

The Progress of a Pilgrim: AN ALLEGORY

Once upon a time, perhaps not so long ago and certainly not so far away, members of an ant colony took up residence in a biscuit box in the pantry. They daily sought nourishment in the biscuits, and each time a new pile of crumblings was ready for eating, the group gathered to praise the First Bearer for leading them to this wonderful, protected place. During such moments, the elder ants also narrated lengthy accounts about the dangers that awaited those who strayed outside their “homey” box. Only in this place of biscuits could they be assured of the true light and the blessings of safety and food.

The challenge for them all, however, was that the biscuits themselves were quite hard. Getting the crumbled pieces required the studied art and dedication of the Bearer ants who carefully followed the intricate routines of the “stomp” that had been taught to them since their youth. Each member ant of the biscuit box got only its share; the undeserving and those too undisciplined to gnaw consistently lived a Spartan life.

Right now, an ant named Will was sitting alone beside the pitiful pile of crumblings that he’d loosened with much effort. He was despondent. His right front foot throbbed with pain after every active round of “stomping.” And he was so daunted by the idea of doing another round that he thought he might just sit tiredly on the crumble pile forever. How had he come to such despair?

As a young ant, he’d shown such great potential for being a Bearer. Unlike his childhood friend, Sim, being a Bearer was all that Little Will had ever dreamed of. While they played, he often urged Sim to practice the “stomp” with him. But his trusted playmate never felt the zeal for the routine that Little Will did. Eventually, as they grew older, Sim lost all interest in the “stomp” and wouldn’t spend time with Will when he practiced it.

Sim, you see, was a member of the Truth family, who weren’t descendants of the First Bearer as Will’s family were. For this reason, and their unwillingness to commit wholly to the complexities of the routines, Sim and his family members were not as accepted in the biscuit box. Some in the colony even wondered why they had come to live in the biscuit box at all, and not many were surprised or unhappy when the whole lot of them finally moved away.

It was Sim’s last visit that was on Will’s mind now as he sat dejectedly beside the crumble pile. He remembered it with surprising clarity and regretted how he had treated his faithful friend. Will had been riding high on the adulation of the other ants during a stupendous round of “stomping.” As a member of the Ful family, he was striving to follow in the footsteps of their ancestor, the First Bearer. Even as a young ant, Will knew just where to gnaw on the biscuit and how to do the perfect “stomp” of his foot to loosen a piece of food. He had learned early, for example, that breaking the rounded corners of the biscuit was the easier “stomp” to do. Many of the Bearers were proficient at it. But only the best, and Will aspired to be one of the best, could crack the center of a biscuit and break it into crumbles.

At the time of Sim's visit, he had, in fact, been competing with the older Bearers, who seemed more deliberate, more cautious in their "stomps." He'd just recently noticed that they limped now and then, but he'd immediately concluded that it must be some failing on their part that they hadn't stayed sure-footed and strong.

Anyway, when Sim arrived, none of the others noticed because they were all watching Will do a master "stomp" at the heart of a biscuit and marveling at how good he was.

The moment that Will saw Sim, however, he ran to his dear friend and greeted him joyfully. Sim hesitated to speak, seemingly overcome by all of the attention and praise Will was getting. He waited quietly until the others had left before talking to his friend. "I have something to tell you," Sim began.

"What?" asked Will, still energized by the day's activities and not as attentive as he could have been.

"There is a better place. You don't have to stay here in the gloom and hardship of the biscuit box," assured Sim.

"You can't mean that," replied Will. "We all know that the only true light comes through the top of this box, and these substantial biscuits are the only true food, found for us by the First Bearer himself."

"But there is no reason," explained Sim earnestly, "for you and the other ants in this box to settle for hard biscuit crumbs."

He went on to tell Will how he and his family had returned to their home hills—beyond the boxes, even beyond the pantry, outside in the full light of the yard. The bright light that shone there was the same light that glanced into the biscuit box, but it radiated on everything with such marvelous warmth and in so much more abundance!

Will tried not to listen when Sim started saying these things. He knew at that point that his dear, childhood friend had lost his way. He could never have understood the "stomp" and life in the biscuit box if he questioned it to this extent. As Will nodded politely but avoided eye contact, Sim continued talking, hoping he would at least look at him. Eventually, though, Sim left, realizing that his friend wasn't seeking what he had to offer.

Will shrugged off the experience, or so he thought, as he returned to his family, glorying once again in the praise of the only true ants in the only true place to be, the biscuit box. And, for a time after that, Will was able to shut out Sim's blasphemy. Now, however, while he was nursing his sore foot, Will recalled his old friend's words of promise. Actually, they were all that he had been able to think about recently. They made his heart yearn for such brightness and warmth. Could it be true? Was there a fuller, more radiant light outside the biscuit box?

Suddenly, Will could not resist the temptation any longer. After reassuring himself that no one was watching, he cautiously started to climb up to the top edge of the box, to the place where the

light shone in. He'd been there before, of course. All young Bearers during training were brought up to the opening to look out of the box and be instructed about the pitiful, hazardous life lived "out there." They all then returned to the crumble pile, rejoicing in the safety of their sturdy, high-walled box and in the blessings that the First Bearer had secured for them. They took comfort in the knowledge that they were indeed a special group, they who derived their food from the "stomp" and who knew all of its intricate routines.

But this time Will was alone as he looked out over the top of the box. He didn't have the instruction from elder ants or the support of his peers. Today he looked out of the box hesitantly, but with feelings of curiosity as well as of fear and uncertainty.

What he saw wasn't so scary really, now that he had confronted it. In fact, Will thought that he could see another box not that far away. He wondered about its inhabitants. It probably wouldn't take long to get there. What did they eat, he wondered? How did they live without the Bearers and the "stomp"? He shrugged his shoulders and turned to go back. But then he stopped, overcome by the knowledge that he had nothing to return to. With his painful and almost worthless foot, his life as a Bearer would soon be over. Besides, he was hungry, and that reminded him of how sore his mouth had gotten from gnawing the hard biscuit crumbles. Suddenly, as though someone had given him a big push, he slipped down the side of the box and landed on the shelf. He sat there a minute awestruck. He couldn't believe that he was completely outside of the biscuit box. What had prompted him to do such a thing, he wondered.

He slowly got up and was getting ready to crawl back up into the box when he thought of Sim. In his heart Will knew he could rely on his childhood friend, and he let the thought of finding him draw him on. Turning around and walking ever so slowly because he was favoring his foot, he set off for the box he thought he had seen in the distance. Several times along the way, his foot throbbed even worse. Was he being punished for leaving the biscuit box? He'd heard stories of such things. But each time such fears stopped him, Will thought of what Sim had shared and took one more step forward.

At last, when the box had come clearly into view, he was surprised to see a great number of ants standing on the top of it, cheering him on. They waved at him and soon welcomed him into their cracker box. Lying long and low on the shelf, it was more accessible than the taller biscuit box, and the light came into this box from the side. Will couldn't believe how easy the food was to get. No one had to "stomp," although they had a very complex routine about waiting their turn. And then the soft white morsels would just crumble in their mouths. Sometimes it was a little hard to maneuver around in the cracker box, though, because there were so many, many ants and because the long flat ceiling had started to sag. In spite of this, Will enjoyed the ease of living that the box offered, and his foot gradually stopped paining him all of the time.

It wasn't long, however, before he started thinking of his trusted friend again. Sim's promises of light and warmth and abundance echoed around him constantly and gave him no peace. Soon he realized that he had no choice but to find his friend, wherever that search might lead.

When the elder ants of this box saw that Will was getting ready to leave, they tried to talk him into staying with them. The light that came through the side entrance of their cracker box was

special, they said. Everyone knew that it was the only true light. Eventually, though, when Will figured they weren't looking, he slipped away and was free once more. The box's lower entrance and the soft crackers made it easier for the ants, but Will felt uncomfortable and closed in nonetheless.

As he continued on and that box disappeared behind him, Will was surprised to find that his foot didn't start paining him the way it had when he left the biscuit box. Relieved of the daily "stomp" routine, it seemed to be gaining strength and sureness as he walked. Besides, a large square of light was now visible ahead of him. He figured it would take all of his strength to get there, but for some reason Will found comfort in the promise of so much light and the possibilities such a radiance offered. He also focused on the hope of seeing Sim once more, particularly during the darkest times on the shelf when he felt the most alone.

Just as Will's hunger and fears were once again tempting him to return to his family and the biscuit box, another box appeared in the distance. A sweet, spicy smell emanated to him from the cookie box long before he was close enough to see its inhabitants. They welcomed him kindly enough, and, though the box stood upright like the biscuit box with light coming in from the top, it didn't stand as tall and straight as his home box did. Something, perhaps water, had weakened the bottom of the box, and that made one whole side lower than the other. The members of the colony were entangled in debates on how to manage the situation and shore up the box, so no one even noticed when Will shortly slipped away.

Once again, as he journeyed along the shelf, the square of light beckoned him. Will wasn't sure that it would lead him to Sim, but it seemed as if it would. The big square had to be very far away because he was tiring from the walking, and it didn't seem to get much closer. Maybe it didn't really exist. It could be an illusion, and he'd be chasing it forever. Many times he was overcome by such fears and was tempted to return to what he knew best, life in the biscuit box. Each time that happened, however, he stood still and thought of the light, and the glowing promise of his friend's words filled his heart.

Just when he felt too scared and hungry to go much further, several small juice boxes came into view. When he got closer, their member ants rushed out and encouraged him to join them. He finally chose to visit the box with the sticky purple stain on it. It had only a small opening at the top, and Will was surprised to find how little light found its way inside. Once he had chosen to enter their juice box, the member ants got distracted by something else and didn't seem too concerned about him. He could stay, or he could go—it was all the same to them.

More and more, though, Will kept focusing on the square of light, and his childhood friend was seldom out of his thoughts. Mostly he regretted how egotistical and self-absorbed he had been on the occasion of Sim's last visit. His foolish actions during that time embarrassed him now a great deal. He didn't like what they showed about himself at all, and he desperately needed to find Sim again and tell him that. So he continued on.

Finally, Will arrived at the large square he had been looking toward for so long. It towered over him and, though it was smudged in some places and covered all over with a film of dust, the light it let through was of greater intensity than anything Will had ever encountered. Its dusty radiance

was probably more expansive because it didn't contain the odd mixtures of light and shadow found in the boxes on the shelf.

As he moved closer, an even brighter light fell across Will's path and almost blinded him. It streamed from a crack at the base of the square. When he had adjusted to its intensity, he cautiously walked into what had to be the brightest radiance he could ever imagine. The dust motes danced in the brilliance of it, and its warmth overwhelmed him. Before approaching the crack's outer edge, he hesitated. He couldn't imagine walking out into such overwhelming light and space alone. What would happen to him? Would he disappear? Would he ever be able to find a trail that led back to his family?

Just when he thought he might turn around and run, he made himself stop and stand still. It was then that he saw his friend, Simple Truth, running towards him. As Sim reached out to him, Will cried, "I've found you at last. I'm so sorry for the foolish way I acted before." Sim then led him from the cracked wall into a world of bright light and unlimited space and millions of other ants.

Will rested peacefully for quite a while in the yard with the Truth family. They all were glad that Will had finally come to be in the bright light and freedom of the yard, and they assured Will that he had a place with them as long as he wanted to stay. They offered him pieces of berry and even some crumbs of bread that had fallen from above. He learned how full life could be without the "stomp"—in fact, he learned how altogether unnecessary such a routine was.

Oh, there were some scary times. Will was very afraid during the storms, for example, when water ran everywhere and when he had to shelter himself beneath a plant leaf or scramble under a rock ledge. And once he almost got stepped on. But the unlimited light and abundance of room more than made up for those hazards. The warmth and texture of this beautiful world of light filled him completely. Although he still realized that the big square offered some protection and order for those who lived behind it, nothing there could ever become a permanent substitute for what he had now. One moment of life and freedom in the yard was better than a multitude of moments on the shelf and in the boxes.

Eventually, though, Will began to feel concern for his family, and he knew what he must do. He had to go back. He had to tell his family and the other ants in the biscuit box what they were missing. Sim encouraged him on his way, confident that his friend would now always return to the life of warmth and radiance in the yard.

Will was surprised at how dim and cool it immediately got as he walked back through the crack and reentered the pantry. And he'd hardly begun his journey along the shelf when he saw an ant sitting downcast and in visible pain. He stopped to talk and find out what was wrong.

"What should I do?" asked the sad, tired ant. "I've come so far, and I don't think I can go another step."

"Let me help you," replied Will. "You're really almost there. The bright light of the yard is only a short distance away. And, once you get there, my friend and his family will shelter you as you explore its wonders."

Will backtracked, then, to the crack below the big square. He walked step by step with his new, now hopeful friend. It didn't really take as long as Will thought that it might. Feeling the other ant's gratitude more than made up for any loss of time.

It wasn't long before he was journeying once more. But, then, when he was only a short distance past the juice boxes, he was delayed again. A small family of ants were circling around frantically with no clear sense of direction at all. Will called to them, "Hey, friends, slow down. Sit here with me quietly for a while."

When the bewildered ants stopped to listen, Will asked, "Where do you want to go? I could maybe help you find your way if you're lost."

"Oh, would you please? You're so kind," one of them replied. "After growing up in the cracker box, our lives got so complicated and burdened that we lost track of what we were doing. Now we've wandered too far to find our way back, and we're all so hungry and exhausted."

"I'll help you return to your home box, if that's what you want," said Will. "But, you know, the juice boxes are much closer. We could get to them very quickly, and you could have something to eat. Then, I'll either walk back with you or lead you to the light and abundance out in the yard. It's really a wonderful place, and my friends the Truth family will be there to get you settled."

They all thought that the yard sounded like what they needed, so Will helped them along, backtracking again. He was quickly learning, though, that these little detours were something he enjoyed doing. In fact, finding ways to aid and support other ants soon became the part of his life that he loved most.

At last, after a really interesting and eventful journey where he'd met and befriended all sorts of ants, he crawled down into the biscuit box unnoticed. The member ants were all listening to Pride, Will's father, as he exhorted them to persevere and make the First Bearer proud. When someone finally did look back and see Will, a hush fell as everyone turned to look at him. Will saw the faces of his family and relatives and other ants he had known all of his life. He couldn't speak at first, so overcome was he by his feelings for them and by the intensity of their stares.

Then he cleared his throat and said, "The biscuit box isn't the only place where there is light. It shines into all of the boxes in the pantry, on the shelf, and in the yard beyond. Only because the boxes sit at various angles does the light appear differently to those ants inside. Come with me and I'll show you the source of this wonderful light. It not only blesses us, but it nourishes everyone in a world beyond your imagining."

Even though Will's remarks were met with silence, he plunged on: "Eating hard biscuit crumbles doesn't insure any more blessings from above than do cracker and cookie crumbs or juice drops or bits of bread. It's not what we do or how we do it that matters. What gives meaning is who we are. The light has created us. It shines on us and in us. Without it, the whole world would be dead and lifeless."

“Leave the box,” he cried. “Don’t be afraid. The light’s brightness and warmth are for everyone. They offer more comfort than ever can be found in this one dusty box.”

When he finished speaking, no one moved. He saw the shadows deepen and knew that this preceded the light’s disappearance above. He could see the wary look in the eyes of the older ants, and the eyes of the younger ones were hungry but tentative. Then his two younger sisters, Merci and Hope, chimed, “We would like to follow you, Will. As soon as we’re old enough.” And his cousin Doubt also allowed as how he might follow later. His mother Care showed only fear and concern for his welfare, and Pride, his father, would not look at him at all, certain in the knowledge that Power, who was the First Bearer and his ancestor, would disapprove.

When no one else spoke, Will turned to leave. He walked slowly, thinking that some of the biscuit box’s inhabitants might still decide to follow him. But none did. When he reached the top of the box, he again looked back, hoping to see some dear ant that he loved coming with him. He saw no one.

After he had crawled down the outside of the box and onto the shelf, the thought of the bright light of the yard beckoned to him once more. He knew that he was no longer Will, the Bearer. That role didn’t have any meaning for him now. He actually felt more like Little Will, the child with simple dreams, before all of the glamour and complexity of the “stomp” had drawn him in.

It was then that he decided. From that moment on he would be known by the name Use and not Will. And the purpose of his life would be to serve all of his fellow ants in the boxes, on the shelves, and in the yard. Yes, he would be Use Ful, journeying often to the boxes to help those in need and telling of the glory and warmth of the light if they would but turn aside to listen and to look.