

Invasion

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Seniors (60 and over)

General Fiction

On the morning of August fifteenth, the heat and humidity were stifling, even for a native Nebraskan like myself. It was not yet eight o'clock, and I knew that the thermometer would steadily rise as the hours passed. We'd marked twelve straight days of drought and hundred-degree temperatures, the air so thick and muggy that it was difficult to catch my breath. Even the nights had brought no relief. Not a whisper of a breeze stirred the tops of the hay stalks in the field below the house. The birds didn't seem to have enough energy to chirp, and the silence weighed almost as oppressively on me as did the heat.

I mopped my brow with a bandana as I searched among the weeds in the kitchen vegetable patch. My hope was to find something edible that wasn't either grotesquely overgrown, like the abandoned zucchini, or shriveled into a desiccated mummy that was once a tomato. I was on my knees, pulling up some carrots that lay buried and protected in the insulating soil, thinking that my pioneer ancestors weren't so stupid when they dug sod houses into the earth.

When Jerome called to me, I straightened right up. His voice was pitched higher than usual, and I first thought he'd encountered a rattlesnake. Shading my eyes with my hand, I hurried over toward where he was standing at the edge of the hay field, wearing tan Bermuda shorts and a white Polo shirt. It struck me, not for the first time, that he didn't look much like a farmer - which indeed he is not, nor am I.

Although my husband has never tilled the land for a living, his master's degree in entomology landed him a good career with the Nebraska Department of Agriculture. I was a numbers geek through and through, a certified CPA. I used to call him "bug man" when we were dating. Other than regular visits to my grandparents' farm in my growing-up years, my only connection to rural life was my all-consuming love affair with horses.

We bought this property when we both retired from our jobs in Omaha. I had always wanted horses, and we had some money saved up. We found this old farmhouse on a twenty-acre parcel west of Broken Bow, I declared it to be perfect, and we moved in. We've been here five years now, and we managed in that time to put up horse fencing and grow about fifteen acres of alfalfa as hay for our two loves, Pink and Joe-Boy. Our neighbor Ed Wiegand, an honest to God farmer, helps us to plant it in late April and harvest it every October, and in exchange, I figure his income taxes for free.

"What's wrong?" I asked when I reached my husband.

"I'm not sure," he said, his gaze fixed on the western horizon. He pointed, and I saw a band of darkness hovering just over the land.

"Smoke?" I asked. "Maybe there's a fire. We'd better get on the radio up at the house and see what we can find out."

"I'm going to feed the horses first. You go up and try to get some news."

I hugged him and turned toward the house. He might not be a farmer bred and born, but he loved those horses as much as I did, even though they'd been much more my dream than his. Pink and Joe-Boy always came first on our chore list.

Setting my basket of carrots down by the sink, I flipped on the radio that was usually tuned to the FM public station in Omaha. I switched to AM and dialed to the all-news station in

nearby Callaway. All I got was static. I tried Broken Bow and got some kind of taped talk-radio rerun that was floating conspiracy theories about Joe Biden. I scrolled up and down the AM dial from one end to the other, trying to find something local and live, but the Omaha stations far to the east of us were the only ones coming in clearly.

I went out to the barn to tell Jerome that I'd had no luck with the radio. He looked worried by the news.

"I'm finished feeding the horses," he said. "I think I'll just drive the pickup over to Ed's place and see if he knows anything about what it could be."

"Take your cell phone, sweetie. Call me if you need anything."

He kissed me lightly and walked over to the truck. As he drove away, I looked once more at the western horizon and noticed that the dark band had grown in height. It seemed about twice as thick as it had been when I first saw it. Could it be some kind of gigantic electric storm that had knocked the power out to the west of us? Maybe that was why I couldn't get a local AM station on the radio. If it was smoke, on the other hand, one hell of a fire must be burning. I started to worry about Jerome being out on the road. Ed's place lay northwest of us, so Jerome was driving right into whatever was out there.

I was grateful for the cellar that lay below the old farmhouse we'd purchased. It had an exterior trap door as well as a rough set of steps leading down from inside the kitchen. Jerome and I were always talking about upgrading that kitchen, but truth be told, I kind of liked it the way it was. It was so much like my grandmother's farm kitchen that I felt her beside me whenever I was there. I remembered her fear of storms, and how, at the first flash of lightning, she was ready to scramble down the steps to the root cellar to wait out what might be a twister.

T-Bone shuffled over to me from his shady spot under the giant elm, and I scratched his neck. He was a placid lab who never worried the horses and tended to seek out my presence whenever he wasn't fast asleep. The dog didn't usually get excited by much, except when he flushed a rabbit out of the tall grass. Now, though, he raised his head and sniffed the air with his ears cocked forward slightly.

"What is it, pal? Do you smell something? Hear something?"

I wondered if maybe he could smell smoke that was still out of my range, and I peered again at the horizon. The cloud, or whatever it was, had definitely grown since I last looked. I still could not distinguish what it was, but it was advancing in our direction. Ill at ease, I walked to the end of the drive, trying to spy Jerome's truck. The road was empty. I stood there for probably ten minutes, T-Bone panting in the heat at my side. I saw nothing but bare road. It seemed like there should have been an occasional car coming by, maybe a delivery truck or a mail van, but nothing appeared.

The dog and I walked back up to the yard. I had almost reached the barn. I was about ready to call Jerome on his cell phone when I noticed that T-Bone had become even more agitated. He lowered his head and pawed at his ears, whining softly. I turned back his ear flaps to check for mites, sniffed for the telltale scent of disease, and came up with nothing. Then I heard it. A whining sound reached my ears, pitched so high that T-Bone must have detected it much earlier. I looked again at the sky and saw that a dark, sparkling mass covered almost half of it.

The truck rolled up the driveway at that moment. Jerome shut off the engine and sat in the driver's seat staring straight ahead, motionless, his normally tan face ashen, his white knuckles gripping the steering wheel. I ran over to him.

“Jerry?” I asked. “Jerome! What’s happened? Say something!”

“It was horrible,” he whispered. “Ed got caught in the field, it looked like he’d fallen, and they suffocated him. I found him there.”

“What are you talking about? Who suffocated him?”

At that moment, the mass that had been advancing on us reached its destination. Jerome leaped from the truck and sprinted toward the hay field. I saw his form, and then it was swallowed by what seemed like a fluctuating wave of blackness.

Wings filled the air, obscuring my vision, making it hard to breathe. The hordes flew into my ears and became entangled in my hair. Little darts were flying up my nostrils. I snorted hard, batting at my nose. Waving my arms frantically, I pulled the back of my shirt up over my head.

“Run!” yelled Jerome. “Get to the barn, hurry up!”

I obeyed immediately. My legs pumped away while my feet slipped on the bodies crushed beneath them, reducing my speed as I skewed from side to side. When I reached the barn door, Jerome yanked it open and followed me inside, pulling the door shut against a barrage of living bullets. The air inside was only somewhat better, swarming with the creatures that had flown in through the hayloft. He boosted me up onto a wagon that was loaded with hay, and we restacked the bales so that they formed a cave around us.

Hunkered down and sweating, gasping for breath, our knees curled between us, we sequestered there like twins in a womb.

“What is it?” I asked, but I knew. I knew, and yet I found it hard to believe. It was a Bible story, it was something that happened in other places, in blighted third-world countries, in Africa. Not here in the good old U.S. of A.

“Locusts.”

I lay there panting, trying to get a clear air channel. I was worried about the dog, about the horses, not least of all about us. Jerome was silent. I kept waiting for reassurance from my “bug man,” my expert who would tell me that it was just a temporary thing and that we’d be fine. But he said nothing.

“Will the onslaught stop when night falls?” I asked him after what seemed like an age.

“Not exactly. They settle down to eat and mate at night, feeding until everything is gone. Then they fly on, but another wave follows right behind them. Our chance to make it back up to the house comes when they’re feeding, not when they’re flying. We have to go before the second wave comes.”

I tried to keep the hay chaff from choking me, breathing through the bottom edge of the shirt that I had pulled up over my nose. Sharp needles of straw dug into my bare arms and legs. The scratches on my exposed stomach were red with tiny beads of blood. Jerome coughed and sneezed, blowing his spray across my face. Had the alternative not been to choke to death, I might have complained.

The horses were screaming frantically, kicking in their stalls. If you’ve never heard a horse scream, you don’t want to. Suddenly a loud thump was followed by frail whinnying.

“That’s Joe-Boy, I know it!” I said. “My God, what is happening? I’ve got to help the horses.” I tried to sit up, but Jerome held me down.

“Hush, Christine. We can’t help them now. Wait for nightfall.”

Pink, the other horse, was still kicking, but her blows became less frequent until they stopped altogether. When I heard another heavy thump, tears sprang to my eyes and spilled

over. I sobbed softly, and Jerome managed to give my arm a gentle squeeze. We didn't try to speak.

The hammering on the barn roof and walls sounded like a tremendous rainstorm. I tried to imagine that it was water and not ravenous insects pelting down around us, and eventually the mental picture managed to calm me somewhat. Depleted of oxygen in our tiny shared space, I dozed fitfully and dreamed that I was drowning.

Jerome shook my shoulder, waking me.

"Christine. Listen."

At first, I heard nothing, which was a blessed relief. Then, as my ears became attuned to the new quiet, I heard a background noise. It sounded almost like humming, except for the brittleness that came across as though it were a whispering and rustling among a great throng of people. It was chewing, voracious and constant, that I heard.

"Now's our chance. We have to go."

"I want to check on the horses," I said.

"The horses are gone. We have to save ourselves. Let's go now, Christine. We need to get to the house."

We shoved the bales of hay aside and sat up, taking in great gulps of air as we brushed the chaff from our hair and faces. Night had fallen, but the light of an almost-full moon streamed in through the hay loft. I jumped down off the wagon, stretching my cramped arms and legs, and headed straight for the horse stalls before Jerome could stop me. What I saw broke my heart.

Joe-Boy and Pink were lying on their sides, eyes wide open and covered with flies. Their nostrils were filled with locusts, both dead and still moving. A mass of blood had dried on Pink's head where she must have cracked it against the wall in her frenzy. Joe-Boy's left rear

leg was cocked at an impossible angle, broken from his wild kicking. Pink was gone, but Joe-Boy was still drawing slow, labored breaths.

Jerome appeared next to me, holding the rifle that he kept in a padlocked box in the tack room. I turned away and braced myself when he fired. The report rang in my ears as tears streamed down my face. His left arm circled my shoulders, and we walked toward the house, the gun still cradled on his right side. When T-Bone crawled out from under a pile of hay and shook himself, I sank to my knees to embrace him.

“Thank God,” I said, burying my wet face in his fur. He licked me solemnly. I rose to see Jerome staring at what had been the hay field. Only stubble was left, but even that was still crawling with the invaders. The three of us crossed the grass lawn, locusts crunching under our feet. We went in through the kitchen door and found the house looking just as we’d left it the day before. I was immensely glad that I’d kept all of the windows closed against the heat. I sank down at the table, laying my head on my arms. I could have slept right there, but Jerome coaxed me upstairs. We lay naked on top of the bed with the window air conditioner blowing frigid air on our sweaty skin.

With morning came another vast horde, beating against the windows and drumming on the roof. The mass of bodies dimmed the sunlight to an eerie brown, turning the landscape into an old sepia photo backlit with the reflection of the sun on their wings. The noise woke me from a dream of bloated horse cadavers, and I groaned when I realized how accurate it had been. T-Bone heard me and came to the edge of the bed, nudging my outstretched arm.

All that day we moved around the house in slow motion, beaten down by the heat and the distress over our dead horses, our ruined field, our poor neighbor Ed. I tried to call his wife, but she wasn’t picking up, so I simply left an inadequate message of sympathy. I knew that Jerome

and I were safe as long as we stayed inside; we had plenty of food and water. Neither of us felt like eating anyway. The house was a bunker under attack, cut off from the outside world, marooned in the half-light that filtered through the bodies crawling over the window glass.

Jerome sat at the kitchen table most of the day, searching through old entomology field guides. He had a few dead locusts lying next to his magnifying glass, and he kept peering at their bodies and shaking his head. His fingers clicked across the keys of his laptop.

The old mantle clock that I'd inherited from my grandmother marked the hours off. A steady drumming on the roof began to decline as the day waned and night descended. I was anxious and fidgety, wondering how much longer we were going to be trapped indoors, cut off from the outside world.

"How long is this going to last?" I asked him.

"It's hard to say," he answered. "I've been trying to key these varmints taxonomically, so that I know which species we're dealing with. But the only match I can find is *Melanoplus spretus*, which doesn't make any sense."

I sighed with annoyance. "You know that means nothing to me. I just want to know when it will end."

He looked at me over the back of his laptop. "The thing is, it never should have started."

"What are you saying?" His tone scared me. I was used to my husband having a firm grasp on science and explaining it to me. I trusted his knowledge of his field, but I was really spooked when he didn't have a ready answer.

"This bug is commonly known as the Rocky Mountain locust. It devastated the plains states in the 1870's, but it hasn't been seen since 1902. It was formally declared to be extinct in 2014."

“So, what’s your explanation, Bug Man?”

“Well, locusts are really grasshoppers in a migratory state that can appear when populations reach extremely high densities. The locust form looks like a completely different insect. Some theorists think that ‘extinct’ forms can resurface when environmental conditions are just right.”

“And what conditions are *just right* for a locust infestation?” I asked with a sour note in my voice that I just couldn’t keep out. The memory of my horses was raw and aching.

He smiled grimly. “Extremely hot and dry. Enough water could end it.” Closing his laptop, he stood and stretched. “Maybe we need a rain dance.”

“I think I’ll just go to bed.” I turned and climbed the wooden stairs, T-Bone following close behind.

A lot of people have trouble sleeping in difficult times. Not I. Faced with a problem that I can’t fix, I hibernate. A solid twelve-hour night would be an almost perfect escape for me, were it not that I dream vividly. Unfortunately, I remember much of what I dream. My nights can be filled with visions that I’d rather forget. I often wake sweaty and disoriented, staying motionless until I can place myself in time and space.

When I woke the next morning, dragging myself back from a confusing dream, I lay still until I remembered who and where I was. The familiar drumming sound played on the roof, even louder than it had the day before. *Oh God, it’s getting worse*, I thought. *They’re going to drill right through the shingles and bury us alive.*

I sat up groggily and looked around the room. On the bedside table I spied a steaming mug of coffee and a note that Jerome had left. *Look outside the window*, it said.

I shuddered to think of the view that might greet me. Still, I climbed out of bed and went to the window. I could barely see out, but it wasn't bugs obscuring my view. It was water. Rain was pouring down harder than I'd seen in a year. A deluge was hammering on the roof, washing up against the glass, splashing out of the rainspouts down below me.

I put my hand up against the pane, and it actually felt cool. Jerome had told me that water would end the scourge. I thought of our poor neighbor, the horses, the barren fields— I didn't yet know how wide a swath of ruin the locusts had left. Although my heart was still heavy, relief washed over me like a balm. In the midst of so much death and destruction, the rain felt like life itself.

With eyes closed, I leaned my forehead against the windowpane, letting the glass cool my fevered brow. I heaved a deep sigh as tears of gratitude streamed down my face. Finally, I opened my bleary eyes. With my gaze cast down toward my feet, I saw them. The floor was alive with locusts. More and more of them were dropping down from our old, leaky attic space through a small crack in the ceiling. The black mass seemed to swell until at last it took flight, and the entire house was buzzing.

"Jerome!" I screamed. But no one answered.