

## Toxic

by James Lynn Smith

I held my arms over the bathtub, watching the bright color spill from my small, pale wrists and swirl in the running water. Soon it would be over. I felt a strange power, like an animal escaping its trap. Over the splashing of water, I heard him coming up the stairs, calling. Probably because I had been out of sight too long. He barged into the bathroom and stood over me like a Titan.

Grimacing, Max placed his beer on the edge of the lavatory. “Damn, Gladys. Cuttin’ yourself again? How come you do this? I wouldn’t have come back if I’d known you were so weird. I thought your moods were bad before, but now...” He snatched a pillowcase from the closet and tore it into strips. “You can be such a pill. What’s with you?”

*Yes, a bitter pill.* I avoided looking at him. “Nothing to say, Max. I can’t seem to...” It was no use talking. He wouldn’t understand. As expected, he was furious and wrapped my wrists so tight my hands turned blue.

I hated him. He could always turn the tables on me when I wanted something, the same as other people do. They think I’m inferior. Why was he putting up with the likes of me? Obviously he was defective but still had powers that I didn’t, like most people. Even though I’m college educated, it’s my luck to end up with the likes of Max. Before walking out the last time, he was rough and sometimes abusive but finally calmed a bit. Even encouraged me when I felt down. But then my low moods became chronic and he left. Said he couldn’t take the paralyzing vibes I sent out.

You have to understand something about me. I cut myself because I'm angry and cutting is something I have control over. I'm not right for this world and no one understands what I need. Some people direct their anger against others but I can't do that because the toxic emanations might bounce back. I don't argue because I'm afraid of consequences. Being right scares me. A shrink told me I needed more confidence, that I should start making more decisions. He doesn't know me. The only thing that almost made sense was when he told me to dig in the dirt and plant a garden.

A whole pharmacy was available and he prescribed it. Nothing really helped. Depression is a living, conscious thing, like a tapeworm in my brain that lets me know I'm toxic. The shrink's knowledge was for illness in average minds.

But my mind is too bitter to be average. It's that way no matter what I try to do. The tapeworm argues down any positive suggestion I hear. Maggots in my head deprive me by feeding on thoughts that might become happy. A huge psychic weight bears down on me. It squeezes my mind through the captive sieve of this world until it comes out as strings of grey mush in another dimension. I see *things* in this dimension all the time but dare not mention them.

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A week later, Max said he was leaving—again. Big deal, I had income from insurance my first and only husband left me when he died. Max worked at odd jobs and once thought shacking with me was going to be a gravy train. Not so.

He said, "You have gorgeous, dark hair and a figure that makes me drool. So much going for you. But I feel like the life is being sucked out of me. There's just no joy in you."

"And you're a tall, slender, handsome man. You can find someone." *Yes tall and bony. I hate your guts. Hurry up and leave.* I let the crude oaf kiss me on the cheek and opened the door for him. "Be safe, Max." When he was out of sight, I

felt relief. A refrain sang in my head “*His bones and guts are gone. Gone, gone away.*” Closest to humor I could muster. I sat in a chair and didn’t move until my gray mood came back.

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A few days later I bought a small hedge plant, went into the side yard and began digging a hole for the root ball. At least it would distract me from loneliness and the misery of misery itself. I used a hatchet to chop through roots running just under the ground. Then after a few shovelfuls of dirt my blade struck something hard and off-white. Removing the dirt around it and tugging, I pulled up bones of a huge arm segment. All parts were connected from elbow to finger tips. The radius and ulna were almost a meter in length, obviously from a giant’s arm. Forgetting the plant, I washed the arm bones with the hose, dried them, and took them into the house. Thought maybe I could get some museum expert to buy it from me. After my evening meal and preparing for sleep, I pushed the big arm segment under my bed.

It was three o’clock when I awoke, feeling stress in the air somewhat like electric charge before lightening. I walked to the window and looked out at the moon-lit side yard. Dirt was flying upward from the hole I had dug for the hedge plant. Then a large skull and one arm appeared. Struggling, the massive skeleton climbed out of the hole, intact except for the lower half of one arm. It stood as tall as a house and the empty sockets of the skull surveyed the surroundings as it turned from left to right. It raised the truncated arm and those dark sockets looked down at it. Some decision must have been made for it began to move off down the street, slowly turning that bony head from side to side.

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The next day was sunny and I did my usual things: Clean where necessary, prepare small meals, and talk to my gray moods. At dusk, I felt that electric charge

sensation again. I pulled the arm bones from under the bed and put them on the table. *Could this feeling come from the arm?* I watched the bones and they began an irregular vibration as though a tremor were shaking them. I did not feel anything in the floor. Then I realized the bone giant was returning. The arm was calling it. *It will come in here.* Trembling, I grabbed the now shaking arm, ran into the yard and threw it beside the hole. Once back inside, I hurried to the window and saw the giant approaching. The heavy steps gave a thump, thump sound in the lawn. The huge creature stopped beside the hole, stooped and picked up its lower arm and reattached it. The skull turned in my direction as it moved to the hole and struggled down into it.

Despite my relief, I was curious. Although there was now a bright moon, I took a flashlight and went into the side yard. I approached the hole and directed the beam of light into it, expecting to see a vertical tunnel leading to Hell. Or a pit of dead bones. What I saw instead was hideous. It appeared to be a huge pile of writhing viscera. I backed up, feeling a gag reflex and nausea. I went back inside and looked out the window.

At first it was quiet but then a pinkish, bloated object rammed upward from the hole, looking like a large intestine with segmented haustra undergoing slow pulsations. The head part looked like the innermost end of a large intestine with the appendix hanging down like a floppy nose. It was over three meters high and swayed right and left as though surveying the environment with unseen eyes. Then it reared even higher, resembling a cobra preparing to strike.

I noticed a man coming toward my house. It was Max. For some reason he was coming back after only a short absence, probably fired from his job. He had to pass through the side yard and appeared not to notice the huge thing beside him. Maybe it was because he couldn't see in the same dimension I could. As he moved near the thing, it dipped to the ground, grabbed the hatchet I left out there with its

appendix-looking protuberance and struck. Max never had a chance.

After the gut-like thing sank back into the hole, I went outside. What was left of Max was not pretty. While I stared, blue and red blinking lights approached. The police car stopped and I heard voices.

One officer looked at me and said, “Good God, neighbors where right. Go see about her.”

“Lady, put the hatchet down,” the other officer said. “Jeez, she’s covered with blood and gore.” The officer pulled her gun and held the barrel toward me until I released the hatchet.

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I hear them out there. The little door to the slot where they push food through is still open. Maybe it stuck.

One guard said, “They put this one in a few days ago. She’s a hard case. I think she’ll be found unfit to stand trial and get transferred to an institution. Report said she had a history of depression, but all I have heard in there is laughing.”

Yes, I feel good. Since I’ve been in here, the tapeworm doesn’t keep me confined with depression because I’m already incarcerated. It has become a friend, ready to offer sage advice. The maggots have hatched into acrobatic flies which no longer eat happy thoughts. Instead, they sing as they cavort about and make me laugh.

Everyone needs something to care for. My keepers need that as well as their income. Now they have both. Seems toxin has its rightful place in the world after all.

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