**Sunday Picnic**

The ant made determined progress across the rumpled red tundra of the picnic blanket. It caught Charlie’s attention as it marched through the hills and valleys of the rough woolen material. He watched as it passed the pitcher of cranberry juice and approached a plate of tepid mustard-peas.

His mother was talking to his father between bites of pastrami on rye.

“This is a good thing, you know, to come out and have a picnic on a Sunday. It’s a good thing to be out in the sun on a day like today,” she said.

Charlie sat with his legs folded to the side, resting on his arm. His mother had dressed him in high socks and a stiff collared shirt, both of which were uncomfortably itchy and warm in the summer sun. A gentle wind whistled around him. It provided a measure of relief against the starchy enemy of his shirt, and blew some pollen into his left nostril which began to itch horribly. Charlie wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

“Charlie stop that,” his mother said, “If you need to blow, just blow. I have tissues right here.”

She held out a wad of soft, crumpled white paper at Charlie. Charlie continued to watch the ant, who was dealing with a particularly steep rise in the blanket’s elevation. He accepted the tissues, but did not blow his nose. The itch was gone, and so blowing his nose was not a priority for Charlie. He let his hand fall back to the blanket, supporting him, tissues gently pulping under his body weight.

Charlie’s mother turned back towards his father. She looked at him expectantly, waiting for him to say something. He was leaning against the tree, watching two young men wrestle down near the water’s edge on the grainy Connecticut sand. He smiled as one of the boys flipped the other, smacking his bare back into the beach. The bested of the two gave a few more seconds of struggle, but for appearances only. He was smaller than his opponent and had no chance now of changing the outcome.

Charlie’s mother sighed and ran her fingers through her hair. “Sweetheart,” she said, “don’t you think this is nice? Going out together for a picnic?”

Charlie’s father turned slowly back to look upon his wife, and took a long sip of his lemonade, sucking it through his teeth.

Finally, he said, “Yes, dear.”

Charlie’s mother smiled at this, and turned her attention back to the pastrami sandwich. Charlie heard none of this exchange. His entire body was focused on holding perfectly still. The ant had now rounded the plate of mustard peas and was making a direct course for the open jar of jam. It sat less than two feet away from the ant, dripping with syrupy sweetness. Between the ant and the jar lay a patch of unusually mounded blanket. The ant stopped, sizing up his path through the bunched and redoubled terrain. Charlie’s right leg was trapped under him and beginning to go numb, but he didn’t dare move for fear of upsetting the balance of the blanket.

His mother was in the middle of a bite of pastrami on rye when she thought of something she wanted to say. She spoke around her sandwich between smacking, digestive movements, “It’s been a while since we did something like this. Together, I mean, as a family. We never go out together.”

Charlie’s father was thinking of other things. A small part of his brain automatically devoted itself to the task, rummaged through a stock of previously prepared replies, selected one that seemed appropriate. “Work,” he said, “you know.”

“Oh I understand,” said Charlie’s mother, “I don’t mean to complain. I just wanted to say that it’s nice, that’s all. That we’re all here.”

She turned her attention to Charlie, who remained statuesque. The ant had chosen a path, and was beginning the arduous final leg of its journey. The numbness in his right leg was steadily mounting but Charlie didn’t dare move, not now at this precious, delicate moment. He didn’t notice that he was holding his breath. The itch returned to his nostril, too persistent to be ignored. Gingerly, with the utmost care Charlie lifted his hand from the blanket and, still holding the tissues, wiped his nose with the butt of his palm.

“Charlie!” his mother cried, “I gave you the tissues for a reason! Jesus Charlie, you know I can’t stand it when you don’t listen to me.” She flung her hands up in the air, appealed to her husband. “We’ve talked about this! The boy never pays attention.”

Charlie was petrified. His mother’s rapid movements were disturbing the blanket. The ant was momentarily perched upon a pointed mountaintop as it wiggled back and forth. It held perfectly still for this exchange, clinging to the fabric.

“Listen to your mother, Charlie,” said his father. He had been jarred out of auto-responses now, removed from his reverie. Being back in the moment reminded Charlie’s father of the many unwelcome compromises that he was making this Sunday. He wanted to be watching golf, not sitting at a picnic. He wanted to silently bear this familial obligation, not participate in it. Charlie’s father felt the familiar undercurrent of resentment towards his family bubbling to the surface, black and ugly in the shade of the tree.

He narrowed his eyes at Charlie, who remained silent, “Charlie? Did you hear me? Did you hear what I said?”

“Yes, dad,” said Charlie quietly, his eyes still locked on the ant.

“Well then do you have something to say to your mother?”

“Sorry mom,” Charlie whispered.

“I don’t want you to be sorry, I want you to blow your nose,” said his mother, taking another bite.

“I don’t need to blow,” said Charlie.

“Obviously you do, or you wouldn’t keep wiping your nose. I had better not catch you doing it again.” His mother finished this warning between bites of pastrami. The blanket had settled, and to Charlie’s relief the ant began it’s journey once more, undeterred by the recent disturbance.

His father was engaged in the discussion now, enjoying his part in it. Picnics suited him poorly. Places with doors that shut, rooms that led to narrow hallways, these were the spaces that suited Charlie’s father. He liked lights that could be turned off. Now he was finally appropriate for this scene. He could cast a stern authority over his son, become useful again.

“Charlie, you haven’t touched your sandwich yet,” said his father.

He pointed a thick finger at the plate in front of Charlie which held his untouched peanut-butter and strawberry jam sandwich. Charlie loved peanut-butter and strawberry jam sandwiches. Almost every day he would beg for one, tugging on his nanny’s dress. Charlie looked down at the sandwich now. He imagined his father’s massive hands in that sandwich, crushing the peanut butter between knuckles, smashing the berries in his fist. There was nothing in the world that Charlie wanted to do less right now than eat that sandwich.

“Charlie,” said his father, “Your mother made that sandwich for you. You’re not going to get anything else to eat until dinner. Now quit being a baby and eat it.”

Charlie nodded. The ant, meanwhile had passed the halfway point, was on the home stretch. It stared up at a daunting mound of fabric, then decided to negotiate its way around instead. Charlie was disappointed, he wanted the ant to go over the mound. He almost reached out to pinch the blanket up, extend the ridge and force the ant to go over, but decided against it. The decision wasn’t his in the end. The ant had to pick its own path.

“It’s like I’m talking to a wall,” said Charlie’s father, “Jesus honey it’s like I’m talking to a fucking wall.”

Charlie’s mother choked politely on her pastrami. “Dear! Language!” she said.

“He’s almost six years old for crying out loud. I knew what a fucking wall was when I was six. I also knew how to listen to my father.”

Charlie’s father was filling out the space now, stretching his shadow across the picnic blanket, blocking out the light that filtered in between the leaves. He was finding that he could build his own walls out here, out on this sunny hill above the ocean. Even on top of this bright, airy expanse, Charlie’s father could make the world feel as small as he wanted.

In Charlie’s left leg the tingling was blossoming into a pulsing ache. The ant was getting so close now, less than a hand’s breadth away from the sticky prize. Moving now would be an unforgiveable sin.

“He’s still a child, dear” said Charlie’s mother, “If he doesn’t want to eat then he doesn’t have to eat.”

“He has to listen, though.”

Charlie’s father smacked his fist into his palm, hard. The noise, the motion, the sudden violence caught Charlie by surprise. He looked up, startled, into the eyes of his father. Charlie realized he hadn’t blinked in minutes, his eyes were watering. He rubbed them with the back of his hand and then, as an afterthought, wiped his nose too. A thin layer of snot came away to rest lightly on the skin above his wrist.

His mother shrilled, “Charlie I have told you twice now, I am not going to tell you again! Why won’t you just blow your nose?”

“This is exactly what I’m talking about,” said Charlie’s father, pointing a finger at his son, “this is what happens when you teach a child not to listen.”

Charlie blinked a few times, looked back and forth between his mother and his father. They towered on either side of him. The light that had filtered down through the trees was blotted out. The wind that had stirred the thin, pale hairs on his arm was quieted. A dim, thick presence hung in the air, stagnating motion, muffling the colors. The air grew moist and hot. It drummed upon Charlie’s temples, a rhythmic beat. His leg was finished pulsing, it was throbbing now, screaming for release.

The ant. Charlie looked back down. The ant had reached the jar of jam and was now scaling the smooth glass. It climbed this final distance with ease, inches away from its destination.

“What are you looking at, boy?” said Charlie’s father. He traced the gaze of his son down to the jar.

“Oh,” he said, “we’ve got ants.”

He reared up from his place of rest against the tree and leaned one knee down across the blanket. Charlie imagined this moment from the ant’s perspective. To the ant the sound of Charlie’s father’s knee falling onto the blanket must have been a massive, godly thump, the shake of a massive earthquake The ant was less than an inch away from the end now, but paused to ride out the shaking of the blanket. Charlie’s father reached out his hand and deftly crushed the ant between his thumb and forefinger.

Somewhere, in another part of the world, at this exact moment, a glass shattered upon a tile floor. The sound that this accident made is exactly the same as the one that Charlie heard in his own mind.

The first time that Charlie had tried to drink from a real glass, he dropped it. He remembered the moment well, how his father had taken away the plastic bottle despite his mother’s protests, poured the milk into a tall glass and handed it to him. He remembered how the smooth glass had slipped out of his hands immediately, shattering on the tile floor. That is the noise that Charlie heard in the back of his mind as his father crushed the ant between his meaty fingers. The sound of a glass smashing to pieces on a tile floor.

There was a bluff, less than thirty feet away from their picnic, that overlooked the ocean. Charlie gathered up a half of the peanut-butter jelly sandwich in each hand and started running towards it. His mother was slow to react. She was barely on her feet by the time he reached the edge and hurled the sandwich towards the sea with both hands. Charlie watched the sandwich fall through tear-filled eyes. It held its shape as it fell, two distinct halves, smacking into the water below and then sinking out of sight. He wiped at the mess of tears and snot pouring down his face with hands that were already covered in the sticky guts of his sandwich. His leg felt wonderful, the blood pumped through it joyfully, filling his muscles with warmth.

A second later Charlie’s mother’s arm was around his chest and lifting him up. She burned angry words into his ear as she carried him back to the tree.

“Don’t you ever run away from me like that again! You almost gave me a heart-attack, do you know that?”

Charlie’s father hadn’t moved from under the tree. “Well,” he said, “at least he finally did something.”

The wind picked up again, gentle gusts. In front of the depression where Charlie had been sitting, an unused wad of tissues began to move. It unfurled itself, flipped once onto its back and was borne away. It floated for a while, dipping between the heavens and the earth. Patiently, with slow, swinging steps the tissues drifted away from the hill, out past the bluff and over the ocean.