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IT STARTED WITH THE FEET. Little red spots turned up in the morning, like polka dots, except always in clusters of three or four. They were too large for chickenpox, too flat for smallpox, and itchy. She started circling them with a marker to keep track of the new ones, her ankles and toes covered with tiny red planets orbited by black rings. He told her she was crazy, like Shakira. *Loca loca loca*.

He thought it must be fleas and kicked the cat out of the bed. *Scat*, he said as he shooed it away. *Cat*, she said, one eyebrow arched. He said, *Shut up*.

There was a time when they would have spent hours decomposing words into other words. *Scurvy, curvy. Shit, hit, it. Cantelope, antelope*. But that was then, and now the red spots seemed to be migrating north, creeping towards their belly buttons and marching along their forearms. *Marching, arching*, she thought. This time she kept it to herself.

Then one Sunday afternoon, as she was lazing around in bed, she saw it. It was about the size of an apple seed and a shade halfway between red and brown. When she squeezed it between her thumb and middle finger, she saw the blood—her blood—smudging her fingertips.

Later, they would wonder how they got there. A lone female hitchhiker picked up in a dank hostel? Haphazard contact with strangers on a bus? Or a neighbourly gift delivered through the ventilation? In her imagination, they must once have had more exotic lives, skipped like stones from one bright, bustling city to another. He preferred not to think of them at all.

A bedbug can live up to a hundred and forty days without food. When they are mating, the male will pounce upon the female and spear her in the abdomen. Sometimes she will bleed. Some females have developed the defence mechanism of shaking off the males and running away into the shadows, between the cushions of couches, or into the seams of mattresses—anything to get away. And so we wake up in the middle of the night, clawing at

our feet.

They smelled like raspberries—not like the ones that are still firm and tart, but like those that cannot hold their shape anymore and droop between your fingers, leaving red juice traces behind. She could not always smell them, only in the hours when she lay awake, listening to him breathing. But the dog Marian had picked up their scent right away as she inched around the bed, couch, and white sheepskin rug, her handler urging, *Show me, show me*. Nose twitching, she had shown them all, resting on her hindlegs before each contaminated object. *Good girl, good Marian*. And so the dismantling of the apartment began.

They were both in the living room, or at least it had been a living room, but now all the baseboards had been ripped out and the walls no longer looked finished. They did not bother wearing clothes anymore, not in the house at any rate, as they were worried about transferring eggs in their cuffs and woolly sweaters. So they sat there naked, each at one end of the circular table, eating spaghetti out of cans with chopsticks—leftover food and leftover habits from the careless days, when they rented an attic room with only a skylight for a window and packed their freezer with frozen pizzas from the drugstore on the corner. Five pizzas for five dollars, every first Wednesday of the month.

They were always naked then too, but it was the kind of nakedness you could only know when you're twenty because there's no such thing as an office job and you don't have to worry about the old lech across the street leering at you from behind his floral curtains, as the only trace of outside is a square of blue sky on the slanted ceiling. And so, clothingless, they would trot across the carpet to Sinatra records until they smelled the telltale burning and pulled the charred pizza from the toaster oven, yelping as it seared their fingers.

In this stripped apartment, their nakedness seemed almost fitting—whatever naked means when you have been living for years with the traces of blue toothpaste she leaves in the sink and the musty smell that clings to his shirts and trousers. The first time she had burrowed her face into his chest and inhaled, she had caught that scent—a heady mix of gym bags stuffed into lockers and the mothballs that your grandmother keeps between her botanical-themed blouses. It had been at a house party. She, eyes already hazy, and he, tripping over kegs and discarded shoes, had somehow ended up propped up against the kitchen doorframe. She breathed him in as they

slow-danced with chip bags and broken pretzels underfoot, unconcerned with the persistent rhymes issued from the stereo.

At some point—that point when someone has snuck their dad’s car out of the garage for a joy ride and another is keeled over the rhododendron bushes—they had left the party. Taking her hand, he had dragged her past block after block of dormant houses, only a porch light to keep them from melding into shadow. They had paused at a wrought-iron gate. PARK CLOSED FROM SUNSET TO SUNRISE. *Are you up for it, sunshine?* he said. He hoisted first her and then himself over the barrier, and they dropped, giggling, into the grass. She ran her fingers through the stalks, searching for the shape of known things that were, all of a sudden, wondrous: a dandelion, a soggy cigarette butt, a three-leaf clover. Dreamily, she turned to him. *Ever noticed how words fit into each other? Like Russian dolls. Clover and lover. Lover and over.* And so it had begun.

They had to make a decision. Anything that couldn’t be laundered had to be frozen below -15 degrees or heated above 45 degrees. She debated the more cruel fate: ice crystals clinging to the stuffed blue elephant she kept on her nightstand or his leather briefcase stifled and sweating? He rolled his eyes. *Oh, for Pete’s sake. They’re just things.*

Things they had accumulated from charity shops and flea markets, such as cookie tins and silver forks, candlesticks and a shearling coat. They had made a game of it—a thirty-dollar allowance each week. How much bang for a buck? Once, in a cardboard box filled with nude barbie dolls, she had found a jar of origami fortune tellers. The street vendor had chuckled when she asked for the price. *Tell you what, sweetheart. Just for today, I’ll sell you your future for only a dime.*

The decision was made: they would freeze. They hired a truck to transport everything to the warehouse, half of which was occupied by a fish processing plant. The inside of the walk-in freezers resembled a hotel lobby, with oversized luggage carts, each bearing a white tag. She wondered if their things would come back smelling of seaweed and salt.

The pest control man said it was essential that they continue existing in the space, lying out each night upon the tainted mattress, baiting the critters with the promise of blood. They found bodies burrowed in the cavities of electrical sockets and within the folds of the linen curtains. Cadavers littered the floor, some still right side up, others on their backs, legs, like commas, curled into their bellies. There was no question of sweeping them

away. They were not to clean until the last of the beasts had been eradicated. He pretended not to notice, only grimacing when he found one in the toe of his shoe. She wondered if they were to be mourned.

Hairballs, like tumbleweeds, sprang up in every corner. The poison left its tracks—white footprints dusting the varnished surface of the coffee table, traipsing across the lattice bedframe, and smattering the TV screen and the hardwood floor. Instead of rotten raspberries, they now inhaled the chemical stink of pesticide. They could no longer distinguish poison from dust. This was life boxed and bagged into plastic so that the beasts could not grip at the surface and shimmy their way back into your belongings—life that revolved around 60-degree cycles of the washing machine, wringing you out.

The containers returned from the freezers, piling up around them like brick walls. The apartment was reduced to its essential parts: microwave, toilet, sink, bed. They learned how to grope their way from bedroom to bathroom, navigating the new topography of their home. Crescents collected under their eyes. He spent his nights with a flashlight in hand, convinced that he could feel the critters nipping at his soles. When she succumbed to sleep, she dreamed of colonies of ant-like creatures trapped within her skin. She awoke with scratch marks etched into her abdomen and thighs.

Outside of the apartment, they found no reprieve. The moquette seats on the subway, the upholstered booths in the local diner—there was always a risk of contamination. They avoided brushing up against coworkers in crowded elevators, declined dinner invitations. Their only human contact was the mornings they spent scouring over each other's skin, shuddering as they encountered each bump and welt.

There were no two ways about it: the bed would have to go. Three rounds of poison later, and yet the critters had burrowed deeply enough to avoid execution. *You're sure you slept on it every night?* the dog handler asked. Yes, they were sure, just as he was sure to leave for work an hour earlier, not to evade the crowds on the bus but rather to avoid the mornings of silence that neither of them could be bothered to fill, leaving that to the rustle of newspaper pages and the clatter of coffee cups on the kitchen table. And she was sure to claim that she was meeting a friend for pancakes at the Five and Dime, when in truth she would go walking along the seawall to stare at reflections of the city in the water.

They fantasized about hauling the bed down to the parking lot and burning it. The smoke would sting their eyes, recalling bonfires down at the

nudist beach with the old hippies and their leather skin. Like the flames, they would dance, laughter rippling from their bellies to their throats. At some point, the woman from the fifth floor would stick her head out of the window and holler, *You goddamn lunatics! I'm calling the police!* And it wouldn't matter because anything, even lunacy, was better than wearing the same crumpled shirt five days in a row.

The disposal truck came by before they even woke up. The receptionist from the town hall sanitation services had given them a giant print out of a bedbug with the word warning in big block letters. *Once you've brought all your furniture down to the sidewalk, make sure you tape this sign on top. Otherwise the scavengers will come for it*, she had said with a laugh.

Congrats, said Marian's handler. *Hope I won't see you folks again*, he added with a wink. They stared at the garbage bags and furniture congregated in the living room. They ought to have been hanging in the balance, asking themselves if they were to pack their lives into separate moving trucks or rebuild a life in common. *We found ourselves at a crossroads*, she imagined they would say. She liked the way it sounded. It reminded her of the time the seventeen-year-old who lived in unit 42 had quarrelled with her boyfriend. There had been something both definitive and oddly dignified in the way the girl had proclaimed, *It's over*, as she slammed the door to his car—not so much like an exclamation mark as a full stop.

Yet even when all your things have been boxed up and labelled with masking tape, chances are your ankle sock has accidentally been paired with his sports sock, and his blue swimming shorts have found their way into your black yoga bag. Not to mention all the board games, coffee cups, and terry cloth towels that have never been *his* or *hers*, and in the end there seemed to be no point philosophizing over crossroads and new directions when there was a floor to mop up, baseboards to nail back in place, and so many cartons to sort through.

In the weeks that followed, they put the pieces of their apartment together again. Their clothes returned to the closets, and their throw pillows to the couch. Only the slight nicks in the furniture and scratches on the floor hinted at what had happened—that and the bodies of flies, mosquitoes, and ladybugs that continued to turn up all over their home. The poison had never been intended for them, but, as the pest control man reminded them, there were always civilian casualties in such a war.