

Dining Out
by Eric Cecil

I'm in a pizzeria. The walls are tiled white. I can see three or four employees behind a high counter. Most are busy at the ovens. But one, a woman, stands completely still. Her face is obscured by the contents of a glass display case: round pies, rectangular, long steamtrays of pasta.

The tables in the dining area are full of patrons, all of whom eat with a total lack of self-awareness. These are large, balding, unkempt men. Construction workers, maybe, or cab drivers, janitors, porters. None of them seem to notice me. They chew with wide-open mouths, faces smeared with food, fingers dewed with grease: nearly reflective.

Their brows, too, glitter with sweat. In fact, almost everything shines under the intensity of the pizzeria's lights. It's so bright that every movement appears to be severe and exaggerated, and I grow sensitive to the most subtle of changes in the confines of the restaurant.

In this heightened state, I sense activity in my periphery. It's vague and speculative, something like shadows that scuttle into the room's margins, or thin hairs that flagellate at the corners of my eyes. It's obscure, but it's there. Something's happening.

I pursue the quivering furrows of air by turning in my seat. But it's no use. I always seem to miss the source of this perceived action. And every time I angle my head or shift my eyes, I see nothing other than the patrons, who are still eating gracelessly, still dining with apparent disregard for my staring.

Finally, one of them returns my gaze. He swallows a mouthful of food, then speaks in a deep and resonant voice. Are you going to? he says.

Going to do what? I ask.

Kill it.

As he says this, his tenor changes. It turns shrill, contemptible, effeminate. I look to the counter. The woman's face is still obscured by the glass displays, but I can see that she's gesturing to a spot just behind me, daggering a gnarled hand toward the back of the restaurant.

I pivot in my chair. And finally, it reveals itself: the source of movement. It's a large insect, roughly three or four feet long. It's impossibly black, yet it's far glossier than anything in the

pizzeria, even more luminescent than the white tiles, the glistening heads. Horns adorn its crown. Its many segments, plated like dark armor, hinge and swing as it shifts forward, lumbering with the slow menace of an animal whose eyes can see but cannot be seen.

Kill it, the woman says.

I don't say anything. I look from her to the insect, watching it edge toward the unoccupied chair of a neighboring table. It struggles to mount the seat. It can't. Instead, it upends the chair into a nearby trashcan. Then it hisses, raising its two forelegs, their serrated edges sawing into a towering column of red plastic trays.

The woman repeats herself, now screaming: Kill it. Kill it. Kill it.

And the men, still eating, await my response.