

## BEETLE

Books are dangerous things. Do you think Fritz Haber learned the choking secrets of poison gas without reading? What about Oppenheimer and the desert-dwelling fathers of the atomic bomb? The gateway to hell lay amidst the equations and theorems of their books.

On the night before I left, Dad said to me, 'Vanessa, you'll never be far from home. I'll visit you every other weekend.'

'I don't know, Dad,' I said, 'I might be at parties.'

But they did not allow that.

Them.

The things on the landing.

At first, I tried to talk to them. They seemed like me. Most just eighteen, except one, Tam, older, twenty at least. They said they couldn't hear me. 'Speak up, you're like a mouse.' And then they giggled.

But they've heard me now.

I bought a gold band for Freshers Week but only went to one event. After standing alone at the edge of the bar for half an hour trying to get a drink, I went back to my room and put the band in a drawer.

Lectures were no better. Hundreds of us in vast rooms. Suffocated and alone all at once.

Dad took me home to see the GP. 'I remember my university days,' she said. 'You feel like you're the only one struggling, but really, everyone is.'

She asked about my sleeping, urged me to join societies, not to give up on socialising, and above all to come back and see her if things didn't improve. Before I left, she gave me a prescription: diazepam for anxiety and temazepam to help me sleep. Not too many of either: 'Habit forming,' she said.

I wouldn't know. I never took them. I didn't want to sleep. Not at night anyway.

If I waited long enough after midnight, *they* were gone, and I could venture into the kitchen alone. Snack pots and noodles only need a little boiling water, so I quickly got back to the safety of my room.

I discovered that our lectures were recorded and watched them on my laptop. I submitted work online and cancelled my tutorials. The only problem was books. To go to the library by day was to risk seeing *them* and even if I didn't see them, as I left my flat, I'd hear them laughing at me from behind their closed doors.

One day, when I tried to go to the library, my heart started beating so fast I thought I was going to die. I couldn't catch my breath. A librarian saw me through the glass doors and came outside to ask if I was okay. She was an older woman with hair like a granny, tied up in a bun. I told her how self-conscious I felt. She said there was a department on campus that could give me emotional support and offered to take me there. When I declined she said, 'You do know the library is open all night? You can come here when it's quiet if you like.'

From then on, I stayed in my room by day, sleeping or watching films, and came to the library at night. I could reserve my books online too. The library staff would find them for me and place them in a special rack on the ground floor. I could be in and out in minutes. No one need see me at all.

Sometimes though, I'd see Tam in the kitchen by night. He didn't laugh at me. And we would speak a little. His voice was calm, always interested in what I had to say. Asking me what I thought. Telling me funny stories about the others. 'I've got insomnia,' he'd say. 'What's your excuse?' and I'd say I had insomnia too.

I started to hope he'd be up. Most weeks I'd see him at least once or twice. Other than the phone conversations I had with my dad, he was the only person I spoke to.

One night he said to me, 'You know, you should come out with us. Give the others a chance. When they get to know you, they'll love you.'

Love me? When they get to know me, they'll love me. That's what he said.

And I really thought about doing it: going out with him. But then I saw the pictures, and I began to understand.

I'd requested one of the books from my course's reading list. It was 3.00 am when I went to the library. In the rack was a volume bound in red leather with a slip bearing my name sticking out of its closed pages. As I took the book and turned back to the door, I saw someone outside. It was a man, I thought, but he wore a hoodie, so I couldn't see the face. He was smoking. I pretended to check the other books on the rack, waiting for him to go. But he wouldn't leave.

In the end I rushed out and ran past him. I didn't look. Even then I feared what I might see under that hood.

I didn't stop running until I got back to the flat. As I went to my door on the landing, Tam called to me from the kitchen, 'Hey, you dirty stop out, come and talk to me.' But I didn't. Pretending not to hear, I went into my room. I sat on the bed, breathless, my heart beating

fast again. I was thinking of going to the kitchen, seeing if Tam was still there, when I flicked through the book, and saw it.

Falling open on a page of glossy pictures, there, splayed out, was the image of a beetle. Its blue-black carapace thick and shiny, cloudy markings on its barbed head, more marks – or symbols? – on its thorax. The abdomen bloated and fat, as if *something* might be inside.

I turned the page and there was a closeup of its head. Warped feelers, disgustingly fungal in their twists and perturbances, slit-eyes, and a mandibled mouth surrounded by sharp bristles. In a third picture, the carapace had split, displaying fibrous wings, fleshy and pink.

What was this?

I looked at the front cover. Nothing. No title. Blank.

I opened the title page: *Forensic entomology: the role of arthropods in post-mortem investigations, by Antony Abital.*

I flicked through the pages. And I saw what chitinous horrors infest people's corpses after death. Every kind of bug that burrows and twists its way into our rotting flesh.

Why had this been given to me? I'd requested a book on the history of Ireland. Could there have been a mix-up? Had the staff given it to me by mistake? But no, the library always gave me the right books. Someone must have chosen it for me. But who? The kind library lady? Maybe.

I sat on my bed reading until the sun began to rise. Even then, I drew my curtains and read some more, fixated on the unclean feasting of the beetles, until I heard *them* coming out of their rooms. *Swarming* in the kitchen. I could hear the laughing, and it seemed to me that

the laughs had to them the strangest note, like a lilting, *scurrying* sound, and I made sure my door was locked. I sank down beneath the duvet, my head under the pillow.

I dreamt I was back home, my dad making dinner. I walked up behind him as he stood at the stove. He cracked eggs into a pan, but rather than yolks, black beetles fell out. They tried to scuttle away but Dad held them down with a potato masher until they sizzled and popped. 'If you eat them this way, you can't be putrefied,' he said.

I woke up, it was day still, but the landing outside my door was quiet. I wanted a drink, but I couldn't risk going to the kitchen. The book lay beside my bed. I had to look.

And there, drawn on its final blank page, I found a sign: a clue pointing me towards the book's hidden truth. An equilateral triangle lightly sketched in pencil. At its apex, the letter  $x$ , at its base a  $y$ , and the number  $z$  etched neatly in the middle of the line making its right edge.

I pulled at my hair. I looked and looked. What did this mean?

I googled equations and geometry, but I do not have a head for maths. I was so thirsty, but I couldn't get a drink. I looked at the triangle again, ran my finger over it, and unbidden, the word pyramid came to mind.

Pyramid. Beetle pyramid? I googled it: page after page of useless links – insect sprays and fishing bait. I was about to stop when I found a YouTube video: *Secret Pyramids on Mars*.

I learned the truth NASA hides from us. I saw ancient monuments, hidden cities and dry canals built by a long dead race. And because of the book, I understood why they died: beetles had consumed them. In the grainy video and enhanced pictures of what NASA claim

are rock formations, I saw pyramid shapes. When I googled pictures of Earthly pyramids, what did I see? Scarabs.

I had to get a drink. It was still quiet outside. Creeping into the corridor, I peered around the kitchen door. But saw one of *them* at the sink. She was washing plates, her sleeves rolled up, and I saw a *bulging* in her flesh. An undulating lump that moved up her arm. Something was crawling *inside* her.

I ran back to my room. I studied the book. Watched the videos again. And then, in a moment of revelation, I knew. The beetles don't burrow into dead skin, but into living flesh. They enter us while we yet breathe. Hollow us out. Alien scarabs. Relentless parasites that left Mars a husk, they swarm here now, taking us over one by one.

Tam! I had to warn him. But what if it were already too late? I went online to get what I needed and found it in the men's Health and Personal care section of Amazon – a nice straight one. I had it sent to my dad's house. I asked him to pick me up for a home visit. 'Have you been eating?' Dad asked, but when I said I was seeing the GP, he relaxed.

The doctor gave me another prescription. 'It's been several weeks since you last had any,' she said, 'so there's little risk of dependency. All the same, I'd like to refer you for CBT.'

I agreed.

Dad dropped me back here late this evening. We stopped at a supermarket on the way. Just as I'd hoped, Tam was in the kitchen. I went to my room, crushed all the tablets from the doctor's first prescription and all the rest she gave me today. Then I went to speak to Tam.

'If you want to sleep,' I said, 'I've got some rum in my room. Want some?'

‘In your room?’ he said, head on one side. He looked at me a few moments. ‘Sure,’ he said, ‘I’d like that.’

I mixed the tablets with his rum and added cola. He drained the glass and lay back on my pillows. ‘I’ve finally made it into your bedroom,’ he said.

Yawning, he closed his eyes, breathed deeply, rolled onto his side, and fell fast asleep.

I used belts to tie his arms and legs. He didn’t stir. I knew it would hurt him, and that he might wake up, so I bundled socks against his mouth and wound Sellotape about his head. Still he slept.

It was the first cut that woke him.

He thrashed and screamed against the gag. I knelt on his chest, ‘Hush! Quiet! They’ll hear, and I need to look. Just let me look!’ I tried to peel back more of his skin, but his twisting made the straight blade of the cut throat razor slice too deep. With all the blood, I couldn’t see.

He was squealing, trying to speak, and a horrid thought struck me, ‘What if I’m wrong?’ I pulled aside the gag, whispering, ‘Hush, I’m sorry, hush now!’ and he was saying, ‘What are you doing to me? What are you doing?’ and he had so little breath, it came as a squeak, and I thought, ‘God, I must let him go!’

But then I saw one.

Under his tongue.

Scuttling back down his throat.

Deceivers!

And I made sure the scarabs wouldn't use his tongue to trick me again. I slashed, gouged and pried until the jaw dropped off his face. But I couldn't find the beetle.

But *they've* heard. They're at the door shouting. Gone for security, they said. I've written this so the truth will be known. I will go out now. I have my cut-throat razor. I only need one beetle to prove my innocence. My mistake was going in through the mouth. This time, I'll go up through the abdomen. There will be no heart, no lungs: just a great void in which a beetle fat and large gnaws and pulls at sinews and nerves, giving them a semblance of life. I will slash open holes and pull the beetles out by their segmented legs. And I won't stop, even if I must skin you all.