



The Anthill

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Published: 2010

Categorie(s):

Tag(s): "short story" fiction horror scary ants insects housewife

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Harold Lutz squinted in concentration over his glasses as he added a ribbon to the dark curls of the busty maiden on the front of the ship. He pursed his lips for a moment, grunted in satisfaction, then set down the tiny paintbrush and reached for the jar of varnish. It wasn't until she walked into the basement that Harold realized Alice was shouting at him.

"Are you down here again?" she asked, even though the answer was obvious.

"Harold, I asked you to mow the lawn today. Violet and Margaret are picking me up for bridge tonight, and I won't have our yard looking like something out of the Wild Kingdom. Honestly, I don't know why I even bother asking you."

She paused to inhale, but before she could start again Harold stood up, apologized meekly, and shuffled past his wife and up the stairs.

"And don't forget to use the rake," she called out behind him.

The lawnmower jostled for space in the tool shed with Alice's potting soil, two cans of yellow house paint, assorted garden hoses, and a rusty bicycle. Harold wiggled it away from the bicycle and rolled it around the side of the house and through the weathered gate into the front yard. He adjusted his glasses, then leaned over and gave a sharp tug on the pull cord. Three more times, and the engine sputtered and coughed itself into life.

Alice was yelling something from the porch.

"Harold, I said don't forget to sweep the sidewalk." She paused and took a drink from her iced tea. "You always forget to sweep the sidewalk. It's part of the yard too, you know." She turned and let the screen door slam behind her.

Harold muttered "yes, dear," and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. Then he straightened his glasses and walked back to the shed to get the broom and the rake.

By the time he finished up, Violet and Margaret were just pulling into the driveway. Alice called out over her shoulder that she'd be home late, and Harold waved as the three of them drove off. He wondered if Alice had left any of that iced tea. Turning back to his pile of grass clippings, he loaded them into the trash can and lugged the can back behind the shed.

He squinted in the afternoon glare as he dragged the can back into place and pushed it up against the wall with his foot. Alice didn't like the trash cans to block the walkway between the shed and her

rhododendrons. He grabbed the other can and moved it a little to one side. Satisfied, he brushed off his hands. He turned to go back inside and noticed the ants.

Must have disturbed them, he thought. The ground around the can was a scurrying mass of alarmed activity. He squatted down and peered over the tops of his glasses. They were just regular black ants, the kind boys feed grasshoppers to, or zap with their magnifying glasses. He grinned and rocked the trash can back and forth a few times. The ants scurried back and forth, sending out their silent alarm.

“Earthquake!” he said, and chuckled.

He watched for a moment more, then stood up and walked back to the house. He was relieved they weren’t sugar ants. He thought about ant poison and a trip to the hardware store. This was followed by the thought of the unfinished Santa Maria, and he immediately remembered his unvarnished poop deck and tiny paintbrushes. He hurried inside, carefully closing the backdoor behind him.

At work the next day, it occurred to him that he liked shipbuilding better than his job. Harold was in accounting, and had been for the past 34 years. He never really liked it, he thought. He didn’t even care when Artie Graham got promoted after “old man” Ross had retired. He told Alice he thought it was probably for the best.

Alice didn’t think it was for the best.

“I don’t understand you Harold, I really don’t,” she said, and waved her fork for emphasis. “You told me yourself that Bill Ross was looking for a replacement. And you stood there and let him pick that child?”

Harold focused on his meatloaf.

“Why Harold? Don’t you think I deserve a nice car like Violet? Or to be able to wear a new dress just once in a while?” Her voice was getting louder.

“Of course, who am I talking to? You’ve never stood up to anyone in your whole life.” Her eyes started to fill with tears.

“Nobody respects you Harold. Not Bill, and certainly not Artie Graham. And you know what? I—”

She caught herself and stared at Harold quietly chewing his meatloaf.

“You’re just hopeless,” she finally spat out. She pushed back her chair and went into the kitchen.

Harold sat and finished his meatloaf while Alice banged the pots and pans in the sink. "You could at least take the trash out," she finally said.

Harold walked into the kitchen and took the pail out from under the sink while Alice stood to one side, glaring. She closed the cabinet door with her foot and went back to clanking plates in the sink. Harold stood watching her back for a moment, then shrugged and stepped out the back door.

The cool air on the back porch felt good after the warm day. It smelled faintly of lawn and the neighbor's barbecue grill. He looked over at the garden shed and remembered that he needed to put the grass clippings out with the trash on Tuesday. With a sigh, he eased down the steps and carried the trash pail over to the can behind the shed.

The ants had gotten there first. Harold squinted at the wriggling stream coming from the large hill on the ground and flowing improbably up the side of the can and under the lid. He clucked his tongue and lifted the lid for a closer look.

He set the pail down and examined the anthill. It was bigger than he remembered it. On a whim, he took the pen out of his pocket and pushed it into the ground near the entrance. Immediately, a group of scouts emerged, heads raised and ready for battle. Harold pushed up his glasses and smiled. "En guard," he said and jousted three or four with the tip of his pen.

"Harold, are you ever coming back in?"

Alice's voice startled him, and he dropped the pen.

"I need the trash pail."

It wasn't until work the next day that he remembered his pen. Artie asked him to check on the Dupree account, and when he went to sign it out, he realized his pen was gone. He patted all of his pockets, searching, then remembered the anthill. He frowned. Alice didn't like ants. He'd have to do something to get rid of them.

"Is there something wrong Mr. Lutz?" Mrs. Doyle asked.

Harold looked up and realized he'd been daydreaming. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said, "I was thinking about some chores I need to do around the house."

"Well, it's nice to hear a man at least thinking about chores. It's all I can do to get my Tom to mow the lawn." She winked at him from behind her horned-rim glasses.

"Yes," Harold replied, and took a pen from her desk and initialed the register. "But we can't all be ants Mrs. Doyle. The summer needs a

few grasshoppers." She laughed her horsey laugh, and he took the folder and went back to his desk.

Alice was out when he got home. Tuesdays were book club night and trash night. Alice took care of the first, and Harold took care of the second. He unlocked the front door, took off his hat and set down his briefcase, then quickly changed out of his suit and tie and into his work clothes. Then it was through the kitchen and down into the basement. He flicked on the light switch and looked over at the gleaming white sails of the Santa Maria. Taped to the main mast was a large yellow piece of paper. It said "TRASH!"

Harold looked at the note then checked his watch, then looked back at the note. He gingerly removed the tape, stuffed the note in his pocket, then turned off the light and slowly climbed the stairs again.

Out at the shed, he put on his work gloves, then went around the side and jerked the handle of the can full of grass clippings. He half-dragged, half-carried it up the cement stairs and down the walkway to the street, then returned for the trash can. He grabbed it and hauled it to the curb, muttering and cursing under his breath then went back to the shed to take off his gloves. They were swarming with ants.

"Eechhh," he said in annoyance, and shook the gloves off. Instinctively, he checked his arms and clothes, then scratched a sudden itch behind his left ear. Satisfied, he looked down at his gloves. The ants had regrouped, and were streaming together back behind the shed. He followed them, and rubbed his eyes when he saw it.

The anthill was still there, but larger than last time. Ants moved in a steady flow in and out of the entrance, some carrying food, others sand or debris. But the entrance was different. His pen was standing erect to one side, and there was a group of soldiers surrounding it.

He leaned down and examined the scene. Four ants had made a square around the pen, with each one standing motionless in a corner. A little beyond that, dozens of ants marched together, forming a living circle around it. He reached out for the pen, but hesitated when he saw the circle slow to a stop. Slender feelers touched one another, uncertain, then one ant broke off and scurried down the hill and towards Harold's shoe. He waited, curious.

The ant approached the sole of his shoe cautiously, pausing every few inches to wave its feelers in the air before moving forward again. Harold stood perfectly still, not wanting to frighten it off. Finally it seemed to gather its courage and climbed up the shoe. It stopped, facing

him. It raised its feelers and front legs. Then it turned and climbed down and crawled eagerly back to the circle. Harold chuckled.

"I hope this means we can be friends," he said.

The ants seemed to hear him, and started the march around the pen again.

He stood up and looked around sheepishly. Then he chuckled again, and watched the pulsing circle of ants until the fading sunlight made it too hard to see.

Harold sped home from work the next day, dropped his briefcase at the front door, and changed into his work clothes before he even said hello to Alice.

"You're home early," she said as he passed through the kitchen.

"I've got some things I needed to do around the house."

"Well, that's a first," she said. Then, without turning around, she added "And don't bother rushing so you can get back to your toys."

Harold froze.

"What's that?"

"I said don't bother rushing your work outside so you can spend all your time in the basement with that damn boat of yours. I threw it away."

Harold's hands started to sweat and he felt slightly sick. He pushed up his glasses and said "N-Now see here Alice, I—"

"No Harold, you see here!"

She took a step forward and pointed her finger at him. "I'm sick and tired of you wasting your days and nights on these ridiculous hobbies while other husbands are improving themselves. Do you think Artie Graham plays with toy boats? Ridiculous!"

"W-What did you do Alice?" He looked like an outclassed boxer.

"I told you, I threw it away. Right in the trashcan." She brushed her hands for effect.

"And another thing," she held up her finger and shook it at him. "There is an enormous anthill behind the shed. While you're outside you can take that can of gasoline and get rid of them."

Harold blinked slowly. He mouthed something like a fish gasping for air, but no sound came out.

Alice tapped him in the chest. "An anthill Harold. Get rid of it."

She stared hard at him until she was satisfied, then turned back to the sink, muttering. "Nasty, disgusting creatures."

Harold took a step towards the door, then stopped. He looked at the doorknob for a full minute, then turned around. He stared at Alice

standing at the sink in her green housedress and apron, then blinked several times.

“What?” Alice growled.

Harold’s face was cold, but his voice was soft and warm. “What anthill?”

She turned to face him. “Don’t tell me you haven’t seen that gigantic anthill behind the shed?”

Harold shook his head dully.

“Do you think I’m an idiot?”

Harold shook his head again. “No Alice, I just didn’t see any ant-hill when I was out there yesterday.”

She glared at him.

“You’re the idiot!” she finally screamed, and untied her apron.

“Come on,” she said and stomped down the stairs. Harold followed her out the back door and back to the shed.

She got there before him and jerked the empty trash can out of the way.

“Right there Harold! Do you see it now?” She grabbed his arm and pulled him in front of the anthill.

“What do you call that Harold?” She pulled over the other can and pushed it away with her foot. “And that? What do you call it Harold?”

He looked down. In the light he thought he could just make out the circle of ants. They were still marching, guarding their monument. Harold looked around. It was later than he thought. The air was still warm, but it was getting dark.

“What do you call it?” she asked again, pounding his arm with her fist.

“Friends,” he finally said, and reached out with both hands and squeezed Alice’s neck until he couldn’t squeeze anymore. Then he crouched down and whispered.

“Dinnertime.”

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