

# Eat Me

BY ROBERT R. McCAMMON

A question gnawed, day and night, at Jim Crisp. He pondered it as he walked the streets, while a dark rain fell and rats chattered at his feet; he mulled over it as he sat in his apartment, staring at the static on the television screen hour after hour. The question haunted him as he sat in the cemetery on Fourteenth Street, surrounded by empty graves. And this burning question was: when did love die?

Thinking took effort. It made his brain hurt, but it seemed to Jim that thinking was his last link with life. He used to be an accountant, a long time ago. He'd worked with a firm downtown for over twenty years, had never been married, hadn't dated much either. Numbers, logic, the rituals of mathematics had been the center of his life; now logic itself had gone insane, and no one kept records anymore. He had a terrible sensation of not belonging in this world, of being suspended in a nightmare that would stretch to the boundaries of eternity. He had no need for sleep any longer; something inside him had burst a while back, and he'd lost the ten or twelve pounds of fat that had gathered around his middle over the years. His body was lean now, so light sometimes a strong wind knocked him off his feet. The smell came and went, but Jim had a caseload of English Leather in his apartment and he took baths in the stuff.

The open maw of time frightened him. Days without number lay ahead. What was there to do, when there was nothing to be done? No one called the roll, no one punched the time-clock, no one set the deadlines. This warped freedom gave a sense of power to others; to Jim it was the most confining of prisons, because all the symbols of order—stoplights, calendars, clocks—were still there, still working, yet they had no purpose or sense, and they reminded him too much of what had been before.

As he walked, aimlessly, through the city's streets he saw others moving past, some as peaceful as sleepwalkers, some raging in the grip of private tortures. Jim came to a corner and stopped, instinctively obeying the DON'T WALK sign; a high squealing noise caught his attention, and he looked to his left.

Rats were scurrying wildly over one of the lowest forms of humanity, a half-decayed corpse that had recently awakened and pulled itself from the grave. The thing crawled on the wet pavement, struggling on one thin arm and two sticklike legs. The rats were chewing it to pieces, and as the thing reached Jim, its skeletal face lifted and the single dim coal of an eye found him. From its mouth came a rattling noise, stifled when several rats squeezed themselves between the gray lips in search of softer flesh. Jim hurried on, not waiting for the light to change. He thought the thing had said *Whhhyy?* and for that question he had no answer.

He felt shame in the coil of his entrails. When did love die? Had it perished at the same time as this living death of human flesh had begun, or had it already died and decayed long before? He went on, through the somber streets where the buildings brooded like tombstones, and he felt crushed beneath the weight of loneliness.

Jim remembered beauty: a yellow flower, the scent of a woman's perfume, the warm sheen of a woman's hair. Remembering was another bar in the prison of bones; the power of memory taunted him unmercifully. He remembered walking on his lunch hour, sighting a pretty girl and following her for a block or two, enraptured by fantasies. He had always been searching for love, for someone to be joined with, and had never realized it so vitally before now, when the gray city was full of rats and the restless dead.

Someone with a cavity where its face had been stumbled past, arms waving blindly. What once had been a child ran by him, and left the scent of rot in its wake. Jim lowered his head, and when a gust of hot wind hit him he lost his balance and would have slammed into a concrete wall if he hadn't grabbed hold

of a bolted-down mailbox. He kept going, deeper into the city, on pavement he'd never walked when he was alive.

At the intersection of two unfamiliar streets he thought he heard music: the crackle of a guitar, the low grunting of a drumbeat. He turned against the wind, fighting the gusts that threatened to hurl him into the air, and followed the sound. Two blocks ahead a strobe light flashed in a cavernous entrance. A sign that read THE COURTYARD had been broken out, and across the front of the building was scrawled BONEYARD in black spray paint. Figures moved within the entrance: dancers, gyrating in the flash of the strobes.

The thunder of the music repulsed him—the soft grace of Brahms remained his lullaby, not the raucous crudity of Grave Rock—but the activity, the movement, the heat of energy drew him closer. He scratched a maddening itch on the dry flesh at the back of his neck and stood on the threshold while the music and the glare blew around him. The Courtyard, he thought, glancing at the old sign. It was the name of a place that might once have served white wine and polite jazz music—a singles bar, maybe, where the lonely went to meet the lonely. The Boneyard it was now, all right: a realm of dancing skeletons. This was not his kind of place, but still. . . the noise, lights, and gyrations spoke of another kind of loneliness. It was a singles bar for the living dead, and it beckoned him in.

Jim crossed the threshold, and with one desiccated hand he smoothed down his remaining bits of black hair.

And now he knew what hell must be like: a smoky, rot-smelling pandemonium. Some of the things writhing on the dance floor were missing arms and legs, and one thin figure in the midst of a whirl lost its hand; the withered flesh skidded across the linoleum, was crushed underfoot as its owner scabbled after it, and then its owner was likewise pummeled down into a twitching mass. On the bandstand were two guitar players, a drummer, and a legless thing hammering at an electric organ. Jim avoided the dance floor, moving through the crowd toward the blue-neon bar. The drum's pounding offended him, in an obscene way; it reminded him too much of how his heartbeat used to feel before it clenched and ceased.

This was a place his mother—God rest her soul—would have warned him to avoid. He had never been one for nightlife, and looking into the decayed faces of some of these people was a preview of torments that lay ahead—but he didn't want to leave. The drumbeat was so loud it destroyed all thinking, and for a while he could pretend it was indeed his own heart returned to scarlet life; and that, he realized, was why the Boneyard was full from wall to wall. This was a mockery of life, yes, but it was the best to be had.

The bar's neon lit up the rotting faces like blue-shadowed Halloween masks. One of them, down to shreds of flesh clinging to yellow bone, shouted something unintelligible and drank from a bottle of beer; the liquid streamed through the fissure in his throat and down over his violet shirt and gold chains. Flies swarmed around the bar, drawn to the reek, and Jim watched as the customers pressed forward. They reached into their pockets and changepurses and offered freshly-killed rats, roaches, spiders, and centipedes to the bartender, who placed the objects in a large glass jar that had replaced the cash register. Such was the currency of the Dead World, and a particularly juicy rat bought two bottles of Miller Lite. Other people were laughing and hollering—gasping, brittle sounds that held no semblance of humanity. A fight broke out near the dance floor, and a twisted arm thunked to the linoleum to the delighted roar of the onlookers.

"I know you!" A woman's face thrust forward into Jim's. She had tatters of gray hair, and she wore heavy makeup over sunken cheeks, her forehead swollen and cracked by some horrible inner pressure. Her glittery dress danced with light, but smelled of gravedirt. "Buy me a drink!" she said, grasping his arm. A flap of flesh at her throat fluttered, and Jim realized her throat had been slashed. "Buy me a

drink!” she insisted.

“No,” Jim said, trying to break free. “No, I’m sorry.”

“You’re the one who killed me!” she screamed. Her grip tightened, about to snap Jim’s forearm. “Yes you are! You killed me, didn’t you?” And she picked up an empty beer bottle off the bar, her face contorted with rage, and started to smash it against his skull.

But before the blow could fall a man lifted her off her feet and pulled her away from Jim; her fingernails flayed to the bones of Jim’s arm. She was still screaming, fighting to pull away, and the man, who wore a T-shirt with *Boneyard* painted across it, said, “She’s a fresh one. Sorry, mac,” before he hauled her toward the entrance. The woman’s scream got shriller, and Jim saw her forehead burst open and ooze like a stomped snail. He shuddered, backing into a dark corner—and there he bumped into another body.

“Excuse me,” he said. Started to move away. Glanced at whom he’d collided with.

And saw her.

She was trembling, her skinny arms wrapped around her chest. She still had most of her long brown hair, but in places it had diminished to the texture of spiderwebs and her scalp showed. Still, it was lovely hair. It looked almost healthy. Her pale blue eyes were liquid and terrified, and her face might have been pretty once. She had lost most of her nose, and gray-rimmed craters pitted her right cheek. She was wearing sensible clothes: a skirt and blouse and a sweater buttoned to the throat. Her clothes were dirty, but they matched. She looked like a librarian, he decided. She didn’t belong in the Boneyard—but, then, where did anyone belong anymore?

He was about to move away when he noticed something else that caught a glint of frenzied light.

Around her neck, just peeking over the collar of her sweater, was a silver chain, and on that chain hung a tiny cloisonne heart.

It was a fragile thing, like a bit of bone china, but it held the power to freeze Jim before he took another step.

“That’s... that’s very pretty,” he said. He nodded at the heart.

Instantly her hand covered it. Parts of her fingers had rotted off, like his own.

He looked into her eyes; she stared—or at least pretended to—right past him. She shook like a frightened deer. Jim paused, waiting for a break in the thunder, nervously casting his gaze to the floor. He caught a whiff of decay, and whether it was from himself or her he didn’t know; what did it matter? He shivered too, not knowing what else to say but wanting to say something, anything, to make a connection. He sensed that at any moment the girl—whose age might be anywhere from twenty to forty, since Death both tightened and wrinkled at the same time—might bolt past him and be lost in the crowd. He thrust his hands into his pockets, not wanting her to see the exposed fingerbones. “This is the first time I’ve been here,” he said. “I don’t go out much.”

She didn’t answer. Maybe her tongue is gone, he thought. Or her throat. Maybe she was insane, which could be a real possibility. She pressed back against the wall, and Jim saw how very thin she was, skin stretched over frail bones. Dried up on the inside, he thought. Just like me.

“My name is Jim,” he told her. “What’s yours?”

Again, no reply. I'm no good at this! he agonized. Singles bars had never been his "scene", as the saying went. No, his world had always been his books, his job, his classical records, his cramped little apartment that now seemed like a four-walled crypt. There was no use in standing here, trying to make conversation with a dead girl. He had dared to eat the peach, as Eliot's Prufrock lamented, and found it rotten.

"Brenda," she said, so suddenly it almost startled him. She kept her hand over the heart, her other arm across her sagging breasts. Her head was lowered, her hair hanging over the cratered cheek.

"Brenda," Jim repeated; he heard his voice tremble. "That's a nice name."

She shrugged, still pressed into the corner as if trying to squeeze through a chink in the bricks.

Another moment of decision presented itself. It was a moment in which Jim could turn and walk three paces away, into the howling mass at the bar, and release Brenda from her corner; or a moment in which Brenda could tell him to go away, or curse him to his face, or scream with haunted dementia and that would be the end of it. The moment passed, and none of those things happened. There was just the drumbeat, pounding across the club, pounding like a counterfeit heart, and the roaches ran their race on the bar and the dancers continued to fling bits of flesh off their bodies like autumn leaves.

He felt he had to say something. "I was just walking. I didn't mean to come here." Maybe she nodded. Maybe; he couldn't tell for sure, and the light played tricks. "I didn't have anywhere else to go," he added.

She spoke, in a whispery voice that he had to strain to hear: "Me neither."

Jim shifted his weight—what weight he had left. "Would you... like to dance?" he asked, for want of anything better.

"Oh, no!" She looked up quickly. "No, I can't dance! I mean... I used to dance, sometimes, but... I can't dance anymore."

Jim understood what she meant; her bones were brittle, just as his own were. They were both as fragile as husks, and to get out on that dance floor would tear them both to pieces. "Good," he said. "I can't dance either."

She nodded, with an expression of relief. There was an instant in which Jim saw how pretty she must have been before all this happened—not pretty in a flashy way, but pretty as homespun lace—and it made his brain ache. "This is a loud place," he said. "Too loud."

"I've... never been here before." Brenda removed her hand from the necklace, and again both arms protected her chest. "I knew this place was here, but..." She shrugged her thin shoulders. "I don't know."

"You're..." *lonely*, he almost said. *As lonely as I am*. "...alone?" he asked.

"I have friends," she answered, too fast.

"I don't," he said, and her gaze lingered on his face for a few seconds before she looked away. "I mean, not in this place," he amended. "I don't know anybody here, except you." He paused, and then he had to ask the question: "Why did you come here tonight?"

She almost spoke, but she closed her mouth before the words got out. I know why, Jim thought. Because you're searching, just like I am. You went out walking, and maybe you came in here because

you couldn't stand to be alone another second. I can look at you, and hear you screaming. "Would you like to go out?" he asked. "Walking, I mean. Right now, so we can talk?"

"I don't know you," she said, uneasily.

"I don't know you, either. But I'd like to."

"I'm..." Her hand fluttered up to the cavity where her nose had been. "*Ugly*," she finished.

"You're not ugly. Anyway, I'm no handsome prince." He smiled, which stretched the flesh on his face. Brenda might have smiled, a little bit; again, it was hard to tell. "I'm not a crazy," Jim reassured her. "I'm not on drugs, and I'm not looking for somebody to hurt. I just thought... you might like to have some company."

Brenda didn't answer for a moment. Her fingers played with the cloisonne heart. "All right," she said finally. "But not too far. Just around the block."

"Just around the block," he agreed, trying to keep his excitement from showing too much. He took her arm—she didn't seem to mind his fleshless fingers—and carefully guided her through the crowd. She felt light, like a dry-rotted stick, and he thought that even he, with his shrunken muscles, might be able to lift her over his head.

Outside, they walked away from the blast of the Bone-yard. The wind was getting stronger, and they soon were holding to each other to keep from being swept away. "A storm's coming," Brenda said, and Jim nodded. The storms were fast and ferocious, and their winds made the buildings shake. But Jim and Brenda kept walking, first around the block and then, at Brenda's direction, southward. Their bodies were bent like question marks; overhead, clouds masked the moon and blue streaks of electricity began to lance across the sky.

Brenda was not a talker, but she was a good listener. Jim told her about himself, about the job he used to have, about how he'd always dreamed that someday he'd have his own firm. He told her about a trip he once took, as a young man, to Lake Michigan, and how cold he recalled the water to be. He told her about a park he visited once, and how he remembered the sound of happy laughter and the smell of flowers. "I miss how it used to be," he said, before he could stop himself, because in the Dead World voicing such regrets was a punishable crime. "I miss beauty," he went on. "I miss... love."

She took his hand, bone against bone, and said, "This is where I live."

It was a plain brownstone building, many of the windows broken out by the windstorms. Jim didn't ask to go to Brenda's apartment; he expected to be turned away on the front steps. But Brenda still had hold of his hand, and now she was leading him up those steps and through the glassless door.

Her apartment, on the fourth floor, was even smaller than Jim's. The walls were a somber gray, but the lights revealed a treasure—pots of flowers set around the room and out on the fire escape. "They're silk," Brenda explained, before he could ask. "But they look real, don't they?"

"They look... wonderful." He saw a stereo and speakers on a table, and near the equipment was a collection of records. He bent down, his knees creaking, and began to examine her taste in music. Another shock greeted him: Beethoven... Chopin... Mozart... Vivaldi... Strauss. And, yes, even Brahms. "Oh!" he said, and that was all he could say.

"I found most of those," she said. "Would you like to listen to them?"

"Yes. Please."

She put on the Chopin, and as the piano chords swelled, so did the wind, whistling in the hall and making the windows tremble.

And then she began to talk about herself: She had been a secretary, in a refrigeration plant across the river. Had never married, though she'd been engaged once. Her hobby was making silk flowers, when she could find the material. She missed ice cream most of all, she said. And summer—what had happened to summer, like it used to be? All the days and nights seemed to bleed together now, and nothing made any of them different. Except the storms, of course, and those could be dangerous.

By the end of the third record, they were sitting side by side on her sofa. The wind had gotten very strong outside; the rain came and went, but the wind and lightning remained.

"I like talking to you," she told him. "I feel like... I've known you for a long, long time."

"I do too. I'm glad I came into that place tonight." He watched the storm and heard the wind shriek. "I don't know how I'm going to get home."

"You... don't have to go," Brenda said, very quietly. "I'd like for you to stay."

He stared at her, unbelieving. The back of his neck itched fiercely, and the itch was spreading to his shoulders and arms, but he couldn't move.

"I don't want to be alone," she continued. "I'm always alone. It's just that... I miss touching. Is that wrong, to miss touching?"

"No. I don't think so."

She leaned forward, her lips almost brushing his, her eyes almost pleading. "Eat me," she whispered.

Jim sat very still. Eat me: the only way left to feel pleasure in the Dead World. He wanted it, too; he needed it, so badly. "Eat me," he whispered back to her, and he began to unbutton her sweater.

Her nude body was riddled with craters, her breasts sunken into her chest. His own was sallow and emaciated, and between his thighs his penis was a gray, useless piece of flesh. She reached for him, he knelt beside her body, and as she urged "Eat me, eat me," his tongue played circles on her cold skin; then his teeth went to work, and he bit away the first chunk. She moaned and shivered, lifted her head and tongued his arm. Her teeth took a piece of flesh from him, and the ecstasy arrowed along his spinal cord like an electric shock.

They clung to each other, shuddering, their teeth working on arms and legs, throat, chest, face. Faster and faster still, as the wind crashed and Beethoven thundered; gobbets of flesh fell to the carpet, and those gobbets were quickly snatched up and consumed. Jim felt himself shrinking, being transformed from one into two; the incandescent moment had enfolded him, and if there had been tears to cry, he might have wept with joy. Here was love, and here was a lover who both claimed him and gave her all.

Brenda's teeth closed on the back of Jim's neck, crunching through the dry flesh. Her eyes closed in rapture as Jim ate the rest of the fingers on her left hand—and suddenly there was a new sensation, a scurrying around her lips. The love wound on Jim's neck was erupting small yellow roaches, like gold coins spilling from a bag, and Jim's itching subsided. He cried out, his face burrowing into Brenda's abdominal cavity.

Their bodies entwined, the flesh being gnawed away, their shrunken stomachs bulging. Brenda bit off his ear, chewed, and swallowed it; fresh passion coursed through Jim, and he nibbled away her lips—they *did* taste like slightly overripe peaches—and ran his tongue across her teeth. They kissed

deeply, biting pieces of their tongues off. Jim drew back and lowered his face to her thighs. He began to eat her, while she gripped his shoulders and screamed.

Brenda arched her body. Jim's sexual organs were there, the testicles like dark, dried fruit. She opened her mouth wide, extended her chewed tongue and bared her teeth; her cheekless, chinless face strained upward—and Jim cried out over even the wail of the wind, his body convulsing.

They continued to feast on each other, like knowing lovers. Jim's body was hollowed out, most of the flesh gone from his face and chest. Brenda's lungs and heart were gone, consumed, and the bones of her arms and legs were fully revealed. Their stomachs swelled. And when they were near explosion, Jim and Brenda lay on the carpet, cradling each other with skeletal arms, lying on bits of flesh like the petals of strange flowers. They were one now, each into the other—and what more could love be than this?

"I love you," Jim said, with his mangled tongue. Brenda made a noise of assent, unable to speak, and took a last love bite from beneath his arm before she snuggled close.

The Beethoven record ended; the next one dropped onto the turntable, and a lilting Strauss waltz began.

Jim felt the building shake. He lifted his head, one eye remaining and that one sated with pleasure, and saw the fire escape trembling. One of the potted plants was suddenly picked up by the wind. "Brenda," he said—and then the plant crashed through the glass and the stormwind came in, whipping around the walls. Another window blew in, and as the next hot wave of wind came, it got into the hollows of the two dried bodies and raised them off the floor like reed-ribbed kites. Brenda made a gasping noise, her arms locked around Jim's spinal cord and his handless arms thrust into her ribcage. The wind hurled them against the wall, snapping bones like matchsticks as the waltz continued to play on for a few seconds before the stereo and table went over. There was no pain, though, and no reason to fear. They were together, in this Dead World where love was a curseword, and together they would face the storm.

The wind churned, threw them one way and then the other—and as it withdrew from Brenda's apartment it took the two bodies with it, into the charged air over the city's roofs.

They flew, buffeted higher and higher, bone locked to bone. The city disappeared beneath them, and they went up into the clouds where the blue lightning danced.

They knew great joy, and at the upper limits of the clouds where the lightning was hottest, they thought they could see the stars.

When the storm passed, a boy on the north side of the city found a strange object on the roof of his apartment building, near the pigeon roost. It looked like a charred-black construction of bones, melded together so you couldn't tell where one bone ended and the other began. And in that mass of bones was a silver chain, with a small ornament. A heart, he saw it was. A white heart, hanging there in the tangle of someone's bones.

He was old enough to realize that someone—two people, maybe—had escaped the Dead World last night. Lucky stiff, he thought.

He reached in for the dangling heart, and it fell to ashes at his touch.