

Minor Fears

By Eugene Boria

Forget Blimpies or Subways. As far as Eddie Vargas was concerned, the best sandwich money could buy was made in All-American 24 hour Hero, a block south of Haven Memorial Hospital, on Euclid Avenue. Eddie would watch, enraptured, as Puerto Rican hands lovingly labored over each paper-thin slice of ham. Mayonnaise was applied liberally to both sides of the bread. Fresh, crisp lettuce (Not shredded, which Eddie despised, but large, full leaves) was neatly placed on top of dripping tomato slices. And, because Eddie was a regular customer, extra swiss cheese is thrown on before the entire masterpiece is wrapped in paper and entrusted to his waiting hands. He always had to restrain himself from ripping into it on the walk to work. Sometimes he lost the battle.

This morning, he made it to work, sandwich intact. Eddie was an orderly at Haven Memorial, beginning his shift at 5 am. When his lunch hour came around at 9 am, Eddie unwrapped the sandwich and gently placed it on the desk, slightly to his left. He reached into his bag and pulled out a bottle of Pepsi, opened it, and set it down on his right. In between the two, he placed a book. He propped it open to his spot by placing a heavy desk stapler across the top. The book was the latest in a series by Eddie's favorite horror writer, John Sage. This one dealt with a small town visited by the animated corpses of recently deceased loved ones. Its eerily satiric title was "Living with the Dead".

Eddie Vargas leaned back in his chair, stretched and yawned loudly. This was very close to a perfection. Great sandwich, cold beverage, good book, peace, quiet and solitude...

Although Eddie wasn't quite as alone as he might like to be.

The room that Eddie chose to enjoy his lunch in had other visitors. Mostly, they were safely locked away in the rows of refrigerated lockers that lined the far wall. At least half of those were occupied. One guest, completely covered by a white sheet, lay on a stretcher. He was in the process of being "worked on". Eddie didn't know the exact nature of the work being done, and quite frankly, he was glad all such work was done in the Autopsy room next door. This was just a holding area. Eddie had gingerly rolled the stretcher to the other side of the room, where he could watch it peripherally, but it didn't command his attention. You had to watch the bodies, he knew, to make sure they didn't rise.

The ridiculous fear of dead things rising was part of the reason Eddie had chosen to eat here. Most people saw him as the dark skinned orderly with a ready smile hidden behind a cheesy mustache, always friendly, ever joking. Many thought that the middle aged Dominican man was religious, which would explain the seemingly permanent smile. His therapist, Dr. Stewart, knew that the famous Vargas smile hid a multitude of fears and concerns, both great and small. He'd diagnosed Eddie Vargas as a borderline OCD sufferer with various other syndromes and phobias thrown into the mix. Most of these, Eddie knew, were harmless and perfectly

normal. Minor fears like the fear of the dark, loud noises, sharp objects, and several other tiny things. In fact, Eddie was a voracious reader of horror novels who actually reveled in most of his minor fears, a trait he shared with most of the true fans of horror that he'd met. Part of the joy of reading great horror or watching suspenseful movies was in the identification and subsequent facing of a phobia. It gives a person the chance to shine a light on the monsters in the closet, and therefore to embrace them. Dr. Stewart disagreed with Eddie's assessment. He wondered if it might be too soon in the treatment to begin confronting deep rooted fears, but Eddie considered these little confrontations to be harmless, even fun. Besides, he rather enjoyed the puzzled looks on people's faces when he told them where he ate. He liked being thought of as mildly eccentric by his peers. So, in an effort to confront his minor, niggling aversion to dead things, Eddie Vargas read John Sage novels and ate his lunch in a room full of dead people.

But that wasn't the only reason. This was also an ideal place to hide from Monroe and Jackie, the other two members of the cleaning staff and the absolute banes of his existence.

But perhaps "hide" was the wrong way of putting it. They were, after all his friends, He'd been to each of their houses, and they'd been to his. They'd gone to movies, basketball games, and strip clubs together. They'd shared many nights swapping life stories over beer and fine weed. But, even with all that, Eddie had to admit that he sometimes got sick of incessant jibes and jokes. They were constantly picking at him, like a school of fish nibbling away at some dead animal in the water until it was picked clean to the bone. As befitting their status as masters of the practical joke, they had catalogued most of Eddie's little peeves, and used them all to full advantage. There were no sacred boundaries to their pranks. Monroe, the more subtle of the pair, loved to catch Eddie alone in a room. He would quietly reach in and flick the light switch off, then casually walk away while Eddie stumbled around in the dark, cursing loudly. Jackie preferred a more direct approach. He would run up on Eddie and grab him from behind. He would do this whether Eddie was alone or in crowded rooms. Sometimes Eddie's yelp had a domino effect, eliciting similar surprised yelps and howls from all over the room. On those occasions, no one looked at Jackie. They all glared angrily at Eddie while Jackie smiled broadly.

As bad as their daily pranks were separately, when they put their heads together, their strategic strike-like practical jokes became the stuff of legend. Everyone still talked about the dinner party in honor of Eddie's In-law's fortieth wedding anniversary. At the height of the festivities, while the happy couple enjoyed yet another toast to the longevity of their relationship, An old woman wearing a gold satin robe and far too much makeup sauntered behind the dais unmolested. When she stood behind Eddie's father-in-law, She let the robe slip to the floor revealing and incredibly wrinkled body covered only by a gold thong that matched the robe. Sagging tits and all, she bounced onto the horrified man's lap, proclaiming for all of the invited guests that her dubious talents and been purchased by Eddie Vargas, the proud son-in-law. As

she began to warble a dreadful version of Marilyn Monroe's birthday song – apparently, no one told her what the occasion was - Eddie's soon-to-be ex-wife fled the room in tears. Her father almost threw the old stripper onto the floor in his haste to be rid of her. His wife, Eddie's mother-in-law, actually covered her eyes like the monkey who sees no evil. Eddie himself ran after his wife, yelling denials, only to come face to face with his two friends, standing by the exit, practically holding each other up and roaring with of laughter.

Yep, he thought wearily, those are my friends.

He supposed he had grown accustomed to being the lowest third of the three. He was not as witty as Monroe, nor as brazen as Jackie, and he didn't have the devious instincts of either of them. Although they were not *always* picking on him, and although they had shared some good times, Eddie had resigned himself to the occasional role of straight man, or patsy.

Eddie's ruminations were interrupted when he heard a light tapping at the bottom of the door, as if someone who stood only two feet tall were knocking. The door had a big, reinforced glass window in it, but there was no one there. Visions burst into his head of all of the small monsters he'd read about or seen in movies. He imagined murderous leprechauns and knife wielding fairy-folk, ridiculously cartoonish African fetish dolls that carried spears and chased young women around their apartments. Any one of these could have been lurking behind the door and the familiar thrill of nervousness began in the back of his neck, running straight down his spine. He shivered a little, inwardly amused at himself, and slowly turned to face the door. Then he heard an eerie voice from beyond the door, which, in a bad impression of Boris Karloff, said, "They're coming to get you, Eddie..."

Great. Eddie breathed a sigh of mixed relief and annoyance. *Those assholes, he thought, they found me.*

"Go away, you morons," he said to the door, returning his attention to his sandwich and book, "I'm on lunch. It's my own time and I'd rather not spend it with the likes of you." His words were greeted with stifled snorts and giggles from the hall. The amazingly bad Boris Karloff replied, "But we've come for you Eddie!" Eddie could tell Monroe was doing the talking, hunkered down on the other side of the door. He imagined Jackie squatting behind the smaller black man, eagerly awaiting the punch line of this latest gag. "We've brought you someone to keep you company, Eddie." The door began to creak open, very slowly. Eddie turned to watch, wondering idly what new crap the guys were going to visit upon him.

What came through the door chilled his blood. His breath caught in his throat and both fists clenched tightly. A large black waterbug, flat on its back, legs spread, was pushed through the open door. *Oh shit,* Eddie thought coldly, *how did they know?* The answer was obvious. Monroe and Jackie were natural born bullies of the old fashioned, schoolyard variety. Their kind

could always spot a weakness, draw it out and exploit it. They knew he didn't like bugs; there was really no way he could hide it. They'd seen him cross a room or a hallway to avoid the water bugs they frequently came across in the lower levels of the hospital. They noticed his flat out refusal to go near even the deadest of bugs. They simply didn't know the full extend of his aversion.

Eddie, among his other minor fears, suffered from entomophobia, the fear of insects. Everything else could be dealt with, confronted, and even toyed with, except bugs.

Eddie really, really hated bugs.

The guys were watching him intently through the window in the door, excitedly examining his reaction like comic scientists. They were waiting for him to jump, to yell, to explode in some other violent eruption that they would talk about for months and years to come.

No. Eddie Vargas would not give them the satisfaction.

With great effort that he didn't believe he possessed, Eddie turned back to his book. "Grow up, you assholes," he said gravely, while dismissing them totally. There was silence on the other side of the door. Good. He had thrown them. They couldn't see the sweat that poured down his forehead and neck. He was carefully concealing the stiffness of all of his muscles, the insane urge to scream. They didn't know that, in Eddie's mind, the ever-growing insect was inching its way toward him, ready to crawl up his leg under his pants. *I will not dance for them. I will not!* He thought resolutely. He fought to remain calm, to tell himself that the bug was, in fact, dead. It was not creeping up on him, nor was it on his back, ready to whisper sweet nothings to him, it's constantly-moving antennae tickling his ear . He struggled valiantly with the urge to reach back there and swat it off.

He almost lost the battle, however, when the shrill ring of a cell phone broke the silence in the hall. It was with the greatest effort that Eddie did not cut loose with a blood-curdling scream. The door clicked shut, and Eddie heard muffled voices and rapidly receding footsteps. He hazarded a glance behind him, and saw that his tormentor's faces were not in the window. Then he glance down at the creature and quickly looked away. Dr. Stewart had explained to him on numerous occasions how acute entomophobia was sometimes accompanied by vivid hallucinations. Armed with this knowledge, Eddie was sure that he hadn't seen the water bug grow to twice its normal size. He hadn't seen nearly six-inch antennae swaying spasmodically back and forth, searching for some prey, perhaps a sweating Dominican? He closed his eyes, took several deep breaths and looked again. The bug was there, normally sized and unmoving.

Or did one of its legs just twitch?

Yes, there was a definite twitch, but that was okay, wasn't it? Didn't he read somewhere that roaches continued to experience electrical impulses in their limbs, much like humans do, long after death? There was a reasonable explanation for the twitch.

“Eddie?”

And this time, he *did* scream and whirl around because he swore that the extra large, undead water bug had just addressed him by name. It didn't, of course. Jackie was calling him on the intercom by the door. Thankfully, it was the old fashioned kind, where you had to press the “talk” button to be heard. Eddie got to his feet, regained some (very little, in fact) of his composure and walked to the intercom – giving the waterbug an extremely wide berth. Taking a deep breath, hoping his first words wouldn't squeak, he pressed the “talk” button and said, as normally as he could, “yeah, what?”

“Eddie?” Jackie asked again, a little uncertainly.

“Yeah, Jack. What do you want?” Eddie asked, a little too sharply, he thought. He was leaning against the wall, head close to the intercom, deeply afraid to look back.

“Dude, “ Jackie said, seriously, “You sound funny.”

“I appreciate the concern.” Eddie said dryly. He had begun to tap his head against the wall by the intercom, “Now what is it? You're interrupting a good lunch again.”

“I just wanted to let you know that Monroe had to go home. Sheila called. There's something wrong with the baby.”

For a moment, what Jackie said managed to pierce Eddie's haze of fear. Monroe had had three children. The two oldest had gotten sick and died. In private, Jackie and Eddie and several other acquaintances on the hospital staff had wondered about the horrible stroke of luck that would see their friend's first two children die of such similar circumstances.

“Is she alright?” Eddie asked, truly concerned, but tapping his head against the wall a little more forcefully. He would not, however, betray the extent of his...discomfort to this buffoon.

“Fucked if I know,” Jackie responded, with his customary delicacy, “She just now called. Just like last time. Listen,” He quickly changed tracks. Eddie knew this was an uncomfortable subject for Jackie. He knew Monroe's wife well. “McNamara just caught up with me and asked me to mop the halls in the Circus. I'll be right back.” McNamara was their supervisor, who somehow always managed to find Jackie lounging about. Eddie supposed it was simple justice this time that he was sent to mop the halls in the psych ward, an assignment which none of them enjoyed. Too much noise. He couldn't figure out why Jackie felt he had to report his whereabouts to him, but...

“Whatever, dude. See ya later.” His voice betrayed only the slightest hint of a quiver, which he was sure Jackie hadn't heard.

When Jackie did not reply, Eddie turned to regard the roach. It was still there, one leg twitching almost imperceptibly. He crossed the room back to the desk where his sandwich waited, untouched.

Of course, Eddie had lost his appetite by now, eating was the last thing on his mind. He could not bring himself to throw the sandwich away, however, so he figured he'd rewrap it; return it to his bag and save it for later. Some of the stark terror of moments before had left him. He felt almost normal as he reached for the sandwich. Then he froze.

There was something moving under the bread.

He almost didn't notice it, but there it was. The bread shifted ever so slightly. Eddie began to back away from the desk, a cool voice in his head reminding him that he could still be hallucinating, and then he remembered that he was backing into where the dead roach lay and whirled around.

The waterbug was gone.

Deep down, where Eddie Vargas was still capable of rational thought, he knew that the bug had been dead. Dead bugs don't come back to life and attack sandwiches, regardless of what John Sage wrote in his ghoulish novels. He knew that he was probably still hallucinating. But still, his eyes were telling him that the bug was gone, magically transported into his sandwich and when he looked back, he could even see the antennae sticking out of one end of it, searching.

And that was that. That was all it took. Eddie Vargas had officially had enough. He no longer cared what his friends thought of him, what *anyone* thought, period. He was getting out of this room and he intended to continue to move until he got outside, where he would scream and he doubted he would be able to stop. He imagined that some of the ambulance drivers, most of whom he knew quite well, would drag him back into the building, straight to the Circus, where Jackie was now mopping the floor. He imagined pointing an accusing finger at Jackie and shouting, "this is your fault!" All of these things were going through his mind when he reached for the doorknob.

And found that door had been locked from the outside.

At the first sign of resistance, he stopped breathing. In the utter silence that ensued, he heard the bugs coming.

He didn't see anything, of course; these bugs were sneaky bastards. They only moved in the periphery. He would see something far to his left, some small dark shape darting along the floor at the edge of his vision. He would turn sharply, and there would be nothing there until he saw something move far to his right. He whipped his head from side to side, trying to catch the

tiny animals that were trying to surround him, to outflank him, to infest him. He knew they were there and their number was growing. They were raising a tiny army against him. They were going to toy with him this way until they tired of the game, then they would swarm over him. The little six-legged monsters were going to pry open his mouth and crawl in. They were going to puncture his eyes and crawl in the seeping holes. They were going to attempt to nestle in his ears and up his nose. They were everywhere now, yet invisible, taunting him, banging on the refrigerator doors, clamoring to get out.

And Eddie stopped, chest heaving in the sudden silence, because he actually heard slapping, tapping sounds coming from within the refrigerated lockers. He could actually see the several of the doors moving although they were locked securely. He knew he was fully in the grip of his phobias, that he was experiencing horrible hallucinations; he could almost hear Dr. Stewart trying to comfort him. Still he had to admit, like someone tripping on acid, that this was a completely fascinating hallucination. A slight sound behind him drew his attention away from the lockers and he turned around again. On the other side of the room, the corpse, which had been resting peacefully on the stretcher, had risen to its feet up and was regarding Eddie quizzically. Its head, wrapped in a halo of wispy gray hair was slightly tilted, and the man was pencil thin. Eddie thought calmly, *the guy really is flesh and bones!* Indeed, the corpse's skin was loosely wrapped around the bones, except where the chest had been opened to remove the vital organs. Eddie could even see the plastic bag that held the organs where it had been placed in the chest cavity.

Eddie's thoughts were split right down the middle. One side was commenting amusedly to itself, *wow, I can't wait to report all of this to Dr. Stewart.* The therapist would be amazed at how one fear had affected and infected another, how this hallucination completely switched gears. The bugs were all gone now, except for the original dead one (Although all of it's legs were now twitching wildly, which Eddie hardly noticed

The other half of his mind was moving his body back towards the intercom. This side of his brain was sending alarms to whoever was willing to listen. Something was definitely not right here.

The old corpse started to move towards him with a slow, hitching, shambling gait, its arms coming up, reaching for him. Eddie reached out himself, behind him, searching blindly for the talk button on the intercom. The dwindling side of his mind that held a tenuous grip on the real world began to scream at him *RUN! RUN!* But the analytical, horror novel reading side still thought of this as an incredible illusion. Perhaps this had come straight out of a story he'd once read in the old "House of Secrets" comics that were so popular when he was a kid. That side had read enough and seen enough to know how this story would end. *Relax,* it said. *Let's see what happens.* Still, Eddie groped blindly behind him for the talk button. He found it just as the corpse found him.

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Jackie was also reaching for an intercom. He had just about finished mopping in the Circus, when he figured he would run down and let his poor, trapped friend know that he was not forgotten. Jackie wouldn't free him, of course; it was way too soon for that. Apparently the whole bug thing was a bust. Eddie wasn't as afraid of bugs as they'd thought. A little more time locked away with the dead folks might just make up for it.

He was about to press the talk button when he realized there were sounds coming out of the speaker. Apparently, the talk button on the Eddie's side had become stuck the last time they'd spoken. He could hear Eddie munching away at whatever he'd brought in for lunch today, making satisfied moaning sounds and chewing loudly, like a cow.

"Sheesh!" Jackie said to himself, "What a fuckin' animal." He shook his head and went back to work, whistling as he went.