

Beelzebub

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I don't know when exactly I began to attract flies. I only

remember when I first noticed it.

I was at my mother's house, brunching. She was talking about her diet, or my diet, or my father's diet, or my brother's diet, or her coworker's diet. It doesn't matter. What matters is that she stopped to say "Oh fuck" at a fat black housefly that had landed on her egg-shell tablecloth to suck on the droplets of peach Bellini I'd spilled.

My mother rose from the table, grabbed a napkin, and chased the thing around her living room, across the white carpet, past the freshly vacuumed couch. It flew out of reach, up to the cathedral ceiling, but still she waited for it below, now armed with a rolled-up copy of *The New Yorker* in hand.

It was when a second fly appeared that I realized something was wrong. One fly could have snuck into my mother's hypoallergenic fortress, but not two.

"Uck! You brought them in with you," she said.

Later, after I went home, I noticed two flies buzzing around my apartment. I took out the trash, cleaned the sink, and disinfected the counters.

The next day, there were three flies.

They found me at work, too.

And at the supermarket on my way home, I saw flies crawling on a pyramid of oranges.

I drove with the windows open, though it was late October, hoping the air would sweep the flies away. But they made it home with me, or maybe their reinforcements hunted me down.

I poured on bug spray. I fumigated the apartment. I sealed all my food in airtight plastic. I put up fly strips, and changed them every day.

I switched soap, shampoo, detergent, skin cream. I washed all my clothes in hot water.

Still the flies came, one or two more each morning, fat little satellites ever orbiting.

I don't think anyone realized they were coming from me yet. But people must have picked up on it subconsciously, for my supervisor at work pulled me into her office on a Friday afternoon to tell me she had to cut my hours. Nothing personal. It was a difficult decision. But with business being the way it was she couldn't justify keeping me full-time.

I made an appointment with a doctor before I lost my health insurance.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Could be a hygiene problem," he said.

"Do I look dirty?" I asked. "Do I smell bad?"

He sniffed. "Guess not. Maybe if you lost some weight..."

Bloodwork did not reveal the cause, though I found my iron was a little low.

More flies came. I gave up swatting at them.

Their presence around me was at last noticeable, and as a result my status at work went from part time to no time. But now my supervisor did not apologize. It was not a difficult decision.

I was fired, not laid off, so unemployment wasn't an option. I considered going on disability, but "attracts flies" probably wasn't a diagnosis the government would accept. I couldn't imagine who would hire me.

Were this the nineteenth century, I would have joined a freak show. But ours is a more enlightened era.

So I took to the Internet where I quickly learned that yes, there is indeed a subculture centered on fly-covered women, and, yes, the subculture has some very devoted fetishists, and yes in fact there was one of them living not too far away. Having no other options, I accepted his offer.

We met at a restaurant of his choosing—an upscale bistro that served cocktails in mason jars and needlessly expensive interpretations of mac and cheese.

I arrived first and sat at the table he'd reserved for us under the

name Geoffrey-with-a-G. He was late. I was about to leave when a surprisingly normal-looking man in his mid-thirties appeared and sat down across from me. He had brown hair and an average build. He wore business casual attire. He smiled at me and said, “It’s you.”

I plucked a fly out of my Merlot and dropped it in a napkin. “Sure is,” I said.

“What’s that joke?” he asked. ““Waiter, there’s a fly in my soup.”“

“Well, don’t shout or else everyone else will want one,” I said.

He laughed long and loud.

Nervousness killed my appetite but I ate anyway because he was paying and all I’d had so far that day was a sleeve of saltines. We chatted about our favorite Netflix shows, skincare, hobbies, and so on, and all the while he marveled at how I endured the insects crawling on my shoulders. “You’re the real thing,” he said. “No tricks. No honey perfume or anything like that. Wow.”

After the meal was over, I joined him in a room at the Marriot a block away. There, as negotiated in a private chat the day before, I lounged in an easy chair with flies buzzing about while he politely masturbated at my feet. I wasn’t ready for more than that. Not on a first date.

I earned three-hundred dollars for the evening’s work (which I later learned was far too little), plus dinner, plus a hotel stay. The experience hadn’t been anywhere near as degrading as the time I’d waited tables at an IHOP, so when I got home to my empty studio apartment I logged back on to find more clients. This, I understood, was my life now.

Geoffrey was my sole source of income for the first month. We met twice. But soon I found a banker who lived an hour and a half away. He wanted a cam show first, but because the Wi-Fi I mooched off the struggling vegetarian restaurant below my apartment was patchy, I opted for a phone call instead. When he heard the hum of little wings over the receiver, he decided I was worth the commute.

The banker was short with soft pink skin and hands like a

baby's. I refused to let him touch me. I tied him to a chair, as requested—much too slowly, for I'd never done it before. This annoyed him. But when I sat on his knee and my flies began to flit around his head and alight upon his flesh, he moaned in ecstasy. He came, hands-free, spraying onto my jeans. I left him tied to his chair as I cleaned my pants in the bathroom sink.

The banker introduced me to a friend of his, and my career took off from there. I moved into a better apartment and paid for my own Internet. I streamed live shows online, where I sat with flies crawling on my face while I talked about how their little feet felt on my skin.

Now that I had a steady income and a job that didn't eat up much of my time, I exercised more, wearing a cloth mask so I could pant without choking on bugs. I ate leaner—meal replacement shakes and kale smoothies, things I could suck through a straw so the flies could not land in it. I lost weight. I looked fantastic.

Business picked up. I learned how to breathe through clenched teeth and how to speak in short utterances with pursed lips so as not to swallow a bug. I bought new clothes for my new body. Geoffrey gifted me a beautiful pair of knee-high boots for fall, and he kissed them as the flies crawled upon the leather.

One of my clients invited me to an art opening in New York City. There, I sat on a dais and sipped free pinot noir, wrapped in a flittering haze. A crowd watched. Nobody masturbated.

My flies infested a found art piece consisting of a roll of hay from a farmer's field. The audience loved it. The sculptor declared it a brilliant work of spontaneous mixed-media collaboration.

A painter asked me to model for him. When I asked about payment, he called me a whore, which was fine. Whores can pay the rent. Muses cannot.

Despite his ire, I managed to ooze into the art scene, somehow. I was invited to parties, and if I did not attend them my absence was noticed. People praised my enigmatic silence, which was nothing more than a way to avoid inhaling insects. People adored my stoicism, which was nothing more than weary resignation to forces

I could not control. Potential lovers surrounded me, wrote songs about me, painted pictures of me. Men are fascinated by a woman who doesn't say or do very much.

I learned, soon, that once you are loved by the rich, you don't have to work to survive. Things somehow find a way of being paid for. I was treated to dinner at the Four Seasons, where I watched flies crawl on my Asian gravlax. Acquaintances passed me unbelievably pure cocaine. An avant-garde composer I'd befriended offered me an apartment in a building he'd inherited from his parents. The entrance had a doorman and a marble floor. It was the most beautiful place I'd ever lived in, and I filled it up with flies.

I was interviewed by *VICE*, photographed by *Fusion*, and profiled in *The New Yorker*. Then came the inevitable flood of think-pieces. I was accused of plagiarizing Yoko Ono. I was said to be taking advantage of the twin privileges of whiteness and conventional beauty—a homeless person of color would not have been rewarded for being covered with vermin.

Then came the backlash to the backlash. The art world was the villain for enabling and exploiting a woman with a terrible medical condition. Or, I wasn't being exploited: I was empowering myself by owning my physicality.

All of them were true. Or none of them. It didn't matter.

The swarm around me still thickened. It occurred to me that their ever-growing presence could be a sign of worsening health. I knew it would be best for me to treat my condition, or at least keep it from getting too severe.

Now that I had the money, I saw specialists: endocrinologists, dermatologists, toxicologists, entomologists, Reiki practitioners. Each diagnosis contradicted the other. And none of them could fix me.

I felt unfaithful, somehow, as though I'd betrayed the flies after they had given me so much.

I got older. At my agent's advice I began to shift to the inspirational self-improvement market. A ghost writer pumped out a book in my name titled *From Flies to Fortune: How to Make the Best of a*

Bad Situation. I gave a TED Talk about body image. I taught self-help seminars and visited talk shows. The rich loved me; they held me up to the world to say, “See? You don’t need health insurance to succeed.”

And the flies still came, more and more. I could conquer a room with my personal swarm. I started sleeping under a powerful fan to keep them from clogging my breathing passages at night. For this reason, I began to wear my hair in a braid.

My mother stopped inviting me to her home. In our phone conversations, she took great care to avoid mentioning my talent. Instead, she asked why I hadn’t found a husband yet. That Geoffrey guy seemed nice. She didn’t understand why he wasn’t interested: Some girls you date and some girls you marry, and you don’t marry a girl covered in flies.

I amassed a greater social following that now included prominent medical researchers and spiritualists. I smiled gently through endless conversations with strangers who thought my silence was noble. Their questions and comments and business pitches melted into the buzzing, forming an ever-present white noise.

To get away from it all, I booked a single-occupancy yurt at a mountain pond in Vermont. I drove there alone, windshield wipers plowing clear arcs through the layer of glimmering black bodies on the auto glass. A few of the flies got trapped in the car when I shut the doors. I left them there.

I dropped my cell phone, vibrating with messages and unanswered calls, on the cot in the yurt, whose white canvas walls throbbed with insect life. Shrouded in a cloud of wings and segmented eyes, I walked to the end of the dock, stepped into the water, and sank to the bottom, where my entourage could not follow.

Above, the flies wheel and wait, or dash their bodies against the surface of the pond to drown.

But down here, if only for a moment, it is painfully, gloriously quiet.

