

Bedbugs

by John Gorman

M scrubs the floor with a wet t-shirt, eyes peeled for bedbugs. She'd been bitten all night and ignored my comment that she has sweet blood. She has zero tolerance for jerkiness and shoves aside my pile of record albums and grabs the Windex. She squirts a spiral galaxy into the chafed pine floor then balls up the t-shirt and punches into every sneaky crevice.

"Dump some of this crap," she says.

I pick up a handful of albums and shuffle through them. Aerosmith, The Eagles, Cannonball Adderley, and stop at Thelonious Monk's *Brilliant Corners* slipping the thirty-three out of its sleeve and blow a sprig of lint off the vinyl. I've been collecting albums for years and once in a while like to listen to the scratchy tunes warbling on my turntable. Neil Young too has a great affinity for Analog over Digital. I'm aware of its shortcomings, they're human. I'm not one who goes around coveting mint condition, I yearn for imperfections.

M stares up at me, on all fours. When the hell are you going to start cleaning? she seems to be saying with her eyes. And I know it's more than a cursory wipe of a rag she's after. She's convinced I've brought the bedbugs into our home because of my affair which is now over. I get my share of bites, but I sleep through it. I'm not allowed to sleep on the couch. M says that's the easy way out. No, she insists we carry on through this ordeal. And it's miserable.

We've already tossed out the mattress and bought a new one, but these bugs have come back. We've dumped the boxspring, sprayed enough repellant to kill a humpback whale, we've almost bought a new wardrobe each, but somehow we can't get rid of this pest,

At this point, it's as much mental as it is physical. The one reprieve is that each night we decided to share intimacies, things we've never told each other before, and we end each sharing with "Can you forgive me?"

Yes, I'm ashamed for bringing a stranger into our bed. No, not literally, but I've brought the baggage of that experience home with me. I've learned things from M that I never wanted to know. For instance, she never wanted to wear the Shetland sweater I'd given her because it made her break out in rashes. She wore it anyway because she saw the electric joy beaming in my eyes when she raised it from its box. She told me she thought my mother was a lousy host because she always rushed us to the dinner table when we visited. My mother never offered light banter or an aperitif. Three years after I'd given up on being a sommelier she told me I didn't have drive. She'd thrown out six years' worth of copious notes on the growers and their wines. She had no confidence I'd ever return to the field.

I'm in awe of her frankness, how she takes my breath away, how I wish to rush off with her to a splendid hideaway where only the two of us touch the grape-stained mountains and the cerulean sea, wild blades of grass quivering with the breeze. Sometimes though, I don't want to kiss her. Sometimes I'm just in such awe I cannot find the nerve or the moment passes.

I don't want the upper hand, but I've grown scared of this game we play. I think both of us have now passed the tongue of forgiveness and have stepped into a new sphere whereupon each newly peeled layer will never taste the same.

I'd rather be invaded by these bedbugs forever than peel any more layers of discontent. If only she'd stop apologizing.

