

The sight of the familiar road sign in the distance made Laura elated, finally coming up on the small town she had called home for the first 18 years of her life. It had been some time since she had last visited, having moved across the country for college and not having the best relationship with her parents. Still, with things having mended somewhat over the years, and with a desire to try and reconnect with old friends and revisit old hangouts, she figured it was time for her to make the trek back.

Still, the drive came with quite a bit of unease, made worse by the fact she was several hours from the nearest airport and had to take a rental car for the long drive alone on the mostly deserted highways. The fact that few people passed her on the way was largely ignored, given the remote location of her town in addition to there being little reason for anyone to go there. As she had stayed overnight in a hotel, she would arrive there around mid-afternoon, giving her plenty of daylight to head out and meet with some of her old friends, the few she had kept in touch with over Facebook who wouldn't mind seeing her after so many years. It really was interesting how many people stayed in town after high school, or had returned after a stint away, to work the various shops and service centers as their parents and families before them. In such a dead-end town, Laura couldn't imagine why people would come back here to settle, being only a population of less than a thousand. But to each their own and Laura would only be back in town for a few days.

Driving into the city limits, Laura found herself a little surprised not to see anyone around; no cars, no people out for walks, and not even any animals. It was a small town, to be fair, though it was a little odd not to see anyone outside. It was around noon by the time she rolled into downtown, about the time people would be looking for lunch. Yet, as she passed the diner and fast food places, there were no cars in the parking lot, nothing near the coffee shops, and no activity on Main Street as she drove down it, slowing down but not seeing any reason to with the lack of any traffic or pedestrians.

Curious, Laura pulled into the paid parking lot, seeing no one working the ticket counter and realizing the gate opened for her without prompting. There were no other cars in the lot during a time of day when it should be impossible to get a spot. And as Laura parked, she took a moment to really think about the situation. Surely, not everyone was home at this hour? There was literally nowhere else in town for people to be unless some new facility had opened up without her knowledge. The only place that came to mind was the arena which was still being built when she was in high school. But not everyone would be there at the same time, right?!

Getting out of the car, Laura was hit with a strange smell, musty and organic, but something she couldn't readily identify. It was powerfully strong with no immediate source, and Laura covered her nose, wondering if it was something toxic she shouldn't be breathing in. But she soon found there was no avoiding it, as though something was being carried on the breeze. It

took some moments to get accustomed to it, but Laura managed, taking a walk back toward Main for a closer look at the shops in case she had missed something.

Much as she had been expecting, there was no one around. All of the stores were closed and there was no sign that anyone had been to work that day. The smell was stronger as she passed the offices and buildings, though she could not for the life of her figure out where it was coming from. As much as she could tell, there wasn't any garbage or the like in the streets that could be causing it. Hell, there wasn't even any garbage in the bins, as though they had all been emptied after everyone had gone... where? Home? It was a little alarming to think that not only had no one come to open their shops and services this morning, but it was likely they hadn't for some days. At the very least since the last trash day.

Pulling out her cell phone to call her parents, the sight of a weathered flier window drew her attention, and Laura walked over to it with some confusion. It seemed to be an ad of some sort, promising a new life free from mundane concerns and providing a vital service for restoring the planet. Given the town's more conservative populace, such an ad seemed like it would fall on deaf ears. Yet, as she looked around the street, Laura's eyes found the same flier posted on every store, bench, and post. Each relatively old with weathered paper as though they had been put up several weeks or even months before. With no other fliers or ads for any other events, it led Laura to wonder why such a thing would take precedence over any of the usual town activities. And advertised on every surface, no less.

More than a little concerned about the fate of the town, Laura dialed her parent's place, letting it ring to the landline for several moments before hanging up. Her father would be at work, certainly, but her mother should be home. Especially if she was waiting to greet Laura. That realization sent shivers throughout her being. If no one was home, then where was everyone? It was like something out of a horror novel, without the obvious sign of what fate might have afflicted the town, but still held that tense aura of dire mystery.

Mind awash in terrifying possibilities, Laura quickly made her way back to her car wanting to make it back home before something happened to her parents, even though a nagging thought told her it was likely already too late. With no one else around, Laura felt no reason not to speed, making the short drive home in record time. Though her mind was focused on getting home as fast as possible, there was a part of her scanning the streets, the lawns, the houses; each with no signs of life. Not even birds, small wildlife, or pets were present. It was as though she had walked into some alternate dimension. Fearing a gas leak or something that might threaten her own life, Laura resolved herself to try and at least find her parents before getting out of town. As much as she had quarreled with them in the past, she did love them and didn't want anything to happen to them, even if they had already left and avoided whatever danger had fallen upon the town.

Seeing their car in the driveway, Laura had to assume they were home, having nowhere else to walk to. The unlocked door was little sign of their presence, given the rural nature of the town and the trust people put in their neighbors. And with dirty dishes in the sink, jam, and butter on the counter, and a magazine on the table, she was sure they were simply there, in the other room and waiting to tell her about some mundane event to explain the state of the town. Calling out to them no reply met her ears and she ran through the house, looking for any sign her parents were home, alive or otherwise. Nothing. It was of little reprieve, given the missing townsfolk and the lack of signs where they had gone. Had they needed to leave quickly to avoid some catastrophe? But then why didn't they take their car? Laura thought to check, gas in the tank and their car turning on without issue. A sigh escaped her lips, kicking the tire as she got out and slammed the door behind her. None of this made any sense, damnit!

Clumps of grass on the lawn and a lack of garbage in the bins were further traces of their activities up until no more than a day or two. But other than their dishes, nothing was left to denote their fate. No torn clothing, no chemicals, no signs of a struggle, nothing. In fact, other than faint traces of that smell from town, there was little else to denote anything was amiss. Running across the lawn to a neighbor's place, the same lack of garbage and presence of breakfast dishes in the kitchen seemed familiar, though a cursory glance around the street turned up nothing. It wasn't until her feet scuffed something crinkling that Laura looked down, finding one of those fliers from town. Looking it over more carefully, it seemed to be advertising some self-help courses, offered every Saturday at the town arena. Promising a new outlook on life and inner peace and fulfillment, the usual rhetoric from a self-help guru who she assumed to be the kind looking elderly man with friendly outstretched arms in a simple robe. But the fact that one was present on her parents' lawn led credence to the fact they might have been in attendance. Hell, with the sheer number of fliers in town, everyone must have been aware of the classes and surely at least some people attended. Save the lack of people, it was the only other thing amiss that might tie everything together.

Today being Monday, it was unlikely anyone would be at the arena, let alone at one of those self-help classes. But the timeline, as much as her mind was trying to tie things together, made sense for people to have left on Saturday. Why they didn't take their cars was a mystery, but without any other leads, Laura figured it was worth taking a drive down there. Given it was a relatively new structure, it had been built outside of town just off of a highway exit and giving her one chance to leave should she desire to. Laura couldn't help but shiver at that revelation. Not that there was much of a chance of her being in danger of whatever befell her parents and the other thousand or so people in the town. But if there was a chance she might be harmed... she could leave, find the nearest town, and file a report to the police. Let the proper authorities handle things, rather than investigate on her own with no information as to the threat level. But would she be able to live with herself if she didn't try? No. Not with her renewed relationship

with her parents, thoughts of her friends, her teachers, and everyone she had grown up around that had shaped her first 18 years. If there was any chance a quicker intervention might increase the chance of saving their lives, she had to try.

As her mind played over the words on the poster as she drove, Laura found herself expecting the worst. A cult, some sort of mind control, a ruse to get everyone to the arena and kill them, or have them kill themselves as part of a demented suicide pack were all possibilities and might actually explain the state of the town. Such things did happen, especially in small towns, and as Laura parked her car in the empty lot, she prepared herself for the worst. Still, come hell or high water, she still had to know.

That stench from downtown was amplified ten-fold as she got out of the car, and it was likely the arena was the source of whatever it was. Again, her mind went to poison or gas, but nothing in her experience could quite match the smell. It was so strong that it made her head dizzy, but Laura resolved herself to breathe through her mouth and made her way to the front door. Still, there was no denying another smell under the perplexing miasma, one akin to rotting garbage. It was almost overpowering, but Laura waded through it, opening the door and being hit by a wave of the stink nearly suffocating.

The source of the first odor, while easily identifiable, made no evident sense as Laura made her way into the darkened corridor. The walls were covered with some sort of hard, shiny material, nothing she had ever seen or easily identified. It seemed to be covering the walls, the trophies, and the lockers, as though growing directly from them. It almost appeared organic, though what sort of thing could create it escaped Laura's knowledge. Figuring it would be detrimental for her to touch it, Laura made her way carefully through the halls, trying not to step on it in places it had grown from the floor.

Holding her breath and opening the door to the bleachers at the end of the hall, Laura did her best to repress a scream at what awaited her. Propped up around the seating were hundreds of people, all looking out into the gym with dead, glassy-eyed stares. With the sheer number of seats, it was possible everyone in town was present, lifeless and stiff as they gazed down at the gym, as though watching a game. She couldn't see what it was they were staring at from her place on the stairs, though it hardly mattered with her focus on scanning the crowd for her parents. A quiet, consistent moaning was the only sign they might still be alive but given their lack of reaction, Laura was left with racing thoughts of zombies and viruses, something that might affect her if she was to stay. Still, she couldn't bring herself to leave, not without at least checking to see if her parents were alive and trying to see if there was a way to get them out.

It took her some moments to scan the crowd for her parents, especially how disturbing she found the sight of their vacant stares. More alarming was the fact that she recognized many

of the faces there, people she had grown up with, her neighbors, and even a few of her friends, making her wish to see if they, too, could be saved. But her priority was her parents, and eventually, she was able to hone in on their faces, expressions as vacant as everyone present with mouths agape and moaning as though in pain.

Having some basic first aid training, Laura made her way through the seats, rushing up to lift their arms and check for signs of a pulse. It was there, though faint, leaving her to breathe a sigh of relief. Still, no matter what she did, she couldn't seem to elicit a response from them, and they were far too heavy for her to move on her own. They didn't even bother to return to her stare, drooling slightly as that same droning moan escaped their lips, more akin to a zombie than anything else. The stench hanging over them was familiar, though overwhelmed as she was, it took Laura some moments to realize that it was likely her parents were sitting in their own waste, likely having been here for some time, at least a couple days.

Laura stood up, dizzy from the overwhelming odor in the arena, something that clung to her skin and something she was sure a hundred showers would fail to get out. It was the stink of something organic as well as garbage, making her recall for a moment all the empty bins around town. It had to be a coincidence, though the reek of garbage was so strong in her nose that she was left stumbling down the stairs, hoping to get out before whatever had happened to the townsfolk affected her as well.

“Oh, a new face! I'm sorry but you've missed the last session! I would offer to have you sign up for my next program, but my services will soon be relocated to a new city, I'm afraid. I may be able to set you up for a private session, though it will have to be rather brief,” came a voice, and Laura looked down to see a man dressed rather well in a colorful suit, a stark contrast with the dirty, filthy clothing adorning all the captors. It was bizarre to see someone in a relatively normal state, though clearly evident that he had something to do with the state of things, as bizarre as they were.

“What the hell is going on?!” Laura cried out, incredulous. The fact that he had evidently gathered the entire town to turn them into zombies was not lost on her, but without any idea how such was done, Laura felt confident to confront him.

“Why, you've stumbled into the final stage of my life coaching program! I'm happy to say that everyone in town managed to graduate from the program, entering what I've happily dubbed the ‘pupae’ stage, though I think it might be a little on the nose, as it were! I'm sorry for the state of things, it might be rather alarming to walk in on things in such a state, but change is messy, as the saying goes. And the changes are soon to enter their final stages, as all of my flock will be given a new, satisfying life as my program has promised!”

Finding herself stunned at the man's demeanor, the man continued, evidently taking pride in the disgusting display. "Now, I'm not one to give away my process to someone who's just joining, but it's likely for the best that you don't leave, and I must admit I'm in the mood to brag, as well as show off the results. And, I'm sorry to say, but I can have you free to leave this session until I've achieved the desired result," he said, and at that, Laura turned to run away, wanting to get out of there lest she be in imminent danger. Not wanting to leave her parents and friends behind, Laura had little choice, with not so much as a weapon to defend herself. How could she have been so foolish?

Yet, she was not prepared for one of the zombified people to reach up and grab her leg, holding on with surprising strength. Laura tried to kick at him, but the sensation of strong hands on her shoulders made her tip backward, and no matter how much she struggled, she could not free herself from their grasp. There had been no warning, no motion for the zombies to attack her, but the guru seemed to have full control over them without needing to issue a single command. Struggling all the while, Laura was brought to the edge of the stands, overlooking the gym and taking in the sight for the first time.

Having entered from the side of the bleachers, Laura hadn't really looked down at the area, thinking nothing was remiss from the corner of her eye. However, upon being forced to look down, Laura was shocked to see that a massive depression had been carved in the center, perhaps where the floor had been dug up to expose a basement pool. Instead of water, however, the depression was filled with all manner of rank garbage, the rancid stench hitting her in the face all at once and making her wish to retch. It was obvious that had been the source of the smell, as though garbage from the entire town was brought here like some makeshift dump.

It was not the stench of garbage that really alarmed her, however. Before her eyes were what looked like dozens of massive, crawling grubs, beyond the scope of any insect in the natural world. They did not have eyes, and three stubs of legs sat on either side of their upper undulating bodies, allowing them to crawl forward somewhat. They possessed massive jaws, two face plate-like protrusions on either side that shoveled in refuse which they ate with a slow, persistence as though feeding was all that mattered in the world. Nothing she had ever seen could match the horror of the creatures, each larger than a human and crawling around like maggots on a piece of rotten meat.

As much as Laura wanted to look away from the repulsive scene, she could not turn away, afraid of what their presence meant for her. Worse than the existence of the grubs was that some were still covered in fragments of clothing, as though they had been ripped out of them or had eaten their inhabitants. The fate of those gathered seemed obvious as the creatures continued their slow, steady feeding, oblivious to the world around them. With their ability to eat garbage,

rotten food, clothing, and even plastics and metals, it was likely those gathered were to be a living feast for them, unable to even resist as their lives were rendered forfeit.

“I take it you are not impressed by the end results of my program? That's okay. It is unfortunate that you have not been in town for the full course, which I think would make things easier for you in your new life of ease and bliss. But perhaps that might be for my own benefit as well. I don't mind having a critic from an outside perspective on my program, at least someone to admire it. As effective as this course has been, I'll only need to lead it a few more times in the surrounding towns to bring my message to as many people as I can! Still, your feedback will be valuable, for as much as you'll be able to give it.”

Laura wanted to yell out at the man, though had nothing to say, still a little shocked with disgust over her fate. To be eaten by such creatures... and for that to be the fate of her entire town, without any ability to fight back was more than she could bear. It was of little solace that she would evidently not be zombified as the rest of the town, knowing what was happening up to the point of being killed and eaten by some sort of mutant grubs.

“I think to show you my process, someone you know is in order. I judge by the age of the people you went for, are they your parents? Consider it a courtesy from me to watch your loved ones entering their new, fulfilling lives, free of all the constraints that held them back from aching inner Nirvana. And a prelude to your own eventual bliss, something to look forward to as I give you a greatly accelerated induction to my program!”

Once more, without a word, the sounds of shuffling made Laura look up in time to see her parents stumbling forward, barely able to walk without falling over. Laura struggled fiercely against her captors, calling out to her parents and trying to convince them to stop. Yet, her cries fell on deaf ears, nothing she could say was able to reach through the hypnosis or zombification that had been instilled in them. They were doomed to be the next victims of this madman's machinations, and her presence was the single reason for their lives to be cut short.

“Yes, they should be ready to take the steps to enter their new lives. The process works at different speeds for everyone, and some need priority in entering the final stages, but most of them are ready by now, I should think. Eventually, the majority of your town will need to ascend at once, but your parents will have the pleasure of joining their new lives together,” the man said and commanded the zombies holding her to take her down the flights of stairs to the gym below. Laura figured this would be her only chance to get free and help her parents, given how unsteady the zombies were on their legs. But her efforts were for naught, and she was taken down the stairs with ease, forced onto the gym floor, and overwhelmed by the stench of garbage, waste, and the sickly scent wafting from the maggot's bodies.

Taking her to the edge of the pool in the center, Laura had a perfect view of what horrors awaited her. The larvae were larger than she'd thought, though the range of sizes made her wonder how quickly they were able to grow. Surely, they started out close to that size, but the sight of sloughed-off flesh the same consistency as the maggot's bodies led credence to the fact they were molting, growing larger as they did so. How long they needed to grow, she had no idea, though, with the sheer volume of garbage in the center, it was likely they had enough food to grow and eventually pupate if that was to be their fate, especially if they were being given human flesh to feed on!

Laura went to scream again, but a pale, fleshy over her mouth made her little more than able to mutter. "I don't need to hear your opinions at the moment, given your demeanor. Your body language is sufficient, anyway. And I want you to focus on everything that you're seeing, to make sure that you fully understand the end goal of my process. Perhaps you'll even appreciate the beauty in its simplicity, though I doubt that a layperson would really comprehend, let alone accept this as a future of humanity. Either way, I hope you enjoy the show!"

Laura couldn't focus on what the man was going on about, given that she was about to witness her parents being slowly consumed by giant maggots. Without a word, both her parents moved toward the pool, toppling in as though they had no strength left in their legs. She wanted to go to them, to pull them out of a certain and slow death. But even if she could get free from her captors, there was no way for her to lift them, and likely no cure for whatever had been done to them.

"It's a bit of a grueling method to get to this point, as ingenious as it is," the man started, as though explaining the situation. "Offering self-help is a dime a dozen these days, even if my classes were free. In some ways, that lessened my credibility, at least at first. Something that I plan to remedy for my next program, I can assure you! But once I started getting people to come, well, then it became possible to induct people with subliminal messaging, getting them to reflect deeply about the idea of letting go of everything they had worried about in their lives. Leaving all human worries, money, obligations, to just live in the moment in a way that defies our human state of being. Nothing too overt, of course. Not at first. It took a few months for the conditioning to take effect, at which point much of the town was already taking part in my course. Enough that any stragglers could be brought into the fold via force if necessary. And then they could be introduced to my greatest achievement, nay, the greatest achievement for mankind! But I digress. I don't require recognition for my efforts, and the results will speak for themselves."

Laura was hardly in a state to understand the man's words, however, staring down in horror at the fate of her parents. Lying face down as they were, Laura was sure they had already expired, and their corpses would feed the massive maggots as much as all the others sure had. Yet, they soon started to move, twitching wildly as they pushed forward, not willing or able to

get back on their feet. Laura went to yell again, yet was stunned at the sight of her mother's mouth opening, reaching for the nearest scrap of garbage before awkwardly trying to pull it into her mouth. It was a struggle, made even more bizarre that she wasn't bothering to use her hands, as though they had atrophied somewhat.

Unable to avert her gaze, Laura watched as her parents writhed around as though they were deadly ill. It was of little solace that the other giant grubs seemed not to notice their presence, simply focused on using their mouth parts to shovel food within their maws. With the glacial speed at which they were eating, Laura found herself wondering if they could eat humans at all, even those in a zombified state. It wasn't the horrific sight she had been expecting, but it was nonetheless alarming, to the point that she wanted to retch if she could.

Suddenly, the arms that were gripping her seemed to let go, and Laura rushed forward, wanting to try to reach for her parents. There was little she could do, but in her desperation, Laura could not think of anything other than getting her parents away and out of there, consequences be damned. They were at least close enough for her to grasp, but the moment her fingers touched their fetid skin, Laura recoiled with fear and disgust. Their skin was slimy, slick as though it was decaying. And Laura, to her horror, had to conclude that they were already dead and there was no going back for them.

Tears running down her eyes, Laura could only kneel down at the side of the pool, watching as her former parents tried their best to gorge themselves, writhing around much like the grubs in the pool. Even though they made little progress, they were still determined, as though feasting on the decaying matter was their entire world. Only several minutes had likely passed, but to Laura, it was an eternity of horror watching her partners writhe and spasm and eat rotting food and refuse like they were designed to do so. Their lips and faces were stained, and the smell from the pool was rancid to the point it made Laura dizzy, but she could not force herself away, even at the risk of her own safety.

It was soon to become much more disgusting, though, like a train wreck, Laura could not avert her eyes as her parents' clothes started to tighten around their bodies, as though the garbage they were consuming was expanding them. The rate of which made no sense, given the slow speed of their consumption. But it was as though something was stretching their skin, growing from underneath as though trying to be released from their prison of flesh.

Yet, the full implication of what was happening was lost on Laura, who couldn't manage to grasp the absurdity of the situation or the possible endgame, being so far removed from her understanding of the world. But as her parents continued to feed, their human skin, while looking rather stretched and fragile, was starting to lighten in color, putrid and off-white and somewhat familiar. With her focus entirely on her parents, the connection could not easily be made. Yet, as

something started to writhe under the skin, pulling and tearing it in some places, the recent memory of where she had witnessed such started to come to the forefront of her mind, and despite the stench around her, Laura couldn't help but start to scream.

The skin started to tear violently now as whatever was growing within became too much for their human shells. Thick creases of putrid white flesh started pulsating underneath, as though rejecting the air on contact. That did not cease the tearing of flesh, and wet gurgling sounds as more of the flesh developed within was exposed to the air. Their clothes were hardly able to take the strain and started to tear down the back, releasing more of that repulsive stink. But the putrid white skin seemed to spread from contact with the air, segments of flesh forming and pushing their humanity away like shards of wrapping paper. Little skin remained on their backs and bellies as much as Laura could perceive, and that was only to be the first change as her former parents prepared to devolve further.

A series of wet cracks ran through their bodies, as though the bones within were starting to break apart. Yet, as her parents continued undulating forward, their flexibility seemed to grow, able to nearly twist around themselves as their innards dissolved with a series of wet squelching sounds. It was horrific and should have been agonizing for them. However, with their drooling faces, Laura could not perceive any pain. Still, it had to be agonizing for their bodies to be expanding, contorting beyond human abilities as their inner supports were robbed from them in such a violent fashion. And every inch of skin was being parted for more of that segmented flesh, no discernible features in their uniform lines, having eliminated any sign of stomachs, chests, and human features as a whole. Skin and hair and clothing were left to fall from their moist, glistening bodies, looking putrid and slimy as much as Laura had felt when she'd foolishly gone to touch them.

It was soon to become much worse as their atrophied arms and legs started to wither and die, looking like all the muscle, bone, and fluids were being sucked within to support their newly formed internal structures. With how weak and shriveled they had become, Laura was sure they would simply fall off to be consumed with the rest of the refuse. That was not to be the case, though with another sharp crack, their husks of legs were being pulled upward, through their former chest cavity without any visible ill to their physiologies. Soon, there was little left as fingers and toes all withered away, nothing remaining to show they had ever been part of their form. As the various segments took shape over their trunks, the remnants of their legs and arms seemed to sit within two of them, long enough under their bodies that they could compel them forward in tandem with their wriggling. With a wet pop, a third set erupted from either side behind their former legs, six in all like the insects they were resembling.

At this point, only their heads retained any shape of humanity, the pulsating segments moving up fattening necks as the back of their heads were pulled inside. In comparison to their

large bodies, their heads remained somewhat of a human size, even as the skin bubbled and their hair fell out. It was pure body horror watching their ears and even their noses falling off, dissolving into nothing with the fragments of their skin. Even their teeth and tongues loosened from their mouths, consumed and swallowed with no ill to their new anatomies. Eyes glazed over and bubbled up in their sockets, not even leaving any holes as they were consumed by the spreading of infectious flesh. The only holes that remained were their mouths, expanding at the pointed tips of their faces to make up their entirety. With a wet spray of fluids, two massive, serrated mandibles burst outward and closed in front of their mouths, before opening to reach out and start drawing in refuse, including the shed fragments of their clothing.

Soon, there was little left of their humanity, looking nothing more than the maggots that were still crawling and feasting in the pool. It was then that the full implication of what was happening hit Laura all at once. All the massive grubs, the dozens of undulating, feeding bodies, were once human, members of the town that had been her teachers, her neighbors, and her friends. Nothing more than squirming maggots at this point, feeding and crawling and defecating without regard for the rest of the world. Perhaps, in a twisted sort of way, a simpler life like what was promised, but something no sane human would have signed up for.

Laura's sights were drawn to her parents, or what used to be them, scraps of clothes clinging to them and showing off their invertebrate bodies. No sign they were once human remained, save the aforementioned clothing and the piles of hair that stuck to their undulating forms. It seemed they were just as gone in mind, as well, though they hadn't displayed any since she'd come across them in their zombified state. And they still possessed that single-minded need to feed, pushing forward with those massive bodies, and disgustingly, expelling piles of feces behind them as they had.

The sound of footfalls was the only thing sufficient to draw Laura's attention from the horror, and she looked behind her in time to see two more zombies walking to the edge of the pit before falling in, convulsing as soon as they hit the pile of garbage, preparing to change in their own right. Laura rose to stare at the guru behind her, rage filling her eyes and not wanting to see the same fate befalling anyone else. "Why!?" she demanded, tears flowing from her eyes as her mind scanned for any reason, twisted or not, that might compel any man to create such a horror show.

"Why? It's obvious!" the man said, making a grandiose gesture toward the stadium at large. "I don't suppose it's blatantly obvious to the layperson, but it should be, and frankly by the time I'm done people will come to understand this is the only way. The world is too far gone by this point, and a drastic problem requires a drastic solution!"

Laura was left dumbstruck, not sure what to make of the man's words. He was clearly insane, and there was no pleading with him. But Laura could see no easy out, and it was likely she would have to keep him talking to find an opening. But then again, what could she do? No one would believe the truth, the reality of which equated to a mediocre sci-fi film. She could report the people missing, but she still had to get out of there with her humanity intact. And by the time she did so, it might be too late.

The man, for his part, was inclined to continue, as though annoyed that his purpose wasn't obvious. "The human race has destroyed all the resources on the planet, consuming them much like the insects that I've fashioned to replace them. The scope of trash is beyond comprehension, and only to grow worse as the population balloons out of control. That, in tandem with the implications of climate change, will not only doom humanity as a species but take the rest of the planet with them like a virus. A drastic solution is required, and thankfully my years of research have produced the perfect thing. Why simply remove humanity when they can be repurposed? Not only does my process change humanity into another species, one harmless to the environment, but this new species I've designed consumes and persists entirely on human-constructed materials! Concrete, fabrics, rotten food, plastics, metals, everything is consumed with a steady ferocity that will eventually clean the planet and spread their influence to the unenlightened at the same time!

"By making people into... these?!" Laura managed to call out, the stink burning into her nose and making her nearly topple over, moving back from the pit in case she were to fall in.

"Exactly! What better life could you imagine for those who have suffered depression, hopelessness, struggles for acceptance, or wealth inequality? All are made equal through my process, and all human strife, challenges, and expectations are removed with the promise of new life and satisfaction. When your only goal in life is to feed, grow, consume and expel, what could be more simplistic bliss!" the man said, and Laura felt herself retch at that. This man was insane! And, worse, he had the beginnings of a plan in motion, one that had robbed the lives of most of the people she'd ever known, and would go on to continue his depraved plans if he wasn't stopped.

Yet, it would not be Laura to pull the trigger, as strong hands grabbed her arms once more, lifting her up and holding her struggling body tight. There was no getting away from their strength, and the implications of such were not lost as her body erupted into a cold sweat.

As though confirming her worst fears, the guru pulled out a small dart gun, aiming it at Laura. "Now, my usual process is a gradual one, not infecting them with the seed of change until their conditioning allows for a smooth transition to the pupae stage, as it were. With the right conditioning, not only do my followers allow the injection of the seed, but welcome it. Not only

does it give time to gather all the unenlightened, but also the refuse and human construction around, giving their new forms something to feast upon when the change takes them. It is truly the best way to work my way into a smaller town, yours in this case being the perfect test case for my process!”

“But, in cases like yours, I have developed a version of the seed that takes root much faster in the host, needing only moments to initiate the change. It’s not ideal, and I would assume the host would mentally struggle against the changes, instead of embracing as do all of my flock. That, and I would already need to have the location set up in advance lest their new forms starve. But, in your case, I do not have enough time for you to experience the full program before I leave for the next town to start my next program. You might suffer for the first few minutes, but I assume you’ll fall into the same bliss as all my subjects have before you. Either way, I’ll have no way to know, but I will have some valuable data on this method of infection in the field.”

Laura went to call out, though a hand clamped down over her mouth before the sensation of the dart hitting her neck made her call out. Before she had a chance to try to reach up to her neck, the two zombies threw her into the pool, the stench of rot and maggots making her want to vomit. The force of the fall stunned her, and it took some moments for her to rise, wondering if she could try to get out of the pool before whatever had been injected into her took effect. The garage was a little lower than the edge of the pool, and she would have to find a grip to pull herself up. Sure, the guru was still there, as well as hundreds of his zombies he could call on to restrain her. But if she didn't at least try, then this man would get away with everything he was trying to do, leaving Laura to-

Yet, the moment she stepped forward, a gnawing hunger started to burn through her, as though she hadn't eaten for days. It was enough that her entire body began to weaken, and Laura fell down on her knees, holding out her hands and not caring that she was resting them in garbage and maggot feces. The hunger burning through her was indescribable, as though her body was preparing to vibrate from the need to satiate it. She had to eat and needed to do so now, nothing else mattered than the basic need. Memories of her favorite meals, the times in her life had been most full flooded her mind, but they were soon erased at the realization that nothing she knew could satisfy her hunger. Nothing in her experience could match her need, and if she didn't receive anything to quell the ache, then she was going to-

It took her some moments to realize it, but the reek of the garage and refuse was gone, as though she had no sense of smell. But it was more than that, a new odor steadily flooded her senses, one of the only things she was still able to detect. It was coming from all around her, as though the stench of garbage was clinging cloyingly to her body and filling her with a strange sense of something that could only be considered alluring. Part of her was shocked she had found it repulsive moments before when it might be the one thing she needed. She was sure she didn't

want the trash, the rotting garbage and fabrics and wet squelching material under her body. Yet, with that smell persisting in her nose, there was no denying her desire for what it might taste like, if it smelled so good...

Realizing what she was smelling and being disgusted by it, Laura froze, unable to deny what it wanted but having no desire to give in. Unlike the zombies that had started mindlessly feeding as soon as they were exposed, Laura had some ability to resist, it seemed, although just barely. Her body was craving food to the point that she would eat anything, and even the notion of trash and filth was starting to become appealing as she continued to smell what was all around her. Part of her knew that giving in would be her damnation, and even if escape was hopeless, she would not let herself become one of those disgusting maggots, at least not without a fight. And yet the more she resisted, the more her body started to violently shake, as though undergoing some sort of severe withdrawal. It became so bad that Laura could feel her entire body trembling, tremors rippling under her skin that for a moment made her forget her hesitation. And that was to be the start of her downfall...

Without giving a further moment of consideration, Laura lowered herself toward the ground, sniffing more of that delectable scent that her rewired brain seemed to crave. There had to be something in the dirt that was causing her to crave it on a primal level. Yet, even as repulsed as she was, there was no stopping her tongue from reaching forward, drawing bits of scraps into it and trying to chew through the difficult material. Without really thinking of what she was eating, Laura felt herself swallowing it. Even though it was something that should have blocked her throat, it was instead dissolved rather quickly, through some sort of known fluids excreted from her throat. The sensation was satisfying, though hardly enough as she lowered her head once more, requiring more substance now that she'd had a taste.

Even the part of her disgusted by what she was doing could not drive her to stop as she pulled up pieces with her mouth and swallowed them whole without any ill to her being. There was nothing else for her to do, nothing else that mattered than to keep eating and ease the twitching in her body. It was overwhelming that even her resistance was moot, having a hard time even thinking why she had been so bothered when eating seemed to satiate her pulsating body. Though, given as much as her body still desired it, Laura couldn't see any future for her other than to eat until she was finally, completely full.

Though she was barely able to eat as fast as she wanted, her consumption was already having an effect on her body, leaving her belly feeling bloated and gassy, swelling slightly all over. It was uncomfortable, especially as her skin started to push against her clothes, as though she was steadily outgrowing them. It was almost enough for her to want to take them off, not caring if she was naked or lying in the filth. Yet, her arms and legs didn't seem to move at her

prompting, as though the muscles within had atrophied. She couldn't bring herself to care, however, save for not being able to use her hands to shovel in the food all around her.

The textures and flavors in her mouth would have made her gag mere moments ago, though, to her changed senses, it seemed like heaven, especially as the spasming in her body seemed to subside. Even though she was clearly not eating enough for what her body seemed to require, her torso was continuing to swell, gasses and tissues within making her feel uncomfortable in her own skin. There was no pain, thankfully as though the food was making her grow, making her something *more*. She simply couldn't get enough!

Something in her mind started screaming at her, like a memory from only moments ago of massive grubs and the death of her parents. She could see fuzzy images of their transformation, how they had gone from their human forms into massive maggots, writhing and eating much as Laura was doing now. And yet... try as she might, Laura couldn't find any fault in that. It felt so fulfilling to feed, meeting her desires and making her crave more. Nothing she could imagine was better than being in this moment, and even if that changed her into a maggot herself... would that be so bad, if it would allow her to eat as much as she wanted? It was happening regardless so was there any point in trying to stop it when simply eating felt so good?

By this point, her expanding body was so tight against her skin that she felt they would tear. Something was pressing against the underside of her skin, feeling slick and slimy, as though oozing some sort of mucus. A strong scent seemed to waft from it, one that she was becoming more aware of now that it was emanating from her own skin. There were several other sources all around her, emanating from beings she was starting to realize were her kin of sorts. Soon she would be just like them, eating and feeding and satisfying that deep-seated desire that nothing else could even match

A soft tearing sound resonated in her ears as her skin gave way, something off-white and slimy parting her human dermis like wax paper. It felt good for the tightness to be alleviated as the slimy skin made her clothes slough off, something she was eager to discard. The new skin began to segment, pulsing as she grew into a form able to eat all she wished. A brief struggle within her mind told her to be disgusted that her body was becoming something repugnant. Yet, it was hard to compete with those thoughts with the knowledge that she was becoming something that would simply allow herself to feed as she wished. Her nakedness served to release more of that glorious musk into the air, one that spoke of her purpose. It was joined with her dozens of fellows, all enraptured in the single-minded goal of satiating their hunger. And Laura could hardly blame them when the simplicity of feeding was so sublime, trumping anything her experience had ever known. Her body began to undulate forward slightly with more ease, pushing her down into the detritus and allowing her still-human mouth to feed unhindered.

The weakness in her arms and legs started to annoy her, weighing her down as the limbs became vestigial. Yet, in her feeding frenzy, Laura barely noticed they were retracting into her expanding trunk. The snapping of shoulders and hips resonated through her body, making way as they started to rapidly contract into her torso. Laura was hardly bothered by their loss, having a hard time recalling why she possessed them in the first place. A part of her mind struggled momentarily with the motion that without them, she could no longer escape, as was once her goal. But those errant thoughts were removed with the realization that she had nowhere to go, that she belonged here, burying herself within the refuse and feasting to her heart's desire.

Soon, her limbs were little more than stubs on her sides, and a wet squelching drew them into place below her. Simplistic muscles and tissue attached them within one of the segments, and Laura realized she was able to move them, almost swimming forward in the garbage around her. It was slightly jarring to feel her legs, or the remnant stubs of them, pushing through her slimy segments and moving into place below what now remained her front legs. Another pop signaled the formation of one set within the segment below, six in total, and allowing her the forward motion her undulating body desperately craved.

All the while, Laura continued eating with vigor, something in the back of her throat dissolving even the tangy metal that she managed to swallow. Yet, something seemed not to sit well within her stomach, akin to acid reflux as though she was eating something that was not suited for her body. There was no likely cause for it, given how much the act of feeding seemed to quell her overwhelming desire. Laura could not bring herself to cease feeding, however, ignoring the discomfort and plowing through the rot and garbage as though her life depended on it. It was soon to be alleviated as an insistent gurgling cascaded through her body, tearing apart human organs and rendering them into little more than mush. A fading part of her mind felt such a thing should have killed her, though she was only pleased to feel the discomfort fading as her body continued developing in its simplicity to provide her all the sustenance her body seemed to require.

At this point, her body was largely uniform, her stomach, her chest, and even her breasts replaced by more of the slimy, off-white segmented flesh. She was barely aware of it, focused more on feeding and not the changing contours of her body. Lungs were not functioning, though the stale air was being drawn in by several dozen holes in the sides of her vermiform body. Her stomach was a single long tube within her, and many of her human organs had dissolved into nothing, no longer required for her new body. Her intestines ended in a single hole, and only a slightly pleasant tingling of her sex was a sign that it was forced toward her anus, which was already extruding a steady quantity of brown paste, the result of her frequent feeding. There was a certain peace that came with it, feeding and defecating and feeding all over again, the rhythm easy to fall into and making it hard to reflect on anything else.

Yet, only one thing annoyed her as she continued to eat, her massive maggot body accented by a mostly human head. Her mouth was not able to draw in nearly enough sustenance, and it was maddening trying to work some of the larger pieces into her mouth. A tingling in her head and the tickling of hair falling out around her, along with the soft tissue of her nose and ears was hardly noticed as well, nor served to cause her any alarm. She could still hear to a degree, her own hemolymph within her body circulating through her body as well as the crawling and chewing of her brethren around her. Little else mattered with the persistent smells drawn into her mouth now and letting her taste her delectable meals, as well as the musk exuding from her own body.

All the while, a nagging feeling steadily continued to degrade into her mind, under the bliss that made up her existence now in feeding. There was something wrong with this, something she needed to do to... what? By this point, much of her mind had degraded along with her body, and all her fading intellect could cling onto was the realization of how satisfying the feeding act had become for her. It was pure ecstasy, and as her brain collapsed within her, turning to mush and removing all cognitive human thought, a certain bliss remained in the knowledge that her jaw had expanded, mandibles tearing forth and finally drawing in enough food... she could finally feed as much as she desired, she could finally...

With that, Doctor Adams turned away, looking through the crowds for the next several specimens to bring to the pool. Soon, the change would take them without the stimuli of garbage, though he was determined to prevent a rush, as much as he could. Much of the refuse in the town had been brought to them, and with the depth of the pool and the basement, there would be enough to sustain them until the final stage of their lives. The overall plan was simplistic in its genius, a marvel of genetic engineering that surpassed the vision of any other human on the planet. It was a shame there was likely very few would see things his way, at least at first. But it didn't matter. Soon, there would be no going back, and with a few more towns converted, he would have enough of an army to make a true difference in the world. Something lasting, something immediate, and something that no one else could ever achieve in their wildest dreams. And something to change the fate of the planet for the better on a scale that would finally reverse the curse of humanity.

Though it would take some time, the grubs would move from the pool, crawling upward and consuming everything in their wake, all the artificial materials created by man. And once they were full, finally full, they would cocoon themselves, changing within their safe prison into their final shape, a lifeform of beauty beyond anything the planet had ever seen. It would take some time, all good things did, after all. But when they emerged, they would be granted the ability to fly, compelled for only two tasks. The first would be to continue to feed on the refuse

of humanity, to clean the planet of their stain. The second would be to find any remaining humans, injecting them with the same eggs that had been introduced to the human hosts after their months-long transition. A much faster way of introduction to the end goal of his program, for infected humans to pupate and become the larva that will feast upon their former humanity, to cleanse the world and allow things to begin anew...