

Music from a Strange Planet

Stories

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Don't tell me the moon is shining;
show me the glint of light on broken glass.

—Anton Chekhov

Mastering Surface Tension

Bert always wanted a cigarette right when something interesting was happening. Like he could only accommodate change on his own terms. It irritated the hell out of Grace. “Look! Forked lightning!” she’d say. And then instead of looking, he’d reach for his cigs, pop one out, light it, then look.

One June day, Bert climbed the ladder leading to the roof of the house. He had done it many times before, thanks to the exhortations of his loving wife to, for god’s sake, do something about the cracked windowpane, the Christmas lights, the leak, the loose shingle. Usually, the supposed defect was a figment of her imagination, which saw decrepitude and disaster lurking in everything. In this case, it was a football-sized hornet nest hanging from the corner of the roof. He lined up the ladder underneath it and climbed to take a look. He liked to at least give the appearance he had done an inspection. The nest appeared inactive. He lit up a cigarette at the top of the ladder and took the opportunity to look into his neighbours’ yards.

There was Mr. Gorman, whose first name and profession were a mystery to Bert and whose yard was soulless perfection. Manicured lawn, tightly clipped box hedge, expensive lounges arranged at right angles. It looked like a high-end miniature train set. All it needed

was people. But Gorman never entertained anyone in his backyard; he only controlled its growth and staged its possibilities. On the other side was the perma-smile guy, Ed Thompson, who whistled in his garden—mostly vegetables—and was perennially cheerful, as if every day were a pleasant and welcome surprise. His yard was populated with water features, Buddha statues, tiki lights and grandchildren. In the summer his barbecue went nonstop, its primordial charred meat fumes billowing into Bert's domain. Bert was neither precise nor free-form. He was the common man between these two extremes. "You're a good man, Bert, a regular good man," his wife always told him. And his yard was just a plain rectangle of grass.

Bert watched Gorman mowing his impeccable lawn back and forth, back and forth, first in double-wide stripes, then diagonally in a diamond pattern. It looked like something Bert would never achieve in his life. He sucked on his cigarette and exhaled a stream of smoke in the direction of the hornet nest. In the other yard, Ed was picking his tomatoes in that luxuriating Buddha-way of his, admiring each red globe as a miracle of nature, when his cellphone rang. Oddly, at the same time, Bert heard his wife's voice coming from the kitchen.

"Oh, I was up to my neck in blackberries! Pie, jam, you name it." When she laughed, Ed laughed, too. Bert thought it must have been a weird coincidence. He moved up to the ladder's platform with the label that said "Not a Step," trying to spot his wife through the narrow window. His head was now six inches from the nest. A sentry popped out of the entrance, its helmet-like black and white head swivelling to face Bert. It sent out the alarm. The last thing Bert remembered was lying on his back on the sidewalk and seeing a squadron of bald-faced hornets dive-bombing his forehead.

Since then, Bert had been in a so-called vegetative state. By all appearances he was inert, confined to a stark-white hospital room on the fifth floor of St. Francis of Assisi Medical Centre. But, in fact, due to a neural short-circuit in his visual cortex, he was now an insect

who roamed a microscopic world of his own creation, a landscape that sometimes resembled a magnified stucco wall, or a dried warped orange peel. Technically, he didn't operate as his human self anymore, but on the other hand, he was free from the constraints of the material world.

Nobody knew of Bert's interior state of being, and had they known, they wouldn't have understood how it came about. Maybe the part of his brain that stored the intense glut of entomological knowledge from seventh grade had suddenly been made accessible. That year, he had spent so much time alone crawling around the forest floor and peering into dirt holes with a magnifying glass that his parents had feared for his sanity. But what he had found in his engagement with the world of earwigs, termites, weevils and stoneflies, cocoons, wasp nests, galls and moults was, above all, kinship. Much of our world is constructed by our brain. Bert's had simply taken it to a whole new level.

Each day, as he lay in the hospital bed, a portal to a new world presented itself, not always pleasant. He didn't think in terms of "days" anymore. Instead, he operated in "intervals." As hospital visitors sat by him, downcast, Bert scuttled through the intervals, knee joints clicking, antennae quivering at odour molecules (passing meal carts), eyes at ground level in his world, which he thought of as "Domain." At first it simply unfolded itself before him, like an opium vision. Later he could actively create the topography and adjust his "attire." If he felt he needed new body parts he switched them in: sculpted elytra, armour, barbed tarsi, an ovipositor (his gender was flexible). Did he feel himself to be a human-sized arthropod or an actual size one? What did it matter? Only the law of dreams applied.



Driven by guilt and loneliness, Grace visited Bert regularly. The hospital, with all its modern angled glass, made her feel as if she was

trapped inside a giant ice crystal. The large room skewed perspective, making Bert look even smaller. From her purse she took out his old black plastic comb and ran it through the limp strands on his head.

“Oh, and Tod insists on staying with me. He’s already polished off most of your liquor. They were saying on TV that the Arctic’s melting.” Her church friend Johanna said global warming was natural, but Grace swore the ocean at the bottom of their street was breaching the high-tide mark already and it worried her. “Do you think we should move, Bert?” The ventilator inhaled as if about to answer.

Tod, their bachelor son, traded hospital shifts with his mother. Transferring his bulk to the undersized chair, he would sit like a giant in kindergarten and read aloud from Bert’s favourite book, *How Stuff Works*: “Water has a higher surface tension than most other liquids...” “The tines of the baler intake pick up hay, feeding it into the rollers...” Whether Bert heard him, Tod didn’t know, but he felt needed. He wondered why his father had never read to him when he was a kid.

Bert did hear him. In fact, Tod’s reading fuelled Bert’s excursions into “Domain.” And Bert’s visions became more detailed, more intense. They had a physiological dimension, too. Regions of his motor cortex and parahippocampal gyrus often flickered like distant lanterns. So distant that no one in the room ever detected them. Thinking, however, remained excruciatingly slow. It could take him two or three days to assemble his body, but his incarnations were not guaranteed successes. “Mayfly,” for example, did not go well: he couldn’t figure out how to operate his hindwings and kept crashing into the lake. “Water Strider,” however, was an interval he revisited several times, revelling in the ideal geometry of his thread-thin legs and the feather-light tiptoe sensation of mastering surface tension. More recently he was learning to detect the pressure waves of objects in his spatial field, a special skill of the much-detested German cockroach. Outwardly, his face and body betrayed nothing of these experiments.



At first, people came with cheery voices and upbeat news, Ed Thompson among them. They crinkled candy wrappers and waved things over his face as if he was a scanner. Gradually, the visits lessened to a smaller circle of friends and family.

Pressure waves. Visitors again. His neighbours the Kilshaws from down the street, and their two young boys.

“He’s moving!”

“No, he’s not.”

“Yes, he is! Just a bit. His temples are twitching.”

“I don’t see it.”

“You missed it. They were.”

Meantime, Bert, during his sojourn as a dung beetle, had invented a machine for rolling dung, thereby revolutionizing life for the family Scarabaeidae. He had sensed it was time to ratchet up his invertebrate existence.



Summer unravelled. Grace and Tod dragged the patio chairs back to the shed. Bert’s dormant rectangle of grass was revived by the autumn rains. Tod knocked down the old hornet nest with a broomstick, like hitting a human-head piñata. It disintegrated into small ash-like flakes.

As far as his daughter, Lisa, was concerned, Bert was as good as dead. She never visited him. She continued tap-tapping out client reports as she always did in her tiny paper-strewn office at WorkSafe. Her imagination was as feeble as Bert’s had been before the accident.



Tod sat on his parents' couch, drinking the remainder of his dad's Johnnie Walker Red, watching the home movie labelled "Shawnigan Lake, 1974." Bert flickered briefly onscreen, waving a blackened pork chop from the barbecue, the lake glistening in the background. Tod had grown closer to Bert since his father had been in the coma, or experiencing "minimal consciousness," as the ICU doctor put it, as if describing a worm. Now Tod spent his days reimagining his childhood as a golden age of father-son ball games, model-making, and fishing expeditions.

The phone rang.

"Mom! Phone's ringing." He rewound to the fishing sequence again so that, in reverse, Bert appeared to lower the cutthroat tail-first through a perfect ring of water and seamlessly guide it back into the depths of the lake. As the answering machine clicked on, Tod shouted, still fixed on the TV, "Someone named Joanne." Grace flew down the stairs and lifted the receiver.

Two weeks after Bert's accident, Grace started attending the First Memorial Church of Faith, which Johanna had suggested the day she had touched Grace's hand so sympathetically and recommended that Grace read the Book of Job. Grace found its endless litany of disaster horrifying but was too polite to say so. Now when she visited Bert, she keened prayers over him with evangelical fervour: "Oh Lord, fill this man with your divine spirit, raise him up to life to see once again the glory of Creation!" In the past, the closest she ever got to religion was when she and Bert first met in 1960 and made out in Saint Luke's churchyard, knocking over a small stone cross, which they hauled off as a souvenir, Grace shouting to the moon, "Forgive me, Mr. Jesus!" The cross still stands crookedly in the shade garden of their backyard, guarding the grave of their first dog, Ripley. She was beginning to think that what made you a certain kind of person depended largely on what kind of person the *other* person in your life thought you were.



More intervals passed. Without ongoing cues about his body, Bert's conception of himself as human had vanished. As Grace grew weary of her inert husband, he was enjoying the glory of his own creation. Mating paraphernalia and positions occupied him for hours and hours: the ideal spermatophore transfer method, or if he preferred to be in a higher order, length of the endophallus, tarsi to grip the smooth backs of females, grasping position, etcetera. Way back, while his schoolmates were ogling *Playboy* centrefolds, Bert the twelve-year-old was diving into the mechanics of invertebrate copulation, which were to him more erotic than the mechanics of human coitus.



Grace came. He felt the pressure wave. And maybe another thicker density beside her, he wasn't sure. She dragged the chair closer, making the rubber ends on the chair legs squeal, causing his landscape to temporarily collapse. "Bert, I've met someone. At church." He had no idea how many intervals it had been since his fall. "I thought I should tell you." If he'd been able to light up a cigarette, he would have. Instead, he spread his wings wide to listen.

"I just want you to know how much I still love you," she said, parting his hair with the black comb. "Even though..." her voice trailed off. She knew you could never really replace one love with another; you could only displace the original, push it to the back of the drawer where the old underwear languishes. She stared at Bert, distressed that he looked so otherworldly, like an alien version of himself.

As that long-ago twelve-year-old, Bert imagined that the woman he would fall in love with would be as dainty as the green lacewing, his favourite nocturnal insect. *Chrysopa*—golden eyes. He had imagined the vibrations of his mating song travelling from his body down into

the ground upon which she would stand before him.

Grace continued to pour forth reasons for abandoning him. But her voice started to feel prickly, different than it was in the past, like tiny barbs puncturing his abdomen. The longer she spoke, the less he could understand. Her words became sound-wave shapes, percussive vocalizations, swirling moans, like a floor polisher making its way down a long, narrowing hallway.

“Tod and Lisa and I will all be here with you in the room....” She whispered a fervent prayer, patted his hand and left.

Bert snapped his wings back smartly, groomed his antennae, and re-entered “Domain.” On the other side of the white hills—no, he had changed them to ochre now—his new mate was waiting.