

The ants, the grasshopper and the owl

A story in five parts by Steve Williams

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One day in summer, when everything in the soil was busy growing, a grasshopper stretched out his long legs in the sun and sang out with all his heart. When he was tired, he lay down and dozed in a shady spot. When he was hungry he nibbled on a juicy fruit or a tasty leaf.

That afternoon, a busy gang of ants hurried past him. On their shoulders they carried an ear of corn they had taken from a nearby field. They didn't stop and listen to the grasshopper singing. They didn't even seem to notice him.

'Hey, little creatures,' said Grasshopper, 'Stop and talk. Enjoy the sunshine with me.'

The ants didn't stop. They didn't even slow down. But they did reply to the grasshopper. This is what they said:

Ant 1: No time to stop!

Ant 2: Collecting food for winter

Ant 3: Suggest you do the same

Ant 4: Before nothing is left

All afternoon, they passed by carrying more things to store in their ant hill. They never spoke another word. The grasshopper was surprised by the way the ants lived. 'Some creatures don't know how to relax and have fun,' he thought.

For the rest of the summer and into the autumn, he stretched and sang. He ate when he felt hungry and talked with other creatures whenever they could spare him the time. Grasshopper loved to talk and to listen.

Winter came suddenly that year. Creatures huddled in their homes with the supplies they had stored in the seasons of growing. The grasshopper had no supplies of his own. He could find no food to eat. He was cold, hungry and miserable.

He remembered the busy ants collecting food all day in the sunshine. 'They must have plenty,' he thought and he decided to pay them a visit. Snow began to fall as he hurried along to the place where the ants lived.

Grasshopper stood outside the ants' nest, rubbed his legs together to attract attention and shouted: 'Hey, little creatures, can you spare me some food? I'm very hungry.'

The ants didn't reply.

'Little creatures, please! You must have SOME food to spare. I saw you carrying it to your nest all summer long.'

Still no reply. Then a little note came out of the top of the nest. The words said: 'It's your own fault. We DID warn you. Anyway, we work for each other. We don't help strangers.'

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The grasshopper looked at the note for a long time. He was so cold and so hungry he could hardly move his long legs. On the back of the note the ants had written: 'Try the owl. He might give you some good advice.'

'What use to me is advice!' the grasshopper said to himself. But he did manage to make it to the owl's nest in the deepening snow. He was desperate.

Fortunately, the owl was welcoming and his nest was warm. 'You are a sorry sight,' said the owl. Grasshopper felt so relieved he began to cry. 'I've been so stupid. I don't know what to do.'

The owl gave the hungry grasshopper an old piece of corn to chew on. 'Here, gnaw on this,' he said 'I can't stand the stuff.' As Grasshopper nibbled the corn, the owl gave him some advice. He always gave advice to others whether they asked for it or not.

'There are only three ways to get things,' said the owl with great authority, 'taking, trading and borrowing. You need to decide which method is right for you.'

'I know what taking is,' said the grasshopper, 'It's what the ants do.'

'It's what YOU are doing right now,' said the owl. 'I've given you some food as a gift and you've taken it. The ants don't wait to be given things. They just take. You take the food you eat in the summer time. It's natural.'

'What's trading then?' asked the grasshopper.

'It's when I give you something if AND ONLY IF you give ME something in return. That's trading.'

'That's no good to me,' said Grasshopper, 'I've got nothing to give'.

'Not so fast,' said the owl, 'What you give could be something you've made.'

'I can't make something out of nothing!' said the Grasshopper.'

'You can trade your effort or your talent,' said the owl. 'In return for that corn you ate, you COULD offer to clean up my nest. I'm a messy creature and I don't like to bother with such things.'

The grasshopper began to cheer up as he imagined how he could make his way in the world by taking and trading.

'What is borrowing?' he asked hopefully.

'Borrowing is getting something you want from someone but only after agreeing to pay them back later.'

'Can I borrow some more food from you?' asked the grasshopper. 'I'll pay you back later.'

'Yes,' said the Owl,' but make sure you pay back what you borrow or there WILL be consequences.' And with that he flew out into the night without saying where he was going. Grasshopper settled down to sleep. He had pleasant dreams for the first time in many days.

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For the rest of that cold winter, Grasshopper borrowed food from the owl and he cleaned the nest in return for a cosy corner to sleep in. When spring came, he was ready to leave. 'Goodbye, Owl,' he said, 'and thank you.'

'Not so fast,' said the owl. 'I've prepared a list showing all the food you borrowed. There are one hundred items on the list. Be sure to return one hundred and twenty items to me before winter comes.'

'One hundred and twenty items!' said Grasshopper. 'Why not one hundred?'

'It's called interest,' said the owl. 'Think of it as a reward for my kindness to you.'

Grasshopper walked back into the wide world worrying how he would manage to pay back all that he had borrowed from the owl. The list looked very, very long. The owl's voice followed him: 'make sure you pay me back or there WILL be consequences!'

All through the rest of the spring and summer the grasshopper did what he liked best: singing, talking and eating fresh fruit and leaves.

By autumn he began to worry about paying back what he had borrowed from the owl. Food was getting hard to find. Grasshopper wondered if there was anything he could trade. He loved to sing so he decided to arrange entertainments for the other creatures. He made some signs that read: 'Grasshopper will sing with all his heart in return for some of your food. Meet here at midday tomorrow to see a great show.'

Grasshopper spent all afternoon and evening rehearsing his songs. He was very excited. At midday when his great show was due to begin, only a few creatures had turned up and they didn't seem to be carrying much food with them. Grasshopper decided to begin anyway. He thought: 'When the creatures hear me sing, they will tell others. Before very long, I will trade my singing for its true worth and I will have enough food to pay back my debts.'

Grasshopper sang with all his heart but the creatures didn't like what they heard. Some of them covered their ears. Some just walked away.

Grasshopper was very upset. When all the creatures had left, he stood alone, cried and walked into the wood, away from the world and all the creatures in it.

One night, at the beginning of winter, he looked up at the moonlit sky. A shape hovered overhead and a voice shouted down: 'Are you ready to pay me back?' It was the owl.

'Well, no, you see my trading didn't work out the way I planned.' Before he could say any more he was gripped by strong talons and lifted into the air.

'I'm sorry to hear that', said the owl. 'I told you there would be consequences if you failed to pay back – WHAT IS MINE.'

Grasshopper was terrified. The owl carried him through the night before dropping him in a place crowded with other creatures. Most of them were insects and there were a few little mice. There was a cage all around them. 'The others will tell you what to do,' shouted the owl as he flew away.

'What did he mean?' cried Grasshopper. 'What am I supposed to do to get out of here?'

'You have to pay back the owl what you owe him by working all day and every day, the whole year through,' said a voice from the crowd.

'What do we work at?'

'Whatever the owl tells you to do,' said a field mouse. 'Sometimes he makes us clean the nests of all his relatives.'

'And he has a lot of relatives,' said a little ladybird.

'Sometimes he sends us inside the ant hill to take things. He lends what we take to other creatures,' said the earth worm.

'The ants get very angry when we try to take their things,' said the ladybird, trembling at the thought of the fierce little creatures who work so hard to take and keep their things.

'Can we leave this place when we have paid back the owl?' asked Grasshopper.

All the creatures looked away.

The worm spoke up for all the others: 'Owl drops food down to us. Some of it is what we have taken from the ants. He adds all the food to the list of items he says we have to pay back to him. We will never pay back all that we owe.'

'We should refuse to work!' said Grasshopper.

All the animals looked down again. This time the ladybird was the one to speak up. 'Owl doesn't like that,' she said. 'If you don't work and pay your debts, the owl will carry you off to his nest and eat you.'

Grasshopper was filled with fear and for many days he didn't speak to anyone. He worked for the owl for two whole years with the other creatures. The only times his life seemed good were when the creatures told their stories and talked together about the lives they would live if they were free.

One night in spring, the earth worm noticed that the rain had washed away the soil around some of the cage posts. The creatures gathered together with great hope and charged towards loose posts. They broke and the creatures scattered into the night.

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After the escape, Grasshopper travelled as far as his long legs would take him. In the daylight he lived in the open. At night he hid out of sight under a log or a stone. He liked to talk to creatures he met on his journey and he told them stories about the ants, the owl, borrowing, trading and his failure to become a great singer.

Creatures liked Grasshopper's stories. Those who listened sometimes laughed out loud. Sometimes they begged to know what happened next and they offered Grasshopper some of their food if he promised to tell them.

Grasshopper liked his new life, trading stories for food. Sometimes he didn't ask for anything from his audience. He enjoyed their company and gave them his stories as a gift. He gave this story to me and now I'm passing it on to you.

Sometimes Grasshopper found a quiet place in the sunshine and sang out loud with all his heart, but he made sure no other creatures were around to hear him.