

Swatted

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James had just sat down and finished his initial routine of settling into his post for the night when he first noticed the small, gnat-like bug on his desk. The bug was so small that it was only the contrast between the white of his report's paper and the dark brown-black color of the insect that made it visible. James stared at it for a few moments. The bug moved slowly, crawling along lazily toward the pen he laid down upon the security officer's hourly report. It was either late in the winter or early in the spring—James was never clear on which season it was officially on the calendar—and the first few flies of the season had begun to appear during the daytime, with a few moths and other obnoxious airborne, light-seeking critters also making their annual debut. Up here in Arizona's mountainous terrain near Globe, essentially out in the middle of nowhere, it seemed only logical to find oneself surrounded by wildlife of one form or another at most times of the year.

James was working the graveyard shift, manning a tiny little guard shack out in the wilderness. The one and only responsibility of this post was to ensure that unauthorized persons did not trespass onto the mine company's property and/or

tamper with equipment on the site. Well, and obviously he was required to stay awake for the duration of his entire shift, an obligation he could only meet by finding ways to amuse himself. There was no cell phone reception out here, he was miles away from any Wi-Fi connections, and he was having a hard time getting into the book he had brought along for the past couple of nights. There wasn't even a direct line of electricity out here; the only means by which he was able to have working lights and a heater in the little shack was from a portable diesel generator that hummed and clattered softly outside, illuminating the area with a few huge sodium-vapor lights. So, James busied himself with a crude and possibly cruel but what he saw as an essential activity.

He crushed the little bug upon the paper with his thumb, grinding it into a tiny wet spot and bits of little bug parts with a twisting, grinding motion.

The kill was not particularly satisfying. No chase, no effort, no skill required. Just... *squish*. Actually, *crunch*. For being such a tiny little bug, the insect's body seemed unusually strong, but still no match for the pressure of a single digit pressing it against a hard surface. He gave his thumb a single swipe upon his pants to clear away the remains of the critter before swiveling in his chair, leaning back, and taking a swig from his large insulated mug of coffee.

The bug hadn't been hurting anything, really. It wasn't a stinging insect. It wasn't going to eat his paperwork or get into his food and spread any diseases. It simply was there, and it annoyed him with its very presence. It had been one of those obnoxious little things whose only purpose in life seemed to be for the sake of trying to fly up one of his nostrils at an opportune moment, although what it might intend to do once it got there was a mystery. James denied it the opportunity to engage in that minor assault upon him, destroying the tiny little thing for the mere crime of having been in a place that he had deemed unsatisfactory.

Even in death, the little insect inconvenienced him, as the place of its demise left a little stain upon the corner of his report. It wasn't a big deal, really. Other security officers turned in papers that were splattered with coffee or had ink that was smeared by rain and so on. But James prided himself upon trying to be better at his job than anyone else, even if that job was fairly pointless and unskilled. As such, he crumpled the stained report, tossed it in a nearby waste basket, took out a fresh form, and began to fill in the blanks with relevant information. He also made a single tally mark on the back of the report, his way of keeping score of how many kills he made each night.

It was less than five minutes later when James got his second visitor of the night. Yet another little bug, this one only just slightly bigger than the first, maybe half the size of a common housefly. He heard it before he saw it, creeping into the cramped and poorly-sealed guard shack through a gap under the door. He looked up and around, trying to locate the gnat-fly-thing, and only caught flashing glimpses of it as it buzzed around the room. The sound of its flight would occasionally stop as it alighted upon some random surface, then resume again as it went about its mission of finding some way to annoy him. Soon, the little bug focused upon its target of choice, a choice that would cost the miniscule creature its life.

James swatted the side of his head as the bug landed upon the top of his right ear. The slapping blow crushed the bug between his palm and the side of his head. It was a bit of a stupid move, slapping his palm against his ear like that and making his eardrum ring and ache in the process. Yet again, the remains of a dead bug inconvenienced him, getting tiny bits of bug in the strands of his close-cropped hair. He flicked them away with a few brushes of his hand, cursing under his breath, made a second tally mark on the back of his report, and then sat back in his chair to take another sip of coffee.

Quite a bit of time passed before the next intruder came long. It was at the top of his second hour into the shift when he heard another buzzing insect, this one sounding like a typical housefly. It buzzed and gently bumped against the glass of the window, getting briefly trapped between the slats of the plastic window blind and the window pane as flies always did.

Now things were going to get interesting. James reached for the beat-up old plastic fly swatter that hung from a push-pin shoved into the wood trim around the front door. Little gnats and mosquitoes were annoying enough, but flies were where the sport was really at. The idea wasn't so much just to wait until a fly landed before swatting it, but rather to smack them right out of the air in mid-flight. To James, it was a more sporting and fair way to kill. It was also a bit more gratifying, perhaps even satisfying him on a somewhat sadistic level, as a fly would often get bounced off a nearby wall with enough force to stun but not kill it. In such an event, James would then either get to choose between allowing the fly to recover and take flight once more, or to simply deliver the coup de grace by killing it where it lay twitching upon its back.

As with the others, this fly appeared to be a slow-mover. Bugs tended to be pretty sluggish this early in the season, especially at night, because the temperatures were still low enough that it made it difficult for them to move. Instead of quickly darting through the air with such speed and with random, sharp changes in its flight path, the fly made lazy circles and loops through the air of the shack as it sought out... whatever it was that it sought. James held the fly swatter firmly, studied its movements, and waited for a good chance to swing.

He realized just how absurd and stupid this all probably sounded. He'd needed to sit through an eight-hour long class just to get his permit to be a security guard in the state of Arizona, had waited as a background check had been conducted on him, had needed to pee in a cup for a drug test, then had additionally been required to sit through no less than three days' worth of safety training just for the privilege of working on a mine site, although he was never anywhere close to anything resembling actual mining activity. All of this training, preparation, and certification... just to sit around, drink coffee, and swat bugs all night. It was perhaps only once a month that he saw any form of human activity during any part but the very end of his shift when the mine workers would start to arrive. Once, just once, he had needed to chase off some angry Native Americans that were harassing him, angry about how the mining company had apparently screwed them out of some old land-sharing agreement. The rest of the time, this was as exciting as it ever got, so he had to make the most of it. After all, swatting bugs in the middle of nowhere sure beat the hell out of working in retail and dealing with rude idiots all day, every day.

Whack-thump! He felt and heard the impact as the swatter scored a solid hit on the fly and sent it careening into a nearby wall. James couldn't figure out where the fly had landed, though. He could hear it buzzing around on the floor somewhere. He got up from his chair, scooted it back, and began hunting for the fly. Like a Roman emperor determining the fate of a fallen gladiator, he needed to evaluate the fly's condition before deciding to give it a thumbs-up (let it recover to fly again) or thumbs-down (kill it where it lay). As he peeked under his desk, the fly surprised him by recovering more quickly than he'd expected. The bug flew out from under the desk and zipped right by his face, causing him to jerk back with a cry of alarm.

What the hell was he afraid of? A fly? Seriously? The things didn't bite, at least not these little things. It wasn't one of those big horse fly things, those big, fat, blue-black, hairy little monsters. Those didn't usually show up until summer, which was still a couple of months off. This was just a stupid little fly... and a weirdly-colored one, at that. He noticed the unusual color of the fly as it finally landed upon his desk, almost mocking him by crawling across the fresh white page of his report.

Come on, the fly seemed to be taunting him. *Swat me. I dare you. I'm just going to make an even bigger mess of your paperwork than the last little guy. You thought that little gnat made a mess? Just think how big of a splat I'm going to make if you smash me! A big, lumpy, yellow-green, snot-like mess of bug guts and...*

Whack! James swung at the fly on the desk. So what if he had to start his report over again? He was only an hour or so along, and it wasn't like he had anything else going on. But as he lifted the swatter from his page, he saw that the page was clean. A buzzing to his left informed him that the fly had escaped his swing somehow. How embarrassing, to miss a clean, easy shot like that when he had so skillfully smacked it right out of the air a few moments beforehand. He was sure of it now. This fly had to go, no mercy, no sport, just kill it.

He missed a couple of times, but on the third swing, he finally nailed the fly again in mid-air. It bounced off the closed window blinds and landed upon the desk. He finished it off with a firm downward slash of the swatter, wielding it almost like a samurai sword, and he turned it into a goopy, nasty splat on a corner of the desk before it could recover and zip away again. He scooted the trash can over, scraped the remains of the fly off the edge of the desk with the edge of the swatter, and then kicked the wastebasket back under the desk. James grabbed a spray can of window cleaner and a roll of paper towels, tore off a square, folded it neatly, and cleaned the remaining bug-smear from the worn and chewed-up old desk. He added one more mark to the back of his report, and then settled into his chair again, tipping back his mug of coffee that had now turned cool and somewhat gross.

He waited for almost thirty minutes for the next insect to appear. Outside, he could see a few moths bumping against the glass as they sought the glare of the ceiling light inside his shack. A thin cluster of bugs of assorted sizes swirling around the lights on the pole above the diesel generator. He kept the swatter in one hand, tapping it upon his shoe impatiently as he sat with his ankle propped upon his knee.

Eventually, he started to space out. His thoughts drifted away from the bug hunt and off to other things: repairs he needed to make to his truck, things he wanted to change with his house, and the cute girl that his friend was trying to send his way by putting in a good word for him. It wasn't long before those wandering thoughts started to turn into something bordering upon sleep. It was when he actually caught his head lolling forward with a half-snore escaping his lips that he sat upright abruptly, then stood. He shook his head vigorously, slapped his cheeks a few times, and took the lid off his coffee cup. He tossed out the cold, stale coffee and set about the task of brewing a fresh pot.

It was too damned early in the shift for him to be nodding off like this. Normally, it wasn't a problem for him to stay up all night on a graveyard shift, even at this ridiculously boring post. But while he was trying to sleep during daylight hours, the rest of the world lived on, and they were annoyingly noisy about it. His neighbor on one side had a piece-of-crap pickup truck with no muffler, and that guy was coming and going at all hours of the day and night, always standing on the throttle when he took off. His neighbor on the other side was usually quiet, but lately he'd been having some contractors build a ramp up to the front door for his elderly mother's motorized wheelchair. Between the annoying pickup, the construction noises, and that stupid damned woodpecker that thought the satellite dish on top of his house was a tree, he'd been lucky to even get a solid four hours of sleep the day before. Now, he was trying to drink away his weariness with the magic of coffee beans.

James had only left the shack's door open for just a few seconds, only long enough for him to step out, chuck the mug full of coffee away into the dirt outside, and then head back inside. Apparently, that bit of time had been long enough to invite in yet another bug, another fly ... bigger, fatter, hairier, and louder with its buzzing. He was more annoyed than unsettled by the fact that this appeared to be one of those big flies that could bite. It was pretty surprising to see one this big and this early in the season. Did these things hibernate or something? He wasn't all that familiar with bug details, only that the bigger they were, the more likely they were to bite or sting him.

Well, it didn't matter. Fly swatter in hand, James felt a smirk tug at the corner of his mouth as he closed the door, sealing the big fly's fate. *You're on my turf now*, he thought. *You just made your last mistake, coming into my shack.*

In spite of its size, this fly was quicker and craftier. It dodged no less than four of his swings, and it seemed to refuse to land upon anything for more than half a second. His sleepiness had made him a little slow to react, but the excitement of the chase was quickly waking him up. Adding a small thrill to the chase was the small but real potential for the fly to bite him, especially if he chose to ignore it and sit still long enough for the fly to land upon him.

Sitting still didn't seem like much of an option, though. Not only was this fly active, it actually seemed to be coming after him. Over and over again, the fly kept zipping towards his head and upper torso, veering off at the last instant as he either bobbed his head out of the way or took a swing at it with the swatter. He got it, though. It was a sloppy hit, actually striking the fly with the shaft of the swatter rather than the wide, flat, plastic part, but it bounced it off a wall and onto the floor. James let out a triumphant laugh and swung for the fly as it buzzed around

in a circle upon the floor, trying to upright itself. He hit it... and it continued to buzz and spin around. He hit it again. It still buzzed. This was one tough damned fly.

He finally wasted it with a solid and shack-shaking stomp from the heel of his hiking boot. He could feel just how solid and crunchy that fly was, almost freakishly hard-bodied, thus understanding why his fly swatter had been inadequate for a killing blow. Maybe he needed to come up with something more heavy-duty for these bigger bugs? As he marked another kill on the back of his report, filled the decanter from the nearby water cooler, and started scooping Golfers coffee into the filter basket, he began to think of how he could make a hardcore bug-smashing swatter. Maybe a thick piece of rubber from something like a truck's mud flap attached with bolts and washers to a piece of steel rebar?

The auto-drip coffeemaker gurgled, hissed, and filled the atmosphere of the little shack with the pleasing aroma of its fresh liquid sleep substitute. So loud was this little device within the confines of the shack that James didn't initially notice the louder, deeper buzz of yet another bug... bigger, more sturdy, and actually more threatening than the last. This one looked a lot like a hornet or a wasp, although it was unlike any he had seen before. It had the same body and wing shape as a hornet, but it was thicker, fatter, and visibly hairy, sort of like a bee. And it was colored all wrong, both beautiful and ominous at once with its iridescent natural paintjob that changed from blue to green to black, depending upon how the overhead light hit it. This bug wasn't afraid to land and crawl around on walls and such, and it wasn't fast at all. In fact, it was so slow that he probably could have snatched it right out of the air with his hand... if not for the fact that it visibly had a stinger, as well as some wicked-looking pincers.

What the hell is that thing? James thought with a bit of alarm. He had never in his life seen a bug like this, not even in pictures on the Internet or on any of those nature shows on TV. Of course, he was out here in the mountains, out in the middle of freaking nowhere, one man amidst the high desert wilderness. For all he knew, this thing was probably fairly common for the area, but he'd certainly never heard about it. He would have expected to have heard tales from others about these big, fat, dark-colored wasp things, especially about how painful their stings and/or bites might be. What were they called? Bird-eaters? Demon wasps? People pokers?

It was while he was pondering this that the bug made its first go at him. And that's exactly what it was, a deliberate and direct flight path right for his face. He ducked with a cry of alarm, feeling it zip by so closely that he could feel the air movement from its wings, the heavy buzz causing the hairs on the back of his neck to stand on end. Somehow, as crazy a thought as it might have been, James just knew that this thing was purposely attacking him. There was no other way it could be. He was the only other living thing in that little room, and this bug followed its first fly-by with another almost immediately after. James swung at it wildly with the swatter as he bobbed and weaved like a clumsy boxer within the confines of the shack.

At one point, he felt the swatter make contact with the huge, dark bug, and the hum of its flight sputtered for a moment as it had to regain its bearings. James saw the bug bob around in the air, turn to face him, and then hover right in place.

And then it just stayed there, buzzing angrily, its wings sounding almost like one of those little remote-controlled helicopters. It stayed, it hovered ... and it stared at him. It actually stared at him with a conscious, intelligent, knowing sort of look that was absolutely not the behavior of a typical bug.

What the hell was going on here? Was this some kind of super bug, some rare mutant thing that had either been spawned by the toxic chemicals of the nearby mine? Was it some ancient, prehistoric insect that had been hibernating for millions of years and then awoken and released when the mine had dug up its eggs? Crazy theories bounced around in James's head as he locked stares with this fat hornet-fly-whatever thing, gripping the swatter so tightly in his hand that the wire frame of its handle was bending.

James took a step to the left. The bug adjusted its hovering and moved in the same direction, stopping its side-tracking at the same time he stopped moving. James feinted at the bug, jabbing the swatter in its direction. The bug zipped back and higher, then resumed hovering.

Okay, he thought, this is going from weird to downright creepy. Bugs don't act like this. Bugs aren't this smart. And they sure as hell don't stare back at people like this. Even birds rarely seemed to exhibit this kind of intelligence, and those were vastly more complex and advanced creatures than these little things. Whatever the case was, James was locked in a battle with this bug. And, worst of all, this thing was between him and the door. Darting out and slamming the door shut behind him wasn't even an option. The only way out was through this bug.

The swatter just wasn't going to do. James knew that already. The only thing it was going to accomplish was to annoy this big ol' bug even more. He needed something stronger, something with more firepower, so to speak. With just his eyes, he frantically began to scan the surrounding area and consider his options. The only things that seemed like a viable option were the cardboard folders full of stapled-together reports. Those would be big and heavy enough to crush this bug, but light enough that he could swing them with enough speed to score a hit.

He tossed the swatter aside to the desk. Amazingly, as he did that, the bug stopped hovering and lowered itself onto the edge of the window. Had the bug actually understood the significance of the swatter? Had it seen him discard it and accepted that as a sign of either surrender or a truce? It seemed absolutely nuts to even think an insect could be that smart, but the change in behavior was immediate and obvious. The bug crawled around the bottom edge of the window sill, turning its side to him but still watching him with one of its two big, bulbous, shiny black eyes without pupils.

The folders were directly behind James, located on top of a shelf where they stood on end among some other binders full of older reports, post orders, and so on. He put his hands behind his back, eased away from the window and nearly up against the wall where the set of shelves stood, and grabbed one folder with each hand. As he drew away from the shelf again, clutching the folders readily and tightly in preparation, the bug seemed to notice the purpose in his movement. It turned to face him directly again, squatting down slightly as if it might disregard its wings and simply jump right at his face.

Just as James drew almost within arms' reach of the windowsill, the bug sprang up into the air. Flinching back with alarm in the same instant, James swung both

arms around in front of him and clapped the folders together so solidly and loudly that it was like a gunshot within the little shack. He fell backward and his shoulders slammed up against the wall and shelf, knocking the cheap little calendar off the small finishing nail it hung from upon the wall. He saw the bug drop from between the folders and fall to the floor. It was visibly damaged and twitching. James stomped upon it. It kept twitching. He stomped, and stomped, and stomped yet again, finally standing on the thing with his heel and doing a violent twisting motion back and forth. Some crazy part in the back of his mind started playing an old Chubby Checker tune, as anyone who might have seen this would have thought he was doing some kind of silly dance. The insane grin of satisfaction and victory he felt upon his face only added to the wild scene. After a moment, James even heard himself giggling with a mad sort of giddiness.

When he finally lifted his foot, he saw the bug was a crushed, mangled, torn-up mess of black bits, yellow and clear snot-like fluids, and disconnected legs and wings. On some level, he sort of wished that he could have found a different way of killing it, somehow preserving the body of the insect so that he could maybe show it to one of his co-workers or even take it in to some place where they might be able to identify it. He wanted... no, he had to know now what the hell this thing was, this bug that had been so smart that it could match him move-for-move and stare him down like that.

James's hands were trembling with adrenaline, both from fear and exhilaration, as he again used the swatter to dispose of the bug's remains, scooping them up off the floor like he was using a spatula for eggs on a fry pan. The leftovers of the thing actually stunk like nothing he'd ever been around before, sort of smelling like a sick cross between spearmint and dog feces. He dumped the bug carcass into the trash can, made a big fat tally mark of victory on the back of his report, and celebrated the outcome of this battle by pouring some freshly-brewed coffee into his insulated mug. He didn't like drinking his coffee black, but he didn't have any creamer on hand at the time. The coffee seemed redundant now, as he was more than awake at that point and probably wouldn't be able to sleep once he got home from his shift. His bit of combat with that big, ugly, and disturbingly intelligent arthropod probably would be giving him nightmares for a day or two.

It was as he was considering this, scratching away a brief note on his report—"No activity, all secure," because "fought and killed a big, scary bug" would just sound absurd—that he heard a scratching, sort of crunching sound coming from one of the windows. About an hour and a half had passed since his duel with the big bug. His hands had stopped shaking, but he was still wide-awake and a bit jumpy at that point. He had nothing to fear at that point. He'd killed his big bug for the night. The fat horsefly had been enough of an oddity in itself, but that monster wasp-thing had been a complete one-off, something he'd never encounter again. Anything else that might bother him that night was bound to be smaller, weaker, more insignificant, and less of a threat to him. Mosquitoes were the worst he had to fear at night, and up in the mountains, nowhere near a still body of water, they were pretty much non-existent.

As such, when James stood and yanked down the cord of the blinds to raise them out of the way, he was expecting to see another bug of some kind, or maybe even some kind of a rodent – a mouse, maybe even a raccoon trying to find its way

inside in search of whatever old food it smelled from the trash can inside. What he wasn't expecting to see, however, was a hole that had been chewed through the wooden frame next to the window, roughly an inch in diameter, with little bits of drywall and wood shavings getting pushed out of it. Apparently, this was how the last bug had gotten inside. And it looked like another one was trying to follow it in through the same hole... something even bigger, if that was even possible.

James cursed loudly as he recoiled from the sight, sloshing hot coffee onto his hand from the mug he still held. Quickly, he set the mug down upon his desk, flinging away the coffee that was mildly burning him. He started looking around inside the shack quickly now, desperate to find something to either fight this new bug or at least to prevent it from getting inside. He'd had a hard enough time fighting that last one in such tight quarters, and he'd been damned lucky to kill that thing the way he had. He didn't want to push his luck with this newest enemy.

What the hell was going on here, anyway? This was just too coincidental, too weird to just be a random thing. Bugs did not arrive in progressively larger sizes and varieties just to bother humans. It was like they were being sent out one at a time from a home base, some sort of bug airport that dispatched them like little buzzing fighter jets. The first little gnat had maybe been the same as a little Cessna airplane; that big, evil bastard he had just killed was the equivalent of an F-22 Raptor. What the hell was trying to get at him now? The insectoid version of a B-2 stealth bomber? Maybe a B-52?

James was almost out of options. He briefly considered using the handle of the broom, but he realized that it was too flimsy to be useful as a weapon, since it was just a thin tube of aluminum or tin with an even thinner layer of plastic over it. He couldn't very well swat the bug with anything, as it still seemed to be burrowing its way through the wall. A crazy thought occurred to him to use the nearby aerosol can of spray lubricant as a flame thrower, but he didn't have a lighter or any other way of igniting it. Even if he had, he probably would have wound up burning down the little shack in the process of trying to kill a stupid insect, however big it might have been.

James saw the head of the insect beginning to make its way through the drywall and wood now. It was absolutely huge, ridiculously large. The head was almost as big around as a baseball, with big, black, shiny eyes and some seriously wicked-looking mandibles crunching away at the wall's material in its effort to get inside. It was coming for him. It wasn't just blindly exploring and trying to find food. It wanted him, specifically. He didn't know how, but he just knew for sure that this bug had a personal grudge against him. It wanted to hurt him. It probably wanted to kill him, maybe even eat him.

James went with the only thing he had on hand that could even be called a weapon: his pocket knife. Given, the post he was working was technically an unarmed security officer position, and both company policy and state law prohibited him from being armed on the site of such a post. But a pocket knife wasn't really a weapon, especially not the one he had, just a simple folding knife from an auto parts store with a blade less than four inches long. He drew it out from where it was clipped to the seam of his pocket, flicked it open, and waited until the bug had burrowed its way just inside of the wall far enough that he was

sure it couldn't come back out. The bug saw him, intelligently looking up to him as it bit off that last piece of drywall and began to wriggle its way through.

I see you, it seemed to be saying. I'm coming for you. You killed my little cousins. Your ass is mine!

"Not tonight," James replied to the unspoken threat as he struck.

The bug seemed to try to shrink back an instant before he hit it, but it couldn't crawl forward or backward through the hole in the wall fast enough to get in the way. As smart as it might have been, and however much of a threat it might have been to James if it had been crawling or flying around freely, it had put itself in a stupid position of helplessness. The blade of James's pocket knife pierced right through the bug's eye and plunged into its head, skewering it fully until the tip of the blade jutted out the opposite side and its other eye.

The bug shuddered, scabbled, and buzzed inside its place of demise within the wall, a mostly clear but yellowish liquid oozing out of the mortal wound to its head. Just for good measure, James twisted the knife inside the bug's cranium—assuming that's what an insect's head was technically called, he didn't know or care—and more pus-like fluid oozed out, along with some grayish-brownish stuff that might have been bug brains. The thing still thrashed and vibrated in its death throes, but it wasn't trying to go anywhere. It was just a bunch of dying nerves now, just an invertebrate changing from an animate thing to an inanimate object... just the stuff of nightmares.

Except it wasn't dead. Not quite, it wasn't. What James had initially thought was the creature's dying moments now seemed to be an attempt to regain its bearings. Instead, it was now trying to crawl back out of the hole in retreat. He couldn't allow that. Hell no! If that thing left, it was going to... to... to do what? Call for reinforcements? Scream for help? Cry out for its mama?

That last thought sent a chill down his spine. These things were getting bigger, smarter, and meaner. Just how big were they going to get? Just how huge and nasty was this thing's mother? Or queen? Or whatever the hell was spawning these nightmare cooties?

He had to make sure it was dead. Sure, killing the other bugs had apparently summoned bigger and badder relatives. But this one had to be the king (or queen) of the bunch. This was as big as they possibly could have been. The laws of nature and reality and so forth just couldn't allow for anything bigger. Surely, in this day and age, someone would have found an insect of this size and recorded its existence. Something this big would have made the news, pictures of it splashed all over the Internet, and probably been used to some effect in a horror movie... or at least a fake recreation of it.

And even if this was some exceedingly rare example, maybe just a one-off freak of nature, then this was the one and only. This was as bad as they could be. And some bug this big and bad simply could not be allowed to carry on and live. What if it bred? What if those other bugs had been its babies, and this was the mama bug? He had to stop this thing, kill it, and make sure there wouldn't be any more after it. He had to stop the monster bug bloodline at this generation.

Even if he had to go out and look for this thing's nest—it couldn't have been far from the shack, given how many of them had shown up—and he had to destroy it. Maybe he would siphon some diesel fuel from the generator, pour it on there, and

burn it up somehow. Or, if nothing else, just report it to the mine company and have them send some professional exterminators out here to deal with them. Yeah, that was probably a better option. He didn't want to fight any more of these little monsters himself. He might be a little crazy, but he wasn't completely out of his gourd.

James left the knife-impaled bug squirming in the wall and went outside for a better weapon. He knew exactly what to use and where to find it. For anything else but maybe a rabid badger or coyote or other small four-legged mammal, it might have been overkill. But in this case, it seemed entirely appropriate. These things were hard and tough. These things had some seriously heavy-duty shells protecting them. Even if it wasn't buried halfway in the wall, his boot wasn't up to the task for this thing.

He went around the corner and grabbed the four-foot length of galvanized steel pipe that was propped up against the guard shack. It was left there as a piece of some temporary chain-link fencing the company had been using around the perimeter of the equipment yard, before the mining company had contracted a security company to send actual guards out here to keep an eye on their bulldozers and backhoes. It was an unofficial but well-known piece of equipment that the officers had kept on that post as a "just in case" measure. Again, they'd had incidents in the past with some rowdy Native Americans giving them problems. If two or more of them showed up and wanted to start a fight, well... he might not be legally able to have a gun at that post, but he could certainly wield a scrap piece of metal as an improvised weapon to help even the odds. Or, in this case, to help deal with a severe bug infestation.

James took the pipe in both hands and was already raising it up in readiness as he rounded the opposite corner of the shack. He was going to nail this thing from behind as it was in the wall, maybe even shove the pipe right up its bug ass. That thought faded just a bit as he saw the other half of the bug and just how monstrous its full size and form really was, a sight that halted him and made his jaw drop open wide.

The insect had to be at least a foot and a half long in total. Almost a foot of its rear-end was still sticking out of the wall, the other half buried in the wall with its head stuck through the other side and impaled by his pocket knife. Apparently, the pocket knife was keeping it from backing out of the hole successfully. He wasn't sure how the hell the thing could be smart enough to still even think to do that, being that he'd shoved a sharpened length of steel right through its head. But there again, he didn't know everything there was to know about bugs. For all he knew, this thing's brain was in its butt, right by the giant inch-long stinger that he saw waving around from its backside like a huge, black thorn.

Anatomy be damned, he knew enough about insects to know that stinger was a huge threat to him. If that thing got loose from the wall—in fact, it seemed to be trying to pull its own head off just to escape—then what would happen if that big huge stinger found its way under his skin? Pain, obviously, and a whole lot of it. Poison? Probably. Maybe some kind of paralyzing neurotoxin, something to immobilize him so it could package him up in a cocoon like a spider and munch on him at its leisure, or maybe drag him off to its lair and feed him to its babies? Hell, maybe that stinger was exactly how it made its babies. Maybe that was some

kind of a bug penis? Or what if the thing used that to inject eggs into its victims, and the babies hatched and ate their host from the inside out?

This was too much. James had to get the hell out of there. But not before taking this sucker down once and for all. With a cry of both rage and fear, James raised the pipe overhead and brought it crashing down upon the back of the bug. There was a solid thump and a bit of a crunch, just a bit of sticky goo that clung to the tip of the pipe with that first hit. It wasn't enough. The bug was still thrashing, only stunned for an instant by that first hit. James raised the pipe again and brought it down again. And again. And again and again. He realized he was making a frantic, hysterical sort of whimpering, keening sound as he bludgeoned the gargantuan insect into a nasty pulp. If this wasn't such an insane situation to begin with, he would've been certain that he'd completely gone off the deep end.

The bug guts absolutely reeked. The smell was utterly indescribable, terribly pungent and rotten, but with that same weird minty sort of edge to it that most any other bug had. Yellow, clear, some parts almost flesh-toned, the insect's innards oozed and splattered out as James pummeled apart the thing's back half. He only stopped when he had destroyed enough of it that he was succeeding only in hitting the side of the guard shack itself instead of what little of the bug was left exposed. He stopped, let the goo-sheathed end of the pipe clank down upon the gravel, and he paused to catch his breath, trying to calm down.

Okay, he thought. It's over. I got it. I got that ugly sucker. It's dead. I'm safe. Everything's cool now. It's been absolutely crazy, beyond nuts, but it's a done deal now. There's only a couple more hours left until dawn, and then just another hour until my relief gets here in the morning, along with the miners. The other guys are never going to believe this crap. I'm going to have to save the leftovers, just leave this mess right where it is so I can show it to them. They won't believe me without some kind of proof. Even taking a picture wouldn't be enough to convince anyone that this thing was real. They'd just say I digitally edited the...

A somewhat distant sound made James freeze right in place. He felt something quivering in his chest like a piece of muscular jelly and realized that it was his heart, not just beating frantically but practically trying to punch its way out of his chest. He was barely able to discern the other sound over the throbbing drumbeats of his pulse in his ears, but it was there, clear as could be and terrifying as hell: deep, low, and loud, the humming sound of an approaching insect... one bigger than anything that should have ever crawled upon this very planet at any point in history.

That was it. He was done. He was so out of this place. He didn't care if nobody believed him. He didn't care if he got written up or even fired for abandoning his post. It just wasn't worth it anymore. This wasn't a game anymore. This wasn't some silly, slightly sadistic means of passing the time on a lonely job assignment. This had become a fight for survival, an honest-to-God life and death struggle. And the thing that he heard humming around in the darkness, the area lit only by the spotty glare of the diesel generator's lights and the starry, moonless night sky above, was certainly going to be more than he could handle.

The pipe wasn't going to do it. He wasn't stupid or crazy enough to make a stand against some nightmarish mega-bug with nothing but a length of steel pipe in his hands. Hell, he wasn't even sure that a twelve-gauge shotgun was going to

be up to the task here. He had to leave. He had to bail, to get the hell out of Dodge, and that needed to happen, like, yesterday. He had to be the one to call in reinforcements, summon the cavalry, or maybe just cry for his mommy—yeah, a grown-ass man in his thirties, crying for mommy.

Man-sized insects will do that to a person... it was man-sized, as he glimpsed a shadow of it streaking by overhead, some huge and heavy thing so massive that its passing caused a little gust of wind in its wake. It flew right by the lights of the generator, maybe just seeking to snap up a mouthful of some of those other bugs that had been flying around it—he'd seen bats and nocturnal birds doing that all the time—or maybe just to give him just a horrifying glance at just how massive and terrible it was. He didn't have a chance to make out the entirety of its form, just a flash of dark iridescent colors, huge wasp-like wings, several crab-like and hairy legs, and a pointy rear-end that likely held a stinger the size of a railroad spike.

He practically dove into his little Chevrolet SUV. It was an old and beat-up thing with a quarter of a million miles on the odometer, but it was his, it was paid off, and it had never left him stranded. That reliability, as well as its ability to handle rugged roads, was what he was counting on to get him the hell out of that place and away from this devil-bug land. He slammed the door shut, locked it—yeah, probably pointless, but he wasn't taking any chances now—and he frantically dug the keys out of his pocket. It took him three tries to get his shaking hands to successfully guide the key into the ignition and turn it. The V6 engine cranked and then gurgled to life, a thing of unimpressive horsepower but plenty of torque, and James yanked the gearshift lever down into Drive. He stabbed the gas pedal with his right foot, and the right-rear tire spun and loudly flung gravel everywhere as it momentarily fought for traction. He turned the little old S10 Blazer toward the gravel road leading away from the mine property and out toward Highway 60, fishtailing a bit and bouncing him around in the driver's seat until he eased off the throttle just long enough to grab his seat belt and start trying to latch it into position.

Just as the buckle found its home and clicked into place, he heard a terribly loud *thump* as something very heavy dropped onto the top-rear of the SUV with enough force to make the suspension nearly bottom out. James screamed an expletive in response, and began shouting that curse word over and over and over again as he raced recklessly for the highway, as if it had become a single-word prayer that might somehow protect him from the multi-legged monstrosity that was now surely latched onto the top of his vehicle. That stupid roof rack, the prominent exterior feature of his SUV that he had never once used, had now apparently found its purpose as a hang-on for a bug from hell.

He kept repeating his vulgar one-word prayer, louder and more frantic, as he heard the scratching and scraping of claw-like appendages searching for traction upon the roof of the SUV as he sailed and banged over bumps and holes in the road. It seemed nothing short of a miracle that he successfully made it onto Highway 60 without destroying the suspension of his vehicle. The sharp, tire-squealing turn he made onto the highway seemed to finally tear the giant bug loose from the Chevy, as he heard that long, screeching, scratching sound of its feet/claws/whatever dragging across the roof and suddenly going away. He

strained to look up and back with the rear-view mirror on his door, unable to see any sign of the huge bug, nor able to hear its humming wings or the scraping of its appendages upon the metal of his vehicle...

...but he did see the lights of a massive tractor-trailer bearing down upon him, just a moment too late. The last thing he heard before the deafening, crushing impact was its blaring horn and his own tongue-swallowing gasp of surprise.

The next night, his fellow security officers were passing off the usual information and the new set of keys for the guard shack and gate—new, because the others were still probably trapped within the horrific wreckage of James's Chevy. Naturally, there was a somber moment of reflection as they both expressed sorrow at the loss of a fellow security guard, a solid co-worker, and someone who had seemed like an all-around nice guy in general. Nobody had yet figured out why in the world he had abandoned his post in the middle of his shift like he had, taking off like a bat out of hell in his compact SUV and heading west toward Gold Canyon. He'd never really hinted that he was so displeased with his job that he had even been thinking of quitting, but maybe he'd just had some sort of a late-night revelation and decided that he'd had enough, that he was just sick of the whole security gig, and he'd just decided to go home, get some sleep, and start a new career the next day. He couldn't really be blamed. The job was boring as hell and didn't pay a lot, anyway.

But whatever his reasoning had been, James had apparently been in such a rush to get out of there that he had zipped out onto Highway 60 without stopping or yielding, and had thus pulled right out in front of a semi that had been carrying a full load of acid toward one of the mines in Pinto Valley. There was no way in hell the heavily-loaded big rig could have stopped in time, even if James hadn't been traveling in the oncoming lane for some idiotic reason. Those smooth-bore liquid-carrying trailers had a tendency to allow all of that weight to shift forward under hard braking, carrying it all forward like a giant, unstoppable missile and crushing that little SUV like a bug on a windshield... or a gnat under the pressure of a thumb pushing down upon a desk. They hadn't so much extracted James's body from the wreckage as much as they'd scooped him off the road and hosed him out of the twisted pile of metal.

The worst part, the guards agreed, was that this wasn't the first time something like this had happened. There had been that other guy, what was his name... Frank? Fred? Whatever. It had only been about a month beforehand, in fact. The guy had apparently been drinking on the job, as they had found alcohol in his system afterward, and he had apparently hopped into his car around midnight and taken off toward Globe, apparently making a late-night beer run. Well, Frank-Fred-Whatever had nodded off or passed out or whatever, floored the gas, and driven straight past a barrier and down into a deep ravine, rolling the car several times and crushing the roof upon him.

One of the guards suggested there might be some kind of curse on the post, some kind of hex placed upon the area or the company or maybe just the security guards by those angry Native American folk. In fact, one of the guards said, they remembered hearing that the local tribe had claimed the land was sacred, that there were powerful forces in the land that had to be respected. The white man—

well, not just the whites but anyone non-Native, really—just couldn't understand this and just wasn't willing to live in harmony with the spirits. They would be punished, the tribe had warned them. Maybe that was the case here. Or maybe not. Maybe James had just lost his marbles, and maybe Frank-Fred-Whatever had just been an irresponsible drunk.

And they couldn't figure out what the hell had bored through the wall next to the window, or what that sticky crap was all over the pocket knife that he found on the floor behind the desk. Maybe the Natives had been throwing eggs at the guard shack? Perhaps that was what had set off James. Maybe he'd confronted them, maybe gotten out his pocket knife to threaten them, and then he'd finally given up and decided he'd had enough of the harassment. That actually sort of made sense. Well, except they couldn't figure why the knife was covered in that dried egg-like goop, nor what the hole in the wall was all about.

Either way, the guards parted ways on that note, and the graveyard shift guy settled into his chair, not really looking forward to the next eight hours of boredom. About thirty minutes later, as he sat there reading his book—it was some wacky sci-fi tale about vampires in a parallel world—he saw a tiny little gnat-like bug land on the upper corner of his open book. It wasn't hurting anything, just a little bug. He turned the page and just ignored it.

He left it alone... and it left him alone.

