Oakely and the Ant

“Pick your witches wisely” was a thing young Oakely was told every so often by his father, when the old man felt like imparting some long-overdue wisdom to his son, and when his son endeavored to listen.

What the father meant by that, Oakely was never so certain; the world of witches and witchcraft was as yet unknown to him. He came to learn those sorts of lessons only much later in life\*.

To be fair, later in life is often the only time one can learn some lessons properly. Hopeful fathers of course continue in vain to impart them to their not-yet-listening sons nonetheless, because hope carries itself forward, whatever else it might bring about.

The first time the father told this to Oakely was the day the mother left them for greener pastures, over the mountain range called Serpent’s Spine, which was believed impassable by most. What most chose to believe had never generally concerned the mother however, and so there she had gone, where the father could not follow. This was the last time Oakely saw her, and the first time he came to know the world would be hard on him. He was Thirteen, and this was his first memory.

Oakely had *had* an early childhood, of that he was reasonably sure. The evidence for it had been compelling in the years that followed the mother’s departure. All other men he had met since in life had had themselves childhoods of some sort or another, and, pressed with enough cider and conversation, could each tell several convincing stories from them.

Oakely imagined there were stories to be told of his own childhood as well, but whether they were meant to appear to him eventually in dreams or sudden flashbacks at some point in his future, he could not say. He aged as most men did, however, and so he assumed the whole process must have started for him as it typically had for others of his kind - that is, as an infant, then a toddler, then a young boy. The memories of this though never came, and he did not, as far as he could tell, ever dream, despite having heard of the phenomenon many times. His own personal history remained partially unwritten.

Oakely’s second memory was of an ant which he had killed unintentionally with his words. The ink he had used in those days to practice his penmanship was of a new, quick-drying kind and, as he was to learn, extremely toxic to creatures so small. His desk had long been host to legions of ants, owing to the hard bread he would let sit at the corner of it for too long, while he did his schoolwork. There was no break for eating or socializing provided by the school, and no enforced protocols surrounding hygiene or cleanliness either (this is sometimes what happens when wizards live among themselves for longer than they perhaps should), so the students took their bread and cheese with them from place to place, and stole bites as opportunities presented themselves.

Most ants were generally quite efficient at carting off their small, crumbling portions of the stuff, left for them by careless pupils. Now and then of course, a wayward ant might find its way onto a sleeve, or a into a boot, or across a book, as though lost, or perhaps on an adventure. Many ants perished in that way, but that was and is still the manner of ants, as far as I can tell.

Oakely’s particular ant, on its journey from left to right across his freshly-inked letters (done in mono-spaced script, a fashion at the time), ventured too close to the work, transfixed at once by its scent and shape. In the two short moments the ink would take to settle and become inert, the careless ant had crossed a T, veered off suddenly as the toxin took hold, and ended its young life silently, as a kind of question mark, halfway down the page.

Oakely failed that assignment - the final one of his Winter term - as he could not afford to buy a new sheet of parchment from the school’s stores, and the Script Master (who still teaches there, I am told) had little tolerance for scripting errors of any sort, and none whatsoever for students of Oakely’s kind.

The young man had wept secretly in his sleeping closet for the better part of the week over the accidental murder, ridden with guilt at luring the ant to its early demise with free food and hidden poison. He refused to put pen to paper, or his bottom to a chair, or even his feet to the floor (except to stand in place for long stretches), but of course eventually did resume his studies after a few days, once the school masters presented him with enough convincing arguments in favour of living a life of action going forward, rather than living a life of eternal (and somewhat melodramatic) regret. His heart, however, from then on was never really in it. Had it ever really been? He assumed it had, but of course did not know.

These early memories, I believe, profoundly affected his demeanor henceforth, being that he was bound for the lifetime practice of both science and magic, which would bring him close to disappointment and danger on more than a few occasions. He took great pains to keep to himself when he had the chance to, to avoid complex attachments, and continued to master the art of stepping lightly well into his old age, to limit the collateral damage his necessary wanderings might cause. He eventually became known among Antkind as *the giant who tries hard to be careful*. Oakely couldn’t know that, of course - few wizards back then bothered to learn the language of the Ants - but had he known, I suspect it might have eased his guilt about ants a little, and allowed some part of his spirit to get on with other things a bit sooner. Ants are, of course, far too busy and practical (with some exceptions) to dwell on self-pity or thoughts of revenge, but will still take a brief moment now and then, as a community, to appreciate the good intentions in others.

Oakely’s third memory was of the day he first saw Bee, though she was called Beatrice then. She and her two sisters had inherited an ancient cauldron from their Aunt (Bee always preferred to call her “Ant Nixie”, incidentally), who had grown tired of spells and just wanted to live out her remaining days lost in good books. The sisters had come into the town where Oakely - now freshly out of college and living in a barn (temporarily) with his less-industrious friend Elmur - was apprenticing with the local blacksmith, so as to pay off his extensive debts acquired at the school, until he could figure out how to make a living as a travelling wizard, something of an aging profession by that point.

The sisters were at the very beginning of their witching career, and had gotten themselves into great stitches, trying to roll the enormous iron thing off their beleaguered hand cart and across the dusty yard, under the smithy’s low awning. It would not roll straight (being quite heavy, mostly round, and especially willful), but instead would move in great circles, and the more the wayward thing wandered off course, the less the sisters could contain their laughter at the ridiculousness of the entire venture.

At that point, witchcraft was still just a funny notion to the three – they had all had their life paths well planned, long before Nixie decided one day, quite out of the blue, to bequeath them her witching tools and tricks. Beatrice was to be a seamstress, having mastered needles and threads by the age of seven. Ellisbeth was to be a mother, having loved children since before she could remember. Maudeline was to be an actress, having always enjoyed pretending to be that which she was not. What had possessed them to suddenly decide they could play at being witches? There was little to no future in that sort of thing, as everybody well knew.

It took twenty minutes to at last coax the cauldron across the yard, and under the smithy’s awning. The smith had left for a drink - a thing he enjoyed mid-afternoons most days - and had left Oakely alone, learning to make nails. Oakely had not been able to bring himself to help the young witches wrangle the cauldron, though he could not understand why.

The sight of them had rooted him in place, under the shade of the awning. They were the first witches he had ever seen, and by that point, as a young wizard and engineer versed in the latest forms of ancient magical tradition, and armed with countless dire warnings regarding the perils of witches and their dark arts, he had become suddenly somewhat transfixed, and could only watch the odd struggle betwixt the young witches and the spirited physics of the large metal pot.

They had needed the handle replaced, please and thank you, sir blacksmith. It was Oakely’s first job, which he did professionally, though not very perfectly. They thanked him kindly all the same, and the following day, Beatrice returned alone for a bucket of nails. They were building their hut on a hill a few miles East of the town’s borders, she told him, as he worked without comment, pounding the iron, so that each strike fell in between her words. They would be brewing potions, taken from the books their Aunt had left them, she thought to add, as he squelched the hot iron bolts in a bucket of water, unable to think of one thing to say to her, managing perhaps a nod at best. She did not say what kind of potions, and he did not think to ask, until much later.

Over the next several days, Oakely came to imagine their hut must have been a rather grand affair, judging by the nails Beatrice would be sent back to fetch from him every day, sometimes twice. By the end of the Season, the townsfolk had begun to ask the smith specifically for the nails made by his young apprentice, for by that point they were simply the strongest and truest nails to be had anywhere, expect perhaps for those to be found in the City of Owl itself.

Bee provided many more of Oakely’s earliest memories, in those next few seasons, gathered from a respectful distance at first, and gradually closer over time. His father’s wise words of warning would often return to his mind unbidden, though as the years passed, the young man understood less and less of their meaning or value. He had not had one opportunity to pick his witch, as far as he could tell; the choice had not seemed to him to have been his at all.

\* That is, he learned ever only some of the Witches Law, as it is well understood that no wizard has ever managed to learn them all. In the Fall of 412 WIY, a conclave of scientific inquiry from the College’s South Peak did attempt to collate them definitively, but by Spring 414 WIY the project was finally shelved for good, as it had become apparent that no two wizards could come to agreement on how to even begin deciphering the laws of witches and witchcraft. The failure of the inquiry was itself, of course, blamed on witchcraft, by most in attendance.