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Danny brought his foot down on another one to a mixture of a squelch and a crunching sound. He winced in disgust as he lifted his shoe up, the mess of another cockroach plastered over the sole and the vile gooey imprint it had left on the cheap kitchen vinyl flooring. Mumbling under his breath, he reached for the kitchen roll to attend to the mini-bloodbath.

“Bastard crawlers, that's the second one this week” he muttered.

Danny hated insects. Bees, wasps, anything with antennae that buzzed, flew or could sting. But he had a particular hatred for cockroaches. Cockroaches had plagued his life at one time or another, both as a child growing up in the various rundown, grimy apartment blocks with his mother and grandpa and now alone, as an adult. He remembered; as a child, watching his mother running around trying to stamp down on them to stem the inevitable infestation that the appearance of one or two of these invading pests had always been a prelude to. Danny's mother had been quite badly afflicted during her life with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and blind panic would consume her at the very prospect of strangers coming into the house to handle the infestation. And cockroaches exploding from the hole in the wall under the kitchen sink *always* meant exterminators tramping through the place, in the end.

Danny's grandpa called them *crawlers*; usually, with some profanity, either side of the word and the term had stuck. At least in Danny's mind. They *were* crawlers. *Bastard* crawlers.

Danny turned his attention away from the mess and looked in the cupboard beneath the kitchen sink, half expecting an avalanche of roaches leap out at him but only to see only the full trash bin, almost overflowing and pungent with the smell of last night's egg shells and used tea bags. Still, better than seeing more crawlers.

Danny had been resident at 12B Lowton Court Building for over ten years. After

his Grandpa passed away, his mother began to get sick soon after. Danny's mother had had a hard life and had led to the early onset of Alzheimer's disease quite young. By the time Danny had turned twenty-two, his mother didn't even recognize him anymore. From her lonely armchair, she would sit in the care home, distant and mostly oblivious to his visits, looking benignly out of the window at nothing with the other lost old souls in chairs dotted around her. Occasionally, during his visits, her eyes might drift back inside the room and momentarily meet his own when he spoke to her. She would give him a look of fleeting recognition and smile as if in some part of her dying mind she had made a connection and suddenly, she was there. *His mother*. But the moment would always pass and her gaze would slip back to the empty expanse of the window and gardens outside.

Jobless, increasingly hopeless and benefits dependent, Social Services had finally rehoused Danny to Lowton Court following the tear down of his old apartment block. Now, in his mid-thirties, Danny's own battles with Depression, and more recently, acute agoraphobia, had become the very epicenter of his universe. Hereditary gifts passed down to him by his mother.

It began with crippling anxiety. Excessive sweating and breathlessness in public places. The weekly pilgrimages to the social security office to sign on and the supermarket becoming ordeals of horror that would keep Danny awake for hours on end the night before. The embarrassing panic attacks on public transport, vomiting into waste paper baskets at interviews for poorly paid supermarket and telesales jobs from nerves and hyperventilation. Slowly and surely, the everyday things that he'd previously taken for granted began to slip away from Danny, flaking away like old grubby paintwork and 12B Lowton Court Building became his fort. A prison and safe house away from the weird and dangerous world outside. Danny's only real contact with anyone for the past year was the weekly visit of Tina, the Goth volunteer student who worked for the mental health charity organization he'd found, online. Tina would bring him the weekly food shopping he'd placed an order for through the charity and sometimes; somewhat reluctantly, stick around an extra half hour. Danny forgave Tina her reticence.

Lowton Court Building was not exactly the most inviting place.

Tina seemed largely distracted when she turned up every Monday, and once she had spotted them, seemed more preoccupied with rifling through Danny's extensive collection of books and DVD's from his shelves, looking for things to borrow. Tina always wore the same imitation German World War Two army jacket, multicolored tights, and Doc Martens. Her blonde hair was forced back from her face in braids leading into dirty looking dreadlocks that stretched down her back and she had several uncomfortable looking piercings on her face. During their first meeting over tea Tina candidly revealed to Danny that she'd also had her clitoris pierced, rather in the same manner that a person would mention what they had eaten for breakfast. She was also due today.

A sudden scurrying movement in the kitchen caught Danny's attention. Something tried to dart across the floor from the tiny gap under the cooker. It was another roach, making a run for the hallway and the front door. Danny cursed in disgust and ran after it, making up the ground quickly. Before he brought his murderous foot down to another vile sounding squelch, something made him pause. He had seen roaches before and they had always looked the same. Sandy brown colored shells and spindly, prickly looking legs. They were ten a penny. But these roaches were *different*. They were black; jet black, not brown, and bigger too, with a greenish tinge that decorated their back carapaces. They looked; to Danny, for want of a better word more *exotic* than your regular roach.

As Danny lifted his foot to terminate the roach, the strangest feeling overcame him. He became almost overwhelmed with the sudden emotion of guilt and shame, to the point that he felt like breaking down and crying. Lightheaded, he reached out for the wall to steady himself. The roach on the floor had stopped, too and turned towards him, giving the absurd impression that it had decided to square up to him. Flinching, Danny dismissed the strange and extreme emotion, regained his composure then stamped down with his foot and heard a sickening

crunch of the roach underneath. It popped, loud and crisp.

Tina came with the food delivery and left soon after. She had poked her way through Danny's new haul of second-hand films he had picked up online and loaned one. As she'd bent over to look at the bottom shelf Danny caught himself looking at Tina's butt and he felt a pulse of mild arousal. Her multi-colored, dirty looking striped stockings were more or less the least sexy thing he had seen on a woman and Tina also looked as though she hadn't showered in weeks. Whilst his lifestyle had rendered Danny's opportunities with the opposite sex non-existent for years, it didn't mean he didn't occasionally get the urge. But the prospect of peeling off Tina's sweaty tights and underwear for impromptu sex immediately poured cold water on his thoughts.

When Tina had left, she remarked that she had seen cockroaches on the communal stairs in the building and that Danny should phone the Landlord. Watching her disappear down the hall towards the staircase Danny shied away in reflex and quickly closed his front door and bolted it, locking out the threat of the outside world and the sour waft of damp from the corridor.

A week passed and the problem with the roaches worsened. They were appearing everywhere in the flat now and with no sign of how they were getting inside. Danny pulled out all of his shelving units and his bed like a crazed lunatic, looking for holes in the walls and floors, but to no avail. It *had* to be behind the cooker, it was the only appliance he couldn't pull out. But the roaches didn't seem to be congregating in any one place either as regular roaches would. They were *everywhere* in the flat like they were attempting a full-scale invasion. Danny finally called the Landlord's head office and they promised to send Ken, the fat and largely useless resident handyman who looked after his block, around to him as soon as possible.

Tired of stomping on them, Danny resorted to using an old carpet slipper with a roll of kitchen towel on hand most of the day. When he switched on a light in a darkened room or opened a cupboard door and a roach went scooting across

the floor, one quick whack was usually easy enough to take them out. Across his apartment flooring were dirty marks accumulating everywhere now, too. Goopy stains of black and brown shit that wouldn't lift no matter how hard he scrubbed at them with washing up liquid and the cheap carpet cleaner Tina had picked up for him from the store.

By the time Ken turned up to look at the problem, the roaches were everywhere, hiding under the TV bench and bookshelves. They were even in the bathroom cabinet next to the toothpaste and deodorant canisters, just sitting there, antennae wiggling like crazy radio receivers when they were discovered. Danny had gotten tired of chasing and crushing them, then dealing with the mess afterward. The insides of the roaches were like wallpaper paste too and seemed to stick to everything. Ken had said no-one else in the building had reported an infestation or seen roaches in the communal areas, so he figured it was just isolated to Danny's flat. He promised he would call in professional exterminators as soon as he could. Danny's headaches were getting worse too and bizarrely seem to occur spontaneously when he was about to kill one of the roaches. That same, acute and overwhelming feeling of shame and guilt at the prospect of murder.

For killing an insect. *A. Fucking. Insect.*

The following Monday Tina didn't show up with Danny's food box. He called the charity and they said Tina hadn't turned up for work since the week before and hadn't answered any of their calls so they'd assumed she no longer wanted to volunteer. Apparently, it was not uncommon for unpaid student volunteers to just disappear at short notice. They apologized and said they'd send someone else around tomorrow.

Just as Danny put the phone down another roach poked its head around the open bathroom door and nonchalantly began to make its way along the hallway. Danny cursed and went after it, grabbing his carpet slipper club along the way. The roach was headed for the front door. As Danny got near he raised the dirty

slipper, ready to bludgeon the insect into oblivion. The roach suddenly turned, faced him and let out a low pitched hiss which put him off. Danny had heard of some foreign types of roach that hissed, but not the common scummy ones he was used to. At that moment, he felt suddenly threatened. *Afraid*. Afraid of a tiny hissing uninvited cockroach which was now staring him down in his own hallway.

Then the feeling of lightheadedness and intoxication washed over him again. Danny's legs buckled a little at the sensation and he rocked against the wall to steady himself. It was bizarre, like acute migraine and the feeling seemed to be emanating from the roach itself, its tiny antennae wiggling furiously as it remained unmoved in their face-off. Again and seemingly from nowhere, emotional impulses of guilt and shame at the murder he was about to commit began to grind at the temples of his skull.

Danny shook his head and raised the slipper again to batter the roach but paused when it turned it's back on him and crawled towards the front door, disappearing under the doormat. Danny followed and pulled back the mat. That was when he spotted it. *The hole*. Tiny and inconspicuous, hidden within the dark grime of the cheap door frame near the base. He had finally found their little door.

Opening his front door to the landing outside, he recoiled back in reflex at the prospect of stepping outside. The roach was there, a meter or so beyond the door and was stationary, giving the ludicrous impression it was waiting for him. Danny knew he didn't want to go out, *couldn't* go out. But somehow, the more he watched the roach, something was cutting through all that irrational fear and paranoia. Danny turned and looked back to his crumby, run-down flat that was now alive with movement. Little black marauding crawlers on the floor in the living room, scuttling up the side of his bookshelves and disappearing under the back of the sofa like they now owned the fucking place. He thought about how long it was going to be before the exterminators turned up. It could be days, *maybe even a week?* He knew couldn't wait a week; the little bastards would have driven him insane by then. But if he could just follow the roach and find out

where it was going within the building, it might lead to a nest of some kind. Then he could deploy fat Ken to get rid of them.

Danny breathed in deeply and held it, knowing he was going to have to face one of his demon fears. He had no other choice. He grabbed his keys, locked his apartment door and stepped gingerly into the deserted hallway. Heart racing, and sweat beginning to formulate on his brow and back he made his way slowly along the landing towards the stairs, running his hand along the wall to steady himself. Almost comically, the roach had already reached the top of the first flight of stairs and paused, giving the appearance of an obedient, domesticated house pet. Danny's body teemed with sweat already and felt the familiar trickle of perspiration running down the middle of his spine, the ordeal of being outside distorting his vision and toying with his mind. The stairs momentarily looked like they were endless, spiralling down in crazy formations like a fairground helter-skelter that led to nowhere. The dirty stairwell reeked of urine and grime and made Danny feel sick, the smell overpowering. His chest began to tighten, the sensation of being bear hugged all too familiar. The cruel suffocation of the outside.

He reached the bottom of the first flight, grabbing on to the wooden handrail that creaked under his grasp. The roach remained ahead of him but still kept pausing momentarily, waiting for him to catch it up. Even in his state of panic, Danny knew that this was ridiculous. Cockroaches do not, *cannot* behave this way. They weren't *smart* enough for god's sake!

Danny wondered if he was losing his grip on reality. Maybe all those weeks and months of being caged up in his own apartment was tipping him over into paranoia and madness. The natural progression of months of isolation and solitude. The thought of insanity actually occurred to him as being a small comfort. At least it would offer a rational explanation for why he was being *talked to* by cockroaches.

The roach was already at the bottom of the second flight of stairs and ground

floor of the building. Danny descended after it and focused on trying to manage his panic. He hadn't been so far away from the safety zone of his flat for as long as he could remember. It felt alien. It felt *wrong*. The foyer of the building hadn't changed at all and looked just the same as he remembered it, the cheap decor now yellow with age and neglect, the carpet stained and grimy. The notice board in the foyer still had notes and flyers on it from years ago, old and irrelevant, mixed with taxi-cab cards and pizza menus. The roach scuttled towards a door at the bottom of the hall at the back of the building and hovered by the tiny gap underneath.

It was a door Danny hadn't even noticed before, let alone knew where it led to and it looked somewhat out of place compared to the rest of the building. Made of iron, the paint had flaked away. Danny assumed a heavy duty door meant it led to some kind of maintenance or storeroom. Perhaps it housed the boilers or electricity mains? His head throbbed with tension, waves of panic now threatening to overwhelm him. His apartment, only two flights of stairs away may as well have been on the other side of the planet. Danny breathed deeply. If he started to hyperventilate, he knew it was only a matter of time before he'd pass out. The roach waited patiently by the gap under the door, its antennae twitching intermittently. As Danny got nearer, a part of him suddenly wanted to stamp down on it and just run back upstairs. But almost at once, the same feelings he experienced upstairs, returned. Overwhelming feelings of guilt and shame at the thought of committing bloody, insect murder. It felt uncanny, yet somehow *artificial* too. Like the side effect of some powerful hallucinogenic that was overpowering his nervous system, inducing these irrational emotions. *How could this fucking cockroach be responsible for this?* he thought. Was it communicating with him using some kind of telepathy or pheromone of some kind to influence his thoughts? What else could it be? Danny considered how utterly ludicrous this sounded, yet every time he had thought about just crushing the roach and turning back, he'd experienced the same emotion.

As the roach suddenly disappeared under the door Danny inhaled deeply and tried the handle, expecting it to be locked. Surprisingly, it depressed with a clunk

when he twisted it. The heavy door swung open and an unexpected gust of trapped air on the other side escaped and hit him head-on. A warm backdraft of air that contained a mixture of putrid smells. Inside was dark, pitch dark and Danny reached for a light switch, eventually finding it on the inside wall. A bulb flickered somewhere on the ceiling and fired up, the small wattage glow dim and minimal. In front was another narrow staircase down, a few concrete steps disappearing into the darkness where the poor light wouldn't stretch. It gave the optical illusion of a few steps above an abyss.

Danny panned his neck inside, feeling afraid to go on, but something else was leading him, now. Something he couldn't explain. There was no sign of the roach, but he figured it must be further down the steps. Danny momentarily considered a last-ditch retreat but the thought quickly passed. He was almost there. He *had* to go on.

The steps seemed infinite as he took them one at a time, holding onto the iron handrail on the wall till he reached the bottom. More low wattage bulbs were dotted on the walls around him offering a little glimpse of his new surroundings. The staircase led to some kind of subterranean basement level and it was far bigger than Danny had expected. It looked like it didn't belong to the building either, odd somehow and misplaced. Various piping and industrial looking structures protruded from the walls and floors and they zig-zagged along the ceilings into steel units in poor repair. Danny assumed they were boilers of some kind. There was an awful smell too, which grew more pungent as he progressed. Putrid, yet sickly sweet at the same time. A smell like hard candy, but years old and gone bad.

Sudden movement on the ground to his left caught his attention. Scuttling shapes that cast large shadows. It was a roach but Danny quickly realized it was more than just one. *Much* more. In the dim light, a sea of black was moving across the concrete floor. It was a swarm of roaches all moving in tandem, like a well-drilled army on parade. Danny guessed they were hundreds in number. The procession of roaches disappeared beyond Danny's sight into the blackness

ahead. He had never seen so many insects in one place, their writhing creating a mixture of hissing and crackling. The noise gave him the sensation his own skin was crawling, roaches burrowing under his flesh. He followed the moving mass slowly, almost hypnotically, now not caring about the darkness or how far he was from his flat. Stumbling forward into the void, Danny found himself now in a more open plan space, some kind of storage area that reeked of grime and had a deep, earthy smell. The dim lights on the walls were just enough for him to see. To see.. *it*.

In the corner, was what looked like some kind of secreted mound or compost heap. A huge pile of something lumped and gooey, a foul-smelling mass Danny couldn't identify. At the epicenter of the heap, a huge, black, bloated cockroach, the size of a small dog perched delicately. A Queen on her throne. The disgusting and mutated ebony carapace section sported enormous legs that sprouted out from the abdomen. The head twitched, and enormous bulbous eyes observed him steadily, seemingly unperturbed by his presence. Danny gawped at the macabre sight of this *B* movie mini-monster, his feelings of disbelief not able to manifest as any other emotion. The smaller worker roaches were swarming around and inside the mound now, scuttling wildly in and around their Queen. A tube was attached to the back of the abdomen of the enormous roach, like some kind of organic egg-sac. It was translucent and Danny could see a vile looking yellowy fluid passing through it slowly, which sloshed and gurgled. He followed the disgusting tubing with his eyes which stretched out around the mound like a small hosepipe. The end hung limply on the floor, like an effigy of a human penis, a seminal-like looking fluid leaking and dripping slowly from the tip.

One of the bigger humps within the mound suddenly began to move. Danny strained his eyes in the light to see better. Whatever was in there had been cocooned and secreted in some kind of resin or organic matter. As Danny stared through the secretions he began to make out the shape of a body, hands, and fingers poking out of the goo. He could see the legs now, wincing in horror when

he saw those familiar striped tights, their colors faded and material ripped.

“*Oh God, Tina!*”

Danny cried out, realizing poor Tina had somehow strayed down here to meet her end. He could now make out the features of her face. She was dead; her lifeless eyes open and fixated, body twisted and contorted as she had been somehow integrated into the mound. But her corpse was now animated, like some kind of demonic puppet, the arms and legs twitching and jerking. Her abdomen suddenly began to convulse and tear, like the sound of cardboard being ripped. Danny winced in horror and disgust when he saw Tina’s mid-section spectacularly erupt and what looked like hundreds of new roach larvae jettison from the corpse like popcorn.

Gagging, Danny felt the burn of bile bubbling and rising in his gullet. He turned to run and make for the door, his senses now igniting, the sheer disbelief at what he had just witnessed turning to blind terror. He wanted out of here. *Right now.*

But the army of roaches seemed to act instinctively, anticipating his move. Hundreds of them had congregated behind him, forming a black mass on the floor. They were trying to block his exit, their crackling and hissing almost deafening. Danny lunged forward, trying to stamp his way desperately through the front line and he felt the popping of hard shells under his feet. He tried to pull up his foot again but his shoe felt heavy from the roach goo underneath that was sticking to the floor like industrial adhesive.

He lost his balance and tipped over, falling to the floor and yelling out in panic. In an instant, the roaches were upon him like a pack of wolves, scuttling up and down his body and face, up his trouser legs and onto his abdomen, their legs raking against his bare skin. He tried to scream, but they were in his mouth now, gagging and stifling his cries for help.

More roaches piled in, like a tidal wave and he felt the sensation of being moved. Of being shifted slowly across the floor. A sea of insects combining their

collective strength like ants and moving him toward the mound like he was their prize. Their new trophy. His skin felt like it was burning, the secretions the roaches were depositing already beginning to harden like glue. Danny tried to move his hands and fingers, but they were already numb. They were useless.

Through the haze of black scurrying across his face, Danny suddenly thought he saw Ken, the handyman, lurking in the background and he felt a wave of relief. Ken was here to save him; pull him out before it was too late. But Ken was not moving nor helping. He just looked on blankly from the corner of the room, his face calm and sedate. Danny gurgled in horror, the true reality of what was happening now sinking in as Ken disappeared from view and more roaches pressed up against his face. In the background, Danny thought he heard the devastating sound of a door close and a lock turn.

Danny could see more now as he was being slowly pushed and absorbed deeper into the huge mound. There were more bodies deep inside, their carcasses decayed and rotten. Danny thought he made out another shape a few feet away from him, long dead and decomposed, but somehow *familiar*. He finally recognized it as the homeless tramp who always sat in the park opposite his building. Danny had often watched him from the window of his apartment, begging for coins and drinking cheap cider on one of the benches in all weathers. The guy's signature baseball cap still hugged the top of his rotting skull, like it still clung defiantly to the notion of who he used to be. Perhaps he'd been lured here by Ken, or abducted. These were carefully chosen victims, just like himself. Handpicked to be hosts. The lost, the weak and the hopeless all convened here. The souls' nobody cared about, would search for, nor miss. Ken was some kind of caretaker to the roaches. A loyal servant and protector for reasons Danny would never know nor understand. The Roach Queen *needed* Ken, so she kept him safe.

As scores of roaches exited his mouth, Danny felt the end of the egg tube pushing its way up his neck and over his chin towards his mouth, the residue sticky and warm. His thoughts were dimming now, making way for the

reassuring, comforting humming sound pulsating from the Roach Queen and he began to lose himself in those deep, black eyes that bored into him. *Here was his place, now. With her, she told him. Don't worry, just be here with us and you'll never be alone again, Danny.*

Drifting away, Danny's eyelids were heavy and he let them fall as the embalming began. He reminisced in his mind for what felt like forever as a sea of roaches went to work. He pictured his mother in another time and place, before the sickness took her away, baking in the kitchen as he sat on his Grandpa's knee who read him stories as a child, from his old corner chair. Danny could smell the sweet icing sugar his mother was preparing and the soothing vibration of his Grandpa's deep voice as he read to him, mixed with that woody smell of pipe tobacco.

Danny reached out with his mind and fully embraced the soft hum coming from the Roach Queen. His submission absolute and unconditional, coupled with that sensation of slipping into a warm bath on a cold winter's night. For the first time in years, Danny felt loved; *needed*. He was to be a host and a giver of life.

In return, the Roach Queen whispered to him discreetly and she promised him everything. For the first time in a long, long time, Danny felt *real* warmth. A heartening sense of communion. The Roach Queen was to give him what he craved. He was to be finally part of a family again.

End.



