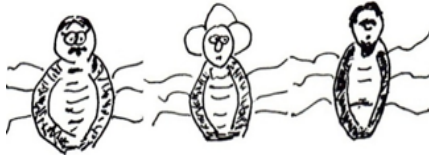


Bedbugs

SERIALIZED



CHAPTER SEVEN

HAGGLE AND HOODWINK

The Tooth Fairy rubbed her bony hands together. She wiggled her long, gnarled fingers, each one bearing a well-polished fingernail. Her winkless eyes glared at the bedbugs sitting on Irene's shoulder. In a shrill voice, she sang:

*"A tooth under a pillow is always so nice.
One penny I'll leave; I'll pay my top price."*

Bug One leaped to his feet. "Preposterous! Poppycrack! A penny, indeed, madam!" he said sharply. "After so many years, you should know better than to bargain with bedbugs."

The Tooth Fairy huffed. Her eyes narrowed to minus signs. Licking her thin lips, she said:

*"Vermin, I do feel generous this eve,
So I'll raise my offer; a nickel I'll leave."*

"Cheapskate! Tightwad!" snapped Bug Two, waving a buggy arm. "Surely that tooth is worth more than five cents. A first-class incisor. Dear Irene brushed and flossed it after every meal. No cavity has ever spoiled it."

The Tooth Fairy scowled. She replied,
*"True, Irene's teeth are shiny each time.
So, I'll be gracious and leave her a dime."*

"Now see here, Tooth Fairy!" Bug Three said. "Children only get twenty baby teeth to put under their pillows, four molars, two canines, and four incisors in each jaw. They need a fair price for each and every one of

them. One silver dollar. That's the going rate for a tooth in this bedroom."

The Tooth Fairy stomped her foot on the mattress. The white moths circled her head in a frenzy.

"What's a poor dental dealer to do?

So eight bits I must part with.

No thanks to you!"



"Hoo! Hoo! So it's settled," said Bug One.

"Now none of your funny business, Tooth Fairy," warned Bug Two. "We've struck a bargain."

"The bedbugs will be watching," said Bug Three.

"Funny business? Me?" said the Tooth Fairy, grinning her gummy grin. "Why, vermin, what kind of fairy do you take me for?"

The Tooth Fairy knelt by Irene's pillow. One by one, she cracked her knuckles and wiggled her fingers the way a burglar might do when he's about to open a safe.

"Nice, nice, nice," she hissed, as her hand slithered under the pillow.

You can imagine the Tooth Fairy was an expert at taking teeth. Having removed millions of them from under pillows, she's never awakened even the lightest sleeper.

"Ah, there's the precious nipper," she said. Then she drew out Irene's tooth.

As if it were a rare jewel, the Tooth Fairy held the white cube up to her eye. "Nice, nice, nice! Splendid specimen!"

After dropping the tooth into her leather pouch, the Tooth Fairy glared at the bedbugs. She sank her hand into the front pocket of her patchwork dress and said,

"One silver dollar, you say, vermin. I keep all my coins right in here."

As quick as a whip, her hand shot from the pocket and under Irene's

pillow.

"Hmm, something flat and round went under the pillow," Bug Two said. "But I'm not sure it was a coin."

Bug Three stroked his black beard. "That fairy can't be trusted. Once I lived in a bed of an old man who snored. One raining and pouring night, he bumped his head and went to bed. Would you believe when the man couldn't get up in the morning, that greedy Tooth Fairy stole his false teeth off the nightstand?"

"I used to be a bedbug in the bed of a lazy boy who refused to brush his teeth," said Bug One. "Each night the Tooth Fairy left piles of sweets in his bedroom, so his teeth would fall out faster."



"Perhaps I better slip under Irene's pillow and check things out," said Bug Two.

Flattening himself against the mattress, the bug wormed his way, head first, under the pillow. Soon his wig bumped into something hard and round. He ran a hand around the item's bumpy edge.

"This is no silver dollar," he said. "It's a *bottle cap*!"

Bug Two was as bugged as a bedbug could get bugged. He began shoving the bottle cap from under the pillow.

"This flips my wig!" he said. "Trying to trick innocent Irene! How low can you go?"

All at once, Bug Two felt two fingers squeeze his middle. The next thing he knew, everything went black, and he was falling. He landed on something slippery and sharp. *Phew!* The place smelled of stale toothpaste.

Bug Two sat up, straightening his wig. "Ugh!" said the bug. "I must be in the Tooth Fairy's tooth sack!"

Things began to shake. The teeth in the bag rattled and clattered.

"By buggy!" Bug Two cried. "And the Tooth Fairy is taking off!"

This was true. After a swan dive off Irene's mattress, the Tooth Fairy sailed across the bedroom. The window eased open, and she floated out into the starless night.