

I HAVE STOPPED TALKING ABOUT THE ANTS

i have stopped talking about the ants. for a while there, ants were all i'd bring up in conversation, and i think it was getting on people's nerves. i thought i had good reason for talking about them though. it seemed like they were everywhere, in everything. i even had a dream in which i was driving a black car that was shaped like an ant. it was very racy and efficient, i remember, and i was very pleased with its overall performance. but i don't talk about them anymore, nor do i encounter them in dreams these nights. i have moved on to talking about my older sister's drinking habits. this has proven to be even less acceptable, i found, than talking about the ants. but, should i really worry about how my concerns are received? and yes, i honestly worry about my older sister. i used to worry about my younger sister, because she is so ridiculously oversexed, but with her, age is starting to work its discouraging magic, and i don't worry about her too much anymore. neither sister knows i have been consumed with worry about them, since they live in different parts of the country, and we speak together only infrequently. and they do not know that recently i had gone through this period of tormenting others with my talk about ants. you might say that they had been spared, thanks to the fact that i don't like to get overly involved when on the phone. i do remind my older sister, every so often, to check the color of her tongue, that if it starts to take on a fuzzy yellow color, then she just might be seriously playing around with causing herself some bodily harm. of course, advice from me is forever taken lightly, by no matter whom it is i have chosen to make a little wiser. i'm afraid i am looked upon more as a target for advice, rather than a proper dispenser of it. over the years i have tried to shrink this image of me being a target, but to date i have had almost no success. it started to stick to me during my childhood, long before i knew what was happening. i remember an uncle, one i was hardly familiar with, on a hot summer day, while i was feeding bread to the fishes from the dock, giving me advice about women. even i knew that i was far too young a target for advice about women, but he was determined, and i showed my respect by listening attentively, all the while pulling tiny balls of bread from the loaves, throwing them to the fishes.

i think i realized then what one of my roles in life would be: a helpless, quiet target for advice. and like then, ultimately i calmly accept it now. not long ago someone advised me to buy ant traps, and i did.

OUR TOWN

the house on the corner was old, and every morning when i walked by, on my way to work, i'd see a woman sitting in the window with a chicken in her arms. this woman had unruly red hair, as though in all her life she had never combed it. the chicken was remarkably calm in her arms; rarely did it ever move. at first i thought the chicken was dead, stuffed, but then one day i saw its head twitch and i knew it wasn't dead but very much alive. i remember telling my wife that the chicken was indeed alive, only she had trouble believing this like everyone else, and she told me that it would be all but impossible to hold a live chicken that long without it stirring up a fuss and trying to get loose. also we all knew that the woman's family was extremely poor, and that if the chicken was alive then it was very strange it wasn't looked upon as food. and besides that, the country was at war again, being very prone to throwing itself into battle at the slightest provocation, and most of the chickens had been slaughtered already and canned and sent to the front. the idea that this woman in the old house on the corner might be sitting in the window with a real live chicken in her arms was unthinkable, if not treasonous. walking past her window i'd purposely whistle some sharp tune, in an attempt to make the chicken move. at this i was successful only once, and when i was the woman looked at me with disgust almost, as though i had been fresh and had whistled at her. rumor had it that there was a plot in the works to kill this woman, so that the chicken could be removed from her arms and prepared to be consumed by the boys in our brave troops. nothing like this came to fruition though, and the years went by and the woman and the chicken continued to remain as fixtures in the town, a town which could never get over its confusion and irritation concerning this. then one morning the woman appeared in the window alone, without the chicken, and the town, well, it just simmered with juicy speculation. no one dared ask the woman though, as she sat there, serene, like a portrait of a member of the royal family. we were, every one of us, intimidated by her, even as there was suspicion that she had been party to the eating of the bird. then shortly after this she started sitting in