

June Bug

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I looked at the brown patches on my lawn and smiled. I would soon have the upper hand on those crawling, digging, root-eating bastards. I would reclaim my lawn. It was May and I knew that they were there; I had seen them. Some of them had begun to emerge, all fat and cocky and repulsive. Their bodies beat against my lighted windows at night.

The streetlight drew them to my corner and the shade from my tree gave them solace; the roots of my lawn, sustenance. I had owned this house for a couple of years now and I had taken the bad lawn for granted, but a little research showed me the error of this acceptance; the error of leaving these hidden predators alone. I'd decided that I was going to have the perfect home, and a perfect home must have a perfect lawn.

Any day now my secret weapon was going to arrive. I sensibly recoiled from the thought of using pesticides on them; filling my lawn, my pets, my vegetable garden with poison. My neighbors could slowly kill themselves with their lush chemically-supported lawns if they must, but I refused to contribute to that game. I had something much more satisfying in mind.

Come fall, when the nacreous white eggs of these monsters hatch and the squirming creatures emerge to dig in for winter, I would unleash a biological horror in the form of nematodes; parasites that burrow into their brains and bodies, eating them from the inside, laying eggs and consuming them alive as they nest in my lawn. A fitting fate. There would be no escape then. But now, no, nematodes would have to wait for their own season.

The brown UPS truck squeaked and rattled up my block, passing me by again, and I sighed. Patience. Soon.

I was sitting at an early dinner on Friday, flipping through the Burpee's catalog and dreaming of tomatoes and zucchini and sunflowers and lilies, when the doorbell rang. Ahh! The fabled ring-and-run of the UPS delivery person. I nearly skipped to the door all a-tingle with anticipation, arriving just in time to hear the grind and roar of the truck driving down the block. I opened the door and, looking down, there was a box lying on the mat. "Welcome".

It seemed small, but it had a sturdy heft when I picked it up. Therein lay death in a hundred sharp spikes. Tonight I would wreak my vengeance.

I cut open the box and dumped out my prize,; Grub-B-Gone, "some assembly required". Two sturdy plastic sandals were the base of this fiendish tool; these would strap onto my shoes. Beneath these lay several bags of glittering death: threaded spikes and the various nuts and fittings needed to attach them to the sandals. It didn't take too long to find pliers and a wrench and, once properly equipped, I laid paper on the dining room table and began assembling.

Those spikes are sharp! And hard to hold onto. By the time I had completed the sandals of death I was bleeding from multiple holes, had scratched the table, and had watched the shadows lengthen through my window until they engulfed the entire suburb. Twilight had spread across the world as I swore and struggled. My assault would have to wait for morning.

After a quick dinner and a chuckle or two at the television, I slept and dreamt that I was dancing over the broken corpses of those lawn-eating bastards.

Saturday dawned clear and fresh, with birds singing in the trees and the sun shining happily over the horizon. As my morning coffee brewed, I struggled through a trial-fit of the sandals on my gardening shoes. I teetered around on the kitchen tile a bit, coming just shy of breaking my head and spilling hot coffee everywhere. Before a full scale disaster ensued, I took off the spikes and prepared to settle down for some bagels and coffee over the morning news.

Going to retrieve the newspaper I was disgusted by the corpses of several more June bugs, and a few live ones clinging in the quiet corners for good measure. I swatted at these with the newspa-

per, grimacing as one of them burst open, spilling its greasy fluids onto the paper. I wiped it off on the grass and went back to breakfast, scowling.

Once the food had settled into my stomach, and the morning news had done its best to unsettle it again, I girded myself for battle and went to the back porch. This first attempt at spiky death would be done in private, where my neighbors couldn't watch in amusement as I flailed and stomped around the yard. Once I had a feel for the sandals, I would do the front yard.

Sitting on the edge of the porch, I strapped death to my feet. I felt powerful! Grinning, I put my feet flat on the grass and levered myself up onto the spikes. I teetered for a brief moment before the steel slid smoothly into the lawn; I was ready for action.

It felt strange being attached to the lawn. My feet couldn't turn or slide. Walking was a new experience; I had to lift my knees up high to pull the spikes out of the ground and taking mincing little steps to get good coverage. I decided to skimp a bit on the healthy green areas and focus on the wilted brown zones, where I knew the monsters were hiding. Lurking. Eating.

It took hours to finish only half of my modest back lawn, during which the sun had crept high into the sky. I sat down in the middle of the lawn, pulled the spikes out of the dirt, and stretched my legs out. I lay sweating on the grass and imagined all of the dead and oozing grubs in the ground to my left. I could almost feel the live ones to my right wriggling under the thatch. I wonder if they scream when I pierce them? Bugs don't have voices, do they? I wonder if they die right away. Maybe some of them will get a glancing blow, catch an infection through the wound, and then suffer a slow and agonizing death over several days; leaking blood and pus into my lawn, giving their lives back to it as fertilizer.

The fresh spring breeze quickly cooled and refreshed me. I pulled my knees up and prepared to stand and finish my grizzly work. I noticed that the spikes on the sandals were holding up nicely, though some seemed to have mud on them, and there were bits of gore squeezed into the crevices of the sandals. Cheered and heartened, I stomped my way back and forth across the lawn with fresh vigor.

I left the gore-covered sandals on the back porch when I went inside for a late lunch consisting of a chicken-salad sandwich and a victory beer or two. Or three.

The sun was well past its zenith by the time I retrieved the sandals of death. The day was hot and still; the morning buzz and crick of insects had given way to the afternoon grumbling of lawnmowers and edgers. Fortunately, my front yard features a beautiful tree that protects me from the dire rays of the sun.

I carried the sandals through the house, careful not to drip dried yuck on the carpet. Sitting on the front porch I strapped them to my feet again. Standing, I towered over the insects trapped, helpless, in my lawn; a vengeful deity. I surveyed the litter of carapaces blown into the corners of the porch and nearly laughed at the prospect of the coming carnage. I imagined the grubs cowering, wet and naked, in their holes; begging to their earthy god for some savior, some relief; wailing about what they ever did to deserve such a horrible fate.

Eat my grass, will they! I will not allow such vile nature to encroach on the beauty and order of my home. I saluted the tree and, eyeing the brown patches, began a steady march up and down the yard

Neighbors came out once or twice during my gradually fading efforts, ostensibly to do fiddly things in their own yards; in truth, to stare at me and my instruments of screaming bug death. I waved cheerfully, if a bit sweatily, and went on with my dance of doom. I should spread leaflets or something, to inform my neighbors of the wonders of these sandals -- and so they can kill their own bugs before they spread back to my yard. And, not only was I killing bugs and aerating my lawn, I was getting good exercise. My back hurt, and I was discovering exciting new and painful muscles in my legs and ankles, but I'm sure these were just signs of my impending new health and strength.

I finished the front yard, taking special care on the crunchy problem areas, and added a brief tromp up and down the side yards before it was too dark to see. Worn out and happy with my day's work, I removed the muddy and battered sandals. Leaving them on the corner of the front

porch, proud symbols of what I had done, I went inside for a shower, dinner, and a relaxing sit in front of the television.

I slept well that night, better than I had in ages. Not only from the effects of physical exercise, but from the happy contentment of a job well done. As I drifted off to dreamland, I resolved to write a testimonial for the Grub-B-Gone website.

Sunday morning came bright and happy, and earlier than usual, I'm sure. I rolled out of bed and nearly fell over from stiffness and pain. Maybe I should have worked up slowly to such a workout. I hobbled to the kitchen for the morning sacrifices to the coffee machine. Once I was through that ritual I padded to the front door to retrieve the Sunday paper. I was pleased to see a reduction in the litter of bug carcasses on the porch. Take that, you little bastards!

The day passed in quiet bliss; coffee and the paper, sports through the afternoon; a nice nap. I pattered around the house feeling old for a while; eventually, my sore muscles loosened up, and by evening I was young again.

An early night for an early day; Monday and the start of a new project at work. My sleep was not as deep as the previous night, but I had such a relaxed day that this was no surprise. I kept hearing scratching noises in the night, disturbing my sleep; a branch against a screen; leaves rustling in the wind. I never really woke up, but my dreams were filled with visions of swarming insects and grasping trees.

Groggy from the long night, I wandered out to the car in the early dawn and let my reflexes drive me to work and the industrial coffee machine therein.

By the time I started towards home that evening my mind was clear and fresh from a productive day, though a bit tired and hungry. I'm going to have to feed the noggin' early today, something good. Pulling into the driveway, it seemed that something wasn't right with the lawn, but I couldn't put my finger on it exactly. Opening the car door, I could tell that something wasn't right with the neighborhood. There was a smell in the air, not too strong but distinct. A skunk,

perhaps, run over in a nearby street; or a dead squirrel under a neighbor's porch. Once inside, the conditioned and deodorized air of my house drove the scent from my nostrils and my memory.

Tonight -- pizza! I made the executive decision and the phone call, and settled in with a beer to wait.

Since I placed my order early, the lovely round meal appeared at my door in no time at all. I greeted the youthful carrier with a smile and a nice tip. I could, however, smell a stench over the pleasing smells of hot bread and tomato sauce. The pizza dude wrinkled his nose at me. "Hey, you must have a dead cat out here man."

I poked my head out the door and sniffed a bit. "I don't know, perhaps." I relieved him of his precious box.

"Thanks. And good luck with that cat." And he was gone.

Maybe something *had* crawled under a bush to die while I was out today. I would have to make an effort to find it, if the smell got any worse.

Before I closed the door, I noticed a great many little flying bugs dashing around the porch light. Looking out to the street, I saw a fog of them around that great bulb as well. Not June Bugs, but still annoying.

After my dinner of beer and pizza, I lulled and laughed myself to sleep with Mandatory Monday Television, after which I cleaned my face and teeth and fell into a hard-earned sleep.

Come morning there were no bugs on my porch, none at all; not even a wisp of a wing or a gnat caught in a web. There was also no hint of smell, though my yard didn't look quite right. I would have to research fertilizers and seeds, and maybe even lawn services, this week. I could address the problem on the weekend. The internet will make the search easy and tell me what to look for and how to solve any problems.

The week went quickly from there. My new project was a pleasant chore, and lawn research was a pleasant distraction when I needed a break. Before I knew it, Friday had come and I could soon spend some quality time with my yard.

I arose early Saturday to the promise of a beautiful day; the clear morning sunshine smoothed over any bad dreams I might have had. After dressing down for physical labor I flicked on the coffee machine and opened the garage, bathing my gleaming array of tools in the dawn light. The wicked bend of the weed whacker; its spool of extra line, ridged and vicious, hanging on a nail next to it. The low and elegant curve of the lawnmower. The bin on wheels that is the feed and seed spreader. Rake, shop broom, vacuum; all standing in their places along the back wall. All electric; quiet, clean, and effective.

I hefted the heavy extension cord off its rack and lugged it to the front porch. Flipping open the outlet cover I plugged it in and unwound a length from the figure eight bundle. I rolled the mower silently onto the lawn and plugged it in, looping the cord through the keeper. It whirred into life and I walked it around the lawn in the zigzag pattern familiar to all homeowners.

Great patches of ground were not only brown, but entirely bare of grass and somewhat sunken. I stopped in the middle of a patch by the tree and prodded the ground with my finger. The dirt was crumbly and almost greasy; unhealthy. There was a slight odor to it that I couldn't place, almost sweet, yet unpleasant.

I finished mowing before the sun rose too high, though I was still sweating profusely by the time I was done. Edging and pruning could wait. I left the extension cord out but put the mower away, and went inside to refresh myself with some juice and a shower.

I had managed to forget the coffee, but remembered it immediately when I stepped out of the steam filled bathroom. I made a beeline to the kitchen, still dripping. Standing in the kitchen pouring my first cup of coffee as the early afternoon sun dazzled me through the window, I was taken aback by my back lawn. Leaning closer to the glare, I peered through the glass. I had just walked that surface but now it seemed crumpled, sunk-in, and darker.

A flash startled me and hot coffee splashed the side of my hand, startling me again. As I sucked the web of my thumb, I watched a fat, shiny beetle crawl across a corner of the window. Soon it was joined by a cousin, and then another, until there was a whole family reunion of the glittering things on the sill. Further out, a shining horde of beetles flitted and crawled around the back deck.

Cup in one hand and carafe in the other I headed for the front of the house. And then back to the kitchen to put the carafe back in the coffee machine and the cup, half filled and cooling, on the counter next to it.

The front porch was crawling with bugs and I slammed the door quickly before more than a few flew in, and before the neighbors noticed I had forgotten most of my clothes. Grabbing a shoe, I chased and beat the intruders to death; with a paper towel I cleaned up their shattered corpses.

Where were they coming from?

How would I get out of my house?

The answer came to me: the garage. It was like an airlock to the house. I opened the door cautiously and reached through to flick on the light. No bugs. Good. I closed and locked the door and got into the car. All windows closed, good. A button push and the garage door rumbled and rattled open and bugs swarmed in to this new space. Backing the car out, I imagined I could hear them crunching under the wheels. I did hear them ticking and bouncing off the windows, oblivious to the glass.

Once in the street I could see that my house was brown with them, covered; the swarm was leaking over to the neighbors as well, the street, the sky. God had smote me with a plague of beetles.

Trembling, I put the car into forward gear and sped away from the nightmare, to the nearest home improvement depot that would carry toxic chemicals and protective clothing. Like an athe-

ist praying as his airplane crashes, I abandoned my organic commitment as this infestation overwhelmed my ability to cope.

Death was in the air, and I was going to be the reaper.

The sharp smells of the pesticides and fertilizers burned my sinuses as I shuffled down the aisle, reading the labels, cringing at the warnings. *May cause blindness. Avoid contact with skin and eyes. Flush with water. See a doctor. Do not induce vomiting.*

I heaved the largest containers of two of the worst into my cart, where they snuggled against the garden-hose spray applicator. I considered getting a pressure washer to really speed things up, but couldn't see how it might connect to the sprayer. Just as well, as it would probably explode, killing me with flying sprayer parts and pesticides. I could see the headlines now: *Man Killed in Freak Gardening Accident.*

Gloves. A respirator mask, with a heavy duty chemical filter. Goggles. Rubber apron. Rubber boots. Hat. Indoor fumigation bombs. Pesticide powder. Credit card and funny looks from the cashier, and have a nice day. The automatic doors squeaked open and sunshine and heat assaulted me as I rolled my weapons into the real world.

The car crunched over the hard bodies of insects as I roll into the garage. They were everywhere.

I put on the boots, goggles, mask, hat, and gloves while still inside the car. I tucked my pants into my socks, my shirt into my pants, the sleeves into the gloves; I turned up my collar and buttoned the top button. Rolling down the window a few inches, I activated a fumigation bomb and lobbed it into the corner of the garage, where it hissed and spun and sputtered its cloud of death. I quickly closed the window after it, and with my gloved hand crushed the one bug that had found its way in. Another was spasming in the groove of the window frame, its guts leaking down the the glass.

I arranged things on the back seat for easy access.

Door open; I leapt out and slammed it shut. Bugs crunched and slipped under my rubber boots.

Opening the back door I quickly pulled the components out and slammed it shut, watching helplessly as several intruders crawled around on the back seat.

Dragging my tools into the sun, I swatted at swarms of bugs and assembled the components that would lead to their doom. The mix of chemicals went into the pressure bin, the lid screwed on, the garden hose attached. And then I sprayed. The house, the sidewalk, the driveway, the grass, the bushes. Front, side, and back. Forty pounds of poison that should kill any living insect in my property, spread with water, seeping into every crack and infiltrating all of the dirt. And still the insects buzzed and crawled and hopped.

I wondered how long it would take for them to die.

And then I was done. My clothes were soaked with sweat; there were puddles in my boots, my hands were raw from the gloves, and my fingers ached from the trigger on the sprayer.

I dragged the packaging that had not blown away, heavy and sodden with wet poison, into the garage and pushed the button to close the door. The bomb had done good work in here; there were twitching carcasses littering the ground near the bomb and in the corners of the room. But many other live insects were still flying around.

I set another bomb in the center of the garage and triggered it. Waiting and watching, I soon found my eyes burning from the chemicals creeping in around the mask.

Quickly now, through growing discomfort, I used a broom to clear the door, and the walls and floor near it, and I dashed into the safety of my house.

Even inside, pesticide smells filled the air, blown in from the garage and through the air conditioning. I imagined my entire property emitting wavy lines of green poisonous death, like in a cartoon, reaching out to kill every insect that passed through my airspace.

My house. My property. No bugs allowed.

Once they were gone, I would return to the healthy approach. I could cleanse my property of the toxins and nurture my world into loving health. I opened a beer and dreamed about green lawns and red tomatoes. And a shower.

Yes, that I could do right away. Setting the half empty beer on the sink, I stripped out of my stinking clothes and turned on the water. After a quick side trip to put laundry in the washing machine, I immersed myself in a hot shower and happiness.

The towel felt good, and the rest of the beer, still nicely cool, finished the job of relaxing me. I put my worries away, content in the power of modern chemistry. I spent the rest of Saturday in the company of my friends from Hollywood, laughing at their exploits and crying with their defeats, until it was time to sleep and dream.

And dream I did; horrible crawling nightmares that I could not wake from. In them, bugs swarmed in through vents in the attic, eating the rubber seals under the doors, burrowing through keyholes and stove vents and drains and ventilation ducts. Buzzing clicking tickling biting insects covered my body as I thrashed and turned in my sweat soaked sheets, the hum of the fan laughing at me, its cool air mocking my ravaged body.

I broke through the night terrors with the first rays of dawn and sat, shaking and nauseous, in my tangled bed.

In spite of my precautions I must have absorbed too much of the chemicals, for my body was tender all over; my muscles ached, and there were red spots and what looked like scratches and bites all over my body.

I staggered into the bathroom and a hot shower that made my skin tingle and burn, but I endured it, knowing the heat would help remove the poisons. The soap and water stung as I washed.

I bypassed the Sunday special roast coffee and ate a piece of dry toast and drank some juice instead, finally collapsing on the couch to watch the horror that is Sunday morning television. There somehow managed to be no sports to watch, no cartoons I could bear to watch, and the talking heads of the morning shows seemed unreal, vacuous, unintelligible.

I turned it off.

I could hear the hum of the air conditioning, as the cool air from the vents caressed my tender skin.

I picked up a pad of paper and rummaged through the drawers in the kitchen until I found a working pen, and I wrote this all down. I couldn't think of what else to do. My skin itched, and I needed the distraction.

While writing this the itching has gotten worse, it almost hurts. I would call a doctor, I think, and make an appointment, but the phone doesn't seem to work. A car must have hit a pole or something, because the lights seem to be flickering as well.

It hurts, like burning, in a random pattern across my body; my foot, my hand, my neck, my chest, a flickering dancing itch-burn-pain-crawling feeling. I scratch at one, chasing it from spot to spot. My finger recoils as it brushes over a numb area; there's something hard and smooth. I look and, though I can't feel it, I see a small, glistening brown carapace squeeze out of the sore. It emerges and seems to swell in the air, to stiffen; its wings uncoil and stretch. It groomed itself as I sat there, horrified.

I feel them inside all of my skin now; I can imagine them there, waiting, growing. I can't write anymore. I have to go. The hospital will have a clinic, an emergency room, I'm going now.