

Screams From The Grass Jungle

by

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It's Sunday. I hear screaming.

I beat my head against the walls of my cell to try to get the noises out of my head. It doesn't work, but it knocks me unconscious for a few minutes, and that's better than hearing.

My name is Annie. I've been in this prison for about three months now. I believe I have gone insane. The jurors, on the other hand, did not believe I was crazy. They sent me here.

My story began about four months ago. I'll tell you, but I don't think you'll believe me. More likely, you'll figure I'm lying. I don't care; not anymore.

I used to be an exterminator. It's not an easy job; not for a woman. But it's not the work that makes it difficult; it's the assholes you have to work with. Women have been invading the work-force, and you hear a lot about women firemen and women police and women soldiers. I didn't want to be any of those things. I wanted to kill bugs. Some kind of phobia I've always had, I guess. I went to school (yes, they have a bug-killing school), got trained up, and landed this job. A team of 32 men and one woman; me. Of course I had to put up with all the wise-cracks, and I've heard countless references to the word "bug" that didn't mean insects. But I put up with it.

I put up with it because I love killing insects. Cock-roaches, termites, ants, it don't matter. When I was a kid, I used to steal lighters from my parents, and then go to the park. I'd set caterpillars on fire. If I got a firecracker, I'd stick it in an anthill and set it off.

Anyways, you get the idea. Now, let me say, I have always been in the best of health; I've never had to take off a day of work because of "women's problems". Never even had a cold, as far as I can remember.

Then, a few weeks ago, I started to have a problem with my hearing. Whenever I was on the job, I'd hear a small buzz in my ear. 'Course, naturally, I went to a doctor right away. My mother always told me not to waste time wondering about such things. Take care of your problems 'fore they take care of you.

Well, I went to the doctor and he examined me, but he couldn't find nothing wrong. Charged me thirty bucks, but he didn't see no problems. Friggin' doctors are all crooks, anyway.

I went right home, and got myself some supper; ordered a pizza. The guy was twenty seconds late, and tried talkin' me out of gettin' three dollars off the price, but I wouldn't have none of it. The guy was late, and as I see it, it was his own fault; I don't care if they do take the three dollars out of their salary.

I ate about half of the pizza and meant to put the rest in the fridge to have for my lunch the next day. I must've forgot to put the pizza in the fridge, 'cause I walked in the kitchen to get a drink and there was the box sittin' on the counter. I went to put it in the fridge and then decided, what the heck? I'd have another slice.

Pizza's better after it's had a chance to cool off. I opened the box and there it was. A frigging roach! I keep a real clean house, and I ain't never seen a roach in my place before; probably came from the damned Spics next door.

Well, you should've seen that mother try to run away; he scattered out of the box and jumped on the floor. He tried to get under the counter; would've made it too, 'cept I was carrying a TV Guide that I had planned to read in the bathroom. I got down on all fours real quick-like and splattered him with Roseanne's face.

And then something weird happened. A pain shot through my head. It was as if someone had shot me with a gun. And I heard a muffled screaming; real loud. I think the screaming was worse than the pain.

At first I thought the screaming was coming from next door, through the wall; there's a colored family living on the other side of me, and you know how nigg-- I mean black folks argue with each other.

Then I lifted the TV Guide. It's always been a habit for me; to look at the bug and make sure it's dead. As I lifted the magazine, the screaming got louder; much louder.

See, roaches are near impossible to kill. You could cut off a roach's head, and it'll still live for days until it finally dies of starvation, God's truth! And when you do manage to get 'em, they take a long time to die; finally, the legs gave one final twitch, and the screaming stopped. So did the pain. I don't understand it. I've never heard a bug scream. It almost made me feel like I killed a real person.

I ran to the bathroom, forgetting my magazine, and threw up extra cheese and pepperoni.

Afterwards, laying in bed, I thought about what had happened. I've killed probably millions of bugs, and lately, I've been working double shifts, 'cause I was saving up to buy one of them DVD players; you know, you can't find movies on VHS, anymore. The movie companies do that so they can keep selling you the same movie over and over again. Fuckers.

The next day, I picked up my gear and rode off to some job. Apparently, some guy was having a problem with ants. Don't laugh, but I was kind of glad it wasn't a roach problem.

Once I got to the house, the first thing I did was to work on the outside. I use a boric acid type of powder for exterminating on the outside. What happens is, I pour this powder around the outside of the house, and on any ant-holes that I find. The ants find this stuff mighty tasty. Ants tend to take

whatever food they find, and they bring it back to their homes to feed the babies, and the queen. This stuff winds up not only killing the ones who eat it, but exterminates any future insects that might be left over. It takes a few days, but it works real good.

Once that was completed, I went back to my truck and got some spray. This I use for the house. It'll only kill the bugs it makes contact with, but it works in about ten minutes, and anything this don't get, the powder will.

I went in the house and sprayed. Once I finished, I lit up a cigarette. I always smoke after killin'. It's the only time I do. I guess it's kind of like how some people smoke after sex. And then it hit me.

I had just finished putting out my cigarette, and had grabbed my spray can. I was just about to walk out the door, when this huge wave of screaming slammed into me. I dropped the can and fell to my knees, holding my hands against my ears. I couldn't muffle out the sound. It was like hearing a nation die. Millions of voices screaming. I could even differentiate between certain voices; some were deeper, some were higher. The high voices were the worst.

They sounded like children.

Slowly, I crawled out of the house, and got to my truck. The noises were slowly dying out; there were fewer and fewer voices. Finally, it stopped. I sat there, in my truck, and breathed heavily. I looked at my hands and noticed there was blood on them; not a lot, just a bit. I looked in my rear-view mirror, and saw a smear of blood that had trickled from my left ear.

'Course, I had to go back to the doctor. He looked in my ear, and says he didn't find nothing, and then he looks at me real funny. He gave me a business card of another doctor; one of them doctors of the minds. Well, I told him that I didn't need a doctor to check my head; I'm just fine, thank you. See, that's the way these doctors operate. If they don't know what's wrong with you, they immediately ship you off to a shrink. And I know that doctor's getting a kick-

back for sendin' me to him. That's where they make the real money; in referrals.

It continued for about a week. I'd go to a job, and start hearin' these bugs scream. I couldn't stand it no-more; I quit. I had to stay out of that situation. Fortunately, I had a little money saved up until I could find something else.

Only things were getting worse for me. One early afternoon, I went out to get the mail. I was walkin' across the lawn when I heard the screaming start. It seemed to get louder each time it happened. I fell to my knees and looked for the bug. See, I was sure that I had accidentally stepped on something. I wanted to find it and do whatever it took to make it die immediately so that the screaming would stop.

I tore at the grass trying to find it. Each time I pulled grass blades, the screaming would rise. And then I knew. There was no bug. The grass was screaming.

I pulled myself onto the pavement of my driveway. The screaming finally stopped. I looked at the lawn. I stood up and looked all around me. There were lawns, and bushes, and trees. See, I never thought about it, but all those living things, like grass, well, they feel pain too; when we pull them, snip them, walk on them. Forgetting about the mail, I went back into the house.

I stayed in the house for two weeks, before they came to get me.

Believe it or not, becoming a shut-in isn't that difficult. I had running water, electricity, and there was a supermarket nearby that delivered. You could order your groceries over the phone. That's what I did. I ordered a lot of beer and wine, and tried to keep myself pretty much as drunk as possible. When I was drunk, I didn't think about it. Because I was real scared. I was being careful not to kill anything, but what do I know? Can a fly have a heart attack? Will I hear it scream? What if one bug kills another? How long will it take to die? I don't know.

I had ordered another case of Old Milwaukee and some stuff for the next few days, and had been slicing up some chicken when the door rang. I opened the door and must've scared the hell out of the delivery-boy. I hadn't showered much, and I'd been forgetting to change my clothes. Not to mention the knife that I had carried from the kitchen.

His eyes opened wide, and I tried to smile to show him I was safe enough, when I heard the screaming. Quickly I looked around, trying to find the source. It was coming from inside of the paper bag the delivery-boy was holding. Before I knew what I was doing, I started stabbing the bag. I didn't mean to kill him. He dropped the bag, and I realized I had plunged the knife about six inches deep in his chest. He fell over. They told me later that I could have saved him if I had called the ambulance right away. I tried to explain to them that I couldn't. I wanted to, but I couldn't. I had to stop the screaming first.

I looked at the torn bag on the ground with the spilled groceries laying all around it. I saw tomatoes, and cucumbers; fruit all over the floor. I started trying to crush them, smash them; it only made it worse. I couldn't stop them. What choice did I have? I grabbed a pen that was laying on the ground and plunged it into my right ear first, and then my left. The doctor says I exploded my eardrums. I could see him yelling at me, but I couldn't hear a thing, and didn't that make me smile!

At the trial, my lawyer wanted to plead insanity. I wasn't going to do that; I'm just as sane as anyone else. I know I killed that man and I did it with a sound mind. I wasn't trying to hurt him, I wanted to kill the vegetables. Well, he plead it anyway, but the jury wouldn't hear of it. They sentenced me to 24 years.

Only I still have a problem. I think maybe that doctor was right. The sounds are inside my head. I'm deaf but I can still hear the screaming. I still have to be careful about where I walk and what I step on. I cannot hear any noises but the screaming.

Today is Mothers' Day. My own kids didn't get me nothing; didn't even come to see me. I think they're ashamed of me. Lots of the other women got to see their kids.

A lot of them got gifts. Most got plants and flowers. Roses that have been cut at the stem. Plants that have been uprooted. Freshly picked daisies. It's all too much. I think I may have to kill myself.

My name is Annie.

It's Sunday.

I hear screaming.