

ELECTRICAL CHARGE

By Craig Bezant

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As Michael woke, his ears captured a buzzing sound. His tired eyes tried to place it, but the blurry bedroom was quite empty. His wife had already left for work – couldn't have been her electric toothbrush. And he hadn't taken to using his electric shaver mid-dream, had he? So what was making the noise?

A fly, he thought. Ever since they'd moved to Australia a day hadn't passed without a thumb-sized, dirty black fly hovering over their skin or food, circling around their rooms and beating against walls and windows in a loud announcement of its ridiculous existence.

His vision centred on the domed light above the bed. The noise seemed concentrated there. Perhaps the fly was trapped between glass and ceiling.

Michael pushed his bed sheets aside and jumped up, arms outstretching as if ready to rip the light from its fixture. Being over six foot tall, he could have done this. A simple adjustment of the clasps sufficed though.

He took the glass casing down with a quick jerk, eager to surprise the fly with his gigantic face and evil glare. Nothing was there though – not even any insect remains – though the fixtures had only been installed a month ago.

Still, the buzzing sound...

Michael examined the light bulb and exposed area of ceiling. Nothing appeared out of place, from his lay experience, though the sound was definitely distinct in the

general area. Soft now, as if hidden, smothered, as if above the ceiling board and inside the roof itself...

Michael gagged as a repulsive thought placed the carcass of a cat or rat or God-knows-what up there, centimetres from his head, its body being helped in decomposition by not one but a horde of ravenous flies.

He quickly placed the casing back, and went into the bathroom. Had a shower. Tried to get his thoughts and day back on track.

By lunchtime he had retained normalcy. He had been filling in some spreadsheets in a back room he'd converted into a home office when his stomach reminded him it needed to eat more than itself. Making a sandwich, Michael moved into the lounge room and turned on the television. He ate, eyes unfocused on the inane chatter of a talk show.

Then he heard it again.

That soft buzzing.

His gaze shot up to the room's light.

Again, after removing the domed casing there was nothing recognisably amiss. Again, the first thought Michael's mind conjured was of an animal's carcass providing sustenance for a family of flies. Tangent scenarios had him imagine an entire roof full of dead animals, a pet store trapped between the plaster and beams, and Michael was soon rushing to the bathroom with bile his objectionable response.

He called his wife to query whether she had heard such a sound before leaving, with the further theory that perhaps her attention had been diverted whilst the electrician had conducted his maintenance. Perhaps the man had installed some faulty fitting that needed replacing almost immediately, so he'd be called back and swiftly increase his bill. Perhaps it was a conspiracy amongst electricians as garnish for their annual salary. Perhaps Michael was just being paranoid, looking for a scapegoat – maybe the buzzing was in his head. Michael quickly put down the handset before his wife answered the call, knowing she would use such apparent lunacy to humiliate him for as long as possible.

He tried to return to some accounts in his home office, but couldn't relax. He opened an internet browser on his computer and typed in an address he'd memorised

years earlier, after learning his wife deemed him sexually desirable on special occasions only, at best. Moments later, he was staring at a screen of scantily-clad women, trying to decide which size, shape and ethnicity would suit to divert his attention.

He was about to click on a sultry brunette when the screen flickered. He would have thought nothing of it, had not the page then rolled off its vertical hold. Moments later, a rainbow of colours saturated the pictures, making the brown hair an orange flame. The arrowhead for his mouse shot across the screen on its own free will. Then the screen went black.

And the buzzing noise started again.

Michael jumped up and screamed his way out of the room. He ran to the games room and burst into the liquor cabinet, grabbing a bottle of scotch and a tumbler. He ripped off the lid, looked around with wary eyes, and told himself the noise had ceased.

He disregarded the tumbler and pressed the bottle to his lips, swigging the throat-burning liquid. He slammed it down, gasped, and looked up at the room's light fixture.

'Buzz,' he whispered. 'I dare you to fucking buzz.'

The light obliged.

Michael hurled the scotch bottle at the noise. He ran from the room as shattered glass rained to the carpeting. He stopped in the kitchen and took some pills from an overhead cabinet, fumbling with the cap before wrenching it off. The pills were a new form of aspirin, their prescription forged but their effect worth the risk. Michael downed them and waited. But the buzzing noise seemed to get louder.

He grabbed the telephone and dialled.

'Yes, boss?' a tired voice asked on the receiver's end.

'I've been doing the accounts,' Michael said, trying to ignore the noise overhead. 'You're a little short –'

'I'm trying to fix that now.'

'No. Bring the remaining product here, to me, and we'll call it even.'

'Sure thing. Is anyone...?'

Michael swore he heard a clicking sound on the line.

'I'm alone. Wife's at work.'

No. A humming noise.

‘Ten minutes then.’

No. A buzzing noise! Michael terminated the call and threw the phone down. It cracked against tiling. He withheld a curse as he thought about the way his mind would be altered in a quarter of an hour. He began to step out the kitchen but froze whilst trying to choose the direction, not wanting his ears to be assaulted any more.

He stepped outside the front of the house, hoping other insects would counter any passing fly in the yard. Rain seemed to be looming on the horizon, as if nature had coordinated with his mood in advance. He looked across the street and saw a plumber’s van parked in his neighbour’s driveway.

At least I’m not the only one with problems, Michael thought.

A burly man was hopping out the van, edging a clipboard onto his waist and dropping to the ground with amplified gravity. The neighbour, Sarah Wills, edged outside to greet him, her blonde hair angelically shining against her white bath robe.

I’ll fix her sink later, Michael thought, thankful past memories with Sarah could only bring a grin to her face. She’d initiated their affair days after he’d arrived in Australia – she said his foreign accent melted her. He realised all neighbours weren’t as... accommodating – heck, he hadn’t even spoken to those on either side of his house – but if there was one reason to love a stinking hot country you’d shuffled your life to...

She looked up at Michael and waved. He pointed to his doorway and she nodded, smiling.

At least *something* was going right. After the plumber left she would come round for a more thorough assessment on her pipes. Michael was about to whoop to the sky in jubilation but several drops of rain hit his open palm. He moaned and ran to his front door, just making it before sticky, humid rain could drench him.

Michael stepped inside, shut the door, and waited.

Finally, there was silence. No buzzing. Just normal, hour-extending silence. As if any movement would alter this, Michael waited in the entryway until the doorbell rang.

‘Here’s the goods. Hope you can sell it.’

‘Ta, lovely. Consider your account balanced.’

‘See you next quarter.’

Michael looked down at the small cardboard box in his hands and decided it was time to brave his lounge room. He sat on his dark blue sofa and placed the box on an old, scratched coffee table left behind by previous renters. Reaching into the table’s drawer, he withdrew a small hand mirror and pair of scissors. He ran the scissors along the box’s sealant. A flap popped up. He eagerly grabbed it, was about to open it.

Stopped.

Waited.

Nope. No buzzing sounds.

He tore open the rest of the box and grabbed out the first layer of contents, removing them from their plastic wrappers, placing them along the coffee table in a long line.

Michael took the first item, opened it, squeezed it on his hands and rubbed it into the skin on his fingers.

Hand cream.

He took the next item and unclipped it, then grabbed the hand mirror and propped it before his face. He dabbed some of the product on his face. Blush. To make his cheek bones radiant.

In the short time since moving to Australia, Michael had edged his way into the Avon world, becoming king of his area in the distribution of personal products. So what if he enjoyed testing items from the latest catalogue? He was entitled to. It made him look nice. Appealing. Couldn’t get more metrosexual...

He looked at a bright-red lipstick pointing up towards him. He reached out and grabbed it, brought it to his lips –

Stopped as the domed light above started buzzing again.

Michael jumped up and screamed to the heavens. Why was his house being singled out for invasion? Or was the electrician’s work so bad the wires in the roof were creating their own sparkly lightshow for the hidden insects and rodents? He wanted answers. He wanted –

The doorbell rang.

Sarah already?

Michael ran to the door, straightened himself, opened up with a carefully-practised look of debonair.

Groaned.

It wasn't Sarah.

Smiled.

It was the electrician – or at least, his uniform and nametag suggested so.

'Saved me a call,' Michael started. 'All these lights –'

'Yes, the lights,' the electrician interrupted. 'I have been notified they need an adjustment.' He looked down at a clipboard in his hands. 'What I have come for though, Mister Campbell, is to discuss payment arrangements for the bill you are about to incur.'

'Bill? I paid your bill, and I want a refund.' Michael opened the screen door, stepping outside. 'Your workmanship –'

'Is so thorough it has taken you this long to notice the extra installations. Would have taken longer too if they didn't overheat and start that buzzing noise.'

'Installations?'

'The cameras.'

'The...?' Michael glanced back into his house. He tried to laugh. 'You're havin' me on, right? Why would you –'

'Nine percent of people remain at home these days, whether unemployed or running a home business. Did you know that? Nearly two million people in Australia. Ever wonder what they get up to?'

Michael had a sinking feeling inside his stomach. If there really were cameras then...the buzzing.... zooming in... No. This was a joke.

'I think you should leave. I'll get another guy to fix your shite work.'

'But the bill?'

'Not my fault if your accounts aren't up to date. Good day.'

'But payment could save you.'

'Save?' Michael forced a laugh, then turned to the screen door, ready to shut this crazy tradesman from his life.

'The government won't like what I have to tell them, Mister Campbell.'

‘The *who?*’ Michael had been about to step inside, but the electrician’s words made him freeze. Slowly he turned, feeling his right hand move up his cheek to rub the blush.

‘Extra-marital affair.’ The electrician pointed to a list on the clipboard. ‘Frequent masturbation, downloading illegal content from websites, storing pornography on your computer, taking falsely prescribed drugs, watching television instead of working in your home office, drinking during office hours, wearing women’s makeup, wearing women’s under –’

‘Stop! Okay.’ Michael was fuming. He had never wanted to harm another individual as much as the man before him, especially since he’d apparently invaded his life, especially since he was grinning widely while silently mouthing the rest of the list, but the man was quite large and Michael knew rage only accounted for one part of a battle. ‘How do I make this go away?’ he asked, sighing in defeat.

‘Pay the bill.’

‘What bill?’

The man turned his clipboard around and pointed to a figure on the paper. ‘This is per month.’

Michael gasped, then nodded slowly.

‘You should have read your immigration laws closer, Mister Campbell. This is a new initiative of the Australian government, to check all residents are abiding by the rules.’

‘This is a conspiracy. You’re invading my privacy.’

‘Move back then.’ The electrician appeared to notice the hurt look on Michael’s face and added: ‘Look. Sorry, but it’s part of my job description now. I complain, someone replaces me.’ He withdrew a pen from his pocket and altered the figures on the list. ‘Tell you what, you’re not a terrorist or anything. In fact, you’re pretty normal in this country. Cause I like you, I won’t pass the info on to my superiors, if...’ He pointed to the revision ‘...you pay this once-off fee.’

‘Does it get rid of the cameras?’

‘No. I have to schedule a repair for that next week, to stop the buzzing. But you can alter your life to please them – just where they can see you.’

Michael hesitated, looked around for help, sighed when he realised he was still alone and nodded. ‘Okay.’

‘I will return to talk to your wife. That is, if you don’t want her details now? An extra hundred, for you.’

‘Forget it.’

‘Good day then.’

‘Never was.’

The electrician turned and walked to his van at the top of the street. Michael was about to use a reserve of rage to chase him down, but as he stepped onto his front lawn he noticed Sarah across the road, clutching her face to hide a stem of tears. The plumber beside her was counting a wad of cash, ticking something on his clipboard. Michael looked away, to his right. He edged closer to the street as his gaze lingered on its length. At every second house there was a vehicle from an assortment of utilities. At every second doorway stood an enraged resident and a worker with a clipboard.

Two million home dwellers.

Plenty of once-off fees.

Conspiracy indeed.