

A vintage microphone with a silver mesh grille is the central focus, set against a dark background with a prominent spiderweb. The microphone is illuminated from below, creating a dramatic glow. The title 'CREEPTYCH' is written in a stylized, gothic font across the top, and the author's name 'JOHN EVERSON' is at the bottom.

CREEPTYCH

JOHN EVERSON

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John Everson

FIRST EDITION

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Bugs creep people out.

There's something about all those legs, and those weird eyes, devoid of pupils. There's something about their multitude that unnerves us, and with good reason—they *own* this earth. Spray dead poison on them and hundreds might die...but you know they'll be back in force eventually. It's estimated that at any one time, there are 10 quintillion (who knew there was a number like that?) bugs creeping and flying around the earth. There are more than 900,000 documented species and there are estimates that millions of species haven't been categorized. They outnumber us in the extreme—something like 200 million insects for every human. They are the aliens among us...and below us and above us.

And the scary thing really is thinking about them *in* us.

Who hasn't heard the urban legends of someone eating food contaminated with cockroach or spider eggs and subsequently having a horde of the critters hatching in the gums—or even the whole body—and eating the victim from the inside out? The urban legends often feature the victims going to the doctor because they're in pain and their gums are inexplicably bleeding...and the doc does a quick exploratory and says "oh, you've got roach eggs hatching in the warm gum pockets around your teeth." The bleeding is the baby roaches digging their way out."

Makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up just to think about it, doesn't it?

We seem especially fearful of spiders. Maybe it's the eight eyes. Or their vampiric nature of sucking the liquefied insides of their paralyzed victims. Never mind that in fact, for the most part, spiders act as our best friends in insect control, patrolling our houses and gardens to kill other unwanted pests. I've been called on many occasions by a frantic female to bash the tiny brains in of a eight-legger who decided at an inopportune time to take a creep across the bedroom or bathroom wall.

Personally, I'm no arachnophobe. But my skin does crawl when I see a cockroach. They're sneaky bastards. Stowaways. I travel a lot, and I'm always nervous about leaving suitcases open in strange hotel rooms, knowing that in the middle of the night I might gain a passenger that comes home to infest my house. It's not an unfounded fear.

A few years ago, not long after I'd returned from a business trip to Florida, my wife said to me that she thought she saw a cockroach upstairs in the bathroom. It disappeared before she could be sure. I assured her it was probably just a large beetle...A week or so later, during a 3 a.m. trip to the bathroom, I came face to face with said cockroach. A big ol' two-inch long hunk of bug, just sitting there on the baseboard in the hallway outside the bath. I knew instantly that it had come home with me from Florida. Had crawled around in my suitcase for hours, touching all my clothes with its legs and antennae. My heart was pounding when I approached him with a wad of tissue...and the crunch made me grimace when I connected with its exoskeleton and pushed. I didn't tell my wife that I'd found the roach until after we moved. I didn't want her worrying, although *I* was looking in all the corners of the house at night for quite some time. Because you know that if there's been one in your house...

It's not that the bug itself is so horrible. It's the knowledge that, if there's one that gets seen, there are a thousand more moving with quiet purpose behind the walls, just waiting for the opportunity to come out and eat what you've left behind.

Which brings us to my little take on insect horror: *Creeptych*.

My very first published story dealt with our fear of insects and was released 16 years ago—January 1994 in *Gaslight Magazine*. It was called "Learning to Build" and was about a colony of roaches that gains communal intelligence. I don't know that I'll ever be reprinting that one...but in the hundred-plus stories I've published in the intervening years, I've not returned to the fear of multi-

legged creepy crawlies in print...until now. Though a couple of these new buggy tales have actually been lurking in my house for some time and were supposed to have crept into print awhile ago.

“Bad Day” was originally written and accepted for a “zombie” anthology called *Aim for the Head*. I wanted to do something a little different than the normal shambling deadly dead story, and so we were born the Luna Roaches—which owe something to the idea behind “Learning to Build.” Unfortunately after several years gestation, the *Aim for the Head* anthology was never born, and so you are reading the tale’s first appearance here.

“Eardrum Buzz” gestated from a frightening bout I had five years ago with tinnitus. I’d been covering the South By Southwest music conference in Austin for my Chicago-area newspaper column on pop music; for those who’ve never heard of SXSW, the conference involves hundreds of bands playing concurrently on 50 stages for several nights...on the final night I went to see Nashville Pussy, Gore Gore Girls and a couple others at the classic Continental Club. I was in the first jam-packed room, holding on to the edge of the stage the whole night, without earplugs...and when I got in the cab to go back to my hotel, I could barely hear the cabbie above the buzzing in my head. Not surprising—I’d experienced that effect before after loud concerts and the club had cranked the sound. But, when it wasn’t gone the next morning... or the next...or even the next *week*...I got really scared. Ultimately the condition alleviated, but the fear translated into “Eardrum Buzz,” though the story’s “buzz” was driven by very different circumstance. This story was originally supposed to appear in *Red Scream* magazine, but that magazine ate itself alive first.

Closing out this trio is “Violet Lagoon,” which I wrote specifically for this book. The tale is actually the back story “prologue” for an outlined novel called *Violet Eyes*, a sort of *Kingdom of the Spiders* type book, only with genetically mutated (and lifecycle-connected) swarms of spiders and flies. I don’t know if I’ll ever get to write the full novel, but this self-contained teaser involves a quartet of co-eds who decide to reenact *The Blue Lagoon* on an abandoned Florida Key, where they find more than just sex and sand is on the agenda. At first the co-ed’s private spring break is marred by a weird purple spider crawling across a girl’s foot. Nothing kills the libido quite like bugs trying to join the party. And then their little XXX vacation gets ever so much worse...

I hope you get a shiver at some point while reading these creepy tales.

Just remember these current world population estimates:

Humans—7,000,000,000

Bugs—10,000,000,000,000,000,000

Wishing you dark dreams of tiny hairlike feet...

—John Everson

Naperville, IL

February 14, 2010

BAD DAY

I can remember the very first time I heard the news report on them. A commentator made a joke of it. “Paul Hughes,” he said, “had a bad day today.”

That was something of an understatement, to say the least. Paul Hughes had just been fired from pushing paper literally the day after his wife filed for divorce. He made the news because in the aftermath of this personal implosion, he was walking, no doubt somewhat disconsolately, in the forest near Brave River. As he moped along a walking trail some kind of insect attacked him. The commentator speculated that the buzzing sound of the creature at the back of Hughes’ earlobe led him to jump, slap at the back of his head and consequently lose his balance to fall to the concrete walking path below. He ended up in the hospital after a cardiac arrest left him thrashing on the river bank with the said insect crushed in a chitinous orange paste to the back of his head.

It wasn’t really funny, but I laughed. The poor guy lost his wife, lost his job, and now, might lose his life because a hornet or something “took advantage” of him at the wrong moment.

That was the last time I laughed.

* * *

In the beginning, everyone thought they were some strange, exotic breed of roaches. They measured about two inches long, and like the roaches of the deep south, were bronze-tinged, dark as well-cured tobacco. They were quickly dubbed Luna Roaches, because they flew in clouds on the wings at twilight and descended on the city in a swarm that blotted out the light of the moon. What bugs flew at night? Nobody really asked that.

The warnings went out quickly. Don’t stay out after dark. Don’t let your children stay out playing after school. Don’t leave your windows open.

Don’t, don’t, *don’t*.

The media told us to hunker down and hide, cuz the killer roaches had come to town.

Of course, they didn’t say it that way. But while some of us laughed at the story of Paul Hughes flailing about and ending up in a coma because a bug dive-bombed him, we lost our morbid sense of humor really quick when swarms of them began to attack people on the streets at night.

We didn’t know what they could do, at first. Didn’t know what they wanted. Initially, the concern was that they could carry some kind of virus or disease.

Who would have guessed that what they brought us was so much more? And so much worse?

* * *

“Kara, come inside,” my wife shouted. Our little girl was only five, but already she was a handful. Sometimes I was glad that I had to go to work everyday and sit in an office. While I lived for the hours that we played together, and she giggled and kicked and fought against my tickle-bombs, I knew I could never spend the day with my baby and keep up with the girl. She was a handful of laughter and energy, while I felt like a slow-moving anchor of molasses shellacked in tar. I was tired after lofting her in the air a few times like a rocket and rolling about on the floor with her before pronouncing bedtime. I played with her an hour or two a day, while Jenna had her for the other 12.

The city was under alert now; for the past few nights swarms of the Luna Roaches had descended on the streets in a bizarre attack of buzz and wings and biting venom. Those who fell prey to the thing were taken to the hospital, but couldn’t be revived. Neither did they die. The doctors quickly learned not to try to pry the roaches from the flesh of the bodies they brought in. While the victims were

comatose when they came in to the hospitals with the bugs on their necks or skulls, when the insects were removed, the low level of neural activity dropped to virtually none. If you removed the bugs, you turned the patient into a human vegetable. But if you left them attached to the host, the victim lay in the hospital in a coma. The difference seemed negligible, but as we soon learned, the difference was great.

Jenna slammed the sliding door like a shotgun behind Kara and my little girl ran right into my arms.

“How’s my baby?” I asked, lofting Kara in the air like a juggler’s bag. She giggled and screeched, her kinked bronze hair flying in the air like her mother’s had once, when I’d had the energy to lift and twirl Jenna around like so much paper. Now, I’d be lucky to dance around her mother, let alone lift her. A combination of her own gain in “stature” and my own declining energy. We’d had Kara late in life, and frankly, the kid wasn’t making me feel younger, as people had promised. I felt every strain in my back these days as I twirled her in the air and when I looked in the mirror in the morning I saw every age line darkened by another night of worry when she was sick.

I’m getting too old for this, I told myself more and more often. I didn’t dare broach those thoughts to Jenna, whose pallid complexion and dark bags beneath her eyes spoke for themselves. She lived in the trenches of child-rearing. I only dabbled.

Kara giggled as I twirled her in the air and asked again, “How’s my baby?”

“Good, Daddy,” she said, throwing her arms around me, and then pushing off my shoulders to raise her moon eyes at me. Knowing she had my attention, she said seriously, “Daddy, there were bugs by the swing set!”

In another time, such a statement from a child would have raised an eyebrow with a smile. But not today, in an age of Luna Roaches that rendered their victims either comatose or vegetable, I spun my daughter in the air and ran my fingers up under her hair, praying with every pounding beat of my heart that I would find nothing beneath those copper locks.

My hand met only the cool skin of a child and I set her to the ground before slumping myself into a chair, exhausted from the onset of panic. My wife hadn’t moved an inch during our conversation. She held her breath. And when I nodded that everything was ok, she closed her eyes and put a palm to her chest.

“What kind of bugs?” I said, as Kara’s moon-eyes stared up smiling at mine.

“Ladybugs!” she proclaimed and ran into the living room laughing and singing: “Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home....”

* * *

If only the Luna Roaches had been ladybugs. If only they had flown away home. But they hadn’t.

Paul Hughes was one of the lucky ones. Apparently, as he’d slapped and fallen, he’d killed the bug before it set its hooks in him. He was shaken. He was physically injured. He was depressed by the disaster of his life.

But he recovered from the bug’s bite. Thinking about his situation, I bet he was later sorry for that. Then again, he never really had the chance. The news reported that he died of a heart attack just a couple days after regaining consciousness from his ordeal. His bad luck streak could have been legendary.

The hospitals were quickly growing overcrowded with those who had not recovered. Instead, beds after beds filled with bodies that were neither dead, nor, in a rational sense, alive. Oh, they laid their heads on pillows and breathed. Their hearts beat out a predictable circadian rhythm, but behind their eyes...nothing stirred.

Within a week of the first Luna Roach swarm sighting, the hospitals were out of beds, and

emergency wards began forming in the gymnasiums of high schools and colleges.

Nobody liked roaches...but few people were so afraid of the things that they wouldn't go out after dark.

They should have been.

* * *

The Luna Roaches were legion. The true meaning of that struck me on a Tuesday night as I walked the five blocks from our house to the library. Kara had forgotten to return *The Book of Five Cows* the day after school, and was distraught that if I didn't get it back to the library she'd have a fine. Welcoming the opportunity to stroll through the neighborhood on a warm summer night, I took the heavily illustrated volume and started down the sidewalk. I was passing the park just a couple blocks down from my house when I saw them.

A silver-white cloud rose like a mist from thousands of blades of darkened grass, and a sibilant hiss filled the air. In a moment, the sky was a mass of pin-wheeling, shimmering dust motes. They ascended like a flock of startled pigeons, and then after gaining their bearings in the sky, momentarily blocking the light of the moon from which they took their name, they turned their shivering antennae on me.

I saw the shift; one moment, the swarm drifted aloft startled and unsettled. The next, they had a direction. And that direction was my head. As they began to shimmer towards me, a million Luna Roaches on the trail of a new victim, I looked around for a safe place. I'd seen plenty of the creature over the past few days, but never so many in one place. They turned the sky a slithering arm of silver and its fingers were reaching for my head. When I saw the shadowed house not too far away, on the corner lot near the park, I nodded to myself. And ran. Where else could I find shelter?

My ears cringed at the chittering sound that grew louder behind me as I shot up the flagstone walkway to the weathered old colonial like a bloodhound, determined to nab my quarry before the things behind me nabbed my back. And my quarry, in this instance, was safety. When I got to the doorway of the house, I found its entryway unlocked. I didn't hesitate in throwing open the screen door and diving in, as a flurry of shimmering wings beat the air in a hungry hiss behind me. Many of them crashed into the screen as it slammed shut, unable to turn, and I breathed a sigh of relief on the floor as the soft crashes echoed in the air behind me.

"Wow," I whispered, tossing the thin hardcover book on the floor in front of me. "That was close."

I laid on the floor for a couple minutes, breathing heavily and occasionally glancing back at the cloud of angry moths still slamming against the door behind me. Finally, I pulled up my legs and pulled myself into a crouch to see where I'd ended up.

That's when I saw her.

The owner of the house, or at least that's what I assumed she was, sat as still as a statue on the couch facing the foyer where I'd landed.

"Did you see that?" I asked. "The damn things came at me like a swarm of killer bees!"

She didn't say anything.

"I'm sorry I let myself into your house like that, but I didn't know where else to go," I apologized.

Behind me, the soft flutterings and keening insectoid cries and smacks against the screen of the door were abating. In front of me, the woman stood, still saying nothing.

She stepped forward.

"Just let me wait here a second, until I'm sure they're gone," I said, picking the library book up. "Then I'll get out of your house."

She stepped forward again. Her eyes didn't blink.

“Um, Ma’am?” I said. Fear began to grip at my bowels. What had I walked into?

~~She put another foot forward, and now I began to panic. She moved with the halting stiltedness of a robot still discovering its joints. And she hadn’t blinked since the moment I’d looked up and noticed her staring blindly ahead from her seat on the couch. How long had she sat there, waiting for me to fall into her house? What would she do when she reached me? She was only feet away.~~

I jumped towards the door and she changed direction to follow. There were still a few Luna Roaches circling in the halo of light like moths outside the screen, but I didn’t hesitate. I launched my way into the twilight and ran back up the street towards my home.

Kara’s library book could be late. I’d be happy to pay the fine.

* * *

That was the night the hospitals emptied. And the churches. And the school gymnasiums. All of the places where the volunteers from the Red Cross and a wide range of other medical saviors had stacked the comatose victims on cots and blankets in hopes that someday they would awake again.

That was the night that they did.

When I got home, breathless and confused at what had just happened, Jenna didn’t give me time to speak. When I dove into the family room, she instantly pointed at the TV and whispered, “look.” The news anchors were raving.

“Around 7 PM tonight, the victims of the Luna Roaches began to walk. But it’s as if they are walking in their sleep. They don’t speak, and they won’t stop, no matter what gets in front of them. We’ve had reports from every part of the city; it’s happening everywhere, all at once. The scene is like something out of a movie. An hour ago, there were thousands of victims, all in a mass coma, and now...now...”

The co-anchor lost it: “...now the dead walk!” she exclaimed.

“What do you think it means?” Jenna said. She put an arm protectively around our daughter.

“I think that this is a really bad day.”

I was only partly right; it was actually a bad night. And a strange one. By morning, after frantic eyewitness news reports flooded the television stations and people barricaded themselves in their homes in panic, it had gotten even stranger.

You wouldn’t think that thousands of people could get up one night, walk out into the streets all at once and then disappear, while the eyes of millions were upon them. But that’s what happened that night. The coma victims got up from wherever they lay, walked out into the street, and as the rest of the world ran inside and panicked at their single-minded, staggering gaits and blank, black gazes, they kept on walking. By the next morning, nobody could quite answer exactly where they’d gone.

On my way to work that next day, I drove by the house I’d hidden in the night before near the park. The front door was wide open. I bet to myself that nobody was at home. But I didn’t stop to find out.

The chatter went on for days. The networks played an endless cycle of footage of blank-eyed men and women and creepily vacant children staggering out of hospitals and churches and walking down the center of the street, feet padding along strangely straight as they strode the dotted yellow lines of town.

There was one image that haunted me, especially. They played it again and again, and every time inexplicably, I began to well up. There was nothing inherently wrong with the picture. It was just a little girl, maybe eight or nine years old. She wore a red T-shirt that had a giant thumbprint stencil on it. And she walked down the street, on the way out of town. Her hair was long and ratty brown, and tousled in so many knots, the father in me knew they’d take hours to comb out, and many yelps of hurt. I don’t know exactly what it was about her. Maybe the way her big brown eyes drooped and

looked hopelessly tired. Maybe it was the way she walked, listless and slow, but with a horrible, unrelenting purpose. Or maybe it was the way she dragged her ragged brown teddy on the asphalt as she walked. The stuffed animal had probably been her favorite toy days before, something she tried to feed and cuddle and hug. And now its head bumped on the ground, silently thumping, thumping with each small step she took. Her hand didn't let go of its leg, but neither did she care that she was dragging the toy to death.

Tears filled my eyes at the image and I looked away. At that moment, a thrumming sound filled the house, as if it had begun to hail. Something was pounding on the shingles and the windows all around the house.

"Daddy," Kara said, running into the room. "There's a bug on my bed."

I scooped her up in my arms and took her back to the room, the noise still echoing overhead and around. Somewhere I heard glass shatter.

"There" she pointed, and on the middle of the pink "Hello Kitty" bedspread sat an abomination. At least two inches long, the Luna Roach sat still, smack in the center of my baby's bed. Its wings shimmered in the yellow light like a gold haze, and it crept forward as I entered the room, heading for the shelter of her pillow. I set Kara on the floor, pulled a tissue from my pants pocket and brought my hand down on the bug. With a scoop I enclosed it in the tissue and squeezed. The crunch of the thing's body was audible, and the warm wetness of its insides bled through the tissue to squish against my hand. I threw the mess into the toilet in the hall bathroom and flushed, rinsing my hand as if I had touched poison in the sink.

From the other side of the house, my wife screamed. Wiping my hand on my jeans, again I scooped up Kara and ran. When we got there, Jenna lay on the floor, arms clenched around herself in a desperate hug. When she saw me, she pointed to the living room window. "They're getting in," she whispered.

Sure enough, on the floor near the windows and streaming around the coffee table were dozens of Luna Roaches.

"Stay here, don't move," I told Kara and set her on the couch.

Then I started stomping.

When the room was a glistening mess of bug guts and broken wings, I finally reached the window and pulled the drapes aside. The glass on one of the side windows had broken, and insects were still crawling up and over the jagged glass to drop into the room. The room hummed with their high pitched, ululating trills. I reached back and grabbed a throw pillow from the couch, stuffing it roughly into the hole that had been my window. Its threads caught on the edges of the glass, and when I was certain the room was airtight again, I continued my stamping campaign until I felt sure that every keening bug was dead. The carpet was a mess of orange goo, and Jenna still hadn't moved from the floor.

"Mommy's asleep" Kara pronounced, and I realized my wife had fainted.

"Let's put her to bed," I said, and with Kara holding onto my leg, I grunted, groaned and eventually staggered aloft again with her mother in my arms. I tucked Jenna under the covers as carefully as she normally tucked Kara, and checked to make sure she was still alive. Her slow, steady breath whispered gently in my ear, telling me that shock had sent her into more peaceful dreams than I was wont to have. When I looked up, my daughter stood at the edge of the bed, brown eyes brimming with silent concern. Her cheeks glistened, and I could see her tiny chest shivering with fright.

"Will mommy be OK?" she whispered.

"She'll be fine," I promised. "She's just scared and tired. Let's climb in with her and get some sleep, too, OK?"

Kara nodded. I scooped her up and slid her into the center of the bed and climbed in beside her.

Once beneath the sheets, it didn't take long before I heard the long slow rhythm of my baby's deep sleep breathing kick in as she clung to her mother's back. I thought about waking Jenna to make sure she was OK, but then decided she was better off to just sleep, while she could. Lord knows she couldn't. I wished that I could join the two of them, but instead I lay awake listening to the light rain of bugs battering against the roof and windows of my house for what seemed like hours. My ears magnified every creak of the house into the echo of an imaginary phalanx of roaches advancing on my bed. I kept itching at phantom touches on my head and legs and hands, driving myself crazy with the idea that a new attack of insects would descend to smother us there in the bed at any moment. At some point, long past midnight, the sound finally quieted and the house grew quiet. I put a hand on my baby's shoulder, and eventually fell asleep myself.

It was the last good sleep I would have.

* * *

"Daddy," Kara said, pushing tiny hands against my shoulder. "Daddy, I'm hungry and mommy won't get up."

I blinked heavy lids open and squinted against the glare. The sun was fully up in the sky and the room glowed with the searchlight of morning. Kara sat in the middle of the bed in her Candykins nightgown, dark hair tousled, but eyes bright as the sun.

"Daddy?" she said again.

I rolled over and hugged her, and then prodded Jenna. Nothing happened.

I pushed against her back again, and then pressed my head to her side. She was breathing.

"She won't wake up, Daddy. I'm scared."

"Let her sleep," I said, slipping out of the bed and grabbing Kara in my arms. "Let's go have some cereal and let her sleep."

I tried to sound boisterous as I said it, but inside, my heart was dissolving like ice on the beach. I knew why Jenna wouldn't get up. A chill went through me as I thought about it. God, we'd slept right next to her. But I knew if I moved her hair aside, I'd find the shell of a Luna Roach attached to her neck.

I choked back a tear as I reached for a box of breakfast cereal in the cabinet and Kara settled herself on a chair at the kitchen table.

Jenna was not going to be waking up. Kara would probably never have her mom make her breakfast again.

* * *

The TV was playing snow. Snow on almost every channel. There was one local access channel still broadcasting, with a wide-eyed, disheveled man screaming into the microphone. "They've come back," he kept saying. "They've come back and there's only one way to stop them: aim for the head. It's the roaches, you've got to smash the roaches..."

As I watched him babble, the door behind him opened, and a stream of people entered the studio. They surrounded the man, who leapt up on a chair and grabbed a microphone stand, holding it out like a cattle prod. Then he began swinging it wildly, like a bat, again and again until he finally connected with someone. The stand hit a woman right in the back of the head, right where the Luna Roach loved to fasten. The woman went down. But then so did the man. There were hands all over him suddenly, and a buzzing sound slowly filled the room. I heard him scream just before a hand covered the lens of the camera, and then that station turned to snow, too.

There were still cable stations playing old sitcoms, but none of the local networks were broadcasting. The same with radio. At last I understood what they meant now by corporate “canned radio. Only the FM channel programmed by someone a thousand miles away on the left coast still played the latest singles from U2 and Green Day. And I knew it was because they had programmed the schedule days before. Nobody was working the boards right now.

For the first time since I’d seen the news story about Paul Hughes, I truly panicked. I felt the ice in my belly, and struggled not to fall to my knees and tremble like a baby *in front of* my baby, who was holding my hand and counting on me to be strong, to make things all right.

Except that I couldn’t.

Not even close.

In the other room, Kara’s mom was turning into some kind of a zombie in her sleep, and outside the world was awash with buzzing, swarming death.

There was no way out.

“Daddy, can I have more milk?”

Blinking back tears, I opened the refrigerator, and pulled out a carton. I wouldn’t look at the missing person picture on its side. Soon, we might all be missing.

* * *

“We’re just going to take a little ride,” I said, as I buckled Kara into the seatbelt.

“But what about mommy?” She quailed.

“Mommy needs her sleep. We’ll bring her back some dinner later.”

It killed me to lie, but I had to get her out of here. I had to get Kara out of the city.

As we pulled out of the garage, I saw the door from the house open, and Jenna stepped out onto the concrete behind us. Thank god Kara was buckled in and couldn’t look in the rear view mirror. Her mother looked ghastly.

Her eyes were vacant.

I hit the gas and squealed out onto the street. I don’t know where I thought we were going to go. Somehow it seemed like this was a local problem; if we could just get out of the city and into the country, everything would be normal again.

We never left the neighborhood.

I pulled out on Highland and turned on to Norfolk to get out of the subdivision...but just before I reached the main road, the way was blocked.

They moved slow, but they were moving. And they were moving inward, a barricade of bodies 10 and 20 deep. They strode towards us, honing in. When one turned, all of the others followed, as if driven by a single mind. When I looked in the rearview mirror, I saw they were behind us as well. Surrounded.

I stopped the car to think. The bodies didn’t stop. They came forward, slowly, inexorably. Their eyes were dark, and unblinking. I could see the tan shadow of Luna Roaches trembling on the necks of some of them as they stepped forward, one shambling shoe at a time.

“Daddy,” Kara said. “They’re getting closer.”

Her hand gripped my shirtsleeve and my heart crawled into my throat. I had to do something...but what? I had no idea. I could try to plow the car through a phalanx of still seemingly human bodies but I had no faith that I would get that far. If we left the car, we were doomed for sure. The mob stretched as far as I could see, in every direction. Were we the only regular humans left in the neighborhood?

“Daddy,” Kara repeated. “They want to come in.”

The first one had finally reached the car. He was an older man, I’d guess 65 or 70. His hair was

white as salt on his head and his lips thin as parchment. He leaned his pale, too-slack face into Kara's window and leered, teeth exposed and rotten.

The pounding began then. And from all around us a hum began to wail.

First the old man began to smack his head against her window. And then from the back window a answering echo, as one of the other Luna Roach automatons began to slap slack fists against the glass. An answering thud joined from my side of the car. One old woman threw her body onto the hood of the car and tried to claw her way up to the windshield. When a gnarled finger grasped at the windshield wiper, I turned the control to full and watched the steel and rubber arm bat her tentative grasp away again and again.

But nothing was going to keep them away for long. Kara held on to my arm tighter and tighter until the car began to shake.

"Daddy, what are we going to do?"

The metal of the passenger door suddenly creaked and squealed. The golf pin of a door lock snapped, the plastic vanished to the floor.

"I don't know what to do," I finally admitted, as the door wrenched open and six arms reached through the breach towards my baby girl.

"Daddddddy!" she screamed.

I pulled her closer, but the hands gripped the fabric of her shirt and pants and then, next to my ear, the glass exploded. Another hand reached through the broken glass to bat at my head.

"Kara, hold on," I begged, grasping for her.

But she was gone.

From outside the car I heard her screams. I dove after her to follow, but before I had my feet on the ground a dozen fists pounded into my neck and back and shoved me to the asphalt. Through a field of swaying bodies and limbs I saw Kara raised above the mob, and then Jenna appeared, arms held out to take her.

"Mommy!" Kara cried, arms outstretched.

My wife scooped my baby up, and Kara hugged her tight. Jenna stared at me over our little girl's shoulders, and a look of victory flickered in her eyes. For the first time in my life, I was sickened by seeing my wife smile. But then, strangely, that smile grew confused, uncertain. It turned to a frown. Her eyes squinted like they did when she got migraines. I could see the muscles on the backs of her arms begin to tense and shiver as she gripped Kara tighter. Then she opened her mouth, not to kiss our baby, but to scream. I heard it clearly over the cacophony of the mob.

That's when the Luna Roach slid out from the wet cavity between her eyeball and eyelid. Kara saw the bug and recoiled from her mother, but Jenna only held our baby tighter, as the roach walked to the edge of Jenna's nose and poised there to stretch its wings. Then my wife's whole face convulsed and began to change. Her skin crawled and swelled; her whole body began to visibly tremble. Jenna's face exploded at that moment, as the hive of Luna Roaches nesting and gestating in her brain finally clawed their way free of her flesh and bone and took to the air. A cloud of blood sprayed the sky as her eyes and flesh caved in like undermined sand to the angry mandibles of a thousand trapped and buzzing bugs. As the first spurts of blood misted, a black and tan cloud of buzzing wings instantly hid the sudden ruin of her features. Luna Roaches lit from her exposed flesh to swarm around the bloody mess of her eyes and the sticky, shredded cartilage of her nose, which hung by a thread down her face.

I launched myself forward to save Kara, but the arms and feet of the mob held me down as my baby beat tiny hands against Jenna's gore-streaked shoulders, trying to escape. Against all sanity, her blinded, broken mother did not fall or let go. A buzz of wings multiplied in the air, and a cloud of Luna Roaches hovered like a bee swarm around my baby's screaming, horrified face. I screamed for her, holding out a helpless hand that was quickly stomped to the ground. Something in my arm

snapped as it met the asphalt, but louder than my own cry was Kara's shriek. I swear that she called for me, but the street was alive in screaming and calls for help. Whether she called my name, something else, in seconds, it was all over. Kara lay quiet and still, limp and blood-spattered in what had been her mother's arms. But I knew, even if my baby never really did, that those were not Jenna's arms any longer. Luna Roaches darted across my baby's face, sampling her innocence with their nervous, hairy feelers.

The crowd drew back from me, setting me free from where they'd pinned me to the pavement and stood up outside the car, cradling my arm and staring at the crowd of blank eyes that glittered like obsidian in the descending night. Silence fell like midnight fog around us, as the mob grew still, and the moment pregnant.

"What *are* you?" I whispered. "What do you *want*?"

One of the men stepped forward, and tentatively opened its mouth. A growling sound came out, and then a word. "Jeesst." It said in a voice like shifting gravel. Its unblinking eyes fluttered at the sound and it seemed to smile. Understanding dawning.

"Jeesst yur legs," the man said, the words coming out slowly before it stepped forward. Its face looked pleased. "Jeesst your arms."

"And what do I get in return?" I asked.

"Us," someone else growled.

From above I heard the fluttering drone of thousands of translucent wings.

"Where did you come from?" I asked.

"The places you have never gone," came my only answer, a whisper from the crowd. And then the cool teeth of a Luna Roach settled onto my spine. For a moment I struggled, hoping to throw it off. But then the ice slid through my brain, and I felt the world go quiet.

As I slid back to the ground, I wondered what would become of my body. And of all the bodies that surrounded me. Normally in a symbiosis, the predator used the host to serve as a nest for its offspring.

Oh God, I cried, as my body went numb. What would gestate and grow inside of Kara. What would hatch from my poor, sweet baby?

What would climb out of my own swollen belly after I had been used...and used up? Or would they use me like Jenna?

I prayed that the chittering sounds I heard in my brain would take any knowledge of that away. Already, I could almost understand what the keening, droning noises I'd been hearing now during the nights meant.

Eat. Eat.

Kill. Eat.

Spawn.

Paul Hughes was lucky. His bad day had ended a long time ago now, before things really did get bad.

Mine was only just beginning.

“Join the *Misery Machine* Street Team!” the ad in the back of the music magazine read. “Inseminate the masses with Eardrum Buzz!”

Wes ripped the page out and filled in the coupon in seconds. The first Eardrum Buzz disc, *Misery Machine*, had permanently bonded to his car CD player a few weeks earlier. He didn’t leave the driveway without the machine gun attack of their bass drum rattling the dashboard. They remained anything but a household name, but Wes couldn’t get enough of the power saw drone of their guitar or the manic fever squeals of their singer, Arachnid.

Yeah, they were a gimmicky band—all the members named themselves after bugs. But the fierce mind-drill power of their music was as insidious as a horde of marauding Carpenter ants. And let’s face it—nobody had designed a cooler looking homage to insect life than Eardrum Buzz’s *Misery Machine* CD cover’s locust orgy—at least not since Journey had celebrated the scarab on multiple CD covers in garish reds, blues and golds. Wes was hooked.

Join their street team and help bring the music of Eardrum Buzz to others? There was nobody more suited to that than Wes. At least, that’s how he felt about it. So he sent in the coupon and waited to hear. Rushed home from work to check the mailbox every day for a week. The ad had only said that “a few would be chosen” in each city, and that the band would be in touch soon with those who were chosen to be “The Swarm.”

Every day he tossed catalogues and junk mail over his head as he rifled through the pile of mail, looking for something that would anoint him a “chosen” one.

And then the call came—but not through the U.S. Post—it was on his e-mail. He almost deleted it as spam. It said Eardrum Buzz was playing a show in a week at the Paranoid Lounge. He was invited to a meet-and-greet party beforehand.

He was in! And he was going to meet the band. Wes ran out to his car, cranked up the volume and peeled his tires with a smokin’ scream as he headed up the street to Rudie’s Tap to share his luck with his friends.

He was “chosen.”

* * *

“It’s not that I don’t like you,” the goth girl said, as she pushed him back two steps. “It’s just that I don’t want to know you.”

With that, a swipe of black hair licked at Wes’s nose and the mini-skirted tramp faded back toward the bar.

It was a swank bar. It was a private bar. The room was barely 20 feet wide...Wes had known friends with bedrooms this big (Not many admittedly. But a couple.) Tucked in the back of the Paranoid Lounge, it put the front, for-business bar to shame. This was clearly the private party portion of the Paranoid, and Wes was at a very private party. There were about a dozen other people in the room, and all of them had shown up within a few minutes of his arrival at the unmarked door behind the club. All of them holding slips of paper that announced “bring this with you for admittance.”

Wes had brought his, and now he stood, watching the black-haired skank walk away, in the low light of the golden-wood bar. He waited to meet the band.

While the ad had said that drinks and hors d’oeuvres would be served, Wes had avoided the snacks. True to the band’s crawly affectation, the silver trays on the side of the room were brimming with French-fried roaches, candied locust and honey-coated raisins...the raisins each gripped by an amber

coated giant black ant.

Wes ordered a Jack and coke and waited.

The band was fashionably late. But they were also fashionably dressed. Arachnid wore a skintight black body suit, and a web of chains jangled from his arms to his chest. When he held his hands up above his head, it looked as if a web of silver joined him to himself. The other members of the band had their own style; Cicada, the drummer, was literally shellacked in black; Wes struggled to ascertain where his painted skin ended and his shiny black clothing began. He suspected there was very little clothing attached. And the lead guitarist, Scorpion, wore an atomic orange bodysuit, and silver dangled from his ears like wind chimes. When he smiled, Wes could have sworn he saw fangs.

A creepy little man in a Metallica T-shirt slid up next to him, and grinned...with the left side of his face. His right seemed as immobile as granite.

“You gonna spread the word?” he asked. Wes saw a trickle of sweat slip between the kinked and wild hairs of his mutton chop sideburns.

“Word?”

“You gonna sell the Buzz?”

“Yeah,” Wes said, and moved away as quickly as the skank had ditched him just minutes before. “Yeah, I love ‘em.”

“We all do, yeah,” the man laughed, nodding, and flashing a row of yellowing teeth. “Love ‘em to death we do, hmmm.”

Wes slipped back to the bar and ordered another Jack and coke.

Arachnid appeared, as if from nowhere. He put two hands on the edge of the bar and pulled. In a flash he was standing on the bar; he raised a bloody red glass to the room and toasted.

“To the Swarm,” he called, and a dozen glasses raised in answer. “I love each and every one of you.”

Someone yelled back “We love you!” and Wes found himself raising his glass in answer, and downing a cool draught of liquor and fizz. He swallowed and felt the warmth in his gut.

“Buzz,” called Arachnid, holding his glass high.

“Buzz,” answered the small crowd, and downed another gulp.

The creepy little Metallica man—who was also bald as a cueball—sidled up to Wes and held out a bowl of fried bugs. Wes wasn’t sure what they were, exactly, but he noted a lot of crusted golden-fried legs protruding from each of the inch-long, worm-thick forms.

“Brood,” the man said, and Wes raised his hands in passing.

“Naw,” he said. “I’m full.”

“Brood!” the man said louder, as Arachnid raised jangling chains again on the bar.

“Take our communion, if you will, and we will be your sponsors to the church of insectoid. With our music, and these children in your belly....our word will spread for miles and miles and miles.”

“I don’t think so,” Wes waved the offering away. But the man didn’t relent. He pushed the bowl insistently and then the goth-skank came back as well.

“Chow down, baby,” she whispered. Her eyes seemed to glow ice-blue in the dim light of the room. She put two long fingernails into the container and then held a crusted insect to Wes’s lips.

Maybe this was some kind of a hazing. A test, he thought. As the woman crushed a warm flesh against his chest to his side, pressing closer to breathe on his neck as she held the French-fried bug to his lips, Wes felt his jaw drop. She dropped in the crunchy insectoid morsel, at the same time leaning in to whisper, “It only hurts a little,” she said. “And then...you *are* the music.”

Wes could have sworn she spit in his ear, because he felt a cool slippery feeling in his ear canal as she bit at his lobe and hugged him. But then, as he turned to face her, she giggled, and planted a kiss on his lips, forcing him to swallow the salty bug before she backed away to fade into the small crowd.

Wes noticed that the girl made a few stops in the crowd, sidling up to people and then slipping away with a whisper. He didn't think much of it at the time, only shook his head to clear away the whiskey blur. Shit, he was fuck-faced and the concert hadn't even started yet. Hell, he hadn't walked up and introduced himself to the band.

He moved towards the bar and Arachnid, and held out his hand. "Hi," he said, trying to make an impression on the singer. "I was a fan before you guys even thought of flying."

The singer opened his mouth to laugh, revealing a row of jagged, jewel-crusted teeth. "And I sucked blood before I was a vampire," he laughed, leaning forward to stare eye-to-eye with Wes. "Bring me more Brood," he whispered.

"I'll spread the word," Wes assented, nodding vigorously. "I have been already."

* * *

In just minutes, the private party was over, and a door was opened to the main floor of the club. Wes pushed for a spot at the front of the stage and held it, turning to put his back to the stage monitor as he watched the club fill. The alcohol settled in his eyes, and the room swirled for a moment like a bad ride on a merry-go-round as he, and the crowd, waited for the band to take the stage.

By the time they did, Wes was slumped against the black fuzz of the monitor. The liquor had hit him harder than he'd expected, and the vibration of the lead guitar jolted him upright in surprise. He hadn't even registered the cheer of the crowd as the band strode onstage. But with the jolt of electricity in his spine as Scorpion chimed out the intro to "Fly For Your Life," Wes threw himself into the frenzy and jumped up and down like a pogo stick. The band accommodated, dealing out one manic anthem after another.

Wes sung...or screamed...every word for the next hour and a half.

At the end of the night, Wes went outside of the club to hail a cab. He hadn't driven; he knew that was likely to be a buzz night, and he lived close enough that a cab ride was far more desirable than the chance of a DUI.

When he climbed into the yellow car, the cabbie asked "good show?" and Wes could only mumble. "Yeah...it's all a blur...and a buzz."

"A buzz?" the cabbie asked.

"Yeah...my ears feel like they're in the middle of a hive," Wes grinned. "Everything's buzzing."

The cabbie grinned. "You better get some sleep."

In moments they'd pulled up to the curb of his place. With an unsteady gait he approached his front door and remembered the cabbie's advice. "I intend to," he mumbled. "I intend to."

* * *

What he hadn't intended, was to be awoken by the buzz in his brain. He'd barely gotten his clothes off before falling onto the sheets, but within minutes the alcohol blur shifted, and Wes found himself staring at the ceiling as in his head, a drone whined like wind through a tin whistle. The noise in his head shimmered and buzzed like a living thing, sinuous and insistent. It didn't let up. And it wouldn't let him fall asleep.

At one point he rolled over and stared at the blue LED of his clock radio. 3:34. "Fuck," he moaned, rolling over and punching a pillow over the offending ear canal. "I've gotta be up in 3 hours."

* * *

"How was the show?" his workmate Trent asked, as Wes slouched down the hallway to his office.

“Loud,” he complained, holding a palm over his ear. “I can still hear it.”

“Kiddin’!” Trent laughed. ~~“Oughtta wear earplugs to those shows.”~~

Wes nodded. “I know.” He stopped a moment at Trent’s doorway and shook his head, trying to clear the still annoying hum from his eardrums. “I’ve woken up with my ears buzzing from a show before but never this loud still. I should have stuffed some cotton.”

Trent shrugged. “Hindsight and all that.”

“Yeah. Ears are old. Can’t take rock and roll the way they used to.”

“You call that rock ‘n’ roll?” Trent shook his head. “I call that shit...shit.”

“Bite me,” Wes said and stepped past the doorway and into his own cube. He punched the computer on-switch, and almost sighed with relief when the machine whirred to life; its hard drive spun at just the right rpm to whine a sympathetic tone to the one frying Wes’s brain right now. The effect was that he didn’t notice the buzz in his head as much, since the same sound was sawing away outside of his head as well.

He did his best to ignore the steady drone in his ears that first day, but when it kept him awake again that night, and was no better the next morning, Wes began to seriously worry. He knew the story of Pete Townshend and how he had to live with tinnitus, a constant ringing in his head from loud shows. His stomach turned cold and hard at the thought of permanent hearing damage, and he did searches on tinnitus on the Internet, praying that he just had gotten what one Web site called “temporary threshold shift (TTS)” from the overexposure to the Eardrum Buzz’s amplified guitar. His life had become a fuzz of constant humming distortion.

“Often TTS dissipates within hours or days, as the ear re-acclimates itself,” one page read. “But in full-blown tinnitus, the patient can suffer the constant ringing and buzzing sound in the brain for the rest of his or her life. This can often lead to depression and, sometimes, suicidal impulses.”

Wes thought about the latter idea as he tugged hard on the skin of his earlobe, trying to open his ear canal wider, and perhaps “pop” it so that the sound would go away. Nothing happened, except for the feeling of a bruised pinch on his already sore-from-pulling lobe.

“I can’t live with this,” he whispered, staring at the words on his computer screen and not comprehending them. “I can’t concentrate.”

He put both palms against his ears and pushed, toilet plunger style. Maybe he could push air into the ear to stop the buzz.

The result was a pressure pain in the bowels of his brain and he reluctantly gave up. Placing both palms on the desk, Wes took a deep breath and forced himself to stop focusing on the problem. He needed to forget the locust hum and read the words on the screen.

“Fly with the swarm,” he read, and shook his head to clear his vision. That couldn’t be right. He stared harder at the lease paperwork. “Fryer with warming console,” it read. Wes put his head on the desk and closed his eyes. He needed sleep.

And silence.

* * *

On the fourth day after the concert, Wes yawned ceaselessly. His eyes were shot through with red and his head lolled periodically, as his body tried to shut down, regardless of its position.

“You need sleep, man,” Trent observed. “Tried taking any sleeping pills?”

“No, but that’s a good idea.”

“Remember, if the dose looks like it reads 22, that’s just because you’re seeing double.”

“Thanks. I think 22 might be the only thing that could put me out.”

After work, he stopped at the supermarket to pick up a frozen dinner and some sleeping pills. The

buzz had subsided some, but it was still there, coiled and hissing in his brain. It had snaked into his consciousness like a viper and it would not leave its lair.

"I can't live with this," he mumbled in the analgesics aisle, and his eyes welled up. He was at the end. "I don't want to live with this," he whispered, and read the back of the bottle to see if it warned against a lethal dose.

When he looked up, the piercing icy eyes of the skank who'd blown him off at the Eardrum Buzz party were staring back at his over the low aisle shelf.

She looked startled when he caught her glance over the top of the Bufferin boxes and turned away.

"Wait," he said. "You can do that to me once, but not twice. I'm Wes."

"Jen," she said. Her voice was brittle, with a melting point that Wes wasn't likely to reach.

"Sorry I spooked ya, Jen," he said. "But I saw you recognized me."

"We're both part of the swarm," she nodded. He noticed that her eyes looked as bloodshot around the edges as his own. And her perfect gloss hair from a few nights ago had a frizzy, static-cling look to it now. She was windblown, or buzz-blown, around the edges.

"How are your ears?" he asked, not knowing quite what to say.

She jerked. "What do you mean?"

"Mine are still buzzing from that show last weekend," he complained.

"I'm fine," she breathed and pulled something from the shelf to throw in her cart. "Spread the word."

And she walked away.

* * *

The next day, Wes saw the grizzled, mutton chop Metallica guy from the Eardrum Buzz party standing around the newsstand he stopped at each morning. As Wes paid for his paper, he saw the guy staring at him from over the top of a newspaper he was pretending to read.

Two in two days, he thought. Some coincidence.

Normally Wes did all he could to avoid trouble. But over the course of this week, his patience had grown thin. He didn't care about consequence anymore.

"Why are you spying on me?" he asked, walking up to the older man. From where he stood, the man sidled backwards, as if trying to be unseen.

"I know you from the concert," Wes said, unconsciously pulling on the edge of his earlobe. The sound seemed to be growing as he remembered the night he'd first seen this loser. And now the guy was spying on him.

"You know nothing," the man hissed. As he approached, the man threw down his newspaper on the pile and darted away, melding into the crowd of briefcase-toters and disappearing into the glass doors of an office building.

In his head, Wes heard the buzz grow like the keening call of a locust swarm on a hot August night. He grabbed the light pole at the curb and held on as if he were on a ship in hurricane season. When he pulled his face away from the cold gray steel, its surface was wet and the locusts laughed and buzzed behind his eyes.

Wes did not want to live like this.

He pulled out the bottle of pills and read its contents again. He could swallow the whole thing with a couple glasses of water, and then the buzzing would go away. Everything would go away. He closed his eyes, and thought about going to the top of an office building instead, and jumping. He would fall for just a moment, like the bugs he swore he heard, before the sound would be gone for good.

He shook both thoughts away, and walked on.

On Friday, Wes couldn't stop the tears from streaming down his face. He cried as he bought his newspaper, and cried again as he tripped and fell over a crack in the pavement, scattering his pages to the wind and the trample of commuter feet.

"I can't stand it," he moaned, writhing on the ground as if he were being bitten by a thousand fire ants. He shivered and jittered, and put both hands to his ears. "No more."

Hands grabbed at his arms, and pulled, tugging under his armpits until he had staggered to his feet. His eyes were swollen and blurry, but he could still make out the faces of his rescuers.

Goth-skank Jen. And the scraggly guy.

"Can you hear them?" he whispered.

Jen nodded. "You're the vessel of the swarm to come," she said. "And this is their time."

She reached a hand then to her own ear, and tugged hard on her lobe. When she poked a long, black-painted fingernail into her ear to itch and clear the channel, Wes swore he saw a winged thing fly out as if a beetle or a fly had been feasting on the wax inside.

"Where are we going?" he asked feebly, as they escorted him to a beat-up Volkswagen, and shoved him into the back seat.

"For help," the man answered.

* * *

The car followed a winding road out of the city and past the docks and the warehouse district. Then it shivered off onto a gravel road that led to a small shack within spitting distance of the bay. As the woman helped him from the car, Wes complained, "I haven't slept, it's so loud."

She nodded and pointed up at the trees around them. "They never sleep."

It was then that Wes realized the trees all around them were alive with the sound in his head.

"I tried to take sleeping pills," he began, but she only laughed and pulled him towards the gravel-boarded shack.

"They never sleep," she repeated.

"Will I ever have my hearing back right?" he asked. "I just want to go back to normal again."

Metallica man laughed at that. "You're chosen," he said. "You'll never know normal again. Just the swarm."

With that, the man grabbed him around the throat and whispered, "Lie down" into his right ear.

"Why?" was all he could say.

"Eardrum Buzz."

They pushed him onto a cot, and as he lay there, face buried in a dusty pillow, Wes could hear the sound in his head chime and chitter, rise and fall like the whir of an engine. It called to the noise in the trees and as it received an answer, its buzz grew more excited. The nagging pain in the back of Wes's head grew from dull to ice-sharp, and spread to pound like a nail gun into his forehead, hammering just behind his eyes.

I'm going to die, he thought. And the thought was good.

* * *

Wes woke from a droning doze to the sound of boots. They clomped hard on the wooden floor and paced back and forth nearby.

"It's almost time," he heard a voice growl.

Wes opened his eyes and rolled to see the thin, saturnine features of Arachnid pacing near the co. The singer wore his usual black leather pants and boots, and a tight, ripped T-shirt. On its black cloth surface, the white fangs of a spider opened hopefully.

“You did this to me,” Wes accused, struggling to sit up.

Arachnid shook his head. “Not me,” he grinned and pointed to Jen. “She did it. I just told her what to do.”

“Why did you bring me here?”

“You want the buzz to stop, yes?”

Wes looked into Arachnid’s too-black eyes and nodded.

“Then we must release the swarm.” He lifted a pair of gardening shears from a small table and ran his finger down the sharp side of the blade. A bead of blood collected almost instantly on the tip.

It occurred to Wes that “releasing the swarm” was not a procedure that he was likely to live through.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked, stalling.

“You were drawn to our music, right?” the singer said. His voice was almost, gentle.

“Yeah.”

“They *are* our music,” Arachnid said. “They live within each of us; it is their sound that makes Eardrum Buzz.”

“How do you live with it?” Wes whispered.

Arachnid leaned down, until Wes could smell the faint licorice and hay scent of his breath. As Wes stared at the singer’s discolored brown and gold-flecked eyes, a small black form crawled from the man’s ear. Its antennae shifted back and forth quickly, like the nervous jitter of a roach. Then, with a spread of brown and clear chitinous wings, the bug launched itself from the lobe of Arachnid’s ear and flew up in a lazy circle to land somewhere in the shadow of the pitched roof.

“They’re our children,” Arachnid grinned. “We love them.”

Wes’s stomach churned as he realized that it hadn’t been her tongue that he’d felt in his ear the night after all. Thanks to Jen’s false kisses at the party, those same bugs were inside him right now. Growing inside his ears. Rubbing tiny hairlike legs together to sing in the center of his brain.

“Bugs don’t live inside humans,” he whispered. Hoping perhaps, that by saying it, the statement would be true. But he’d seen the evidence proving his theorem false, just seconds ago.

“These do,” Arachnid smiled. “They feed off of us, just a little at a time. They can’t live without us. That’s why we’re helping them find new hosts. Soon the swarm will be strong enough to fend for itself, and find its own hosts. But right now...only one in a million survive.”

“What do they eat?” Wes whispered.

“Brains.” The singer laughed and pointed the shears at Wes’s forehead. “Right now they’re in there nibbling. Before long, if you incubated a few nests of them, you’d have a hole in your head as big as a baseball. Like our drummer, Cicada. He found them a couple years ago, when he went on a rainforest trip. But he’s hosted so many, that he’s not much there anymore, ya know? That’s why he never does interviews.”

Arachnid drew a cold steel line from Wes’s forehead to his ear.

“But you won’t have to go through that. I know you haven’t enjoyed our children. Jen and Orin have told me their song is driving you a little nuts. So we’ll just set your brood free.”

“Set them free?”

“Outpatient surgery,” Arachnid laughed brandishing the pruning shears. “Won’t take but a moment. And when we’re done...your babies will be free and the swarm will have a fresh dinner.”

“Dinner?”

“Your brains.” Arachnid shoved downward with the shears like a spear thrust. But Wes had seen the

tensing of his arms, and rolled just in time. He jumped to his feet as Jen and Orin grabbed him from behind.

Kicking backwards, he heard a grunt of anguish from Orin, and as one set of hands released, he spun hard to his left, catching Jen in the breast with his elbow. Like a dancer he spun in a slow circle away from the three. He lost his balance in the momentum, and staggered into the rough-hewn wall in the corner of the shack. Something rattled, as he hit the wall, and Wes grinned when he darted a glance to see what. There was a rack of old rusted gardening tools screwed to the wall.

“Just what I needed,” he whispered, and reached past a rake to nab a long, pointed spade from its hook.

Arachnid was on him before he had it fully in hand.

“Drop it,” the singer hissed. Wes felt the bite of cold metal at his throat, and he twisted backwards a step before letting his body crumple. The shovel thumped to the floor as he released it. Before Arachnid could follow through with a stab, Wes rolled into the singer’s shins, knocking him off balance. Wes grabbed the shovel again and from a crouch on the floor, he brought it around hard to finish the job his body had started. The edge of the steel connected with Arachnid’s shins and the singer went down hard as Wes leapt up.

Orin and Jen were waiting.

They circled him, hands outstretched to grab for his shovel, to disarm him. Arachnid moaned on the floor and clutched his leg in a fetal curl.

Orin came for him. Without thinking, Wes brought the spade up and around, catching the grizzled man in the side of his shiny head with the back of the rusted blade. The man went down with a loud “whoof.”

Something scratched at his neck, and Wes gasped. Jen brought her fingernails around to claw at his eyes. Wes couldn’t go forward without driving her nails into his brain, so he shoved hard in reverse, throwing his weight against her. She didn’t expect the motion and fell back, as he piledrove her into the wall. Her body slammed hard enough to rattle the window.

Jen screamed. Not a little “there’s a mouse” squeal of fear. Jen screamed a horrible, long, wrenching cry of anguish.

Wes turned to see why, and the reason fell to the floor as Jen staggered to the center of the room, grabbing at her back. The rake rattled to rest, and Jen fell forward, five blooms of blood already seeping through the puncture marks in the back of her shirt. She was gasping for air, her screams cut short by a gurgle of fluid filling her lungs.

Wes backed away to the other side of the room. Orin lay where he’d fallen. A gory gash split the skin along his forehead leading to his ear. And around that ear clustered a handful of small, black antenna-ed bugs. They buzzed, quietly, as more emerged from the black, bloody hole of Orin’s ear. They shook the crimson free as they met the air and gathered on the man’s cheek.

“Fuck,” Wes gasped, and held a hand up to his own ear. The noise in his brain escalated as he covered the canal.

Jen was shuddering on the floor, trying to crawl toward Orin. But Arachnid was no longer on the ground with them.

Arachnid was back on his feet, and moving slowly towards Wes with the shears. He was now smiling.

“It would have been painless,” the singer growled.

“For you, maybe.”

Arachnid launched forward and cut at Wes, who recoiled and tried to bring the shovel around. Too late. The blade slashed against his chest, cutting through the shirt and drawing a line of blood. He screamed and ducked as Arachnid brought the shears down again, this time aiming for his neck.

Wes threw himself sideways, and rolled over the dead weight of Orin, disturbing the small swarms that had gathered on the man's face. Wes came to his feet in front of the door, and with one hand fe behind him for the knob. It turned as Arachnid rushed at him. Wes pushed the door as the lock released, and fell back, stumbling down the step to the ground outside.

"You're not going anywhere," the singer yelled, limping after him.

Wes leapt to his feet and ran around the shack, waiting for Arachnid. He didn't wait long. The singer turned the corner, brandishing the shears.

But Wes's reach was longer. He held the shovel like a baseball bat, and as Arachnid lunged, he brought the heavy side around, and all those years of little league paid off—in a spade. The metal tip of the garden implement connected dead-on with a clang against Arachnid's skull. But this time, the singer didn't just go down.

This time, the shovel cleaved his skull just above the ear. Maybe it was because the generations of Brood he'd fed had weakened his skull, or maybe it was because Wes swung that shovel damned hard.

But the top of Arachnid's head came off as clean as a Tupperware lid. With a slight pop.

As it did, a cloud of black wings filled the air, and the world was alive with the drone of an angry, surprised hive.

The Brood.

As the droning black bugs swirled into the air, a cloud of larger insects poured like smoke from the trees all around and Wes was pummeled by legs and wings and chittering, buzzing smacks of bug.

The Swarm.

Wes dropped the shovel and ran.

He'd only gone a few yards when he realized...the swarm wasn't after him. They hadn't followed. The yard sounded like the inside of a beehive, but when he looked back, he saw the center of activity was Arachnid's head.

More precisely, Arachnid's brain. The swarm...was feeding.

There was a pain then, in his own head, and Wes felt dozens of tiny teeth pull at the inner part of his ear. Something pushed through his ear canal, and legs pricked at the lobe of his ear as it crawled out. He swatted the side of his head.

His hand came away bloody and black.

"Oh god," he cried and slipped down to his knees. His stomach threatened to puke. These things were really alive *in his head!* Then he felt the creepy plucking feeling again, and this time he didn't swat. There was a piercing cicada buzz and a small black bug flew past his face. And then another. And another. They were leaving!

His brood were going to join the swarm. For dinner.

He stifled the gorge in his throat, and his whole body shook with horror as he forced himself to remain still, kneeling, and let them go.

* * *

When he got home that night, Wes took his Eardrum Buzz CD and threw it in the garbage. Then he reached for something older. Safer. He popped in a The The disc, and sat down on the couch.

"Infected with your love," Matt Johnson began to sing.

"Uh-uh," Wes said, and hit the power button on the remote. The stereo went dead.

"No more infected with your anything," he said.

As he lay back on the pillow, he realized that the drone in his head was finally gone. Mostly.

It was actually so quiet, he could hear the silence.

It buzzed.

Setting Sail

“You’re sure Jess is coming?” Billy asked pointedly. “You didn’t scare her off with that *Blue Lagoon* shit?”

Mark shook his head and grinned. “My gal ain’t shy. She’ll be here.”

Casey nodded and popped the top on a Lite. She took a swig and then gave Billy a long kiss. When it broke, her boyfriend could barely hide a gasp. “Wow...” he said. “I could get drunk on that!”

“Jess was all into it,” Casey smiled. “Just like me. We could all use a total break from reality.”

“Well, I’d like to start that break this week,” Billy grumbled, toying with the “Captain’s wheel” of the speedboat. “I only borrowed this for three days you know.”

“We’ll get it back in time,” Mark promised. “Knowing your clients, I think you could get away with being a little late if it came to it.”

“Knowing my clients, I could be at the bottom of the bay if it’s back an hour late,” Billy answered. “Anyway, I’m reformed.”

Mark pointed to the red cooler sitting in the rear of the craft and grinned. “And I suppose you’ll tell me that there’s no secret compartment filled with Mexico’s finest beneath the false floor right about there?”

“I said reformed, not no fun,” Billy said. “And how do you know so much about drug smuggling hmmm?”

“Well for starters, I’ve been your friend since Freshman year.”

Casey laughed and ran her hand up Mark’s shoulder. “Hey that’s right...You know, I bet you could give me a lot of good dirt on our friend here. For instance, that girl he was seeing last semester, Beth. Did he ever...”

Just then, the slim blur of a brunette came running down the dock yelling, “OK, OK, I’m late! You can make me walk the plank later. But look what I got!”

From a bulging canvass bag, Jess pulled out a few scraps of tan fabric, cut with irregular triangles. One piece was clearly meant as a loincloth, the other could have been a bikini top. Both looked like stage costumes meant for extremely scantily clad prehistoric island dwellers.

“I am not wearing *that*,” Billy proclaimed, as Mark reached out an arm and helped her climb into the boat.

“Of course not, silly! That’s for Casey.” She reached into her sack and pulled an almost equally small loincloth and tossed it in his lap. “This one’s for you.”

Mark cocked an eyebrow and looked skeptically at her. “I know we said ‘Blue Lagoon’ and all, but do you really think we’re all going to parade around in these?”

“Well not *here*,” she grinned, waving at the dock, crowded with sailboats and speedboats and people milling about. It was a gorgeous summer Friday morning, and plenty of people were playing hooky and heading out to sea. On many of the decks, small groups of people were kicked back in easy chairs taking in the sun, drinking beer for brunch and talking with friends. “But Billy promised that nobody goes to this island, it’s off the map. Totally empty. So if we’re going to ‘get away from it all’ and play *Blue Lagoon* for the weekend, let’s *do* it. We can change once we’re out near the island.”

“I don’t think you girls will stay in those outfits for long, anyway,” Billy said with an evil grin. Then he turned the key in the ignition and the motor sputtered to life. “All hands on deck,” he called and after releasing the dock ties, they slowly began to move out into the crystal blue ocean.

The Island

Billy McAllister drove the boat borrowed from one of his former “customers” due south, navigating

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