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Ants

by Loren MacLeod

Daljit sits on the parched grass beneath the dusty *neem* tree, straddling an earthen mound. Her dirty cotton sari is hiked high on her thighs, and she knows her mother will beat later for her immodesty, but she cannot keep her eyes from the fascinating comings and goings of the mound, which is an anthill. The ants stream up and down the sides of the hill, these tiny beings the Jains sweep from their paths with brooms for fear of crushing them. She is amazed that their armored columns can march far, far away, to places unknown, and return unerringly to the hill.

Daljit looks up, squinting in the midday sun. Missy Sahib is there, watching her from the bedroom window on the second floor of the great stone bungalow. Missy Sahib is naked. Daljit can see a hairless triangle and two little breasts, and then she smiles down at her in a mysterious, catlike manner. But her blue eyes do not narrow.

They are not allowed to play with each other.

Daljit looks down at the ants. Some time ago, they were brown and small, but a race of larger ants has conquered them. These new ants are very dangerous, she was told once by the shriek-roughened throat of her mother. No matter. They love her the same, they still crawl caressingly over her bare arms and legs and the sweet skin next to her *yoni*, and they never, ever bite.

During the last monsoon the rain caused a branch to fall from the neem tree. It tore a hole in the side of the hill, and Daljit observed the marvelous network of chambers and tunnels the first ants had made. She admired the ants' industry, the complicated routines of their lives. *Those are British ants*, said her mother, *they have red coats. And are poisonous.*

Daljit looks up again. A figure has appeared behind Missy Sahib.

It is Master Sahib, and he is also naked. His wide-hipped, womanish body makes her giggle. *You must respect him*, her mother said, *he is a colonel in His Majesty's army, and I am lucky to be Sahib's cook, although I am but a poor widow with an idiot for a daughter.* What luck, Daljit wonders; they are trapped together in a single, smoke-blackened room in the servants' quarters with the constant smell of damp-rot and a hole in the ground to squat over (she studies how others live, in that great stone bungalow with three floors and porcelain toilets).

Daljit knows the colonel will be going out with Mem Sahib this evening, to a party on the Lower Circular Road; Mem Sahib has made Daljit's mother repair the hem of a bias-cut dress, a yellow silk dress the color of cholera, and her mother's resentment led to anger, which led to the weals on Daljit's back. *Ai! How shall I ever find a husband for you? You are so dark, so ugly.*

Missy and Master Sahib retreat from the window, back into the shadows, and Daljit can no longer see them. The ants have fashioned a beard on her chin. Brilliant green parrots swarm from one tree to the next. From the vine-covered wall comes the ghost of jasmine, and a water-wallah cries his wares in the alley beyond it.

Su-ra-hi! Su-ra-hi!

Master Sahib sleeps alone in a white, mosquito-netted bed. One day, Daljit will creep up the carpeted stairs on her bare feet, ants thick as rubies around her neck, and allow them to bleed into the spaces between the freshly-ironed sheets. She knows they can find their way home, even from a strange, new place.

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