The Grasshopper and the Ant

by PrairieDawn

Summary

A retelling of The Ant and the Grasshopper, taking into account the behavioral ecology of ants and grasshoppers (while ignoring the fact that neither ants nor grasshoppers have interspecies friendships nor philosophical discussions--so far as we know.)

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

The ant struggled up the well-worn path toward home. Her burden, a fragment of leaf, pulled her back and forth along her path as shifting breezes caught it. It slipped out of her grasp and fluttered a short distance to light against a grasshopper’s back legs.

The grasshopper laid down the long strand of grass she had been chewing her way down. “Hi there!” The grasshopper called. She hopped once, landing precisely a body length away from the ant. The ant took one startled step backward, glad she hadn’t ended up beneath those great feet.

“Your leaf.” The grasshopper dropped the leaf at the ant’s feet. “You’ve passed by this way five times already today. Where are you taking all of this food?”

The ant was not inclined to neglect her duties to answer impertinent questions from members of other species, but the grasshopper had done her a favor. “I take it home to the garden for my sisters and the Queen My Mother,” she replied. The ant touched her antennae to the grasshopper’s politely, picked up the leaf, and was on her way. A little way past the two small stones that marked the entrance to the colony, at the point where it began to smell damp and cool and homelike, she passed her burden to a sister, ate a small snack, and retraced her steps. She smelled her way along the path, marked as it was by her many trips and the passing of dozens of sisters.

She had just reached the bend in the path by the clump of violets when she saw the grasshopper
again, still nibbling at the grass. The grasshopper lay the grass down to greet her. "Little friend, why are you in such a hurry? All you do is walk back and forth with your head to the ground. It's a beautiful day, and beautiful days are to be savored!"

The ant turned back to look at the grasshopper. “Dance and play if you wish, foolish grasshopper. Summer will not last forever, and if you have no safe home and stored food, you will die with the first frost. The Queen My Mother has lived through three winters and is very wise. She knows.”

The ant’s words gave the grasshopper pause. She watched her race up the path to her chosen gathering grounds, then hopped away, worried. For a while, she forgot her troubles in a game of hopscotch with another young female, but she soon grew hungry and left her play to seek out a bit of food. As she rested in the cool shadow of a tuft of little bluestem, chewing the sweet, crisp stem of an aster, she heard a cicada beginning his slow march up a nearby cottonwood. “Cicada,” she called, “have you heard of this thing called winter? I have spoken to an ant, and she says we must all gather food and save it, or we shall freeze and starve in the end.”

The cicada crept another step up the tree. He answered without turning his head. “I have grown under the ground for eleven years. The cold always comes. I have spoken to many on the ground and under it, and I know a thing or two.” There was a brief silence as the cicada negotiated a knothole. "You are a grasshopper. You must grow fat, and find love, and bury your eggs in the ground all in this one season before you grow old and die. That ant likely won't live to see winter either. Do what's right for a grasshopper and don't worry. It will sort itself in the end. Now if you'll excuse me, I have only today to find love before death finds me. Time is short.” The cicada soon climbed too high for the grasshopper to easily follow.

The grasshopper found herself busy with a molt, which left her bigger and better equipped for high jumping, and with watching the boys show off doing tricks and singing songs. It was a couple of weeks before she found herself at the clump of violets where she had last seen the ant. When the ant came by, this time laden with early ripening grass seeds, she called out again. "Little friend! Put down those seeds for a minute and talk to me.”

The ant twitched her antennae, exasperated, but stopped before the grasshopper. “What is it, you silly thing?”

The grasshopper tilted her head. “The cicada says he has been in the ground for eleven years. Winter, he says, is real, but you and I don't need to worry about it. We will grow old and die anyway before it gets here." She hopped back and forth. "So come play a while!"

The ant shifted the seeds to a more comfortable position and started away. “I will consider what you have said,” she replied, “and discuss it with the Queen My Mother.”

The ant grew troubled by the grasshopper's words. On her return to the colony, she passed the seeds to one of her younger sisters and made her way deep under the ground to the queen’s chamber. There she waited for the queen to acknowledge her presence. “O Queen My Mother,” she began, stroking the queen’s great side with her antennae in respect, “I have heard from a grasshopper something which has disturbed me.”

“What is it, child?”
“He said that the gathering of plants and seeds for the garden here is wasted effort, for I will grow old and die before the winter comes, and will never need it.”

The queen touched the ant with one antenna. “Listen, smell, and feel. what do you perceive?”

The ant waved her antennae through the dark room. “Eggs. And infants.”

“Do you remember when you were very young, and you tended the eggs and your new sisters in the chambers here with me?”

“Yes.”

“O dutiful child, if I had the power to grant you and your sisters lives as long as mine, I would, but the world is not so and in this it cannot be changed.

“Through the winter and for years to come, I will bear eggs, and from each of those eggs will come another young daughter of mine and sister of yours. The gift of your work will feed me and your little sisters through the winter and allow another generation to see the sunshine in the spring.”

The ant considered this for a long time. Finally, she touched her antennae to the floor of the chamber. “I believe I understand, O Queen My Mother.” She reached out to stroke the smooth, white body of an infant.

“Daughter,” the queen continued, "It has been so long since I smelled the wind or felt the sun on my body. I envy you that. Do not forget in your labors to appreciate the beauty of the upper world.”

The ant bowed again. “Yes, O Queen My Mother.”

The next time the ant saw the grasshopper she was perched at the top of a twig, admiring the antics of a dozen male grasshoppers as they vied for her attention. Momentarily weary of her popularity, she hopped down to visit her tiny friend.

“You were right,” the ant began.

The grasshopper preened.

The ant went on. “And you are wrong. I gather for the Queen My Mother, who cannot leave her chamber underground, and for my sisters to be born after I am gone. What will happen to your sisters this winter?”

“I don’t have any sisters that I know of. It is kind of you to think of them, though.” Something caught the grasshopper's eye and she hopped a little way up the twig again to get a better view. "Oh look, do you see the longish one with the speckles on the ends of his wings? Isn’t he handsome?”

The ant followed the grasshopper’s gaze. “I might find him so, if I were a grasshopper,” she allowed.

“He’s the most gorgeous thing I have ever seen! “ the grasshopper cried, then hopped away after the handsome male.
A few days later, the ant met the grasshopper among the violets again. This time, the grasshopper seemed quieter than she had ever been before. She was resting near a pile of seeds she had plainly gathered, looking strangely serene. “I gathered these for your sisters,” she said.

The ant nodded her acknowledgement of the gift. “Where is the splendid gentleman you caught last time I saw you?”

The grasshopper hunched a little. “Gone. That’s how it is with males.” Her antennae roved along her abdomen. “I have been laying eggs all day, down in the ground where they will be safe until springtime.”

The ant twitched in surprise. “You lay eggs? You’re a queen?”

“Of course I do. There is no one to lay them for me,” she teased. “But I am tired and needed to rest a while. The summer is over. The air feels different. Chill and dry.”

“Thank you for the seeds. We will make good use of them,” the ant said. She gathered a few to take back with her. Once she had stowed what she could carry, she added, “Will I see you again?”

The grasshopper shrugged. “I don’t know. I have a lot of eggs to lay. It will take me days. But when I’m finished, I think I will spend the rest of my life in this spot. There is plenty of grass yet, and the view is spectacular.”

The ant looked around for a moment. Being an ant, she was more a creature of touch and smell than of sight, but the crisp blue of the sky did contrast prettily with the curtains of leaves in the midst of turning from rich green to gold and brown. The air smelled of violets, clean earth, and the scent trails she had left all summer as she passed this way. Homelike. The ant agreed, “It is beautiful here.” She turned with her carefully balanced seeds and walked, no, strolled back to the colony, taking care to notice a delightful smell in the air or an interesting texture underfoot as she passed by. By the time she returned to the grasshopper’s small stash for a second load, the grasshopper had moved on.

The ant was finding it more difficult to forage. It had grown colder, and she grew worn out and stiff. She had to stop and rest on her route many times and could carry only one small seed at a time. She had lost a leg tumbling away from a hungry lizard, and one of her antennae didn’t stretch as it once had. In the evening, on her way home with a small berry, the air grew suddenly colder than she had ever known it. She forced herself to move more quickly, but she grew more tired and stiff. Just as the clump of violets came into view, she could move no more, and stood at the edge of the path. She could see the grasshopper’s swept back shape under the curving violet leaves.

The grasshopper called to her. “Are you hurt?”

The ant wagged her good antenna. “I am only old, and it is too cold for me to move.”

“I can still move a little,” the grasshopper said. She crept out of her small shelter. The ant climbed onto her body gratefully. The grasshopper staggered back to the violet with her friend on her back. “This will be the last night, I think,” she said.

The ant slid down to rest beside the grasshopper. She waved her good antenna in agreement. “Look! Do you see the white feathers spreading on the grass?”

The grasshopper nodded. “Does your family have enough food to last the winter?”

“All they need and more. Did you lay all of your eggs?”

“They all sleep safe underground until spring.”
“Then we have done well.” The two sat together, silent as old friends, and watched the frost spread on the fallen leaves.

End Notes

This fable has bothered me for a long time, and not just because it casts aspersions on the character of grasshoppers.

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