



WEIRD LAMENTS

-by E. Heffernan

And then it happened again.

It was about the dozenth time or so it had happened in the past two hours. I scratched my chin musingly, thinking it over. Then I reached in my pocket, pulled out a cigarette, sparked it up and puffed away thoughtfully.

From my perch on the brick wall I was sitting on I had a pretty good view of the comings and goings of the campus around me. My last class was over about two hours ago, and I was in no hurry to get back to my dorm room. A few months after moving onto campus I had learned that my roommate was a chronic masturbator, and because I was always forgetting his name I simply dubbed him 'The Jerkoff King'. A dozen times in the past two months I have walked into the room to catch him with his pants around his ankles, face broken out in a sweat while his fist furiously pumped up and down. It's really gross.

Anyway I was sitting on the brick wall, thinking about nothing in general, just watching the general riff raff pass by me. You know the people I'm talking about, all the strange little American sub cultures that spring up whenever you have more than a couple hundred people under the age of thirty. You have the those jocks with the greek-god bodies and vacant eyes, you have the fraternity brothers avidly declaring their house is the best (I cant tell the damn difference), the people on skateboards whizzing by, falling on their ass more times than actually doing a stunt, the loners who hurry by with their eyes fixed on the ground before them, afraid to make eye contact with anyone they passed. I could go on forever.

It first happened out of the corner of my eye. This one guy was ambling along, minding his own business. I sort of subconsciously picked him out in the back of my mind because I noticed his socks were a dullish pink and I mildly wondered how long ago he had had his little laundry catastrophe. Anyhow the guy was walking along, sort of bobbing his head to a little musical beat only he could hear, when the big green tentacle whizzed out of a nearby sewer grating and yanked him in.

I froze. I had heard the term 'my heart skipped a beat' before, but this was the first time I had ever actually experienced it. I stared at the sewer grating on the ground, but there was no evidence that anything vastly weird had happened. The sun was shining brightly, the air had a nice little gentle breeze to it, and there was about three dozen people around me who must have seen the same thing. But there was nobody screaming, no shouting or yelling or even a curious glance towards the sewer grating.

I thought about screaming. I thought about laughing out loud. I thought about hopping off my little comfy wall perch and leaving. Finally I decided to pretend that it didn't happen. Hell, no one else around me was doing anything, then why should I?

A few years ago I had tried acid. It was the usual peer pressure 'everyone does it' type situation. It did some funky things to me, making me see little purple trails and causing me to giggle at inappropriate moments, but that was about it. No pink elephants or visions of the wizard of Oz or anything of the sort. But the word 'flashback' had always hung over my head like some dark cloud. I began to think that perhaps the unsightly little thing I had just witnessed was perhaps caused by the proverbial flashback.

Nonetheless, I peered at the sewer grating suspiciously for a few moments longer. Just one of those anonymous sewer gratings that are dotted across the roads and sidewalks of America like some sort of steel acne. Nothing real special about it, certainly not something you would point out to a buddy and say 'Gee, isn't that a rather NICE sewer grating?'. Most people probably walk over it a dozen times a day and never even know it's there.

The next one was a girl. This time I watched very carefully, eyes absorbing every speck of information. The girl was medium height, wearing a pair of denim shorts so tight they could have been painted on, fake blonde hair piled up on top of her head, books clutched protectively to her chest in that odd, almost insecure way girls carry them. A half-healed hickie on the side of her neck winked at the world as she flounced by.

This time I was waiting.

This time I was watching.

And this time I saw it.

The big green tentacle snaked out from the sewer with sickening speed. It was sort of splotchy green and covered with little suckers that seemed to be gasping for air. It was dirty, quivering, and at places and splotches along its length there seemed to be coarse hair growing from it. It also appeared to be slimy. Of course, I thought. We couldn't have a big nasty tentacle without it being slimy, can we? Mustn't break the cliché'.

It lurched about six feet away to where the girl was. It coiled around her waist in a rather sickening way. She looked down, eyes widening like saucers, her mouth opening up. I could just hear what she was about to say, "Oh! grody to the max, I'm sure!" or something along those lines. But it never got out of her mouth, because the moment the thing had a tight grip, it whisked her off her feet and sucked her down the dark dank opening of the sewer faster than you could say 'corn pops'.

Its funny the way the human brain can rationalize just about anything. In a split instant I decided I wasn't crazy, I wasn't having a flashback, I was just seeing something very, very weird. I glanced around me. Once again, although the place was modestly scattered with people, no one seemed to have noticed a thing. Everyone was simply going their merry way, totally oblivious that there was something very nasty right beneath their feet snatching up people the way you or I would snatch up a stray dollar bill.

I watched it happen several more times to several more people. It didn't seem to be a very choosy whatever it was. So far it had equally snatched up men, women, all races and ages. After a while I began to see a pattern develop. Although there were people around whenever the thing scooped up a homo-sapiens goody, no one actually seemed to be LOOKING at it when it happened. In the brief instant it slithered out from the sewer the people in the general vicinity had their eyes somewhere else. In a book. Looking and talking to a friend. Sneezing. Looking up at the sky to see if any rain clouds were around. Searching in a purse. And so on. No one ever had their attention on that particular area of the ground...except me.

An old joke came to my mind... it went "if you were in the woods, and you watched a tree fall and it didn't make a sound, does that mean your a nobody?" I was actually starting to get offended that this thing was letting me watch this. The nerve of it!

Of course, by now you are probably wondering why I haven't rushed out and tried to make what I've seen known. But even though I'm no Steven Hawkings, I'm no moron, either. If some guy came up to me and asked me if I had seen any large tentacles snatching up people from nasty little sewer gratings in the ground, I would more than likely smile, nod, pat the guy on the shoulder, and walk straight ahead. I wouldn't expect any less from another person.

I was lost in thought for a moment when a sudden familiar voice pulled me back to the present.

"Dave, yo, hey, Dave!" A whiny little voice that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end floated over my shoulder.

I turned around and The Jerkoff King was standing there, slack mouth, milking a pimple on the end of his nose.

"Can I bum a cigarette off of you?" he asked. His eyes holding the reflection of hopefulness.

I thought for a second and then said "Sure, you can have one, but first, do you see that sewer opening over there?"

He peered beyond me, squinted, saw the opening, and nodded his head enthusiastically. "Sure, what about it?"

"Just watch it for a moment"

And so we sat there watching it, as the minutes ticked by. One. And then two. Several people have passed over the hole that was the fix of our attention several times now. The Jerkoff King next to me began to get a little fidgety.

"Er, just what are we watching for?" he asked.

"Just watch!" I hissed warningly back.

Another handful of seconds slid by. Finally I sighed and gave up. "Never mind," I said.

He just stood there for a moment longer, and it took me a second to remember that I had offered to give him a cigarette, so I pulled one out of my pocket and gave it to him (being quite careful not to touch his hands) and gave him a bored wave as he lit up and walked away.

I should have seen it coming, of course. I could just feel the gods up in the heavens laughing at me. The Jerkoff King got thirty paces away, near the sewer hole, and the big green thing again erupted out and plucked him clean off the face of the earth as if he had never existed.

I sighed.

I had about all I thought I could handle in one day. Besides I had some homework to do, and it would be nice to finally go into my room without making a big show of stomping up to the door and making loud exaggerated noises with my keys so my roommate would get the idea that someone was walking in. I hopped off the wall, and wandered away. Whistling a little and avoiding sewer holes.