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LOOKIN’ OUT MY BACKDOOR

Late in the afternoon.

Buzzing…

The first beetle was white, pale, armored in the death-color of bone. It crawled by the just-beyond-my-property-line graveyard where I’d buried my two (beloved) cats and three (beloved) dogs, and my heart (five times).

Louder than the distant, occasional hum of late night-silent night highway traffic 1.2 miles from the edge of my suburban acres—sudden, rushing echo.

Plodded by the small mud-beach of the frog pond—a six-legged tiger, robber, plotting.

Unexpected.

The second, the stalker, constructed by the same philosophical congress, and built for the same purpose, came an hour later. Same track—no toad or bee, but a hunter-seeker in season. Metallic black, shiny, brittle, even the honeycombed-legs of its slowly-moving tank. No idle wanderer, not astray or confused—its longhorn-antennae focused and processed. Seizure, the laughter of its forward dance of dismember. Bright summer flowers—heart-math red and pure white and softly-blued by Ra’s animal fervor and soothing rain—cut down, t-r-a-m-p-l-e-d. Overgrown, hardened lunatic weeds that had not been beaten down by currents of raw wind and the iron of hailstorms fell.

Insectoid, alien, metallic aural weather, horde powerful, cursing my ears, crushing the freedom-green peace I’d paid (dearly—thirty years dearly) to live on; (Steve Stills bought Johnny’s garden, I stepped off the highway, too, settled here, feet up, rock-a-bye in hopes of avoiding toll.)

Battlefield: my pumpkin patch (never to know playful Halloween); my tomato boxes and their plump, still-green, readying Big Betties; the evocative caress of my tender herb garden. Delightful, the remedies and conjurations I could have folded into my dining pleasure, rained upon by darkened habits. Damned.

Above the productive soil and strong tall grass, sirens and squalls issued from (high-energy, high-voltage) yellow-striped black bombers, darting, arcing, wasp-winged. Scorched the ground. Left ashes. The vines and orbs of my dear

pumpkin patch, blackened, brittle—no sweet pumpkin fruit to fill pies in slow, cool autumn.

Dangerous—metallic black, shiny, brittle—came, a trio in formation flight, and came again.

Buzz a decade back: CNN SCIENCE, a brief, informational feature, INSECTS INSPIRE. Dr. Barbara Abbott (The New York Center for Advanced Sciences) and Dr. Anna-Lena Kramp-Karrenbauer (Berlin Institute of Biotechnology), both geek-giddy, discussing creating and developing bio-mech creatures. “Yes, that’s right; the future is now. They are computer-programmed, remote-controlled beetles, spiders, and bees, that one day could be used to assist us in geoengineering and other developing technologies. They crawl, fly, and are adaptable to complex situations that are impossibly dangerous for humans,” Dr. Kramp-Karrenbauer said.

Dr. Abbott chimed in, “At any given moment, there are ten quintillion insects on the planet. Just imagine the uses.”

I looked at Dr. Abbott’s elation beaming from the TV. Thought: “Ten what? That’s a number beyond my color palette.”

New direction: blended, intentionally. A bio-mech miracle to save us from the bitter tonalities of war and religion, to help us heal our planet. Micro-chips and insects: ‘an implantable system able to provide precision communication between the carrier insect and the host apparatus.’ One day, tasked and employed in real world situations, they will become the regulatory centers of larger mechanical versions, the size of tanks and C-17 Globemaster III’s. Apparatus that could, after earthquakes, rapidly-project assistance assets, move mountains, and remove the vast concentration of debris and chem-sludge from the Pacific Trash Vortex. “They could be deployed in the dangerous and impenetrable for search and rescue purposes, and be used as the primary assets in Air-Land-Sea exploration, or to monitor hurricane and tornadic research and activity. We foresee limitless applications,” said chief-researcher, Dr. Kramp-Karrenbauer.Limitless applications. That painted a picture on my radar, wasn’t a good one.

Mind-control brain implant.

Accelerated education for cybernetic hive minds.

DARPA.

Terminator robots.

SWORDS robots.

An expendable insect-robot army.

Didn’t anyone think the military would muscle aside everyone in line, to snap up and exploit this new tech? ‘Nam-era, Cold War baby, I sure did. Wondered how long it would take before the James Bond-meets-Terminator movies started appearing.

I loathed the thought I might, even remotely, agree with Alex Jones—the batshit-crazy who said there was video of Hillary Clinton giving birth to an alien, and secret, elite government pedophile rings of Satanists that rule the world—or Robert Duncan, about things like Voice of God Weapons… or anything.

When I told him about it, Dom laughed at me. “Christ-on-a-stick!” Said I sounded as loony and moronic as a conspiracy theorist. With a grin, that grin I knew too well, added, “And not the first time.” I got up and went inside, grabbed two beers. When I came back he asked: “Will you be telling me about the chemtrails of Butterfly bombers next week? Hey, got any fairy tales of any techy-grasshopper daring-do you’d care to relate?” We laughed.

The scientific community, fueled by vast sums from the Progressive Left, certain of their calculations and nu-applications, did not foresee the possibility of disconnect. Links to the overlords severed (by a hacker’s anger; confirmed and agreed upon by the CIA, MI6, BND, and SVR), they, a self-aware hive mind with its own vision—proper purification required cutting away the greatest cancer, humankind—took up arms.

Blindsided.

Humanity, its governments and leaders, don’t learn.

Hellbound.

The seeds sown in immaculate laboratories, risen. Golden prophecies that promised Better Days, brought altered monsters with all-absorbing black holes, maws, in them, monsters come to control the roost.

Buzzing…

Hellfire.

Fear.

Lose: California dreaming—believe—dazzle—domestic Tranquility—General Welfare—the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.

Warday.

That’s what CNN called it. BBC, MSNBC, and even FOX, followed suit.

Live video filled the TV screen.

Vegas—cell phone video of Hellfire ordinance slamming into the Bellagio, Wynn’s missile-riddled and burning, Luxor, top taken clean off—rubble everywhere. Eiffel Tower: defenseless crowds of tourists fallen to the lions. Times Square, Brussels, won’t be hymns or headlines tomorrow. The music of the neighborhoods of East L. A. falling silent. President Kamala Harris, vacation at Camp David flushed, visibly frightened, spoke of God, asked the country not to panic. Teary-eyed, she prayed for the nation and humanity. Pope John XXIV celebrated a final mass in St. Peter’s Basilica. Elon Musk’s statement expressed the ended dreams of a pilgrim. Better part of an hour was all I could bear. I pushed the OFF button on the TV remote, dropped it in my armchair. Took a fresh pack of smokes and my favorite teacup and a bottle of Glenlivet 12 out to the patio. Wished I had some weed.

Somewhere around my forth double, flash image: MAD magazine/political cartoon—single, full-page black and white, Don Martin rendering: me, longhaired, jeans and sandals and hippie beads, stoned. Nixon as a four-star general on one shoulder, shouting, "RAID KILLS BUGS DEAD!!!!!!" while offering me an industrial-size spray can of Wasp & Hornet Killer. Nichelle Nichols dressed as Uhura, on my other shoulder; she was an angel holding a stone tablet, on which was written, Thou shall not kill. I didn’t laugh.

We were unprepared, or maybe we’re just slow and impenetrable. And stupid, often naïve, me, found that shocking. Hadn’t anyone read Heinlein or Asimov?

No, pincushion-prick; the insect army is on the move. West and East, never to agree, speech and hearts opposed, cannot stand against the single-minded change deployed.

Buzzing…

Not a symphony.

Look up: clouds (size, beyond the limits of my I-am-a-simple-man understanding) of whining bomber-wasps (cold metal and engineered perfection) distort the sky. The colors of birds, gone. The doe that comes to my back lawn at twilight I’ll never see again.

Didn’t foresee the dark, didn’t listen to the pressure within the egg.

Dom lived next door. He married at twenty-eight. Leslie, lovely women, kind, her

laughter meadowlarked freely. We grew up together, Strong Street kids—baseball and comic books (we believed in Justice, Captain America and Batman, we wanted to save the world), rock and roll, lot of soul (Diana Ross for Dom, Marvin for me), too, and together, dreamed dreams of places far from the city blocks—untouched, green places, with serene shores and bubbling streams, places you'd hear frogs and hoot-owls, lose endless day-to-day troubles in the peaceful grandeur of soft-ceiling sunsets. Went fishing; we weren't very good at it. Still, we kept at it (at our campfires, ate cans of pork 'n beans, or chicken noodle soup, when our stringer didn't see a need to come out of the tackle box). Went to the jazz festival together every year, took great pleasure in Italian sausage and peppers sandwiches and cold Genny Creamers. Dom got a PhD in math, taught the undergrads at Weir. When Larry, the owner of Apex Records was retiring in '76, I bought the store—yeah, I found a way to remain Peter Pan. Both of us wound-up widowers too soon. He was raised Catholic, believed there was a heaven; held on to it. My mom raised me Methodist; lost my way, didn't think there was any "After". Teenagers, spent time, as still lives, sitting on his concrete, front-porch steps; talked, spun fantasies—trips of the mind—the way kids (chained to near) will, a lot of it was non-verbal. Played baseball in the sandlot of Wylie St; we wanted to be Yankees. Nights, we were out of the gate—full of Ulysses and tomorrow—Dom's Chevy cruising up and down State Street, unaccepting of or have not. High school: Dom and I formed a band for a heartbeat; played inferior covers of Steppenwolf and Iron Butterfly, hornless Sly and Santana tunes, with Mike and Ray and Hans, we had fun. Didn't have computers, never occurred to us what machines could do—that was a future for the science fiction movies to explore. We dreamed big, we lived small, close to home. Never occurred to us this was coming. Two, crusted old widowers—fated, childless. Old Friends—brothers—who'd learned to fold their own clothes and pair socks, and take out the trash (without several reminders). Both hoped we'd slip away quietly in our sleep.

He did. Last summer, five days before my seventy-second birthday.

Looked in Dom's yard: swing set still, sandbox empty. New owners had taken their children to Orlando. My Staffie, Giant, had played there with Casey, Dom's snow-white boxer. They, once bright with play, ran imaginary labyrinths and mazes, rolled in the sun-warmed grass, in that yard. Turned my gaze: looked at the fiery, orange-red blossoms of "Fred Loads" shrub roses I'd planted on Giant's grave. Poured another drink.

Buzzing…

There's another white beetle, pair of wasp-bombers above it—black silhouettes stamped on the blue sky. They really are as menacing as Apache helicopters.

What have butterflies been turned into?

Damn sure not something Joni Mitchell would approve of. Denise loved butterflies. She planted hollyhocks and violets to attract them. Whatever butterflies look like now would have shattered her Woodstock dreams.

Buzzing…

Immediacy. Scientific fact. Technology accelerated without caution.

Buzzing…

Emerson, Lake, & Palmer. Tarkus. June ’71. Armadillo/tank, the inspired burst of the artwork on the cover amazed; I couldn’t wait to get it home and play the record. The bio-mech merger on the cover would not only come true, but its war-machine would thunder, and we, defenseless human meat, would find our coming END delivered by unimaginable.

CNN reports there will be no counterstrike, no response. How do you, could you, eradicate ten quintillion insects in a single stroke? Warday brings devastation complete. Result: the voyage of man ends; survivors none.

Buzzing…

My Mossberg 500 Hunting is inside, box of shells, too. “Home protection,” I told Dom. “Brown bear decides to come inside to plunder my kitchen, I’m good—I hope.” Use today, as this rains down upon us, against us, zero.

Buzzing…

Human: no longer a factor in globalization. Our affairs of the heart, gambles, reasons, unwise, sins, will leave no footprints in the sand.

Never been close to a real tank. M1A2 has a crew of four, don’t know how I know that, but I do. This mech-beetle, white, pale, armored in the death-color of bone, crawling by, the fourth by my count, looks like it could hold twice that number of personnel.

Took a long drag off my smoke, waited for it to turn to me.

Shocked it didn’t.

Half grinned. Maybe the next one?

Movement partially-obscured by the pine and maples, flash of my first big bug movie, Them! Was eight, scared the hell out of me. In my forties, with a big bowl of buttered popcorn in my lap, I laughed. Stupid, blind fools we are, we sure opened the door to a

new world.

Buzzing…

I didn’t have the blues when I woke up this morning. There were two cardinals at the feeder while I had buttered rye toast and tea for breakfast. It was sunny, warm—June just the way I like it. I put Joe Henderson’s tribute to Jobim, Double Rainbow, in the CD player, read Mary Oliver, lamp-eyes owls and motionless ponds, she fit my Emerson mood. I don’t think I’ll see the stars tonight.

Buzzing cracks the sky…

My ears are full.

Memories… the language and realities of felt and its aftermath, still warm—

Sip of single malt, kill the finger in the glass. Last smoke, I figure.

Me, so much older now. Done composing. On the patio—quiet, ready to breathe in the star-milk. With the book, the nest of bandaged tears, I wrote for you (All the hours you kept my distress away from the murk of doom.)

You.

You’d see words on the page.

Blue eyes. I see blue eyes, caring, soft, full of promised stars, stare up at me. Again, is what they say.

I push aside the bottle of single malt, no longer full. Hold I do.

—bleeding wounds—

there will be no white doves to harpoon the heart, no soft, golden chain of gentle sleep

no town (of whole milk, and Elijah, singing James Taylor songs, come home from the sorrows and the weeds, and hello that comes with no excuses…or pretty holidays laughing aloud with Denise)

no… getting up

(won’t see the leaves turn…not this year.)

daring to care about someone who cares (always—moonlight/afternoon/when you

expressed that spark/when I droned drab generalities that meant nothing—cared) about

y-o-u

I can smell the coconut butter you used when you were sunbathing—you had the radio in the kitchen window, were humming along to Tommy James & the Shondells' "Crystal Blue Persuasion"

wish you could call to

me