

Smothered in Bugs

Madeline Todd

The ladybugs appeared in early July. There were just two at first, roaming across your left hand. Their twelve, tiny feet pitter-pattered across your skin, tapping out a heartbeat rhythm. You tolerated ladybugs, to a point. Creepy crawlies weren't your favorite of the creatures of the Earth, but they killed the aphids eating up the plants in Ma's garden, so you let them be. You preferred the animals with more pleasant faces, the ones that wouldn't start crawling all over you without warning. So you tried to brush the ladybugs off, gently coaxing them into the hyacinth bushes. You never saw the ladybugs crawling among the soft, purplish petals, but you assumed they'd returned from whence they came. Bugs generally did.

They appeared in the shower the next day. Four ladybugs, like the two from before had settled down and had a little ladybug nuclear family on the back of your hand. All they needed was a white picket fence made of toothpicks and a pet dust mite. You frowned at the spotted beetles skittering across your fingers. Bathwater dew accumulated in droplets on their shells, ballooning their black spots in the yellowish light. They probably thought it felt like a monsoon. Shrugging, you flicked them off your finger, watching them get swept down the drain. For a moment, you felt a twinge of guilt as the rushing water dragged them away. But they were bugs, after all. It happened to them all the time.

The next day was Friday, and there were eight

ladybugs crawling on your left hand. Every time you tried to peel them away, they came away covered in some kind of yellow secretion. It tingled your nostrils as all eight of them started tracking it all over your skin, bitter like wilted vegetables left out too long in the sun. You flushed them down the kitchen sink. They tumbled through the tap water, glimmering like tiny, soaked rubies as their thin legs flailed. You tried, once more, to not feel so guilty.

On Saturday, 16 ladybugs lay like cheap rings on your fingers. Two of them seemed to be humping each other, however ladybugs did that. You'd gotten a D in Honors Bio. Those things escaped you easily. You sprayed a can of Raid on your hand, and they collapsed into the trash bag below. Yellowish stains lined the back of your hand. Now, your skin smelled chemically bitter, considerably more so than the mild bitterness of the ladybugs.

On Sunday, you gave up on counting the ladybugs on your left hand. You assumed that there were 32. On went the torrent of Raid, off went the ladybugs.

Monday was when you could ignore it no longer.

It was like those golden summers years ago, when you'd buy a mesh bag full of squirming ladybugs from the garden store and let them loose on the porch. They would crawl all over the potted plants, all over the wooden slats of the steps, all over the walkway. All over your hands, your shirt, your knees. They'd get scared, and your fingers would get

covered in those damp trails of yellow. It was then that you'd have the revelation that "*OH MY GOD, IT PEED ON ME! MOM, IT PEED ON ME!*" It was all at once a badge of honor and a brand casting you off into exile from the village.

But you hadn't gone to the garden store in years. You always stayed home when Ma offered to take you over to pick up packets of seeds for the garden. It would still be there when you stayed in bed, draping the sheets over your body, even though you were covered in sweat from the summer heat. The backyard would always be there, and so would the hyacinths and tulips, at least until the first frost clenched its fist over their petals.

And yet, here were the ladybugs.

You had to pluck them off occasionally just to see if you had any skin beneath the writhing mass of ladybugs. Thankfully, it was still there. They had not melted through the muscle and bone. They were only ladybugs, after all. Just an awful lot of them. So down the drain they went. You assumed that there were 64 of them.

Tuesday was when you gave up on trying to sweep them away. Presumably, there were 120 of them congregating on your hand. You'd driven back to your apartment, so you wouldn't have to explain anything to Ma. Either way, she got that look in her eye, the one that scanned every part of your body as though looking for offending germs, and told her that no, you weren't just tired. But it wasn't like you could tell her that there were hundreds of ladybugs making your hand look like it had the world's weirdest Michael Jackson glove. You assumed that searching up "hundreds of ladybugs on hand won't come off" on WebMD wouldn't produce anything helpful, nor would it look good in your search history. But the ladybugs didn't bother you too much today. Whatever the case, it seemed like they enjoyed crawling onto the steering wheel, listening to the low hum of the ailing speakers of your beat-up Honda.

Some friends invited you to dinner. A woolly sweater did the trick for concealing the bugs traveling up the highways of your palm and wrist. You obliged, though you didn't talk much. You picked at the pesto-slathered chicken and peppery green beans, saying little, laughing on cue. It was loud enough for nobody to notice that anything was amiss with you. The scent of ladybug secretion prickled your nose every time you tried to swallow. As the hosts began to clear the table for dessert, a pair of ladybugs snuck out of your sleeve. You froze, trying to brush them away, but your neighbor cooed at the two little creatures, coaxing them onto their own palm, watching them dance for him like circus monkeys. You wish they'd just go and crawl on his hand, if he liked them so damn much.

Before dessert had been served, you ducked out, saying that you weren't feeling well. Your friends packed a slice of graham cracker-sprinkled cheesecake in some tupperware. You cradled it in your lap as you drove home in the rain. A handful of the ladybugs skittered over the lid to investigate the cake. It had been worth it, right? It was an easy secret to keep. You'd just have to sweat through the end of summer, and then it would be alright.

You'd been dealing in small talk to Lindy, skirting around the personal, but enough to let her in. Despite the parade of ladybugs that dared to crawl up your cheek, something twinged in you whenever you saw her smile, the freckles dotting every inch of her face, the glint of silver in the ring in her left nostril, the way her greenish eyes crinkled at the corners.

You wore another sweater to your date. Lindy was a little weirded out by it, what with it being July, and all, but you joked that you were the type who wore nothing but hoodies in middle school, so she waved it off. Secretly, you had begun to sweat buckets through the sleeves. The ladybugs were placated under the maroon wool, their black spots fading between the stitches. At least until, in the

darkness of the movie theater, they crawled out as explosions rang out on the gargantuan screen. Little by little, they marched like toy soldiers, leaving their tracks all over the popcorn. Before you could scoop them out, Lindy reached in, grabbed a handful, and bit into a ladybug. She raced out of the theater, hurriedly spitting out mouthfuls of bugs and butter. In the darkness, you couldn't even tell what was butter and what was the secretion anymore. You left the rest of the large popcorn uneaten. Neither of you spoke for days after that.

The cat knew. That damn cat. They always knew, the same way they knew the exact pitch at which the mice in the walls squeaked and the precise angle at which to score their claw marks in the couch. It was a mercy that he didn't try to eat the stupid bugs. Even when you wore your most oversized hoodie, the one that left only the barest suggestion of fingers poking out, the cat perked up, catching the scent of insect. It nibbled at your fingertips when you stroked its black-furred head. You felt the ladybugs recede up your wrist. You bit down bile as they all seemed to retreat, in unison, further up your arm. The cat went off to do its business. The ladybugs marched back down. As you were.

Out of desperation, you put your keys into the ignition that morning with ladybugs crawling over your keys. They perked up whenever you drove, as though they were all your antsy students on the most crowded, underfunded field trip. Their tiny, black antennae perked up whenever the turn signal clicked or the traffic light ahead of them turned the same shade of red as their shells. You looked down. A tiny congregation of ladybugs had clustered around one knuckle, huddled together, as though from a storm. There was a garden store a few blocks down from your place. Maybe they would have the answers.

You thought of the ladybugs tumbling down the drain in your parents' house as you parked

in front of the garden store. Tugging your baggy sleeve over your hand, you strolled through displays of blooming perennials and row after row of tiny sprouts in plastic containers. Behind a door caked in peeling paint sat an older woman with a nest of hair piled haphazardly on top of her head. Her brow wrinkled as she saw you stumble through the door.

"How can I help you today?" she asked, smoothing out the wrinkles on her pinkish, dirt-stained apron. Small rings crowded her fingers. You cleared your throat, tucking your ladybugged hand in your pocket for good measure. They migrated into your jeans as you spoke.

"I...I've got a ladybug problem," you managed. The older woman raised a pencilled eyebrow.

"A ladybug *problem*?" she asked, her rings clacking on the countertop as she drummed her blunt nails against the wood.

"Never heard of anybody having a ladybug problem. All they ever do is help. They aren't problem children."

You shrugged. "Yeah, I guess, but...there's just a lot of 'em."

The older woman let out a short, gruff laugh, her eyes meandering to something hidden by the cash register.

"I suppose you can occasionally get too much of a good thing," she said. "My advice? Let 'em be. Don't mind them, and they won't mind you. Give them the space to run around, and they'll be out of your way."

As she spoke, the pitter-patter of the ladybugs against your skin intensified, thousands of typewriters drumming against the back of my hand. The pungent scent of their secretion, blown over by the breeze coming through the cracked window, nearly made your eyes prickle with panicked tears.

"Alright...thank you, ma'am."

She gave you a knowing smile. "Let me know if you need anything else."

You meandered around the garden store for a

while after that, pretending to have something to look for. Your apartment didn't have much in the sunlight department, but you did have the blinds closed half the time. There was plenty of room for something to grow, if you just had the wherewithal to actually try. You picked a bundle of marigolds and a red pot to put them in. Traffic light red. Ladybug red.

As you drove back home, a few brave ladybugs clambered onto the dashboard. Without having much idea of what to do with a plant, you'd strapped the unpotted marigolds into the front seat of the car with the seatbelt. You drove all your children home from school. The marigold trembled every time you braked. So did the ladybugs. You tried to brake more slowly.



"Ladybugs? Is that what you said, hon? Ladybugs?"

"Yeah, Ma. Thousands of 'em."

Your face reddened as the words stumbled out of your mouth. But you'd said them. Something popped in your chest, giving wake for more space to be filled in. You sighed, your aging cell phone warm against your cheek.

"Why didn't you say so earlier?"

You blinked.

"Ma, what do you mean?"

"The ladybugs! It's an easy fix. Your cousin had 'em, remember? On her right leg?"

Something dawned on you, a faint memory. Emma. That was her name, wasn't it? Too distantly related to be at every family gathering, but she did always show up wearing long skirts and massive combat boots no matter the weather.

"...so how do I fix it then, Ma?"

"Aww, it's nothing," she said, her voice crackling through my too-old phone. "Just give them what ladybugs need. Sunlight. Something green. Y'know."

My shoulders slumped into the pillowcase. Beneath my sleeve, the ladybugs charted highways across my follicles.

"Well, I did go to the garden store yesterday," you said.

"You did? I'm so proud of you, hon."

"Ma, it was just the garden store——"

"You still went. And you did the right thing."

You glanced at the marigold on the windowsill. Round buds hinted at the bright oranges and yellows beneath the curled leaves. Squinting, you swore that you could see a splotch of red tucked beneath one of the stems.

"So there's a plant on the windowsill now," you said. *"Do you think that'll work?"*

Your mother paused on the other line. Sunlight spilled through the open slats of the blinds when she finally did speak.

"I think it'll work just fine," she said, *"I'm just so sorry that you got so worked up about it. You know you can come to me with these things, alright?"*

A ladybug snuck onto the side of the phone.

Another, then another marched across your battered, peeling phone case. Message received.

"Sorry, Ma."

"I'm just sorry that you were so worried, sweetheart. I love you."

"Love you too."



A handful of other full-sun flowers joined the marigold on the windowsill. Their petals stretched out in the August sunlight, leaves seeming to reach for the open window. Every day, they gained more spotted visitors. Other than the cat trying to liberate the plants from the windowsill, the problem hadn't increased. Once you had gotten into the rhythm of watering them, it had been gradually easier, this plant thing. As you glanced down at your hands, now discernible from the bugs that once roamed over them, you swore the bitter smell of secretion was waning. You'd looked it up. They only secreted that yellow stuff when they were afraid, as it happened.

Lindy texted you out of the blue. You'd ignored

her text for days, knowing that it was bound to be some vitriolic condemnation of your disastrous date last month. Late at night, you'd dared to peer at the text. She wanted to try again. So did you.

You wore a t-shirt that time. The ladybugs roamed freer this time, having the entire landscape of your arm to themselves. You felt the late summer breeze against your neck as you waited outside her door. When Lindy finally poked her head out, the ladybugs were the first thing she saw, crowded along your arm like the Left Hand of Doom. She blinked, as though going through a play-by-play of your last date, going all the way back to the bugs that landed in her mouth.

She looked at them. Then back at you. Then back at them.

"I can change into something else, if you need me to," you sputtered. Lindy shook her head. A smile crept across her face as she watched them parade down your arm.

"No need," she said, "they're kinda cute, aren't they?"

She clasped her hand in yours. The ladybugs hopped the fence, reveling in Lindy's soft, summer-tanned hands. You smiled back at her.

"They take a bit of getting used to," you said, "but yeah. Cute, huh?"