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Legs in the Dust

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Legs in the Dust

Janie Mckinsley sat on the front step just outside the summer cottage her family had rented for a week's vacation. Behind her, the breeze gently rattled the thin screen door and inside she could hear her mother and older sister clearing dishes from the tiny round table. Her father said the family needed this time away. He said they should get out and breath some real fresh "country air" and escape from the crime and pollution of the city for a while. Janie's mother was always worried about her getting kidnapped on the way to school or when she wanted to walk to the 7-11 a few blocks from their apartment. She warned her about dark alleys and men who offer candy, then try to snatch away little children. As a result, Jane rarely got to go anywhere alone. But today her mother had said after breakfast, "Janie, why don't you go out and look around? Wouldn't you like to explore and see what the country is like?" Surprised at her mother's suggestions of such freedom, Janie lifted perplexed eyes and asked, "But mommy, aren't you afraid I'll get stolen or mugged or sumthin?" Her mother chuckled a little and explained to her that no, this is the country and we're safe out here, we don't have to worry about those kinds of things while were here, and sent her out into the inviting sunlight.

Not quite sure what to do with her new found freedom, Janie sat quietly on the step for sometime, just staring at the dirt below her feet watching a colony of ants climbing in and out of a tiny mountain. She'd never seen so many ants before at one time. She guessed ants probably were afraid to live in the city too and so most of them came to live in the country. She thought the country would be a much safer place for ants, after all, the city has so many feet rushing around and cars speeding by all the time. Janie concluded that if she were an ant, she'd much rather live in the country. She soon grew bored with the ants and so she stood up, stretched and stepped down into the dirt road leading away from the cottage. She cautiously started down the road, still thinking, despite her mother's reassurance, that there may be some danger somewhere. As she continued to walk, she began to relax more, taking in the peaceful scenery surrounding her. The colors were so much more clear and crisp than in the city. She noticed this when she looked at the pristine blue sky, so clear she imagined if she had a straw, she could drink it, slurp it right out of the sky. And the green grass, even the dusty brown of the dirt road under her white tennis shoes, were colors more real than she'd ever seen in the smoggy streets at home. With the morning sun and her curiosity both climbing higher, Janie began to think maybe her mother was right about the country. As she rounded a dusty bend in the path, Janie spotted another little cottage like her own in the distance. Coming closer she could tell there was a young boy squatted on the ground in front. She walked up slowly and the boy lifted his eyes to greet her. Janie was excited to have found someone to play with and thought maybe this boy would know something fun they could do. Janie began to introduce herself, "Hi! My name's Janie Mckinsley, what's yours? I'm from the city and do you want to play a game or somethin?" The boy did not lift his head again, but motioned for Janice to assume a similar

squatting position in the dirt beside him. When she had situated herself next to him he said in almost a whisper. "Would ya keep it down, you'll scare away the spiders." Janie looked down at the bare ground he had been so intently staring at the whole time.

"What spiders?" she inquired back in a hushed voice.

"The spiders I'm huntin for", he answered in an annoyed tone.

"Oh..", she said and then asked, "But I don't see any spiders, where are they?"

"Don't you know anything, that's why I'm huntin for em. Will you please be quiet or we'll never see any!"

Janie obeyed but thought to herself that she'd never heard of anyone hunting spiders before and it seemed kinda silly to be sitting here staring at the ground. She had almost decided to get up and leave and look for someone else to play with when the boy jumped up and moved to another spot. He waved his arms wildly in the air at her, signally her to also move to the new spot. When she did, she saw the boy was proudly pointing at a very long-legged spider, sitting quietly in the dirt.

"It's a Daddy-Long Legger", hne informed her with authority.

Janie had seen spiders before, mostly inside her family's apartment. Her older sister would always scream whenever she saw one. Janie thought her sister would really scream at this spider because it was about the biggest one she'd ever seen before. The ones in the apartment, creeping up her white bedroom walls or stuck to the smooth tiles in the yellow bathroom, were tiny, with short little legs. The spider before her now fascinated her, with its long, slender legs spreading gracefully from its round, black body. Each leg bent at perfect delicate angles and ended thread-like in dainty points. Janie thought the spider was beautiful. She tried to imagine what it would be like if she had so many long, thin legs flowing from her body. She thought she could be the fastest runner in the world, swiftly stretching her legs across the finish line, or be the most graceful dancer, elegantly spinning over the dance floor.

She remembered the ice-skater she watched on T.V. one time and how she spun around so quickly it seemed she had at least a hundred legs circling around he slender twirling body. Janie decided that must be what she'd look like if she had as many legs as this spider.

Janie was lost in her own thoughts as she stared at the spider and had almost forgotten the boy was still squatted beside her. She was brought back to reality by a small grubby hand reaching out towards the spider. She watched, almost thinking she was dreaming, as the boy's fingers carefully grasped one of the spider's fragile legs and proceeded to pluck it off. She stared in curious horror as even after the leg was removed, it continued to twitch in his fingers. She wanted to yell, to tell the boy to stop, but she was paralyzed with fear and couldn't move her eyes off the spider. The maimed body tried to lopsidedly scramble away, but the boy followed it with greedy fingers and tweezed another leg, then another, then other. The spider fell to the ground on one side of its body, legs twitching independently in the dirt around it. Finally, as he took the last limb, the small black dot sat motionless in the dust. Her stomach felt sick as she stared numbly at the tiny raised body sitting like a pebble on the side of the road. She thought the

spider must still be alive except he'd been amputated by the boy's cruel fingers and he couldn't run away. He couldn't even squirm with the pain he must be feeling, he couldn't move at all. She tried to imagine what it would feel like to have someone rip off all her arms and legs and leave her to lie in the road by herself. She wanted to do something to help the spider, but when the boy stood up, standing victoriously over the spider and said "Come on, let's go hunt some more!", all she could do was glance once more at the black bump and run the other direction back towards her own cottage.

That evening, her mother asked if she enjoyed her day in the country. She kept her head down looking at her plate full of uneaten, now cold, tuna casserole and attempted to nod in response to her mother's question.

"Aren't you hungry Janie? I thought you'd be famished after a day in the clean fresh air! Didn't you have fun today dear?"

"Yes mommy, it was fun," she said trying to sound convincing.

"That's nice dear. Now didn't I tell you how great the country is!"

Janie asked to be excused from the dinner table before she finished her food and then went to bed early. That night she dreamed she was running a race. She was winning, just ahead of everyone else. Her legs were sprinting lightly over the track and she could see the finish line ahead. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, something pushed her over, knocking her to the side of the track. She tried to get back up, but her legs wouldn't move. She couldn't move anywhere and she just lay there looking up as all the other legs and feet passed her by without stopping.

The next morning, Janie woke up early before the rest of her family. She climbed out of bed and walked to the screen door. Opening it with a slight creak, she stepped barefoot onto the chilly cement step. Everything around her was still and quiet, waiting for the sun to peek over the horizon, except for the colony of ants that were already busily attending to their work. She watched the ants for a while, as they were marching back and forth across the dirt. She saw one of the ants straying away in the direction she'd traveled the day before. Just then Janie wondered if maybe she should take some of these ants home with her, when she went back to the city.

- Alison Stevens '95