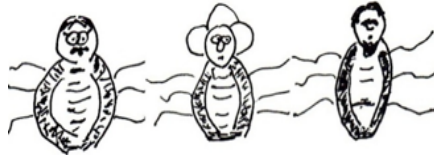


# Bedbugs

SERIALIZED



## CHAPTER ONE

### GOOD NIGHT, IRENE

**I**rene's parents tiptoed to the bedroom door.

"Goodnight, Irene," said her father.

"Sweet dreams, Irene," said her mother. "Sleep tight."

"Don't let the bedbugs bite!" they said together and left the room.

"Sweet dreams? Sleeping tight? Biting bedbugs?" Irene told herself. "That's a lot for a girl to worry about when she's supposed to go to sleep."

Irene lay on her back in her four-poster bed. Her head plopped onto her plump pillow, and her brown braids flopped to the sides. She waggled her bottom to get more snug. She tugged the checkered quilt under her chin and smoothed out every wrinkle with her hands.

Her bedtime routine complete, Irene was usually set for sleep. But not this night. Tonight, something was different in her bedroom. Something was off; something was not quite right. The instant she closed her eyes, she knew what it was.

"Mercy me," she said, and her eyes popped open. "My bedroom is *too* dark.

There's not a spot of light anywhere. Even the white line under my door is missing."

Irene peered at her toes and saw nothing. She twisted her head side to side but found no bedposts. She waved her fingers in front of her face.

"It's as though my hands aren't there at all."

Surrounded by the walls of black, Irene lay as still as a stone. All at

once, a glint of light caught her eye. The edge of the moon, white and blotchy, appeared in the corner of her bedroom window. Tonight the moon was extraordinary, easily four times its normal size. Inch by inch, more of it rolled into view until the big, bald thing filled the entire window.

Shivers paraded down Irene's spine. "Mercy me," she said. "The moon is too close to my bedroom."

As she spoke, a single moonbeam, one thin shaft of light, shot toward the windowpane. It passed through the glass, not quickly like a flashlight beam, but it oozed into the room like syrup running across pancakes. Once over the windowsill, the finger of light poured onto the floor.

Slowly, slowly, the beam flowed toward Irene's bed. It sliced through the blackness, leaving a white strip across the floorboards.

Forgetting to breathe, forgetting to move, Irene watched the moonbeam approach. Her eyes grew as big as tiddlywinks. She would have screamed her head off if she could.

When the ray reached her bed, it ran up her quilt. When it reached her mattress, it rolled onto her belly. There it stopped, forming a white puddle on her belly button.

"Mercy," she whispered.

As Irene studied the patch of light, her stomach began to itch. She squirmed, but no, the itch had to be scratched.

Oh, so slowly, Irene slid her hand under her covers and pajama tops. But before her fingers could curl, she heard something that made her freeze. From under the quilt came muffled voices.

"Hold it, madam!" called one voice.

"Do stop, my dear!" said another.

"Don't scratch us, Irene!" shouted a third.

Irene gulped air. "There's *something* on my stomach," she said under her breath.

How Irene wanted to leap out of bed. How she wanted to dash from her room and sprint like crazy to her parents. But she dared not budge. She dared not breathe too deeply.

With both hands, she lifted the top of her checkered quilt. She peered underneath.

"Too dark," she said, and she turned down the covers so the

moonbeam shone upon her pink pajama tops.

Here came the scariest part. This took guts. With a jerk, Irene yanked up her pajamas and stared at her bare, round belly.

She wrinkled her nose and said, "Oh, ick!"

There, bathed in moonlight, were three shiny, brown bugs, the ugliest bugs Irene had ever seen.

"Oh, ick," she said again. "Bedbugs."