A Metamorphosis

By Margaret Van Every

though superior

in the great chain of being

humans expire

no differently than roaches

belly up, facing the light

Agatha already has her right foot in the tub, well on her way to taking a shower, when her eye trips over a roach in the classic death pose lying near her left foot. It can't be easy, weak and near death, she muses, to roll over like that if you're built like a tank. It must be something they've learned from watching roaches who've gone before. She asks herself whether Lupita will think less of her if she leaves the roach there for her. She'll be coming in a couple of days to clean. What the hell, it's her job, says Agatha out loud, thereby strengthening her resolve. Why should Lupita be insulted if I leave her a roach? You might even say it's in her job description.

On the other hand, leaving it might be a bad reflection on me. What kind of person would not even dispose of their own defunct roach? It only involves bending over, scooping it up, and sending it to its last reward down the toilet.

Agatha postpones the decision. She's had planned to step into a relaxing shower when she just happened to notice this corpse on the floor. She can pretend not to have noticed it. Or pretend that it died sometime after the shower. In her state of undress it's too far to walk to the utility room for a dustpan and broom.

Nonetheless, she makes up her mind not to let Lupita find her out, how lazy she really is, how tolerant of filth. A roach on the floor, left there until Lupita stumbles on it, so to speak, in a state of partial decomposition—it could undermine her diligence in cleaning the house. Agatha resolves to do what she has to do, but after the shower.

And so at last she lifts that left foot into the tub to join its mate. She luxuriates in the pulse of water on her skin and lathers up her silver hair, soap running down her face. At that very moment, she is certain she feels hairy, scratchy roach feet scurry up her ankle and calf and then pause as its command center waves its antennae and strategizes where to go next. The problem is that she can't see it because shampoo is in her eyes, which she is trying to wash out with the left hand while swatting at her calf with her right. She's aware these jerky motions may cause her to slip in the tub and fracture her brittle bones, and that could ultimately lead to her death. She's read about women who slip in the tub, break their hip or pelvis, and have to lie there on their back for hours, maybe days, until someone comes looking for them.

Meanwhile, the shower keeps running and hot water turns to cold. Agatha shivers to contemplate the potential havoc caused by a single roach. When she can finally open her eyes, she is astonished and maybe even dismayed to find no roach in the tub. She peers over the side of the tub and there it is where she left it, rigor mortis having set safely in. What could ever have made me believe a roach was running up my leg, she asks herself, and yet the sensation of running roach feet was unmistakable.

Agatha remembers having had repetitive roach delusions in college and cramming for final exams. Her eyes would be focused on the book when suddenly a roach zipped across the floor, daring her to drop everything and step on it. She saw it out of the corner of her eye, but when she snapped her head around to get a really good look, it was gone. Now, after all these years and far more intimately, the phantom roach had returned, daring to actually touch her. And even though its brain was small, the phantom roach was a mastermind of psychological torture. This time it stopped at the knee, but what if . . . ?

Lacking language, perhaps the roach was only trying to get her attention, she rationalizes, begging for proper disposal. But what would that consist of? Was the wastebasket good enough? What about flushing? Torching? Agatha reminds herself that while primates took millions of years to evolve, roaches were near perfect from the start. She imagines the Sistine Chapel with the power-charged finger of God stretched toward an antenna, and with that she is transformed with new respect. She pulls herself together, dries off, and gets dressed, allowing herself only positive thoughts and visualizing the task successfully accomplished.

Plucking a single snow-white winding sheet from the Kleenex box, Agatha stoops to her task. As she begins to enfold the corpse tenderly in its shroud, she sees the legs start moving. Not feebly, like you'd expect of something in the throes of death, but frantically like they're running the 100-yard dash upside down and in mid-air. The antennae are rotating, too, picking up vibes, assessing the terrain. This roach has revived after a good nap, leaving Agatha all over again not knowing what to do, for she doesn't have it in her to step on a living, perfectly functional roach. She walks away. Only two days remain before Lupita will scoop it up without a second thought.

Tuesday morning arrives and Agatha goes to check on her roach, but the body is nowhere to be seen. She scans the floor. Did her playful friend scoot to some other part of the bathroom, propelling himself with a scratchy foot? Her search is interrupted by something like a cosmic snicker booming *Foolish crone! The one you seek is NOT HERE!* Frantically her eyes comb every inch of the tiles until the mystery is revealed. Over there by the commode, a tiny ant on a

mission is shouldering, like the scythe of the Grim Reaper, a shiny black leg.