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When most people think of vampires, they think of someone like Count Dracula. You know . . . someone dressed all in black with pasty-white skin, with two fangs protruding over cherry-red lips. A creature that sleeps during the day and prowls the night, searching for victims.

And most people—myself included—know that vampires are only real in books and movies. Vampires just don't exist anywhere else.

But what if I told you that they really *do* exist? What if I told you that, yes, there really are vampires, that exist in another world . . . a world that is closer than you might think?

Would you believe me?

Because that's what this is about. Not just vampires . . . but *virtual* vampires. Vampires that are alive like you and me, living and breathing, walking and talking.

Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that it's impossible. Hey . . . that's what I thought—at first.

But now I know the truth. And soon, you will, too.

My name is Mike Sherman, and I live in Stowe. It's a village in the state of Vermont. Lots of people vacation here, because there's all kinds of things to do . . . especially in the winter. Mt. Mansfield, which has the highest peak in Vermont, is a great place to ski and snowboard. In the winter, my friends and I go there a lot.

Something else I really like to do is tinker with computers. Oh, I use the computer for my homework and to play games, but I really like fixing computers and finding out how they work. When I grow up, I want to get a job repairing computers, or maybe even building them.

And that's how this whole thing got started: with a computer and a game.

I know it doesn't sound scary at all. But when you understand just what happened and why, you'll realize why I was so frightened.

The computer that I have wasn't working right. It was an older one that my dad gave me. He had bought a new computer, and said that I could have his old one. It seemed to work okay for a while, but then it started acting up. It would shut down all by itself, and sometimes it would freeze up and I would lose all of my homework that I had been working on. There was something wrong with it, but I didn't know what it was.

Which wasn't that big of a deal. I could fix it, I was sure. I didn't think it would be much of a problem.

And if I hadn't received a birthday gift in the mail, things probably would have turned out a lot different than they did.

I got home from school one snowy November day to find a small package waiting for me. It was a birthday gift, sent by my aunt and uncle in South Carolina.

Even before I opened it, I was sure of what it was. They had asked me what I wanted for my birthday, and I told them I wanted a new car, or a computer game. Well, of course they weren't going to get me a new car! It's a great trick, and it works.

I opened up the package, and sure enough . . . it was a game for my computer. It was called *'Return of*

the Vampire'. On the front of the box was a picture of an old stone castle. It looked really cool, and I couldn't wait to play it. *Return of the Vampire* looked like it would be an awesome game.

But it wasn't.

It wasn't awesome . . . because it wasn't a game.

It was real—and my rollercoaster ride of terror was about to begin.



I took the game into my bedroom and turned on my computer. The screen flashed to life, blinked a few times, and then started up. The computer game was on a CD-ROM, and I placed it in the tray and slid it shut. I could hear it whir as it spun round and round.

Suddenly, the computer screen went black, and it stayed that way.

Oh, come on, I thought. Not again.

I tried tapping the keys, but nothing happened. I clicked the mouse, but that didn't work either.

Just then, Jenny, my little sister, came into my room carrying a Barbie doll. She's seven, and four years younger than me. Sometimes she can be a real pest, but usually, she keeps to herself.

"Whatcha doin'?" she asked.

“Trying to get this thing working,” I replied.

“Did you break it?”

I shook my head. “No. It’s just getting old, and it doesn’t work like it used to.”

Jenny saw the computer game box on my desk. “Eeewww,” she said. “That looks scary.”

“I hope it is,” I said, still tapping the keys. The computer screen remained dark. “If I can ever get this thing working right.”

“My Barbie doll works right,” she said, holding her doll up for me to see.

“Yeah, but I don’t play with dolls,” I said, growing increasingly frustrated with the broken computer.

“It doesn’t look like you’re going to play on the computer, either,” Jenny said.

“Look,” I said angrily. “Don’t you have something else to do?”

Jenny shook her head, and her hair slapped her cheeks. “Nope.”

“Well, find something, or else I’m going to flush your Barbie doll down the toilet.”

Jenny’s eyes widened. The thought of her doll swirling down the toilet was horrifying. She spun and stormed off.

Well, that’s one problem taken care of, I thought. Now if I can only get this computer working.

I turned the computer off, waited for a few minutes, then re-started it. While I was waiting, Mom came to my bedroom door. Jenny was standing next to her.

“Did you tell your sister that you were going to flush Barbie down the toilet?” Mom asked.

“I was only kidding,” I said. “She was bugging me.”

“Well, you apologize right now.” Mom folded her arms, and if there’s one thing I’ve learned in my eleven years, it’s this: when Mom folds her arms, she means *business*. There’s no point arguing with her when she’s standing in front of you with her arms crossed.

“I’m sorry, Jenny,” I said, even though I was mad at her.

“Tell Barbie you’re sorry,” Jenny said, holding out her doll.

Good grief, I thought, rolling my eyes. But if I apologized to her doll, maybe she would leave me alone. “I’m sorry, Barbie,” I said, looking at the doll.

That seemed to satisfy both Mom and Jenny, and they walked away.

I worked on the computer for an hour, and I still couldn’t get it to work. Soon, it was time to eat. The four of us—Mom, Dad, Jenny, and I—had dinner.

Jenny and I washed the dishes, and then I went back to work on the computer.

By bedtime, I still hadn't got it working right. I could get the machine to turn on, but it kept freezing up, and then all I would get was a black screen. I was really bummed, because I wanted to play *Return of the Vampire*. I guessed I would have to wait until tomorrow to get the computer working.

Sometime in the night, I was awakened by a noise. It was a whirring sound, like a gentle hum. As I emerged from my sleep, I realized what it was.

My computer. I recognized the sound instantly.

But that's impossible!

It had turned on . . . all by itself!

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I was confused. How did the computer turn itself on? I mean . . . I knew that it wasn't working right, and it was freezing up. Sometimes, it would even turn itself off.

But who ever heard of a computer turning itself *on*?

From where my bed was, I couldn't see the monitor, but the glow from the screen reflected against my bedroom wall. I pulled down the covers, slipped out of bed, and walked to my desk.

On the screen was the same brick castle that was on the box of the computer game. The words *Return of the Vampire* were at the top of the screen, and, at the bottom, the words *Play* and *Exit*.

How did this thing turn itself on? I wondered. I had worked on the computer for hours and didn't have any luck, and now, in the middle of the night, the computer had turned itself on and loaded the game . . . all by itself.

For a moment, I just stared at the screen. The brick castle sat alone, cold and dark. I wondered about the game and how it was played. I had read books about vampires, but I had never played any games. I was sure that this game was going to be really cool.

But it was late. If I played the game right now, I would be really tired when I got up in the morning. Not to mention the fact that if Mom or Dad found me playing a computer game in the middle of the night, they would probably take the computer away from me.

By moving the mouse, I placed the arrow-shaped cursor over the word *Exit*. I clicked it twice, and the castle vanished. Then I shut down the computer and went back to bed.

But something still bothered me.

How did the computer turn on all by itself? I didn't think it was possible. I've heard of computers that turn off all by themselves, but they're programmed to do it. I've never heard of a computer programmed to turn on by itself.

And in the morning—you guessed it—the computer was on! Only now, there were two words written on the screen. White letters in front of a black background read:

I'M WAITING.

It was kind of eerie. Who was waiting? For who? I moved the mouse and the letters vanished. The image of the castle appeared.

Return of the Vampire. Play. Exit.

I left the computer on and went into the kitchen. Dad was at the table reading a newspaper and sipping coffee. Mom was drinking tea and watching a small television set on the top of the fridge. Jenny was eating a bowl of cereal.

“That computer you gave me sure is acting weird,” I said to Dad.

He looked up from his paper. “That’s why I gave it to you,” he said.

“No,” I replied. “I mean, it comes on all by itself. It happened last night. I shut it off, but it did it again.”

“Hey, it’s better than nothing,” Dad said without looking up from the newspaper.

“Maybe it’s stuck on,” Mom said.

I shook my head. “No. If that was the case, it would be impossible to turn it off.”

I went back into my bedroom and shut off the computer. Today was another school day, and I didn’t have time to fool around with the computer. I’d have to wait until I got home to work on it.

And as I rode the bus, that is what I figured I would do. After school was over, I would go home and find out just what was going on with the computer. I would fix it, and then I would finally be able to play the game.

Return of the Vampire.

Of course, if I knew then what I know now, I would have thrown that computer game—and the entire computer—into the lake.

And it all began when I got home and went into my bedroom. It was then that I realized something was really, really wrong.



Mom and Dad both work, and Jenny stays after school, which means that I get home first. Which is kind of cool, because that means that nobody is around to bug me if I'm busy working on something.

When I got home, I walked straight into my bedroom. Once again, my computer had turned itself on all by itself.

But that wasn't the weird part.

The weird part was what was on the screen. Big letters read:

MAY I COME IN?

That's all it said. The words remained in the center of the screen.

I sat down at my desk and moved the mouse. Instantly, the words disappeared. The castle came into view, along with the words *Play* and *Exit*.

Well, might as well play, I thought, hoping that the computer wouldn't crash.

I clicked *Play*. Nothing happened for a moment, and then the screen went dark.

Suddenly, white letters appeared on the black screen.

YOU DIDN'T ANSWER ME. MAY I COME IN?

What in the world? I thought. I placed my fingers on the keys and spoke as I typed. "No," I said.

What happened next was bizarre. The screen went black again, and there was a loud popping sound. Then there was an electrical buzz and a hum. The computer shut itself off.

Terrific, I thought. I had been hoping that the computer might somehow fix itself, but that wasn't going to happen.

I reached down and turned the computer on. I could hear it whir and begin to start up.

"Hey Mike!" a voice shouted from outside. "You home?!?!"

It was Hayley Winthrop. Hayley lives next door, and she's in the same grade I am.

I stood up and looked out the window. Hayley was standing in the yard, facing our house. Snow was falling.

"Yeah!" I yelled loudly so she could hear me through the closed window. "I'm trying to fix this dumb computer! Come on in!"

I sat back down and heard the front door open, and soft footsteps padding across the living room floor. Then my bedroom door opened, and Hayley came in.

"What's wrong with it?" she asked, standing next to my desk.

"I don't know," I replied, shaking my head. "It's acting weird. I got a new game called *Return of the Vampire*, and I really want to play it."

The computer was up and running again, but the screen was black.

Suddenly, words began to form.

WHO IS YOUR FRIEND?

I gasped.

"How . . . how did it know you're here?" I stammered. I scooted my chair back from the desk.

“What’s that?” Hayley asked, pointing at the screen.

I shook my head. “I don’t know. But it’s acting like it knows that you’re here.”

“That’s impossible,” Hayley said. “It’s just a computer.”

NO, I’M NOT.

Hayley and I gasped.

“It . . . it heard me!” Hayley exclaimed.

Now I was getting scared. I’ve never heard of a computer that could actually respond like that.

I reached down and pressed the on/off button.

Nothing happened.

I pressed it again. Still nothing.

“Well, there’s another way to shut it off,” I said. I knelt down and reached behind the desk . . . but what I found sent waves of chills through my body.

“No!” I exclaimed. *“It’s impossible! It’s just not possible!”*

“What?” Hayley asked. “What’s wrong, Mike?”

I held up the power cord, displaying the three prongs.

“It’s not plugged in,” I whispered. *“The computer is on . . . but it’s not even plugged into the wall!”*

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