

ON MY OWN

Back in 1928, I left my family and stayed away for nearly three years. Carlisle, Esme, and I had been living as a family for seven years by that time and I'd developed the classic seven-year-itch. As an immortal, the timespan changes, but the soul's natural cycle of contentment, followed by increasing restlessness, and finally, a demand for change doesn't.

Carlisle is old enough to get the seventy-year itch. I suppose that Aro gets the seven-hundred-year itch. It would be easy to test that theory by reviewing the dates of the crises he's instigated and the amount of time between them...the battles with the Romanian coven, the slaughter of the vampire children, annihilation of the Mexican newborn armies. Perhaps the destruction of the Cullen coven will occur on the next 700-year anniversary. I hope not.

Carlisle has been a true father to me, unlike Edward Masen, who was more of a provider than a father. Not only had Carlisle saved my life and made me his family, he taught me how to make a life for myself. Nobody had taught him...he learned everything on his own over the millennia of his vampire existence. I got the more comfortable, abridged version from him.

When Carlisle met me, I was young and immature for my age. I'd been sheltered, living in an upper-middle-class neighborhood and attending private school. My mother and I were close because my father was married to his job and my parents never had a second child.

Therefore, at seventeen, I was not a fully grown man. If I'd had my way and joined the army at eighteen to fight the good fight in Europe, I'd have matured rapidly...or perhaps merely died along with eight or nine million other men from a dozen countries. Neither of those things happened, though. When the Spanish flu hit Chicago, my life was forever stalled at the age of seventeen.

Once I became a vampire, the maturation process slowed, as is typical of our kind, but it didn't stop entirely. I continued to develop in response to Carlisle's mentoring, and later, in rebellion to it, like any teenager.

My rebellious phase arrived in my twenty-eighth year of existence, after I'd been a vampire for eleven years. Perhaps it would have happened sooner if Carlisle had been a tyrant, or a hypocrite, or a complete bastard, but why would one rebel against an authority figure who is genuinely principled and admirable? His thoughts and his actions were always congruent. One could find no fault with him, not even an overgrown teenager who needed to rebel against something if only to define himself.

Except for the fact that we were not human, our family life wasn't so different from the human one that I had lived. Because Carlisle's beliefs were so well considered, I had never explored my nature as a vampire. I watched Esme as a newborn and I saw how she struggled to live up to Carlisle's ideals with respect to her eating habits. She slipped up more than once and followed her instincts. I never had... Carlisle was my only role model for how to be what I was, so even though I must have suffered as much as anyone else who is thrust into our world, I took it for granted that I wouldn't succumb to my natural urges. Until Esme came along, that is.

I'd seen Esme come home after a night away with dried blood on her clothing and with her eyes burning scarlet red. I'd smelled the change in her scent after she'd satisfied her desire for human blood. The experience of watching Esme stumble had stuck with me... not so much for the fact that she'd drunk human blood, but more because in her thoughts, she was not sorry. No, that's not wholly true. She was sorry that she'd disappointed Carlisle and she was very sorry that she had provided a bad example for me. Even though I was her vampire elder, she was still my mom.

What I took from those experiences was that drinking human blood was a desirable thing, a pleasurable thing, and something that took a great deal of personal fortitude to refrain from doing.

It never seemed to trouble Carlisle, not even when he performed surgeries on humans. Their blood might as well have been RC Cola for all the cravings he ever demonstrated for it.

It was obvious—to me, at least—that I was no Carlisle. Though I practiced self-control in mimicry of him, it was not something I particularly desired to do as he always had. Carlisle is a righteous man. I've never met anyone with his moral sensibilities who also lives up to them, which is obviously the most important part.

So, it took me eleven years to rebel against my peerless father and begin to see fault with him. The “fault” was primarily that he had defined our lifestyle and I was expected to conform to it as long as I lived in his house.

Carlisle had kept such a careful eye on me in my first three years that I'd never had a chance to take a human life. I didn't decide to leave home because I wanted to kill people, though. I only wanted to know why we lived as we did and I felt I couldn't truly know the answer to that unless I had lived otherwise.

Carlisle listened to my explanation of why I wanted to leave and made his disapproval clear, but he did not try to stop me. I think he understood that I needed to go my own way to discover who I was apart from him. Esme, on the other hand, was desperate that I stay. She tried cajoling, arguing, pleading, and getting emotional. In the end, I departed when she and Carlisle were hunting to avoid the scene I knew would unfold if I said a proper goodbye. I did leave a note, of course.

Mom, Dad—

Gone hunting.

Love, Edward

...something like that.

It felt good to be “free”—to do whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted, though it hadn't occurred to me in advance that I still

had rules to live by if I wanted to continue to live. I had to stay out of the sunshine; I had to hide the evidence of my hunting; and I had to not make a spectacle of myself. In short, I had to do everything required to satisfy the one rule the Volturi enforce, which is to keep our existence a secret.

I'd told Carlisle of my plan to hunt only evildoers. Using my mind-reading capability, I could locate criminals and target them for my meals. I would show Carlisle that I could yield to my nature and yet be something of a hero. It seemed like a reasonable moral code.

To prove the theory to myself, I first traveled to Ohio to find Charles Evenson, Esme's human husband. In her thoughts, I'd seen the cruelty he'd inflicted upon her. Her memories of the marriage were dim, but several events were so traumatic that the images of them were branded into Esme's brain. When Rosalie joined our family, I saw that the man who had assaulted her resembled Esme's husband in such a way that it put doubts in my mind about the quality of America's privileged young bachelors. Were their lives so easy, so pampered, that they became bored enough to torture the weak and vulnerable for their own pleasure?

Esme's husband was a secret abuser, the type who terrified his victim into silence, so Esme's plight went undetected. Moreover, it was a time in our country when social mores valued a family's sovereignty more than protecting its weakest members. People might feel badly about domestic violence, but even the victims often preferred that nobody else know. Esme's family, unforgivably, told her to be a good wife and keep quiet about it.

It was my pleasure to track down Charles Evenson to his favorite watering hole one December evening. Then it was a simple matter to follow him to his Ford Model A when he stumbled through the tavern's door at closing time. Before drinking his blood, I told him exactly who I was and why I had come. Before I killed him, I wanted to see the terror in his eyes that I had seen so often in my mother's mind.

Though I'd wanted to make the process slow and painful in revenge for Esme's suffering, I found that I had no control whatsoever over the act of drinking blood. Evenson had consumed a great deal of alcohol, which made his blood smell and taste antiseptic, but even so, it was an unimaginable ecstasy to pierce his skin and gulp down the hot, sweet fluid.

I'd opened the wound on the evil man's wrist, but his blood wasn't pumping fast enough for my satisfaction, so I gripped his skull and sank my teeth into his carotid artery. He'd started to scream from the pain of the venom, but it wasn't long before he passed out from lack of oxygen and then died from lack of blood. Evenson was a big man, so I was surprised by how fast I had emptied him.

In eleven years of abstention, my craving to drink human blood had not lessened, but neither had I fully appreciated the extreme pleasure it would be to partake. Immediately, I wanted more.

It had been easy to decide to murder Evenson, because I had a personal stake in the harm he had caused my guiltless mother. But once he was gone, who should I choose next? Knowing that I must drink human blood again, I had decisions to make. If I'd known Rosalie then, probably I would have gone after Royce King and all of his friends. That, too, would have been an obvious choice. For lack of any other ideas, I returned to the tavern that Evenson had frequented with the logic that birds-of-a-feather flock together.

The tavern was full of unsavory characters, from run-of-the-mill, belligerent drunks to the thieves and thugs who preyed upon them. But it wasn't as easy to choose my next meal as I thought it would be. Though there were plenty of individuals who'd committed crimes of some sort (and who'd thought about them while I was listening—an important consideration), none of the criminals I identified seemed evil enough to warrant sacrificing their lives.

I wasn't particularly sentimental about humans after a decade as a nonhuman, but I'd expected to find victims who were undeniably deserving of death. And yet, it wasn't that simple. There were complications and nuances I hadn't considered. For example, what if my potential victim had harmed, or even killed, someone else out of retaliation for crimes committed against himself? Was I still justified in taking his life? And if so, how could I know that my prey's thoughts represented the truth? Humans are fully capable of fabricating and even believing excuses that justify their behavior.

I found the questions to be endless and confusing. At first, I simply fell back on an easy solution. Stronger individuals who harmed or killed weaker ones—such as occurred in domestic abuse—would be fair game.

One problem was that not many abusers saw themselves as guilty of any wrongdoing. In order to find evildoers, I had to read their minds, but they had to recognize their own guilt before I could identify them by their thoughts. But weren't people who felt culpable for their actions (and thus had guilty thoughts) slightly better than those who consistently denied their guilt even to themselves? Then there was the problem of differentiating between those who merely felt guilty and those who actually were guilty. To top it off, I had to separate those who only had evil thoughts from those who committed evil deeds.

The easiest solution to these dilemmas would be to listen to the thoughts of convicted criminals to locate my prey, but they were largely corralled into prisons which were inaccessible except by calling attention to myself. Street gangs were a reliable source of criminals, but many of the perpetrators were children, or nearly so. That brought up the issue of whether a child truly could be evil and whether I could justify murdering a child, even an evil one.

Abusers of the vulnerable—women and children, or the elderly or sick, for example—were easy targets to justify. However, even those persons often had mitigating circumstances, such as having been

abused themselves or otherwise been rendered helpless victims before becoming victimizers.

Every solution I considered seemed rife with problems. It seemed there was no good way either to find criminals or to decide how bad a criminal must be in order to deserve my death sentence. It all became too complicated, and I found that I didn't feed on as many humans as I wanted to.

As time went on, my scruples eroded and my criteria for "deserving prey" became less stringent. But as the number of my victims rose, I felt more and more compromised myself. If I killed killers, wasn't I still a killer?

After three years, these nagging moral questions and the heavy burden of extinguishing so many lives weighed heavily on my soul. Depression set in and I became unwilling to hunt. I had tested the boundaries of my personal morality and found out who I was, but at a tremendous cost.

When I came crawling home to Carlisle and Esme, no longer able to tolerate my own nature, they welcomed me back with open arms. They never chastised me about my prodigal sojourn, even though my red eyes gave everything away. As I told Bella later, their steadfast love and kindness were so much more than I deserved.

Edward

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