

Love Nest

Albert

Albert sat at his desk on the 18th floor of the BNZ building. His orthopaedic chair was pushed back, and he looked out over the Mount Victoria hills. "I wonder why no-one has ever built houses over there?" he thought to himself. "Such a nice view and good evening sun. Perhaps a farmer owns it, or it's government land." He loved to look over the city and imagine the best location for houses. The two things Albert loved most were food and day-dreaming.

He patted his stomach with both hands, a long time habit. The sagging skin on his arms wobbled, and his stomach rippled. Albert was fat. Not that he cared, goodness no. Not that was until last Tuesday when he went to the Doctor with a mild flu. Doctor Malpas weighed him, blood-pressured him, pulsed him and respired him.

"You're getting on in life Albert, 46 isn't old but if you don't make some lifestyle changes your quality of life will deteriorate rapidly."

Albert received the intended shock and went home with a low-fat recipe book (\$7.95 from the nurse), a number of pamphlets on heart disease and the like, and some advice by the Doctor to take up golf or cycling.

Feeling a little better the next day, he spent \$180 at the supermarket on healthy low-fat food, \$3,000 on a new set of golf clubs, and \$1,200 on a membership of the Karori golf club. Albert did not care about money; he did not even know how much he had.

That Saturday afternoon, Albert drove his new Audi to the links. His belly and jowls slopped to and fro through the tight corners. He looked down at himself and said "Enjoy it while you can fat boy", and smiled mischievously to himself.

His first round was not spectacular as first rounds go. It took him until the fifth hole, heaving himself up and down the fairways, to lose the 12 new balls he started with. He found looking for lost balls disagreeable and overly tiring. He was out of breath anyway by then, so he trudged back to the clubhouse feeling proud of himself, and feeling slimmer. Back at the clubhouse he devoured two of Mack's (the clubhouse cook) great bacon and egg burgers, and washed them down with a pint of cold beer. That night he watched two hours of golf on Sky and improved his game considerably.

In mid afternoon the following Friday, he decided he could take the project he was working on home for the weekend. He stood up and the strain on his cardigan buttons relaxed as his gut slid down a little. The strain slipped down to his knee joints and the balls of his feet. He bounced over to his putter, next to his new "Putting Partner", picked it up in one hand and with his laptop in the other, headed for the door.

He took the trip to the golf course slower this time and enjoyed the drive. After all, his first round had only taken an hour. He parked as close to the clubhouse as he could, and on his way to the first tee, popped in for a piece of Mack's excellent fudge cake.

Sarlenkaar

Sarlenkaar lay inside a fallen log, in a paddock bordering the second hole of the Karori links. She (the most convenient description of her sex, although she had none that would fit within a human paradigm) was non human and non earth-born.

Sarlenkaar left her birth-world 86 light years before, with 481 others. Each travelled in different directions into space. She travelled in stasis, unconscious and unknowing, with only her instincts and her eggs alive within her. The equivalent of a computer brought her back to consciousness when she reached the first life-planet of her journey - earth. Her ship, at 18 centimetres, was unnoticed entering the earth's atmosphere above the pacific. She chose the nearest large land mass, and found a place to wait, a little way from a city.

Since 11:42 am Sarlenkaar had been ready. Instinct told her the host must be alone, and the larger the mass the better. She became very warm and aroused when she sensed Albert toiling up to the first green for his eighth shot.

Albert was in a jolly mood as he swung his pitching wedge back and forth. He tried to bend his knees a little and swing slowly and straight as he had seen Tiger Woods do on TV. The huge slice of earth had no chance as Albert's considerable mass was discharged into his pitching wedge. The massive divot slopped in a heap twelve metres ahead and the ball dribbled a little further. Albert tried a few more practice swings and looked down embarrassed at the brown earth he had scarred.

He did not like the second hole. Climbing up to the tee was hard work, and he rested at the top. "I've got to get the ball over the creek this time", he wheezed out loud. He duffed the first into the long grass in front of the tee and pulled another one from his pocket. His second shot clipped the top of the ball but it plopped over the creek on the second bounce. "Ha" he said and smiled broadly at no-one.

Sarlenkaar waited until his fourth shot went to the right near the boundary fence. She became hot with anticipation, and her small body shook in tiny spasms. She felt her responsibility to the hive - she had to succeed with the host.

Albert ambled over to his ball, and picked an eight iron out of his bag. While he had a few practice swings, Sarlenkaar (on ten legs) jumped out of the tree trunk and ran fast though the grass towards him. Coming up behind him, she jumped a few feet from him, and inserting her sting into his leg just above his walk socks, disgorged some 3,000 tiny eggs into his flab.

Albert cried out in pain and reached back to brush Sarlenkaar off his leg. He lifted his big foot, and his Nike cross-trainer stamped down on Sarlenkaar with a pressure of 20kg per centimetre. Sarlenkaar died in peace, her task complete.

"Damn country pests" said Albert as he looked down on the strange multi-coloured carcass. He took aim, and with the best shot of his short golfing history, chipped Sarlenkaar's carcass into the trees to the right of the green.

Twisting his body as best he could, Albert looked at his leg where he had been stung. There was a slight lump but the puncture had sealed up. He rubbed it gently and felt no pain. Unfortunately

his chipping touch deserted him, and he took another six shots to finish the hole. As he pushed the flag home, he began to feel drowsy, and so, feeling happy with his minor improvement, made his way back to the car.

Albert

Albert drove sleepily up the driveway of his large Kelburn house where he lived alone. He stayed awake long enough to undress and climb into his soft king-size bed. A few minutes later he was sound asleep. While he slept, the eggs began to synthesise a powerful drug which leaked slowly into his bloodstream. When Albert woke fifteen hours later his whole mind and heart were filled with a deep love for the bump on his leg. He did not find it at all unusual, his only desire was to love and protect his bump. He felt no strangeness when his already formidable appetite doubled, as he voraciously ate through the food in his house. The bump very slowly, almost imperceptibly grew larger.

On Monday morning, Albert limped to his office, packed a few books and CD-ROMs, and left a message to say that he was working from home. He stopped in at the supermarket and bought loads of vitamin and protein rich food, including three kilograms of sea-food which he ordinarily detested. Back at home he did little more than eat, sleep, and pat his swelling leg paternally.

On Tuesday, one of his clients rang about a project he was working on. Albert said he was sorry but had to go overseas for a month, and the work done so far would not be billed. He rang his office and changed his phone message to that effect, and did the same to his answer phone at home. After consuming a huge pile of seafood (raw) he fell into bed again.

By Thursday, Albert's leg was very swollen and red, and he was beginning to lose the feeling in his toes. Very slowly and gently, he drove to the bank and withdrew \$5,000 in cash. He then went to the supermarket where he slowly shuffled round, filled four trolleys and spent \$926. "For my friends", he said to the check-out girl in a conspirator's whisper. She smiled quite sweetly and asked one of the trolley boys to help Albert load the food into his car.

Albert gorged and slept and watched TV, and completely forgot he had not been to the toilet for a week. He checked on his leg regularly with joy and eagerness, watching sometimes for hours. By Monday of the following week his leg was bloated and his skin was breaking down. An opaque liquid ran slowly from the broken areas. His foot was black and he felt nothing there.

After a few days his food supply ran low again. Albert rang Student Job Search and asked for an honest young person with a car. Sarah Bolton arrived at his house soon after. Albert opened the door until the safety chain was taut. He handed her \$1000 and a large list. "For a big party" was all he said. Sarah nodded and backed away, his pungent smell wafted through the doorway to her. Three hours later she returned and loaded all the grocery bags onto Albert's front door step. He gave her \$100 and apologised that he was sick. He asked her to return the following week.

Food preparation was a thing of the past. He opened the bags just inside the door and gorged himself on raw meat, nuts, chocolate, yoghurt, and coke. His mass had increased nearly 40% in two weeks. The final time he moved any distance was the day after Sarah's visit. He half-crawled favouring his immense right leg, to his bed and took four pillows back to the front door. He made sure the phone was in reach and lay down to sleep.

When he woke on the evening of the following day, he noticed the bumps in his leg had moved through, into his lower abdomen. They must be burrowing he thought with pride. "Oh my darlings", he said aloud. "You're growing stronger every day aren't you!"

While he watched TV, the larvae continued down into his left leg; consuming, growing, developing. By the next morning, from his lower stomach down, he was a twitching, moving, mass. During a commercial break he looked down at himself and had an idea. He put a banana, a steak, and a small block of cheese on his leg and stomach. The steak and the cheese were absorbed and consumed within 10 minutes, and Albert noticed flashes of tiny teeth from time to time. The banana rolled off him untouched so he ate it skin and all.

The next Wednesday, Sarah knocked on the door, waking Albert from a 20 hour sleep. He pushed \$1000 under the door and croaked "The same again please." Sarah backed away a little scared and nauseous. The smell was atrocious within a few metres of the house. She delivered the food, kept \$200 of the \$1000 and accepted the \$100 which was slid under the door. "Dirty old bastard" she whispered on the way out. But she had agreed to come back on Friday.

Albert's parasites were clever. They left his main organs, stomach, and right arm alone, but occupied the rest of him. Albert simply put mounds of food on himself, and it was consumed. Most of the time now he just looked at his squirming, writhing body with deep love. He knew he was happier than he had ever been, and he would be happy to die for his new children.

On Friday, after her 10 o'clock lecture, Sarah once again knocked on Albert's door. She could stand the smell and weirdness for \$300. Albert opened the door a crack and whispered to her. Sarah bent down, holding her nose, to hear him better. Taking a deep breath, Albert opened the door, grabbed the front of her shirt, and pulled her inside. Sarah screamed and vomited as Albert held her on top of him. She screamed and choked as she felt little creatures burrowing into her breasts and stomach. As she gasped a breath between screams and struggles, she realised she loved it and loved them. She snuggled into Albert's huge wriggling mass. Hungry, twisting larvae chewed into her with sucking slurping sounds. When Albert woke the next day, there was nothing left of Sarah.

Albert rang Student Job Search again. The woman who answered was a little put out by his request for a very large woman to clean his house. When Albert explained that he was very large, and felt more comfortable about a large person in his house, the woman said she understood. Amelia arrived at 4pm. She was a strapping 90 kilos, and arrived a little hot, and out of breath. Albert opened the door a few centimetres to her knocking, reached up his hand and said "Hi". The smell hit her, and she almost backed away. But from habit, she reached out to shake Albert's hand. He grasped it and pulled her down towards him. With a surprised look she fell off balance, into a heap on the front door step. Albert rolled, and squeezed around the half open door and dragged her on top of himself. Amelia's muffled yells of fear and pain soon turned to sighs of joy as the burrowers consumed her. Amelia and Albert became one writhing, jolting spasm of flesh.

Albert's task complete, he drew his last breath in ecstasy as the burrowers finally chewed into the rest of him, and took the last sustenance they needed.

The Spread

At 7:36am the next morning, as the first rays of sun licked Albert's front door step, Sarlenkaar's offspring broke out of the flip-flopping squelch, and found patches of sunshine to stand in. Over 900 of them broke free of the bubbly white mass, and stood taking energy from the sun. As they dried, they turned bright colours in strange, wonderful patterns.

By 9:15, they were all ready. They came together and formed an intricate circle. Then at once, as if a signal had been given, ran off in their designated directions to find a host.

Skinny people and pets were generally ignored as the swarm moved out in search of flesh. A few were run over, and some were mauled by cats. But by mid-afternoon, almost all had found a host, delivered their eggs and died. News reports started from 11:00am, and scientists and pest control experts were alerted shortly before 2:00pm. Relatives, friends, work-mates, and doctors notified the police, the Council, hospitals (whoever would listen) about the love-struck hosts' bizarre behaviour. A state of emergency was called for Wellington City at 7:00am the next morning (Sunday).

Almost all of the 900 alien carcasses were found, classified, and examined. All known hosts were isolated. All of the hosts violently defended any attempts to examine their lumps. Undetected hosts hid or fled out of town to protect their loved parasites. Many were caught by road blocks and search teams.

Special Forces from the UN and the Pacific Rim flew in, as well as an elite team of disease control personnel from the U.S. A large private hospital was commandeered, and the 812 captured hosts were tested, observed, operated on, and in some cases euthanased when the parasitism was too advanced.

Scientists, doctors, and zoologists were disconcerted by the new, unknown creature. The thousands of eggs, the rate of advancement, and the hosts' love-sickness scared most of them. Newly found hosts turned up regularly, but everyone was concerned about the dozens still at large.

The Hosts

Andrew had been struggling uphill on the way home from a weight watchers group when he was attacked. The drug acted straight away, and he began to fill up on food at the local dairy. He heard the 11:00am news and realised he should get out of town. He emptied the contents of his fridge and freezer, and a rifle, into the back of his Hilux, and drove over to the Wairarapa. He drove off the main road and deep into a forest, following a fire-break. He went as far as he could, stopped and ate all he could manage, and took the rest of his food and rifle into the bush.

Andrew and 28 others were never found. The most successful of Andrew's parasites found a number of large pigs, a herd of cattle, and a farmer and his wife. The rest settled for sheep, goats, and the two farm dogs.

Helen was attacked walking down the hill not far from Albert's house, on her way to the bus to the airport. She flew to Auckland as planned (after cleaning out most of the Koru Club Lounge buffet lunch), took a bus into Northland, and disappeared into farm and forest land, stealing food, and eating fruit. A few days later she graduated to lambs and sheep. Her burrowers found their way into three small towns as well as large numbers of livestock. The Special Forces arrived in under an hour. They had found Albert's remains and traced his activities. The

incubation period had originally been 23 days. Now it was five. The burrowers were adapting. They were also spreading. New Zealand was officially declared under international quarantine.

Big Morris was attacked outside his beach house. Within hours he knew what he had to do. He stocked his yacht with as much food as she would take and sailed out of Pahia harbour at dusk. He resisted long periods of sleep and the burrowers seemed to understand, and slowed down their progress. He landed in a remote area in South West Australia eight days later. He slept long and ate raw fish for the next few days. He sailed slowly to a port town, flopped onto a marina wharf in the early hours of the morning, and was emptied of 286 burrowers at the first light of day. Special Forces, ready and waiting, flew in from Sydney an hour after the first reports came in.

The world was at war.

The Conquerors

Humanity might have won if not for John (a pilot) and his huge wife Dawn. They were attacked at the same time, on their hobby farm outside Perth, and devised a plan together. He fed her huge amounts of food, both raw and cooked. He stripped their fruit trees, did small shopping trips to many different supermarkets, sacrificed the family pets, and the few animals they had on the property. John slaved over his wife's needs day and night. The burrowers seemed to understand this and stayed dormant inside him. He loved her swelling body, and caressed her huge crawling flesh.

On the third day, he took all of the seats from their plane, and lay Dawn in the back. He continued to feed her until the fifth day, when he dragged the heavy carcass of Daisy the milking cow to the plane. On the third attempt, he tipped it on top of his wife's ever-hungry palpitating body, and closed the door on the slurping/chewing sounds which emanated from her. With joy and elation he tanked up and flew the short jump to the Island of Java, Indonesia (population 500 million). He landed in a small unattended airfield at 6:00am local time.

John turned off the plane, and walked round to the main door. When he opened it and let the sun fall on the pulsating glop, 1,400 slimy bodies crawled and ran over him to find a patch of sunlight to stand in.

Four months later, there were only a few thousand people left on Earth. Most were holed up, paranoid and hungry, in shelters and bunkers. The burrowers did not care. They went about their own business.

For the next month, all over the world, the burrowers built 482, 18 centimetre stasis-ships. On the 4th October, seven months after Sarlenkaar descended to this life-planet, the ships took off in different directions into space to look for new worlds.

It was not that their motives were much different to those of humankind; it was that they were far more efficient.