

The Watchers, Ray Bradbury

The Watchers

In this room the sound of the tapping of the typewriter keys is like knuckles on wood, and my perspiration falls down upon the keys that are being punched unceasingly by my trembling fingers.

And over and above the sound of my writing comes the ironical melody of a mosquito circling over my bent head, and a number of flies buzzing and colliding with the wire screen.

And around the naked filament-skeleton of the yellow bulb in the ceiling a bit of torn white paper that is a moth, flutters. An ant crawls up the wall; I watch it—I laugh with a steady, unceasing bitterness.

How ironical the shining flies and the red ants and the armored crickets. How mistaken we three were: Susan and I and William Tinsley.

Whoever you are, wherever you are, if you do happen upon this, do not ever again crush the ants upon the sidewalk, do not smash the bumblebee that thunders by your window, do not annihilate the cricket upon your hearth!

That's where Tinsley made his colossal error. You remember William Tinsley, certainly? The man who threw away a million dollars on fly-sprays and insecticides and ant pastes?

There was never a spot for a fly or a mosquito in Tinsley's office. Not a white wall or green desk or any immaculate surface where a fly might land before Tinsley destroyed it with an instantaneous stroke of his magnificent flyswatter.

I shall never forget that instrument of death. Tinsley, a monarch, ruled his industry with that flyswatter as a scepter.

I was Tinsley's secretary and right-hand man in his kitchenware industry; sometimes I advised him on his many investments.

Tinsley carried the flyswatter to work with him under his arm in July, 1944. By the week's end, if I happened to be in one of the filing alcoves out of sight when Tinsley arrived, I could always tell of his arrival when I heard the swicking, whistling passage of the flyswatter through the air as Tinsley killed his morning quota.

As the days passed, I noted Tinsley's preoccupied alertness. He'd dictate to me, but his eyes would be searching the north-southeast-west walls, the rug, the bookcases, even my clothing.

Once I laughed and made some comment about Tinsley and Clyde Beatty being fearless animal trainers, and Tinsley froze and turned his back on me. I shut up. People have a right, I thought, to be as damned eccentric as they please.

"Hello, Steve." Tinsley waved his flyswatter one morning as I poised my pencil over my pad. "Before we start, would you mind cleaning away the corpses."

Spread in a rumpled trail over the thick sienna rug were the fallen conquered, the flies; silent, mashed, dewinged. I threw them one by one in the waste-bin, muttering.

"To S. H. Little, Philadelphia. Dear Little: Will invest money in your insect spray. Five thousand dollars—"

"Five thousand?" I complained. I stopped writing.

Tinsley ignored me. "Five thousand dollars. Advise immediate production as soon as war conditions permit. Sincerely." Tinsley twisted his flyswatter. "You think I'm crazy," he said.

"Is that a P.S., or are you talking to me?" I asked.

The phone rang and it was the Termite Control Company, to whom Tinsley told me to write a thousand-dollar check for having termite-

proofed his house. Tinsley patted his metal chair. “One thing I like about my offices—all iron, cement, solid; not a chance for termites.”

He leaped from his chair, the swatter shone swiftly in the air.
“Damn it, Steve, has THAT been here all this time!”

Something buzzed in a small arc somewhere, into silence. The four walls moved in around us in that silence, it seemed, the blank ceiling stared over us and Tinsley’s breath arched through his nostrils. I couldn’t see the infernal insect anywhere. Tinsley exploded. “Help me find it! Damn you, help me!”

“Now, hold on—” I retorted.
Somebody rapped on the door.

“Stay out!” Tinsley’s yell was high, afraid. “Get away from the door, and stay away!” He flung himself headlong, bolted the door with a frantic gesture and lay against it, wildly searching the room. “Quickly now, Steve, systematically! Don’t sit there!”

Desk, chairs, chandelier, walls. Like an insane animal, Tinsley searched, found the buzzing, struck at it. A bit of insensate glitter fell to the floor where he crushed it with his foot in a queerly triumphant sort of action.

He started to dress me down, but I wouldn’t have it. “Look here,” I came back at him. “I’m a secretary and right-hand stooge, not a spotter for high-flying insects. I haven’t got eyes in the back of my head!”

“Either have they!” cried Tinsley. “So you know what They do?”
“They? Who in hell are They?”

He shut up. He went to his desk and sat down, wearily, and finally said, “Never mind. Forget it. Don’t talk about this to anyone.”
I softened up. “Bill, you should go see a psychiatrist about—”

Tinsley laughed bitterly. "And the psychiatrist would tell his wife, and she'd tell others, and then They'd find out. They're everywhere, They are. I don't want to be stopped with my campaign."

"If you mean the one hundred thousand bucks you've sunk in your insect sprays and ant pastes in the last four weeks," I said. "Someone should stop you. You'll break yourself, me, and the stockholders. Honest to God, Tinsley—"

"Shut up!" he said. "You don't understand."

I guess I didn't, then. I went back to my office and all day long I heard that damned flyswatter hissing in the air.

I had supper with Susan Miller that evening. I told her about Tinsley and she lent a sympathetically professional ear. Then she tapped her cigarette and lit it and said, "Steve, I may be a psychiatrist, but I wouldn't have a tinker's chance in hell, unless Tinsley came to see me.

I couldn't help him unless he wanted help." She patted my arm. "I'll look him over for you, if you insist, though, for old time's sake. But half the fight's lost if the patient won't cooperate."

"You've got to help me, Susan," I said. "He'll be stark raving in another month. I think he has delusions of persecution—"

We drove to Tinsley's house.

The first date worked out well. We laughed, we danced we dined late at the Brown Derby, and Tinsley didn't suspect for a moment that the slender, soft-voiced woman he held in his arms to a waltz was a psychiatrist picking his reactions apart.

From the table, I watched them, together, and I shielded a small laugh with my hand, and heard Susan laughing at one of his jokes.

We drove along the road in a pleasant, relaxed silence, the silence that follows on the heels of a good, happy evening. The perfume of Susan

was in the car, the radio played dimly, and the car wheels whirled with a slight whisper over the highway.

I looked at Susan and she at me, her brows going up to indicate that she'd found nothing so far this evening to show that Tinsley was in any way unbalanced. I shrugged.

At that very instant, a moth flew in the window, fluttering, flickering its velvety white wings upon the imprisoning glass.

Tinsley screamed, wrenched the car involuntarily, struck out a gloved hand at the moth, gabbling, his face pale. The tires wobbled. Susan seized the steering wheel firmly and held the car on the road until we slowed to a stop.

As we pulled up, Tinsley crushed the moth between tightened fingers and watched the odorous powder of it sift down upon Susan's arm. We sat there, the three of us, breathing rapidly.

Susan looked at me, and this time there was comprehension in her eyes. I nodded.

Tinsley looked straight ahead, then. In a dream he said, "Ninety-nine percent of all life in the world is insect life—"

He rolled up the windows without another word, and drove us home.

Susan phoned me an hour later. "Steve, he's built a terrific complex for himself. I'm having lunch with him tomorrow. He likes me, I might find out what we want to know. By the way, Steve, does he own any pets?" Tinsley had never owned a cat or dog. He detested animals.

"I might have expected that," said Susan. "Well, good-night, Steve, see you tomorrow."

The flies were breeding thick and golden and buzzing like a million intricately fine electric machines in the pouring direct light of summer noon. In vortexes they whirled and curtailed and fell upon refuse to inject their eggs, to mate, to flutter, to whirl again, as I watched them, and in their whirling my mind intermixed.

I wondered why Tinsley should fear them so, should dread and kill them, and as I walked the streets, all about me, cutting arcs and spaces from the sky, omnipresent flies hummed and sizzled and beat their lucid wings. I counted darning needles, mud-daubers and hornets, yellow bees and brown ants. The world was suddenly much more alive to me than ever before, because Tinsley's apprehensive awareness had set me aware.

Before I knew my actions, brushing a small red ant from my coat that had fallen from a lilac bush as I passed, I turned in at a familiar white house and knew it to be Lawyer Remington's who had been Tinsley's family representative for forty years, even before Tinsley was born. Remington was only a business acquaintance to me but there I was, touching his gate and ringing his bell and in a few minutes looking at him over a sparkling good glass of his sherry.

"I remember," said Remington, remembering. "Poor Tinsley. He was only seventeen when it happened."

I leaned forward intently. "It happened?" The ant raced in wild frenzies upon the golden stubble on my fingers' backs, becoming entangled in the bramble of my wrist, turning back, hopelessly clenching its mandibles. I watched the ant. "Some unfortunate accident?"

Lawyer Remington nodded grimly and the memory lay raw and naked in his old brown eyes. He spread the memory out on the table and pinned it down so I could look at it with a few accurate words: "Tinsley's father took him hunting up in the Lake Arrowhead region in the autumn of the young lad's seventeenth year. Beautiful country, a lovely clear cold autumn day: I remember it because I was hunting not seventy miles from there on that selfsame afternoon.

Game was plentiful. You could hear the sound of guns passing over and back across the lakes through the scent of pine trees. Tinsley's father leaned his gun against a bush to lace his shoe, when a flurry of quail arose, some of them, in their fright, straight at Tinsley senior and his son."

Remington looked into his glass to see what he was telling. “A quail knocked the gun down, it fired off, and the charge struck the elder. Tinsley full in the face!”

“Good God!”

In my mind I saw the elder Tinsley stagger, grasp at his red mask of face, drop his hands now gloved with scarlet fabric, and fall, even as the young boy, struck numb and ashen, swayed and could not believe what he saw.

I drank my sherry hastily, and Remington continued:

“But that wasn’t the least horrible of details. One might think it sufficient. But what followed later was something indescribable to the lad. He ran five miles for help, leaving his father behind, dead, but refusing to believe him dead. Screaming, panting, ripping his clothes from his body, young Tinsley made it to a road and back with a doctor and two other men in something like six hours.

The sun was just going down when they hurried back through the pine forest to where the father lay.” Remington paused and shook his head from side to side, eyes closed. “The entire body, the arms, the legs, and the shattered contour of what was once a strong, handsome face, was clustered over and covered with scuttling, twitching insects, bugs, ants of every and all descriptions, drawn by the sweet odor of blood. It was impossible to see one square inch of the elder Tinsley’s body!”

Mentally, I created the pine trees, and the three men towering over the small boy who stood before a body upon which a tide of small, attentively hungry creatures ebbed and flowed, subsided and returned. Somewhere, a woodpecker knocked, a squirrel scampered, and the quail beat their small wings. And the three men held onto the small boy’s arms and turned him away from the sight. . . .

Some of the boy’s agony and terror must have escaped my lips, for when my mind returned to the library, I found Remington staring at

me, and my sherry glass broken in half causing a bleeding cut which I did not feel.

“So that’s why Tinsley has this fear of insects and animals,” I breathed, several minutes later, settling back, my heart pounding. “And it’s grown like a yeast over the years, to obsess him.”

Remington expressed an interest in Tinsley’s problem, but I allayed him and inquired, “What was his father’s profession?”

“I thought you knew!” cried Remington in faint surprise. “Why the elder Tinsley was a very famous naturalist. Very famous indeed. Ironic, in a way, isn’t it, that he should be killed by the very creatures which he studied, eh?”

“Yes.” I rose up and shook Remington’s hand. “Thanks, Lawyer. You have helped me very much. I must get going now.”

“Good-bye.”

I stood in the open air before Remington’s house and the ant still scrambled over my hand, wildly. I began to understand and sympathize deeply with Tinsley for the first time. I went to pick up Susan in my car.

Susan pushed the veil of her hat back from her eyes and looked off into the distance and said, “What you’ve told me pretty well puts the finger on Tinsley, all right. He’s been brooding.” She waved a hand.

“Look around. See how easy it would be to believe that insects are really the horrors he makes them out to be. There’s a Monarch butterfly pacing us.” She flicked a fingernail. “Is it listening to our every word?”

Tinsley the elder was a naturalist. What happened? He interfered, busybodied where he wasn’t wanted, so They, They who control the animals and insects, killed him. Night and day for the last ten years that thought has been on Tinsley’s mind, and everywhere he looked he saw

the numerous life of the world and the suspicions began to take shape, form and substance!”

“I can’t say I blame him,” I said. “If my father had been killed in a like fashion—”

“He refuses to talk when there’s an insect in the room, isn’t that it, Steve?”

“Yes, he’s afraid they’ll discover that he knows about them.”

“You can see how silly that is, yourself, can’t you. He couldn’t possibly keep it a secret, granting that butterflies and ants and houseflies are evil, for you and I have talked about it, and others, too.

But he persists in his delusion that as long as he himself says no word in Their presence . . . well, he’s still alive, isn’t he? They haven’t destroyed him, have They? And if They were evil and feared his knowledge, wouldn’t They have destroyed him long since?”

“Maybe They’re playing with him?” I wondered. “You know it is strange. The elder Tinsley was on the verge of some great discovery when he was killed. It sort of fits a pattern:”

“I’d better get you out of this hot sun,” laughed Susan, swerving the car into a shady lane.

The next Sunday morning, Bill Tinsley and Susan and I attended church and sat in the middle of the soft music and the vast muteness and quiet color. During the service, Bill began to laugh to himself until I shoved him in the ribs and asked him what was wrong.

“Look at the Reverend up there,” replied Tinsley, fascinated. “There’s a fly on his bald spot. A fly in church. They go everywhere, I tell you. Let the minister talk, it won’t do a bit of good. Oh, gentle, Lord.”

After the service we drove for a picnic lunch in the country under a warm blue sky. A few times, Susan tried to get Bill on the subject of his fear, but Bill only pointed at the train of ants swarming across the picnic linen and shook his head, angrily.

Later, he apologized and with a certain tenseness, asked us to come up to his house that evening, he couldn't go on much longer by himself, he was running low on funds, the business was liable to go on the rocks, and he needed us.

Susan and I held onto his hands and understood. In a matter of forty minutes we were inside the locked study of his house, cocktails in our midst, with Tinsley pacing anxiously back and forth, dandling his familiar flyswatter, searching the room and killing two flies before he made his speech.

He tapped the wall. "Metal. No maggots, ticks, woodbeetles, termites. Metal chairs, metal everything. We're alone; aren't we?" I looked around: "I think so."

"Good." Bill drew in a breath and exhaled. "Have you ever wondered about God and the Devil and the Universe, Susan, Steve? Have you ever realized how cruel the world is? How we try to get ahead, but are hit over the head every time we succeed a fraction?" I nodded silently, and Tinsley went on.

"You sometimes wonder where God is, or where the Forces of Evil are. You wonder how these forces get around, if they are invisible angels. Well, the solution is simple and clever and scientific. We are being watched constantly.

Is there ever a minute in our lives that passes without a fly buzzing in our room with us, or an ant crossing our path, or a flea on a dog, or a cat itself, or a beetle or moth rushing through the dark, or a mosquito skirting around a netting?"

Susan said nothing, but looked at Tinsley easily and without making him self-conscious. Tinsley sipped his drink.

"Small winged things we pay no heed to, that follow us every day of our lives, that listen to our prayers and our hopes and our desires and fears,

that listen to us and then tell what there is to be told to Him or Her or It, or whatever Force sends them out into the world.”

“Oh, come now,” I said impulsively.

To my surprise, Susan hushed me. “Let him finish,” she said. Then she looked at Tinsley. “Go on.”

Tinsley said, “It sounds silly, but I’ve gone about this in a fairly scientific manner. First, I’ve never been able to figure out a reason for so many insects, for their varied profusion. They seem to be nothing but irritants to we mortals, at the very least. Well, a very simple explanation is as follows: the government of Them is a small body, it may be one person alone, and It or They can’t be everywhere. Flies can be.

So can ants and other insects. And since we mortals cannot tell one ant from another, all identity is impossible and one fly is as good as another, their set-up is perfect. There are so many of them and there have been so many for years, that we pay no attention to them. Like Hawthorne’s ‘Scarlet Letter,’ they are right before our eyes and familiarity has blinded us to them.”

“I don’t believe any of that,” I said directly.

“Let me finish!” cried Tinsley, hurriedly. “Before you judge. There is a Force, and it must have a contractual system, a communicative set-up, so that life can be twisted and adjusted according to each individual. Think of it, billions of insects, checking, correlating and reporting on their special subjects, controlling humanity!”

“Look here!” I burst out. “You’ve grown worse ever since that accident back when you were a kid! You’ve let it feed on your mind! You can’t go on fooling yourself!” I got up.

“Steve!” Susan rose, too, her cheeks reddening. “You won’t help with talk like that! Sit down.” She pressed against my chest. Then she turned rapidly to Tinsley. “Bill, if what you say should be true, if all of your plans, your insect-proofing your house, your silence in the presence of

Their small winged creatures your campaign, your ant pastes and pitifully small insect sprays, should really mean something, why are you still alive?"

"Why?" shouted Tinsley. "Because I've worked alone."

"But if there is a They, Bill, They have known of you for a month now, because Steve and I have told them, haven't we Steve and yet you live. Isn't that proof that you must be wrong?"

"You told them? You fool!" Tinsley's eyes showed white and furious.

"No, you didn't, I made Steve promise!"

"Listen to me." Susan's voice shook him, as she might shake a small boy by the scruff of his neck. "Listen, before you scream. Will you agree to an experiment?"

"What kind of experiment?"

"From now on, all of your plans will be aboveboard, in the open. If nothing happens to you, in the next eight weeks, then you'll have to agree that your fears are baseless."

"But they'll kill me!"

"Listen! Steve and I will stake our lives on it, Bill. If you die, Steve and I'll die with you. I value my life greatly, Bill, and Steve values his. We don't believe in your horrors, and we want to get you out of this."

Tinsley hung his head and looked at the floor. "I don't know. I don't know."

"Eight weeks, Bill. You can go on the rest of your life, if you wish, manufacturing insecticides, but for God's sake don't have a nervous breakdown over it. The very fact of your living should be some sort of proof that They bear you no ill-will, and have left you intact?"

Tinsley had to admit to that. But he was reluctant to give in. He murmured almost to himself. "This is the beginning of the campaign. It might take a thousand years, but in the end we can liberate ourselves."

“You can be liberated in eight weeks, Bill, don’t you see? If we can prove that insects are blameless? For the next eight weeks, carry on your campaign, advertise it in weekly magazines and papers, thrust it to the hilt, tell everyone, so that if you should die, the world will be left behind. Then, when the eight weeks are up, you’ll be liberated and free, and won’t that feel good to you, Bill, after all these years?”

Something happened then that startled us. Buzzing over our heads, a fly came by. It had been in the room with us all the time, and yet I had sworn that, earlier, I had seen none. Tinsley began to shiver.

I didn’t know what I was doing, I seemed to react mechanically to some inner drive. I grabbed at the air and caught the tight buzzing in a cupped hand. Then I crushed it hard, staring at Bill and Susan. Their faces were chalky.

“I got it,” I said crazily. “I got the damned thing, and I don’t know why.”

I opened my hand. The fly dropped to the floor. I stepped on it as I had seen Bill often step on them, and my body was cold for no reason. Susan stared at me as if she’d lost her last friend.

“What am I saying?” I cried. “I don’t believe a damn word of all this filth!”

It was dark outside the thick-glassed window. Tinsley managed to light a cigarette and then, because all three of us were in a strange state of nerves, offered to let us have rooms in the house for the night. Susan said she would stay if: “You promise to give the eight-week trial a chance.”

“You’d risk your life on it?” Bill couldn’t make Susan out. Susan nodded gravely. “We’ll be joking about it next year.” Bill said, “All right. The eight-week trial it is.”

My room, upstairs, had a fine view of the spreading country hills. Susan stayed in the room next to mine, and Bill slept across the hall. Lying in

bed I heard the crickets chirping outside my window, and I could barely bear the sound.

I closed the window.

Later in the night I got no sleep so I began imagining that a mosquito was soaring freely about in the dark of my room. Finally, I robed myself and fumbled down to the kitchen, not actually hungry, but wanting something to do to stop my nervousness. I found Susan bending over the refrigerator trays, selecting food.

We looked at one another. We handed plates of stuff to the table and sat stiffly down. The world was unreal to us. Somehow, being around Tinsley made the universe insecure and misty underfoot. Susan, for all her training and mind-culture, was still a woman, and deep under, women are superstitious.

To top it all, we were about to plunge our knives into the half-shattered carcass of a chicken when a fly landed upon it.

We sat looking at the fly for five minutes. The fly walked around on the chicken, flew up, circled, and came back to promenade a drumstick.

We put the chicken back in the icebox, joking very quietly about it, talked uneasily for awhile, and returned upstairs, where we shut our doors and felt alone. I climbed into bed and began having bad dreams before I shut my eyes. My wrist-watch set up an abominable loud clicking in the blackness, and it had clicked several thousand times when I heard the scream.

I don't mind hearing a woman scream occasionally, but a man's scream is so strange, and is heard so rarely, that when it finally comes, it turns your blood into an arctic torrent. The screaming seemed to be borne all through the house and it seemed I heard some frantic words babbled that sounded like, "Now I know why They let me live!"

I pulled the door wide in time to see Tinsley running down the hall, his clothing drenched and soaked, his body wet from head to foot. He turned when he saw me, and cried out. "Stay away from me, oh, God,

Steve, don't touch me, or it'll happen to you, too! I was wrong! I was wrong, yes, but near the truth, too, so very near!"

Before I could prevent him, he had descended the stairs and slammed the door below. Susan suddenly stood beside me. "He's gone mad for certain this time, Steve, we've got to stop him."

A noise from the bathroom drew my attention. Peering in, I turned off the shower which was steaming hot, drumming insistently, scaldingly, on the yellow tiles.

Bill's car thundered into life, a jerking of gears, and the car careened down the road at an insane speed.

"We've got to follow him," insisted Susan. "He'll kill himself! He's trying to run away from something. Where's your car?"

We ran to my car through a cold wind, under very cold stars, climbed in, warmed the motor, and were off, bewildered and breathless.

"Which way?" I shouted.

"He went east, I'm certain."

"East it is, then." I poked up the speed and muttered, "Oh, Bill, you idiot, you fool. Slow down. Come back. Wait for me, you nut." I felt Susan's arm creep through my elbow and hold tight. She whispered, "Faster!" and I said, "We're going sixty now, and there are some bad turns coming!"

The night had gotten into us; the talk of insects, the wind, the roaring of the tires over hard concrete, the beating of our frightened hearts.

"There!" Susan pointed. I saw a gash of light cutting through the hills a mile away. "More speed, Steve!"

More speed. Aching foot pressing out the miles, motor thundering, stars wheeling crazily overhead, lights cutting the dark away into dismembered sections. And in my mind I saw Tinsley again, in the hall, drenched to the skin. He had been standing under the hot, scalding shower! Why? Why?

“Bill, stop, you idiot! Stop driving! Where are you going, what are you running away from, Bill?”

We were catching up with him now. We drew closer, yard by yard, bit by bit, around curves where gravity yanked at us and tried to smash us against huge granite bulwarks of earth, over hills and down into night-filled valleys, over streams and bridges, around curves again.

“He’s only about six hundred yards ahead, now,” said Susan.

“We’ll get him,” I twisted the wheel. “So help me God, we’ll get to him!”

Then, quite unexpectedly, it happened.

Tinsley’s car slowed down. It slowed and crept along the road. We were on a straight length of concrete that continued for a mile in a firm line, no curves or hills. His car slowed to a crawling, pattering pace.

By the time we pulled up in back of him, Tinsley’s roadster was going three miles an hour, just poking along at a pace like a man walking, its lights glaring.

“Steve—” Susan’s fingernails cut my wrist, tight, hard. “Something’s—wrong.”

I knew it. I honked the horn. Silence. I honked again and it was a lonely, blatant sound in the darkness and the emptiness. I parked the car.

Tinsley’s car moved on like a metal snail ahead of us, its exhaust whispering to the night. I opened the door and slid out. “Stay here,” I warned Susan. In the reflected glare her face was like snow and her lips were trembling.

I ran to the car, calling: “Bill, Bill—!”

Tinsley didn’t answer. He couldn’t.

He just lay there behind the wheel, quietly, and the car moved ahead, slowly, so very slowly.

I got sick to my stomach. I reached in and braked the car and cut the ignition, not looking at him, my mind working in a slow kind of new and frightened horror.

I looked once more at Bill where he slumped with his head back.

It didn't do any good to kill flies, kill moths, kill termites, kill mosquitoes. The Evil ones were too clever for that.

Kill all the insects you find, destroy the dogs and the cats and the birds, the weasels and the chipmunks, and the termites, and all animals and insects in the world, it can be done, eventually by man, killing, killing, killing, and after you are finished, after that job is done you still have—microbes.

Bacteria. Microbes. Yes. Unicellular and bi-cellular and multi-cellular microscopic life!

Millions of them, billions of them on every pore, on every inch of flesh of your body. On your lips when you speak, inside your ears when you listen, on your skin when you feel, on your tongue when you taste, in your eyes when you see! You can't wash them off, you can't destroy all of them in the world! It would be an impossible task, impossible! You discovered that, didn't you, Bill.

I stared at him. We almost convinced you, didn't we, Bill, that insects were not guilty, were not Watchers. We were right about that part of it. We convinced you and you got to thinking tonight, and you hit upon the real crux of the situation. Bacteria. That's why the shower was running at home just now! But you can't kill bacteria fast enough. They multiply and multiply, instantly!

I looked at Bill, slumped there. "The flyswatter, you thought the flyswatter was enough. That's a—laugh."

Bill, is that you lying there with your body changed by leprosy and gangrene and tuberculosis and malaria and bubonic all at once? Where is the skin of your face, Bill, and the flesh of your bones, your fingers

lying clenched to the steering wheel. Oh, God, Tinsley, the color and the smell of you—the rotting fetid combination of disease you are!

Microbes. Messengers. Millions of them. Billions of them.

God can't be everywhere at once. Maybe He invented flies, insects to watch his peoples.

But the Evil Ones were brilliant, too. They invented bacteria!

Bill, you look so different . . .

You'll not tell your secret to the world now. I returned to Susan, looked in at her, not able to speak. I could only point for her to go home, without me. I had a job to do, to drive Bill's car into the ditch and set fire to him and it. Susan drove away, not looking back.

And now, tonight, a week later, I am typing this out for what it is worth, here and now, in the summer evening, with flies buzzing about my room. Now I realize why Bill Tinsley lived so long.

While his efforts were directed against insects, ants, birds, animals, who were representatives of the Good Forces, the Evil Forces let him go ahead. Tinsley, unaware, was working for the Evil Ones. But when he comprehended that bacteria were the real enemy, and were more numerous and invisibly insidious, then the Evil Ones demolished him.

In my mind, I still remember the picture of the Elder Tinsley's death when he was shot as a result of the quail flying against his gun. On the face of it, it doesn't seem to fit into the picture. Why would the quail, representative of Good, kill the Elder Tinsley?

The answer to this comes clear now. Quail, too, have disease, and disease disrupts their neutral set-up, and disease, on that day long ago, caused the birds to strike down Tinsley's weapon, killing him, and thus, subtly, animals and insects.

And another thought in my mind is the picture of the Elder Tinsley as he lay covered with ants in a red, quivering blanket. And I wonder if perhaps they were not giving solace to him in his dying and decay,

talking in some silent mandibled tongue none of us can hear until we die. Or perhaps they are all.

The game of chess continues. Good against Evil, I hope. And I am losing.

Tonight I sit here writing and waiting, and my skin itches and softens, and Susan is on the other side of town, unaware, safe from this knowledge which I must set on paper even if it kills me. I listen to the flies, as if to detect some good message in their uneven whirring, but I hear nothing.

Even as I write, the skin of my fingers loosens and changes color and my face feels partially dry and flaking, partially wet, slippery and released from its anchorage of softening bone, my eyes water with a kind of leprosy and my skin darkens with something akin to bubonic, my stomach gripes me with sickening gastric wrenches, my tongue tastes bitter and acid, my teeth loosen in my mouth, my ears ring, and in a few minutes the structure of my fingers, the muscles, the small thin, fine bones will be enmeshed, entangled, so much fallen gelatin spread over and down between the black lettered keys of this typewriter, the flesh of me will slide like a decayed, diseased cloak from my skeleton, but I must write on and on and on until etaoïn shrdlucmfwyp . . .
cmfwaaaaa ddddddddddddddddddd . . .

The End