

# BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Pest Control  
A Short Story

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Hey, we've got a problem in 5-F.

It was the biweekly meeting of the Skyview Apartment Coop's Board of Directors, gathered around a ping-pong table in an empty storage room on the 11<sup>th</sup> floor, which was still being renovated. Eventually they planned to buy a decent seminar table for their meetings but for now the fading green tableau would have to do. Erica had removed the net at least but its size meant they were separated at some distance from one another, seated, as they were, on metal folding chairs, also for some reason painted green.

At the Chairperson's words, which he delivered in a solemn intonation that commanded attention, the others looked up. The speaker, Mr. Harrington of 3-B, lay down the clutch of papers he was holding, sighed, and flipped his glasses to the top of his head.

He glanced wearily at the other Board members: seated at his right was Frank Fujita, a computer analyst, next to whom was Erica Crawford-Jones. Across from her sat Isabelle Watson, whom they called Bella. She was a postal worker. At the Chairperson's left was Dr. Mort Steiner, known for his popular books on dental hygiene.

5-F refuses to let us in to spray, the Chairperson explained.

You mean for roaches? Erica asked.

The Chairperson nodded.

Why? Is she some sort of New Age freak? Dr. Steiner asked, leaning forward.

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The Chairperson nodded again. She doesn't believe in pesticides, he amplified.

There was a pause while the committee members took time to reflect.

Sensing their uncertainty, the Chairperson provided further background.

As you know, he explained, according to our by-laws, management is required to keep the building free of infestation. So we have the monthly spraying schedule, where, as you know, they go into each apartment and conduct the deinfestation.

And she won't let them into her apartment? Erica asked.

No, the Chairperson said. She says pesticides are poison and she doesn't want her or her animals exposed to them.

I can see her point about the animals, Erica said. They're more vulnerable to pesticides. Even a small amount can affect them. What kind does she have?

The Chairperson said he wasn't sure, perhaps a couple of cats and maybe a turtle or some small aquarium animals of that sort.

Dr. Steiner spoke up next. He prided himself on his skills as a negotiator, which was one of the reasons he'd volunteered for the Board.

Well, couldn't we just find a place for her to remove her animals while the spraying is taking place—it doesn't take that

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long. She could stay out with them, and they could all return once it's completed.

That did seem like an eminently sensible solution.

Why, they could come up here, Frank suggested, gesturing at the storage room they were meeting in.

That's a good idea, Bella agreed.

So we're in agreement, the Chairperson asked, returning his glasses to his nose, and poised to jot down their resolution on a notepad he had before him. The Board members nodded. They had a policy of making decisions by consensus, so it was gratifying when that worked. Sometimes in the interests of time, if consensus failed, they had to resort to old-fashioned majority rule. But that meant running over the minority, which, philosophically, they didn't like to do.

Out of a sense of civic duty Erica volunteered to present their proposal to the woman in 5-F. She didn't really know her but she'd said hello to her once or twice in the stairwell on their way up or down to the laundry room on the third floor and she'd seemed pleasant enough. Erica figured it would only be a matter of a few minutes visit, on her way to the green-grocer perhaps; the woman would see the wisdom of their suggestion and that would be it.

Their meeting took place in 5-F the following day at 1 p.m. Erica sat across the room from the woman, who was settled comfortably, it seemed, on a couch. The room was sparsely furnished but attractive nevertheless in a Spartan, Shaker way. Erica wasted no time in explaining the situation to the woman. She said they could provide crates to carry the cats in or boxes

for the other animals. It would only take a few minutes for the spraying to be accomplished and it shouldn't disturb the animals that much to be removed for the duration.

The woman smiled politely, clasped her hands, and explained that for her part she appreciated their willingness to evacuate the animals but they would still have to return to a pesticide-contaminated environment, and she couldn't allow that to happen. It was clear the woman had done some reading on the subject and Erica was impressed that she knew the scientific names of the pesticides and could cite studies that documented the harm they could do to animals, not to mention humans.

As she was speaking, Erica began to wonder what difference it would make to simply allow the woman her eccentricity and leave her apartment unsprayed. Live and let live. They could deinfest the rest of the building. That should take care of the roach problem, she calculated. Indeed, the woman suggested just this proposal at the end of her peroration. Erica agreed to return to the Board with the new proposition.

Does it really matter? Erica found herself asking the Board at their next meeting. She had already laid out the request of the woman in 5-F that she be excused from the spraying operation.

The others looked at her questioningly.

I mean, I think we should respect each individual's values and not force them to conform. What does it matter if one apartment is left untreated? All the others will be deinfested. That should take care of the roach problem in the building.

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It was Dr. Steiner who spoke first in his usual soothing, pedagogical voice.

The problem, he said, is that all the roaches will run into her apartment during the spraying and then run right back into the rest of the building once the spraying is complete.

Erica couldn't help smiling. She found it amusing to think of such tiny creatures outwitting that great genius of the animal kingdom, man.

Clever little scamps, aren't they? she said flippantly, half forgetting her audience.

The Chairperson frowned at Erica's apparent failure to appreciate the gravity of the situation, so she quickly assumed a more serious, adult demeanor. The Chairperson had in fact never been entirely comfortable with Erica's presence on the Board; he'd heard tales about loose behavior in her apartment, 4-C. But they had to have one or two women on the Board, and none of the others would agree to serve.

Erica felt intimidated by the Chairperson's stern look and Dr. Steiner's theory. She couldn't afford to be in their bad graces; she had just lost her job and was going through a messy divorce. The last thing she needed was more stress. So she capitulated to their judgment and shrugged. Well, whatever, she said.

The Board decided to send a second delegation to explain the situation to the woman in 5-F. This time they would send a subcommittee of two, Dr. Steiner and Frank Fujita. Any reasonable person, Dr. Steiner claimed, will understand the problem. It just needs to be presented in a calm and sensible man-

ner. Once the woman in 5-F realizes she's putting the rest of us at risk, she will undoubtedly agree to participate.

Dr. Steiner and Mr. Fujita met with the woman in 5-F one evening a few days later. They were pleased to find her a mild-mannered, hospitable person. She even offered them each a cup of herbal tea or some soymilk, whichever they preferred.

Dr. Steiner explained the situation. You see, he said, the problem is, if your apartment remains unsprayed, the roaches just run into it while they're spraying the others, and then run right back, so having one apartment as a kind of unsecured sanctuary renders the entire operation ineffectual.

The woman seemed surprised at Dr. Steiner's theory. She said she hadn't noticed any increase in the number of roaches during Spray Days; in fact, she hadn't noticed any pests in her apartment at all.

Mr. Fujita and Dr. Steiner glanced at one another. They didn't want to directly contradict the woman or accuse her of outright lying, yet what she said was patently incredulous.

Dr. Steiner decided to take a different approach. Perhaps by pretending to be on her side he could win her over. We understand you have a right to control what happens in your own space, he said. Nobody has the right to force you to do something you don't want to do. He looked over at Mr. Fujita for ratification. Every man a king in his own castle, right Frank?

Yes, Frank said, nodding his head in a jerky manner, that's the American way.

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At this pronouncement the woman in 5-F sighed and smiled. Evidently, they were beginning to appreciate her position.

Still, Dr. Steiner went on, turning back toward the woman, we have to respect one another's rights. It's a two-way street. As a tenant, I have the right not to have cockroaches in my own apartment, if I don't want them. You have to respect that right.

The woman nodded as if in agreement with what seemed a perfectly reasonable statement but said nothing.

Dr. Steiner wasn't sure, however, that she had followed the implication of his argument—namely that to respect his rights to be pest-free she should allow them to spray her apartment—so he stated this implication outright.

The woman folded her hands quietly before her and upon a few moments reflection said she was sorry but if that was his conclusion she would have to respectfully disagree. The bottom line was she couldn't allow her apartment to be sprayed.

At this rebuff Dr. Steiner's face began turning dark red. Well, he started in an ominous tone, then checked himself, thinking, I don't want to say anything rude or threatening until we figure out the legal options. In truth, as a medical professional he was not used to having his positions controverted and the woman's attitude baffled and shocked him. He wanted therefore to get away as soon as possible to collect his thoughts. Something was unraveling. Some kind of order.

So that remains your position? Mr. Fujita asked the woman in a high thin voice as the two men rose and headed for the door.



The woman, still seated, nodded with a kindly smile and shrugged, as if to say, the matter is out of my hands. I have no choice.

While the discussions were ensuing with the woman in 5-F, the Board had promulgated a moratorium on spraying. There seemed no point in conducting the operation so long as the roaches could find sanctuary in 5-F, they reasoned. One day, however, not long after the meeting between Dr. Steiner and Mr. Fujita and the woman, Mrs. Alberti in 3-C discovered a cockroach in her kitchen sink and complained to management that something had to be done. When the next day Mr. Green in 4-A found one in his bathtub, it was clear they were under siege again, so the Board held an emergency meeting.

Who is this woman anyway? asked Mr. Green from 4-A. He had joined the regular Board members at their emergency convocation. (According to Coop by-laws, Board meetings were open to all building residents, who were allowed to participate in discussions, though they had no vote nor say in consensus decisions.)

The Board members looked at one another uncertainly in response to Mr. Green's question.

The fact is, the Chairperson finally said, no one knows much about her.

Is she crazy or what? Mr. Green continued.

She may be a little off, Dr. Steiner said with a weak smile, as if to say, we must be compassionate toward the mentally ill.

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Mr. Green understood his look but insisted that if she were certifiably crazy they should do something about it.

Perhaps we could get a doctor or psychiatrist to examine her, Bella proposed.

And then what? Erica asked.

Well, the Chairperson said, if she's certifiably insane, we can have her removed, institutionalized, or put on medications: something.

Erica frowned. She didn't seem insane to me, she said.

Sometimes they can act very sane, Dr. Steiner explained. The schizophrenic ones. He pointed to his head and twirled his finger so as to suggest the mental chaos that goes on inside such a brain.

How can we get her to see a psychiatrist? Mr. Fujita asked, getting to the practical heart of the matter. We can't just order her to see one.

Perhaps we could get a court order declaring her insane, Dr. Steiner proposed. Certainly her behavior is wildly aberrant, any court could see that, he said.

There must be some law, Bella said. We could have her arrested.

She might be within her civil liberties, Mr. Fujita suggested. You know how fanatic libertarians are about privacy issues.

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So we might have a court battle? the Chairperson interrupted, turning to look directly at Mr. Fujita. If we took it to court? Is that what you're saying?

Yes, that is what I was driving at, Mr. Fujita said.

I don't want a protracted court battle, the Chairperson said. I just want to get this building free of vermin.

We could take matters into our own hands, Dr. Steiner suggested hesitantly.

What do you mean? the Chairperson asked.

We could just haul her out of there ourselves. I mean, I know that isn't a nice thought, but unless she relents, we're faced with a real plague here.

The Chairperson stared at Dr. Steiner. You mean, what? Grab her and tie her up?

Well, something like that, Dr. Steiner said, just during the time 5-F is being sprayed.

What about her animals? Erica asked.

Well, we could remove them too, Dr. Steiner replied.

I don't know about this, the Chairperson said.

It wouldn't be legal, Mr. Fujita said nervously. You can't just break into someone's house and tie them up.

We wouldn't be breaking in, Dr. Steiner objected. We could just get her to open the door and then slip in. We wouldn't have

to tie her up either. I meant that figuratively. We could just escort her to one of these ladies' apartments and they could have tea or something. He waved at Erica and Bella and smirked at the idea.

There was a pause during which the Board members silently contemplated Dr. Steiner's proposal.

I don't know about this, the Chairperson said finally.

You have to consider the health issue, Dr. Steiner said. Vermin spread disease. What are you going to do if someone comes down with some fatal illness caused by the germs spread by the roaches? They could sue you for failing to keep the building in a sanitary condition.

Mr. Fujita nodded his agreement and Bella joined in. We could all be sued, she said.

What if she resists, Erica said suddenly. What if she refuses to leave her apartment when you move in on her?

Well, we could grab her by the arms and hustle her out, Dr. Steiner said, his voice sounding more determined than before. I mean, if she screws around, he said in a suddenly angry tone, we could take her by force.

Erica blanched.

Seeing her shocked look Dr. Steiner quickly added, I don't mean that way. I mean we could just lift her up and remove her bodily.

Mr. Green said he supported Dr. Steiner's proposal. Something had to be done, and quickly. Tenants would soon be moving out. Who wanted to live in such a disgustingly filthy environment?

I have an idea, Mr. Fujita said. Why don't we wait until she goes out for food or to the park? Then we could sneak in and spray it while she's gone. The Chairperson has a master key. We could get in that way. She wouldn't even know what's happened.

You can smell, Erica said. You can smell the pesticide for days afterward. It gets into everything, that chemical smell. She would know.

Even so, Dr. Steiner said, the deed would be done, the extermination complete. We could rest easy, pest-free, for several months, at least.

The Board came to a consensus, then, that their next step would be to attempt to spray 5-F sometime the woman was out. Erica had hesitated to agree to the plan, wondering how the animals in apartment 5-F would fare—surely the woman was right that pesticide spray would do them no good—but she could think of no way to bring the matter up without seeming like a deviant herself, which she was not in a position to do.

That the logistics of the Board's new tactic would prove highly complex soon became apparent, however. First, a twenty-four-hour watch had to be maintained on the woman's apartment, so they would know when she went out. Frank figured out a way to rig up a TV camera aimed at the door to 5-F, which relayed a picture to monitors in the apartments of volunteer watch-persons. The problem was who wanted to sit

and watch a monitor that showed nothing but a door for twenty-four hours? They finally worked out a schedule where no one watch-person would have to watch for more than two hours at a time, but even that proved to be more of a strain than they'd imagined. Such a schedule furthermore required that the watch brigade had to include at least ten volunteers, in addition to all the Board members, who were themselves of course inevitably dragooned into service.

The other logistical problem was that when the woman did go out, someone would have to contact the spraying firm, MR. PEST-BE-GONE, immediately to get them over to spray 5-F while she was out. After considerable debate the Board authorized the Chairperson to take care of this matter.

The plan was quickly executed. Mr. Fujita hooked up the camera and monitors and all the members of the watch brigade had cell phones by which they could reach the Chairperson, who in turn was to call in MR. PEST-BE-GONE on a moment's notice. In the meantime, Dr. Steiner and Mr. Green agreed to remain on the highest state of alert in their respective apartments for the moment when the call came that the woman in 5-F had opened her door. Their job was to secure the apartment until such time as the exterminators arrived.

Everything was therefore in place and the surveillance squad quickly began operations without further ado. When a week went by, however, with no sightings—indeed with no sign of life whatsoever at the door of 5-F, several of the non-Board-member watch-persons began to complain. Some of them said their eyesight was beginning to show signs of strain. One said he was having trouble focusing; another said she saw double

for about an hour after each 2-hour stint; a third was having problems with blurriness.

The Chairperson took it upon himself to shore up the troops, so to speak, explaining to them again how important their mission was and that in any event it was only a temporary assignment. Soon the woman in 5-F was bound to appear and they would be able to execute the plan.

When another week had passed, however, with no result, it became clear that another Board meeting was in order.

How is she getting out? Mr Green angrily demanded, even before the meeting had been called to order. Or, how is she getting food in? She must have allies, someone who's sneaking her in and out, or perhaps sneaking food in.

It's probably those environmentalists, Bella said. Maybe they're making her a test case. There might be a whole battalion of them in there.

Maybe they're armed, Mr. Green said.

I think we would have noticed that kind of activity, a short, round-faced woman spoke up from the back. She was one of the volunteer watch-persons, several of whom had come to the meeting. I've been watching my monitor nearly all the time and I haven't seen any activity of that kind.

Maybe there's a back exit we don't know about, Mr. Fujita suggested.

Well, there's the fire escape, Erica said. She could go down that.

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How old is she? Bella asked.

I couldn't tell, Erica said. Not that old.

But why? Dr. Steiner asked, going back to the fire escape theory. Why would she suddenly start leaving her apartment by fire escape? Somebody must have tipped her off.

But who? the Chairperson said. Nobody knows about this plan except us. He waved his hand around the room, unintentionally causing them all to reflect upon the question of who might be the traitor in their midst.

Whoever tipped her off should be shot, Mr. Green said.

Nobody spoke for a moment or two. Then Mr. Fujita broke the silence.

I could set up another camera focused on the fire escape, he said. I know the man who lives in 5-E. He would let us set up a camera in his window. Then we could see if she's exiting that way.

That means we'll have to add on several more watchers to keep track of another set of monitors, the Chairperson said.

Yes, it does, Frank admitted.

All of this is going to cost money, the Chairperson said, sighing. Where am I going to get the money for all these cameras and monitors?

We could add a surcharge onto the monthly fee, Dr. Steiner suggested.



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We'd have to call a meeting of the entire building to do that, the Chairperson said. Tenants have the right to vote on any rate hikes, according to the by-laws.

Well, once we explain to them the nature of the emergency, I'm sure they'll go along with it, Dr. Steiner said reassuringly.

I don't know, the Chairperson said.

I'm tired of all this fucking around, Mr. Green announced suddenly, standing up. Why don't we stop wasting everyone's time and just go in there and take her out?

The group was silent for a moment.

You mean, revert to my original plan? Dr. Steiner asked, putting the best spin on Mr. Green's statement. And just remove her bodily from the apartment?

Yes, Mr. Green said, I'm tired of all this foot-dragging. We've got to get on with our lives. Just go in, take the bitch out, and get this over with.

Erica spoke next, ignoring Mr. Green and proceeding matter-of-factly as if they were still entertaining rational proposals.

Why don't we try spraying the building again, leaving out her apartment, and retest Dr. Steiner's theory? she asked. If we act quickly enough, maybe the spray will take out the cockroaches before they can get to the sanctuary in 5-F. Maybe they just didn't act quickly enough before.

That's ridiculous, Dr. Steiner said with unusual abruptness. We know that won't work. We tried it before. They just run

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into her sanctuary and run right back out again. She probably feeds the little devils while they're in there, he added sarcastically.

In my opinion, the time for talking is over, Mr. Green said, still standing in the door.

I'm willing to give Mr. Fujita's plan a try, said the round-faced watcher in back. I can get more monitor-volunteers and we can track the fire escape. It's worth a try.

Mr. Green snorted and abruptly left the room.

The Chairperson sighed and looked around the ping-pong table at the Board members.

Well, he said, what's the consensus?

Well, Dr. Steiner said, I'm willing to give it one more shot. After that I'm with Mr. Green. Things are getting out of hand. We can't tolerate this kind of impertinence. It's insupportable. We have to take decisive action.

So the surveillance resumed in the Skyview Apartment Coop, this time with the added security of the rearview camera focused on 5-F's fire escape. Happily, within a couple of days, the door to 5-F finally opened. Their efforts were rewarded.

The round-faced woman who had so dedicated herself to the project happened to be on duty (even though it was after hours) and was thus rewarded for her devotion. She could scarcely believe her eyes at first and wondered like some of the others if her days of staring at the monitor were leading them to play tricks on her. But, no, there is was, the door was decisively

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moving. She felt her pulse quicken and her fingers tremble as she quickly tapped the buttons on her cell phone, still keeping her eye on the monitor.

It moved, she said, almost breathlessly when the Chairperson answered. As it was 2 in the morning, the call had evidently awakened him and his first reaction was admittedly less than coherent.

What moved? he said.

The door. The door, the woman said excitedly. It's moving. The door to 5-F.

Oh my God! he exclaimed.

Call in the team, she said. Right away. Before she can get away.

The Chairperson, suddenly wide awake, immediately called the exterminator at MR. PEST-BE-GONE, as well as Dr. Steiner, and Mr. Green. Of the three only the latter seemed pleased at being woken up at 2 in the morning. Indeed, the exterminator asked, couldn't they wait till morning, but the Chairperson insisted it was an emergency.

Meanwhile, the round-faced woman continued to watch. The door was clearly open but she detected no further movement. She thought she caught sight of a shadowy figure or maybe two hovering within the apartment but as the door was only open a crack, she realized later it could have been a figment of her imagination.

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In their separate apartments, Dr. Steiner and Mr. Green both quickly dressed, having laid out their clothes in firefighter fashion on chairs beside their beds the night before, all ready to be jumped into. Both arrived at 5-F at about the same time, prepared, if necessary, to grab the woman and incapacitate her in whatever way circumstances required.

At the same time as they were dressing, several blocks away two of MR. PEST-BE-GONE's crack technicians were heading toward the Skyview building with a tanker full of pesticide. They were outfitted with tanks strapped on their backs attached to which were hoses and nozzles for applying the chemicals. Their headgear, of course, included a face mask which was connected to a small oxygen container lest they accidentally breathe in any of the noxious fumes during the application. Thus attired, they raced up to the fifth floor, arriving shortly after Mr. Green and Dr. Steiner, who were standing before the door to 5-F.

It's closed, they said in unison to the pesticide technicians.

One of the technicians said something in reply but as he was wearing the mask, his words were muffled. Finally, he pulled it off.

What's going on? he said.

The door's closed, they said.

I can see that, he said. Why don't you ring the buzzer?

It was supposed to be open, Dr. Steiner explained. I don't think she'll let us in.

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Hey, Mr. Green said, sensing opportunity beckoning, let's try. He pulled Dr. Steiner aside and said to him in a low voice so the technicians couldn't hear, this is our chance. Ring the bell. When she comes to the door, grab her and pull her out. Then we push these guys in and the deed's done.

All right, Dr. Steiner said. He hadn't prepared himself mentally for this eventuality, but what Mr. Green said made sense. Here they had a golden opportunity to deal with this problem once and for all. It would be silly to miss it.

Go ahead, he said, gesturing at the buzzer.

The technician, who was unaware of the woman's recalcitrance, glanced at the two quizzically.

You go in when the door opens, Mr. Green said to him, and spray the apartment like you would ordinarily.

OK, the technician said, repositioning the mask, which had the effect of making him look like a human-sized insect himself, because of the goggles. We're ready, he said, aiming his nozzle toward the door.

Mr. Green rang the doorbell.

There was no answer.

Try again, Dr. Steiner said. Maybe it isn't working.

Dr. Steiner banged on the door.

Open up! he shouted. Open up. Open up this door!

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Still no response, though Dr. Steiner thought he heard some scurrying inside.

I don't think she's there, he said.

The head technician pulled his mask off again. We'll have to charge you for this, he said.

Wait a minute, Mr. Green said, let's just bust it down. He started kicking at the door. Then he rammed his body against it. Here, he said to Dr. Steiner, help me. With the two of us.

Hey, what's all the commotion down there? A man from 5-B, evidently unaware of the problem in 5-F, stuck his head out his door. Pipe down, came a voice from across the corridor.

We can't be a party to this, the technician said suddenly, having finally figured out what was going on. You can't break into someone's apartment like that.

Dr. Steiner smiled sheepishly. We weren't exactly breaking in, he said.

Wait, Mr. Green said, what about the master key? Where's the Chairperson? We can get in that way. The Chairperson still down in 3-B had in fact fallen back asleep.

I'll go get it, Dr. Steiner volunteered.

No, I will, Mr. Green said. You wait here.

While Mr. Green was gone, the man from 5-B, still tying the belt around his bathrobe, approached. Hey, what's going on here? he said.

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We're trying to get into 5-F, Dr. Steiner explained, to spray it. For roaches.

At 2 in the morning? the man from 5-B said.

It's our only opportunity, Dr. Steiner said. To do it while she's out.

She's not out, the man from 5-B said.

How do you know? Dr. Steiner asked.

I can hear noises in there from my apartment. Part of my bedroom wall is adjacent to 5-F.

Well, she doesn't answer the doorbell, Dr. Steiner said.

Here it is! Mr Green exclaimed, running down the corridor, holding the key up in his left hand in a gesture of triumph.

He says she's still in there, Dr. Steiner said, gesturing at the man in the bathrobe.

But Mr. Green appeared not to hear him, so eager he was to fit the key in the lock. Just go in there and take her out, he muttered to Dr. Steiner under his breath, as he rammed the key into the keyhole.

After a few moments of unsuccessful jiggling and twisting of the doorknob, however, it became apparent that the key didn't fit.

Damn! Mr. Green said, stepping back from the door in exasperation. The bitch must have changed the lock.

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With this realization the five men stood momentarily motionless as if awaiting orders from some higher authority as to what their next move should be.

Then Mr. Green began kicking the door and crashing his body against it. C'mon, he said to Dr. Steiner, help me break this damn thing in.

Dr. Steiner stepped back. I don't know, he said.

The technician took this welcoming show of hesitation as a signal to leave. Call us in the morning, he said, gesturing at his partner to follow and backing down the hall.

Mr. Green looked angrily at Dr. Steiner who instantly realized an imperative to deflect blame onto someone else.

Who started all this anyway? he said. Harrington called me. He said someone saw the door open. That door was never open. This has been a wild-goose chase. They're making fools of us.

The Board next held an emergency meeting to discuss what had gone wrong. Roaches had in the meantime been sighted on the second floor and one tenant claimed they were setting up outposts in the laundry room. He had seen several, he said, behind the dryers. Beset by a rising tide of indignation from the tenants, the Chairperson realized action of some decisive kind would simply have to be taken. It was time to settle the problem once and for all.

I can't understand how she gets in and out, Frank Fujita said. There's no way she could get in and out under our surveillance.



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Maybe she's stockpiled food, Bella said. She could hold out for months.

Maybe she has magical powers, one of the watchers, a round-faced woman, said. Maybe she can make herself invisible, she giggled to the woman next to her.

Maybe she's a witch, Dr. Steiner, said sarcastically. She looks like one. Maybe she rides out the window on her broom.

Enough of this, Mr. Green interrupted. That witch in 5-F is making a mockery of us.

I agree, Dr. Steiner said. Things have gotten out of hand. We're facing a severe health contagion. New roach sightings are being reported every day. They're multiplying to the point where we'll never be able to get them back under control. Once they're established, you might as well give the building up to them.

Erica had to repress a smile at the idea of an entire city building ceded to cockroach control. Cockroach Condos. She imagined the little creatures stretched out in comfort on hastily abandoned beds, joyfully sliding up and down the walls of increasingly slimy tubs, nibbling on rotting delicacies in surrendered refrigerators, toasting one another in triumph.

This is war, Mr. Green said, interrupting her thoughts. It's us or them.

Well, said the Chairperson after a moment's pause, perhaps it's time to call in the police.

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Oh, the police, Mr. Green said. They'll have to get a search warrant. We'll have to hire a lawyer to present our case in court. It'll take forever. We don't have time for that.

Well, what do you propose? the Chairperson asked.

I have a secret plan, Mr. Green announced. But I'm not going to announce it to this Board, because there's a Judas rat in here somewhere, he said, glancing at Erica. Someone's been tipping her off.

Well, the Chairperson said, perhaps you could share the plan with me privately and then I could make a recommendation to the Board based on what you tell me. He glanced around the room. Is that an acceptable option? he asked.

As there was no objection, he adjourned the meeting with the proviso that they might be called back within the evening to decide on Mr. Green's plan.

As the others began filing out, Mr. Green motioned to Dr. Steiner to remain. Even though he had reservations about the dentist, he felt he was the only one who realized the seriousness of the situation and would be willing, if properly instructed, to take the desperate measures that were called for. After the room cleared, Mr. Green shut the door, checking up and down the corridor beforehand to make sure that no one lingered, sat down, and explained his idea to the Chairperson and Dr. Steiner.

It was a military plan, he said, that called for an armed attack on 5-F. He had served in the Army Rangers on a swat team and was well trained in the tactics required for such a mission.

The Board will never agree to that, the Chairperson said.

JOSEPHINE DONOVAN

The Board doesn't have to know, Mr. Green said. We can present them with a *fait accompli*. Once we've accomplished our mission, they'll see the wisdom of our plan. Nothing succeeds like success.

Well, I don't know, the Chairperson said.

We're facing a serious threat, Dr. Steiner observed.

We're at war, Mr. Green said, whether we like it or not.

Well, I don't know, the Chairperson repeated.

You don't have to know the particulars of the plan, Mr. Green said to the Chairperson. Dr. Steiner and I will take care of the details.

Dr. Steiner felt pleased to be thus entrusted and evidently reinstated in Mr. Green's favor; in truth he'd felt somewhat emasculated by having hesitated to break the door in—Mr. Green's suggestion—on the earlier occasion when the MR. PEST-BE-GONE technicians had been called in on a false alarm.

Well, the Chairperson said.

So we're agreed, Mr. Green said. It will all be over before you know it, and once again we can resume our normal lives.

Mr. Green knew a place where he could get surplus army camouflage fatigues, he explained to Dr. Steiner in going over the details of his plan the next morning in his apartment. When Dr. Steiner looked momentarily dubious, Mr. Green explained

that personally he felt more comfortable wearing camouflage uniforms, even though it obviously wasn't that necessary in an urban apartment building. They would have to wear black ski masks, of course, to keep their identity disguised. As for weapons, he had several M-1 rifles handy in his apartment. He collected guns as a hobby, he explained, having picked them up at various gun shows over the years.

Dr. Steiner suddenly had an unwelcome recollection of a provision in the Coop by-laws that prohibited the possession of firearms, but he decided this was probably not the time to bring up legalistic niceties.

When Mr. Green returned from a rear closet holding a couple of what looked like submachine guns, however, Dr. Steiner involuntarily took a step back. He explained he had never used weapons before, having fallen through the cracks of military service and not being a hunter.

We won't have to use them, Mr. Green assured him. They're just to scare her. The only thing is I might have to take out the lock on her door, but I can probably do that with a sidearm.

OK, Dr. Steiner said.

You just have to carry yours up like this, Mr. Green demonstrated, holding the gun in a menacing way.

OK, Dr. Steiner said. I can do that.

The operation was set for 2 a.m. the following day. Mr. Green said that was an optimal time for this kind of mission.

Back in his own apartment, 4-E, Dr. Steiner, outfitted for war, proudly examined himself in the hall mirror. He felt like a man again. And the thought of the Spray Days they could have once the woman in 5-F was disposed of filled him with joy. A pollution would be removed and the incipient fumigation would erase its last vestiges. Why, it would be like a new baptism for Skyview, he thought giddily; he almost wished he could bathe in the pesticide himself, shower in the sanctifying solution from tip to toe, scouring filth from every pore.

Having synchronized their watches, the two arrived in front of 5-F the next day exactly on schedule, dressed, as planned, in camouflage outfits and wearing ski masks. Dr. Steiner had to admit they looked ferocious.

Stand back, Mr. Green said in a hoarse whisper, once they had stationed themselves in front of the door to 5-F. Dr. Steiner could see he was holding what looked like a hand grenade. I'm going to take out the lock, Mr. Green explained. Dr. Steiner backed several feet away, not wanting to be hit by shrapnel or other flying metal debris.

Mr. Green pulled the grenade trigger, tossed it at the door, and flung himself down on top of Dr. Steiner.

Nothing happened.

Damn, Mr. Green said, pulling himself up. A dud.

In annoyance he pulled his revolver out of his belt. This'll do it, he said.

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Dr. Steiner remained crouched on the floor of the corridor.

Wait, he said, I think the door's open.

Quick, Mr. Green yelled suddenly to Dr. Steiner. It's open.

The two pushed against the door, which gave way so abruptly that they fell inside, landing against one another in a heap. Before they knew it, a raging swarm of insects was upon them—they couldn't see what kind in the dark—swathing them in a sticky sheath like that spun by spiders around their prey.

What the? Mr. Green cried out in a muffled voice, but the two struggled in vain, soon finding themselves encased and immobile in silken cocoons, which, before they knew what was happening, were rolled abruptly and unceremoniously back into the corridor with the door closed behind them.

Because of the dim lighting the surveillance cameras had only recorded the men disappearing into 5-F and moments later two mummy-looking forms being ejected out back through the same door. In the background, however, if you looked closely, you could see the shadowy figure of the woman in 5-F orchestrating the operation.

It was a few days before anyone dared go anywhere near the mummified forms; indeed people who lived on the fifth floor were afraid to leave their apartments. Finally, the round-faced woman who'd continued her diligent monitoring noticed that one of the mummies was moving.

They're alive, she exclaimed to the Chairperson over her cell phone. We have to do something.

The Chairperson called an emergency meeting of the Board to determine how to handle the latest crisis. By then the horrifying thought had occurred to them that the human cocoons might in fact be their old companions Mr. Green and Dr. Steiner.

The Chairperson asked for volunteers to go investigate but none were forthcoming. Who wanted to end up like that?

We can't just let them die, the round-faced lady said.

I wasn't in favor of their plan to begin with, Erica said.

Me neither, Bella and Frank Fujita chimed in.

The Chairperson finally realized that as the responsible authority he would have to go investigate the mummies, or claim the bodies, as the case may be.

Fortified with several martinis, the Chairperson warily approached the forms lying in front of 5-F. In truth, from a distance they looked like white body bags. He kept an anxious eye on the door of the apartment, which, happily, remained politely closed. All the while he remained prepared to beat a hasty retreat should there be any sign of further enemy action.

As he neared the mummies, he heard sounds from deep within the forms and noticed slight movements.

Get us out of here. It was the unmistakable voice of Dr. Steiner. As the Chairperson looked more closely, he could see that holes had been left in the casings for breathing and in fact a straw connected to a carton of soymilk had been thoughtfully inserted in each of the mummy's mouth openings.

## JOSEPHINE DONOVAN

Why, that was considerate, he reflected involuntarily; they provided them with refreshments. Then the hairs raised on the back of his neck as he began to realize what must have happened.

Get us out of here, one of the forms repeated.

Yes, yes, we will, the Chairperson said. Help is on the way.

What happened? the Chairperson asked once Mr. Green and Dr. Steiner had been removed from the fifth floor and liberated from their silken sheaths.

We're not sure, Mr. Green said, not wanting to verify what they suspected as the horrifying--and it must be acknowledged, humiliating--truth. It happened so fast.

At the Board's final meeting on the subject of 5-F they all agreed with Frank Fujita's observation that discretion is often the better part of valor. Consensus was quickly reached that a truce with the occupants of 5-F was in order.

Live and let live, Dr. Steiner said weakly, brushing a silken thread off his sleeve.