

The Science of Play

“Mum, why can’t you put the egg shell in the cake?” I stand on my stool and peer into the bowl of unmixed ingredients.

“I’m busy, Tom. I have to get this cake in the oven and start dinner.”

I clap my hands over my ears as Mum turns the electric mixer on and watch the egg get broken into a thin stream of yellow, before it disappears into the chocolatey liquid. I keep my hands away from the bowl, because Mum says I might get my fingers chopped off. I like my fingers. They’re good for all kinds of things, especially when I’ve got a blocked nose.

“Do you want to lick a beater?”

Is she kidding? Why does she think I’m helping? “Yes, please.”

Mum clicks a button and pulls a dripping beater out of the machine. “Here you go. Now take it outside so I can cook dinner.”

I don’t need to be told twice. Mum opens the sliding door while I hold the beater in one hand and cradle the other under it, like she taught me. *We don’t want any on the floor.*

I sit on a moss rock step in the garden and wrap my tongue around the metal frame, closing my eyes as the sweet, wet goo slides down my throat. It beats me why grown-ups bother to cook cakes. Don’t get me wrong, I *love* soft cake with thick icing on top, but when I’m a grown up and have my own kitchen, I’m going to make a chocolate cake mix just like this one and eat the whole bowl. Better not let mum see me though.

A large dollop of batter misses my cupped hand and lands on my khaki shorts, so I scoop it up with two fingers and lick them clean. Don’t want to waste any. I rub at the brown smudge on my shorts, but it won’t budge. Doesn’t matter, because by the time I’ve finished with them they’ll look much worse. Mum calls me her *little tornado*.

My dog, Sandy, drools beside me. She’s my best mate and we share everything, but I’m not letting her have my beater until I’ve finished with it. Her tongue is huge and she can clean a beater in three licks. Won’t do that again. Even when there is no trace of batter left, I keep licking until all the flavor is gone. I’m onto Mum. There are two beaters in that machine and I only ever see one of them. She says, *one is enough*, but I reckon she licks the other one after I leave the kitchen. She’s probably wiping chocolate off her mouth right now.

I drop the beater onto the rock and give Sandy a pat.

The moss rock steps go down to the lawn, which is surrounded by plants that are like a jungle. We've got a pretty cool garden. My bucket and Dad's old paint brush are where I left them yesterday. Yep, still some water in there. A few dead flying things too. The largest one is easy to pick up by the wings, so I inspect its limp body as it glistens with water droplets in the sunlight. I toss it aside and Sandy snuffles and licks it.

Painting rocks with water is fun. At first I thought Mum would give me a hiding, but Dad showed me how the water dries after a while and the rocks look just the same as before. I paint a big rock in splotches, watching the dribbles make snake patterns below my brush and pool on the soil. Painting is fun for a while, but I paint over a line of ants and decide to follow them, leaving Sandy licking the wet rock.

Ants are hard to follow. There are lots of them, but they're tiny and you have to be careful where you stand. My cousin, Kate, didn't know she was standing on an ants nest at Uncle Mike's birthday barbeque and they crawled up her trousers. I had to cover my ears, because Kate screams louder than the electric mixer. I didn't know girls could move so fast. Kate had her jeans off and was smacking her legs faster than Fatty Fred down the road can swallow a cup cake whole.

The black procession of ants moves down the rock, over the pale green moss, across a strip of soil and into the grass. That's where it gets tricky, so I lay my cheek on the prickly grass and pretend that I'm as tiny as an ant. They have to climb up and down the criss-crossed blades of grass. Sometimes they lose the line, but another ant going in the opposite direction bumps into them and they get back on track. When the line goes under a pile of gum leaves Dad raked yesterday, it disappears. I circle the leaves to see where it comes out, but can't pick up the trail again.

I've got kind of a cubby house behind the Mela . . . Mela . . . something tree. The bottom branches were dead anyway and the neighbour's cat used to sleep in there, so I broke off the small branches so that Sandy could get in. The neighbour's cat doesn't sleep there anymore. I've stashed my favourite plastic animals there, because I don't like to share those. Besides, when my brother Billy gets home from school he's inclined to bend their legs. Billy says plastic animals are for babies. Big kids play with soldiers.

I smile at the headless soldier hanging from a string on a Melaleuca branch and bend one of its arms.

Sandy pushes her way into the cubby and flops down beside me. She rests her chin on my knee and looks at me, so I rub behind her ears. Her ears are long and floppy and as soft as silk. Sandy's my best mate and we share everything. I don't mind sharing my cubby with my pets.

I've got a pet spider too. He doesn't have a name, but he has a web in the Melaleuca and today he has caught a green caterpillar. He's wrapping it up (let's call the caterpillar, Billy) in a silvery web, as carefully as a Christmas present. He turns Billy around and around slowly, rubbing his long black legs together to pull more of the silk thread out. I'm not sure why he wraps his dinner up, maybe because he can't eat it all at once, but I do know that by the end of the week chubby, green Billy will be nothing more than a withered, dry shell. That makes me smile again.

There are lots of Slater beetles in the cool soil, but I don't bother with them. Not since I discovered that when they roll into a ball they are the perfect size to fit up my nose. Five up one side and two up the other. Mum was cross that she had to take me to the emergency department so a doctor could get them out with some really long tweezers.

I wonder if Mum has finished cooking tea yet, so I can go inside. I hear the clatter of a saucepan crashing into the sink. Better wait a bit longer . . . but I need to pee. Mum says that only animals pee outside, but Dad reckons it's good for the lemon tree, so I hose a few ants off the trunk. Sandy squats on the lawn.

There are lots of millipedes on the back porch, so I get the dustpan and broom that Mum bought especially for me to help her. I sweep a lot up, but can't resist squishing one under my shoe. Yep, they still stink. Dad puts millipedes into a bucket of water sometimes, or straight into the bin, but I can't reach the bin, so I toss them into the bushes.

"Come inside and wash up, Tom. You can help me set the table before your Dad gets home," Mum calls through the kitchen window.

Then I remember the beater on the rock. It's swarming with ants now, so I make a game out of flicking them as far as I can, pretending they are spacemen being launched into another universe. Jurassic Park.

"Tom, hurry up."

I shake the rest of the ants off. I like playing in the garden with Sandy, but I don't want to be a baby anymore. I want to go to school so that I can learn stuff.