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This Old Man, He Played Five

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A Tomato in the Sun

Old Tom couldn't take it anymore. The Coleopsi were driving him crazy.

"You sumbitches! You bug-terds! Every morning it's the same thing! Y'all crap and I clean. Just crap everywhere. Crap and clean. Crap and clean. Disgusting."

Grumbling didn't help, but Old Tom did it anyway. Nor did shaking his fist at the hundreds of beetles perched every morning across every tree branch in his garden, as they'd been doing for the last thirteen lunar cycles. Swearing did add a bit of poetic vitriol to the moment, but still they refused to leave. And nothing Tom tried dissuaded them.

"One of these days, I'm gonna get me a couple of feral tomcats and turn them loose on y'all! Let 'em hunt y'all down like vermin! Go to town on you like you was a buffet at a fat convention. I swear by God then not a one of y'all will ever poison my nice tomato plants again. It's enough to make a grown man cry."

It was true, the Coleopsi beetle, or *Trechus arribasi* -- which was the closest Earth's biologists could classify this new alien species -- downright despised organic earth

tomatoes. Something about the acidity in the seeds messed with their internal digestive tracts, causing them to bloat and painfully expel gas more odorous than rotten eggs. Sometimes they even swelled and popped. Which could be nauseating.

“One day, you little shits,” Old Tom vowed shaking his fist. *“One day.”*

Occasionally, when the bloat did make them burst, like soda shaken in a bottle, Tom smiled as he cleaned up the little mess of fragmented shell and goo. *“Serves y’all right, he’d think. Why, if I had my way, I’d plant every square inch of Texas with solanum lycopersicum just to watch all y’all snap, crackle and pop. Hells bells, I’d even sell tickets so people could watch.”*

As it was, Tom was lucky to have even the one acre of the tomato plants he did. Only because his farm was protected under historical preservation laws implemented by the Western Coalition of CanMexAmerica before the turn of the century. His being one of the last organic farms still in existence – and the only farm growing heirloom tomatoes in naturated organic soil. A prized and protected status for several highly influential families rich enough to keep him in the green. And keep his one acre farm safe from the new DEI government’s attempts to shut him down.

“Them bastards up in Washington may love your crusty, shit spewing asses, but that don’t mean I have to -- no matter how good they say y’all are for the Earth.”

Turns out, *alien Trechus arribasi* -- whom Texans commonly called Cyclops due to their single insectoid eye mounted in the center of their shells - loved to dine on earth’s abundant toxic waste and pollution. Not just dine, but effectively metabolize and nullify through digestion. Why, in the last four years since the Coleopsi’s arrival, they’d successfully absorbed enough waste to turn the planet’s standards of purity back more than a hundred years. And in less than a decade, would effectively regenerate the

land, air and sea to nearly as pristine as the day God created them. As long as organic tomatoes and other nightshade variants were kept limited to their exposure.

Which was why the DEI government could give two shits about Old Tom and the legacy of his farm – or his ancestors who'd ground out a living, pouring their blood, sweat and tears into its sustainability. As far the DEI were concerned, Tom and his kind were nothing more than ignorant field hands impeding the safe comfort of their benevolent alien guests -- and their guests invaluable gifts to humankind.

"Alright you little shitheels, enough gab. Time to get my work done." Old Tom started removing the protective covering from each tomato plant, slipping the soiled plastic squares into large basins of soap, vinegar, and water so he could later clean off the Cyclops' crap coating. He worked diligently for the next few hours – careful so he didn't damage the plastic or his plants – but trying to finish up before the Texas sun reached its noon zenith and the heat of the day became unbearable. And as he worked, he whistled *God Bless the USA* and *America the Beautiful* and *This Land is My Land* while watering heirlooms, pulling new growth weeds, and picking up any dead leaves fallen to the ground. All while breathing in the richly fetid smell of bug excrement layered over dirt and tomato fruit filling the sweet morning air.

"Maybe I should bottle this crap," Old Tom pondered, "then I can ship it around the solar system as a detoxifier. It's certainly smells potent enough -- like it could strip the varnish from wood. And I'm sure those poor souls on Venus and Mercury would appreciate y'all's contributions more than I. I hear their air modifiers are having a damn difficult time filtering the planet's carbon dioxide levels down to safely breathable levels – which leaves most of them poor, bedeviled Spaniards trapped beneath the surface choking on dirty air. Or so says the intergalactic news feed."

Old Tom crossed through the west portcullis to check his new Monterosa strain, which he'd carefully planted last year. He could see the roots looked strong, but this season's harvest was undersized. Maybe a few inches in diameter and nothing close to the twelve inch, deep red heirlooms he'd harvested before the Cyclops invasion. This season just wasn't ripening with the same energy. Which, to an old green thumb like Tom, was both an indictment and insult.

"Don't worry girls," Tom soothed his plants, "I'll figure a way out of this. I promise. I don't know how yet, but I'll find a way."

Old Tom's One Acre Farm would still fill it's seasonal quota, despite the underwhelming harvest approaching. It was a point of pride. Not to mention why his customers relied on him -- so they wouldn't have to resort to Earth's store of chemically produced, fruit-like substitutes. Which were edible, sure, but contained high levels of chemical preservatives that essentially countered what little nutrition the substitutes provided.

What the new DEI government didn't understand was Old Tom had a mission too -- which in his mind was much more important than their alien guest's comfort. Old Tom had grown organic hot house fruits and vegetables since a little boy. Learned at the knee of his Daddy -- and his Daddy's Daddy and his Daddy's Daddy's Daddy. A legacy of cumulative experience dating back more than two centuries to their original farm in Ogallala. Heritage, to his people, was a point of pride not to be dismissed lightly.

Of course, that was before the Seven Continents War and its extensive fallout. Before China abandoned Earth to colonize Jupiter. Before the United Kingdom built their expansive, no-soil hydro-silicone herbotic warehouses across the Tyco and Eimmert Craters of Mars so they could feed all the English, Irish, and Scotsmen who'd flocked

there. And well before Africa took over Saturn and revolutionized the food supplementation industry by developing edible cotton – those little puffs of augmented nutrition that Old Tom knew tasted terrible, but staved off starvation for the millions inhabiting the outer rims.

Earth, by the end of the previous century, had all but been abandoned by most of its human inhabitants. Except for men and women like Old Tom -- the blue collar, western working class -- who'd lived their lives working dirt farms or in coal mines or on oil plantation rigs. Who were hard scrabble and poor, but hardy enough to resist the extensive pollution that permeated the planet and threatened to choke it out.

"Maybe I can grind up all that brown sticky shit you little suckers keep cranking out, mix it with fertilizer and soap shavings and make some kinda homemade glycerin. Turn the whole mess into a low grade dynamite and ship it off to them Estonians on Neptune who're trying to liberate themselves from Georgian rule. I could probably make a mint."

Spotting several fallen leaves under the south corner Jacaranda tree, Old Tom walked over to pick them up. And as he did, groaned with the effort. "Definitely getting old," he muttered putting a hand to his lower back as he gathered the leaves up -- only to feel the gust of wings buzzing as the Cyclops beetle he'd uncovered took flight and bounced off his forehead. Then flew up to the nearest tree branch.

"Dammit, you unholy bastard!" Old Tom yelled, slapping the air in front of his face, "I'm just trying to tend to my garden!" Tom could feel a murderous rage rising, but knew better than to act on it. Because if he did, and intentionally hurt any one of these little shitheels, the DEI government would come down on him like a hammer on a nail. Not only would they take his farm, but surely throw him into a deep dark jail cell for violating Earth's newest DEI, "foreign visitors" protection laws. Course, this particular

Cyclops wasn't making it easier for Old Tom to calm down -- it was sitting on the tree branch, giving him the evil eye, full of contempt. How that one black eye could project such a thing, Old Tom didn't rightly know. But it did. And he didn't like it one bit. "You're a big fucker, ain't you, you little shitheel. Bigger than the others. It's bad enough with the normal sized ones, but now I gotta deal with your sorry ass."

Tom hissed at the Cyclops through his teeth and spat a line of tobacco at the bug.

"Don't hiss at me, *Farmer John*," the Cyclops spoke back. "I wasn't the one who interrupted your nap."

Tom stared up at the alien beetle and thought, *Did that big fucker just talk to me or am I overheating and hearing things?*

"You're not sick, Old Man. At least not by our standards. And, yes, I did speak to you."

"What the...I must be going off my nut."

"No you aren't. So stop questioning your reality. I'd like to have a word with you if I may and I can't have you questioning your sanity while we do."

Tom agreed he had a choice here – accept the moment as reality or admit he'd gone round the bend and needed to be shipped off to the looney bin. Either way, this sumbitch Cyclops WAS talking to him.

"Alright, I'll bite. What do you want? Don't y'all have someone better to bug?" Tom chuckled at his bon mot. "Get it? Bug?"

"Yes, Tom, I understand."

Now he knows my name? "You know my name?"

"I have ears to hear."

“Do you?”

“I do.”

Tom was feeling dizzy, so walked back to the patio and sat in his favorite chair before lighting up a cigarette. Quickly followed by the Cyclops flying down and taking a seat on the table in front of him.

“As much as I enjoy the smell of cigarette smoke,” the Cyclops spoke, “and the other truly astounding odors of your kind -- smoking appears to be one of the most self-debasing habits you humans have invented. You’re essentially poisoning your own bodies from within by inhaling cancer into your breathing apparatus. Which will eventually kill you.”

“You’re one to talk. Don’t you and your kind eat toxic shit.”

“It’s not toxic to us. To us, that toxic waste are the fruits and vegetables of our nutritional needs. And believe me, of all the world’s we’ve visited, the buffet of nutrition on this planet has been exemplary. Almost a paradise – which is one of the reasons we came here. Did you know the aroma of your toxic waste and garbage can be detected from nearly two galaxies away? Out past the Magalona region. Which, ironically, is why most other intelligent civilizations stay away. They all think this place is one big gigantic, galactic dump.”

“Oh joy. Aren’t we the lucky people.”

“Sarcasm is such a strange human response.”

“Fuck off, bug-boy. Why are you even talking to me? Don’t you have some uranium or whatever to go feast on?”

“Believe me, it wasn’t my choice to approach you. I thought there were better candidates. But the council, in their wisdom, decided you to be the best potential spokesperson.”

“Spokesperson for what? For who? Y’ALL?! Right. Don’t make me laugh.”

“Yes. We’d like to engage you as our official human liaison.”

“Get bent! There ain’t no way I’m gonna be a spokesman for y’all. Plus, who would I even talk to?”

“The DEI government of your own country to start. But then the rest of the planet’s other reigning monarch’s. Those oligarchs you call presidents.”

“Ain’t no way! One, cause I’m a farmer, not no two bit politician carpetbagger. And two, cause I don’t like you. Don’t y’all realize I’m nowhere near your biggest fan. Just the opposite, in fact. I’d like to see y’all dead and gone.”

“I am aware. Which is why the elders wanted you. Their theory being if the most adversarial of humans relayed our message to his own people -- the very messenger who not only despises us, but wants us wiped out -- then your fellow humans would surely take notice. Not to mention, you own son – who is the current President of CanMexAmerica, is he not?”

“My son died the day he left the farm and turned into one of them liberal commie pinko politician assholes. I have no son.”

“That isn’t what your genetics suggest to us. We can plainly detect the DNA connection. Not to mention, your son appears to be very alive and well – living up in the neutral zone. Up in the territory you call Washington D.C.”

“Screw you, my son is dead.”

“Ahh, sarcasm again. Well, regardless, we’d like you to deliver a message to your son who is the DEI president of your land. We’ve tried to speak to him directly, but despite all our efforts, and as much as has been arranged between our species, your government will not recognize us as anything more than a tool to be used. A pet to do the dirty work. To participate, but not allowed to make decisions affecting us all. But we’ve learned, despite your political tribes being so dysfunctional – if you have a human attaché to intervene, then they tend to listen. And the best human representatives are nepotistic -- engaged through paternal patterns of obedience.”

“What does that mean?”

“Meaning if a father calls, is not that son required to answer? And when he does, you can deliver our message so that he will listen and understand.”

“Alright, I’ll bite. What message?”

“We’re running out of food and need more.”

“What do you mean you’re running out and need more?”

“That would appear to be obvious. The current status of your world’s environments – which is more amenable to you in terms of purity now than to our species – is significantly less polluted. Which means our food supply is running low. With projections that we will have consumed nearly 100% of all pollution and toxic waste within, at best estimate, two to three more years. It is imperative we secure our future food supply now before it runs out.”

“So go somewhere else. Just like y’all did when you came here.”

“Yes, we could do that. But the results are not guaranteed. Many swarms in the past have died from such intergalactic transitory efforts. Not every planet or solar system

has this rich a supply of food. Not to mention, our intel suggests you still have the ability to feed us for the next hundred or so years with your currently inactive supply.”

“Inactive supply? What supply?”

“Your atomic based nuclear weapons. At last count, humans have around 5,500 projectiles housed in silos across this continent. Another 5,800 on the abandoned Russian continent. And a few thousand more in various other places. Those combined would be enough to feed us for a very long time. Conservatively speaking, at least a century.”

“You don’t need my permission to go into those silos. No one will stop you. Go ahead and chow down.”

“We could, but that would be extremely wasteful of their potential and not as bountiful. If we simply dined on the nuclear missile’s internal parts, sure the radiation and plutonium could feed us for a short while. A day or two. Maybe a month. But if those missiles were launched instead, and exploded over open terrain, the resulting food supply would expand to more than a thousand-fold per individual missile use. And feed the entire swarm for years with each engagement.”

“That’s insane.”

“No, it’s science. It’s not unlike how your species uses fertilizer to grow your repugnant tomatoes – the use of which increases their size and yield each season, yes? Well, for us, setting off a nuclear missile would act the same – with the nuclear fallout producing the greater yield.”

“Let me see if I have this straight. Y’all want me to call my son and ask him to set off nuclear missiles, one at a time, which would cause a nuclear winter across Earth, just so

y'all can have more toxic munchies to dine on? And in the process, destroy what remains of the human race? Are you fucking nuts?!"

"We would not harm humans. And our efforts would be timed and controlled in seasons to achieve the best effect of potentiality in action, of course. Just like your Earth seasons of planting before winter and then harvesting when spring comes. We'd concentrate each individual launch annually, directing it to locations along the equator."

"The fallout would still kill us."

"No. Not if your kind take up permanent occupancy in the more northern and southern areas of your planet, farthest from the equator and nearer the poles. Humans would be minimally affected there, as long as you took a few precautions during the launch and explosion season. We've purified the poles already, so humans should be very comfortable and happy there. You could even continue farming your repugnant fruit, I suppose, though it would have to be an indoor grow."

"Get bent! No way! No! No matter how reasonable y'all try to make it sound, its bullshit. This was our planet before you shitheels showed up. And I'll be damned if I let some bug take it away. Plus, there's no way I'm gonna help y'all set off nuclear missiles. They didn't even do that during the Seven Continent War and you think I'm gonna help?! For all I know, this is just some ploy so y'all can actually eliminate the human race and keep Earth for yourselves."

"I understand your fears, Tom. I do. But your Earth wasn't doing all that well before we got here, now was it? And you were already on a doomed trajectory -- choking your planet out with all your self-made garbage. In fact, till we came along, and it has been said among your politicians, your culture was in its last dying days. But we arrived and saved the Earth. Purified your planet and gave you all a new lease on life. So us being

here is symbiotic, don't you see? Is that not worthy of us staying? And you making a few accommodations to help us? Besides, the alternative would be...unfortunate."

"What alternative?"

"Have you not considered what happens when we run out of food here on your planet?"

"Sure, you leave."

"No. Not while there is still nourishment to be had."

"Which means what?"

"If we are forced to leave, then we will not do so till the last source of all nourishment from this planet has been gathered and stored for travel. Do you know where that nourishment lies? After all the garbage and nuclear waste and toxic dumps have been picked clean? There is only one other source on this planet that holds pollution within its own system and still lives. That will be the source we take from as a last resort."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Your kind has spent decades, even centuries, poisoning yourself with self-administered chemicals – smoking and drinking and all your chemically enhanced foods products. Poisoned air and toxic water. Your bodies are virtual petri dishes of toxic growth. Like an incubator that would provide us a great deal of nutrition. Ironic, seeing how humans, if we chose, could easily be seen as the farms for our nutritional needs. But it doesn't have to be that way if you help us."

"Y'all are saying, if we don't get you more food, y'all eat us humans?"

"Not so much your bodies, but more those areas saturated with chemicals toxins – lungs, pancreas, bones. Any of the internal parts were cancer grows. Course,

biologically speaking, none of you could survive such a cleansing. And, unfortunately, since fresh is best, you'd be alive when we started dining, but not so much when we finished."

"Son of a bitch! You cock sucking bugs! I knew you were up to no good!"

"I do not, in any way, wish to see such an event come to pass. Neither do my brothers and sisters. Your kind produces such wonderful product on an external basis, we'd hate to give that up. And would regret having to feed on you directly to acquire it. Thus why our council of elders have asked me to approach you and get you invested in helping. I believe our plan is a win-win scenario for both our species – an excellent symbiotic trade. So you should take us up on our offer and call your son right away. Time is growing short. And, hey, who knows, in the long run, you'll be seen as a hero for helping the human race flourish again."

"That's all bullshit. You fuckers invaded us and now you want to be shown special treatment or else you'll eat us?! Well, this Earth man says hell no! We were doing fine before you came and we'll do well after. Even if we have to stomp each and every one of you motherfuckers with our bootheels in the process. We'll stop you!"

"You won't be able. Humans aren't strong enough or smart enough to resist us. In fact, to us, you're nothing really more than pets -- domesticated animals who provide a small purpose. Not unlike your earth cows and sheep and goats. And, as a rule, we don't like to eat our pets when they can serve a better purpose otherwise. Unless it's necessary to hold off starvation for the millions of my brothers and sisters."

Tom's anger finally boiled over. "Well, y'all got it all figured out, don't you, ya' little fucker. The swarm as overlord, huh. But you forgot one thing. We Texans don't take shit off no one. Not even alien locust motherfuckers who think they're doing us a favor!" And with that, Tom stood quickly, removing a tomato from his pocket -- the one

he'd been saving for a mid-morning snack -- and smashed it down hard on the alien locust shell. Feeling the satisfying crunch as the Cyclops began shrieking in pain.

"Oh, you bastard!" the Cyclops whined. "That hurt! Oh, you human turd! You've done it now. Do you think you've stopped us?! We will not be denied even if I die! Oh you pigheaded human piece of Texas shit! You can die too for all I care!"

"Viva Texas, you Cyclops motherfucker!" Tom yelled again bringing his open palm, coated with tomato juice, back down on the coleopsi, crushing the shell completely and sending goo squirting everywhere. It felt damn good. Something he'd been wanting to do for a long time.

Old Tom sat back in his chair to light up another smoke and calm his nerves. Gazing with satisfaction over what he'd done and realizing bugs and bug shit weren't on his mind anymore. No, his thoughts had turned back to his one acre farm – remembering how it once thrived and dreaming how it could again. A veritable garden of eden with endless tomato plants blossoming under the hot Texas sun filling the entire horizon. All seen from his back porch. Where Old Tom could, once again, feel the prestige of being a successful farmer who worked the land and was the master of all he surveyed.

Old Tom was still deep into his daydream when he heard the swarm rising up. Buzzing low and long at first, echoing off the nearby hills, but growing in pitch till the piercing sound cut through his reverie. Then, all across his farm and in the distance, he could see the hive rising into the air -- a dense black cloud of one-eyed Cyclops swarming together, beginning to blacken the sky over his one acre farm. Millions of alien bugs gathering in mass high above.

"Well, shit," Old Tom grumbled, standing quickly. "I think I better mosey on back to the house now and make that call to my son."

The End.