

## A SURPRISING END

Stovall Hardy was not a curious man. Despite the name he shared with a team of brother sleuths, he was also not crazy about mysteries. That's why what was happening to him was so troubling.

The first time he noticed anything strange was at work. He was washing his hands after using the urinal, and as his hands were lathering, an earwig appeared. It came from around the back of the faucet and was working its little legs down the bowl of the sink. Stovall told himself to be calm. Just an earwig, he thought, a pincer bug can't hurt you.

As he was rinsing his hands, he carefully scooped a little extra water in his hands and flooded the spot where the earwig was. The little bug had no chance. It was quickly swept down the drain. He rinsed his hands for an extra few seconds to make sure it was down the drain for good.

He dried his hands on the one sheet of paper towel the electronic eye provided, and carefully gripped the doorknob with the moist towel. Door opened, he threw the waded paper in the basket and told himself quietly he had just made two points. A co-worker passed him going into the bathroom, as Stovall was exiting with his two points secured. Stovall never knew that the same earwig had survived the assault, and climb back up the drain. It scared the shit out of Steve from accounts payable, as he witnessed it crawl out of the drain.

That, of course, was just the beginning. The very next night, Stovall was in his pajamas carefully tucked under a small blanket. He had dimmed the light for a movie. It was the *Bicycle*

*Thieves*, and was in Italian, so Stovall was concentrating on the subtitles. He had been meaning to see it for years, but it had just made it to the number one slot in his online movie service.

As he was watching, from the warm glow projected from the TV, he noticed movement on the ceiling. No, it was just his imagination, he thought. But the movement continued and reached a place where the glow showed an outline of a small spider. It was a... well he didn't know what kind of spider, but the harmless small kind that must be tolerated from time to time. As he looked up again, it was still moving.

The amazing thing was that it was moving in a completely straight line. Not exactly, he noticed. The spider was kind of feeling its way on the semi-smooth white ceiling. It was moving very slowly, but it was headed straight over the spot where Stovall was sitting. He assumed it was his imagination and soon the tiny spider would veer off in a different direction and end up in a corner of the ceiling. He decided that when he finished his popcorn, he would get up and kill it.

It kept coming. Stovall had missed too many subtitles glancing back up at the spider, and paused the movie. He was fascinated now. He hated spiders, true, but he had to know whether it was really going in a straight line. It was. It was now only a foot away from being directly over his head. He put down his popcorn and reached for the lamp. He looked up at the newly illuminated ceiling and the spider was gone. Stovall scanned the ceiling, but it was nowhere.

As he got up his eyes focused on the glow from the TV and the spider was suspended in front of his face. He screamed like a little girl. He lived in a small two bedroom home, so no close neighbors heard him, he hoped. Without thinking, he grabbed the blanket that had been on his lap and sandwiched the spider between it in one quick movement. He kept his hand firmly together to make sure it was squished.

That would not be enough, he decided. He quickly moved to the sliding glass door and flung the balled up blanket outside. As he stood there he wasn't sure why he overreacted. It was not like him. He closed the door and decide to leave the lights on for the rest of the movie. He brushed his teeth and used the toilet. He thought he noticed a little water near the base of the toilet. He was too tired to care. He went to bed without incident, and had nearly forgotten all about the spider. Waking up and not remembering his dreams, he dressed and left for work as usual.

Just before his morning break, Stovall noticed he had been itching the back of his left hand all morning. He only now looked at it to notice the small red bump. Something must have bit me, he thought. He only then remembered the spider, and realized he would have to wash the blanket he threw outside the night before.

He thought of bugs all day after that. He tried not to. He didn't much care for bugs, insects, spiders or whatever other categories there were, thank you very much. He didn't have anything against them exactly, he just thought they were...icky. He suddenly realized that he had made up rules without consciously knowing it. He always tried to avoid killing things, even bugs: if there was a trail of ants crossing the sidewalk, he would step over them, he never pulled the wings off bees as a boy. He had even got annoyed when his brother had. He had never caught a bug in a jar or killed one with a magnifying glass.

But *inside* was different. Without realizing it he had declared it a war zone inside. Flies and spiders had an instant death sentence, no jury needed. This idea was just for insects, of course. He didn't have many pets as a child, but he liked animals. He had no problem eating meat, but Stovall wouldn't want to kill his own dinner. Hamburgers were one of his favorite

foods. Stovall knew he would never be a vegetarian, but he would never hurt an animal. Thank God he lived in a civilized world. But bugs were different. No quarter would be given to any bug inside the house.

He had shaken the thoughts of bugs almost completely as he walked towards his car leaving work. He was rounding the last corner before the parking structure when he walked right through a small swarm of flies. He hurried through, almost thinking he'd swallowed one. Luckily he hadn't. He hated flies the worst. Living on shit most of the day and then landing on people. He had always thought they were the most disgusting bug of all.

He picked up dinner at a fast food place on the way home. Thinking of hamburgers earlier that day had gotten him in the mood. As he sat on the couch eating his dinner, he heard a buzzing sound. He went back to watching the news as a fly landed on his TV screen. It moved over the screen as Stovall tried to chew. He couldn't stop looking at it. Even the thought that it might land on his food disgusted him. He slowly rose up and went for the fly swatter in the kitchen. When he returned to the living room, the fly was in a holding pattern over his food. He never understood why flies seemed to get into a square or rectangle flying pattern. Stovall knew someone had to have studied this, but he had no interest in finding out. He just wanted the fly dead before it touched his food.

He inched closer, not wanting to disturb the air too much and alert the fly. The fly kept to its regimented pattern. As Stovall got within an inch the fly landed on his straw. Not just landed, but Stovall knew the diseased thing was lapping up the tiny droplet of soda that he had left behind. He swung the swatter. The soda went over, broke open on the hard wood floor and made

an icy, sticky pool. The fly returned to the TV, where Stovall smashed it against the screen. It was an unusually fat fly and made a large smear.

Stovall went to the kitchen for paper towels and glass cleaner. The guts cleaned off the TV, he began work on the soda puddle. All was clean in a few minutes. But his nerves were shot. He couldn't be sure if the fly had touched anything else, so he threw away the remaining fries and half eaten burger. What kind of weird coincidence was this? Completely unrelated bug incidents in a few days. They had to be random. Weird things like this just happen sometimes, he told himself. He was still uneasy.

He decided he would shower and maybe have a drink before bed. He enjoyed his small finger of scotch and fell asleep quickly. He woke in the dead of night. The clock said three am exactly. He felt a little strange, probably from the scotch. He wasn't use to drinking. Stovall was given the bottle as a present three years ago. It had sat in the cabinet, aging. Just out of a deep sleep, Stovall almost felt as though he was still dreaming.

He went to the bathroom and turned on the bright light. Like the rest of his small rental house, the walls and ceiling were white. No spiders on the ceiling and no earwigs on the sink. He did hear a quiet buzzing sound, but realized that it was because he had woken so suddenly from his deep sleep. As he urinated, his big toes felt a little wet, "Damn it," he said aloud, "The seal must be leaking again." As Stovall reached for the hand towel for the leak, he looked in the mirror and froze. Just above his upper lip, it... was moving. He though his lip was twitching at first, but realized it felt like something was under his skin. He looked again. Something *was* moving under his skin. The buzzing got louder, but he realized that must be adrenaline. He tore open the medicine cabinet and yanked out the rubbing alcohol and a pair of tweezers.

He slammed the cabinet shut hard enough to break the mirror, but it held firm. Keeping his lips shut tight, he poured the rubbing alcohol over his upper lip. The numbing was almost immediate. He kept his lips pressed firmly together, so that no rubbing alcohol would get into his mouth. He hoped he was dreaming. He looked again and saw a little red spot just above his lip. He still felt something moving under his skin, again. He poured more alcohol and put the tweezers on the spot. He pulled hard and a tiny worm came out along with a gush of blood.

He couldn't move. He put his hand over his bleeding lip and stared. The tiny worm was only about a third of an inch long and almost as thin as a kite string. It was in the sink, along with Stovall's dripping blood. It writhed in the blood. In horror, Stovall washed it down the drain, along with his blood. He kept the water running, both hot and cold faucets, on all the way.

He took his hand off his face. It was still bleeding, but he felt nothing else under his skin. He realized the hole he punctured was very small and soon the ban-aids he kept changing out had less and less blood on them. At 5:30 am he put his last band-aid on and had his third *glass* of scotch. The panicked, surreal horror he had felt was slowly fading now. He had kept the water running all night.

He knew he couldn't go back to sleep. He decided to do his laundry, to keep his mind off things, and suddenly remembered the blanket outside. He was feeling very good now, thanks to the scotch. Very numb. He was not totally smashed yet, but knew when all the scotch he drank finally hit his system, he might sleep after all. At least something *like* sleep. He turned on the outside light and opened the sliding glass door to the patio.

The blanket had landed in a ball on the small juniper bush. He approached it carefully. He knew that Juniper bushes was notorious hiding places for spiders. Although his landlord paid a

gardener to trim the bushes, and the exterminator came once a month, Stovall was taking no chances. He carefully arched his body so that when he shook the blanket, nothing might fall on his slippers. Shit. He had forgotten his slippers. He also remembered he was *outside*. According to his own secret rules of engagement, “outside,” was *their* turf. He went back and closed the sliding glass door, then returned to the blanket on the bush. Okay, he thought, my rear flank is protected: no bug can get in a closed glass door. As he arched his back to reach for the blanket, he heard the clicking.

Stovall thought it was a cricket at first. Stovall didn't mind crickets; they seemed to be in a different category. But the sound wasn't right for a cricket. The clicking sound continued. The porch light was very bright and easily illuminated the entire small space. It was only a few bushes and a hedge in a small raised flower bed. The rest was concrete patio leading to the house. The sound didn't stop. But there was a change: now it sounded like clattering. As he looked around he realized it was the clickety sound of small feet. A large potato bug was running straight for him. He screamed and ran for the glass door. It was a small patio and the bug was coming at Stovall impossibly fast. He grabbed the handle and jerked. It did not slide open. He put his palm on the door and tried to push the door open. It wouldn't move. It must have locked. As he continue to push on the glass, he realized it was just the sweat on his palms. He finally got traction and the door opened just as Stovall thought he felt the potato bug touch him.

He closed the door and the bug stopped in its tracks and stood there. He locked the latch and the potato bug slowly moved along the bottom of the glass door. Stovall knew it couldn't get in. But as it pushed itself up on the glass to reveal its striped stomach, Stovall slid the blinds in their track. The plastic vertical blinds sways with the violent closure. He twisted the long wand

to make the blinds close. Gaps appears between the slats at the blinds swayed, showing the bug trying to climb up the glass. He waited until the bug could no longer be seen.

Stovall awoke with a scream, the sun was up behind the white vertical blinds. It was morning and Stovall was on the couch. He threw off the blanket he had been under from head to toe. He knew if a spider had fallen on him in the night it would not penetrate the blanket. He saw that over half the bottle of scotch was gone. That explained his massive headache. He put his hand to his upper lip. The band aid was there. It hadn't been a dream.

He called in sick to work and hurriedly got dressed to go to the small nearby doctor's clinic. He had not brushed his teeth, thinking that stretching his mouth might open the wound over his lip again. He had used mouthwash the best he could and put deodorant on. He went carefully to his car, scanning in all directions for any form of insect. He drove to the clinic and checked himself in the rear view mirror before going in. Stovall looked terrible and he knew it.

When the nurse handed him the clipboard full of papers, she asked, "What is the reason for your visit today?" He told her he had cut his lip. He would save the weird story for the doctor. As he waited with the five or six other people, he began to think. His mind wandered to bugs, of course. Stovall wondered how many bugs he had killed over his thirty two years. How many flies and spiders had he killed? How many bees had stung him and died? Ants? It could be thousands. He realized this line of thinking was ridiculous, just as the nurse called his name.

The doctor was both professional and kind as he laid out his story. While examining his lip, the doctor said, "Have you been to Africa lately?"

"Uh, no. No trips to Africa... ever, I mean. Why?"



"Well, there are several kinds of parasites in Africa and even South America that cause worms to come out through the skin. The Guinea worm comes to mind, but there's nothing comparable in the US. Have you eaten anything strange lately? Did you keep this worm?"

Stovall replied, "No. It went down the sink with my blood. And I have a pretty boring diet. Canned tuna, processed foods, I wash all of my fruits and veggies carefully..."

The doctor asked Stovall to remove his shirt. As the doctor put the stethoscope on Stovall's back he said, "What about alcohol use?"

Stovall realized that the mouth wash hadn't worked very well, "I rarely drink. I drank last night because of all the stuff that happened."

"Just asking. Go ahead and put your shirt on," The doctor made some notes and then said, "Your vitals are fine. Your blood pressure is slightly elevated, but that's not surprising considering your night. I'm going to write you up a prescription for something to help you sleep. If even half that stuff had happened to me, I would want to be knocked out tonight."

"Thanks Doc. I know it all sounds crazy, but it really happened. Any ideas what's going on? How could this be happening?"

The doctor said, "Well, actually, you came to the right doctor. I am a medical doctor now, but as a kid, even college years, I loved insects. I almost went down the entomologist road, but decided on general medical practice. That's why I know how strange your story really is. True, earwigs are very common in this part of the country and can seemingly get anywhere. It's a myth that they get into the ear canal, although they may have gotten tangled up in a "wig" or two. The name is a complete misnomer. Spiders of all kinds are everywhere. Some estimates say that there

are one million spiders per acre. Most are harmless. They don't usually aim for humans inside a house, but with the volume of spiders around, I can see that maybe happening. It's weird, but it could happen. This summer has been especially warm and the flies are bad this year, so that explains that. The strangest thing for me as an insect lover is the behavior of the Jerusalem cricket."

"The what?" asked Stovall.

"The potato bug. Also a misnomer. They do not eat potatoes, they are not dangerous to humans, and I have never heard of them charging anyone like that. They are called the Jerusalem Cricket even though they are not indigenous to the Middle East. They are mostly in this part of the country, I'm afraid..."

"Lucky me," replied Stovall.

The doctor continued, "The worm thing is deeply troubling. If we have some sort of dangerous imported parasite going on locally, I want to know about it. I will look on the CDC website for any warnings and I have ordered a series of tests. The nurse at the desk will have the details. Please keep me informed if anything else happens. And let's have you come back in a week, okay?"

"Okay," Stovall began, "But this all can't all be a coincidence, can it?"

"Well, your last few days are strange, but honestly there can't be some vast bug conspiracy against you. Even if they could organize a coordinated attack, which they can't, all the insects you mentioned are enemies to each other."

"Really?" asked Stovall hopefully.

"Really," comforted the doctor.

Stovall left feeling much better. He still scanned the sidewalks and the walls as he entered the house. He felt like a policeman as he looked behind every door and in every area of his house. His stomach was upset. He decided his stomach was telling him to go to the bathroom.

Stovall took the trash can from besides the toilet and bent down to inspect all around it very carefully. Before he could look around the back of the bowl, he felt water on his palm, "oh great," he said aloud, "The seal really is leaking again," he complained out loud to no one. He made a mental note to call the landlord when he got out of the bathroom. He put a towel around the base of the toilet to soak up the water.

Stovall sat down on the toilet and grabbed the magazine sitting on the counter close by. He felt a strange sensation and heard a loud crack. With that, he felt the toilet give way beneath him. He didn't know what was happening. As he went down the broken porcelain of the cracked bowl cut into Stovall's legs. He thought the hard seat would save, or at least shield him from the jagged, broken toilet. He was getting cut badly as he sunk onto the jagged porcelain. He put his hands down to try to right himself, but gravity was too much. His hands were getting cut as well just as a piece of porcelain cut an artery in his leg. Water was everywhere. As he lay there bleeding to death, impaled and helpless on the former toilet, he heard a strange clicking sound, getting closer. The last thing he saw was a pincer bug on the roll of toilet paper.