

The Brownshirts Are Coming

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When my parents have a little more income we can sometimes afford a double feature at the neighborhood cinema. The theater provides a few hours of relief from the summer heat. Of course our railroad tenement has no air conditioning in the summer of 1941. Windows at both ends of our flat offer just a little circulation, thanks to a fan at the living room end.

The front door opens into the kitchen. We have a ritual for entering the front door into the dark apartment and this Saturday night is no different. Mutti unlocks the door with her key and steps back. Papa takes off his right shoe and holds it as if he would hammer a nail with the heel. The seven-year-old that is me hides behind Papa. We all take a deep breath in anticipation.

Suddenly Papa opens the door, reaches around for the light switch and bam, wham, bam. He is pounding roaches.

Thousands scurry for shelter in the baseboard and the cupboards. They're on the walls and floor and ceiling – everywhere. Roaches flee from the table and the chairs. *Skwoosh, skwoosh, skwoosh* as one after another is crushed by Papa's heavy rubber heel. Sometimes Papa accidentally steps on one or two of the disoriented, frightened beasts with his stockinged foot. Brown, stiff-backed, multi-legged, monster-faced roaches who had been in total control of the darkened apartment are now escaping my father's wrath. Fat bugs, some over two inches long, seem to fly short distances, or are they hopping? I hold on to Papa's belt and hide my face in his back.

When no more live roaches can be seen, Papa cleans up. On a good night Papa kills more than thirty. When each living roach has found shelter from Papa's shoe and each dead roach has been dropped into the garbage can, Mutti enters the room as if nothing has happened. My heart races. I am terrified. Surely these roaches reproduce faster than Papa can kill them.

The cockroach chase fills my mind, even replacing the memory of the movie. Before undressing, I check under the sheets and inside the pillowcase. I know that once the lights are turned off for the night, our creepy tenants will reappear. I fear I will dream about the roaches – and I do. Do I dream that they walk on me during the night or do they really?

In the morning I check my body and inside my pajamas. I turn my slippers upside down and bang them, individually and carefully, against the bed frame. Too often a roach falls to the floor and scampers away.

Concern about roach droppings becomes an obsession and prompts careful daily washing and inspection of my body. I welcome my weekly bath and I wipe each dish before I allow it to cradle my food.

There are cockroaches everywhere. I don't mean just everywhere in the apartment. I mean all over the city. New York is a city of roaches. We have been living in the United States about sixteen months, escaping from Germany via Holland and Belgium, a step ahead of the Nazis. The next-door commercial bakery, where Papa works, provides food for much of the big city and for the roaches. Poison around the baseboard does not have a big impact. There are way too many millions of them to control. Surely, I imagine, there are at least 1,000 roaches for each of New York's seven million residents.

My dreams become ever more frightening and, as the weeks pass, the roaches seem to grow larger. And they feel heavier when they walk on me. In one dream they have hot feet and burn my skin as they wander aimlessly on my chest and arms. When I awake, Mutti is holding me. I've been screaming and I ripped the buttons from my pajama top.

Anna lives at the other end of our block in an apartment house slightly more upscale than our tenement. Hers is a larger apartment with a separate entrance to her father's medical office.

Anna is a special friend, almost a girlfriend, and I visit her apartment often. Anna's family escaped Nazi Germany quite early and learned to speak English while living in Manchester, England. They moved to New York when the European war seemed imminent. The family speaks German and a British version of English at home. They help with my developing command of the new language.

One evening, when Anna's mom has invited me to dinner, I regale the family with one of my dreams. Mrs. Wertheimner's response – horror and disgust – encourages me to elaborate in great detail, even identifying the number of legs each roach has and describing the fuzz on the legs. Doctor Wertheimer outdoes me. He tells about another Jew who wrote stories in German. "Franz Kafka," he says, "wrote a story called *Die Verwandlung*, *The Metamorphosis*, in which a young man wakes up one morning to discover that he has been turned into a monstrous bug, perhaps a cockroach." Anna's father then proceeds to tell Kafka's horrible story, simplified so that the two youngsters in his audience can understand. In dismay, Mrs. Wertheimer leaves the room. Anna cries a little and I try hard not to. I skip dessert.

That evening in bed, I think about Dr. Wertheimer's story. Will I dream about being turned into a roach? What if I were really changed? What if my family became disgusted by me and disowned me? Could I live with the Wertheimers? Could Dr. W. cure me?

I am *not* changed into a giant cockroach. I remain a small boy. However, giant roaches come to my bed. Giant roaches wearing shiny boots and brown uniforms. Hundreds march in parade formation past my house. They wear pistols and carry large clubs like the SS officers I saw in Germany. They march four abreast and as they pass my house, the last row peels off and walks swiftly toward our front door. I hear the outside door slam and the boots in the hallway. They stop at our apartment door and one of them knocks. No, he pounds. *Bang, bang, bang!*

Pause. *Bang, bang, bang!* Loud, determined knocks. A third series of three bangs. Another pause. The apartment door bursts open and crashes to the floor. The four roach brownshirts are in the room. Their armbands seem familiar but I can't quite place where I've seen them before.

"*Aufstehen,*" commands one of the soldiers. "Stand up." The brownshirts are larger than Papa and Mutti. The shiny boots on their many legs confuse and frighten me. In one motion the lead soldier tears the blanket from my bed. Four large roaches and my bed are now squeezed into my tiny room. "Aufstehen!" Louder than before. Where should I stand? Sitting on the edge of the bed, I move my bare feet to the floor. It now occurs to me that Papa and Mutti have not come to the rescue. Where are they? Still sleeping?

I look down. Usually, when I step out of bed I'm careful not to crush a roach with my bare foot. Now, out of respect, no, out of fear of the roach soldiers, I certainly don't want to crush a bug of any kind. I picture the small roaches that dominate our tenement. Are they all now larger than me? But there is no time for speculation. The four soldier roaches now move apart, making a narrow path for me to walk out of the room. They march me out of the cramped bedroom into the kitchen, past the broken front door and into the dark hallway. "*Raus. Raus aus dem Haus,*" they order. "Out of the house."

They guide me outdoors and into a waiting truck. I climb up and they lock the doors behind me. I stand in total darkness. Something touches me and I let out a huge scream. Scream after uncontrolled scream. I can't stop myself. Anna's voice reassures me, "I'm here." But I can't stop screaming. "*Ich bin hier Freddy. Ich bin dein Freund Anna,*" Anna keeps saying. "I'm here. I'm your friend Anna." She touches me again and we both allow ourselves to cry.

When we stop crying, Anna says, “When the truck door opened to let you in, I noticed that the roaches have boots on all their feet. They have no hands, only feet. That’s why they push with their bodies.” That is all we know except that we are locked in a large black box.

We sit in silence. Suddenly I remember that the roaches at our house scramble about feeding in the dark. “Are there roaches with us?” I ask.

Anna assures, “I saw none when you were pushed aboard. And no humans either.”

Anna had been first into the box. Apparently the parade had passed Anna’s building before it reached my end of the block. Four soldiers had peeled off the back of the parade to arrest her. I was second.

“Will there be others?” Anna wonders. Almost immediately the truck door pops open and another girl is pushed into the truck. Anna rushes toward the door and starts talking very loud so that the girl will immediately know that we are also in the truck. No more fearful screaming. The girl quickly crawls to Anna who is ready with a hug. The frightened little girl cries for quite some time. Then between sobs she announces, “My name is Lisa and I’m six years old.” Her heavy accent hints that she, like Anna and me, is not American.

After Anna calms Lisa, we learn that she is Jewish and from Austria. Her father had been hauled away after the *Anschluss*, the Nazi annexation of Austria. Lisa and her mother hid in the woods and secretly made their way across the Alps into Switzerland. She arrived in the United States only a few weeks ago.

I blurt out the obvious, “They’re rounding up the children.” Something makes me uncomfortable. The phrase “rounding up” troubles me. I heard my parents use that phrase. Dr. Wertheimer used it. Why are the words so disturbing?

The three of us wait. We agree that Anna will again talk to any newcomer while Lisa will use the opportunity of light to study the inside of the truck. I will see what I can learn from the outside world.

It is a long wait for the next child. Pincus yells at the roaches as they kick and prod him. He fights back. Several especially large roaches pick him up by biting his clothes. Others crawl beneath him and a few butt him with their heads. Without hands the roaches have difficulty placing Pincus into the truck. The roaches create a ladder by standing on one another and eventually are able to push and kick their victim into our box. Pincus's resistance gives each of us ample time to accomplish our tasks.

Anna introduces herself, Lisa and me. Pincus tells us that he is twelve years old, a Polish Jew who, with his older brother, escaped from a concentration camp. An uncle arranged Pincus's trip to the United States and he has arrived just a week ago. That explains his bitter fight with the ... But who are the roach soldiers?

"They're rounding up Jewish refugee children!" Anna observes.

There's that phrase again: "rounding up." The image is horrible. Millions of giant roaches are rounding up Jewish children. Who are these monsters?

None of us know the time although we can tell it is still night. Pincus suggests that we set aside one corner of the truck box as a toilet. He has had some experience with boxcars. We look to Pincus for leadership. Anna takes on the role of mother, providing comfort.

Yitzak, Rachel, Sarah, Manny – we are soon thirteen children clustered in our dark box. Not yet crowded. Pincus warns, "When we are too many for our space we will start fighting for territory. Then they will either move us in this truck or they will kill us all right here. Perhaps this truck is a mobile gas chamber."

“Will the roaches scatter when daylight appears?” I ask naïvely. I remember how they scatter when Papa turns on the apartment lights. The very first rays of light were noticeable when the most recent child had been pushed into the truck.

Of course, no one could know the answer.

“Who are these monsters?” asks Anna. “What are those marks on their armbands? They look so familiar.”

“Don’t you children know anything?” We can’t see his face but we can hear Pincus’s frustration. “Those are the Brownshirts.”

“What are Brownshirts?” asks Lisa.

“The Brownshirts came to get my father when we still lived in Germany,” Sarah announces. “Those marks on their armbands are swastikas.” The picture was becoming clear for me. I had heard Mutti and Papa talking about “rounding up the Jews” on Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass, in 1938. The roach Brownshirts were rounding up the Jewish children.

Anna, realizing that we have to take action, asks, “Pincus, what shall we do?”

“If Freddy’s question about light makes sense we will have to wait all day for them to come back at night,” suggests Pincus. Rachel, who is beginning to get the gist of the conversation about light, announces that she always sleeps with a flashlight and that it is still in the pocket of her pajamas. With that she provides a strong beam of light that reaches the top of the truck.

“It’s almost light outside,” Pincus says. “If the roaches bring one more child before full daybreak, we can use the flashlight to frighten them and we can fight until the sun rescues us. If God helps us with the sun, we may be saved. I cannot see you. However, I’m guessing that I am

the oldest and perhaps the strongest. If you like I'll use the flashlight to frighten them and all of you will have to fight for your lives. Beware. They bite."

"What if they don't come before daybreak?" asks Anna. Just as she finishes her sentence the door opens. Rachel hands the light to Pincus who pounces out like an angry tiger. We follow our leader, a huge gust of children leaping on the roaches. We children outnumber the Brownshirts guarding the truck, although they are much larger than we are.

I awake to find myself pummeling my Papa who is holding me on the bed with all his strength. I am wild! Fists swinging! Kicking! Papa is shouting for me to calm down.

That evening Mutti takes me to meet with Dr. Wertheimer. She and the doctor speak in German. He explains that dreams help us cope with terror – real and imagined. The Holocaust has done that to many children – and to millions of adults. Dr. Wertheimer tells my mother that Anna, too, has fearful dreams. "As do I," he adds. Mutti allows that she has nightmares quite regularly.

"Those who have died and will die in the Holocaust pay the ultimate price," says Dr. Wertheimer in his most reassuring voice. "We survivors also pay a price – a price we are willing to pay to be alive and to have our children alive and not in the gas chambers. We can live with our nightmares"

"But the cockroaches in our apartment are real," I say. Or am I asking a question?

"They are," assures Dr. Wertheimer "They disappear when you turn on the light. I hope that you and Anna will enjoy the security of light and that one day you will no longer have to fear the darkness."

When we arrive home Papa promises to buy me a flashlight of my own.