

## People Like Ants

Over the dining table, Bea leans closer to my breakfast. Her eyes are magnificent saucers behind her glasses, and I know she hates it—to wear glasses—but her expression of constant bewilderment is painfully endearing. One day, she'll grow up and get the contact lenses she so desperately wants, and she'll no longer tilt into me, her warm child's breath a soft intrusion of love.

“Hey dad, did you know there are billions of ants in the world?”

Bea's proximity threatens my bacon and toast. She's not focused on it, but I'm a parent and therefore always on high alert, protective of my food. Children are vultures.

“Billions, you say?”

“Mmhm.” She's proud when she can school the schoolteacher.

“Wow,” I say. “That sure is a lot. There are probably a billion right here in Hillsboro alone.”

“Really?”

Billions is an intriguing yet impossible concept for an eight-year-old. It’s an impossible concept for me, now that I think of it. Used to be that I understood the magnitude of numbers, back when I lived in New York City in a dank, roach-infested high rise that was the culmination of my young career as a writer. I thought I’d mind coming back to Hillsboro, though it turned out to be just what I needed. Big city it isn’t, but it has its charms. That our small town could hold a million, let alone a billion of anything may as well contradict the known laws of physics.

“Oh yeah, kid. How many ants are in an anthill, you think?”

The corner of Bea’s rosebud mouth moves like it’s pulled by an invisible marionette string.

“A hundred?”

It’s infinitely more, closer to hundreds of thousands, but one hundred is an easier number.

“Okay, one hundred ants per anthill. How many anthills do you suppose are in our backyard?”

She runs to the sliding door that separates our dining room from the fenced-in yard. Her hands press against the glass, and I hear her whisper one, two, three... as she counts the sandy piles.

“Twenty!”

“Okay, so one hundred times twenty is two thousand ants. Just in our backyard!”

“Whoa.”

Bea’s wonderment as she tries to calculate the number of regular old ants in our front yard, then our neighbors’ yards, then our town, produces the sobering effect I’m looking for. I can finish my break—

“If there are so many ants, Dad, then does it matter if you step on one?”

If she were older, I’d say no, but she’s at an impressionable age where curiosity can become psychopathy with just the right combination of free time and magnifying glasses. Her mother wouldn’t have to think about a response—Allison would gently tell Bea that all lives are precious, even tiny ant ones. But Allison isn’t here right now, so I do what any dad would do in the absence of a more responsible parent: I lie.

“Sure, it matters, baby. All life is special.”

“Jordan Rogers stepped on a lot of ants at recess yesterday. He poured his soda in the anthill and then stepped all over them.”

“That wasn’t nice at all,” I say. “But I’m sure the ant family will be okay. There are a lot of ant brothers and sisters to help out.”

Tears start to pool in Bea’s eyes. “But won’t they miss them?”

This isn’t going the way I hoped.

“Oh honey, sure they will, but ants are among the strongest and most resilient insect species on the planet.” That last part is true, though I can’t speak for their emotional depth. “Did you know that ants can lift over twenty times their body weight?”

“No way!” It seems to cheer her up.

I take a bite of my toast and nod, but before I can snap off a crispy end of bacon, Bea snatches it from my plate and darts upstairs to get ready for school.

#

For the better part of the semester, the Language and Science departments have instructed from sweaty mobile trailers, but the eastside wing has finally been rebuilt after last year's chemistry lab fire. The portable classrooms had done little for school spirit, and I've been looking forward to the general teenage chaos of high school. Within its walls, the school still holds opportunity and promise.

My class had finished *Our Town* right before the move, but something was bugging me about how perfunctory the process was. Read. Grade. Repeat. There were before me seniors in high school, months before graduating and flitting off like fireflies to colleges and universities across the country. I glance at the clock in my new classroom and sigh.

“Okay guys, let’s, uh... why don’t we put away the books for today. What do you say?”

“Hell yeah.” Candice Percy claps her hardcover text shut and slumps down in her chair.

The rest of the class looks on in careful fascination, the same way Bea had looked numbering the ants.

“I mean it. Let’s rap.”

A few kids laugh at my attempt at modern vernacular.

“Oh, ha ha, laugh at the old guy,” I joke. “I want to talk about time.”

“Time?” Sarah Yoder cocks her head to the side in confusion.

I nod. “Yeah. Time is a big element in the play we just read—not enough of it, not using it wisely, the time capsule—and it’s intrinsically linked to memory. Emily, in a sense, grieves twice. Once for her own death and yet again because she’s reliving a moment in her life in which her loved ones aren’t fully appreciating the time they have.”

“Then why are we spending it in school?” Wallace Perkins asks.

“Because otherwise,” I say, “you wouldn’t be exploring the meaning of life through a play written over seventy years ago. You guys are young, not yet inundated with bills and jobs and weird tasks like remembering to buy kitchen sponges and gluten-free crackers.”

Heather Chang’s lips arch, showing a row of even, perfect teeth. “Ew.”

“I know. My wife, not me.” I shrug. “Anyway, the point is that we’ve only got so much time here on earth and Emily recognizes that, but only when it’s too late. She can’t go back to her twelfth birthday no more than she can swoop down to metaphorically shake awake those she left behind from experiencing a lifetime of trivial pursuits.”

“So, when we’re adults we shouldn’t pay bills?” Keith Scott leans back in his desk and grins.

“If it were only that simple. But I think Wilder is saying, through Emily’s observations, that maybe it can be *simpler*, if we learn to appreciate it. Life is wonderful—it doesn’t always have to be complicated—but it is fleeting.”

My students are more focused on putzing around in a future without jobs or grocery lists. I throw my hands up and smile. “Okay, let’s try something else. Our time is valuable already, but would you do anything different if you had more of it?”

When I’m met with silence, I choose a volunteer. “Heather, what would you do with an extra hour in the day?”

All eyes turn to the back corner, where Heather is grimacing at her nails.

“Hang out with my boyfriend, Tommy.”

“Okay. Perfect. Spending time with loved ones.” I turn to the chalkboard and write down “Loved Ones” in my neatest handwriting.

Wallace hits the desk and laughs.. “Oh, so you *love* him now?”

“You’re just jealous,” Heather sneers.

“Hey now, settle that after class,” I say. “This—” I hold up a copy of the play and give it a little shake for effect, “is the kind of drama that belongs in the classroom. Wallace, you’re up. What would you do with an extra hour?”

“Football practice. We’re gonna win this year!” The hulking seventeen-year-old flexes and barks, riling up his other teammates in class.

“Football. Practicing a hobby, potential career path. Great idea. Anyone else? What about you, Marty?”

“I dunno, maybe... read more?”

“Excellent.”

“Read? Pfish. Lame,” Keith says.

“I think it’s nice.” Sarah turns to face Marty and smiles.

It’s a cinema-perfect moment where the popular girl shows understanding to the nerdy boy. The bookish, acne-marred teenager in me melts. “What would you do, Sarah?”

“Go to the mall?”

I scrawl “Shop” on the board. “Anyone else? No? Okay, let’s get down to the heart of it. Extra hour or not, you’re the only person who can make your dreams a reality, so use your time wisely. Class dis—”

The end-of-school bell interrupts, sending the students into a flurry. When I’m alone, I stare at the board. My students’ responses range from learning new languages to sleeping and playing video games. To hope for existential reflection would have been nuts.

#

At dinner, I decide to ask Bea what she’d do with the gift of an extra hour.

“Spend more time with you and mommy and the ants.”

My heart.

“That’s very sweet,” Allison says. Her left hand reaches out and rests on the table near Bea, where our daughter is lining up beans in a long coiling snake around her plate. “Do you not want your beans?”

“I’m making an ant family.”

“An ant family?”

“Did you know that there are billions of ants in the world and over two thousand of them live in our backyard?”

“Is that so?”

“And some of them are in our kitchen!”

“Some of them are what? Where?”

“Yeah! I left them some breakfast this morning. Do ants like bacon?”

My eyes widen as Allison blinks at me. I shake my head and mouth an expression of confusion, trying to shirk off responsibility as best I can. It was my bacon, but it was not my hand that fed the insects.

“Dad said we shouldn’t step on ants.”

My wife’s alarm smooths into a razor-sharp line of annoyance directed at me. “Is that so?”

“They’re part of the ecosystem, Mom.”

“Well, I’m sure Dad will find a way to bring them back outside where they belong.”

Allison grins and her maybe-not-so-mock tension withdraws. “Without stepping on any one of them.”



After Bea is upstairs in bed, I help Allison clean the kitchen. She's hovering over the floor, tracing the ants' destination from the sliding door, through the dining room. I crouch ahead of her with a handheld broom. The ants are pooled around a series of tiny red spots left on the floor like breadcrumbs. Bacon.

"What's with her sudden interest in ants?"

"She's curious. Kid stuff," I say.

I open the door to the backyard and set the dustpan on the grass. The ants will make quick work of the food and eventually return to their home.

We sit in the plastic lawn chairs on our patio and share a cigarette. It's one of the few remaining vices we have left since becoming parents. Of course, smoking runs in direct opposition to what we teach Bea about health, but old habits die hard.

"And you gave her the 'all life is precious' spiel? I'm impressed."

"I panicked. Figured it was better than her becoming a serial killer."

"Hell of a correlation."

"You never know these days, Ali. One moment she's Dr. Doolittle of the ant world, next she's Dr. Moreau." I take a long drag and pass the cigarette to her. "You don't believe me?"

"I believe you, but I don't think we have to worry about Bea. At least not like that. Maybe turning our house into a zoo..."

The square of grass illuminated from Bea's bedroom window goes dark and suddenly there arises a symphony of crickets and cicadas, noises we didn't notice moments before. It's peaceful. Just Allison, me, and a drifting coil of smoke in the night.

#

The ecosystem Bea coaxed into our kitchen grows. There's not a room in our house safe from these tiny black bugs. They eat forgotten food particles that have collected under the cabinets, parade along the windows to our living room, and take showers with us. Bea's in love. And while I'm rather fascinated by how these little creatures can lift colossal crumbs and travel the distance of our dining room to report back to ant headquarters, Allison is decidedly livid.

Under Bea's watchful eye we employ first the homeopathic remedies of cayenne, mint, and cinnamon barricades with varying degrees of success.

"Should I recite an incantation?" I whisper to Allison. "Some ancient curse to deter insects?"

Allison sprinkles the combination of spices across the threshold of the sliding door, Ground Zero of the ant invasion. She snorts a half-laugh but catches herself.

"Oh, come on. It was funny," I say.

"It'll be funny when I'm not picking ants off my dinner plate, Eddie. I swear, my skin is crawling. I feel them everywhere."

"They're harmless, Mom." Bea's belly-down on the kitchen tile with a microscope to the tile.

"I know, sweetie. It's just that ants belong outside where they can be in the sunshine and, you know, eat leaves, do ant things." Allison empties the container of cinnamon with a final

shake and looks over her shoulder at our daughter before directing a threatening voice to me. “If this doesn’t work, we have to use baits. We have to kill them.”

#

I bring up the predicament to my class the next morning. Among the solutions my students offer, moving ranks highest, right above setting the house on fire or transforming into an ant a la Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*.

“But you see,” I say, “my real conundrum isn’t removing the ants—although that certainly presents a problem—but it’s how to handle this ethical dilemma. Do I kill the ants in secret and lie or admit to my daughter I was wrong, that hundreds of ant lives are indeed not precious?”

“All parents lie, Mr. G,” Wallace says.

“Yeah, and look how you turned out.” Heather pops her gum and shrugs. “He’s right though. You should lie.”

“Is that what you would do?” I ask the class. “Who would lie and kill the ants in secret?” Hands shoot up. “And what about those in the other camp? Who thinks I should admit my hypocrisy?”

It’s a fifty-fifty split.

“Anyone else have a Plan C?”

Marty Hanson raises his hand. “Why don’t you get her an ant farm? You’ll have to kill them, anyway, so why not let her keep some?”

“That’s a great idea, Marty,” Sarah says.

Murmured assents ripple through the room. In a surprising display of helpfulness, Wallace offers his old lizard tank. Other students volunteer to collect foliage and create obstacle courses for the insects. I sit against the edge of my desk and survey the class. There’s hope for them after all.

#

“I thought we were getting rid of the ants,” Allison mumbles.

“We will, we will. I’ll set baits tonight for the rest of them.” I sidle in close and kiss her cheek. “Win-win.”

Bea’s on her hands and knees in the kitchen coaxing ants onto a sheet of paper and depositing them into the terrarium my students had made for her in class that afternoon. Each ant has a name: Artie, Adam, Amy, even one named Allison. My daughter makes an unlikely Noah, shepherding insects to safety, all while unknowingly condemning the others to death. A sticky thought of betrayal crawls over my shoulders; I had assigned her the role of playing God to relieve myself of the burden of choice.

But damn if it doesn’t make her happy.

The baits go under the kitchen sink, in a corner behind the couch, any inconspicuous place I can find. I don't feel good about it, but we can't keep up the charade. The spice barriers are useless, so Allison and I have resorted to squashing bugs in secret after Bea goes to bed. It's only a matter of time before they fall victim to the sugary traps; I just hope Bea doesn't find them first.

The truth of the matter—and what I hate to admit to my daughter—is that I was wrong. Ants are important, sure, but our sanity wins over the few hundred insects making our casa sus casa. We had spent hours in our daughter's presence pretending to coddle an invading ant population and it was exhausting. Ants did matter. Just not the uninvited ones in our home. Was I a bad father for lying to my daughter and subsequently hiding my lie by having my students soften the blow? Perhaps. But Santa Claus still exists for a couple more years, so the scales are tipped in my favor.

Or so I thought.

Bea's high-pitched shriek rattles the windowpanes the next morning. Downstairs, she crouches by the sofa where a pile of ants had surrendered to their deaths. Little black bodies float in the poisonous liquid. The temporary survivors are crawling back outside, where they'll carry the disease back to the colony.

Between sobs she expresses the depth of her anguish. "You said you wouldn't kill them!"

"Oh, baby girl, I'm sorry." I kneel down beside her, but she pushes me away. "There were just too many."

"I could have saved them!"

A couple dozen more, maybe—the process to obtain the ones she had had taken hours—but she couldn't prevent the death of thousands. I wonder if she'd say the same for head lice.

Allison comes down the stairs. When she sees the scene—the candy-bar sized ant trap and our crying daughter, she frowns. “Oh honey.”

“Yeah, I know she—”

“Not you.” Allison rolls her eyes at me and perches on the edge of the couch.

“Dad killed the ants.” Bea swipes her palm across her nose and pouts. The gap between mother and daughter closes, and I'm left watching the two women in my life comfort each other over the Bad Dad.

Allison tucks a piece of Bea's hair behind her ears. “Sweetheart, he was only doing what he thought was right. You see, ants and people can't live together like that.”

“Why not?”

Because humans are bigger and ants are pesky, and some animals serve a purpose like food and some animals are inconsequential in their deaths like ants, and not all animal lives are created equal? That even the sanctity of life has its limits?

Instead, my wife says, “Because ants would eat all of our food. They would get in your hair and bite you, and then they might bring their friends along, like wasps and hornets, which are mean and sting you.”

This imagined wilderness of nasty insects and bug bites appears to calm Bea down.

“Oh,” she whispers.

There's little I can do, so I set myself to making coffee and breakfast while Allison helps Bea conduct an ant funeral, complete with an old shoe box and soft-spoken condolences.

When they finish, the sliding door scrapes to a close and I feel Allison's hand glide against my back.

"How's she doing?" I pass a mug to her and sigh.

"She'll be fine. I think the idea of angry bees and ants sharing her Oreos helped."

"You always know what to say in these situations. I'm not good with this."

"You think too much, that's all."

"Well, yeah." I face her and stare into the backyard. A small mound of dirt with a popsicle stick poking out of it marks the gravesite. "You even made her an ant memorial."

"I'm a sucker for a good sob story." Allison kisses me on the cheek. "Bea will forgive you."

"I know. I just hate being the jerk."

"But you're our jerk. And we love you."

#

The outpouring of sympathy from my students is unexpected. Sarah Yoder's face falls when I retell the morning's saga. Marty and Wallace remain overjoyed that their contributions are intact and appreciated by Bea, while Candice Percy snickers in the background at first but frowns when

I mention the popsicle tombstone. It seems my class has a vested interest in my success, and the optimist in me quivers with pride.

“There was no easy way out of this, Mr. G,” says Wallace. “But you did the right thing.”

“Did I? I still lied to my daughter.”

“It was to be kind,” Sarah says. “It was harmless. The ants would have died anyway.”

“But now she knows I’m a liar.”

Candice scoffs. “She’d find out sooner or later. No offense.”

She’s right—there’ll be a day when Bea learns that her mother and I told a number of untruths big and small, even if it was all in good faith. We do it to keep her safe, to prolong her happiness, to find ways to make moments stand still. Who can blame me for wanting to spare Bea the knowledge of time and its consequences?

Bea would have spent her extra hour with the ants—elbows in the dirt, chin cradled in her hands, ogling the lives of another species like a curious god. My students, well, they made an eight-year-old child an ant farm when they could have been shopping or playing video games or making it to second base.

I scan the rows of seats with these familiar yet strange, impressionable students before me and smile. One day their extra hours will melt like ice cream in summer, when the idea of spending sixty minutes doing any one thing will be unfathomable. For now, they have a whole world of possibility right in front of them. They have all the time in the world.

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