

The Flies



'We hadn't the pleasure now of feeling we were starting a new life,
only a sense of dragging on into a future full of new troubles.'
Italo Calvino, 'The Argentine Ant'

One morning after a disturbed night, a year after they moved into the flat, and with their son only a few months old, Baxter goes into the box-room where he and his wife have put their wardrobes, opens the door to his, and picks up a pile of sweaters. Unfolding them one by one, he discovers that they all appear to have been crocheted. Not only that, the remaining threads are smeared with a viscous yellow deposit, like egg yolk, which has stiffened the remains of the ruined garments.

He shakes out the moths or flies that have gorged on his clothes, and stamps on the tiny crisp corpses. Other flies, only stupefied, dart out past him and position themselves on the curtains, where they appear threateningly settled, just out of reach.

Baxter hurriedly rolls up the clothes in plastic bags, and, retching, thrusts them into the bottom of a dustbin on the street. He goes to the shops and packs his wardrobe with fly killer; he sprays the curtains; he disinfects the rugs. He stands in the shower a long time. With water streaming down him nothing can adhere to his skin.

He doesn't tell his wife about the incident, thinking, at first, that he won't bother her with such an unimportant matter. He has, though, spotted flies all over the flat, which his wife, it seems, has not noticed. If he puts mothballs in his pockets, and has to mask this odour with scents, and goes about imagining that people are sniffing as he passes them, he doesn't care, since the attack has troubled him.

He wants to keep it from himself as much as from her. But at different times of the day he needs to check the wardrobe, and suddenly rips open the door as if to surprise an intruder. At night he begins to dream of ragged bullet-shaped holes chewed in fetid fabric, and of creamy white eggs hatching in darkness. In his mind he hears the amplified rustle of gnawing, chewing, devouring. When this wakes him he rushes into the box-room to shake his clothes or stab at them with an umbrella. On his knees he scours the dusty corners of the flat for the nest or bed where the contamination must be incubating. He is convinced, though, that while he is doing this, flies are striking at the bedsheets and pillows.

When one night his wife catches him with his nose against the skirting board, and he explains to her what has happened, she isn't much concerned, particularly as he has thrown away the evidence. Telling her about it makes him realise what a slight matter it is.

He and his wife acquired the small flat in a hurry and consider themselves fortunate to have it. For what they can afford, the three rooms, with kitchen and bathroom, are acceptable for a youngish couple starting out. Yet when Baxter rings the landlord to enquire whether there have been any 'outbreaks' before, he is not sympathetic but maintains they carried the flies with them. If it continues he will review their contract. Baxter, vexed by the accusation, counters that he will suspend his rent payments if the contagion doesn't clear up. Indeed, that morning he noticed one of his child's cardigans smeared and half-devoured, and only just managed to conceal it from his wife.

Still, he does need to discuss it with her. He asks an acquaintance to babysit. They will go out to dinner. There was a time when they would have long discussions about anything – they particularly enjoyed talking over their first impressions of one another – so happy were they just to be together. As he shaves, Baxter reflects that since the birth of their child they have rarely been to the theatre or cinema, or even to coffee shops. It has been months since they ate out. He is unemployed and most of their money has been spent on rent, bills, debts, and the child. If he were to put it plainly, he'd say that they can hardly taste their food; they can't even watch TV for long. They rarely see their friends or think of making new ones. They never make love; or, if one of them wants to, the other doesn't. Never does their desire coincide – except once, when, at the climax, the screams of their child interrupted. Anyhow, they feel ugly and their bodies ache. They sleep with their eyes open; occasionally, while awake, they are actually asleep. While asleep they dream of sleep.

Before the birth, they'd been together for a few months, and then serious lovers for a year. Since the child their arguments have increased, which Baxter imagines is natural as so much has happened to them. But their disagreements have taken on a new tone. There was a moment recently when they looked at one another and said, simultaneously, that they wished they had never met.

He had wanted a baby because it was something to want; other people had them. She agreed because she was thirty-five. Perhaps they no longer believed they'd find the one person who would change everything.

Wanting to feel tidy, Baxter extracts a suit from his wardrobe. He holds it up to the light on its hanger. It seems complete, as it did the last time he looked, a couple of hours before. In the bathroom his wife is taking longer than ever to apply her make-up and curl her hair.

While removing his shoes, Baxter turns his back. When he looks again, only the hanger remains. Surely a thief has rushed into the room and filched his jacket and trousers? No; the suit is on the floor, a small pyramid of charred ash. His other suits disintegrate at one touch. Flies hurl themselves at his face before chasing into the air.

He collects the ash in his hands and piles it on the desk he's arranged in the box-room, where he has intended to study something to broaden his understanding of life now that he goes out less. He has placed on the desk several sharpened but unused pencils. Now he sniffs the dirt and sifts it with the pencils. He even puts a little on his tongue. In it are several creamy ridged eggs. Within them something is alive, hoping for light. He crushes them. Soot and cocoon soup sticks to his fingers and gets under his nails.

Over dinner they drink wine, eat good food and look around, surprised to see so many people out and about, some of whom are smiling. He tells her about the flies. However, like him, she has become sarcastic and says she's long thought it time he acquired a new wardrobe. She hopes the involuntary clear-out will lead to sartorial improvement. Her own clothes are invariably protected by various guaranteed ladies' potions, like lavender, which he should try.

That night, tired by pettiness and their inability to amuse one another, she sits in the box-room and he walks the child up and down in the kitchen. He hears a cry and runs to her. She has unlocked her wardrobe to discover that her coats, dresses and knitwear have been replaced by a row of

yellowish tatters. On the floor are piles of dead flies.

She starts to weep, saying she has nothing of her own left. She implies that it is his fault. He feels this too, and is ready to be blamed.

He helps her to bed, where the child sleeps between them. Just as they barely kiss now when they attempt love, he rarely looks into her eyes; but as he takes her arm, he notices a black fly emerge from her cornea and hop onto her eyelash.

Next morning he telephones a firm of exterminators. With unusual dispatch, they agree to send an Operative. 'You need the service,' they say before Baxter has described the symptoms. He and his wife obviously have a known condition.

They watch the van arrive; the Operative opens its rear doors and strides into their hall. He is a big and unkempt man, in green overalls, with thick glasses. Clearly not given to speaking, he listens keenly, examines the remains of their clothes, and is eager to see the pyramidal piles of ash which Baxter has arranged on newspaper. Baxter is grateful for the interest.

At last the Operative says, 'You need the total service.'

'I see,' says Baxter. 'Will that do it?'

In reply the man grunts.

Baxter's wife and the baby are ordered out. Baxter runs to fetch a box in order to watch through the window.

The Operative dons a grey mask. A transparent bottle of greenish liquid is strapped to his side. From the bottle extends a rubber tube with a metal sieve on the end. Also feeding into the sieve is a flat-pack of greyish putty attached to a piece of string around the man's neck. On one thigh is a small engine which he starts with a bootlace. While it runs, he strikes various practised poses and holds them like a strangely attired dancer. The rattling noise and force is terrific; not a living cretin could proceed through the curtains of sprayed venom.

The Operative leaves behind, in a corner, an illuminated electrified blue pole in a flower pot, for 'protection'.

'How long will we need that?' Baxter enquires.

'I'll look at it the next couple of times. It'll have to be recharged.'

'We'll need the full Operative service again?'

The Operative is offended. 'We're not called Operatives now. We're Microbe Consultants. And we are normally invited back, when we are available. Better make an appointment.' He adds, 'We're hoping to employ more qualified people. By the way, you'll be needing a pack too.'

'What is that?'

From the van he fetches a packet comprising of several sections, each containing different potions. Baxter glances over the interminable instructions.

'I'll put it on the bill,' says the Operative. 'Along with the curtain atomiser, and this one for the carpet. Better take three packs, eh, just in case.'

'Two will be fine, thanks.'

'Sure?' He puts on a confidential voice. 'I've noticed, your wife looks nice. Surely you want to protect her?'

'I do.'

'You won't want to run out at night.'

'No. Three then.'

'Good.'

The total is formidable. Baxter writes the cheque. His wife leans against the door jamb. He looks with vacillating confidence into her tense but hopeful eyes, wanting to impress on her that it will be worth it.

She puts out the potions. The caustic smell stings their eyes and makes them cough; the baby develops red sores on its belly. But they rub cream into the marks and he sleeps contentedly. Baxter goes to the shops; his wife cooks a meal. They eat together, cuddle, and observe with great pleasure the saucers in which the dying flies are writhing. The blue pole buzzes. In the morning they will clear out the corpses. They are almost looking forward to it, and even laugh when Baxter says, 'Perhaps it would have been cheaper to play Bulgarian music at the flies. We should have thought of that!'

The next morning he clears the mess away and, as there are still flies in the air, puts out more saucers and other potions. Surely, though, they are through the worst. How brought down he has been!

Lately, particularly when the baby cries, he has been dawdling out on the street. A couple of the neighbours have suggested that the new couple stop by for a drink. He has noticed lighted windows and people moving across holding drinks. Leaving his wife and child in safety, he will go out more, that very night in fact, wearing whatever he can assemble, a suit of armour if need be.

His wife won't join him and she gives Baxter the impression that he hasn't brought them to the right sort of neighbourhood. But as he is only going to be five minutes away, she can't object. He kisses her, and after checking that the blue pole is functioning correctly, he begins at the top of the street, wearing an acrylic cardigan purchased from the charity shop, inedible combat trousers and a coat.

The first couple Baxter visits have three young children. Both adults work, designing household objects of some kind. Kettles, Baxter presumes, but it could be chair legs. He can't remember what his wife has said.

He rings the bell. After what seems a considerable amount of hurried movement inside, a bearded man opens the door, breathing heavily. Baxter introduces himself, offering, at the same time, to go away if his visit is inconvenient. The man demurs. In his armchair he is drinking. Baxter, celebrating that night, joins him, taking half a glass of whisky. They discuss sport. But it is a disconcerting conversation, since it is so dark in the room that Baxter can barely make out the other man.

The woman, harassed but eager to join in, comes to the foot of the stairs before the children's yells interrupt. Then she stomps upstairs again, crying out, 'Oh right, right, it must be my turn again!'

'Will they never stop?' shouts the man.

'How can they sleep?' she replies. 'The atmosphere is suffocating them.'

'All of us!' says the man.

'So you've noticed!'

'How could I not?'

He drinks in silence. Baxter, growing accustomed to the gloom, notices a strange gesture he makes. Dipping his fingers into his glass, the bearded man flicks the liquid across his face, and in places rubs it in. He does the same with his arms, even as they talk, as if the alcohol is a lotion rather than an intoxicant.

The man stands up and thrusts his face towards his guest.

'We're getting out.'

'Where?'

He is hustling Baxter by the arm of his black PVC coat towards the door. Immediately the woman flies down the stairs like a bat and begins to dispute with her husband. Baxter doesn't attend to what they are saying, although other couples' arguments now have the ability to fascinate him.

He is looking at the fly attached to the end of the man's protuberant tongue, crawling the side of his nose, and settling on his eyebrow, where it joins a companion, unnoticed until now, already grazing on the hairy ridge. It is time to move on.

Taking a wrong turn in the hall, Baxter passes through two rooms, following a smell he recognises but can't identify. He opens a door and notices an object standing in the bath. It is a glowing blue pole, like the one in his flat, and it seems to be pulsating. He looks closer and realises that this effect is caused by the movement of flies. He is reaching out to touch the thing when he hears a voice behind him, and turns to see the bearded man and his wife.

'Looking for something?'

'No, sorry.'

He doesn't want to look at them but can't help himself. As he moves past they drop their eyes. At that moment the woman blushes, for shame. They give off a sharp bleachy odour.

He isn't ready to go home but can't stay out on the street. Further down the road he sees figures in a window, before a hand drags the curtain across. He has barely knocked on the door before he is in the room with a glass in his hand.

It is a disparate crowd, comprising, he guesses, shy foreign students, the sorts of girls who would join cults, an oldish man in a tweed suit and rakish hat, people dancing with their shoes off, and others sitting in a row on the sofa. In the corner is a two-bar electric fire and a fish tank. Baxter has forgotten what exactly he is wearing and when he glimpses himself in a mirror and realises that no one minds, he is thankful.

His neighbour is drunk but oddly watchful. She puts her arms around his neck, which discomfits him, as if there is some need in him that she has noticed, though he can't see what it is.

'We didn't think you'd come. Your wife barely speaks to any of us.'

'Doesn't she?'

'Well, she's charming to some people. How is the flat?'

'It's fine ... Not too bad.'

Becoming aware of an itching on his forehead, he slaughters a fly between finger and thumb.

She says, 'Sure?'

'Why not?'

He feels another fly creeping across his cheek. She is looking at him curiously.

'I'd like it if you would dance with me,' she says.

He dislikes dancing but suspects that movement is preferable to stasis. And tonight – why not? – he will celebrate. She points out her husband, a tall man standing in the doorway, talking to a woman. Warm and fleshy, she shakes her arse, and he does what he can.

Then she takes the index finger of his right hand and leads him into a conservatory at the back. It is cold; there is no music. She shoves down her clothes, bends forward over the arm of a chair and he slides the finger she's taken possession of, and two others, into her. It is a luxurious and well-deserved oblivion. Surely happiness is forgetting who you are! But too soon he notices a familiar caustic smell. He looks about and sees bowls of white powder placed on the floor; another contains a greenish-blue sticky substance. Injured specks move drowsily in the buckets.

He extracts his hand and holds it out. Up at the wrist it is alive with flies.

She looks round. 'Oh dear, the little babies are hungry tonight.' She flaps at them unconcernedly.

'Isn't there a remedy?' he asks.

'People live with it.'

'They do?'

'That is the best thing. It is also the worst. They work incessantly. Or drink. People all over the world endure different kinds of bacteria.'

'But surely, surely there is a poison, brew or ... blue light that will deter them for ever?'

'There is,' she says. 'Of a kind.'

'What is it?'

She smiles at his desperation. 'The potions do work, for a period. But you have to replace them with different makes. Imported is best, but expensive. Try the Argentinian. Then the South African, in that order. I'm not sure what they put in that stuff, but ... Course, the flies get used to it, and it only maddens and incites them. You might need to go on to the Madagascan.' Baxter must be looking disheartened because she says, 'In this street this is how we keep them away – passion!'

'Passion?'

'Where there is passion you don't notice anything.'

He lies over her from behind. He says he can't believe that these things are just inevitable; that there isn't, somewhere, a solution.

'We'll see to it – later,' she grunts.

After, in the living room, she whispers, 'Most of them have got flies round here. Except the newly-weds and adulterers.' She laughs. 'They got other things. Eighteen months, it takes. If you're lucky you get eighteen months and then you get the flies.' She explains that the flies are the only secret that everyone keeps. Other problems can be paraded and boasted of, but this is an unacceptable shame. 'We are poisoned by ourselves.' She looks at him. 'Do you hate her?'

'What?'

'Do you, yet? You can tell me.'

He whispers that it is dawning on him, as love dawns on people, that at times he does hate her; hates the way she cuts up an apple; hates her hands. He hates her tone of voice and the words he knows she'll use; he hates her clothes, her eyelids, and everyone she knows; her perfume makes him nauseous. He hates the things he's loved about her; hates the way he has put himself in thrall to her; hates the kindnesses she shows him, as if she is asking for something. He sees, too, that it doesn't matter that you don't love someone, until you have a child with them. And he understands, too, how important hatred is, what a strong sustaining feeling it is; a screen perhaps, to stop him pitying her, and himself, and falling into a pit of misery.

His neighbour nods as he shivers with shame at what she has provoked him into saying. She says, 'My husband and I are starting a microbe business ourselves.'

'Is there that much call for it?'

'You can't sing to them, can you?'

'I suppose not.'

'We've put a down payment on our first van. You will use only us, won't you?'

'We're broke, I'm afraid. Can't use anyone.'

'You can't let yourself be invaded. You'll have to work. You haven't been using the Microbe Consultants, have you?'

'They have passed by, yes.'

'They didn't sell you a pack?'

'Only two.'

'Useless, useless. Those men are on commission. Never let them in the house.'

She holds him. Dancing in the middle of the night, while he is still conscious, she puts her mouth to his ear and murmurs, 'You might need Gerard Quinn.'

'Who?'

'Quinn has been hanging around. He'll be in touch. Meanwhile, behind that door' – she points at a wooden door with a steel frame, with a padlock hanging from it – 'we are working on a combination potion, a deadly solution. It's not yet ready, but when we have a sample, I'll bring it.' He looks at her sceptically. 'Yes, everyone would be doing it. But the snag is, what prevents a definitive remedy is that husbands and wives give the stuff to their partners.' Baxter feels as if he will fall over. 'Have you actually mixed it in with her cereal yet, or are you still considering it?'

'One time I did do that, but I put it down the drain.'

'People use it to commit suicide too. One can't be too careful, you see.'

She leaves him. He notices that the bearded man has arrived, and is laughing and sprinkling himself with alcohol beside the fish tank. He raises his hand in acknowledgement of Baxter. Later, before Baxter passes out, he sees the bearded man and the female neighbour go into the conservatory together.

Early in the morning his neighbour's husband carries Baxter home.

Baxter is still asleep beside the bed, where he has collapsed, when the landlord visits. Fortunately he has forewarned them, and Baxter's wife has stuffed the blue pole, potions and any devoured items into a cupboard. The man is susceptible to her; when necessary she can be both charming and forceful. Even though a fly lands on his lapel as they are talking, she convinces him that the problem is 'in remission'.

After lunch, Baxter empties the full saucers once more, and sets out new ones. Once more the flies begin to die. But it is no longer something he can bear to look at. He stands in the bedroom and tells his wife that he will be out for the afternoon, and will take the kid with him. No, she says, he has always been irresponsible. He has to insist, as if it is his last wish, until she gives in.

It has made her sullen, but it is an important victory. He has never been alone with his son. In its sling, weighted against his body, he carries this novelty about the city. He sits in cafés, puts it on his knee and admires its hands and ears; he flings it in the air and kisses it. He strolls in the park and on the grass gives it a bottle. People speak to him; women, particularly, seem to assume he is not a bad character. The child makes him more attractive. He likes having this new companion, or friend, with him.

He thinks of what else they might do. His lover's phone number comes into his mind. He calls her. They cross the river on the bus. At her door he wants to turn back but she is there immediately. He holds up the child like a trophy, though Baxter is fearful that she will be unnerved by the softened features of the other woman alive between them.

She invites them in. She is wearing the ear-rings he gave her; she must have put them on for him. They find themselves sighing at the sight of one another. How pleased she is to see them both; more pleased than he has allowed himself to imagine. She can't stop herself slipping her hands inside his coat, as she used to. He wraps her up and kisses her neck. She belongs in this position, she tells him. How dispirited she has been since he left last time, and hasn't been in touch. Sometimes she hasn't wanted to go out. At times she has thought she would go mad. Why did he push her away when he knew that with her everything seemed right? She has had to find another lover.

He doesn't know how to say he couldn't believe she loved him, and that he lacked the courage to follow her.

She holds the baby, yet is unsure about kissing him. But the boy is irresistible. She hasn't changed a nappy before. He shows her. She wipes the boy down, and rubs her cheeks against his skin. His soother stops twitching and hangs from his lips.

They take off their clothes and slip into bed with him. She caresses Baxter from his fingertips to his feet, to make him hers again. She asks him to circle her stomach with kisses. He asks her to sit on her knees, touching herself, showing herself to him, her thumbs touching her pubic bone, making a butterfly of her hands. They are careful not to rock the bed or cry out suddenly, but he has forgotten how fierce their desire can become, and how much they can laugh together, and he has to stuff his fingers in her mouth.

As she sleeps he lies looking at her face, whispering words he has never said to anyone. This makes him more than peaceful. If he is away from his wife for a few hours he feels a curious warmth. He has been frozen, and now his love of things is returning, like a forgotten heat, and he can fall against any nearby wall and slide down it, so soft does he feel. He wants to go home and say to his wife, why can't we cover each other in affection for ever?

Something is brushing his face. He sits up to see a fly emerging from his lover's ear. Another hangs in his son's hair. His leg itches; his hand, too, and his back. A fly creeps from the child's nose. Baxter is carrying the contagion with him, giving it to everyone!

He picks up the sleeping child and wakes the dismayed woman. She attempts to reason with him, but he is hurrying down the street as if pursued by lunatics, and with the desire to yell heartless words at strangers.

He passes the child to his wife, fearing he is looking at her a little wildly. It has all rushed back, what he owes her: kindness, succour, and something else, the details elude him; and how one can't let people down merely because one happens, one day, to feel differently.

Not that she notices his agitation, as she checks the baby over.

He take a bath, the only place in the flat they can feel at peace. Drinking wine and listening to the radio, he will swat away all thoughts. But the vows he made her aren't affection, just as a signature isn't a kiss, and no amount of promises can guarantee love. Without thinking, he gave her his life. He valued it less then, and now he wants it back. But he knows that retrieving a life takes a different courage, and is crueller.

At that moment his heart swells. He can hear her singing in the kitchen. She claps too. He calls her name several times.

She comes in irritably. 'What do you want?'

'You.'

'What for? Not now.' She looks down at him. 'What a surprise.'

'Come on.'

'Baxter –'

He reaches out to stroke her.

'Your hands are hot,' she says. 'You're sweating.'

'Please.'

She sighs, removes her skirt and pants, gets in the bath and pulls him onto her.

'What brought that on?' she says after, a little cheered.

'I heard you singing and clapping.'

'Yes, that's how I catch the flies.' She gets out of the bath. 'Look, there are flies floating on the water.'

A few days later, when the blue pole has flickered and died – and been smashed against the wall by Baxter – and the bowls of powder have been devoured, leaving a crust of frothing corpses, the Operative is at the door. He doesn't seem surprised by the failure of his medicaments, nor by Baxter's fierce complaints about the hopeless cures.

'It's a course,' he insists. 'You can't abandon it now, unless you want to throw away the advances and go back to the beginning.'

'What advances?'

'This is a critical case. What world are you living in, thinking it'll be a simple cure?'

'Why didn't you say that last time?'

'Didn't I? I'd say you're the sort who doesn't listen.'

'The blue pole doesn't work.'

He speaks as if to a dolt. 'It draws them. The vibration makes them voracious. Then they eat. And perish for ever. But not if you kick it to pieces like a child. I passed your wife on the doorstep. She's changed since the last time. Her eyes –'

'All right!'

'I've seen it before. She is discouraged. Don't think she doesn't know what's going on!'

'What is going on?'

'You know.'

Baxter puts his head in his hands.

The Operative sweeps up the remains of the blue pole and offers Baxter a bag of grey crystals. 'Watch.' He pours them into a bowl – the sound is a whoosh of hope – and rests it on the floor. The flies land on it and, after a taste, hop a few inches, then drop dead.

The Operative kisses his fingers.

'This is incomparable.'

'Argentinian?' asks Baxter. 'Or South African?'

The Operative gives him a mocking look.

'We never disclose formulas. We have heard that there are people who are mixing their own poisons at home. This will make your skin bubble like leprosy, and your bones soften like rubber. It could be fatal. Leave these things to the experts.'

Baxter writes a cheque for five packs. At the end of the afternoon, he sees the Operative has parked his unmarked van outside the bearded man's house and is going in with plastic bags. The man glances at Baxter and give a little shrug. Several of the local inhabitants are making slow journeys past the house; as Baxter moves away he notices faces at nearby windows.

Baxter discovers his wife examining the chequebook.

'Another cheque!' she cries. 'For what?'

'Three packs!'

'It doesn't work.'

'How do you know?'

'Just look!'

'It might be worse without the poison.'

'How could it be worse? You're throwing money away!'

'I'm trying to help us!'

'You don't know where to start!'

She blinks and nods with anger. The baby cries. Baxter refuses to recount what the Operative said. She doesn't deserve an explanation. It does occur to him, though, to smash her in the mouth, and at that instant she flinches and draws back. Oh, how we understand one another, without meaning to!

What suggestions does she have, he enquires, trying to keep down self-disgust. She doesn't have to consider this; she has intentions. Tired of the secrecy, she will discuss the contagion with a friend, when she has the energy. She wants to go out into the world. She has been lonely.

'Yes, yes,' he agrees. 'That would be good. We must try something new.'

A few days later, as soon as his wife has left for the park, there are several urgent taps on the window. Baxter ducks down. However, it is too late. At the door, with a triumphant twirl, his female neighbour presents a paint pot. She wrenches off the lid. It contains a sticky brown substance like treacle. Her head is thrown back by the reek.

Holding the paint pot at arm's length, she takes in the room. By now they have, piece by piece, removed a good deal of the furniture, though a few items, the curtains and cushions, have been replaced by spares, since it is imperative to uphold belief. Baxter and his wife can't encourage visitors, of course. If old friends ring they arrange to see them outside. The only person who visits regularly is his mother-in-law, from whom his wife strives to conceal all signs of decay. This loyalty and protectiveness surprises and moves Baxter. When he asks his wife about it, she says, 'I don't want her to blame you.'

'Why not?'

'Because you're my husband, stupid.'

The neighbour says, 'Put this out.'

Baxter looks dubiously at the substance and grimaces. 'You're not an expert.'

'Not an expert? Me?'

'No.'

'Who told you to say that?'

'No one.'

'Yes they did. Because who is, may I ask? You don't know, do you?'

'I suppose not.'

'Experts steal our power and sell it back to us, at a profit. You're not falling for that, are you?'

'I see what you mean.'

'Look.'

She sticks her finger in the stuff, puts it on her tongue, waggles it at him, tastes it, and spits it into a napkin.

'Your wife's not going to eat that, even if you smother it in honey,' she says, gagging. 'But it'll draw the little devils from all over the room.' She gets on her knees and makes a cooing sound. 'You might notice a dungy smell.'

'Yes.'

'In that case – open the window. This is an early prototype.'

She puts out the treacle in his saucers. There is no doubt that the flies are drawn by it, and they do keel over. But they are not diminishing; the treacle seems to entice more and more of them.

She turns to him. 'Excellent! The ingredients were expensive, you see.'

'I can't pay!' he says forcibly. 'Not anything!'

'Everybody wants something for nothing. This then, for now.' She kisses his mouth. 'Remember,' she says, as she goes. 'Passion. Passion!'

He is staring into the overrun saucers when his wife comes in, holding her nose.

'Where did you get that?'

'An acquaintance. A kind neighbour.'

'That harridan who stares at me so? You're swayed by the oddest people. Any fool's flattery can seduce you.'

'Clearly.'

'But it stinks!'

'The houses are old, the century is old ... what do you expect?'

He sticks his finger in the muck, licks it and bends forward, holding his stomach.

'Baxter, you are suffering from insanity.' She says softly, 'You would prefer her opinion to mine. But why? Is something going on there?'

'No!'

'You don't care about me now, do you?'

'I do.'

'Liar. The truth counts for nothing with you.'

He notices she has kept her coat on. She puts the baby in his cot. She has finally arranged to visit her best friend, a well-off snobbish woman with two children whose exhibitions of affluence and happiness can be exasperating. He notices now the trouble his wife has taken to look her best. A woman's face alters when she has a baby, and a new beauty may emerge. But she still looks shabby in her ragged clothes, and strained, as if from the effort of constantly keeping something bad away.

From the window he watches her go, and is happy that at least her determination hasn't gone. There is, though, nothing left of their innocence.

Baxter digs a hole in the garden and throws in the odoriferous paint pot and saucers. To avoid his neighbour, he will have to be sure to look both ways and hurry when leaving the house.

He gets the boy up and lies on the floor with him. The kid crawls about, banging a wooden spoon on a metal tray, a noise which delights him, and keeps away all flies. He seems unaffected by the strange tensions around him. Every day he is different, full of enthusiasm and curiosity, and Baxter doesn't want to miss a moment.

He looks up to see the Operative waving through the window. Baxter has never seen him so genial.

'Look,' he says. 'I've nabbed some of the latest development and rushed it straight to you.' He puts several tins of a sticky treaclish substance on the table. 'It's a free sample.'

Baxter pushes him towards the door. 'Get out.'

'But –'

'Pour the tins over your head!'

'Don't shove! You're giving up, are you?' The Operative is enraged but affects sadness. 'It is a common reaction. You think you can shut your eyes to it. But your wife will never stop despising you, and your child will be made sick!' Baxter lunges at him. The man skips down the steps. 'Or have you got a solution of your own?' he sneers. 'Everyone thinks that at some time. But they're deceived! You'll be back. I await your call but might be too busy to take it.'

When Baxter's wife returns they sit attentively opposite one another and have a keen discussion. The visit to her friend has animated her.

'She and the house and the children were immaculate and practically gold-plated, as usual. I kept thinking, I'm never going to be able to bring the subject up. Fortunately the phone rang. I went to the bathroom. I opened her closet.' Baxter nods, understanding this. 'She loves clothes, but there was virtually nothing in there. There were powders and poisons in the bottom.'

'They've been married six years,' says Baxter.

'He's lazy –'

'She's domineering –'

'He's promiscuous –'

'She's frigid –'

'Just shut up and listen!' She continues, 'The rich aren't immune but they can afford to replace everything. When I brought up the subject she knew what I was talking about. She admitted to a slight outbreak – from next door.' They both laugh. 'She even said she was thinking of making a radio programme about it. And if there's a good response, a television investigation.' Baxter nods. 'I'm afraid there's only one thing for it. There's this man they've found. All the top people are using him.'

'He must be expensive.'

'All the best things are, and not everyone is too mean to pay for it. I'm not ready to go back to work, but Baxter, you must.'

'You know I can't find a job.'

'You must stop thinking you're better than other people, and take anything. It's our only hope. They're living a normal life, Baxter. And look at us.'

Once he loved her tenacity. He thinks of how to close this subject.

'What will I wear?'

'You can go to my mother's in the morning and change there, and do the same in the evening.'

'I see.'

She comes towards him and puts her face close to his; her eyes, though darkly ringed and lined now, shine with optimism.

'Baxter, we are going to try everything, aren't we?'

Feeling she will stand there for ever, and ashamed of how her close presence alarms him, he talks of what they might do once the contagion is over. He thinks, too, of how little people need, and how little they ask for! A touch, a hug, a word of reassurance, a moment of warm love, is all she wants. Yet a kiss is too much for him. Why is he so cruel, and what is wrong with him?

For a few weeks he thinks that by keeping away from her, by self-containment and the avoidance of 'controversial' subjects, she will forget this idea. But every few days she brings up the subject again, as if they have both agreed to it.

One night when he leans back, the new cushion disintegrates. It is a charred pile. He jumps up and, standing there, feels he will fall over. He reaches out and grabs the curtains. The entire thing – gauze, he realises – comes apart in his hand. The room has darkened; shadows hang in menacing shapes; the air is thick with flies; the furniture looks as though it has been in a fire. Flies spot his face; his hair turns sticky and yellow

even as he stands there. He wants to cry out but can't cry out; he wants to flee but can't flee.

He hears a noise outside. A quarrel is taking place. Crouching below the windowsill, he sees the bearded man on the doorstep of his own house, shouting to be let in. A window opens upstairs and a suitcase is flung out, along with bitter words and sobs. The bearded man eventually picks up the suitcase and walks away. He passes Baxter's house pulling the wheeled case. Certain that Baxter is watching, he waves forlornly at the window.

Baxter feels that if the plague is to be conquered it is unreasonable of him not to try everything. Even if he doesn't succeed he will, at least, have pleased his wife. He blames and resents her, and what has she tried to do but make him happy and create a comfortable home? No doubt she is right about the other thing: in isolation he has developed unreasonably exalted ideas about himself.

But he goes reluctantly to work. The other employees look at him knowingly the day he goes in to apply for the job. It is exhausting work, yet he soon masters the morose patten, and his body becomes accustomed to the physical labour. The spraying is unpleasant; he has no idea what effect the unavoidable inhalation of noxious gases will have. Seeing all the distressed and naive couples is upsetting at first, but he learns from the other men to detach himself, ignore all insults and concentrate on selling as many packs as possible in order to earn a high commission. The Operatives are a cynical and morose group who resemble lawyers. None of the many people who need them will insult these parasites directly – they can't survive without them. But they can never be liked.

Baxter and his wife have more money than before, but to afford the exceptional Exterminator they must save for much longer and do without 'luxuries'. Baxter is hardly at home, which improves the atmosphere during the day. But there is something he has to do every night. When his wife and baby are asleep he turns off the light, sinks to his knees and turns onto his back on the living-room floor. There, as he hums to himself, working up a steady vibration from his stomach, moths graze on his clothes, in his hair, and on his closed eyes. It is a repellent but – he is convinced – necessary ritual of accustomisation. He tells himself that nothing can be repaired or advanced but only accepted. And, after acceptance, there will occur a liberation into pure spirit, without desire, a state he awaits with self-defeating impatience. Often he falls asleep here, imagining that the different parts of himself are being distributed by insects around the neighbourhood, or 'universe' as he puts it; he regards this as the ultimate compliance. His wife believes that his mind has been overrun.

One morning a youngish man in a black suit stands at the door. Baxter is surprised to see he carries no powders, illuminated electrifying poles, squirters, or even a briefcase. His hands are in his pockets. Gerard sits down, barely glancing at the chewed carpet or buckets of powder. He declines an offer to look in the wardrobe. He seems to know about it already.

'Has there been much of this about?' Baxter asks.

'In this street? A few cases.'

Hope rushes in again from its hiding place. Baxter is almost incoherent. 'Did you cure it? Did you? How long did it take?'

Gerard doesn't reply. Baxter goes and tells his wife she should talk to Gerard, saying he has a reassuring composure. She comes into the room and looks Gerard over, but she cannot bring herself to discuss any of their 'private matters'.

Baxter, though, tells Gerard the most forbidden, depressing and, particularly, trivial things. Gerard likes this stuff the most, persuading Baxter to see it as an aperture through which to follow the labyrinth of his mind. After, Baxter is more emotional than he has ever been, and wheels about the flat, feeling he will collapse, and that mad creatures have been released in the cage of his mind.

When Gerard asks if he should come back, Baxter says yes. Gerard turns up twice a week, to listen. Somehow he extends Baxter's view of things and makes unusual connections, until Baxter surprises himself. How gloomy one feels, explains Baxter, as if one has entered a tunnel which leads to the centre of the earth, with not an arrow of light possible. Surely this is one's natural condition, human fate, and one can only instruct oneself to be realistic? The wise will understand this, and the brave, called stoics by some, will endure it. Or is it very stupid? suggests Gerard. He turns things around until revolt seems possible, a terrifying revolt against one's easy assumptions.

Baxter begins to rely on Gerard. His wife, though, resents him. Despite all the ardent talk, the flat remains infested. She claims Gerard is making Baxter self-absorbed, and that he no longer cares about her and the baby.

Baxter wonders about Gerard too. Does this man know everything? Is he above it all? And why is he expending his gifts on Baxter without asking for money? Why should the 'clean man' be immune from the contagion? What can be so special about him?

One time the Operatives bring up the subject in the canteen. Baxter, who normally pays no attention to their conversations, looks up. 'There are people now who think they can talk the contagion away,' they scoff. 'Like people who think they can pray for rain, they won't accept it is a biological fact of nature. There is nothing to be done but await a breakthrough.'

Baxter wants to ask Gerard why he is interested in these conversations, but it soon ceases to matter. Something is different. Gerard has aroused in him a motivating desperation. At night he no longer lies on the floor being devoured. He paces, yes; but at least this is movement, and nothing will stick to him. There is something still alive within him, in both of them, which the flies have been unable to kill off.

Near dawn one night Baxter wakes up and can't go back to sleep. In his cot the boy sucks at his bottle. Baxter places his finger in the boy's fist; he holds his father tight. Baxter waits until he can withdraw without waking him. From the cot he takes a little wooden rattle. He dresses in silence, puts the rattle in his pocket, and walks towards the wardrobe. It is a while since he has poked at anything in there. It seems fruitless now.

He steps out onto the street. As he goes past the bearded man's house and that of his female neighbour he sees a black cloud in the sky ahead of him. There will be a storm, no doubt about it. Soon he is lost, but he keeps his eyes on the cloud, making his way through narrow streets and alleys; he traverses wide roads and, eventually, crosses the river, trying to think of what, yet, might be done. He sees other men who are, perhaps, like him, travelling through the night with mementoes in their pockets, searching for different fears; or popping out of doorways to stand still and stare upwards, thinking of too much to notice anyone, before walking determinedly in one direction, and then in another.

The cloud, as he walks towards it, seems to explode. It separates and breaks up into thousands of tiny fragments. It is a cloud of flies which lifts and breaks, sweeping upwards into the indifferent sky.