

The page is decorated with numerous ants of various sizes and colors (black, red, brown) scattered throughout. The title 'Stepping' is written in a large, light blue, bubbly font with a black outline and a light blue dotted pattern. The word 'Between' is in a smaller, grey, bubbly font with a black outline. The word 'The' is in a small, brown, dotted font with a black outline. The word 'Ants' is in a large, white, bubbly font with a black outline and a white dotted pattern.

Stepping Between The Ants

By

Lord Chester L. Baldwin II

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A Semblance Of Dignity

By the time the bus stopped in Boise for the driver to get gas and the passengers to get food, Fisher was hungry again. Prior to the stop Nicky and Fisher were playing cards, but the distraction of the stop was too much and they found themselves gazing out the windows at the two restaurants.

“I’m out of candy bars.” Nicky announced with his face glued to the bus window.

“You sure?” Fisher asked with his face also pasted to the bus window

“Yeah,” Nicky said as he returned to his bag and dumped everything out to check again. “We ate the last one a couple of hours ago.”

“That’s okay.” Fisher replied, “I’m tired of eating candy anyway.”

“Me too.”

“Anyway,” Fisher said smiling sadly, “were almost there.”

Nicky’s head followed the fat lady as she went into a restaurant. “I wonder what she’ll get?” He asked out loud.

“Something good I bet.” Fisher answered staring out the window at the bus driver who was standing by the pumps eating a sandwich.

“I wonder what those guys have in those bags.” Nicky said, referring to a couple returning to the bus from the gift shop. “Maybe it’s Hostess cupcakes or a couple of small pecan pies or a bear claw, or maybe it’s a maple bar.”

“I don’t think so.” Fisher replied. “They wouldn’t use that kind of bag. And anyways, that guy in the white Tee-shirt? He looks like he’s got something really heavy in it.”

“Maybe it’s a burger and fries.” Nicky said longingly. “Boy, would that be good? I’d give just about anything for a burger and fries right now.” He reached down and scratched his leg. “And a chocolate milkshake to wash it all down.” He smiled. “I’ll bet that’s what they got: a cheeseburger and a bunch of fries.”

“Naw.” Fisher answered almost laughing. “It’s probably just some more candy bars.”

The forty-minute wait was difficult as Fisher watched the passengers get off and go into one of the two restaurant stops before coming back looking refreshed and revitalized. Fisher glanced at his mother who sat rigid, avoiding any eye contact until the bus pulled away.

“How much longer till we get there?” Nicky asked annoyed.

“I think we’re no more than eight hours away from Portland.” Mother Bean replied.

Nicky turned to Fisher and whispered, “those guys three seats up,” he grimaced, “they’re eating burgers and fries from that white paper bag.”

“How do you know?” Fisher asked with suspicion, cocking his head to one side to see. “I can’t see anything.”

Nicky looked skeptically at Fisher, pretending to be offended and asked, “You got a cold or something?”

“No.”

“You mean you can’t smell that, ‘burger with onions’ smell, and the French fries?”

Suddenly like he’d turned on a switch, the aroma of the sack lunch wafted into Fisher’s nostrils. “Yeah, you’re right. I don’t know how I missed it. It smells really good.”

“I know.” Nicky said with emphasis. “I want to just go up there and snatch that bag and run into the bathroom and lock the door and eat it all.”

There was a moment of optimism as the bus passed over the Idaho border into Oregon, but it was short-lived as it was realized that eastern Oregon had very little difference from Western Idaho. Fisher searched the desolate scenery and wondered how anybody would even want to live out in an area that

lacked green grass and forests of trees. With the soft rumblings of the bus as it traveled down Interstate 84, Luke and Rachel fell asleep, and after a while, Nicky and Fisher did too.

Fisher woke up to a darkened overcast sky as the bus pulled into a small college community called La Grande. “Are we gonna have dinner here?” Fisher heard Luke ask his mother.

“No dear.” She answered. “The bus only stops here for five minutes.”

“When are we gonna have dinner?” Luke asked with his pitiful voice, putting down the three-dimensional plastic marble maze game that Fisher had let him use.

Mother Bean looked Luke in the eyes while stroking his hair and said, “We’ll be stopping soon. It’ll just be a little while longer.” Her sad smile reassured Luke and he went back to playing with the marble maze.

When the bus driver got back on the bus he announced, “Just to let you guys know, there’s gonna be a dinner stop in Pendleton, about an hour from now.”

“Okay, Rachel.” Luke said in a happy voice. “Like I told you. We’ll be having a good dinner at the next stop.”

After Fisher saw a certain dread wash over his mother’s face, he went to Luke and said with an excited whisper, “That bus driver didn’t mean us, Luke.”

“What do you mean?” Luke insisted. “Yes it does.”

“No.” Fisher insisted, “What the bus driver meant was that the bus was gonna stop and,…”

“Stop it.” Luke demanded, not wanting to hear his brother.

“Fish.” Mother Bean said, leaning forward and touching him on the shoulder. “It’s okay. Everyone’s hungry and I just need to swallow my pride.”

“But we’re so close.” Fisher said anxiously. “We only got a couple of hours and we’ll be there.”

She looked at him with a look that he had never seen before; a look that said she understood and appreciated his concern, and acknowledged a new, mature nature in him. “It’s okay Fish,” She said with a nod, pursing her lips in thought, “we’ll be okay.”

A part of Fisher wanted to save his mother from the sadness circumstances she faced and the degradation of the inevitable call to his grandmother for assistance when they arrived, but almost shamefully, even at the expense of any lost dignity, another part of him secretly just wanted something to eat.

The hour between La Grande and Pendleton seemed to go by in a matter of minutes and suddenly Fisher found himself getting off the bus with his family following his mother into a long, stainless steel trailer-like diner, into a corner booth with a window where the bus could be seen.

“Kids.” Mother Bean said quickly. “We don’t have much time; maybe a half an hour, so find something quick and let me know what you want so I can order it.”

What Fisher interpreted her to say was, “find what you want so I can add it all up and figure out if I have enough money.” Then, while they were still looking at the menu, Mother Bean collected them all and said, “I know what we’re gonna order, so don’t worry about it.” She smiled in such a way that no one could argue with her, but Fisher knew she had done the math and knew what she could afford.

“But I wanted a hamburger.” Nicky complained under his breath.

“Nicky, you’ll like what I get you.” Mother Bean said reassuringly as the waitress stepped up. “Hi.” Mother Bean said smiling to the waitress. “We’ll have three of the deluxe cheeseburger baskets and this special here,…” she pointed to a picture on the menu, “the tuna salad sandwich, and oh, can I have that on rye toast please?”

“Yes Ma’am.” The waitress answered in a kind of Southern accent. “Would you like anything to drink with that? Maybe some milk for the children?”

“No thank you.” Mother Bean replied amiably. “Just water please.”

Nicky could hardly contain himself. He turned to Fisher and said, “The deluxe cheeseburger basket has the, ‘mountain of fries.’”

Mother Bean nervously tapped her fingernails on the table, lit a cigarette, and then, for some unknown reason, decided to put lipstick on.

“Luke and Rachel?” She asked. “I ordered one of these baskets for you two to share, and I don’t want any fighting, you understand me?”

“But I’m really, really hungry.” Luke said loud enough for people to hear four tables away.

“Luke,” Mother Bean said annoyed, “the deluxe cheeseburger is like getting two regular burgers—you’ll get enough to eat. And Rachel won’t be able to finish hers; you can have the rest of hers.”

Minutes later, the burger baskets arrived, and true to their advertisement, they were enormous. After the waitress set the burgers down she realized she was missing the tuna sandwich. She apologized and quickly disappeared to the back kitchen in search of it. Mother Bean pulled out a napkin, cut a burger in half and then placed it and a portion of the ‘mountain of fries’ onto Rachel’s napkin before she slid the remainder of the basket in front of Luke.

Fisher and Nicky dove into their deluxe cheeseburger baskets like they hadn’t eaten in a week. While Mother Bean waited for her sandwich to arrive she nonchalantly picked at the fries from Rachel, then Luke’s basket, and then from Fisher’s basket and then from Nicky’s basket; moving in a circular motion.

“Sorry for the wait, Ma’am.” The waitress apologized as she handed mother her plate and then hurriedly scribbled on a piece of paper and slid it facedown under the tuna plate. Mother Bean picked up the piece of paper with a serious look on her face, but then smiled to herself as she turned the bill back upside down on the table and decided to eat her dinner.

“Fish, could you pass me the salt and pepper?” She asked, stealing another fry from his basket.

“You bet.” Fisher replied before he took a big bite of his cheeseburger, and in a sweeping motion, he grabbed the salt and pepper and slid them over to his mother and picked up his glass of water on the rebound.

Mother Bean lifted one of the top pieces of toast off the sandwich to sprinkle salt and pepper on the tuna but suddenly gasped in surprise before she dropped the toast back down onto her plate. Her gasp was loud enough to raise the heads of her children, and a few of the surrounding customers.

“What?” Fisher asked, craning his head to see what happened.

Mother Bean nodded as if to say, “it’s nothing,” and she seemed to go in a trance as she stared out at the bus with a look of surprise on her face. Then, breathing hard and blinking her eyes, she quickly regained her composure, turned to Fisher and said, “You all eat up now.” She reached over and took some fries from Nicky’s basket and said, “Come on Luke, you said you were hungry.” She looked to the front counter at the waitress who was pouring coffee to the other bus riders sitting on counter stools. “We don’t have very much time before the bus leaves, you should eat up.” She pulled out her glasses and her crossword puzzle from her purse and started to work on a page.

Fisher was taking another bite of his burger when he realized that his mother had not touched her sandwich. “Aren’t you hungry?” He asked.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full of food.” Mother Bean chided as she lowered her head and peered at Fisher above her glasses with a special, knowing look as if to say, “Not now, later.”

Fisher looked back confused.

With a queer smile, she motioned with her hand for Fisher to get close, and she said, “Now don’t say anything.” She looked Fisher determinedly in the eyes, letting him know she was bringing him into her confidence. She put a finger to her lips before she lifted the top pieces of rye toast off the tuna sandwich. There in the center of the tuna salad spread, on one of the halves of the sandwich was the carcass of a very large fly.

“Oh my gosh,…” Fisher whispered in surprise. “What are you gonna do?”

She pursed her lips and looked up at the ceiling.

“Why don’t you let them know and have em get you another sandwich?” Fisher asked.

“Oh, I’ll let them know alright,” Mother Bean replied with a grin, “in just a moment.”

She looked at Fisher and his food and silently squinted her eyebrows, as if to say, “hurry up and finish eating.”

In that next bite of his cheeseburger, Fisher began to realize what was happening.

“We have to leave real soon.” Mother Bean repeated as she looked around the diner.

The waitress was talking to the cook through the open window between the behind-the-counter serving area and the kitchen when Mother Bean called out, “Oh, Miss?” The waitress either didn’t hear or ignored Mother Bean, so she called out a little louder, getting not only the waitress’s attention but also many others in the diner as well.

“Yes?” The waitress responded confrontationally. “Is there something the matter?”

Mother Bean motioned with her eyes and turned her head slightly to draw less attention before she lifted off the top of her sandwich.

“Oh My God!” The waitress exclaimed as she stepped back. The waitress stood in silence for a moment before she called out, “Frank? Frank, get out here please.”

Most everyone in the diner now watched as Frank, the cook peered out from the kitchen window in curiosity before he realized the waitress needed him, and he rushed out and stood in front of Mother Bean. “Yes,” Frank asked, good-naturedly, “Can I help you?”

The waitress mechanically reached down and uncovered the dead fly and silently but suspiciously looked Frank in the face.

Frank looked back at her with a look of authority before turning to Mother Bean. “I’m really sorry Ma’am.” He said regretfully, “I don’t know how that could have happened.” He picked up the plate and said, “Can I make you another sandwich?”

Mother Bean rubbed the top of her forehead back and forth for a few seconds and looking up into Frank’s face said, “We’re on that bus outside and I don’t think there’s time enough for that; but,... I don’t think I can look at another sandwich for a while,... it, ah,... I’m kind of upset.”

“Well we are sorry for this terrible mishap.” Frank apologized with concern. “If there’s anything we can do,…”

The waitress scowled as she said, “Frank?”

Frank turned to her and said in a hushed voice, “Damn it Millie; stop it! These folks didn’t do anything wrong.” He reached down and picked up the bill, then turned to Mother Bean and said, “Again, we’re real sorry Ma’am. We’ll take care of this and I do hope you won’t hesitate eating here again in the future.”

Mother Bean looked up to him ingratiatingly and said, “Thank you so much, Sir. These things happen and I don’t fault anyone. Thank you for your kind consideration. Can I at least leave a tip for the waitress?”

“Hell no.” Frank said looking at Millie with anger. “Not the way she’s been treating you. Let me get some bags for your food so you don’t miss your bus.”

Frank disappeared back into the kitchen, followed by Millie. There was an inaudible argument for a few seconds before Frank reappeared with two brown paper bags of their leftover food along with a handful of balloons and a bunch of assorted candy bars. “Please ah, take this for your trip and,…” He placed the candy bars, the balloons and some small white paper bags in front of Mother Bean.

“You’ve been more than kind Sir,” Mother Bean said smiling, “I won’t forget that.”

“Please don’t,” Frank said with an accommodating smile, “and come back.”

Mother Bean and her children had no sooner gotten back on the bus and settled in, when the bus left the station and drove out of Pendleton. Luke and Rachel were playing with their balloons and Nicky was eating French fries from his grease-spotted paper bag, opening the bag, doling out one of the fries to

himself and then closing the bag, repeating the process to make the deluxe cheeseburger basket experience last as long as possible.

In the darkness Fisher could see his mother’s face from the glow of her cigarette. There was a kind of peace that made Fisher happy and drew him over to be with her.

“Mother?” Fisher questioned as he sat next to her. “What does this mean now? I mean, about the taxi and stuff?”

Mother Bean yawned and exhaled in an exhausted manner and looked at Fisher wearily. “We’ll talk about it later.” She said taking a drag from her cigarette.

Fisher knew that “talk about it later,” meant it was a dead subject, but he was still happy that his mother had brought him into her confidence, which, if nothing else, singled him out and made him special. “Do you want the rest of my cheeseburger and fries?” He asked, handing her the bag. “I’m not really hungry anymore.”

Mother Bean quickly looked down and into the bag. “No, you go ahead.” She answered with a smile.

“No really.” Fisher said. “I’ve had enough and you didn’t get anything.”

She looked at him with suspicion.

“We got at least four or five hours until we get to Portland.” Fisher insisted. “And anyways, when we get to grandma’s, she’ll have something for us to eat.”

Mother Bean smiled and took the bag and set it on her lap. Then, looking up at Fisher, she asked. “Are you sure you don’t want this?”

“You bet.” Fisher answered, smiling. “Besides, if I get hungry,” He patted his small but bulging white paper bag, “I always got these candy bars.”

In the five minutes it took for Mother Bean to finish the remains of the cheeseburger dinner, Rachel and Luke had fallen asleep and Nicky, with his head against the vibrating bus window, was close to doing the same. Fisher watched his mother nodding off not long after she had lit up a cigarette. She was holding the cigarette in her hand, lodged between two fingers, but it was slowly burning its way down to those fingers. Fisher was standing over his sleeping mother, wondering if he should wake her, when he got an idea and licking his fingers, he clutched the cigarette from the hot end and extinguished it into an ashtray. His little plan was not fool-proof and he did burn the tips of two of his fingers, but he delighted in the knowledge that he had saved his mother the same fate. He sat in the seat in front of her to make himself available, should she need to converse, but being warm and sitting in the dark, Fisher fell onto the seat for a second to rest his eyes, telling himself that he would sit up in just a moment, but as he got more acceptingly comfortable, that moment kept extending itself until he fell asleep.

As the bus was close to arriving in Portland, it got caught up in a powerful downpour. The bus driver apparently lost a good portion of his visibility and slowed down for safety. The bus driver said something out loud, but nothing could be heard above the loud, hard rain pounding on the semi-flat metal roof of the bus.

Fisher walked back to where Nicky was asleep. “Hey, guess what?” Fisher asked his barely awake brother Nicky, in a loud, uncontrolled voice. “We’re here. We’re finally here!”

“We are?” Nicky replied, popping up from his seat, suddenly and instantly awake.

“Portland Oregon.” Fisher said proudly.

“Do you think school will be harder in Portland?” Nicky asked.

“What?” Fisher asked, annoyed.

“Do you think school will be harder here?” Nicky said, wide-eyed.

“No, I heard that first part.” Fisher said with sarcasm. “Why are you talking about school?”

“What if it’s really hard here?”

“It won’t be.” Fisher said, looking outside.

“Why do you say that?”

“Catholic schools are six months ahead of other schools,” Fisher replied without looking away from the window, “and mother doesn’t have money for us to go to a parochial school, so we’re gonna have to go to a public school instead. So, we’ll be ahead of everyone.”

“What is parochial?”

“It means a church school, mostly it means Catholic school.”

The conversation stopped as the city skyline illuminated in front of them and the bus crossed a bridge over the Willamette River to roll onto the downtown streets.

“When we get to Grandma’s house, I hope she’ll have lots of food.” Nicky said concerned.

“You’re kidding?” Fisher asked, mildly bothered.

“Nope.” Nicky said. “I’m hungry; I need more food.”

“But we just ate a while ago.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“That was a couple hours ago.”

“No it wasn’t.” Nicky said as the air brakes of the bus screeched one last time. “We’re here.”

The bus pulled into a docking area and the engine of the vehicle died down to an idling as people started standing up, gathering their belongings and making preparations to get off. Many hugged their temporary neighbors that they would never see again.

Mother Bean looked over at Fisher with eyes that asked for help in getting the kids off. Amidst the chaos, he went back to the seats where Rachel and Luke were seated and found that they were still asleep. As he reached down to wake them, Luke sat up with a smile asking, “Are we here?”

“Yeah, were there.” Fisher replied.

“Fish, you need help?” Asked Nicky.

“Yeah.” Fisher answered. “Could you grab my bag with the comics and stuff so I can carry her?”

“But what about,…” Nicky began to ask, looking at the other belongings.

“We’ll come back for the rest in a minute after we find a place inside to set things down.”

“Okay.” Nicky said confidently as he stepped into an almost empty aisle.

Mother Bean looked back at Fisher and Nicky before she stepped off the bus and into the station with Luke. A torrential cold rain continued to pound the streets outside the depot as the smell of diesel and gas from the busses drifted in through the bus door. After the bags were released and drug to the curb, a taxicab was secured and as everyone got in, Mother Bean gave the driver the address.

“So, the Lent district, huh?” The driver replied.

Mother Bean, sitting in the front, turned to the driver and said something about taking the scenic route as they crossed the Hawthorne Bridge. When the taxi passed the Mount Scott Rexall Drug Store, Mother Bean turned to the driver and said, “My mother works there.”

A few blocks later and they were there in front of Fisher’s grandma’s house.

“You kids wait here for a minute.” Mother Bean said as she opened the door.

“But what,…” Nicky began.

“Just wait here.” She returned, a bit annoyed to be slowed down.

Mother Bean went up to the porch and knocked. The rain fell heavily on her as she stood on the unsheltered steps waiting. After a moment the front-porch light went on and the door opened just as far as the security chain would allow. Seconds later the door shut again while Fisher’s grandma unchained the door and swung it open wide. Fisher watched as his grandma and mother embraced. He saw his mother get excited as she smiled and talked excitedly.

Leda Scarbrough was sitting in her living room listening to, but not watching, her television as she worked on one of her many hobbies. That night she was creating clip-on jewelry by gluing cut pieces of polished rocks onto holders that would eventually be a pair of earrings. It was late and she

knew she should have gone to bed earlier, perhaps right after she'd come home from a church meeting, but she had felt that she needed to get her craft work done; so much so, that she hadn't even changed her formal attire from the earlier meeting.

It was at the very moment when she had set her things down and stood to go to her bedroom, a knock sounded on her front door. With caution, she opened the door ever so slightly and to her surprise, she saw Eva Bean, her daughter that lived in Iron Mountain Michigan. Eva Bean, or Mother Bean as her children knew her, stood alone on the front steps of the doorway, getting wet.

“Come in,... come in.” Grandma Scarbrough said as she pulled her daughter inside and hugged her. Grandma Scarbrough did not have to ask why her daughter was there. She knew that her daughter had had an ongoing rocky relationship with her husband Senior. “How did you get here?” Grandma Scarbrough asked, smiling and hugging her daughter.

“Bus.” Mother Bean replied. “And it was a long ride.”

As Grandma Scarbrough released her daughter from the embrace, she spied two bruises covered by makeup. The fact that four or five days had passed only testified of the severity of the beating. “So where are the kids?” Grandma Scarbrough asked, forcing a smile, trying to rid her mind of the pain and anguish her daughter had endured.

“They're out in the taxi.” Mother Bean answered shyly, knowing the answer came with the admittance of a number of more uninvited guests.

“What are they doing out there?” Grandma Scarbrough said with false surprise. “Bring them in.” Mother Bean smiled graciously and waved the children to come in.

When their mother gave a wave of her hand, Luke, Nicky and Rachel excitedly poured out of the taxi and onto the sidewalk while Fisher followed cautiously. As they stepped up onto the porch, Grandma Scarbrough welcomed them all, each individually, with a warm smile and a hug. Strangely, Fisher noticed that his grandmother was dressed up formally like she had just come back from some event or that she might have been expecting to receive company.

After a few moments in the doorway Mother Bean said, “Oh, the taxi.” She reached into her purse and pulled out the five-dollar bill and handed it to Fisher.

“Fish?” Mother Bean said with in a hushed tone, leaning in close to his ear, “Here.” She said, handing him the money. “Go and pay the man.” and then, leaning closer she whispered privately, “Let the driver tell you how much it is and then give him the money and tell him to keep the change.”

The taxicab driver's eyes seemed to follow Fisher as he stepped down the porch steps. Fisher opened the door and said, “Well it looks like this is the place.” Fisher laughed nervously as the driver opened his trunk and mechanically emptied the bags onto the wet sidewalk.

Fisher made three trips and wrestled the overweight suitcases up to the front door and slid them into the living room. When he returned to the cab where the driver stood waiting, after an awkward moment passed, Fisher asked. “So how much is it?”

“That'll be three seventy five, Sir.” The driver answered with curt politeness.

Fisher quickly did the math: A dollar and a quarter change. That could buy a lot of good stuff and he knew that nobody would ever know if he asked the driver for the change; nobody but him. Fisher stood there with the five-dollar bill tightly crumbled in his hand as he hesitated for a moment with the gravity of that singular decision.

“Thank you Sir.” Fisher finally said with all the look of the oldest child in charge, and like someone that had done this kind of thing before. He straightened out the crumpled bill and handed it to the driver. “Keep the change.” Fisher said authoritatively.

“Thank you Sir.” The driver said, smiling happily. “You've just made my night.”

With the rain still falling, Fisher stood on the sidewalk and watched as the taxi went around the corner at Woodstock before he turned and went into his grandma’s house. As he stepped into the room he was surprised to find that his mother was in the kitchen doorway watching him as he entered.

The contentment in her smile and the look in her eyes made Fisher happy they were safely there in his grandma’s place. Mother Bean mouthed a silent, “thank you” to Fisher before she turned inward to the kitchen.

A moment later, Fisher’s grandma came to the living room doorway and called out, “Anybody here hungry for pumpkin pie?”