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HOUSE OF FLIES

1

The Reverend Paul Wymarsh lowered his book and reached across to his bedside table for his mug of hot chocolate. He lifted up his book again and took a first sip of chocolate, but as he did so he felt something bob lightly against his upper lip.

When he looked into his mug, he saw that there were three dead flies floating in it. He let out a '*yah!*' of utter disgust, threw back his duvet and climbed out of bed. He had not seen any flies circling around his bedroom. It was late October, after all, and a chilly October too, and by now the fly breeding season was usually over.

He carried his mug into the bathroom, switched on the light, poured the hot chocolate and the flies into the lavatory and flushed it. He saw himself in the mirror over the washbasin, narrow-shouldered and wiry-haired and bespectacled in his green-striped pyjamas, and he thought he looked quite shaken.

He wondered for a moment if he ought to ask God if there was any significance to three flies drowning in his bedtime drink, but then he thought it was far too petty a question with which to bother the Almighty, especially tonight, with so many wars in the world.

In any case, God would probably say *How the hell would I know?* The Reverend Wymarsh knew from experience that God had a sense of humour.

He left his empty mug on the small table on the landing. But as he crossed back to his bedroom, he heard a shuffling sound from downstairs. He stopped and listened, and after a few seconds he heard another sound, as if somebody were softly sweeping the floor.

He switched on the landing light. The sweeping sound gradually faded, but then he thought he heard another shuffle.

'I say! Is there somebody down there?' he called out. He had meant to sound stern and authoritative, but his voice came out strained and clogged up, as if he had a bad cold.

There was no answer, only silence, although the Reverend Wymarsh could hear his heart beating. He had locked both the front door and the kitchen door before he came up to bed, so he was sure that he would have heard anyone breaking in.

Even though he could hear no more noises from downstairs, he knew he would have to go down to make sure there was nobody there. Perhaps he had simply heard the gas boiler switching itself off, or the radiators cooling. The vicarage was early Victorian. The floorboards and rafters had a tendency to creak, and the windows to rattle, but he had never heard shuffling and sweeping sounds before.

Outside, it was raining, but not heavily, only a light patter, and there was no rumbling of thunder.

He went back into the bedroom and put on his corduroy slippers. Then he made his way cautiously downstairs, past the framed pictures of Jesus and his disciples at Gethsemane and of Southwark Cathedral, where the Reverend Wymarsh had been ordained. When he reached the hallway, he switched on the light and listened again. Still silence.

First he looked into the living room, with its antique leather sofa and armchairs and its Gothic stone fireplace. He leaned

sideways so that he could see behind the sofa, but there was nobody crouched down behind it, and there were no toecaps protruding from underneath the brown velvet curtains.

He was undecided for a moment, but then he picked up the brass-topped poker from beside the fireplace. Perhaps it was less than Christian for him to look for a possible intruder with a weapon in his hand, but crusaders had carried swords against the infidels, after all.

He checked his book-lined study, and the downstairs lavatory, and the large mahogany wardrobe where he kept his overcoats and hats and shoes. He prodded the coats with the end of the poker, but there was nobody hiding behind them.

Lastly, he went into the kitchen. When the fluorescent light blinked on, he could see that there was nobody there. He tried the door that gave out into the garden, and that was definitely locked. He opened the door to the utility room, where his shirts were hanging to dry, but there was nobody in there either.

It must have been the heating, making those noises. Either that, or mice. Or maybe I'm starting to suffer from tinnitus.

He was about to return the poker to the living room and go back upstairs when he saw something sparkling on the kitchen window, behind the Venetian blinds. At first, he thought it was raindrops, but when he looked closer, he realised that it was five or six flies, crawling up the glass.

He stared at them in disgust, and also in bewilderment. Where in the world had all these flies come from? The kitchen was spotless, because his cleaning lady, Ola, had visited only yesterday. He had left out no food uncovered, or dirty plates that might have attracted flies.

He laid down the poker and opened the cupboard under the sink to take out a can of Raid, which he had bought during the summer to get rid of wasps. He raised the Venetian

blind and then sprayed the flies with much more insecticide than was probably needed to kill them.

Almost immediately, the flies dropped off the glass and fell on to their backs on the windowsill, where they waved their legs and spun around and around for a few seconds before lying still. The Reverend Wymarsh tore off a sheet of kitchen paper, wrapped them all up in it, and dropped them into his pedal bin.

He stood in the kitchen feeling relieved but strangely guilty. Even a fly was a life, given by God, and he had just taken half a dozen of them.

He gave one last look around, and then he picked up the poker, switched off the lights, and made his way back upstairs to bed.

Before he closed his eyes, he said, very quietly, 'Lord Jesus, I believe you are the Son of God who died to pay the penalty for my sins. I open the door of my heart and ask you to be my Saviour and Lord. I ask your forgiveness for all my misdeeds.'

It took him nearly twenty minutes to fall asleep, and when he did, he began to dream almost at once that his late wife, Glenda, was playing the piano in the living room. At least, she was sitting in front of the piano and fingering the keys, but there was no sound.

He came up behind her and watched her for a while, and then he said, 'There's no music, Glenda. What's wrong?'

Without looking at him, she said, 'Cancer, Paul. Once you have cancer, nobody can hear what you're playing.'

He laid both his hands lightly on her shoulders and continued to watch her as she carried on running her fingers

over the keyboard in total silence. He missed her so much that it made his stomach hurt.

While he was dreaming that he was watching her, his bedroom door opened. A tall figure was standing outside on the landing, a figure that glittered in green from head to foot, as if it were covered all over in tiny shattered fragments of green glass. It stayed there for a few moments, listening to the Reverend Wymarsh murmuring in his sleep, and then it entered his bedroom and stood beside his bed. It was making a constant hissing sound, so soft that it was almost inaudible, like the white noise from a radio.

The figure waited for over a minute, and then it seized the top of his duvet and dragged it halfway downwards. The Reverend Wymarsh instantly woke up, although for the first two or three seconds he was not sure if he was actually awake or if he was still dreaming. He rolled over on to his back and said, '*What—?*'

The figure grasped him by the throat and clenched it so tight that he was unable to say any more, only choke. He struggled and beat with both hands at the mattress, but the figure was not only throttling him but pushing him downwards with such force that he was unable to lift his head off his pillow. His legs were tangled up in his duvet, too, so that it was impossible for him to kick.

It was dark already in the bedroom, but he began to feel a deeper darkness coming over him. He couldn't think about praying to God to save him. All he could think about was the crushing pain in his throat and his desperate inability to breathe. His lungs felt as if they were just about to burst.

His mouth was wide open, gagging for air, so while the figure was still strangling him with one hand, it pinched the tip of his tongue between its fingernails and pulled it out

as far as it would go. The Reverend Wymarsh would have retched if his larynx had not been squeezed so hard. He felt a prickling sensation on his tongue, as if flies had settled on it, and then he felt as if flies were starting to crawl inside his mouth, not just a few, but scores of them. He managed to make a thin wheezing sound, but then he blacked out.

The figure kept its grip on his throat until it was sure that he had stopped breathing. Then it pulled his duvet back up, and covered him with it.

It said nothing, but stood there for a while in utter silence, as quiet as Glenda's piano.