

A Better Mousehole

by EDGAR PANGBORN

Trouble with those blue bugs was they didn't hurt you . . . they did something far worse!

So now Irma will be at me to do something about them blue bugs. I got to do something about Irma.

Dr. West is wise too, as good as said so when him and Judge Van Anda was in today for a couple beers. Pity Dr. West is not the doctoring type doctor but just has letters and stuff. Sort of ex-plorer people say, account of his Independent Income, gone for months till the town's forgot him and then he turns up full of what the bull was done with.

I don't think the Judge knows about the blue bugs. If they bit him like they done me he'd never go to dreaming, not him up there, six feet five, (looking back at what he thinks the world used to be. Still if you was old like him, you might want big dreams more than ever, about being young.

If you could *tell* them bugs, if you could name your own dream! No way, I guess. I take the dreams I can get.

Dr. West certainly knows something. I'd no sooner drawed them beers when he starts mentioning mice. I told him, Look, I said, you do not see the Health Department climbing all over my back the way they would if I had mice. He asks me, so what is that hole in the floor below the liquor shelves? I had to make like hunting for it, and act surprised. Knothole, I says. Oh, knothole, he says, knothole the regal twin-cushioned back of my lap, how come a knothole in linoleum? So I had to say it could be mice. Judge Van Anda says Ha.

Iwent down the bar to pass the time with Lulu who doesn't get much business in the after-noon because the light is too strong. Lulu is like blonde this week. If only I could tell the bugs to put Lulu into a dream with me! The only time they done it she turned into Irma. I can't figure that.

What if Lulu got bit and had some dreams herself?

I suppose Irma thinks I married her so I can't do nothing without she comes clomping in onto it? If she's solid gold why don't she move to Fort Knox?

I had not hardly started talk-ing to Lulu when Dr. West goes to booming. Desolation, he says, do you think you know what desolation is? It's the sub-Arctic tundra, he says, and me alone in that borrowed Cessna that might've got its engine tuned three or four months earlier, and no reason to be there except my itch to see more of the poor wonderful planet before they blow it up. Lulu, what do you think? What do you say desola-tion is?

Oh, she says, maybe the Sta-dium, game over, crowd gone and you know, empty popcorn bags and match cards and spit.

You, Al? he says to me. What's desolation?

I said, oh, maybe a dark night and nobody shows you where to go. I believe Dr. West is sad in his heart in spite of that educa-tion which is over my head. It would be like him to take off in a borrowed plane for the flat side of nowhere. I like to watch him standing by Judge Van Anda who he is always telling siddown siddown and the Judge merely says Ha. I can feel sad without no Independent Income. I

am 42 and I have this ulcer.

The tundra, says Dr. West—a nothing of dun colors, rotting snow, and you wonder when the whole earth will look like that.

No! says Lulu about to cry. Don't talk thataway!

Never mind, chicken, he says, I was just bleating.

Suppose you took Irma to this here Tundra and told her to walk home. Flies, she says last night, flies all over you and you drunk as a pig. God, I pretty near shut her up for good. But she just don't know no better. She don't have too much of a life with a busted-down hack like me that couldn't even last five rounds with Willie Donohue.

Dr. West went on about bor-rowing a plane from a friend has got this lodge in the north woods, and flying over the tundra till he saw like a blue spark down there. Landed and picked up the ob-ject, size and shape of a basket-ball he said, not really blue, more like daylight split and turned a million ways. It hummed when he held it to his ear. That's when he broke off to ask me is there a basement under this part of the bar.

He knows damn well it's got no basement. He was in town when I got this addition added on. Al-ready a cellar under the main part, I didn't need another, got this part done with merely the footing and concrete under the lino, I mean if there is any exca-vation in forty miles Dr. West will be there watching. It's the people with an Independent In-come or them with not any that get the excavation watched. Guys like me that work for a living, we are up that creek with a little bity plastic spoon and no breeze. All's I said was Hell no, this here is an addition was added on, it's got no basement.

Unless somebody walled it off on you, says Judge Van Anda. You won't find a better way to dispose of a body, the Judge says, that's if you have time and materials and don't mind the labor. Well, the Judge is retired after forty years on what they call the bench, and keeps saying with his experience he ought to write detective stories. Yes sir, he says, if the walling off has been done right, proper pains taken, you can give the whole thing a very attractive finish. I guess he meant the wall. You never know, with the Judge. I must of said to him a hundred times, Look, I've said, the surprising type things that have happened to me, you ought to put them into a book if you're going to write one. He just goes hrrm hrrm and Ha.

I hated him sounding off about bodies that way, account of Lu-lu's nerves. Before Dr. West be-gun his story Lulu was talking to me about that murderer over to Lincolnville, the one that done in his whole family with a kitchen knife, and the shooting down in Jonesburg a couple weeks ago. She was real nerved up. His whole family, and with a plain kitchen knife. When the cops come for him—Jesus, he was like asleep, it said. Lulu takes the news pretty personal, it's the woman of it.

Dr. West's little blue eyes—why, damn, they're near the same color as my bugs, like sky with the sun caught in it. Maybe the bugs are something new to science that Dr. West has to keep top secret? Then this tundra story would be the edu-cated crappola he's obliged to shovel over it? His eyes are bloodshot like mine have been getting the last few weeks. I been losing weight too and it ain't my ulcer. The blood the bugs take out couldn't make no such differ-ence, and them so gentle—I float off into the dreams almost as soon as they come settle on me.

I'd give anything to have an-other dream where Irma is like when we got married, not bony and mean but soft, brown hair with all them goldy lights, voice like country cream.

When Dr. West quit talking Lulu was crying. She says she feels sometimes like everything was on top of her, usually goes to the Ladies and comes back with a rebuilt mouth and a fresh bounce to her. Lulu could put her shoes in my trunk any time. She ain't had a real happy life.

Aw, who does? For young peo-ple it's always a maybe-tomor-row, for the rest, it's where-did--everything-go? The Judge, he should be happy looking across all them years of playing God and sticking people in jail? Dr. West never married, chases moonblink over the world with his

Independent Income, but once he told me what he honestly craved was hearth and home, nice woman to warm his slippers and his bed, only a devil in him couldn't ever let him rest. And I have this ulcer.

The Bible or somebody says if you build a better mousetrap they'll like put you on teevy. All's I got is a better mousehole. What do they give you for that?

Dr. West waited till Lulu come back from the Ladies to go on with his story. He wasn't telling it for her, though, spite of her coming to sit on the stool by him and give him a feel or two for friendship's sake. Not for the Judge neither. It was for me and that hole in the floor. I could of told him they never come out till I close the bar and dim the lights.

He said he smuggled the blue ball home, not a word to anyone. As a story it wasn't nothing, which is one reason I can't be-lieve he was making it up. He kept calling the thing a sphere. I always thought a sphere was some type musical instrument.

When he says home he means the ram-and-shackle man-sion at the edge of town with back land running up Ragged Rock Hill and Johnny Blood rat-ting around in the mansion being caretaker with one eye that used to be an actor and still lets go with some Shakespeare if any-thing startles him. He said he sent Johnny away for two months vacation to this sister in Maine who has been trying to make Johnny come to Jesus anyhow thirty-forty years, only when Johnny hears that special tone of voice he shuts the good eye and lets go with something from this Shakespeare.

I wish I had the education to make with Shakespeare when Irma is at me about talking to Lulu or drinking up the profits which I never could do with this ulcer unless I would drop dead, she never thinks of that, or why don't I at least try to earn enough we would spend winters in Florida if I had any zing.

Sent Johnny away, he says, and kept the sphere at room tem-perature. Dr. West is always talking thataway. A room don't run a temperature, or if he means hot like some room what's so scientific if somebody mon-keys with the thermostack or leaves the God-damn door open?

Winter in Florida for Christ's sake.

The blue thing hatched one night after he'd gone to bed —except he says it was not an egg but a figure of speech. He found the two halves in the morning not chipped like a hatch-ed egg, just separated, like they'd been fitted together originally so good you couldn't find the joint. Nothing else disturbed, but a hole in the window-screen that looked like it was melted through, the ends of copper wire fused so the hole looked like a grom-met.

Judge Van Anda asked him did he keep the busted eggshell. Dr. West says, Now I did try to make it plain it was not an egg, nor do I know why I waste my experiences on you, like when I showed that comb my mermaid gave me it could of been a paper clip, all the impression it made. So it could, says the Judge kind of brisk, seeing they make such combs in Bridgeport and you can buy them in any drugstore for upwards of nineteen cents plus tax. All right, says Dr. West, so if she did happen on it in the billows off Bridgeport, God damn it, she gave it to me, didn't she? Oh, don't get red-eyed about it, says Judge Van Anda.

Im not, says Dr. West. Al's the one with bloodshot eyes, late hours likely. He was watching me real sharp. No sir, you too, Sid, says the Judge, you look in the mirror you'll see you're red-eyed like a weasel, I snow you not. Now if you could have brought home just one mermaid scale. And Dr. West says they do not have scales, no more reason to have scales than a seal or a whale or any other ocean-dwelling mammal. Ocean-dwelling mahoooha, says Judge Van Anda.

And I suppose, says Dr. West, back there ninety-six years ago in the little red schoolhouse the only biology you ever learned was out in the bushes during re-cess. Which was a friendly re-mark because the Judge could go hrrm reminding himself how he wants you to think he used to be. All the same I quick took them another round of beers.

Lulu says, You got out of that too easy, Doc. I remember she pushed her shoulders back show-ing what she has got. She could put her shoes in my trunk any time. She says, Do you still have the eggshell

or do you don't?

I do not, says Dr. West. I do not still possess the two halves of that vehicle.

Well excuse me for living, says Lulu, but she wasn't mad. She likes everybody, you could call it a weakness.

And why don't you? says the Judge. As if I didn't know.

Because, says Dr. West, I car-ried them outdoors to see them in the sun, was disturbed by the telephone, set them down in a thicket, answered the phone, at which you bent my ear for a half-hour about a detective story you plan to start writing any day. When I got back the two halves were gone.

Naturally, says the Judge. Na-turally.

Gone, says Dr. West, from a patch of soft earth in the thicket that showed no footprints.

We left it at that. Ever since, I been thinking about it. Only minutes now till closing time or I would flip my lid.

Dr. West was not lying or he would of done a mermaid story. That don't mean it was the whole truth. How could anybody ever tell that like they say in the law courts? Maybe the bugs bit him before they went off through the hole in the screen? One bite would be enough to show him what it does to you. Could we sort of share them?

Iwould like that. Something's gentled me down lately. I got no jealousy about him and Lulu going off together like they done this afternoon. I don't seem to have no angry feelings of no kind except about drowning Irma in the bathtub if it was practi-cal. Aw, I guess I mean I might make that type joke, a man couldn't *do* no such thing. Be-sides it could be my fault Irma is like she is. How about that, Al?

Anyhow I'd sooner Lulu went off with Dr. West than with say this salesman looks like a shaved pig and wants a beer.

Beer. Why can't they ask for something unusual just once so I would have to think about it and stop thinking?

Five minutes still to closing.

It was last night Irma found me with my bugs and called them flies. I bet she believes that. It was the finest part of my dream — gone, clobbered, and here's Irma in her nightgown come down and turned on the light, standing there all bones and bad temper saying Drunk as a pig, now I see where the profits go, all down your gut. Her that used to talk like a lady, and had them goldy lights in her hair. Flies, she says, flies everywhere.

She don't know about the hole, my better mousehole, or she would of poured cleaning fluid down it, and they would of come out and fixed her little red wag-on. I would not like that to hap-pen. It's funny how gentle I feel nowadays. I used to be what they call a Ruffed Diamond.

I guess Irma will have took her twenty-year grouch to bed by now. Oh no, it wasn't like that all of them twenty years, not by no means — but my Jesus. I'm supposed to be some damn God-almighty Apollo Valentino Rock-efeller or I'm no good? I'm good in them dreams. I been seven feet tall and bronzy, ready when-ever I said so.

There they go again about that thing, in Jonesburg where the lady shot up a radio-teevy store account she claimed the noise spoiled her dreams. Look —things like that—it can't mean these bugs are—

I won't have a dream tonight though. I won't, till I can get a real talk with Dr. West. Well, speak of the —

It has come to be morning, hot and quiet outside in that gold-en street. I better try to think through what happened, and what Dr. West said.

When he come in at closing time I seen he wanted talk same as me. I told him stick around, I closed up, doused the front lights, we carried a Jameson into the back room. He flung down a shot and said, I took Lulu up to my place. The Judge too. Johnny Blood'll be gone another couple weeks, but I suppose may-be the Judge'll be missed.

Missed? I says.

He says, Don't be like that. Al. The Judge is asleep and dream-ing, Lulu is asleep and dream-ing, and don't you go acting sur-prised on me, because I come back to talk to you. Beat-up crocks like you and me, Al, he says, we're into middle age, we can wait a mite longer for our dreams, seeing we've spent mor'n half a lifetime doing not much else.

While I poured him another he said, it was Lulu brought them back to me. I asked him how come.

She didn't do anything, he says, she's just overweight with a big blood pressure. They like that. They must need the blood, maybe to help them breed. Only a couple dozen came out of that sphere, but now they might have several colonies. I wasn't quite truthful, he says — I saw them come out, and a few of them flew around me with things in the fifth pair of limbs that look-ed like weapons. While I held still because of that, one of them bit me and I dreamed a journey to Alpha Centauri.

Maybe, he says, they always do it merely to hold us quiet so they can drink. Maybe it's from loving kindness.

I asked if it was true what he'd told us about the halves of the shell disappearing. Yes, he said, and he said that afterward he went searching and grieving all over till one night he caught a bluish gleam up on Ragged Rock Hill. He went to it, work-ing his way through the trees with a flashlight to where he thought it had showed, and set-tled down to wait. Sure enough they came and gave him a dream. It breaks his heart too, the way a man can't name his own.

They come for Lulu. All we did, he says, we turned off the lights and set by the open window. Coming for Lulu be-cause she's right for them, they took care of the Judge too, and me. My dream was a short one, Al. I don't have much blood in me.

He put down another Jame-son while I told him what I been going through. He stepped over to one of the other back-room booths to pick something off the floor. He's a noticing restless man. Just a buckle like a gold rosebud off of a girl's shoe. The back room gets lively Saturday nights, and I ain't been sweeping up too good, last couple-three weeks. Only light I turned on for us was the 25-watt bulb in our booth with the pink shade—Irma chose them shades. They're real nice. You won't find no God-damn interior desecrator that's got taste like hers. Dr. West set there playing with that gold rose-bud and going slow on his Jame-son while I talked.

And I asked him, where do they come from?

Oh, he says, outer space, where else? He was turning the buckle in and out of the light, reflecting a glow into the drink itself, a kind of glory. And he says, or else inner space.

I asked him did he think the bugs had anything to do with them killings. He just wiggled his shoulders. That's when I said, Look, couldn't my Irma have a dream?

He give me no answer. I says, Maybe it would change how she acts and feels about some things?

Maybe, he says. We don't know, he says, we don't know much of anything. More we know, better we get at asking questions we can't answer. Then he poured himself another Jame-son and after a while I went up-stairs.

Irma wasn't asleep. When I touched her shoulder she says, God give me patience! and flounces clear across the bed. I says, Irma, honey, I ain't after you thataway, I just want you could come down talk something over with I and Doc West. West? she says. That dirty old man? What for?

I says, Irma, this is special, you give me lip I'm big enough to make you. You get up and fling some clothes on and you take that God-damn cold cream off your face and come down. All's we want is have a couple drinks, talk something over.

Well, she says, aren't we the lord and master all of a sudden! You goddam right, I says, and get going. I didn't say that mean, nor she didn't take it mean, just wiped the guck off her face as meek as anything, put on slippers, and a bathrobe over her p-js, and come along. In the light of the upstairs hall I seen some of them goldy lights, I know I did.

Dr. West had laid his head on his arms. Small he was, and clean as a dry stick, I don't know why she would call him a dirty old man. He hadn't finished his Jameson. I thought he was hav-ing a dream, for the bugs had come, but he looked up and said, I brought it on us, I brought it on the world. I and some other billions, he said. I don't under-stand what he meant by that.

Irma seen the bugs and she screamed. Only five-six of them, nothing scary. I put my arms around her to gentle her. Irma, I says, all they do is give you beautiful dreams. I want you should have some like I've had. Let 'em bite a little, it don't hurt. But she screamed and tried to fight me off. She said, I don't want to, I just want — I just want—

I didn't listen. So hell-bent she should have dreams like mine, I didn't listen. The way she was perking around, the p-js got twisted away from her little breasts, and I just hung on, too lame-brain dumb for anything else. Them little things is like when she was a girl, I used to kid her about what would the babies eat, only we never could have any. One bug lit there, and I just held her — why, them bites don't hurt, I got a hundred onto me, they don't even itch.

She didn't scream again. I felt a shock go through her and she said, Oh, oh, oh, a kind of cry-ing like what I used to hear in bed, and her with a voice like country cream. The bug flew off. I found her mouth and kissed her. Her face sagged away from me and she was dead.

I think Dr. West said, your little lady, she's asleep?

I carried her over to this lounge chair, sat here with her. I don't know what to do. I remember Dr. West, he come over and stood by us, though I want-ed him to go away. I know I said something about maybe some people just couldn't have such dreams.

He says, maybe it's that, or maybe she dreamed *more* than us, Al. Maybe this thing gave her too big a dream for her to stand. Dreaming's a dangerous thing, he said, it's got a dark side. If the bugs shoot in some-thing that makes the dreaming part of us blaze up, the way the rest of us can't take it—

I told him I wasn't going to try to understand it no more. I said I ought to knowed you can't make another person have a dream. It's not right, it's not right some-way.

Dr. West said more, I can't just bring it back. I think he said, dreaming's not a sickness but it's like one, partly. It made the world what it is, different front ancient days, and it could un-make it.

I asked him not to notify no one, just go away and leave us be.

People will figure the bar is closed, they'll give us a bit of time before they start crowding in.

And there was something he said about how things might even get better with the bugs taking over, if that's what they meant to do. I told him I didn't care much about the world, all's I ever wanted was to have a de-cent life with work I knowed how to do and a nice woman and maybe some kids. I guess that's when Dr. West went away. He's just a lonesome little guy trying to figure things out, I shouldn't of spoke harsh.

See, it wasn't like I was trying to make you have *my* dream.

You look like you was dreaming. You look real sweet, I meant to tell you. I don't know why I couldn't ever tell you.

—EDGAR PANGBORN