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**Myra Nour**

Cover art by Dawn Seewer



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## Better Than Candy

by Myra Nour

Matt hunched in the dark, shivering in fear. The dampness of the small space crept across his skin, chilling him even more. The faint odor of mold and mouse droppings tickled his senses. Twitching his nose, Matt felt the sneeze building, but then it simply vanished.

Surprised, he rubbed his nose. He'd never been able to stop a sneeze before. His hand stilled as a loud thump came from overhead. Up there. In the house.

When another shiver rippled through him, Matt clasped his arms tight around his body. For a moment he'd forgotten he was hiding under the stairs in the basement.

*Slam!*

He jumped, as if whatever, or whoever was above, could hear him flinch. Matt placed one hand over his heart. It felt like it was trying to jump out of his chest. Fear, that's all it was, just like when he awoke from a bad nightmare, his heart racing like a scared rabbit. Taking a deep breath, he calmed down.

Then straining forward, Matt listened carefully. The drip of water from a pipe nearby was annoying, cutting through his concentration. From upstairs, muffled sounds filtered down into the basement. He dared to scoot closer to the opening, craning

his neck out from under the stairs. Now he could hear the funny chattering noises above him.

Matt crawled out of his space and stood up; inching along, pausing every few feet to listen, only stopping when he reached the bottom of the stairs. He stared upward through the gloom. There was only one small window in the basement and it illuminated but a mere tiny square patch on the floor. If not for that opening to the outside, it would be pitch black in the basement, for Matt hadn't dared turn the light on.

A bar of brightness shone beneath the door at the top of the stairs. Beyond that door was the kitchen.

*Thump!*

Another loud noise above his head, from the kitchen. Matt stilled his hand on the rail. Had he really been thinking of creeping up those stairs and peeking beneath the door? He wasn't sure, but his hand came back down to his side. His thoughts were becoming more confused.

He could hear more of those irritating, babbling sounds that made him want to cover his ears. No way was he going up those stairs now.

He turned sharply and stumbled. His legs had gone stiff on him, probably from squatting so long under the stairs. Glancing around the shadow-filled basement, Matt wondered if he should try to escape. His head tilted. The window was too high. He

sighed, his breath escaping through his mouth in a self-pitying moan. He walked slowly around the room, winding between stacked boxes and old furniture. There really was no good place to hide.

Matt trudged with hesitant steps back to the stairs. The tight, black space he'd first fled to was really the best spot to hide. But he hated it. He'd always been afraid of the dark-- the monsters that inhabited the shadowed spaces represented his worst fears. As he drew near the hidey hole, Matt realized it didn't seem as bad as he imagined. There were real monsters upstairs and if this was the safest place to hide, then he would rather live.

Another loud thump pounded the ceiling above his head, followed by total silence. Matt stood at the bottom of the stairs, where he'd paused. Should he try through the kitchen? It seemed as though the invaders had left, because the last round of noise sounded like the kitchen door slamming shut. His shoulders slumped as exhaustion crept into his body. Turning, he writhed back under the stairs, calling himself a scaredy-cat in his head.

He must have fallen asleep, because another loud bang drew him from a dreamless void. Turning his eyes upward, Matt listened, then closed his eyes, straining. It was silly to think that looking up or closing his eyes would make him hear better.

More jabbering, then moans. Sharp cries. His senses had

dulled because the sounds seemed further away and less irritating. He was so frigging cold and stiff, it was a wonder he could feel anything. He wished they would go away though. Disgusted with his cowardly behavior, he crawled out once again.

He wondered if the power of prayer could make them disappear, but couldn't remember any of the words Mom had taught him.

Matt jerked. *Mom*. An image of a woman with long brown hair popped into his mind. The love and warmth didn't flow over him like it always did when he thought of her. He was just too tired to think. But he did remember her plump arms around him, and how she often smelled like Apple pie, not perfume. There was some reason she never wore perfume, but he couldn't pull any information from his memory. It was there, at the back of his mind, like a tickling that needed scratching, but he couldn't reach it.

He could conjure the image of the pie though, which was his and dad's favorite dessert, and mom baked it almost every weekend.

Dad's rugged face floated in front of him and Matt reached for the imaginary face. The tall, rough-looking man, who had crease lines around his eyes from smiling so much, couldn't be touched or held. His face dissipated quickly. Sadness gripped him for a few seconds. He remembered being held tightly by the

big man and how safe it made him feel. The need to cry hammered through him, but no tears leaked down his face.

A sudden, deep aching desire overcame him. *I want Mommy and Daddy.* Pain and sorrow mixed within him, along with a searing urge to bawl like a baby. He was confused.

Some memories flittered through his mind randomly, but there were many gaps. It was as if a video played through his head, and much of the movie was blank, while other spots were fuzzy, with only a few scenes crystal-clear.

*Bam!*

The door slammed back and light spilled onto the first few steps. Matt staggered back too quickly for his stiff legs, stumbling like a drunk and landed on his back.

More strange noises emanated from the dark figures blocking the light at the top of the stairs. Matt moaned in fear and flipped over clumsily, then stomach crawled back to his hiding place. He was afraid they would see him if he stood up. Funny, this time his heart didn't beat like crazy, but thudded slowly.

# # #

"Did you hear that?"

"I'm not sure." The woman grabbed the big man's arm as he took a step down. "What if it is one of them," she whispered.

He snorted. "Don't be silly, we have the place locked up tight." Sighing, he patted her restraining hand. "Remember, the

only access is that one small window, and it's covered with a heavy metal grating."

Her brown hair swirled softly around her shoulders as she nodded. "Now I'm glad you didn't listen to me when I wanted to enlarge the window."

He grinned, white teeth bright against his tanned flesh. Who knew what went through his mind--expenses, hassle, or simply a woman's whim ignored.

As he started down again she followed, gripping his t-shirt in the back. The darkness was deep down there even with his flashlight cutting a swath in front of their feet.

"I wish you had connected the light switch by the door like I asked." She waved back toward the door.

"I know hon. Why these old houses have only one light bulb in the center of the basement...doesn't make sense." Stumbling, he righted his body as she gasped behind him.

"Damn. Julie you're right this time. Tomorrow I'm putting in a switch."

Her mouth dropped open, but she shut it immediately as if she cut off the retort she was about to make.

Continuing more cautiously, he mumbled, "Lucky I know how to do it. No electrician in his right mind would venture out in that mess."

They had made it to the last six steps, when the man yelped

and staggered. The woman reached for him, but his misstep threw her balance off and instead she pitched forward, slamming into his back.

With a tumble of entwined limbs they fell down and landed on the hard, cold cement floor.

# # #

Matt stayed a few fearful seconds in the dark hole. The creatures lay totally quiet. Knowing this was his only chance of escape he crept out and stood up with creaking, weak legs. Swaying, he reached the light pooling around the flashlight that had fallen near one of the thing's outstretched limb.

Their immobility gave Matt courage. He grabbed the leg of the nearest creature and tugged to check for a response. Nothing. Something unusual drew his attention from the tangled bodies. Matt held up his hands, surprised by the red running down his fingers.

Sure he'd purposely swiped at the big creature's ankle. The result had been spectacular and he had no idea he had clawed the thing in the process. He shuddered, afraid of the liquid dribbling slowly down his hands. What if they gave him a disease? What if they were the nightmare monsters he heard his parents whisper about, and simply touching one turned him into one of *them*?

Bringing one hand up, Matt tentatively sniffed it. Didn't



stink. In fact, it smelled delicious. Something nudged at his memory. Apple pie? No, it didn't smell like that, but it had the same yummy reaction in the pit of his stomach. Sticking out his tongue he licked up a thick droplet. Matt closed his eyes, overcome with the indescribable taste.

His eyes popped open and he gasped. What had he done? Gross. Probably stupid too. As he stared in horror at his red coated hand, the intriguing odor wafted upward. Without thinking Matt stuck one finger in his mouth. He groaned, swaying. A gurgling growl erupted as he licked and sucked each digit until they glistened.

Disappointment flashed through him as he held both hands up. All gone. It reminded him of the first time he'd tasted chocolate. Ever since that first bite he'd loved anything chocolate, whether it was candy, cake or pie. But this red stuff was even better. He lowered his arm and moaned. His stomach rumbled loudly and Matt couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten.

His awareness had been centered on his hands and the discovery of the best thing since chocolate. But now, that mouth-watering odor was floating around his body, tantalizing him. Torturing him. Matt stared at his hands in confusion, then turned slowly to look for the source of the red, better than candy treat. He inhaled deeply. Drool slid down his lips on

either side, dripping onto his chest, but he didn't notice. The smell was everywhere, as if the basement had been drenched in the red stuff.

Following his nose, Matt stumbled closer to the downed creatures. Worry over their fearsome size was gone. The odor was strongest by the form lying farthest from the stairs. Kneeling with difficulty, he strained to see. His vision was cloudy, like there was a veil of smoke obscuring the creature. It was lying perfectly still. Something dark spread out all around the head, staining the hair. Swiping one hand through the gooey liquid Matt could smell it before he tasted the same red ambrosia coating his fingers.

He moaned in ecstasy as he dipped his fingers over and over into the thick liquid. Matt's stomach was hit with fierce hunger pains that forced him to pause momentarily. Moaning, he wrapped his arms around his middle, hunching over in agony. Something instinctual took over and he knew he had to fill his stomach or the pain would become intolerable.

Matt had to get to the source of the delicious treat. His hands searched through the gore until he felt an opening in the creature's skull. Squealing in excitement and hunger he pried his fingers inside and pulled. Falling backwards, he was surprised the skull sprang open so easily. He was so weak a few moments ago--maybe the meal renewed his strength?

Wiggling forward, Matt stuck his face into the cavity, slurping up fluid and chunky goblets of flesh. Dissatisfied, he rose to his knees and sinking one hand inside the skull, he brought forth a handful of the gory-soaked pieces. Shoving it into his mouth brought instant satisfaction. The glistening food took the edge off his pain. He continued with his feast, moaning and rocking on his knees.

Digging his fingers in for another helping, they wriggled around, encountering nothing but empty space. Hunger pains shot through his whole body, as if knowing the food source was gone had brought on the agony again. Matt clutched the edges of the skull, moaning loudly.

"Julie."

The remaining creature's strange word cut through Matt's self-pitying moaning. He rose to his feet, happy that he could move so easily now with just a little stiffness. He walked toward the creature's feet.

As he attempted to identify the terrible beast, a word floated through Matt's consciousness: man. The word meant nothing to him.

The big creature fumbled for the flashlight, and then flicked it around, never touching the other form lying but ten feet away. It stopped on Matt.

"Matt!" the beast gasped loudly. "Son, you're hurt." He

started to move, but then stopped and groaned.

"I think my ribs are broken. Damn. I can't move my other arm. Must have busted it up too." The light dipped down, wavering on his pants legs. "Shit."

He thought he recognized the strange creature--even the garbled words seemed a bit familiar.

Matt became distracted and his eyes followed the light, fascinated by the brightness. When it stopped on the beast's legs, he couldn't help another stream of drool that slipped between his lips. The material had ripped, exposing the thick leg from the thigh down.

Jagged bone jutted out of the flesh. It was the wetness dripping from the wound that enticed Matt. A pool of dark liquid candy treat waited for him. He eagerly stumbled forward and fell on his knees beside the creature, running his hands immediately through the muck. He slurped up the tasty stuff.

"What's that noise?" The light moved, wavering on the kneeling figure.

"Matthew!"

The scream drew his attention. The powerful need to fill his stomach had caused him to forget the creature. He emitted a low growl from his throat.

"Get back!"

Matt recognized fear in the strange, unintelligible word.

It made him feel powerful and angry.

The flashlight hit the side of his head. It didn't hurt, but it caused immediate frustration. The bright light was incredibly hot, but it didn't deter him. The hunger was everything.

Matt fell onto the creature's leg and tore off a chunk of red meat with his teeth. The piercing shriek that erupted from the thing was much louder than the earlier one. Matt hunched over his meal protectively, moaning with delight, shoving the flesh into his mouth.

His head was slammed by a glancing blow, but it was enough to knock him sideways. Struggling to his knees took more of an effort. He felt weird. The creature swung at him again and he avoided it by falling backwards. Something within him told Matt that it was important not to get hit again. He flipped over, dragged his body a few feet and then stood up. The light picked him out of the darkness.

"Julie, I need your help." Silence followed the whispered plea.

The flashlight flickered around the room until it landed on the other beast lying nearby. The top of the open skull faced the panicking, frenzied creature. The light hovered on the bits of brain matter clinging to the hair and scattered about the skull.

A shrill scream full of agony erupted out of the thing.

Matt cocked his head, wondering why the creature cried out when it was not being attacked.

"Stay away from me Matt. I don't want to hurt you."

Deep inside there was a spark of memory; he knew he should laugh, but wasn't sure how to do it. He did know he had to avoid being hit by the big flashlight, so he glanced around. How could he get past the creature's deadly aim? His eyes lit on a long, thin object. It was a familiar piece of wood but other than that, he didn't know what it was called.

It was strange how he could remember some things, like the flashlight, but others just were not in his head. For a brief moment he was distracted by the gaps in his memory and how they were increasing, but then he lost his train of thought. He hefted the thick end of the wood and swung it in a wide arc; the object flipped out of his hand. Moaning, he picked it up again, even though it cost him effort for that type of movement. Matt bent over as hunger pains ripped at his insides.

He'd picked up the object by the smaller end this time and found it was easier to grip. Swinging it experimentally, he discovered it was easier to move around too. And it felt right.

"What are you doing?"

The fear in those garbled words gave Matt more confidence. When he drew near, he clumsily swung the wood at the frightened

creature. It struck the exposed thigh and the thing screamed in agony. Matt swung again, but this time the beast was ready and deflected his blow with the flashlight. No matter. Maybe he could smash the flashlight.

He was getting better at every swing, but also frustrated. Then he noticed after repeated swings, it groaned and barely got the flashlight up in time to block him.

Matt grinned, a nasty grimace filled with red stained teeth and bits of flesh clinging to his lips.

*Wham!*

The creature yelped after being struck on the arm. The flashlight bounced from its grip, spinning around crazily on the floor and then stopping with the light shining on him. Matt paused as if he were the main character in a play, caught in strong beam of the spotlight. There was no memory of the third grade show in which he'd played Lancelot--just that flash of a scenario.

The creature gasped as Matt moved closer and raised the weapon high above his head; he brought it down hard. It gave him great satisfaction when screams of pain erupted. He continued slamming onto the same upraised arm until it was a bloody pulp and the thing stopped moving or screaming.

He'd made a tasty-looking mess of its limb. Matt walked around the body, kneeling next to the juicy flesh that remained

on the battered arm. Saliva dripped in long strings out of his mouth. Without even glancing at the thing, Matt plunged onto the red pile of churned-up meat. A big chunk was easy to rip off. The creature bellowed, returning from whatever dark place it had retreated to.

Matt alternated tearing pieces loose with both hands and diving his mouth into the succulent feast. The screams never stopped, but they were nothing to him. The beast couldn't hurt him now or stop him.

Whimpers rose from the thing as he licked up droplets from his fingers. The arm had little left that was appetizing. What next? He eyed the long body. The head of the other had been a delight, but were there other goodies waiting to be discovered? The shirt the creature wore had been ripped, exposing the stomach area.

Matt remembered something about a belly full of jelly. He loved jelly. In one swift action he tore at the soft skin with his fingers, revealing rivers of the red treat and funny-looking, long, wetly-glistening organs. They reminded him of worms--what did worms taste like?

The creature's shrill screams went on endlessly while Matt munched on the huge, delectable red worms. The screams didn't stop until the body grew cold. When that happened Matt lost interest.



Rising easily to his feet, he looked around the basement. There was nothing keeping him here now. He started up the stairs, which were a little tricky at first. He thought he was going to tumble back down. After a long struggle, he finally made it to the top.

A loud shuffling sound startled him and Matt stared down into the inky blackness. Was it one of the monsters? The prostate flashlight picked up movement. The creature was flopping around like a fish. Matt wanted to giggle, but it seemed to be another thing he'd forgotten how to do.

The horribly disfigured creature below was no threat to him. Matt knew this. Even if it could manage the stairs, it would have no interest in him.

He nudged the door open and slid through, then looked around the kitchen. It seemed familiar. But there were boards across the back door. As he turned, Matt stopped in terror; a strange figure looked back at him, and it took a few seconds for his brain to register that it was a mirror facing him. The face in the mirror belonged to him.

Matt's mind spiraled crazily in flashes as memories bombarded him. Getting up in the morning. Boredom because he couldn't go outside and play with his friends. Unlatching the back door carefully so his parents wouldn't wake up. Even managing to lift the heavy board that Dad had fixed across the

door, so it could be removed easily.

Feeling safe inside the tall privacy fence out back. Picking up his baseball and glove. Throwing the ball against the fence. The baseball landing where a few boards were rotted away. Reaching for the ball as it rolled away, so he had to stick his arm through the hole. Searing pain as something clamped onto his wrist. Jerking back, tearing his skin. Running into the house and wrapping the horrible, bloody wound in one of mom's kitchen towels.

His fear that his parents would find out he'd disobeyed them. Tears and throbbing, awful pain. Abrupt, gut-wrenching terror. He knew it had to be one of the monsters who bit him. Creeping slowly down the stairs, even though the basement normally scared the crap out of him.

Matt remembered that his all-encompassing fear made him look for a place to hide away from the world.

He zeroed back to the present. The Spiderman pajamas were covered in blood and gore, so were his hands and his lower face. He ran one hand down the soaked shirt. It was weird how the word "blood" came to mind so easily now. The skin on his face that wasn't stained by blood was a funny gray color. Matt's blonde hair had gone unscathed except for flecks of red scattered through it.

Reaching out, he touched the mirror. Was that what he

really looked like? His light blue eyes were glazed and the image was hazy, but clear enough. He was a monster.

Matt's mind recoiled from the horrors he'd committed. The last vestiges of humanity fled, his mind unable to bear the agony. The once beautiful boy turned from its reflection and sniffed the air.

He no longer thought; his mind ran on pure instinct. His earlier desire to find his parents was gone, buried deep within his dead brain. Inhaling deeply, he sought something.

Stumbling around the kitchen, Matt tried to find a way out, but was locked in. Eventually he lurched into the living room, and then was drawn to the curtains that were ruffled by the air conditioner vent beneath them. He grabbed the material and the rod broke free, exposing the large front window. Pressing his nose against the glass, he was excited by the activity outside.

Bodies moved. Some of them were running.

Matt slammed his hands on the glass repeatedly until a small hole appeared around the cracks. Sticking his nose in the opening, he sniffed and then tried to ram his head through. Only his nose fit through the hole, and finally he withdrew, ripping all the flesh from his nostrils on a jagged shard of glass.

He relentlessly beat on the glass until it exploded outward. The inhuman boy crawled through the window, tearing off chunks of gray flesh. Dragging his body to the nearest column,

he managed to pull himself up after long minutes of struggling. He was incredibly weak.

Matt surveyed his world and noticed smoke in the distance. A nearby house burned, but the two hazards were dismissed with a mere glance. Screams and gun blasts captured his attention. The terror in those wordless cries excited his dead brain. The bodies he'd spied earlier were gone, but he caught the faint odor of something that made his mouth water.

The zombie child stumbled down the stairs, sniffing the air. No thoughts entered his mind now; he was propelled by impulse and need. He no longer searched for Mommy and Daddy, but for food that tasted better than candy.

THE END

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