



# Insects

It all started with that dream.

'Wake up. Lena, wake up.'

His voice, the only familiar thing in the dark, reached to me and I grabbed and held and let it lead me.

His arms around me, strong, safe, warm. We stayed like that until my body softened and the knocking of my heart, like pounding, at a door of a house at night, where you thought you would be safe, returned to its normal course. My shirt, pasted on my back, got colder as drops of sweat rolled down my neck.

I heard my voice trembling and low.

'John, I'm scared.'

'It's alright, you're safe now. It was just a dream.'

'It didn't feel like a dream, it felt real.'

He nodded and said dreams always feel real. Even in the poor light of the room I could see his eyes worried, loving. I must have looked as terrible as I felt.

'We shouldn't watch those movies before going to bed', he said walking his fingers through my hair. 'I was afraid this would happen.'

'I don't think it was the movie, it wasn't like the dreams I usually have.'

'What do you mean?'

'You know how you joke about being from another planet, how you sometimes feel you don't belong?'

'Yes', he said softly.

'It was something like that. I was in a place I didn't belong, but everything told me that it's where I needed to be. And I wasn't myself. I mean, it was me, but it didn't feel like me. I, I felt like an alien, like an outsider trapped on a different planet.'

'You mean green, oval shaped head, noseless and big dark eyes?'

'It wasn't physical', I said ignoring his joke. 'I was in my own body, but I couldn't control anything. It felt like I was one of those ventriloquist puppets and someone was directing my every move. Even my thoughts. I was terrified. I don't remember much of what happened, the images are starting to fade away now, but the feeling is still here.'

'Yeah, I hate that about dreams, it's so frustrating. But Lena, it was just a dream. You're here with me and you are as gorgeous as you always were', he said playfully and kissed me.

Hours later I was still awake. I didn't want to close my eyes. I was afraid if I fell asleep, I would go back to that place. It was too much. I tried to think about the next day, about work, and all the things I wanted to do.

Anything that would keep my mind busy and feed it neutral, safe images.

In the morning I heard John get out of the bed and go to the bathroom. Afterwards, the sound of water falling down on his body, changing rhythm along with his movements.

I remained there listening, unable and unwilling to move. I wasn't ready to face the world, my head was still foggy and I felt exhausted after the other night. I hated that feeling. I knew from experience I won't get rid of it too soon. It will follow me throughout the day haunting, lurking from the shadows of my mind.

He was now in the kitchen. The smell of fresh toast and a faded voice from a podcast running on his phone reached to me, as an invisible path to the outside world.

*Get out, get out. No, not yet, I'm not ready yet.*

I moved to his side of the bed and felt his perfume on the pillow. I pressed my face against it and breathed deeply. It felt familiar, comforting. The next time I opened my eyes he was sitting on the bedside, leaning down over me.

'I'll see you tonight', he said and placed a kiss on my forehead.

Don't go, don't leave me alone, I wanted to say. Instead I mumbled something and hid more underneath the blankets.

Finally, in the bathroom, I looked myself in the mirror.

It was fine. Everything was fine. I was as normal as any human could be. I didn't feel fine though. My mouth was dry, my jaws were clenched and my stomach hurt. I stretched my back, washed my face with cold water, then stepped into the shower. Showers always helped.

'What do you want for dinner?' John asked one day.

'Locusts', I said without even blinking.

*Why did I say that?*

He laughed.

'I'm afraid we're out of stock my dear lady. Should I interest you in some burgers instead?'

It took me a few seconds to get back to myself. I laughed and hid behind his joke.

'Make it a veggie one', I finally said.

But I couldn't help the feeling that something had changed, something was different. Something was different with me.

After a while, my body signaled it too, through unfamiliar and strange noises, like some kind of animal was living inside me, releasing occasional groans and complaints.

Fortunately, this mostly happened when I was alone and if he was around, I'd hide my belly under the blankets or blame everything on my digestion and he would smile and giggle and make a funny joke about his cooking skills. He was perfect.

Other than that things were fine. I made myself believe it for a while. I was fine. I was normal. Many people went through this. I just needed to be more careful with my nutrition. Maybe drink less of that soda I liked so much. That must be it. I decided to get rid of it. Too many bubbles are bad for you, not to mention all that sugar.

Things were fine. Everything was fine.

One day in the kitchen I was preparing a shake before my morning run. That always gave me enough energy to keep me going for an hour or so. I cut a banana into round pieces, put it over some frozen spinach, added water and some lemon juice, then mixed everything up in the blender. As the mixture turned into a uniform green liquid, my eyes wandered across the room. On the left side wall, a spider climbed its way up to the corner of the ceiling. Small, rapid moves, stopping from time to time as if paying attention to its environment. Maybe it knew, maybe they have a sense about things like these.

I watched it for a while. It didn't look scary or repulsive as it used to, rather tempting and mouth-watering. Before he got out of reach, I grabbed it in my hand and felt the little legs tickling up and down inside my closed palm, then, as if split in two, I witnessed myself take it close to my lips, put it in my mouth and swallow. It tasted delicious and I yearned for more.

*What's happening to me?*

Later that evening the noises started again. I was craving. I wanted flies and spiders and bugs. I wanted insects. Despite the attractive colors on my plate, I couldn't touch much of dinner that night. Nothing there looked as appetizing as it used to, but I felt guilty and forced myself to eat it. He enjoyed making things like that for me.

'Surprise', he said. 'I made your favorite.'

It wasn't the case anymore. To my horror, my favorite would now have been a bowl full of swarming brown and dark creatures, with small eyes and a handful of legs.

'Looks delicious', I said and flashed the smile that never went wrong.

After dinner I helped him wash the dishes, then closed myself in the bathroom. I turned the water on and let it fall. My stomach was louder, more vocal, angry and demanding.

*Sometimes people try new things. I am just experimenting. Nothing unusual about that.*

In the morning I was out on the running track again. All warmed up, I watched the orange rays of light slid playfully through the branches of the trees and inhaled the smell of freshly cut grass. I felt invigorated, powerful, my senses more perceptive than usual. I directed my body towards the lake and switched from sprint to my comfortable speed.

There was no one else, I was relieved to notice. No one to see me pass through the little swarm of flies. No one to see me open my mouth and absorb them one by one, hungry, impatient, ecstatic.

It was fine. Everything was fine. I was just going through a phase. I had to be careful though, I couldn't get caught. I couldn't let others find out about this. Especially John. What would he think of me? I didn't want to lose him. No. I had to control this, whatever "this" was. This addiction, this abnormal and bizarre thing I accepted so freely.

I took a deep breath and continued running. Everything was going to be fine.

Days passed and things seemed to go back as they used to. Or so I thought. My life was unfolding to the same comforting routine for over two weeks now. And then, the craving started again.

It was late in the night when I couldn't bare it any longer. John was lying by my side, snoring softly, unaware. I got out of the bed, out of the house, straight into the barn. Under the pale light of a candle I saw John's fishing tools, neatly arranged for the next morning. I knew I should find something there. Bingo. Close to the hooks and the rods, there were bait worms swarming in a tall, transparent jar. And in a second, just like an animal on its prey, I devoured them. No, maybe not devour, but sucked them and chewed on them as if they were fruit jellies.

In the bathroom I brushed, flossed and gargled until my eyes began to wet. Back underneath the blankets, John's body was burning and moved slowly after I kissed him on the neck.

That was it, I was fine now. I was done with it. I slept like a baby that night.

'Have you seen my Willy worms?'

'What?'

I didn't startle. I was sitting calm at the table, sipping on my coffee, scrolling the news headlines on my phone.

'My Willy worms. I use them as fishing bait.'

'What about them?'

'They're gone. I had them in a jar and I can't find them.'

'Didn't you use them last time you went fishing?'

'I did, but I just bought a new batch the other day.'

'Then it must have been a fox or a raccoon. A lot of neighbours complained they began barging in. Mary lost all her chicks because of them.'

He paused a little considering the option.

'Yeah, might be. I'll need to do something about it these days. And I guess I'll just have to manage with the rest of the bait I have for the moment.'

As he drove away from the house I put my hands in the pockets of my dress and took out a small plastic bag with the rest of the Willy worms. I ate them slowly, one by one, and felt outraged at the possibility of him entering the kitchen right that second, discovering me. Then I wished he did.

I wished for him to see me eat them. I wished he would ask me if he could try one too. I wished he'd like it and do it together.

After I finished I threw the empty bag in the bin and went upstairs to wash until I made sure there was no trace of flesh between my teeth. That was it. Cured. Revolted. Never again.

And I was cured, I'd sorted myself out. The thought, the memory, the taste of it, it had me aching all day. I couldn't let it go. I tortured myself until I knew I was fixed.

It was protein I was after. I had decided that after I had done a little bit of googling when I went back to work. It made sense; it was fresh air across my face. Something about the taste, even the look of insects. That was what I craved - the meet, the protein. I had stopped eating meat for the past months and now my body was sending me signals. I'd been looking pale, I'd been falling asleep in front of the TV like old people do. That was what I craved for, meat.

During lunch break I went to a restaurant near the office and ordered stake, but spit it all out as soon as the first bite touched my tongue. I ate the salad and the chips and asked for the bill.

By the time I got home I knew my protein theory was shit. There was nothing wrong with me, except I wanted to eat insects.

But I had a life, that was the point. I had a fiancée I adored and a job that fulfilled me. Well, most of the time. I worked in a charity organization and I was pleased to do something I believed in. The money was ok, not enough to consider myself rich, far from that, but enough to bring to a starting family and to afford a two week vacation abroad, once a year.

The point was, I was normal. I was a thirty three year old woman, who lived in a nice city and enjoyed the occasional night out with her friends; went to her book club once a month and had sex with her partner often enough to qualify as regularly. We've been together since high school and I would like to have had sex with other men, but that was just a thought, never a real ambition or anything urgent or mad.

I was normal.

Next day at the office I went to the bathroom with a casserole of crickets, hidden in my bag. On the toilet seat, I ate them one by one, until there was nothing left. After I finished, I checked myself in the mirror, even though I'd been careful not to let myself get carried away. I was clean, spotless, my normal self. I went back to my desk and ate my lunch with my colleagues, a sandwich I'd made myself that morning - avocado and tomatoes. I felt good, I felt great.

I was controlling it, feeding it. I had learnt not to take from John's fishing lot, it would have been too risky. I found a pet shop near my job and discovered they had most of the things I wanted. Ironic, I never thought I would be grateful for people owning rats, and snakes and reptiles as pets.

So I was quite surprised when, at our anniversary dinner, I ate a moth, right in front of him. It happened too fast, it was too instinctual for me to be able to refrain myself. One minute it was flying above our heads, desperately hitting the lightbulb, the next it was in my fist, then my mouth and finally swallowed up with satisfaction.

And then I froze. I was terrified.

*This is it, this is where I lose him.*

I looked at him waiting. He looked at me in silence, then eventually

'It was you, wasn't it?'

'What do you mean?'

'The worms. My fishing bait. Was that you?'

I couldn't do it, I couldn't hide it.

'Yes', I admitted.

'Why did you do it? Is this a new diet thing of yours?'

He was giving me a way out, an explanation that made more sense than anything I could have made up. But I could do it. I couldn't go on like that.

'I ate them', I said. 'I like eating insects.'

He went quiet again, for quite a while, then looked at me and said

'How was it?'

'It was good, I said. It was great.'

This short story was inspired by  
weird body noises and a story by Roddy Doyle.