## THE BOOK EATERS

# The Book Exters



### SUNYI DEAN



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For my mother,
who has been a force of nature her entire life;
and for my dear friend John O'Toole,
who is something of a Jarrow.





PRESENT DAY

We have just begun to navigate a strange region; we must expect to encounter strange adventures, strange perils.

-Arthur Machen, The Terror

These days, Devon only bought three things from the shops: books, booze, and Sensitive Care skin cream. The books she ate, the booze kept her sane, and the lotion was for Cai, her son. He suffered occasionally from eczema, especially in winter.

There were no books in this convenience store, only rows of garish magazines. Not to her taste, and anyway she had enough books to eat at home. Her gaze skipped across the soft porn, power tools, and home living publications down to the lowest strata, where children's magazines glowed pink and yellow.

Devon ran short, ragged nails across the covers. She thought about buying one for Cai, because he seemed to like reading that kind of thing at the moment, and decided against it. After tonight, his preferences might change.

She walked to the end of the aisle, linoleum squishing beneath her heeled boots, and set her basket at the checkout. Four bottles of vodka and a tub of skin cream.

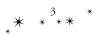
The cashier looked at the basket, then back at her. "D'you have ID?" "Pardon?"

"Do you, have, any ID?" he repeated, slowly, as if to someone hard of hearing.

She stared. "I'm twenty-nine, for Christ's sake." And looked every year of it, too.

He shrugged, crossed his arms. Waiting. Wasn't much more than a kid himself, at most eighteen or nineteen, working in the family shop and likely trying to follow all the rules.

Understandable, but she couldn't oblige him. Devon didn't have any ID. No birth certificate, no passport, no driver's license; nothing. Officially, she didn't exist.



"Forget it." Devon shoved the basket at him, bottles clinking. "I'll get a drink somewhere else."

She stalked out, annoyed and flustered. Hordes of teenagers bought booze from other corner shops all the time. It was a daily occurrence around here. That someone would choose to card *her*, so clearly an adult, was ridiculous.

Only after she'd crossed the badly lit street did she realize that she'd left without buying the skin cream. It was a small failure, forgetting the lotion, but she failed Cai so constantly in so many different, myriad ways that even this tiny mistake was sufficient to wring her insides with fresh anger.

She considered going back for it, then checked her watch. The time was pushing 8 P.M. Already in danger of running late.

Besides, eczema was nothing compared to his hunger. Much more important to feed him.

Newcastle-upon-Tyne was a pretty enough city, if a little rowdy for Devon's liking. This time of year, the sun set at 4 P.M. and the sky was already fully dark, the lamps abuzz. The lack of ambient light suited her mood. Compulsively, she checked her phone with its short list of contacts. No texts. No calls.

She slunk past a row of decrepit terraces. Passersby drifted up and down the pavement. A tight knot of people huddled outside one of the houses, drinking and smoking. Music leaked through curtainless windows. Devon took a left off the main street to avoid the crowds.

There were so many things to remember when she was out and around humans. Feigning cold was one of them. Thinking of it, she drew her coat tight around her, as if bothered by the chill. Walking with sound was another. She scuffed her feet with deliberate heaviness, grinding gravel and dust beneath her heels. Big boots helped with the plodding tread, made her clunky and stompy like a toddler in adult wellies.

Her vision in darkness was another awkward one. Having to remember to squint, and to pick her way across a detritus-littered pavement that she could see with perfect clarity; having to feign a fear she never felt, but which should have ruled her. Solitary human women walked with caution in the night.

In short, Devon had always to act like prey, and not like the predator she had become.

She picked up the pace, keen to get home. The flat she rented (cash only, no questions) occupied a squalid space above a tire shop. In the daytime it was noisy, reeked of oil, and filled with the conversation of customers. The evenings were quieter, if no less foul-smelling.



Down the alley, up the stairs to the back entrance. There was no street-facing door, but that was a good thing. Meant she could come and go by dark side alleys, unwatched by curious eyes—and so could her visitors, when she had them. Privacy was essential.

Devon fished out a set of keys, hanging around her neck on a lanyard. The cord was entangled with a brass compass on a steel chain. She shook the lanyard free, slotted the key in, and wrestled briefly with the lock before stepping inside.

Since neither she nor her son required light, the flat sat in perpetual dark. It saved on the energy meter and reminded her a little of home, back when home had been welcoming: the cool unlit calm of Fairweather Manor, with its shade-tinted hallways and shadow-layered libraries.

She was expecting human company, though, and switched on all the lights. Cheap bulbs flickered into anemic existence. The flat contained only a claustro-phobic living space, a small kitchenette with fold-out table, a bathroom veering off to the left, and a locked bedroom to her right where her son spent much of every day. She dropped her bag by the door, hung her coat on a hook, and clunked across to his room.

"Cai? Are you awake?"

Silence, then the faintest of shuffles from within.

"No lotion, sorry," she said. "They were out. I'll get some tomorrow, aye?" The shuffling stopped.

Always, she was tempted to go in and offer comfort of some kind. By the three-week mark, starvation would have ravaged him to thinness, his suffering spiraling into unbearable agony as his body began to produce toxins. The madness already gnawed his mind, incurable except through his next feed, and even after feeding, the craving would remain ever-present. He would either sit in a corner, huddled up and unresponsive, or else attack her in a frothing rage.

Impossible to know which reaction she'd get and so, fingers shaking, she checked and double-checked the bolts instead of going in. One on the top and one on the bottom, both solid things she'd installed herself, and one regular lock that required a key. The room had no window, courtesy of its awkward layout in relation to the shop; no additional security needed there. For once.

Someone knocked at the entrance to her flat. She jumped, felt chagrined, then checked her watch. Ten past eight; bang on time. Just as well she'd not gone back for the lotion.

Devon went to let in her guest. He had a name, but she would not allow herself to think it. Better to consider only his role, his profession: the local vicar. He needed to be no more and no less.

The vicar waited anxiously on her doorstep, wearing a black-and-mustard coat that might have been fashionable forty years ago. He had kind eyes, a quiet demeanor, and impressive patience with his quarrelsome congregation. Not touchy-feely with kids and no severe personal problems that she could find after two weeks of intense stalking. Everyone had small vices and little problems, always, but that was a given, and she could cope with the small stuff. They were only human, after all.

"Thanks for coming." Devon hunched herself smaller. Be uneasy, be reluctant, and above all, be vulnerable. The sure-fire act that suckered them every time. "I didn't think you would."

"Not at all!" He offered a smile. "As I told you on Sunday, it's no trouble."

Devon said nothing, looking sheepish and fiddling with the compass around her neck. She'd done this conversation or some variation of it so many times, tried all kinds of lines, and found it was better to let them take the initiative. Probably she should have put on something more feminine to look even more unthreatening, but she despised dresses.

"May I come in?" he ventured, and she feigned embarrassment for her rudeness, stepping aside.

His gaze snagged on the dilapidated interior. Devon couldn't blame him. She gave the usual, awkward apologies for the state of the flat while he gave the usual demurring reassurances.

That ritual completed, she said, "My son is in a bad way. I spoke to him earlier, and he didn't answer. You may not have much luck, I'm afraid."

The vicar nodded, lips pursed with concern. "If you are happy for me to try, I will see if I can speak to him."

Devon clenched her teeth to hold back a contemptuous laugh. As if talking could solve problems like this. Wasn't the vicar's fault, she'd been the one to say that Cai had depression, but hysteria crept up on her nonetheless.

The vicar was still awaiting a response. She managed a tight nod, hoping he'd read her emotions for the right kind of conflicted, and led him to the locked door.

"You lock your son in his room?" He sounded shocked, and she could feel the weight of his judgment as she undid each bolt. No doubt he thought she had something to do with Cai's present mental state.

If only he knew.



"It's complicated." Devon turned the key and paused, aware her heart was racing. "I need to ask you something."

"What is it?" The vicar was wary, his senses alert to a danger that his eyes could not perceive.

Didn't matter. He'd been lost the moment he stepped inside.

She met his gaze. "Are you a good person?" The question that consumed her, every time. Every victim. "Are you kind?"

He frowned, considering his words. Trying to understand what reassurance she sought, not that he had a cat's chance in hell of guessing. Still, his hesitation was its own reassurance. The bad ones lied, quick and smooth—or worse, brushed it aside, sometimes with humor. Only those with a conscience would stop and evaluate her question.

"None of us are truly good," the vicar said, at last. He put a hand on her shoulder, so gently, so kindly, and she almost threw up on the spot. "All we can do is live by the light we are given."

"Some of us don't have any light," Devon said. "How are we supposed to live, then?"

He blinked. "I—"

Devon caught his wrist, wrenched the door open, and shoved him in. The vicar wasn't frail but Devon was far stronger than she looked and had the element of surprise. He stumbled forward, startled and gasping, into the darkness of Cai's room. Devon yanked the door shut and held it hard.

"I'm so sorry," she said through the keyhole. "I'm just doing the best I can." The vicar didn't answer. He was already shouting and thrashing.

Really, it was pointless to apologize. Victims didn't want your sorry-so-sorrys when you were hurting them, they wanted you to stop. Devon couldn't oblige, though, and apologies were all she had these days. Apologies, and booze.

The noise of the vicar's muffled struggling trickled away in a minute or less. She could never decide which was worse: the wailing, or the silence. Maybe they were equally bad. After a moment of dithering, she let go of the doorknob. No point locking up. Cai wouldn't be dangerous, not anymore, and better to make sure he could leave his room if he wished.

The flat oppressed, mildewed walls crushing her spirit to flatness. After so many days of ravenous hunger, her son would need to sleep off his feed. In the meantime, she wanted a drink and there was no vodka in the house.

No, wait. She still had a half bottle of whiskey, left behind by the previous person she'd brought to her home. Devon didn't like whiskey, but right now

she liked being sober even less. A couple minutes of rifling through the cabinets turned up the errant alcohol.

Bottle in hand, Devon locked herself in the tiny, dingy bathroom and drank into oblivion.



#### A PRINCESS OF THE MAGIC LINE

#### TWENTY-TWO YEARS AGO

She was a princess of the magic line. The gods had sent their shadows to her christening.

-Lord Dunsany, The King of Elfland's Daughter

Devon was eight years old when she met her first human, though she did not realize what he was at the time. Or rather, she did not realize what *she* was.

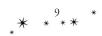
Growing up, there had only been the Six Families, scattered across different regions of Britain. Devon's family was the Fairweathers, whose North Yorkshire estate was wedged between low-lying hills and wild moorland. Uncle Aike was the patriarch of their manor because he was the wisest, even though he was not the oldest. Under him were a succession of other aunts and uncles ranging from barely adult to discreetly ancient.

And under *them* were the seven Fairweather children, of whom all except Devon were boys. There were very few women around, for girl-children were rare among the Families. The uncles outnumbered the aunts, just as the brothers outnumbered their sister, and no brides were in residence at the time. Devon's own mother was an unremembered face, having long since moved on to another marriage contract.

"You're the only princess in our little castle," Uncle Aike would say with a wink. Tall and gray-haired, he enjoyed folding his lanky frame into comfortable chairs and drinking copious quantities of inktea. "You get to be Princess Devon. Just like in the fairy tales, eh?" He would make a little flourish with his hands, a smile crinkling up the corners of his mouth.

And Devon would laugh, put on a crown made from braided daisies, and run around the yard in her tattered lace dress shouting *I'm a princess!* Sometimes, she tried to play with the aunts, because if she were a princess then they ought to be queens. But always, the older women withdrew from her with anxious glances, rarely leaving their own bedrooms. Devon eventually decided they were boring and left them alone.

The house itself was a ten-bedroom building, three stories high. It might have been quite ordinary for manors of that type if not for the haphazard



collection of parapets, extensions, tile roofs, and Gothic flourishes. ("Courtesy of your great-uncle Bolton," Uncle Aike had said once. "Architecture was his, ah, treasured pastime.")

Beneath the ground, more levels sprawled with delightfully twisted passageways. Devon knew every nook and corner, from the dark sublevel halls to the sun-filled music rooms of the upper floors.

And the libraries. Like the other Families, the Fairweathers had libraries with a flavor all their own: vintage books stitched from carefully aged leather—the darker, the better—with textured, embossed covers. When opened, the brown-edged pages flaked in soft, dry puffs, smelling faintly of March rain. One bite and Devon's bookteeth could sink straight through those covers and chewy strings of binding, tongue alive with the acidic tang of ink-tinged paper.

"Biblichor," Uncle Aike liked to say, rolling the word in his mouth. "That is a word that means *the smell of very old books*. We love biblichor, here. And other old things."

"Everything in the house is old," Devon giggled. Like the paintings in the downstairs dining room; four hundred years old, apparently. "I think *you're* very old!"

Uncle Aike always laughed, was never offended. "Maybe I am, princess, but you'll never make it to my age with that tongue of yours!"

That tongue of yours. Lots of people commented on Devon's tongue. She stuck it out, sometimes, inspecting it in the mirror. There was nothing special about her tongue that she could ever see.

The land they lived on stretched vast to the eyes of a child. Rocky hills couched moorland, full of hollows and peat bogs. In summer, when the moors bloomed purple with heather, Devon chased rabbits and grouse birds. Twice she found otters, whose little fangs looked like her own growing bookteeth. In winter, the grass dried up and crisped with frost. She built snowmen with her brothers and they ran together, ever barefoot, through the hillocks and valley forests.

And then, one January morning, eight-year-old Devon went out on her own in search of snow buntings and red fox vixens. She had heard the foxes barking in the night and hoped to catch a glimpse of one scampering across the snow, like flame racing across paper.

She'd hardly gone three hundred yards, crossing into the small wood behind the house, when an unfamiliar noise snagged her attention. Someone was crashing through the trees and snow with loud, clumsy steps. No one at Fairweather Manor walked so heavily and Devon, intrigued, went to investigate.

A man she didn't recognize slogged and huffed through freshly fallen snow. He was of indeterminate Adult Age, with dark hair and warm brown skin, his chin fully bearded. A curling black moustache framed his nose. Weirdly, he wore heavy boots, long trousers, funny knitted things on his hands, and bizarre puffed clothes that buttoned up to his chin. Another knitted thing sat on his head.

It took her a moment to recognize his gear as gloves, coat, and hat. They were things she knew from stories but had never seen on a real person. He looked so different from adults on the estate, who were rather paler and mostly dressed in dusty old suits. She wondered if he might be a knight of the Six Families, but knights usually traveled in pairs, on motorcycles, with a dragon in tow. He had no partner and no dragon and *definitely* no motorcycle.

She circled behind and tapped his shoulder.

"Hi," she said, and snickered when he nearly fell over with shock. How had he not seen her? All that fabric must have muted his senses.

"Holy—!" He checked himself, took a breath. Frost dusted his dark sideburns, and the hems of his trousers were soaked from melted snow. "Where did you come from, little one?"

Devon was utterly delighted. It'd been at least two years since she'd managed to sneak up on anyone. "Are you one of my cousins?" She skipped around him in a circle. "I haven't seen you before. Why aren't you in a car? I thought all the cousins came in cars."

"Cousin? No, I don't think so." For some reason, he kept staring at her bare feet and knees, and her sleeveless linen dress. "Aren't you cold, love?"

She stopped in her tracks, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

She knew about cold from eating all the right books. Cold was what made snow happen, instead of rain, just like in the Snow Queen story.

It was snowing now, light flakes landing on her arms and filling in her footprints. And it felt different from heat: balmy, instead of spikey. But cold was a part of the world and its seasons, a sensation detached from reaction. Not something that you had to do anything about.

"Strong kid," he said, eyebrows raised. "To answer your question, I'm not a cousin. I'm a guest, I suppose."

Now that, Devon understood. "You're very rude, then," she said, hands on hips. "If you really are a guest to the house, you're supposed to tell me who you are and where you're from."

She knew that non-Cousin people existed in the world: humans, who ate animal flesh and dirty plants plucked from the soil. But guest or not, Family or not, everyone had to show what Uncle Aike called *basic courtesy*.

"Is that so?" A tentative smile. "Very well, my apologies. I'm Amarinder Patel, or 'Mani' for short. I'm a journalist from London. Do you know London?"

Devon nodded. Everybody knew London. That was where the Gladstones lived, far down south. They were the biggest, richest, and most powerful of the Families. She'd met some of their visiting cousins once.

"And you are?" Mani's smile stabilized, became more genuine.

"I'm Devon Fairweather of the Six Families," she informed him. "All of this land belongs to Fairweather Manor."

"The Six Families?" he echoed.

Devon gave up being polite. "What's a jerna . . . jernaliss?" If he wasn't going to do the right words, then neither would she.

"Jour-na-list," he said, with slow emphasis. "The investigative kind. That means I do research and go chasing strange stories. Sometimes, the things I discover appear on the telly. Isn't that exciting?"

"What's the telly?"

Another pause, shorter this time. He was learning to hide his surprise. "Devon . . . interesting name, by the way . . . I actually came here in search of your family. There are rumors about a remote clan living in the moors. I was hoping I could write a story—"

"A story? Like, a new one?" Devon was immediately interested. "Can all jour-na-lists write stories?"

"Well—"

"Will you write one just for me?" Questions burst from her in an excited flurry. "Can I eat it when you're done? I've never had a story written for me to eat!"

The smile slid from his face, like melting snow from a roof. "Eat it?"

"Is that how stories are made? I always wondered but Uncle Aike said he'd tell me when I was older. How do you write a story? I can't write a story. Will it be a book when you're finished? Do all stories become books?"

"You can't write?" he said, bewildered.

"Huh? Of course not!" She goggled at him. "How can we write?" If book eaters could write, they wouldn't need other people's books. The uncles had told her that.

Mani let out a slow breath. "I see." He turned up the collar of his coat. "Do you have a mum or dad?" When she looked confused, he added, lips twisting, "Someone who looks after you. A grown-up."

"Oh. D'you mean Uncle Aike?" Devon said, trying not to let her disappointment show. Uncle Aike got all the visitors. "I guess I could take you to

him." She knew the stranger wouldn't be wanting to see the aunts, because nobody ever wanted to see the aunts.

"Sure," Mani said darkly. "Let's meet your uncle Aike."

Devon skipped through the snowdrifts, disappointment giving way to self-consolation. So what if the visitor wanted to see Uncle Aike? She'd found him first. Ramsey would be so jealous. Her other brothers, too, but she didn't like them as well as Ramsey; most were much older and very boring and didn't play with her so much. Anyway, she would rub it in Ramsey's face all week. Maybe *two* weeks.

The forest thinned rapidly into rocky hills whose hard edges were softened with frost. The house unfolded into view, giving the illusion of a pop-up children's book, the ancient parapets jutting uncomfortably against failing winter light. A few of Devon's brothers were kicking a ball in the wild, overgrown gardens out front. None of them paid any attention to her except Ramsey, who looked over in pure astonishment. Devon took smug pleasure in his shock.

"No power source, no crops, no adequate clothing for any of the children. House in a state of disrepair, and the grounds look poorly tended. Yet they have modern cars on the drive." Mani was muttering into a small black device with a red flashing light. "Can't help but wonder what they eat. Insular and isolated, either way. Could these folks be the source of those old local legends?" He caught her staring and smiled disarmingly.

"Follow me!" Devon said, and tugged him, strangely reluctant, beneath the yawning archway into the entrance hall beyond.

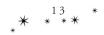
A once-rich carpet lay tattered and flat over a rough-hewn stone floor. Crystalline light fixtures hung darkly immaculate, barren of candle or bulb. If they'd ever been lit, Devon had never seen it. The rooms they passed contained low couches or polished wooden tables, the chandeliers and lamps also unused. Walls were thickly lined with shelves, unending shelves. The scent of biblichor suffused everything.

She took a sharp left at the end of the hallway and skipped into the drawing room, Mani trailing after. Several of her uncles were gathered around a particularly large oak table, playing a game of bridge and drinking inktea. The moment Devon and her prize visitor walked in, all conversation ceased. Every head swiveled their way.

"Uncle!" Devon said. "I found a guest!"

"So you have." Uncle Aike set down his fan of cards. "Who are you, sir?"

"Amarinder Patel, freelance journalist," Mani said, and extended a hand. "I was looking—"



"This is private property." Uncle Aike rose slowly. When not stooping, he stood over six feet. "You are not allowed to be here. Journalists, in particular, are not welcome."

Devon looked on, bewildered. She had never seen her favorite uncle so unfunny. So lacking in Basic Courtesy.

Mani lowered his hand. "I'm sorry, I would have called in advance, but I wasn't even sure you and your family lived here. There's no listed phone number on the land registry, no names on the electoral register—"

"Quite so." Uncle Aike leaned forward, knuckles pressed to the table. "Did it occur to you, Mr. Patel, that perhaps we have no wish to be contacted? Least of all by a *journalist*. Private citizens are entitled to private lives."

The air seemed to thicken, stifling Devon's questions. Something was happening that she didn't understand, though nobody seemed to be mad at her.

Mani adjusted his glasses. "Very well, I'll see myself out."

But Uncle Aike pointed to an empty seat and said, "Nonsense. Done is done, and you are already here. Take a seat, please." A muscle jumped in his cheek. "This is what you have come for, yes? To find the members of my Family? Well, come and speak to us, and we shall converse like adults."

"I..." Mani fidgeted with his small black machine, turning it over and over in his hands. To the perspective of this fully human man, he had entered a dark and somber room lined with crumbling tomes and populated by looming, pale-faced figures in old-fashioned suits. Not a situation for the faint of heart.

But after a moment, his professionalism and rationality won out. Mani edged over and sat down, squashed between Uncle Bury and Uncle Romford.

"Dev, my dear." Uncle Aike did not take his eyes off the journalist. "Go and play, yes? We will be a little while, having a chat with Mr. Patel."

"But . . ." Devon glanced mournfully at the table, where her guest sat rigid. She always had to leave when the grown-ups talked, and it was never fair.

Uncle Aike shifted his gaze toward Devon, shoulders and face softening a little. "Tell you what. Take yourself up to my room, little princess, and find one of the special-edition fairy tales. But off the lowest shelf, mind. Nothing naughty, aye?"

"Oh! I will, I will!" Devon scampered out of the room in excitement. Though fairy tales were all she ever ate, some were better than others, and the special ones in her uncle's study tasted exquisite: the crisp gold bindings, ribbon bookmarks, bright illustrations with multihued inks. An explosion of color and sparkles, words dangling and lingering on the palate.