

# SHOWDOWN AT THE DQ CORRAL

A short story By Russell Warner

Scratching his head, Travis drifts into the living room, feeling late morning on his head like a burro; hairy, warm, scratchy and possibly getting ready to kick him. He has awoken from a gelatin-thick dream of trying to put together the pieces of an invitation to the world's greatest party of... but wondering the whole time if it was really worth the effort. His roommate's stereo in the next room is blaring the sounds of a mariachi band, and Travis feels stuck in a movie with bad pacing.

The sunbeams pour in through the blinds, thick and tangible, dust swirling and alighting on the fuzzy edges of everything. "I didn't wanna go to a stupid party anyway," he mumbles to the invisible mariachi players. In synch, the too-giddy Spanish guitars reach a climatic tremolo as a loud, persistent knocking at the door barges into Travis's head and pushes his brain down. While gathering his wits, Travis eyes the door, knowing that if he stands very quiet and--and who the hell left the stereo on anyway? He was alone in the place, had been all week, roommates away doing things that roommates do when they're away. He looks around suspiciously to make sure there's no one there but him and his mess is all the evidence he needs.

The knocking continues and Travis looks to the door again and squints. "Fine. I'll get it," he says to no one in particular, "but if it's Jehovah's witnesses I'm gonna' go crazy on their shit." Travis opens the front door slowly, revealing the brilliant light of a clear day, and the silhouette of an imposing purple jellybean. The guitars rattle and a trumpet sounds the arrival of a mysterious hero.

"May I help you?" Travis asks, vainly attempting to remove crust stuck good to the corners of his eyes. As Travis's vision adjusts to the light, the man comes into focus, the

light from the outside giving the lavender encapsulated exterminator the appearance of divinity.

"You're not a Jehovah's witness."

The little man pushes Travis aside and enters the apartment announcing, "I have come for the denizens, sir," in the thickest of southern preacher accents.

"Damn. I was gonna' go crazy on their... The denizens?" Travis asks sleepily, the archaic word having sunk to the bottom of his brain.

"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 as if to identify prey and glimpses about the room quickly. "Can't ya' feel em?" he asks.

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

\* \* \*

Travis stares, concerned.

"Let's go to lunch!" the bug man announces, loudly disturbing the quiet and dusty reverie of the room.

Standing, Travis stretches hard, reaching out, elbows cracking and ending in a "nnngMwaah." He scratches his stomach beneath his t-shirt which says: `In Case of Emergency: Panic!` "Okay."

Suddenly, the record makes a horrendous scratching sound and the mariachi band is silenced. Both Travis and the bug man look.

"Sounds like your record done skipped, Chief," the bug man offers.

"No. He doesn't have a record player..." Travis starts to investigate.

"Lets 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 away from the door only to confront a gigantic, lavender pick-up truck. "What'd'ya think?" He bangs on the door in admiration and the mirror falls off. Squatting down quickly the bug man picks up the mirror and holds it behind his back. He looks around and says, "You know what a Hemi is?"

Travis, still standing in front of the door, briefly wonders what he is doing but then replies, "I think I saw a commercial about them... or something."

The bug man laughs hysterically and slaps his leg. "That's a good one, Chief."

\* \* \*

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 speakers. "Now you don't know nothin' bout Hemi's 'til you seen one in action." With that, the bug man stomps on the accelerator and peels out like a Montego Hera. Travis watches ahead as the truck swerves through the parking lot, the accelerator and brakes being applied frequently and randomly, jolting him back and forth, back and forth, like a punching bag before a kangaroo. When they get to the apartment complex's exit to the road, though, the giant truck pulls out at a crawl as cars stop or swerve to miss the lumbering obstacle. It becomes apparent to Travis that the bug man cannot see through his thick glasses. The little fellow has placed his nose against the steering wheel, resting it there squinting, hunching the entire top half 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.

"Uh. Can you see with those glasses on?"

"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 strained chipmunk grin.

"Oh," Travis agrees without question.

"Yeah, the people—they 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..."

"M as in mmm that's mighty fine fried chicken!"

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.

"Meatlamp!" 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 screams into 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?"

"Any particular kind of bug?"

The bug man looks irritated, "What *kind*!? Them's bugs."

"Right. Sorry." Travis shrugs. "I give up. How many?"

"Uh, lets see," the bug man says, calculating, "One hundred thousand, five hundred and sixty-three—not countin' the trunk!" Then he laughs suddenly, like a mule, banging back into his seat a couple of times causing the truck to start and stop. Turning to Travis, he punches him in the shoulder. "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. That was a really good joke," hoping that a minor semblance of control might return to the vehicle.

"That there is a good joke," the bug man says, leaning back to the steering wheel, resting his nose there again. "It's the only joke I kin ever remember cuz 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, once." Travis says nostalgically.

\* \* \*

"Tell ya what, ameeego, we're gonna stop off and see Wayne quick-like 'fore lunch."

"Okay." In for a dime, in for a dollar.

With that, the bug man pulls the steering wheel right and bumps the truck up on to the sidewalk full speed then jerk stops, half in traffic, half out, in front of a run down gas station. He hops down out of the truck as a car races by, horn blaring.

"Oh," Travis says without surprise, "We're here."

Travis gets out of the truck and follows the bug man stepping carefully, looking out for broken glass.

"Now Wayne here—he jes' might be the best karyoke round these parts... cain't sing worth a darn though."

"Well, naturally."

From out of the shadows of the decrepit gas station comes a thin wiry man in mechanic's jumpers wiping his oil-black hands off on a dirty rag. "Well, shit. Look what the cat done drug in." He winks at the bug man.

"A mouse?" the bug man asks.

"Naw, you! The Mack hisself." He winks at Travis

The bug man looks nervously at Travis who doesn't notice.

"Hi, I'm Trav—"

"This here's Chief."

"Oh yeah right," says Travis as though he'd stupidly forgotten.

"Ya' seem ta fergot your shoes," Wayne points out. Then winks.

Defiantly, "No. I didn't."

"I got some extra flip-flops you kin have, if ya' want."

"What?"

"Ya want some flip-flops I got?"

"What're'ya tryin' ta say, man?"

"I got... flip... flops."

The group ponders the words for a quiet moment until Wayne turns to M and says, "They come in." Then he winks at him.

"That's what I was hopin'." Turning to Travis, the bug man smiles and winks.

"Wait'll ya see this."

Feeling left out for a moment, Travis turns to Wayne. And then winks at him.

This sets Wayne wondering off back to the garage as Travis looks around the lot made up of asphalt punctured by seams of grass here and there, broken gas pumps and rusty cars—all framed by a chain-link fence. "You know, I've been meaning to ask... I mean, you're an exterminator and doesn't it ever seem... well... futile to try to kill bugs—there's really..."

"I hate them."

"Of course, I just meant that given—"

"I hate them."

Travis waits for a moment, looking at the little man. His eyes are tense and wide and round, waiting. "We're not really gonna discuss—"

"I hate them."

"Okay." Travis nods.

"Found 'em!" hollers a voice from the garage. Wayne comes back out from the shadows carrying a light colored leather belt with two round holsters—in them, nestled carefully, are two shining silver canisters. As Wayne gets to them he holds them up to the sun which glints off the majestic chrome as somewhere in the distance a hawk calls. Travis looks around at the sky.

"These'll keep ma pants up real good," says M.

"You know this place you got," Travis says to Wayne, "I'm thinkin', well ya know, I know some people and—you know the old gas pumps, the cars—Night club." Travis spreads his hands out in front of them to show them the bright lights. "That's the way I would rock it, Wayne."

"Ya think?"

"Oh yeah. Hot commodity. Hot. I know people."

"Well shit." Wayne says and scratches his head. "Ya think it'd have karyoke?"

"Wayne—baby. I'm talking kayroke, lip synching, mouthing words to songs without knowing the lyrics, the works. Air guitar. Crazy shit."

"Huh."

"Well, we gotta get goin ta lunch."

"Oh. Where was you goin?"

The bug man shrugs.

"Well, I jes' heard from Johnny who heard from Gary that the Diablo is out." As the name is spoken a rattlesnake rattles.

Travis looks around his bare feet quickly. "C'mon, that's obnoxious."

"No, it's true. Don't know how he done it but he got out. They said he's lookin for you, the Mack."

"Well, well, well," M intones. "I guess I'll keep an eye out."

"All right. Ya'll take care."

"Nice ta meet ya Wayne. And seriously man, air guitar. Think about it."

"All right then." Wayne winks at Travis as they all turn to go.

Getting back into the truck, Travis looks at M and says, "the Mack, huh?"

"Well, you know how it is," M says as he puts the key in the ignition and brings the mariachi band back to life. The truck pulls off the sidewalk, peels out, turns out into the left lane as another car dodges it, and straightens itself out. "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 plump, jovial 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. They both get out, and begin to walk towards the Dairy Queen, its barn roof looming ominously before them as a single crumpled napkin tumbles by in the breeze. Ambling up to the front door, the bug man protectively places one arm in front of Travis. "Let me handle this, Chief," he says, and proceeds to balance uncertainly on one leg, kicking the door hard with his other. The door bangs loudly but 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. Travis spots a group of gangsters from the barrio who sit in the corner watching the pair carefully, as the music tiptoes carefully into a dark place.

\* \* \*

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

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

"Jes a cup a coffee? I'm buyin, Chief. You can have whatever you desire," M says, waving his hands in a long arc beneath the brightly colored menu, his wandering eye revealing the sparkle of a genie, his secret kept safely tucked away somewhere 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 at him.

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

"So, El Bugo," the leader sneers with a thick Mexican accent, "I see you have come back to la Dairy Queen. How... unfortunate."

"Well, well. If it isn't you, Diablo. How'd you get out of jail so soon?"

Travis screws up his face. "You two know each other?"

The leader never takes his eyes off of M. "Manwell ere is a lawyer." He jerks his head toward one of the smaller gang members, who smiles and looks down, screwing his foot into the floor. "Ee 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 and unconcerned.

"Of course ju know, El Bugo, we are gonna have to keel you," the Diablo says, cracking his knuckles.

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

"You know eet. But I ain't jus gonna keel you, El Bugo. I'm gonna keel you special-like. And the Diablo reaches into his pocket and slowly withdraws a large cockroach, holding it up to the bug man's nose as the mariachi band crescendos.

The waitress sees this and runs for the back door.

Staring at the roach, its little legs squirming between the Diablo's thick, dirty thumb and forefinger, the Bug Man's eyes widen. The thin, hairy roach legs wave aimlessly and reach out for his face, as the exterminator's good eye quivers, shaking with a paralyzing mixture of fear and anger. The ice cream cone drops from the bug mans 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. Cone"



One of the gang members looks to the Diablo nervously, and then to the ice cream on the floor, and then to the bug man, still staring down. He begins to back away, nervous perspiration breaking out on his forehead and upper lip. Manwell follows.

The bug man's right hand comes up to hover 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. The mariachi bands 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 tears the canister from his belt up to the Diablo's face, spray releasing, hitting the Diablo eyes in a wash. Too quickly though, the roach is flung, and it soars through the air in a treacherous arc, sticky legs searching in all directions, until it collides with the bug man's round nose. The duelists fall back, the bug man stumbling, flailing, grabbing for some handhold to steady himself, knocking into Travis, spilling the coffee and crashing into the counter. He slides to the floor. The puddle of coffee spreads out across the dirty tile, soaking into the Mack's lavender, polyester slacks.

Travis, stunned, looks to see the Diablo's body sprawled across one of the brightly painted red and yellow tables. The other gang members run away and Travis, looks to the bug man. Squatting down next to his now still, round frame, Travis leans in. Coughing the bug man speaks only in a whisper, "We sure had good times, didn't we?"

"Now you hang in there. We're not through yet."

"No, Chief." M coughs. "A man don't recover from that."

"Damn it. You hang in there—you hear me?"

Removing the roach from his glasses, the bug man contemplates it for a moment before closing his eyes. The puddle of coffee spreads out, thinning. "They won't have roaches in heaven, will they, Chief?" He lets the squiggling creature drop to the floor.

"No. No they won't, amigo." Removing the lavender hat, Travis pushes back the wet sweaty combover. "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. He grabs Travis's shirt and whispers, "I hate them still," and his body convulses one last time, and then one more last time, before it is finally still.

A lone guitar melody drifts through the tinny intercom speakers, as Travis stands and look around. He walks behind the counter and makes himself an ice cream cone. Stopping by the exit, he surveys the damage. Then he walks out the door, lavender cap in hand, into the brilliant sunlight. It warms his skin comfortingly as he steps out of the air conditioned restaurant. Before him, the road leads off to the horizon, and he begins to walk to the truck, thinking to himself, *I never wanted to be an exterminator.*