



BUG LORD

Guy sat sprung back in his office chair, feet up, staring at the computer monitor on his desk. His hands hovered over the keyboard in his lap, but he couldn't think of anything to type.

The rattle of a grasshopper distracted him. He looked out the shipping container's bay doors and thought of how much his life had changed over the past month. From a suburb of Austin he'd jumped to his remote acreage on the southern fringe of the Texas plains. He would have built on the property when he retired two years before, but he couldn't afford to. Most of his money was tied up in the Austin house. He thought about selling but real estate values were down, so he stayed put and continued cobbling together his short stories. The writing that used to help pass the time gradually came to fill it.

Then Covid appeared and things changed. Local dictatorships began springing up all over the country, and suddenly his house was worth more. Forty-four percent more to the couple that bought it. They were fleeing the leftist lunacy of California.

He moved the stuff he wanted to keep into storage, then took up residence in the modified shipping container that he'd put on his property a few years before. He was glad the container was there and glad it was wired with electricity. It gave him all he needed for the moment—a place to sleep and write.

A cricket started a singsong chirrup and Guy saw that the shadows outside had lengthened. Dusk was approaching. He couldn't remember when he'd been more comfortable. September was

a temperate month, a cool hammock stretched between the sweaty sheets of summer and the blanketed bed of winter. But soon the northerners would glaze his container with ice. Fittingly symbolic, he thought, given the way that global shipping was cooling off. He knew he would have to hustle if he hoped to get a house built on the property. He needed to see to it before goods stopped moving completely and the dollar collapsed.

Over the years he'd read dozens of articles about the deliberate devaluation of the U.S. dollar. America was to be reduced to third world status through excessive borrowing and spending. The Powers That Be planned to extinguish the American beacon and plunge the world into a new Dark Age. Or not quite dark, but dim. People would have access to lifesaving goods and services, but just enough access to feed a desperate hope. That was what the essential/nonessential employee business had been about at the start of the Covid crisis—the world's overlords were preparing the peasants for a future where only the deserving survived.

Guy sighed and turned his attention back to his computer. He'd taken a break from writing during the hectic time of the move, and now he was finding it hard to get back in harness. The story he put on hold weeks before seemed anemic. He thought about starting a new one but couldn't come up with an idea that interested him. He wondered if he would ever have another idea worth pursuing.

The lone cricket had been joined by others, and dusk was darkening to night. The container needed to be closed up before insects began flooding in to the light. Guy set his keyboard aside, stood up and stretched. He stepped outside and latched the bay doors, then he went in through the side door and latched it.

The windows were screened and a couple of

moths were already fluttering at the one nearest the desk, trying to get in to the little bit of light the monitor put out. Guy switched on a lamp and returned to his springy chair. He put his feet up again and yawned, and while his mouth was open his stomach rumbled. He was hungry but too tired to fuss with supper. A can of something later would do, but tomorrow he would fix a proper meal. He might grill one of the T-bones from the freezer.

He pictured the prices on the steaks' wrappers and felt a twinge of sticker shock. Beef cost so much now. The Powers That Be said meat consumption was bad for the planet, and apparently they planned to deal with the matter in the same way they'd dealt with tobacco, by raising prices until people could no longer afford it.

Something flitted across the computer monitor. It was a lacewing that had made it into the container before lockup. Guy's thoughts shifted from T-bones to remembering an article he'd read online. It was called "Protein Going to Waste" and promoted a U.N. program to replace traditional meats with insects. The photos in the piece had triggered Guy's gag reflex. One showed a grub casserole and the other a caterpillar parfait.

The lacewing came to rest on the monitor and Guy leaned forward to study it. It was so frail, just a twitch of diaphanous green. When he was a kid he was obsessed with insects. He studied them with a magnifying glass and a half-dozen field guides. And sometimes he would imagine them blown up to ten times their size, or a hundred. At a hundred times its size the lacewing would be as big as a dragon.

Guy yawned again, leaned back in his chair and felt his eyelids droop. . .

. . . and he saw Dolph and his wife retreat into their steel hut for the night. Dolph barred the door while Shelly worked the chain that hung from the

center of the domed ceiling. She left the vent open just enough to take in air and let out smoke. Dolph added some wood to the fire and then tried to join Shelly as she crawled into her bed. But of course she rebuffed him. For nearly twenty years she'd been rebuffing him, ever since she realized they couldn't have children. Still, a man had to try, so Dolph got his customary kick in the shin and then limped over to his own bed.

He roused from sleep occasionally during the night, as the howls and rustlings came and went. His dreams echoed with screeches, clicks and trumpeting. And then he was looking up at light coming in around the damper. He picked up a boot from the floor and tossed it at Shelly's bed, to get her stirring.

Together they stood at the front door and Shelly opened the viewing slit. Dolph dangled a red bandanna through it. Sometimes the movement caught the attention of a compound eye, but nothing attacked that morning. Shelly thanked The Powers Of Bees. Dolph snorted at her superstition and opened the door.

Two fleas were caught in the canopy that covered the front yard. Both were alive and kicking, so Dolph used his crossbow to put bolts in them. He cursed under his breath when he saw that one of them had broken a strand of rope. He and Shelly had woven the canopy out of nylon parachute shroud about five years before, and it was still strong but patched in a hundred places.

The net acted as a deterrent against diving insects, and sometimes it caught food. Like the fleas. Dolph thought of Shelly's grilled flea steaks and his mouth watered. He could have eaten a stack of them right then, but she was busy putting a fire together, so it would be awhile before she got to the cooking. He'd pull the fleas down after he inspected the grounds.

The front yard looked fine, with its canopy above and the pair of large crossbows mounted on stands near the hut's door. The stands swiveled to provide coverage for the area in front of the hut and to the sides. Dolph made sure the quivers were full of rebar bolts. They were heavy and would kill or slow down anything coming at them along the ground.

Dolph preferred bows to guns because the sound of gunfire could draw predators. Sometimes though guns were necessary, so he kept a barrel of shotguns near the crossbows. He took the lid off the barrel and examined a couple of the guns. They were fully loaded and working smoothly. He left the barrel open and set off for his walk around the hut.

He tested trip alarms and checked for damage to the building. It looked like a big, rusted igloo. He'd decided to build the hut after he found a semi overturned on a nearby highway. Its load of half-inch sheet metal had broken free of the trailer and fanned out like a deck of cards along the road. The truck was still there, with a grasshopper leg through the windshield and the skeleton of the driver still pinned to his seat.

Dolph knew how to weld, so he cut the metal into manageable pieces and hauled them to the site where he planned to put the hut. After he found some metal for the framework he poured a ring of concrete four feet deep and built on that. The concrete was to prevent insects from burrowing in from underneath, and the steel was to bounce them off from above.

Dolph paused from time to time to study tracks. The cleared zone between the hut and the brush that began a few yards away was pitted with them, but he didn't see anything to worry about. And there wasn't any activity in the trees. The crumbling beetle's shell in the distance had lost an

antenna, but otherwise things looked the same as the day before.

Then something moved. Dolph crouched and listened. He heard footsteps, lots of them, and he pictured a swarm of ants moving through the brush. There was no way he could defend against them if they attacked, but he raised the bow to his shoulder anyway. He waited, the footsteps grew louder, and then he saw something big moving left to right in the trees. It was a centipede. Fortunately it seemed unaware of Dolph and trundled by like one of the trains he'd seen at railroad crossings when he was a kid.

The rest of the perimeter check was uneventful, and when Dolph returned to the front yard he found Shelly standing at the butcher table. She drummed her fingers on her exoskeleton chisel. "All right, all right," he grumbled, and he got the stepladder and bolt cutters. He went to one of the fleas and cut its legs off. Shelly dragged it away when it hit the ground.

The second flea was harder to remove. It was the one that had caused the damage. Dolph got it untangled and repaired the gap in the nylon.

By the time he was finished and ready for a cup of coffee, Shelly had the trash cart loaded with offal from the butchering. Dolph went to the coffee pot but she cleared her throat.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," he said, and he went to unplug the all-terrain vehicle from its solar charger. He backed the vehicle up to the cart, connected it and took off for the ravine that was a half mile away.

The ATV and the cart were both covered with camo canopies, and the ATV bristled with rebar spikes. A shotgun was mounted on the dashboard and a big fire extinguisher was in back. Bugs hated getting a face full of foam.

Dolph drove slowly, looking and listening for

insect activity, but there wasn't any. He reached the ravine and dumped his load. The ravine was a creek bed that coursed with water sometimes, but at the moment it was covered with weeds and the husks of dead insects.

Dolph returned to the front yard and parked the cart beside the butcher table. Shelly was just starting to work on the second flea, so he finally had time for his coffee. He relaxed in a lawn chair and sipped.

He thought of trains again and remembered how the world used to be, before the experiments to make insects larger. The U.N. promoted the experiments as the answer to world hunger. Everywhere you looked there were posters that said "Bigger is Better" and "New and Improved." The posters showed children chasing butterflies with wings the size of kites. Dolph's Uncle Ned said the cutesy ads drew attention away from the catastrophe that was going on all around them, and it turned out he was right. Either by accident or design the insect enlargement program spread beyond the labs. Eggs the size of footballs began appearing here and there, and some of the bugs that hatched out grew to the size of elephants. Before long it was humanity that was insect-sized on the scale of things. The big bugs ate humans, pets and farm animals. People weren't prepared, and few survived for more than a year.

Shelly called out and pointed to a tree that was fifty or so yards into the brush. It swayed in a way that Dolph knew meant an antlion. He grabbed his crossbow and went to investigate. It was important to keep lions away from the hut; their digging might undermine the foundation.

He reached the tree and found one of the bugs hard at work beside it. It was digging a conical ant trap. He shot a bolt into its soft abdomen and it disappeared beneath the dirt. He stood watching

until the dirt stopped moving and showed a dark, spreading stain.

Back at the hut Dolph told Shelly the lion was waiting for her. She ignored him. Antlions were tasty but hard to remove from their holes. Shelly ignored Dolph again when he said he expected lion brain gravy on his flea.

She laid a couple of steaks on the grill as Dolph returned to his chair. The sound of the sizzle and the seared smell made his mouth water again. Shelly said flea reminded her of chicken, but for the life of him he couldn't remember what chicken tasted like. The last time he'd had any was out of a rusted can. Before that he ate the fresh thing at his Uncle Ned's farm, but then some damselflies got the birds. He and Ned watched through a boarded up window at the back of the house as the bugs stripped the chicken yard. Ned yelled, "Damn you, Bill Gates!" each time one of the hens got snatched up. He told Dolph that Gates had financed the big bug research. "Him and his methane crowd." He ripped a fart and barked, "That's for you too, Gates!" He told Dolph that Gates and his bankers had concocted the climate crisis in order to take over the world, and they demonized methane because everybody passes gas. "The plan is to tax us for the air we breathe in and the farts we let out." Dolph couldn't picture how they would tax farts, and he was going to ask, but his uncle had already moved on. He said that another reason Gates pushed bug eating was because insect meat was so lean. "Children's brains need animal fat to develop properly, and they won't get enough from bugs. English monarchs used to starve the serfs to keep their brains from developing. That way they'd never know enough to question authority." Poor Uncle Ned, Dolph thought. He was knowledgeable about history and current events, but that didn't save him from an earwig in the barn.

Shelly was cooking the steaks slowly, and the sun was on her, so Dolph set up the sun screen. He'd made it years before out of a big aluminum tripod and a half-dozen moth wings. He used wings from a sphinx moth, a gypsy and a luna moth. The thing was once quite pretty, but over time the colored scales fell away, and now the wings were a dull gray. Still though, the screen broke the worst of the sun and Shelly thanked Dolph for setting it up.

He got his slingshot and returned to his chair. The weapon was for the insects that grilling tended to attract. That day the bugs were mostly gnats, the kind they used to call "no see 'ems" because they were so small. They'd crowd around your head and get up your nose. Now they were as big as clay pigeons and Dolph nailed one about every third shot. They'd hover in a mass, then one would fall and the mass would shift to the side and re-form, then shift and re-form again.

Dolph shot gnats until the survivors moved away, and then he felt himself getting sleepy. Shelly was tending the meat and putting together a salad of wild greens. Life was good. Dolph's head grew heavy and his chin dropped to his chest.

Then Shelly said something and there was a note of alarm in her voice. Dolph snapped to his feet and saw that she was holding a hand cupped to an ear. She pointed to the sky and said, "Bzzz." Dolph listened until he heard it too. It was a deep drone, but far away.

"Horseflies," he said.

"Wasps," Shelly said, and she went into one of her rocking religious chants about The Powers.

Dolph stood scanning the canopied sky. The droning grew louder but he didn't see anything. And then something large and dark came from the rear of the hut. It passed overhead and landed with a thump in the front yard, between the canopy and

the brush line. The buzzing stopped.

The insect was nearly twenty feet long, black, and had long wings and a long neck. Dolph had never seen anything like it. He started to ask Shelly if she knew what it was, but she was running to one of the mounted crossbows. He ran to the other. Within seconds the bows were loaded and aimed.

Dolph still wondered what the insect was, and as if reading his mind Shelly said, "Snakefly. Long prothorax. Predatory."

The creature cocked its head and seemed to look at them. Dolph put his finger on his bow's trigger and aimed for the point where he judged the heart would be, but he held fire. So did Shelly. She was as good a shot as he was, so he knew the snakefly wouldn't get far if it came at them.

A long moment later the creature lowered its head to the ground and Dolph saw something on its back. There was a lump above its front pair of legs.

"What's on its shoulders?" he asked Shelly.

"I think it's. . . Is it a man?"

It was. A man in a saddle. He was dressed all in black—black pants, shoes and hoodie. The hood covered his head.

"Hello!" he called out. "Do you mind if I get down and stretch my legs?"

"Depends," Dolph answered. "Is your animal safe?"

"Oh, yes." The man fiddled with a keyboard on the front of his saddle, and the snakefly's legs folded. It dropped and lay stretched out on the ground.

"Incapacitated," the man said as he unbuckled his seatbelt and slid down from the saddle.

When he was on the ground Dolph was surprised by how short he was. He was also surprised when he pulled back his hood to reveal a pale, puffy

face. He'd looked like a warrior in the saddle, but on the ground he looked more like a worm with thick glasses and a goofy grin.

"My team and I have been flying for hours," he said. He pointed up to a couple of black specks high overhead. Dolph could just barely make out their buzz.

"May I get a drink of water?" the man asked.

Shelly went while Dolph kept watch. The man drank his water, then as Shelly walked away with the glass he began doing some stretching exercises. He lifted his legs this way and that and touched his toes. Then he went up on his toes and spun like a ballerina. He counted out loud as he spun, and when he reached ten he stopped and unzipped the front of his hoodie. A pink sweater was underneath. Dolph felt something stir in his memory. The sweater, the soft face, the glasses . . . it dawned on him who the man was.

"You're Bill Gates."

"Yes, I am, though I prefer to be called 'Bug Lord' now."

Gates continued with his ballet exercises, prancing and kicking, and Dolph wondered what his uncle Ned would have thought of the situation. Gates had wiped out most of humanity, yet here he was dancing around like he was at a garden party. Ned would have killed him. Dolph wouldn't go that far, but out of respect for his uncle's memory he wanted Gates gone.

"Well I'm sure you need to get going," he said brusquely.

Shelly gave him a scowl that he knew would be followed later with talk about hive hospitality. It would be nice to avoid the sermon, so he sighed and resigned himself to some chitchat.

"So what brings you to our neck of the woods?" he asked Gates.

"Oh, we're just hunting and tracking." Gates

lifted his hoodie in back to show a pistol stuck in the waistband of his pants. “We tag special insects and then track them down later with GPS.”

“That’s interesting,” Dolph said, “but why are you here, on our property?”

“Well, we saw your house, and I wanted to ask if you’ve seen any unusual insects in the area. Any exotics.”

“Not lately,” Dolph said. “Your snakefly is the most exotic thing we’ve seen in a couple of years. Why do you track insects?”

“So we can kill them and harvest body parts. There’s quite a market for the organs and glands of the rarer species. Scientists want them for research, and others use them to make potions for virility, cell regeneration and so forth. Lately I’ve been injecting myself with a distillate of one of the regenerative compounds. Look at this.” He leaned forward and ran a hand across his forehead. “New hair growth.”

Dolph wasn’t sure how to respond so he said, “That’s . . .impressive.”

“Thank you,” Gates smiled, then he looked around and asked if they’d seen any orchid mantises.

“Not that I know of,” Dolph said. “What do they look like?”

“They’re white, with big flaps of pink, and conical eyes. A warlord in Peru wants the hypocerebral ganglion from a male. I could trade it for a diamond mine.”

Again Dolph didn’t know what to say, and as he was trying to think of something, Gates did a series of tiptoe lunges that took him to his snakefly. The insect was still flat on the ground.

“Thanks for letting me stretch,” he said, “and for the water.” He climbed the snakefly’s neck and buckled himself to his saddle.

Then a loud buzz seemed to flare out of

nowhere. A shadow appeared, and an insect landed beside Gates. It was nearly the size of the snakefly and had long, scimitar-like jaws. A dobsonfly, Dolph realized, and he leaned to his crossbow. Gates sat frozen at first, then he reached for his pistol. But the dobsonfly was too fast. It flicked its head sideways and closed its jaws around Gates' neck. He fired his pistol as his head was lifted from his shoulders.

The dobsonfly took off with its prize, and Gates' body thrashed around in its saddle. As it thrashed, one of the hands hit the keyboard that controlled the snakefly. The insect went spiraling up and then shot away in a straight line. The specks that were Gates' companions followed.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully for Dolph and Shelly, as did the next few weeks, except for a hatching of stinkbugs that made life a bit whiffy for a while. Dolph smiled whenever he thought of Gates losing his head. He wished his Uncle Ned could have been there to see it.

And then one day Gates returned. He was riding a different snakefly, lighter in color and smaller, but he was dressed the same. He landed and sat with his black hood covering his head.

"So have you seen an orchid mantis yet?" he asked Dolph and Shelly.

They were both stunned and couldn't answer, then Dolph said, "We. . . we thought you were dead."

Gates pulled his hood back to show a head that was half the size it used to be. The sight was unnerving and Shelly said, "Powers." Dolph said he didn't understand. "We saw you decapitated. Nobody could survive that."

"That was true," Gates said, "once. But the regenerative compound I told you I was taking is a lot stronger than even I thought it would be. And look at this." He tilted his little head forward and said, "I'm going to have a full head of hair."

“Well, uh, congratulations,” Dolph said. “Do you know what happened to your old head?”

“I accidentally shot it with a tracking dart when I was attacked. It’s stationary, a couple hundred miles from here, so I assume the dobsonfly crapped it out. But it doesn’t matter. This new head will be much better.”

He ran his fingers through his hair and then shifted in his saddle, as if trying to get comfortable. “And my head’s not the only thing I’ve been regenerating. We’re on our way back to China, and by the time we get there my new testicles should be fully grown. I traded the original pair for a tin mine, and now I’m going to trade for a smelting operation. And by the time the next pair . . .”

One of Gates’ people buzzed past on a dragonfly and he said, “Oops. Time to go.” He punched at the saddle’s keyboard and the snakefly’s wings began to pump. “On to China,” he said as he rose into the air. The drone of the Gates group faded into the distance and . . .

. . . Guy jerked awake with an intense buzzing in one of his ears. He stabbed with a finger, then examined the tip and saw mosquito parts trapped in amber earwax. One of the wings twitched with a final spasm. And something twitched at the back of his throat. He gagged and coughed the remains of the lacewing into the palm of a hand. It must have flown into his mouth while he was dozing. He smacked his lips and tasted . . . was it green blood?

His stomach growled and he looked at his computer monitor. He decided he’d beaten his brain against the writing enough for one day, and he wondered if he would ever have another idea that was worth pursuing. Maybe something would come to him while he ate. A can of beef stew would get the bug taste out of his mouth.