To Kill a Fruit Fly

By D. Benjamin Baskin

Just that morning, the assassin bug had thoughts about retiring. Not that he wasn’t doing great; he was at the top of his game. But he had this nagging feeling that he was beginning, just beginning, to lose his edge. And an assassin bug with no edge is in the wrong business.

He hadn’t always worked the trade. Not too long ago he was flipping maggots in some greasy log, barely getting by. Then one night, after a long shift, he was nursing a nectar at some dive when a cheaply dressed roach tapped him on the thorax.

“You’re an assassin bug,” said the roach.

“And you’re a master of observation,” replied the assassin bug, his rostrum deep in his drink.

“I’s just wondering what your kind is doing in a place like this,” said the roach.

“You got a problem with my kind?” said the assassin bug, removing his rostrum from his drink.

“A problem? No one who cherishes life makes problems with assassin bugs. I’s just wondering…”

“You’re wondering is getting on my nerves,” said the assassin bug, turning to face the roach.

Raising his forelegs, the roach said, “Peace, brother, I mean no harm. It’s just what with the monies you make, you should be drinking champagne in some hoity-toity joint.”

“Flippin’ maggots don’t exactly pay big bucks,” said the assassin bug.

“Flippin’ maggots? What’s a bug like you doing in a maggot joint? You could be making big bucks, I mean serious big bucks,” said the roach.

“Doin’ what?” asked the assassin bug.

“You’re funny. ‘Doin’ what?’” imitated the roach, resting his foreleg on the assassin bug’s thorax.

Said foreleg was instantly retracted when the observant roach noticed his new acquaintance’s murderous glare.

“I’ll tell you doin’ what. Killing bugs, that’s what doin’. Killing bugs and getting paid!”

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“Bugs pay other bugs money to kills bugs?” asked the assassin bug.

“All due respect, but where was you hatched? They don’t pay just any bugs. They pay assassin bugs bucks to kill bugs,” said the roach. “Big bucks, I’m tellin’ you. Tell you what. Come back here in a week, same time, and I’ll have a job lined up for you.”

“I don’t know,” said the assassin bug

“What you don’t know? Evolution has gifted you certain gifts, you might as well use ‘em. I’ll bring you an easy job, so you can see how it’s done, and how well we’re paid.”

“We’re?” asked the assassin bug.

“Well, yeah. A roach gotta eat, too. I bring the gigs, you do the gigs, we share the dough,” said the roach.

“Share?”

“Alright, I make a commission, fifty percent,” said the roach.

“Fifty percent is sharing. I’ll give you ten percent,” said the assassin bug.

“Ten percent? You call that fair?” said the roach.

“You’re not arguing with an assassin bug, are you?” said the assassin bug, leaning into the roach.

“I guess not.”

So they shook on it.

Now look at him. He wasn’t just an assassin bug, he was the assassin bug. You needed someone dead in the bug world, he was your bug. He even gave himself a new name, a nom de guerre, if you will, “Fate.” It was far more ominous than his given name, Burton. Bugs near and far shuddered to hear his name, for when Fate came a callin’…

As for the money, the roach, of blessed memory, knew what he was talking about. The assassin bug had more money than he could spend. He owned a beautiful treetop property, tastefully decorated with the finest assortment of mounted heads. For the assassin bug didn’t agree to do a job unless he got two things: top dollar and the heads of his victims.

Whenever Fate got depressed, he admired his marvelous collection of heads, which is exactly what he did that morning, what with those thoughts of retirement.

He looked at the head of the black widow above the fireplace. His first job (and the roach said it would be an easy one!). The widow’s ex-husband paid for that hit.

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On the other side of the room, the heads of an army ant queen and a termite queen, mounted together, killed on the same job. He never found out if the rich ladybug who paid for the hit had something against all queens or just those two.

The head of the praying mantis in the library. That one went down hard. One minute he’s prophesizing the end of the world, next minute he’s fighting Fate like there’s no tomorrow.

The head of the dung beetle, over the toilet, of course. No matter how much the maid scrubbed, she couldn’t get the stink out. Definitely the smelliest job.

And of course, the head of the roach. He found out his erstwhile agent was cheating on him, skimming off the top. So he fired him and killed him; or maybe it was the other way around.

There were so many more heads, most still in boxes. He’d have to get himself a bigger place.

And yet that morning, even the heads didn’t cheer him up. He had this feeling like his streak was coming to an end. He heard constant rumors of upstart assassin bugs looking to dethrone him. Bugs spoke in hushed tones of one in particular, who called herself the Assassinatrix. Fate went so far as to hire bodyguards, two burly tarantulas named Frill and Puff, who he couldn’t tell apart.

Maybe retirement wasn’t such a bad idea. In fact he was just daydreaming of an island somewhere, just him and some pretty assassin bug of the non-violent sort (maybe a Buddhist) when Frill, or maybe it was Puff, let in his new agent. This agent was a Jesus bug who was afraid of water; a strange bird, but he hadn’t embezzled yet.

The agent handed Fate a dossier, a new job. Fate grabbed it with a bit more enthusiasm than he wanted to show. He was a bit giddy, though he couldn’t say why. Could he have somehow known this would be his strangest job yet? Not to mention, his last.

“This has to be a mistake,” said Fate, looking up from the dossier. “Someone wants me to kill a fruit fly?”

“Yessir,” said the Jesus bug.

“But don’t they only live for a day?”

“Yes, boss,” said the agent.

“And, wait, I’m supposed to kill him in a week. That means he’s not even hatched yet. And woa! Look what they’re offering for the kill! Who’s behind this?”
“Apparently, it’s an inheritance issue. The poor unhatched fly’s great-great-great-great-grand… woops… one more… great grandfather ordered the hit in his will; left the funds in escrow for just this purpose.”

“Talk about cold,” said Fate.

“Yessir. So, will you do it?”

“Of course,” said Fate, rubbing his forelegs together. And to think he’d even entertained thoughts of retirement! It didn’t get easier than this. Not to mention there was the little empty nook in the powder room; a fruit fly head would look perfect there.

“Don’t forget, chief,” said his agent. “You have to kill him on that day. You let the day run out, and he dies a natural death, you don’t collect.”

Fate believed strongly in learning the ways of his targets, so he researched the lives and ways of fruit flies. But how much was there to learn about a bug that lived the entirety of a day? They’re hatched, eat rotten fruit, mate, and die. Not much to it, really. He just had to find the little bugger, on the right day, and kill him before his pathetic little life ran out on him.

The night before kill day, Fate stayed at a Grand Flyatt near the fruit fly’s ancestral home (settled by the yet-to-be-hatched fruit fly’s forebears over a month ago). He put up Frill and Puff at a nearby flea bag called Harlot’s Web; it didn’t hurt to have his henchbugs nearby, even for a job this easy.

Next morning Fate broke into the fruit fly’s little home, where the little fly sat on a little divan, reading a little book of poetry, Sylvia Splath.

The fruit fly looked up.

“You’re an assassin bug,” he said.

“How would you know, weren’t you just hatched?” asked Fate.

“Know it the same way you know how to kill. Instinct. Besides, I’m nearly an hour old. According to some calculations, I might even be older than you.”

“Oh.”

“So, what are you waiting for? Kill me already,” said the fly.

“Say what?”
“You heard me,” said the fruit fly. “Slit my throat or strangle me. Shoot me between the eyes. Pulverize my innards. Isn’t that what you nasty bugs do? Get it over with, the sooner the better.”

This was a first. He was used to bugs begging for their lives.

“Don’t you want to live?”

“Live? What do I have to live for? We’re hatched, eat rotten fruit, mate and then die, and all in a day’s time.”

A pretty good synopsis of a fruit fly’s life.

“What do you want out of life, anyhow?” asked an intrigued Fate.

“Oh that’s rich. The bug’s paid to snuff out my life, and he wants to know what I want from life?”

“As a matter of fact, he does,” insisted Fate, folding his forelegs in front of him.

“OK, I’ll tell you what I want. I want to live a life worth living, even if it’s only for a day. I want to go water-skiing. I want to eat a big, juicy steak. I want a ritzy apartment with a view of the sunset. I want bugservants who will serve me rotten fruit shakes at the clap of my feet! I want to meet fun chicks and get married; not some fly-by-night affair, but a real shindig. I want to dance the jitterbug until I can dance no more and fall asleep looking at the stars. I want to live a life that my grandkids will talk about to their grandkids, who will tell their grandkids, who will…”

“I get the idea. But all this you wanna do in a day?”

“What choice do I have? Other bugs have all the time in the world. Not me,” he said.

“Well, that’s quite a day and quite a life, but it’ll require funds,” said Fate.

“Well, that’s just it, my trust fund is sort of locked up due to a legal fight… oh, wait, it wasn’t my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather who contracted the hit, was it?”

“Well, uh, no,” said Fate. “It was actually his lawyer.”

“I knew it,” the fruit fly said glumly. “If I had any guts, I’d take my own life.”

“How about I kill you and make it look like a suicide?” offered Fate, half jokingly.

“If there’s one thing worse than an assassin bug, it’s an assassin bug with a sense of humor,” groaned the sad little fly.

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“Now you sound like my dad,” said Fate.

“So, what’s it gonna be, Killer? You gonna do your job or what?”

Fate should have squashed the little guy then and there, but there was something moving about the fruit fly. Maybe it was the weird thoughts about retiring, or maybe it was the fly’s eyes, which had to be the saddest he’d ever seen (except for the ones belonging to the Geocoris he took out the previous spring, the one with the hyperactive tear ducts). Goodness, he was turning to complete mush inside. Before he could rein his thoughts in, his mouth went rattling off:

“I tell you what, little guy. I have funds. I’ll help you have the day of your life, or the life of your day. I’ll even pay for it.”

Had his mouth actually just said that? It really was time to retire.

“And you’ll still kill me?” asked the fruit fly.

“Of course, but in the evening, an hour or so before you’d die anyhow.”

“Really, you’d do this for me?”

Fate paused for a moment, and then as if resigned to a fate he could not avoid, he said, “Yes.”

“You’re the best!” cried the fruit fly. He raised his eyes and tiny forelegs to the heavens and said, “Thank you great-great-great-great-great-great-grandpa for sending me this… this… angel!”

Then he threw down his book of poetry, flew out of his divan and gave Fate as tight a hug as his stunted legs would allow.

“Now, now,” said Fate, patting the little fly on his head.

“Oh, and one more thing,” the fruit fly said mid-hug

“Yes,” said Fate, looking down.

“I don’t want to be known as just a fruit fly. I want a name, a real name. From now on, call me ‘Gramps.’”

“You got it, Gramps,” said Fate.

And so, accompanied by Frill and Puff, Fate set out to give Gramps the day of his life.

They started with water-skiing at a nearby vernal pool. Fate hitched Gramps to a water bug friend of his who helped him out with aquatic hit jobs. To see little Gramps skimming the
surface of the frothy water was to see joy incarnate. And such a natural! Frill and Puff gave water-skiing the good ol’ college try, but what they lacked in buoyancy, they made up for in their profound lack of coordination. They spent the rest of the morning on the beach shaking the water from their hair, much to the consternation of the sunbathers.

Then off for some steaks and shakes at the greasy log where Fate used to work. True it was rump of buffalo beetle and not real steak, but with all due respect to instinct, Gramps wouldn’t know the difference. And the wait staff, so honored to have the now infamous Fate back at his old place of employment, treated the fruit fly like a prince. Every time Gramps took but a sip of his worm slime shake, they refilled his glass. They gave up trying to keep up with Frill and Puff.

Then it was time for apartment hunting. Fate knew of a newly opened penthouse suite in the exclusive Crown Terrace Condos, at the top of the tallest tree in the forest. He had been eyeing the place for himself. The leasing manager, an uptight walking stick in a silly uniform, was at first unwilling to sign any lease shorter than six months.

“I don’t care if the little bloke has a life span of three minutes, that is our stated policy,” say the prickly stick.

But after some delicate negotiations, the stickler made an exception and offered a one-week lease. It’s truly amazing how even the toughest negotiator can succumb to the charms of an assassin bug flanked by two tarantulas.

“I love it!” cried Gramps, flitting about the expansive terrace. “The terrace will be a perfect place for a sunset wedding!”

“Wedding? You haven’t met a girl yet,” said Fate. “And are you sure you’re ready?”

“Hey, I’m already eight hours old and not getting any younger,” said Gramps. “I’m ready to meet some lady bugs.”

Fate realized that sometime between water skiing and steaks, his little fruit fly had grown up. It happened so fast, he thought, as he wiped a tear from his eye.

“Come on!” cried Gramps. “There’s no time to waste. Let’s go find the ladies!”

As they were about to leave the penthouse, Frill said, “Boss, you want I should stay behind and decorate the place for the upcoming festivities?”

“Sure, Puff,” said Fate.

“I can stay, too?” asked Puff.

“No! Someone has to come along and protect me,” said Fate.
“Not fair! Frill always gets to decorate,” whined Puff, or maybe it was Frill.

“I don’t want to hear about it, Fruff,” said Fate. “You’re coming with me and that’s all there is to it.”

“Well, then, I get to serve the crudité at the party,” said Puff, stomping several feet.

“Fine,” said Fate.

“And Frill doesn’t get to help,” declared Fluff, er, Puff, crossing several arms.

“Fine!” Yelled Fate, stomping out.

They headed over to a popular fruit fly hangout, The Rotten Mango. It was mid afternoon, but the place was already swarming. A small but loud three hundred-piece band was riling up the crowd, which, to Fate’s surprise, contained a good number of non fruit flies.

“I thought only fruit flies frequented fruity bars!” yelled Fate over the din.

“No way!” shouted Gramps. “Everyone knows fruit flies know how to party. It’s our motto: eat, drink, propagate and be merry, for tomorrow you’re dead.”

Fate found himself sucked into the frenzy. In the course of an hour, he drank quantities of rotten fruit shake, danced with members of at least ten different genera and made a commitment to several mosquitos to invest in a plot of swampy property. And was that Puff doing the tango with a fuzzy caterpillar?

But in all the fun, he had a sense he was being watched. Considering his line of work, he probably should’ve paid attention to this sense, but before he could, Gramps buzzed over with a different fruit fly under each of six arms.

“I’ve met the girls of my dreams,” he said, introducing several of his lady friends. “Their brothers are the band.”

“All of them?”

“No, some are in trash collection. Anyhow, we’re getting married.”

“To which one?” Not that it mattered; they all looked the same.

“To all of them, you silly!”

Then in a voice that far exceeded his size, Gramps yelled:
“To the penthouse! Come one, come all to our wedding celebrations. There’ll be drinks, music and dancing till you drop!!”

A great yell went up as the bar emptied and a great procession followed the fruit fly and his brides-to-be.

As they proceeded to the penthouse, Gramps confided to Fate, “Don’t tell their fathers, but they’re all with eggs! Talk about a real shotguns wedding.”

True to his word, Frill had decorated the penthouse to the hilt, with the help of several silk worms. And just as the sun was setting over the trees, Gramps got married to the flies of his dreams. The mantis Fate got to officiate wasn’t exactly the praying type; he botched up the words and made several attempts to marry himself to one of the brides, but in the end Gramps was married. Fate was best bug, and he cried like a baby when he gave his friend away.

The rest was a blur of dancing, drinking and revelry. But for all the diversions Fate couldn’t shake the feeling he was being watched. Would that he had acted on that feeling! But by the time he found out its source, it was too late. For he found himself, in the middle of the dance floor, face-to-face with his nemesis, the Assassinatrix. They circled each in midst of the dance floor, each one bracing for attack. Somehow, Fate didn’t feel as sharp as usual; like a water bug out of water. Must’ve been all the rotten fruit shakes.

If I’m meant to die tonight, so be it, thought Fate fatefully. At least he had given Gramps the day of his life.

But instead of trying to kill him, the Assasinatrix smiled and said, “Wow, you really know how to throw a party. But can you dance?

Perhaps she was the Buddhist of his dreams.

“I do a killer jitterbug,” he said, winking.

She laughed and they began to dance. He could see Puff and Frill making their way over to him from different sides of the terrace, but he waved them off. Killing was not on the agenda at that moment.

The two assassin bugs danced until well after midnight, when the Assassinatrix had to leave for a job. Fate too had a job; it was time to find Gramps.

Shortly afterwards the assassin bug and fruit fly sat side by side in lounge chairs looking at the stars.
Fate looked over to Gramps and noticed that he really looked like a gramps. His follicles were white, his big eyes cloudy and his wings wilted.

“Where are the wives?”

“Taking care of the grandkids. Their parents needed a night off.”

“You’ve got grandkids already? You don’t mess around, do you?”

Then looking up at the stars, Fate said, “Well, friend, it’s time I killed you. I’ve held up my end of the bargain. It was a good day, no?”

“A good day? It was a good life!” said Gramps. “But, friend, let’s first have one more rotten fruit shake, and then you can do your job.”

“Fair enough,” said Fate. He was enjoying watching the stars with his friend.

Gramps clapped his legs and two bugservants brought shakes.

Fate took several deep draughts. He was thirsty, and they were good.

Suddenly he felt drowsy.

“Wow, these shakes really pack a punch. If you don’t mind, I’ll drop off for a few seconds. Do me a favor and wake me up in a bit so I can do my job,” Fate said, barely finishing his sentence before falling asleep.

“No problem, friend,” whispered the fruit fly, patting his friend’s arm.

Then from under his wing Gramps pulled out a syringe with a needle no bigger than one of the follicles on his back. Leaning over, he gently injected a green fluid into Fate’s side. The assassin bug stirred, fell back asleep, then suddenly convulsed in his chair for several moments, before settling back down, where he lay absolutely still.

The fruit fly nodded and fell asleep.

A little later Gramps woke up. He was cold and damp with dew; his joints ached with age. Using his remaining energy, he leaned over and felt the cold, rigid body of his friend, the assassin bug.

“I did it,” he whispered. “I, a simple fruit fly, killed an assassin bug. Now my grandkids will have something to talk about, and they’ll tell their grandkids, who’ll tell their grandkids, who’ll tell their…”

And with a smile the fruit fly drifted off, this time for good.