

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

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King of Cryptic

The bedbug (*Cimex lectularius*), entomologists say, makes visual detection very hard because it is “cryptic,” its colorless state rendering it translucent before it bites and turns rusty colored from ingested blood. If you’ve ever seen a bedbug, it’s probably been a rusty one, its hue meaning it has recently bitten you or someone else in your household. A fed bedbug is usually a “runner,” one that moves very fast to a hiding place. If you catch it and crush it, it makes a popping sound and releases its blood meal like a squashed mosquito.

The bedbug’s translucency is just one of the ingenious traits that help it to parasitize its human host. Others include its evolutionary adaptability, its prolific reproductive capability, its heat- and carbon dioxide-sensing apparatus, and its anesthetizing sputum. So successful is this species (one of 92 in the family Cimicididae) that it is the king of cryptic pests.

To the bedbug, you are just a slab of warm mammalian meat for it to puncture with its cone-nosed proboscis in order to withdraw its only nutrient, your blood. One feeding can allow it to survive for up to a year, but most critters feed every 5-10 days. Because its sputum, like a tick’s, contains an anesthetic, you won’t feel the bedbug bite you, but an hour or more later, you will feel an itch three times as intense as the worst mosquito bite. The site of the bite will blush and swell and itch to a degree that depends on your susceptibility, and people highly sensitive to bedbug bites might suffer a tightening of the throat and other signs of an allergic attack. The itch might remain for up to three days, no matter what anti-itch agents you apply. Scratching will only inflame the bite-site.

An example of the bedbug’s evolutionary success is that it was first a batbug, feeding off bats in dark caves. Once the bedbug crawled out of the cave, it had to shift from diurnal feeding—while the nocturnal bat hung asleep in its roost—to nighttime feeding. Now the parasite had to find a likely host, a creature active in the day but dormant at night. What better than homo sapiens, especially after it had moved indoors and heated its abode, keeping the insect comfortable in mattress or wall-niche. Actually, a bedbug can nest anywhere there’s a hiding place. Once you go to sleep, the critter will sense your warm body lying motionless. Its appetite aroused, the bedbug will crawl rapidly from its lair to the bed, climb up a bed leg, and latch onto your wrist or ankle, from which it can make a fast escape after it has fed, turning itself swollen and reddish.

How does the bedbug arrive in your home? It, or its eggs, hitches a ride on your clothing or a handbag or a piece of luggage. Some experts advise travelers when entering a hotel room to first put luggage in the bathtub and then inspect the bed for signs of insects. Bedbugs have been known to stay at high-priced hostelries such as the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. Other places to pick up a traveler include movie theaters, taxis, and other people’s homes. All you need to start your own bedbug family is to bring home a pregnant female.

The female, by the way, is fertilized through traumatic insemination. The male has a sharp sex organ with which he punctures a female’s abdo-

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men and ejaculates inside her body cavity, where its sperm fertilizes her eggs. When the male is attracted by a pheromone, he will puncture the nearest available bedbug, even if it's a male.

Getting rid of this parasite has made the extermination business highly profitable these days. The treatment for removing bedbugs requires the use of a vacuum cleaner, a steam machine, and toxic sprays at intervals of a week or two until the host no longer is being bitten or sees visual evidence of the insect. The most expensive weapon in the exterminator's arsenal is a dog, often a beagle, trained to detect the bedbug's almond scent to locate nests. The use of a full panoply of tactics and agents can cost up to \$3,000 for a successful extermination.

Another important aid in preventing bites is the moat, a plastic footer that goes under each bed leg. Filled with powder, the moat intercepts bedbugs on their way up to the sleeping host by coating them with powder so that their undersurface becomes too slippery for them to climb out of the moat, much less up the bed leg.

According to First-Rate Exterminators of Westchester County, NY, the bedbug population is mushrooming around the country, so much so that many exterminator companies are now hiring, as well as buying more equipment and pesticides. This pest might prove to be an unlikely key to reviving our economy. Otherwise, it has little to offer us.