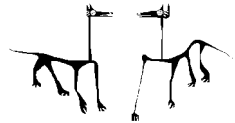




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The
Ants
Enter
Los Angeles



STORIES
TWO DOGS



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RODRIQUEZ WAS AWAKENED by an insistent pain stabbing deep into his left shoulder. He thought that maybe Harry had snuck upon him in the night and knifed him good, just like he had done one time to a guy in Riverside. It would be like him to do it, never mind that they were pals and that they had spent the prior day together drinking and that Harry had even helped him get his little truck running. That Harry just isn't to be trusted, especially when he has been drinking.

Rodriquez couldn't open his eyes because they were stuck, but he used his right hand to feel around for the wound. When he pulled his hand back and forced one eye open to look, expecting to see blood, there wasn't any. He felt around again, thinking there should be a hole or something, but there wasn't. He groaned and rolled over onto his back. "Must be middle age getting me," he said, a little disappointed.

He lay there for a long while, trying to pull together his memory, which was strewn about the great dark of his head like the stuff left behind after a street riot. He remembered this or that, but mainly that it had been a long night and that Harry had seemed to leave after they finished the last bottle of wine. The effort to remember more than that exhausted him, and he had to take deep breaths and mop his sweating forehead with the corner of the bed sheet. After a bit, when the pain in his shoulder softened so that it was just a numbness, he pawed back the blankets to let one leg loose from the edge of the bed and fall to the floor. "Maybe it was the wine. Sure it was. That bastard Harry goes out of his way to buy the worst there is. It's as good as a knife job." He paused, cocked one ear, trying to

decide if he was talking to himself or thinking so loud it just seemed like he was talking. He deliberated for several seconds, which were longer than ordinary seconds on account of his condition, and then felt his mouth. "You idiot," he said, "if you were talking, your lips would be moving. And they weren't, except for just now, and that doesn't count." He fell back, closed his eyes, letting the gray lids slide down like curtains. In no time he was in dreamland where Harry was smiling like a cat and waving his arms. The two of them were running, Harry in the lead, heading across a saltflat that was surrounded by miles of white, hot sand and gray scrub brush. The ground underfoot smoked from the heat. And there were ants, large black ones, some of them as big as cats, marching in long lines that went off in different directions and they had to jump to avoid stepping on them. Harry just laughed, like it was some kind of game. But not Rodriquez. He was in a panic and he screamed obscenities at the ants and called them names that were the names of ant curses his mother had taught him. The ants in the meantime multiplied by the thousands, just like that, and in an instant the lines of them became black, continuous rays that shot off every which way. Then, just as before, he felt something jarring his dream. It was the pain in his shoulder. His eyes popped open and he was awake again, staring at the ceiling, wondering if he'd been stabbed.

In the bathroom, straddling the toilet, Rodriquez felt himself growing smaller and lighter as he pissed, because he just kept on pissing, like there was no end to it, except the limits of his body. His mother had told him once that when a person pisses on an anthill the ants get revenge by stealing all the water from their body. He always thought there must be some truth in that, because when a doctor in his hometown treated people for bloat, he would tie them down on top of anthills and that afterwards the people would look like shit, like they had been baked. And when Rodriquez was only four or five years old his father had told him that ants are jealous of people and try to make life miserable for them, mostly because people get

to sleep and they don't. That seemed true enough too, because, for a fact, Rodriquez hadn't ever seen an ant sleep.

When he couldn't piss another drop he stepped to one side to look into the small mirror that was over the wash basin. His face, he saw, was a little grayer than usual, like cheese mold, and when he poked a finger in his cheek it felt mushy. He leaned over, turned the tap on the cold side and cupped his hands under the running water, splashing himself on the face and chest two or three times. Though, when he looked into the mirror again, not much had changed. "Hey!" he shouted. "Are you in there? Hey, buzzard brain, speak up!" But the face looked back without answering. His eyes were the color of frost-bitten cherries, kind of red in the center and gray around the edges, and he considered that he might not be seeing what he was seeing. Still, the person he was looking for was in there. He could see him, almost, hanging back in the dim light of his consciousness, the Rodriquez who was always in the making, the everyday Rodriquez who had never ceased to be a disappointment on account of his fear of ants. Of all the possible versions of himself, including the more perfect ones, the Rodriquez who always showed up to breathe and eat, the only visible Rodriquez there ever was to be, was the one with the obsessive fears, especially of ants, that not even his mother could explain. She said that ants were sure nothing to be afraid of (contrary to what his father had told him again and again) and only God knows why some people are afraid and others are not, but the fact is that some people are, and if they weren't they would just be afraid of something else. That's the way it is, she said. And then she said that when he was old enough to grow a mustache it would be different. But it wasn't, because he was never able to grow a mustache that wasn't funny to look at. The face in the mirror had tears in its eyes, so he looked away.

Meanwhile, under his feet, tiny black ants, real ones in long lines, not dreamy ones, marched in the cracks of the linoleum, along the baseboard and up the drain pipes. He only noticed them when he felt them crawling between his bare toes. "Damn!"

he said, and he began to dance around, beating them away with a bath towel.

Rodriguez was sitting at the table in the kitchen later in the day, smoking a cigarette and fumbling around for something to drop the ashes in, when Harry came in. He didn't say anything, but when he saw Harry his hand went straight to his shoulder and felt around for what wasn't there.

"You look awful," Harry said. He was smiling, too, in a sly way. "Any of the wine left?"

"No, you skunk," Rodriguez said flatly, not moving or looking up.

"Just as well. I might end up looking like you."

"What are you doing here, Harry?"

"I wanted to see if you're still alive."

"I don't know yet. I could be dead and just having nightmares."

Harry sat down across from him. "By the looks of things I'd say it's a toss up. Give me one of those cigarettes."

Rodriguez pushed the pack toward him. "It was that damn, cheap-ass wine of yours, you know."

"That stuff cost me four bucks, chico."

"Yeah, you creep, four bucks worth of cow piss."

"You drank it, and I damn sure didn't hear you complaining." Harry paused, lit up a cigarette. "But, listen, never mind last night. Let's do something. We could go to Frank's, maybe eat a chili burger, drink some beer and shoot some pool. Come on, whatta ya say? Or maybe you want to go out to Lake Elsinor and mess around. It'll be crawling with women. Hell, you might even run into that Dulce broad. You remember Dulce? She's the one with big hips and a runny nose from doing dope. She likes you, you know. She goes around bragging to everybody that you've got some kind of pecker."

Rodriguez dropped the stub of his cigarette in a fat bottle near his foot, listened to the low hiss it made when it hit wet residue at the bottom. "No, damn it, I got some things to do today," he said.

"What kind of things?" asked Harry. He was suspicious, as Rodriguez wasn't given to dodging a good time.

"Just things," Rodriguez replied. "I got to find some boxes to pack my stuff in. I'm moving. I'm getting out of this crappy, ant-infested apartment and this crappy ant-infested town."

Harry laughed. "You dip, you're always saying that."

"This time I mean it."

"Okay, where are you going?"

"Los Angeles. They don't have ants there."

"Now, who told you that?"

"My cousin Rudy. He knows."

Harry laughed again, rolled his eyes. "Bullshit!" he screamed. "Ants are everywhere. Why, you jackass, they even have ants in Alaska where it's fifty below."

"They don't have ants in East L.A."

"Christ o'mighty, ants own the frigging world."

"They don't have the bastards in East L.A. Rudy doesn't lie."

"Your ass he doesn't."

"Well, to hell with you, Harry."

"Listen, even if they don't have any ants now, they will," Harry said with a little snarl. "You can count on it, because those ants will follow you. They've got a thing for you, like Dulce. You'll have them everywhere, and at night, while you're asleep, they'll eat your goddamn eyes out." Harry laughed at his joke and made little crawling things out of his fingers, dancing them across the table. He could see that Rodriguez didn't like it, so he started to sing. "Ants, ants. They crawl up your pants, eat your pecker and then your balls. Ants, ants..."

"Shut up, you shit-faced bastard!" muttered Rodriguez. Harry was enjoying it all too much, though, and began again. "Ants like Mex burgers, cuz. They can smell those chili peppers clear from the moon."

Rodriguez shut his eyes and was quiet. He forgot about Harry and started to look around for that other Rodriguez, the one who was always waiting for life and never knowing how to

become alive, the one who wasn't haunted by ants and the one who, if he ever met some ants, wouldn't be afraid to step on them with his bare feet, make mush of them and eat them on toast. But all he could find was himself, the visible one who only gets older and never better, and he could see himself asleep in bed and the ants eating his eyes out. "Those ants are devils, all right," he said, looking across the table at Harry. "I think they followed me up here from Chiapas. The ants are really something down there. They eat tigers and buses."

"I think I've heard that story before," interrupted Harry. "Tell me, when are you going to do this moving?"

Rodriquez thought for a moment, lit another cigarette, then moved to the window. "I'm going to sneak out of here on the first real hot afternoon, when those ants aren't paying attention. I just want to be ready, because you got to move fast where ants are concerned."

Harry stood up, grabbed a cigarette from the pack on the table. "You're crazy, you know."

"Maybe," replied Rodriquez. "But, Harry, you can't tell me that you aren't afraid of something in this world."

Harry didn't answer. He didn't look at Rodriquez either, which meant that he might have had a secret, or something like a secret. But he wasn't going to give it up to Rodriquez, not then anyway.

"Yeah," said Rodriquez with a smirk. "I thought so. Maybe you'll tell me all about it one of these days when you're not having so much fun at my expense."

The two men became silent, Rodriquez thinking about his cousin Rudy and the possibility of him being wrong about the ants. It had occurred to him that Rudy really didn't know much about anything, except girls and wasting time. Harry, perhaps annoyed by the suggestion that he could be afraid of something, shuffled around a bit, played with the knobs on the stove top, then left. Rodriquez turned in time to hear him say over his shoulder that he would be at Frank's, shooting pool, if he changed his mind, if he came to his senses. "Maybe," Harry

shouted, "I can find somebody who ain't so full of shit as you are today."

It might have been only a couple of days later and the hottest day on record when Rodriquez carried the last of his belongings out to his pickup, that little red one that Harry had helped to fix. His cousin Rudy, who was something of an artist, had painted a picture on the driver's door, showing a magnificent Quetzalcoatl and a Jesus astride a giant ant, which Rudy assured him would warn away any ants that saw it. Rodriquez wasn't sure if it was that good of a picture—Jesus looked too much like Rudy—but then it hadn't cost him anything either.

Rodriquez didn't own enough to fill the back of his little truck, but he was careful to check every box, every bag, every space where an ant was likely to hide. He checked the truck too, inside and out, several times. Finally, when he was satisfied that no ants had snuck through his defenses, he got in, started the engine and headed for the freeway. Just to be on the safe side, though, he looked in the rearview mirror, because, on a freeway, it's sometimes hard to tell cars from ants and also because the streams of cars and trucks could just be ants in disguise. But when he looked, the cars and trucks looked only like cars and trucks, and not anything like ants, which was comforting but certainly not compelling reassurance. Still, he felt good about the day. He smiled at himself in the mirror, and said: "Maybe this time I caught those sneaky bastards napping."

That night, however, by various routes, lines of black ants, whole armies of them, in fact, some as big as cats, entered Los Angeles—looking for Rodriquez. He was hard asleep in his new bed, which was not far from his cousin's house. He heard them coming in his dream, where there wasn't another sound but the ticking of ant feet, and he saw the black lines of them forming off in the distance where the sand turned to concrete and night is always twilight because the city can't turn itself off. And he just rolled over and buried his face in the pillow, praying to God that they wouldn't eat his eyes out, because that was all he could do, him being Rodriquez and not someone else.