

Arthur Rackham's  
illustration to the  
Brothers Grimm,  
'The Valiant Little Tailor'.



# One with Seven Blows: An Airy Tale

Paul Shovlin

**H**ans was born an uncommon housefly, *Musca domestica*, on the carcass of a dead rat killed by a sleek, self-satisfied house cat named Mäusefänger, in the crawlspace under the small, warm house of a tailor in the present-day region of Baden-Württemberg, Germany, in the small town of Waldkirch, about 15 kilometres northeast of the city of Freiberg im Breisgau, in the year of 1663, on a day reckoned by the fly calendar as under the sign of Rotten Fruit.

Although it's said he was 'born' a housefly, all houseflies begin their life journey as maggots. Hans was unimpressive at maggotry. "Wiggle like us!" his siblings seemed to signal with their undulating bodies, although they could not yet speak. Hans shimmied and ate, but he could not writh as beautifully as his kin. Their teeming masses (there were 127 of them, including Hans) shivered and swelled over the rat's carcass, giving it the impression of life, but Hans' poor attempt at writhing seemed more like a grain of rice sizzling on a pan on the stove. Hans was content to eat and think and learn while his sisters and brothers upstaged one another with their beautiful wriggling translucent bodies.

From the beginning, the maggots were undergoing an amazing metamorphosis. Through three beautiful stages of larva, they grew fatter and longer and more obscene in their maturity. As pupae their outer shells seasoned to a beautiful, putrid brown, the kind humans delicately call 'kackbraun', before they awoke in their new perfect forms. Stepping forth from their pupa shells like Athena stepping lightly and fully formed from the head of Zeus, they emerged as glorious, winged houseflies.

As far as flies go, Hans was not much of one at all, just as he was barely worthy of the title maggot. His body was smaller than those of his brothers and sisters, his wings buzzed a register lower, and his feet were just a little less sticky. If one could say one nice thing about Hans, it might be that his eyes were the rich titian colour of a spoiled tangerine. Of the 127 in this batch of eggs, many of the flies were lured out to the street by the delightful raw sewage that flowed there; some kept going and made it into the Black Forest and the cornucopia of carrion the wilderness offered, but Hans was content to move into the small house with the tailor. Seven of his 127 brothers and sisters joined him.

Hans was timid in general, but especially among humans. They disgusted him, dirty and filthy as they were. You could never tell what illness they might be carrying. Hans spent his mornings outside, across the street, at the open-air market. From conversations there he

gathered that humans were disease-ridden beasts. It had only been a year since the so-called Spanish plague had ravaged Waldkirch and the surrounding region and people and flies still spoke of it: the people with fear in their voices and the flies with longing. Hans, unlike his kin, wouldn't debase himself by touching a human, even if it were a festering, bloated corpse, and so he didn't dream of those bountiful times past.

It's hard to say what was really at the heart of Hans's aversion. Hans thought a lot more than the average housefly, or the average human for that matter. Maybe there was more to it than believing humans were dirty or being fearful because they were dangerous ... maybe the heart of it lay in Hans's tendency to listen, to really listen to people. It's quite possible that all it takes to evaluate the human condition (and find it lacking) is the evidence available through a myriad of conversations that normal folks have every day, particularly when they focus on subjects that people fear; such as calamity and disease. For example, it doesn't exactly paint the best picture of humanity when Albrecht the Weaver's view of the Spanish Plague was, "It weren't all bad. When Klaus the Bowyer croaked, I were able to expand my booth in the market into his space. Been selling twice as many baskets ever since."

Obviously, no fly remembered that time of plague; that would be ridiculous. Flies lived only a few weeks by human reckoning. But, all the same, flies still told stories of the elaborate feasts they'd had the year before. Flies had an oral tradition, though, that passed down information through mnemonic devices and common symbols, tropes and archetypes. Given the role flying plays in the lives and identities of 'flies', it's no surprise that the stories they told from generation to generation were called 'airy tales'. The tales they told regarding the time of the plague were enough to make any fly drool with hunger, except of course Hans.

As it is told in the tales, Hans was a substandard fly and his seven siblings never let him forget his shortcomings. They would often taunt him as they flew freely to food that he was too timid to reach.

"This muffin is to die for!" Griselda, his graceful older sister, would heckle him, while barrel-rolling onto a muffin in a wooden bowl on the table. Griselda could pirouette, like a dancer in a ballet, on the head of the iron pins the tailor had embedded in a cushion shaped like an iced cupcake near his workspace. Her brothers and sisters would clap their front legs in appreciation of her choreography.

"I prefer the sausage curing in the rafters," cried Frantz, the most athletic, hanging upside down high above on the best string of wurst. Frantz would make his siblings laugh when he would alight on the nose of Mäusefänger, who slept in a box next to the tailor while he worked. Frantz would land, call out, "Watch this!" and then pummel the poor cat's nose. For most flies, such a stunt would result in, perhaps at most, a slight itch for the cat and a lazy twitch from Mäusefänger's hind claw. With Frantz's mighty blow, poor Mäusefänger would jump straight up, startled out of his sleep. The tailor would laugh at his cat's antics.

"You are both wrong!" called Stefan, the brave. "The best food can be found on the tailor's plate!" He said this as he buzzed off a steaming egg, navigating boldly between the

waving hands of the giant. Stefan had no fear. He would often land directly on the tailor's beard, which always held a bounty of treasures, such as a crumb of cheese or some sticky egg yolk. More often than not, he'd secure a delicious feast before he was swatted away by the tailor's hands.

Hans watched his siblings closely and longed for skills such as theirs. Every fly had something that made them special, even Hans. Hans's great talent was his command of languages. As I'm sure you can imagine, polylingualism isn't held in high esteem among houseflies. Fluency in one human language was just about the limit in flydom, where the average lifespan was about two weeks. But languages came to Hans very simply. He knew many, and it did not take him long to learn new ones.

I'm not sure his brothers and sisters even registered his talent as a valuable tool. To them, humans were like hurricanes or rockslides ... very dangerous, but not sentient in the same way you or I are. Trying to understand them was as pointless as trying to understand individual drops of water in a great waterfall.

The time Hans spent in the market was key to his language development. Produce and goods flowed into Waldkirch from Breisgau, a town known for its fine Pinot Noir. Hans spent his mornings learning from other flies in the market, who came from many different exciting places and spoke different languages. The turmoil that the humans called the Thirty Years' War only added more travellers and interaction with flies from different locales. Hans was a genius at it. Within even a few moments of encountering a new language, which for a fly was almost like a few months, he could pick it up. He had a knack for accents, as well.

One day Hans happened to be sitting on the wall in the tailor's house. That day his brothers had taunted him more than usual. Hans tried to ignore them by performing, in his head, a dialogue between a Russian speaker and a Spaniard. Soon, the sweet smell of jam interrupted his thoughts and broke his concentration. Hans looked down to see the tailor sewing a belt. A slice of bread covered with the most heavenly smelling jam sat on the table next to him.

The tailor was of disgusting and gigantic proportions. A few times Hans had been sucking at a crumb here or there in the house and had been caught unaware by the man. Hans remembered each of the times and relived them in his nightmares. Huge, knobby teeth sticking out of pink, puckered gums. Wiry black hair poking and twisting out of a grey, scaling scalp. Large crushing mallet-hands that could obliterate an unwary fly. These nightmare images flashed through Hans's mind as he sat on the wall and nervously licked his front legs. The smell of the jam was enticing, but Hans trembled on the wall and wouldn't move.

Hans's seven siblings were heady with the smell of jam, but not too heady to miss a chance at taunting their poor brother. "Hans," they cried, "You are not a fly, but a speck of paint on the wall! What? Are you afraid of that big oaf down there? He does not even notice us, and is too slow and dull-witted to catch us if he tried!" They circled Hans until the scent of jam became too overwhelming, then plunged to the jam-covered bread below.

"Hey, who invited you?" Hans heard the tailor say.

"Watch out brothers! You have angered the giant!" shouted Hans, who was the only one who spoke fluent German. Hans's brothers and sisters ignored him. The tailor waved his hands in the air and dispersed the flies.

"Ha ha!" the flies laughed and yelled at Hans. "Didn't we tell you he was too slow for the likes of us?" With that they turned in the air and descended again.

"Wait, I'll give you something!" said the tailor.

"Get out of there, brothers and sisters! You have pushed the giant too far!" shouted Hans. Again, they did not listen to Hans. The shadow of the tailor loomed over them. When it receded, Hans's seven siblings were lying dead on the table with their legs bent in odd angles, like clumps of false eyelashes. They had never treated Hans very kindly, but they were family and they were all he had. Hans remembered that even as maggots they had been a part of his life, crawling and shimmying on the belly of the dead rat in Hans's general vicinity. His blood, for everyone knows that flies' bodies run thick with blood, began to boil. Hans vowed revenge.

The tailor, quite satisfied with the orgiastic bloodbath, embroidered "Seven with one blow!" onto the ornamental belt he was working on. He abandoned poor Mäusefänger and went out into the world to spread the news. There he encountered giants and beasts, all of whom he bested with his sneakiness and complete lack of morals. Before two weeks were up, he proved himself a greater monster than those that plagued the land; in defeating them he became ruler, as such men do. He was named St Gall's Knight Regent and Governor of Ebringen and Norsingen. He remained Governor for the rest of his short life, but during that time he called himself 'King', pompous and self-satisfied with his own achievement.

Brave little Hans, who had only ever flown outside the house to visit the market, took to the air and followed the tailor throughout his adventures. He kept his compound eyes out for an opportunity to pay the tailor back but none suggested itself. Hans spent the time ruminating on his brothers and sisters and drew strength from their memories.

Finally, Hans settled down in the tailor's castle and congregated with the other flies in the great hall. They were all abuzz with news of the new ruler. It was here that Hans learned the tailor's full name, Freidrich Ludwig Knuffsky.

"He is a killer of flies," Hans said icily.

"What is that, old one?" asked the flies. A week and a half had passed since Hans had set out for vengeance. Hans was extremely old, and knew that death was near, but his blood still boiled with desire for vengeance.

"He killed my seven sisters and brothers," Hans said.

"Outrageous!" said the flies, "Regents usually have their servants do the dirty work. When did it happen?"

"A week and a half ago," replied Hans.

"Ancient history!" said the flies, "Who needs to discuss ancient history when more interesting topics offer themselves."

"Such as what?" inquired Hans.

"Such as the visit tomorrow by the Ambassador of Sweden."

"Are you sure of this?" asked Hans.

"Yes, he comes to discuss trade with the new Regent."

Hmmm, thought Hans, Swedish is one of my favourite languages, so sonorous and rhythmic. A plan began to form in Hans's head.

"Listen to this," he said as he gathered the other flies around him and told them what he was going to do.

The Swedish Ambassador arrived the following day with much ado. An extravagant feast was laid out and flies landed on it wherever they could. Bored servants shooed them away occasionally, but it ended up being a banquet for the flies as much as for humans. It was decided that the men would parley over the food. Trumpets blew and red carpets were unfurled and eventually everyone entered the main hall to begin the feast. The tailor, who thought quite a bit of himself, sat at the centre of a long table at the back of hall, his chair slightly raised on a platform, so as to appear higher than the others. As had become his habit, he was clad in a voluminous robe trimmed in ermine.

Hans flew over to the ear of the Swedish Ambassador. Perched amidst the great bristles of grey hair that erupted from Sven's ear, Hans shouted out as loud as he could, "Sir! Friedrich plans to poison you! Take heed!" Though Hans had shouted, it still only came out quite softly to the ears of Ambassador Svensson, who was nonetheless startled. His bushy eyebrows almost twitched themselves into a knot and he called for the officer in charge of his retinue.

"I don't know whether it be by angel or devil, but somehow I am warned of foulness afoot. Watch carefully, and if you see anything strange, take action. I believe they mean to poison me," Sven whispered.

"As you command it, so shall it be done," said the Lieutenant, who thought that diplomatic missions were a waste of time. The Lieutenant longed for battle and blood and daring deeds instead.

Dinner was served. The men ate and spoke of matters of state. The Lieutenant watched everything closely and kept his hand on his sword. When it came time for the roast pheasant to be served, the flies of the castle stopped what they were doing and all eyes trained on Hans.

Hans had been lazily circling the dinner table. He felt much better than he had in days. His long journey had strengthened his wings. He glided down to Sven Svensson's mouth. His yawning maw was wide open, as he was in mid-bite of a succulent morsel of pheasant. You may doubt what happened next, but it is the truth. The hero's journey must have

changed Hans, for he was brave, fast and strong., Channelling Stefan's courage to overcome his distaste of humans, Hans shot inside and flew deep to the back of Sven's throat. He gave the Ambassador's tonsils a mighty blow, then nipped out as quick as could be.

Sven's first reaction was to clamp his mouth shut and then open it wide like a fish on dry land as he began to cough and sputter. Hans zipped in and out again, barrel-rolling like Griselda between Sven's ivory teeth. Like lightning he sped, delivering more agitating ticklings to the back of Sven's throat. The castle flies hooted with pleasure as they watched. Hans's seventh trip was enough. Like Frantz, he pummelled Sven's dangling uvula. The human's cavernous mouth finally clamped closed on Hans, who was crushed as Sven swallowed him. However, it did the trick. Ambassador Svensson grabbed his throat.

His coughs, gags and wheezes, growing in succession and intensity, had caught the attention of the Swedish Lieutenant. When the ambassador grabbed his throat, the Lieutenant acted. Through short, swift gestures with his hands he signalled his men to attack. The main hall was quickly taken, and during the battle the tailor was slain. His robe had gotten tangled under his chair, restricting his movement, and being up on a platform had made him the perfect target.

Later, it was realised that Sven had not been poisoned. Though a bit queasy, he rode out with his troops. In the end, he was glad about it all because the trade disputes had been settled. Sweden now controlled Freiburg, although that reign would only last for a couple of years. Humans are fickle creatures and so is their history.

The flies that live in the castle where it happened still tell the airy tale of Hans from generation to generation. And though the tailor was killed only indirectly, Hans is known to them all as the brave little fly who killed one with seven blows.

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**Paul Shovlin**

'Still-Life with Fish', Georg Flegel (1566–1638).

