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JAMES ROLLINS

THE BOOK EATERS

SUNYI DEAN

THE
BOOK
EATERS



SUNYI DEAN



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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*For my mother, who has been a force of nature her entire life;
and for my dear friend John O'Toole, who is something of a Jarrow.*

ACT 1
DUSK

1

DEVON BY DAY

PRESENT DAY

We have just begun to navigate a strange region; we must expect to encounter strange adventures, strange perils.

—Arthur Machen, *The Terror*

These days, Devon only bought three things from the shops: books, booze, and Sensitive Care skin cream. The books she ate, the booze kept her sane, and the lotion was for Cai, her son. He suffered occasionally from eczema, especially in winter.

There were no books in this convenience store, only rows of garish magazines. Not to her taste, and anyway she had enough books to eat at home. Her gaze skipped across the soft porn, power tools, and home living publications down to the lowest strata, where children's magazines glowed pink and yellow.

Devon ran short, ragged nails across the covers. She thought about buying one for Cai, because he seemed to like reading that kind of thing at the moment, and decided against it. After tonight, his preferences might change.

She walked to the end of the aisle, linoleum squishing beneath her heeled boots, and set her basket at the checkout. Four bottles of vodka and a tub of skin cream.

The cashier looked at the basket, then back at her. "D'you have ID?"

"Pardon?"

"Do you, have, any ID?" he repeated, slowly, as if to someone hard of hearing.

She stared. “I’m twenty-nine, for Christ’s sake.” And looked every year of it, too.

He shrugged, crossed his arms. Waiting. Wasn’t much more than a kid himself, at most eighteen or nineteen, working in the family shop and likely trying to follow all the rules.

Understandable, but she couldn’t oblige him. Devon didn’t have any ID. No birth certificate, no passport, no driver’s license; nothing. Officially, she didn’t exist.

“Forget it.” Devon shoved the basket at him, bottles clinking. “I’ll get a drink somewhere else.”

She stalked out, annoyed and flustered. Hordes of teenagers bought booze from other corner shops all the time. It was a daily occurrence around here. That someone would choose to card *her*, so clearly an adult, was ridiculous.

Only after she’d crossed the badly lit street did she realize that she’d left without buying the skin cream. It was a small failure, forgetting the lotion, but she failed Cai so constantly in so many different, myriad ways that even this tiny mistake was sufficient to wring her insides with fresh anger.

She considered going back for it, then checked her watch. The time was pushing 8 P.M. Already in danger of running late.

Besides, eczema was nothing compared to his hunger. Much more important to feed him.

Newcastle-upon-Tyne was a pretty enough city, if a little rowdy for Devon’s liking. This time of year, the sun set at 4 P.M. and the sky was already fully dark, the lamps abuzz. The lack of ambient light suited her mood. Compulsively, she checked her phone with its short list of contacts. No texts. No calls.

She slunk past a row of decrepit terraces. Passersby drifted up and down the pavement. A tight knot of people huddled outside one of the houses, drinking and smoking. Music leaked through curtainless windows. Devon took a left off the main street to avoid the crowds.

There were so many things to remember when she was out and around humans. Feigning cold was one of them. Thinking of it, she drew her coat tight around her, as if bothered by the chill. Walking with sound was another. She scuffed her feet with deliberate heaviness, grinding gravel and dust beneath her heels. Big boots helped with the plodding tread, made her clunky and stompy like a toddler in adult wellies.

Her vision in darkness was another awkward one. Having to remember to squint, and to pick her way across a detritus-littered pavement that she could see

with perfect clarity; having to feign a fear she never felt, but which should have ruled her. Solitary human women walked with caution in the night.

In short, Devon had always to act like prey, and not like the predator she had become.

She picked up the pace, keen to get home. The flat she rented (cash only, no questions) occupied a squalid space above a tire shop. In the daytime it was noisy, reeked of oil, and filled with the conversation of customers. The evenings were quieter, if no less foul-smelling.

Down the alley, up the stairs to the back entrance. There was no street-facing door, but that was a good thing. Meant she could come and go by dark side alleys, unwatched by curious eyes—and so could her visitors, when she had them. Privacy was essential.

Devon fished out a set of keys, hanging around her neck on a lanyard. The cord was entangled with a brass compass on a steel chain. She shook the lanyard free, slotted the key in, and wrestled briefly with the lock before stepping inside.

Since neither she nor her son required light, the flat sat in perpetual dark. It saved on the energy meter and reminded her a little of home, back when home had been welcoming: the cool unlit calm of Fairweather Manor, with its shade-tinted hallways and shadow-layered libraries.

She was expecting human company, though, and switched on all the lights. Cheap bulbs flickered into anemic existence. The flat contained only a claustrophobic living space, a small kitchenette with fold-out table, a bathroom veering off to the left, and a locked bedroom to her right where her son spent much of every day. She dropped her bag by the door, hung her coat on a hook, and clunked across to his room.

“Cai? Are you awake?”

Silence, then the faintest of shuffles from within.

“No lotion, sorry,” she said. “They were out. I’ll get some tomorrow, aye?”

The shuffling stopped.

Always, she was tempted to go in and offer comfort of some kind. By the three-week mark, starvation would have ravaged him to thinness, his suffering spiraling into unbearable agony as his body began to produce toxins. The madness already gnawed his mind, incurable except through his next feed, and even after feeding, the craving would remain ever-present. He would either sit in a corner, huddled up and unresponsive, or else attack her in a frothing rage.

Impossible to know which reaction she’d get and so, fingers shaking, she checked and double-checked the bolts instead of going in. One on the top and one

on the bottom, both solid things she'd installed herself, and one regular lock that required a key. The room had no window, courtesy of its awkward layout in relation to the shop; no additional security needed there. For once.

Someone knocked at the entrance to her flat. She jumped, felt chagrined, then checked her watch. Ten past eight; bang on time. Just as well she'd not gone back for the lotion.

Devon went to let in her guest. He had a name, but she would not allow herself to think it. Better to consider only his role, his profession: the local vicar. He needed to be no more and no less.

The vicar waited anxiously on her doorstep, wearing a black-and-mustard coat that might have been fashionable forty years ago. He had kind eyes, a quiet demeanor, and impressive patience with his quarrelsome congregation. Not touchy-feely with kids and no severe personal problems that she could find after two weeks of intense stalking. Everyone had small vices and little problems, always, but that was a given, and she could cope with the small stuff. They were only human, after all.

"Thanks for coming." Devon hunched herself smaller. Be uneasy, be reluctant, and above all, be vulnerable. The sure-fire act that suckered them every time. "I didn't think you would."

"Not at all!" He offered a smile. "As I told you on Sunday, it's no trouble."

Devon said nothing, looking sheepish and fiddling with the compass around her neck. She'd done this conversation or some variation of it so many times, tried all kinds of lines, and found it was better to let them take the initiative. Probably she should have put on something more feminine to look even more unthreatening, but she despised dresses.

"May I come in?" he ventured, and she feigned embarrassment for her rudeness, stepping aside.

His gaze snagged on the dilapidated interior. Devon couldn't blame him. She gave the usual, awkward apologies for the state of the flat while he gave the usual demurring reassurances.

That ritual completed, she said, "My son is in a bad way. I spoke to him earlier, and he didn't answer. You may not have much luck, I'm afraid."

The vicar nodded, lips pursed with concern. "If you are happy for me to try, I will see if I can speak to him."

Devon clenched her teeth to hold back a contemptuous laugh. As if talking could solve problems like this. Wasn't the vicar's fault, she'd been the one to say that Cai had depression, but hysteria crept up on her nonetheless.

The vicar was still awaiting a response. She managed a tight nod, hoping he'd read her emotions for the right kind of conflicted, and led him to the locked door.

"You lock your son in his room?" He sounded shocked, and she could feel the weight of his judgment as she undid each bolt. No doubt he thought she had something to do with Cai's present mental state.

If only he knew.

"It's complicated." Devon turned the key and paused, aware her heart was racing. "I need to ask you something."

"What is it?" The vicar was wary, his senses alert to a danger that his eyes could not perceive.

Didn't matter. He'd been lost the moment he stepped inside.

She met his gaze. "Are you a good person?" The question that consumed her, every time. Every victim. "Are you kind?"

He frowned, considering his words. Trying to understand what reassurance she sought, not that he had a cat's chance in hell of guessing. Still, his hesitation was its own reassurance. The bad ones lied, quick and smooth—or worse, brushed it aside, sometimes with humor. Only those with a conscience would stop and evaluate her question.

"None of us are truly good," the vicar said, at last. He put a hand on her shoulder, so gently, so kindly, and she almost threw up on the spot. "All we can do is live by the light we are given."

"Some of us don't have any light," Devon said. "How are we supposed to live, then?"

He blinked. "I—"

Devon caught his wrist, wrenched the door open, and shoved him in. The vicar wasn't frail but Devon was far stronger than she looked and had the element of surprise. He stumbled forward, startled and gasping, into the darkness of Cai's room. Devon yanked the door shut and held it hard.

"I'm so sorry," she said through the keyhole. "I'm just doing the best I can."

The vicar didn't answer. He was already shouting and thrashing.

Really, it was pointless to apologize. Victims didn't want your sorry-so-sorrys when you were hurting them, they wanted you to stop. Devon couldn't oblige, though, and apologies were all she had these days. Apologies, and booze.

The noise of the vicar's muffled struggling trickled away in a minute or less. She could never decide which was worse: the wailing, or the silence. Maybe they were equally bad. After a moment of dithering, she let go of the doorknob. No

point locking up. Cai wouldn't be dangerous, not anymore, and better to make sure he could leave his room if he wished.

The flat oppressed, mildewed walls crushing her spirit to flatness. After so many days of ravenous hunger, her son would need to sleep off his feed. In the meantime, she wanted a drink and there was no vodka in the house.

No, wait. She still had a half bottle of whiskey, left behind by the previous person she'd brought to her home. Devon didn't like whiskey, but right now she liked being sober even less. A couple minutes of rifling through the cabinets turned up the errant alcohol.

Bottle in hand, Devon locked herself in the tiny, dingy bathroom and drank into oblivion.