

SHELBY'S TV DINNERS

BY R.B. ASHTON

CHAPTER 5

“You’re coming on again!” Gillian called from the living room, and I hurried to finish pouring her wine and join her. I entered with a smile, seeing the news anchor on TV, stood in our street with emergency vehicles in the background, leading into my small contribution. The third time it had been aired that day, and it still hadn’t clicked that it might be a bad thing. I came to Gillian and put an arm around her as we watched. She said, “My hero.”

My face came on the screen and I told the camera in a bumbling manner that it was nothing, I just acted. Suddenly my stomach knotted with anxiety. I tensed and Gillian gave me a sideways glance, sensing something was wrong. I realised it only a second before it struck: *I* was on TV.

In a painful instant, my head was struck with a sharp spike of pain and my vision suddenly went blindingly, glaringly white. Something was rushing towards me. I couldn’t feel anything for a second and heard nothing but crackling static. Then my vision blurred, things coming back into focus, and I was pulled forward, and suddenly falling. I cried, weightless for a terrifying second, before I slammed into soft ground and bounced. I blinked to clear my vision but knew exactly where I was. I scrambled onto my hands and knees, up to my wrists in the thick knots of brown carpet pile, then sat onto my haunches to look up. Up.

Up.

Before a ceiling as vast as a sky, Shelby towered over me. Her socked feet stood to my left and right, poking out from the folds of her loose grey joggers; her legs rose in an impossibly huge triangle, each bigger than any tree I'd seen, up to her immense torso, baggy t-shirt down over her waist, bare arms folded over her chest. And there, so high up, was her smirking, satisfied face. She didn't look a day older than the last time I'd seen her, though her hair was longer, hanging in erratic strands, never quite taken care of properly.

I shoved up to my feet and took two steps back. I hit something, twisted and looked up the impassable wall of the TV stand. To the side, from my perspective, it was a thirty-foot dash to the corner. In the other direction, the PlayStation, the same PlayStation, sat like a building blocking my path. I hurriedly scanned around Shelby's legs. It was the same apartment – the same paint-peeling walls, a familiar unwashed mug on the same tatty coffee table. Magazines on the floor. Even Shelby's clothes looked the same. The only difference was the sofa: her old one replaced with a big, luxurious blue one.

My heart beat fast as I realised Shelby was waiting for me to accept my situation. There was nowhere to run. Under the sofa or behind the TV stand, maybe I could get out of reach, but then what? The door was far off the other side of the room, and in the other direction there was only the kitchenette. Trembling, I looked back up at her, meeting her dark eyes.

Her smile stretched as she crouched, knees bending out either side of my head with immense span. Only now did I truly appreciate how Pepper had felt when she

emerged – none of my nightmares had quite captured this same terror that had fuelled her struggling and screaming. Shelby was absolutely huge, and I was barely up to her shin.

“You don’t look happy to see me,” she said, with a volume that shook me. “How’s long’s it been, Brian? Three years?”

I stared up, speechless for a moment. How could I have been so stupid, to set myself in front of a camera? But then, how crazy was she, waiting for me to show up on TV? I said, “You’ve been here all this time?”

Shelby cocked her head to one side, tilting an ear towards me to better hear. She nodded. “Nowhere better to be. I thought you might call eventually; there was so much I wanted to show you. You’ve got no idea how entertaining it’s been. I’ve had the whole world, right here in my living room. A different guest every day.”

“You’ve been . . . eating them?” I replied feebly, with the implied extra detail of *all this time*. She wrinkled her eyes in amusement and my mind raced at the maths. Three years, and she’d said one a day was enough. Over a thousand people. I swallowed. “But you only took ones that were already dead.”

“Oh, you’ve missed *loads*,” she replied merrily, shifting as though for a casual conversation, one hand resting on a knee. It hung about three feet to the right of my head, and I couldn’t help but focus on those frighteningly powerful fingers. “I found it works for everything that’s broadcast. Even things people have published on the internet, which I can connect through the PlayStation. So I didn’t have to worry so much about people spotting patterns in celebrity deaths; I could literally get almost anyone I wanted.”

“But . . .” I searched her face for any sign of sanity. “Why? You said the old videos were harmless.”

"I've been talking to a lot of my guests," Shelby said, "and I can't be *sure*, but some of them came to the consensus that they'd still been drawn from their life, even if it ended earlier. You're not a manifestation of the body, is my guess" – she rotated her hand and I fought the urge to cower – "but maybe it's your soul? Your essence? I don't know, it'd explain a bit about how it keeps me so healthy."

"My soul," I echoed worriedly. "Then . . . what happens when you eat them?"

"I get happy." Shelby laughed, as though that was the only thing that mattered in the great metaphysical question of her power over countless people's afterlives. I squeezed my eyes closed at the injustice – the horror that of all people, in all places, this power had fallen to her, and this fate to me.

"You've been here all this time," I repeated, still scarcely believing it. "There's so much that could've been done with this. So much *you* could've done."

"What more could I want?" Shelby said. "I've had all the company in the world, fascinating conversation, the luxury of all kinds of pampering, and that feeling" – she inhaled with great, deep relation – "there's nothing quite like that feeling, of having someone's life in your hands. Or in your stomach. Absorbing it as your own."

I had been a fool before, but felt worse than terrible then, as it dawned on me that this was inevitable. I had kidded myself that Shelby might make something of this sick gift, or that she might tire of it and move in. But Shelby, the girl who'd achieved nothing since university, who never wanted to achieve anything, was bound to have done exactly this. Found a comfortable niche and stuck to it. At the great expense of other people. I said, "And you've been waiting to get even with me?"

"No." Shelby shrugged. "Don't flatter yourself, I watch a lot of TV and happened

to see you come on. I thought, I wonder what became of my friend Brian. My one friend who stuck by me through everything. Everything except when I found something really meaningful to do with myself.”

“Something meaningful?” I cried back. “You’re a slob turned cannibal!”

Her face darkened like a stormy sky as she loomed closer, head almost directly above me, body filling my view. I pressed harder into the TV stand as she said, “You used to like it. You were happy enough before. And look at you now. You’re back, aren’t you?”

“Because you wanted a *chat*? Shelby, I’m begging you. Send me back.”

“Ah, not possible.” She rested back again, mood lightening. “I did try it. I wasn’t completely selfish, and I snagged a guy I liked one time. I remembered your suggestion, and tried to put him back through, but there was no way. It doesn’t work in reverse. That actually turned out for the best; when we couldn’t send him back, that guy got *really* obnoxious.” Her eyes rested back on me in a questioning way, as though to ask if I would be the same.

I shook my head. “We were friends.”

“I know, and I’m not a monster. I didn’t take your girlfriend as well, and I could have. This isn’t me being malicious or anything. You’re the one who never came back.”

There was nothing to say to that. All I could do was run my eyes back to the floor, considering the best escape route. At this point, there was only one thing that was certain: if she got a hand on me, all hope was lost.

“So, go on then,” Shelby said brightly. “How’ve you been? Still at that stuffy old job?”

With one sharp breath, I ran.

I aimed right between her legs. But as I sprinted, she quickly dropped and I jumped back just in time before she landed on me. I almost skidded straight into the thick cotton wall of her crotch. I turned and found the paths to both sides blocked by her legs as they fell down straight, and I saw her socked feet pressing into the TV stand, trapping me in a triangle. I got only a second to consider climbing over a leg, before her hand closed around me. Shelby's fist closed over my chest and pinned my arms to my sides. All I could do was swing my head and kick my feet as she lifted me.

I was airborne, flying up before her face, a big drop below. She studied me with a curious eye as I tried uselessly to push out against her fingers. She said, "Brian, you think I haven't had people try and escape before? And I told you, I *know* you."

"Shelby, please," I tried, voice strained by her pressure.

She rolled her eyes, a big, expressive gesture of boredom. "I guess I should've known; you weren't much fun when you left, I don't know what I expected. But look on the bright side." Her lips stretched to a horrible, huge grin, each white tooth bigger than a book. "You'll finally help make me a better person."

"Stop!" I cried, panicking as I saw her intention. Her mouth opened into a cavern, saliva dripping in strands between her teeth, tongue flat and waiting. I yelled as she raised me towards it. "Wait, we can talk! I can still be fun!"

She paused to speak, that huge tongue moving powerfully before me. "I know, you will be."

"Let's have some wine —" I started, desperately, but she pushed me into her mouth, hot and muggy, my shoulders clipping her teeth. When her fingers slackened I

shrugged my arms forwards and tried to push against her tongue, the hard teeth, anything, but the mouth that contained me was moving, and I was being drawn in. Her throat widened, accepting me as I begged and screamed. But there was no way back, no way out. I was sucked deeper in, arms pinned tight into me, only able to kick my feet before they got squeezed in too. I slid down hugged on all sides by wet flesh, down, until I was released and dropped into the acid of her stomach.

And there, thrashing within the tight space, cursing and begging Shelby alternately, I felt her acid bite into me, as my flesh burnt. The truth hit me, with immense yet simple clarity. This journey from start to finish, everything that had led to me falling into this trap, where my death will be total and absolute, all of my being consumed to fuel a small part of my former friend. She says something above, and even in my terror I can picture it perfectly, Shelby, rubbing her belly, expressing satisfaction at what I have been reduced to.

Another meagre dinner.

THANKS FOR READING!

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