

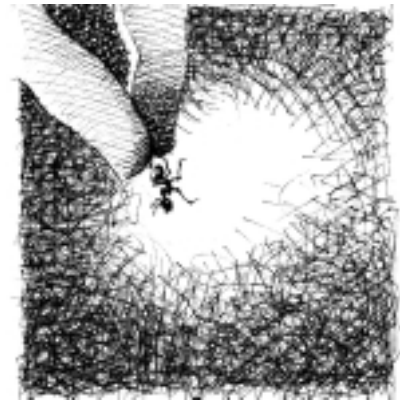
Tyler's First Biology Lesson

by John Skinner

Tyler was a bright little boy. Sunny, chirpy, full of beans. And keenly interested in nature, life, everything that lived and moved. Mr. and Mrs. Thomas, being proud and enlightened parents, did everything they could to encourage their son's interests.

So one Saturday morning just after breakfast, when Tyler ran into the kitchen, eyes wild with excitement, screaming: 'Mum! Mum! Come and look at this spider', Mrs. Thomas smiled indulgently at Tyler and examined the poor struggling creature squashed between his thumb and forefinger. As he held it up for his mother to see, she could see its thin little legs flailing about in the air trying vainly to get a foothold.

'Put it down, Tyler dear, before you squash the poor thing completely', said Mrs. Thomas, 'and let's have a proper look at it. Put it in this jar here so it doesn't run away.'



And she put a jar down on the table just in front of him. Tyler eased the creature into the jar and let it drop to the bottom, where its little legs went nineteen to the dozen as it scampered this way and that, trying to find a way out of its glass cage. And getting nowhere very fast.

'That's not a spider, dear', said Mrs. Thomas. 'Spiders have eight legs. This only has six. Unless you've pulled two off - which might explain why it's walking so oddly.' Then she turned to him with a scolding look on her face, 'You haven't pulled any of its legs off, have you Tyler?'

'No mum, really.'

'I certainly hope not. No, if you look closely, you can see it was only ever meant to have six legs. That means this is not a spider, but an insect. And this particular insect, Tyler dear, is an ant.'

Tyler was very pleased with this lesson in biology and went off in search of some more ants. It was not long before he had found a whole nest of them, little black ants busily shovelling sand up between a crack in the garden path.

With excitement mounting from one moment to the next, he ran back into the house. 'Mum! Mum! I've found a whole load more of them outside. Can I have a pot to collect them in?'

Mrs. Thomas smiled. Handing her son a large glass jar with a secure lid, she urged him to be careful with the little creatures and not to crush them or hurt them in any other way.

'Ants are very clever little creatures, you know,' she explained. 'Of all the insects on this planet, ants deserve a very special respect. So treat them well.'



Tyler promised he would be very careful, returned to his newly discovered miracle of nature, and busied himself with collecting as many ants as possible in his glass jar. He was not seen again for most of the day.

That evening, when it was time for bed, Mr. Thomas went to tuck Tyler in and kiss him goodnight.

'What have you got here, Tyler?' he asked, when he saw the jar on the bedside table.

'It's my ant collection,' Tyler said very proudly. 'My ants are keeping me company. Mum says ants are very clever. Is that true? Could they read me a bedtime story?'

'Well, Tyler, you'd have to teach them English first,' said Mr. Thomas, tucking the bedclothes tightly round his son. 'And that might not be so easy. Just imagine how big the letters must appear to them on the page. But if I were you, I'd just let them be. And whatever you do, don't go letting them out of the jar, or you'll never get any sleep.'

And Tyler drifted off to sleep, already forming plans to start training his ants the next morning.

Sunday was the day when Mr. and Mrs. Thomas liked to have a lie in. So when Tyler woke up, he would go straight downstairs and get his own breakfast without disturbing his parents. On this particular Sunday, his first with his new companions, Tyler took his jar of ants down to breakfast with him. *It's nice to have company for a change*, he thought. Then it occurred to him: *I expect they're hungry too. I wonder what ants eat for breakfast. Well, as we're friends now, I expect they'd like the same as me.*

So Tyler opened the jar, poured in some cornflakes, sprinkled some sugar over them, and added some milk. As he tucked into his own bowl of cereal, Tyler thought: *What noisy, slurpy eaters these ants are.* And he made a mental note to teach them a few table manners.

But that will have to wait until they've had their English lessons, he said to himself.

Yet he had barely even begun to consider how he might go about organising these ant classes, when he was amazed to find that the ant jar, which he had filled almost to the brim with cornflakes, was now completely empty. And the ants were lined up in rows around the sides of the glass jar, looking longingly at Tyler.

I think they want some more, he thought. But this time, he decided to try them on peanut butter sandwich.

He went to the bread bin and cut a slice of bread. *Not too thick*, he thought, *otherwise they might not be able to get their jaws around it.* Then he went over to the cupboard and, standing on one of the kitchen chairs, he reached down a half-empty jar of peanut butter. *They'd probably like a nice thick helping of this*, he said to himself, and he spread two heaped spoonfuls of the gooey brown stuff over the bread. Then he lowered the bread carefully into the jar and watched spellbound as the ants devoured every crumb of bread and every creamy smear of peanut butter.

Tyler did not tell his parents of this exciting new discovery, but from then on Mrs. Thomas could not help noticing how much more Tyler seemed to be eating. Every lunchtime now he would ask for twice his normal helping. And secretly,

unnoticed by his parents, he would scrape the extra off his plate into the jar, which he kept hidden under the table during meal times. Very soon he had to ask his mother for some more glass jars.

'And do you have any bigger ones?' Tyler added, because the ants were now growing quite big on their new diet.

It was already several weeks since Tyler had started his ant collection, which by now had almost grown to an ant farm. But although the growing creatures were beginning to invade parts of the Thomas household where you would not normally expect to find an ant, his parents supported Tyler's interest with true parental devotion. But the stress was beginning to tell.

When Mr. Thomas went to sit in his favourite armchair one rainy Saturday afternoon to read the newspaper, he found it was already occupied.

'What's this, Tyler?' He asked, pointing to an odd, shiny black creature about the size of a small dog, with a strange waspish sort of waist, lying in his chair.

'That's Achilles, Dad,' said Tyler.

'Achilles? That's an odd name to give an ant.'

'Well, he's got something wrong with his foot and can't walk properly, so it seemed a good idea at the time,' Tyler explained.

'Hmm,' said Mr. Thomas very slowly, as he examined the insect more closely. 'That's very interesting, Tyler,' and he went instead to sit on the couch, where he opened a book and started to read. Then suddenly:

'Oop, er, what the...!' Mr. Thomas spluttered, as he was swamped by about a dozen more black dog-sized ants which swarmed up onto the couch and clambered all over him, licking at his face, snuggling up to him with their heavy pincer jaws, and tickling him with their antennae.

It was soon after this that Tyler asked his father if he could build some kennels, because his ants had rather outgrown their glass jars.

'That would seem a very sensible idea' said Mr. Thomas. 'It's nice to see you taking a real interest in something, Tyler.'

But Tyler's father did not fully appreciate what he was letting himself in for. It took Mr. Thomas a long time to make fifty kennels. About a day for each one. And at the end of every day, he needed to take a shower to get the sawdust out of his hair. But every time he went for a shower, he found that half a dozen or more of the ants had already beaten him to it. So he had to wait until two o'clock in the morning, when all the ants were asleep, before he could take his shower. And by the time he had finished all the kennels, he had to start making bigger ones because the ants had already outgrown the first batch.

For a long time now of course, the meals which Tyler had been scraping off his plate were no longer enough. Mr. and Mrs. Thomas had to make special trips every week to the wholesale warehouse. Here, to support Tyler's keen interest in nature study, they bought in giant economy packets and cartons of cornflakes, sugar, milk, peanuts (they had graduated by now from peanut butter to the real thing), and their two most favourite treats of all time: raspberry ripple ice-cream and black-cherry yoghurt; in fact, they were so fond of the black cherries, Tyler thought he might try them soon on Black Forest gateau for dessert.

On this diet, it was not long before the ants were considerably bigger than Tyler himself, and it was becoming difficult to move in the house with all the extra chairs Mr. Thomas had to make for Tyler's guests. He drew the line at beds - they would simply have to sleep on the floor of their kennels, he said.

But it did not stop at furniture. Mr Thomas was even compelled to buy extra televisions, one set for each channel, to avoid any violent ant arguments over whether they should watch CNN, BBC World News, MTV, Sky Sports or a film.

All in all, the Thomas's' life was rather disrupted by Tyler's ants; and there were times when they began to despair. For example, they could never lock up the house when they went out for the day, because the ants had not learned yet how to use a key. And when they did go out, they always had to take at least two or three of the ants with them to the shops, to the beach, and even, on one

occasion, to the cinema. Perhaps the moments of greatest despair were those which led to fighting and squabbling, or even just boisterous ant play, which invariably resulted in things getting broken.

But all this the Thomas's tolerated with admirable patience and indulgent smiles to encourage Tyler's interest in the world around him. Until one day, Mr. Thomas finally snapped.

He came into the lounge and found one of them, the one they had been good enough to take with them to the cinema (and buy a raspberry-ripple ice-cream in the interval), sitting back in Mr. Thomas' s favourite chair, with its back four legs crossed, reading the newspaper and smoking Mr. Thomas's pipe. That was it. He could take no more. His pipe of all things! His one remaining comfort! No, he would take no more of this.

He decided then and there that they would have to go.

And go they did. Within a few days, Mr. Thomas had rented an apartment and moved Mrs. Thomas and Tyler in. Of course, they had to buy new furniture, because the ants had become rather attached to the furnishings in their house. And Tyler always visited the old house every day to make sure his ants were feeding themselves properly.



So life with the Thomas's returned more or less to normal; Mr. Thomas could smoke his pipe in peace now; Mrs. Thomas could use her glass jars as she wished; and they could all watch television by and large without argument. Meanwhile, they continued to encourage Tyler's interest in natural history.

And one Saturday, just after breakfast, Tyler started jumping up and down with great excitement, screaming from the garden:

'Mum! Mum! Come and look at this slug!'