

## **2020 Horror Story Contest**

Honorable Mention: "Eat, Love, Praying Mantis"

Kit Decker

I have never had a pet. I have never much cared for the humans that I assume I must resemble, and I have long and flatly rejected the possibility of liking other creatures that have fur or feathers, paws and claws, scales or tails. Or whiskers and fins – there are all manner of indescribable textures and awful appendages that I have spurned. They are dangerous and dirty and they must not come near me.

Long ago, my father forbade most everything that a normal child might expect to enjoy and he did so with apocalyptic fulmination; I despaired over the prohibition of comic books, television or candy but I was openly relieved that he banned all animals from being admitted across the threshold. Most relatives were banned, too, at first by individual excommunication and then broad injunction such that our once infrequent visitors dwindled to none. Two legs – manageable of necessity but acceptable in only a few particular instances; four legs - deeply troubling, to be shunned at all costs; no legs - unspeakable; six legs, ... no. No.

Yet, after all, it seems that I have acquired a sort of pet. She is a praying mantis, a svelte torpedo of a bug with delicately hinged hind legs and triple jointed forelegs ending in tiny weapons, a kukri perhaps or a scimitar, that flash out at flies like an exquisitely miniature knife and fork. She says a patient grace before meals and gives serene thanks when sated. She lives on the rim of the small compost bucket that I set on the ledge of the kitchen window. The compost draws the flies naturally, but I think they come to her, wanting to be chosen, willing to sacrifice themselves on her altar. She skewers the flies with a subtle, almost imperceptible flick like a hieratic conjuror, works them through fast-moving pincers of her curved jaws, then clasps her hands in prayerful contemplation and bobs gently. Normally brown against the wood of the bucket, she may flush green with satisfaction, and I cannot look away.

I watch her through the window. I press my face up close against the glass. I forget the dishes in the sink as I watch her in repose and wait for her to perform her rituals. I watch the long, tubular abdomen balance on the rim, swaying on the overlong legs. I watch the perfect triangle of her

head cock robotically as her wispy antennae respond with a quiver to the tiny vibrating current of a bluebottle's wings; the huge jeweled, glassy eyes rotate at the sides of her head, and I am initiated into the timeless mysteries of her insect religion. The cult of the high priestess-hunter, the blood sacrifice and post-coital cannibalism, the shaman-chameleon who performs the animatronic choreography of worship, a sorcerer's mimesis of wood, leaf or flower; I am absorbed, I am utterly entranced.

I leave her a daily offering – a few strawberry hulls, carrot parings – then retreat inside behind the glass. My elbows rest on the sill and my forehead leans against the pane so that I am slightly stooped - that is the orthodox position of reverence that I must assume. I while away a morning, a whole afternoon, days at time. There is nothing else beyond this communion. There is no glass. I sit on the edge of the compost pail and fold back my serrated forelegs, my green fades to gray once more and I bow my triangular head to rest. In my insect half-slumber, I toy with the idea of a mate...