

Sugared Plums (05 . 0 2 . 2 4)

They weren't people; for if they were then they wouldn't have set our homes ablaze or stabbed Coblaith's new bairn at the teat, in wanton desolation. The creatures apparaeted from the harr as invigorated as you would be from a Sunday jaunt round the farm, though we knew no land existed through the Eastern wake.

I had been rescued by my mother; her delicate graze nursed my palm in heartful rhythm, while my face was soothed by the heated weight of a fresh flannel over my face and she poured thick Sorrel tea on my tongue. She was resigned and never let my faceloth turn cold, even while I was bed-ridden and the other sick men pressed against my shoulders.

Her patience was everlasting, yet her hand had tipped and the tea – made so thick and putrid by its congealing – had filled my mouth so I began to choke. I revolted against my binds, and dared to drag my eyelashes against the warmth of the cloth – her stroking had ceased though her moist fist remained curled in my hand. Not wishing to cause any more disrespect, I briskly fought against the weighted blanket to find that something had spilled – it, and everything else – was sodden and slick with moisture. The gasping heat remained, and I gave a reassuring squeeze to my mother's hand while I removed the clammy, clotted kerchief.

Yet her hand burst in pus and sinew; covering his hand with jellied flesh while he removed his aide to have his healing interrupted by slabs of gnashing flesh, weeping and whimpering in this living crypt. The air was humid with the cloying sweetness of decay, and it peeled his eyes while filling his mouth with imploring saliva.

Navigation was devoid in this place, for the walls of limbs enclosed him from every dimension – one of his knees, bent against his stomach, fed the puréed organs through his toes and caused them to drip down his shins. Reaching out into the wallowed darkness, he found he could not extend his bones fully without pressing against the terrine of muscle and tendoned human meat.

Rotating his neck, he saw no light, no shade – only the congealed nothingness; but for what he could not see, he could only feel. He has become increasingly aware of the

intermittent trickling of curdled innards from a nearby carcass indiscriminately gushing over his forehead as the larvae and maggots gorged elsewhere. From that pustulant overflow, he was able to manufacture his North Star and so he extended his reach towards his hopeful salvation.

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Piercing the fleshy walls with his nails, and screwing in his fingers to support his weight, he persevered to pull his body from the cradle of pestilence it had formed – either that or to build a monument to his venture in the toppled remains of pulped flesh in which he would be entombed were he to fail. He tore and punctured upwards towards the source; ignoring the twinges and irritations of his body as they would prove no help in his infernal escape.

Turning his cheek to the excavated stomach cavity above him, which was now rippling with the fetid labour of a thousand unseen parasites, he mumbled an unheard prayer to his negligent God for what he had to do. Soberly inching his hand towards the man's teeming stomach, which quivered as if the infestation inside feared his touch, he prodded the open wound. Placing his palm firmly inside the tear, his fingers pushed back against the walls of the gash, and he thrust firmly against the man's midriff.

His thumb punctured the skin first and a vein of muddy liquid cascaded down his arm, casting tributaries to snake around his elbow to his shoulder. In that moment, doubt caused him to pull his arm back though this did not save him from the loathsome gestation which erupted above his head. The rotten stomach gave way in a shower of mouldy flesh, engorged maggots and festered innards which threatened his balance as its corruption dragged on his half-naked person.

With trembling arms, he clawed his fingers into the screaming walls – as a hound should clench its jaws, with spit running from its mouth, as its owner struggles to remove a delicate slab of meat. Yet – as the pinhead vermin writhed in their descent and, in their existential terror, attempted to smuggle their way through the ducts and pores of his body – he found he had remained solid against the gasping structures of this hell. In return for this daring act, he dully regained his own senses as the hallowed morning light shone faintly, beckoning him.

With the newfound stability afforded him by his regained sight, he scraped and tore his fingers up the chimney of corpses; tremblingly inching his way skyward with the aided lubrication of the fermented digestion which had poured over him. Concentrating on the light, his brushing past the barricades of pulsing muscle and ripped cartilage were replaced in his mind by the colours of the autumn trees rushing past – the velvet leaves and snatching branches scraping into his body.

As if the other corpses of the pit could sense his increased pace, the organs and cartilage of the fleshy oubliette began to twitch and writhe in choreographed spasm. Such movement had begun to not only close up the columned passage with dripping flesh and broken limbs, but the thrashing muscle of the walls were forcing his fingers from their holds. Scrambling his way up the grave, the air was becoming oppressively humid with the odour of sweet decay emanating from all sides.

Reaching out for a final ascent, he instinctively dug his nails into a decomposing socket to pull himself upwards – only for a muffled scream to resonate the walls from within. A withered hand, with the skin stripped and the muscles exposed, reached out ahead: pleading for escape or release.

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He could feel his heart rattling the bars of his ribcage, turned crazed by the choking horror of its surroundings, and forcing his eyes to notice the loose-hanging pebble hanging from twisted yarn on the hand's noticeably feminine wrist. In a last act of frustrated pleading his heart emanated recollections of youthful days spent splashing in the surf, skimming stones not unlike the granite gem dangling just ahead.

His father caught crustations in the waves, and with great patience would teach him how to correctly prepare the cerulean casings of the mussels and to savagely fracture the lobster's flame-plated hide. Even in the damp, warm, compressed confines of this place he could recite the steps from memory;

Firstly, you twist and splinter the claws and knuckles –
dragging the flesh out with your fingers

Secondly, split the lobster in half - removing the tail from
the body of the creature.

Lastly, ignore the squirming terror and bellowing screams of
the beast as you insert a thumb in the underside of its body
and fracture it apart in the middle – allowing the briny liquor
to seep through your fingers.

Pushing up from the shivering, bloody stump the cawing of
the gulls beckoned him through the shaft into the salty
midnight air. Overcome with the added reek of the dense
peaty smoke from a smouldering pyre, he suddenly became
aware that – though he was pushing desperately away from
the fleshy mound – the irritable material of his clothing had
become snagged on something within the hole.

With crawling bile climbing up his throat, and the temptation
to itch his stomach becoming agonizingly inviting, he rubbed
his streaming eyes with his blood-lathered fingers to notice
the extended limb of a horseless cart. Refusing to be torn from
his triumph, his soaking hands gripped the wooden beam and
pulled with the last bastions of his dwindling brawn.

The beam dripping with others' blood, his muscles shivered
and congregated in this final moment. Like uprooting a crop,
he shuffled and twisted in the gory soil; displacing the
bleeding earth to pull himself free.

A twinge, a squirm, a grunt, then - success!

Ripping free from the hellscape, his body propelled itself in a
slump over the lip of the mound. Looking through the
dripping blood from his hair, he could see the invaders'
bonfires lit from every dwelling on the island – and a dozen
more heaped graves around every one – as they converged on
the Broch with feverish appetite.

And the maggots and larvae which had been feasting on his
stomach were spilled – alongside his streaming intestines –
in haphazard decoration on top of the pile of corpses.