

Wasps' nests

Do it, she says. Now, do it.

I do: slow at first, tips of the index and middle fingers testing the coming buzz.

Come on, all the way.

I creep on. She doesn't work the pump on the smoker until the first knuckle of my pinkie is no longer visible. The smoke blows warm past my fingers and everything stills. I continue. The second knuckle, the third. I stop and wait for her.

Not going to say ask a third time.

In go the forearm and the elbow. She gasps, I stop.

Now, she says. Feel them out.

She pumps the smoker a couple of times. I lower my hand and fan out my fingers.

Find some antennae, she says.

I nod.

Now feel for a head.

Done, I say.

Thorax, then abdomen.

My, my.

Just do it.

I trail the tip of my curved middle finger head to sting. Three small distinct segments beneath the cellophane wings. I look at her but she's lost in the blackness between the rectangular opening of the super and my forearm. She works the smoker in intervals and we stand there as it grows cool and dark. I say her name twice, tension gnawing at my elbow. She remains silent and mechanical and between us the eventual curtains of smoke twist and turn and rise thinner and thinner into the coming dusk.

Someone calls the dogs in and they trot heavy and momentous on the hard earth behind the house. She presses her eyes shut and rubs her nose with one of her wrists before opening the lid on the smoker and pitching the still burning twigs and needles on the gravel and stomping them out with the rubber heel of her sneakers.

Let's go, she says.

We walk to the creek, our steps flattening the edges of the clover patches on the clearing and launching the torn leaves and stems into sour vectors that hang senseless on the cross breeze. I slip, all caught up in my dance of long awkward strides and in the laces of shoes that are one and a half sizes too big for my feet, as we near the thin belt of trees adjacent to the water. She lifts me by the elbows and wipes the undergrowth's green stain from the outseams of my jeans. She laughs and I, too, laugh. She pats my back, fingernails shimmering in the half light. We press on down the sand hills and their windfallen limbs. Soon the current's gargle talks above us.

Scotland, she says. No: actually, Japan.

I ask how so.

Well, she says. We lived in this old house on the side of a mountain. It wasn't a Japanese style house or anything, just an old two bedroom place in the middle of nowhere and a bunch of apiaries next to it.

She picks up a pebble and casts into the water closer to the other side of the creek. A few birds wing over us, their shadows barely anything.

So?

So nothing, really. We were just stuck there for like a year and half while my father worked on a paper about bees, the usual.

But it was better than Scotland.

I guess, she says. I remember that my mother would walk me to this bus stop that was on a bend in one of these mountain roads and I would ride this ugly blue bus to a school with all the other kids that weren't Japanese. I really liked that.

All the other kids?

Yeah, there was a big agricultural research university in town and they had people from all over lecturing or whatever. We even had a special class: English speaking teacher, English books, different time for recess, the works.

You liked the class then?

Not particularly. Some kids were mean and the ones I liked, I only ever saw at school because we had no car and we lived such a long way from town, so no one ever came over. Every day after school it

was mostly me running after my father and setting up his camera while he wrote down whatever it is he wrote down on those clipboards he always had with him.

I take one of the honey confections her mother had given me back in the house out of my pocket and undo, with excessive care, the twists of wax paper. She carries on.

You know about Asian giant hornets?

I bite down hard on the candy and nod and say that I don't know about them.

She turns and faces me. I chew, quiet as a mouse, and watch as she spreads her thumb and index about an inch and a half apart: They're about this big and vicious, they live mostly off bees and other bugs, ten could kill you.

Did you ever see them?

No, she says. But that's why kids were never allowed to come over. Us living up there by ourselves and with all the bees and stuff, they probably figured we spent all day and night just fighting the damn things off.

The sky grows a deeper shade of blue. I swallow, the crystallised honey sharp as it drops down my gullet. She cracks the knuckles of her left hand before racing them over the skin of my neck and shoulders. The water glints as it folds black and jagged over the stones and branches in its ever downward rush. I unfold a page of composition book paper that has been burning in my pocket since last night and read, stumbling on every other line, but still she laughs and gets close and then closer.

Wasps' nests, she says. Say it fast: wasps' nests.

I try and somehow manage a decent effort.

Next time, before you try something like that, warm up. Wasps' nests or red leather yellow leather or whatever.

I say it again under my breath before folding the page along its creases and throwing it into the water.

They killed a kid six months before we got there, she says. The son of a man who looked over the apiaries, he was probably playing in the woods while his father harvested the honey and he must've kicked the wrong rock or put his hand down a rabbit hole or something.

Hornets in a hole on the ground?

They mostly nest underground, like in fox dens. They don't do trees or high places, they keep close to the ground. Anyway, that's where all the fear came from. I didn't know a thing about it until one of the kids in class told me. He was all purple when they found him, he said. Be careful or they're going to find you all purple one of these days. And that, of course, is what they started calling me: Here comes Purple, Watch out for the bees under Purple's skirt, You're gonna end up purple up in your purple mountain house Purple. I hated it. I told my father and all he did was tell me that there was nothing to be afraid of, that our bees, in fact, would protect us from the hornets because they were a special type of bee, a smart bee. He said that whenever one of those hornets found one of their hives, these bees would just ball up around it and suffocate it with their wings. I tried telling the kids in school all about this, but you know how those kids are.

I say I do. She nods and continues.

There was a patch of woods behind the school playground. We would sometimes go there if the teacher tried to sneak a smoke during recess. A few weeks before we were due back home, we went in

there, me and two or three of the bigger, badder kids. We were playing hide and seek or something and someone found a hole beneath a rotting branch.

She stops and breathes in deep. A few bugs flutter above our heads. I can still make her out in the moonlight, legs extended, weight all on her arms planted on the sand behind her. I clear my throat.

They took turns to talk about snakes and spiders and hornets, she says. After that, they took turns to chicken. Then it was my turn.

Turn for what?

She draws her legs beneath her and her arms onto them. Well, she says and holds out one of her hands. You know what.

Clouds drag ragged and unhurried over the moon and their shade hides her and her outstretched hand. The silence and cold grow solid in the space between us. The dogs howl distant and blue and beneath them a voice calls out a name I can't make out. I dig my fingers in the sand and remain silent, trying to find some more senseless words to stumble over, and the clouds drag on and on and on.