

Me Against the Ants

by Eric C. Wat

People have told me that homeownership (like marriage or parenthood) ages you. I moved into my new house the summer of 2005. A couple months later, I was at USC doing a workshop for a graduate social work class. It's been a few months since I stepped foot on a college campus full of students. They were wearing tank tops, basketball shorts, tennis skirts, jeans with holes. I felt old in my work clothes: button-down shirt and cords. It's as casual as I'm allowed to be on a weekday. I remember my college days: all the drama then was so laughable now. These young people too have little care in the world. Even their troubles were borrowed, as I passed one table for hurricane relief after another. What do they know about real adult problems?

Like ants.

Yes, when I left my new house, I didn't worry about burglaries, earthquakes, leaking roof, or neighborhood kids sneaking into my backyard and leaving drug paraphernalia in the toolshed. It was ants. I've battled an endless army of them ever since I'd moved in. I could no longer leave foodstuff out, not even bread. Once they bore into a baguette so when I sliced it, a family of them scurried out in eight different directions.

I had some friends over for dinner a couple weeks ago. I left the dirty dishes in the sink, as we took the party to the living room. After they left, the ants decided to have an after-party on my counter. I spent half an hour wiping and killing, but they kept on coming. I gave up and went to sleep. The next morning, they were treading the same trails. From the wall around the sink and disappearing into the crack by the stove, they looked like the 405 during rush hour.

One night I left a glass of lemonade by my bedstand, the ants found their way into my bedroom and decided to take a dip into the pool (and found out they couldn't swim).

Even after I stopped exposing food, there was the problem of dead bugs. The last time we battled, they were out trying to carry a dead spider. I CAN'T CONTROL BUGS DYING IN MY HOUSE. I used to treat scout ants with the mercy of a superior living being. Now I squish them wherever I see them. Kill the messengers! My thumb has seen more death all the Michael Bay movies combined.

tAnts is a problem because, much like love, there is no agreed upon solutions. Everyone has their own advice (also much like love – “you gotta put yourself out there”; “you have to visualize that it's going to happen for you”; “you should try this dating website”; “get a haircut,” etc.). Friends and Internet sites suggest myriad of weapons. I kept score:

Cloves are pretty good, though they take a while to work. The illegal chalk thing from Chinatown is not effective at all...so I was told. Baby powder is amazing, and I'm hoping the hexagonal bait thing does what it promises: sicken the ants and spread the disease around the colony. 409 is pretty good, too, but then I'd be dead, too, if you drown me in that shit. But the most devastating (with apologies to my environmentally conscious friends) is Raid. It even killed a gecko in my basement, and no ants were found trying to carry it away.

After I bought the house, my grandmother had been imagining a different problem for me: money. Actually, she often imagines money problems for other people in the family, like my brother in DC, when he decided to change jobs. This is also who she is. As a single mother with four kids, money has been what she worried about for almost 70 years. Now, in her nineties, she doesn't even have the short-term memory or the physical attributes to be a busybody. So advice about money is the only thing she can offer to us, her only way to feel useful. If there's a cautionary tale about over-independence, my grandmother is it. Some of us have to have a problem that she can fix.

So, in the beginning, every time I visited her, she asked if I was making enough money to pay my mortgage. And each time, I explained to her that I was doing fine. I had even shown her my bank statements from time to time. Then she'd smile, trusting me at least until numbers swirled too fast in her head.

Once when she asked me about money, I told her I was consumed with a problem even more pressing: ants. I explained to her the tenacity of these creatures, overwhelming my arsenal of technology with the sheer strength of their volume.

"That's easy," she said, refusing to obsess over my real problem. "Window cleaner is good for that. It covers the smell of food and ants won't come back." Then she asked me to go online to show her my checking account balance. I did, glad that at least she wasn't dispensing love advice for me.