Fulton was reasonably sure that he had not really meant to kill Ledyard, and that the fall was an accident. At the same time, Fulton knew now that he was capable of murder, and that his thoughts of violence were not idle.

**THE BEETLE**

by Jay Williams

Fulton sat alone in the living room listening to the noises of the house. There was a faint clink as ice melted in his glass, the whirr of the refrigerator in the kitchen, the humming of the pump in the cellar, the low crack of an expanding board. Now and then something banged against the window screens, a night-flying June bug perhaps. It was a hot night and the sweat ran down Fulton's face although he wasn't moving. He was thinking about Ledyard again, not with remorse but simply because whenever he was alone he could not get the man out of his mind.

Upstairs, Ellis called, "I want a drink of water, Donald."

Fulton ignored him, except to let himself think, in passing, that the boy had never learned to call him "Daddy" although he had been married to Eliza for two years.

He sipped his drink. Ledyard, he thought. I'll bet the kid would've called him Daddy. The kid had liked Ledyard. Too bad about Ledyard. But it had been suicide; nobody had questioned that. And the better man had won.

He remembered that night. He and Ledyard on the balcony in Ledyard's apartment. He had said, "Get wise to yourself, Ledyard. Just stay away from Eliza."

Ledyard had said, "Don't push me, Fulton," but there had been no menace in his voice, no aggressiveness. It was mild, like the rest of him, soft, small, with mild eyes behind large spectacles: He was as inoffensive and helpless, Fulton thought, as a worm or a bug under one's foot—and as repulsive, too. Perhaps it was that which made him hate the man so, almost unreasonably, for Fulton was a strong man and hated all things that crept and crawled.

Fulton had said, "Well, just get it through your head. She's my type. Don't bust in, that's all."

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Ellis called again, chanting monotonously, “Dri-i-i-ink a wa-a-a-a-ater.”

“Damn brat,” Fulton said, without emotion, without moving. If Eliza were out of the way he could get rid of the boy. Send him to a school. Best thing in the world for him. Make a man of him.

It was not the first time he had gone from thoughts of Ledyard’s death to thoughts of his wife’s death. It had not been a happy marriage; he had been somewhat more attracted to her money than to her pale beauty, for Fulton was, as he expressed it, a man who liked to live high but not dry, and who had no patience with sitting around a house in Connecticut every evening and looking at the pictures on the walls. There was the boy, too. Ellis had never liked him, although for a few weeks Fulton had put himself out to be pleasant and fatherly. “That’s how it is,” he thought to himself, “you knock yourself out trying to be nice to people and they kick you in the teeth.”

Not that it would be difficult to get rid of Eliza. He did not think of himself as a murderer, not any more than any man does, and even the happiest of men sometimes finds himself contemplating methods of doing away with his wife. But he knew, in an inner, secret core that he was capable of it; he had been hardened by Ledyard’s death. Sometimes, thinking about
that smaller man, he was able to make himself believe that he had deliberately pushed the man to his death. Indeed, when he was not touched by the vertigo that came with remembering the fall, he felt a little proud; there were not many people who had done in a rival and gotten away with it.

Utterly capable of it . . . of something clever in which his hand would not show. That was the trouble, he must run no risk. Then the house, the stocks, the cars, the property would be his for the taking. He thought of cunningly elaborate devices, of wiring a bomb into the engine of her car, of high-tension cables mysteriously parting, of falls down long flights of stairs.

He took another drink, and suddenly he sat upright, full of a new idea. It might be very easy, much easier than any of those notions. She was out tonight at one of her customary civic duties, the P.T.A. or the League of Women Voters, or one of those crackpot things he had never suspected her of liking when he had first known her . . . but that was how it was with these pale, tall women—they quickly become exhausted with pleasure and made up for it by trying to take the place of men. He grinned mirthlessly, and went back to his idea. She might fall in with some teen-age thug on the way home, or with a mugger; the papers were full of stories of women who were attacked, raped, and killed in deserted places. He could, for instance, slip out of the house and meet her at the cross road near Cowbridge Lane. It was quiet there, quiet and lonely and wooded, not a house in sight. She would see him and stop the car, unsuspecting, thinking maybe that something was wrong with Ellis. Then, at about one o'clock he could call the police: "Have you had any reports of accidents? You see, my wife hasn't come home yet and I'm a little worried," he could say. But he would have to remember to wear gloves.

Ellis yelled, "Donald! I'm awful thirsty, Donald!"

"Shut up!" Fulton said. He could never do anything while the kid was awake. His pulse began to hammer, he felt a surge of choking anger and of excitement, as well, in his throat. "I'll bring you some water," he shouted, menacingly.

He went into the kitchen and got a glass and filled it, not bothering to let the water run, so that it was luke-warm. He climbed the stairs, taking some satisfaction in tramping as heavily as he could. Ellis's room was always cluttered with toys that he had forgotten to put away, and his boxes, and paint sets, and automobiles, and animals overflowed into the hall, and there was a fire-engine loaded with marbles and blocks at the head of the stairs. Fulton savagely kicked the thing aside and went
into the bedroom. He tripped on a corner of the rug which Ellis had turned up for a secret hiding place, and staggered. A blot of water jerked from the glass and spilled on his shoes.

"Now see what you made me do," he snarled.

The boy was sitting up in bed. He said, "Where's my mummy?"

"She's out," said Fulton. "You know she's out. Drink this damn water and go to sleep. You hear me?"

Ellis drank, looking at him over the rim of the glass. "Are you my father?" he said.

"Shut up," said Fulton. "And tomorrow I want you to pick up these toys. You hear?" He tapped with his toe at some marbles on the floor. "Somebody'll trip over them. Maybe it'll be you and you'll break your neck. Serve you right, too."

One of the marbles detached itself and moved away. It was a beetle of some sort. Fulton did not know of what sort, nor did he think of that; he stamped down at the thing automatically. It had run along the baseboard, however, where his shoe could not touch it. It darted into the hall.

"A bug," Ellis said. "That was a bug."

"You shut up and go to sleep."

Fulton got one of the child's building blocks, a flat one about two feet long and an inch thick. Without turning off the light he stepped into the hall. There was a pale tan carpet running the length of the hall, and on it he saw the beetle. He raised the block and at the same moment the insect lifted its wing-cases and with a buzz flew towards him. Involuntarily, he ducked his head. The beetle vanished.

He hesitated, searching about for the thing. The fact that it had made him dodge he counted as its victory; it made him hate the creature. "No damn bug," he said to himself, "is going to make me jump."

He thought he heard it buzz again, in his bedroom at the end of the hall. He went to the door and listened. Something certainly went "tick!" inside, as if the insect had knocked against a lamp shade. He reached inside and snapped on the light. At that, the beetle rose from his trousers where it had been clinging all the while, and flew at the light. It closed its wing-cases again and fell to the floor. He saw it scuttle under the bureau.

Fulton wiped his face with his sleeve. Keeping his eye on the bureau, he took a newspaper from the magazine rack beside the chair and rolled it up tightly. With that in one hand and the block in the other, he got down on hands and knees and peered under the bureau. He swished the rolled paper back and forth, holding the block ready. It seemed to him that he felt something, and he jammed the newspaper in hard against the
wall, grinding it around until it split and broke. He withdrew it and bent down to look. Something tickled his hand. He glanced sideways. The beetle had run out over his hand, across his wrist, and was making for the door of the bathroom.

Quivering with fury and revulsion, Fulton sprang up and hurled the block at it. It changed direction and vanished under the bed.

He wiped his hand on his trousers. He got the flashlight from the drawer of the night table. He said, “No you don’t. Oh, no, Buster,” biting his lower lip. He took the broken roll of newspaper and stuffed it in the crack under the bathroom door. “You won’t get away in there,” he said. He picked up the block again and got on his knees; sweeping the beam back and forth he searched beneath the bed. He could see nothing but curls of dust.

Then he noticed that the baseboard, where it ran along the wall under the bed, was raised a trifle from the floor and he fancied he saw in that minute space, as in a cave, the glint of tiny eyes.

It was obvious that he could not reach it with the block. He thought for a moment, and then he said, “I’ll fix you. Wait right there a minute. Don’t go away.” That amused him, and he chuckled. Getting to his feet, he found a long sharp nail file on the dresser and went back to the bed. He lay down flat and crawled under a little way. Holding the flashlight with one hand he stabbed the nail file into the crack. A kind of vicious frenzy seized him; he gutted the crack, slashing the file back and forth. Dust flew out and made him sneeze.

He wriggled backwards and stood up. “Good-bye, bug,” he said. He went into the bathroom and washed his hands. His face was red, and his shirt stuck to his body; his hair was full of wisps of fluff. “God,” he said to his reflection, “how about that? Chasing a bug. Reminded me of Ledyard, didn’t it? Same bug-eyes. Do beetles wear glasses?”

He laughed again, and came out of the bathroom. Cataclysmically, the beetle sprang up from the bedspread and flew out of the room.

Fulton snatched up the block. He rushed into the hall. He spied the thing resting on the rug near the other end, and ran, and struck at it. It scurried along the floor, its antennae quivering. It made for the guest room. Fulton tried to hit it but missed, and it disappeared into the shadows of the room.

“You won’t make out in there, Ledyard,” Fulton said, without thinking, and only when he heard the sound of his own words, realized what he had said.

“Of course,” he said, standing in the dim hall, swinging the block, staring into the dark guest-room. “It’s Ledyard. He’s wise to me. He
was always a wise guy.” Curiously, he felt like giggling. He put his hand out and felt cautiously along the wall of the guest room until he found the light switch. “Okay, Ledyard,” he said, snapping it on. “Okay. You want to play games, eh? Just wait.”

He edged into the room and stood in the corner, looking. He muttered, “A damned beetle. How about that? Eh? How about it?”

The beetle was clinging to the wall at the level of his shoulder. It was a handsome insect, nearly two inches long, with a glossy brown-blue back and long jointed antennae. He could see one eye clearly, a round lustrous black bead that seemed to regard him over a shoulder, as it were; he fancied the thing was grinning at him. He raised the block slowly, and slowly brought it forward. No hurrying, this time. It would crunch.

But before he could touch it, the beetle dropped off the wall. It darted to the rug and stopped. Fulton swung round to look for it, and suddenly he had the feeling that it was he who had been backed into a corner, that the beetle was chasing him.

He sprang forward, stamping his foot down. He was too late again. It was gone. He could hear a scratching sound somewhere, but he could see nothing.

The block was a poor weapon, it was too unwieldy. He dropped it, deciding to rely on his feet or even his fists, although the thought of touching the thing filled him with loathing. He began to stoop, to look under the bed, and saw, with no more than a corner of his eye, what appeared to be a faint black shadow whisk out of the room. He flung open the door. He began advancing up the hall very deliberately, inspecting every foot.

He came to the stairs and stopped. With his toe, he carefully moved a couple of comic books, and rolled the toy fire-engine aside. He grunted, straightening; his back hurt, for he had been going along half stooped. Then he saw it again.

It was perched on the top step, quietly regarding him, its antennae motionless. He took a single long step and this time trod heavily on it.

It was one of Ellis’s marbles. His foot shot out from under him. He grabbed for the bannister, missed, and pitched down the stairs. His head came against the steps with a solid crack, and when he got to the bottom he lay for quite a while making a hoarse sound, and then he died.

The beetle flew down from the ceiling and fastidiously, like a man buttoning his coat, tucked its wings under their cases. It ran along the floor back into Ellis’s room. The boy was still sitting up in bed, the light on, listening to all the noise.

“Hello, Mr. Ledyard,” he said.