Invisible Horde

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I was sitting in the front entry way to my apartment smoking, three months after Doug's then girlfriend slit her wrists in our bathroom. She had only lived with us for a week. A week of boozing, getting high, and fucking Doug. I’m not sure what made my thoughts trace the events of Paddy’s departure in my memory as I slowly took drags from my cigarette. I was glad she was gone; the way she started drinking at seven in the morning while she sat on my beat up blue sofa in her pajamas had really weirded me out. I had no problem with drinking, hell I didn't care that Doug got drunk every-night. It was the uneasy feeling that he had duped me with a sad song about loving her to convince me to let her move into our household.

Using the word household may be a little much, where we lived was just place to squeak by. A quadplex in a neighborhood in town right by the rail road tracks, where blacks and whites smoked weed together on their stoops, many of them hailing from Chicago and other larger metropolitan areas. Everyone in the neighborhood lived in housing that was meant to accommodate as many families as possible. They tended to look bland on the outside, and run down on the inside: tile marred by the feet of its inhabitants, the structures too out of code to keep the cold out, and the sound of the train rushing by at regular intervals reverberating through the walls. The only thing that brought the neighborhood together was the occasional fire. Someone would fall asleep smoking in bed or pass out on a coach with a cigarette between their lips, and the whole building would go up. While their unit burned the neighborhood children would gather to watch, in some kind of weird ritual, as if they were new age Vikings watching their dead burn.

I stubbed out my smoke in the ashtray we hid in a busted grill our upstairs neighbor had given us and walked inside. Since Paddy slit her wrists, went to the hospital and gotten herself institutionalized, things had been quite around the apartment. I was restless though. Something had started nagging at my mind, like I was staring one of those three dimensional pictures you have to cross your eyes to see, but didn't know it. Everything around the place seemed the same—our bookshelves stood side by side in the living room like they always had, our kitchen stayed pig-disgusting, and the tribe of black and white children that roamed our
neighborhood continued to circle the block like jackals.

In my restlessness I paced the apartment. I got bored quickly and decide to use the single bathroom that Doug and I share. When I tried to turn the door knob it wouldn't give.

“Sorry, I'm in here,” Doug's voice came from the other side of the door.

“Jesus, how many times a day can you use the bathroom?” I used a playful voice, not wanting to come across as an asshole. It had been bothering me though, how much Doug seemed to be occupying the only toilet in the apartment.

I'm not sure when exactly I noticed Doug rushing in and out of the bathroom, taking a long time at weird hours of the day. I wasn't trying to pry when I analyzed why, exactly, someone would spend so much time in the bathroom; it was just weird was all. The amount of time he had control of the bathroom couldn't be explained, “Sorry I took so long I was putting some new product in my hair.”

Over the next few days it became common for me to hear Doug scratching furiously at himself. While at my computer, eating, using the bathroom, playing video games: the sound was always somewhere in the background, an ever ignored omen. I had thought nothing of it until he brought it up when we were playing video games together—one of the few times we interacted—and broached the subject.

The explanation was packed in an innocent conversation.

“Are you itching at all? I keep itching and I don't know why.” Doug asked as he glanced sideways at me, the television reflecting off of his eyes.

“Ya,” I responded, “I'm itching a little bit, I think it's the water though. It must be really hard water or something. I'm not itching too bad, not like you are, anyway.”

We both shrugged it off as nothing of importance, not taking into account that Doug's constant itching and scratching could be anything of any kind of significance. It was just a asterix note in our day. We were both relatively busy, so neither of us had the situational awareness to realize that the gods were about to send down a plague to smite our household in a Biblical manner.

It wasn't until a week later, during yet another round of shoot'em up video games, that he dropped the bombshell on me.

“Hey man, I, uh, I... have something to tell you...” and then he trailed off.

“Well, what is it? Did you lose the mail key or something?” I asked
light heartedly as the virtual game played out before our eyes.

“I have scabies,” he dove in head first, mustering the courage up from places unknown, “I’ve been itching because I have scabies. I went to plan parenthood today and had a doctor there look at me.”

“Well what the fuck man, isn’t that contagious? Are you going to get it treated or something?” I wasn’t entirely creeped out just yet, so I was keeping my cool pretty well.

“Ya, it’s pretty contagious from what I hear. I’ve got this stuff to treat it though, and I’ll be taking care of it in a couple of days. I would take care of it tonight but you need like, a twelve hour period where you can sleep while the treatment works.” Doug paused for a second, “You might have it and not even know it. I had it for a month and didn’t know it, I just thought I was itching a lot.”

“What! Are you kidding me! I could have it right now, and not even know it! Holy shit dude, this is so not fucking cool at all!” my mind was spinning with the possibilities.

If I had it right now, then I had already given it to my girl friend. If she had it then she would probably break up with me thinking that I had gotten it by sleeping with some skank. I had been home in the last month, so my family might have it. People I came in close contact with might have it.

“Fuck dude, I don’t even know if I have it, so what the fuck am I supposed to do? Is there any way I can check and see if I have it this early?” My questions came out in a quick and jilted manner, as if I were pleading for the answer I wanted.

“No, I don’t think so,” Doug said, the video game played out on the screen without us, as our fingers had momentarily forgotten about the controllers in our hands, and the cigarettes dangled from our lips, smoldered indignantly. “You won’t know until you start itching really bad, and get a bunch of red bumps all over you.”

I sanitized everything, absolutely everything. Surfaces had to be careful cleaned before I would touch them. Before I would sit down on the toilet to shit, I sanitized it with bleach wipes. Before I would touch the sink, I would wipe it down with bleach wipes. Before I would get in the shower I would take powdered bleach and sprinkle it in and then let the water run for a while. I stopped letting my bare feet touch the ground, always wearing some kind of foot wear. I took Lysol and used it to sanitize controllers before I would play video games. I took big heavy duty garbage bags and filled them with clothes, and then piled them waste high in front...
of my door, thinking that maybe it would deter any little critters from marching into my room like ants to infect me. I stopped sitting on any of the furniture that wasn't in my room, so I had to purchase a sportsman's hunting stool and sat on that in front of the TV. Sometimes--when I didn't feel like wearing shows while I played video games--I would take a freshly sanitized phone book, sit it on the floor, and then take my shoes off and set my bare feet on it. If I absolutely had to touch something that couldn't be bleached or sprayed I would wear plastic disposable gloves, the kind that cost a buck at Wal-Mart.

My life became meticulous cleaning rituals. Nothing could be overlooked; I couldn't afford to deal with scabies. I just didn't think that I could handle it. So in my mind the best thing to do was to sanitize things twice sometimes, just to make sure; to do things that I had trouble justifying to myself, but did anyway for the strange reassurance it gave me. I reasoned that if I took showers that were scalding hot, then maybe I could keep the little bugs off me. So I took showers that were as hot as I could make them. The water turned my skin a bright red with its heat, and I felt a purer after, at least for a little bit.

I never seemed to get enough sleep. It took a long time for me to get out the door in the morning so I started to get up earlier. I would get up, put my robe on, slip on some shoes and head into the bathroom. Then I would begin to sanitize the sink, taking care to wipe down everything: all of the exposed surfaces had to be cleaned, from the water knobs, to the basin, to the counter around it. I would then grab a fresh bleach wipe and clean the mirror, the door knob, and everything else from waste to shoulder height. I was careful, if missed one thing I could get it. I would then careful wipe down the toilet-the seat, and the reservoir tank in case my back touched it because that was an area of high contact for both of us. When I started cleaning the toilet I would run the shower, and right before I finished with the toilet reservoir I would powdered bleach the shower. After this was all done I would remove my robe, and step out of my shoes into the shower.

I became stressed out before I had even stepped out of my front door to great the day. Much of this was due to the fact that I had no idea if I was being effective or not. I couldn't tell if the little critters had gotten on to me and were breeding at rate that only insects can achieve. I had to stay the course, to bear down in an attempt to be stronger in will than a hive mind of insects who had only one urge: to reproduce as quickly as possible. So I continued, I persevered, I stayed the course. I became a prisoner in my
own home, and the irony that my room was about the same dimensions of jail cell was not lost on me.

The timbers of my mind began to creep and groan under the pressure, like a ship being tossed about in a maelstrom. There were times when I would wake up, throw the sheets and comforter off of me, turn and sit up in my bed only to freeze just before my feet would touch the drab carpet of my room. Could I do it today? Would today be the day I slipped up, made that one error that allowed the little buggers to crawl onto me and start borrowing?

No, I would tell myself, you are better than that. You will overcome. Day by day I overcame, and day by day the toll that the effort levied compounded. The creeks and groans blended cacophonously in a symphony of discord that betrayed something that I was not willing to accept. I could not go on with this forever. At some point I would have to stop the sanitation, the scalding showers, and the rituals that preserved me through the onslaught of my unseen swarm of enemies. Eventually they would find a fissure in my defense, blow it open like the sappers of old and come flooding through the breach in numbers so great, and in such a quickness, they would seem like a black, chittering, tidal wave.

I talked to Doug one night when we were both sitting at home drinking, hoping that he would anoint my ears with words of victory over the pestilence that had moved like a black cloud into our lives.

"Did you get the treatment?" I asked meekly, like a child expecting to feel his fathers firm backhand.

I needed good news; I was losing my mind being a prisoner in my own home. I needed Doug to throw some gusto into his voice and proclaim with all his being that our foe was vanquished. That the invisible war was over, and that we would go back to the regularly scheduled programming of our lives. The creaking and groaning in my head was getting relentless, I had tried drinking to quite it down, but it hadn't done anything but make me depressed. I had been growing irritable in a bad way, about things that didn't matter. It was seeping into the rest of my life. The bugs may have not gotten onto my skin, but they had gotten onto my head. They had fucked with me in way much worse than scratching.

I needed it to end.

For a second Doug looked like he was going to be a hero, even as ridiculous as he looked, sitting there in his in pajamas, gazing at his computer monitor. He leaned the bottle up at a steep angle while that made his eyes glaze, while the poison flowed down the hatch. He glanced at me,
setting the bottle down by the others. They made an empty clinking sound as they rattled together on the glass top of his computer desk.

“You know something,” his words slurred as he twisted his head toward me, “I don't give a fuck if you get it. You think this is easy for me? Getting this fucking shit from the girl I love, from the women who I've been in love with for years?”

“You haven’t got it treated yet, have you?” I froze as I said it.

I stood in his door stalk still as I looked at him. The way a deer freezes in the woods after a the sharp crack of a rifle flies through the trees. My whole body was tense, every muscle, my flesh literally strung out across my bones by my sinews. All the struggle that I had been going through, and all tension that it had cause in my life; it was all welling up in me and locking my body more solid than stone. I stood as still as a withered, yellow corn stalk as Doug recounted his woe to me.

He went on about how he was fucking this girl now, that he had most assuredly given it to. Now it wouldn't do him any good to get it treated, because he was still going to sleep with her. About how he couldn't tell her, because that would mess things up. He would get treated when she left and took the plague with her to her boyfriend out of state. When he mentioned that she wouldn't be leaving for six weeks, I realized the help I needed was denied.

I unraveled against the door frame, all of the tension rushing back to where it came from. I was limp, like a grotesque humanoid sock puppet left to try to stand on its own. Doug was going on and on about things that didn't even matter: excuses, justifications, it was all bullshit. The same song and dance he had been doing, lying, denying what was going on to people. Leaving me to twist in the wind as a marionette, while he lived in a facade he had constructed where everything was ok, where nothing was the matter as long as he was getting his dick wet, even if it was covered in scabies.

I hated him for it. I realized that as lay deflated against the door, a shell of a human being. I felt someone else forming the words on my lips, and heard someone else telling Doug:

“You're a worthless piece of shit. You don't give a damn about anybody but yourself. You couldn't care less about me. You're garbage, do you know that? You're nothing but filth, and you should be ashamed.”