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MASTERPIECE



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illustrated by Kelly Murphy



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*"Nobody sees a flower really; it is so small.
We haven't time, and to see takes time—
like to have a friend takes time."
—Georgia O'Keeffe*



MASTERPIECE 



A Family Emergency

Home, for Marvin's family, was a damp corner of the cupboard beneath the kitchen sink. Here, a leaking pipe had softened the plaster and caused it to crumble away. Just behind the wall, Marvin's family had hollowed out three spacious rooms, and, as his parents often remarked, it was a perfect location. It was warm, because of the hot-water pipes embedded in the wall; moist, to make burrowing easy; and dark and musty, like all the other homes the family had lived in. Best of all, the white plastic wastebasket that loomed on one side offered a constant litter of apple cores, bread crumbs, onion skins, and candy wrappers, making the cupboard an ideal foraging ground.

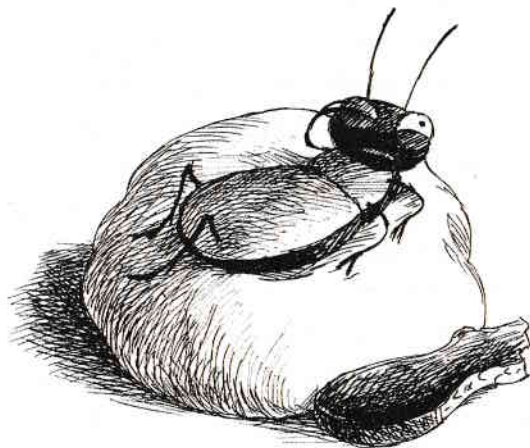
Marvin and his relatives were beetles. They had shiny black shells, six legs, and excellent night vision. They were medium-sized, as beetles go, not much bigger than a raisin. But they were very agile: good at climbing walls, scurrying across countertops, and slipping

under closed doors. They lived in the large apartment of a human family, the Pompadays, in New York City.

One morning, Marvin awoke to find the household in an uproar. Usually the first sounds of the day were the gentle rustlings of his parents in the next room and, in the distance, the clank of pots in the Pompaday kitchen sink. But today he heard the frantic clicking of Mrs. Pompaday's high heels, and her voice, anxious and shrill. Just as he was beginning to wonder what had happened, his mother came looking for him in a great hurry.

"Marvin!" she cried. "Come quickly, darling! We have an emergency."

Marvin crawled out of the soft cotton ball that was his bed and, still only half-awake, followed her into the living room. There, his father, his uncle Albert, and his cousin Elaine were deep in conversation. Elaine ran to him and grabbed one of his legs.



"Mrs. Pompaday has lost her contact lens! Down the bathroom sink! And since you're the only one who knows how to swim, we need *you* to fish it out!"

Marvin drew back in surprise, but his cousin continued happily. "Oh! What if you drown?"

Marvin was not nearly as thrilled at this prospect as Elaine. "I won't drown," he said firmly. "I'm a good swimmer."

He'd practiced swimming for almost a month now, in an old juice bottle cap filled with water. He was the only member of his entire family who could swim, a skill his parents both marveled at and took credit for.

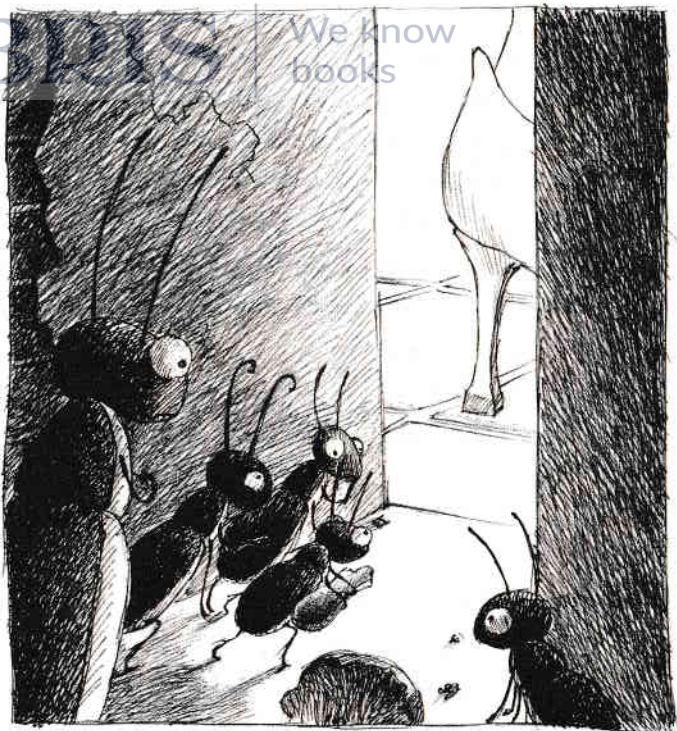
"Marvin has exceptional coordination, such fine control over his legs," Mama often remarked. "It reminds me of my days in the ballet."

"When he sets his mind to something, there's no stopping him," Papa would add smugly. "He's a chip off the old block."

But right now, these words were little comfort to Marvin. Swimming in a bottle cap was one thing—it was half an inch deep. Swimming inside a drainpipe was something else altogether. He paced the room nervously.

Mama was talking to Uncle Albert, looking mad. "Well, I should think not!" she exclaimed. "He's just a child. I say let the Pompadays call a plumber."

Papa shook his head. "It's too risky. If a plumber goes poking around in there, he'll see that the wall is rotting away. He'll say they need to replace it, and that'll be the end of Albert and Edith's home."



Uncle Albert nodded vigorously and beckoned to Marvin. "Marvin, my boy, what do you say? You'll have to go down the bathroom pipe and find that contact lens. Think you can handle it?"

Marvin hesitated. Mama and Papa were still arguing. Now Papa looked at him unhappily. "I'd go myself, son—you know I would—if I could swim."

"No one can swim like Marvin," Elaine declared. "But even Marvin may not be able to swim well enough. There's probably a lot of water in that pipe by now. Who knows how far down he'll have to go?" She paused dramatically.

"Maybe he'll never make it back up to the surface."

"Hush, Elaine," said Uncle Albert.

Marvin grabbed the fragment of peanut shell that he used as a float when he swam in his own pool at home. He took a deep breath.

"I can try, at least," he said to his parents. "I'll be careful."

"Then I'm going with you," Mama decided, "to make sure you aren't foolhardy. And if it looks the least bit dangerous, we won't risk it."

And so they set off for the Pompadays' bathroom, with Uncle Albert leading the way. Marvin followed close behind his mother, the peanut shell tucked awkwardly under one of his legs.

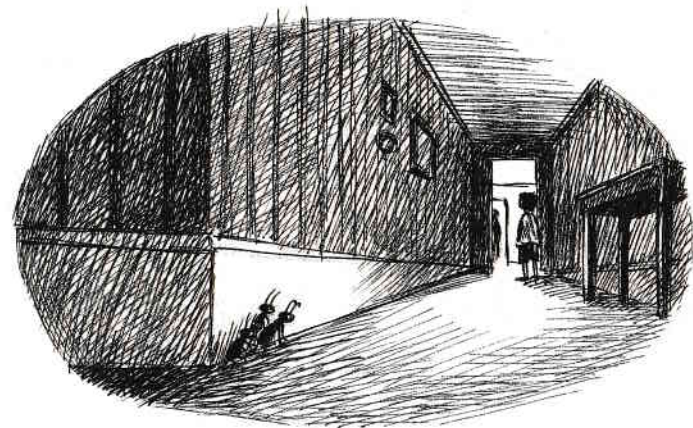


Down the Drain

It took them a fair bit of time to reach the bathroom. First they had to crawl out of the cupboard into the bright morning light of the Pompadays' kitchen. There, baby William was banging on his high chair with a spoon, scattering Cheerios all over the floor. Ordinarily, the beetles might have waited in the shadows to snatch one and carry it off for lunch, but today there were more important tasks ahead. They scuttled along the skirting-board to the living room, and then began the exhausting journey over the Oriental rug, which at least was dark blue, so they didn't have to worry about being seen.

All the way to the bathroom, Marvin could hear Mr. and Mrs. Pompaday yelling at each other.

"I don't understand why you can't just take the pipe apart and find it," Mrs. Pompaday complained. "That's what Karl would have done." Karl was Mrs. Pompaday's first husband.



"You take the pipe apart and find it. And flood the bathroom. Then we'll have to replace more than your contact lens," Mr. Pompaday fumed. He stomped to the phone. "I'm calling a plumber."

"Oh, fine," said Mrs. Pompaday. "He'll take all day to get here. I have to leave for work in twenty minutes, and I won't be able to find my way to the door without my contact lenses."

James, Mrs. Pompaday's son from her first marriage, stood in the doorway. He was ten years old, a thin boy with big feet, serious gray eyes, and a scattering of freckles across his cheeks. He would be eleven tomorrow, and Marvin and his family had been trying to think of something nice to do for his birthday, since they infinitely preferred him to the rest of the Pompaday family. He was quiet and reasonable, unlikely to make sudden movements or raise his voice.

Seeing him now, Marvin remembered how James had

caught sight of him once, a few weeks ago, when Marvin was dragging home an M&M he'd found for the family dessert. Marvin had been so excited about his good luck that he'd forgotten to stay close to the skirting-board. There he was, out in the open sea of cream-colored tile in the kitchen, when James's blue sneaker stopped alongside him. Marvin panicked, dropped the M&M, and ran for his life. But James only crouched down and watched him, never saying a word.

Marvin hadn't told his parents about that particular close call. He'd vowed to himself that he'd be more careful in the future.

Now James shifted thoughtfully on those same blue sneakers. "You could wear your glasses, Mom," he said.

"Oh, fine," said Mrs. Pompaday. "Wear my glasses. Fine. I guess it doesn't matter what I look like when I meet clients. Maybe I should just go to work in my bathrobe."

By this time, Uncle Albert, Marvin, and his mother had reached the door of the bedroom, and the bathroom lay just beyond. Unfortunately, the three humans were effectively blocking the route. Three jittery pairs of feet—one in sneakers, one in high heels, and one in loafers—made it hard to find a safe path.

"Stay close to me," Mama told Marvin. She hurried along the door frame. Dodging the spikes of Mrs. Pompaday's heels, Marvin and Uncle Albert followed.

They made it up the bathroom wall to the sink without mishap. Normally, the light tile would have made them easy targets for a rolled-up newspaper or the bottom of

a slipper. But the Pompadays were so engrossed in their argument that they didn't notice three shiny black beetles scrambling onto the sink.

"I'll keep a lookout," Uncle Albert said. "You two go ahead."

Marvin and his mother tumbled and slid down the smooth side of the sink to the drain. They ducked under the silver stopper and stood on the edge of the open pipe, staring into blackness.

Marvin could hear a distant trickling sound. As his eyes adjusted, he saw water, murky and uninviting, a few inches below. He thought of Cousin Elaine's grim prediction and shuddered. Why hadn't his mother taken a firmer stand against this?

"Well . . . here I go," he said to Mama, who promptly grabbed his leg and held fast.

"Now don't do anything rash, darling," she told him. "Go slowly, and come right back to me if it seems dangerous."

"Okay," Marvin promised. He clutched his peanut-shell float and took a deep breath. Then he launched himself into the void.

He barely remembered to shut his eyes before the cold water closed over his head. Pedaling his legs frantically, he came bobbing back up to the surface. The cloudy water tasted vaguely of toothpaste. It smelled horrible.

"Marvin? Marvin, are you all right?" Mama's voice echoed thinly in the pipe.