In the Flesh

by DJ Young

Here we go again. Noxious little invaders back for more. They always bring a few new ones, just as dog-vomit ugly and twice as stupid. They don't even need to wear masks, they're so filthy hideous. All piss stinking pockmarked pubescence. There's one now, his shriveled little banger wilting in the wind, wetting my poor old porch. No wonder it's rotted through. You know how many I've seen do that over the years? His smells like some diseased old cat, stinging essence of putrid.

I know what they want, all poking and daring, those aggravating giggle-screams - and that's just the boys. The girls are always a bit more brave, trying my tender knobs and latches, tip-toeing like they're actually a secret, as if I don't know already the dead-rubber stench of their shoes. Then the boys, those two, hanging back, as if they know what's coming, just watching, trying to look composed, in-control. They smell like rat shit. Like dead rat shit. Whenever one of them takes a step, I give a little heave, from beneath and listen for the little hitch in the throat, that jagged pulse, like an old metal saw, ripping through stubborn bone. They've never heard a sound like that.

The short one, hands shoved in his pockets, he's got other plans. I can smell it coming off of him as he touches the arm of one of the girls. He's going to lead her to the kitchen, the old pantry. He took a different girl there last year. She was small and pretty and drunk. The cupboards still reek of their sour old sweat and spit. This girl won't like it, I can tell. She's going to resist. She wants to follow the other two, upstairs.

I want to laugh when they reach out for the railing. You can tell they don't want to touch me, so old and peeling in odd places. They can never help it. They start fingering my cracks and chafes and

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notches, testing me for balance. No, you little monsters I won't fall apart on you tonight. Don't you worry - you just keep going.

Funny how they never look in the obvious places — no one ever goes down, not to the basement - much too dark, of course and too many noises and damp smells. They'll never put a hand down there: too many strange spots. I know what terrible stains people leave behind. No, don't go down there, boys and girls. Don't go down there!

“This is so fucking stupid. We're gonna get tetanus or fall through the fucking floor.”

“How old is this place?”

“Fuck if I know.”

“Smells like ass.”

“This is her bedroom, this is where it happened.”

The tall boy, the one who looks a bit like *him* is standing by the bedroom door. If he stomps his foot all the mice will go scampering. I hate it. You would too. Hundreds of little rodent feet tearing all over you. Little bastards.

“He tied her to the bed posts and stripped off all her clothes. They say he painted her first.”

Here we go — they always get this wrong. He's just making it up I want to say. He's full of shit.

“Painted her with what?”

The tall one looks over his shoulder at them. I can smell the cocky musk coming off of his jeans.

“What do you think?”

He makes that cruel, rude gesture with his fist at hip level and his smile is just like *his.*

The short one has come up behind the others. He grinds himself at the girl he wants to seduce. She smells like *her*, but there's something else, too. It's churning up her stomach. Little man should be careful - could wind up all over his nice leather shoes.

“They say he took a hack saw to her ankles first. She was alive when he started, awake and alive. He cut her into a hundred little pieces. It took hours because the saw was old and rusty. Can you imagine? She watched herself get hacked up and couldn't do a thing.”

The taller girl, the brave one, looks doubtful. I like the shape of her lips, like a permanent, cold kiss.

“No one heard her scream? What about the servants?”

“He must have cut out her tongue.”

The tall boy has run out of story; he just shrugs at her. They always run out of steam at this point. No one explores further. They just race down my stairs and out the door. Sometimes they leave me a little something, a lock of hair, a fingernail or two, some sticky effluvium. Usually it's something smelly, snotty. What will they give me tonight?

“Do you guys ever go down in the basement? What's down there?”

The tall girl is full of surprises. I feel like shivering. I rattle my panes a bit.

“They never found him, did they? They found her, what was left, in the furnace, but they never found him.”

She is staring at the old padlock on the door that leads to my basement. The lock is nothing but rust and I know when she touches it, rattles it a little, it will just give way. She is smiling at the others, provoking them. She thinks this is all a joke. She thinks she can turn the tables somehow. We'll see, precious. Just touch it and we'll see.

“It's always locked. Besides, it's probably full of rats and rat shit and fuck knows what.”

The short one hasn't got a brain in his balls, but he's not wrong.

“You scared?”

The excitement is dripping off of them in waves. They smell like low tides and fish markets. The boys will do anything for a snatch. The tall one takes the lead and grips the padlock; it all but crumbles in his hand, leaving it dusty rust red.

“Let's do it, come on.”

He reaches into his jeans and pulls out a small silver lighter that illuminates the passage way. There is a sheer wall of cobwebs hanging over the steps. He lifts his light to the edge of the closest and watches it shrivel and turn black.

“Hand me that stick.”

The short one picks up a rusted narrow pipe, a piece that was left behind some 30 years ago when another young man thought he'd pay me a visit. Just like old times.

The tall one uses the pipe to clear a path through the cobwebs and the others fall in line behind him, following his flame into my recesses, my secret.

“Oh my God it smells like puke.”

The girls are cupping their hands over their faces; the boys just grimace, too macho to be perturbed by a little rancid, two hundred year old stench. But I can smell their apprehension. They've both gone completely soft.

“I can't see anything.”

The short one pulls out another lighter and waves it around the room. I can see the shine of sweat on his fingers. I can tell he's shaking a little. He keeps turning to look behind him, making circles as they walk. He's too easy.

The girls are holding themselves, against the damp draft. I know how cold it is. I can see their nipples tenting the fronts of their t-shirts. They don't want the boys to notice. Funny — what can make one hard makes others shrink. I'm pretty sure there are two pairs of testicles disappearing inside the bodies of these two young men.

“Can you see anything?”

“It's just a basement. There's a bunch of old tools.”

“Is that it?”

Yes, there it is: the furnace. Go on. Take a look.

The smaller girl reaches out for the long iron handle on the door, the others creeping around her, so anxious, the boys holding their tiny torches only as high as their noses.

“Open it.”

She gives it a small tug and the door falls off, BANG on the floor and all four of them jump back, heads knocking against old lanterns hanging from my knotty old beams. Serves them right.

“Fuck!”

Clouds of old soot swirl up and flour their jeans, but they know. All the evidence is long gone.

“Like we were gonna find something. It's just old and this is stupid. Let's go.”

The short one is really taking this personally. I like that. His temper is like steam rising off of him. He just wanted a quick fuck in a cupboard, now he's got dead girl dust all over him. Well, maybe it's *her*s.

The tall girl is already moving away, but she's not going back to the stairs. She's looking at me, looking *right* at me. I know she *thinks* she knows what she sees, but it's too dark. She takes the lighter from the tall boy and moves closer. She is so close to me I can see the tiny scar above her left eye. She knows what its like to be touched wrong too.

“Look at this.”

The smaller girl is still shuddering, dusting off her jeans when she looks up, just a little higher than the others. She sees too.

“What the fuck is that?”

The thrill of it is dancing through me, I feel like gooseflesh. I wonder if they see that, too.

The tall girl, my favorite, my love, she reaches out to me, her fingers are so long and pointed and soft — where she touches me, I'm the one shivering now. I know she knows.

“Feels like…leather, like really old leather.”

The other girl is reaching for me now too, and so is the tall boy - him - but I don't care for him. His fingers are sweaty worm meal.

“The whole wall is covered in it. What is it? Cow hide?”

“It still has hair on it, gross.”

“It's warm.”

The short one is waving his torch at me now, spasmodic, I know he's ready to run, ready to panic, but he's got to stay now, hasn't he?

“They probably made their own clothes. They hung it up down here to dry or something.”

“Why is it so warm? Do you feel that? I think it's...pulsing.”

The smaller girl jumps back a little and I feel such an ache where her hands have been. The tall ones won't leave me alone. They keep looking for the end of it.

“It's just the wall; it's the rats in the walls or something.”

“This was one big cow if that's what this was cut from. I don't see where it stops, do you? It's like the whole wall.”

The short one is shuffling now, he's so dizzy with need I just want to squeeze it out of him, watch it drip down his cheeks.

“You guys are gonna need to totally wash up after this. You don't know what that shit is. It's probably got shit on it.”

She's getting closer to it, I know she feels it, right through me, just as I know her now, know everything about her, how much more I want to know, her caress like feathers, like dreams I haven't dreamed in a hundred years. I want her. I want her to see it. She's so close —

“They never found that guy, did they?”

The tall one is taking her shoulder now, her hands drop. I want to grind his hands under glass and rip the flesh off his skull.

“He's right. We need to go.”

The other two are already walking away, back to the stairs and I would break myself if I could, I would stop them dead in their tracks —

“Can you hear that?”

He's got her by the hand now; he's not going to let go until they touch the grass again.

“It's just the rats.”

He is leading her away, but she's not cooperating, not enough, she's still looking at me. She sees me. I know she sees me.

“Come on.”

Their smell is fading, too fast, they're running now, pounding me out, slipping on the cold piss shit floors, the outer shell of me. Their hearts are romping in their chests. They'll be hard again in no time, hard and furious in some other shit hole. The boys are begging for candy. Trick or treat.

I can taste her. I know her better than he ever will.

I know she'll come back. She'll come back without them and she'll find me.

Won't she.

END