

THE
BEETLE

A Novel

IAIN REID

FOE

FOE

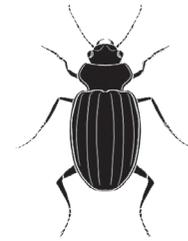
A Novel

IAIN REID



SIMON &
SCHUSTER

To Ewan



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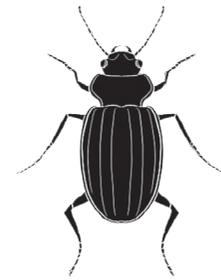


One has to be careful what one takes when
one goes away forever.

—LEONORA CARRINGTON, *The Hearing Trumpet*

Act One

ARRIVAL



TWO HEADLIGHTS. I wake to the sight of them. Odd because of the distinct green tint. Not the usual white headlights you see around here. I spot them through the window, at the end of the lane. I must have been in a kind of quasi slumber; an after-dinner daze brought on by a full stomach and the evening heat. I blink several times, attempting to focus.

There's no warning, no explanation. I can't hear the car from here. I just open my eyes and see the green lights. It's like they appeared out of nowhere, shaking me from my daze. They are brighter than most headlights, glaring from between the two dead trees at the end of the lane. I don't know the precise time, but it's dark. It's late. Too late for a visitor. Not that we get many of them.

We don't get visitors. Never have. Not out here.

I stand, stretch my arms above my head. My lower back is stiff. I pick up the open bottle of beer that's beside me, walk from my chair straight ahead several steps to the window. My shirt is unbuttoned, as it often is at this time of night. Nothing ever feels simple in this heat. Everything requires an effort. I'm waiting to see if, as I think, the car will stop, reverse back onto the road, continue on, and leave us alone, as it should.

But it doesn't. The car stays where it is; the green lights are pointing my way. And then, after a long hesitation or reluctance or uncertainty, the car starts moving again, toward the house.

You expecting anyone? I yell to Hen.

"No," she calls down from upstairs.

Of course she's not. I don't know why I asked. We've never had anyone show up at this time of night. Not ever. I take a swig of beer. It's warm. I watch as the car drives all the way up to the house and pulls in beside my truck.

Well, you better come down here, I call again. Someone's here.

I HEAR HEN WALK DOWN THE STAIRS and into the room. I turn around. She must have just gotten out of the shower. She's in cutoff shorts and a black tank top. Her hair is damp. She looks beautiful. Truly. I don't think she could look more like herself or any better than she does right now, like this.

Hello, I say.

"Hey."

Neither of us says anything else for a moment, until she breaks the silence. "I didn't know you were here. Inside, I mean. I thought you were still out in the barn."

She brings her hand up to her hair, playing with it in a specific way, curling it slowly around her index finger and then straightening the hair out. It's compulsive. She does this when she's concentrating. Or when she's agitated.

Someone's here, I say again.

She stands there, staring at me. I don't think she's blinked. Her posture is stiff, reserved.

What? I ask. What is it? Are you okay?

"Yes," she replies. "It's nothing. I'm surprised someone's here."

She takes a few hesitant steps toward me. She maintains more than an arm's length distance but is close enough now that I smell her hand cream. Coconut and something else. Mint, I think. It's a unique smell, and one I register as Hen.

"Do you know anyone with a black car like that?"

No, I say. Looks official, like government, doesn't it?

"Could be," she says.

The windows are tinted. I can't see inside.

"He must want something. Whoever it is. They're here, they came all the way up to the house."

A car door finally opens, but no one steps out. At least not right away. We wait. It feels like five minutes—standing, watching, waiting to see who will step out of the car. But maybe it's more like twenty seconds.

Then, I see a leg. Someone steps out. It's a man. He has long blond hair. He's wearing a dark suit. Collared shirt, open at the top, no tie. He has a black briefcase with him. He shuts the car door, adjusts his jacket, and walks up to the front porch. I hear him on the old wooden planks. He doesn't need to knock on the door because we're watching, and he can see us through the window. And we know he's here, but we wait and watch anyhow, and eventually the knock comes.

You answer it, I say, buttoning a section of middle buttons on my shirt.

Hen doesn't reply but turns and walks out of the living room, goes to the front door. She delays, looks back at me, turns, takes a breath, and then she opens the door.

"Hello," she says.

"Hi there. Sorry to disturb you at this hour," the man replies. "I hope it's okay. Henrietta, right?"

She nods and looks down at her feet.

"My name is Terrance. I'd like to have a word with you. Inside, if possible. Is your husband home?"

The man's exaggerated smile hasn't changed since she opened the door, not at all. What's this about? I ask, stepping out of the living room, into the hall. I'm right behind Hen. I place a hand on her shoulder. She flinches at my touch.

The man turns his attention to me. I'm taller than he is, wider. And older by a few years. Our eyes meet. He holds his attention on me for several moments, longer than what I deem normal. His smile moves to his eyes as if he's delighted by what he sees.

"Junior, right?"

Sorry, do we know you?

"You look great."

What's that?

"This is very exciting." He looks to Hen. She doesn't look at him. "I had butterflies in my stomach the whole way over, and it's not a short drive from the city. It's thrilling to finally

see you like this. I'm here to talk with you, both of you. That's all," he says. "Just to talk. I think you'll want to hear what I have to say."

What's this about? I ask again.

There's something unusual about this man's presence. Hen's unease is visible. I'm uncomfortable because Hen is uncomfortable. He better start telling us more.

"I'm here on behalf of OuterMore. Have you heard of us?"

OuterMore, I say. That's the organization that's dealing with—

"Would it be okay if I came in?"

I open the door wider. Hen and I step aside. Even if this stranger has malicious intentions, I've seen enough to know Terrance is not a threat, not to me. There isn't much to him. He has an office worker's body, a delicate frame. He's a pencil pusher. He's not a man like me, a laborer, someone used to working with his body. Once inside the front hall, he looks around.

"Great place," he says. "Spacious. Rustic, unadorned, in a charming way. Lovely."

"Do you want to sit down, in here?" Hen says, leading us to the living room.

"Thank you," he replies.

Hen turns on a lamp and sits in her rocking chair. I sit in my recliner. Terrance sits in the middle of the couch in front of us. He puts his case on the coffee table. His pant legs rise as he sits. He's wearing white socks.

Anybody else in the car? I ask.

"Just me," he says. "Making these kinds of visits is my job. Took a little longer to get here than I thought it would. You guys are a long way out. That's why I'm a bit late. Again, my apologies. But it really is great to be here. To see you both."

"Yeah, it is quite late," says Hen. "You're lucky you caught us before bed."

He's so calm, relaxed, as if he's been here, sitting on our

couch hundreds of times. His excessive composure has the counter effect on me. I try to catch Hen's eye, but she's just looking straight ahead and won't turn her head. I return to the matter at hand.

What's this about? I ask.

"Right, I don't want to get ahead of myself. As I said, I'm a representative of OuterMore. We're an organization that formed more than six decades ago. We started in the driverless automobile sector. Our fleet of self-driving cars was the most efficient and safest in the world. Our mandate changed over the years, and today it is very specific. We've moved out of the auto sector and into aerospace, exploration, and development. We're working toward the next phase of transition."

The next phase of transition, I repeat. So, like, space? The government sent you here? That's a government car out there.

"Yes and no. If you follow the news at all, you might know that OuterMore is a joint assembly. A partnership. We have a branch in government, hence the car, and roots in the private sector. I can show you a brief introductory video about us."

He removes a screen from his black case. He holds it up with both hands, facing it toward us. I glance at Hen. She nods, signaling to me that I should watch. A video plays. It seems typical of government-style promotion—overly enthusiastic and forced. Again, I peer at Hen. She appears uninterested. She's twirling a lock of hair around her index finger.

The images on the screen move from one to the next quickly, too fast to discern specific details or glean intent. People smiling, people engaged in group activities, laughing together, eating together. Everyone is happy. There are several images of the sky, the launch of a rocket, and rows of barrack-style metal beds.

When the video ends, Terrance tucks the screen away in his bag. "So," he says. "As you can see, we've been working on this particular project for a long time. Longer than most people realize. There's still a lot to do, but things are progressing.

The technology is quite impressive and advanced. We just received another significant surge of funding. This is happening. I know some of this has been in the media of late, but I can tell you that it goes much deeper than what's being reported. This is a long time coming."

I'm trying to follow his logic, but I can't quite piece it together.

Just to be clear, when you say, "This is happening," what exactly are you talking about? We don't follow the news much, do we? I say, looking over at Hen.

"No," she says. "Not really."

I'm waiting for her to elaborate, to ask a question, to say something, anything, but she doesn't.

"I'm talking about the first trip," he says. "The Installation." The what?

"The Installation. It's the first wave of temporary resettlement."

Resettlement. Like, away from Earth? In space?

"That's correct."

I thought that was more hypothetical, like a fantasy, I say. That's what this is about?

"It's very real. And, yes, this is why I'm here."

Hen exhales. It's closer to an audible groan. I can't tell if it's uncertainty or annoyance.

"I'm sorry," the man says, "but could I trouble one of you for a glass of water? I'm parched from the drive."

Hen stands, turns in my general direction, but doesn't make eye contact. "You want anything?"

I shake my head. I still have my beer to finish, the one I was drinking before the car arrived, before our night took this unpredictable turn. I pick it up off the table, take a warm mouthful.

"Well, here we are. This is your house. Very nice. How old is this place?" he asks when Hen's gone to the kitchen.

Old, I say. Couple hundred years or so.

"Amazing! I love that. And you're happy here? You like it, Junior? You feel comfortable? Just the two of you?"

What's he implying? I wonder.

It's really all we've ever known, I say. Hen and me. We're happy here, together.

He tilts his head to the side, smiling again.

"Well, what a place. What a story. Must be a lot of history in these walls. Must be nice to have so much space and quiet. You could do whatever you want out here. No one would see or hear a thing. There's no one to bother you. Are there other farms around here?"

Not so much anymore, I say. Used to be. Now it's mostly just crop fields. The canola.

"Yes, I saw the fields on my drive. I didn't realize canola was quite so tall."

It didn't used to be, I say, when farmers owned this land. Now, most of it is owned by the big companies or the government. The companies grow the new stuff. It's a hybrid, a lot taller and more yellow than the original was in the old days. Barely needs any water. These plants will last through a long drought. Grows faster, too. Doesn't seem natural to me, but it is what it is.

He leans toward me.

"That's fascinating. Do you ever feel a little . . . antsy? All alone out here?"

Hen returns with his glass of water and passes it to Terrence. She moves her rocking chair closer to me and sits.

Fresh from our well, I say. You won't get water like this in the city.

He thanks her and brings it to his mouth, drinking three-quarters of the glass in one long, loud pull. A small rivulet of water escapes the side of his mouth, down his chin. He puts the glass down on the table with a satisfying sigh.

"Delicious," he says. "Now, as I was saying, planning is already under way. I'm a liaison with the public relations depart-

ment. I've been assigned to your file. I'll be working closely with both of you."

With us? I say. We have a file? Why do we have a file?

"You didn't until . . . well, recently."

My mouth is dry. I swallow, but it doesn't help.

We didn't sign up for anything or agree to have a file, I say, sipping from my beer. He displays his toothy smile again. Like many people in the city, I assume his sparkling white teeth are implants. "No, that's true. But we've had our first lottery, Junior."

Your first what? I ask.

"Our first lottery."

"That's what you're calling it," says Hen, shaking her head.

A lottery? What exactly are you talking about? I ask.

"It's hard for me to know how much the general public such as yourselves are aware of already, how much you've pieced together based on things you've read or seen. I guess out here, not much. So it's like this: you've been selected. That's why I'm here."

Even though his mouth is closed, I see Terrance run his tongue over his top row of teeth.

I look over at Hen. She's looking straight ahead again. Why won't she look at me? Something's bothering her. It's not like her to avoid me. I don't like it.

"We have to listen to this, Junior," Hen says, but her tone is off. "We have to try to understand what he's saying."

Terrance looks from me to her and back to me. Does he notice her irritation? Could he? He doesn't know us, know what we're like together when we're alone.

"Excuse my informality," he says, standing up to take off his jacket. "The water helped, but I'm still a bit warm. Everything is air-conditioned back home. I hope you don't mind if I get a bit more comfortable. Are you sure you don't want some water, Henrietta?"

"I'm fine," she says.

Henrietta. He's calling her by her full name. He's sweating through his shirt. The blotches of random moisture look like a map of small islands. He folds the jacket and lays it down on the couch beside him.

Now's the time to ask more questions. He's giving me the opportunity. It's clear from his body language.

So you said I've been selected.

"Right," he says. "You have."

For what? I ask.

"For the trip. The Installation. Obviously, this is preliminary; it's just the beginning. I have to stress that this is still only the long list, so I don't want you to get too excited just yet. But what can I say? It's hard not to be excited. I'm excited for you. I love this part of my job more than anything—delivering the good news. There are no guarantees. I need you to understand that. In fact, far from it, but this is significant. This is a significant moment."

He looks at Hen. Her face is expressionless.

"You wouldn't believe the flood of volunteers we've had over the last few years. Thousands of folks are all dying to be picked. There are a lot of people who would give everything they have to be getting this same great news right now. So . . ."

I'm not really following, I say.

"Really?" he laughs, shakes his head, composes himself. "Junior, you made it! You're on the long list! For the Installation. If things progress, if you're chosen, you'll get to visit Outer-More's development. You might even get to be part of the first move. The first wave. You might get to live up there."

Terrance points to the ceiling, but he means to gesture beyond it, beyond the roof and into the sky. He wipes a hand across his forehead, waiting for his news to sink in, and then continues.

"It's the chance of a lifetime. It's just the beginning. We've gone ahead with the first lottery because this kind of . . . fortunate conscription . . . can take time."

I take another sip of beer. I think I'm going to need another. Fortunate conscription?

"I know this is wonderful," Terrance says. "And it's a lot to take in. But remember, I always say this, and I really believe it: Everything changes. Change is one of the only certainties in life. Human beings progress. We have to. We evolve. We move. We expand. What seems far-fetched and extreme becomes normal and then outdated pretty quickly. We move on to the next thing, the next development, the next frontier. What's up there, it's not really another world. It is far away. It's been beyond our reach for most of our existence. But it's getting closer all the time. We're moving it closer. You see?"

His eyes are filled with a confident excitement. What do my eyes look like to him? It's not excitement that I feel. It should be. But it's not. I look to Hen. She feels me looking at her, turns, and smiles meekly. Finally. A smile. Something to unite us. She's with me. She's back.

This is crazy, I say, reaching out to touch Hen's arm. Space. It is another world. But we have a world here. A life. Here. Together.

I'm starting to feel defensive, protective of this life, the one I know and understand.

You show up here, at my home, I say, out of the blue, and you announce that I might have to go? Regardless of what I want to do? You think that after all this time living here with Hen, I might actually have to leave? I never asked for this. This isn't normal.

Terrance smiles again, leans forward slowly, cautiously. "Look," he says. "This is the warning." He stops himself, readjusts how he's seated on my couch. "No, sorry. That's the wrong word. Warning makes it sound negative. And it's not. This is a good thing. It's a dream come true. And I admit that you didn't volunteer for this. Not exactly. But you have talked about space before. Our algorithm picked it up."

Hen perks up upon hearing this. "So you've been listening

in on us?" she asks. "How long have you been listening to us?" There's an unfamiliar edge to her voice. It makes me feel . . . I don't know what it makes me feel. I just know I don't like it.

Terrance puts his hand out as if to apologize. "Please," he says. "I'm not being clear. I'm not explaining things very well. It's not surveillance or active listening. The microphones in your screens are always on—you know that. It's data collection. The program we use sorts through the information, categorizes it. It recognizes words of interest."

"I'm sure you'll be listening even closer to him now," Hen says. "Won't you."

"Yes, we will."

Hen's face is tight, composed, unrevealing.

Words of interest? Can you explain that? I ask. What kinds of words would have registered for the lottery, a lottery I wasn't even aware of, by the way?

I hope this is the question Hen wants answered.

"For our purpose, words of interest include any talk of travel or space or planets or the moon. We'd pick those up for sure. It's information we need." He stops, pausing as if deciding how much to say. "Our lottery system is complex and impossible to explain in a simple way. You just have to trust us. This whole thing is about trust."

Hen's hands are pressed together. She's so still, so quiet. Why doesn't she say anything? Why doesn't she ask more questions? Why is she leaving it all up to me?

Can you tell us more? I ask. What's the development like?

"Back when this started, years ago, there were many possibilities for human existence in space. Or so we believed. The moon. Mars. OuterMore was even considering colonizing a newly discovered planet that was orbiting a star in a neighboring solar system. In the end, we decided to build our own planet, as it were, our own space station."

All of this, what he's saying—neighboring solar systems—it's hard for someone like me to comprehend. But I have to try.

Why? I ask. Why build a station at all when there are perfectly good places to live here? And why build an entire space station if there are perfectly good planets out there already?

Terrance scratches the side of his head. “For lots of reasons. For example, if you were to travel to one of those planets, even if you traveled at the speed of light, which is impossible, it would take approximately seventy-eight years to get there and back. So that was a barrier. We chose to conquer other barriers instead. We knew we wanted the first phase, the development, to be a test period, an investigation. People would go and live there, we would observe, run tests, complete analyses, and then they’d return home. Building our own planet was the best idea for this model. There have been space stations up there. For a long time. Our first one was launched several years ago. We’ve been working on it since then. The development has expanded rapidly. It’s now become a massive space station. It’s orbiting around Earth right now, as we speak. It’s not finished yet, but it’s up there.”

We can’t help ourselves, I think, can’t stop expanding, spreading, conquering.

And the government knows about all this?

“We are the government,” he says. “We’re connected to the government. It’s our research.”

I’ve never even been on an airplane, I say. Neither has Hen. She would hate it. She’s never traveled far. She would be terrified of going to space.

“Oh,” says Terrance. “I should have clarified that right away. That’s my fault. It’s you I’m talking about here, Junior. Just you.”

And then it dawns on me. I see what he’s suggesting.

We’re not both on the list? We’re not both part of the lottery? I ask.

“No, I’m afraid not. Only you, Junior.”

Hen doesn’t react. She doesn’t say anything. She doesn’t even sigh, or make a sound. She just sits there. I don’t know

how to take this. I don’t feel like I have a choice. And she’s not helping.

What happens next? I say.

“Nothing really. Nothing that’s pressing or immediate. The list is still long, as is the process. Think of this as a marathon. It’s part of our policy to give you this news in person, if possible. It’s the best way to start our relationship. If you don’t get picked for the short list, this will be our first and last visit, but it might be a lot more than that.”

How long is the long list?

“Unfortunately, and I’m sure you can appreciate this, Junior, I can’t reveal any details other than you’re on it. Everything else is classified. What I can say is that nothing will be decided for a few years.”

A few years. Hearing this helps me relax. This remote possibility is actually far off, distant, like the orbiting space station itself. Maybe Hen understood that from the outset. Maybe that’s why she’s so quiet, so calm.

This brings our conversation to an end, kind of. In actual fact, Terrance continues to talk, to pontificate, to explain the goals of OuterMore for another hour or more, but he’s not saying anything relevant to me. When I interject with a question or comment, he toes the company line. A lot of what he says seems rehearsed. I wonder how long he’s been doing this job. It can’t be that long. He’s still too scripted and self-conscious. It’s clear that he’s openly excited. That’s for sure. At one point, he tells us about something OuterMore developed called Life Gel, a kind of topical ointment that helps bodies acclimatize to the lack of atmosphere. A gel, I think. A gel that helps you get used to something. It’s so weird, so abstract, that I can’t really imagine it.

When Terrance excuses himself to go to the bathroom, Hen and I are left alone at last. At first neither of us says anything. We sit in bewildered silence. Then Hen finally looks at me.

I look right into her eyes. Now that she sees me, is paying

attention to me, I feel instantly better.

“What are you thinking?” she asks.

I’m not sure. Just trying to take it all in, I say, shaking my head. I know I’m supposed to be happy and excited, that this is an opportunity most people would pay for, but . . .

“Do you feel upset? Scared? Blindsided?”

No, no, no, I say. I’m fine.

“Good,” she says. “It’s a lot to take in. Fucking Life Gel.”

Yeah, fucking Life Gel, I repeat.

Terrance comes back, so we don’t have a chance to talk anymore by ourselves. He picks back up right where he left off, barely pausing. And yet, he still doesn’t answer any of my questions. He goes off on abstract tangents. He reveals complex algorithmic details about the long list. He shows more videos of newly designed rockets with transparent exhaust and a video that attempts to explain something called “thrust vectoring.”

Hen, sitting beside me the whole time, listens to all of it. Then, after a half hour or so, she excuses herself. Terrance talks at me for a while longer, and at last, it seems he has nothing else to say. I know I have more questions, more concerns I want to ask him about, but this whole experience has been so unexpected and overwhelming that I can’t remember what my questions are. I’ve lost all my stamina, all my curiosity. I escort him to his car. We shake hands. Looking at him out here, feeling his hand in mine, I get an odd sensation for the first time tonight that he’s somehow familiar to me.

He sets his case in the car, leaves the door open, and surprises me by turning back around and pulling me in for a hug. When he releases me, he steps back and grabs my shoulder.

“Congrats,” he says. “I’m so pleased to see you here.”

Do I know you? I ask.

Those teeth. That smile. “This is just the beginning. Day one. But I have a good feeling we’ll meet again before long,” he says. Then he settles into the car. “Best of luck to you.”

The door closes with a thunk. I watch the car drive down the lane and pull out onto the road. It’s pitch-dark out now. I can hear the crickets and critters in the canola. I look around. This is where I’m from. It’s what I know. It’s all I’ve ever known. I always assumed it’s all I would ever know.

I look up at the sky—dotted with stars. The same as it’s always been. I’ve been looking up at the same night sky my whole life. It’s the only sky I’ve ever seen. All those stars. Satellites. The moon. I know the moon is so far away. It looks different tonight, though. I’ve never thought about it before, but if I can see it, all of it—those stars, the moon—see them from here with my own eyes, how far away can they really be?

