

Copper, the Taste of Blood
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It began with lice.

The kids all came off the bus scratching their heads, but not in an intellectual way. The lice were feeding on the children, sucking blood from their scalps while laying 8-10 eggs per day. They can't jump or fly, that's a common misconception. But they can hide. It's like they're sentient, they sense watching eyes and they disappear. Their six legs end in sharp hooks that were perfectly designed to clutch hair, to latch onto their human host and never let go. Is that love?

The parents at Weaver Elementary spent hours that night combing through their children's hair, trying various home remedies and calling each other to compare results. Lisa Jennings's mom coated Lisa's hair with mayonnaise, she had read that it would suffocate the lice. It didn't work, or maybe she applied it incorrectly, because a few hours later Lisa, now looking distinctly oily and smelling vaguely of lunch meat, was still scratching vigorously. Kevin and Kelly Rank, as unnerving a pair of twins as ever existed, shaved each other's heads using their dad's razor as soon as they got home from school. They did a poor job of it, because they are children (worse, they are twins), and their identical, translucent scalps were marked with haphazard patches of stubbly black hair and dried, crumbling blood. Their parents found them sitting on the bathroom floor, hands on each other's heads, rubbing over their freshly-excavated lumps and moles. Their abandoned black hair contrasted starkly with the bathroom's pink tile, and their mom sighed looking at it, knowing that she would be the one to clean it up. Billy Walker's dad doused Billy's head in gasoline to poison the lice, which anyone would have told him not to do, if he had bothered to ask, and now Billy is blind in his left eye. The doctor reassured them that it was likely temporary. The other parents silently agreed that this it would serve Billy's father right, if Billy stayed blind.

Millie Rose spent all night scrutinizing her daughter, Mary Katherine's, honey-colored hair, getting angrier with every stroke of the lice comb. Mary Katherine would never have started a lice infestation, she was such a good girl, she takes daily bubble baths, she wears her hair in ribbons, for christsake. It was that nasty Walker boy, Billy, always getting into trouble, no mother to bathe him or wash his clothes, he must have been the origin of this fiasco. Millie Rose resolved to start a campaign to get him kicked out of school, a few phone calls to the right people and he would be gone. She grinned, baring her teeth more determinedly as she yanked the comb through a particularly nasty set of tangles. Mary Katherine whimpered, and Millie Rose poked her again with the sharp end of the lice comb, demanding silence. She'd always thought Mary Katherine's hair was her best feature. She was only nine years old, but her hair was almost two

feet long. Millie Rose could make a lot of money selling her daughter's hair to a wig-maker. Not that she ever would, obviously.

Billy was not kicked out of Weaver Elementary, because, as his teacher, Miss Emily, pointed out to an irate gaggle of extremely tan and extremely blonde mothers, there was no way to prove that Billy brought lice to the town. This, of course, was a "serious miscarriage of justice," and it was resolved that the children in the school would simply shun Billy. A bit old-fashioned, but effective. Billy was flattered that Miss Emily had defended him. After all, he did have a crush on her, in a rather disappointingly cliché sort of way. It was not quite his fault, as she was young and very pretty, and she wore cheap perfume and sat very close to the children. If Billy or another student performed well, she would praise them directly, touching their arm and looking into their eyes. This was quite an effective teaching method, and all of the students, male and female, loved her. They were all quite caught in her web, you see. But they were better at math there.

A few weeks into Billy's shunning, when he was feeling particularly sorry for himself, he looked up and caught the eye of Miss Emily. Before he could take a breath, she smiled so sweetly, with such genuine joy that crinkled her eyes, that Billy felt his heart break. How could he repay such kindness? He didn't deserve her, of this he was sure. But kids in movies were always bringing their teachers apples, so Billy might as well start there. Maybe, when he was older, when he had some money from working in the mines, he could buy her some fancy clothes, maybe a summer scarf, only rich people wore scarves in the summer. So, he picked a red apple from the hanging tree, and he rubbed it with his shirt, even though he didn't see how that would make it shinier. Miss Emily was pleased. He knew he had done the right thing as soon as he earned another world-ending smile. She brought it to her sweet mouth and took one, large bite. *Crunch*. The whole class looked on jealously, wishing they had thought of this. Now Miss Emily would like Billy better than them. *And* he had given them lice! But Billy's victory was short-lived, because Miss Emily gave a girlish shriek and spat out the apple chunk. The class leaned forward in their desks and then chaos erupted. On the apple squirmed one long worm. It was pink and blind, like Billy's left eye. It was moving horrifically slowly, like the monsters in old movies, before they had CGI. Billy died of embarrassment. Well, he wanted to. The entire class ran outside screaming, and he sat in silence at his desk while Miss Emily found a broom and took care of the worm, the problem he had caused, him. But Billy noticed that Miss Emily was much less pretty when she wasn't smiling. And her lipstick had been smeared on the apple. She would fix the lipstick during recess, but Billy didn't forget.

After a few weeks, despite the town's inventive efforts, it became clear that they would not succeed in eradicating the lice. Parents would proclaim their children lice-free and send them back to school, where they caught it again. The parents themselves became carriers, and they

spread it to their neighbors and children and friends and enemies alike. These were super lice, zombie lice, they could not be killed. Itchy was the new normal in this small Arizona mining town. It began with lice.

Billy was relieved when school finally let out for the summer. It would be much better when he could be out in the desert, where there would be all sorts of bugs and animals to keep him company. Of course, Billy was never alone, because of the now-significant lice colony living on his head, but he didn't think of it that way.

On the first day of summer, Billy got dressed quickly, he put his dirty clothes on backwards, Mary Katherine's mother would have a field day if she saw him. But she didn't, because he was up before the sun, and she demands beauty rest on Saturday mornings (this beauty rest often extends until Saturday night and involves a significant number of vitamin supplements and prescription pills). Billy ate his strawberry Poptart cold, there was no time to toast it. He wanted to be gone before his dad woke up and needed Billy's help burning the trash or checking the tire pressure or fixing the sprinklers. Billy hopped on his bike, savoring the artificial strawberry flavor. He strained his compact child muscles, biking quickly past the desert-toned houses on his street. The houses were originally, supposedly, white. They were now varying shades of red, the same red that coated the surrounding mountains. Mrs. Elliot's house, which Billy had recently been paid to hose down (and don't worry about wasting water dear, I just want the house to be white again), was the cleanest of the group. But already there was a red tinge to its walls. In the beginning, there was dust. And now, there is lice. And long, slow-moving worm. Note that these are the building blocks of an apocalypse.

Weaver was founded by copper miners in 1885, and now their descendants ran the town. It was quite simple, really. The town had never really taken off, they weren't near any important railroads, the mine was only big enough to support their population of a few thousand. So, the town followed the basic format, with a church and a balding pastor and a quaint post office and a school (two!) and a hanging tree and a greasy diner where the coffee is always burned and where the waitress has ginormous breasts. And, off to the left about half a mile is the mine. Ideally, it would have been a little farther away, given the chemical runoff whenever it rains, but it's a bit late for that now. It's true that the flooding is more frequent now than ever. But, the mayor rationalized, no one seemed to have gotten cancer who didn't deserve it (because they smoked or had tattoos or whatever). Without the mine, Weaver would never be able to support the ample-breasted waitress or the balding pastor. They'd have to close the quaint post office, and the lady who works there always gives away homemade cookies, that wouldn't be allowed in other places. Without the town, the hanging tree would just be a tree, and children wouldn't have nightmares about it and adults wouldn't walk past it and be thankful that Weaver is so civilized, now. So, the mine is necessary.

Billy biked past that quaint post office and the diner and the hanging tree. He biked past the church, and he noted the pastor admiring his own reflection in the stained-glass windows. Billy smirked—the pastor was ugly, which is probably why he had time to be a pastor. Well, that’s what Billy’s dad said anyway. But maybe the pastor thought he didn’t look so bad. Maybe his features were distorted by the colorful glass or by his religion into something beautiful. Maybe.

It didn’t take long before Billy had left the town behind. He wove expertly in and out of cactuses, leaning closer with every turn, daring the plants to cut him. The gaps between the cactus plants grew larger and larger as Billy neared the mine and its poisoned soil. He pedaled more leisurely, going out of his way to run over a spare beetle or two. When he reached the mine, he sat on his favorite rock to watch the sunrise.

The constant layer of smoke in the air made Weaver’s sunrises and sunsets beautiful. There were a few aspiring artists in town, they had come to paint the sky. They foreground their paintings with bleached cow skulls and abandoned buildings and think themselves poetic. They tell people that they will put Weaver on the map, but most people don’t like to hear that they aren’t on the map, or they don’t care about the map, so those conversations never go well. Today’s sunrise is beautiful; the smog is in rare form. It was incredibly dramatic, and the entire sky turned blood red before it softened into a more manageable pink.

Having observed the sunrise, Billy decided to go hunting. His dad had never taken him, but Billy had been watching Bear Grylls on *Man Vs. Wild*, and so Billy feels good about his odds of survival. He had no qualms about drinking his own piss, and he felt like he should be a survivalist shoe-in. He found a stick which he sharpened against a rock. Already he felt better than he had in months. He was shaping the earth, just like his dad did in the mine. His spear crafted, Billy determined to lie in wait behind a particularly plump cactus. It seemed as though hours had passed by the time a bunny finally meandered past. Billy almost forgotten what he was waiting for, and he almost forgot to spear the bunny. But he didn’t. Forget. He threw the spear lustily; the spear was an extension of his arm. The wood slipped wetly through the bunny and out the other side.

Billy heard someone yelling and then realized it was him. He stopped. But the memory of his own yell echoed in his ears. He wished it would stop. It was unsettling, his ghostly shriek. And he needed to focus. What was he going to do with a dead bunny? It’s not as though he could take it home, like some dog hoping for praise. Already the bunny’s blood was pooling, that would be so messy to carry, and he didn’t have a bag or anything, he’d have to hold it while biking. The body looked increasingly disgusting to Billy, all twisted and tiny. One of its ears twitched, and it occurred to Billy that the bunny might still be alive, its body held together by same tool that

ripped it apart. He scratched his head (from the lice), and he determined to walk away without getting any closer. He had done what he had come to do. Now he knew he could survive in the wild, if he needed to, if it came to that. He had won the battle against nature, but that didn't mean he needed to eat the bunny or anything. Billy kicked some dirt over the speared bunny and biked away, faster than before, faster than ever.

It was probably because he was going so quickly that he kept getting hit by flying bugs. Did that make sense? No, Billy, it doesn't. One beetle after another is pelting Billy, their sharp shells drawing blood wherever they make contact. Billy remembers learning about their exoskeletons, he knows that Egypt has dung beetles, but he can't think why he would be encountering a swarm of vengeful beetles in the middle of the Arizona desert. Bear Grylls did not prepare him for this. Billy closed his mouth tightly, squinted his eyes, and biked harder than ever before. But it was no use, he was soon covered in hundreds of tiny lacerations. His one good eye was now covered in blood, and so he did not see the cactus that impaled him. The autopsy later revealed that he wasn't killed immediately. That he tried and failed to extract himself from the cactus. It was a horribly inhumane way to die, everyone agreed.

The funeral was long. Billy's father did not cry, and no one expected him to. Mary Katherine did, but that was more because she realized that she might die alone, too. The pastor was quite good at inspiring fear of death itself, but he had never quite mastered the ability to inspire fear of the life after death. But he hoped that would come with time. He just needed more practice.

Millie Rose would never admit it, but she was feeling guilty following Billy's death. Not guilty of the death of course, she could hardly be blamed for the boy's inability to steer his bicycle. But it was unfortunate that things had shaken out like they did, the lice really could have come from anyone. One of Mary Katherine's friends, Olivia Kramer, was looking more suspicious every day. It was this guilt, this creeping unpleasantness, that led Millie Rose to offer to host the reception following Billy's funeral. Truthfully, she also wanted to squash the nasty rumors that she had somehow been involved, that this was her latest scheme to protect Mary Katherine's honey-colored hair. Billy's father, not normally a hospitable character, was in no shape to be hosting. He had reeked of alcohol since Billy's death, which Millie Rose was electing to temporarily, generously overlook.

For Billy's funeral party, Millie Rose spared no expense. There were 14 varieties of olives on the olive platter, she made her famous crab Rangoons, she added macadamia nuts to the mixed nut bowl, there were six different flavors of hummus, the cake had seven layers, it was a goddamn miracle. A half-blind, motherless nine-year-old boy doesn't die every day, after all. Everyone at the party seemed to be enjoying themselves. The adults were mingling politely while the children ran around with olives on their fingertips, pretending to attack one another with their bulbous

appendages. Millie Rose stood looking over her pristine kitchen, admiring the throngs admiring her food, when she heard something that made her freeze. Her skin crawled with invisible lice and lies.

“I heard that she only hosts so many funeral parties because she wants attention from Pastor Mike. She’s been single for a few years now, and he’s one of the last respectable bachelors in town.”

“Really? I can’t imagine anyone liking the pastor. He has never once made it beyond my boobs to look into my eyes. But I suppose she doesn’t have many options. Not after she basically killed her husband.”

“Tracy, you can’t just go around accusing people of killing their husbands. Especially people like Millie Rose, she runs this town.”

“All I’m saying is that the doctors said he was paralyzed, but stable. The next thing we know, he’s dead and she’s using his mine money to buy a fancy house, says she can’t stand to live in their old one, because of all the memories. I’m just saying that it’s suspicious, is all.”

“Maybe. I do wish he hadn’t of died, he was such a sweet man. He’d be so upset to see what Mary Katherine has become. You know she was caught cheating in school? She’s nine-years-old! What is there to cheat on? She doesn’t know two plus two?”

“Allison says Mary Katherine brags that her mom does all of her homework for her while she shares it with her little posse. At least that explains why she has so many friends.”

“Though I’m honestly surprised that Millie Rose can do her daughter’s homework. Intelligence doesn’t seem to run in the family, does it.”

“Evil! But I love you.”

“You love me for my gossip.”

“This is true.”

Here the two women, whose voices had floated through a vent, laughed and clinked their drinks. Millie Rose thought she had never heard such self-satisfied cackling, she could imagine them stuffing their smug faces with her crab Rangoons, the ones she had spent hours on. For Billy! She told herself that was what really riled her about their conversation, the fact that they weren’t

thinking about Billy, that poor, motherless boy. Stabbed to death by a cactus. Eaten alive by beetles. In 2019! It was all positively medieval. And here these women were, accusing her of killing her husband and of being a bad mother. They were the bad mothers. They were bad people! She determined to confront them. This level of insubordination could not be abided. Not in her home.

Millie Rose turned the corner into the dining room, where the two overweight women sat eating crab Rangoons, just as Millie Rose had predicted. They both froze mid-bite, so they looked absolutely ridiculous, with their terrified, black eyes and slack jaws. They knew they were caught, and they didn't dare chew the food already in their mouths. Good. Millie Rose hoped they choked on it, maybe that would prevent them spreading nasty lies. She mentally ran through the list of facts she had memorized about Billy. She wanted to lecture the women on the reason for their gathering, but she needed to remember first. But before she could open her mouth, she saw a spider. No, this creature was like a spider in the same way a crocodile is like a lizard. The spider was massive. It was unfathomably large. Spiders of that proportion might exist in Africa or on the moon, but there was no way they could exist in Millie Rose's climate-controlled home.

Millie Rose was terrified, like anyone is when faced with their own mortality. But she was also a mother. She did not live for herself. She did everything for her daughter, anything and everything. She grabbed a nearby broom, the problematic women temporarily forgotten. She raised her chosen weapon and brought it down, hard, on the pulsing spider. And then a thousand spiders were running everywhere, they must have been inside the mother spider, awaiting their release. They were running up the walls and up the women's legs and up Millie Rose's neck and into her mouth, her ears, her eyes. Their tiny legs tortured her body as they plugged every pore. She couldn't breathe, she was choking, this all seemed so real, but how could it be real?

All three of the women died, of course. The people of Weaver were terrified. *That was four insect-related deaths in two and a half days.* People kept repeating this to each other, like quantifying the problem would help solve it, like this was some math problem and not an insect apocalypse. The rumors spread. *Maybe Billy's ghost killed Millie Rose in revenge for her cruelty? And anyone who tried to kick him out of school will be next? But then why did the bugs kill Billy? Why can't these be flukes? Don't bugs migrate or swarm every few years, when the wind is exactly right? But have you ever heard of spiders eating people alive? I saw the bodies. No skin left. Millie Rose had breast implants. Agatha, one of the other women, had a steel knee. You ever heard of anything like that before?*

The pastor was the only person to offer a solution. Death was really his specialty. He had always lived for funerals. And mysterious insect-related deaths were fantastic for inspiring church attendance. He warned his rapt audience that Billy, Millie Rose, Agatha, and Kristen (God rest

their tortured souls) were killed because they turned from God. If the community wanted to avoid a plague of biblical proportions, they needed to confess their sins. Reveal your secrets, and you can avoid being eaten alive by spiders. Such are the bargains of men. The smoke from the mine wasn't blowing away in the wind anymore. The sunset that night was more ominous than ever.

Initially, only a few people confessed their sins. Eddie hobbled to the front of church to confess that he was cheating on his wife with Susan. No one had the heart to tell him that his wife was long dead, and so was Susan. Meredith lied about running over Jack's dog with her truck. Henry had never recycled in his life.

But the next morning, the mayor and his entire family were found dead on the floor of their mansion. They did not appear to have any visible wounds. Then a neighbor noticed a line of ants exiting the little boy's ears. It's funny how ants really do march. They stepped in time together, leaving a winding trail of microscopic red dots on the white marble floor. Those dots, of course, were blood stains from the boy's brain. Similar red trails curlicued away from the rest of the family's heads. The blood trails were lost in the red dust outside. So, no one could follow the ants home. Not that anyone wanted to.

After that, the people of Weaver were more willing to out themselves. And to out each other. Edna's neighbor was having an affair, she was sure of it. Sam was only pretending to be a vegetarian. Megan hated her husband. That's not really a sin, ma'am. Yes, well I dream about killing him. Okay. Jorge stole from the school board. Logan has had sex with a horse. No one wanted to know that one. And he enjoyed it. Please stop. Chris doesn't love his children. Louise hates her mother-in-law. We all hate our mothers-in-law.

The confessions and accusations were flying across the church aisles, people were screaming, babies were crying, everyone was itching, itching. And, unnoticed, the sky was darkening. The smoke was congealing, pulsing, molting. And out of it were pouring millions of bugs. The smoke vomited insects of all kinds into the sky, onto the ground, into the poisoned lakes and rivers. They flew and crawled and swam towards the church.

The people of Weaver probably screamed when they realized that the sky was black with insects, not smoke. They probably attempted to bar the doors. They probably revealed ever-blacker secrets as the insects closed in.

But it is impossible to tell exactly what happened. The insects were too loud, the humming and slithering and scuttling quite drowned out all human noises. And, this time, when the insects were done, there was no evidence to piece together. The termites and maggots and centipedes

had made sure of that. There was no body mangled in cactus spines. No breast implant or steel knee. No trail of red dots. And no people to do the piecing. Weaver was simply gone. If it were on a map, we could say it had been wiped off. The artists had failed to make Weaver famous.

Though, to be fair, the sunrises are less beautiful now.