

Ghoul Boy

By Peter J. Summers

Susannah moved stealthily across the moors, dodging this way and that, avoiding the many traps mother nature had set there, hoping beyond hope that at least one of her three pursuers might fall victim. It was a sinful thought, to be sure, but she didn't care. Enough times had she been raped by these brutes that any such a monstrous solution would seem justified.

It was more than she could hope, though, for, like her, they had grown up on these moors. Even now she could sense that they had separated, planning to cut off her path from three directions. They would have her, she could not doubt, but she would never lay back and take it. As long as she had the strength, they were in for a fight.

Her sudden struggle for breath must have blocked the sound of approach, for, before her senses even picked up on another's closeness, he was upon her. Her ankles were grasped as he flung himself at her, tripping her, winding her as a boulder connected with her stomach. Her head felt as though it would burst, almost hoped it would. As the other two caught up, they laughed and cheered drunkenly, rolled her onto her back, and held her hands and feet down, letting the winner have first go.

Susannah wondered vaguely how their society friends would react if they saw them now. Knowing them, they'd probably join in.

Her breath returned as her clothes were shredded, too late to fight them off. But that would not stop her from making as much noise as possible, chastising them, tearing into them with her words. But she knew, like all men, they were impervious to insults.

Above her own screams, and despite the roaring laughter of her attackers, she could hear a faint noise. Was it music? Indeed it was. Carnival music. Or maybe it was just her imagination. In many respects, it was a carnival that dragged her down to this pitiful level. One night, early in childhood, was enough to draw hatred and disgust from the villagers, formerly her father's greatest friends. These men, once boys, she remembered as her playmates. They, like so many others, had been fed their parents' prejudices.

Memories of that night tried to force themselves into her mind. She wouldn't let it happen. The pain of that wild evening's conclusion beat upon her harder even than this. Finally, she could control it no longer. The past decade swam away from her. She was eight years of age again, a beautiful little girl with long yellow tresses, a cute button nose, and large hazel eyes. Eager to go to the carnival, she flashed these eyes pleadingly at her father. "Please, may we go," she whined for the tenth time. "*Please.*" She knew it would work eventually. He could never refuse his only daughter anything, even if it meant disturbing his own principles.

This carnival had been here before, coming back once every ten years, after its circuit of the entire country. They dealt mainly in freak shows, most of their tents devoted to the hideous, the malformed. It wasn't that as much as the way these creatures were treated that angered and disgusted him. Before the excited onlookers, human skeletons, bearded ladies, multiple-breasted women, and many more sadly deformed people were humiliated beyond belief, their little performances created only for degradation. And if they refused, to the delight of the spectators, the whips were drawn. As he reluctantly agreed to take her he hoped the years had eased the carnival's iron fist.

The sound of so many voices colliding was incredible, even above the music. Susannah was

overwhelmed. Her heart bounded with joy. The rides were her first objective, then the food. She must have had ten ice-creams, five hot dogs, and so much more she couldn't recall.

'Freaks' was a new word for her. She asked its meaning, and her father avoided the subject. He also forcibly prevented her from entering the tents that occupied these 'freaks.'

At the first opportunity, which wasn't long once the crowds enveloped them, Susannah broke free from her father. He called to her, but she pretended not to hear. Straight to the Freak Tents she headed, and boldly passed the ticket booth. But these carnies are sharp people. No money, no entry.

She decided it was no use, went to look for her father, when she spotted an opening under a smaller tent attached to one side of the much larger ones occupying the freaks. If she was able to sneak in through there...

It wasn't difficult once she got inside to mingle with the crowd. She looked just like a paying customer. Who she suspected was the carnival owner stood by a cage, looking rather pleased with himself, smiling satisfactorily at all the oohs and aahs coming from the people.

Susannah tried to see what was so interesting, couldn't. The crowds were impenetrable. But the carnival owner's commentary was enough to draw a picture in her mind: "Ladies and gentlemen, it pleases me to grant you all a seat at meal time. Stand back, though, or you might find yourself on the menu. Ha, ha. As you know, a ghoul is a flesh-eater. Human flesh, that is. He robs graves, and devours the worm-ridden flesh of the dead. Now, for your enjoyment tonight, we've already secured a corpse. Behold!" From her position, Susannah could only hear the sound of tearing, and the disgusted noises issuing from the spectators. Some vomited on the spot. They were ushered out with harsh words (presumably by those who had to clean it up), but the owner was overjoyed by the various reactions.

Soon the tent was empty, leaving Susannah alone with the creature. She was about to escape back out beneath the lining, but something tempted her to have a closer look. With steady steps she reached the cage and stared. Why, he's just a boy, she thought, astonished. Gripping the bars, she said, "Hello, what's your name?"

"That's Ghoul Boy, that is."

Susannah jumped, didn't realize the carnival owner was still there. She glared at him. "Ghoul Boy? That's no name."

"It's the only one he's got."

She turned her attention back to the boy. "Then it's up to me to give you one. Now, let's see." She pressed a finger to her lips, deep in thought. "Um, uh... Tom! Yeah, you look like a Tom." Was that a grin they saw on his lips? "He likes it!"

"Bah!" exclaimed the carnival owner, his beard pointing accusingly at Susannah. "Don't you go ruinin' him for me. A domesticated ghoul, huh! He's my livelihood, is that lad. Now scoot! Get outta here. And if I see you around here again, I'll personally see to it you'll be in there with 'im. Yeah, as his next feast."

As fast as she could carry her little legs, Susannah ran from the enclosure, landing straight into her father's arms. "I wanna go home!" she cried.

No further explanation was needed. He carried her back immediately.

That night, there was no talking to her. She would say nothing of her ordeal, but her father respected her decision and set her down to sleep, leaving a candle burning at her request.

She couldn't sleep, couldn't get the image of that boy from her mind, all caged up in that awful, horrible place, wearing nought but rags, lorded over by that cruel old man. She imagined her own life in that place. No freedom, no room to run amok. She *had* to get him out of there.

Leaving the candle, not wanting to direct any attention to herself on this dark night, she snuck out of her room by the window, and ran the distance to the carnival, which was utterly quiet,

closed till the morrow. She squeezed herself under the lining of the tent again, reaching her new-found friend as simply as before, but the trouble she didn't anticipate was the most obvious. The key!

All the while she sought this, 'Tom' slept, never waking to know his saviour had come. She would have appreciated his participation, but couldn't bring herself to force him from such a peaceful slumber as he seemed to be having.

If she had woken him, it would have saved a lot of time and trouble, for, as she soon discovered, the lock to his cell merely was positioned at such an angle which 'Tom' could not reach.

The sound of the bolt being drawn back released the boy from sleep. He sat up in fright, then calmed himself as he spotted the little girl who had named him. He approached cautiously, not at first understanding what she wanted. However, it didn't take long for her to persuade him to take his first steps into freedom. Once out from under the tent, and off into the moors, they ran, clasping hands, their hearts alive with laughter.

It was the following morning when both disappearances were discovered. The 'logical' minds of the townsfolk automatically believed the freak to have escaped and carried off the girl. They banded together with pitchforks and guns, and scoured the neighborhood. The carnival owner, not to be deprived of his most prized possession, led the mob, hoping to persuade them against any hostile action when, and if, they found him.

Find him they did, but the sight that presented itself to them halted all intentions. In a barn in the middle of town, in amongst the hay, snuggled close together, arms about each other, lay sleeping the 'escapee and his victim.'

The townspeople stood frozen, too stunned to move or speak. Was this the little girl they all cherished and loved, running off with a dirty little freak boy? This, they could never forgive.

"What the hell are you looking at?"

The words staggered her from her memories. Her eyes opened to reveal a night as bright as any day. Clearly, she could see the second rapist at work upon her. His thrusts continued, but his attention was elsewhere, as was that of the others. Susannah struggled to look around. She glimpsed another figure, hazy from where she lay. He didn't answer, just crouched there, staring.

The moment of opportunity was almost lost. She suddenly realized her advantage. Her hands and legs were still held, but only loosely. With one swift motion, she pulled both wrists from under their grasp, clenched fists, and pummeled her present attacker. Teeth chipped and blood flowed, but nothing seemed apt to move this bastard.

Except for the newcomer. He leapt upon all three at once, first tearing them from her, then wrestling them to the ground, swinging arms and legs, clawing and punching and kicking. He was in a frenzy, seemed unlikely to stop, even though his opponents could barely stand. Blood and what looked like pieces of flesh splattered every which way.

Susannah, though suffering so much pain and inner torment from these boys, could stand no more. She screamed at him to stop, pleaded with him. He did, eventually, exhausting himself. He dropped with them, and looked towards Susannah with large dark eyes. He even managed a smile, revealing crooked yellow teeth.

She almost fainted at the sight. It was he, Tom, the Ghoul Boy, her friend from the carnival. So she hadn't been imagining it. The carnival *was* back in town. She could control herself no longer. Flinging herself into his arms, she showered him with kisses. He grinned his pleasure.

Then all of a sudden, feeling a wetness soaking through what was left of her clothing, she remembered the rapists. She sat upon them, their blood covering her. Gagging, she backed away. There was no doubt that they were dead. Foreheads were caved, brain oozed, and limbs hung at odd angles.

Tom continued to grin, then, seeing her interest in the corpses, tore off a head and offered it to her. Susannah threw her hands to her face in revulsion. She turned away, not wanting him to see her disgust. But the sound of crunching forced her to look back. Tom was eating them. Her mind whirled, dropped her to her knees. A hand upon her caused her to involuntarily draw back, but as she saw his worried expression she managed to calm herself. There was no way she was going to let Tom hang for what he had done. He merely wished to protect her. No matter what the cost to herself, she would stand by his side. But first, they must get rid of the corpses. And what better place than the moors, where even the most cautious traveler can disappear without a trace. When Tom realized she was dragging the bodies toward a bog, he tried to stop her, started crying, even threatened her. She knew she was safe, though, for he would never harm her, as she would never harm him.

Once all three had sunk, Susannah looked about her. Indeed it was much lighter than it should have been. Then she spotted its source. Clouds of smoke drifted over from the west. Something was on fire. The carnival! That would explain Tom's presence here, at least part of it. From him she could make no sense of what happened that night. His only response to any questions was to gesticulate theatrically and rave incomprehensibly. On the following day, though, sneaking through town with a shawl to hide her features, she was able to overhear snippets of conversation. It seems the town council took a vote. They recalled very clearly what happened the last time the carnival rode in. Simply, without any scruples, young and old, each with a torch, set tents and caravans aflame. They went up in minutes.

There was no investigation into the disappearance of the three boys. Amidst the confusion of the night, one infant and an elderly lady were trampled to death. Others, including some of the carnival freaks who managed to escape a fiery death, were suspected to have been lost on the moors, thus sucked into a bog. Families grieved but accepted the obvious.

Susannah could not abandon Tom to the wild. He had lived like that long enough. Surely a peaceful life with her would be better than being locked in a cage and fed scraps of dead flesh. She would do her best to make his stay as much like paradise as she could. But the first order of business would be to teach him some table manners, such as what *not* to eat.

Since her father died some months ago Susannah's lonely home close upon the borders of the moor was even more so. Not a building, even empty, stood nearby. Nevertheless, people once had flocked there... before the incident. Her father, not the richest man in town, could do wonders with a low budget. His parties were always the most talked about, the charming little hostess taking most of the credit. And rightly too. There was no one more sociable than this adorable child, nor as dance-crazy. She had everyone equally in hysterics and awe.

As it was, the situation could be no better. With no visitors, there could be no one to spy her new house-guest. Not that her reputation could be tainted any further. But she feared for him, what might happen if any of the townspeople recognized him. There would be little chance of that, though, after a change of clothes, a wash, and a haircut.

Having a live-in companion was fun at times, a little disturbing at others. It wasn't that she had anything to hide, but Tom's gaze seemed to seek out all her hidden secrets. She wondered if maybe he did have certain other abilities to compensate for his abnormality. She attempted to communicate her suspicions once but his lack of language skills caused difficulties, so gave up after a few tries.

Weeks passed without problems. The two got along together as though they had grown up under the same roof. But for the past few days now Susannah could not help but notice a slight difference in Tom's unrelenting stare. Usually when she caught him, his eyes would meet hers and hold them. Now he turned away, as though embarrassed. It dawned on her only when she began to feel the same attraction for him. She wondered how it was possible that it had evaded

her till now that he was quite a handsome young man.

Susannah was forced to make the first move, and even so, she found it hard to make herself understood. She sensed his doubts, knowing that he remembered her hurt when those three boys had raped her. She assured him it was different now. She wanted to be with him, even had to admit she might love him.

Living like a savage beast all those years hadn't created one. Tom was gentle, almost too much so. At times she had to urge him along. But it was the greatest love-making she had ever experienced. Never before had the act of sex stimulated her so. Orgasm was reached quickly, and returned many times over. It was now a nightly ritual.

It wasn't long before Susannah discovered she was pregnant. Her major misgiving, though she did not express her concerns to Tom, was whether or not he was the father. It wasn't so long ago since she'd been raped by those three thugs. She hoped to God it resembled none of them, could never live with that.

The nine months following were relatively easy. Morning sickness rarely troubled her, though at times exasperated her completely. Tom sensed her needs before they arose, fetched her goodies from the town, stayed with her, left her alone, as the situation called.

An easy pregnancy, however, did not mean simple labour, especially without the aid of a midwife. She feared for the life of her baby, felt certain that nothing this painful could end in glory. From the look on Tom's passive face she could not discern his feelings. But she knew, sensed from him, his own concern.

Fourteen of the longest hours she ever spent finally passed. She had a beautiful baby boy, the image of his mother. So far, no clue to the father's identity.

A happier existence neither of them could have imagined. The baby, named Henri, was well behaved, as was the husband, and no one bothered them. If she'd thought all was complete when Tom came back to her, it didn't compare with family life.

Yet not too much time elapsed before the suspicions crept in, when Susannah was awakened by Henri in the middle of the night and found the bed empty beside her, and not a soul in the house. Add that with his coming home just before dawn smothered in dirt, and Susannah was almost hysterical. Of course she didn't mention it, couldn't bring herself to hear the truth if it meant hurting their relationship.

Weeks passed, and every night was the same. She needed to know but felt a confrontation would be unwise. What if it was something innocent? She didn't want to be considered a hen-pecking nag who didn't let her man out of her sight. She felt that her only option was to find out for herself what he was up to.

That night, she thought, would be the night.

She steadied her breath just right so he would think her asleep. It didn't take long before he fell for it, for he was up and on his way within seconds. Through slitted eyes, she spied his departure. As the front door closed, she quickly dressed, and was about to follow, when the baby awoke. He began by sobbing quietly, then pelted out a full-on scream. Susannah had no choice but to go to him. His tears dried the moment he was lifted into her arms. Lowering him back down into the crib proved fatal. He burst into fresh bouts. So there was only one thing for it: she would have to take him along.

Wrapped in warm clothes and a blanket, cradled in his mother's arms, he seemed content. Susannah hoped he'd not get a chill, was sure she should wait another night, but her husband's strange behavior gnawed at her. She didn't think she'd last another day of unknowing without going utterly crazy.

She stepped out into the frosty wind, looking from left to right. The moon was full that night, so it was not hard to see. Except when the object you sought was no longer in sight. She almost

gave up at that moment when a sudden impulse struck her. It made her sick to think it, but her mind would not let go. Whether her intuition was right or wrong, she had to know, so she bravely walked on, hugging her son close.

Her destination she reached in less than five minutes. It would have taken longer if the wind had not heaved her along its course.

Cemeteries rarely unnerved her, but tonight this particular one sent chills down her spine. It was from no supernatural source that scared her, however, for she did not believe in ghosts. Yet she did in monsters - how could she not? Had she not seen with her very own eyes, not so many months ago..?

Could such a creature change? She hoped so. Or else what she might see here could alter their life completely. The damage to her heart could never be fixed.

Susannah stepped cautiously around the many gravestones, careful not to upset any loose stone-work, when a hand roughly clasped her shoulder. She gasped and spun round.

“What the hell do you think you're doing 'ere this time o' night, lady?” the caretaker, a thin, haggard-looking man in dirty blue overalls demanded.

“J-just,” she stammered, before a sound reached both their ears simultaneously.

Oh, God, she thought, don't let this happen.

”You wait right there, missus,” the caretaker said, cocking his shotgun and holding it ready for immediate trouble.

She followed nevertheless. She would stop him if she had to, kill him if it meant saving her beloved Tom. It was no longer a suspicion, but practically a reality. What they heard was distinctly the sound of digging.

Close at the caretaker's heels she stayed, almost bumping into him when he stopped so suddenly. His breath escaped in a quick gasp. Susannah craned her neck to peer over his bony shoulder. She almost vomited on the spot. Sitting on the edge of a newly excavated grave was Tom, a decaying, stinking arm between his teeth.

The caretaker regained composure first. One shot and brain splattered. There was nothing Susannah could do but scream, to shove the caretaker from her path and fall upon her knees before Tom, her true love, and cry, to wail as she never had before. Her poor darling. She doubted he'd even known they'd been there. Not a chance did he have to plead his case. Which was probably for the best. If the townspeople had got wind of this, a lynching would surely have ensued.

Henri began to whimper in her arms. His tiny hands stretched out before him, trying to reach his father. Susannah moved to sit beside Tom, and lifted their son into his lap, arranged Tom's arms as though he cradled the boy. He nuzzled his little round face into Tom's stiffening palm, gurgling, drooling. Then, before she could stop him, Henri took a toothless bite of his father's finger, munched noisily and swallowed.

Susannah stared in disbelief, then shrugged. “Well, that proves it. He is his father's son.”