

DO YOU NEED? DO YOU NEED?

By Alexander Saxton

A bad winter; very bad. A new wave of virus; a new wave of lockdowns, coming after Christmas, when the damage was already done. January, February in the North; bad times of year at the best of times. But worse, far worse when you're sealed in, knowing just outside your walls that the dead are piling up like dry flowers on the compost heap.

A bad winter.

The weather was worse than normal. After half a dozen mild winters, the cold came back that year, as bad as I could ever remember. Down past twenty below for weeks on end, and always grey; never a break to the grey, dark grey, darker than any winter I remember. You could wake up at ten and find the sun had barely risen. You could go to bed at six, for the night was already dark as a smothering cloth.

A bad time to be out of work.

I dropped out. Dropped out of the world, dropped out of touch. Gone were the days when I called my friends; what was there to talk about? Gone were the days when I called my family; they never picked up the phone. I stayed in. I had enough to live off from my last contract, for a while. I hunkered down. The wind outside blew colder, and the snows piled up. It was too hot in my little apartment; too bitter-cold outside.

I dropped my days down the computer screen like pennies into a well, and never heard the splash of water at the bottom.

It was a bad winter to be in that place.

It was the best I could afford after my roommate moved out of the old unit. It was still three hundred more per month than I could comfortably handle, and it was small. A nook for the bed; a little kitchen, a bathroom, that was all. There was a little upper-corner window out onto a brick wall, where the mortar was full of hoarfrost. I had to kick away the snow outside it every day, or the snow blued out the last few bits of light. The walls of this basement suite were all painted leaden grey. The landlord didn't want them changed. I was too listless to change them.

And the days dropped, dropped, dropped. January lasted several months.

On the 64th day of the month I found a cockroach on the bathroom floor.

Not one of the little ones; the quick brown ones dancing in the rotten wood at your local bar. No, this was a Black Knight; a fast beast in armour, larger than your big toe, with long, sharp antennae bending back like goat's horns.

I went to the kitchen for bleach cream.

You can't just squish em, you know. They're full of eggs, the male and females both alike, and so if you smash them with a shoe, then more and more spring up, until one morning you're lying in your bed and the bedsheets come alive. So you have to use the bleach cream. Vim, or nearest possible equivalent. You spray them with it, and it slows them down for long enough that the Cleansing Power gets between the joints, and does them in. At the last, you can see a dark current spurt amidst the bleach, as they shit their eggs and die. But the bleach cleans up nice.

It gets it clean. Clean as the snow whipping past outside.

I was too slow that time. I got back into the bathroom just in time to see the roach penetrating its way between two tiles behind the toilet.

I bent and shone my phone light through the crack, shuddering as I expected thousands and thousands more of them to come boiling out at me, clattering in the silence; their bodies cold and heavy across my skin as they surged at my screaming mouth, my nose and eyes and poured into me, tasting of sour, wet sewage, and filling my stomach until it burst, and I died there on the floor, roaches flowing in and out of my ruptured holes, leaving pinprick red footprints all across the floor.

But nothing of the sort happened. All that happened was that the cold white light slid into the darkness, killing a sliver of it. There was a dark, damp space back there; larger than I might have thought. Some sort of crawlspace on the other side of the basement.

I got up and washed my hands. It had been a while since I had mopped the bathroom floor, and there was a greasy feeling to the tiles. I considered going to the hardware store and getting some caulking for the hole. But I was too tired.

I lay on the couch and watched something; I don't remember what.

That night I considered texting Bahar. We'd been seeing each other a little before everything went to shit, and afterwards, we'd tried to do the video thing for a while. But both of us felt awkward about the sexual aspect. The pillow-talk was terrible, brief, forced. And after that you closed your laptop and were completely alone in the gloom, lying in a cold, damp spot on the sheets. But that evening I was feeling so alone that I almost texted her anyway. It was only when I pulled up her contact and read our last, terse, awkward exchange that the futility of it overflowed me. We didn't even like each other anyway. What was the point?

And so that night I got drunk alone, instead. The first time I'd ever done that. Around midnight, maybe, I passed out. I slept badly: my dreams were full of roaches crawling in and out of my navel; penetrating; leaving inky currents of their eggs.

The next morning when I woke up bleary to spray dark piss into the toilet's stained bowl, there was another roach in the bathroom, or else the same one all over again. This time I had the cleaner close to hand and I sprayed the creature: practiced, merciless. The thick spray of cream clobbered it off its feet, and when it steadied itself and charged through the other side of the goop, I hit it a second time. It dragged itself forward another few inches and collapsed. A little spurt of black fluid erupted from its abdomen, to mingle and grey in the pure white cleaner. I stood there looking at it for a few minutes, trying to work up the energy to clean up the carcass and the piss-drops that had scattered across the floor. But I was too tired, and so I left the body where it lay.

While I'd slept, a blizzard had blown in, and my apartment's one window was all snowed up and blocked. Too much snow to kick away, and I was too tired to go to the hardware store for a shovel. So instead I left through my apartment's one door and wandered around to the unfinished half of the basement, just for the sake of a change of scenery.

This, of course, was full of all my landlord's junk. I think it had been a second apartment once, but everything down there had been gutted between then and now. Maybe it was supposed to be renovated but the money had run out. And so now it was storage space; full of dust-choked linens, broken chairs, and bone china from someone dead: too precious to be thrown away; too old and ugly to be used.

I shouldered my way through the junk, not especially bothered if something broke. There was nothing in that basement that anyone gave a shit about, and even if there was, it would take years for any broken thing to be discovered. It was a place of forgotten things, and I felt a certain sad kinship with those rolled-up carpets, those boxes of crumbing books. This world had no use for them anymore, except maybe as scrap to be sold.

At about where my bathroom was on the other side of the basement, the wall zigzagged out, and there was a hole in the drywall close to the floor, as if someone had cut in to install some plumbing, but had never actually gotten around to that part of the job. Maybe they had been too tired.

Intrigued by this little mystery, I climbed down on all fours and shone my phone inside.

There was a space in there. Dark, a bit damp, with some sweating pipes and wires that a good electrician probably wouldn't have put in there. But a decently sized space. You could sit in there if you wanted. And it didn't seem especially gross, either, for all that I'd expected dripping white eggsacs filled with roach. Actually, with the exception of some long-dry insect-husks, it was perfectly habitable. I'd even go so far as to say, there was something appealing about the space. It looked dark, safe and contained, and it was cool. Pleasantly cool, when the rest of the building was about thirty eight celsius, and outside twenty six below.

I got down on all fours and crawled inside.

It was nice. I fit in there nicely, and for all that it was nothing but a nook, it felt less claustrophobic than my own sweltering little apartment. I could see a little bright line of light from the crack in my bathroom wall, and for some reason, being able to see into my own apartment from there was delightful. It was like a little secret; having a little secret. I could look into that other space without anybody knowing. It was my own apartment, sure, but I could *imagine* it belonged to someone else; someone else that I could watch without them ever guessing. The thought gave me a little shiver. I chuckled. I chuckled.

With my eyes adjusting to the dark, I found that the nook was connected with a crawlspace between the walls, angling downwards. And the air in that direction felt even more pleasant and cool. And so, leading with the light on my phone, I crawled down the passage on hands and knees, away from the heat, about eight or ten steps down until the crawlspace opened up.

This opening... I wasn't exactly sure what it was. It was a 'space'. Dark and wooden; old. The building I lived in was from the 20s or thereabouts, and this space seemed at least as old as that. Its walls and floor were dry, splintery slats of wood. There was a wide, flat piece of stone set into the floor along one wall, like a flagstone outside of somebody's front door. There were little pictures painted on it with what looked like old house paint. The paint was more than half-flaked away with age, and the pictures weren't that well-drawn to begin with. Their artistic style was rough, childish. But the images were simple enough that their outlines were still easy to make out. A cup, a sheaf of wheat, a bird. Some kid's little hidey-hole, then, from back in the day. Well, it was a nice spot. I could see why a little kid would crawl down here to hide out from the world above. It was safe, it was cool, it was *away* from everything. You understand me? Even though it was a confined space, I found that it felt *freeing* to be down there. For a kid... there was no school, no parents, no rules down there. There was just you and the darkness in a place that only you knew about. And that made you special.

I turned off the light on my phone and sat there in the utter blackness, in the cool, hidden from the pressures of the world. There were no draining bank accounts down there, no stalled careers, no worlds spinning out into madness and loss. There was nothing. And that was a relief. Down there it was safe, contained, cool, empty.

That evening, after wasting another day online, I decided to reach out to my friend Hamid. Surprisingly, he texted back after a few minutes.

"Hey man whats up"

"Hey! Found something cool today. It's this, like, crawlspace under my apartment."

"Oh word."

"Yeah, its like a free bonus room to the apartment. They should probably charge like and extra 300 a month for it."

“Lol”

“So how are you doing, man? Whats new?”

In response... three dots... three dots... three dots... nothing. I waited a few minutes to see if he'd respond. He didn't.

At loose ends, I returned to the hole and sat in darkness again, drinking beer and listening to music on my phone's tinny little speaker. On a whim, I poured some of my cup out onto the stone. “Libations, for thee!” I chuckled. I chuckled. It was nice to make a joke.

That night, I slept badly. In my dream, I was lurking in the space behind my bathroom wall, watching through the crack in the tile. But in the dream, it wasn't my bathroom, but Bahar's. And as I watched her bathe, the roaches rushed out past me and I had to look away as they swarmed up the walls of the tub toward her.

The next morning, I woke with disgust to find my sheets crusted and a second day of blizzard on the weather app. I couldn't check the weather myself; the window was snowed up and the snow frozen solid. No natural light would enter my apartment until the spring. I wandered out of my door and up the stairs, which were the back stairs of the building I lived in. Looking out the wire-mesh glass of the back door, I could see the walk was buried three feet deep in snow. The streets would be just as bad. And it was cold. At least 20 below, again. No laundromat today, then. No hardware store. I slouched back down to my unit, and found that I couldn't stand the thought of eating breakfast in that sweltering kitchenette, alone, again.

And so I made toast and wandered down the hole to eat it in the dark.

An interesting little side-note here. When I went to the bathroom that morning, the body of the roach was gone. Maybe it had survived, after all. Maybe another roach had come and eaten it whole.

Down in the dark it was nice and cool. The toast was stale and I got crumbs all over myself and the stone, but I wasn't too bothered about it. The roaches would take care of the crumbs. I noticed that the space was bigger and nicer than it had seemed the day before. Large enough for me to sit up straight in, and walled and floored with black, cool, and pleasing tile. It smelled, yeasty in a satisfying way.

I spent most of the day down there, listening to music, drifting in and out of sleep, and humming along, even as I noticed my phone was dead and the music I was humming along to was in my own head.. Another day dropped past. Another day dropped past? That night I slept badly. Or maybe it was the night after. I dreamed I went for a walk in the snow, dragging crusted sheets behind me, and all the buildings everywhere were empty, open to the winter's wind. Everybody in the city had up and left in the night, leaving me behind. I dug down into a snowdrift and found

a laptop screen. I climbed through it into Bahar's bedroom, and there I made love with a giant roach.

After the roach and I had finished in each other, I went to Bahar's washroom, which was my washroom, and found her weeping naked in the tub. Hamid was sitting on the tub's edge, trying to comfort her, but she would not be consoled. It was clear to see why: her bathwater was full of dead birds. As I looked on, the roach entered behind me. It climbed into the tub beside Bahar and started eating the birds: each one crunching between its mandibles, sending out a little burst of blood into the pinkened water.

When I awoke, there was a bird in the apartment.

I don't know how it got there. To this day I don't know how it got there. Sometimes a bird just finds its way into a place. Somehow it had gotten into mine. Maybe the blizzard had driven it into a crack in the outer wall, and it had come through a crack into mine. The poor thing was in a panic, flapping back and forth across the apartment, bashing up against the walls and cabinets, making a panicked trilling noise. Yelling in disgust at the feathers and birdshit on the air, I flung my arms over my head and ran for the door to my apartment. The bird shot past me as I opened the door, and whipped up the stairs. A heartbeat later, there came a dull and horrid sound.

The bird had flown headlong into the glass window of the back door. As I bounded up the stairs after it, I found it twitching on the doormat with a broken neck.

Not knowing what to do, I stared dumbly for a long, long time, until it died.

It was snowing outside.

A bird in the house; that was supposed to be a bad omen; foretelling death. And the bird itself had died. Prophecy and execution, all in one.

"I'm going to take you down into the hole, my little guy."

I said this aloud, to the dead bird. For a moment, the sound of my own words was alien to my ears, and my head whipped around, trying to locate the speaker. But after a second's panic I realized it was my voice. It was just that my own voice sounded strange to me because I hadn't spoken to a human being in... days, at least. In several days.

I cupped the dead bird in my hands, and its cool, grey-brown feathers were slightly damp, and slightly greasy to the touch. There was a bit of blood that made me cringe.

"I'm going to take you down into the hole, my little guy."

I said it again, just to make sure I said it.

My phone rang as I reached the bottom of the stairs. Shifting the bird to one hand, I pulled it out. The name on the screen read 'Mom'. My thumb hovered over the 'answer' button. But I was torn! It had been so long since I had spoken to someone. But I had to take this bird down into the hole. I had to take this bird down into the hole.

I stood there for a long moment, weighing my priorities while the phone rang and rang. At last the ringing stopped. I waited a moment to see if it would ring again. It didn't. I nodded to myself and pocketed the phone. I stepped into the unfinished basement. Now that I was fully underground, my phone would not ring again.

I climbed into the hole, pausing for a moment to look through the crack and watch Bahar bathe. Her hair was shiny and black from the water, falling down across her shoulders like twin antennae. She didn't know that I was in there, holding a dead bird in both of my hands. It was funny to me. It was a funny little secret and it made me special. I chuckled. I chuckled. It was very fun to joke.

Further down, I found the space with the stone, and was surprised to find that it was roomier than it had been the day before, or the day before, or the day before, or the day before, or the day before. The ceiling was wide and low; high enough that I could almost stand, but low enough compared to the wideness of the room that it felt very low and oppressive. The floor was made from a nice black glass, pleasantly cool, and the distant black-glass walls were spaced with nice little step-arched alcoves, each with little black-glass people curled in them. I trundled over to the painted stone, which was unchanged, and placed the bird down upon it.

There was a sense of lightness as the ceiling lifted, and a black space soared and stretched above me, up to the utmost heights. A damp and cool wind blew, soothing the prickles of sweat across my forehead. It was nice down here.

It came.

All of a sudden it was squatting in the dark above me: a dark figure, only hinted at by a sense of weight in the utter darkness. A muscular form, squatting in the night; an armoured head with great, black, backswept antennae. Wet and good; a virile presence in the dark, with black and shining eyes. Between its legs, the black eggs were dripping from its member.

"My child," it asked. "Do you need a God?"

I looked up toward it.

"Yes."