Trade building, the light making unpleasant shadows on his feral face.

"Hope you weren't waiting long," I said. "I had to call my editor and tell him the column will be late."

"How much play do you think the papers will give all this?"

"I don't know," I said slowly. "She was nobody. If it had happened any place but downtown, she wouldn't be worth a six-point notice in one edition. As it is, I suppose she'll rate a brief on the front page, but it won't amount to much."

We walked up LaSalle Street a little ways and he stopped in front of a shoe store where the doorway was set back from the street.

"She was found in there," he said, "crumpled against the door. You could see little drops of blood spattered on the snow all the way from the walk to where she lay."

I struck a match to look but the snow had sifted in and covered any marks.

"It's hard to think of vicious dogs roaming downtown," I said, "though I suppose it could happen. They could hide in the alleys or Grant Park during the day and come out at night."

"From the teeth marks, it must have been an awfully big dog," Rezabek said, "but I don't think it was. And I don't think it was anybody with a trained pooch that he could sic on people, either."

"Look," I encouraged, "you found the body. Why not tell me what you know about it? I'll work in a mention of you in the

column. A personal plug."

He showed his teeth in a humorless grin. "All right, but it has its fantastic angles. It started snowing a little earlier this evening and we could follow her footsteps from the office building where she worked to here. Not many people were, on the streets, you see, and since I found her just after it happened, we could still see her prints. She waited on the corner for a couple of minutes—apparently waiting for someone to meet her. A little later a car drove up and a man got out. He must have scared the girl for she started to run, with him following her."

"He followed her here?" I asked. "And tore her throat out?"

"There's more to it," he said. "Six steps from the curb the man's footprints stopped and the marks changed to *pad* prints."

I looked at him thoughtfully. "It's an unusual pitch but straight off the cob. All the little kids will write in and want to know what happened to his shoes and his clothes when he changed into a werewolf."

"He didn't have his shoes on. He was in his bare feet."

"You're kidding," I said. "Bare feet—in winter?" I stared at him. "The modern version, eh? Our modernized werewolf strips and waits inside his warm

car until he's ready to—change.”

“Don't be stupid,” he said. “I don't know how it was done but I doubt that it was supernatural. He was probably some whack with an iron claw set with animal teeth of some sort, like leopard men over in Africa, or something. As far as his bare feet go, that just convinces me he's a crackpot.”

I felt a little better. For a moment I had begun to wonder.

We had walked over to the entertainment district, Chicago's Great White Way where the restaurants and movies and glittering bars are jammed together along Randolph and State Streets. Most of the shows had let out and the signs were dark, except for those on the all-night cafeterias.

“Just for the sake of argument,” he mused, “what would be wrong with a twentieth century version of a werewolf?”

“Nothing,” I said reluctantly. “If they existed a couple of hundred years ago, I suppose they'd be around today as well. The point is, they probably never existed in the first place.”

“You could develop a case for them,” he said. “A few hundred years ago, stories of werewolves and witches and the like were too widespread, too well rooted in the lives of the people to be

just—stories. With all the smoke, there must have been a few small fires at the bottom of it.”

“Modern psychologists would have an explanation for it,” I said. “Simple-minded peasants who let the stories prey on their minds until they went off their rocker, thought *they* were werewolves and vampires, and tried to do somebody in, in the best werewolf or vampire tradition.”

We got to Van Buren and started walking west, into a cold and snowbound no-man's-land of deserted streets and vacant buildings. Even the street lamps look cold and frosted and lonely.

“Besides,” I said, my breath coming in little spurts of fog, “the main reasons we have for thinking that they existed at all in the past is the folklore, the stories that have been handed down about them. But you don't hear anybody running around yelling werewolf now.”

He paused a moment to shoot a flashlight beam up a deserted alley. “A few hundred years ago,” he said, “towns were small, families were well-knit, everybody knew everybody else. The whole community knew who died, when, and how. But take modern cities and consider the number of floaters and drifters and people who have no ties; the anonymous city public where nobody knows anybody. Have you

followed the statistics, the number of people who are murdered during the year? The unidentified and the unknown? They're forgotten within a day. Nobody knows who they are, nobody cares how they died."

A streetcar clanged its doleful way past us, tired faces looking blankly out of the frosted windows. It turned a corner and the noise of its wheels died, leaving only the creak of signs and the sound of our feet in the crisp snow.

It was turning colder, the air was acquiring a certain snap to it.

"I've got a room in an apartment hotel a few blocks down," he said. "You want to join me in some coffee and doughnuts? Get something warm to last us the rest of the night."

"Thanks," I said. "I'm not particularly hungry but I could go for some java."

The snow was gradually covering the sidewalks and the streets and outlining the windows in the buildings.

"You know," he said quietly, "the circumstances were just right for it tonight, though. The moon was full, for a brief period the weather was clear, and the girl died sometime around midnight."

It was just a sleeping room,

with a small single bed and a stove and icebox. A bureau was against one wall, along with a couple of dirty, paper covered shelves that served as a pantry. A little closet opened off the room.

"You know," he said, "I haven't got a morbid mind but thinking about something like that keeps your imagination in trim. You take old myths and put them in modern dress, bring them up to date. Like imagining, for example, that all the werewolves and vampires immigrated to the city and settled there."

He put a pot of water on to boil and got out a little jar of powdered coffee. I preferred fresh brewed but when you live out of one room, I could see where things would be reduced to their essentials.

"I suppose," I said, "that they'd hide during the day and come out at night."

"I imagine so. The city at night would belong to them, naturally."

I took the cup he offered and added a little sugar.

"Of course, it's got flaws in it," I said. "For one thing, people would start finding too many spare bodies with two little holes in the throat or else looking like they had been mangled by wolves; messy little details like that. It would be awkward."

"I don't think you'd ever hear about them," he said. "They'd have enough of an organization so they could cover up, wipe out their tracks. For instance, like the girl tonight. If Sammy wanted to, he could cover on her—see that no information got out, that nobody knew anything about it. He would never report it, nobody would ever hear about it. The only loose end would be a room on the south side whose occupant had disappeared, leaving behind a few cheap dresses, a half loaf of bread, and an empty peanut butter jar."

It was warm in the room. I took off my suit-coat and unbuttoned the neck of my shirt.

"I like the peanut butter jar, it adds a certain touch. To finish it off, you should say that the landlady would confiscate the clothing for unpaid rent, throw out the bread and the empty jar, and rent it to somebody else. No traces left, no indication that the girl had ever existed. Her boss would hire somebody else to take her place—someone who was prettier, no doubt—and that would be that."

I loosened my belt a little. "Only it wouldn't work like that. It's a reporter's job to snoop around and find out things like that. Sammy wouldn't dare to hide it. If he did, he'd find him-

self smeared all over the papers next day."

"It was just a straw man," he said. "You carry any idea like that far enough and it would break down—heaven help us if it didn't. More coffee?"

I shoved my cup forward. "I don't think they'd be organized at all anyways," I said. "I think they'd all be lone wolves."

He laughed. "Good pun, though I don't agree with you. I think they'd be organized into something like mobs. You know, cut up the nation into territories so a different gang would control each territory, the werewolves controlling Chicago and suburbs and vampires New York, for instance."

"Witches would probably have the franchise in Providence and Salem," I said. "They'd want to get even with Cotton Mather."

I loosened my collar still more and unbuttoned the next button down on my shirt.

"Say," he said suddenly, "I meant to show you something when we came up here. Just a minute." He went into the closet and came back with a few photographs. "I took these earlier this evening."

They were very clear. They showed the body lying in the doorway, the crimson splotches on the snow, and the footprints that led up to her and then

abruptly weren't footprints any more.

"I thought you'd be interested," he said.

"They're nice shots," I said. "Develop them yourself?"

He nodded and pointed to the clothes closet. "My darkroom."

"Very nice," I murmured. I stared at them for a moment more, then gave them back to him. I yawned, bent down, and started to fumble with my shoes.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," I said. "Just loosening my shoelaces."

The city was cold and quiet, with just a faint hint of dawn in the east. Nobody was on the streets, except maybe a few early paper boys and the milk men.

I could hear Sammy behind me, sniping the end off a cigar, then scratching a match with his thumbnail and lighting up.

"What's the column going to be about today?" he asked.

"Something simple," I said.

"How elevator operators while away the night in the big buildings downtown. It was a column I had in reserve; I called the editor earlier this evening and told him to run it. I didn't feel

like writing a new one."

I turned and slowly shredded a letter into a steel ashtray and lit a match to it.

"Let me guess," Sammy said. "A fan letter from a celebrity-struck file clerk who wanted to meet you some night."

I didn't say anything. I watched it burn, then added a couple of crumpled negatives. They poofed into flame and died, powdery cinders.

"You should be more careful whom you hire, Sammy," I said.

"I see you got the photographs, though."

"Not without a struggle; he thought he was going to blackmail us with them."

"What happened to him?"

I grinned wolfishly. "He's lying in his room with his throat torn out."

I turned back to the window and looked at the frozen city. The nice people, the good people, the eight-to-fivers ran it during the day. But Sammy and I handled it on the night shift. We—and the others.

"That lousy vampire!" I said coldly. "He certainly should have known better than to try and muscle in on our territory!"