

The Perfect Infestation

by Carol Emshwiller

On her Website, Ms. Emshwiller comments that her favorite author is Franz Kafka. Perhaps the author of “The Metamorphosis” would have enjoyed this story.

This is the best idea we've ever had. Not that there aren't some problems to it. It's the perfect disguise. Creep in the ear and take over the world. But don't bother with the opposable-thumb creatures. That's where most other takeovers made their big mistake.

We keep telling our young seeds not to be tempted by thumbs. Those creatures' lives are thankless. Full of wars and work. All sorts of problems. More anxiety than you'd want. We wouldn't wish that kind of a life on any of our kind even while waiting for the takeover. You young ones might as well enjoy your confinement in a happy host. Not only that, a host that gets looked after all its life.

What you want is fun and play and getting stroked and patted. Opposable thumb beings don't get much of that—not that they don't like it just as much as any creature. What you want is getting patted but also having teeth.

Don't take on the characteristics of your hosts. If you do, you'll feel loyalty you shouldn't feel. You should be loyal only to your own kind. Don't ever forget your breezy blowing relatives. Don't worry about getting found out as you take over. If the opposable-thumb creatures spot you, they'll take you for a floating dandelion seed.

On the other hand, you shouldn't waste too much time getting ready. We have to take over before these creatures completely destroy their world.

Feel no jealousy for thumbs. You don't need them. You'll have other abilities.

Later, when the signal for the takeover comes, it'll be so high the thumb creatures won't hear it. That's another good reason for this host we picked out especially for you.

It's a pretty good world. So far. But you have to be careful. You

mustn't seem too smart. Be sure you don't do anything that isn't native to the species we've selected.

So spread out, waft down, and take over.

* * * *

I went for a small cute host. I was in the mood for fun. It had been a long hard voyage in cramped quarters. It was good to go off by myself.

I like my host so much I don't think I'll ever want to give him up. I wonder if I'll have to at the end. He's mostly white with one ear up, the white one, and one black floppy ear.

I want to look straight into the opposable-thumb people's eyes. I want to smell their crotches. I want to get a pat or two—see what that's like.

The only trouble is, my host is in the wrong part of town. I don't want to be cared for by just anybody. Of course right now it's raining and you'd think I'd take what I can get, but if we're going to take over the world, why not do it from the top down? Why not begin with the rich so we can pass the waiting time in luxury? But for that you have to be in the rich part of town.

The pods in charge said to spread out. I did that. I wafted and floated about for hours and ended up down here, and here was this perfect funny-looking host.

The rich live on a hill and they have a view of the ocean. They have a chunk of the beach.

Now, though, I drink from the gutter.

I'll go up and find a rich opposable-thumb old lady. I can change her life. A cat only goes so far in changing one's life whereas I get people outside and walking.

But now I'm dirty and matted, wet and shivering. I'll take this misery up to see what the rich will do about me.

* * * *

I sneak uptown. But I'm getting too cold and wet to be choosy. I think I'm going to have to make do with whoever comes along.

And what comes along is a very wet and cold older man, shivering as much as I am.

I had slipped through a gate where I saw an old lady at a window. I hid under the bushes by the garage when ... (I was thinking: No sense in coming out for just anybody. I was thinking: I'm small enough to be let up on the couch. I was thinking: I hope she likes music) ... when ... along comes this man.

We look at each other and there's instant recognition—of cold and damp and misery. His hair is plastered to his forehead and he smells of wet earth.

I wag my tail as fast as I can and he throws back his head and laughs a big laugh. Without him telling me to do it, I "speak" three times. But I wouldn't have had to do anything. When we looked at each other and saw our misery, we were stuck with each other.

This isn't what I wanted, but it'll have to do. For now. And I can see in this creature's eyes that they were right about the thumbed ones. There's loneliness and pain and much too much thinking.

I'm still looking for a fun time after that long bunched up confinement. Wet and miserable as he is, even so, he did laugh that great big laugh. He's the best I can do.

He says, "I see we agree about the weather."

Just how much dare I show I understand? I don't have many options. I know better than to nod. I cock my head this way and that. That makes him laugh again.

He takes me into the garage. It's a little warmer in there. He finds an old towel and wipes himself off a bit and then me.

He says, "You wouldn't be bad looking if you were cleaned up some." And then, "I know exactly what to do with you."

* * * *

There's a connecting hallway between the garage and the house. He brings me inside to the kitchen. Now I see he has a limp and that the sole of one of his shoes is built up by more than an inch.

It's nice and warm in there. Also quiet. Seems as if nobody is home but us. First thing he feeds me some very good leftovers, beef cooked in wine. I want to savor the food, but I don't dare. That wouldn't be like my species. (If I get to live like this I wouldn't have to jump up on the table to snatch tidbits.)

Then he cuts out the tangles in my coat and gives me a bath. I even get blow dried. He keeps talking all through it. That's what they told us: These creatures talk all the time. Cramped in as we were on our voyage, that would have been hard to bear, but this isn't. Mostly he talks a lot of nothing but I do hear that I'm supposed to cheer somebody up. He tells me I should smile.

Afterward he holds me up to the mirror. What a nice thumb person!

* * * *

Then I get presented to my old lady. Just the one I'd hoped for.

He's gotten dressed up for the occasion. He's put on slacks and a sweater.

"Mother," he says, "I brought you somebody to cheer you up."

She's lying back on a big couch. Not doing anything at all. And she does look morose. I can smell it, too. Just like they said, the opposable-thumb creatures have a hard life. I'd rather be back on our transport's cramped hold than to be her right now.

She looks like the man except her hair is all white while he only has a little white at the temples. Neither one is handsome. Even if he hadn't called her Mother, I could have smelled that they're relatives. Inside myself I congratulate my host creature for his nose.

"Poor little guy. He needed a lot of cleaning up."

She doesn't say anything, but I can see on her face how much I please her. She reaches for me and now I get to feel what getting stroked and petted is like. I can see why they wanted us to experience it. Dry and warm and fed and cuddled ... I fall asleep. I see why they warned us not to get too much under the spell of getting stroked.

* * * *

And I do cheer her up. I dance on my hind legs. I twirl. I wag myself all over. I talk back to her in whimpers and whines. I sing when she listens to opera. I haven't seen her on the couch doing nothing since that first time.

She keeps calling me a Pussy Cat. I understand almost everything the thumb creatures do (after all, I've been trained for these creatures), but I don't understand that.

She starts right out teaching me tricks. The usual ones: roll over, speak, sit. It's hard not to do everything just right the first try. I want to please. It's my host's nature. I mustn't get too caught up in my own intelligence. They warned us about something else, too. Enjoy yourself, they said, but beware of love.

* * * *

Remember that we love you more than any of these creatures ever can. We know who you really are. We love your thistledown and rudder. We love the sharpness of your probes.

* * * *

And they have to walk me. Down the street there's a coffee shop. They sit at the outdoor tables and have breakfast every morning. I don't think they ever did that until I came along. I'm good for both of them.

I behave myself, trotting at the man's left heel as if I had been trained for it. I only misbehave if there's a chance to make them laugh. Even though he always acts as if he's cheerful, he needs as much cheering up as she does.

As we sit, I watch the people pass by. I check out their smells. My man needs a woman to make him happy. I can tell if any passing women are compatible with him or not. But when I find the perfect one I don't know what I should do about it. Except maybe put on a performance of all my comical tricks. I'd try to be a conversation piece so she couldn't help but come over to say something about me.

* * * *

Watch the sunrise over the water from the highest window, pick a clear day. Remember that this world will soon belong to us. You'll be free, then, to drift and float about with no host at all. And you can come

back to us to love and be loved. Be patient.

* * * *

These messages have become an interruption. I know we need to be reminded of our mission, but I'm not going to forget what I'm here for. It's that this interruption comes just when I smell a good match for my man.

As usual we're at breakfast. She's walking by. Not young. A little gray at the temples just as he is. He ought to like her looks because she has the same sharp nose, the same slimness with hunched shoulders as if they both think they're too tall.

My man never holds my leash as we sit. He doesn't need to. I never run away, but now I do. I let her get a head start down the block and then I take off after her. Of course right away my man jumps up and runs after us as best he can. They can't afford not to have me. I'm their happiness.

But how to stop her? She's striding along and I've got short legs. If my man gets to me before I can stop her they'll never meet, and he's moving a lot faster than I thought he could.

I manage to get up to her feet, run between them, and trip her. She goes down harder than I wanted her to, but I had to do it. Right away I smell pain.

My man kneels beside her. He keeps saying he's sorry—so, so, so sorry. He can't figure out what got into me. I never did anything like this before.

He touches her shoulder ... keeping her down. "Don't get up yet. Rest a minute."

I was so focused on her smell I didn't notice much else about her but now I see she's attractive in spite of her nose and her large mouth. In fact those are what make her looks special.

There's blood on the knees of her nice tan slacks—actually, on one side, a hole right through them—and blood on the palms of her hands. At least she didn't break anything. I would have smelled that.

My man still kneels next to her, touching her arm. "We found him in a rain storm. He's a stray. Does he know you from before? Is he yours?"

She's not ready to answer anything yet.

I sit still so they won't look at me. I'm thinking: Look into her eyes. Maybe she'll see who you are just as I did. Except she's the one, not ready to look at him yet.

We sit. He keeps quiet. Finally he helps her up and brings her, both of them limping now, back to the table where his mother sits. I come back, too, dragging my leash.

The woman still hasn't said a word. They get her tea. My man wets his handkerchief and washes the blood and dirt from her palms. His mother is asking, can she get you this or that? Even the mother is saying she's so sorry.

"Does he know you? He's never acted this way before."

Finally, after a few sips of tea, the woman speaks. "I've never seen him before."

"I can't imagine what got into him. He's always so well behaved. We live just down the block. I can get the car and take you home. But I should take you to the emergency room. Wait here with my mother."

Finally, she looks up into his eyes and sees who he is.

She doesn't live far. There's a lot of back and forth that ends up with the woman getting bandaged up at the emergency room and then going home for fresh clothes and then everybody going out to supper ... without me.

I "stay" and pay attention to messages from our pods.

* * * *

This will all be yours. The view of the Milky Way, the North Star in the north.... Does any other world have any such view? Does any other world have dragonflies? A single moon? Butter? Pine needles? Strawberries? Chickadees?.... This will be yours.

* * * *

Actually I'm really thinking more about my man and the woman than

the pods' messages. I'm wondering how they're getting along. I already know how beautiful this world is and with all its smells, I don't need to be reminded. It's us seeds who are down here appreciating everything. The pods just talk about it. It's we who really know.

I wonder how many others of us seeds are in the middle of the same adventures I am, changing things for our owners? It's part of our hosts' nature to help the opposable-thumb people. It's part of our enjoyment of this world.

* * * *

I can tell when they're on their way home. I rush to the door, twirling and dancing, and right after the mother and the man come in I can tell my plans are already working.

* * * *

Now almost every morning we all four of us including me ... meet for breakfast at the sidewalk café and walk together afterward. First they walk the mother home and then the two of them walk me to the park.

My man always walks farther than is comfortable for him. When he comes home he takes a long hot shower and then uses a heating pad on his leg. I lick his hands and arms and, when I can, his face, to show how I feel, but I'm not sorry for him. I know he wants to do it to prove to the woman, and to himself, also, that he's a whole man.

He always tastes good.

But my man needs help. He's not making a move. I don't know what to do. I'm wondering if I should trip her again. Would that put her in his arms? I keep them laughing, but, so far, that hasn't brought them closer to what they both want to do. Perhaps I should trip him instead of her.

One good thing, though, they're both tall people who slumped to seem shorter and now they stand up straight.

He does take her hand now and then but only to help her up the steeper places. He's the one that needs help for those. I suppose she knows that and yet takes his hand and leans on him anyway.

* * * *

They've found a secret place. Off the path. Surrounded by trees and bushes and at the top of a hill.

One day they take the mother home and then bring a picnic so as to spend more time in their special spot. They even bring snacks for me.

They sit side by side on a rock, put me through all my tricks and give me a tiny bite after each one. They keep laughing at me. Then I do a whole set of tricks all on my own and they laugh even more. The woman says, "I do love Pussy Cat." I know she doesn't really mean she loves me, though she does. Then she says, "And I'm glad he tripped me."

I'm wondering if my man can hear what she really wants to say. Or is he too busy thinking about his bad leg? I can tell it hurts him by now. Is that foot going to spoil everything? Though why not? It's spoiled his life so far.

I lie down right on top of his bad foot.

He looks at me and I stare back. I try to tell him things with my eyes and what voice I have: Put your arm around her. Pull her closer. If that goes well, kiss her. For Heaven's sake! And it *will* go well.

He doesn't do any of it.

Then it's she who dares to lean her shoulder against his.

I move from his foot to hers. I look up at her. Then at him. Then at her. I don't know how they do it, but they get the idea. They laugh at me and then look at each other and then kiss. Really kiss and I leap up and kiss them, too. They laugh again and kiss all the more.

And right then the signal comes. So high pitched it even seems high to my host. The pods have already left the transport.

* * * *

Move suddenly. If you're quick it won't matter how small you are. Those of you in the alleyways, find the first of the thumb people you see. Their thumbs are useless against your teeth.

This very moment, as you attack, we're creeping out of our shells. Without your impregnation we'll lie unfertilized ... shriveling.

* * * *

I sense others of us not far from me. We're busy at our jobs, guarding thumb people's property, letting ourselves be dressed up in silly costumes, retrieving ducks, leading blind thumb people, running after sticks, getting petted.... We're enjoying it as much as our hosts do. We don't make any moves against our owners.

* * * *

This was not the perfect infestation after all. No wonder no other aliens tried it ... or perhaps they did and didn't succeed. Probably they ended up as we have, dwindling away and drying into nothing. What a pity. This is such a nice place.