

Futures

Without a password

Making connections. By Marissa Lingen



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

It was the ants, first of all. Little sugar ants, nothing stinging or biting. Not an insect you'd notice on their own – although they so rarely showed up on their own that it was moot. There was a little trail of them, tiny, innocuous, into everything. Into all your food, into your toothpaste, into who knew what in your bathroom. Why were they even in the bathroom? There was nothing to eat there. They were almost impossible to get out of the apartments the postdocs used, but nobody was actually from California, so it seemed normal to battle with ants. Anything could have been normal. Who would know.

The older professors and their families grumbled that it didn't used to be like this, wave after wave of the tiny ones, never a good-sized ant in the bunch. But no one really thought to ask. It didn't seem like it mattered. You could complain to the apartment complex manager (graduate students, postdocs and junior faculty; the complex manager wouldn't care); you could get an exterminator (tenured

faculty; the ants wouldn't stay gone more than a month). Mostly what you did was smash ants and swear, complain about it, roll your eyes when someone else complained. Because, I mean, ants. Obviously.

The naked mole rats in East Africa were a story the new professor told at a dinner party. Of course everyone had seen them on the news – wave upon wave of them, determinedly pouring through the tunnels under a Nairobi shopping mall, chattering to each other as they went. The professor's husband told his startled fellow guests about how it sounded like birds singing, like a giant flock of birds under your feet as you shopped for perfume or socks.

A popular anecdote, much discussed on the way home, but a curiosity, not a warning, they all agreed.

There was no way that ants and naked mole rats could relate to songbirds. And in any case, the songbird population had been falling in California for decades. If it went up a little, well, that was only natural. A rebound, the kind of

bounce that happened any time or anywhere. Maybe related to the ants, even. Plenty to eat. Did songbirds eat ants? Nobody seemed to know off the top of their heads. Surely not all the songbirds could eat the same thing, but it was impossible to check all at once.

No one was even sure what the ocean sound was to begin with. There were swells and tides. Ominous moments on the sonar, that disappeared as soon as they came. Surely they could not be cetacean in nature; they were too large, from too wide a range. No one even looked at whales. The noises were large enough to ping seismometers in any case; looking into tectonic action was reasonable, if eccentric. If not that, some other form of undersea geology.

Some very novel form.

Then, large ship interactions – wake patterns, perhaps. A great deal was unknown about wake patterns. They might explain much. They did not explain this.

They caught the whales at it eventually, a dozen different species of whales, the same

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song. What were they telling each other? No one knew. They were silent for long stretches, and then: ripples of song. Together, and cetacean biologists stopped observing even a single orca hunting another cetacean species.

This fascinated them, and a few 12-year-olds, and almost no one else. Deciphering whalesong had been large enough for a basically infinite number of theses for enough decades that no one considered “hey, there’s something weird going on with whalesong” to be urgent news.

Nor would it have been, without the ants, the mole rats – whose tunnels began to resemble a series of surgeon’s knots through the ground, populated by an ever healthier and more enthusiastic colony or perhaps colonies – the songbirds, and then. Then the people.

We were hard-pressed to say what it was about the other humans. It wasn’t race, nationality, height, weight, ability, gender, sexuality, vocal range, hairstyle, colour of shirt. There was just a pleasant air about them.

“An air?” a researcher asked.

One of the new humans cocked her head, smiled. “Maybe like a hum you can’t quite hear. Maybe a smell.”

“I don’t smell anything.”

“No, well.” She smiled again. “Maybe you will later.”

The researcher sighed and went on to the next, trying to figure out what was spreading, what was changing. Why there were crowds that could stop mobs where adding people had always started them before. The more people the researcher pressed, the more he heard the same things people had always said: that we were stronger together.

The problem was, we had never really meant ‘we’ before.

“It’s like undoing the Tower of Babel,” the researcher suggested to one woman who was handing out sandwiches to the unhoused downtown, or perhaps just to passers-by who wanted sandwiches. The reporter sheepishly accepted one with egg and cress.

“No, we still –” She grinned. “Even this conversation proves it. We still mostly don’t understand each other.”

“What, then?”

“We don’t think that not understanding means something bad. Not always.”

The researcher watched the crowds go by. They were like any other pack of strangers, no one he knew, no one he could trust. Wait, no, but there was that one. There was an air about her. She just seemed like someone he could relax around. Was she humming? Was it a smell? He looked down the street. There were more of them, he could tell even from the way their heads bobbed above the crowd. This was good. This was excellent. Maybe they could work together.

Marissa Lingen has published more than 100 short stories in venues such as *Analog*, *Lightspeed* and *Tor.com*.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Marissa Lingen reveals the inspiration behind *Without a password*.

When I lived out in California for graduate school, I read that the reason that the particular colonies of ants we were battling in our apartment complex were so competitively successful is that they didn’t kill ants of the same species from different nests. The species they were competing with did: if you smelt like another queen’s ant, you were competition, you were foreign, you were not-us. You were dead. But this particular species just ... didn’t.

They didn’t have the drive to kill members of their own species that were basically their neighbours. *Plenty of Marissa’s groceries for all of us!* they apparently decided. Or, not really decided, as far as I know, we’re talking ants here. But somewhere along the way some gene flipped, and it just became less chemically urgent to do that, they just ... learnt to mind their own business, biologically speaking.

Interesting, I said to myself, and I filed that away in the part of my mind where science-fiction writers store things. That was *18 years ago*, when I was living in California and fighting off ants. I moved home to Minnesota, where I belong, where you can fail to wipe up a drop of tomato juice from the counter when you cut up a tomato and not have it covered in ants when you wake up the next morning. And I didn’t think anything more of it, until I read an article about naked mole rats and how they communicate.

Hmm, I said. Lots of different ... communications. Lots of different signals of us and not-us out there. What if there was just a little more ... relaxation of protocol ...

