

THE SHARP DRESSED MAN AT THE END OF THE LINE

He was collecting roaches. They moved faster than he expected them to. They'd be within centimeters of Dean's fingers and suddenly speed left or right with quarterback maneuverability. Crafty fuckers. Even more survival driven than he gave them credit for.

Survival, Dean's modus operandi. He understood the cockroaches on that level. Both of them had a clearly established Goal One:

Do Not Die.

He left out muffins. They swarmed the muffins. Dean harvested the unsuspecting bugs by the handful.

He replaced his regular bulbs with UV black lights, so he could see, but the roaches didn't scatter like they would under normal apartment light.

In between roach round-ups, he watched television. He grimaced. He cringed. Every image on the screen was a fat, flashing sign that read WW III.

The news showed Conflict with a capital C, international and senseless.

It caused Dean to sweat stress and stink up his flop pad, the worst in all of D.C. Check the rotting floorboards, the dripping fau-

cets. Noise-aholic neighbor bass and baby screams as the soundscape. Swinging bare-bulb ambience. Mildew and asbestos fighting for air-space. Punctured pipes leaking slow into linoleum cracks. Plastered pellets of roach shit as the common denominator.

Living cheap. Barely living.

He watched television. The President poked angry bears with sharp sticks.

We will not relent to this Axis of Assholes!

Take that Iraqi-Bear!

They're hoarding weapons and plannin' rape missions!

Yield before us Korea-Bear!

Commie baby-killers, pure and simple!

Oh, China-Bear, you'll rue the day!

The President was up in the polls. The populace- petrified and war weary, but strangely supportive. Dean included. He'd back a bully... as long as El Presidente could guarantee a win. It was that possibility of a loss that spooked Dean to screeching simian defense levels. A loss, at this heavily armed and nuclear point in world history, meant Apocalypse.

Dean's answer- Cockroach Suit. Thousands of cockroaches hand stitched through the thorax, tightly sewn to a Penney's business suit bought on the cheap.

Dean's days and nights were occupied with the spreading of wings and the careful puncturing of his pathogenic pals with needle and thread. He positioned them all feet-out, so their mouths could still feed.

Dead roaches were of no use to Dean. The live ones carried the instinct.

The instinct had kept them alive for four hundred million years. Their bodies were natural radiation shock absorbers. They could live for ten days after being decapitated. Dean knew that in the event of Apocalypse, he'd be rolling with the right crew.

He knew they were training him for war, and for suffering. He'd already borne the brunt of their bacterial ballast. He'd coped with clostridium. He'd dealt with dysentery.

He was becoming impervious to disease, like them.

He kept and catalogued the roaches, separated into clusters of speedy Smokybrowns, ravenous Germans, and over-eating Americans.

Jars upon jars of the bugs were stored in his deep freezer. They slowed down in the chill. The cold goofed them like opium, kept them still.

It kept them from eating each other.

That insatiable appetite had been the primary problem with the first cockroach suit. Dean had left it out in the muggy tenement warmth at night, stored along with some chocolate cereal in a microwave-sized cardboard box. When he opened the box in the morning the cockroaches had not only eaten all the cereal, but had ravaged each other. His carefully crafted suit had gone cannibalistic.

He bought another suit. Dean didn't sweat his cash flow. Daddy Dean Sr.'s estate was still kicking out cash in steady intervals. The primary source of cash—royalties from the sale of Daddy Dean's Ivy League approved books on entomology.

Daddy Dean Sr. had been a big time bug man and serious scholar until his car accident. A deer had run into the road. Daddy Dean Sr. swerved hard with his right hand on the wheel. His left hand gripped a cherry Slurpee with a thick red straw. Daddy Dean Sr.'s car hit an elm tree straight on. The dependable airbag exploded and jammed the fortified Slurpee straw straight into Daddy Dean Sr.'s left nostril and right on through to his frontal lobe.

Dean had shown up at the scene in time to see the cops detach the straw and blood-filled cup.

Dean had heard one cop on the accident scene call it a "straw-botomy."

Dean didn't think it was funny.

Dean didn't think a single fucking thing was funny for quite a while, and resolved to find happiness however he could.

For a long while that meant spending Daddy's textbook royalties on hallucinogens. The "straw-botomy" had taught him that the world made no sense anyway, so he traveled the world hunting head-

trips. He tongued toads. He feasted on fungus. He inhaled ayahuasca. A bad encounter with a sodomizing shaman and some industrial strength desert peyote finally scared Dean straight.

Then he moved back to the states and began his survival training.

He knew the world wanted to erase him. He'd seen it in visions. He'd seen it in the eyes of the priapic shaman. He saw flash frames of his own father felled by a plastic straw.

Dean moved to the slums of D.C. He wanted to move to a place that resisted and destroyed life. He knew there were survival secrets in the daily struggle.

He holed up and watched television. He watched El Presidente taunting nuclear armed countries anxious to see if they could one-up Hiroshima.

Y'all ain't got the bomb, or maybe y'all just ain't got the balls to use it!

C'mon Korea-Bear, show us you got a pair!

Dean read books about roaches. He studied sewing and stitch types. He bought spools of thread and heat sterilized needles.

Dean developed his cockroach suit and watched it fail.

He cried and sucked up the sick, musty attar of roaches when his first suit dined on itself.

He cursed himself when the second suit crawled through a hole in the crumbling apartment drywall. Fifty seconds to piss. That's all he'd taken. That was all they'd needed. He heard his roach riddled jacket and pants skittering around in the crawlspace above his kitchen.

Every time he failed, he felt as if Apocalypse was seconds away. He got weak, the blood flow to his head lagged. He thought he could hear the roar of approaching bombs overhead. He worked harder, his hands shaking with fear.

He ignored the doubt that crept into his skull and took up permanent residence.

Dean, don't you know the bomb is coming for you? You think some bugs and some cheap threads can stop a holocaust?

He ignored the fists that pounded on his door, the angry

screams, the vulgar notes slipped through the crack of his mail slot.

The note last Tuesday read: Mister room 308, you are the cockroach man and ever since you came all up in here they've gone crazy. My little sister has to wear cotton balls in her ears to keep them roaches from digging into her head and laying eggs, like they did with Brian. You ain't right at all Mister room 308, and you ought to leave and take your roaches with you. I see them coming out from under your front door right now. My dad says if Brian has eggs in his brain, then you die. Go away. Love, Maysie.

The neighbors thought Dean was bad mojo. They threatened litigation. They threatened worse. Dean knew it was part of the world's plan to erase him. He kept working.

Dean actually saw the first bomb hit. He knew it was coming.

He knew from the silence. El Presidente had gone quiet for three days. There were no more TV broadcasts promising patriotic retribution. There were no more shots on CNN of El Presidente grabbing his balls and shouting, "Eat this, Iran!"

El Presidente was quiet because he was hiding, somewhere, from the grief he saw coming America's way. El Presidente was crafty, even more survival driven than Dean had given him credit for.

In the calm before the atomic shit-storm, Dean finished his third cockroach suit.

It was perfect. A living tapestry of twitching legs and chittering mandibles. Add to the threads a pair of Kroeg blast goggles, a crash helmet, a refillable oxygen tank, and a thick pair of foil lined tan work boots, and Dean was suited up for survival.

When the first newscaster started crying on air, Dean suited up and began to walk from his apartment to the street. He didn't want to be inside that roach trap when the Earth started shaking.

Dean walked by apartments, heard the crying of the tenants. They could sense the bomb was coming. Their cries were weird, and strangely complacent, the mewling of doomed animals with no options. Baby seals, waiting for the spiked bat to spread their skulls wide.

It made Dean sad. He cried and fogged up his goggles. He felt the suit writhing around his body, taking in his warmth, seething. He stayed in motion.

Dean made it into the street and turned to his left, not sure quite where to go, hoping the cockroaches' instinct would take over soon. Then he would just lay down on his belly or his back and let them carry him to survival, like a God.

The D.C. streets were packed with people looking up at the sky, waiting. Dean expected chaos and conflict. No one even looked twice at him. They were waiting for the Big Delivery from above.

They got it, twenty seconds later.

The flash blinded Dean, even with the goggles and helmet on.

He crouched behind a cement stoop and heard the most cohesive and unified scream any dying species had ever let loose.

Then there was silence, and heat, terrible heat.

And, of course, darkness.

The cockroaches carried Dean, like a God. He woke to dark clouds and electrical storms overhead, and gray ash falling all around him. His retinas were blast burnt, but functional.

He was alive.

That was the part he could not comprehend.

He was fucking alive.

The roaches were too, and they were moving quickly towards a perceived food source. Dean felt them moving, swift and single-minded, driven by constant hunger.

His hands were cold. Nuclear winter was just beginning, and the air already approached frosty. He'd forgotten to buy gloves. He hunched his shoulders, pulled his hands inside the living suit. He relaxed and enjoyed the eerie quiet, and reveled in being alive. Being a survivor.

He moved without effort through the ash of nuclear winter. His suit surged beneath him as it crawled up onto a sidewalk. The legion of tiny legs pushed onward as Dean zoned out on the gray snowfall floating down from the sky.

He watched the sky turn darker. He saw thick red and green clouds of nuclear dust float above him. He saw an obelisk in the distance, stark and tarred jet black by the bomb blast.

It was the Washington Monument, just like he'd seen on T.V. There was something walking back and forth at the base of the monument. It moved like a human, but glowed bright yellow.

Dean let the suit carry him closer, and then stood up when he was within ten feet of the yellow shifting mass.

Dean lifted the visor of his helmet and de-fogged his goggles. He could see clearly after that, aside from the bright imprint of the blast that wouldn't leave his sight.

The peripatetic figure was a man. A man in a Twinkie suit. The thousands of Twinkies were half charred and oozing cream filling.

The man turned to face Dean.

The man's face was slack, and the eyes were empty of thought or feeling. Despite this lack of emotion, El Presidente was still the most recognizable man on Earth.

He looked at Dean and started to weep.

Dean opened his arms, offering a hug.

El Presidente stepped forward, and then hesitated. It was too late. The cockroach suit was upon him, a thousand mouths demanding to be fed.

Dean looked into El Presidente's eyes, caught dilated pupils, animal-level fear.

The eyes no longer promised Dean's destruction, as they had from the static screen of his television. The world's plan to erase Dean had failed; it was vaporized to dust, silt in sick Strontium-19 winds.

The scarred sky above Dean grew darker, the air around him even colder. Dean shivered; El Presidente screamed.

Dean reached up and warmed his hands around El Presidente's throat. He felt the pulse under his hands drop to zero.

The weeping had ended, and the feasting had begun.