

Morphometesis

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I saw it while taking out the rubbish bags, the biggest beetle I'd ever seen. It lay on its back, black and shiny like clingfilm. The insect kicked its segmented legs in the air like a futile attempt to ride an invisible bicycle.

Like a fool, I'd left the house without shoes, since the distance to the rubbish bins in the alley was so short. It wouldn't have mattered much: the creature was far too large to step on. It would have made a massive, gory mess of chitin and residue. I do not consider myself a violent person, but this thing was invasive and repulsive, and my first instinct was that such a creature should not be suffered to live.

I picked up a nearby brick and dropped it.

The insect caught it immediately. It did several reps, pumping the brick up and down; just a few millimetres but still a very impressive showing. Then, in a great show of strength and fortitude, it flipped over, stood up on its two rear legs, and glared at me in a threatening way. Its mandibles clacked together in a series of Morse code clicks.

If I had been intimidated before, now that the beetle was armed, I was beside myself. I wanted to back away, but no direction seemed like a safe escape, and I just stared as it skittered up to me, holding the brick like it was nothing. It was intentionally intercepting me, knowing which way I might run.

It knocked me down with a blow to the forehead, throwing the brick with pinpoint accuracy. With what can only be described as a haughty snort, it left me there, lying on my back garden walk, and entered my house.

This was two days ago. It sleeps in my bed, now. My children call it "daddy." My wife doesn't seem to notice. I keep looking through the windows, pawing at them, trying desperately to get someone's attention. The beetle is the only one who seems to pay me any mind. Right now, I can see it through my picture window. It's sitting in my favourite chair, reading the paper. The newspaper is far too large for it to hold comfortably, but it seems to be able to manage with one tiny claw.

My wife just brought it a cup of coffee and gave it a kiss on its cheek, if that's the correct terminology for the part of its body next to its chattering mandibles and above its thorax. I can hear her in the kitchen, clattering around. I think she's baking something. As I sit in the bushes, I run my hand against my cheek. I am covered in scratchy stubble, and feel very self-conscious and unattractive.

Just then, the door opens, and my children come running outside into the front yard. I wave to them, but Sally ignores me, and Jason makes a weird face. I cannot tell if this is because he saw me, or if my son just has a weird looking face. Moments later, the beetle comes crawling out the front door. He is carrying a ball in one tiny claw, three rackets in the others, and somehow still manages to kick the front door shut with his rearmost leg. I think back to when I first saw him, struggling to right himself, and only now do I suspect that his helpless appearance was a trap all along.

They're playing tennis now. I glance over at my car, sitting clean and shiny in the driveway. It washed my car before it drove to work yesterday. It was wearing my hat and carrying my briefcase. It cleaned the car by hand. Leg. Mandible. Whatever. As I watch my kids laughing and throwing the ball back and forth with the insect, I grow very angry.

I lunge out of the shrubbery and attack the bug. My children scream and look shocked as I tackle the beetle and roll around, trying to get my hands around its tiny neck to strangle it. Jason picks up a nearby racket and runs toward us, screaming "Leave him alone!" He takes a swing, and I'm able to

turn quickly enough to get the insect in front of me. I know this will result in broken fingers, but at least the beetle will be obliterated.

Instead, the insect reaches out his inordinately powerful forelimbs and grabs the racket. It chitters gently at my son, who backs away, tears of rage and confusion still in his eyes. The beetle points one of its mandibles, and my children run inside the house, to safety, as it turns to me and stands tall on its tiny back legs. It weighs the racket in its front legs a few times, like a gangster from a classic movie, then it points with the narrow end like its telling me where the ace is going to go. I know it's not talking about a ball. It has its legs bent and mandibles against its abdomen, in a stern parody of a man with his hands on hips, watching as some unwanted creature slinks back into the shadows from which it emerged.

And I do.

It has been almost a week now. I have been living under the eaves of my own house. I eat birdseed from the bird feeder, and occasionally raid the rubbish bins out back. Yesterday, I found the discarded remains of a sandwich. It was a ham and cheese with gherkins, my favourite sandwich.

I watch as the van pulls up out front. There are huge red letters on the side that read "Exterminator." I didn't call anyone. I can only assume who did. Anxious, I crawl back as far as I can under my eaves, and wait in silence. I spy the brick from before, laying beside the house, and I wonder if I will have time to reach it before he comes to spray me.