

The Jump to Man

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by

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When I tried telling the colony about our past they only looked up and blinked, half sucking and half listening, and I could tell some thought my words propaganda. It's the reason I have to write it down. Nobody cares about fleas.

Before we had names, before we even had families, Quine and I met on the Labrador's head. We were crouched in the soft folds between her ears, and we started to talk. Quine might have been my brother—my mother laid an enormous number of eggs—but mostly he was my friend. We'd hop around together, Quine and I, up the Labrador's tail and along her back, stopping here and there to suck. We'd make it to the crown of her head before the professor began his lectures, keeping still so she wouldn't scratch or shake. She was an aging dog with watery blood and a ponderous walk. She'd put her chin on the ground as if listening too and we'd learn about philosophy.

We covered Hume and Kant and Berkeley, the big doubters, the titans of skepticism. They were outsized heroes of thought, men with grand ideas simple enough

for fleas. When the professor spoke of them his voice shook and the Lab whimpered. “Take an object like this,” he said during a lecture, holding a magnifying glass high in the air. “If I let it go, how do you *know* it will fall to the ground?”

“Gravity,” a student suggested.

“That’s a *term* you’ve learned. What about before, when you were a child?”

The student shifted in his seat. “I guess...I saw things fall?”

“Observation is central to our beliefs. But haven’t you ever spotted a friend in the distance—only to realize it’s a stranger? Eyes are fallible. Now, if I let go of this magnifying glass, you *expect* it to hit the ground, but it’s a far cry from *knowing* it will. That difference constitutes—”

The professor had never dropped anything during his lectures. It was probably an accident—and when the magnifying glass shattered, Quine and I dodged the fragments. The dog shook herself, and we dug into her coat.

The next morning, we scavenged the bits of glass and fastened them to our heads with the Lab’s hair. The world opened up. It wasn’t just *our* world of skin and eggs and blood, it was the world of humans. We saw the professor’s fleshy cheeks. We looked out the window at the sunlight and the trees, the parts of nature we’d sensed with our antennae but could never see. Best of all, we started to read. At night while the Lab slept, Quine and I hopped across the books lying open in the professor’s library. We taught ourselves math and science and history. We discussed the nature of fleas and honored each other with names. By the time the professor had moved to ethics, we were reading the assignments along with his students.

It was ethics that ended our friendship. “Hempel,” Quine asked me one day, “why are you making eyeglasses for the others?”

“So they can read. So they might see the trees.”

“We might live a year at most,” he said, his eyes getting huge. “Let’s get fat on blood!”

“Didn’t you read that Rousseau today? We have to build a better colony. If we don’t, then we’ll always be—”

“We don’t owe anyone! When I was born, I had to learn everything for myself. You did too! Now that we have eyeglasses, we can hop to younger dogs with more blood. There will be fatter females...and we can reap the rewards of our intelligence!”

I shook my head and wiggled my antennae. “Haven’t you seen the way our weakest members die, Quine? We can reduce hunger in our colony. Then fleas don’t have to fight each other for blood.”

“A starry-eyed dreamer! A real Candide! You want the strongest to pay for misguided altruism? Not me. After all, Hempel—might makes right.”

“Plato disproved that! You must not have read the whole dialogue!”

The sight of Quine grinning on top of the Lab’s eyelid, his mouth dripping with blood, made me sick. I hopped away to distribute the eyeglasses I’d made. I didn’t feel like sucking any longer because I’d lost my best friend. After a few days, I’d also lost a great deal of strength. Then the Lab died at the vet’s, and I was nearly too weak to hop off.

Quine led half our colony to a female Rottweiler getting her paw stitched. The others waited for me. I didn't know what to do, but I didn't want to go with Quine. I stayed on the Lab's corpse right until she was bagged. In the alley behind the vet's, a pug was eating from a dumpster and I led the jump.

Our new colony had a difficult time on the pug. The strongest had followed Quine, and the rest of us struggled to survive. The days and nights were cold. There wasn't enough blood, and the skin was covered with open wounds of poisonous fluids. Since the pug was a dog of the streets, we suffered constant noise. There were fewer places to stop sucking and rest, fewer places to talk. Many died of exposure because the dog had little hair.

"Hempel!" everyone cried, "save us! We followed you because you gave us eyeglasses. But seeing the world doesn't help now. Think of something—or we'll die!"

These events I recall with great sadness. Hundreds of eggs went unhatched. Larvae and pupae perished. Grown fleas were dying of starvation until a single idea saved us. It came to me on the pug's underbelly. "Families," I told the colony. They were hopping wildly, frantic with fear. They were sucking on patches of dead skin. "Everyone must form families. Each male, stay with one female. Protect her from harm, keep her fed. Find blood anywhere you can and bring it back in your mouths. Females: if your males don't return, stay with your eggs until they're hatched before hopping around."

They started off in twos. The ones with eyeglasses were hopping in front of the others and I kept shouting until they stopped. "Wait! This last part is important. If your

family has enough blood to survive for a few days, give the rest to those who need it most.”

The colony began to rebuild. Everyone shared blood and hair and eyeglasses. And all on their own, families gave themselves names.

Most members of our colony lived in the pug’s loins, where it was warm. I stayed in the neck to safeguard the blood supply, so I spotted the beagle first. Something had attacked her. She was in the alley, dragging her hind legs.

Our pug went to her. He licked her open wounds and put his nose against her face until she stopped whimpering. He kept her warm until the end came. Some of the beagle’s fleas hopped over as she died. They were shivering and scared and looking for hair to crouch in.

“Go away!” Worm told them. He was a short-tempered flea, but he was still a friend. “Get off this pug—right now!”

“Worm,” I said, “what’s come over you? Can’t you see they’re starving?”

He twitched his antennae at me. “I’m not *blind*. But have you forgotten how close we came to death, Hempel? Do you want to endanger our families by giving away what little blood we have?”

I told him to wait while I talked to the beagle’s fleas. I didn’t know what I was going to say because Worm was probably right. “We’ve been through difficult times recently,” I began. “You might think of somewhere else...”

“Please,” a young female said. She looked like she’d once been fat. She tried to stand and fell to her knees. “It was awful, what happened. We were just sucking that beagle and minding our own business. Then...” She looked up at me, and her face went pale as she collapsed on a patch of dead skin.

“Those things tied to your head.”

A little male with red eyes stretched his antennae toward me. I could see he meant business. “Yes?”

“How did you get them?”

“They’re eyeglasses. Would you like to try—”

“Our beagle was drinking from a puddle when that Rottweiler pounced. While he was taking our dog apart, this monstrous flea appeared. He was enormous—the size of a fly. Five of his males, all coated with armor made of hair, carried him out on a human toenail. *He* had eyeglasses too.”

“Quine.”

“You know him.”

“I used to.”

“A brute, this flea. He said we were weak and only fit to be destroyed. He was the flea with the most strength, he said, so his colony had a right to do anything it wanted. They killed our injured. They ate our babies. They took our fattest women. Then they hopped back to the Rottweiler and left us on the beagle to die.”

Worm hopped over to us. “Enough talk,” he told them. “Now go.”

The red-faced flea squinted at me. “You’re the same as Quine,” he said.

“Maybe we’re simply meant to die,” the female said. She started to cry.

To this day, I believe a greater power guided my movements. I leaned down and filled the female’s mouth with blood. “Have strength,” I whispered. “Agree with what I say.” Then I stood up and raised my voice. “I can’t let these fleas die,” I announced to Worm. “They’re my family now.”

“What? How?”

“I just copulated with this one.”

“Just now?”

“Yes. So these others...” I hopped around, touching my antennae to theirs. “These are my in-laws.”

“All of them?”

“They’re probably related, Worm. The beagle’s colony didn’t have families. They were like us, until recently. Remember?” Worm was furious, but he knew he couldn’t argue against the sanctity of families. “Follow me to the neck!” I told the beagle’s fleas. The female was weak, so I carried her.

“I’m not yet strong enough to lay eggs,” she whispered.

I almost hopped straight into the pug’s ear. My blood started rushing in all directions and I couldn’t think. “But...I only said that to stop Worm from sending you away.”

“I’ll lay eggs *eventually*, of course. After we suck at the neck.”

My knees wobbled as I hopped. I hadn’t yet been with a female. I’d been too busy reading and making eyeglasses. But as we reached the soft underside of the pug’s chin,

and as her family gathered around, sucking gratefully, I realized it was time to follow my own rules. I had to choose a female.

It was night by the time her family finally stopped sucking and went to sleep. When she hopped over, she was a white blur. "I'm ready," she said. She crouched.

"Wait," I told her, "it's happening too quickly. Can't we talk?"

"We might die soon."

"But...are you strong enough? Do you really think you can lay eggs?"

"I think so, Hempel. Come on."

She was still a blur. My blood was rushing everywhere, and why? Why couldn't I see? "It's no use," I said, slumping to the skin, "I'll never be able to have my own family." Then she reached back and took off my eyeglasses. There she was in my antennae, plump and beautiful, digging her claws into my copulatory apparatus. "Dawn," I said, after I'd finished and the sun was coming up. "I'll call you Dawn."

She wrapped all her legs around mine to keep warm. For the first time since I was a baby in a cocoon, I slept for hours. We might have slept longer if all the water hadn't woken us.

It was a torrent. It seemed to last forever. We dug into the pug's skin and held on as if the world might end. Then everything was quiet and clean. Dawn smiled. "What was that?"

I put on my eyeglasses. The pug had made it into someone's house. A girl was bending over his head with a towel, and as she came closer she looked straight at me. "I think this dog has fleas," she said.

"Well? What did you *think*?" A man with gray hair bent over to look at me too. "You brought this thing off the street. Soap doesn't get rid of a dog's fleas, it just cleans bacteria off the skin. You need a special powder."

"Will you get some on your way home from work?"

The man sighed. "He's an ugly mutt."

She put her arms around the man and buried her face in his chest. "Please, Dad? To me, he's pretty."

When the man smiled, I felt better about humans. I'd never seen such a look, not from the professor, not from any of his students, not even from the vet. "All right," he said. It was straight out of Rousseau. It was love.

Then the girl came at us with the towel. The pug started to squirm, and it took everything we had to hang on. When she'd finished scrubbing, the dog lay on the carpet and stared out the window.

"I need to restore order," I told Dawn, hearing the screams. The water and the towel had killed many eggs. But many members of the colony were helping without being asked. A flea named Spider was hopping all over the body, drying off larvae and pupae with a bit of carpet. Worm was distributing mouthfuls of blood to families too injured to hop. When I came back, Dawn was on her side, her legs twitching. I gave her some blood, but she spat it out.

“Are you hurt?”

She smiled a little. “Not exactly, Hempel. But tomorrow...”

I’d forgotten about the dangers involved in laying eggs. “I don’t know what I’ll do,” I said, sinking to the pug’s skin, “if...”

Dawn touched her antennae to my face. “Be strong. This colony needs you.”

“What can I do to help?”

“I need it to be dark, Hempel. And warmer.”

I hopped up to the tip of the pug’s nose and looked out the window with him. There might have been trees, but I could only see the tears streaming down my eyeglasses. How could it be, I wondered, that so quickly after we learn to live, we die?

I was feeling sorry for myself. Dawn was suffering, not me. It was she who had to lay eggs, she who might die after creating our babies. It was no time for philosophy. I dried my eyeglasses and started hopping down the pug’s cheek when I heard the door to the house open.

“Don’t let him out!” the girl screamed.

The man with the gray hair lunged, but our pug ran through his arms and out the door. I hung on to the whiskers and hoped Dawn was hanging on too.

The pug lifted his leg a moment and kept running. The man wasn’t chasing our dog any longer. But as I clung to his whiskers I could tell something inside the pug still wanted to be free. He’d been bathed. He’d had a warm house and a girl caring for him. But he belonged on the streets. He passed houses without even glancing at the dogs in their

fenced-in yards—barking, it seemed, in a sort of celebration of his escape. Then our pug turned a corner. He sprinted under the traffic light as if he'd planned the journey in his head.

I saw the truck before he did. It wasn't as if I could warn him. There was a screeching of brakes, and he was knocked in the air. A horrible sound came out of the pug's body when he hit the ground. It was his breath, slowly escaping. Then the whole colony started screaming.

I hopped off the dog and tried to assess his condition. The truck had kept going, our pug was leaking blood, and all around, scattered like dust on the pavement, lay pupae and eggs. If only he'd stayed indoors, I thought, if only that man hadn't been so slow. Then again, that girl had her sights on us with that towel and powder. Were fleas ever safe?

I was feeling sorry for myself again. I'd forgotten about Dawn. Hopping back, I started looking for her. Near the pug's hip, a swarm had gathered on a pool of blood. I expected it from the flies, but there were also members of our own colony, sucking and slurping and generally embarrassing themselves.

“Stop!” I shouted. “Take blood back to your families. Help the injured on the road...” A few of them started carrying mouthfuls and helping where they could. Others kept sucking on the wound. There wasn't anything I could do to stop them.

I thought all was lost. Our colony was stranded under a traffic light, gobbling a dead animal. Then, as if given a second life, the pug rose. “Jump back!” I called to the fleas on the road. “He's alive!” Some landed on his paws as he limped away. I can still

hear the voices of those who didn't make it. They kept hopping after us in the road, their screams growing fainter.

The pug neared the alley. He lurched along with a labored wheeze. It seemed nothing would stop him. A mangy poodle poked her head around the dumpster, and he picked up his pace, whimpering with joy. This too was love...

But out of the shadows the Rottweiler pounced, and we had chaos once again.

At least it was a swift death. With the poodle watching from a distance, the Rottweiler clamped her jaws around our pug's neck and shook him. He yelped and made little biting motions until he stopped moving altogether.

"Good *girl*," a man said. He was a human version of his dog—stocky, and covered with hair. His big jaw opened in a hideous leer. "That's it, *kill* that ugly mutt. *Kill* it!"

"He's already dead!" I cried, but the man didn't hear. His Rottweiler shook the lifeless corpse in her mouth. Our colony was desperate and we had no choice but to jump. It was steaming hot on the Rottweiler. Her thick hair made it hard to see. We tried to hide but Quine's soldiers rounded us up. They were oversized and covered with hair armor. After separating the females from the males, they threw our larvae and pupae into a pile and started feasting.

Dawn was gone, possibly dead. It was just a matter of time before Quine appeared. I didn't want to look at him, this flea responsible for so much pointless death. I tried to hide my eyeglasses but a young soldier saw me. He tied my hind legs with hair and hopped me deep into the dog's left ear. It was cooler there.

Quine was propped up on a bed of feces. “Hempel!” he bellowed. He was bigger than any flea I’ve ever seen. As he rolled onto his stomach, he wiggled his tiny legs. “Aren’t you going to greet your old friend?”

Even deep in the ear, I heard our females screaming. “You disgust me,” I told him. “Your soldiers are eating our babies. They have enough blood. Why do they need to kill for more?”

“*Need?*” Quine drooled on his bed. “How do you know what it is we *need*? I’ve trained them to take what they want. If they want to get fat, that’s their right.”

The young soldier hopped to the base of Quine’s bed. “He was wearing these,” he said.

Quine closed his antennae around my eyeglasses. “You created a culture of weakness,” he sneered. “Families? Redistribution of blood? A waste of time, Hempel. You haven’t changed.”

“In our colony, we share eyeglasses so that everyone can see the sunlight and the trees, and the stars at night.” The young soldier was listening to me, I noticed. Behind my back, I was loosening my hind legs. “It’s too bad no fleas in your colony have eyeglasses. Meanwhile, you’ve grown enormous. You probably can’t even hop.”

Quine shrugged. “What’s the point of hopping when others hop for you?”

The head soldier, the one with the most armor and the biggest head, caught me trying to free my legs. He hopped over and tightened the hair. “Trees,” he scoffed. “Sunlight. These are mistakes of the antennae—incorrect perceptions, not facts. Quine says so.” He sucked the side of my face until I screamed.

Quine laughed. “It hurts to be wrong, doesn’t it, Hempel? We’re *fleas*. Greed is beneficial to our species.” A soldier hopped into the ear, carrying Dawn. She was squirming and kicking as the soldier hoisted her onto the bed. “But since you believe in sharing...”

Quine rolled on top of her. I fought to get free, but the head soldier held me down. Dawn was screaming. I closed my eyes, but my antennae sensed everything. Quine panted heavily and took a long time to finish copulating. Afterward, he fell asleep.

“Be strong,” I told Dawn. She was still underneath Quine on the bed of feces. “We’ll be together soon. We’ll have our family.”

The head soldier kicked my face. “Shut your mouth about families. If you don’t, I’ll—”

“Quine is hiding the truth,” I told him. “He’s trying to keep power. Those eyeglasses—they let you see what humans do—sunlight and trees, even the possibility of love.”

The Rottweiler barked. It was too dark to see why, but he kept barking and quivering. Quine rolled off Dawn and slowly lifted his head. “What is it?”

“It’s happening again,” the head soldier said. He looked afraid.

Quine swung his hind legs off the edge of the bed. “To the eyebrow!”

“It won’t be safe.”

“I must see what our dog sees. There might be females to take, blood to suck. Raise the toenail!”

Four of the soldiers ran to the side of the bed and raised the human toenail to Quine. He rolled onto the middle of it, wiggling his legs and twitching his antennae. “Guard this female. Block the entrance to the ear. And bring my sentimental friend along.”

The young soldier seized me. We hopped in the procession behind Quine and his toenail. The dog was getting hotter. “Hurry!” Quine yelled. As we left the ear, others hopped in to seal it off, carrying bundles of hair on their backs.

“Here are the humans you want to emulate,” Quine said, handing me back my eyeglasses, “in their natural state.”

I could hardly hear through the barking. I put on the eyeglasses. When I gasped, Quine’s soldiers did too, as if seeing what I did. A male pit bull stood in front of us, straining at his leash. He was smaller than our dog but looked capable of a great deal of damage. The Rottweiler kept barking, as if to convince herself of her toughness. A few feet away, a crowd of men had gathered.

“*Kill him,*” the Rottweiler’s owner said, leaning over her ears. He unclipped the leash, and the owner of the pit bull did too.

We dug into the eyebrow as the dogs surged forward. We were upside down and then up again, dirt flying. Lowering her head, our Rottweiler tore into the pit bull’s side. Quine looked at me and laughed. “Nasty, brutish and short!”

The men roared. But the pit bull spun away, escaping the Rottweiler’s jaws. He was a quick little pit bull. He circled us twice, and then we were upside down again. The

Rottweiler howled, and there was a strong smell of blood. The pit bull's eye drifted over us like a giant moon, cold and unblinking. He stared straight at us, his jaws tight on our dog's neck. One of Quine's soldiers defecated.

"He's killing her!" the Rottweiler's owner cried.

"You know the rules," another man said. But the owner ran forward. He pulled the pit bull by the hind leg and kicked him in the stomach.

"Get away from my dog!" the pit bull's owner yelled. He sprung forward and wrestled the Rottweiler's owner to the ground. While the men fought, the pit bull kept clamping onto the Rottweiler's neck, growling steadily. Then the pit bull stood up and blew blood from his nostrils.

Throughout both colonies, fleas were screaming. "What do we do now, sir?" the head soldier asked Quine.

"Jump to the pit bull. Now!"

"What about our eggs and pupae? And our soldiers inside the ear?"

"Leave them," Quine said, rolling around on his back. "That pit bull will have plenty of female fleas."

"But what if his male fleas are stronger?"

"I have friends down in the ear," the young soldier said, bobbing his head.

Quine drooled. "Bring my toenail. Prepare to jump! We can't survive on a dead dog."

In the yard, the men had stopped fighting. The Rottweiler's owner, his face bruised and swollen, leaned over us. There were tears in his eyes. "My poor baby," he said. He took our dog in his arms and headed for a truck.

"Sunlight," I said. "And trees." I gave the head soldier my eyeglasses. "See for yourself."

"Give me those!" Quine said, his voice shaking with the man's footsteps. "We need to jump to that pit bull before—"

"There *are* trees," the head soldier said. "And sunlight. You said there was no such thing as sunlight."

Quine's antennae twitched wildly. "Who cares? We're fleas!" He tried to grab the eyeglasses but the young soldier hopped onto his head, put his mouth down, and sucked. I looked away. Fleas can be vicious. But my antennae sensed it all, of course—Quine shaking his legs and screaming until his eyes popped out. The soldier was killing him.

"We'll need to go *somewhere*," the head soldier said calmly, still gazing at the world. "Maybe we should distribute the eyeglasses in the ear and search for a new animal."

"Man *is* an animal," I explained, "especially this one. There will be places on his body he doesn't always wash."

The head soldier nodded. "Places warm and dark."

"Places to start families," I said, trying to ignore Quine's screams.

"Where are these places, Hempel?"

"Take me to Dawn and I'll tell you."

“Can my friends come?” the young soldier asked. He’d finished sucking the contents of Quine’s head. Grunting, he pushed the corpse off the dog’s eyebrow with his hind legs.

“Of course,” I said. “Everyone can find room on man.”

The head soldier untied my hind legs. He gave me back my eyeglasses. “Very well,” he said. “I’ll take you to Dawn. We’ll distribute the eyeglasses. Then we’ll collect the eggs and pupae and you will lead everyone to man.”

At the ear, we removed the hair bundles and came inside. Dawn was still lying on the bed of feces. She was near death. But she was a strong flea, and she overcame the trauma of Quine’s copulation. Dawn will be remembered as the mother of many generations.

The man placed the dead Rottweiler in the back of his truck. It was getting cold on the dog’s corpse, and nobody wanted to stay any longer than necessary. When I told everyone to make the jump, they did so—the soldiers, the remaining families of our original colony, the females with eggs and pupae. We landed on the man’s stomach and branched out.

This is our past. I hope it will be remembered for its lessons in philosophy and survival. If it is necessary to jump again, we will do so with courage. Our man is not an ideal host. He is far from a professor, or even a professor’s dog. But our babies have grown into the sort of fleas any parent can be proud of. During hardship, we show charity to our weak. During prosperity, we shun selfishness. Only then can a species thrive, by answering a higher calling to stop killing itself for blood.