

Pharaoh's Revenge

by Daniel Harris

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The first intimation that something was afoul was when his computer crashed.

He rebooted, but the story he had worked on all night was gone. WordPerfect eventually recovered an earlier version. He had printed that earlier version. The recovered version had misspelled words. The printed version was correct. He blamed the variation on the crash. He spent two hours recreating what he had lost, ran the spell check and printed out that version before saving it to two places.

The next day when he loaded the story, there were spelling errors and even missing words. He closed the document and loaded it from the memory stick. The document was correct. Fearful that that version would become corrupted, he ejected the memory stick from his computer and loaded the original version.

As he was correcting the computer version using the printout as a master, he noticed a pattern to the errors; they all involved the letter "e". All letter "e's" and "E's" were missing.

It was then that he noticed the first one. An ant, less than a millimeter long was crawling on his computer monitor. In its jaws was a small object. The object glowed enough to light up the mandibles of the ant.

Something was itching his arm. He looked. A tiny ant was working its way over his wrist and up his forearm. It too had glowing jaws.

He killed both ants. As he was typing he noticed an ant crawling up his left hand middle finger. It too had glowing jaws. He killed it. Something was itching behind his right ears. He slapped at it. It was another ant with glowing jaws. What was happening?

He had been drinking vodka all night. Maybe it was the vodka. He shut down his computer and went to bed.

At three in the morning he awoke. He sat up and had stars in his eyes. Maybe it was his sudden movements. He rubbed his eyes and looked at the bed. Myriads of tiny points of light were marching in ragged files over the bedding.

He struggled out of bed, pulling off the covers. He noticed his pajamas were covered with glowing jawed ants. He tore off his pajamas. Floods of ants were flowing out of his ears and nose. Tears in his eyes each floated a glowing ant onto his cheeks. His beard was lit like a Halloween jack-o'lantern. Streams of these miniscule ants with glowing jaws were exiting every orifice in his head. They streamed down his body and joined the army of glowing ants on the floor.

He ran into the shower. The floor of the tub was awash with glowing ants. After the shower there were no more ants.

It must be the computer, he said to himself. He went into his office and booted his computer. A message came up on the screen:

Boot in Saf Mod

He rebooted the computer in safe mode. Everything looked normal.

He opened WordPerfect and typed: Now is the time for all good men to come to the aide of their party.

The display read: Now is th tim for all good m n to com to th aid of th ir party.

Where were the e's?

An ant crawled out from under the e-key on his keyboard. Soon another ant crawled out from under the e-key. Their jaws glowed.

He opened his story. Every e was missing. The story made no sense. It was a lipogram with no meaning.

He started rewriting, finding words to substitute for words that contained e's. Whole sentences were deleted or rewritten. A story of hope and redemption morphed into a story of diasporic immigration and loss.

On-line dictionaries were useless. there were no e's. His desk was covered with dictionaries and thesauri. The ants continued to file out from under the e key. Now that he wasn't using that key, the volume of ants increased.

Sometimes they crawled onto him, but mostly they trudged across his desk, their mandibles glowing with electronic bytes. They walked in straight files off the edge of the desk, falling like lemmings into the sea, onto the floor and marching across the room. They disappeared into a nearly invisible hole in the molding.

In the morning he called his exterminator.

—Sounds like Pharaoh ants, said the exterminator, a loud laughing man with a heavy Brooklyn accent. They were the plague of Egypt, thus the name Pharaoh ants, *Monomorium pharaonis*, devilish creatures. Never heard of them attacking a computer. Usually they like high protein foods. Cat and dog food bowls are a favorite target.

—I thought hard drives were sealed against even the smallest microbes and dust.

—I wouldn't put it past these devils to get into a hermitically sealed hard drive, said the exterminator. I suggest you call a computer expert.

—I don't imagine an anti-virus program would work against ants.

—I can kill those buggers, but I don't know about computer viruses.

He was afraid to ask the exterminator if they would enter a human brain. And if they did, how one removed them. Later that day he went to J&R Computer World near City Hall and bought a new computer. He took the old computer, destroyed it with the super's sledgehammer and put it in the trash. He loaded his story from the memory stick. It was as he had originally written it. Now, reading the original version it seemed fecund. There seemed to be e's everywhere. He wished he hadn't destroyed the computer with the version of his story without the e's. Was this a hex of the Pharaohs? Maybe the ghost of the late Georges Perec, who wrote a whole novel without using the letter e, was infecting him. Using

Google he found another man who wrote a book without using the letter e, Ernest Vincent Wright. His *Gadsby* was an extremely rare collectors item and Perec's inspiration. He wished he had saved his eviscerated lipogrammatic story.

