

CANNIBALISM FOR BEGINNERS

By Claire McGowan

The first time it happened was with a mussel, which was perhaps not a surprise. Mussels are an act of faith at any time – the chances so high that a bad one has slipped in, nestled among its friends in the cream and garlic, its poisonous bacteria just waiting to colonise you.

‘I don’t know how you can eat those,’ said Kevin. He had his usual, steak and chips with pepper sauce. At a seafood restaurant.

‘Just try one?’ she coaxed, holding it out, the orange-pink flesh and the band of black.

‘Jen, get that away from me, it makes me sick.’ He was right. It was disgusting if you looked at it, or thought about it, but she wouldn’t let him ruin it for her. So she swallowed it down, rubbery and salty, and another, and another.

About half an hour later, over the profiteroles in chocolate sauce, it started. Not sickness. Something she couldn’t name.

‘I feel weird,’ she said, as Kevin examined the bill with his usual forensic attention.

‘Serves you right, eating those horrible things. I’ll head back to mine if you’re going to be sick, I don’t fancy holding your hair all night.’

But it wasn’t that. It was a sensation of....the only way she could describe it was of being nestled in mud. Surrounded, warm, cosy. Attached to others just like herself, swaying in currents, light filtered through water, life making sense...and then! She gasped as the feeling hit her. Ripped from her safe bed, dredged to the light, winkled open, boiled up in a pot, drowning in sauce, and then the heat....She choked, feeling it in her throat. Wine and cream. Garlic and parsley.

‘What on earth’s the matter with you?’ said Kevin, after quibbling with the waiter about the 12.5% service (‘It’s discretionary, that means we don’t have to pay it!’).

‘I don’t know. I really don’t know.’

‘Well, don’t be sick in the car, I’ve just had it cleaned.’

‘I won’t.’ It wasn’t nausea, it was more like...a terrible fear. She knew for certain she would never eat mussels again.

The next morning it was the breakfast she cooked Kevin, before he went off to work at the bank. She had not been sick in the night, and when she woke the mud and cream

were gone, though she couldn't shake the memory of the heat, the garlic. She could taste it in her mouth still, a choking richness, as she fried up bacon and eggs. Kevin liked a proper breakfast in him before a hard day of spreadsheets.

Still, the feeling had left her, and she could now imagine eating again. As she layered butter and ketchup on toasted bread, and placed her own bacon and egg onto it, her mouth watered pleasantly. Nothing nicer than a simple bacon sandwich. Perhaps Kevin was right, there was no need to eat things that looked like mangled body parts. She made the tea, mashing the bag against the side, brought the plate to the table with salt and pepper, took a mouthful, crispy and salty, and then it happened again.

She was in a field. Running joyfully on tiny legs. A little snout, more mud, warm and safe, a horrible smell but somehow she liked it. A feeling of MOTHER, big and undefined. And then. The horrors. A van, a terrible squealing fear. A room full of blades and blood. Blackness that came for her, swallowed her, took her....She put down the sandwich, hyper-ventilating.

'What is it?' said Kevin, chewing loudly as he scrolled through Twitter reporting posts he didn't agree with. 'You've gone white.'

'I...I just felt strange.'

'I hope you're not ill. Was it those mussels?'

'I don't know. No, I don't – no, it's not like sickness.' She tried to think how to explain it. 'I feel weird.'

Kevin looked at her suspiciously. 'Are you going into work?'

'I – yeah, I suppose so.' She could hardly take the day off just because she'd become afraid of food.

Later, at her own office, she googled *feeling like the things I eat. Feeling like animals. Imagining I am a mussel*. No results. Of course not, it was insane. She'd been under a lot of pressure, working long hours. Worrying about Kevin, their future together, if it was normal that he insisted they split dinner bills according to how many slices of bread she'd eaten. It was all in her head.

Just to be safe though, at lunchtime she chose a vegetarian sandwich. Cheese and pickle. It wasn't possible to feel like a pickle, surely. Oh but it was, as Jen found out when suddenly the sensation hit her of being trapped in a jar, gasping for air. Sealed in, marinating in salt brine, feeling it penetrate her, fill her up inside. And cheese – well, cheese was full of

microbes, working away together, churning out acid. It felt extremely... busy. Companionable. Smelly. Jen put down the sandwich after a bite and fled. She would go hungry for the rest of the day, until this strangeness passed.

All the way home on the bus, her stomach rumbled. Kevin was cooking that night, which was as always depressingly straightforward. The kind of cubed frozen vegetable medley Jen was amazed to find they still sold, boiled potatoes, a steak so well-cooked it was black in the middle. Optional mayonnaise or HP sauce on the side. She took a mouthful of food, having spread the vegetables with butter just to make them taste of something. There it was. A carrotty feeling, earth all around her, quietly growing, at one with the soil. Then. Ripped from the safety. The horror of fresh air and light. Wind on her face. Chopped into pieces, boiled.

She chewed on valiantly. Butter, there was no getting around it, tasted like bodily fluids. Potato was secretive, earthy, boiled in its jacket. The steak was a charred scream.

Kevin was watching her, his own fork poised. 'What is it now?'

'I'm sorry, I don't know what's wrong with me. It's like I can...feel the food.'

'What?'

'I can't explain it. I feel like it would have felt. The food. If it was scared, or hurt, before it...died. Or was picked.' Could carrots be said to have died?

Kevin looked appalled. 'You aren't becoming a *vegetarian*, Jen?'

'No. No! It's all food, not just meat. I don't...I don't what to do. I can feel the carrots suffocating as they're picked. The way the potato was boiled. The milk before it was churned.' This was intolerable. What would she live off? Would she have to choose between the terrified last memories of dying animals, or the gentle shrieks of expiring plants? Or else slowly starve to death?

Kevin stood up, with a martyred sigh, and lifted her barely touched plate. 'Fine. Don't eat it then.'

'No, wait...'

He tipped it into the bin, and she felt the screams within her muffle as the lid snapped shut. Ghostly living beings. Inside her now, part of her. It was like a haunting, but she had to eat something, she couldn't simply stop. Sarcastically, Kevin said, 'Can you feel cake? The ghost of sugar as it's, I don't know, squeezed out of the cane?'

'Is that how they make sugar?'

‘Of course it is.’ He was opening a drawer and taking out a large knife. On the counter was a bought cheesecake, topped with swirls of white and milk chocolate. A cheap and processed thing. He peeled the plastic off the top, talking all the while. ‘Honestly, Jen, you know so little about the world. Maybe this is a sign you should learn about your food. You’ll see that it’s perfectly possible to eat sustainable, humanely farmed meat, and as for the idea of plants feeling pain, I really don’t –Ohhhh!’

Lecturing and cutting at the same time, Kevin had sliced off the top of his finger. Blood dripped onto the counter as he howled, the knife clattering to the floor. ‘My finger. My finger!’

‘Oh God! Where is it?’ She hunted about for the small flap of skin. His finger, clutched in his other hand, was spouting out bright-red blood, quickly staining his white polo shirt. Its top sheared off like a boiled egg. She grabbed the tea-towel and pressed it around the injury, bright flowers of blood blooming through. ‘Maybe they can re-attach it if we...’

‘Don’t be stupid, Jen! Just take me to hospital, they can stitch it up.’

‘Right. Alright, sorry, let’s go.’ She found the car keys and her phone, hurried out after him.

In the hospital, they waited for a doctor, Kevin dripping gently through the tea-towel and onto his slacks.

‘I’m sor--’

‘Don’t.’ He shot her a look. When he was called in, she gathered their coats and followed him into the cubicle.

‘How did this happen then?’ said the jolly doctor, ruddy-red neck like someone who’d sat in a beer garden all weekend. ‘Kitchen incident? She attack you with a knife, eh?’

‘Doctor,’ said Jen hesitantly. ‘Is there any condition where you can start....feeling like your food?’

The doctor and Kevin exchanged looks. She saw the doctor’s eyes twitch to a folder labelled *Psychiatric Referrals*. ‘I’m sorry?’

‘Nothing,’ she said hastily. ‘Nothing. Is the finger OK?’

A few hours later, Jen returned home alone. Kevin had been stitched up and sent away with a huge white bandage on his finger. It wasn’t a serious injury, though it would hurt, and could easily become infected. He’d have to shower with a bag over his hand for

several weeks. He had informed her he was going to his own flat, and she needed to 'think quite seriously about what was going on with her.'

The cheesecake still sat on the counter, melting slightly round the edges. Jen hadn't eaten all day, since every mouthful of food brought pain and fear. What harm could dessert do? Surely this processed thing was so far from its origins, any feelings would be muted enough that she could manage it. She opened the drawer for a fork and scooped up a bite of the wobbly centre, the crunchy base, the chocolate twirls. Crammed it into her mouth.

And she felt....a muffled gasp of death, so far removed it hardly registered. That same milk feeling, churning loss and confusion, the squeezing of sugar. Other tastes, hard and bright, chemicals she assumed. And in the middle, something else. Suddenly, she was feeling very sure of herself. Her spine straightened, she stood up tall. The world seemed to make perfect sense, and she was convinced that she understood it all exactly, and everyone else was wrong. What...?

Jen fished around in her mouth and pulled it out before she swallowed, the tiny piece of skin from the top of Kevin's finger. Oh God. She had almost eaten *him*. However, there had been no anguish this time, no pain, because he was still very much alive. Instead there had been a rush of such great confidence and ease it filled her up like water, plumping out her edges. Was this how Kevin felt all the time? Taking up as much space as he could? Never afraid or doubting? She only knew she wanted more of this.

Jen threw the skin into the bin, rinsed her mouth out with several gulps of water, then stood thinking for a moment. She fished her phone from her jeans pocket and typed out a message to Kevin. *So sorry about what happened. Have been feeling strange – women's troubles maybe?? Perhaps I can have you for dinner tomorrow to make up?*

No, that wasn't quite right. Carefully, she changed the text to read *have you round for dinner*, and then, with her stomach rumbling slightly, she pressed send.