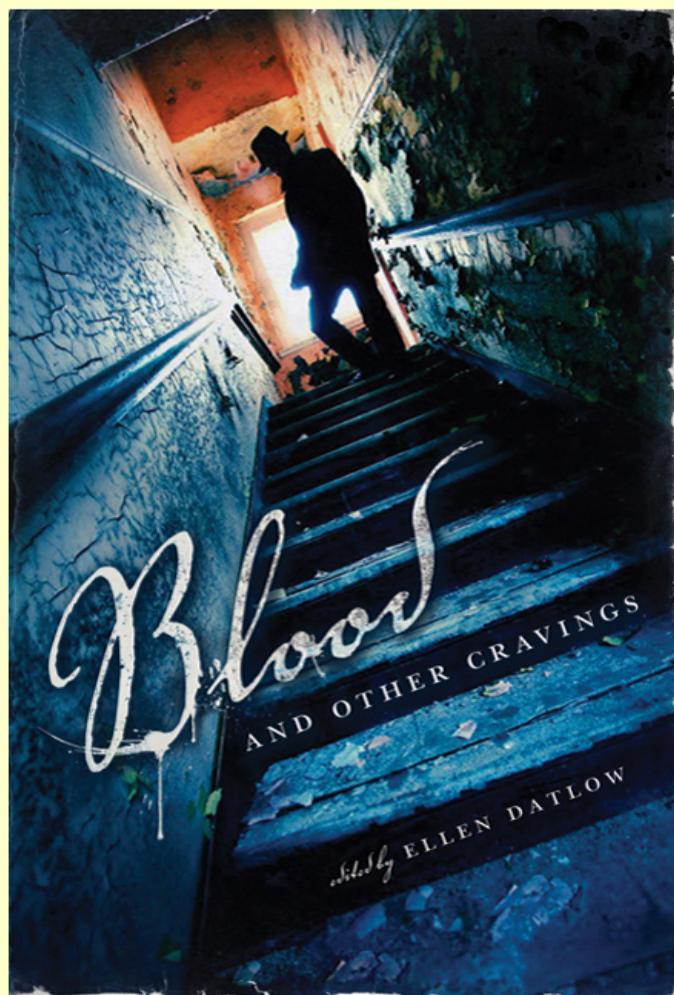


**READ IT FIRST**



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed  
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BLOOD AND OTHER CRAVINGS

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Tor Books Editor: James Frenkel

A Tor Book  
Published by Tom Doherty Associates, LLC  
175 Fifth Avenue  
New York, NY 10010

[www.tor-forge.com](http://www.tor-forge.com)

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Blood and other cravings / edited by Ellen Datlow.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-7653-2828-1

1. Vampires—Fiction. 2. Horror tales, American. I. Datlow, Ellen.  
PS648.V35B54 2011  
813'.08738—dc23

2011019917

First Edition: September 2011

Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# ALL YOU CAN DO IS BREATHE

*Kaaron Warren*



Kaaron Warren's first short-story collection was the award winning *The Grinding House* (CSFG Publishing). Her second collection, *Dead Sea Fruit*, is published by Ticonderoga Publications and is shortlisted for two Ditmar Awards. Her first novel, *Slights*, (Angry Robot Books) won the Australian Shadows Award for fiction, the Ditmar Award, and the Canberra Critics' Award for Fiction. Angry Robot Books also published the novel *Walking the Tree*, (shortlisted for an Aurealis Award) and most recently, *Mistification*.

Warren lives in Canberra, Australia, with her family. Her website can be found at [kaaronwarren.wordpress.com](http://kaaronwarren.wordpress.com).

Stuart lay trapped underground for five days before the tall man appeared and stared into his eyes.

He thought he sensed movement. Flicked on his cap lamp—"Barry? Did you make it through the wall?"—but there was no one here.

There was something though, in his face, so close he pulled back and banged his head on the rock behind. He shouted, mouth open, squeezed his eyes shut. He'd never felt such terror, not even when his daughter had fallen into the pool and they didn't notice for god knows how long.

This was a man. Something like a man. Tall, elongated, the thing looked deep into his eyes. It reached out and almost took his chin with its bony fingers, keeping his head still, paralyzing him even though it wasn't actually touching him.

Stuart could smell sour cherries, something like that. It made him hungry, and that hunger somehow beat out the terror.

He pulled his head backward. The man nodded, stepped back, and was gone.

Within a minute or two, Stuart was sure he'd imagined it. Though he had words in his ear. "See you soon, Stuart." He was sure he'd heard those words.

It felt like the walls were getting closer, but he kept testing by stretching his arms and the distance was the same. The part of the mine he was working had collapsed so quickly, it seemed like time

stopped and froze, and when it started up again, he was surrounded on all sides by rock.

Barry, his workmate, was on the other side, but he'd heard nothing from him for twelve hours now.

Thank god for the luminous hand on his watch. The kid gave it to him for Father's Day years ago, and even at the time he'd been thrilled. You don't always get that with Father's Day presents.

It wasn't what you'd call a worker's watch. It was full of gadgets, like the watches of the office men who drove to work each day, passing him as he stood, cold in the dark, at the bus stop with the other miners. Their cars blinked with gadgets.

This watch kept perfect time, and followed the date, and the hand provided a warm green glow in the pitch black. At home he had to keep it in his bedside drawer at night because the light kept his wife awake. But he could still see the thin green line across the top of the drawer where the light escaped.

Since the walls came down, he'd slept sporadically, waking a couple of times thinking he was home in bed because of the glow. He'd covered it up with his lunch box and only a small line escaped.

He had his cap lamp, but he really didn't want to use that. There'd been mine rescues lasting two weeks, and he wanted to know he could have bright light if he needed to. He knew they wouldn't give up. They never left a body underground, mostly because they didn't want it found much later.

He had his GPS so they knew where he was. He could see Barry's blip, too, but that didn't mean he was still going. Just his GPS.

Stuart stretched his legs and arms out and in, counting to a hundred. His wife was always on at him to do more exercise, so she'd be pleased to see him do this. His water and food had run out on the third day. He knew there was no sense keeping the food. It'd just go off and make him sick. Some gritty water dripped down the wall. Licking it made his tongue ache it was so cold, and there wasn't enough of it. He pissed into his water bottle and knew that drinking it wouldn't kill him. He pretended it was lime cordial, the sour stuff, not the sweet.

Foodwise he knew he could last without for a while, but it didn't help the hunger pains. Lucky his wife packed him heaps and there

was Barry's lunch as well, on Stuart's side of the wall where Barry couldn't get to it.

He'd tried moving the rocks but it just caused more of a tumble no matter where he took the rocks from. He wanted to keep trying but his instincts told him just to leave it.

Bugs skittered about and he could eat them. The strap of his lunch box was leather and he chewed on that, making jokes that it was about as good as his sister-in-law's roast dinner. If he got out, he'd make that joke and people would write it up and his sister-in-law would be famous for her bad cooking.

Stuart tried to sleep when he figured it was nighttime outside, to keep a routine going. It was hard without a change of light and with an empty stomach, and he hadn't done anything to wear himself out. Usually he'd drop into bed after a shift and a feed exhausted. On a Saturday, if he hadn't been in the mine, he and his wife might have sex, but it wasn't something he thought about much.

He thought about it now.

He spent a lot of the time with his eyes closed, but he tried not to think about the dark. Instead, he went through football matches he remembered.

It was seven days before they found him. Nowhere near the record, but enough to have a media frenzy going on. As they were getting close they'd managed to get a tube through to him, and sent him notes from his wife and daughter, and bags of glucose. They dropped some biscuits down, too. "I was hoping for a meat pie," he called up the tube. He could talk with his mouth close to the tube, tell them shit he wanted his family to know. Tell them all the jokes he'd thought up while he was down there. Nothing worse than a joke without an audience. They called questions down, like, "Are you scared?"

"Naah, I'm not scared. I'm fearless! Nothing scares me!"

He asked them about Barry and they said they were working on it. Ever since the long man had visited him, Stuart had had a bad feeling about Barry. He thought perhaps that was Barry's ghost and he felt bad about screaming. He wished he'd said, "G'day, mate," whatever.

It was overcast when they pulled him out, but still far warmer than inside the mine. It meant he didn't have to squint because of

the sun. His wife, Cheryl, was there, and his daughter, Sarah, and for a long time he couldn't talk, just held them and cried. He'd never actually cried before, not since he was a little kid, anyway, but this he couldn't help. He thought he'd never see them again and he loved them, loved them hard. Sarah looked so beautiful, so grown up for her thirteen years. Underground he'd imagined her future. In his darkest times, like the hours after the long man disappeared and he felt like giving up, he imagined her future. Who she'd be, what she'd do, who she'd marry. What her kids would look like. He dreamed it all in case he didn't get to see it, and now, there she was.

His rescuers were there, too. None of them keen to go home. Dirty faced, exhausted, he couldn't believe how happy they were to see him. He knew he'd have to live well, every day of his life, to justify what they'd done.

"Where's Barry? Did you get him out yet?" he asked once he'd had a warm drink. They loaded him into an ambulance although he said he felt fine.

"They haven't got Barry yet," Cheryl said, but her eyes were downcast and he knew she was fibbing. She didn't do it very often and he thought only to protect him. Like the time half the mine was shut down and the wives knew about it first. And the time Sarah had broken her arm because of the kid next door. Cheryl didn't want to tell him that because she knew how angry he'd be, but he didn't do anything about it. The kid was never allowed in their front door again, but that was it.

"I'd rather know than not know," he said.

There were news cameras, people with microphones and others with notepads.

"Why do you think you survived?" they shouted at him. "Why you and not Barry?"

The tears took again at that and Cheryl squeezed his hand hard. The ambulance crew shut the door and then it was a week in the hospital before he had to face the questions again.

They told him about Barry once they thought he was all good. Barry'd been trapped, his leg under the rocks. Stuart could imagine how bad that must have felt. So Barry tried to cut his way through, Jesus, cut his way through his own leg.

They said he bled to death.

“He wrote you something while he was down there,” Cheryl said.

“He was always scribbling, that Barry. He’d write a letter to the Pope if he could get the address,” Stuart said. It was an old joke, which made him tear up, thinking that Barry would have laughed at this one.

“He was hallucinating, they reckon. But still. You should read it.”

*I thought you'd got through the wall, Stu. I didn't hear you but heard a rock shift so thought you must be to my left. You wouldn't answer me so I cracked the shits. I couldn't turn my body but turned my face as far as I could, twisted my cap lamp around to catch you. I figured you wanted to kill and eat me, that's how stupid I was.*

*Wasn't you.*

*My light went right through this thing. I could see it, though. Looked almost like a man, but stretched out like a piece of bubble gum or something. Or when you press Blu-Tak onto newspaper and get some print and stretch it out. Like that. He had long fingers, twice as long as mine. Dunno if you heard me scream but this thing freaked me out. It came at me and I would have pissed myself if I wasn't already sitting in my own wet pants. It leaned forward and put its eyes real close to mine. Stared into me. I screamed my head off, no reason, just scared shitless. It came at me, touched my nose with its long finger, then it shook its head and drifted back.*

*I thought, shit, it's going to Stu, and I screamed louder. I wanted to warn you. But what do you do? I didn't know what to tell you.*

*I don't know if I'll last until they find me. Tell my mates they did me proud and if you can find my mother tell her I'm sorry.*

“Do you know anything about this long man, Stuart? Did you hear anything, see anything?” his wife asked him.

Stuart nodded. He spoke quietly. “I saw a man like that. I thought I must have imagined it. But maybe it was a ghost. Maybe someone died in there and he was looking at us, going, ‘You’re not going to make it. No way. You’re going to die.’ Because he made me feel so bad I almost wanted to die.”

“That’s awful, Stuart. We’re so lucky to have you back.” He kissed her, as he did any chance he got.

“Maybe keep it just between us for now. About this long man. Other people won’t understand it. Don’t tell the media types. Okay?”

“You think I’m crazy.”

“No, I don’t. But I know you and they don’t. Just keep it to the simple stuff, hey? Shouldn’t be hard for you!”

He discovered he was good at talking. Cheryl thought it was funny. “You’re a gabber now, Stuart. Couldn’t get ten words a day out of you beforehand!” She fixed his hair, getting him ready for the next press conference.

“Yeah, well, they’re always asking me for answers,” he said. He didn’t mind. It was always the same thing, so he didn’t have to think too hard. This one, the room was packed. They knew he was fully recovered and had some others to talk, too. The mine owner, who Stuart had never met. One of his rescuers. And some doctor, a psychologist.

They had a good go at the mine owner for a while about responsibilities and compensation, then they turned to Stuart.

“Did you always think you’d be found?”

“I always expected to be found. I’m a bit like that. I expect I’m gonna get good luck. Just that kind of person. All credit to the rescuers, though. I can’t believe those guys, still can’t believe what they did. We’ll be friends for life because of it.”

The rescuer next to him clapped a hand on his shoulder.

“Was there any time you wanted to give up?”

He thought of the long gray man and the feelings of despair he’d left behind. They wouldn’t believe him if he talked about that, think he was mad.

“Nah. I just thought of my wife’s pot roast and that got me through.”

“What is it you’ve got? Why did you survive and not Barry?”

“I can’t answer that.”

The psychologist stepped in. “There are many reasons why people survive. For Stuart, he had thoughts of his family to sustain

him. Barry didn't have that and studies have shown it makes a difference. Also, Stuart was less dramatic in his actions. Maybe he thought ahead a bit more, and maybe Barry thought he could get out of it."

"You're saying it's Barry's fault he was trapped? His own fault he died?"

"No. Not at all. But the fact is that Stuart thought it through and trusted the rescuers."

"Do you think yourself lucky, Stuart?"

"Couldn't be luckier," Stuart said. "Luckiest man left alive."

"I'm sure your rescuers will be happy to hear that. Do you feel any sense of obligation to them? Do you owe them anything?"

"Yeah, look, they're all spread out around the place, but they can come to my place for a feed any time they like. And you know what I really owe them? I owe them a good life."

He and the rescuer shook hands, and the cheering of the audience went on for two minutes.

"What do you say to the idea that some people don't survive because they may have died helping others?"

"Yeah, well, if I coulda helped Barry survive I would have."

"What about his food? Is it true you ate his food?"

"Yeah, I ate his food. He couldn't get to it and it was only going off. That's not what killed him."

The psychologist said, "It is true that often it is the survivors don't help others. Especially in times of famine. Survivors are the ones who will take food from a child's mouth."

Stuart felt stunned. He wasn't sure how the conversation had turned against him and what a hero he was, but it seemed it had.

"All I did was survive," he said. "No one had to die for me to survive. I did it because I love my family, I love my life, and I wanted to get here on TV for the free beer I've heard about."

With that, he had the audience back.

Afterward, there was plenty of beer drunk. The crew took him out to the local pub and he was there long after they left. People had watched the interview and they all wanted to talk to him about it.

"If only we could bottle what you've got, there'd be no little kiddies dying of cancer," people said to him more often than he wanted to hear.

“If only we could bottle it, you’d be a rich man.”

“If only we could bottle it, we’d save the world.”

They thought he had some magic power, that it wasn’t a willingness to drink your own piss and a great desire to have proper sex with your wife again, it was something else. Something they couldn’t have.

He took a drink well but even he was feeling a bit woozy by around midnight. By 3 A.M., the pub was almost empty. He could no longer remember who he’d spoken to, so when a sad-faced man said hello, he nodded and went back to his beer.

“Hello, Stuart,” the man said again. His voice was soft. It had an amused tone, as if he knew more than other people, found something amusing. Stuart no longer wondered how people knew his name. Plenty of them did. He rather liked the celebrity. He’d always enjoyed making connections with people all over.

Stuart looked at him this time. “Do I know you?” he asked.

His teeth were bright, white and even. Clearly false. His hair, pale blond, sat flat on his head. He smelled strongly of aftershave, the kind Stuart used to smell wafting out of the cars while he waited for the bus. His mouth drooped. *Sad man*, Stuart thought.

“How are you holding up?”

“I’m okay. Bit tired.”

The man moved so that he looked directly into Stuart’s eyes. Stuart froze. This is how the apparition in the cave had looked at him. With this intensity. He was used to people staring at him greedily, but this was different. The sad face, the long arms. Long, long fingers.

It was the apparition from the mine.

The man’s hand went out and grabbed Stuart by the wrist with a powerful grip.

“Hold still, Stuart. This won’t take long.”

Stuart shivered, feeling as cold as he had underground. Chilled to the bone and dreaming of snow.

“Leggo, mate, wouldya?” he said. He tried to pull back, but he felt a deep lethargy, as if he’d been injected with golden syrup and his limbs couldn’t move.

The man raised his other arm and brought it up to pinch the bridge of Stuart’s nose. Stuart was paralyzed. He wanted one of the

other drinkers to intervene, to hit the man, knock him away, but no one did. It was so quiet Stuart felt as if he were back in the mine and the idea of it made him choke.

No. It wasn't that. He had a nose bleed, blood pouring backward down his throat because the man held his sinuses so tight.

He let go and Stuart slumped forward, spitting blood. He felt movement return.

Turned his head away from the man.

The man bent and helped him up. "Nose bleed, nose bleed, make a bit of room, I'll take him and clean him up. Nose bleed, he'll be fine."

Stuart tried to pull his arm away. His mouth was full of blood.

"Come on, Stuart, it'll be all right."

He led Stuart into the men's toilets. Propped him against the wall.

Stuart heard a skittering sound, like cockroaches across the kitchen bench at midnight. He thought he caught a whiff of them, that slightly plasticky smell. A smell of sour cherries.

"It won't hurt," the man said.

Stuart felt the creatures and, by straining his eyes, could watch them walking up his arm. The scream in his head deafened him.

Up his forearm, his biceps, over his shoulders and onto his neck, where he could feel them latching on.

"It's not your blood they're taking," the man said. His voice was soft and almost too broad to listen to. "It's something else. You won't miss it. It'll be like it was never there. You won't know."

He clicked his tongue and Stuart thought the sucking stopped. He felt light-headed and nauseous. The man plucked a beetle off Stuart's shoulder and ate it. Crunched it like it was a nut and took the next. Two more, and he was smacking his lips. Stuart couldn't move. He felt so cold he felt like he'd been buried in snow. Or was back in the cave. But it was light in here. Very bright.

"Look at me." The man's cheeks were pink, his eyes bright. He looked younger. Happy.

"Thank you, Stuart. Have a good life."

He tapped Stuart on the head and Stuart slept.

He awoke on the filthy toilet floor. Someone had dropped a wad of shitty toilet paper and he could smell that.

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