

The Melody of Ants

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Probably hours had passed, she couldn't know for sure. Her body was exhausted from the maddening struggle. She had almost no energy left, but in those circumstances the mind works at a different speed from the body and it is really the one that holds all the cards. Suddenly, the latch pin gave in so she pushed the heavy lid and was finally free. She couldn't believe it. She stayed there, completely stumped, and felt the overpowering exhaustion of her whole being now. She then stood up and stepped out of the hole, that is, the hole where her casket was, and somehow started running. She got to a deserted road, and the light from the streetlamp bathed her in a quiet, shimmering glow. There was nobody around, just her aching body under that tremulous light.

Somebody had made a mistake, obviously, and as she thought about getting quickly into a nearby diner, she remembered the sound of her mother crying next to the casket. She imagined her reddened eyes, her sunken cheeks. Such a horrific image to her, an old woman that miserable. It was not just the idea of her mother suffering that troubled her; it was the image of a person in her advanced years going through that kind of pain, the pain of losing a daughter. She closed her eyes for a second and relived the soft cadence of her crying, that universal crying that encompassed all mothers, every old woman in the world, because she thought that all women cried in the same way, especially the ones in the last part of their lives. Those tears were the outline of a form of being unhappy, a sort of foundation for being a woman in the world.

She finally saw the diner and accelerated her pace. She believed she had been running all that time when, in reality, she had been kind of hopping, almost dragging her body, trapped in a delusion of gargantuan proportions. The diner was open, and she could see there were only two customers at the counter. Good, almost empty, she thought, since she was all covered in mud and looked like a zombie. She stepped in, went up to the counter, and sat three stools apart from the only two customers, a woman in her thirties and a man in his forties. They didn't even acknowledge her presence, and this made her feel at ease. The owner of the place, or at least the woman who was on the other side of the counter, wearing an apron and chewing gum with a certain theatrical flair, asked what she was having and she hesitated. Was it a normal thing to go into a diner all covered in mud from head to toe and not even get weird looks? Some innocent staring or something? She quickly dismissed this thought, because, really, it was much better that nobody was looking at her or asking questions, and she proceeded to order a cup of coffee. As soon as she did this, she realized she had no money. "Wait!" she said and canceled her order. "It's on the house," said the woman,

eying her warily. "I can see you've been through...something." She thanked her for such a generous gesture and would have started crying if she hadn't been distracted by the sudden flapping of a little bird that appeared on the counter, and it quickly flew over to the woman's shoulder. The bird stayed there, looking straight at her. "He likes looking at people like that. Don't feel threatened," said the woman and disappeared through a narrow door with the bird still on her shoulder. Seconds later, she reappeared (still with her companion) and placed a cup of coffee on the counter in front of her. She said thank you and tried not to look at the bird. There was an eerie aura about it.

As she drank her coffee, she remembered a story about a man who had died young from a long, terminal disease. As a final joke to his friends and family, already aware that there was no recovery from his illness and his days were numbered, he had decided to prepare a recording for his funeral in which he shouted, "Let me out! Let me out!" Some people had been confused at first and had then realized that it was a last wink, a parting gift inviting everyone to just make fun of life, death, and everything in between. She smiled as she remembered this story, but the image of her crying mother came back to her mind, and her smile instantly vanished.

It wasn't that she had actually been able to hear her mother from the casket. She hadn't. She just concocted that whole idea of her in the cemetery, surrounded by people who could never understand the depth of her sorrow. She had woken up seconds after everybody had left and felt she couldn't breathe. She started shouting and kicking until the pin of the lid gave in and she could free herself. But it wasn't until she saw the crown of the oak tree next to the casket that she realized what had happened.

"So what's your story?" asked the woman with the bird as she took some slices of bread from a toaster.

"I was buried alive."

"Oh, that's why...right. Well, now you have a new appreciation for ants, don't you?" she said and went over to where the other two customers were and offered them the bread.

What a strange remark, she thought, and started thinking of ants. She had read somewhere about a type of ant from Malaysia that was capable of killing itself as a defense mechanism, which is called "suicidal altruism" or "autothysis." The ants basically blow themselves up and, when doing so, spatter their foes with toxic fluids that kill them instantly. She had seen pictures of this. The little insects all coated in green goo.

What if she had actually died in that casket, not being able to breathe, to free herself? Her mother would have never known the real reasons for her death. She would have cried for a different death. All those tears wasted, all that time of useless suffering, of thinking about a car crash, of

putting it all in God's hands, when it had actually been placed in the hands of those doctors who had made the mistake of pronouncing her dead. Her mother was a Catholic and would have made God responsible for everything, anyhow. The fact that she had God was a good thing, she thought. At least something tapped her on her shoulder every now and then and gave her reasons to keep on going.

What was she still doing in the diner? She had to get to her mother! As this thought took shape in her mind, the two customers stood up ready to leave. The woman looked at her and nodded, as if saying goodbye or something. The man looked at her, too, but did nothing. Then they left, and now it was just the owner, the bird, and herself.

"What's its name?" she asked just to be polite.

"His name is Robert. We call him Bobby," replied the woman as she caressed the bird.

"Amazing that it—he lets you touch him."

The woman observed her for a long time while she attended Bobby. She was serious, and it was hard to tell whether she had been offended by what she had just said or whether that was her normal self in the diner, just looking at people like that, sort of like under hypnosis, while petting her bird. Just in case, she smiled, lowered her eyes, and decided to drink her coffee in silence.

Her mother would be alone now. It was late, but she wasn't sure what time it was exactly. There were no clocks in the diner, and she didn't dare ask the woman. She felt something had shifted in her mood but couldn't explain what. So she just drank her coffee and tried to remember what had happened. She could only think of the accident. Images of her car, catapulted off the road, and one of her arms full of blood. She looked at her arm; it was fine. It had a long wound, but it seemed to be healing. Then she couldn't remember anything else. That fabricated memory of her mother crying was gaining territory now because she felt she hadn't invented it. She felt she had actually heard her, and as her mind created the sound of her wailing, it did exactly the same with the images of her suffering: her poor old mother sitting on a plastic chair next to the casket, all in black, wearing a small hat with a veil and those gray gloves she loved. Her little hands on her lap looked like two little doves hugging each other. That image sent shivers down her spine. She wanted to cry. She looked up, and the woman was looking at the street outside, lost in thought, her eyes wide open. She sensed the woman was somewhere else and felt like patching things up, if that was what the situation needed.

"Thank you again for the coffee, really. You didn't have to," she said.

"Oh, honey, forget it. It was not a big deal. Nothing really is. Except Tina Turner, everything is overrated in this shithole of a world we live in."

She was surprised by that reply, but, strangely, it didn't feel totally out of place. The world was a shithole. And her mother was in it, suffering the loss of someone who hadn't died. She finished her coffee and stood up. The woman didn't even look at her. She had gone back to that dark, pensive mood of hers.

As she was opening the door, she felt observed. She turned around, and Bobby was, of course, looking at her. The woman was distracted, jotting things down on a tiny notebook now, ignoring her. She closed the door behind her and started walking. It was strange that she hadn't realized it before, but she wasn't wearing any shoes. The asphalt felt cold and wet. The lights from the lampposts were weak but still managed to rob the stars of their dignity.

She walked and walked until she reached a bench. She was tired; her body ached; and she didn't really know how to get home. She sat down and started dozing off, then a nightmare woke her up. She had dreamed she couldn't breathe, and now she wondered if that was her new life after what had happened. She wondered whether she had now developed some sort of psychological problem regarding entrapment after what she had experienced. Her hand itched, and, as she was about to scratch it, she saw a tiny ant walking on her thumb. It looked confused, but she decided she wouldn't help her. She would just look at it and see what it did. The ant walked all over her hand and then up her arm. It reached her wound and spent a very long time exploring it. It was crazy that after just a few seconds of that very private and minuscule interaction, she started feeling that as long as there were ants, there was hope in the world. What a silly thing to think, she told herself. The ant kept on exploring her wound, sometimes circling her arm. It was a she, she decided. She named her Roberta, Bobbie. Bobbie suddenly twisted her body up, and she felt she was looking straight at her. Of course she wasn't, was she?

She stayed on that bench for hours, looking at the ant, which seemed to be very much interested in her wound. She saw the wound as a huge planet where ants lived, except there was only one inhabitant. The thought of getting another ant and placing it on her arm attracted her, but it felt kind of wrong, so she decided to let things flow and soon found that the ant had reached her shoulder. She had traveled all the way up and was resting there now. She wasn't moving, and this was strange. She had always seen ants move from one place to the other, never stopping, never having a moment for themselves. Bobbie was just tired.

The light from the lamppost cast shadows on the street, illuminating huge arms waving crazily each time a soft breeze whispered something into the trees' ears. She enjoyed seeing the strange waving, that unstoppable dance of living organisms, those dilated patches of darkness on the wet asphalt that felt like happy monsters extending their poetic monstrosity on a rainy night. It

wasn't raining now, but the air felt humid, too humid. Bobbie "woke up" and slogged through her arm until she reached the wound again and was her usual self: She walked and walked and walked. Just by following the ant's comings and goings, she started feeling drowsy again.

She remembered her mother now as if in a dream. Her name was Helen, and she was a beautiful woman. Even in old age she was gorgeous. She thought she would have liked to look like her mother in old age. Bobbie made her arm tickle a bit, and she lost her train of thought. Oh, yes, her mother. One of the most distinctive features about Helen were her hands. She had the softest hands in the world, and, each time her mother touched her, she felt protected. She felt nothing could ever happen to her. She closed her eyes and remembered those hands, cooking, holding books, combing her hair, taking objects, clapping, caressing her. And then...those hands on her poor mother's lap, hugging each other, trying to find comfort in the horrible circumstance of death. She could sleep forever thinking of those hands.

The bench felt cold, and the air was filled with tiny drops of water. Bobbie kept walking around on her wound. Each step she took felt like feeble beatings of a heart, like a song sung in the depth of silence. "Everything is overrated in this shithole of a world we live in," had said the woman in the diner, but now the little drops of rain, the night in its suffocating darkness, the faint glimmer of the lights from the lampposts, the big oak tree, all of them felt like a grandiose demonstration of life itself, an outstanding account of the simplicity of going through the eternal cycles of existence.

Bobbie, the tiny little ant who was making her way through this strange land, found another friend doing the same, then another, and another, and another. The light from one of the lampposts flickered, and it suddenly went out. The sound of the night was the sound of the ants carrying the world on their shoulders.