

Why Did the Fly Fly? Because the Spider Spied Her

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I just swatted at a fly. I say "swatted at" because moving flies are hard to actually swat, though you can some times derail them or even make some glancing contact that discourages them from continuing to fly in your airspace. Anyway, I swatted at him* from a relaxed position on the upper bunk, never lifting more than just my hand to dismiss him. I emphasize these details specifically to contrast with the hyper-spazzy reactions I described in my last two bug-centric posts ("I Beat You, Bitch!" and "Thugs, Drugs, and Bugs", July 2026). Why should my mild approach to this fly today be so different from my abject, squealing terror in the face of an imaginary dead cockroach or the primordial beast that emerged from the depths of the sink drain to apparently permanently invade my consciousness a couple weeks ago? I had to think about that, so now, I'm writing about it.

The fly that was bothering me today was a small one, and a slow one. He wasn't a typical housefly, which darts around very quickly; more like a fruit fly, a lazy, floating fly. He made no abrupt directional changes or wild accelerations, but just sort of cruised. Maybe his laid back slowness softened my disposition? But if so, then why my existential freak-out at the big black sewer bug that crawled so slowly up the side of the sink, then just chilled for a couple minutes while I shook with terror and disgust and desperately tried to think of a way to either rid my space of it or remove myself permanently from the space? No, slowness alone was not the issue.

Some years ago an acquaintance of mine offered his theory that we value other lives based primarily on their size. He thought that, despite many exceptions to the rule, we are generally much more comfortable killing smaller creatures than large ones. I rejected this theory; that is, I wanted to reject it, because it did violence to my self-serving idea that I value all living things equally, or at least not on a sliding scale measured almost entirely by mere carbon mass. But something about his idea rang uncomfortably true. I decided not to think much more about it.

Today I realize I can't deny he was right. In fact, it's painfully obvious (probably why I'd forced myself to just put it entirely out of mind rather than sit with it further.) Almost

anyone will kill mice before they'll kill cats, and they're lying to say that's just because mice ruin things. They'd still kill the mouse with relatively little compunction, even if it clearly is it or cannot do any actual damage. And importantly, our reactions to others killing mice, regardless of their reasons, will invariably be qualitatively different from our reactions to hearing they'd killed cats instead. Or turtles. Or even pigeons (unless you're a New Yorker).

We ~~kill~~ kill largish bugs with less emotional consequence than smallish snakes, generally speaking. And we make almost no effort to avoid killing countless hundreds of creatures each day that trod the ground beneath our feet. We roadkill squirrels with hardly a second thought, whereas we might even stop to see if a coyote we've hit is still alive. There's clearly a size-related hierarchy to our valuation of life, no matter what we want to think. And not just in terms of what we're willing to kill, but also what we're willing to tolerate. At the smallest scale that's especially apparent. Myself, I don't like to kill flies. Yet I have, many times. Very little remorse usually follows, though I do make efforts to just direct them outside if possible. Either way, I'm not so disgusted and upset by them that I can't bear their presence. I've wiped out seemingly entire colonies of ants at times. On the other hand, I'll also let long ant trails alone, even coexist with them sometimes with no compulsion to destroy them at all. Why? They're so small. If they stay to their trail, not invading my food or drink, then I hardly even notice them. I just don't care. But that cockroach carcass I THOUGHT I saw, and the huge whatever-bug I definitely saw — those bastards commanded my fullest attention, and I could not rest until I was sure both were gone from my life. Why? It must be partly related to size, no? They sickened me, disturbed me deeply. Their ugliness triggered something ancient in me. But ants I find mostly unobtrusive. That said... I've also seen full-page, glossy photos of ants up close, and I KNOW if I saw something like THAT on a larger scale, I would absolutely implode. It needn't be horror-movie huge, and it doesn't have to pose any physical threat to me; it simply has to be big enough for me to discern its awful alien features, to intuit some heft to its individual parts. Same for fleas. Same for flies, even that slow little guy I nonchalantly shooed away today, unconcerned with its proximity so long as he wasn't right up in my face. But suppose that same fly, with the same mild temperament, moving at exactly the same speed, were 50 or 100 times larger? How would I react then? Oh, believe me,

I harbor no illusions on that point. I would fucking LOSE IT. I'd yell, and I'd run (if there was anywhere to run to). Stuck in a cage with it, I would almost certainly hide under the blankets, even in the most extreme heat, until the door was opened again and I could make a proper escape. I wouldn't return until I was sure it had gone. But I'd also be a whole lot more reluctant to smash it, or otherwise mortally wound it, than I would that little fly who visited today. Infinitely more reluctant. Not so much from concern for its life, but then again, yes, that too, in a way. I would more inherently understand or empathise with its suffering from a crushed thorax or lost limb or wing. It's likely pain would upset me. Any visible evidence of damage, any sight of its internal tissues or fluids would greatly distress me. A very tiny fly, on the other hand, can be crushed with a wad of Kleenex and leave nothing but a nearly invisible blotch. It will make no noise, no cataclysmic crunch signalling my responsibility for the snuffing out of life. I'm not sure why, maybe it's an evolved psychological protective mechanism (due to the utter unavoidability of killing tiny creatures en masse), but the savage mauling of barely visible animals just doesn't affect me much, and certainly not without a pointed and intentionally sustained consciousness of their lives.

I'm just rambling now... do you have any thoughts on this stuff? Please share!

* (I'll call the little fly "him" because, why not? I think the neutral use of the English masculine pronoun is still acceptable for non-human creatures, right? And even though it appears to be in vain to keep hoping for the adoption of a brand new, invented, ungendered 3rd pronoun in place of "it" that we can comfortably use for humans, I still reject the abominable substitution of the singular "they" for just one person or creature.)