

Thinking of Moses

Henry was writing in his study when the first one appeared, almost special for being the first fly of spring. After trying to ignore its trademark buzz for a while, Henry stopped writing and forced himself to watch it. It was big, almost large enough to be a horsefly, and although mostly black, it also had a tinge of that strange hologram-ish iridescent metallic blue only insects and seashells seem to have. Alien protuberances, hairs, and sucking things stuck out of it in all directions. Multifaceted eyes reflected back a million watching Henrys as the fly rubbed its chitinous legs together and then over its face, just as a cat would.

“Welcome to Earth,” Henry said to the visiting member of the order Diptera, family Muscidae. The fly signaled that the long winter was finally over. Henry felt he should welcome it. But Henry also felt an instant overwhelming desire—almost a need—to *kill* on sight anything so horribly ugly, so obviously alien. His hand rose reflexively to smash the fly, but he stopped, surprised at the intensity of his instant reaction.

It was just mammalian instinct, he thought. We fear the different. Some of us more than others.

Later the lone fly buzzed around the kitchen, a black blur of movement. It caught the eye of hunter/killer Henry, his human vision programmed by evolution to register the movement of prey. Henry calmly remarked to his wife, Akiko, “Look. It’s a fly. You wouldn’t think it’s warm enough out yet.”

“Kill it!” she commanded, pulling back in instant revulsion and fear.

Henry rolled his eyes at his Japanese wife—an avowed pacifist, and Buddhist, to boot. He shrugged and made a half-hearted attempt to catch it out of the air, making Bruce Lee noises to make Akiko laugh.

The fly disappeared into Henry’s hand. Henry frowned, looking around the kitchen for the fly, and then he chuckled. “Would you look at that? I actually caught it!”

“It must be stupid or something. Kill it, before it makes more!”

Henry ran to the door, opened it with his left hand, and threw out the fly. It buzzed away, lurching from side to side like an astronaut after a ride in the Vomit Comet. Henry shuddered slightly and went in to wash his hands.

“I don’t want to live in a bug house,” Akiko muttered.

Henry sighed. An old argument.

“It’s just a fly. It won’t hurt you. It might even be the reincarnated soul of one of your Shogun ancestors,” Henry said with a smile.

Akiko crinkled up her nose, rolled her eyes, and then held up the *National Geographic* she’d been reading, showing Henry some of the pictures. He scanned it quickly. It was something about forensic pathology and counting the number of insects that feed on human corpses to determine the time of death.

“So what? What’s that got to do with our new friend?”

Akiko ignored his question. She started reading aloud to him: “The blowfly can strip the flesh off a corpse in two days, leaving nothing but a mass of writhing maggots...”

Henry ducked back into the study to do his writing, before she got any further. Damn it, that’s not funny; she knows I hate worms, thought Henry. *Let’s see. Back to the alien princess.*

Two flies buzzed around his study, slamming into the glass of the sunlit window. He tried to ignore them and concentrate on his writing. When one of the flies kept landing right on the computer screen, Henry shooed it away with a quick flick of his hand.

The stupid fly just sat there as the hand crushed it against the screen, smearing a sticky red and black across the glass. Henry felt sick. He ran to the bathroom to wash his hand, careful to avoid looking at the gooey mess of legs and spiracles and bug blood and squishiness.

Henry tried not to think about the feel of the fly in his hand. He tried not to think about how flies eat, spewing their acidic vomit on the food and then sucking up the dissolved remnants. He tried not to think about the fact that blowflies can reduce a human body to a writhing pile of maggots in just under two days. He tried not to remember the gory, living color picture that had accompanied this information in the *National Geographic* article, or the caption underneath it. In his mind’s eye, Henry tried not to read it, but the caption read itself anyway inside Henry’s brain—a brain that was a marvelously complex piece of parallel multi-processing computing, a brain incapable of looking at the words “Counting the number of insects that feed on human corpses to determine time of death” without attaching meaning to the otherwise squiggles on fancy magazine photo paper.

Squiggles reminded Henry of worms. Henry shuddered again and then he switched from not thinking about worms to not thinking about a white horse, and although equally unsuccessful—damn it, white horse!—at least he couldn’t think about flies *and* a white horse, until he made the jump to *horseflies* and flies that surrounded the manure piles in the field, laying their eggs—

Henry looked down at his raw and steaming hands. Oh, clean. He turned off the scalding water.

When he returned to his study, there were still two flies in the windowsill.

There would be no stories of the princess today

The next day brought six more flies to his study.

“That’s eight, now!” Akiko accused Henry, when he made the mistake of informing her.

The study was now the prime suspect for the source of the Brood. Henry wanted to just leave them alone—the flies would go away, eventually—but Akiko insisted he open the nailed-up study window and shoo them out by hand. Strips of plastic garden sheeting quarantined the study off from the rest of the house, while Henry donned his biological contamination suit—long rubber kitchen gloves and painter’s/surgeon’s mask—and took a hammer to the stubborn egress. As he worked, the eight flies circled his head like vultures.

The window finally opened, and the flies obligingly flew to Freedom.

The next day, bright and early, Henry opened the blinds and carefully checked for flies. One solitary fly buzzed around, light-stunned and heat-crazy, slamming itself into the newly-nailed window.

Henry closed the blinds on the lone dying fly and then jumped when something else buzzed past his ear. He turned and saw flies everywhere in the just-empty room. Henry’s hunter/killer spatial processors clicked into overdrive, and he tried to count the moving objects, carefully eliminating flies already counted as he tracked their seemingly random paths through three-dimensional space. A circuit fried somewhere in Henry’s head; more flies appeared behind him to be counted every time he turned around. Ten, fifteen, twenty. . . They had passed the limit where they could be ignored.

Henry froze, trying to catch a glimpse of a fly coming out of a crack in the window, a wall, or the ceiling. They had to be coming from *somewhere*.

When Henry saw fly after fly come streaming out of nowhere, he immediately thought of Moses—or rather, Charlton Heston as he thunders “Let my people go!” at Pharaoh, and a cloud

of locusts comes streaming out of his mouth at the advancing army. Or was that from that mummy movie? Henry always confused the two. As soon as Henry thought of Moses, his next thought was to wonder why he had thought of Moses in the first place, and then did a little three-second circular game in his head while Henry thought about thinking about thinking about thinking of Moses. And then even *Moses* started thinking of Moses and thinking about thinking about. Even the phrase “Thinking of Moses” started to sound like lyrics for a song, or a band, or maybe an obscure or clever title for a short story—

But all of this thinking about Moses couldn't distract Henry from thinking about *flies*. Henry now hated them almost as much as worms. More than hate, Henry loathed the very sight of them. Not the thought. Henry tried not to think about them but the sight always triggered the thinking.

Henry was close to figuring out the princess story. He just had to ignore the flies for a few pages and the rest of the story would present itself. But Henry knew it was going to be difficult to simply ignore the flies—especially for a recovering helminthophobe, afraid of being infested with worms. Maggots and flies: an unfortunate association, a necessary connection in the great life cycle of the common house fly, the metaphor-made-incarnate fly on the wall, the ubiquitous-to-every-environment-and-able-to-be-unnoticed-by-most-of-the-larger-predators fly—except as a potential food source for frogs, spiders, birds, and other insects, Henry reminded himself. Now there's the problem. You don't want to get et by the small critters.

Henry had diagnosed himself with helminthophobia last summer, when his aging, incontinent Chow had gotten its thick fur encrusted with its own fecal matter, and then flies had come and laid their eggs in the fur, and then they hatched quickly in the hot sun of one afternoon, and the Chow's entire living backside was covered in a noisome mass of wriggling little—

It was better if he didn't think about it.

All of this was distracting Henry from doing his writing. Henry needed peace and quiet while he wrote his stories of the far-off alien princess and her galactic empire, her doomed cause, the surprising betrayal, and the death—no, make that *destruction* of a thousand-year reign. It was all starting to come together in his head. He just needed a few bug-free moments to get it all down.

“Henry!” Akiko yelled. “Now there are flies in the *kitchen!*”

Henry winced. Akiko would demand nothing less than the flies' total eradication: less writing, more fighting. Henry had more of a male *laissez-faire* attitude towards bugs: while roaches were unspeakably evil, there was nothing wrong with the occasional cricket or spider. Henry drew the line at roaches. They were nasty vermin.

“*Hai, hai*, I'm coming!” he yelled back, putting away the princess.

One fly circled around the kitchen. Henry was usually happy to ignore one or two, if they kept to themselves and away from the food. “It's just *one* fly!” he protested.

Akiko grimaced. “But it's *dirty!*”

Henry tried not to think about where flies came from; as far as he was concerned, maggots were a different creature altogether. Henry had grown up on a farm and there were flies anywhere there were animals. Some stubborn neuron or cluster of ganglia in Henry's brain misfired, reminding his conscious mind that there were also *maggots* anywhere there were flies. A flash from grade school biology: the frightful days when Spontaneous Generation ruled the Earth and maggots arose from rotting meat. Francesco Redi—Italian physician, poet, and the savior of helminthophobes everywhere—places meat in test tubes wrapped with holy gauze, awaiting confirmation that he alone has the secrets of life.

Ah, stupid brain, anyway, Henry decided, tuning back into what his wife was saying.

Akiko was holding counsel and had already declared war upon the incoming invaders.

“Take that!” she crowed, saturating the small fly against the wall with half a can of spring-scented Lysol.

Henry watched the drowning fly slowly drip down the wallpaper. He couldn’t resist asking, “Chemical warfare? Weapons of mass destruction? On our possible hallowed ancestors?”

“Purely a defensive move,” she explained, in deference to the Cosmic Buddha, perhaps, but Henry saw it for what it was: a doomed retreating action.

More flies came and came. The supplies of Lysol ran low.

They couldn’t find the source of the alien infestation. They searched the house from top to bottom, finally eliminating the crazy old lady that lived in the upstairs apartment as a possible candidate for murder—a dead body stuffed into the chimney or buried in the floorboards. Who knew what went on up there? Henry’s machine-brain raced at the possibilities, but he knew it was more likely an overfilled catbox or something dropped behind the frig, turned hairy and putrescent and prime breeding ground for the Brood, the Horde, the ravaging insectoid infestation come sneaking through the floorboards into the Promised Land, the Holy Refuge of hearth and human home, the abode of The Writer Who Must Not Be Disturbed and his Wife Who Must Be Placated.

They killed the flies as they came. But that was it. Try though they might, the flies just seemed to appear out of the nothingness of Chaos, the raw flux of possibilities and frothing quantum foam. Eradication subsumed prevention.

As a boy on the Kansas farm, Henry had learned an old fly-killing technique, handed down from wizened patriarch to down-cheeked boy. If you clapped your hands together above

the spot a fly sits—even slowly—the fly will jump up into the waiting Handpress of Doom to be squished. Try to swat the fly with your bare hand or smash it down into the ground, and it will jump away every time. This technique was pure magic to Akiko when he first showed her, but both of them blanched when they realized it meant crushing bugs with your bare skin. Henry decided to rethink his strategy a bit.

A quick trip to the store wrought destructive riches: two flyswatters and enough of the dangling, sticky-glue strips to give any aerial invasion fleet a quick reminder of who had the opposable thumbs.

“If it’s war you want, then war it shall be,” Henry muttered to his wife and the flies and any other bugs biding their time. “You’re just flies. We’re the culmination of millions of years of evolutionary progress.”

“So are the flies,” Akiko reminded him.

Worse than stubborn ganglia, thought Henry, reminding himself not to think aloud if he didn’t want to have his crackpot theories debunked by his too-logical wife. They taught evolution in even hide-bound, static Japan, to Henry’s Kansan shame.

For three solid days and nights, Henry and Akiko strode through the house, wielding flyswatters against the forces of darkness, evil, death, and destruction. The first day, they killed fifty-eight flies, their crushed bodies piled in a heap in front of the window to be counted—trophies taken on the savannah hunt. At least that’s what it was like for Henry.

Henry imagined Akiko and himself as the Lady Shiva and the Lord of the Flies, dispensing death unto the unholy, cleansing the plague from the land. Henry stuck his flyswatter in his belt and whipped it out every time he heard a buzz. He felt empowered for the first time in a long time. He didn’t even think about worms the entire first day.



Akiko insisted on counting the Fallen. This was no game for her. She had to know, to quantify the strangeness that she saw in this barbarian land. Henry protested over and over that he had never seen an infestation of flies in a normal house, but his arguments seemed vacuous even to him, as fly after fly come streaming out of nowhere.

There were never more than eight to ten flies that Henry could ever count at any time. Henry would kill eight flies, stacking them in front of the window with a practiced flick of his swatter, just like the years flipping pancakes through college, and then he would stop and count. Eight more flies were still buzzing around. It was frustrating for Henry, a challenging mystery, but it was *maddening* for Akiko. She was an equal-opportunity hater of all bugs, unlike Henry and his preferential treatment reserved for worms. All insects genuinely frightened her. Moths scared her into crying—Henry, the barbarian hero, could pick them out of the air with his bare hands.

Late the first night of Bug Attack, Akiko collapsed onto the living room couch.

“Where are they coming from?” she demanded to know, frustration rising in her voice. “We keep killing them and they keep coming. I hate this bug house!” She threw her flyswatter at Henry.

Henry was stumped. He had yet to see where the flies were coming from. The study—and the princess—were still shut up and sealed with plastic. He wanted to tell Akiko to just let it go, the flies couldn’t last much longer. He almost stopped when he saw her expression. “We killed fifty-eight today, baby. I’m sure that tomorrow—”

Henry stopped. Another set of flies circled the living room. The flies had now reached every room in the house.

“*Beast!*” cried Akiko, but Henry pretended he didn’t hear her swearing in Japanese; it was almost cute. Her eyes were red and Henry took her into his arms.

“I’ll protect you. I promise,” he soothed, resolving to further gird up his loins or whatever Charlie Heston did before going out to take on Pharaoh.

Day Two of the Insect Infest Fest, they killed sixty-eight flies. Every time a room was cleared and they proceeded to the next room, the room would fill up with more flies behind them. It was impossible, beyond the laws of science. Henry believed deeply in the power of science to explain all things—except for the limit to the explainable world expressed at the quantum level, but Henry was willing to live with that. What his science couldn’t explain was how sixty-eight flies could come out of nowhere in a sealed house already winterized, insulated, and now bound in several layers of garden plastic. This was something of Biblical, plague-like proportions. *Henry* had somehow become the Pharaoh to be intimidated by plagues, boils, locusts, and the death of his firstborn. Where was Moses and what were his demands?

“Take your damn people and call off the bugs!” Henry yelled, looking guiltily at the study door behind which Moses himself might lay, wrapped beneath layers of plastic in his reed crib, waiting to be picked up along the riverside by some ‘50s white actress that couldn’t possibly be the mother of an Egyptian Pharaoh. Egypt was in Africa, for Pete’s sake.

“What’s that, Henry?” Akiko called out, her eyes red from crying again.

“Just talking to the flies, trying to see what they want. Maybe we can reach an accommodation.” Henry then muttered under his breath so that she couldn’t hear him. “You know, they get the house on Monday/Wednesday/Friday, and we get it the other days and weekends. At least I’d get to write.” But he didn’t dare say it too loudly.

The third and final day of the invasion they killed eighty-four more flies. Henry was ready to call the landlord and have either a professional exterminator or a priest come out. Akiko was in tears and had already called up her mother across the thousands of miles of ocean and fifteen time zones to ask for bug advice. The descendent of 1,200 years of ancient Japanese Daimyo Lords and matriarch of the Tagawa family—the Tagawa family that had served the One-Eyed Dragon, Daté Masamuné, Bringer of Christianity to Northern Japan, and Slaughterer of the Infidel—anyway, her wise and learned advice: kill them as they came and try to find out where they were coming from. Redundant and impotent advice, but Akiko felt better.

The fourth day, Moses must have heard Henry’s supplications and called off the plagues. There was not a fly to be found anywhere in the house. The flies had left just as mysteriously as they had come. The fact that the crux of the invasion had lasted exactly a Biblically-significant three days seemed to resonate comfortably with something inside of Henry. It made the most sense yet.

All of that day and the rest of the week were spent in careful expectation: the flies had kept coming back, why would they be done now? But not a fly was to be found.

Akiko held a press conference and declared the war over. The strips were taken down, the flyswatters beat into plowshares or crochet hooks or something. She even made little origami medals for all combatants and gave the AOK for work in the study to proceed.

Humility and respect for the unknown had tempered Henry’s initial cockiness and belief in his own evolutionary superiority over the lowly flies. He had emerged the victor, but it had been a Pyrrhic victory. Even Henry hadn’t imagined the death toll would reach in the several hundreds. The flies could come back at any time, just as suddenly as they had the first time, and there was absolutely nothing that Henry could do about it.

Henry guiltily looked at the study door. He hadn't even thought about his story in several days. He ripped off the garden plastic and peeked inside. Not a fly to be seen or a buzz to be heard.

Henry sat at his desk drumming his fingers and tried to recall where he was in the story of the princess. He cursed when he found that he couldn't remember the great ideas he had had just a few days ago, before the flies came. Something about a galactic Empire and a princess and an old man leading his people to a better land—

Moses, again, damn it, thought Henry, recognizing the theme. That's Moses' story.

Henry sighed and said *Moses'* to himself a couple of times, adding an extra sibilant until it became *Moses-suz*. He played with that absently for a while, and thought about the last few day's strange events, trying to remember what he had been thinking before the whole mess started.

A smile lit up Henry's face.

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Mossessus(clicking of the back spiracles)(elided pop), 1<sup>st</sup> Daughter of the Brood Queen Mother, stared at the star charts with three sets of light-receptors.

“A scout has found a wormhole jump-point through hyperspace in this quadrant that we believe extends through the Void here, and here,” she indicated with a trueleg, exuding a calming pheromone and flashing pink through her carapace to indicate her excitement.

General (Buzz)thip(Green) edged away from her, ever so slightly. If the pink were to swell into the red of a sex flush, the General might be called upon to perform the ultimate service for the Brood, in a ritual that would leave Mossessus(clicking of the back spiracles)(elided pop)

quite sated and the General missing his sex organs and his head—both with which he had become quite fond of.

“The scout was welcomed in Realspace by the dominant life form, a mega-mammal. If we move the Brood through this region of Realspace, we can cut parsecs out of our children’s long journeys through the Void, the Desert of Stars. Begin moving all 210 transport ships through the wormhole.” She could barely contain her excitement.

General (Buzz)thip(Green) carefully tasted his own emotional particulate emissions to make sure they were socially neutral and then asked, “Standard camouflage cloaking?”

“Yes. Model one of the indigenous lower life forms, something inconspicuous.”

“And if something goes wrong, if the treaty is broken, or if Realspace has hidden dangers?” General (Buzz)thip(Green) was paid to think negatively, although his work cycle chit was usually paid in royal jelly. Or royal dung, if he was lucky.

Mossessus(clicking of the back spiracles)(elided pop), 1<sup>st</sup> Daughter of the Brood Queen Mother, pulled herself up to her full one-centimeter height and clicked her *eight* opposable mandibles together. “The Brood is the product of millions of years of directed evolution. We endured a thousand years of slavery and predation at the hand of the Phurog. I have led our people out of the bonds of slavery and through the Void. The Land I Promised lies through the wormhole. To Freedom!”

“To Freedom!” the General echoed, before the Princess, in her excitement, ate him.