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"I WANT BLOOD!" VAMPIRISM IN THE 20TH CENTURY RUSSIAN URBAN CHILDLORE

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Summary

The genre of oral scary stories or strashilki is one of the most popular of the contemporary Russian children's subculture. Rooted both in traditional folklore and children's mythic thinking, these are tales about encounters with supernatural forces, objects, and things that usually end in the victim's death. This paper focuses on one particular category of strashilki's evil agents, namely vampires. The vampire of Russian children's scary stories possesses many of the attributes of the "general vampire" although the word itself did not appear in oral childlore until after the arrival of cable channels and video salons in the late 1980s. Special attention is paid to stories about cookies/meat pies prepared of people and tales about ominous stains. This group of strashilki is regarded here as vampiric stories as their malevolent protagonists employ known folk vampiric qualities. Several scary stories appearing on these pages are translated from Russian by the author of the paper.

Key Words: Vampires, blood, scary stories, children's folklore, childlore, Russia, red.

Introduction

As is known from some primary sources, Russian youngsters have been telling scary stories since 19th century. There are memoirs from the mid-1800s in which authors remember getting together in some quiet nook to terrify each other with wild tales about demons, ghosts, and vourdalaks (vurdalaks). About the same time, enthusiasts started collecting and studying children's oral narratives (Loiter 1998, 56).

The foundations for scholarly studies focused on children's oral prose were set in the USSR in 1920s when the term "children's folklore" was introduced. Childlore was regarded in its relation to the general way of life, rather than a genre or subculture as such. The political and social situation of the 1930s did not encourage further research. Folklorists resumed their studies only with the beginning of Khrushchev's *thaw*, in the mid-1950s. After years of cautious work, Soviet researchers first introduced childlore as a genre at an All-Union research conference in 1970. They revealed types of children's oral narratives long known in the West, such as ruthless rhymes, scary stories, black humor, etc. Scary stories, or *strashilki* (term by M. Osorina) have been in the focus of scholarly attention since then; it has become the most studied genre of the contemporary children's subculture (Belousov et al. 2005). The vast body of oral tales collected by folklorists in 1970s-1990s throughout the country allowed researchers to reveal structural similarities and plot-character-motif stereotypes. On the whole, patterns distinguished in this type of childlore make it a specific oral epic tradition (Loiter 1998, 58-59).

It was established that *strashilki* were genetically linked to fairy tales and *bylichkas**; their social role was seen in evoking the experience of fear which, in the circumstances known to be safe, incited a specific kind of pleasure and lead to emotional catharsis. Thus, *strashilki*, paradoxically, perform a therapeutic function: by telling these tales and listening to them children experience fear and learn to master it (Ibid., 232-233).

At the most recent stage in the studies of *strashilki* they are regarded as children's mythology, an integral system reflecting some common patterns of formation of children's perception. The sources of this phenomenon are found in the mythical thinking of preschool and early elementary school children. Behind the simple gear of child mythology there are psychological constants, emotional experiences and images rooted in the collective unconscious. This mythology actualizes ancient archetypes in the preservation of which children's folklore is instrumental. Being saturated with relics of archaic rituals and mythical conceptions lore becomes a means of cognition and appropriating culture (Cherednikova 1996, 4).

For this paper, tales from two compendiums were analyzed: 140 scary stories collected by S. Loiter (LC) published in *Russkii shkolnyi folklor* (Loiter 1998) and 287 texts from the web site *Detskie strashilki* ["Children's Scary Stories"] (Pionerskie strashilki 2014). This assortment contains *strashilki* from the folklore collection of the State University of Nizhni Novgorod and stories uploaded by users (UNN). All the quotations from scholarly texts originally written in Russian as well as scary tales presented in Section 3 were translated by the author of this paper.

The Genre of Strashilki

The main feature of *strashilki*, which are tales with similar plot collisions and outcome, is the fact that the mysterious and unexplainable events that take place in them are the result of the activities of supernatural forces, objects, and things. These supernatural forces are not just evil-doing; they are fatal in most cases. Children's inquisitiveness deals here with the mystery of death. According to V.N. Toporov (quoted in Loiter, 1998) childhood is "a zone of increased and exposed danger", "a zone which is under the death's unsleeping attention, when every hazard is a threat against life, irrevocable possibility of death" (Toporov 1995, 59). The irreversibility of death makes *strashilki* not just scary stories but rather tales about death which often comes as a punishment for disobedience or for breaking a taboo or prohibition (Loiter 1998, 59-60).

Researchers distinguish between two types of *strashilki* according to their evil protagonists. The biggest group features ordinary inanimate objects from the material world: gloves, curtains,

shoes, ribbons, dolls, cookies, etc. They move, talk, strangle, and suck blood. This behavior is based on the mythical consciousness of children. The ability to naïvely personify non-living creatures which is, according to E.M. Meletinsky (quoted in Loiter, 1998), intrinsic to the primeval and characteristic of children's thinking is responsible for the fact that objects and things from everyday life in these stories cease being themselves and acquire symbolism (Meletinsky 1976, 60). This ability along with the child's ever-ready recreative imagination which assigns to objects emotional meaning not matching their real qualities accounts for the genesis of *strashilki's* demonic figures (Loiter 1998, 60).

The second group includes stories descending from traditional folklore genres. Malevolent agents here are the witch, the cadaver, the vampire, the sorcerer, etc. They act and reason differently from their namesakes of "adult" tales, but archetypal motifs found their way into *strashilki*. By assimilating the motifs and characters of the adult superstitious tales and by personifying occurrences, objects and things of the world around them, children created their own "late demonological tradition" (S. Neklyudov), which reflected the complex of their ideas about fear, death, and fatal hazard (Ibid., 63-65).

There is no universally accepted classification of *strashilki*. They have been organized by the main malefactor: a mystic agent, an object-killer, an object representing a dead person, a harmful locus, an anthropomorphic evildoer, a malevolent family member; by the similar plot development: a hand appeared and strangled someone, a red stain came back, "don't buy black gloves", "girl, girl, approach the piano", green eyes, red curtains, etc. There have been attempts to create a detailed typology of the scary childlore, which identifies "classical" *strashilki*, children's *bylichki*, "innovative" *strashilki* descending from literary or cinematic pretexts, etc. A need to build a strong taxonomy is accounted for by the heterogeneity of the genre which easily draws on rural *bylichki*, urban legends, horror movies and junk food news (Belousov 2005, 233). For the purposes of this paper we will simply sort the texts according to the way their victims are destroyed.

The biggest group from UNN (118 items) features death from unidentified reasons (e.g. "the boy died", "everyone died") or from random causes ("the boy died of fear", "mother stamped him to death with her hoofs", etc.). A similar category from LC comprises 37 items. In the second biggest group (UNN - 57; LC - 37) victims are strangled. Such popularity of strangulation deserves a separate study since this is not the way people are usually killed in traditional Russian fairy and folk tales; *Baba Yaga* and other villain figures usually consume their victims, cooked or uncooked. This study, however, is beyond the limits of the present project. Straightforward vampirism, i.e. sucking or drinking the victim's blood is depicted in 32 and 19 stories respectively. We think that at least two other types of children's scary stories also belong in this category, namely the stories about ominous stains and cookies/meat pies (researchers identify consumer rumors, urban legends, and the blood libel (A. Arkhipova) as main sources of these plots.)

Analysis and Illustrations

Definitions of vampirism vary, but one common trait is that "vampires are killers who physically or psychically drain the life from human victims" (Swensen 1993, 492). Traditionally, it is done by blood-sucking or blood-drinking. The meaning of blood as the seat of life and the source of the power of the soul (Stuckrad 2006, 187-190) or a soul substance (Roux 2005, 986) is manifest here. While featuring classic vampiric attributes, blood-consuming villains of Russian childlore have never born their generic name until later. The word *vampir* (vampire) did not really circulate among elementary school children; the Russian vampires *oupir* and *vourdalak/vurdalak* (e.g. Oupir in the

Afanasiev's compendium of Russian tales and Aleksey Konstantinovich Tolstoy's *La Famille du Vourdalak*) never left the realm of written fiction until the late 1980s - early 1990s. The experience of this paper's author who belongs to the *strashilki*-telling and *strashilki*-ingesting generation corroborates here with researchers' findings.

Strashilki reached their popularity peak in the 1970s-1980s when they were told at night in the pitch-black darkness of a pioneer camp dorm. Later, in the 1990s, the genre nearly went into oblivion, especially with the demise of pioneer camps and the arrival of video salons and cable channels, which introduced people to the barely known before thrillers and horror films swarming with the undead, zombies, and vampires. It is then that the word *vampir* started to appear in *strashilki* (3 instances in LC). With the development of the Internet in the 2000s this category of childlore got a new impetus and a new existence (Marfin 2010, 115-116).

Similarly, blood-sucking and blood drawing in *strashilki* is not necessarily done by the plain vanilla neck biting. Malevolent agents use knives and forks, tubes, beating up and hanging upside down, etc. Sometimes blood consuming is only implied or, as illustrated in the following tale, happens post factum. Note the appearance of militia men in this and many other *strashilki*. In the minds of Soviet children they still are mighty and valorous heroes who come to rescue when summoned.

Red piano

A girl got a red piano; people in the piano store said that one single old woman would be able to fix it and gave her address. The girl started practicing and after some time felt that her fingertips hurt. They told her that she had simply chafed her fingers. Soon the girl began to wither away, she grew thinner, and her cheeks lost their blush. A month later the piano broke. They called the old woman. She arrived and said:

"I will fix it but you are not to look, don't come into the room or I won't be able to do my work."

They obeyed.

After some time the old woman left.

The girl started playing again, but she was getting thinner and thinner. Soon she was not able to walk. A month later the piano broke. The old woman came one more time. She told the parents not to watch her. But they could not bear it and peeped into the room. They saw that the old woman opened the piano and took out a jar full of blood. She started drinking greedily.

They called militia men, and the old woman got arrested. They began examining the piano and saw that its keys were made of tiny needles. The girl was playing and the needles pricked her fingers. The blood ran into the jar drop by drop, and the old woman came in to drink it (Pionerskie strashilki 2014).

The old woman in this story is acting in perfect accordance with Andrew Swensen's definition of a vampire as "a demonic being which feeds on human life and destroys that life in securing its own existence" (Swensen 1993, 492). While the piano-practicing girl grows weaker, a jar of her blood keeps an old woman active for at least a month. "The traditional image of blood-sucking [or blood-drinking in this case. - YN] acts as a metaphor for tapping into human essence; the vampiric drawing of this essence produces sustenance and, generally, diabolic revelry for the vampire and results in the loss of some or, more frequently, all of the victim's life energy" (Ibid.)

In his "Vampirism in Gogol's Short Fiction", Swensen notes that the vampire being a

corporeal but supernatural entity nonetheless dwells in the so called objective reality. Characteristically, "the vampire psychologically manipulates, enchants, hypnotizes, and seduces its victims and generally overcomes them by enticement rather than by the use of brute force, and this facet of the vampiric relationship augments the aura of sexuality and primal desire" (Ibid., 493). This principle is unintentionally travestied in the naïve account of *strashilki*. Young narrators hardly had any idea about psychological manipulations but what else could compel the victims to abide by the blood drinkers' life-threatening demands? The girl in the previous story gets back to playing the piano after it is "fixed" despite becoming sick while the daughter from the following tale continues obliging the skeleton until almost dead. (Why does a piano perform such an ominous part in *strashilki*? Is this because Soviet children hated their private music classes which were considered almost an obligatory addition to the universal school education?)

Black piano

Once there was a family: the mother, the father and the daughter. The girl wanted to learn to play the piano and they agreed to buy it for her. They also had an old grandmother who told them to on no account buy a black piano. The mother and the father went to the store, but there were only black pianos there and they bought a black one.

Next day when everyone went to work, the girl decided to practice. No sooner had she pressed a key that a skeleton got out of the piano and demanded a jar of blood from her. The girl gave him her blood; the skeleton drank it up and went back inside the piano. This was going on for 3 days. On the fourth day the girl became sick. Doctors could not help her because every day when everyone went to work, the skeleton came out the piano and drank the girl's blood.

Then the grandmother suggested breaking the piano. The father took an axe and started chopping and destroyed the skeleton along with the piano. Then the girl immediately got well (Pionerskie *strashilki* 2014).

Earthy characters of *strashilki* would comply with commands from murderous curtains and blood-thirsty black tulips but for some unknown reason would ignore warnings about an imminent danger. There are four versions of the "Coffin on wheels" story in UNN; LC contains two. In all of them a girl pays no attention to the menace and is killed (most often, strangled). The gruesome finale of the tale below is unprecedented.

Coffin on wheels

One girl started cleaning up her apartment. Radio goes:

"Girl, girl, a coffin on wheels is looking for your city."

The girl does not hide out. Radio goes again:

"Girl, girl, a coffin on wheels is looking for your building."

The girl does not hide out. Radio goes:

"Girl, girl, a coffin on wheels is looking for your apartment."

The girl does not hide out. Radio goes again:

"Girl, girl, a coffin on wheels is behind you."

The girl did not hide out, and the coffin beat her and hung her from the ceiling and put a bowl under her for her blood to run into it (Ibid.).

The vampire of Russian folklore finds its way into *strashilki* even if their narrators are not aware of this fact. It may assume all sorts of shapes, and we believe that the various blood drinking curtains, gloves, shawls, flowers, etc. are shapeshifters. Occasionally there would be explicit

transformations: a girl found a black wallet, at home she sat down to examine it, suddenly a terrible voice sounded and a witch came out of the wallet (Ibid.). Or the father gave the mother three black tulips for her birthday, at night the parents disappeared while the tulips grew bigger, long black arms stretched out of the lamp to seize the daughter but a militia man chopped them away and blood flew out of black tulips; it was a sorceress and tulips were her heart (Ibid.). At other times a nonanthropomorphic figure takes the place of a blood-sucking object: the mother asked her daughter to buy her a coat of any color except red, there were only red coats in the store, the girl bought the red one and dyed it, the mother put it on and never could take it off, she could only take it off when the coat drank all her blood (Loiter, 1998, 56-134). There is a similar tale about blood-drinking shoes (Ibid.). In the following story footwear consumes blood and is indestructible with common weapons as vampires are.

White slippers

A family got a new apartment. When they moved in, they saw a pair of white slippers by the entrance. They did not remove them. At night the father woke up and heard some noise; he thought it was just his imagination and did not get up from the bed. When everyone woke up in the morning, they found that he was nowhere to be seen and that there was a red stain on the bed sheets.

Next night the same thing happened to the mother, then to the daughter and to the son. A unit of 20 militia men came in and put a jar with 1 liter of blood on the bed and covered it with a blanket. At night there were some banging sounds, and then a slipper crawled onto bed and started drinking blood. One militia man shot it, and it burst into small pieces. These pieces flew out of the window and went towards the graveyard.

Militia men ran out of the building and followed the pieces. They reached an old well. They looked into it and there were bones, skeletons and upon them a trunk with blood. The second slipper was sitting on the trunk and militia men could not hit it no matter how they tried. They were unable to destroy it (Pionerskie strashilki 2014).

The shapeshifter from the next story hypnotizes a victim with her eyes. This ability is a common attribute of the vampire. "The eyes also symbolize the fantastic and dark powers of the night as they represent implacable portals to the dark nether realms" (Swensen 1993, 493, 504).

Black roses-2

One girl's mother died. When she was dying she asked the girl to never buy black roses. Once the girl went for a walk and met an old woman who was selling black roses. The girl felt a desire to buy these roses and she bought them. At night, when the girl went to sleep, the black roses suddenly started to open and little black old women began to get out of them. They grew bigger and bigger and finally joined together into one huge old woman. She thrust herself at the girl:

"I want blood!"

The girl got scared and cried. The old woman vanished. On the next morning the girl goes to see her grandmother. The road runs through the graveyard. The girl walks and sees the grave of the old woman who sold black roses. The girl wants to run away but cannot. The eyes on the old woman's portrait draw her in. The girl steps further towards the grave and falls under the ground. There she sees a dark hallway and three doors. She enters the first door; young girls sit there and cry.

"Why are you crying, young girls?"

"How can we not cry if they are going to undress us now?"

The girl enters another door; undressed girls sit there and cry.

"And you, why are you crying?"

"How can we not cry if they are going to suck blood from us now?"

The girl enters the third door and sees that the old woman drinks blood from young girls. The girl ran so fast that the old woman could not catch her. She got out of the grave, shook off the dirt - and there is her mother standing there and smiling (Pionerskie strashilki 2014).

Vampiric folk motifs found in *strashilki* include the eating of corpses (see "Oupir" in Afanasiev's compendium of Russian tales, Afanasiev 1957): an old woman catches a taxi and asks to take her to a graveyard; the driver waits for her to take her back, she returns covered with blood. "Why are you all covered in blood, were you eating corpses?" "Ye-e-e-es!" (Loiter 1998, 56-134).

In stories about mincing people for meat pies or adding blood and sometimes brains or flesh to prepare red cookies (13 in UNN and 6 in LC) this motif may be aggravated by the repercussions of court trials and vague rumors about serial killers, but the vampiric aspect is more or less explicit in them.

Red cookies

A girl loved red cookies. Her mother baked these cookies. The daughter said: "Mom, I love red cookies." And the girl followed her mother. When the mother bought regular cookies, she went to the graveyard and drank blood from a grave. Then she comes home and says: "Here are the cookies you wanted!" "No! I didn't want those! And you are a bloodsucker!!!" (Ibid.).

Another story which may be in part inspired by criminal reports employs a known vampiric attribute, the urge to propagate. Bandits lured a girl into a cellar of her own building, hit her on the head and took her to their hiding place. They killed her, tore off her skin, cut her in pieces and poured her blood into glass jars. Then they caught other children and made them drink this blood (Pionerskie strashilki 2014).

Still another variation of the blood-and-flesh-devouring motif is presented in the two stories about men feeding on their family. Curiously, in both cases the arrangements they use to attain their goal includes a staircase. In an old building lived a girl and her family, there also was an old woman in the neighborhood. The girl noticed that the old woman always jumped over 3 steps when using the staircase in the old building and asked her about the reason. The old woman told her to come to the stairs at midnight. In the meantime the girl's mother and sister disappeared. She saw that everything was ablaze under the stairs at night, looked closer and saw that a man all covered with blood was tearing off her sister's skin and eating her flesh. Her mother's skin hung on the wall. The man turned out to be the girl's father** who sat under the stairs and used tubes to drink blood from everyone; when people became too weak to escape he dragged them in and ate their flesh (Ibid.). Or: there lived a family and they had an old man who would say that a person who stepped on the 11th step would die. The family did not know that this old man was a sorcerer. The son of the family came back from the army and found no one at home. He immediately understood that they had stepped on the 11th step and decided to do the same. He was lucky and he just fell down between the knives [which were apparently mounted there]. There were human bodies and bottles of blood underneath. He got out and came back with militia men. They jumped down and found the old man who was sitting there and eating meat from the bodies. They started to shoot, and even when their bullets hit him they did no harm to him. Eventually, a militia man saw a black spot on the old man's forehead and when he hit it the old man blew up (Ibid.).

Slavic vampires often could be deceased people who in their lifetime had been sorcerers, (Swensen 1993, 493), so the remark about the old man from the second story being a sorcerer is still

another indication of the ties *strashilki* have with folklore.

The universal vampiric invincibility to regular bullets has left its trace in *strashilki*, but the naïve narrative gives it a peculiar twist. The old man from the previous story had a weak spot on his body and only by hitting this spot they were able to kill him. In another story a vulnerable spot which helps to destroy vampires is almost literally the Achilles' heel. A woman in black and three men in white would come out through a picture on the wall of a birthing center to steal babies. Police were watching because babies had disappeared from this place before. They followed and saw a horrible room stained with blood with bins packed with little legs, arms, and heads; one bin was filled with blood. Police opened fire. They hit the villains, but their bullets did no harm to them. Suddenly the woman tripped and her shoe fell off her foot. Police saw that there was a little baby tooth in her heel. A sniper shot and hit this tooth. The woman and the three men dropped down dead. When they brought them to the police station, it turned out that they were robots, apparently aliens (Pionerskie *strashilki* 2014).

The outcome of the following story is disarmingly unsophisticated. A girl begged her mother to buy her a red rose, and the mother agreed. They brought it home and put it on the piano. At night the girl did not go to sleep and remained in the room admiring the rose. Suddenly, it began to grow, and grew very big, and a red man came out of it. He started walking down the corridor and, after a long trip, disappeared behind a door. In the morning the girl told her parents about it. The mother went and brought militia men with her. They hid away and began watching the rose. It grew huge once again, and the red man came out of it. Militia men started firing at him, but all was in vain. He kept walking and eventually entered that room. Militia men followed and saw that he was bathing in a pool filled with blood. And then he came out of it and died (Ibid.).

The group of stories about ominous stains (usually red, sometimes black or otherwise colored) stands apart from other vampiric *strashilki*, but we will attempt to show that they pertain to the category. This formula occurs 7 times in UNN and 6 times in LC.

When discussing one of the most popular formulas of the childlore researchers speculate about the sacral function of the stain in traditional culture. For example, ethnographic materials related to the construction of a Slavic dwelling introduced by A.K. Baiburin suggest a conclusion that the stain plays the role of a medium between the cosmos of the home and the chaos of the external world. The stain marks the wall which appears pervious to the supernatural force. This stain is a clear and distinct sign of disaster (Cherednikova 1996, 13).

Another valuable observation comes from a person who shares his own experience with telling *strashilki* and listening to them at the web site of the University of Nizhni Novgorod. One of the most vividly remembered motifs for him is the motif of the underground which was not an ordinary grave or a crypt but rather a supernatural space. The stain fraught with death which could emerge on any wall at any time before an unsuspecting person was for him the scariest protagonist of *strashilki*, and it clearly connected in his mind to this underground motif (Strashilki).

The liminal function of the stain is emphasized by its color, most frequently red, sometimes black; other hues occur rarely. Black is traditionally associated with impure forces, night, death. The archetypal power of red demands a particular attention, as it "often represents a threshold between extreme emotions or between different realms" (Hale 2010, 482). Discussing the psychological implications of red in Carl Jung's conceptual system, Cynthia Anne Hale remarks that any color can be simultaneously perceived as a physical and emotional experience. With its implications of "a ritual symbol that connects the living to the dead", a "threshold between reality and fantasy or between sleeping and dreaming", red may be an element of connection between the unconscious realm and the world of matter (Ibid., 482-484).

Red stain

A family got a new apartment. There was a red stain on the wall; they did not have time to paint it. In the morning the girl sees that her mother is dead and the stain has become much brighter.

At night the girl woke up because she felt very scared. Suddenly she saw an arm reaching to her from the stain. The girl was so frightened that she died.

Then militia men came and found nothing. One militia man shot the stain and it disappeared. And then he came home and saw a red stain on the wall above his bed. At night he felt that someone wanted to strangle him. He started shooting.

His neighbors came running and saw that the militia man was lying there strangled and the stain was not there anymore (Loiter 1998, 56-134)

Black stain

A man came to an unfamiliar town and wanted to settle in a hotel. They offered him a hotel on the outskirts of the town where no one wanted to live. The hotel keeper gave him a room right under the attic.

At night the man saw a black stain on the ceiling. It began to grow. The man turned on the light. The stain disappeared. But when he turned off the light, the stain came back. The man decided to sleep with the light on.

In the morning the hotel keeper kept turning away from the man and squinted. The man brought in a stone and put it under the bed. At night the stain was back. He tried to turn on the light, but the lamp was not working. Then he threw the stone at the stain. There was a cry, and the stain disappeared. In the morning the man saw that the hotel keeper's arm is bandaged. The man told him about the stain, and the hotel keeper frowned.

That night the man came back very late hoping that there would be no stain. But the stain began to grow and fill the room. The man threw a knife at it. There was a cry, the stain turned red, and blood ran down the walls. The man hurried to the attic and found the hotel keeper with the knife in his heart (Pionerskie strashilki 2014).

Not only is the stain in these and in similar stories a marker of the threshold and a shapeshifter: the arms reaching out from a stain belong to a woman who kills people; when trying to rub away a stain a girl cripples her mother; a stain turns into a door which leads into a room full of murderous bandits; a stain on the wall is a mother's gateway to the room crowded with demons where she eats corpses (*Baba Yaga* comes to mind, but consuming cadavers is rather the predilection of a Slavic vampire). Its attributes suggest the properties of a substance whose propensity is "to travel within, between, and beyond" various domains and whose material qualities "are only one plausible starting-point for understanding its symbolic salience" (Carsten 2013, S2, S6), namely blood. Being able to secure life, blood can also be "a source of danger through its lack of boundaries" (Ibid., S5). Leonid Lipavskii impressively describes this unique combination of material properties in his "*Issledovanie Uzhasa*" ("Study of Horror").

Curiously, some people are still scared by the view of blood, they start feeling lightheaded. But, one would think, what is there to be afraid of? Here it oozes from the cut, this red liquid containing life; it flows freely and languidly and creeps out in a freeform, ever-widening stain. Although, I suppose there is something revolting in it. It is all too effortlessly that it leaves its habitat and becomes independent, a tepid puddle, whether living or non-living it is unknown. To an onlooker this seems so against the nature that they weaken, the world becomes grey blur in their eyes, a giddy dimness. (...) Slowly leaving its captivity, blood begins its primal, impersonal life that is alienated from us (Lipavskii 2005, 24).

The ominous stain whose association with blood is implicit in its character and whose ability to become bigger or brighter when it kills someone, falls under Jan Perkowski's definition of the "general vampire" (quoted in Swensen, 1993) as "a being which derives sustenance from a victim, who is weakened by the experience" (Perkowski in Swensen 1993, 507). It may be a shapeshifter and usually emerges at night or the major events related to it occur before sunrise; this also marks the stain as a vampiric figure.

Thus, the vampiric personage is one of the most popular agents of harm in the Russian childlore; there are 45 such stories in UNN and 38 in LC, cookies/meat pies and ominous stain tales included. The vampire of *strashilki* is a killer that finds a particular way to feed on its victim(s) to provide its own nourishment, sometimes using naïvely complicated procedures devised by a child's mind instead of mere blood-sucking. Being genetically connected to Slavic folklore it may adopt various guises and often is a shapeshifter. It is basically a nocturnal creature. It has the ability to enchant its prey with its eyes and tends to propagate. It is a supernatural entity but often dwells in the material world. It can appear at any moment anywhere.

Beware, a coffin on wheels is in your city.

Notes

* One of the three main types of Russian legend, the other two being the *bylina* and the *skazka*. *Bylichki* deal with the supernatural world and with beings that come from the land of the dead, the underworld. When pagan beliefs were at their strongest in ancient Russia, the common peasants half-believed the *bylichki*. These legends are generally short and told in the first person, being related from father to son and thence passed down through the generations. (Dixon-Kennedy 1998, 48).

** One cannot help noticing that parents and, sometimes, grandparents are the malevolent agents in *strashilki* only too often. But speculations on this topic are clearly beyond the limits of this paper.

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