

## The New York Times

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MENAGERIE

# The Power of Light

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Menagerie: Just between us species.

My brother, Scott, kept the magnifying glass in his top desk drawer, with his pencils. On sunny days, he would take it to the driveway, sprawl out on his stomach and scan the asphalt for ants. I knew that he was incinerating the bugs with the lens, lasering them dead until smoke rose up from their carcasses. At age 7, I was a budding conservationist, preferring to rescue insects and the like rather than maim them. Still, I was curious.

On one such afternoon, I followed Scott outside to watch. He clutched the glass in his left hand and headed to the front of the house, looking pleased with the minimal cloud cover.

The driveway was on an incline. Scott located a spot near the top and stretched himself out, extending his legs down the hill behind him. It was not difficult to find the ants on the pavement; within minutes, he had spotted several. He propped himself on his forearms and closed in on one, dragging his body forward like a soldier in the brush. I stood to the side, not getting too close.

He held the magnifier about six inches above the chosen target. With his right hand, he braced his wrist. A yellow pinpoint appeared in the center of the glass and shot a ray of light onto the bug. Immediately, it dodged the beam. Scott reset and aimed. Again, the ant fled from the heat. Scott curled his sneakers into the cement and stiffened. He lowered the glass, intensifying the assault, cornering his prey. I

bent to see. The insect continued to move, left, then right. Scott pressed the glass lower. Torture, after the weakening.

My brother and I seemed like similar people. We wore the same camel-hair toggle coats. We performed equally well on social studies quizzes and vocabulary tests. We played musical instruments and followed the rules, jumped the hoops, exceeded the bar. Just 15 months younger, I revered Scott, even though he stepped on the backs of my shoes and drove my front tire into the curb when we rode our bikes. I thought that he would protect me, if he had to. All older brothers send their sisters into curbs. I did sense, though, that we had different temperaments, different outlooks about human life in general; I just couldn't tell if the fact of his boyiness had anything to do with it.

The plume of death swirled up past my face. Scott pulled the magnifying glass aside and watched. The bug lay charred, still. Within a minute, he had found another victim and this time, placed a dried leaf next to it. Kindling. Raised stakes.

The second ant found its way onto the leaf and my brother immediately lassoed it with a blazing ray of sun. In seconds, the leaf caught fire and with it, the insect, who had little time to escape. Tricked into thinking he had found new terrain — something to provide entertainment or challenge underfoot, perhaps — he was instead seared.

Despite my revulsion, the magnifying glass wound up in my hand. I can't imagine that I asked for it; I don't remember if my brother offered it. I had watched my brother with disdain and disbelief. Now I knelt down on the pavement and held the magnifier up to the sun.

The handle was metal, and weighty. It could be made longer or shorter with a twist. I remember a dull silver, textured, rough in my palm. I caught the light in the glass and pointed the beam on the driveway, moving it around like a pencil on paper. About a foot away, I spotted a single ant. It was carrying a crumb and moving industriously despite the weight. The insects, of course, are known for this, for brute strength, order and purpose, what with their ability to colonize and surmount obstacles. Creating the beam was easy, I had discovered, as I had a steady hand and

above average spatial awareness. The ant with the crumb would be a simple target, dead in a flash. My brother agreed.

I assumed the position, wiggling into a stiff plank, keeping my gaze on the bug, only the bug. In seconds, I had the sun in the glass. Like a bullet in the barrel. My muscles tightened, my hands gripped. I traced the beam on the pavement, drawing invisible pictures around the ant, circling it, putting it in a box. Never coming close.

Then I placed the magnifying glass down on the driveway and stood up. Dirt clung to the indentations in my knees. My elbows hurt. My psyche wobbled.

I wonder if, when I took the glass from my brother, I truly thought that I might kill the bug, that I could kill the bug. I can't imagine that I considered it, but perhaps I did. I would like to think that I merely tried the idea on, went through the motions as if its completion were a possibility, knowing that it was not. Treading the divide between my brother and me. Between boy and girl.

Little sisters cheerlead, particularly when they are 7 and when their brothers are pretty nice, most of the time. We are taught to, and it feels good. It feels like what families do. It feels unified and whole. More than that, I think that I was trying to be like my brother that day, or to actually be him, in order to understand him. Decades later, I am still trying to understand him, and boys, entirely, and I am relieved that no animal has lost its life during my edification.

My brother stayed out on the driveway that day after I went inside and on many other sunny days that followed. His friends joined him sometimes, huddled over the ants in a swarm themselves, of boyhood and conquest. The magnifying glass remained in his desk drawer for years, ultimately lying dormant, its singular purpose outgrown but its power, piercing. I never touched it again.

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