

The Way of All Flesh

Written by Paul Hart-Wilden

The body of the tramp had lain in the cellar of the house on Burgundy Street for several weeks now. He had finally shuffled off the mortal coil less than forty-eight hours after having sought refuge from the chill London winter. A half-empty bottle of cider stood going to waste next to the body. It had never been his favorite tippie but beggars could not be choosers and, besides, he had drunk far worse in his time—just about anything he could lay his hands on; meths, petrol, even his own piss when he had been too weak to forage for anything better. His body expelled the final pocket of gas from his intestines where the remnants of a cold, fur-covered hamburger, discovered in the gutter not a hundred yards from this, his final resting place and now dissolved into a sticky, black nothing in a pool of digestive juice.

Who he was and where he had come from were questions that he could not have answered, even if anyone had taken the trouble to ask. What meager existence had passed for his life had long since become obscured in an impenetrable haze of alcohol.

The tramp's death had been as inconsequential an event to the world at large as his life had been.

But in the midst of death there is life—and this was no exception.

The tramp had carried with him his own personal menagerie of fleas, ticks, lice and mites for as long as he could remember. Over the course of the years they had all become a part of his

life. After such a time even the continual circle of itching and scratching had become as natural to him as blinking and breathing.

The microscopic creatures clung to his flesh, drank his blood, shared his life until it had run out. Now the tramp was dead but his menagerie had not deserted him. They clung to the body he had bequeathed them; his sole earthly possession.

As the days in the cellar passed, the menagerie were joined by tiny worms, the larvae of blowflies, all attracted by the enticing stench of putrefying flesh, the stale aroma of vomit on the tramp's chest and the shit in his pants.

It was a parasitic utopia.

With nothing to do but ingest and inbreed, the invertebrate community, for it was a community they had become, wanted more. Their biting, sucking mouthparts and huge, distended stomachs slavered and ached for tastier morsels than the decaying flesh their home could offer.

Intelligence was not the correct word to describe what was beginning to develop among them. It was more of an intuition, a sense of a world that existed beyond the shadowy confines of the cellar. A world of endless possibilities—if only it were within easier reach.

Then they would go, all of them. But their tiny, gripping claws were designed for that purpose only; major locomotion had not been a part of the package. The fleas stood the best chance of traveling the distances involved but the community consciousness demanded “one for all and all for one.” No one was going anywhere without the others.

And so it remained, the tiny, clawed limbs clung precariously to the ever-diminishing body of their dead host. Some mechanism to transport them out into the brave new world was all that they needed, but such things were out of their hands

There was nothing they could do about it—so they waited.

And while they waited they continued evolving, perfecting, fucking themselves into new forms of life. The community grew. Praying had never entered their tiny minds but whether it was divine intervention, or just blind chance, their salvation was delivered from above.

All four hundred pounds of Edward Peterson came crashing down through the rotten floorboards as they gave way beneath his substantial bulk. Eddie, as he had always hoped people would call him, hit the floor of the cellar and lay still.

Everything went quiet as the dust swirled in the shafts of light from above, then gradually settled. That was good; he had not been followed. Breath labored in the huge chest and blood dribbled from his lips. The skin of Eddie's left cheek hung in a limp flap beneath the empty socket from which his eye had been gouged. He had meant to keep hold of it, try to put it back in place later when things were quiet but in the rushing and confusion he had dropped it in the street.

They had done a good job on him, almost, but Eddie had still managed to escape them. Twenty, perhaps thirty against one but he had still been able to summon up the strength from somewhere within himself to claw his way free of the mob, drag himself away and then, despite his certainly fatal wounds, outrun them.

All of his training had been worth the effort. It had hurt at the time but he had been driving himself on and on—and it had paid off. There had to be more dignity in dying here, even in the cellar of an old, ruined house; letting life slip away from him in his own sweet time. That was what it was, his own sweet time, just to lie and remember, to replay his life one last time. His own private picture show.

They had surprised him—that was obvious. How else could they have cornered him so easily? Up until the moment he had found himself confronted by the mob, Eddie had never really stopped to consider just exactly the reaction of the public at large to his hobbying. To Eddie it had always been something between him and the “Littleones,” no one else.

The make up of the mob had surprised him even more. This was not some rampaging rabble of drunks and vagabonds, like he saw in the movies. These had been real people; men, women, old, young. There had even been a young girl, no more than eight or nine—just the age that Eddie liked them. That had been what caused his hesitation, enough to give them the chance they

needed to grab him. He really had stirred up something in that sleepy little community. Average, ordinary people with their nine-to-five jobs and two-point-four children, all baying for his blood like a pack of hounds.

Eddie could not move—but that was all right. All he wanted to do now was rest. The pictures of all those angry people began to fade in his head. If they had seen where he had run they would have been here by now. But they had not followed. Eddie could take his time. Only a couple of bones had been broken by the fall, the mob had done the real damage. Coils of intestine slid almost gracefully from the hole in Eddie's stomach that had been gouged by the elderly woman wielding her broomstick like a fighting staff.

Eddie could feel his stomach running away from him. He wanted to put up his hand to stop it but he had fallen on top of one arm and the other had had three of the fingers ripped from it and would be useless even if he could summon the strength to raise it.

Eddie stared up at the jagged hole in the ceiling and a tear came to his remaining eye. It was not pain that made Eddie Peterson cry. The pain if anything was the best part of all. Not an inch of his flesh had escaped being punched, kicked, gouged, scratched or torn away. His entire body was a mass of screaming nerve endings, each sending messages to the pain receptors in his brain, screaming so loud that Eddie could not differentiate between them.

For the first, and possibly last, time in his life Eddie Peterson was truly in touch with every part of his body—and it felt electric. But even such exalted sensations could not entirely block out the realization that this warm, shadowy cellar would be the last place on God's earth that he would know. Even though he had not died at their feet as they had wished, the damage the mob had inflicted upon him would ensure that Eddie Peterson would never again see the light of day. Another tear trickled down Eddie's cheek. There was a whole world teeming with the Littleones that Eddie liked to call his own; their bodies waiting to satisfy him, their flesh to fill his

stomach, all that and more. And here was Eddie Peterson, lying, dying alone in the dark.

But Eddie was not alone.

The cellar community had been aware of Eddie's presence for quite a while before the first brave scouts had been sent forth to investigate this new, warm territory that had arrived on their doorstep. Eddie's left leg lay across what had once been the tramp's foot. That was the point of contact where the pilgrimage began.

Had he not spent so much time dreaming of the Littleones, Eddie may have been more aware of what was happening to him. He would not have seen the tramp's body even if it had occurred to him to look for it. The light that permeated the cellar was too faint to discern any detail.

The pilgrimage began at night as a hundred thousand microscopic explorers made their way from the remains of the tramp to pastures new. As they touched Eddie's body the itching began.

The symphony of pain that had accompanied him since his arrival had begun to subside into a vague numbness, but now it exploded again as the desire to scratch away every last inch of flesh that remained made him want to scream. Screaming, however, was something Eddie could no longer do. His tongue flopped uselessly in his mouth and all that escaped as sound was him gurgling on his own blood and saliva.

The procession of mites, fleas, bugs and lice moved onwards and upwards. Eddie could not see the microscopic invaders but he could feel every footfall, every searching proboscis as they overran him.

Fortress Eddie was soon overwhelmed. His already fading vision blurred as hundreds of thousands of microscopic mites converged on the tender flesh of his eyeball. Had Eddie had the benefit of a mirror he would scarcely have recognized himself among the huge, amorphous blob that rippled and writhed on the cellar floor.

The itching became more and more intense until Eddie thought he could take it no more. Then it got worse. As if on some

unheard command a hundred million mouths began to feed. Eddie's body quivered, moved by the ferocity of the voracious horde. His mind, rapidly becoming as blubbery as his body, tried vainly to comprehend what was happening to him. The body that had carried him around for almost thirty years, and had kept him out of the clutches of those who would have gladly watched him burn in Hell, was now being destroyed by tiny nothings that could sit ten thousand on the head of a pin.

The feeding took a day and a night until all of the flesh had been stripped clean from the skeleton. Eddie would have found some comfort even in that state—as he had always maintained to taunters of his excessive physique—he really was big boned. And that should have been the end of things, at least as far as Eddie Peterson was concerned. But what puzzled Eddie the most was the fact that he could still puzzle at all. For a day and a night he had lain in the cellar and been slowly devoured, but he could still see, still hear. If that were not the end of things, then what next?

Eddie sat up. He looked around. Perhaps he had been dreaming. He raised his hands and stared at them. Four fingers and a thumb on each, just as they had always been. But what of the fingers that had been ripped away during his escape?

We're your fingers now, Eddie.

Fingers that talked. Eddie liked that. He smiled and got slowly, unsteadily to his feet. He stood in the middle of the cellar, a thin beam of light shining down on him through a hole in the floorboards above. Eddie looked himself up and down. His body could not weigh four hundred pounds now. It looked far too lean and muscular.

That way no one will be able to catch us.

Now his body was talking to him. Eddie raised his talking hands in front of his face. He flexed the fingers. They moved just as they always had, but the sensations were somehow different.

We are different, Eddie. You are different now.

“How am I different?” Eddie was taken aback. Who was he talking to?

We are you now, Eddie. And you are us.

So that was it. That was how his fingers spoke to him, why they felt so different. They were alive.

Eddie touched his body, it felt the same all over. A body constructed from a thousand million living organisms. A man replicated from a billion invertebrates, each cell a living creature.

“Why have you done this?”

We need each other, Eddie. We all need to leave this place but we can't do it alone.

Eddie strutted around the cellar becoming accustomed to the weight of his new body. “Does this mean I can go back to my Littleones?”

Yes, Eddie, we all can.

Eddie smiled. “Will it be like before?” he asked eagerly.

Not quite... but it will be good. We must all learn to adapt.

Eddie frowned, unsure of what they meant. Then he felt down between his legs. Their replica of a man was not as anatomically correct as Eddie would have liked.

“But that was the part I liked best.”

Don't worry, Eddie. You can teach us. We are all eager to learn.

Eddie beamed, friends at last to share his hobby with.

“Then let's go,” he said. “The Littleones are waiting.”

Author's Note: The Way of all Flesh

“How could you sleep with someone who writes things like that?” I remember a girl friend of a girl I used to date saying that after having read *The Way of All Flesh*.

I guess you could say the question would be just as valid regardless of what I wrote, but nevertheless it does raise the point, “where do you think up this stuff?” I’m not the first person to get asked it and I won’t be the last.

In terms of an answer, I don’t really have much to offer by way of an explanation. I’m quite sympathetic to Stephen King’s theory that we all possess an individual mess over the drains of our minds, which filters catches and allows through different things based on the size of the mesh.

I can buy that. My own thoughts are along the lines of...why do I like steak? Why do I like strawberries? I have no idea. I just do. Sure, I could pontificate about the taste or color or texture, but why does that particular taste or color or texture appeal to me and other tastes, colors and textures not?

I have no idea...that’s just the way it is. Different people like different stuff and it makes the world a whole lot more interesting than if we all liked the same stuff.

It’s hardly scientific...but it works for me.

Now, having been about as vague as it’s possible to be on the general question of where you drag these ideas from, it is possible to get a little more specific when looking at the stories individually.

The Way of All Flesh was my first really “serious” attempt to write something. There’s plenty of stuff that sticks in my grid. If you take more than a second to look around the world we inhabit and the kinds of people and creatures that live there, you’ll never run out of material or inspiration.

I’d been watching TV documentaries and read magazine articles about the number of tiny creatures that actually inhabit the human body. There’s little bugs that live in your eyebrows, bugs that live in your bed... hundreds and thousands of them—without even considering lice or fleas or any of the other myriad creatures that can invade and infect the human form.

So... there you have it... the life of these tiny creatures.

And what would happen if these creatures actually came into contact with a person...could there be any kind of communication or understanding?

Probably not. But this is a story and you only have to take your inspiration from reality...you don’t need to follow all of its rules.

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