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Shattered

In the fly world, there is no nuance, no breaking of news, no small talk. One fly would never approach another wondering how to break the news that the other was just not acting appropriately. There are no fly social networks.

There are just quadrillions and quadrillions and quadrillions of simple, single-minded flies.

Of those quadrillions, it started with just one in our house. It was large and black fly with giant soulless eyes and slow moving wings that buzzed like helicopter blades when it flew by. It seemed mocking as it hovered just in front of my chin, as it landed on the kitchen table, the couch, the orange ashtray as if it fancied a smoke break. It was almost silly how easily it was to kill, one smash and the problem became a white smear on the wall, one brilliant blob of yellow where its fly brain used to live. It was simple, at least in the beginning, more of a science experiment, just a few more notes to add to my many journals: *Calliphora livida*, the black blow fly and it was over and done with.

My books said *C. livida* is a springtime insect, most active in the time where the snow gives way to baseball, but this was June, when this first one was found which was strange, but not enough to make me dig any deeper.

When three more were spotted in the living room, three days later, I killed again, fishing out the wiffle ball bat and trusty books in hopes of answers, some help in my exterminating quest, now that it was just me versus them. Michael was of legal age now and almost done with school, and lately my dad had not been around so much, with meetings and things he had to do he didn't really talk about. It was up to me to splat the foes and do what I could to make them stay gone.

Each time their heads squished against the walls, the cabinets, the sink, wherever they landed and met their subsequent doom, I bleached. I'd read that they could carry dysentery, that they fed on feces, carrion and filth, that everywhere a fly lands it throws up just a little. I stowed the heeby-jeebies way down below and carried on, bat in one hand, spray bottle in the other; my shoulders way up under my ears out of the sheer super-ickiness of it all for the benefit of my mom. I didn't want one to land in her mouth while she napped and certainly did not want to bother her. I would nonchalantly walk through the room, strategically placing my weapon at my side.

Had that bat not been used for so much, it probably would have looked suspicious. But for me it had been an extendo-arm, a fake cane, a pointer, a javelin, a sword. I had walked through the living room with that bat so many times it wouldn't raise an eyelash or the faintest glimmer of suspicion. The spray bleach, however, would have gotten me jammed up for sure. That one I hid under my shirt.

Within a week the three fat bastards grew to nine at a time, and by midsummer, we had a steady black stream of loud, slow-moving disease flying through our house room by room.

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No one seemed to be as bothered by them as I was. I was starting to annoy everyone as it became more and more difficult to hide the clumsy swatting.

"If they're bothering you that much, find where they're coming from," my mom said to me over her shoulder as she left for coffee, as easily as if she'd been directing me to order a pizza or to add fabric softener to the wash.

So the true hunt began.

In the fly world males will execute aerial acrobatics in order to win a mate's attention. They will perform for her in the air in order to woo, in efforts to mate. If that was the case, these flies were into me especially, because they seemed to circle me wherever I went, buzzing by my forehead, grazing my cheeks and hair. They congregated in the corners of my room like delinquents. Perhaps they were attracted to bubblegum pink of the walls, a color not my choosing. Maybe they thought it was the only way out, the entrance to my room a mammoth opening to a fly, having no door and all.

I started my hunt upstairs, half for logic's sake, a thorough top to bottom search is normally how the police do it on TV, but mostly for selfish reasons. The little bastards were treating my room like a frat house, buzzing and landing and flying wherever they pleased, puking their hideous mucus all over my walls and stereo. If this invasion was based in my room, it was going to stop now.

So I went digging.

The books said the flies like it cooler, thriving in temperatures between 38 and 60 degrees.

They weren't in my closet. I'd outgrown my rubber eggs and potato babies, my sugar crystals and even my Monkees albums. The flies weren't interested either.

The right flank of the room was clear, including the crawlspace even where it ended in my brother's room.

It was the left flank that caught me off guard.

Crawling through the old stuffed animals, my Ewoks and some old 45 records, back by the Pink Panther insulation, still there from my youth was the stash of white bags. Some had been brought out to the curb eventually. Others were new additions. And then there was the one that stuck out. Even I noticed it didn't belong.

Something was off.

Any smart person will tell you, from any medical journal to even the simplest horror movie, to Mr. Indiana Jones himself- you don't go digging, especially when something looks off.

But of course, I am not a smart person.

In fact, I am an idiot.

The bag didn't look like the other ones that dotted the way through the crawlspace. It was gouged and torn and even more hastily overstuffed

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than the others. It brimmed over with papers and pencils and sat lopsided, leaning on the others for support, if not to topple over.

I approached like Indy, trepidation replacing adventure, in my care. And there it was. Not flies or maggots. In that case my stomach wouldn't have turned as it did. At the top of my bag was my artwork, a piece done in second grade, one for which I swelled with pride. It was one I'd completed myself that actually, for the first time, looked good. We'd been doing the emotions and our project was to pick one ourselves and to illustrate it.

There mine sat, ripped in two. Half the "frus" crumpled into a tight ball. The other half was bent at the corner but I could just make out the "ated." It sported half a squinted eye and furrowed brow, half a set of clenched teeth, half a head of crazy hair, half my gold star for the day.

Any hope I'd had that this was just a case of bad packing was dashed into pieces along with the cards I'd found ripped into shreds. Some were made with construction paper and crayons, others covered in glitter and glue. Some were the store-bought kind, signed in sloppy, tentative letters. A tape of songs I'd sung for her lay limp and broken, the tape pulled completely from its casing. There was a collection of stupid notes I made in school crushed into an arsenal of giant spitballs.

That wasn't all so shocking. It had given me pause for only a second to wonder what it was I'd done this time to make the list.

The real sting came at the bottom of the bag, in between a decapitated stuffed doll and my first-grade picture. That one had actually been cute. It was where the bag juttied out in stretched out gashes. At first it just looked like smashed up Styrofoam, the kind that you use to put on your furniture when you get the rugs cleaned. But then it caught me, the glimmer of gold and shattered porcelain. There in tiny bits and pieces, intermingled with pulverized bits of the stuff that was supposed to protect them, was my entire set of fairy tale plates.

It was like they were smashed with a hammer.

And I knew why.

If I wasn't such an idiot this whole thing could have been avoided.

I laid my head on the bag like sad pillow and wallowed in my own stupidity.

It was one of those horrible moments when the planets align into a giant bull's-eye right on your face. I had said the exact wrong thing to her when she was on an upswing. She'd been laying low when I'd left for school that morning. I had no idea the switch had been thrown.

And no matter what I did I was screwed. If I'd let her have her way she'd be in the school screaming, making a scene and giving all the suburban moms more to talk about. So I chose the latter. I picked the fight instead.

I heard the words "*You're acting like a crazy person*" fill the room like Pavaratti, only they didn't bring my mother to tears as the tenor's voice would. They instead enraged her in a way that would bring a torrent of

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profanity the likes of which I could only semi-understand and the subsequent assault I didn't know had occurred.

I couldn't take it personally. As my dad would remind me when we met that Tuesday for dinner, I should have known better.

He also told me that night as he dropped me at the door, that he wouldn't be coming inside. For reasons he didn't say, he would be gone Tuesdays and Thursdays, not just for his meetings, but gone. Little did I know this was part of the reason we could all of a sudden afford to go out to eat twice a week, that he had entered back into a world of numbers and speculation that had less to do with the stock market and more to do with his friend, the giant landscaper, who happened to have a knack for getting people to pay back debts in a timely fashion.

What he didn't tell me was that twice a week would turn into weekends, which would eventually turn into whole weeks at a time.

He also didn't come check the living room for flies like he'd promised.

With their love for the cold and dark there was only one more place these fat little bastards could be hiding; they had to be in the basement somewhere.

By now the basement had been flooded in a freak washing-machine accident that left the orange rug out to dry, never to return. The big-screen had been replaced with a small, buy-at-the-grocery store TV, and the pole had lost all the buttons but IRAN SUCKS. It glowed orange against the exposed multi-colored tile that had been laid down when the house was built. It smelled down there of old, wet things, dirty ashtrays and raggedy clothes.

The utility room was clear. The dirty double sink next to the washer was free of flies, though the dark grey panty hose my mom used to stop the overflow of water from the wash sat plump and disgusting over the spout. The extra kitchen stuff down there, a prime suspect, was free of maggots, not one sign of vermin, just the old liquor hidden in the cabinets, a porcelain turkey that smelled like old men at the bowling alley.

My dad's workroom was at the back corner, a small cramped room that looked like a miniature version of the junkyard. At the back of the room, facing you upon entering was a life-sized portrait of Geronimo, scowling with a rifle. Prepared or not for the poster, I jumped about a foot in the air each and every time my tootsie crossed the threshold. There was a set of subway lockers just inside the door, filled with non-fly items: odds and ends only a junkyard could provide: screws and nails, magnets, random metal things. The center locker was filled with a collection of "BB guns" I would later find out weren't for BB's at all.

Across the cramped room were what looked like tiny scaffoldings: loaded with projector films, baby pictures, old greeting cards, magazines with naked ladies and old cigarette cartons. The room stunk of grease and old paper, manly things like dirt and lava soap. Everything in me hated being in that room, but I had to keep digging. I am an idiot after all, and I was obsessed with getting these filthy bastards out of my house and away from my mother.

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It was somewhere under some really old picture books that a random Polaroid sat tucked away. Its little white corner juttied out from the dusty mass, so I pulled.

So dumb.

There are some things in life a person can never un-see, that scene from *the Exorcist* when Regan gets creative with a crucifix, your neighbor's cat getting hit by a car and surviving just long enough to limp broken and bloody back to its owner's house to drop at the door, the guy from down the street just older than my brother OD-ing on something only to walk up the street shirtless telling everyone he was going to "get us." These kinds of things stop you where you stand and make the breath catch in your chest. These and of course, the picture.

No one is ready to see a clinical close-up of their own mom, especially when its intent wasn't to be clinical. Its intent was to be nasty and gross like those cotton-candy headed whores in the movies my dad loved so much. Her eyes looked dead. Of all the horror that can be remembered from that image, that's the one that stings the most.

I choked down the nausea and retreated from the room. The flies could have it if they wanted it.

As I turned the corner to climb the stairs, I noticed from the side of my eye a solid grouping of flies. They were doing that dance in the air I'd gotten used to in my room, where they get interested in something. They hover and circle, and dip close to what it is they want. This time it wasn't my eyeballs or desk they were investigating but a giant black bag, the kind we'd put leaves in when the fall came.

Michael had cleaned out his room a few weeks ago, at the end of school, kind of a manhood thing I guess, moving his comics and teenage things downstairs to streamline his more grownup haunt. I learned to approach things slowly, like Indy, ducking my head down like a boxer to avoid the flies. They didn't want me for once. Perhaps even they knew how tainted I was at this point.

I gave the bag a poke and at least twenty of the fat flies emerged, buzzing like mad past my ears and lips.

It was just a bag of comics and papers, notes from girls, old school books.

I dug deeper, despite revulsion.

I reached down as far as I could, half my body could fit in this bag, but I didn't care. There was no turning back now.

I hit something hard and wet. I pulled it out only to find Michael's high school yearbook. But it was different than it was when I looked at it like a celebrity magazine. It was covered in a sticky, oozy goo that formed a big wet circle on the cover right over the '86. The pages were stained and stuck together with a yellow stain that matched the goo exactly.

Most of the stuff in the bag was.

Nothing about this could be explained. There was no carrion or filth, no putrid flesh like my books had said, just ruined books and pictures,

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cards and toys, my brother's old hockey gloves from when he was in eighth grade.

They didn't look so bad.

I extracted the gloves from the bottom of the bag hoping at least one thing could be saved. And out of the one glove flew at least five pissed-off flies.

In the right glove sat a mottled, pink-glitter Easter egg, cracked in the middle, oozing the mother of all goo, greenish yellow and wiggling with stinky maggots.

The smell was bad, but the image was worse.

I ran upstairs as fast as I could, leaving my brother's ruined memories on the ground.

My mother, from the couch, instructed me to get rid of it, but I was already out the door.

I held the disgusting thing in my hands, frozen on my front stairs. The garbage cans were not ten feet away, just in the driveway, but I walked past them.

I stared at my next-door neighbor's house, the Cavots. They were British I think, and grandparents. I would play with their grandson Josh every summer when his mom would come to visit. They watched me when Michael broke his finger. Mrs. Cavot was a round woman with rosy Santa Claus cheeks that went well with her husband's white hair. They were both so nice.

I held the ruined egg in my hand staring at the green gash down the center and the wiggly fly babies getting ready to become filthy bastards.

And for no reason whatsoever I did something for which I am even now truly ashamed.

I threw the egg with all of my might at the side of the Cavot's house, smiling as it shattered.