

Showdown at the DQ Corral

a short story by bugs@troped.com

Scratching his head, Travis enters the living room, feeling the shock of the anvil of early morning in his head, something he is entirely new to. His roommate's stereo in the next room is blasting the sounds of a mariachi band, and Travis feels suddenly as though he were in a movie with the sunbeams pouring in through the blinds, thick and tangible. In sudden synchronicity, the all too giddy Spanish guitars reach a climatic state as there comes a single, solemn knock at the door. Gathering his wits, Travis opens the front door slowly, revealing the brilliant light of a clear day, and the imposing silhouette of large jellybean. The guitars rattle and a trumpet sounds.

"May I help you?" Travis asks, vainly attempting to remove crust from his eye. Slowly, the man comes into focus, the light from the outside giving the lavender encapsulated exterminator the appearance of divinity. The little man pushes Travis aside and announces, "I have come for the denizens, sir," in the thickest of southern accents.

"The denizens?" Travis asks sleepily, the mariachi band quieting to a ballad.

"Wicked bugs, sir," the exterminator states, adjusting his glasses. They are as thick as bottle glass, magnifying the short man's eyes as large as cup saucers, one eye wandering in the opposite direction of the other. He sniffs the air for a minute and glimpses about the room quickly. "Can't ya' feel 'em?" he asks.

"They're in there," Travis says, pointing to the kitchen, wondering if it's Tuesday or Thursday.

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Hefting his lavender, polyester pants, the bug man lifts his spray canister with his right hand, and pulls his purple baseball cap, with a smashed bug logo, down tight with his left. "I do love a good Spanish melody," the bug man says, crossing into the other room.

"Mm hmm," says Travis, still rubbing his eyes. He sits on the old couch and closes his eyes, listening to the sounds of the bug man's voice destroying the Spanish melody, the warmth of the thin sunbeams caressing him, and the hypnotic movements of the small dust particles in the light, making him sleepy.

"Ees par may en mo car pa amoree!" the bug man sings.

Half drifting in sleep, Travis feels a moist wind of some kind, as though someone were breathing on him. Opening his eyes, only the face of the bug man is revealed to him, as large as the sky. For a moment, Travis can make out all the particular details of the face: the huge magnified, wandering eye; the bristly mustache; the myriad of small beads of sweat on the forehead; the red blubbery cheeks. But then, as quickly as the face appeared, it disappears in a dizzying vortex as the bug man pulls away, and takes one step directly back from Travis.

"I was sure you was dead," the bug man says, pushing his glasses up to the bridge of his large nose. "I wanted to make sure you wasn't dead." Stepping meekly to the side, the bug man playfully pats Travis on the shoulder, light and uncertain, like a kitten. "Kay pasa, me ameego?"

"Yeah, yeah," Travis says, waving him off with one hand, rubbing his eye with the other. Yawning, Travis looks around the room, making smacking noises with his mouth. The place looks like a train wreck, and the mariachi band takes on a desperate tone. Looking back, Travis finds the bug man still standing where he was. Like a greasy, grilled cheese sandwich stood up on one end, he slumps. Travis just ponders the little man for a moment, feeling sad.

"It's about that time," the bug man says, sounding almost menacing,

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but almost not, again adjusting his pants around his middle.

Travis stares, concerned.

“Let’s go to lunch!” the bug man announces, just loud enough to disturb the quiet of the room.

Standing, Travis scratches his stomach beneath his neon green, surfer tee. “Okay.”

Suddenly, the record makes a horrendous scratching sound and the mariachi band is silenced.

“Sounds like your record skipped,” the bug man offers.

“But he doesn’t have a record player...” Travis says questioningly.

“Let’s go!” the bug man shouts, marching out the front door into the sun.

Travis follows, shuts the door and locks it before realizing he has no shoes on. Shrugging, he turns around only to confront a giant, lavender pick up truck. The bug man is already in it, starting the engine. Walking around the front and hopping in the other side, Travis turns to the bug man, “So, you got a name?”

“Yep, yep,” the bug says. Leaning over, the little man turns the radio nob, and the sounds of the mariachi band trickle through the truck’s speakers. Travis watches ahead as the truck meanders slowly through the parking lot, the brakes being applied frequently and randomly, jolting him back and forth, back and forth, like a boxer in a fight with a giant, invisible kangaroo. Gradually the giant truck pulls out into the road at a crawl, narrowly missing another car, and begins to swerve down the lane. It becomes quickly apparent that the bug man cannot see through his huge lenses. He has placed his nose against the steering wheel, resting it there, hunching the entirety of his bulk over the steering column. The mariachi band jingles merrily in time with the convulsions of the truck, still randomly braking, accelerating and swerving.

“Can you see with those glasses on?”

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“Nope.”

Furrowing his brow, Travis stares at the bug man, who looks back at him as though no explanation should be necessary. “They’re a disguise,” he whispers mysteriously, before bursting into a chipmunk smile.

“Sure,” Travis agrees without question.

“Yeah, people call me M.”

Travis looks to the bug man quizzically, while latching onto his door handle as the truck swerves hard right out of the opposing lane of traffic. “M as in the letter, or as in the sound: mmm,” he asks.

The brakes squeal as the bug man slams on the brakes at a red light; Travis flies into the dashboard, bracing himself just in time.

“Assbutt!” the exterminator yells at no one in particular, his face jammed up against the windshield. After a moment, the truck engine roars as the bug man slams on the gas again and the huge lavender truck bolts through the intersection, the light still red. Looking back through the rear window, Travis watches as two cars swerve and smash into one another.

“So, I got a joke for ya’,” the bug man announces.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. How many bugs can you fit into a Buick?”

Travis shrugs, “I don’t know. What kind of bugs?”

“Uh, let’s see,” the bug man says, calculating, “One hundred thousand, five hundred and sixty three not countin’ the trunk.” The bug man laughs suddenly, like a mule. Turning to Travis, he punches him in the shoulder, the laughter making his stomach go into convulsions like a cooler full of jell o. “Get it?” he yells, his one wandering eye, searching Travis out. Several cars swerve to miss the truck, which is riding in and out of its own lane in rhythm with the bug man’s mule like giggling.

Forcing a nervous chuckle, Travis just replies, “Sure, sure.”

“It’s a good joke,” the bug man says, leaning back to the steering

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wheel, resting his nose there again. "It's the only joke I can ever remember, 'cause I made it up." He pushes his glasses up again, from where they had slid down onto the steering wheel. "I wish I could remember more jokes."

"I knew a good joke..." Travis says, strangely nostalgic.

"Wait! We're here!" the bug man yells, as the truck fishtails into the parking lot of a Dairy Queen. Unexpectedly swept by gravity, Travis slides down the bench seat into the bug man.

Looking Travis up and down, the jovial, fat man smiles. "That's right nice. I like you, too." He nods once and turns the truck engine off, silencing the sounds of the mariachi as well. They both get out, and begin to walk towards the Dairy Queen, its barn roof looming ominously before them, a single crumpled napkin tumbling along the mostly empty parking lot in the warm breeze. The world seems mostly silent for a moment until Travis can hear just in the distance the sounds of the mariachi band. He cranes his neck to see where it's coming from.

Ambling up to the front door, the bug man protectively places one arm in front of Travis. "Let me handle this," he says, and proceeds to balance uncertainly on one leg, kicking the door hard with his other. The door stands stoically, unmoved. Leaning in, the bug man examines the door, adjusting his glasses, and then pulls it open, smiling at Travis.

"Thanks," Travis says and enters.

Inside, the sound of the mariachi band plays through the tinny intercom speakers, and a group of dark men sit in the corner watching the pair carefully, as the music takes on a dark tone.

Travis and the bug man approach the counter, where a Dairy Queen associate stands fussing with her hair. "I'll have a single, vanilla ice cream cone, and whatever me ameeego here wants."

"Just a cup of coffee," Travis says sleepily.

"Jus' a cup a' coffee? I'm buyin', Chief. You can have whatever

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you desire,” the bug man says, his wandering eye revealing the sparkle of a genie, his secret kept safely tucked away in his spray canisters.

“Yeah. I just want a cup of coffee.”

The bug man turns to the waitress. “He’ll have one cup of coffee.”

“I guess I heard him,” the waitress replies to the bug man who, completely ignoring the waitress, just whistles along with the mariachi band, rapping his fingers on the counter.

Turning to Travis, he smiles, “We have a lot of fun when we hang out, don’t we?”

Travis stares blankly.

After a moment, the order arrives. Travis picks up his coffee and blows on it lightly. Turning, he discovers the four dark men standing directly behind him now. The leader smiles, revealing a single, gold tooth. The bug man turns slowly, already aware of the presence, and looks the leader in the eye like a matador, as the mariachi band rumbles away.

“So, El hombre del insecto, I see you have come back,” the leader snarls with a thick Mexican accent.

“Well, well. If it isn’t you, Diablo. How’d you get out of jail so soon?”

“Manwel is a lawyer.” He jerks his head toward one of the smaller gang members, who smiles politely and looks down. “E got us off on’a tek nee kal itee,” the Diablo says.

“What a shame,” the bug man replies, licking his ice cream cone and looking over the rim of his glasses at Travis, innocently, unconcerned.

“I hope you know, El Bugo, wee are going to have to keel you,” the Diablo says, cracking his knuckles.

“Is that so?” the bug man asks, resting his free hand casually on his stomach.

“Yeah, but I ain’t jus’ gonna’ keel you, El Bugo. I’m gonna’ keel you special like.” And the Diablo revealing his hand from his jeans pocket,

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produces a large cockroach, holding it up to the bug man's nose as the mariachi band crescendos.

Staring at the roach, its little legs squirming between the Diablo's thick, brown thumb and forefinger, the bug man's eyes widen. The thin, hairy roach legs squirm and reach out for his face, as his one eye wanders, shaking with a paralyzing mixture of fear and anger. The ice cream cone drops from the bug man's hand as his arms go slack, and it falls, turning over and over, slowly until the thick white ball smashes into the floor, dispersing like an asteroid. Looking down, the bug man examines the wreckage of his tasty, frozen treat. He licks his thick lips once and frowns. Still staring at it, he speaks slowly, the tension mounting in his voice, "You made me drop my ice cream."

One of the gang members looks to the Diablo nervously, and then to the ice cream on the floor, and then to El hombre del insecto, still staring down. Slowly, he begins to back away, nervous perspiration breaking out on his forehead and upper lip. Manwel follows, slowly but surely, one step at a time.

The bug man's right hand begins to hover near his waistline near the gleaming canister of bug spray hung from his belt just so. He looks up, past the roach, into the Diablo's eyes, and for a moment the two stare deep into one another's souls, as behind them, a giant plastic ice cream cone revolves. And the mariachi band's song raises to a fortissimo, one guitar string sounding out, plucked again and again, continuously, in staccato.

In one fluid motion, like a well oiled vending machine, the bug man releases the canister from his belt up to the Diablo's face, spray releasing from it, hitting the penetrating eyes in a wash. Too quickly though, the roach is flung, and it soars through the air in a treacherous arc, legs searching in all directions, until it collides with the bug man's round nose. The dualists fall back, the bug man stumbling, flailing, grabbing for some handhold to steady himself. Knocking into Travis, spilling the coffee, the

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bug man crashes into the counter and slides to the floor. The puddle of coffee beneath him spreads out across the dirty tile, soaking into the bug man's lavender, polyester slacks.

The Diablo's body is sprawled across one of the brightly painted red and yellow tables. His gang runs away in fright, and Travis, looking to the bug man, squats down next to his now still, round frame. Coughing the bug man speaks in a whisper, "We sure had good times, didn't we?"

"Yeah. Yeah we did," Travis says quietly.

Removing the roach from his glasses, the bug man contemplates it for a moment before closing his eyes. And the puddle of coffee spreads out, thinning and running into the cracks in the tile. "They won't have roaches in heaven, will they, Chief?"

"No. No they won't, amigo." Removing the lavender hat, Travis pushes back the wet sweaty hair of the bug man. "You just rest now."

Opening his eyes one last time, blinking quickly, the bug man looks at the hat in Travis's hand. "You take good care of that for me," he says, and his body convulses one last time before it is finally still.

A lone guitar melody drifts through the tinny intercom speakers. Travis stands and walks out the door, lavender cap in hand. The sun warms his skin comfortingly as he steps out of the air conditioned restaurant, thinking to himself, I've got a paper due in two hours. It's just a trivial matter, though.