

The Economy in Perspective

Once upon a time ... there lived a grasshopper named Lucky and an ant named Ernest. Like his ancestors, Lucky loved to live in the moment and rarely thought about tomorrow. Ernest, following his ancestral traditions, kept his nose to the grindstone and his eye on the future. Despite their differences, the two were the best of friends.

By day, Lucky was a manufacturer's rep for a pet-food company; on weekends, he played acoustic fiddle around town with a band called the Manic Mantises. The pay was lousy, but the bug juice was on the house. Ernest had worked for years as a mechanical engineer for an ant-colony design firm. In his spare time, he gardened and read books on human psychology.

The two friends met one evening at the Night Crawler, a local hangout. After gossiping a while about the ladybugs and lounge lizards on the scene, they settled into more serious conversation. "Lucky," Ernest said, "I'm worried about you. How long can you go on like this, jumping from one job to the next? I used to be afraid that you wouldn't get through the winter, but now I'm even more worried that you aren't storing up any food for your old age. When you drove up to the Crawler in that new Alpha Rodeo Spyder tonight, I knew you'd really gone buggy!"

Lucky grinned. "Ernie," he said affectionately, "You are such a pest! First off, I got a great deal on those wheels from Arachnid Motors: nothing down and only one saltine a month for 84 months. Besides, I can afford it—my investments have been doing great. My Manic Mantis buddies put me onto this start-up company that invented a new food-recognition system. You put these drops in your eyes and you can actually see the food through walls and stuff. It's awesome! I gave the termites who invented it two grams of wood shavings so they could spend all their time perfecting the drops. They'll sell the drops for one saltine per dram, and I get a share of everything they rake in. And then there's a research team of carpenter ants who think they've discovered a way to neutralize Raid; I gave them three grams of peanut butter for a share of all the saltines they get. Pretty soon I'll be in clover and I can quit my day job! But hey, Ernie, you should know about all these new inventions, being an engineer yourself."

"I already know more than I want to. You should see what's going on at my shop. We are prototyping a new colony design that provides more space and better security and can be built

by fewer ants in less time than the conventional model. What's more, we think the technology will transfer to beehives. Queen bees are shipping us honey like you wouldn't believe, just for an opportunity to invest! The first colony won't go live for years, if ever. These ladies could be stung deep, but when there's a big buzz for the next new thing, they won't listen to reason. I'm telling you, Lucky, I'm in the eye of this swarm and I don't like what I see."

Lucky looked bug-eyed at his friend and replied, "Get with the program, Ernesto, it's a no-lose proposition! You can have your cake and eat it too. Just buy everything on credit, which is a snap to get because you have all these saltines coming to you down the road. You can enjoy life today and tomorrow! All the herbivores are doing it."

As sure as larvae become pupae, Ernest knew what would become of Lucky. "All I can tell you, my friend, is don't count your crackers."

Months passed. One night, Ernest sat nursing a tall cool one at the Crawler when Lucky sauntered in, a ladybug on each arm and a fat rye-grass cigar in his mandible. "Wheatgrass shakes all around!" he called to the bartender. Seeing his old friend, Lucky hopped over and sat down.

"You look like a million saltines!" exclaimed Ernest. "I guess that new eye-drop system really panned out. Or was it the Raid neutralizer?"

"Ernie, all those schemes went bust. But my investments were structured as limited partnerships and, after court-supervised reorganization, I landed on my hind legs every time. Then I hit on another business plan. I knew this Internet thing was going to be huge for bugs, and there had to be a way to cash in big time. Then it came to me! Investors want to be sure that advertisers will bankroll the sites, and advertisers want the sites to attract lots of eyes. So I developed sites for compound eyes—you know how insects can see multiple images simultaneously. And I'm working on an infrared site for the honeybees. I got financing from a group of locusts who'll wait another 17 years for a payback! What a stroke of genius, borrowing from that swarm! Needless to say, I expect the saltines will soon start pouring in."

Morals: Never consume tomorrow what you can consume today.

A fool and her honey are soon parted.
If at first you don't succeed,
reorganize, borrow, and try again.