



FORMICIDAE

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Saara's earliest memory was of ants drinking her mother's blood. It would take years for her to recall it consciously. The large coin-sized droplets were like buttons dropped on the dusty, dry ground. Round, bright red, smooth, starting to slowly curdle on the edges. There was a fine frill circling each droplet – small black ants, forming a beautiful ring around them, a steady queue of small insects coming in to drink and heading back out with their ant bellies full of warm blood.

It was a bright, sunny day, and the sky looked impossibly blue and high. Saara lifted her gaze up to her father, who stood on the farmhouse yard, sweaty and wearing just a pair of worn, paint splattered jeans. He breathed in fast, noisy gasps that made his chest heave, and stared at Saara's mother who lay crumpled on the cool grass, the handle of a bread knife jutting from her chest. There were dark patches of blood on her pink dress. She wasn't moving.

The skin on Saara's face felt sticky and raw from the crying, and her nose ran.

But the ants, where were they coming from? Saara slapped her hand down on the ochre coloured dust.

In spite of the hot sunshine, the ground felt cool and solid. The ants didn't seem to mind her slap, they kept on lapping up the blood, their mandibles and antennae twitching.

Saara got on her feet, feeling wobbly. The line of ants vanished into tall grass, heading towards the forest. Father moved, which got Saara's attention. She watched him turn and walk towards the cow shed, his broad shoulders shaking. Saara didn't follow his last steps that ended in a noose, but turned towards the forest instead.

Where were the ants going? She had to know.

Saara never made it to the tree line, thanks to the neighbours, who had been alerted by all the shouting and screaming.

Fifteen years later Saara watched a line of ants walking over the chest of her lover Pasi, who snored lightly, deep in drunken sleep next to her. It was a sunny late autumn day. Gusts of wind tugged at the trees, and made their way through the open window, just on this side of being too cold.

Saara had turned 18 in the previous day, and she had

been released from the foster home. This was her first proper apartment and her first proper boyfriend. Lover. Whatever.

The ants gave Saara a shiver of disgust. For a moment she thought she could smell dust and grass in the autumn air, which made her chest feel tight. The little black insects wove their way around the hairs on Pasi's chest, and vanished somewhere between the mattresses. Saara got up faster than she meant, without realizing why she had to get out of the bed right there and then, out of the reach of the little crawling things. She padded to the kitchen feeling shaky from last night's drinking. Pasi grunted something in the bedroom as she turned on the tap and ran the water until it was cool. When she got back, Pasi had turned around. He was lying on his stomach, which had demolished the path of the little insects. There were a few stragglers on the bed sheets, looking lost and confused.

It was the fourth floor, how the heck had they gotten in?

Pasi was long gone, and Pekka was bitching about Saara to the marriage councillor. Saara kept staring at the windowsill in the psychologist's office, not really paying any attention to Pekka's invective about her being distant, aloof, not committed to the relationship and being emotionally unavailable.

The late summer sunlight poured in through the windows, throwing huge shadows of the plants to the white wall of the room. The councillor nodded in sync with Pekka's diatribe.

There was a queue of ants coming into the room from somewhere behind one of the flowerpots. Saara frowned and tried to move so she could see where they were coming from, which got the attention of the councillor.

Never mind how they got in – where were the ants going? The insects vanished into the shadows under the windowsill.

The councillor spoke to Saara, but she didn't pay attention to his words. Her eyes wandered on the corners of the room, until she made out the line of small black insects heading towards the door.

She got up and left the room without a word.

Eight years later, on a cool and sunny autumn morning, Saara stood for an hour just staring at her dead baby girl in the crib. Fragile little maggot-like thing, lips blue and skin turning slowly purple. A cot death. Wei was at work, and Saara didn't know whom to call.

The ants made their way into the crib, and started lapping at what moisture remained in the baby girl's eyes and mouth. They gave her a second set of eyelashes.

In the evening, when the paramedics had taken the baby away, Saara went berserk. She cleaned and disinfected the whole apartment, peering under every piece of furniture, behind the radiators and between the trims and the walls looking for the ants and killing them all. Wei was trying to hug her and comfort her, but she pushed him away. She wanted out of the apartment, out of the damn sweltering concrete canyons of Singapore, which had been looming over her for years. She wanted lakes, soft fresh spring grass, trees – a cool and dark forest where to escape the sunlight.

The thought made her squeal of disgust and hurl the can of pesticide to the other side of the room, a reaction that surprised even herself.

Saara followed the line of ants to a light switch. When she opened the screws holding the plastic cover to the wall, it fell off by itself and poured clumps of dry, electrocuted little insects all over her hands and the floor.

A decade later in Cambodia, somewhere north of Kaoh Preah, the rain was hammering the roof of the old cargo container that had been turned into an impromptu hospital. Saara shook with fever, although it was over +30C outside and much hotter in the small hospital room. The thunder was like a series of explosions, no pause at all between the lightning and the sound.

The wounds in Saara's legs and arms were badly infected. Necrotizing fasciitis, what a way to go.

The room smelled of stale sweat, diarrhoea and sickness, and when the wind shifted, it pushed in the muddy scent of the river and the churned earth from outside.

Someone moaned in the bed next to Saara's, but she didn't pay any real attention to it anymore. Most of the other patients were probably dead; it had been two days since she had seen any of the medical personnel.

The line of ants vanished behind the yellowed and crusty bandages on her forearm, the discharge on them the colour of ochre. The wounds had stopped hurting, and Saara's limbs felt numb and stiff. The ants walked in and out through the small holes and creases in the bandages. This made Saara chuckle, which came out as a dry rattle. Finally she realized it all.

Earlier Saara had moved her arm just to see if she could, which had closed the hole the ants were using, leaving one of them pinned between the fabric and her flushed flesh. Saara had moved again, freeing the ant, and giving its compatriots better access to her. Her legs tingled, there must be a lot of traffic there.

What a total, utter, ironic relief to finally realize where you had been heading all through your life. The

ants climbed over the creases of the soiled bed sheets towards the edge of the bed, but just before they reached it, they turned towards the foot of the bed and the door.

For the twentieth time in the last few days Saara made a solemn decision to get up right now and follow them. She had to know where they were going. Just like before, she closed her eyes instead and fell into delirious dreams of ochre coloured dust, red buttons and pink dresses.

This time she finally got to follow the ants into the cool and shadowy forest, away from the scorching sun of the farmstead yard.

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Janos Honkonen is a Finnish author in his early 40's. He writes in Finnish and English and has so far published a novel, a comic, a number of short stories, non-fiction and scores of articles. Talking about his work history, "motley" is a fair modifier to use. It spans such fields as linguistics, media, healthcare, film industry, games industry, sniffing acetone and scientific diving. Janos is currently working on two novels, a game, a movie script for international audiences, and various other projects. Website: <http://vornaskotti.com/> Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/janos.honkonen.page> Twitter: <http://twitter.com/vornaskotti>

