

## Story Submission: MAGGOT

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Original Short Story (Horror)

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Topo grabbed the corpse roughly by the shoulder and turned it on its side. The blood, already drying in the apartment's oppressive heat, made a ripping sound as the body was separated from the cheap plastic cover on the couch. Viscous strands of it still connected the dead man to his furniture. Topo inserted a dirty forefinger into one of the sixteen knife wounds he'd helped inflict and explored until he scraped a rib. He grunted in satisfaction.

New York City in the summer of 1988, was plagued by record-breaking heat and homicides. Newspaper headlines featured the triple-digit numbers of the temperature alongside the quadruple-digit number of murders, as if trumpeting the daily results of a macabre contest. While scientists blamed the rise in temperature on Global Warming and El Nino, police blamed the rise in violence on that summer's two most readily available commodities. The heat, and crack cocaine.

In the tiny tenement apartment where Topo and his accomplice stood, covered in an old man's blood, the air felt almost as thick and sticky as the blood that now decorated the walls and cheap, sparse furniture. A screenless window stood wide open, torn gray curtains hanging limply on either side. No soft breeze disturbed or stirred them. The only things that stirred in the relentless heat of that summer-- were the flies.

One of those flies, a fat, hairy specimen, buzzed close by and landed on Topo's hand. He shook it off and let the body of his girlfriend's uncle roll softly to the floor. Topo looked up and glared at his blood-spattered co-conspirator, her own knife still held loosely in her hand, and stepped over the body towards her. The fly, bloated with eggs, flew lazily onto the corpse and disappeared into one of the brownish-red wounds in its back.

Topo planted himself in front of his girlfriend and stared down at her. Even though he was barely eighteen years old, he towered more than a foot above his sixteen year old "main squeeze". She kept her eyes on the body of her dead uncle on the floor, her young/old face expressionless. Topo placed a large, knobby hand on her head and twisted his fingers into the tight curls of her

## Story Submission: MAGGOT

hair. Suddenly, he yanked her head back, forcing her to look at him. Sharon yelped in pain and dropped her knife.

"I thought you said your uncle had a lot of money Sharon," Topo hissed.

"H-he did, I mean he does," Sharon replied. "I-I mean he's supposed to. Today's Thursday, and he always gets paid on Thursdays."

Sharon flinched, expecting Topo to strike her at any moment. She wouldn't blame him either. They'd planned to kill her uncle and use his money to buy crack cocaine. Then after using some themselves, they would turn the apartment into their own crack den and make more money - more money than they ever imagined. She rolled her eyes and looked again at her uncle's corpse. Now the whole plan may be ruined because there wasn't any money. Sharon didn't understand it... what happened to the money?

Sharon's large eyes widened even more at the sight of the large number of flies that were congregating near the wounds on her dead uncle's body, she saw that some of them were actually entering the nasty gouges in his flesh.

A fly landed on Sharon's face and she brushed it away. Suddenly the sight of the corpse and its flies was replaced by a kaleidoscope of stars as Topo struck her in the face with his big, bony fist. The force of the blow knocked her backward, leaving a few strands of her hair trapped in Topo's other fist. She fell against a small ornate table, breaking it. The carefully positioned collection of small statuettes, incense burners, and candles, along with a tiny basket of fruit, fell to the floor. Sharon laid there not moving, dazed. Topo stomped to where she was, fanning a cloud of flies out of the air before him, and prodded her in the ribs with his foot.

"Don't you ever raise a hand to me bitch," he yelled. Topo knew Sharon's gesture had been harmless, but he liked to assert his power over her. "You even think of raising your hand to me again and I'll kill you!"

Sharon moaned and pulled herself up onto the gore-covered couch. Blood, like a bright red tear, trickled down toward her mouth from a cut high up on her rapidly swelling cheek. Her eye, now partially closed, didn't see the fly that buzzed toward her face, and her cheek, painfully numb from the blow it'd just received, didn't feel the fly when it landed and started sopping up her blood with its brush-like proboscis. Topo pulled her up by the arm and shook her. The fly, disturbed, flew over to the corpse on the floor and made its way into one of the many wounds. The corpse shuddered.

## Story Submission: MAGGOT

Topo reached into his pocket with his free hand and pulled out a handful of crumpled and bloody bills. Sharon's one good eye widened in surprise.

"That's my uncle's money, Topo," she said. "You said he didn't have no money on him!"

Topo increased his grip on her arm and she winced.

"Two hundred dollars? Two hundred dollars? That ain't no money bitch," Topo snarled in reply as he waved the money in front of Sharon's battered face. "You made it sound like he had him some real money. What you think we can do with only two bills?"

Topo walked over to the apartment door, kicking upturned furniture and debris from his path, and dragged Sharon along behind him. He kicked the knife she'd dropped earlier and it skittered to a stop against the dead man's leg. When Topo got to the door, he turned and stuffed the money into one of Sharon's grimy hands.

"Go to Fatty Dee's place over on Myrtle Avenue," he said. "Bring back a couple of jumbos, and about ten nickel hits." Sharon nodded excitedly, gripping the money tighter in her fist.

"You better hurry too," Topo continued. "Don't stop to talk to nobody, and you better not smoke none on your own."

Sharon shook her head and tried to smile. "I...", she began.

Topo spun her around and shoved her face into the apartment's old wooden door. Paint chips splintered and fell off, falling into her hair and settling on the floor. She tasted some in her mouth but she was afraid to spit them out.

"Don't think I'm playing with you, Sharon," Topo growled. "You better run there and run back, and don't smoke none over there by yourself or I'll kick your ass from Fatty Dee's all the way back here. You understand?"

Sharon nodded as much as she could in her present position and felt relieved when Topo finally let her go.

"Go ahead then," he said.

Sharon nodded her head again and Topo opened the door and pushed her out into the dimly lit hallway. A large rat, unafraid, watched her as she ran out into the searingly hot dusk. The rat, smelling blood, crept toward the apartment. Topo, disgusted, slammed the door shut. The rat, disappointed, bared its long incisors and turned away. There will always be blood another day.

Topo turned and surveyed the wrecked apartment. 'I got to put Sharon out on the street so she can make me some money,' he thought. 'This little bit of money I got here

## Story Submission: MAGGOT

is gonna go quick, but she's still young and cute enough to make me more. That little bitch'll be working the street until she's too ugly or too dead. Then I'll just hook me up another young bitch that'll do anything for some crack. There's a lot of them. Their mamas too.'

Topo walked over to the corpse on the floor, it was covered with a moving, living mat of flies. As Topo watched, the rhythmic movement of the flies made the body seem as if it were breathing. He kicked the body savagely, causing the flies to rise in an angrily buzzing cloud. One fly landed on his lip.

"Damn!"

Topo brushed the fly off and swatted at it as it flew away. It landed on the body again and made its way inside.

Topo watched all of this with building revulsion. He eyed a nearby closet and decided that now would be as good a time as any to move the body. He opened the closet door, tossed most of its contents out into the room behind him, and then turned and bent in order to drag the body in by its legs. Topo stopped. Something was different. The body didn't look the same somehow. Topo felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end as superstitious fear washed over him like an ice-cold wave of dark, polluted water. Slowly, he straightened up and took a step back. Warily, he circled the body, looking for any impossible sign of life. The only life he could make out were the flies and their newly emerging offspring. Maggots. They were everywhere that he saw exposed flesh on the body, resembling thousands of tiny grains of rice.

Topo shrugged off his fear. 'The guy probably just had a spasm or something,' Topo thought. 'I heard about stuff like that happening in funeral homes.' After stalling for a few more minutes, Topo resumed his position at the dead man's feet and pulled him toward the closet, leaving behind a trail of blood, slime and wriggling larvae. Sharon's knife, wedged under the corpse, was dragged in with the body.

Hours later, Sharon snuck back into the apartment mostly empty-handed. She crept through the doorway, wanting to enter unnoticed. At the same time she knew how futile this was since there was no place to hide in the tiny apartment, and Topo would be expecting her. Sharon tip-toed into the apartment anyway in the hope of delaying the punishment that Topo was sure to subject her to for being late.

When she'd gotten to Fatty Dee's crack house and saw all those other people taking all those delicious hits from their pipes, she just had to do some. She didn't think

## Story Submission: MAGGOT

that she'd get so caught up in smoking that most of the money would be gone. Topo, she knew, would be enraged and would beat her mercilessly. Hopefully however, if she wasn't hurt too bad, things would go right back to normal and the two of them would stay like they were. Together forever. Young, in love, and high.

Cautiously, she peered into the minuscule kitchen, her eyes wide with fear and anticipation. Topo wasn't there. She stepped over her uncle's body and looked in his bedroom as well as in the dingy bathroom, they were empty as well. Puzzled, she stepped back into the middle of the living room which, with its fold-out couch, also served as her bedroom. She looked around at the apartment's devastation and at the items scattered about that her uncle had so lovingly and dutifully collected and cared for. Her uncle had told her on numerous occasions that he was a powerful Vodou priest. The tiny statues that now decorated the floor were representatives of Orishas, or Voodoo Gods, the other things scattered about were offerings or stuff used in rituals. When Sharon was small she was fascinated by the statues, the rituals, and the stories her uncle told her in the quivering light of the candles. But as Sharon grew older, she became bored with all of his mumbo-jumbo, she often wondered that if he was such a great voodoo priest, why did they live in such a tiny, crappy apartment in such a crappy neighborhood? Why didn't they drive around in an expensive car? Why couldn't he buy her the latest clothes? Sharon shook her head, why couldn't he stop them from killing him?

She stood there wondering where Topo was and what she should do next when she became aware of a strange sound.

The sound was faint, but not unfamiliar. She looked around, trying to figure out where it was coming from. Finally she was able to pinpoint it. It was coming from the closet.

'Topo is hiding in there,' she thought. Slowly, she put her hand on the doorknob and placed an ear against the door. She pulled her face away quickly. The sound coming from the closet's interior made the door vibrate. It was a weird buzzing noise, and it was louder now too.

"Topo?" Sharon called through the door. "Topo, what are you doing in there? Sounds like you're messing with the electricity. Can I open the door?" Sharon turned the knob and pulled the door open, an apology and an explanation already on her lips.

The closet's black interior exploded in her face as thousands of flies, buzzing agitatedly, swarmed all over her. They became entangled in her hair and in her clothes.

## Story Submission: MAGGOT

They flew into her nose, her ears, and her mouth. She flailed her arms about wildly, backing away from the closet, and tripped over one of her dead uncle's outstretched legs. She landed on the floor with a heavy thud, barking her elbow on the hard linoleum and had the wind knocked out of her. She lay on her back for a few seconds trying to regain her breath and composure as flies slowly crawled all over her.

She raised herself up on her elbows, her eyes straying to the open closet... and she screamed. There was Topo. His eyes and mouth were opened wide with terror. Fresh blood stained the front of his tattered shirt, running from a dozen or more knife wounds in his torso. Maggots bristled from his hands, chest, neck, face, even his tongue. Slowly, they waved in her direction, as if beckoning to her. As Sharon watched, one of Topo's eyeballs rotated crazily in its socket and sank from view. It was replaced almost immediately by a wriggling mass of fly larvae that boiled from the eye socket and splattered onto his sneakers. Sharon screamed.

The screams of the terrified or dying were common in this dark, forlorn building. Its residents, long the hostages of crack, crime, and indifference, were used to death. Anyone that heard Sharon's cry merely shivered at its timbre and turned up the volume on the television set.

Topo's body swayed and Sharon, terrified that it would fall on her, dug in her heels and scooted backwards. Without warning, a swollen hand grabbed her ankle and held her fast. Despite the oppressive heat, Sharon felt her spine turn to ice. She stared at the hand uncomprehendingly, until suddenly her uncle raised his head to hers. The skin of his face and hands rippled with the living multitude that swarmed underneath. Sharon watched as maggots pulsed from a wound in her uncle's heart. They rushed through his arteries and veins, replacing the blood that she helped to spill. He smiled and more of the maggots dripped from the corner of his mouth.

Just then, Topo's body toppled forward and landed on top of her, spraying her with blood and larvae. Sharon screamed again and again... until at last all that could be heard was the lazy drone of the summer flies.

The End