

CUL DE SAC: A RIFF FOR TOMORROW
by Christina Ham

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

POE	male, early-50's,
BEE	female, late-50's
ER	male, mid-30's
PUDDLE/BLACK IMPORTED FIRE ANT	male, mid-20's
NETTA/A-105000/HOME OWNER	female, early-20's
EXTERMINATOR/PODCAST	male, 40's
BAKER/CULPEPPER	male, 40's

TIME:

Present day.

SETTING:

A lawn in Reseda, California.

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

A stroke (/) marks the point of interruption in overlapping dialogue.

The Podcast can either be miked during the show *or* pre-recorded. If pre-recorded it can play in a loop prior to the beginning of the show.

There should be an abstract representation of the insects that inhabit this world so as not to turn the play into a costume drama.

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*You live
in Los Angeles
and you are going to
Reseda, we are all
in some way or
another going to
Reseda someday
to die...*

— *Soul Coughing*

*“The universe is not only queerer than we can suppose,
but queerer than we can suppose.”*

—*J.B.S. Haldane, British geneticist and evolutionary biologist*

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Scene One

SETTING:

The blueprint: A tented pre-fab home in the San Fernando Valley. This subdivision, if in plain or unobstructed view, would contain a living room, dining room, and den that seamlessly flows into one another without any walls to hamper them. Of prominence would be the suggestion of a fireplace in the den and a fireplace in the living room areas that are back to back to one another. The den would most likely be covered in wood paneling with a semblance of family accoutrements—trophies, awards, etc. Perhaps this backdrop is where our code alerts and slide show, with its pervasive images, are displayed.

The images should include (but not be limited to) the following, in arbitrary sequence: war, pestilence, starvation, WMDs, pin-ups, mass graves, shopping, drive-thrus, convertibles, the Galleria, smog, riots, pornography, nuclear waste, prescription meds, etc. They may be exhibited in a frenetic feedback loop, or as inert images, or both.

Unfortunately, in the midst of this suburban sprawl—deep inside its crevices—is housed a darker secret. Beneath the floorboards, below the crawlspace, underneath the foundation, a nascent tribe exists.

Inside a perfectly manicured part of the St. Augustine lawn at 1812 S. DeSoto Avenue lies a ground nest that extends six feet underground and is laced with interconnected galleries and chambers. What started out as a lawn with excellent shade-tolerant properties and high heat tolerance has now become susceptible to lawn diseases and worst of all—pests.

ONE: CODE GREEN

A PODCAST bleeds through the darkness.

PODCAST (V.O.)

From Los Angeles Public Radio this is “Buggin’”. “Buggin’” is produced by KSFV and is heard across the smog-county area on Public Radio stations. This Podcast is made possible by KSFV, Tompkins Exterminators, and its listeners. Support your local public radio station. Visit buggin.org to find where “Buggin’” is playing near you.

As the lights come up it reveals POE and BEE inside the queen's chamber. BEE wears a dressing gown and satin slippers. POE wears coveralls and a CSUN baseball cap.

BEE watches POE pack boxes as the underscore of "Buggin's" theme music plays.

PODCAST (V.O.)

From KSFV this is "Buggin". Don Yellowstone is away on vacation... I'm Rosanna Alabama.

If you lived here you would be home by now. Reseda, California—located in the western arm of the San Fernando Valley. It sits next to beautiful Balboa Park and the large man-made lake within.

The land that used to be comprised of acres of wheat fields, orange groves, palm trees, and sheep ranches, is now covered by smog, epicenters, drive-thrus, and of course, the porn industry. However, today, Los Angeles County Agricultural Commissioner Jeremiah Culpepper reported that two infestations of Red Imported Fire Ants (RIFA) have been discovered in the San Fernando Valley.

The concerned, authoritative voice of COMMISSIONER CULPEPPER. His face may also come and go on the slides.

CULPEPPER

Except for a single ant found earlier at an undisclosed location, these are the first infestations found in the San Fernando Valley. We are confident that, eventually, with CDFA and City support, we will be able to eliminate this and the other infestations. We look at this as the ultimate challenge in our quest for homeland security.

COMMISSIONER CULPEPPER puts on a gas mask and moves out of the frame.

PODCAST (V.O.)

The first infestation was detected on March 11th by inspectors from the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) in a cemetery in the 10,000 block of Sepulveda Boulevard in Mission Hills. Inspectors responded to a complaint from a person who was stung by ants while visiting the cemetery. Even though the ants that stung the caller are suspected to be a local species, RIFA was discovered on the property and confirmed by the CDFA entomologist.

On June 22nd a second infestation of RIFA was discovered in landscaping in the 30700 block of Prairie Street. Los Angeles County Agricultural Inspectors responded to a call from a private pest control company reporting unusual ant activity found in several well-

PODCAST (V.O.) (Cont.)

developed ant colonies. This infestation was also confirmed by entomologists to be RIFA. We spoke to RIFA Ambassador, A-105000, to get to the bottom of what some are speculating to be terrorist attacks.

A-105000

I have had assurances from the queens of polygyne colonies that these strikes are not acts of terror. The recent uprising is due to in fighting and an evolutionary changing of the guard among the queens in which an unfortunate casualty of war are the humans. It would be a misfire on the part of CDFA to turn this anthill into a mountain.

PODCAST (V.O.)

Department staff, with help from CDFA personnel, has begun surveying surrounding areas to determine the extent of the infestation. As with other finds, with the cooperation of the property owners, all infested properties will be put under an eradication program that consists of baiting the colonies with a material that sterilizes the queens and an ant growth regulator to eliminate the colony. Such extermination measures were drawn when peace talks between the CDFA and the RIFA Ambassador failed to reach a unilateral agreement. Commissioner Culpepper offered these final words...

CULPEPPER

We are currently eradicating RIFA at all known locations, but in order to remain vigilant in our task we need help from the public in reporting any new suspected RIFA colonies.

PODCAST (V.O.)

County officials will be mailing out 50,000 postcards to homeowners with newly landscaped properties to alert them to report any unusual ant activity. Residents are urged to call the Red Imported Fire Ant Hotline number 1-800-4fi-reant to report unusual ants or stinging incidents. Additional information can be obtained by visiting the County Agricultural Commissioner's website at www.abcd.efg.ca.us.la.org.com. There is a brand new face of terror and it's foraged its way into our lives.

As the PODCAST fades into the recesses POE and BEE's reality emerges. The distant sound of heavy metal music coming from an upper chamber can be heard.

POE

Good riddance.

The sound of a low-flying HELICOPTER glazes the skyline, then fades away.

A BOOT steps near their mound shaking its very foundation. BEE and POE are jarred for a moment. It walks away.

BEE

You don't mean that.

POE
 Always hated the Valley. The smog...

BEE
 Arid environment's always been good to my body.

POE
 The dehydration...

BEE
 The weather patterns have gotten better over time. The rains—more frequent.

POE
 We've had to fight for every drop we got.

BEE
 It's not fair. We've done our time. We should stay...put.

POE
 We're immigrants. We don't have any rights.

BEE
 Fourth generation hardly makes us immigrants.

POE
 We should've relocated a long time ago. Between the neighborhood dogs scratching and sniffing at us and the property owners stomping on us it was only a matter of time before we came to this bitter end.

BEE
 This is the price we've had to pay for living amongst Type-A suburbanites who take more pride in the perfection of their flowerbeds and lawns than loving thy neighbor.

POE
 If we were more like the army ants...

BEE
 They're a bunch of rough necks. That type of behavior is strongly discouraged here.

POE
 It's how you came to power.

BEE
 Who told you such a thing?

POE
 It's not a secret around here or in the science books.

BEE

I did what any queen in my position would've done. In our system—only one queen can rule—you know that.

POE

That's why I know—with your strength—we'll get out of this alive.

BEE

You always know how to put me at ease.

POE

I wouldn't be too sure about that.

BEE

What do you mean?

A BUTTERFLY flies over the mound, wonders if it should stick around, but knows better. It flutters away like a Technicolored dream. POE stops packing. He takes the flour from BEE.

Pause.

POE

This information is second hand from our neighbors—the Silverfish.

BEE

Those free loaders?

POE

Our commensalisms with them keep us up-to-date regarding our fate.

BEE

You're right.

POE

You can't let Netta know I told you.

BEE

I won't. Break it to me. In gentle pieces.

POE

(pause)

Once they fasten the tent they'll release the warning agent—chloropicrin.

BEE

Methyl bromide-chloropicrin?

	POE
(nods)	
It causes tearing of the eyes and throat irritation—for them.	
	BEE
I know. That's good. That's our warning.	
	POE
Then, they release the Vikane—the pest-killing gas—for us.	
	BEE
What's our cue?	
	POE
There is none.	
	BEE
In any war there's fair warning.	
	POE
The Vikane's colorless and odorless.	
	BEE
Death always has a stench.	
	POE
Not this one.	
	BEE
A most peculiar holocaust.	
	POE
Still. It's not a preventative treatment. Just kills what's already there.	
	BEE
Us.	
	POE
But, our nemeses—cockroaches, rodents, dry wood termites—eradicated.	
	BEE
Evaporated.	
	POE
Decimated.	
	BEE
Once again suburbia can return to its status quo: “sleeping soundly”.	

POE
Thanks to neighborhood watch.

BEE
They've learned from their mistakes.

POE
It would seem.

BEE
Does this pick up where Mirex left off?

POE
No. Like I said—it won't protect the residents from our future infestations.

BEE
The methodologies become ever more quick and clever.

POE
Courtesy of the Masters of War.

A few DANDELION CLOCKS sprout around them. These asexual reproductives, curious, take a peek, before a small gust of wind blows their seeds to future generations.

BEE
Any more details about the cemetery attacks?

POE
They've got three of the assailants that started the attack in custody. One remains at large.

BEE
This is a total violation of our peace treaty. We never strike first unless provoked.

POE
Rogue colonies live by their own rules.

Blades of GRASS push through part of the mound. This green intrusion unfolds its arms to the wind and its eyes to the sun's dull shine.

BEE
Maybe if we told that death squad that we don't share the same viewpoint as these dissenters we'd get a reprieve.

POE
There's no way to negotiate with exterminators.

BEE

What about Ambassador A-105000?

POE

Everyone knows she's nothing but a puppet for their government. If she's going to work alongside the uprights she's got to play by their rules.

BEE

I had high hopes for her. First of our kind to rise through their political ranks. To betray us like this...stings.

POE

We've had no bargaining power ever since the Federal government started monitoring and regulating us fifty years ago.

BEE touches POE's head.

BEE

I'm such a bad mother. With everything that's been going on I never bothered to ask about your wedding day.

POE

(pause)

No one ever prepares you for how to live with the aftermath.

BEE

You feel...dirty?

POE

She never gave me her name. It was just business as usual.

BEE

Just remember your nuptial sacrifice means our survival.

POE

Not 'til the eggs successfully hatch.

BEE

Do you know where she's nested?

POE

No.

BEE

What about the other four drones that she was with?

POE

Five.

Impressive. BEE

They died within hours of the ceremony. POE

You're the last? BEE

Some consolation. POE

I didn't say that. BEE

Didn't need to. POE

BEE
I think this pensive attitude regarding your sexuality comes from the absence of a father in your life. Just when I think my sons have adapted to our matriarchal system your Y chromosome always proves me wrong.

POE
My quest for the truth has nothing to do with my genetic shortcomings.

BEE
The truth is when I was a young alate I never asked questions. I knew my one job in this short lifetime was to lie down and take it—for God and colony. But you and the rest of your generations? You expect a pat on the thorax for a job half done. I expect it's from living among the uprights. We've started to pick up some of their bad habits.

POE
We've been able to adapt to our host's society while still maintaining our identity.

BEE
Like our host's it hasn't stopped us from getting blood on our hands.

POE
What do you mean?

BEE
What if this is payback?

POE
In war payback's the fallout from its rules of engagement.

BEE
I'm talking about the war at home.

POE

You shouldn't involve yourself with worker skirmishes.

BEE

My child —he was the only one I ever relinquished.

POE

You said you wouldn't talk about it. Ever.

BEE

I can't help but take responsibility for his demise.

POE

Best you can do for him at this point is to hope that he's dead so he won't have to go through this.

BEE

Poe!

POE

I'm serious. Besides, you never gave him a name.

BEE

If I named him I would've kept him.

A SNAIL with its coiled shell of woe contracts its way across the stage. It pulls its yoke in a slow-moving locomotion past them.

POE

He was a liability.

BEE

Like us? Isn't that exactly why we're under attack?

POE

No one here was willing to pay the high price to rear a sterile male. It would've meant the demise of our entire colony.

BEE

Maybe.

POE

Sterile males eat more than their fair share and contribute less to colony welfare. No one faults you for being pro-life—except when it comes to a sterile.

BEE

You call this living?

POE

Last I checked—dying looked a lot different.

NETTA enters. She's a worker. Dressed in combat boots coveralls, a scarf, and somewhat dirty. She wipes her "hands" on her pants.

BEE

Is it time?

NETTA

We're almost packed. I would start to look presentable. Poe, get the rest of this stuff packed.

POE

It's nice to know the only other thing I'm good for is fertilizer.

NETTA

Our buffet on your remains will be a natural progression of where we left off with the rest of your brothers.

POE

You'll be the first in line at my buffet.

NETTA

Drones like you are nothing more than a parasite...a sexually transmitted disease.

BEE steps between them.

BEE

But necessary—nonetheless—for our survival.

POE coughs some. He puts a handkerchief to his mouth.
POE tries to exit.

NETTA

Not feeling well?

POE

I'm fine.

NETTA confronts him.

NETTA

Let me see it.

POE

It's my business.

NETTA forces his hand. She looks at the blood-tinged handkerchief.

NETTA
Looks like it won't be long now.

POE
Satisfied?

NETTA
Immensely.

POE moves to exit, but it's slowly, as he tries to mask an obvious limp. BEE will change into something "regal" during their conversation.

BEE
Wish there were something we could give him/to

NETTA
Speed up the process? Me too. The longer he lives the more of a liability he becomes.

BEE
I *meant* I wish there was something we could give him to ease his pain.

NETTA
If the others got a hint of your favoritism there would be anarchy.

BEE
He's pulled his weight here. To see him suffer is almost too much to bear.

NETTA
There was a time when you'd see him for the disposable haploid that he is. You've softened with age.

BEE
This move has dredged up the pain of the past.

NETTA
Such as?

BEE
(pause)
My mistake? Where did you hide it?

NETTA
Which one?

First born. BEE

No good can come from this knowledge. NETTA

Please. BEE

Is this Poe's idea? NETTA

This has nothing to do with him. BEE

This reeks like Poe. NETTA

Netta, I order you to tell me where he was placed! BEE

(pause)
The midden. Along with the rest of the garbage. NETTA

He is dead. BEE

Have I ever failed you? NETTA

BEE shakes her head.

Wish I had forced myself to at least look at his face—once. BEE

He hadn't reached the full stage of development to truly call himself one of us. NETTA

Who granted you the power to decide when an ant really becomes an ant? BEE

You did when you asked me to throw him on the heaps. NETTA

POE re-enters. Slightly hunched over. His limp is a bit more obvious. He sits—quickly, winded. There is a disturbance in the mound. Dirt falls around them.

NETTA (Cont.)

Something's wrong. Come with me. At once.

BEE looks at her state of half-dress.

BEE

I'm hardly ready for a close-up.

NETTA

I'll be back for you. Poe, make sure she's ready.

NETTA exits. As she exits, a LADYBUG flitters and lands for a moment on a pile of leaves near the mound's entrance. However, their lucky charm evaporates into afternoon's urgency.

BEE

Have they come to destroy us so soon?

POE

Netta's sending a warning. I wouldn't worry. It's probably just the Jehovah Witnesses.

BEE

Could they be here to mediate between us and our executioners.

POE

Above ground they separate church and state.

BEE moves a cocoon curtain so that she can get a better view through the nest.

BEE

It's been so long since I've been outside. If I could just see it. Maybe I won't be so scared when I have to go.

POE

They'll see your shadow and know we're home.

BEE

Being evasive is not a very good trait.

POE

In a big city you can't be an open book. You have to learn to be enigmatic.

BEE

Enigmatic? I'm busy being a mother to thousands. Now, I have to learn how to wear a disguise too?

POE

I'm just saying—to spice things up a bit.

BEE

I thought that's what taco night was for?

A MOSQUITO searches for its latest dose of Type O. Dissatisfied, this Jurassic vampire takes flight in that mysterious quest that this insect requires—to leech another day. There is another disturbance to the nest shortly thereafter.

BEE slowly advances towards the “roof” of her chamber and looks up.

POE

Bee. *Don't.*

BEE

I need to know.

POE

What?

BEE

The land of the living.

BEE and POE present a united front. A moment of contemplation brushes the palate of their faces as they search for an explanation that might only be found in the sky and its heavens. Like that of the sun tumbling over the horizon and the two-hundred and fifty million stars that will be given life and death on this day...life continues to interrogate. As falling dirt cements their will, they retreat... slowly... like the sun to the moon.

POE

During the Reagan years everyone but us was thinking of protection. Iran. Contras. Even the Bogeyman. Now, our lack of preparation has come back to bite us.

BEE

I didn't come this far to die today.

A CATERPILLAR expands and contracts past them as it makes its way across the stage. This muscle-bound moth, blind to the world around it still appears to measure this earth and its circumstances with some accuracy.

POE

If we're going to die we're going to go down fighting.

BEE

I don't have any poison like the rest of you.

POE

Use these.

POE hands BEE needles.

BEE

Heroin needles? This was supper.

POE

Waste not. Want not.

BEE

If you distract'em I'll go right for the eyes.

POE

Just remember the greatest violence usually occurs during the initial sixty seconds of the attack.

POE and BEE stand their ground and wait. And wait. We watch time close its narrow lungs around them as the universe pauses for their fear. Finally, the disturbance stops. POE and BEE look at each other—relieved.

BEE

They're...leaving?

POE

Sounds like it.

BEE advances towards the opening a bit.

BEE

That's it? That's the best they can do?

POE

They must've gotten second thoughts.

Suddenly, the disturbance returns, but it has escalated. Dirt, pebbles, and leaves fall all around them in an unexpected ecological Niagara.

POE (Cont.)

We should send another warning to the others.

BEE

Save the pheromones. There's...no time.

POE goes to look through the nest's opening. He doesn't notice BEE who has taken a squatted position on the floor. She lifts her robe. Beads of sweat rush down her face. She looks underneath the robe. Her breathing becomes labored and should remain so until the end of the scene. The dirt continues to fall creating a skylight in the underground atrium. "Hands" come through the opening.

POE

They're all over the St. Augustine's. Shame too. Mr. Shaw spent nearly two hours trying to create a tailored English Garden look with his handheld edger.

The movement continues again. Like an incessant stop watch this intrusion brings with it a backpack that comes through the opening. A pair of "arms" pushes its way through the skylight. The BODY continues to maneuver through the opening. BEE continues her labor.

Through the opening a ray of sunshine pierces the mound and its refraction makes a beautiful prism that fills the nest and its inhabitants momentarily. This visual sonata fills the chamber with expectation. BEE does a final "push" before the egg/newborn is released. POE shields his eyes from the light.

POE (Cont.)

Do you see this?

BEE

It's...

POE

...terrifying...

The skylight, exposed like an abscess, festers with snowflakes that begin to crave the ground upon which they fall. They might appear, cumulatively, as a blizzard that churns around BEE and POE like butter, frenzied, a beautiful, mid-air *Swan Lake*. A FIGURE parachutes

through the opening—falling. Slow. The scene appears to us mere mortals as a subterranean snow globe. The FIGURE falls to earth cocooned in its makeshift wings. It walks towards them, its motions possibly underscored by a Wurlitzer for added affect. Lost in their separate winters BEE and POE do not notice the uninvited.

BEE

(cradles the newborn)

...it's a...boy.

As the FIGURE moves out of the shadows and into the light ER reveals himself. He has a red mark on his pant leg.

ER

I'm home.

The light engulfs the stage for a moment as the snow leaves the ground and returns to the sky as...

Black Out.

CUL DE SAC: A RIFF FOR TOMORROW

Scene Two

SETTING: Same set: The mound. Moments later. The skylight penetrates the right side of the mound where ER has Evil Knieveled his way through it. The light is muted, due to the dull, Southern California marine layer.

TWO: CODE BLUE

POE and BEE stare at ER for an uncomfortable moment. He wears jeans, cuffed, with a scarlet mark on the leg, combat boots, a t-shirt and some aviator shades.

ER

Room gets a lot of light.

(refers to shades)

Mind if I keep these on?

POE

Actually, I do. I like to see the eyelets of those I'm dealing with.

ER

Fair enough.

ER removes the shades. POE, BEE, and ER proceed to sniff one another. They stop. POE and BEE both look puzzled.

POE

Your cuticular hydrocarbons don't match up with the rest of us.

ER

(belges)

I had a Coke before I got here. That might be what you smell.

BEE

I wish you had brought me a Coke. I haven't had one in ages. And, now I've been told they have all these wonderful flavors—Cherry, Vanilla, Black Cherry Vanilla, Lemon, Lime...

POE

Mom.

BEE

I get tired of eating needles and i.v. tubes all the time. And the workers are so daft. They don't have the common sense to bring you something to wash it down with. Next time we shouldn't move so close to a hospital.

POE

I keep telling you we don't live near a hospital. It's the i.v. drug users from the neighborhood.

ER

He's right. Got a lot of people watching this place: CDFA, pest control, media. Given the circumstances I was wondering if I'd be able to get a moment alone with you.

POE

Now that you've got it what do you want?

ER

My parents.

POE

Think you got us confused with a different mound.

ER

The documentation I have doesn't support that theory.

- END OF EXCERPT -

**To finish reading the play contact the playwright:
emailme@christinaham.com**