

Eric The Pie

by Graham Masterton

'It's a very odd thing -
As odd as can be -
That whatever Miss T. eats
Turns into Miss T.'
Walter De La Mare

Eric's mother always used to tell him that 'You are what you eat.' Eric, seven years old, used to eat up all his minced-beef pie at supper-time and then lie in bed, feeling his arms and legs, to see if he were developing a crust.

How many minced-beef pies did you have to eat before you yourself turned into a minced-beef pie?

But if you ate Marmite sandwiches, as well; and fishcakes; and sweet cigarettes; and greengage jam tarts; and licquorice hardsticks; and apples; and cornflakes - what did you turn into then?

Eric used to lean on the windowsill of his high attic bedroom and look out over the slated rooftops of suburban south London and try to imagine what you turned into then.

A kind of terrible groaning slushy monster, with eyes like pickled onions and skin as black as haddock, with crusty excrescences of Hovis loaf and appalling soft cavities dripping with gravy and strings of lamb-fat.

One hot afternoon in August, Eric fell over in the play-ground at school when he and his friends were playing 'it'. He scraped his knee and it bled into his sock. That night he lay in bed feeling the scab form hard and crusty on his leg and thought that he was turning into minced-beef pie.

He spent hours in his room staring at his nursery-rhyme book. '*Simple Simon met a pieman.*' A pieman! There was no picture of the pieman, but Eric didn't need a picture. He could imagine himself what this terrifying creature was like. A hunched, pastry-encrusted beast, dragging himself along with muffled whimpers. A man who had eaten far too many pies in his life, and had paid the ultimate penalty.

A man whose skin had gradually turned crumbling pastry. A man whose lungs and stomach had gradually turned into minced beef. *A pieman!*

Eric had gone to bed and had nightmares about the pie-man. He had heard the pieman's nasal begging through bubbles of gravy. *Eat me, kill me. I can't bear it any longer.*

For weeks, he had eaten scarcely anything at all. And he had always left his crusts on the side of his plate. His mother had talked to Dr Wilson; and once Dr Wilson had visited the house, and Eric had answered questions to his blue chalk-striped waistcoat and his gold watch-chain.

'Do you dislike your food, Eric?'

'No, sir.'

'Are you worried about anything at school?'

'No sir.'

'Cough.'

(Eric coughed)

'Breathe in, and hold it.'

(Eric breathed in, and held it.)

Then, in the brown-wallpapered hallway, next to the barometer that was always set fair, the doctor murmuring to his mother, 'He's quite all right, you know. Boys of this age quite often eat very little. But when he starts to grow ... well, he'll have to eat to live; and he'll live to eat. You mark my words, and stock up your larder.'

His mother had returned to the sitting-room, and sat and stared at him; almost as if she were resentful that he wasn't really sick.

'The doctor says you're all right.'

Long pause. 'Oh.'

She knelt on the floor next to him, and took his hand. Her eyes were so colourless. Her face was so colourless. 'You have to eat, Eric. You have to build yourself up. You have to eat or you'll die. You are what you eat, Eric.'

'That's what I'm afraid of,' he whispered.

'What?'

'That's what I'm afraid of. If I eat too many pies.'

'What?'

'If I eat too many pies, I'll be Eric the Pie.'

His mother had laughed. Her laugh like fragments of broken mirror in the summer bedroom. Bright, sharp, slice your nose off.

'No, you won't. Food gives you life, that's all. If you eat life, you'll have life. It's like an equation. Life in, life out.'

'Oh.'

Eric understood. Suddenly the pieman was nothing but a story. Pieces fell off him. Crust, base, lumps of kidney. Suddenly the pieman was nothing but pie. Eric had grown up. Now, at last, he understood the mystery of human existence. It was like an equation. Life in, life out. That was all. Nothing to do with minced-beef pies; nothing to do with fishcakes; or greenage jam tarts. It was simple. If you ate life, you stayed alive.

Next morning was sunny and suffocatingly hot. Eric, bored, and tired by the heat, sat on top of the coal-shed swinging his legs, a pale elf-faced boy with huge brown eyes and protruding ears. He had no friends to play with. Everybody at school called him 'Mekon' and bullied him. He was no good at football and when he tried to play cricket he was always out for a duck.

In the yard at the back of Eric's terraced suburban house there was a strong smell of elderflowers and cat's pee, because next door's used to slink into the coal to relieve itself. Eric's mother had just hung out her laundry and it dripped intermittently onto the concrete path. Above Eric's head the sky was as blue as washable writing-ink, and thinly streaked with cirrus clouds. High up, to the west, a Bristol Britannia airliner caught the sunlight. The Whispering Giant, the newspapers called it. Eric thought the idea of a whispering giant was rather sad and rather sinister.

He watched a woodlouse crawl across the hot tarpaper roof of the coal-shed. It reached his cotton shorts, and then began a long and painful diversion along his thigh.

Eric picked it up between finger and thumb. Immediately, it curled itself up into a grey armoured ball. Eric threw it up a little way, and then caught it. He did this two or three times. He wondered what it was thinking about, as he tossed it up. Was it frightened? Or didn't it have enough brains to be frightened?

It was alive. Alive enough to crawl across the coal-shed roof. So it must think *something*. He wondered what it would think if he ate it. The woodlouse's life would become part of his life. His big life and the woodlouse's tiny life would be irreversibly combined. Perhaps then he would know what the woodlouse was thinking. You are what you eat, after all.

He popped the pill-like woodlouse into his mouth. It rested on his tongue. It must have thought it had discovered some damp, warm friendly niche in the coal-shed somewhere, because it unrolled itself in the cleft of his tongue, and began to crawl down his throat.

For a moment, Eric was seized by the urge to gag. But he calmed himself, restrained himself. The woodlouse was joining his life by its own volition, and he liked the idea of that.

It crawled to the back of his throat and then he swallowed it.

He closed his eyes. He wondered how long it would take before the woodlouse's consciousness became part of his own.

Perhaps it was too small. Perhaps he needed to eat lots more woodlice. He jumped down from the top of the coal-shed and searched around the yard, picking up bricks and stones and poking in the dampest corners of the wall. Each woodlouse he found, he popped into his mouth, and swallowed. In less than a quarter of an hour, he found thirty-one.

His mother came out with another basket of washing and began to peg her slips and stockings onto the line. 'What are you doing, Eric?' she asked him, one eye closed against the sunlight.

'Nothing,' said Eric. While she pegged up her clothes, he quickly ate four more woodlice. They crunched between his teeth.

That night in bed he stared at the ceiling and he was sure that he could feel the woodlice's

lives weaving in and out of his body and his mind. He felt stronger, more alive. If you eat life, you stay alive.

On his eighth birthday his mother gave him a bicycle. It wasn't new, but she had cleaned it and painted it blue and Mr Tedder at the second-hand van showroom had fitted new brake-blocks and a blue hooter with a rubber bulb.

He cycled up and down Churchill Road, which was as far as his mother would let him go. Churchill Eoad was a crescent, safe and quiet, away from the main road.

One grey afternoon he came across a pigeon, limping and fluttering in the gutter. He stopped his bicycle close beside it and watched it. It stared helplessly up at him with a beady orange eye. Every now and then it dragged itself a few inches further away, but Eric followed it, the wheels of his bicycle tick-ticking with every step.

It was alive. It had a much larger life than woodlice (which he had been eating by the handful whenever he found them; and ants, too; and spiders; and moths). If he ate it, maybe he could experience just the briefest flicker of what it was like to fly.

He looked around. The crescent was deserted. Three parked cars, one of them propped up on bricks, but that was all. Nobody looking. Only the distant sound of buses.

He left his bicycle propped against a garden fence and took the wounded pigeon into the alleyway between two terraced houses. It struggled and fluttered and he could feel its heart racing against his thumbs. He pressed its hard pungent breast against his mouth, and bit into feathers and meat and sinew. The pigeon struggled wildly, and uttered a throaty scream that excited Eric so much that he bit it again, and then again, until the pigeon was thrashing bloodily against his face and he was biting into bone and sinew and things that were bitter and slimy.

For one ecstatic instant, he felt its heart beating on the tip of his tongue. Then he forced its breast even deeper into his mouth, and killed it.

An elderly woman was watching him from an upstairs window. She had suffered a stroke not long ago, and she was unable to speak. All she could do was stare at him in horror as he wiped the ragged bloody remains of the bird around his face; and skipped while he did; a pigeon dance; a death dance.

When he got home, Eric had to sneak in by the back door, and wash his face and hands in cold water in the scullery. Blood streaked the white ceramic sink. He felt elated, as if he had learned how to fly. He heard his mother calling, 'Eric?'

When he was eleven, he crouched in the fusty-smelling, coalshed, waiting for the neighbours' cat. When it came in, he caught it, and tied its mouth tight with fishing-line, knotted tight. The cat struggled furiously, hurling itself from side to side, and scratching at his face and hands. But Eric was ready for that. He chopped off its paws, one by one, with a pair of gardening shears. Then, when it was still struggling and writhing with pain, he hung it up from a cup-hook that he had screwed into the low wooden ceiling. He was covered in blood.

The cat sprayed blood everywhere. But Eric liked the blood. It was warm and it tasted salty, like life.

He buried his face in the hot tangled fur of the cat's belly and bit into it. It crunched and burst, and the cat almost exploded with pain. Eric licked its lungs while they were still breathing. There was air inside them; life. Eric licked its heart while it was still pumping. There was blood inside it; life. Eric took the cat's life in his mouth and ate it, and the cat became Eric. You are what you eat. Eric was an insect, a bird, a cat, and scores of spiders.

Eric knew that he could live for ever.

Not long after his sixteenth birthday, Eric went to stay with his grandparents in Earl's Colne, in rural Essex. Hot summer days, glazed like syrup. Hallucinatory hay-fields, dotted with bright-red poppies.

Eric found a brown-and-white calf, down by the river. The calf had become entangled in barbed-wire, and was crying in pain. Eric knelt down beside it for a long time and watched it struggle. Butterflies blew by; the afternoon was so hot that it almost seemed to swell.

Eric took off his jeans and his T-shirt and his underpants and hung them up on the bushes. Naked, he approached the calf, and touched it. It licked his hand, and twisted pitifully against the barbed-wire.

Eric picked up a large stone in his right hand and broke the calf's legs, all four of them, one after the other. The calf dropped to the ground, bellowing with pain. Eric forced the stone between its jaws so that it couldn't cry out any more. He was panting and sweaty and his penis was rigid, with the foreskin drawn tautly back.

He mounted the calf and raped it. Black flesh, pink flesh. While he raped it, he bit into its smooth-haired chest, and tore lumps of bloody meat away. It kicked and fought, but Eric was too strong. Eric had too much life in him. Cats' lives; dogs' lives. Eric was life itself. He ran the tip of his tongue over the calf's living eye and the eye slickly quivered; so Eric bit into it, so that a clear gelatinous goblet of optic fluid slithered down his throat like a prize oyster; and at the same time he ejaculated into the dying animal's bowels.

He spent almost an hour eating and retching and smothering himself in blood. By the time he had finished, he was surrounded by swarms of flies. The calf quivered, just once. He kissed its bloodied anus, from which his own semen glutinously dripped. He said a prayer to all that was terrible, all that was wonderful. The power of one life over another.

In the far distance, the sky was very black; granite black; and thunder rumbled. A rush of warm wind crossed the hayfield, like a premonition of early death.

Eric left school and found a job at a colour-separation company in Lewisham, in south-east London. He lived in a mews flat over a lock-up garage only a one-and-sixpenny busride from where he worked. He was tall now, tall and long-legged, with a strange diving stride that could only have been adopted by a man who never walked with women; because no woman

could have possibly caught up with him. He wore National Health tortoiseshell spectacles and his hair was cut so short that it always stuck up at the crown, like a cockatoo.

He sat at his drawing-board at work, painting out flaws on colour separations, his head bowed, his nose so close to the celluloid film that his face was reflected in its blackness. He hardly ever spoke to anybody. He brought a Thermos of Ovaltine, but nobody ever saw him eat lunch. Deborah Gibbs, who was new in accounts, thought he was lonely and strange and rather alluring. 'He's Byronic,' she said; and Kevin in the platemaking section wanted to know if it was catching.

Every night Eric stood on the corner outside the works and waited for the bus which would take him back home. He would sit downstairs on the 3-seats where his thigh would be pressed against the thigh of some homegoing typist or some big West Indian woman in a bright print frock, with bagfuls of Sainsbury's shopping on her lap. He liked to feel their warmth. He liked to feel their life. There were airless days in summer when his leg was pressed close to the woman next to him, and he could have ducked his head down and taken a bite out of her living flesh.

The mews was almost always deserted when he returned; the late sun hanging in the sky like a yellow badge. Occasionally Mr Bristow was tinkering with his old Standard Twelve, but usually it was Eric's echoing footsteps and Eric's jingling keys and nothing else. Only the deep ambient roar of suburban London.

He would climb the metal fire-escape stairs and let himself into the flat. A small kitchenette with a wooden drainingboard and a tap that constantly dripped. A curled-up calendar for 1961, Views of the Lake District. He would sniff, whistle, switch on the electric kettle. Then he would walk through to the sitting-room; which at this time of day was always dark, and smelled of damp.

He would switch on the black-and-white television but he would turn down the sound. Nobody on television ever had anything to say which interested Eric in the slightest. The news was all about President Kennedy and Mr K and death; or pop music, which he didn't understand. He heard it all day, every day. They played it on transistor radios at work. But he simply didn't understand it. That endless nagging bang, bang, bang, bang. It gave him a headache. It made him feel that he had been imprisoned by some primitive tribe that didn't even realise that that night sky wasn't a lid.

The only programme that Eric liked was *Hancock's Half Hour*, although it never made him laugh. He liked lines like, 'I thought my mother was a bad cook, but at least her gravy moved about.'

In the bedroom, Eric's unmade bed. And all around it, pinned to the wall in their hundreds, Eric's drawings. Anatomical studies of insects, rats, dogs and horses. Anatomical studies of woodlice, anatomical studies of pigeons. Everything that Eric had eaten, meticulously drawn in pencil. Each one signed, each one dated, a catalogue of Eric's living meals. Each one bore the legend, 'Y ou are what you eat.'

Under the bed were drawings which he kept tied up in a large grey fibreboard portfolio. These were special drawings which he didn't want the landlady to see, in case she visited his flat when he was out at work.

These were drawings of things that Eric had never eaten, but which he would like to eat. New-born babies, as they emerged from their mothers, still hot, still steaming, like offerings from some sacred oven. Afterbirths, Eric would have given anything to be able to eat an afterbirth, plunge his face into hot pungent gristle. Men's faces; children's thighs. Slices of women's breasts. Eric drew them in painstaking detail, shading and shading with his 2B pencil until the heel of his hand was silvery-black with rubbed-off graphite.

Later, when the sun had set behind the rooftops, and the mews was very dark, Eric used to go down to the garage. He would lay his hand against the green weather-blistered paint. He would say nothing; but close his eyes. Sometimes he felt as if he didn't belong on this planet at all. At other times, he felt that he owned it, and that everybody else was intruding on his privacy.

He would turn his key in the Yale lock, and push open the wooden concertina doors. They would always shudder and complain, even though Eric had greased them three or four times. Eric would step into the darkness of the garage and smell 1930s motor-oil and leather and dust; but most of all, blood; and despair.

He would close the doors behind him, and then he would switch on the light. Suspended from the garage ceiling by an elaborate system of weights and hooks and pulleys were six or seven animals - dogs, cats, rabbits, even a goat. Their jaws were bound with fishing-line so that they were unable to utter the slightest sound, even though they were suspended from hooks and wires that must have been causing them intense and endless agony. Most of them had been bitten here and there. A black Labrador dog had the flesh from its hind-legs missing, so that it pedaled the air with nothing but bones. The goat's eyes had been sucked from their sockets, and its udder had been opened up and partially devoured; like a huge bloody pudding.

Eric took life wherever he could find it. Eric ate everything which offered him life. He felt strong and knowledgeable and *many*, as if every animal that he had eaten had given him some of its instincts, some of its intellect, some of its individuality. He was sure that he could run faster, balance better, smell more keenly. He was sure that he could hear dog-whistles. He was convinced that if he ate many living birds, he would soon be able to fly.

Every night, Eric would lock his garage door, take off all of his clothes, and fold them on a bentwood chair which he had placed by the wall for this very purpose. Then, naked, Eric would feed; trying to keep each of his animals alive for as long as possible. There was nothing like staring into the eyes of a living creature while you were actually chewing its flesh. And digesting it. Sometimes he would bend over naked in front of the suffering, dangling animals and excrete, so that they could witness their final fate. Dropped onto the oil-stained concrete floor, lifeless!

One hot evening in August, 1963, Deborah Gibbs came over and perched her hip on Eric's plan-chest. She was wearing a small white sleeveless top and a short green skirt and Eric, when he looked up, could see chestnut-brown stocking-tops and white plump thighs and white knickers.

Sandy Jarrett in developing had bet Deborah ten shillings that she couldn't persuade Eric to take her out for a drink. Sandy was hiding behind the reeded-glass partition and trying to smother giggles. Eric could see her ginger hair bobbing.

'I was wondering what you was doing tonight,' said Deborah.

Eric wiped his brush and peered at her through his paint-freckled spectacles.

'I'm not doing anything. Why?'

'I don't know. Thought you might like to come down the Blue Wanker.'

'The what?' blushed Eric.

'Oh, sorry. We all call it that. The Blue Anchor. It's the pub over at Hilly Fields.'

'Why should I want to do that?' Eric asked her. His hand lying still and white on the drawing-board, as if it were something dead that didn't belong to him. Fingernails ruthlessly bitten until they bled, and formed scabs, and been bitten again, and bled again...

Deborah wriggled and giggled. Sandy giggled from the next office. 'It's hot. Thought you might like it, that's all.'

'Well...' said Eric, staring at Deborah's stocking-tops, staring at the flesh that bulged from Deborah's thighs.

They sat outside the Blue Anchor watching half-a-dozen small boys play cricket. Eric drank two halves of cider and pecked at a packet of criaps. Deborah drank gin-and-orange and chattered incessantly.

'Sandy says you're a mystery man,' she giggled.

'Oh, yes?'

'Sandy says you're probably a spy or something.'

'No, I'm not a spy.'

'You're a mystery, though, aren't you?'

'I don't think so. I just believe in living my life my own way, that's all.'

'And what way's that?'

He stared at her. She hadn't realised before now how dreadfully pale he was. He smelled, too. He gave off the strangest of smells. It was sweet, yet sickening. A bit like a gas-leak. She hadn't smelled anything like it since a starling had died in her bedroom chimney.

'You can come and see my flat if you like,' he told her. 'Then I'll show you.'

They finished their drinks and took the bus to Eric's flat. The sun was almost gone. Eric seemed to be peculiarly cheerful, and he strode along with his hands in his pockets and Deborah found it almost impossible to keep up with him.

They reached the mews. It was silent and deserted. Mr Bristow's Standard Twelve but no Mr Bristow

'He's probably inside, having his tea,' Eric remarked.

'Who?' asked Deborah. She had laddered one of her stockings and she was growing worried.

'Sandy thinks I'm a mystery man, does she? Well she should come and see this.'

Eric unlocked the garage door and took hold of Deborah's hand and guided her inside. It was so dark that she couldn't see anything at all. Eric let go of her hand and she stood breathless not knowing what to do. But then the garage doors collided behind her, and locked, and Eric switched on the light.

He folded his glasses and set them on top of his trousers. He was white, ribby, blue-veined, but his penis stood out erect and very dark.

Deborah tried to scream, but he had gagged her so tightly that she could only shout mfff, mfff, mfff. He approached her, drawing aside the hooks and chains that dangled down from every beam on the ceiling, and peered at her from only six or seven inches away. She could smell his breath; and it smelled of unspeakable decay.

He had taken off all her clothes except for her stockings and garter-belt and he had tied her in a sitting position in his bentwood chair. He had criss-crossed her breasts with thin cord so that they bulged in diamond patterns. He peered shortsightedly between her leg and then reached out to touch her, but she mfff'd! with such ferocity that he hesitated.

'I've never seen a real girl naked before.'

She tried to scream at him to let her go; but he suddenly turned away, with apparent disinterest. But then he turned back again, and he was holding a craft-knife in his hand.

'You are what you eat, Deborah. Can't argue with that. Cakes, Mars bars, you are what you eat. I always used to think that if I ate too many pies, I'd turn into a pie! Can you imagine that? Eric the Pie!'

He took the triangular-bladed craft-knife, and touched the point of it against her skin, just below the breast-bone. She saw the knife, his smile, his blue-cheese skin.

'Life, that's what it's all about,' said Eric, and sliced Deborah open, all the way down to her light brown pubic hair.

She looked down and saw her own bloodied intestines, pouring into her lap. There was a fetid smell like nothing she had ever smelled before, blood and digestion and bile. Then she saw Eric plunge his whole head into the gaping cavity of her body, *his whole head*, and felt the unbearable tearing of his teeth. He was after her living liver. He was after her pancreas, and her stomach, and her kidneys. He was trying to eat her alive, from the inside out.

She felt herself fainting; she felt herself dying. She felt her whole world tinged with black. She did the only thing that she was capable of doing, which was to throw herself backward. Her chair fell; she fell; Eric fell. He bellowed with rage, his head still buried in the bloodiness of her body. The goat, nearly dead now, swung heavily against them on its Calvary of chains.

Deborah lay with her head against the concrete floor, quivering with agony and approaching death. Eric sucked and bit and tore at her liver, almost drowned in blood. Deborah turned her face and saw that her fall had loosened her right arm; that her right arm was free.

She also saw the hook that swung on the end of a chain, backwards and forwards.

She didn't care whether she could summon up the strength or not. She was going to do it, no matter what. She was dying; and words like 'impossible' didn't mean anything any more.

She snatched at the chain, once, twice, then caught it. Eric bloodily guzzled, oblivious. With a trembling, blood-smearred hand, she grasped the hook, and lifted it as high as she could. She couldn't scream; she couldn't cry out. She was almost dead. She probably was dead, pathologically speaking.

But she dug the hook in between Eric's bare buttocks as deeply as she could; and she felt sphincter and muscle and tissue tear, and *inside her body* Eric screamed. A muffled, wet, bubbling scream.

His face rose out of the gaping lips of her abdomen like the scarlet mask of the devil himself. His eyes were wide, bloody-black liver clung to his teeth. A fine spray of blood blew out of his nostrils. He roared, hopped, twisted, and tried to pull the hook out of himself. But as he did so, Deborah seized the goat, and the goat fell on top of her, and all of Eric's weights and chains and counterbalances went furiously haywire.

Eric was yanked, shrieking, up to the ceiling, where he dangled and writhed and prayed and wept.

Deborah died. The day died. But Eric circled around all night and still he didn't die. He spun slowly around and around, feeling a pain that was almost dreamlike in its intensity. He slept, and he woke, and the pain still dominated everything.

Near to dawn, he tried to shake himself free, jerking up and down on his hook, until at last it tore through and skin and he dropped heavily onto the garage floor. He lay shivering and weeping, bruised and maimed and unable to move.

The day passed him by. He heard cars. He heard Mr Bristow with his spanners, whistling and humming to himself. He slept, shivered, mumbled.

Late in the evening, he felt something tug at his left eyelid. Something sharp, something painful. He tried to brush it away, but when he opened his eyes he knew that he wouldn't have the strength to keep it away for long.

It was a massive grey sewer-rat, one of the biggest he had ever seen. It wasn't attacking him, it was simply feeding. It stared at him and he knew with a terrible certainty that Eric the Pie had met his Simple Simon; that he would soon become nothing more than pellet-shaped droppings, in some unexplored outfall; that you are what you eat.

For the very first time in his life, Eric understood the sin of being predatory, and he prayed for forgiveness while one rat, then another rat, then many rats, turned his body into a thrashing, rolling cloak of bloodied fur.

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