

Not Quite Dead

Episode 17

'Playing Favourites'

Show-wide Content Warnings

This show is a work of horror fiction frequently places characters in situations which jeopardise their psychological and physical health. In addition, listeners should be aware that this show contains the following throughout:

- profanity
- references to sex
- frequent violence
- traumatic injury
- death, including violent death
- references to medical procedures
- hospital settings

Episode Seventeen, Content Warnings

- profanity
- threats of violence
- discussion of traumatic injury
- mentions near-death experiences
- descriptions of blood
- descriptions of decaying bodies
- mention of deceased children (once, non-specific)

- sounds of a character in emotional distress
- scenes with sexual implications
- detailed descriptions of gruesome injuries

TRANSCRIPT

Episode Seventeen - Playing Favourites

I've just done something really stupid. I've turned on my phone.

I know it was a bad idea, but it's just-- it's my birthday. It's been my birthday for three minutes.

I just wanted to see, I don't know.

I wanted know if people missed me.

Turns out my mum's been trying to make plans with me all week. She doesn't know why I'm not talking to her anymore. She's worried she's done something wrong. She wants to go out for lunch, she said. 'We don't have to talk'.

I feel so bad. And now in the morning she's gonna see I've read the texts! How the hell am I--?!
How'm I gonna--

I don't know how to explain this. How can I explain this?! I haven't thought about this yet, haven't had enough time, I've been so preoccupied with all of everything and I'm-- I'm so bad at this!

ALFIE GASPS

I'm so phenomenally bad at this. I'm the worst at being a vampire. I don't even know how I'm as bad at it as I am. It's not even a conscience thing, it's--

And Neige is so kind about it. And it's horrible because it's like-- ugh. He's not nice about things, you know? He's not like that. But this? He's like 'oh Alfie, don't worry. It happens to everyone sometimes'. But then he's clearly so frustrated. Clearly. Because who wouldn't be, you know? He's stuck babysitting me and--

ALFIE SIGHS

I need to get out of the house, but outside feels so horrible. I hate it in here. I can't go outside. I hate this.

INTRO MUSIC. EIRA: This is Not Quite Dead, Episode Seventeen, Playing Favourites

Neige hasn't completely stopped talking to me, which is something at least. He's out again. Clubbing, probably. Drinking little bits of people. Last night when he came I could tell he'd been drinking booze, too. I could taste the vodka in his blood. God I sound like a miserable housewife, don't I?

ALFIE SIGHS FRUSTRATEDLY

I say he's not nice. He is. Kind of. He's... patient? He feels bad, I think, about the other night? He's not said it, but he's being.... He's not brought it up, and it's the kind of thing I imagine he'd usually bring up.

He's got a comment about most things. The cushions on the couch, he hates. He doesn't like the smell of my fabric softener. The way the pull for the light in the bathroom clinks against the wall when you walk past it, he doesn't like that, either. Also things Neige doesn't like; the colour of the cabinets; the handles on the cabinets; the fact the bath is plastic; the fact I don't have a separate shower; the sound of the shower curtain; the texture of my bathmat; the texture of the

carpets; the number of socks I own; the way I ball my socks up to store them instead of folding them, because apparently it 'wears the elastic out'.

Oh, and; swing-top bins; on-street parking; polyester; measuring cars in 'horsepower'; driving on the left; driving on the right; underwired bras; laudanum; and Cornish pasties.

So far, I have managed to pin down *three* things he *does* unambiguously like, and those are sex, blood, and the song 'Like A Prayer' by Madonna. Not necessarily in that order.

You will notice I am not included on *either* of these lists. I don't think he hates me but to say he likes me would be a significant overstatement.

But he has been feeding me. Every day he goes out and comes back and sits across from me on the floor and let's me drink from the crook of his arm.

So he *can't* hate me. Because he doesn't want me dead.

He lets me lie in his lap, runs his hands through my hair, and lets me lull into that not quite sleep that comes over me when I've drunk from him. It's not quite like exhaustion? It's not quite like passing out drunk, it's something else. Heavy, but soft.

He lets me lie with him through it, until I do eventually sleep, or I can find it within myself to move off him.

Sometimes when I'm lying there he talks to me. Softly, swiftly, lapsing in and out of other languages, mostly French, but others too. He speaks about the flat mostly, complaining about things. He also talks about the people he's fed on and what he thinks of York. He doesn't like it, unsurprisingly.

But yesterday, he talked about the sunrise. He said for the longest time, he couldn't bear to watch it. Centuries passed, he said, and the brightness hurt his eyes too much to watch the sunrise directly. It was different back then, he said. Vampires might go months without crossing paths with someone to feed upon. That's why there was so much devastation, he told me. Any time they came across a new settlement, it was like an oasis in a desert.

The first few hundred years of his life, he said, were these deserts of starvation, punctuated by bright red.

I was drifting into sleep by then, and he'd also started speaking French, but it wasn't French like I knew it from old movies, it was stranger. It felt older. *He* felt older.

I turned over that idea in my head a lot. 'The first few hundred years of his life'. He's old. Older than I can really get my head around. Older than you could reasonably express with words.

There's something about the taste of his blood, I think. It's like water from a mountain spring, so delicately infused with pine and nectar. It lights a fire in my stomach when I swallow it, cold flames licking at my insides.

Neige lets me drink and drink and drink, and it barely makes him flinch.

I remembered something Casper said, that the older a vampire gets, the less blood he needs to live on. Neige goes out every night to hunt, but it's clearly just for me. And still, he doesn't complain about it. He hasn't shouted at me since he took me out with him, but I can tell he's frustrated.

Frustrated but patient.

I don't know why that makes it all feel so much worse, but it does. I don't want him to be kind. I don't want him to be nice. I want him to--

I don't know what I want from him.

More importantly, I think, I don't know what he wants from *me*.

He came here looking for Casper, he said, and sure, he brings him up often enough. He told me that one time he and Casper snuck into a medieval fort in mid-Wales because they'd heard there was a man from Norway in the dungeons, and they'd never tasted a Norwegian before, so they thought they'd give it a go. He told me that he and Casper once swam to Venezuela from Puerto Rico because they got caught half-way through a local priest. He said he and Casper once rode on horseback from central China to the north coast of Russia so they could watch the Northern Lights above the Laptev sea.

Sometimes he talks about Casper like he's an old friend. Sometimes he talks about him like a lover. Sometimes he talks about him like a divorcee.

He says he's the one who cleans up Casper's messes. I don't know what that means.

If Neige is here to clean *me* up, I wonder what that might mean, in the end, too.

Casper always made it sound like he'd been alone for so long. He was with Antoinette for a few decades until he killed her to avenge Paolina, and then he became this vampire avenger, going from place to place, setting vampires' wrongs to rights. It all sounded so lonely when Cas spoke about it.

I remember him telling me about this house he had gone to, in Romania. Casper had been drifting across Romania for weeks. It was around the turn of the century, not long after the novel Dracula had been published. For a while, Cas said he got very interested in trying to work out where vampires came from. In the novel, Dracula is almost a singular creature, he makes his company himself, he craves Jonathon Harker's modern blood to acquaint himself with the new century.

Cas had heard vampire stories before, older, more disparate ones. He had no reason to believe the stuff in Dracula was real, or based anywhere in fact. He knew that there was likely more truth in those stories with ancient roots about creatures that came in the night and drained your soul kiss by kiss or cut by cut, but there was something compelling about Dracula.

Naturally he started his search in Transylvania. It wasn't because he thought he was going to find anything there, necessarily, it just seemed like the most sensible place to start. He kept a copy of Bram Stoker's novel in his pocket and followed Jonathan Harker's route as closely as he could. He even ate paprika hendl, he said, even though he rarely ate human food at all back then and it caused him awful stomach pain whenever he did because his body wasn't used to it.

He walked and walked, trying his best to pick up local dialects, and he found nothing. Barely a whisper or a trace of anything even remotely like the vampire from the story everyone was reading.

That was, until he had almost hit the border with Hungary. There was a small town in a valley. The people were ordinary, unexceptional, but there was a strange quiet in the streets. Many of the houses stood empty and unoccupied. And then there was the smell. The sweet stink of decay. And underneath it, faint but unmistakable; a vampire.

They didn't like Casper, in the town. They saw something familiar in him that made them frightened, that much he could tell. He wondered at it for a while; did they keep their distance from him because they'd learned what vampires were? Had whoever had taken up residence in this town decided it was for the best to be public about what he was?

Casper's grasp of the language was rocky and this combined with their apprehension around him made it almost impossible to work out what they thought was going on, and even harder to work out what they thought of Casper himself.

Late at night, Casper walked the town's quiet streets. There was no sound but the whistle of the wind and the clang of the bells hung on the necks of the goats many of the townspeople kept on the hillsides. Casper followed his nose to the source of the rot.

It did not lead him to the kind of place he'd been expecting. He'd been imagining a mass grave. Instead, he walked to a barn. The door was nailed shut.

Casper walked down the building's sides, and peered through the gaps in the wood-plank walls. He could see shapes like people on the ground between the hay-bales. He reached up and pulled a plank down, the smell of decay, sweet and rancid, wafting out into the night.

Flies buzzed about the bodies which lay here and there, like dropped marionettes. They were all close to the walls, some slumped against them, others lying face down, arms reaching. The wooden walls were streaked with blood, old, rancid, nauseating. In some of the cracks between the planks, there were strips and hunks of flesh, sloughed off the hands of the things lying at Casper's feet.

They were half-mades, at least fifty of them. Men, women, children.

As Casper examined their battered remains, a side door to the barn that he hadn't noticed was there clattered open. One of the townspeople stood, pitchfork raised, another holding a lantern aloft behind him. They spoke to Casper in angry, rapid tones. He tried to explain he was just trying to find out what was going on, but he never knew how much they understood. Before he could make sense of it, someone grabbed him from behind, slinging a rope around his head, and pulling it taught into his mouth.

It was clear the townspeople had dealt with a vampire before; once his teeth were useless, people rushed Casper from both sides to pin down his arms. They tied him up firmly, and though it took five of them to pin him to the ground, once they were finished, Casper could not break free.

They dragged Casper by the rope in his mouth through the street, and slung him into coal shed. He heard chains rattle.

Casper strained against his bindings but they were tight; he'd have to break his wrist to be free of them. There were plenty of rocks of coal to make that easier than it might've been otherwise, but it was still breaking his own wrist. Vampires are less fragile than people, he said, but that doesn't mean things hurt any less. In fact, the added resilience would take a lot of force to get the bone to snap, so if anything, it only made it feel *worse*.

I remember I called him up on that. 'How can your bones be different,' I said.

Casper looked at me. 'Do you know how much blood a vampire bat needs to consume to stay alive?' he said.

'As in a bat that's a vampire, or a normal vampire bat?'

'Are vampires abnormal?' said Casper.

'You tell me,' I said.

Casper sighed. 'A vampire bat needs such a high quantity of blood every day that they often consume so much they can't fly safely after they feed. Blood is an extremely inefficient way to get nutrients. Which means that what happens inside of me, it's not the same as what's happening inside of *you*. Blood isn't replacing food one-to-one like that. However it works, whatever the mechanism, it's not human. It's not even *mammalian*. I've become something else. A different sort of lifeform entirely.'

He looked repulsed as he spoke, the same sort of look in his face he got when he looked at his own reflection. He saw himself as something disgusting. Something that I should fear and push away. But I wouldn't. I couldn't. That's not what he was. He was soft, and kind, and beautiful. He was my Casper. He *is* my Casper.

ALFIE SIGHS

Neige has his theories for how it all works, internally. He says it's like a virus, that whatever it is that lives in a vampire's blood, it infects a human body, replaces it cell by cell, and then puppets the preserved corpse around for the sole purpose of self-replication, the way all viruses work.

Which is interesting because I feel the same. I feel like me, but with... I don't know. Something else. Like how I imagine it might feel to be possessed by a ghost that won't speak to you, and instead uses you to achieve its own ends without explaining anything.

Like. Part of it. Part of what it is, in me, the stopping point, when-- when I put my teeth against Neige's skin and I feel the flesh begin to give.

What it is that makes me stop, that locks my jaw, that holds me fast in place. Part of that is this sense of control. I have to stop because if I don't, it's gone, that feeling, that I'm in charge.

If I bite I let the ravenous hunger in me take me under. I surrender something. And I--

I can't do that. I can't surrender anything else. I've let so much go already.

And then I think about Casper. I think about how it felt when he almost killed me, and what I said to him. That I knew what he was. He's a vampire. That it happened because of him being a vampire, and I love him, really, not in spite of what he is but in part because of that.

I love him, I love that he's a vampire. Would I love him if he wasn't? Of course I would, but it's like. If he wasn't a vampire, we'd never have met. He wouldn't *be* the Casper I know, if he was born now. Him, as I know him and love him, that version of him exists because he is a vampire, so how can I not love that part of him too?

If I wasn't a vampire I'd be dead.

If I wasn't a vampire, I just wouldn't be.

So why does it feel so different when it's me?

Why is it so frightening to see exactly what I saw and loved in Casper in myself, now? Why does it feel so much more scary this way around?

Casper told me his story about looking for Dracula because of what happened in the coal shed. He broke his wrist, slipped it free of his bindings, and lay panting and aching on the ground for hours whilst it healed and sapped the strength from his muscles, and made that deep, burning hunger flare hot and bright in his throat. I know how hard it is to think, in those moments, how it consumes you, the need to consume. It feels like a blackhole of wanting, it's so big and it draws in so much.

And as he lay there, needing to feast, he smelled it. The other vampire. It was hunched in the corner, its face against the wall. Casper pulled it back; its eye, where it had been peering out of a small hole in the wood of the shed, was frozen and covered with a thin film of frost.

It hissed, arms stiff, partially frozen up against its chest. Its fingers were severed, the ragged stumps raw and frozen. There was a crust of dried blood on its chin. Casper could smell that it wasn't human blood. Stepping closer, he saw the vampire's jaw was completely shattered. Its mouth gaped as it hissed at him, and from ragged, oozing gums, Casper saw just a few splinters of tooth and bone peeking through the flesh.

Casper sat and looked at it for a long time as it continued to feebly hiss at him. It didn't even have the strength to writhe on the ground. Covered in frost and coal, Casper could not tell its age or gender, and so depleted was its blood it was impossible for him to tell how long since it had been turned. But he knew it had been about a month since it had fed. No doubt it had tried to bite itself in desperation, had kept damaging its own jaw as it it tried, uselessly, to chew its way out of the coal shed.

That was when Casper really realised what he was, he said. Maybe he could speak, maybe he could walk around, but in the end, this hissing monster chewing off its own fingers, that's who he was at his core.

But. I don't know. I don't think we should be defined by what we're forced to become when we're bound up, beaten and imprisoned. I don't think that's a fair standard to hold anyone to. Especially not yourself.

Under the right set of circumstances, anyone can be pathetic. Anyone can be a monster. That's the reality of it, you know? To have it fixed in your head that any one category of person is wrong or bad just purely just by its nature, that's a terrible mistake because that's an awful thing to say, but also because it means you miss the truth that really anyone, regardless of what they look like, where they come from, the circumstances of their birth. Anyone can be a monster.

I know this better than most.

Casper got upset, then. He never finished telling me the story. He never explained how he got out of the coal shed, or where he went next. And...

I'm not angry, really, I'm just. I wish he'd explained more. I wish he'd told me about Neige. I wish that all the stories he'd told me about himself and his past didn't end so awfully, if there are so many of them that ended in a way that's less depressing and results in less of a total condemnation of his personal character, you know?

NEIGE

That is just what Casper is like.

ALFIE

Neige! You-- I thought you were out. How long have you--

NEIGE

I've been here the whole time, I'm a vampire but I can't teleport, Alfie, and your sense of hearing should be so keen that you could not have missed me coming in. Unless that part of your vampirism is malfunctioning the same way that your appetite is.

ALFIE

Um. Right.

NEIGE

Casper has his problems, mon petit. Don't make the mistake of making them yours, too.

ALFIE

Don't call me that.

NEIGE

Mon petit? Why not?

ALFIE

It makes me feel pathetic.

NEIGE

Well, then. I think it is a very appropriate nickname in the circumstances.

ALFIE

Jesus christ, you are so incapable of--- what the fuck is wrong with you?! Why are you even here?!

NEIGE

It is ridiculous that you need to ask that!

ALFIE

Yeah, it is! But somehow I think the reason YOU think that and the reason that I think it are very different.

NEIGE

Perhaps.

ALFIE

So tell me! Why won't you leave me alone?!

NEIGE

You think you could survive alone? You think you'd make it, if I left? Don't you understand that the drive for blood, the very thing you fear so much that it makes you deny your own nature, do you not know that in two days without me feeding you, it would swallow you whole?

ALFIE

Of course I know that.

NEIGE

So be grateful for me, then!

ALFIE

I just don't understand why you're here!

NEIGE

Is it not enough that I am?

ALFIE

I-- I don't know! I just. I don't know.

NEIGE

Casper has never tried to turn another vampire himself, not alone, not without Antoinette forcing his hand. He has taken many humans to his bed but you? He kept *you* alive. At great personal cost, he kept you alive. He chose you, mon petit.

ALFIE

So you're looking after me for him?

NEIGE

Non. I'm looking after you because I trust his judgement. If he kept you alive, you're worth looking after.

ALFIE

Oh.

NEIGE

Whether we save him alive, you are, how they say? Stuck with me?

ALFIE

Save him alive. You-- you say it like there's a way to save him where he's not alive, but like. If he's dead, we haven't saved him.

NEIGE

Ah, gentil garçon. If death is the only release I can give him, I'll give it. Without hesitation.

ALFIE

Is it that bad?

NEIGE

I do not delay our rescue out of neglect, Alfie. I promise you that. First I need to help you, comprendre?

ALFIE

Yeah. I comprehend it.

NEIGE

I don't think you do. You must feel it, the call inside you. You'll feel it here, right below the navel, and here, in your throat. Yes?

ALFIE

Yes.

NEIGE

Bien. Now, breathe deep. You will sense the memory of people who have been here before, the flavour of their blood on the wind. You can tell apart any human by their smell alone, know where they've been, what they've eaten, what they do for a living. You are a fine tuned instrument, mon petit, do you feel it?

ALFIE

I'm-- I don't know.

NEIGE

Shh, of course you do. You know it. You feel it. You feel strong. You feel hungry, but you know satisfaction will come. You feel beautiful. La belle et la bête, tout en toi. You are a magnificent thing.

ALFIE

No...

NEIGE

Oh, but you are! And you know you are! Say it.

ALFIE

I am a magnificent thing?

NEIGE

Non, mon petit, like you *mean* it. With your whole chest. What are you?

ALFIE

A vampire.

NEIGE

And?

ALFIE

I'm magnificent.

NEIGE

Oui, mon petit, yes you are. And you are going to stop recording yourself, and you are going to bite me. D'accord?

ALFIE

Oui-- I mean, yes.

NEIGE

Good. Now *do it*.

[END]

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[END]