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Opening Extract from...

Horns

Written by Joe Hill

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1



Ignatius Martin Perrish spent the night drunk and doing terrible things. He woke the next morning with a headache, put his hands to his temples, and felt something unfamiliar, a pair of knobby pointed protuberances. He was so ill – wet-eyed and weak – he didn't think anything of it at first, was too hungover for thinking or worry.

But when he was swaying above the toilet, he glanced at himself in the mirror over the sink and saw he had grown horns while he slept. He lurched in surprise, and for the second time in twelve hours he pissed on his feet.

2

He shoved himself back into his khaki shorts – he was still wearing yesterday's clothes – and leaned over the sink for a better look.

They weren't much as horns went, each of them about as long as his ring finger, thick at the base but soon narrowing to a point as they hooked upwards. The horns were covered in his own too-pale skin, except at the very tips, which were an ugly, inflamed red, as if the needle points at the ends of them were about to poke through the flesh. He touched one and found the point sensitive, a little sore. He ran his fingers along the sides of each and felt the density of bone beneath the stretched-tight smoothness of skin.

His first thought was that somehow he had brought this affliction upon himself. Late the night before, he had gone into the woods beyond the old foundry, to the place where Merrin Williams had been killed. People had left remembrances at a diseased black cherry tree, its bark peeling away to show the flesh beneath. Merrin had been found like that, clothes peeled away to show the flesh beneath. There were photographs of her placed delicately in the branches, a vase of pussy willows, Hallmark cards warped and stained from exposure to the elements. Someone – Merrin's mother, probably – had left a decorative cross with yellow nylon roses stapled to it and a plastic Virgin who smiled with the beatific idiocy of the functionally retarded.

He couldn't stand that simpering smile. He couldn't stand the cross either, planted in the place where Merrin had bled to death from her smashed-in head. A cross with yellow roses. What a fucking thing. It was like an electric chair with floral-print cushions, a bad joke. It bothered him that someone wanted to bring Christ out here. Christ was a year too late to do any good. He hadn't been anywhere around when Merrin needed Him.

Ig had ripped the decorative cross down and stamped it into the dirt. He'd had to take a leak, and he did it on the Virgin, drunkenly urinating on his own feet in the process. Perhaps that was blasphemy enough to bring on this transformation. But no – he sensed that there had been more. What else, he couldn't recall. He'd had a lot to drink.

He turned his head this way and that, studying himself in the mirror, lifting his fingers to touch the horns, once and again. How deep did the bone go? Did the horns have roots, pushing back into his brain? At this thought the bathroom darkened, as if the lightbulb overhead had briefly gone dim. The welling darkness, though, was behind his eyes, in his head, not in the light fixtures. He held the sink and waited for the feeling of weakness to pass.

He saw it then. He was going to die. Of course he was going to die. Something was pushing into his brain, all right: a tumour. The horns weren't really there. They were metaphorical, imaginary. He had a tumour eating his brain, and it was causing him to see things. And if he was at the point of seeing things, then it was probably too late to save him.

The idea that he might be going to die brought with it a surge of relief, a physical sensation, like coming up for air after being underwater too long. Ig had come close to drowning once and had suffered from asthma as a child, and, to him, contentment was as simple as being able to breathe.

'I'm sick,' he whispered. 'I'm dying.'

It improved his mood to say it aloud.

He studied himself in the mirror, expecting the horns to vanish now that he knew they were hallucinatory, but it didn't work that way. The horns remained. He fretfully tugged at his hair, trying to see if he could hide them, at least until he got to the doctor's, then quit when he realised how silly it was to try to conceal something no one would be able to see but him.

He wandered into the bedroom on shaky legs. The bedclothes were shoved back on either side and the bottom sheet still bore the rumpled impression of Glenna Nicholson's curves. He had no memory of falling into bed beside her, didn't even remember getting home – another missing part of the evening. It had been in his head until this very moment that he'd slept alone and that Glenna had spent the night somewhere else. *With* someone else.

They had gone out together, the night before, but after he'd been drinking awhile, Ig had just naturally started to think about Merrin, the anniversary of her death coming up in a few days. The more he drank, the more he missed her – and the more conscious he was of how little like her Glenna was. With her tattoos and her paste-on nails, her bookshelf full of Dean Koontz novels, her cigarettes and her rap sheet, Glenna was the un-Merrin. It irritated Ig to see her sitting there on the other side of the table, seemed a kind of betrayal to be with her, although whether he was betraying Merrin or himself, he didn't know. Finally he had to get away – Glenna kept reaching over to stroke his knuckles with one finger, a gesture she meant to be tender but for some reason pissed him off. He went to the men's room and hid there for twenty minutes. When he returned, he found the booth empty. He sat drinking for an hour before he understood that she was not coming back and that he was not sorry. But at some point in the evening, they had both wound up here

in the same bed, the bed they'd shared for the last three months.

He heard the distant babble of the TV in the next room. Glenna was still in the apartment then, hadn't left for the salon yet. He would ask her to drive him to the doctor. The brief feeling of relief at the thought of dying had passed and he was already dreading the days and weeks to come: his father struggling not to cry, his mother putting on false cheer, IV drips, treatments, radiation, helpless vomiting, hospital food.

Ig crept into the next room, where Glenna sat on the living-room couch, in a Guns N' Roses tank-top and faded pyjama bottoms. She was hunched forward, elbows on the coffee table, tucking the last of a doughnut into her mouth with her fingers. In front of her was the box, containing three-day-old supermarket doughnuts, and a two-litre bottle of Diet Coke. She was watching daytime talk TV.

She heard him and glanced his way, eyelids low, gaze disapproving, then returned her stare to the tube. 'My Best Friend Is a Sociopath!' was the subject of today's programme. Flabby rednecks were getting ready to throw chairs at one another.

She hadn't noticed the horns.

'I think I'm sick,' he said.

'Don't bitch at me,' she said. 'I'm hungover too.'

'No. I mean … look at me. Do I look all right?' Asking because he had to be sure.

She slowly turned her head towards him again and peered at him from under her eyelashes. She had on last night's mascara, a little smudged. Glenna had a smooth, pleasantly round face and a smooth, pleasantly curvy body. She could've almost been a model, if the job were modelling plus sizes. She outweighed Ig by fifty pounds. It wasn't that she was grotesquely fat, but that he was absurdly skinny. She liked to fuck him from on top,

and when she put her elbows on his chest, she could push all the air out of him, a thoughtless act of erotic asphyxiation. Ig, who so often struggled for breath, knew every famous person who had ever died of erotic asphyxiation. It was a surprisingly common end for musicians. Kevin Gilbert. Hideto Matsumoto, probably. Michael Hutchence, of course, not someone he wanted to be thinking about at this particular moment. The devil inside.

'Are you still drunk?' she asked.

When he didn't reply, she shook her head and looked back at the television.

That was it, then. If she had seen them, she would've come screaming to her feet. But she couldn't see them because they weren't there. They existed only in Ig's mind. Probably if he looked at himself now in a mirror, he wouldn't see them either. But then Ig spotted a reflection of himself in the window, and the horns were still there. In the window he was a glassy, transparent figure, a demonic ghost.

'I think I need to go to the doctor,' he said.

'You know what *I* need?' she asked.

'What?'

'Another doughnut,' she said, leaning forward to look into the open box. 'You think another doughnut would be okay?'

He replied in a flat voice he hardly recognised, 'What's stopping you?'

'I already had one, and I'm not even hungry anymore. I just want to eat it.' She turned her head and peered up at him, her eyes glittering in a way that suddenly seemed both scared and pleading. 'I'd like to eat the whole box.'

'The whole box,' he repeated.

'I don't even want to use my hands. I just want to stick my face in and start eating. I know that's gross.' She moved her finger from doughnut to doughnut, counting. 'Six. Do you

think it would be okay if I ate six more doughnuts?'

It was hard to think past his alarm and the feeling of pressure and weight at his temples. What she had just said made no sense, was another part of the whole unnatural bad-dream morning.

'If you're screwing with me, I wish you wouldn't. I told you, I don't feel good.'

'I want another doughnut,' she said.

'Go ahead. I don't care.'

'Well. Okay. If you think it's all right,' she said, and she took a doughnut, pulled it into three pieces, and began to eat, shoving in one chunk after another without swallowing.

Soon the whole doughnut was in her mouth, filling her cheeks. She gagged, softly, then inhaled deeply through her nostrils and began to swallow.

Iggy watched, repelled. He had never seen her do anything like it, hadn't seen anything like it since junior high, kids grossing out other kids in the cafeteria. When she was done, she took a few panting, uneven breaths, then looked over her shoulder, eyeing him anxiously.

'I didn't even like it. My stomach hurts,' she said. 'Do you think I should have another one?'

'Why would you eat another one if your stomach hurts?'

''Cause I want to get really fat. Not fat like I am now. Fat enough so you won't want to have anything to do with me.' Her tongue came out, and the tip touched her upper lip, a thoughtful, considering gesture. 'I did something disgusting last night. I want to tell you about it.'

The thought occurred again that none of it was really happening. If he was having some sort of fever dream, though, it was a persistent one, convincing in its fine details. A fly crawled across the TV screen. A car shushed past out on the road. One moment naturally followed the last, in a way that seemed to add up to reality. Ig was a natural at addition. Maths

had been his best subject in school, after ethics, which he didn't count as a real subject.

'I don't think I want to know what you did last night,' he said.

'That's why I want to tell you. To make you sick. To give you a reason to go away. I feel so bad about what you've been through and what people say about you, but I can't stand waking up next to you anymore. I just want you to go, and if I told you what I did, this disgusting thing, then you'd leave and I'd be free again.'

'What do people say about me?' he asked. It was a silly question. He already knew.

She shrugged. 'Things about what you did to Merrin. How you're like a sick sex pervert and stuff.'

Ig stared at her, transfixed. It fascinated him, the way each thing she said was worse than the one before and how at ease she seemed to be with saying them. Without shame or awkwardness.

'So what did you want to tell me?'

'I ran into Lee Tourneau last night after you disappeared on me. You remember Lee and I used to have a thing going, back in high school?'

'I remember,' Ig said. Lee and Ig had been friends in another life, but all that was behind Ig now, had died with Merrin. It was difficult to maintain close friendships when you were under suspicion of being a sex murderer.

'Last night at the Station House, he was sitting in a booth in back, and after you disappeared, he bought me a drink. I haven't talked to Lee in forever. I forgot how easy he is to talk to. You know Lee, he doesn't look down on anyone. He was real nice to me. When you didn't come back after a while, he said we ought to look for you in the parking lot, and if you were gone, he'd drive me home. But then when we were outside, we got kissing kind of hot, like old times, like when we were

together – and I got carried away and went down on him, right there with a couple of guys watching and everything. I haven't done anything that crazy since I was nineteen and on speed.'

Ig needed help. He needed to get out of the apartment. The air was too close, and his lungs felt tight and pinched.

She was leaning over the box of doughnuts again, her expression placid, as if she had just told him a fact of no particular consequence: that they were out of milk or had lost the hot water again.

'You think it would be all right to eat one more?' she asked. 'My stomach feels better.'

'Do what you want.'

She turned her head and stared at him, her pale eyes glittering with an unnatural excitement. 'You mean it?'

'I don't give a fuck,' he said. 'Pig out.'

She smiled, cheeks dimpling, then bent over the table, taking the box in one hand. She held it in place, shoved her face into it and began to eat. She made noises while she chewed, smacking her lips and breathing strangely. She gagged again, her shoulders hitching, but kept eating, using her free hand to push more doughnut into her mouth, even though her cheeks were already swollen and full. A fly buzzed around her head, agitated.

Ig edged past the couch, heading for the door. She sat up a little, gasping for breath, and rolled her eyes towards him. Her gaze was panicky, and her cheeks and wet mouth were gritted with sugar.

'*Mm*,' she moaned. '*Mmm.*' Whether she moaned in pleasure or misery, he didn't know.

The fly landed at the corner of her mouth. He saw it there for a moment – then Glenna's tongue darted out, and she trapped it with her hand at the same time. When she lowered her hand, the fly was gone. Her jaw worked up and down, grinding everything in her mouth into paste.

Ig opened the door and slid himself out. As he closed the door behind him, she was lowering her face to the box again . . . a diver who had filled her lungs with air and was plunging once more into the depths.