

All Flesh Must Be Eaten

The  
Book of  
More Flesh

EDITED BY JAMES LOWDER

*PDF Preview*

— Not For Sale —

**EDEN**  
STUDIOS INC

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PDF PREVIEW EDITION

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preview for Eden Studios publication EDN 8701, October 2002.

ISBN 1-891153-86-2

Printed in the United States.

# *BOOK OF MORE FLESH*

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# GOOBERS

SCOTT EDELMAN

Willard woke to echoing screams. The sound didn't bother him at all.

He had gotten used to those screams over the past few months, so used to them, in fact, that by now, it had become something of a ritual for him. Wake to the sounds of fear, start up a new reel in the theater's projection booth, fall asleep a moment or two later, jolt awake whenever the audience freaked out at the scary parts . . . and then get ready to start another new reel. Lately, he'd been spending more time on the job sleeping than waking. Still, he hadn't missed a cue for changing a reel yet.

Chocolate. He smelled chocolate. When he touched his cheek, his fingers came away brown. He glanced down to the remnants of a box of Raisinets scattered across his desk, and realized that he'd fallen asleep face down, melting them into the desktop.

It wasn't the first time he'd stirred to find himself like that. Movies always went better with a snack, and that he sometimes ended up face down in them didn't change that fact.

When Dan, his boss, had first switched over to his all-zombie all-the-time line-up, Willard had occasionally peeked out to see what had made the audiences scream, but it was never anything worth his effort: just Caro syrup, food coloring, and pig entrails. He quickly became bored sick with the repetitive nature of these undead flicks, with corpses jumping out of closets, with brain munchers, with doubters who died and believers who, well, who seemed to die anyway.

*Night of the Living Dead. The Incredible Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies. Voodoo Dawn.* Willard thought them all ridiculous, thought Dan's whole theme idea ridiculous, and longed for the variety of the old days—but that's why he was only the projectionist and not the manager, for it looked as if his boss had guessed right, had made the right business decision.

Terrifying reports were coming out of the big cities every day, and so Dan had figured that, given the chance, customers might turn to the movies to soak up all they could about the coming plague, might choose to sift through the cinematic

past in search of survival tips. Dan had been right—ticket sales were through the roof.

Willard was stunned. What fiction could teach anyone at a time like this, he just couldn't see.

But he didn't complain, at least not out loud. The concept kept him employed, when so many other types of businesses were failing under the threat of an approaching apocalypse. People seemed to get something out of the unreal dead, and what's more, bought out the concession stand while they did so. Movies and candy went hand in hand, which meant that Willard's hand was guaranteed to go hand in hand with a weekly paycheck. Which was just fine with him, so when he muttered, he muttered quietly.

He found it hard to believe what was going on in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, all those big cities that had once seemed impossibly distant and now felt terribly close. Even with the news footage that confronted him each morning, it still seemed like—like a movie. And yet what the television showed him each day, though it mimicked what he spooled each night, that was real.

Graves splitting open. The dead returning with a new life. People being eaten alive, their shredded remnants rising to begin the cycle all over again. He used to envy those who lived in the metropolises. But no more.

The country was falling apart—or more precisely, being eaten alive—and no one knew exactly why.

The shouts from the theater were still going on, longer than seemed necessary, and not just in response to some tense, fleeting moment on the screen. They were continuous now, almost a living, breathing thing. Willard, who'd long since given up on the audience, slid his wheeled stool forward so he could peer through the small square window and into the crowd below.

In the flickering light, as sluggish zombies stalked humans upon the screen, Willard could see the same scene enacted in the bowels of the theater—only the walking dead below were not so sluggish as the ones above.

{end preview}

# THE HOUNDS OF LOVE

SCOTT NICHOLSON

Dexter licked his lips. His stomach was shivery. October was brown and yellow and crackly and tasted like candy corn. He knelt by the hutch that Dad had built back before the restraining order was filed.

He touched the welt under his eye. The wound felt like a busted plum and stung where the flesh had split open. Mom had accidentally left her thumb sticking out of her fist when she hit him. She hadn't meant to do it. Usually, she was careful when she punched him.

But one good thing about Mom, she didn't hold a grudge for long. She'd turned on the television and opened a beer, and after the next commercial break had forgotten all about him. It was easy to sneak out the back door.

Dexter poked some fresh blades of grass through the silver squares of wire. The rabbit flashed its buck teeth and wrinkled its nose before clamping down on the grass and hopping to the back of the hutch. It crouched in the shadows and chewed with a sideways gnashing of its jaws. The black eyes stared straight ahead. They looked like doll's eyes, dead and cold and stupid.

Dexter's stomach was still puke-shivery. He opened the cage and snaked his hand inside. The rabbit hopped away and kept chewing. Dexter stroked the soft fur between the rabbit's eyes.

*Gotta tell 'em that you love 'em.*

He snatched the leathery ears and pulled the rabbit forward into the light. He held it that way for a moment, like a magician dangling a trick above a hat, as it spasmed and kicked its four white legs. This was October, after all, the month when anything could happen. Even stupid old magic, if you dressed like a dork in a wizard's cape for Halloween.

Dexter looked over his shoulder at the house. Mom was most likely passed out by now. After all, it was four o'clock in the afternoon. But Dexter had learned from his dad that it never hurt to be paranoid.

He tucked the rabbit under his windbreaker and crossed the backyard into the woods. When he reached the safety of the trees, he took the leash from his pocket. This was the

tricky part. With his tongue hanging out from concentration, he squeezed the rabbit between his knees.

He pressed harder until he heard something snap and the rabbit's back legs hung limp. He almost puked then, almost wept, but his first tear rolled across the split skin beneath his eye and he got angry again. "I'll teach you better than to love me," he whispered, his breath ragged.

It was the rabbit's fault. The dumb creature shouldn't have tried to love him. The rabbit was trying to get him, to play the trick on him, to make him care. Well, he wasn't going to belong to nothing or nobody.

Dexter used both hands to attach the leather collar. The collar had belonged to his little redbone hound. Uncle Clem had let Dexter have the pick of the litter. Dexter had chosen the one with the belly taut from milk, the one that wagged its thin rope of a tail whenever Dexter patted its head. Dexter had named it Turd Factory. Well, stupid old Turd Factory didn't need the collar anymore.

Dexter fastened the collar and let the rabbit drop to the ground. It rolled on its side and twitched its front legs. Sometimes they died too fast, sometimes before he even started. Dexter headed deeper into the woods, dragging the rabbit behind him by the leash. It was a hundred feet to the clearing where he liked to play. There, the sun broke through the tree limbs and a shallow creek spilled over the rocks. Dexter squinted at the scraps of the sky, his eye almost swollen shut now. The clearing smelled like autumn mud and rot, the magic odors of buried secrets.

Dexter tightened the leash around the rabbit's neck until its veins bulged. He put one hand under the soft white chest and felt the trip-hammering heart that was trying to pump blood through the tourniquet. The rabbit began kicking its front legs again, throwing leaves and dark forest dirt into the air.

This was the part Dexter hated—the fear that came to the animals sooner or later as he tortured them, that little frantic spark in the eyes. The desperation and submission as they gave all that they had. Stupid things, they made him sick, they made him want to throw up. It was all their fault.

Dexter opened the pocketknife and went to work. This one was a relief. The rabbit had started out scared and stayed scared, paid for loving him without a whimper. Dexter was blind from tears by the time he finished.

He buried the carcass between the roots of a big oak tree. Right next to old Turd Factory. Dexter washed his hands in the creek. It was almost dinnertime. He turned and walked back

through the clearing, past the depressions of soil where he had buried the other animals.

His own little pet cemetery. He had seen that movie. It had given him the creeps, but not badly enough to make him give up his hobby. Plus, by the time he was finished with them, no chunk was big enough to stand up by itself, much less walk.

Three cats were underground here, two of them compliments of dear old Grandma. She'd given him the rabbit as an Easter present. He'd swiped a rooster from a falling-down coop up the road, but he didn't think he'd be pulling any more of those jobs. The rooster had spurred him, plus the dumb bird had squawked and clucked loud enough to wake the dead. There was a box turtle buried somewhere around. But that had mostly been a mercy killing. Mom kept pouring beer into its water.

Same with the goldfish. He told her he'd flushed them down the toilet. Goldfish were boring, though. They didn't scream or whimper. They didn't make him want to throw up while they bled. They were too dumb to love.

Dexter giggled at the thought of a goldfish coming back from the dead and haunting him. He'd like to see that in a movie someday. *The Revenge of the Zombie Fish*. He wiped his eyes dry and headed down the trail to the house.

{end preview}

# MEMORY REMAINS

STEVE ELLER

The face in the bathroom mirror isn't dead. It's not alive.

I stopped living a few months ago; I know that. But I thought I was still alive. Now too many signs tell me otherwise. I'm not dead, though. I know dead when I see it.

Dead comes quick. It's a sudden thing, and a certainty. That's not what I am. I'm a slow unraveling. A day-by-day dissolution. Joints with a brittlestick crack, and muscles hanging like rotten fruit. Acid burning at the back of my throat, and ulcers in my mouth that won't heal. Breaths coming fewer at a time.

I twist the faucet and splash water on my face. Hot, cold, it doesn't matter. I can barely tell the difference anymore. I wipe my cheeks with my fingertips. My skin feels sticky, like half-melted wax. I watch my reflection, waiting, but no flesh is carried away by the dripping water. There's darkness below my cheekbones, and under my eyes. But I could pass for alive, if someone looked without care. And they never care.

I unbutton my soiled shirt and touch the bruises between my ribs. The skin is cool and sunken, like clay molded by a sculptor's touch. I can't shake the notion that something is missing. I lay my hand flat on my chest, and I feel nothing. Before I slept, my heart was pulsing at a frantic pace. Now, it's silent. I drop the shirt to the floor and turn out the light.

My apartment is dark because I keep the blinds closed. Passing through my living room, I wonder if it's day or night. But it's just a casual thought. Time only matters if someone is waiting for you. Or thinking of you.

The blankets are still bundled on the couch. This is where I sleep. Or just sit, watching television. There are still a few channels that come in, even with a disconnected cable. But most times I just watch the gray dots swirl. I listen to the static until my mind gives out and I drift away. I don't like sleeping in a bed anymore. Sometimes I leak in places, and I hate staining the sheets.

I sit down on the couch and wrap the blanket around my shoulders. I'm not cold, but it's a comforting thing to do. The refrigerator hums in the kitchen, and I try to recall the last time I ate anything. It seems it was a long time ago, but it's

hard to say. There might still be something in the refrigerator, blackening or withering to dust. Maybe there's something like that, inside of me.

Closing my eyes, I lean back against the couch. I swallow a deep breath, by reflex. But it never gets past my mouth. My throat is closed like a fist. I gag, and something flies out of my lips. A tooth, dotted with black blood.

+ + +

"I'm not your daddy."

It's something I say to him sometimes. A joke, a meaning-less thing. He always wags his tongue at me, then runs off. Maybe it comes out differently this time, poisoned by the alcohol in my blood. Or maybe there's no reason to assume things will always be the way they were.

He gets deathly quiet. Tears well in his eyes, but he dashes away before they trickle down his face. This isn't the way he usually runs, with his bony arms jacking and his head thrown back. His hands are clenched across his stomach, and his chin touches his chest.

I get up, to go after him, but it takes a minute to get my bearings. A few too many beers in the hot sun. The world spins in a whorl of bright green grass and white vinyl siding and blue popsicle sky. By the time I find my balance, he's around the house and gone.

But it doesn't take long to find him.

He's in his castle. It's actually an old shed, too small to keep the lawnmower in. I was going to knock it down, but he said he wanted it. So we painted it gray, like stone, and drew meandering lines to look like mortar.

Matt is inside, holding his little plastic sword. His helmet and armor are beside him on the ground, like he tossed them away. Sir Matthew. That's what he calls himself when he defends his castle. The Lord of Light. When he plays this game, he won't answer unless you call him Sir Matthew Light.

"Hey," I say. "You know I didn't mean anything."

"You never mean anything."

Tears glaze his eyes, pupils as dark as melting chocolate. His hair is copper, with streaks of white and gold. His lip quivers, and he bites it to keep from crying. Six years old, and he's already struggling to keep it inside. Maybe he learned it from me, when I wasn't looking. When I was trying not to cry at his mother's funeral.

"You know I'm your daddy, don't you?"

He starts to pull away when I reach for his face, but he

doesn't. Light skin to match his hair, and a spray of freckles across his nose. His cheek is warm from playing in the sun.

"Not my real daddy," he says.

It doesn't matter if he says it to hurt me. He can't punish me any worse than I'm punishing myself. My beer buzz fades, replaced by a perfect clarity.

"Yes, I am. We've been together since you were two years old. I married your mommy. And gave you my name. I'm your daddy."

His eyes are deep, and wide open. He wants so badly to believe it. I catch myself biting my own lip.

"So don't say it anymore. Okay?"

"Okay, it's a deal. Never again."

+ + +

On a whim, I lift back the edge of the curtain and open the blinds.

It's daytime outside, a few wispy clouds in the sky like running cream. I start to open the window, for a breath of fresh air, until I remember I don't breathe anymore. It's just as well. The window overlooks the alley, and all I'd get is a noseful of dumpster stink.

I see, at the mouth of the alley, people strolling down the street. Dressed in suits, dressed in rags. It must be warm. Perfect pink skin sticks out from shirt sleeves and the legs of shorts. I see flat stomachs, some twinkling with belly rings. The sun glistens on bare skin, making it golden and soft, like butter. My stomach growls.

Thinking about warm, shiny flesh makes my mouth ache. It's like a hunger, what I remember of hunger. I want that skin against my lips, inside my mouth. There's no way I could eat. I can't even force a breath down my throat. But I still want it.

I close the blinds, and drop the curtain. Outside isn't for me anymore. I belong in my little dark apartment, alone with my thoughts. With my memories.

Falling back on the couch, I grab the television remote. My skin splits in a crescent around my left thumb. That's no surprise. I keep the sewing kit close these days. Hazy ghosts appear on the screen, their voices more buzz than words. Bathed in artificial light, I thread a needle.

{end preview}

# THE HYPHENATED SPIRIT

SCOT NOEL

*Cursed be the sickly forms that err from honest Nature's rule!*

—Alfred Lord Tennyson, “Locksley Hall”

Elizabeth embraced the early morning as she might a secret lover. It was a time of quiet, with curtains drawn against the coming of the light. The air was chill and clean. In these moments she would lose herself in the verses of Clare and Browning, or commit Tennyson to memory in whispers too soft for her sleeping sister to hear. For an hour or more there would be peace. No household to run. No constant fussing to keep her dear sister civilized. As Cordelia's *illness* intensified, the strain between them had grown to the breaking point. To give in to Cordelia one more time, Elizabeth knew, might prove fatal to them both.

With delicate fingers, Elizabeth turned a page. Besides her in the bed, Cordelia shifted uneasily, snoring, and then breaking wind. The chill air did little to dampen the stench. Elizabeth kept to her reading, having endured far worse.

Another movement and Elizabeth lowered the flame on the bedside lamp. Sleep had never come easily to the twins, and the import of the coming day had done them no favors, keeping them arguing well into the night. At last Cordelia had succumbed to exhaustion, while Elizabeth read aloud from Wordsworth's “Apology.”

After a moment's consideration, she lowered the flame still further. The pleated curtain hanging between them might too easily permit through a shimmer of light, awakening Cordelia. The curtain should have been replaced with darker cloth, Elizabeth knew, but it and the four-poster bed on which it hung had been with them since childhood. Edged in Brussels lace, the separator lay gently across the band of flesh that conjoined Elizabeth to her sister.

In the fading light, Elizabeth continued to read from Tennyson. After a time she realized the marks on the page meant nothing, her spirit having grown too heavy to decipher them. She closed the musty volume.

Elizabeth lay back, putting aside her book. Frightened of the coming day, she drew her quilt close against the cold. A

tear began to form. She wished that she could pass now. Leave flesh, breath, and dreams behind. Slip away without fear. It was so hard, with Father gone and Mother having passed soon after. Three years past. For three years, everything had rested on Elizabeth's shoulders: the house, the servants downstairs, the caring for Cordelia. It weighed her down. It drowned her in a darkness she had never imagined.

Focusing her gaze on the lace canopy above, Elizabeth felt herself pulled toward the beauty and oblivion that had always fluttered like a heart within her.

A thump. Perhaps a servant stumbling in the dark. There followed a crash of glassware and a curse. It all but stopped Elizabeth's heart, but, more to the point, stirred Cordelia, bringing a quick tug to the ligament between them. There followed a rattling growl from the twin beyond the curtain. Elizabeth drew back, feeling the bed shake with the power of a nightmare aroused. The curtain swirled in parting, lost itself in shadow, torn aside by arms flailing and groping as much toward consciousness as toward the warm flesh and soft yellow light on Elizabeth's side of the bed.

"Sister, stop!" Elizabeth cried. She reached to the bedside, her hand groping for something unseen. A vicious tug to the ligament lifted her bodily away. Her hands flew to her defense as she repeated Cordelia's name over and over.

Coming at Elizabeth, out of the dark, loomed a beast within a cage, the head and shoulders of her wild twin having been secured within hoops and rods of iron. Behind this barrier, Cordelia's eyes held the rage of dying men. Their dark gaze was lost in pools of blood.

In the moment of awakening, Cordelia lost track of all precaution, forgetting the cage that enclosed her head and shoulders, forgetting everything. She grasped with darkened flesh at the powder-white shoulders of her twin. Lips pulled back, revealing teeth already broken and blunted by a taste for bone, for the softness within. Yet recognition, too, began to rise. Sluggishly, it registered on Cordelia's muddied countenance.

As the startling rumpus presented by her conjoined twin eased, Elizabeth once again reached to the side of the bed. There her fingers wrapped about the hilt of their father's silver-knobbed walking stick. With a will, she brought it crashing against Cordelia's imprisoned head.

The chill of Cordelia's fingers withdrew, lingering no more than a child's hand on a hot loaf. Next they went to the bird-cage, to the hoops and threads of iron that had been hammered into a special aviary, an enclosure capturing within Cordelia's

lust for flesh, a hunger they both knew she could not control upon awakening. Elizabeth banged against the cage again.

“Sister, sweet Sister!” the gray twin cried. “Stop it. I’m . . . awake now.”

“It was a servant,” Elizabeth explained, “making a noise. They shall learn the better of it on the morrow. They should not have disturbed you.”

Seeing the pages of Tennyson thrown open across the bed, Cordelia groaned.

“Dear Sister, might you please put out the light?” Cordelia asked. “Or is it time to begin?”

“You’ve had too little rest.”

“I feel fine.”

“I’m afraid I know best, Cordelia. Now, if you should calm yourself, I promise to read you to sleep once again.”

Cordelia growled. She grasped the thick book with unfeeling hands, tearing it away from Elizabeth. She recognized the pages, so well did she hate them. Leaves were brushed aside until the one she sought flickered in the light, its voice all too familiar. Elizabeth’s voice.

She read: “‘Thou art mated with a clown, and the grossness of his nature will have weight to drag thee down.’” Closing the book with a dusty wallop, the gray twin tossed the volume across her shoulder, where it bumped and thumped into darkness.

“Wake me when it is time,” said Cordelia, reclining with her arms wrapped tightly, defiantly, about her bosom. Finding the edge of the separator, she pulled the curtain closed.

Encircling the ligament of flesh between them with the fingers of one hand, Elizabeth stroked gently at the navel they shared. It had always before calmed Cordelia’s capricious nerves. “Sleep, dear Sister. Sleep.”

When certain her twin had passed into Morpheus’ realm, Elizabeth snuffled and closed her eyes. The need to escape was gone. Oblivion no longer beckoned. As her pillow grew wet with tears, she knew she could never leave Cordelia on her own, no matter what they had agreed.

{end preview}

# GODDAMN REDNECK SURFER ZOMBIES

MICHAEL J. JASPER

People stopped coming to the North Carolina coast when the dead returned to the beach after four decades away. Got to the point where folks couldn't sit outside their own beach-side trailers with a case of Bud without some rotting corpse staggering up and asking for directions to the cemetery or the bars or the bait shop, the whole time smelling like spoiled tuna. They killed us for most of the entire tourist season before we realized what they were up to, and actually did something about 'em. Goddamn zombies.

Back at the season's start, like now, I spent most of my days down at the end of the pier, the longest one in the state, where the stink of fish innards cooking in the sun never got to me like the reek of dead-person guts in some walking corpse does. If you come out to Long Beach—which you *should* do, even now, with the zombies and all—to fish and swim in the bath-warm water during the day and eat seafood and drink cold ones with us at night, you'll find me there at the farthest tip of the pier, past the signs saying *No Spectators Beyond This Point* and *King Mackerel Fishing Only*. If you give a shout for Big Al, I'll come over and say “hey” to you, long as the kings aren't biting.

Anyway, before things got messy again, I caught my limit most days by noon, smoking and drinking with the other old men with skin like leather and just enough teeth to hold their Camels in place. After the doc threatened to cut a hole in my neck, I stopped with the cancer sticks, but I still like a cold Bud while I watch my lines in the salty, hot Carolina air.

High point of those days came late in the afternoon, when the pretty girls came up and visited with us after a day of sun-bathing and gossiping. Oh Lord, to be young again. Their tanned stomachs were tight and their long hair was salty and wet from the Atlantic, and they acted like they wanted to learn about fishing. We all knew they weren't interested in any of that. They were up there on the pier with us for protection.

Because every afternoon, when the tide started to head out, the dead came lurching out of the brush on the other side

of the dunes and headed for the waves. The girls didn't want to be alone on the beach wearing just their bits of bikini as the zombies walked past, dragging their coffin lids behind 'em. Couple of the girls even recognized their grandparents, stripped down to their birthday suits, showing off their pale gray skin. That shook 'em up pretty good, let me tell you.

Far as I could tell, the girls didn't have nothing to worry about. These zombies were here for one thing only—they wanted to *surf*.

Some of us thought the zombies were attracted to the waves because of the pull of the tides. Mort and Lymon had their nicotine-and-six-pack theories about the moon's effect on the graveyards and the bodies buried in 'em. "Tidal forces from the moon," Mort said in his gravelly voice. "Pulls 'em up outta the ground just like it makes the waves come in and out. They put that cemetery too close to the ocean, that's what. Yeppers. Tidal forces."

We all just laughed and tried not to look at the naked corpses falling off their coffin lids like the newbies we called "grommets" back in my surfing days. Ten of the dead were out on the water that day, flinging their rotting and bloodless bodies toward the next wave. I recognized Alfie and Zach, old buddies from high school (flipped their car into the Intracoastal Waterway one Saturday night in '59 and drowned in three feet of water) along with my own mother (lung cancer, '82) surfing next to four-decades-dead Purnell Austin, forever twenty-one.

They took some tremendous tumbles, like the time Purnell was launched off his lid by a wave and slammed head-first into the lid of the rotting girl next to him, sending pieces of nose and teeth flying. That one was so bad I caught myself moving out of my chair toward the water. But the surfing dead don't need any kind of first aid, not any more. Purnell climbed back onto his coffin lid, twisted his head with both hands to the left once, hard, and got ready for the next wave with a laugh. Lucky he didn't lose his head on that one.

{end preview}

# THE ETHICAL TREATMENT OF MEAT

CLAUDE LALUMIÈRE

Raymond and George had never thought much about religion. They'd tried going to services at their local church shortly after adopting the child—it seemed like the right thing to do—but the preacher said children weren't allowed. No animals of any kind. Only people. It had never occurred to Raymond and George that there was that kind of bigotry in the world. They shopped around and found a more open-minded church about a thirty-minute drive away from their home. It was more trouble than they'd bargained for, but they wanted to be good parents.

They weren't the first ones to adopt a fleshie as a pet child—almost a family member, really—but they were the first in their neighborhood. They decided to get a boy, hoping he'd fit in with the all-male character of their household. The agency said his name was Rod, but they didn't like that. So they called him Scott, instead. He was so cute.

They loved Scott like a son. It was biologically impossible for people to have children, and George had heard on the news that recent studies indicated that the lack of children was a probable cause of apathy and depression, an unconscious nostalgia for people's animal past. So, when George noticed that Raymond was maybe getting a little depressed, he suggested that they nip the problem in the bud and adopt a fleshie child. Even if it was expensive.

The mere idea of it had so lifted Raymond's mood that George had known it was the right thing to do. Besides, it's not like it was a long-term commitment or anything. Scott was already four years old; he'd only be a child for another ten years or so. Adoption was such a new fad that people didn't really know what they'd do with the fleshie children once they grew up. This was the topic of the preacher's sermon.

Scott was sitting between Raymond and George, with a gag in his mouth to keep him from shouting during the service and his hands tied to make sure he didn't remove the gag. George smiled when he noticed how affectionately Raymond kept his arm around the boy.

Most people thought that, once the children grew up, they should be sold so their brains could be used as food, or simply

killed by their adoptive families, their brains eaten fresh. Fresh brains were such a rare—and delicious—treat. That packaged stuff was never as good. Too many preservatives.

But the preacher at this church was a radical. She loudly advocated animal rights, even human rights, for fleshies. George listened. He had never considered these ideas seriously before. He used to snicker at anyone so naive as to buy into that sentimental propaganda. Glancing at the boy, he pondered the preacher's words. He wasn't convinced, but he realized that he now needed to think about all this more carefully.

+ + +

Food was a problem. Pet food came in two formats. There was kibble, which wasn't too smelly, but Scott clearly wasn't that enthusiastic about it. He loved the other kind, the moist food. But neither George nor Raymond could stand the smell of the stuff, those icky vegetable, leafy, and fruity odors.

They argued about it. Raymond was willing to try, for the boy's sake. Plus, the vet said that the moist food was healthier.

George, however, was far from convinced. "No! It's just too disgusting," he said as Raymond served dinner. They were having brain casserole with chunky brain sauce. The brain cake they were going to eat for dessert was baking in the oven. It all smelled so delicious.

He continued: "And who cares if it's healthier? It's not like he's going to have a long life or anything."

Raymond looked hurt. "Don't say that! You heard what the preacher said! We have to work toward becoming a more compassionate society! To stop thinking about these animals only as a resource, a source of food. I mean, look at them—they look almost exactly like us. Sure, their skin is kind of sickly smooth, without any rot, and you can't see any of their bones or anything, but, still, they almost look like people. They can talk. They walk on two legs. It's not their fault if they smell, well, alive or something. Sure, it's kind of revolting that they grow old and then just stop moving once they die. But what we do to them in those factory farms just isn't right!"

George waited before replying. There was a tense, uncomfortable silence—save for Scott's constant crying and yelling and pounding. The boy always had so much fun when they locked him in that closet. After a few minutes, George glared at Raymond and said, "Are you done? Can I speak now?"

Raymond crossed his arms and nodded reluctantly.

"First, where do you think this meal comes from? From dead animals—animals just like Scott. This is what these

animals are—food. Meat. They're our only source of food. And we have to farm them, or else we wouldn't be able to feed everyone. Do you—"

"Farming's not natural. The preacher said so! And she's right. You know she is."

George was livid. "Don't interrupt me! I let you drone on. Now you listen to me."

Pouting, Raymond said, "Okay, I'm listening."

George wagged his finger, his mouth open, ready to bark his anger at Raymond, but instead he let his arm and shoulders drop and said in a neutral voice, "Oh, what's the use." He walked out of the house.

What was really irritating George was that he found himself starting to agree with Raymond and the preacher. But he didn't want to. He hated this kind of sentimental anthropomorphizing. Meat was meat. He was starting to regret ever adopting the boy. None of this would be an issue if Raymond hadn't become so attached to Scott.

He wandered around the neighborhood for an hour or so and then decided to go back home.

He heard the screams even before he opened the door. He walked into the living room and saw Raymond playing with the boy. Scott's screams were so loud. He must really be enjoying himself. George could see that the boy had shat and peed himself in excitement, tears and snot running down his face. Raymond and Scott looked so beautiful playing hide-the-maggots that George's anger melted away. He took a handful of maggots out of his mouth and joined the two of them at their game. Scott screamed even louder when George started pushing maggots up the boy's nose. What fun! George softened even more and gave Raymond a loving look. They kissed, the boy's screams making it all the more meaningful.

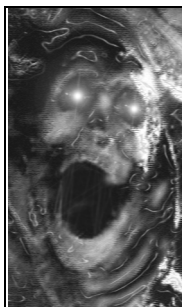
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