

# {the entomologist}

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Her first memory is of rain. Sheets of it bearing down on the roof of her house, smacking the windows and tocking like the tongue on the roof of her mother's mouth. Through the window she sees the ocean pelted and roiling. A fog rolls in and the rest is darkness.

When she is six her mother asks her to feed the dog. It's summer and sunny out, the only time of year when it is such. She goes out onto the back porch. The dog is in a far corner of the yard, digging a hole through the great grassy lawn. She watches the dog for a few moments then turns to the large plastic container. It's so tall she has to get on her tip-toes. Having taken off the top she reaches in without looking inside. Her hands sift through the dry dog food in search of the elusive tin cup used for pouring. Her fingers touch dry pellet after dry pellet and then...a skittering, a squirming

little thing. More skittering, squirming things. She whips her hand out of the container and looks at it, horrified to see three earwigs crawling down her wrist. With a cry she flings them off and then runs screaming inside the house.

Later that summer, the summer of her sixth year, she walks around the rose bush in the backyard on the great grassy lawn. She hears a tremendous buzz and looks up to see the largest bee yet—its black furry hide seems to sweat in the sun. The sight of this too sends her into the house.

Over a decade later she is a teenager graduating from Bellingham High School on the coast of Washington State. Her sport is basketball, and she graduates captain of the team. To her basketball is the essential in life. She's fond of saying that if she were stranded on a desert island she'd need

only sunscreen, a Double-Double from In-N-Out, a Diet Coke and her teammates to survive. When a reporter from the local rag poses the question "Gilligan or the Skipper?" she answers, "I don't think I've ever watched that show." Her favorite movie is Father of the Bride. Her favorite quote, "Pause for Poise." She would like to think she's a nicer person off the court than on it, but she's uncertain if others would agree with that.

To get away from the rain she attends college in southern California. Here it rains at most three months out of the year instead of nine. She is ecstatic. She goes to the beach often, decides to major in history. Basketball is again a priority and she works her way quickly into the captain position. The key is to keep the competitive edge sharp. When a different reporter stops her after a big win and asks her what CD is currently in her player, she says, "I don't own any CDs."

One night she is brushing her teeth in her kitchen as she always does. The thing is she can't stand to watch people brush their teeth. This includes herself. It makes her nauseous. She rinses her mouth out in the

sink and when she looks up she sees a millipede crawling along the wall beside the light-switch. She watches it for a time. Does nothing to it. Goes to bed.

In one dream she is lying in bed, covered by a white sheet. The room is all white too. She lifts up the sheet to find the bed covered with earwigs. Slimy black little earwigs, their pincers working wildly. She sees that they are on the ceiling, the walls, they will soon black out the room. That's only one dream.

The story of a hamlet in the south of England, August 19, 1776. At just after noon on that day the village is beset upon by a vast horde of earwigs. The twittering little bugs move like a rolling carpet across the plain and descend on the homes, shops and livestock. The village's inhabitants flee. It will be another two days before they're able to return.

She begins to look at insects closely. Study them, in a sense, as only an amateur can. She watches their movements, takes notes on their activity patterns both night and day, and checks out books from the school library. She comes to

believe that insects will be the next great species to rule the world. It only makes sense. Life began with the fish, ocean dwellers, and then came the reptiles, dinosaurs, great hulking beasts of the earth. After the dinosaurs died out it was the mammals' turn. Still their turn. But when the mammals die out what will be left? Insects have patiently been waiting their turn for millions of years. They're up next. She imagines the future, a post-apocalyptic world where insects have mutated from nuclear fallout. Great deserts patrolled by roving bands of giant wasps, scorpions the size of semi-trucks basking in the bloody sun. Jungles and city ruins filled with spiders, centipedes, the scolopendromorphs and the mygalomorphs. And the people. She wonders if any people will be left alive in this future epoch. She wonders if it will ever rain. She considers changing her major.

"Okay, Gregor. I gotta go."

He is lying on his back, his arms folded, his legs crossed over one another. She has been dating him for too long now.

"Hey, I mean it. It's time."

She shakes him. His legs come uncrossed and splay forward. His arms remain folded, mummy-like, but his head falls to the side now, a bit of spittle issuing. She can no longer see his eyes behind his glasses. His nakedness, for the first time, shames her. As she's seen in movies, she presses two fingers against the side of his neck and waits. After a minute she calls 9-1-1.

She decides against the study of insects and graduates with a degree in history followed, a year and a half later, by a teaching credential. To her surprise, when she does earn her credential and finishes the requisite hours of student teaching, the job offers are few. It's not that she's a bad teacher, she thinks, it's just that there's not a lot of need for history teachers at this time. She applies everywhere—everywhere in California, that is. Hoping to stay in a beach city, if possible. But after months of no bites all up and down the coast, she begins to think maybe she's being just a bit too picky. She branches inland. A high school in San Diego's North County is looking for a history teacher. She

applies and is hired. Disappointed at having to leave the beach but well aware that a forty-five minute commute each way down twisting cliff-side roads five days a week would do her in, she reluctantly moves to her high school's small town. Her apartment is efficient and sad, but the job is good and she gets a cat. She'd like to get another but fears she might turn into a Cat Lady.

That is not to be, for she meets a man, another teacher, who's been at the high school for a few years now. He's a local and—to her immense happiness—a bit older, handsome and outgoing and very much interested in her. That he's the boy's basketball coach and a much-admired P.E. teacher is another plus. They date for just over a year before he proposes and she accepts. Since he owns horses and has convinced her, during this time, to accept these creatures as family, they move a little ways out of town to a place he's been eyeing for years.

She had never imagined herself living in the country but here she is now, standing in front of an old ranch house that sits on a sprawling three and a half

acres. She'll learn to at least like it. He says it just needs some fixing up. He was raised in the country, so he knows.

That first night they sleep on the floor in one of the rooms, surrounded by boxes, awaiting the bed that is only a day away. In the initial dawn-glow she awakes to find him against one of the walls, looking up, a shoe in one hand. Cautious, she approaches him.

“What is it?”

“Shhh. I think I got it.”

She too looks up and sees, just barely, a black widow spider in the corner, sitting still in its haphazardly-constructed web.

She holds down his arm. “Don't kill it.”

“Don't kill it? You crazy?”

“It'll be gone in the morning.”

“Honey. No way I'm leaving this thing in peace.”

But he can't seem to free his arm. She continues to observe.

“They're really beautiful,” she says.

“They’re probably all over the house. I’ll pick up some spray today. See if we can get by without calling an exterminator.”

“You’ll have to wait till the night.”

“I don’t know why we don’t have a broom.”

Three days later she is on a ladder set against the side of the house. Washing windows. It is early summer and she wears a hat, gloves, sunglasses, shorts and a plain t-shirt. She wishes she were taller.

He comes by, his body bent, his face strained.

“Any more widows?” she calls out cheerfully.

He grunts but stops to watch her.

“I’ll quit asking,” she says over her shoulder.

He stands there, watching.

“You know I wanted to study insects, when I was in undergrad.”

“Spiders aren’t insects, honey.”

She considers saying, Why not? but, seeing his look, decides against it.

Finally he says, “I’m gonna run and get us some sandwiches. You want the usual?”

She nods and he leaves. She hears the truck pull away.

The renovations have been coming along nicely. Already the sideboards have been painted anew, the window frames touched up—all except for those on this side of the house. She draws the hand-squeegee down the left side, the last side, of the window. The way she’s positioned the ladder, though, she can’t quite get it all. That very top left corner....She reaches, and as she reaches she feels the ladder wobble—just a bit, but enough for her to freeze. Pause for Poise. She looks down at an overgrowth of weeds and figures it’s at most a six foot fall. Nothing that would kill her, but still. She puts one foot on the next lowest rung and then pauses. That corner.... Determined, she stands back up and throws her arm out. It’s enough to nab the spot. It’s also enough to send the ladder toppling to the left. For an awful moment she feels nothing

beneath her, it's as if she's weightless, and then she feels the blood rush to her head, feels—for a few seconds—the weeds—and then something else: wood. Old, brittle wood. She lands on this wood, hard, and breaks through. An ugly crack rings out and she's falling, continuing to fall, her arms outstretched. A cellar? she has time to think. Weeds give way to webs and then she feels them, all of them, on her at once as she lands on her back in what could be dirt. A sudden jolt, her eyes open and close. For them, she opens her mouth, and the rest is darkness, thousands of silent screams, faces never thought to smile, shiny, taut skin, a new look, the last beauty borne.