

# Entomology

The man is middle-aged. He is dressed in new blue jeans and a short-sleeved white shirt with a collar and an empty breast pocket. His hair is almost black and is cut in the cut worn by millions of men, not long and not short and parted on one side. He is on his knees in the dirt of a desert road, next to his new, big, dual-cab, clean and shiny red pickup truck. A desert ant is crawling up the leg of his jeans. The nearest town is small and far away.

“He says he doesn’t want to be shot,” Candy says. You know this, you heard the man.

Candy stands by the driver’s door. The truck is taller than he is. The door is still open from when the man got out. The truck’s engine is turned off. It cools and clicks come from under the hood. Far overhead, a jet airliner leaves a thin white contrail ahead of the distant, hollow and hushed whisper of its engines. The contrail slowly evaporates and vanishes after the jet lays it down.

Candy holds a pistol in one hand. He points it at the man who doesn’t want to be shot. You hold the man’s thin and beat-up old black leather trifold wallet and you count the bills you find folded neatly inside. You’ve already pocketed the credit cards and the driver’s license.

“Fuck. There’s not much.”

“Not much? How much? Not much? You said not much?”

“Not fucking much.” You look up from the wallet and the money. Candy is pointing the pistol at you, casually, carelessly, not aiming.

“Hey, goddammit! Don’t point that thing at me! Point it at him!”

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry. Sorry.”

A click comes from under the hood. The sun is bright and hot. The man who doesn’t want to be shot has his hands pressed flat together in front of him like he’s

praying. His lips don't move. He's on his knees in the gravel circle of a desert ant colony. He put himself there after he got out of his truck, not paying attention to where he was except to know that he had been pulled over on a very empty back road by two men who had a gun and who ordered him to get out of his truck and get on his knees. He raises his hands in fluttering supplication and begins pleading for mercy until you tell him to fucking shut the fuck up.

The desert ants are nearly a half-inch long. They bite from one end and sting from the other. They are brainless. In this heat, they are vicious at the least provocation.

“So how much?”

“Forty-seven dollars.”

“Shit. Forty-seven dollars. That's not fucking much.”

The man who doesn't want to be shot begins to shudder and cry. He whimpers softly. You watch the ants crawling on his white athletic shoes, his white socks, on his legs. You wonder if the ants bite first, or if they sting first. You wonder if anybody knows.

“Ow!” The man scrambles to his feet and slaps at his pants. “Mother of God!”

Candy shoots. The man who didn't want to be shot falls down like a sack filled with something broken. His blood pumps out of a hole in his side.

“Oh fuck! Oh fuck! Oh, Jesus-fuck!” Candy's eyes are wide, his mouth open.

You hear the man breathing and gurgling and see him struggling.

“Finish him off.” You slip the wallet into your pocket.

“I can't, I can't.” Candy looks like he's about to drop the pistol. He's holding it like it's about to turn itself around and shoot him. “I've never shot anything before!”

“You told me you shot—oh fuck, never mind. Give me the gun.”

You reach and Candy gives you the pistol. You walk over to the man who hadn't wanted to be shot and you shoot him again. He gives one big flopping and is

still. Candy is crying.

“Thank you, man. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” you say, but not like you mean it, because you don’t. Then you say, “There’s something I’ve been wondering.”

“What’s that?”

“I want to know,” you point the pistol at Candy, “if they bite first or if they sting first.”

Candy looks at you and his mouth is open and slightly moving, like he’s trying to find something to say but can’t. The circle of gravel soaks up the man’s blood. There is no shortage of ants.