

SJ Edelheit

Indoor Wildlife

April, as we all know, is the cruelest month. Why is it so called? Why is it so damnably cruel? It's the time of year when indoor wildlife awakens from its winter dormancy. That's why. I never know where they spend the winter months, the household bugs of New England, but I'm delighted when they come to their senses and depart with the cold. Each November, I'm convinced I've banished them for good. Hard work, prayers, indifference, whatever it was that did the trick, I'm grateful. But then comes April. And like the swallows to Capistrano and the buzzards to Hinkley, the ants return to my bathroom. There they are happily treading over sink and tile, tunneling the walls, going about their anty ways oblivious to history and all their past defeats.

But it's not just the ants of course. The indoor tribes, like underworld mobs, have carefully divided the territory. April 1, and the silverfish spring from nowhere. (It's enough to make you believe in spontaneous generation; the hell with Leeuwenhoek, I say!) They immediately lay claim to the damp world beneath the radiators. Sluggish little water beetles surface, only at night and only in the bathtub. And the roaches, the tough guys of the lot, are back and seem graciously content to confine themselves, as always, to the kitchen.

I've tried scrupulous cleanliness, of course, poisons, persuasion. No luck. It's just an old building and with them, the bugs, it seems a matter of tradition. They return each spring searching for their roots, crawling the same floors and walls as their ancestors. Nothing I try deters them. Maybe microwaves, I think; surely technology must have an answer. Or perhaps I should read to them. Camus, Perelman, quotations from Chairman Mao. Why not convert and convince them to move on? All great journeys, after all, begin with a single, small (in this case very small) step. But like the silent majority they are, they've stopped listening. So I watch and wait for fall, and occasionally philosophize on these little lives, these unwelcome roomers and boarders who've come to share the season with me.

Silverfish. Obnoxious little creatures, you say. Why do you find them so noisome? Is it their roach-like quality, paler, quicker cousins of that ancient, hated pest? Actually, they look like rapid little crustaceans. Of course, it's difficult to get a really good look—they're such fast little bug-gers! Who knows how they live? In darkness and toil, consuming your sweaters? Perhaps they dine on all the old oils in unwashed clothing. Who knows. What is fearsome about them, I've discovered, is not that they inhabit the dark, but that they enter and leave the light at such great speed; they propel themselves in and out of view so quickly that one does not have proper time to react. We're left with loathing and maybe some queasiness, but with no recourse; no slam-bang, thank you, and another little body to be swept away and added to the count. We can only stare uneasily at the floor and wonder what will happen when the lights go out, as they must, for sleep. Are there hordes, schools of these night swimmers, waiting to overrun our sacred territory, crawl the bed, circle the kitchen table? Oh, heavens! Will they come after us while we doze, infest our dreams?

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What do they want anyway: our leavings, our nightmares, our carbohydrates? Or perhaps they're content to coexist; a cold and damp loving life that shrinks from body heat and what must be (to them) our colossal motion. They inhabit a universe of dust, and come to think of it, so do we.

Ant wars. It's hard not to make military analogies when discussing ants, that efficient, aggressive, colonizing foe. As I've said, they routinely fortify the bathroom walls. If they confined themselves there, I could perhaps accept such an occupation. But there are constant sorties, you see, incursions into the kitchen, the bedroom. Negotiations have proved fruitless. They're inscrutable, they're brave, and they've got, let's face it, the numbers; they keep coming! Raid spray, whatever the cute commercials, seems to work more by drowning than poisoning. And downing them one by one is too time consuming and too cruel. So I invested in some ant traps, those round little disks of death. Sure enough, they took the bait. And kept taking it, week after week, long lines marching calmly, efficiently, in and out of the metal tubes.

And then there are the stolid, imperturbable water beetles. I think of them as the Muscovites of the insect world, burly, lazy, immobile. Sometimes I find them meditating in the bathtub in the mornings. They seem like harmless, fat little friars. Passive resistors these, they don't scurry away in fright. They squat. And dare. Do unto them as you will; I've got nothing against them, really. But look, I do want a shower, and there's no way I'm going to get in there while they sit and play Buddha. And so, scrunch in a Kleenex, and it's down the toilet and away with them. Life is nasty, brutish, and short.

Of course, the arch-demon of the indoor wild is the roach. Now Boston roaches aren't really much of a challenge. A little chase, some banging, that's it; they're mannerly, discreet, generally keep out of the way. No comparison to their brazen cousins in New York, definitely a pushy, aggressive lot. Day or night, makes no difference, they're an in your face disgrace. They don't care that your clean-loving mother is over for a visit.

"What's that?"

"What's what?"

"That bug!"

"That's just a stain, Mom."

"You got movable stains here?"

No, the only cure for New York roaches is to move out of the city. (Rumor has it they've learned to operate can-openers of late.)

In Boston, you simply try to make their life a little more difficult in your apartment than in the apartment next door. So you sprinkle boric acid around. (It's supposed to bloat them. They pop. A painful way to go, but, hey, you warned them.) You keep the light on at all hours. And you make lots of noise. (Your neighbors will appreciate that, too. However, just think, when they finally have your bugs, they'll at least be thankful for the renewed quiet.)

Roaches, New York or Boston, are persistent, smart, tough. They've been around and will still be around, global warming or no global warm-

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ing. Climate change, radiation, chemical death, taunts, beatings, nothing frightens them. So get used to them—and the rest of their indoor brethren. Look at it this way, when it comes to endurance, they have a lot more to teach us than goldfish.