

2022 Short Story & Essay Contest: Third Place, High School Short Story Contest

Infestation

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On that Monday morning, Will's crappy off-brand phone charger saved his life.

Will had woken up the same as any other Monday: tired and wanting to do anything but go to school. After getting ready in a half-asleep daze, Will headed downstairs to catch his bus, popping his phone off the cord only to discover that the charger—a 99-cent Apple rip-off his mom had bought off Amazon—had failed to accomplish its single purpose.

Dammit, Will thought, as he heard the scraping tires of the bus pull up outside his house.

Screw it, I'll just borrow a charger from someone at school.

Slinging his backpack over his shoulder, Will shoved the dead phone into the side pocket of his backpack and rushed outside, catching the bus just before it pulled away.

Evidently, the Monday-morning lag wasn't exclusive to Will; the bus arrived at Waterford High School just a few minutes before first period. With no time to mooch a charger off a friend, Will went straight to his first class, taking a seat by the window to distract himself from the impending double period of history.

Around 20 minutes into class, Will noticed a small procession of centipede-like bugs trickling in from the edge of the window frame, crawling through the trenches in the painted cinderblock wall. Bugs had never really bothered Will, but he instinctively scooted his chair a few inches away from the window. Will watched the procession for a few minutes. The bugs didn't appear to be doing much of anything, and Will lost interest. With a hint of jealousy, he noticed his friends Drew and Kiran were playing on their phones under their desks. Just as Will was about to pass a note over to them asking for a charger, he heard an exclamation from the front of the class.

Glancing up, Will saw Ms. Stewart staring bug-eyed at the laptop sitting on her desk. The same small bugs Will had seen on the window were crawling across her desk and onto the laptop screen. With a disgusted look, Ms. Stewart grabbed a Kleenex and wiped it across the computer, scattering the bugs.

"F--k!" she exclaimed, tossing the tissue onto the ground and stomping on it. Realizing her slip-up, she turned back to the class with an apologetic look, "Oh—sorry guys, you weren't supposed to hear me say that—but that thing just *bit* me!" As she held up her hand, Will could see an ugly welt growing on her wrist, already almost the size of a quarter. As Ms. Stewart walked over to the trash can with the crumpled tissue, a fresh round of yells burst

out from the front row of the class. Anastasia Lawrence—a classic teacher’s pet—leaped to her feet.

“Ms. Stewart, something is wrong with Jacob!” she said, staring wide-eyed at the boy next to her as he let out another shriek.

Jacob was the backup pitcher of the varsity baseball team and a semi-infamous prankster at Waterford High, so Will’s first thought was that he was making fun of the teacher for her panic, but as Jacob writhed out of his chair and onto the floor, Will realized something else was going on. Jacob was pawing at his legs, his screams growing louder by the second as Ms. Stewart raced over to him. Crowding toward them along with the rest of the class, Will realized that Jacob’s legs, hands, and the floor beneath him were covered in the same scuttling bugs—and as Ms. Stewart knelt to examine Jacob, they started swarming up her legs as well.

And not just her. Around the fallen student and teacher, Will’s classmates began scrambling away, the bugs scattering across the floor and closing in around the feet of the students too slow to flee. Anastasia tripped over a backpack as she tried to backpedal away from the scene—landing on her side and screaming as the bugs swarmed over her.

Jacob’s face and hands disappeared under a sheet of shiny black carapaces and legs, and his scream came to a gurgling halt. As it did, Will heard something that scared him even more: bloodcurdling shrieks echoing through the walls from the classrooms on either side of him—sounds of pure agony and terror that could only mean that the same horror enveloping his class was consuming the entire school.

The bugs moved like liquid. As they spilled out along the classroom floor, Will and his classmates were forced up onto the desks and back into the corners of the room—the classroom door already cut off by the insects, now spreading like a pool of deadly oil. Almost half the class had been too slow and were engulfed by the swarm. The students thrashed and screamed; the bugs enveloped their bodies until their struggles came to a twitching halt. The heaving waves of bugs made the dead bodies look as though they were still breathing, leaving behind nothing but bloody lumps of flesh for the bugs to slowly burrow into and pick apart. As they moved across the tile floor, the black-shelled creatures made a low chattering sound, somewhere between the chirp of crickets and the buzz of an angry wasp.

Will was horrified to see his friends devoured. But the stagnation that came after was even worse. Silently, he and his fellow students waited, frozen on top of their desks and too terrified to make a noise. The agonized sound of their classmates’ screams surrounded them, subsiding every few minutes only for a fresh outburst to remind the silent onlookers that their torturous end was near.

Moving with cold efficiency, the deadly carpet of insects swept along the ground, slowly amassing around the desks where the students perched motionless. Sending their feelers up the aluminum legs of the desks, the insects began to climb.

Drew—who had been playing games under his desk just a moment ago, or so it seemed—was the first to have the bugs reach him. His face puffy with tears and his crotch stained with fear, he frantically tried to brush them off the edges of the desk, leaping to his feet on top of the table—trying to crush them underfoot as they crawled across the chipped wooden surface. But there were too many of them.

Eventually, one must have gotten past his defenses because he let out a scream—probably more fear than pain—and clutched at his leg. That lapse was all the time the swarm needed to begin surging up his Nikes. Drew tumbled off his desk with another scream—and that scream didn't stop. Will turned away, trying to tune out the noise and shut off his mind as his best friend was devoured a few feet away from him.

Perched on a desk at the back of the room, Will watched as the bugs scuttled across the ground and slowly began to ascend the desks. As he watched, his friends toppled one by one—the same desperate scene playing out over and over again. Terry—he had been one of Waterford's track captains—made a dash for the door when the bugs breached his desk; he had almost made it too, succumbing to the bites and surging masses just as he leaped over the unrecognizable remains of Ms. Stewart before falling to the ground and succumbing to the swarm. As the bugs reached the final two rows of desks, the students' resistance seemed to crumble, and the girl four desks to the right of Will simply gave in, sobbing and whispering a prayer as she slumped off her desk and into the seething masses below.

As the bugs surged along the ground toward the final row of desks, Will realized that, somehow, it seemed like they weren't coming for him. Looking down, he realized that, yes, the ground around his desk—while still littered with hundreds of the disgusting creatures—was just as clear as the ground around the other empty desks. For some reason, he was safe.

Taking what felt like his first breath in hours, Will took a look around the classroom.

Along with the swarms amassing around each of his fallen classmates, which Will did his best to ignore, the insects appeared to be gathering around...the laptops? Yes—from what Will could tell, the bugs were amassing around the fallen Chromebooks and Macs just as insatiably as they were to the corpses that had been his friends. And not just that. On the wall, a dark spot was slowly growing as the bugs swarmed onto the Promethean projector. The slideshow on European expansion flickered as the bugs crawled across the lens, their silhouettes projected onto the map of the world as if scuttling across the Atlantic.

Will slowly touched his back pocket, feeling the empty denim sleeve where his phone would normally reside. Looking over to the backpack holding his phone, Will saw that the insects were flocking around it with the intensity of wasps cut off from their queen—the same intensity with which they were currently scaling the desks of Will's remaining two classmates: Owen, a quiet kid Will didn't know very well, and a girl whose name Will didn't remember.

Here goes nothing, Will thought, taking a deep, slow breath.

“H-hey.” What Will had meant as a whisper came out as a hoarse dry groan, just loud enough to be heard over the clittering of the bugs across the tile floor.

Both heads turned toward Will—two pairs of red-rimmed eyes, staring at him as though he was the first person they had ever seen.

“Do you still have your phones?”

Owen kept staring at Will, as though not fully aware of where he was. However, the girl nodded her head slightly, the shadow across her face darkening as she did.

She let out a whisper too, her voice sounding odd, almost alien in the silence. “I...I tried to text—and call too—but nothing has service...it’s all down for some reason. There’s no way to reach anyone.” At this, she trailed off, her shoulders shaking as though she wanted to cry but had nothing left to grieve with.

“Please, just listen to me,” said Will. He glanced down at the bugs piling around the aluminum legs of the girl’s desk, and then looked back up at her, staring directly into her dark brown eyes. “Try something for me, please. Just throw your phone as far over to that corner as you can.”

Expressions flashed across her face—confusion, fear and a hint of tired resignation. Wordlessly, she looked down at the shining black shells of the insects coming to devour her, reached into her pocket, and clenched her eyes shut. Raising her hand over her head, knuckles clenched white around her phone, she hurled it into the far corner of the classroom, the screen coming to life as the phone tumbled through the air. Will caught a glimpse of a screensaver—a group of friends, laughing together—before the phone clattered to the ground by the teacher’s desk.

As Will had expected, the girl’s phone was covered with crawling black insects in a matter of seconds, mutating into yet another one of the mounds scattered haphazardly across the ground—bodies and loose devices intermingling in their demise.

But miraculously, as the phone left her hand, the bugs that had been midway up the sheer metal legs of the girl’s desk dispersed back onto the ground as if their prey had vanished into thin air. The girl looked down, her eyes widening as she realized what had just happened.

As she gazed around the room with new clarity, Will could see the understanding dawning on her just as it had for him.

Will and the girl turned to face Owen, only to see his phone already hurtling across the classroom, striking the front board with enough force to dislodge some of the bugs and send them scattering to the floor. A few seconds later, the bugs around his desk retreated as well

and the three kids let out a slow, collective sigh of relief. Will glanced over at his surviving classmates. On their faces, a look of grim determination had overtaken the dazed fear that had been omnipresent before.

They were still trapped, but—for now, at least—they were alive.