

# CROCODILE ROT



Lydia Peever

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Gary searched the floor, sifting through the dirt and food debris, looking for his last match. It had dropped, skipped, and floated away about the same time he had. A filthy shoelace lay draped over his wrist - what was left of a tourniquet. He shook it off and resumed pawing around for his only match.

The girl passed out across the room had a lighter, but across the room was - like - all the way across the room. Besides, she was on the nod. No fair to harass her now. Not when she might think he was trying something seedy.

He found his needle under a soot coated pie tin, a little closer to finding the dropped match. Tucking the syringe away in his dingy and frayed belt bag, he found the girl's lighter in there, along with another shoelace and empty fold. Good thing. All the matchboxes here were fucked.

With a groan, he sat back against the plaster wall with his aching legs splayed out inside loose jeans. He had not been moving around enough. Spent too much time in this house with these... people. He'd managed to get clean for a bit until last week. For nearly a month he toyed with the idea of rehab, but ended up back here. They were never clean, these guys. And that girl. Never clean. And not just filthy with drugs either. They barely ate, never bathed, and rarely spoke.

Ray had been cooking up his own shit since none of them were mobile enough to go out and score on their own. They were mostly too far gone to steal either, which could be a plus. Too messed up to get needles, they shared those too. Gary passed a hand over his belt pack. One thing he would never ever do was share a needle. Well, that and shoot that shit Ray was making.

Two college brats had told them all about Crocodile. Gary hadn't liked them much and didn't trust them at all. Party kids. Cracking out and slumming it. They'd told Ray about making Croc, the new drug, from iodine, and other easy to get ingredients.

That had been two months ago, and those kids hadn't been back since. A few weeks after Ray's first batch, flaking and discolored patches began growing on his slummates' bodies. By the time Gary gave up on rehab and came back here, the patches had grown to glistening lesions.

No fucking way would he shoot that shit. Just look! Look what it had done to Ray's legs. Without seeing through the dark into the next room, he could picture the sickness affecting the owner of the house. Huge sores oozed with what was left of his calf muscles and now ulcers were forming on his arms and even his face. Scaly and shiny, a discoloured sheen covered his legs and threatened to spread. Still, he sat in the kitchen all day, cooking up the next batch. Gary hated going into that room.

More people were coming by lately, looking to try the new shit they'd been hearing about. Putting that stuff on the street was homicide. Ray was giving some away for free. Test shots. Gary had almost given up his place in the house when that had started. He'd rather go back to the homeless shelter and explain where he'd been for the last week. He knew it was only a matter of time before what was happening to Ray happened to the rest of them and he didn't know how long he could stay and watch that.

Sour growls turned his stomach. No telling how long he had been on the nod, but it must be after noon. He could head out, make a few bucks, spend a few bucks and come back by dark before the street got mean. His choices were either come back here and ignore what was going on in the next room or stay out there where there was no guarantee. Safer here with people who barely moved, rarely spoke and were pretty much rotting away.

Fishing his last cigarette out of his front shirt pocket, he lit it, and tried to not think about Ray's bones flashing through small yellowed holes in the greying flesh of his calves.

Bright sunlight and the heat off of the concrete nearly made him turn back into the stagnant shade of the house. The promise of cigarettes and the hope of getting high shut the door behind him. He walked down McIntyre Street past more houses identical to Ray's. He had heard that every third house downtown hid either a grow-op or crack house. He'd been in enough of them to believe it.

Looking down a few familiar alleys, the lack of people around today surprised him. By people, he meant *his* people. Cars, busses, and strollers whizzed past in all directions, but no one else was really visible anymore. Around him, the city buzzed like annoying flies.

Tripping over the blown sole of one shoe, Gary stopped at a dark receiving bay behind a grocery store. The guy was crouched so far in the corner, Gary jumped when he noticed him. From under the concrete stairwell, he stirred and began clambering out. Maybe just waking up. Gary didn't know him, but didn't like him at once. His eyes were milky, like he

was blind - but they were looking straight at one another. Gary leaned away, trying to spur his body into leaving.

*Keep walking*, he thought, unable to move. *Who is that guy?*

Gary couldn't expect to know everyone and really, everyone looked familiar. Wanting, selling, buying or already stoned - they all looked the same. Fear crept up his spine, looking into the face he didn't recognize. Those eyes within a face flaccid with near-death locked on Gary. His teeth gnashed once, and if they made words he would never know.

Gary lurched away and nearly ran to the next intersection. Looking back, the street was empty. He had been stumbling, so there was no way he could catch up. Slowing to a walk, he shook off the sensation that they knew one another. He'd looked moments away from dying and a horrible lump rose in Gary's throat to think of it.

He had enough sickness in himself to cure. Around the next corner, down the next alley, Gary soon forgot all about it with the anticipation of fixing for the day.

“Tell you what I fuckin’ saw, dude.”

Terry was talking shit as usual as he stalled, digging a dimebag out of his underwear or wherever he really kept his stash. Gary looked along the wall at the back door of the steamy laundromat. Usually there were a few people he knew around here. Right now, it was like a ghost town, just the two of them. He could barely hear Terry over the hum of the machines inside.

“-eating his own fuckin’ arm!”

“What?” Gary said. Last he'd heard, the conversation had been about where everyone was.

“Tell you. That guy, you know, with the raincoat. The bum.” Since none of them were actually bums, the bum stood out. “He was walking along the beach doin’ whatever in fuck he does, but I swear to fuck he was eating his own fuckin’ arm.”

Gary stared hard at his dealer. He had not wasted time coming here instead of downtown to get jerked around. “You’re nuts, man. Listen to yourself.” Gary eyed the dealer’s searching hands that still had not found drugs among his jeans. “Eating arms? Bullshit.”

“No seriously.” The dealer checked his pockets. His face now drawn slack and serious. “No one around. People, I don’t know, missing or some shit.”

“Missing? Dude. My *ten bucks* is what’s missing,” he said, and held out his hand.

Suddenly Terry slapped a fold into his open hand, startling Gary, who jerked his head up, his brow furrowed.

“Chill.” Terry stared, his hand left resting on top of the drugs. “And fucking be careful,” he said. “You going to the house?” There were no secrets in this city.

Gary stammered, wondering why anyone would care. “Yeah.”

Terry’s eyes were intense. “Fucking be careful.”

Back at the house, the door hung wide open. Everyone was in the front room, passed out around the open door. That was annoying. Weird and annoying. Gary had pretty much staked claim on the front room. He’d put up with the girl hanging out there mostly because she was like furniture, but anyone else in the front room was usually either coming or going. Bewildered, he walked past everyone further into the house.

The huge pot on the burner smoldered away untended. Puzzled, Gary went back to the front room, but had been right: Ray wasn’t there. On a normal night, someone would be hovering and tending to Ray and his slow commands growled between bouts of tossed salad conversation and sleep. The pot roiled on with no one paying attention.

Around the corner, in the farthest room, he could see where a wooden chair, now knocked over with Ray sprawled out on the floor. Gary leapt forward and knelt over him. He was okay—well, alive, with shallow breaths and quivering eyelids at least. It didn’t look like he’d been hurt. Hadn’t fallen. The busted cans, filthy rags, and piles of cigarette butts were in their average state of disarray. It looked like he had crawled out of the chair, knocking it over, to lie down on the floor.

Gary looked past the hem of sooty cut off jeans to check Ray’s legs. As much as he hated to look, if his muscles had finally - *oh God*.

Solid white bone showed through the oozing mass that had once been flesh, now held together with socks. Stained by old blood, they were filled with misshapen lumps and blood instead of feet. Most of the flesh from his socks to his knees had sloughed off and laid on the floor, some still clinging in between the bones by tender slick ribbons.

Recoiling, Gary craned his neck sideways to rip his eyes away from the gore. His nose crinkled and he tried to shut out the rotten scent that wafted up from the mess. That smell wasn’t new, but now it clung and stank far worse, acrid like scorched plastic. Steeling himself, he leaned in again. As he did, Ray exhaled. Hot breath ripe with liquefying guts and rot sent up a plume of stench that hit him like a baseball bat. He stumbled backward into the hot plate and pot of cooking drugs, and the noise



clattered through the silence of the house.

As Ray pushed himself up on hands covered in fresh sores, for the first time Gary could see the new decay. The green had darkened and spread. Scales covered the insides of both arms, gray-green and flaking. The tops of his legs, where the strained flesh was bloated, was covered in gangrenous patches.

A weak voice—he barely realized it was his—whined, “Oh man! Oh man, oh man!”

Gary reached toward his dying friend, but then drew his hand back. *What if it were catching?* Pus frothed from new wounds in between the stringy muscles of Ray’s forearms, as if the skin had softened, melted and given up. Where collapsed veins had been were now yawning furrows leading deeper into festering tissue. His face was ruined, lips bloated and cracking, with two useless white orbs staring. Before Gary’s eyes, Ray was rotting right off his bones.

Turning, stumbling, he knocked the pot of milky ochre fluid over. It clanged to the floor, sending out a slosh of putrid fluid. A thump on the floor, and a severed arm rolled out on the hardwood. As his eyes focused on it, Terry’s words came back to him. The arm that had been cooking in the pot glimmered a familiar poncho yellow beneath the iodine stain. Plastic was melted into the gangly forearm, and the hand sticking out of the cuff ended with filthy chipped fingernails. *The bum! When had the come in? Eating his own arm, then making his way here—why had the bum come here? How the fuck did his arm get in the pot!*

Reeling away, he lunged toward the front of the house. A feeble hand grazed his foot, swiping out sluggishly to stop him. Behind him, Ray slapped the floor and pulled himself in chase, moaning low in agony. The wet smacking and dragging along hardwood became all at once deafening and horrifying.

In the front room, they were all stirring now. Motion from the stairs stopped Gary mid-stride. The bum’s yellow raincoat glowed in the darkness as he jerked his legs down one step at a time, cloudy eyes trained on Gary. Rotten teeth, red stained, worked a chunk of flesh. No arm on one side, the other was a stump jammed ragged in the chewing mouth. With one arm gone – the one in the pot – he’d started gnawing on what he had left.

Suddenly, the noise crashed in on him. *How many people were in here?* Scuffling from behind him, other rooms, all around him.

Tottering toward him shirtless, a skinny guy who’d once been fat, his reptile patched skin hanging in slack folds, reached for him, his mouth hanging open. The skinny fat guy growled. Dying air stretched into a soulless moan. The look in his eyes moved Gary backward toward the

door. Fading eyes, full of need and hunger. Shooting Crocodile turned their flesh copper rust green and decomposed the muscles eventually, but something else was doing this. It was doing it to all of them, and fast.

The bum near the loading dock with the milky eyes. *That arm*, Gary thought, *something in that arm. Something in the bum. Something was spreading with or without needles.*

He needed to get out.

The girl had climbed up, clawing up the wall to steady her neglected legs. Her head wrenched around, an opal iris followed him. Teeth gnashed through her sneer and Gary heard them crack. Again, her jaw snapped open and shut, with the sound of breaking teeth. Her tongue just missed the bear trap of her head darting out to bite at him. The needle jutting from her throat bounced in the air. A filthy needle full of diseased Croc. Her throat had been her favorite place to shoot up, saying that if she swapped holes she would not waste away like Ray. Until now, she had been mostly right. Only small patches of track marks had been turning a dull mint color when Gary had left the house. Now, he could see every vein in her body pulsing with dark blood. Black blood, seconds from seeping through her tissue paper skin.

He ran and they followed, scraping, crawling, and lurching behind him.

Looking both ways fast when he hit the sidewalk he saw more of them lumbering in between parked cars, toward people blithely walking, ignorant of what was happening.

Straight across the road there was a café. *People! Weapons!*

The street proved miraculously clear for a heartbeat so he bolted across. The café exploded in protest the moment he burst in, people yelling—

“Get the hell out!”

“Who do you think you are?”

—shocked at the sight of the frenzied junkie blasting through the door.

Gary leapt over the counter and pushed past a swinging door into the kitchen.

Drugs forgotten, he scrambled for weapons.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lydia Peever is a journalist and horror author living in Ottawa. With articles in some newspapers and a few magazines, she is currently working on the sequel to her violent vampire novel, *Nightface*.

With too many hobbies and diverse interests, you may find her researching genealogy in a dusty library or taking photos at a punk show. By day, she haunts trendy cafés, tends poison flowerbeds, and photographs roadkill.

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