

Bug Off



WHenever ants are running around our house, I think of the scene in Marjorie Rawlings' *Cross Creek*, when she asks her tenant how she's getting on, and the woman replies, "Nothin' extry. They ain't no screens to the house and the skeeters like to eat us alive. And I can't keep the antses out of Tim's breakfast."

Neither could we this morning. The sugar bowl was full of bull ants. They were boiling, but not spoiling, for a fight—for the jaws of the bull ant worker are not very strong, and their bite is a dullish pressure. Also known as Florida carpenter ants, they're among the largest in the state, not to mention the sugar bowl. It made my wife, Lorry, mad—so many bustling bodies in the sugar bowl. Me, I just thought of Mrs. Rawlings' story about Tim. At least they weren't swimming in my Cream of Wheat.

I returned the bull ants and their sugar to the piney woods and then put our newly replenished sugar bowl in the fridge where ants never roam—not yet, anyway.

It was a week of wonders. We had mad ants, as they're called in Jamaica, crazy ants, as they're known here. Is there a difference? They were scrimmaging around on our tile floors for a few days. Harmless but dizzyingly busy. So busy, in fact, they make us seem statuesque amidst their madness, their—forgive me—antic behavior.

SUSAN SANFORD I blithely tossed a log on the fire that evening, as there was a chill in the air, and any chill in Florida is a blade of ice as far as I'm concerned;

and there, stranded on my log, was a dark little angry scorpion with his angry tail upraised.

As he defied the flames, I remembered the African tale of the scorpion and the frog. The scorpion asks the frog to take him across the river. The frog replies, "Why should I do that when I know you'll sting me?" The scorpion tells the frog, "I won't this time." So the frog ferries the scorpion across the river. Halfway there, the frog is stung. "Why did you do that?" asks the frog. "Now we'll both drown." The scorpion replies, "It's my nature."

I looked at that scorpion and, in truth, it disgusted me. However, it was perched on a piece of burning

wood, a *Titanic* of sorts, about to go down in flames, and thus some arcane moral urgency compelled me to save the mean little creature. Carefully, I lifted off the curled, smoking bark he was on and carried it hastily to the back door with no harm done to me, or my stinger-tailed guest.

Lorry says, "I suppose it's your nature. But where do you draw the line?"

The other day while writing at my desk, I glanced down at my bare foot. There, by my big toe, was a brown widow spider. Not a black, but a brown. Same poison, I'm told, but these spiders have a burnt-orange hourglass on their abdomen instead of the familiar red one borne by their sister widows in black.

The brown has the same long, thin, tapered legs that give her an uplifted grace, if you will. Typically light to medium brown, this timid spider is reported to bite very rarely. Nonetheless, I didn't enjoy her camping by my toe. Yet the elegant-looking widow was minding her own business as I was minding mine, and she didn't trouble herself to bite me.

I didn't want to kill her. Not really. I just wanted her out of the house. So I got a jar and escorted the brown lady into it with a ruler, and took her to the farm fence out back. When I let her out of the jar, I said a few words of prayer to all things small and beautiful that forget to bite us tall and willful, and I let it go at that.

Truthfully, I've not killed any creature knowingly—except mosquitoes and fire ants and the occasional cockroach. I don't like killing things. My dear departed friend Fred Rogers (*Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*)—who was, as we all know, a bit of a saint—once said to me, "Your relation with animals reminds me of Albert Schweitzer. Do you not hurt anything, Gerry?"

"Not if I can help it," I said.

"Are there any exceptions? True humility means no exceptions."

I thought about it and replied, "Fire ants receive no mercy. I kill them whenever they get within a few yards of the house."

Fred lived in Florida for a part of each winter, and he knew the fire ant drill. "How do

you get rid of them?"

"Poison."

There was a moment of silence. During which I wondered, "Can a man achieve humility and awe and still wield poison?"

"One day you'll have to take me swimming in your pond," Fred said, changing the subject, "but please don't invite your ants."

We always planned on going swimming on my property at Pletcher's Pond, but Fred passed on before he could get over here. I like to think he sometimes joins me there on a summer afternoon.

He was a beautiful swimmer, and his streaking through the water was more fish than human. Well, he *was* a Pisces, as I recall.

It was sometime after Fred had passed on that we had a bad infestation of ghost ants. David Dally of Tarpon Springs had just given me a wonderful painting he'd done of Pletcher's Pond, and I'd framed it and hung it on a wall that was visible from almost any part of the living room and kitchen. The day after I hung the painting, I saw a creepy little ant line leading up and down the wall and ending up at the corner of the painting.

Curious, I lifted the painting, and stepped back: A whole colony of tiny ants was ghost dancing back there.

If you've never seen a ghost ant, let me describe it for you. They're a 16th of an inch long. A minuscule creature with a dark head. Ghost ant legs are white, thorax dark. As a group, they move somewhat erratically. But when you get up close to them, you'll notice that some are loafing and others are urging those loafers along. I got a ladder and took the painting off the wall, and painted the colony area with a pastiche of water and chili powder. If that didn't send them packing, nothing would.

But, as a matter of fact, nothing would. Or did. They stayed, and stayed.

So, very reluctantly, I put my painting of Pletcher's Pond outside on the lanai and sought some new remedies for the ant problem.

Because it was a problem: Now they had invaded our kitchen, our bathroom sink and the shower. Apparently, though, the mother ship was Dave's painting. There were feeder

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lines coming off it in all directions going in and out of the house to the lanai and then back to the painting.

In the bathroom cabinet I found my favorite remedy for a sore throat. It's called Throat Assist and it consists of thyme, black currant herb, Echinacea, Angustofolio root, ginger rhizome, goldenseal root, licorice root, maiden-hair herb, propolis beehive scrapings and much more.

Lorry won't get near me when I spray this stuff in my mouth, and neither would the ghosties dance again on Saturday night after I sprayed it on their trails, paths and conference halls.

They packed up soon after. Did I poison them? Maybe.

Wise King Solomon had something to say about ants. One day he was riding with his Queen Sheba, and at their horse's feet was a huge ant nest. The Queen wanted to keep going, arguing, "The ants should be pleased to be under the hooves of a great king's horses."

But he said, "Not so, my Queen." He turned his horse aside, and all his followers did the same. When they had passed, the anthill lay unharmed like a small city in the sun.

"He is only great who cares for each and all," Solomon told his queen. "And he is only strong who cares for the weak."

I think often of Solomon and Fred Rogers and all those saintly people who have resisted the urge to harm living things. I think, too, of the brown widow who spared me and the ghost ants that dared me, and all creatures great and small who love and bedevil me in this mixed paradise of manifold blessings that we call home.

So, repeat your daily prayer for all sentient beings, no matter how morbid or testy or fanged or small. But just in case, don't forget to keep some Throat Assist handy. †

Pine Island's Gerald Hausman has written more than 35 books for children and adults, including The Mythology of Horses (with Loretta Hausman).