

## Ant Colony

by Alissa Nutting

When space on earth became very limited, it was declared all people had to host another organism on or inside of their bodies. Many people chose something noninvasive, such as barnacles or wig-voles. Some women had breast operations that allowed them to accommodate small aquatic life within implants. But because I was already perfectly-breasted (and, admittedly, vain) I sought out a doctor who, for several thousands of dollars, drilled holes into my bones to make room for an ant colony.

After being turned down by every surgeon in the book, I finally found my doctor. Actually he's a dentist. I had to lead him on in order to get what I wanted—he only agreed to the procedure because he is in love with me.

“I have all your movies,” the doctor told me during our first consultation. “I think you're the most perfect woman in the world.”

Since this had never been attempted, I was a study trial. My participation in this experiment had a lot of parallels to modeling, which I used to do before commercial acting. Once a month I went into a laboratory and removed all my clothing. This latter step probably wasn't necessary, but I did it because I was grateful, and also because it was interesting to feel someone looking at my outsides and my insides at the same time. When I laid down onto an imaging machine and certain buttons were pushed, the doctor could see all the ants moving around in my body, using their mandibles to pick up what he said were synthetic calcium deposits. The ants were first implanted within my spine, where their food supply was injected monthly, but then they quickly moved throughout the other various pathways that had been drilled into my limbs and even my skull.

The ants' mandibles were the only part of them that disgusted me; they reminded me of the headgear I'd had to wear with my braces in grades six through eight. I'd refused to wear it to school or even walk around the house when I had it on. Instead I wore it two hours each night before bed, and I spent this time reading fashion magazines in my closet. I wouldn't allow anyone, even my mother, to see me. She used to stand at the door and beg for a kiss goodnight. This was of course before the cancer—she had already been dead for several years by the time the organism hosting movement started. When she began dying I didn't want to watch on; I usually grew angry when she'd ask me to come see her in the hospital. The cancer overtook her body until she looked parasitic herself. Near the end, if I felt her lips on my cheek while I was hugging her I'd pull away—I knew it was ridiculous, but I was afraid she was somehow going to suck out my beauty.

“Can you feel them inside you?” As he watched the scan from an outside control room, the doctor's would whisper into a microphone that I could hear through a headset earpiece. His voice sounded sweaty. “Does it seem like your blood is crawling? Does it tickle? Are you ticklish?” He'd ask me questions the entire time, but even if I were to answer, there was no way for him to hear my response.

In truth I didn't feel a thing; it was hard to believe they were even there. On my first follow-up visit I made the doctor show me footage of myself in the large ant-imaging machine to prove they were actually inside me. But after awhile I got used to the thought of their presence and even started speaking to them throughout the day. The doctor said this was healthy.

“It's not uncommon to feel a shift of identity,” he assured me. “It's okay to talk to your organism, and to feel like it understands you. After all, it's a part of your self. We could talk about this more over dinner?”

But I never actually crossed the line into dating. Then one day I received a frantic call.

“Come in immediately. Where are you right now?”

At the moment, I was in the middle of shooting a commercial for a water company.

“Leave the minute you hang up the phone. What we have to discuss is far more important.”

I was very used to people feeling like they were more important than me, but less beautiful. I often felt that every transaction in my life somehow revolved around this premise.

“Refreshing,” I said. It was my only line in the commercial, and I’d been practicing all day.

I can tell you this: I did love how invisible the ants were. They were creatures that seemed to consider themselves neither important nor beautiful. Earlier that month, the doctor had given me a videotape of several ants feasting on the corpse of ant that had died in my femur. This cannibalism was an aberration, he’d pointed out: ants do not normally eat other ants from their own colony. The doctor had worked with an entomologist to specifically breed a contained bone-ant species that would eat the dead, lay the eggs in the dead, and make the dead a part of the living.

Defying these orders, I finished the refreshing water shoot. When I finally arrived at the doctor’s he was very upset—he’d cancelled everything and had been waiting in his office, which is covered with wall-to-wall pictures of me, for hours.

“Your left wrist.”

I slipped off my glove and held it out to him in a vulnerable way. My wrist was smooth and fragrant and pale and had a nicotine patch on it; the doctor had suggested I quit

smoking for the health of the ants. I squeezed my eyes to look beneath my skin for them. “It’s like they’re not even there,” I muttered.

“Grip my fingers,” he said, holding two of his own upon my pulse. It was a little difficult to do.

“God,” he said. Even though his voice sounded worried, he seemed a little pleased. “Goodness.”

He ran out of the room, face flushed. And there I sat alone, or not alone truly.

“We seem to be in crisis,” I muttered to them, and put my glove back on.

Since the ants, I have started gloving my arms. I buy the longest gloves I can find. It feels like putting the ants to bed, the way one might place a blanket over the cage of a bird.

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“We are all certain this can be resolved.” Around the table sat several new doctors I’d never met, or maybe they were dentists. I spotted a magazine that I was in—mascara ad, page seven—lying on an end table in the conference room. Somehow this made me feel safer, more of a majority. There were two of me in the room and only one of everybody else.

My doctor passed me a glossy picture: its subject was a fat, excreting ant. The ant was surrounded by small piles of powder that, when magnified, almost looked like crumbs of bread. I gagged a bit. “Why are you showing me this?”

“This is their queen,” he said. The doctor’s pupils had dilated to a width universally associated with insanity. “She wants you gone.” His fingertip moved from pile to pile on the glossy photo, leaving a print upon each one. “These are piles of your bone. You are being devoured by the ants that live inside you.”

“Eaten from within.” A dull woman at the very end of the table repeated this in a parrot-like manner. She wore a large dome cap, the obvious fashion of one hosting an

organism on her head. Hers appeared tall and slightly conical; I was very interested in what type of creature it might be, but it is considered rude to ask about other peoples' organisms—they are ultimately too much of a bodily function.

“But we feed the ants so they don't have to eat me. I come here once a month so you can put their food inside.”

An authoritarian doctor whispered something to my doctor, who whispered to me. “They're not eating it anymore.”

I whispered back to him. “Can we start feeding them something more enticing? A different bone-substitute? Ground bones from animals? Or maybe even the dead?” I knew it was a tasteless suggestion, but I did have money and my life was apparently in danger. The authoritarian doctor scooted back in his rolling-chair and looked at his shoes.

“No,” my doctor said, and then he stood. His hands lifted slightly above his head. “This is not about consumption. It is an act of interspecies war!”

In the following weeks, my strength and health deteriorated until I was finally admitted to a very special hospital ward. It was a room my doctor had built onto his existing home just for me.

Around this time, the doctor also started wearing a large sack around his waist—to conceal his organism, I assumed, whatever it might be. It must've grown larger since when I'd first met him. I was grateful my organism wasn't making me wear a sack around my waist, even if it was eating me alive. The sack made a swish noise when he walked; in motion the doctor sounded like a giant broom.

This swishing became more and more of a comfort as I gradually lost my vision. The doctor reminded me that when one door closes another opens, and this was true; I did seem to be gaining a sort of ant-sight. My ears began to turn away from human sounds as well, but

soon I could pick up more ant noises. Around the third week I requested that my room's television be taken away. When my eyes were closed I could see various dark caves and swarming ant-limbs, and these images gradually started to feel preferential to anything I might view of the outer world.

"I'm becoming them," I said one night when I heard my doctor swish in. "I'm becoming the ants."

I heard him pull up a chair and sit down next to me. "It is wonderful, isn't it? My swan, my pet?"

He hadn't called me those things before, but I was in no condition to disagree. My arms and legs could no longer move—I could only move through the ants. It was like having hundreds of different hands. I could make them go anywhere and do anything inside my body; I'd even started eating with them. Though I didn't necessarily want to devour my own bone, I had an insatiable hunger, and there was a commanding voice, *Eat, Walk, Lift, Chomp*, it was my own voice but much deeper, not exactly masculine but echoing and confident, like my home was a large cave and I firmly believed in everything I said. I seemed able to express only one word at a time, but this felt more liberating than restrictive—suddenly every word could be a full representation of myself.

I lost all track of time. Eventually I was certain of only two things: the appetite was getting out of control, and my old eyes were completely gone.

"The rest of the world thinks that you've died," the doctor told me. As he swished into the room, there was the sound of yards and yards of material being unwrapped and lifted. His words seemed round with satisfaction. "You cannot see it, but I have just unveiled the portal."

I would've answered him, but I was no longer sure if my voice still made a sound or if words even came out when I felt like I was talking.

“It is right here on my waist; I've been making paths inside of me just as there are paths inside of you. After you first came to see me, I reported to the government that I, too, hold ants inside my body, but I don't. Not yet. It is your ants I'm after. You have now become the ants who have fed on you; your consciousness is united with theirs. And when you all crawl inside of me, we will all be one forever.” As his voice continued I could feel the ants rallying, see their legs beginning kick with heightened motion. “I never actually fed the ants you've become; I simply allowed them to eat you whole. But you will not eat me. I will feed you properly so that you don't. We will share my stomach—I've inserted a tube whereby everything I swallow will also be accessible to your minions, your thousands of minions that are now you entirely and do your bidding. I have always loved you, and when you came to my office, I knew this was my chance to make you mine.”

And then I smelled something irresistible and began to crawl towards it, into the new pink-grey cave that must be the doctor. If what he said was true, in a primary way I was somewhat grateful to get inside of him—if I was now just thousands of swarming ants I did not wish to be in the public eye.

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Once we had transferred, I was pleased to realize that I could see through the doctor's eyes as well as those of my ants. It is calming, to look through the eyes of another person. It stills your own thoughts almost to a halt.

“Do you love me?”

The doctor likes to ask this; he does so almost every hour. Although I cannot speak, he always smiles afterwards and says that he loves me too.

Throughout the day I have all types of sensations. Some are good, others worry me, but my fears can't grow so big that they reach outside of his body. Nothing can move beyond this body, so in a way I feel like I am the world, and he is the world, the same way that lovers feel. "How strange," I often think, though I try not to let him hear me thinking it, "to have so much in common with an unattractive man."

And then there is the evening, when sunlight pours into the window like nectar. He sits down to the dinner table in front of a large mirror—I think so that I can see him, though maybe he has figured out a way to see me. Then he carefully opens the bag of sugar with a knife. When I hear this sound, each of my ants jump and he smiles, his legs and arms contract whether he likes it or not. And though they are his own, I feel as if I guide his fingertips, that the tiniest of my workers go down into the marrow of his thumb and help to grip the teaspoon.

I love watching him eat. Teaspoon after teaspoon disappears into his mouth; his saliva coats the spoon's surface with stuck granules that change its color from silver to a crusty white. I cannot decide if he did me a favor or if I'm a victim. When I try to think, all I can feel is the sugar fluid, and a rage that comes when I find myself, after our feedings, somewhat hungry.