



# FOOD NOISE

A HORROR SHORT STORY

S.E. HOWARD

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**A Horror Short Story**

by S.E. Howard

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I began to hear the noise soon after I stopped using Evite injections. Or, rather, after my health insurance company notified me in writing that the medication, which I'd been using for over a year, would no longer be covered.

The letter read in part: *Effective immediately, weight loss medications will no longer be included in our pharmaceutical formulary. We encourage you to speak with your doctor about other options that may be available, including outpatient nutritional and behavioral health counseling, as well as lifestyle modification.*

To that point, I'd lost nearly one hundred pounds thanks to Evite. While using it, I simply wasn't hungry, and I could walk away from meals without some compulsive need to clean my plate. I could watch TV without a salty munchie on hand or feel compelled to indulge in a midnight snack. I'd never really given much thought to having these things before Evite, but once I started the injections, it was impossible not to notice, and I'd mentioned as much to my doctor.

"It's called food noise," she told me, that persistent urge I'd felt in the background of my mind for so long. And Evite was designed to make that awful, incessant noise go away.

"It acts the same as a hormone your gut produces naturally," Dr. Bevins had said. "It's what makes us feel full, turns the hunger switch off inside our brains."

"Isn't there anything you can do?" I demanded of one of Dr. Bevins' nurses, because when I received that letter, I'd called her office in a state of near-panic. "File an appeal or something?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "If your insurance won't cover it, our hands are pretty much tied."

She tried to give me information about different companies like BetterRx that let you download coupons to save on out-of-pocket drug costs, but even though I scoured each and every one of them, I couldn't find anything less than \$650 per month, which was more than my car and student loan payments put together.

"Of course, there's also direct compounders," the nurse told me, referring to what was basically the back alley abortion clinics of the booming weight loss industry: pharmacies and practitioners of ill- or questionable repute that charged almost as much as the retail chains for products of suspicious quality. Having heard horror stories online about blood clots, fat emboli, phlebitis, and other awful complications people who used them risked, I laughed out loud at the nurse's suggestion.

"You've got to be kidding," I said, but she wasn't, of course, and I hung up on her when she pointed out that my insurance would have stopped coverage sooner rather than later anyway, as I had nearly reached my goal weight and a healthy BMI.

After that, I resigned myself to the inevitable and decided that come hell or high water, I wasn't going to lose all the progress I'd made in the past year. I'd lost so much

weight, I'd bought all new clothes, everything from jeans to dresses, even bras and underpants. I'd bagged up all my larger sizes and given them away to charity, thinking at the time that as long as I had Evite, I'd never need to worry about needing them again. Now I felt grimly determined to stick to that objective through diet and exercise.

*How hard can it be?* I thought, but I found out in short order once the effects of Evite wore off. The medicine hung in for a while, almost two full weeks past my last injection, and I'd honestly – and foolishly – told myself: *I've got this. It's going to be easy.*

Then the food noise had returned.

I became aware of it subtly, as it crept back into my conscious awareness, a low murmur at first, like white noise, discernable but not disruptive. I caught myself opening my cupboard doors and surveying the contents even after just finishing a meal or thinking about the ice cream I had in the freezer, the popcorn I could make, or a million other snacks that might occupy both my mouth and hands.

Slowly, insidiously, the food noise began to grow. I'd fix myself healthy meals, then tell myself that meant an extra spoonful here and there wouldn't hurt, a second helping now and then would be alright. *It's healthy, after all,* I thought.

"Make sure you're including plenty of protein," Dr. Bevins' nurse had told me. At least eighty grams daily, she advised, so I found myself spending hours in the grocery store two or three times a week, reading and comparing nutritional labels. I used a little tracking app on my phone to keep a food diary tallying up all my calories, fat content, sodium, and protein. It would shower my screen with a burst of digital confetti if I hit one or more of my daily goals for each, and a sad-face emoji would pop up if I overdid anything.

Every morning, I'd step on the scale, having stripped myself naked, keeping a watchful, wary eye on the digital read out. One hundred and fifty-four pounds. That was where I wound up when I stopped using Evite; that was where I meant to remain. Sixteen hundred calories per day, at least sixty minutes of walking, and sixty-four fluid ounces of water were all supposed to do it, according to my app. Thus, after several weeks, as I watched that number inch its way up, first one-fifty-five, then fifty-six, now fifty-eight, I wondered, panic-stricken, what I was doing wrong.

*You're eating more now,* Dr. Bevins wrote in reply to a desperate message I'd sent to her through MyChart. At least, it was sent to me under Dr. Bevins name. I secretly suspect it was really the same nurse I'd spoken to earlier on the phone, and as I read through the response, I imagined the words in the nurse's voice instead of my doctor's.

*While you were using Evite, your appetite was curbed, and your caloric count was less. Now that you're eating more, that can add up to a few extra ounces and pounds. Try not to feel discouraged. You're also exercising more, you said, and that makes a difference, too. You're building muscle mass, and muscle weighs more than fat.*

*Muscle weighs more than fat*, I told myself as I chopped vegetables for a stir fry shortly after this. It had become a sort of mantra to me, that silly little phrase, a distraction of sorts from the food noise that otherwise burbled constantly in the back of my mind, like static on an open AM radio band.

*Muscle weighs more than fat*, I thought, scooping a pile of chopped bok choy into the wok I had heating up on the stove. I thought I'd pulled a package of chicken breasts out of the freezer earlier, but when I reached for it now, I blinked in surprise to find I'd accidentally grabbed flank steak instead.

Why had I even bought this? I wondered. I'd seldom eaten red meat or pork while using Evite, and now that I was all alone against the food noise, I'd made it a point to steer clear of both these sections at the grocery's meat department. Chicken breasts and thighs, all boneless and skinless, ground turkey, or fish, that was all I allowed myself. But as I regarded that package of beef, I decided what the hell. It was already thawed.

"Waste not, want not," my mother always used to say, one of many colorful phrases and philosophies she'd been fond to spout, like "a moment on the lips, an eternity on the hips," "a stitch in time saves nine," or "don't take any wooden nickels."

Thus, I slid the edge of my knife through the thin layer of cellophane covering the meat, then slapped the wet, ruddy steak onto my cutting board. As I set about slicing it into thin ribbons for the stir fry, it occurred to me that raw beef has a pleasant odor, sort of metallic, almost buttery, unlike raw chicken or fish, which can be pungent enough sometimes, even if fresh, to make me want to gag.

Each time the blade cut through the beef, a tiny bit of blood would come squelching out, and maybe I was distracted by that, or the thought of how it smelled good, or maybe it was just that low drone of food noise inside my head – whatever the reason, when I accidentally drew the knife blade across the tip of my right index finger, I didn't immediately feel pain. I saw more blood welling along the deep incision, and immediately, I jerked my hand back, my finger darting into my mouth. It was a childish reflex, but it happened nonetheless, and as the coppery taste of my own blood hit my tongue, I realized that was what had made the beef smell so tasty.

*The blood.*

I stood there for a moment, my vegetables sizzling in the skillet beside me, my finger lodged in my mouth. With the tip of my tongue, I prodded lightly, curiously at the flap of loose, lacerated skin and finally felt the first sting of discomfort. I turned to the sink, then held my wounded hand beneath the open tap, watching the water turn red-tinged as it cascaded down to the stainless steel basin beneath.

I left bloody smears as I pulled a handful of paper towels loose from a roll, then held them clamped around my finger. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I thought of an old wives' tale I'd heard once upon a time, about how you should apply raw meat to an open cut or wound to stop the bleeding. Or was it to stop swelling in a black eye? I couldn't remember exactly, but it occurred to me I could at least test the bleeding theory for myself.

I peeled the paper towels back, wincing as I got a look at the wound. I hadn't cut clear down to the bone, thank God, but it looked deep enough to make me worry I might need stitches. I picked up one of the strips of sliced beef from the cutting board and wrapped it, bandage-like, around my fingertip. Then, without thinking, I drew my hand up, putting my finger – and the meat tourniquet – into my mouth.

Although my first reaction was of disgusted surprise, I kept it there. I could still taste blood, a strange and not entirely unpleasant intermingling of my own with that of the beef, along with the tangy flavor of the meat itself. It felt cool, moist, and strangely silky in my mouth, and I found myself pressing my lips together, sucking on it like I might have a lollipop.

At the same time, I couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like to sink my teeth into the beef, my back molars coming together gently at first, then more firmly. As I did this, I slipped my finger out of my mouth, leaving only the steak behind, and began to chew. It wasn't until I swallowed that I realized the food noise had grown silent, and I only noticed because as soon as I swallowed, the meat sliding down my esophagus, it returned, a buzz like an orchard full of cicadas in summer.

Had the meat made it quiet? I wondered, and reached for the cutting board, picking up another piece of steak. I put it in my mouth, folding it up like a stick of chewing gum, and as soon as I sank my teeth down, feeling it yield between my jaws, that unexpected but blessed silence fell once more.

I ate every bit of the raw steak, and for the first time since stopping Evite, I felt satisfied, that otherwise ravenous ache inside me momentarily quelled. Each time I swallowed, that serenity would quickly fade, only to return as soon as I bit into the next slice. When I finished eating, I picked up the cutting board and pulled it to my face so I could scrape my tongue across the course plastic surface, lapping up every last scrap.

I felt I was in a daze, nearly sleepwalking, and when I realized what I was doing, I gave a shudder of disgust, then threw the cutting board down into the sink. As I did, I caught a whiff of something scorched, and whirled, the wok left unattended for too long, the vegetables beginning to char. With a yelp, I snatched it off the burner and, like the cutting board, dropped it into the sink with a noisy clatter.

*Damn it*, I thought, because my stir fry was ruined, and even though I should have felt nauseated at the thought of having eaten raw meat, never mind having actually done it, I was hungrier than ever. Starving, actually. I didn't have any more meat thawed out, however, and when nothing in my pantry or fridge seemed appealing, I taped up my finger with some gauze, then grabbed my coat and headed out.

I hit the first restaurant I came to within walking distance of my apartment building: the Urban Grille. It was more of a sports bar than anything, with TVs plastered over every inch of available wall space, all playing at least a dozen different ball games or sports shows. I still had the lingering taste of that raw steak in my mouth, however; thus, despite the warning in fine print at the bottom of the menu that "consuming raw or undercooked animal products may increase your risk of foodborne illnesses," I ordered triple-decker burger rare.

I didn't even bother to take my coat off as I sat alone in a booth big enough for a party of six in the back. As I waited for my food, I took anxious sips of my Diet Coke and tried to distract myself with the racket from the nearest TVs, but it was drowned out by the food noise in my brain.

*I'm so hungry.*

When my burger arrived, I set about dismantling it, setting the top bun aside, then removing the lettuce, tomato, onions, and pickles. I was tempted just to start shoveling the meat into my mouth with my hands, but figured since I was in a public place, I'd at least practice a modicum of manners. Thus, I began to eat by the heaping forkful; with the first bite, I closed my eyes and held back a little moan, feeling that glorious silence in my skull fall like the closing curtain in an off-Broadway show once again.

"Angela?" I heard a guy ask.

I opened my eyes and found him standing near my table, having paused as he walked by. He looked dimly familiar, but at first I couldn't place him.

"Holy shit, it *is* you," he exclaimed. "You look terrific!"

I recognized him at last. We'd worked together a few years ago.

"Seth?" I said, dredging his name from my sediment of memories, and he beamed, nodding. "Uh, wow. It's been a long time."

"No kidding!" Without waiting for an invitation, he slid into the booth to sit across from me. He looked like he'd stopped off at the bar on his way home from a late evening at the office, judging by his loosened tie. Because he carried a half-empty mug in one hand, and his cheeks looked bright with color, I suspected he'd also had a few beers to unwind, as well.

“Are you still at Praither and Gund?” he asked and I shook my head. “Me, either. That place was fucking nuts. I’ve been a project manager over at Joubert for about a year now.”

He chattered on and on like we were old friends catching up, but to be honest, we hadn’t been. That was back in my overweight days, and to the best of my recollection, he’d never said more than a handful of words to me. I hadn’t been his type, because guys like Seth – tall, athletic, handsome in a smarmy, sleazy kind of way – would rather try their luck with skinny, pretty girls with big boobs. Apparently he now felt I fit this bill.

“You’re on a keto diet, then?” he asked, nodding toward the pile of undercooked beef on my plate. “It must be working for you. I mean, you’ve lost a ton of weight, haven’t you? You look terrific.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking another bite.

“I’ve known some other people who tried that. You know, you can use a couple of pieces of lettuce to take the place of the bun?”

“Really?” I said, chewing.

“It’s a lot less messy that way, I’ve heard,” Seth said, adding with a laugh, “Though I guess a knife and fork will do the trick, too.”

He was there with some work buddies, he told me but didn’t seem in a hurry to get back to them anytime soon. Instead, when the server came by, he ordered another beer.

“You want one?” he asked me but I shook my head.

“No, thanks,” I said. Then, because he’d come up with a good excuse all on his own, I added, “Carbs and all.”

“Oh, right.” He laughed at this, then made himself at home while I continued to eat.

“Well, uh, hey,” I said once I’d finished. “It’s been fun catching up, but really, I need to get going.”

As I slid out from the booth, he followed suit so we stood, facing each other. I was vaguely disturbed to realize despite the massive amount of food I’d just put away, I could already feel hunger pangs stirring again, and that strange food noise, like the deep rumble of distant thunder, rising once more.

“You think you’d ever want to get together some time?” Seth asked. “Maybe go out for drinks, grab some dinner?”

“Sure,” I said, pressing my hand to my stomach. Maybe what I was feeling wasn’t hunger, I thought. Maybe all that meat wasn’t agreeing with me.

“Great,” Seth said, brightening again, and we exchanged contact information. “I’ll text you.”

I hurried home, afraid if I didn’t, all the meat I’d gobbled down that night would come spewing back out again from one end of me or the other. But even though I sat on the commode almost as soon as I got home, doubled over with my belly roiling, the trash can in front of me in case I hurled, nothing happened.

Well, that wasn’t exactly true.

The food noise returned like an incoming tsunami, and although I pressed my hands over my ears, I couldn’t block it out or muffle it.

*I’m so hungry.*

Finally, I left the bathroom and returned to the kitchen. I dug through the foil-wrapped contents in my freezer, hoping for more beef, but all I found was chicken.

*It will have to do*, I thought, and I told myself it wasn’t disgusting as I watched it spin around in the microwave, defrosting, my mouth so flooded with saliva, it trickled from the corner and down my chin.

The chicken was still mostly frozen as I scarfed it down. I told myself it was safer that way, made me less likely to come down with salmonella or something.

My phone chirped with an incoming text, and I dug through my purse to retrieve it.

*Can’t wait to see you again*, Seth told me. *You really look amazing.*

*Thanks*, I replied, leaving a smear of chicken juice on the screen as I typed. *You should see me with my clothes off.*

To this, I added a cheeky little winking emoji.

*Maybe you’ll let me sometime*, Seth replied, with one of his own.

I popped the last of the half-frozen chicken in my mouth. *Maybe.*

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*Is it normal to have strange food cravings after stopping Evite?*

At the office the next morning, I found myself too distracted to work, despite the mountain of paperwork waiting on my desk, the projects I was working on with deadlines fast approaching.

The food noise had returned in full-force overnight, enough to wake me from a dead sleep, and I’d spent most of the night staring up at my ceiling, clammy and tremorous, unable to quiet my mind enough to rest. I kept thinking about food, but not just anything. I kept thinking about meat.

*I’m so hungry.*

Instead of doing any of the tasks demanding my attention at work, instead I opened an internet browser window on my computer and typed in the search bar about cravings after stopping Evite.

*Food cravings may result from a number of things, the internet helpfully replied, like nutrient deficiencies, hormonal changes, even in response to stress and anxiety.*

Beneath this, another link caught my eye: *Craving meat? It could mean you need more iron and zinc in your diet.*

Was that it, then? Were my cravings – this ceaseless food noise – so easily explained? I clicked the link and skimmed the article. On my way home later that afternoon, I stopped at the drug store and bought some iron and zinc supplements. I popped a couple before even leaving the parking lot, but by the time I got home, I wasn't feeling any different, the food noise no less pervasive. It played in my head in a rushing din, like I sat beside a washing machine, listening to the spin cycle. Luckily, I'd also stopped at the grocery on my way home, and thus, I wound up sitting on the couch, scarfing a two-pound package of ground sirloin straight from the Styrofoam packaging.

When the meat was gone, I sucked on the little absorbent pad that had been packed beneath it. I've heard them called "meat diapers" before, and I tried not to find myself disgusting or pathetic as I slurped on it like I might have a popsicle.

*It's a vitamin deficiency, I told myself. It will take time for those supplements to work.*

By the next morning, however, I still didn't feel any different, so even though I took the iron and zinc again, hoping against hope, I also shot a text message to my boss to say I wasn't feeling well, and would need the day off.

*Sure thing, Angela, he replied. Get some rest and feel better soon.*

But rest wasn't going to make me feel any better, I knew. Nothing would – except for meat.

*I'm so hungry.*

I'd bought several packages of the ground sirloin the night before, and by late afternoon, all were gone, picked clean and sucked dry. Luckily, Seth texted as I stood in front of the sink in my bathroom, having unwrapped the tape and gauze to inspect my lacerated fingertip.

*Want to meet up later for some drinks?* he asked, and as I drew my finger to my mouth, using the edges of my front teeth to scrape away the thin scab forming over the wound, with my free hand, I typed in reply:

*How about dinner instead? I'm starving.*

*Sure thing, he responded. What do you feel like eating?*

*Steak,* I said without hesitation. I'd made my fingertip start bleeding again, and I suckled at it now like some orphaned calf nursing from a baby bottle.

*Steak it is*, Seth replied, and after that, I didn't pay much attention to anything else he might have said, because I was too distracted by the blissful silence inside my head, broken only by my own occasional slurping.

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"Wow," he said with a laugh an hour or so later, watching with an expression that was both hesitant yet impressed as I tore into a 22-ounce Porterhouse steak cooked to bloody, rare perfection. "I've never seen a woman eat like you before. Usually, they're all like 'I'll just have a salad,' then pick at it like an ostrich."

"I've always been a big eater," I told him. "Well, except for when I was on Evite."

I went on to explain my weight loss odyssey. When I got to the part about my insurance refusing to cover it anymore, he managed to look appropriately outraged on my behalf.

"Health insurance is such a racket," he said. "They don't care if we live or die, as long as they turn a profit."

Still, he told me, it was hard to believe I'd lost so much weight.

"A hundred pounds? Wow," he said again. "You sure look amazing."

He regarded me with the same ravenous expression I awarded my steak.

"Thanks," I said, stuffing in another juicy mouthful.

"Have you had any problems since stopping those shots?"

"Not really, although it's taken some getting used to, the food noise."

"Food noise?"

"That's what my doctor called it. It's not really sounds or anything. But it reminds me of like how you think you hear the ocean when you hold a seashell up to your ear, only it's telling me to eat. All the time."

"Man, that must suck."

"It's not too bad," I told him. "I can manage."

Even though I devoured the entire Porterhouse, I still felt hungry. There were scraps and meat bits clinging to the bone, so I picked it up with my hands and began to gnaw.

"So I've been thinking," Seth said, watching with a mixture of revulsion and fascination. "About what you said before. You know, in your text?"

I nodded, even though I wasn't paying much attention to him. Within moments, I'd worked every bit of gristle and flesh I could get off the bone, and with both it and my plate now bare, I felt the dull, throbbing ache of food noise beginning to stoke again behind my temples.

*No, no, not yet*, I thought, because it wasn't fair that it could rebound before I even had the chance to catch my breath. Already, I found my gaze cutting toward the menu at the far side of the table, and I wondered if Seth would think it was strange if I ordered a steak for dessert.

"I was thinking you might want to," he said with a wry smile. "You know, let me see?"

*Meat*, I thought, salivating just at the thought. *I need meat.*

*I'm so hungry.*

"So?" He raised his brows as if in invitation and reached across the table for my hand. "What do you —"

His voice cut short in a pained yowl as I plunged the tines of my fork into the back of his hand.

"Holy shit!" he cried, shoving his chair back and scrambling away from the table, clutching at his hand. With a grimace, he grabbed the fork by the handle and wrenched it loose, letting it tumble to the floor. "What the hell! You just fucking stabbed me!"

"Oh, my God," I gasped, because it felt like someone had dumped ice water on my head, like up until that moment, I'd been suspended in Jell-O with all sights and sounds made hazy and muffled, my body and brain detached from all of them. Now, things snapped back into rightful place with stark, painful clarity, and I stood in horror, my hands darting to my mouth. "Oh, Seth, I'm so sorry! I...I didn't mean...!"

"What's wrong with you?" he demanded, and now other diners had turned to us, confused and startled, and several waiters came scurrying toward the table, alerted by his distress. As one of them coaxed him into lowering his hand, I saw blood spattering down from the line of holes punched in his skin, dripping onto the floor. I stared at this, sinking back into that swimming pool of gelatin inside my mind, losing myself for a moment as I inhaled deeply, savoring that bittersweet stink of iron and salt. I found myself stepping toward him, reaching for his hand, meaning to draw it to my mouth, to put my mouth against his wounds.

"Do I need to call an ambulance?" one of the waiters asked, and as he stepped in between me and Seth, he blocked my view of the blood. Again, it was like breaking the surface after being submerged in a pond, my eyes opening wide, my breath tangling in a gasp.

"Seth," I said, staring at him over the waiter's shoulder. "I'm so sorry. It was an accident."

"An accident?" he practically yelled. "You stabbed me with your fork!"

"I didn't mean to," I pleaded. "I forgot it was in my hand. I only meant to...to..."

To what? I struggled to find the words to finish. The truth was, the only thing I'd been thinking was that I was hungry. I wanted meat. And in that moment, his hand had looked and smelled for all the world no different than the Porterhouse had.

"I'm sorry," I told Seth again, and began to cry.

"Do you need me to call an ambulance, sir?" one of the waiters asked again, but this time, Seth shook his head, then took a linen napkin to wrap around his injured hand.

"No, it's fine. I'm okay. It was just a misunderstanding."

"Are you sure?" the waiter said.

Sniffling and tearful, I looked up at him, hopeful, and he managed a strained smile.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm positive."

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*Something is wrong*, I wrote to Dr. Bevins in MyChart. I knew she wouldn't see my message until the morning, but still, I had to let her know.

*I think I'm having a reaction to going off the Evite. Withdrawal or something.*

I'd told Seth he didn't have to drive me home from the restaurant, that I could take an Uber instead and wouldn't blame him at all. I also offered to pay, not just for dinner, but any medical expenses, too, if he wanted to go to the emergency room.

"It's fine," he told me, and the waiters had found a large enough bandage to cover the entire spot where I'd jabbed him.

"Don't worry about it anymore," he said, and before leaving the restaurant, he'd pressed his wounded hand against my cheek, leaned down, and kissed me. His sudden proximity brought with it a whiff of the blood congealing on the back of his hand.

He drove me home and kissed me again after pulling to a stop in front of my building. "I still want to see you naked one of these days," he whispered, and trapped within the confines of his sportscar, the aroma of his blood was intoxicating to me, making the food noise in my head swell like a orchestral crescendo. I wanted to wrench the bandage away and bite his wounds open once more. I wanted to dig my teeth into the spot, rip the flesh away, and taste the meat beneath.

"Why not now?" I'd asked.

*I'm so hungry*, I wrote to Dr. Bevins. *I'm hungry all the time. The food noise was never this bad before I started Evite. It's in my head, all day, every day, and it never stops, never goes away, not unless...*

I was in the living room, facing a set of patio doors leading out onto the balcony. In the glass, my reflection appeared eerily aglow by the blue-green light from my

phone. Behind me, from the direction of the kitchen, a swath of brighter light spilled out from the kitchen doorway.

In my reflection, the blood splattered and smeared on my face and chest looked as dark as tar, still wet and glistening. I'd offered Seth fellatio to make up for the fork incident, and of course, he'd agreed. I'd gnashed my teeth together while deepthroating him, eliciting a shriek that had only grown shriller as I'd shaken my head like a rat terrier with a chew toy, the thick, spongy column of his penis at last ripping free.

Hours had passed since then, and it was now nearly dawn. I'd made a glutton of myself in some kind of depraved bloodlust. Nothing recognizable remained of Seth's face. Hell, not much that was discernable as *human* was left, considering how much of him I'd eaten. Even from the living room and in the dark, I could see blood seeping past the kitchen doorway and into the hall, as well as my own footprints tracking through it, leading in a meandering, staggering trail to where I now stood.

The taste of blood remained fresh and ripe in my mouth, but even so, the noise had already returned. It was no more than a low hum for the moment, but I knew it wouldn't be long before it rose again, until it roared inside my head like the winds of a tropical cyclone.

*Dr. Bevins, you have to help,* I wrote, as tears streaked through the congealing gore on my cheeks. *I don't know what else to do, or how to make it stop. You said the Evite injections turned off the hunger switch in my brain. That switch is back on now, only it's gone completely out of control.*

*I can't stop myself,* I pleaded. *The food noise is so loud. Please, you have to help. I'm so hungry.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.E. Howard lives in Kentucky where she works as a registered nurse, certified in toxicology (a fitting field given her side-hustle writing horror stories). Her short stories have appeared in numerous anthologies, including *PUSH! An Anthology of Childbirth Horror* presented by Ruth Anna Evans, *Carnival of Horror* from Undertaker Books, and the Amber, Sinister, and Green Diamond Editions of *The Horror Collection* by KJK Publishing. Her short story "You've Been Saved" was also adapted for the screen in the 2022 GenreBlast film anthology *Worst Laid Plans*. Her horror novella, "Prairie Madness" is available from Baynam Books Press, and a novel, *The Vessel* from Wicked House Publishing. For more information, visit online at [www.sehoward.com](http://www.sehoward.com).