

EXTERMINATOR!

Fiction by William Burroughs

During the war I worked for A. J. Cohen Exterminators ground floor office dead end street by the river. An old Jew with cold grey fish eyes and a cigar was the oldest of four brothers. Marv was the youngest wore wind breakers had three kids. There was a smooth well-dressed college trained brother. The fourth brother burly and muscular looked like an old-time hooper could bellow a leather lunged 'Mammy' and you hope he won't do it. Every night at closing time these two brothers would get in a heated argument from nowhere I could see the older brother would take the cigar out of his mouth and move across the floor with short sliding steps advancing on the vaudeville brother.

"You vant I should spit right in your face!? You vant!? You vant!? You vant!?"

The vaudeville brother would retreat shadow boxing presences invisible to my boyish eyes which I took to be potent Jewish Mammams conjured up by the elder brother. On many occasions I witnessed this ritual open mouthed hoping the old cigar would let fly one day but he never did. A few minutes later they would be talking quietly and checking the work slips as the exterminators fell in. On the other hand the old brother never argued with his exterminators.

"That's why I have a cigar," he said the cigar being for him a source of magical calm.

I used my own car a black Ford V8 and worked alone carrying my bed bug spray pyrethium powder bellows and bulbs of fluoride up and down stairs.

"Exterminator! You need the service?"

A fat smiling Chinese rationed out the pyrethium powder—it was hard to get during the war—and cautioned us to use fluoride whenever possible. Personally I prefer a pyrethium

job to a fluoride. With the pyrethium you kill the roaches right there in front of God and the client whereas this starch and fluoride you leave it around and back a few days later a Southern defence worker told me: "They eat it and run around here fat as hawgs."

From a great distance I see a cool remote neighbourhood blue windy day in April sun cold on your exterminator there climbing the grey wooden outside stairs.

"Exterminator, lady. You need the service?"

"Well come in young man and have a cup of tea. That wind has a bite to it."

"It does that, mam, cuts me like a knife and I'm not well you know (cough)."

"You put me in mind of my brother Michael Fenny."

"He passed away?"

It was a long time ago April day like this sun cold on a thin boy with freckles through that door like yourself. I made him a cup of hot tea. When I brought it to him he was gone." She gestured to the empty blue sky: "Cold tea sitting right where you are sitting now." I decide this old witch deserves a pyrethium job no matter what the fat Chinese allows. I lean forward discreetly.

"Is it roaches Mrs Murphy?"

"It is that from those Jews downstairs."

"Or is it the Hunkys next door Mrs Murphy?"

She shrugs: "Sure and an Irish cockroach is as bad as another."

"You make a nice cup of tea Mrs Murphy . . . Sure I'll be taking care of your roaches . . . Oh don't be telling me where they are . . . You see I *know* Mrs Murphy . . . Experienced along these lines . . . And I don't mind telling you Mrs Murphy I *like* my work and take pride in it."

"Well the city exterminating people were around and left

*'Don't tell me where
the roaches are,
Mrs Murphy,
I already know.
I love my work
and take a
pride in it'*



some white powder draws roaches the way whiskey will draw a priest."

"They are a cheap outfit Mrs Murphy. What they left was fluoride. The roaches build up a tolerance and become addicted. They can be dangerous if the fluoride is suddenly withdrawn . . . Ah just here it is . . ."

I have spotted a brown crack by the kitchen sink put my bellows in and blow a load of the precious yellow powder. As if they had heard the last trumpet the roaches stream out and flop in convulsions on the floor.

"Well I never!" says Mrs Murphy and turns me back as I advanced for coup de grace . . . "Don't shoot them again. Just let them die."

When it is all over she sweeps up a dust-pan full of roaches into the wood stove and makes me another cup of tea.

When it comes to bed bugs there is a board of health regulation against spraying beds and that of course is just where the bugs are in most cases now an old wood house with bed bugs back in the wood for generations only thing is to fumigate . . . So here is Mamma with a glass of sweet wine here beds back and ready . . . I look at her over the syrupy red wine . . . "Lady we don't spray no beds. Board of Health regulations you know."

"Ach so the wine is not enough?"

She comes back with a crumpled dollar. So I go to work . . . bed bugs great red clusters of them in the ticking of the mattresses. I mix a little formaldehyde with my kerosene in the spray its more sanitary that way and if you tangle with some pimp in one of the Negro whore-houses we service a face full of formaldehyde keeps the boy in line.

Now you'll often find these old Jewish grandmas in a back room like their bugs and we have to force the door with the younger generation smooth college-trained Jew there could turn into a narcotics agent while you wait.



" . . . The name is Ron. Tell your daughter I'm here, will you?"

"All right grandma, open up! The exterminator is here."

She is screaming in Yiddish no bugs are there we force our way in I turn the bed back . . . My God thousands of them fat and red with grandma and when I put the spray on them she moans like the Gestapo is murdering her nubile daughter engaged to a dentist.

And there are whole backward families with bed bugs don't want to let the exterminator in.

"We'll slap a Board of Health summons on them if we have to," said the college-trained brother . . . "I'll go along with you on this one. Get in the car."

They didn't want to let us in but he was smooth and firm. They gave way muttering like sullen troops cowed by the brass. Well he told me what to do and I did it. When he was settled at the wheel of his car cool grey and removed he said: "Just plain ordinary sons of bitches. That's all they are."

TB sanitorium on the outskirts of town. . . . Cool blue basements fluoride dust drifting streaks of phosphorus paste on the walls . . . grey smell of institution cooking . . . heavy dark glass front door . . . funny thing I never saw any patients there but I don't ask questions. Do my job and go a man who works for his living . . . remember this janitor who broke into tears because I said shit in front of his wife it wasn't me actually said it was Wagner who was dyspeptic and thin with knobby wrists and stringy yellow hair . . . and the fumigation jobs under the table I did on my day off. . . .

Young Jewish matron there: "Let's not talk about the company. The company makes too much money anyway. I'll get you a drink of whisky." Well I have come up from the sweet wine circuit. So I arrange a sulphur job with her five Abes and it takes me about two hours you have to tape up all the windows and the door and leave the fumes in there twenty-four hours studying the good work.

One time me and the smooth brother went out on a special fumigation job. . . . "This man is sort of a crank. . . . Been out here a number of times . . . claims he has rats under the house. . . . We'll have to put on a show for him."

Well he hauls out one of those tin pump guns loaded with cyanide dust and I am subject to crawl under the house through spider webs and broken glass to find the rat holes and squirt the cyanide to them.

"Watch yourself under there," said the cool brother. "If you don't come out in ten minutes I'm coming in after you."

I liked the cafeteria basement jobs long grey basement you can't see the end of it white dust drifting as I trace arabesques of fluoride on the wall.

We serviced an old theatrical, hotel rooms with rose wall-paper photograph albums. . . . "Yes that's me there on the left."

The boss has a trick he does every now and again assembles his staff and eats arsenic been in that office breathing the powder in so long the arsenic just brings an embalmer's flush to his smooth grey cheek. And he has a pet rat he knocked all its teeth out feeds it on milk the rat is now very tame and affectionate.

I stuck the job nine months. It was my record on any job. Left the old grey Jew there with his cigar the fat Chinese pouring my pyrethium powder back into the barrel. All the brothers shook hands. A distant cry echoes down cobble stone streets through all the grey basements up the outside stairs to a windy blue sky. "Exterminator!"