

Bed Bugs

She never told me what was going on. I never told her what was going on. We were going through a rough patch, you see. The flow of communication had been severed, if only slightly. It was expected that the same thing happened to us, yet failed to talk about it. It's not unusual when going through our rough patches.

When it began, I didn't pay attention to it. One small red circle on my leg. It could pass off as a mosquito bite, no big deal.

I'm no patient person. Soon after I discovered the bite I scratched the living hell out of it. It bled, it hurt, but it didn't go away. The bite was sore for a few days before it came back to itch with a vengeance. I simply put it in the back of my mind. And there was this sick pleasure of scratching it until it hurt, until it bled. I found satisfaction in pain, even if it didn't make the bite go away.

We had been sharing a bed. We had done it for a while now. Freshly moved in together and spending way much more time together than before. We were completely unused to that. Sharing our lives so intimately with another person, not to mention waking up to the same person every morning.

And so, in spending so much time together, we ran out of things to say. We fell into monotony and monotony led us right into a false sense of safety that our bubble would never be touched. Not even by us.

Would this have anything to do with what happened? Maybe. Who knows? Maybe that fucking insect knew and took advantage of it. Maybe it was just a coincidence, but when she pointed out how banged up my leg was I shrugged it off.

“It’s just a bruise,” I said.

“Maybe you blew something while biking.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Does it hurt?” she asked and reached out to touch it.

“Not that I recall.” She put pressure on the bruise and I felt nothing. I shook my head.

“That’s weird,” she said to herself, running a hand through my calf.

“What is?” I put my hand on her head and stroked her hair.

“You got a mountain chain of mosquito bites,” she made a pause, as if suddenly remembering something. “Very much like mine.”

She lifted her pants and surely, there was a chain of red, angry mosquito bites. I touched them, one by one.

“Do they itch?” I asked.

“Like hell.”

I leaned down and licked them, then I blew what I expected to be cold air. “And now?”

She stared at me intently. “Do it again.”

And so I repeated the motion.

“Again.”

I kissed softly along her leg and before I drew back, I licked the inside of her leg from her ankle to her knee. She sighed and I felt how she leaned down on the bed. I knew where this was going; she knew where this was going. I crawled on top of her and pecked her lips. I felt her hands circle my neck and tangle on my hair to bring me down for a hard

kiss. My tongue met hers and the warm bliss settled all over my body—kissing her had always been the biggest pleasure I could ever encounter.

Her hands dragged along the front of my body and settled in the hem of my shirt. She pouted and batted her eyelashes at me.

“Take it off?”

I smirked and shook my head.

The morning found us taking a shower together. Showers always meant a gentle exploration of muscles, a worshipping of curves, a stroking of birthmarks and scars. Time was suspended on a thread during showers. Until it came back barreling into us. Her hands brushed my hips, halted, and ran again over the same spot, effectively stopping the spell.

“What is it?” I asked languedly.

“You got something there,” she said, lowering her head so she could take a look.

“What does it look like?”

“Like another mosquito bite. Come on, let’s wrap this up.”

And like that, our ritual was cut short.

We dried ourselves, and before I put my shirt on, she stopped me and looked at my side. She gasped and ran her hand through the space below my ribs and between my hips and the side of my leg.

“What is it?” I asked, now worried at her silence.

“Do you feel nothing?”

“It tickles a little.”

“Look in the mirror.”

I did as I was told and in the mirror I realized my side was completely covered in angry, rounded and big bites. “This isn’t a mosquito,” I mused out loud.

“No,” she agreed. She then showed me her leg, which looked more attacked than it had looked the night before. “Our bites are identical.”

“Do you think there’s something in the bed?” I asked, putting my shirt on.

“I have no idea,” she said, wide-eyed.

“Let’s check.”

We walked to the bed and threw the cover and the sheets off. We took the duvet off. We used the sheets to beat anything out of the bed and we left it there to soak in the sunlight. Very much like me, any insect that lives in a bed will be pulverized by sunlight. Sunlight cleanses.

After that initial scare, we moved on with our lives. She prompted me to look at myself in the mirror every morning and also to use a homemade ointment she and her mother had made. The bites on my side wouldn’t go away; the bite chain that started below my ribs and continued all the way to my ankle looked even redder and bigger. I scratched them every morning for pleasure and at night out of impatience. They wouldn’t go away and they itched like hell.

“Spider?” she asked me one night.

“I haven’t felt anything very leggy,” I wiggled my fingers over her arm and she gave me a scoff, but the smile was there.

“I’m serious. There’s something somewhere and I don’t like it.”

“Okay, let’s change the sheets again and if it continues happening, we buy another mattress. Sound good?”

She nodded and looked pleased at the solution I offered.

That night, I had a weird dream. I dreamt I was somewhere with tall, impenetrable walls and something was stalking me. I couldn't run, my body felt heavy and tingly. It was dark, so I couldn't see anything, but I also couldn't help the feeling of being watched. Not even watched—that's putting it nicely. I felt like prey, and I couldn't identify the predator.

In this dream, I couldn't move. I was rooted in place, in the middle of a vast and unending darkness, because something was tugging me, tying me down to the floor. I struggled, grasping at nothing, touching some sort of fog that suddenly smelt rotten. I started breathing faster, the spoilt air filling my nose and lungs, surely turning my insides rotten and velvety dark as well.

I looked down at my legs. Even in the darkness I could see it. Maybe it chose to be seen in the darkness. A parasite, a shiny black arthropod with a smooth head that resembled obsidian was clawing at my legs, chewing them, drawing blood from them. The head shifted and its several deep green and black eyes stared up at me, and I yelled. I expelled all the foul fog I had been breathing and yelled myself hoarse.

She was holding me and rubbing my chest into consciousness when the dream fell apart. I was sweating and found my hand scratching madly at my right leg, where I felt a warm liquid. I could feel the vibrations of her voice against my back, but I couldn't hear her above all the white noise burning my ears. The dream felt real and it still lingered in the back of my eyes and the hollow of my throat and I couldn't forget.

Something queasy sat in the pit of my stomach and burned all along my throat. I felt the sudden need to puke and I detached myself from her embrace and ran to the bathroom.

I barely made it before I started vomiting until my eyes watered and my stomach growled in response to the effort. The liquid oozing out of me was deep black and viscous. I recoiled the moment I saw it because I just knew that it was the fog I inhaled during the dream. I was feeling light-headed and collapsed on my side in a weird position.

“What is that?” She asked me, putting me in a sitting position and separating me from the toilet. She touched my face and her cold hands felt soothing and grounded me in reality.

“I don’t know, but I dreamt about it,” I said, my voice raw and slurred.

“What happened to your leg?”

I mumbled something in response and when I saw my leg I understood why I was feeling so light-headed. I was bleeding profusely from all the bites along my limb.

“It’s not an insect,” I said.

“What?”

“It’s not a spider or a mosquito. It’s something else.”

“What are you talking about?” She asked me and I could hear her desperation in trying to understand what I was saying.

“I saw it. It was eating my leg. It’s still in the bed.”

Her face was blurry and my body was slowly shutting down. I felt her hands on my face and all around me and I lost consciousness knowing for sure I was safe with her.

In the morning, I still hadn’t forgotten the dream and remembered clearly everything that had happened. I also had a killer hangover, absolutely no appetite whatsoever, and a bandage around my leg.

I sat up in the bed, but she stopped me gently with a hand on my shoulder.

“You have to rest,” she looked worried and red-eyed.

“Did you cry?”

“You passed out in my arms. You would’ve cried too.”

“I felt safe,” I said, barely audible.

“What happened?” She asked, laying down beside me.

I explained everything. I recounted my dream with vivid detail—the darkness, the fog, being tied down—but when I got to describing the creature, I could not get the words out. The image was seared into the back of my skull, but somehow I couldn’t find the words to describe it. I couldn’t utter its existence. Stuttering and gesturing wildly with my hands, I wasn’t able to conjure a picture so that she could see what I saw, and I only succeeded at worrying her more.

She insisted I stayed in bed all day, resting. She helped me stand up, but putting my weight into my right leg caused a great deal of pain and a burning sensation. She left for work and texted me constantly throughout the day to see how I was doing. I stayed in bed reading and taking naps, making up for the energy I lost after waking up from the nightmare. And when she came home I was feeling more like myself.

She went straight into the bathroom and when she came out, she had a fresh face and looking more than ready for bed. She bounced into the bed, cuddled up to me and burrowed under the covers. She smiled at me, sleepily.

“Will you be okay tonight?”

“I feel okay right now,” I said, running my pointer and middle fingers from her forehead to the tip of her nose.

“Charmer,” she smiled.

“Only for you.”

“I got you,” she said, dead serious.

I smiled back. “I know.”

We laid still in bed. Me on my back and her on her side, hugging me, her hand under my shirt. There was nothing remarkable about that night. The crickets didn’t sing a song of premonition. The darkness didn’t feel inciting, and yet there was haste and no bullshit whatsoever in the take over. It took that thing only two nights.

The first thing I registered was that something was tugging at my arm. I opened my eyes, but my body didn’t register my wakefulness. I looked at my periphery and I could make out her shape. I figured she was tugging at my arm, but I couldn’t tell her to stop because I was already awake. I tried to ease her worry, to tell her everything was okay and there was no need to tug me so painfully.

Darkness surrounded us and my mind was foggy, barely registering what was happening. I tried to blink, but even that required a superhuman effort. It was as if my body didn’t belong to me anymore and I was at the mercy of this darkness and numbness and tingle that began in my hips and moved lower to my legs, but didn’t reach my feet.

Panic began seizing me. I tried to take a deep breath, but there was a pressure on my chest, pushing me down, contracting my lungs. And then I thought the inevitable.

“You’re going to die here,” said a voice in the back of mind that didn’t quite sound like my own.

The bed shifted and I could feel her warmth leaving my side. “No, please, come back,” my own voice whispered in my head.

I got sucked into the silence and the depth of paralysis. I went down. I was looking up as if I were underwater and something were pulling me to the bottom of the unknown

darkness. I couldn't call out for her, couldn't breathe, couldn't come up. I was suspended in nothing.

And then I saw her come back; she looked down at me, concern and determination and fury all at once showing in her face. Whatever she was going to do, she was going to do it by force and deep down she was going to enjoy it.

Something cracked. Like glass breaking into tiny pieces. I looked around me and I could see the cracks sprouting in the darkness—thin silver lines spreading through the endless wall. The only sound breaking into the silence was an insistent pounding. It became clearer the more cracks appeared in the darkness. And just like that I was being pulled up for air with a horrible and sharp screech following closely behind.

I inhaled and coughed. She tugged my arm and pulled me out of the bed. I stumbled and ended up on the floor. I felt how the blood flowed out of my leg, staining the bandage and my pants. The screech was still there, but I was too dazed to try to find the source of it. However, she was fast in locating it.

“Look! Under the bed,” she pointed with the tip of a knife dripping with something viscous I didn't even see when she pulled me up.

And surely, under the bed was the arthropod that haunted my dreams. It was facing up, its disgusting legs grasping at nothing and screeching. There was blood in what I could assume was its belly.

“What in the fuck?” I asked, heaving and scattering as far away as possible from it.

“That was on your leg, sucking on your blood,” she explained.

“What's the black goo?” I pointed unhelpfully under the bed where she couldn't see.

“What black goo?” She laid on the floor and turned to look at it. The arthropod was thrashing about in black goo, looking to draw strength from it.

“Help me move the bed,” she said, determined and dropping the knife.

I don’t know how I stood up and together we turned over the bed. Maybe we were pumped up in adrenaline. Maybe our fight response was stronger than our flight response. But whatever the reason was, when we turned over the bed we saw that the arthropod wasn’t thrashing in just goo, but in a sort of obsidian black nest with pointy ends sticking out of our wooden floor.

“What in the fuck?” It was her turn to ask.

No sooner had we discovered the arthropod’s nest, when it recovered part of its impulses and jumped towards her. I, on pure instinct, managed to swing my foot on time and kicked it out of her way. It crashed against the wall, leaving a print of red and black on it, unable to recover from the impact. She picked up the knife and went towards it, stabbing it and nailing it to the floor. The screech that echoed through the space was deafening.

“What do we do with that?” She pointed at the nest.

“We set fire to it,” I answered without a pause to think about it. Fire cleanses what sunlight was too tame to cleanse.

Dawn warmed us from head to toe. She’d dropped the knife, my pants were changed, and the firefighters busied themselves inside our apartment.

One of them came out carrying a plastic box of evidence with a weird black amorphous thing inside. “Is this yours?”

“Not anymore,” she said.