TRUE FOR BEES: A CREATIVE DISSERTATION

by

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To my brother Michael

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by

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DISSERTATION

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This creative dissertation is comprised of a novel titled *True for Bees* and a scholarly apparatus that offers background for the creation of the novel. The novel is a work of speculative fiction, set in the near future, and focuses on the plight of the western honeybee, as well as explores the potential implications of climate change and food scarcity. The critical essay examines the role of perspective in a speculative novel, situating *True for Bees* within the evolution of narrative technique in the modern novel.

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PART I

TRUE FOR BEES: A NOVEL

It's true for bees as it is for human beings:

Life brings sickness with it.

--Virgil, *Georgics*

Chapter 1: Universes

What was once Myakka State Park, Florida.

"Your mind travels your whole body, Willa. It doesn't just stay up here." Hormidas had his thumb on her forehead. "It goes out into the world and comes back again. Rides the current and comes back to tell you all about it. You communicate with people, Willa. You do. And they with you. Whether you want to or not. It's not just yours, your mind. It's only part yours. The rest is shared. Don't ever forget it." He removed his thumb but Willa could still feel it there. Cold and hard.

They were sitting on a low, horizontal tree trunk. Its scraggly foliage hung just above the ground. The cypress trees above them stole the sunlight, and the tree adapted by growing not up but sideways, reaching out like an arm toward a small patch of swamp that permitted, most afternoons, a bit of dappled sunlight. It seemed to Willa that this tree had gone to an awful lot of trouble for such little reward. Hormidas said Myakka State Park was becoming a rainforest, like the Amazon.

A line of small, yellowish swamp ants trooped past them. They were busy building an enormous hill at edge of the river. "It's only when you see the mass of them," Hormidas said, suddenly, startling her. He pointed a bony finger at the ants. "The whole of the hill, blackening

the ground. That's when you begin to see the whole creature. They're as connected to one another as your hand is to you." He shifted his weight on the tree trunk. His watch chain was a smiling loop outside his filthy pants.

She had no idea how old 'Midas was. He could've been sixty. He could've been a hundred. Wrinkles slashed deep grooves across his forehead but he moved like a younger man, like someone her father's age. Hormidas hopped off the tree and began following the trail of ants to the river's edge. Willa followed him.

"We're just building a different kind of hill," he said, yelling louder than he needed to, over his shoulder and back at Willa. "All of us. Even if most of us don't know it."

Willa could feel the anxiety outside the swamp. People had long been protecting their food supplies, but there'd been a new wave of lawlessness. People, floaters and criminals alike, had to rely upon their fiercest instincts. Hormidas said this was normal, considering.

But in their swamp, near the water, Willa, Cass, and Hormidas were protected. There was only one way in, which meant they could see people coming. The ocean, which was once fifteen miles away, now bordered the swamp on one side. It offered the best route of escape, if it came to that. Willa had been taught, through regular drills, how to portage her own small canoe through the swamp while carrying her pack and supplies, west three quarters of a mile to the ocean. From there, they could paddle north to St. Petersburg, which was nearly overcome by the Gulf of Mexico.

There was a compound there led by a man Hormidas knew. Willa and her father Cass had never met Brother Mutte, but Hormidas told them Brother Mutte was the first person they should

seek out should anything happen to him. “He will keep you alive,” Hormidas said. “He knows how to survive.”

Hormidas said Brother Mutte was a false prophet but that he was a good leader all the same. Willa didn’t know what this meant, really, although she pretended she did. She knew what true and false meant. And she knew what it meant to be a prophet because she herself was one. She figured at least Brother Mutte *was* prophet, even if he was a false one.

Willa and her family lived alone. Willa suspected that they way they lived was dangerous, being without a group for protection, but she didn’t feel threatened. They were prepared for anything, and they were usually able to find food. The ranger’s cabin they lived in had been abandoned for years. The park’s small sections of grassland had given way to wide tangles of trees and shrubs, impassable brambles and vines, and what was emerging was an inviolate, tropical swampland layered with life. Before Hormidas came and taught them how to catch fish, and where to get cheap corn to press arepas, how to trap small game and raise goats for milk and butter, before he taught Willa about revelations and healings and took her to the abandoned grocery store parking lots and the beach revivals, before all that, Willa and her father Cass were starving. Willa’s mother, Katherine, had already died in the ranger’s cabin two years earlier, when Willa was eight.

Her mother was only fifteen when Willa was born and small enough that they were often mistaken for sisters. Malnourished and susceptible to everything the swamp mosquito carried, Willa’s mother was always sick. Willa remembered the feel of her prickly flesh, which was often raised in small, unhappy looking bumps. Willa remembered her as cold to the touch; she would read books or sit alone outside for long periods of time doing nothing at all, eased by the

humidity. Katherine wouldn't take food from the mouths of Cass and Willa, so she often went without.

But even so, she was always humming and whistling. The sounds that came from her were incongruous, too loud for her narrow frame. Willa thought her mother lived in a secret world and she so desperately wanted in. But before she could come to know her, her mother died. She just nodded off in the rotten, leather swivel chair that once belonged to the park ranger. She slipped away from the world without a sound. She had one of the ranger's old maps spread across her lap, and she just lowered her head and died. Willa thought her mother was sleeping. Katherine made crayons for Willa from candle wax and food dye, and Willa sat across from her body at the card table they used for meals, coloring, until her father returned home.

Now Willa scrambled to catch up with Hormidas, 'Midas she called him. His gait had carried him far ahead of her, still following the trail of ants. "Do you think someday I'll see her again, 'Midas?" There was no need to be specific. He knew what she was asking.

"Sure. Sure you will. And you can see her now, if you want. Nothing's stopping you. The connection is still there, always there. You'll see her soon enough, clear as you see me here. And you'll remember she was always there. Just like it was with the filament. Like it was with Champion."

Later that evening, Hormidas and Cass took Willa to do a healing. The afternoon on the river had passed quietly, as did their dinner of river gar, milk, and arepas. The day had dropped out of sight and night fell over the swamp, which is much like sunrise everywhere else because in a swamp, everything comes alive at night.

“She might be angry,” Hormidas told her as they waited on the porch of the ranger’s cabin for their ride. The swamp was alive with a cacophony of life: insects, the beating bats and night birds, the scurry-scurry-plop of nutria. “People with stomach ailments are often angry,” he said. “They have trouble letting go.”

Willa never knew what to expect when she healed someone new, and she preferred to wait and see things for herself. But she always listened to Hormidas.

“Does Mrs. Cassavant even want a healing? Does she want me to come?” Sometimes family members would arrange for healings, and the sick person wouldn’t want Willa’s help, and Willa was ashamed when her father had to convince them. Cass would tell them about Willa’s mother and how she’d died in the swamp, and how he’d had been at the museum-slash-gift shop trading for food, and how little Willa had been left alone with her mother’s body for nearly two days. He’d never tell them about the filament or the connections. He’d never tell them about what Hormidas called “Willa’s gifts.”

“Yes, she wants you there. And she’s going to give you fifty dollars just to come and see her. We’re going to get a pound of cornmeal, coffee, and a down payment on a new goat with that money. And maybe some bubble gum, too.” He gave her a quick smack on the thigh and smiled at her, the wide gap between his two front teeth appearing like a secret passageway. His white, straight teeth often surprised her because the rest of him was dirty and crooked: crooked nose, crooked fingers, bowed legs. He had raucous, long grey hair and ravaged skin but he was beautiful. “Fifty dollars!” he said. “We’ll put out some gator traps this time.”

Willa thought of the alligator tracks like giant tulips pressed into the silt outside the ranger’s cabin, the impression of a tail slicing through them. An alligator had come up out of the

swamp and taken their last nanny goat the week before, and they were nearly out of what was left of her milk.

Soon the headlights of a car came over the trailhead and illuminated the secret flight of millions of swamp insects. Mrs. Cassavant's son had arrived to pick them up in his convertible. She could hear the engine after his car passed the trailhead. Cass had repurposed the ranger's wildlife cameras to create surveillance of their section of the swamp, keeping the system alive with car batteries he'd traded for at the museum-slash-gift shop. Cass came out to the porch after the car pass the first camera on the closed circuit in the kitchen. He scrubbed his scalp, deep into his tight curls, and kicked a worked boot up onto her lap so she could tie his shoelaces. Her father was wiry, loose all over, with dark skin and a curly beard.

"You ready, bear?" He father called her bear sometimes. Cass was twenty-six, still a kid himself, but his eyes told Willa about his childhood during the height of the famine, of losing his own parents, of hiding out in the state park with a group of teenagers who had died one by one. It was an older car. Willa had only been in a car a couple of times. She had travelled to do healings in 'Midas' RV on a few occasions. But not often. Only when whoever Willa was visiting was also paying for the gas. Gas was expensive and hard to find, except in the Have-towns. Mrs. Cassavant's son had the top of the convertible up, which immediately disappointed Willa, but he put the windows down after they got in. Willa slid in the back next to Hormidas and Cass got up front.

There was one other kid that lived nearby in the swamp, at the bottom of the road heading to the highway, and Willa so desperately hoped the girl would be out front of her camper when they drove by in the convertible. She wasn't.

Willa studied the man driving the car. He had tight curls, and a few sprung ones cut a splintery silhouette through the blue light illuminating his dashboard. His freckles were so thick they gave the impression of a stubbly beard. She tried to smell him, but all she could smell was cigarettes, old vinyl seats, and the musty smell of the decomposing foam that was exposed at all the seat's edges.

The son was mumbling something to Cass, and Cass was mumbling back. Willa couldn't hear what they were saying. Too much wind through the open windows. Wind was a problem these days, too. Unstable air masses collided constantly now. But in the swamp, the wind was tempered by the trees, and it was the middle of the country that was most affected by the howlers. The car's tires spun through the washed out roads, deeply scarred from lack of upkeep. Cass passed something to the son and he put it in his coat pocket. Willa couldn't see what it was. What lights there had once been were long extinguished on the roads crisscrossing Myakka National Park.

During the height of the famine, before Willa was born, people starved in nursing homes. Willa's dad told her his own parents had eventually starved, but their parents, Willa's great-grandparents, had died early on, in a nursing home. "Everyone starved in the nursing homes," Cass had said. "And the state and veteran's hospitals. Waiting obediently for the government to come and save them. And in perfect faith, too, like abandoned chicks in the nest." Willa had seen abandoned nests many times in the swamp, the eggs picked apart or covered in mold.

But Mrs. Cassavant didn't live in a starving-nursing home. They lived in a Have-town, so Willa expected the nursing home to be first rate. Willa was excited to see the flowers. Cass said

people in the Have-town pay thousands to dollars to fill their flowerbeds. Only Haves had flowerbeds, seeing how difficult it is to grow flowers now.

And Willa found it strange that people in a Have-towns sent the old people to live away from their families. Everywhere else, old people lived and died with their families. Many of the floaters that Willa visited had several generations living together all together. Families were grateful for the elderly and their memories, stories from the past.

A private security force met them at the checkpoint of the Venice Have-town. "You are expected," Mrs. Cassavant's son told in a haughty voice. A sign lit up the road, beguiling millions of bugs. It read: *Venice Luxury Homesites. Corporate Resort and Compound. Private Property*. Two young men on either side of the car, blonde and square jarred, shined flashlights in each of their faces. They checked the trunk. They asked for ID's. They asked if they were carrying any guns or weapons, insects or produce. They issued temporary passes to Cass, Hormidas, and Willa. They had to wear them around their necks. This meant they were floaters, although the passes didn't eplicitly spell that out. Instead, they square, black letters on the green pass read: *Non-affiliated*, which meant they didn't belong to a Have-town in Venice or anywhere else.

They snaked through the quiet roads. The bio dome above them was open, so it was a natural night sky, the same Willa slept under out in the swamp. Willa had been in a Have-town once in Dallas that had a bio-dome that looked just like a night sky when it was closed, except with more stars. And during the day, even if the howlers were raging and the bio-dome was covered in sediment, the sky was majestic azure color, knitted here and there with delicate clouds.

That night, the Venice have-town glittered in peaceful opulence. Manicured lawns spread about like thick green sponges and streetlights cast halos of soft light in every corner. Sprinkler systems shimmied across lawns and public buildings. For every house, a white fence. Every public space was manicured and dignified. There was nothing wild or unkempt. The stores looked old-fashioned with hand-painted lettering and striped awnings: pastries, produce, milkshakes, electronics. There were advertisements hanging from the sign posts for different safety initiatives and disaster drills. In the ads, all the faces were white, all the teeth straight, all the clothes clean. *Be Prepared!* One sign read, *Always keep your generators primed and your protective suits at the ready!* Another read, *Teach your kids the basics of safety. Disaster drills can be fun for the whole family.* The children in the ad looked like they'd been carved out of soap. Floaters as a rule had terrible teeth, were almost never clean, and came in all shapes, sizes, and colors. But in the Have-towns, everyone was the same. The boy and the girl in the ad for disaster drills both had assault rifles slung casually across their shoulder. Willa tapped Hormidas and pointed up at the sign as they drove under it. "They make hateful and selfish look fun, don't they?" he said with grin.

The streets were deserted. Hormidas grabbed Cass by the shoulder and pointed at the swiveling cameras attached to the tops of the electric poles and lampposts. Cass flipped a quick bird at the next one as they passed underneath.

The nurses and workers in the home stared at Hormidas as the son signed them in. They had to come at night, as not to disturb the other residents. Hormidas made a point to shake out his long, grey hair and clomp passed them down the hall to Mrs. Cassavant's room, dropping chunks of swamp mud along the way. The son had produced from the trunk of his car a floral

bouquet: roses, tulips, and chrysanthemums. Willa ran a fingernail across one of the leaves while they were standing at the admissions desk to be sure it was a real. She'd never seen flowers like that before. The son looked much younger in the fluorescent light in the hallway. Brown freckles puddled his otherwise white face, and he avoided Willa's eyes, instead talking only to Cass in a low, monotone.

Mrs. Cassavant had been in bed, waiting for them. "Oh!" she yelled, obviously startled when they opened the door to her room. She sat up and settled herself nervously. She smoothed the waffle blanket and tucked it in around her deflated little legs. She hooked wisps of gray hair away from her temples and behind her ears and lifted her glasses from the chain below her chin. Willa considered her movement: the agitation, the shakiness, the muted desperation. Willa tried to imagine what she would find when she laid hands on Mrs. Cassavant. The old woman leaned over and fumbled with a few items on her bedside table—a clock, nail clippers, two sewing thimbles, a remote control—before muttering, "Oh, never mind," and turning her attention to them. Hormidas said Mrs. Cassavant had stopped eating all together the week before, and while she was already small, like a child no bigger than Willa, she was, on top of this, somewhat emaciated. Her teeth seemed far too big for her head. She had stark blue eyes muddied by milky cataracts.

"How old are you, girl?" she said, directly to Willa.

"Eleven."

She looked at Cass. "Are you a black man?"

"My parents were from Nicaragua."

“And you have red hair,” she said to Willa. “I was told the child prophet in the swamp had brown hair.”

“It’s more red, I guess,” Willa told her. “Like my mom.”

“Your eyes…” the woman started to say. Willa had been told her eyes were like marbles, but she’d never seen a marble.

“They’re like marbles,” Willa told her.

Mrs. Cassavant didn’t seem to register this but instead turned to her son, who was still holding the flowers. “What’s this? Ron? Flowers, for me?” She clapped her hands together. “You shouldn’t have. Flowers cost a king’s ransom!”

Then her eyes fell on Hormidas. “What an Earth?” She looked at her son then at Willa and back at Hormidas, the spilled-milk spread in the center of her wide eyes. She smiled broadly. “This girl comes with quite the entourage. We don’t have much variety around here. We may have many varieties of apples but not…” She seemed lost for a moment then resumed her assessment of Hormidas. “Are you an Indian? Middle Eastern?” Willa knew Hormidas was from Canada, way up at the highest part, where humans cannot survive anymore because of the violent storms, but she kept quiet. To her son, Mrs. Cassavant said, “I’m surprised they let this ragtag group in here!” She clapped her hands together, and Willa thought she seemed very pleased they’d come to see her, ragtag or not.

Hormidas ignored her and began walking around the spacious, single room, practically an apartment. There was a bed on a raised platform just inside the door, and the room opened to a small sitting area fitted with a flat screen television and built in bookshelves. Mrs. Cassavant had art and photography books on the shelves, as well as small crisp-looking book sets with matching

covers. There were old books, too. There was one that Willa imagined might be a family Bible. There were maps in frames, old maps with nautical symbols. Interspersed amongst the books and maps were photos and other keepsakes. Silver placards sat on small easels, inscribed with Bible verses and praying hands. Several small, ornate boxes covered with semi-precious stone were scattered around the room. There was stuff everywhere.

"Amulets," Hormidas said in a low voice. "Against something strong. Maybe a *bugaloo*. Worry first about the amulets. You choose."

"I beg your pardon?" Mrs. Cassavant asked.

Willa stepped forward. Hormidas had been talking to her, warning her of the power that Mrs. Cassavant, or someone else, had bestowed upon an object in the room. Mrs. Cassavant needed amulets. And something else needed to be located and removed immediately. The *bugaloo*. Willa understood and answered him in her silent voice. *Tu-ha* was in the wind outside. Willa was grateful that the bio-dome had been left often and *Tu-ha* could blow in on the night breeze.

"What he means," Cass said, approaching the bed and taking Mrs. Cassavant's reluctant hand, "is that my daughter is here to help you. Your son tells me you've heard a lot about her already. All of it true. You'll see." Cass backed up and let Willa come in beside the woman's bed.

"I'm Willa."

"I know who you are, dear. Some women who work here told me you could help me. I've had so many surgeries on my stomach, you see. I no longer have a belly button." Mrs. Cassavant turned down the waffle blanked in three neat folds. She lifted her silk pajama top

whose buttons were strained by her small, but protruding, belly. Underneath was a severe looking undergarment. She pulled it down to expose a scarred, shriveled swath of skin that betrayed the shapes and shadows of the organs beneath. No belly button. "I don't have any fascia tissue, do you know what that is? I had a terrible infection that ate that all away. My organs are pressed right up to my skin. These hold me in." She pulled the waste band of her undergarments out and let them go with a snap.

Cass cleared his throat and stepped back toward the door next to the son, who looked as if he was waiting to make an exit. Hormidas, hearing the woman describe her illness, had turned and ascended the small platform that raised the bed above the floor. He managed only a moment's inspection before Mrs. Cassavant flipped down her top, glaring at him. Hormidas, unfazed, went back to examining the woman's things. A sliding glass door at the end of her room opened to a small patio. A bird feeder hung from the roof. Hormidas flung the door open, as if he had misjudged the strength needed to open in, and stepped outside, sliding the door closed gently behind him. It seemed he took the air with him when went.

Willa had Hormidas' basket, which he'd brought back with him from the Amazon basin. She selected four amulets from the basket and gave them to Mrs. Cassavant, along with a pencil. Willa asked the old woman to copy down some words. She spelled the ancient words out for her, one by one, and Mrs. Cassavant wrote them each on an amulet with her shaky, old-fashioned handwriting.

"What does all this mean, dear?"

"These will protect you. So you can heal."

Willa then gave the amulets, just diamond shape pieces of paper, to Cass to place around the corners of the room. As usual, her father did this with drama, making a big show of it, bending and placing the amulets face down. Willa thought it was as if he was making fun of her. She frowned at his back, his bagging jeans dipping down to reveal the ragged elastic waistband of his underwear. Willa glanced out the glass door at Hormidas who was picking seeds from the birdfeeder and placing them in his mouth.

Willa understood right away that Mrs. Cassavant had been deeply in love with her dead husband; it was the kind of love Willa could feel and see; it was all around her, even though the woman's husband was dead a year and now she lived alone in a room that smelled like toothpaste. But her husband had betrayed her. Worse than betrayal. He'd stolen something from her, something precious. A child? An animal? Willa couldn't see. But she could see Mrs. Cassavant was caught between love and hate, and all the guilt that comes from living in the in-between-place. Yes, lots of guilt. Guilt and shame.

"May I hold you?" Willa asked.

The old woman nodded solemnly, biting her lower lip. Her son had taken a seat in an easy chair and he was flipping through the digital guide on the soundless TV. Willa climbed up into Mrs. Cassavant's bed.

Mrs. Cassavant immediately curled into Willa like a kidney bean. This didn't bother Willa. Mrs. Cassavant was warm and she felt waxy, like the film that formed on the top of the stagnant water at the edges of the Myakka River. She had tissue paper hands and hard bones protruding everywhere. Willa put one hand on the woman's head and the other on her back, behind her belly.

Willa listened for her silent voice. Tu-ha whispered a warning, *Be careful*, she said, *Go slow*. Fluid rattled through Mrs. Cassavant's lungs as she took breath, and Willa felt her struggle. Like Hormidas had taught her, she must start with smell. At first there was nothing familiar in Mrs. Cassavant's smell. There was anger to be sure. And something else. Something far worse than anger.

And like that it was upon her.

The smell of something Willa already knew well, a forever smell, the kind that was already catalogued inside her, part of her. Powerful things, when they enter a person as smell, never leave. Not like things that enter through the ears or the eyes, which can fade away with time, or change. Willa would recognize this scent no matter what, forever. It was sometimes hidden in things, objects, just waiting for Willa to find it and remember. But here it was, it seemed, for the first time ever, in a living, breathing person. The *bugaloo*.

Willa's heart began to beat rapidly and she could hear the blood rushing in her ears. Her vision went hazy; she felt sick. She was otherwise frozen, looking sideways at Mrs. Cassavant who had her eyes closed. Willa could see she was crying, almost shyly. Willa's back and stomach began to ache, a deep visceral twisting, something terrible. She could feel movement inside Mrs. Cassavant, too. The old woman's breathing was becoming more labored. Willa tried again to speak but she couldn't, constriction around her vocal cords, as in so many dreams, her mouth open, no sound. She couldn't remember what Hormidas had told her to do in this situation. Or not to do. She looked out to the patio where Hormidas was running a finger across Mrs. Cassavant's wind chimes. They tinkled pleasantly.

'Midas, she used her silent voice. *Tu-ha*? He didn't look back at her. But there was a voice alongside her in her mind, *Listen, breathe, forget all about yourself, use your full attention, look into her eyes and wait*. *Just you wait.* Was that her silent voice, or his? It wasn't Tu-ha. Nothing was right. Had he told her to wait and to listen? Why wouldn't he turn around?

Willa had done a dozen healings by this time, always with Hormidas. Nothing like this had ever happened before. Tu-ha tried to comfort her in her pain, she said, *Afterward, you'll sit in the swampy forest and drink Koolaid and eat pistachio nuts. You'll sit on the horizontal tree, shelling the green nuts*. But the pain was constant.

The son opened the door to Mrs. Cassavant's room and spoke with someone in the hallway. It was as if Willa was watching this from the ceiling. She felt herself being pulled out of the room. There was a buzzing and a dark, freezing smell all around her.

Just then, the patio door flew open and banged against the frame; the sound of wind chimes filled the space. Hormidas had ripped them from the hook dangling from the patio's ceiling and he was waving them, stretching his long-legs toward the bed and crossing the space in his flying gait. "*Bugaloo*!" he yelled, his voice booming, deep and hollow like a kettledrum. "*Bugaloo*!" He waved the wind chimes in front of Willa and Mrs. Cassavant.

Willa felt the spin of sickness in her belly, the whirl beneath her hands, which were once again on the rigid woman. She was off the ceiling and back on the bed next to the still body of Mrs. Cassavant, whose breath was even but ragged.

Hormidas closed his eyes. "*Kndors. S'ariel. Vngsursh. Abrid."* The wind came sweeping in from the open patio door. The room remained still, but gusts stirred the amulets in the four corners. The wind seemed to be blowing in four directions at once. "*Kndors! S'ariel! Vngsursh!*

Abrid!*"* These were the names Mrs. Cassavant had written on the amulets. The angels that Willa had chosen out of a list of twenty. But how did Hormidas know? He had told Willa she could choose. He'd been on the patio the whole time. Hormidas' power never ceased to amaze her. Willa heard the roar of wind, and behind it, the buzz of insects. *Bugaloo. Tu-ha* whispered and then told Willa a terrible truth. The sounds seemed to sweep out the open door as if sucked away into the air. Willa was able to close her eyes. The muscles in her back and stomach relaxed. When she opened her eyes again, Mrs. Cassavant was dead.

The Peacekeepers were at the door of the ranger's cabin by ten the next morning. They'd brought with them representatives from their child-welfare unit. All of them, even the women from the child welfare unit, wore combat gear. Willa had been asleep in Hormidas' RV, which he kept parked in front of the cabin. Cass came and rustled Willa out of bed. Hormidas was gone. Willa figured he'd gone to buy the new goat. Mrs. Cassavant's son had still given them the money, even after all of the commotion at the nursing home. They left abruptly, without taking the time to notify the staff of Mrs. Cassavant's passing. The son seemed unworried, pleased the old woman was gone and gave them an extra twenty dollars and gave Cass a packet of cigarettes.

Cass led Willa from the RV back to the cabin where a tall woman was standing with a Peacekeeper and another, smaller woman with grey hair. Willa thought the small, grey-haired woman looked ridiculous in her combat gear. The tall woman threatened her father. She said they were going to make him take a drug test, and they wanted to know about the laying on of hands that had taken place in the Have-town. They asked about Hormidas. The Peacekeeper called him a "crackpot Indian."

“He’s not Indian,” Willa spoke up. “He’s from Canada. He lived in the Amazon jungle.” They looked at her with disinterest.

A large, thick-necked, Peacekeeper took Cass outside, and the women made Willa sit in the old leather chair where her mother had died two years before. They brought out fabric dolls with stitches for eyes, a boy doll and a girl doll, and asked her to show them how she did it. How she laid on hands. The tall woman told her to touch the doll the way she touched the people that paid for healings. Willa explained to them about the circuitry, the filament, and how she couldn’t do it to the stitch-eyed dolls because they weren’t alive. There was nothing in them to move. So the tall woman with the glasses asked Willa to show her how she did it, and Willa suggested she could try and touch her the way she touched the people who came for the healings. That was how Willa could show her. If Willa was permitted to touch the woman, then the woman would know.

“Is there anything wrong with you? Pain? Sadness? Anything that might need healing?”

“My back hurts,” the tall woman said. The other woman glared at her, smoothing the legs of her puffy, combat pants as she sat down. There were pockets and straps all over the pants, which appeared to be empty. “It does,” the tall woman said to the grey-haired woman who just sighed and looked away.

Willa had the tall woman take her spot in the leather chair. Willa placed one hand on the woman’s back and one on her head. She closed her eyes and did all the things that Hormidas had taught her, in the right order.

Most people, unless they’re really sick or are soon going to die, have spinning energy in the middle. Pinwheels, Hormidas called them. But this woman was exploded in the middle. Her energy clung in cold, little pieces to her sides and to her innards. Large, angry growths along her

spine. *Cancer*, Willa said, not out loud but in her silent voice. And immediately, the woman began to cry.

The grey-haired woman stood up violently, as if she were going to pull Willa away but the tall woman lifted her hand in a flat-palm gesture—she was obviously the boss, Willa thought— and the grey-haired woman sat back down. And after a few minutes of healing, which was difficult work with the tall woman crying the whole time, Willa became very tired and fell asleep standing up, which sometimes happened.

When she awoke, she, Cass, and Hormidas were alone in Hormidas' RV, driving fast, heading north out of Florida.

Hormidas was standing over her, steadying himself with one hand against the motion of the RV barreling down the highway; with the other, he placed a thumb on her forehead. "The mind," he said, "isn't just up here. Don't ever forget. Anger has its own energy. It doesn't just disappear. If you try and throw it away it creates a hole, and something has to fill it. It has to be *changed* into something else. Otherwise, you make a perfect space for the *bugaloo*."

"Are you saying I killed Mrs. Cassavant?" Willa asked.

"No. But you may have let death in."

Willa understood that she'd killed Mrs. Cassavant. She'd let the *bugaloo* in. She didn't know that could happen. Willa was more afraid than she'd ever been in her life. She wondered what it must it be like to have the *bugaloo* inside of you? She shivered and even her bones vibrated deep inside within her. She'd been born in the swamp. They had buried her mother there, and it was there that she felt safe, even with the ocean closing in on one side. She

wondered about the tall woman with cancer who had threatened her father. Did Willa let the *bugaloo* kill her, too?

Hormidas pulled an upended bucket over close to her and sat down. The vibration of their motion along the highway travelled every inch of her, jostling her frozen bones.

"I don't think I've told you everything about the Amazon," he began. "In the jungle, worms rolled everywhere in the soil. Life was always decomposing all around you. Everything was sauced in the Amazon. Amazon-sauce, a special kind of life-juice. All around was water, either river or slow drying, steady rain. This was the most magical of places. They've known about the *bugaloo* there for a long, long time. And *Tu-ha* also came from the Amazon. The very best part of the Amazon was the universes. Universes spin in the Amazon basin, billions of them, far below the canopies that steal the sun. Imagine that? Whole universes."

Chapter 2: Matrimony

Two years later. Just outside the Black Hills of South Dakota.

Simon was getting cold, and Brother Mutte and his men weren't yet back with Joss' body. They'd left hours ago to dig him up. Joss Payne was buried last September on the Sleeping Giant, six feet down in the pumpkin-colored earth, no coffin, no embalming. No fuss, unless you count the combustible sermon Brother Mutte said over his body, or the fact that the whole affair had sent Joss' mother Marlene atavistic and streaking through the Black Hills for days.
Joss had been up in the canyon overwinter, covered with snow. Simon imagined an animal had probably gotten to him by now. The ghost bride was already in the campground awaiting the ceremony. Simon had been averting his eyes from the simple wooden coffin sitting atop a wooden picnic table in front of the campground's office.

Marlene Payne, Joss' mother, was vinous and weepy by sunset. She was Lakota, born on the reservation an hour and a half east of Lead, the niece of Chief Struck by the Moon, a direct descendent of the great Chief Hump. Simon had it on some authority that she'd left the Sioux Nation and married an ex-casino manager who'd died early on in the famine leaving her with an infant, the bridegroom whose corpse, at present, they were all awaiting.

In what by this time was a long forgotten century, Chief Hump was deemed by the United States government to be beyond agreement, a "non-treaty" chief, unmoved, unswayed, terminally defiant. But Simon found his descendent Marlene to be perhaps too soft, far too acquiescent to this plan to dig up her long-buried son and marry his ghost to that of a young woman he knew only casually in life. It made Simon angry. It made him want to walk across the

campground, shake her and say, “Wake up, Marlene! Men are wrenching your boy from the earth as we speak. Poking divots into what’s left of him.” But he didn’t. Simon stayed put on his blue beer cooler.

Two women, who Simon assumed to be Amy’s sister and mother, had been bent next to the coffin most of the afternoon. They’d covered the coffin with plastic ivy and roses and remained still in the New Earth mode of reverence, kneeling, curved like the letter “c.”

Bossman’s Ten-Acre Campsites was situated in a bowl of farmland that interrupted the northeast Black Hills. It had a few year-round cabins in addition to the RV hook-ups and permanent trailers and close to two-hundred acres of open land for tents and big sky living. Everything was full. It seemed as if every Earther, even the ones that didn’t live in the campground full time, had come out for the ghost wedding. The Earthers hailed from what was once St. Petersburg, Florida, before it was completely consumed by ocean. Mutte told him, when they moved north, they were one-hundred and fifteen devotees strong. Looking out at the gathering crowd, Simon figured there were at least two-hundred of them now. A fire burned in every pit. There were steaks grilling, too, a rich smell that stirred Simon’s blood. A rare smell, even for Simon who could get his hands on just about anything for a decent price, except for beef, even with produce and honey to trade, even in what was once cattle-country.

Simon was seated on his cooler just outside of the clearing, watching the commotion around him. The thick smoke rising off the searing meat reminded Simon of another time: his years as a child and young man on the road with his father’s honeybees, steaks at every stop. He wondered how much the Earthers had shelled out for this meat. Tinny music competed from

several worn-out speakers stashed around the campground and sent an accompanying soundtrack up with the smoke, something Simon didn't know but recognized as Bluegrass.

He'd delivered the cherries to Marlene Payne directly, three hours earlier, at her trailer on the campground. She'd made the cherry pies just as she'd said she would, her son's favorite, and they were lined up on a table under the tent: six small and one large. Each was filled with mounds of thawed, pitted, red Washington cherries, crisscrossed with pastry. The cherries shined as though she'd lacquered them. Cream, whipped to peaks, sat in bowls along the table. Marlene greeted the few people that came by, gesturing at the desserts and shaking hands. But most people kept their distance from Marlene Payne, despite the novelty of fresh cherry pies.
The previous fall, after Joss' funeral, Marlene shocked everyone by staying out on the Sleeping Giant, alone in Spearfish canyon for two full days. She refused to come down. She slept during the day and came out at night to crawl on her hands and knees along the spruce needles, sniffing the air, hunting for animals. She spoke in the tongue of her people about centuries-old enemies and dodged the headlights of those who worked in shifts at night to find her.

Simon, who took two shifts with the Earthers, and a few of Marlene's relatives, had seen her darting across the road one night, lithe as a ferret, before disappearing into a tree line on the other side. Eventually they gave up. It was assumed by everyone that Marlene had rejoined her Lakota ancestors up in the Hills. The Sioux had finally been returned large portions of the Black Hills decades ago by a long dead American president, and after famine and the collapse, they were able to buy back even more. Bossman had an agreement with the Sioux, which allowed the Earthers access to the Sleeping Giant, their sacred cliff. And there had been, over the years Simon was told, a few Sioux that had joined the Earthers, but not many. Most notably, another

young Sioux woman, an Earther, had gotten disoriented during one of the region's terrible dust storm and was never seen again. People, at the time, had also suspected she'd returned to the Sioux. Many parallels were drawn between Marlene and the young woman, whose name was Lilith. But unlike Lilith, Marlene did return. Marlene hadn't rejoined the Sioux. She eventually came down on her own and walked into the campground, shredded feet and hands, caked all over with mud.

And now she was back to being Marlene from the post office. Like many Earthers, Marlene held a regular job in the loose semblance of post-collapse society. Simon watched her with curiosity. He tried to make out the thin scars on her cheeks.

Marlene was holding a large Bordeaux glass, taking a rapid succession of sips, defending her cherry pies from the New Earth children who weren't bothered by their proximity to "crazy Marlene" if it meant getting a look at a cherry. Some of the younger ones had probably never seen a cherry. A small pack of them, including the kid with the buzzed head who loved to hustle Simon for honey, were frozen in front of the pies. Every now and then Marlene would swat the kids off and they'd go for a while but they'd come right back again to stare again at the cherries, to marvel at their red, a color Simon thought was only achieved only by good cherries and deep, arterial blood, the kind of blood he'd seen more often than he'd care to recall.

He was looking for Tipper. Not in a direct way, but in that circumspect way that inevitably left a person exhausted. He was sitting on his cooler of cherries and wine, staring straight ahead and watching Marlene, but all the time, he was anticipating Tipper. Even in a crowded campground, he trusted his eyes would find her, single her out. He was waiting—but not waiting—for her to register on the scene. He knew he'd feel her before he saw her, that he'd

catch her skirt in his peripheral vision and her visage would burn there, like a stray bit of hot ash from the fire, until she moved directly in front of him. And then he could take her in, and he would once again marvel at this unlikely affection. She was the age of his oldest son, if he were still alive. And her eyes were an unsteady green, tipping sometimes to hazel, sometimes to blue. She had brown curls like spiraled around her ears. She was thin but, having grown up in the have town, she had the distinct look of someone reared with access to the full range of vitamins and minerals. Strong, intact teeth, stout bones, well-developed muscles. But there was something else, too. An innocence, a vulnerability, and an attitude that attempted to deny both.

But not yet, not quite yet. Her yellow truck was parked alongside her trailer two hundreds yards to his right. So she was home. He imagined what she might be doing in there. Drinking his wine? Spraying her plants? Listening to her short-wave radio? The last time the New Earthers achieved critical mass in the campground was the day that Joss Payne lost his young life. That day Simon remembered well. The party had gone deep into the night.

Simon learned later from Tipper that they'd taken what she'd called "magic mushrooms." Simon watched them progress from dancing to taking off their clothes. Several of them paired off to have sex in that drunken way that sadly, to Simon, felt all too familiar. They were stashed here and there but unabashed, as if drunkenness came with the benefit of invisibility. A few of them vomited. Afterwards, they slept. All this while Simon watched from the window of the Mesa. Bathed in the subtle morning light, he'd touched himself in the silence of his trailer before he had to get up to watch the bees leave the hives for their the morning forage.

He thought now of Tipper's long white body laid out still as it was that night. Like a death at sunrise, was the phrase that returned to mind. But she was very alive. More alive

perhaps than Simon had ever been. More alive than Joss Payne, who, unbeknownst to Simon at the time, had been busy dying two hundred feet from Simon's Mesa RV.

Simon rapped on the side of the cooler with his knuckles and appreciated the sound that it returned. Fullness. Bounty. What was inside would trade for over $1000 on the market: four bottles of pinot noir, one bottle of moscato, and six pounds of frozen cherries. He'd planned to give it all to Marlene Payne, but at the moment, seeing as she'd nearly finished the wine he'd brought her earlier that afternoon, he thought he'd hold off. Was it so bad that he wanted to keep some for himself?

The problem was this: Simon worried the wine might wrench loose his inhibitions. Instead of hunkering behind the Mesa's tiny curtains tonight to watch, like he did the last time, he feared he might be enticed to join them. To join her. And he couldn't do that. He couldn't mingle with the Earthers that way. It was his goal to remain separate, like a detached observer, like a scientist. He felt as a scientist, an entomologist by training, he couldn't rationalize fraternizing with a doomsday cult.

Several small honeybee swarms had been spotted the year before, southwest of the campground, in the canyon. This was the real reason Simon spent the majority of what was once the peak honey-making season in South Dakota, a place once brimming in sweet clover, sunflowers, and alfalfa.

Within fifty square miles of Bossman's campground, there was once the highest concentration of honeybees on planet Earth. If Mother Nature was going to evolve the honeybee on her own, in such a way that would ensure their ongoing survival, Simon thought it would happen here, in the deep seat of Earth's geology.

Simon also found himself scanning the clearing for Willa Walker. The long aluminum stage the Earthers erected earlier that morning was front and center, flanked by Amy's coffin on one side and a picnic table draped in a white sheet on the other, presumably the platform upon which they'd place the groom.

Willa had come out to Simon's hives that very morning, which was something she did often. She liked to help him with his bees. He'd let her pry the lids open and slide out the trays, check for honey, of which there was predictably none. While Simon was able to keep as many as three or four struggling hives at a time, they hardly ever produced any honey. The honey flow was a magical thing, and the magic, it seemed, was long gone.

Simon had told Willa that morning that he was headed to pick up cherries for Marlene from a local trader, and he was going to give the trader a small hive in return, complete with a virgin queen still encased in a sugar box. It was the least he could do for Marlene and Joss, seeing as it was Simon's bees that had killed him, and Marlene had told him that cherries were her son's very favorite.

When he told Willa his plans, she'd stopped what she was doing. She was wearing a protective suit. He kept a small one, the one that once belonged to his youngest son, and she had it on. He could just make out the frozen look on her face through the dark veil. She carefully slid the tray back in to the super and walked across to him. She slid the glove off her hand.

"Don't take that off. We've talked about this, kid. You're going to get stung," he'd told her.

"I don't get stung," she'd said. And it's true, she didn't. Simon wondered if she even needed a suit, at all. He didn't, but that was another story. He was completely at ease with his

honeybees and could tell by the way they were flying, or the sound they made, what was on their collective mind.

She grabbed a hold of his arm. Simon had looked out toward the campground where a few Earthers were toiling around in the distance, preparing for the ghost wedding later that afternoon. He'd been concerned that someone would see them. As innocent as it was, a grown man in a field alone with a child, her touching him, who knows how people think? Intimacy is easily misdiagnosed at a distance. Behind the veil, her strange eyes, like clouded marbles, slid up into her skull and what remained there were simple crescents of pure white. She gripped his arm tighter.

After a long, uncomfortable moment she said, "Take the interstate around the Hills. Don't take Needles Highway." After her cryptic proclamation, she spun curtly and returned to the super to pull another frame, to be disappointed yet again with another honey-less comb.

Simon never took the highway. The highway was crawling with federal troops, "Peacekeepers" they were called. If they caught him with a hive, they'd surely confiscate and kill them. And there was no way to travel with bees incognito. Any kind of tarp or covering would allow too much kinetic energy to build inside the hive, far too much heat. Even a short trip under a tarp would be enough to kill them.

The Black Hills were now under the control of the Sioux Nation, but they'd always let Simon pass under the directive of Bossman, the savvy businessman who owned the Ten-Acre Campsites. And, of course, the Sioux were always interested in getting a look at the honeybees, the "white man flies" that, in a long-ago century, had announced the arrival of the white men themselves.

“I can’t take the highway, Willa.”

“Promise me, Simon,” she’d said. “You have to.”

This kid, Willa Walker, only thirteen, was convinced she had supernatural powers. She wasn’t convinced as much as she was brainwashed, and from birth as far as Simon could tell. It broke his heart, really, if he allowed himself to think too deeply about it.

Willa was born in a swamp to teenaged parents and raised by some Shaman healer. She’d never been to school. She didn’t have the first clue about science. Or history. She understood the world as it was taught to her, which was hardly her fault. They’d made their money lending her out like some kind of miniature fortuneteller. She told him that when she was a baby, people would pay money just to touch her. Simon thought, unbelievably, she sounded proud of that. It was as if Willa had been born in a long-ago era with her talk of amulets and spirits and hyperesthesia. She’d told him she could smell fear and illness. And see people’s auras. She said she used to offer revelations in her RV twice a week, before she and her dad came to live on the Earther compound. Of course Simon didn’t believe her. But then again, he never would’ve believed it if you’d have told him fifty years ago what he’d see in his own lifetime, so who knows? There’d been so much death. So much fear. And fear brought out superstition every time.

Even so, later that day when it came time to turn off onto Needles Highway, to take the winding road through the Hills instead of the old interstate, Simon saw in his mind Willa’s small face, her eyes rolling back in her head, and he decided to do the foolish thing. He took the interstate. And, remarkably, the trip had been without incident. When Simon reached the small farm fifty miles east—where he’d gone to buy the cherries at the home of Gus Lockhart, former

king of South Dakota honey—Gus' wife told him there was a blockade along Needles. The Peacekeepers were standing off with the Sioux, demanding entry into the Back Hills. They were looking for a couple they claimed had planted a bomb in a tiny little Have-town in Rapid City. If Simon had attempted that blockade with his bees, he'd surely be locked up right now, or at the very least detained. His bees would have been confiscated and likely killed, and Marlene would have had to marry off her dead son without the cherry pies. So the child prophet had gotten at least this one right. Simon thought he'd make sure to tell her, maybe give her something in return, blackjack gum, a few extra cherries.

It used to be, every time Simon saw Cass Walker's truck kicking up dust at the campground's entrance, he'd feel a swell of anger toward this man who'd pimped his daughter, which was what Simon thought it was, lending her out to a bunch of sad, desperate people. At first, he'd fully intended on confronting the guy, who was really just a kid himself. But on the few occasions he did manage to meet up face-to-face with Cass Walker, Simon was taken aback by his blank ignorance. There seemed to be no malice at all in the young man, no guile, just hopefulness. Just an earnest desire to exist. It was clear that Cass' only objective in life thus far had been to keep himself and his daughter alive.

Now, hours later, dusk was flirting with the horizon, and the ghost wedding was spread out in front of him. Marlene Payne was talking with one of the New Earth musicians. Marlene offered the woman a sip of her wine, tilting the glass but keeping ahold of it as though it were a sacred vessel. The wine glass was an overly ornate piece of Irish crystal, a glass that looked like it could have come from Tipper's trailer. Maybe it had. Simon scanned the campground for Tipper again. Still no sign of her. Yellow truck still parked in front of her trailer. Curtains drawn.

Marlene and this musician stood in an intimate way, he noticed. Simon watched as the woman reached up to Marlene's face and ran a single finger along her scars. In a gesture that Simon found both touching and horrifying, six months earlier, the afternoon of Joss's death and before Marlene disappeared into the streams and spruces atop the Sleeping Giant, she'd cut two slits in her right cheek and made a long slash along her calf. Deep enough to scar.

The day after Joss died, Brother Mutte brought Simon to see Marlene Payne at her brother David's house in Lead, which was now a Sioux city. The house sat up on the hill, crooked, screwed into the bluff like an afterthought. Simon had wanted to offer condolences, to apologize for his foolishness, breeding a strain of bees he'd known to be aggressive because he'd seen signs that they were hygienic, killing their diseased in the course of their daily housekeeping.

The bees had left the box and attacked Joss without provocation, without the division brought on by the birth of a new queen. They'd left before sunrise, a time when honeybees should be inactive. Simon was mystified. *Apis mellifera's* primary orientation is to the sun. Their dance-language—which does by every standard qualify as language—relies upon the sun. Their dance orients to the sun and rotates by exact degrees, in loops and wiggles, to communicate the distance and location of nectar to one another. They are, in essence, creatures of light. But no, these bees left with the express purpose, it seemed, of attacking a man who was passively sleeping five feet away. All this as Simon peeped at the New Earthers from the window of his Mesa, a fact that still caused him considerable private guilt and embarrassment.

When they'd arrived at her brother's crooked house to offer their condolences, Marlene was sitting at his kitchen table with a boning knife out on a cutting board. Simon remembered the

way she'd lifted it up once, turning it over in her hand as they sat with her, drinking coffee. She hadn't yet cut herself. Her cheek was still smooth, the color of caramel.

Joss had been twenty-one years old, and Simon thought Marlene hardly seemed old enough to be his mother. She had a discernible, muscular shape underneath a thick layer of fat. She moved easily, talked with her hands.

Marlene Payne was a famine widow, once the secretary in the office of the local Methodist church. Now, she worked at the post office. If she had ties to the Sioux nation that had retaken much of the Black Hills—other than a cursory relationship with her brother David Bearbull—she didn't flaunt it. Up until that point, she and her son had been quiet, unimposing figures in the Earther sect. Joss, a strong young man, had been important to the Earthers. He could manage long hours of the hardest kinds of labor. He could fight if it came to it.

Marlene had been polite to them that afternoon, listening to Simon apologize for his bees and tell her how he'd killed them himself before the Peacekeepers came to confiscate them. Simon had made himself sick killing his bees earlier that afternoon, but he had long suspected those bees were overly aggressive. They had all the common traits he'd seen before in his Kona-blends, but something else. Strange eyes. Large eyes. He'd bred them using a small hive he'd captured just north of the Hills. He'd found a bee corpse in his boot in the truck on the over, and he wrapped it in a scrap of cloth from glove box and put in his pocket. He reached down now into his pocket to feel the soft cloth, the small knot of the honeybee still warm inside . So much death.

"Great house," Simon said, after a long pause. Marlene did not appear to be listening anymore. Mutte—after spouting some scripture and receiving assurances from Marlene that she

wouldn't notify the authorities about her son's death at the Earther compound—sat picking at a spot on his hand, looking bored.

Simon didn't meet David Bearbull that day. He would, however, be taking shifts with him later that week, searching for Marlene after she took off into the Hills after her son's funeral. And on one of those shifts, after a long, oddly comfortable silence of a kind that can only be enjoyed with strangers, David Bullbear would tell Simon that his kids had grown one leg longer than the other on account of that house and its sloping floor. His kitchen table and chairs were nailed to the floor planks to keep them from sliding.

"Sitting Bull said there was great gentleness in strength," Marlene said that day, suddenly, her voice cracking to life. "But my father said he wasn't a great chief. Great chiefs never surrender. They never give in, no matter how terrible the cost." She slammed her knife down on the table.

Simon looked at Mutte who received this with a simple nod. Simon didn't know how to take it. He wondered if this was somehow a veiled reference to him killing the bees? Or maybe she was just remembering her family, the way people do when someone dies, recalling the lost generations and the ideas and impulses they inevitably passed along. There was no telling what families relayed to one another, the inescapable past that becomes encoded in the genes.

And after they'd left her that afternoon, Marlene cut her cheek, from the corner of her lip to her left ear, with her boning knife. Two slices. One below the other. And she took a long swipe at her calf. He imagined she'd sat bleeding, alone at that nailed-down table, perhaps thinking about what it means to be gentle. She'd be crawling around the spruce bluffs on the Sleeping Giant within a week.

Just as the last of the sun dipped down below the horizon, Mutte's caravan came into view out on the highway. They'd returned with the body of the bridegroom. And within an hour, the firepits were lit, the music had begun, and Joss and Amy were lying in state atop their twin altars, simple wooden picnic tables, awaiting the preacher to say the wedding vows. Simon decided to drag his cooler back to his Mesa RV and lock it up inside. He'd changed his mind about giving it over to Marlene. He felt he'd paid for his guilt already. He believed, if left unchecked, guilt could go on forever.

Marlene had taken a stance some distance from the stage, having poured herself a fresh glass of wine. He tried to imagine her crawling around Spearfish canyon, high up in in the Hills among the cliffs and the caves. What had she been feeling? What had she been thinking? But no one in the Ten-Acre Campsites spoke of it again. It wasn't unusual, really, for people to ignore all kinds of things. Things that may have once made the news hardly registered with people anymore. Perhaps, before the collapse, some local station would have covered her story*: Local post office worker, a Lakota woman named Marlene Payne, direct ancestor the Great Chief Hump, disappeared into the western Black Hills this past Saturday and hasn't been seen for two days*.

But only the Earthers went looking for her. Not even the Sioux, with the exception of her brother, were willing to join the hunt. Mainly, Simon suspected, because they didn't want to bring any undo scrutiny from the Peacekeepers. Not that the Peacekeepers were likely to care. It didn't seem to Simon that the Peacekeepers would care much about a single wild woman in the Black Hills. What Marlene learned as a young wife, what she'd learned in her daily exchanges at

the post office, peeled off her easily like a superficial top layer. Below that was a cell-deep-recall: the memory of the bluffs, the Hills, the soil and the insects, the animals, the water, the narratives of the past. It was instinct brought on by grief. Simon didn't find it all that hard to understand.

Simon was once again scanning the campground for Tipper when Cass Walker brought Willa by the hand out of their RV, down the steps of their trailer and toward the rear of the tent, back behind the stage. Although still unimaginable to Simon, Willa was going to preach at the Ghost Wedding.

Chapter 3: Still

It was Willa's first ghost wedding. Joss Payne, dead six months, was marrying Amy Turner, dead three days. Willa had never met Joss Payne, even though he'd died three-hundred yards from her bed while she slept. He died the day before Willa's thirteenth birthday. That morning, Willa had gone walking alone outside the edge of the campground to catch a glimpse of the horses across the highway. She did this most days. And while she was there, watching the horses, she'd seen it. A swarm of bees. Honeybees. High up in a lone pine, the one tree allowed to remain on what was otherwise pasture. Wild honeybees were supposed to be gone, extinct, for years now, Willa knew that. Everyone knew that. But there they were.

They were wild and very much alive, worshipping a queen whose movements dictated the mass. The undulations, the expansion and contraction of the swarm, were all orchestrated by what Willa imagined were probably small, imperceptible movements on the part of the queen at the center.

Simon, who brought his own fraggle of bees to the campground each spring, kept his own sickly bees too carefully to allow swarms to escape. He'd told her he had the last honeybees on planet Earth, except for the ones kept by the government in labs, away from the mites and weather, the fungus and pesticides that rendered the world too hostile for honeybees.
Simon said his bees were too feeble to swarm. She'd seen the strongest worker bees leave the hive to forage, but never a swarm. And there was never enough pollen or nectar or bees to produce much honey. But the bees she saw that day out in the pasture looked different, stronger, and their black mass indicated a significant number. Twenty, thirty thousand at least. Willa knew

about bees because of her teacher, Hormidas. He had been a beekeeper, too, not honeybees, but his bees were just as special.

And so later that morning, after she'd heard from Wren about Joss Payne's stinging death. Wren was her only friend on the campground, she'd thought of those wild bees. Wren said he'd taken more than a thousand stings while he slept outside near the bluffs that skirted Bossman's Ten-Acre Campsites. Maybe, Willa had thought, it wasn't Simon's bees that killed Joss.

Willa had left Wren in mid-sentence and run across the campground and out through the spruce trees that lined the edge of the property behind the trailers and into another clearing where Simon kept his bee boxes. But by the time she'd arrived it was too late. He'd already killed them. One of only two hives he had at the time. The bees he'd worked so hard to keep alive were still falling all around him, coating the ground and the bee boxes, a kind of chunky honeybee-paste. Simon the beekeeper was weeping. Streams of tears took a single path from his right eye down the gully of his nose. Still Willa found him handsome, dignified, neat and pressed despite his sprawling on the ground, his muscular legs spread-eagled out before him, sitting like a child. His white hair—white although he had the tanned face of a younger man—was horrent, a tangle of confusion. He was covered in sweat and his "beek-suit," what he called it, looked to have been put on in a hurry. The rounded bowl of his hat was askew and the veil that hung below it was concentrated on one side. He still held his smoking tool, loaded with poison. He was sitting on the ground, legs outstretched in front of him, thousands of corpses on his pants and boots. So much death.

It the midst of all that death, Willa couldn't find the words to tell him what she'd seen, the bees in the pasture. The Peacekeepers never came. Cass and Preacher Mutte convinced Marlene to bury Joss on the Sleeping Giant: no hospital, no death certificate, no Peacekeepers.

"Get the hell out of here," he'd yelled at her when he saw her approaching, waving his hands frantically around him. "Poison. It's poison."

Soon her father would arrive to take Willa by the hand and help her up the aluminum stairs to preach, not that she needed the help. He always walked her up the stairs to the platform if it was set up in a grocery story parking lot, or on the Sleeping Giant, or wherever. If she were preaching in a school cafeteria, or a community center, or the one time when she was asked into a Have-church, he'd walk her to the microphone, holding her hand, escorting her like royalty. She figured he did this for her because Hormidas, her teacher, used to do the same thing. What her father didn't understand was that Hormidas was preparing her, filling her with his calm, blue energy before he left her alone at the microphone.

But she was never truly alone when Hormidas was alive. Even when he turned to leave her, to sit in a chair or lean against a wall within her view, they were connected.

Willa and Hormidas were sewn together by filament, his word. Filament was a loose-tentacled kind of circuitry that allowed them to read and understand one another, even from a distance. Willa knew, because Hormidas had told her, that circuitry was always there between all people, even when the current wasn't on. And the current was rarely on. She loved her father but she wasn't connected to him. She was afraid of him, not because he'd ever harmed her but because she knew he had a sickness she couldn't cure. What her father really wanted was to

disappear, but he kept going because people were willing to pay. And money meant life. People would pay for healings, preaching, laying on of hands, which was what Willa liked the best. And with that money, they had lived pretty well until Hormidas died and it became too hard all on their own, and so they joined the Earthers.

Willa knew the laying on of hands was the thing that made people the most uncomfortable. Even so, Willa liked it the most. It was how she knew for sure that her life was useful. Willa had become accustomed to preaching and revelations. She even enjoyed it sometimes, but not always, not like the laying on of hands. She always got butterflies in her stomach when she set out to heal someone; sometimes, she'd throw up beforehand. Many times, afterwards, she would pass out. But even with all of that, she still liked the laying on of hands. It was the dresses Cass would buy for her that she rarely liked. This time he let her select one herself from a dime store in Rapid City. It was a sweater dress with a banded waist and a built-in brooch. It made her feel older, like the women in the old-fashion magazines Bossman gave them to line the chicken coops.

Willa had told her father that she was scared of the dead bodies and didn't want to stand near Joss' and Amy's corpses when she spoke at the ghost wedding. So he'd let her get the dress she wanted.

It was an unseasonably warm March. Winter was lost now in much of the country, except for a few weeks a year when the ice howlers would blow in artic air so suddenly people and animals would freeze before they could get to shelter. But most of the year, the howlers only brought dust and silt. When the howlers weren't blowing, the air was always sticky and hot. The mosquito was queen.

Already that afternoon, it was nearly eighty degrees and Willa was sweating in her new dress, waiting for her father and the other men to return from the Giant with Joss' body. She was in their Tuscany Motor Coach, at the kitchen table, watching the scene under the tent from the bench seat under the window. Simon the beekeeper was at the edge of the tent by himself, sitting on a blue cooler.

She knew he'd taken the highway, just as she'd told him to. The thought of him and his bees, flagrant and free on the highway and right under the nose of the Peacekeepers made her smile. Was it the same with Simon the beekeeper as it had been with Hormidas, her teacher? No, she decided. But there was something about Simon that made her feel at home.

Could she still see the filament between people? Yes, she could see the filament moving like egg white tendrils floating in boiling water, moving all around Simon the beekeeper and many of the Earthers on Bossman's Ten-Acre Campsites. She could still see the filament, she told herself, just like Hormidas taught her to.

It made her sad to think of the connections now that Hormidas was gone. And on the days when she couldn't see the filament she wondered, but only in her silent voice, if Hormidas had made it all up. Maybe she couldn't do the things Hormidas told her she could do? Maybe it was all about getting money, like it was for her father. But then, something would happen to reaffirm her faith in herself.

She'd told Simon the beekeeper to take the highway to get the frozen cherries for the ghost wedding, and he did. She'd only seen cherries once before. The grocery store in town once had a single, small, flimsy carton once. An old woman had plucked one browning cherry from the top and plopped it in her mouth, without even paying.

Willa had *known* Simon would be safe on the highway. She'd seen it in the sky that morning, written there. She'd felt it when she placed her hand on his arm, even through his bee-suit. She was paying attention, just as Hormidas told her she must, and she was. And so it seemed was Simon the beekeeper. He'd listened to her, and he didn't take the highway, and he was out there now sitting on his blue cooler, likely filled with cherries.

She knew he'd worked so hard to build back his hive after what happened with Joss, after so much death. Seeing Simon made her feel better about preaching at the ghost wedding, despite the dead bodies. And she could still see the filament. And he had taken the highway. And there was always the sky. And she could listen to the wind. *Tu-ha* still whispered the truth when she wasn't drowned out by the howlers. And even when she was, *Tu-ha* could speak to Willa in her silent voice. And of course, Willa had Hormidas' basket.

Their Tuscany Motor Coach had once belonged to Hormidas, as did almost everything of value that Willa and her father possessed. Hormidas had left them everything when he died, including a considerable number of artifacts from the Amazon basin, a place where Hormidas had gone as a missionary. He'd talked about it very little except to say that there were lots of insects and it was difficult to grow his garden. But Willa had often seen him handle the items from the basin with reverence and something else, devotion maybe: an arrowhead, some handmade fishing lures, a leather satchel, a knife with a bone handle. And, of course, the basket.

Willa held out her hand, placed it on the table and turned it, palm up.

And just like that, he was there.

Are you ready, Willa? What do you smell? Tell me in colors. Tell me in sounds, he said..

I smell musk. Squirrel-brown musk. That's what I smell, 'Midas. Crackling and buzzing, like in the fields behind the television station back home in Florida.

'Midas, she said in her silent voice, *I'm scared*.

No matter. You're ready.

She was sure she felt his dry, chapped skin, the callouses. She rubbed her hand along his. Her vision clouded and then, as quickly as he'd come, he was gone. What was it Hormidas used to say about the feel of someone's skin? She'd forgotten. She must say no to forgetting. If she couldn't remember 'Midas and the things he'd taught her, maybe she wouldn't be able to see him anymore? Maybe she wouldn't be who he'd told her she was? A prophet. A miracle. Born to deliver people, maybe even, if she was very lucky and very good, the world.

She wouldn't go out to the clearing until her father came for her. The moon and the sun, both visible from the window, were haunting the same hill. She was at a strange angle, which made it hard to see what was going on in the clearing. The Tuscany Motor Coach was not docked firmly in the soil of Bossman's Ten-Acre Campsites but instead was parked slightly askew, as if it were a boat run ashore.

She turned the crank on the window so she could hear and, of course, smell. The evening had a deep earth, living smell, like the swamp back in Myakka State Park. This was rare. The Hills and the surrounded prairie often smelled of nothing, or the great cancelling of all things at once. The howlers often changed everything, wiping the landscape clean.

Willa knew smell was the best way to understand. Far better even than looking or listening, or touching, which sometimes confused her. Hormidas taught her that the human brain

was once a hunk of olfactory tissue atop a kind of spine, meant for smelling predators in the grope-black of the ocean. It all began with smell.

Out in the courtyard, Willa located the bottom half of Mrs. Payne, Joss' mother. The striped tent hid her top half. Willa could see she'd made cherry pies from Simon's cherries, and they shone like jewels. Willa wanted to be one of the children hovering over the pies just then, giggling, carefree. This, despite the fact that Max was among them.

Max considered himself the leader of the Earther kids. As a rule, Earthers had lots of children, as many as the group could withstand. They needed children for labor. The children scouted for strangers and Peacekeepers. They culled seeds, tended goats, harvested eggs, they filled the silos on Bossman's property and those hidden up in the Hills, they hauled water. After the loss of most pollinators—honeybees, bumblebees, leafcutters, many species of birds—the dexterous and obedient hands of children hand-pollenated the small Earther crops. They moved pollen with small paintbrushes from stamen to pistil. Willa hated the work. She would play tricks with herself, trying to move the pollen or count the seed trays while doing something else, like imagining the swamp in her head, reconstructing slowly every detail like the ants and moss, or holding conversations in her spirit with Tu-ha and Hormidas.

Max called Willa "the freak" or "the demon." He'd once pulled down her pants in front of a group of kids in the campground. He'd done it so quickly, with such force, the shock of it was like being slapped across the face. Willa had felt the strangling shame, the heat on her face and in the tips of her fingers.

And then, as sometimes happened when Willa became too angry, the Earth came to still. She could tell when it was coming on, the relative slowing of everything around her, the

thickening of the air, the changing light. Then, everything would just stop. No sound. No air. No movement. Just the frozen faces and bodies of animals and people. And on the day that Max pulled down her pants, the halt was especially abrupt. Champion froze mid-leap, caught in a brave and valiant act of immediate retribution. His flank muscles taught, his tail straight out, his teeth bared.

No one moved.

Nothing happened.

All were frozen but Willa with her pants around her ankles, her blue underwear ringed inside it. She wasn't sure what to do next, as afraid as she was of her own anger, so she carefully reached down and pulled her clothing up, smoothing her ragged tunic over her workpants. Then, after taking the scene in one last time, she blew her shame out on a stream of hot breath and the Earth resumed rotating and proceeded along its path around the sun. Champion, reanimated and stunned, landed comically and turned to give Willa with a quizzical look. The boys, confused and groggy, seemed to forget how they got there.

Before her son's death, Willa thought Marlene Payne smelled like earwax and toe jam. She smelled as if every pore in her was clogged. Willa sensed that everything the woman ate or drank had sat in her and stewed, leaving only begrudgingly. If Willa were to lay hands on Mrs. Payne back then she guessed she'd have found dense, heavy energy like in the ancient granite of the Hills, compressed under the weight of the world.

Willa had stood behind Mrs. Payne at her son's funeral on the Sleeping Giant, high and deep in Spearfish canyon, far into Sioux territory. It took several steep dirt roads to get there. The Giant was impossible to reach in winter, and in the spring it roared in every corner with the melt

from the winter snow. That was, until the spring howlers came, bringing with them a deluge of sediment and clogging the canyon with sediment, much like Mrs. Payne herself had once been clogged.

Brother Mutte spoke at Joss' funeral that day. Mrs. Payne stood over Joss before they lowered him down into the hole. Mrs. Payne took off her shoes and stood barefoot in a heap of orange earth next to her son's body. His body was wrapped in plain white muslin cloth under which you could just make out his pale, white skin. He didn't look Lakota. But then again, neither did Mrs. Payne back then. Then without a word she crossed over the small clearing to the bluff above the burial ground, removed her sensible, knit blazer and dropped it behind her as she stepped into the forest.

Willa thought Mrs. Payne looked like a Sioux princess now. Tall and chiseled, black hair glossed into two braids, the slices on her skin making her somehow even more beautiful. The layer of fat that used to cover her had been stripped away and she was only herself now, no excess. Mrs. Payne's time on the Sleeping Giant had blown all the stagnant, smelliness out of her and she was brown and solid as a trout and smelled fresh like the moss-covered river rocks in the Cheyenne. Willa watched as, in one elegant gesture, she moved one braid behind her shoulder and took another drink of her wine.

Just then, Willa's father pushed open the door to their trailer. "You ready?"

"What should I say? Am I the only one talking? Preacher Mutte doesn't want to talk, Daddy?"

"He's gonna talk. He'll do the wedding rights. But these people need to hear you, Willa. Lots of them are old. They'll need help. And besides, we can make money, real money here.

They'll come to you for healings. They will. Once they get a look at you. They're letting us in, you know? Can't you see it? We're making a home here. Half of those people are sick to death of Mutte. Where has he gotten them? Seeds in silos? Goat milk? Those seeds don't grow. They blow away in the howlers. His prophecies are all but abandoned two seconds after they've left his maw. They're primed, Willa. Primed for you."

Willa stood. Showed him the dress. "Do I look okay?"

"All the Earthers come for the ghost weddings," he said, ignoring her. "The campground is packed full. The death of two, fine young people. Same age. So close together. Same age your mother and me were when we had you. Sixteen and seventeen. It's a sign of something, don't you think?"

"I guess." Her mother and father were never married. They were orphans of the famine. They'd left Willa's mother in Florida, buried in the swamp outside of the ranger's cabin where Willa was born.

Willa knew what her father expected of her. She knew money was important. She knew the routine.

"It's a sign of something. What's it a sign of, Willa? You can say it's a sign of something, surely. You want me to take you outside to think through what this might be a sign of?"

Willa closed her eyes. "No."

She thought about Joss Payne and Amy Turner. She'd seen them at the revival, briefly, the night Joss died. There'd been fires in all of the pits that night, too. Joss and Amy were huddled over one, sharing a cigarette. They'd gone to the junior high school shared by the two

old mining towns, back when there still was a junior high school. Joss had liked the bee, too. He was bigger than most of the kids, and so he had to do some of the hardest jobs in the compound, digging trenches to fortify the campground, building razor wire fences, breaking wild horses. But when they'd allow him to, Joss would come out to visit the bees. And he, like Willa, always signed up for pollination duty. No one else ever wanted it, but they got to work side by side with Simon's bees. Joss had got as far as the tenth grade. Willa had watched Joss and Amy that night and wondered what it would be like to go to school. To be a part of something so ordinary: backpack, science, math, bus ride home.

Only a few Earther kids were allowed to go to school, and it wasn't a school as much as it was an insurance office where two ladies taught kids of all ages at once. But they had a bus and they picked kids up at the highway at the entrance to the Ten-Acre Campsites. The only kids she knew that went to school were Max and Wren, and Mars. Mars was Dane's son, and he was beautiful, and Willa wondered about him. She liked the look of his filament, the white tendrils were thick and meaty, like worms. He was deeply connected to other people, and the Earth, despite his awful father, Dane. Dane frightened her. He was a big burly man who never left Mutte's side.

After Max had pulled her pants down, she was most ashamed because Mars had been there to witness it. Not because he'd seen her body, which she didn't much mind, but because Mars had so fully rejected her afterward. Before that day, they'd talk a little and sometimes he'd come with her to the beehives to visit Simon. But after he'd seen her exposed, and after she'd gotten so angry that her anger had brought the Earth to still, Mars had rejected her so fully and completely that she felt the full force of her difference.

Years ago, Hormidas and her father had taken Willa to see a young Brazilian girl preach at the beach near their home in Florida. The preacher who announced her said that Cuca was ten. From where Willa sat, off to the left of the stage and ten feet down, it seemed as if Cuca was floating just above the stage.

The beach was kicked up that night. The wind and the spray assaulted the crowd of at least two hundred that was gathered to hear her. Willa wanted a puppy then, desperate as she was for something to love after her mother died. It was all she thought about, asked God for, made believe at night in her cot at the back of the abandoned ranger's cabin where they lived.

On the beach that day, Cuca had floated over, looked in Willa's direction, paused for a moment, then went on. What she said next was plucked straight from Willa's most secret heart.

Cuca said, "Trust *Gawd* without hesitation. Like you were a sweet, fluffy puppy dog, full of innocence and perfect purity. *Gawd* is a loving master. " It was as if with the word "*Gawd*," Cuca had spoken of something new, something Willa hadn't considered before. For the first time, she truly believed in and felt her difference and thought then for the first time that her difference might just be a gift.

It wasn't a full day later when a starving, chewed-on Golden Retriever puppy materialized out of the Myakka River and made its way up to their front door. Willa named him Champion. Champion couldn't be seen by everyone. Cass had never been able to see him. But Willa could see him. And so could Hormidas. That was all that mattered.

The people on that beach that night had been starving. The country had descended into chaos and people were scared. But it was clear that they trusted this floating girl. Willa could see

it in their eyes. The was power in difference. And it was on that night that, for the first time, Willa had seen the filament.

'Midas had told her that her veil would tear one day, the scales would drop from her eyes, and there it would be. Plain as the nose on her face. And she would remember then that it had been there all along. And that's exactly how it happened. Just as he said it would. The filament appeared, stretching out from this floating girl and curling around people in the crowd, hooking some like fish, looping others like cattle. Thin whisps of smoke-like filament, just like 'Midas said.

Willa thought that Cuca was a clear bell of sung truth because, finally, Willa could see the filament. But now there were days when Willa couldn't see it at all, or the webbed connections would crackle in and out like static. It was Cuca that Willa was searching for now when she was preaching. 'Midas, Cuca, the filament, and the *Gawd* of puppy dogs. Willa still feared losing her difference but, when she thought of Mars, she wanted to abandon it all together. She knew that the holding of two conflicting wishes at once only made her weaker. And weakness was as dangerous as fear. Fear, Hormidas had told her many times, was a muddler.

"Cuca. Do you remember her, Daddy?"

"The girl from the beach. Of course, yeah." He pressed the top of Willa's head with the flat of his plam. "Give me a second here." Cass went over to the kitchenette and began gently opening and closing the lacquered, wooden cabinets, looking for something. Their Tuscany Motor Coach was the nicest RV in the campground, and Cass was careful with it. He eventually located a coffee can in a cabinet he'd already opened three times. He put the contents in the pocket of his coat and turned up his collar. She could sense his anxiety. Cass got excited when

she preached. He made jittery little elevations with his heels. “That Cuca once made two thousand on that beach. In one night. Damn glorious.”

Willa saw Preacher Mutte standing just outside the tent. Cass and Willa made their way across the small dirt road that circled the clearing, into the center of Bossman’s Ten-Acre Campsites. Champion, grey around the muzzle now, trotted slowly beside them. A few other dogs came up to sniff on Champion, but he ignored them. Champion preferred people to dogs. The sky was salmon-streaked and the clouds were on the move. The sun had rolled away down the side of Hills to the west but threw the last of its gold dust along the squat bluffs in the distance, beyond the east edge of the campground. The air was cold and Willa pulled the coat in close around her. She adjusted ‘Midas’ basket in the crook of her arm.

Preacher Mutte was an imposing man. He was holding onto the back flap of the greasy tent, waiting to climb the aluminum stairs to the narrow, portable stage. He wore clothes far too big for him, the excess of his belt hung down low in front of his crotch. Willa thought he must of been a big, fat man once upon a time, perhaps when Hormidas first met him. A lot of people that were once big and fat were now thin. He had a red, scraggly beard. The kind of beard a teenager could grow. And, he smelled like almonds.

Almonds had been gone a long time. No one had seen an almond in fifteen years, long before Willa was born. They went almost instantly, right after the collapse. But Willa had almond extract, which had been a gift from ‘Midas. She smelled it often, even though it had started to sour, and she thought it smelled the way cherries might.

Willa had never met anyone who smelled like her almond extract before, and she didn’t know what to make of him. She sensed that Reverend Mutte didn’t like her, or maybe he didn’t

trust her. There was no filament around Brother Mutte. None at all. Nothing came near him but stale, still air. He'd been leading the New Earthers in the Ten-acre campsites for ten years now. They'd already had one child preacher, and Mutte told Cass right in front of Willa that one child preacher was enough for a lifetime.

Joss' body was there now, atop a picnic table on the other side of the podium across from Amy's. Willa was struck by how small Joss seemed. He wasn't wrapped like a pharaoh, not the way she remembered him at his funeral atop the Sleeping Giant. Instead, his muslin shroud bagged around him. He was shriveled and dirtied with orange earth and flecked with granite pebbles. He looked a loose pile of old trash.

She stopped a few feet from the back of the tent. Cass turned, rubbing his hands together quickly. The propane generators hummed around them, powering the floodlights and the heaters and the amplifiers, which were plugged in and ready for the New Earth musicians. Fans were plugged in to blow the smell of the bodies away from the crowd.

"He smells awful." Willa stopped and looked up at her father.

"It's not him. He's been in the ground without a coffin for six months. He likely smells like the worms that call him home. Nope, that's sweet Amy Turner you're smelling."

Amy was wrapped in the same muslin cloth, but hers was still white and stiff. The Earthers had placed coffee grounds around the platform that held her, but it didn't do much for the smell. Clouds, like great, grey whales, traded places in the dusk. Champion whined, looking up at her. He didn't want to walk any farther. He lay down in the dirt at her feet. Willa stood frozen, staring through the tent flap at the wrapped bodies of the bride and groom and, beyond them, to the musician's stage to the left. She wanted to hear music. She wanted to close her eyes

and be carried away. The New Earthers with their lawn chairs and picnic blankets took up most of the space under the tent. Around the edge of the tent were the tables with the food. Standing next to a folding card table was Marlene Payne and her cherry pies.

She held her post by the pies and stood, thick legs astride, drinking from a wine glass. Willa watched Simon the beekeeper drag his blue cooler away from the tent, across the clearing toward his RV.

Just then, the smell penetrated Willa, confused her, caused every cell inside her to close up and seek shelter. She pulled on the back of her father's jacket. She grabbed ahold of it and buried her face in his back. "The smell. I can't go up there," she mumbled into him.

Her father turned and steadied her, lifted her chin to his face. "You can. You can. And you will. You'll get used to it. Cuca, remember? "

She wanted to cry, to run. It was the smell of disaster, of panic, of pain and of being ripped from life unexpectedly. *She saw the hairpin turns Amy Turner took in the canyon the night she died—one, two, three—and then the headlights. It was her lane. It was her lane! Impact. Light, light, light. The sound of a thousand saws, gears, and metal: a symphony of metal. Now, the passenger door is open and Willa/Amy hangs from the half open window like a circus act. She stares one last moment down into the canyon, into the great, grey depth before…* Willa fell to the ground. A few feet away, Brother Mutte was just now ascending the stairs leading up to the stage. From the ground, she could sense the confusion above her, her father's voice, Champion's hot breath on her face, but it all seemed hazy-away. Her eyes were locked onto another frozen pair of eyes, peering out at her from underneath the stairs. Max.

“Hey, it’s the freak. The freak fell down again. Having another one of her fits. You got the devil,” Max whispered. “Ain’t anyone here can’t see that, no matter what they say. What you got hidden in that basket of yours?”

Chapter 4: To Life!

Simon couldn't get over all the Earther children gathered for the ghost wedding. There'd been reproduction laws, albeit less strict now, since the height of the famine. And yet these people shunned the laws, birthing babies at home. The Earthers may just stack the population in their favor in the end, he thought. And why the hell not? At least, they had conviction. They could never be accused of clinging to the past, like the Haves.

The Earthers called the people still living in the cities, still participating in culture, voting and watching the news, The Haves. These people hung in because they could afford to. They lived in cordoned off sections of city, corporate-owned, town-sized resorts: walled-in, gated, secured, enclosed with their own tennis courts, fitness centers, banks, schools, and militaristic, private security forces. And of course, they had their own grocery stores. Simon thought the folks in the Have-towns were just deniers, singing lullabies to their children about America the great and prosperous nation. But after the collapse, one in every three outside the Have-towns died in the famine. Those that lived did so in lawlessness and instability.

There was still no sign of Tipper and the ghost wedding was already in full swing. Simon startled at a burst of feedback. He looked over to the stage just in time to see the disheveled Brother Mutte ascending.

Mutte howled into the microphone. "Listen to what I say, people! As you know, the bees have already been called to heaven. With those first worthy souls, the rapture has most certainly begun!"

Bees. Simon figured Mutte brought up the bees just to get to him. Because he'd seen him sitting there in the back of the tent, half in half out. Simon and Mutte went way back. Although beekeeping was illegal now, except in government labs, no one was really looking. Even so, Simon wasn't looking to broadcast the fact that he kept bee boxes—albeit mostly empty—at the edge of the campground.

The microphone was turned up so Mutte could be heard over the din from the speakers. Simon had seen Willa Walker disappear behind the tent with her father a moment before but there was no sign of her now. She was going to be on stage soon. He would stay to watch her and then go back inside his RV.

He'd poured out a glass of the wine he'd brought for Marlene. Marlene Payne would get no more of his guilt bounty. Yes, his bees killed her son. Yes, he was responsible. But Simon had *paid*. The colony, the only semi-healthy one he'd managed to raise in the last three years, had indeed paid.

The Peacekeepers never showed the day Joss died. Nobody in authority arrived to investigate. They never took Joss to a hospital, not that the hospitals out here were adequately staffed or stocked with anything but the most cursory provisions. With Marlene's permission, the Earthers buried Joss on the Giant and avoided all scrutiny. Digging him up, however, brought with it a sense of unease for Simon, a reboot of the previous, impending doom. His bees. His fault.

Yes, he'd left the hive tool on the steps. He'd left it there in plain sight, knowing full well Joss and the Earthers were getting loaded in the clearing. He should've seen this coming. He'd

never seen partying like what he'd witnessed with those people, and Simon had spent the better part of thirty years on the road with bees. He'd seen a lot of partying.

The night Joss Payne died, Simon had gone to check on the bees. He'd laid the hive tool down on the steps and he must have left it there. Not locked in the shed, as usual. And the kid must have wandered over sometime in the night, smashed, hammered, whatever, picked up the tool, and wrenched the flat, wooden top from the box. The lid would have been tacky, fused to the box by a week of accumulated goo, what honey they bees had managed to make, and the yellow "rain" they'd regularly secreted. Joss would have had to wrestle with the lid a bit to free it.

Simon looked around for an empty picnic table. He'd rather sit along the edge than under the tent with the majority of the Earthers. This would make him more of an observer and less of a participant. But all the tables were taken.

On Bossman's Ten-Acre Campsites, where the sweet clover, alfalfa and sunflower once bloomed, stood a single, solitary tree. The howlers, winds that swept the middle of the country now—a farther-reaching, more constant version of the formerly seasonal Chinook winds—had bowed most of the trees alongside the northern-facing Black Hills. People called them "howlers" because of the high-pitched sound they made sweeping through the farmland and up into the Hills. This singular tree was a sorry, dappled oak, a transplant from more hospitable terrain. It had one remaining live limb that pointed upward in a semi-hopeful gesture and one dead, accusatory limb that pointed back at Boss's trailer-slash-office. Simon chose a spot beneath one of its low limbs, directly on the grass.

“The chief malady of man,” Mutte continued to preach, “is his desire to wrestle with things he cannot understand. He used to love to shun religion as superstition then he turned around and used it as a weapon at his convenience! He’d claim faith in God and yet he’d cling tight to science and technology to solve all his problems. Oh, but his avarice and selfishness. Oh but the danger of all of that chaos, all of that self-love!”

Simon had cohabitated with these people for two years now, albeit seasonally and strictly for the sake of the bees. Every kind of person came to the campground. Simon suspected they were there for the safety and tolerated the cult-stuff. Most of these people had nowhere to go, no money, nothing but a tent, or if they were lucky an old RV or a trailer. For his part, Simon always knew he could leave at any time. But then there was Joss’s death, and Willa Walker, and now, it seemed, there was Tipper, who he’d been sleeping with, and all this seemed to be dragging him into the electric core of these people. Whereas, once he’d been content to sit back and silently deride them from the shelter of the Mesa, here he was, a participant at one of their lunatic hoedowns. The Earthers were made real now by their sheer proximity. Out in the open air amongst them, he was flooded by their sounds and smells.

A dozen Earthers sat in a semi-circle of chairs in the clearing about twenty feet in front of him. A teenage girl, a wedge of watermelon (watermelon!) bisecting her mouth, turned and regarded him with disinterest. A terrier stood up underneath a portable table covered in napkins and plastic forks and wagged its head before taking a few steps toward him. Along with kids, the Earthers seemed to be collecting dogs. The dogs peppered the campground with their ubiquitous crap. They seemed a separate society unto themselves. They’d hardly bothered with the humans at all but instead ran together, breaking up occasionally into smaller, strategic formations to sniff

and piss a perimeter around Bossman's empire of dirt. Now, at dinnertime, they lolled about on the picnic blankets and underneath portable tables with their tongues hanging out.

"Are you ready to die?" Mutte hollered. He let the question hang in the air a full fifteen seconds. Simon looked around, bracing himself for the response, which he assumed would come in booming unanimity.

But there was only silence.

An indelicate squeal escaped from the speaker as the guitarist shifted her guitar, still plugged into the amp, from shoulder to shoulder. The Earthers stared up at Mutte, blinking, a smile twitching uncertainly at the lips of some, stony reserve on the faces of others.
Simon wondered what the correct Earther response should be? Death, yes or no? On the one hand, their stockpiling of seeds and dry goods, their tanks of water and gasoline, the cache of weapons Simon had never seen but presumed with certainty all the same, seemed to indicate a deep desire to live. Theirs was an almost manic imperative to live. But then the cow-eyed fanaticism, the marrying off of spirits to ensure bliss in the near-approaching everafter, the fixation on the rapture, all this seemed to indicate a readiness to die, or at least to disappear. Contradiction. Wasn't that always the way? Simon struggled with people, and to those who claimed to fair better, after honest self-examination, well, Simon invited them to let loose their jackass cry. He preferred bees.

"He created us with the will to live!" Mutte finally conceded. "God placed eternity in our hearts." At hearing this, the Earthers seemed to collectively deflate.

"To life!" Simon said to no one in particular and lifted the plastic cup to his lips. He breathed in the deep earth smell, and underneath that, the plum and cherry in the wine. The soil

still remembered the fruit but Simon knew that neither cherries nor plums had grown near the tiny Northern California vineyard where he'd been trading for wine over the last decade. Even grapes struggled along now, not because of the bees but because grapevines had their own mites to contend with. And on top of that, the west coast weather had become far too hostile for the delicate grape.

"To life!" a voice in front of him said. A man turned to face Simon. He was holding a clouded, plastic cup with an inch of brown liquid in the bottom. Simon nodded in response as the man turned up the liquid in one swallow. It was Dane, Mutte's right hand man. As far as Simon could tell, Dane was the muscle. He accompanied Mutte when he'd travel on his frequent trips, missions they called them, to recruit floaters. He also worked closely with Bossman on the business end of things. Dane was always in the passenger seat of someone truck, going somewhere of important, looking intimidating. A terrier left Dane's side and wandered up to Simon as if following some silent command. This was Dane's companion dog, as opposed to the snarling pack he kept chained to metal poles on the northern edge of the compound, the ones the Earthers took on patrols at night when they suspected a breach. Marauders were still common, even in Bossman's kingdom. The food and supplies were just too tempting.

Simon dipped his finger into the wine and dropped it down for the terrier to taste. The dog sniffed his finger before turning and running back to Dane, leaving the wine untasted.

"We are gathered here today to join the spirits of Brother Joss and Sister Amy, taken from us too soon. Taken from the world at the wrong moment. The order is upended. What we are witnessing here is pure entropy. Pure chaos. But truly I tell you, order is still there, underneath. We were given the Earth to hold care of. And did we hold care of the Earth?"

"No!" was the response from the Earthers, gallant and certain as they were on this point.

"No, we did not. We did not. And now the Earth is rejecting us, spitting us out like the putrid, squirming mass that we are. God is showing us who's in control here. Who's *really* in control. The Haves think they control the world. The Haves and their precious Have-towns. They think they own Christianity, patriotism, safety, technology, food, and life itself. But they are prisoners in their Have-towns! Prisoners in their sin! It's the rest of us who have finally inherited the kingdom. But there are some things left for us still to do."

He walked back and forth on the platform. Simon watched the belt end bob in front of him like fishing line. There was something feline in Preacher Mutte's face, almost predatory. "The first of which is to continue the sacraments. And for those bodies left on earth, our dead, those Earthers *will* rise alongside us, body and soul. They'll hear his voice and be called to him. And so we must prepare. We must continue. Baptisms and marriages. Dead or alive.

"The night Amy Turner died, an angel came to me. As clear as you people standing here before me. The angel stood before me, a nimbus of pure gold, fire and light. And this angel told me that Amy's betrothed was awaiting their union in the spiritual realm. And I learned then that groom's name was Joss Payne! Hallelujah!"

"Hallelujah!" the Earthers shot back. Marlene Payne closed her eyes as if fighting off a headache. Simon could see, even from a hundred feet, that she was drunk and unhappy. Simon started to rise to cross over to her. He wondered if it was unreasonable to expect an end to his guilt.

But Simon sat back down at the sound of Mutte's voice, the tone of which had startled even him. "You two there," the preacher boomed, "with the cellular phones!" Mutte was

pointing directly in front of him, about thirty feet, where two young men were standing, one fumbling to return something to his pocket. “What news have you brought us of Babylon?” While the Earthers welcomed visitors, always seeking to expand their flock, any unknowns in their midst were carefully watched. And technology of any kind was strictly prohibited. This was clearly stated on all their fliers and posted again at the campsite entracne. For his part, Simon kept his cell phone in the Mesa. It was rarely useful, anyway. Solar flares and cyber-pirates, vaporous threats to equally vaporous technology, had long ago rendered cell phones and the internet merely a flickering phenomena on the best of days.

“How’s the world of The Haves?” Mutte asked the boys, who appeared frozen in place. The boys looked nervous. They weren’t boys, really, but to Simon they were still decades from men. Several of the Earthers began shouldering their way through the crowd toward the commotion. Dane, enormous and overly enthusiastic, crumpled his plastic cup and threw it down at his feet. He hopped down from the picnic table in front of Simon and began making his way toward the intruders. Dane reached into the stocky one’s jacket and plucked out a cell phone, held it proudly above his head for Mutte to see.

“Did you not read the sign when you came in?” Mutte said into the microphone. “No technology. We don’t participate in your brand of idolatry here. It was you that finally changed the truth of God into a lie for the lot of you, you who worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator! ”

“Look,” the stocky kid said, clearly terrified. “Sorry if we did something wrong. I don’t know anything about that stuff you’re saying. But we drove all the way from Valentine, Nebraska today.”

“Welcome boys! Welcome. All the way from Valentine, Nebraska he says,” Mutte confirmed for the crowd.

The Earthers noodled around each other to get a look. Dane’s terrier took his vacated spot atop the picnic table and let out an urgent bark. The light was starting to drop away and it was hard to see. The generators whizzed and shimmied and the floodlights gave Boss’s campground a halo of intrigue.

Simon looked for Tipper. Still closed up in her trailer, apparently. Yellow truck parked at the base of her trailer steps. Still home.

There were no Have-towns in Valentine, Nebraska, of course. Simon wondered if he would meet the Earther definition of a Have. Simon’s family had a considerable fortune once upon a time, but he was always just a beek, which was what beekeepers called themselves, also once upon a time. He’d always been on the road, with his bees, in RV’s his whole life. Sometimes he marveled at how little had actually changed for him in this new world order, after the so-called collapse, which was the name bestowed upon the collective jolt to modern civilization. The final surrender brought with it global market instability, volatile weather, and the loss of two thirds of the Earth’s population. Collapsed, it seemed, were the systems—energy, information, infrastructure, transportation, agriculture. Systems, by definition, were always in flux, but they were also firm foundations upon which people built their whole lives, Simon included.

Simon’s wife Gloria and their children had attempted to remain on the family compound in Northern California, until safety and food security caused Simon to sell. Gloria lived in a Have-town now, a Have if there ever was one. One of their sons died in the famine, refusing

their help, a tragedy for which he and Gloria never forgave themselves. Simon's daughter still lived with Gloria. And his oldest Michael died in in Simon's arms many years ago, at the start of the one collapse that, if he were honst, mattered most to Simon, the canary in the coal mine: honeybee colony collapse.

No, Simon wasn't sure if the Earthers saw him as doomed or chosen, as was their only distinction, sharp as it was. It never occurred to him before now that their opinion probably mattered, at least it did while he resided on Bossman's Ten-Acre Campsites.

Dane and another man hovered behind the boys, standing menacingly with an arm of each of their shoulders. The taller, lanky kid yelled out, "He was just trying to text his girlfriend. She's pregnant with their baby. She's sick. She's really sick."

Mutte took a step forward and glared at the kid as he spoke.

"The girl you've got on this flyer," the boy continued, pulling a square folded piece of paper out of his back pocket and shaking it full. "Willa Walker. She cured Crazy Joe from the Circle K when she came through our town last year. We all saw it. This is her, right?" The kid held up a small, blue flyer. Simon had seen these flyers before. They had a photo of Willa standing shyly outside her Tuscany Motor Coach. The text on the flyer read, in part, *Willa Walker. Child prophet. Revelations and healings for a fee.* Simon had seen her father, Cass, carrying stacks of these flyers around town, leaving them at swap meets and other campsites. "Crazy Joe from the Circle K?" Mutte sputtered back. The crowd of Earthers laughed together at this.

Just then, another woman in the crowd yelled out, "Willa Walker stopped Sister Jill Macy's miscarriage. Didn't she, Jill?" She turned and gestured to a woman with frizzy hair in an

oversized t-shirt sitting on the picnic blanket at her feet. Babies were important to the Earthers, and nutrition and medical care were scarce. Miscarriage was a problem. The woman with the frizzy hair stood up, cradling her belly. Grass needles stuck in the flesh of her white thighs.

"Willa Walker cured Crazy Joe, you say? Well, hot damn! Willa get on up here!" Mutte crossed one leg in front of the other and put a hand on his hip. "Little Willa, get on up here!" Mutte craned his head around a little, obviously looking for Willa, before turning and bobbing his grinning head up and down at the crowd.

Simon remembered his grandfather years ago on the road telling him, "God is enticing mankind to a higher and greater complexity. Only we can be at fault for what happens here. His mind is greater than your mind, Simon. Don't ever forget it, son. Whatever we've been given to make sense of the world, son, it ain't enough. It ain't never gonna be enough."

Simon once had an assistant who, while he was away, thought she was being helpful by painting flowers on the apiary trailers in order to attract foraging bees after they'd begun to have trouble returning to the hive, losing their path navigation, their special ability, the notorious beeline.

Early on, the foragers had begun abandoning their queens and eventually died, shriveled up, huddled together, not in the elegant precision of a swarm but in utter confusion. And in the hive would Simon inevitably discover an unattended queen, a few confused attendants, and no other sign of trouble: no marauding fungus or beetle. All the honey would be intact.

The problem with those painted flowers was this: honeybees learn a color, and their color memory is astoundingly precise, only after they've successfully found food will they commit a specific color to memory. They have ultra-violet vision—much better than that of humans— for

this express purpose. Otherwise, they'll just forget. Honeybees are masters at forgetting. Those painted flowers were lost on the honeybees.

Simon didn't see any evidence of any higher greatness or complexity after the trials of the last fifteen years: the collapse, the famine, the wildfires, winds, and floods that reordered the landscape. These were aleatory events, not connected or instructive, not allegorical, certainly not divine. Simon thought what his grandfather really meant to say all those years ago was this: there is no justice on Earth.

Chapter 5: Crazy Joe

The smell of death abided as Willa lay in the dirt at the edge of the aluminum stage. Max, the Earther kid, lay across from her. She'd rendered him silent. *Silence. Tu-ha* had given her the strength. His face was less than six inches from hers, and she could smell his breath, which wasn't entirely unpleasant. It smelled like spongy moss, like the wet corners of the ranger's cabin back in the swamp. Willa wondered what might happen if the stage collapsed at that very moment, if both she and Max were crushed by its weight? Would the Earthers marry them off to one another? Maybe. Probably.

Mutte was speaking into the microphone above them but his words seemed distorted, jibberish. Willa kept her eyes on Max's, willing him silent. He stared back at her, transfixed. She heard the words being spoken into the microphone above her but didn't immediately recognize them. The world was all a fog.

"Little Willa Walker," Brother Mutte's voice called out, "get on up here."

She lifted herself onto on elbow and felt an ache in the bend of her waist. She looked down at her legs, her shoes. She was still thinking of Amy Turner, of one, two, three turns, her final human moment dangling by a single foot. It had been *her lane*.

"It's just for a moment," she murmured in Max's direction, but he had already rolled away under the opposite side of the stage. She felt her father's hand around her bicep, pulling her up.

"You okay? What the hell was that?" Cass asked, not unkindly.

“Fine. I’m fine. It was the smell, I think. Is he calling my name?” she whispered. But there wasn’t time for an answer. Cass dusted off her sweater dress in three smacks. Willa handed him Hormidas’ basket. She felt the pull of it, like a magnet, the basket straining away from him and back toward her. “I’m giving you all the treasures left in the world,” she said. “Take care of them.”

Hormidas would never have let Cass hold the basket, but Willa wasn’t worried. Cass knew it mattered to Willa, but he didn’t care to know why. Why would he? There wasn’t any money in it.

She missed the last step and faltered as she stepped unto the stage. She felt Cass’s hand lift off her back as he left her. The tent was huge; it always looked bigger when she was underneath it; the few times she’d been allowed underneath it. Willa and Cass were relatively new to the Earthers, still not completely trusted.

Mutte turned to face her. He was tall. She was thirteen but she stood five foot seven. He was at least six inches taller than her. He crossed to her, not looking her in the eye but somewhere over her head. When Mutte reached her he made a claw and gripped the back of her neck, with the other hand he held a microphone into which he was broadcasting his heavy, uneven breath. He guided her with his claw, flew her like a toy airplane, forward and to the right until she was at the front of the stage.

Willa didn’t dare close her eyes, but she summoned her strength all the same. Fear was a muddler, a temptation to confusion, Hormidas had said. Mutte had her hooked but she told herself that he held no power over her. Still, she smelled his almond smell and was reminded of Hormidas. Under the almonds she smelled sweat, and there was alcohol on his breath.

So she did what ‘Midas had taught her to do, and in the right order. She could feel *Tu-ha* all around her, in the wind. She allowed herself to glance down once at Amy Turner whose body was just below her. Her shroud was much thicker than Joss’. Rolled tightly. No glimpse of flesh. But the smell. A wide current of pungent, heavy air, the particles that were once the body of Amy Turner passed over her, a river of particles.

It was her lane.

Willa thought of Cuca, the floating girl. Floating sounded nice. She thought perhaps she’d try it if Mutte would just let go of her neck. She felt dizzy again.

The tent was broad across the middle and took up much of the clearing in the center of Bossman’s Ten-Acre Campsites. There were groups of Earthers spread out on blankets, some standing around on the outside. The sun had dropped and the floodlights, plugged into generators, lit the perimeter of the tent, pointing in. The effect turned the Earthers outside the tent into no more than black smudges, child-and-dog-shaped blobs moving among them. Cast in flood light and encircled by generators, the Earthers inside the tent seemed to glow.

Awakened by God’s light? she heard ‘Midas ask. *No,* she said in her inside voice.

The Earthers seemed fearful but eager. They leaned forward as Willa crossed the stage, bending toward her. They, too, were placid, quiet, the way Max had been under the stage. Could she put them all to still with her eyes, she wondered? Probably not? But perhaps she could bring the world to still if it came to that?

She allowed herself an extended glance at Joss. She remembered his broad, flushed cheeks, the way he’d stood by the fire the night before he died, shuffling side to side. Little hops like her father. He’d looked cold that night but he also looked happy, content to be sharing a

cigarette with the beautiful Amy Turner, drinking grain alcohol, listening to Preacher Mutte who that night had been singing with the band.

From this height, she could see Joss' silhouette inside his linen wrappings. He didn't look like a pile of loose trash anymore. From this vantage point above him, she could make out a leg, clearly, although it must surely be only a bone after all this time in the ground? Willa heard that when they found him he'd swelled so much they had a hard time identifying who it was who'd fallen asleep out by Simon's trailer. Willa didn't know what happened to someone who'd been killed by bees. Maybe that many stings could preserve a body forever? Simon told her that when Alexander the Great died, they filled his coffin with honey.

When they got to the end of the stage, Mutte kept his hand behind her neck. Fleshy fingers held her in place. "Is this the girl you're seeking?" he asked. He seemed to be addressing two young men, clearly singled out, surrounded by Mutte's closest cronies, who had a hand on each of their shoulders. "Is this the girl who cured your Crazy Joe?" Mutte asked into the microphone.

Willa stood still. She was concentrating, just the way Hormidas had taught her, doing things in the right order. The shorter man nodded in enthusiastic recognition at first but then after glancing between Mutte and Willa, he seemed to think again. "I don't know. I think. She looks the same, but she's too young to be the one." To Willa he said, "You the one who came to the Circle K? The one who ground up on Crazy Joe?"

They'd pulled up in the Tuscany Motor Coach. 'Midas had recently died just a few days before. He had died in a manner that Willa could hardly bear thinking of, and they'd buried him

themselves, her and her father, along the old Cowboy Trail ten miles outside of Valentine, which was illegal, but people did that kind of stuff all the time.

Cass told her he'd buy her some spicy pork rinds from the Circle K, in return for which she told her father that she'd stop crying, at least for a while. A small crowd of people gathered on the sidewalk to the right of the entrance to the store, maybe eight guys, two girls. They were playing dominoes. Cass had sent her inside alone with money.

Before she reached the door, one of the young men who'd been standing over the game turned and called out to her, "Slow down, sweet thing!" They were dirty, bearded like most floaters. They smelled strong, like motor oil or old cooking grease Nothing about that frightened her. There were women, too, sitting on the ground, passing a bottle between them. Willa kept walking, it wasn't unusual, even though she was only twelve at the time, for people to think she was older.

"Wait, wait, wait, yo." The kid came jogging—a loose, athletic gate— in her direction. "Say, baby, say." He placed an arm around her and began steering her toward the domino game. Willa looked back at their Tuscany Motor Coach, which was facing the other direction, toward the highway, idling loudly.

"Our friend wants you," the boy said. Willa had closed her eyes and set herself to still. She wouldn't be afraid. Fear was a muddler.

He brought her to the domino table and stood her in front of a man in a wheelchair. He was dirty, black gunk accumulated around his fingernails. His filthy clothes were shreds with openings for his claves and elbows. "Crazy Joe, what did you want to tell this sweet thing?" the

boy asked, grinning. He kept one arm around Willa's waist, one hand dipped down onto her bottom.

Crazy Joe had a twisted-up face, a broken-looking jaw. His neck and face jerked to the side when he spoke. He was holding up his arms, his hands dangled uselessly from bent wrists. Willa understood human bodies for what they were. 'Midas had taught her that we didn't evolve armored exoskeletons but soft, pliable flesh for a reason. There are an infinite number of ailments, misalignments, genetics and experiences that change, scar, and twist people. Willa had touched all kinds of people and found that, really, they were all the same.

"Wou-wou-wou-wou-would y-y-y-y-ou z-z-z-ip me up-p?" Joe asked her. He was flapping his wrists wildly. Bumping his chin into his chest over and over, indicating downward with his head. Willa glanced into the man's lap. His ragged pants were unzipped, and his penis—swollen, purplish, rimmed in goose flesh—pressed erect against his abdomen.
Willa took a quick step back when she saw it, and the small group around her exploded with laughter.

"Crazy Joe dick's stuck that way, sweet thing. Can't you help a guy out?" the boy next to her said into her ear. She wanted to hate these people. Oh, how she wanted to hate them, especially the boy next to her. But Willa knew how weak hatred made people. And she couldn't afford weakness. And so without her basket, or amulets, or even talking herself through 'Midas' steps, Willa held her breath and brought the world to still. The faces of the jeering crowd were the twisted ones now, twisted in mid-laugh, bent over in jeering hilarity and frozen in time.
But Crazy Joe was looking straight ahead. Blinking. Quiet. She unhooked herself from the crooked arm of the frozen man next to her and pushed Joe's wheelchair out so she could move in

front of him. She took his hands in her hand. Hand to hand. And she moved on top of him. Chest to chest. She lay her weight on him, as much she could, arcing her mid-section away to avoid his penis. Willa and Crazy Joe were eye to eye. Face to face. Joe's eyes were becoming huge, bulging. Fearful.

She gave Crazy Joe the best advice she had. "Fear is a muddler," she whispered into his ear. He smelled like the burlap sacks that 'Midas would lug to the ranger's shack, loaded with cornmeal. His neck and face twisted in one last, frantic gesture. He made a sound like someone had sucker-punched him. "Ewwwwww," he said and spittle ran from the side of his mouth. Willa got as close to his lips as she could and blew. A steady stream of air.

And just like that, what was rigid went soft: hands, arms, face. She watched him drop the pain. She felt it pass quickly. Superficial. Not a *bugaloo*. Not even close.

Crazy Joe looked her in the eye, clear, composed. He waited for Willa to climb out of his lap and then he reached down and zipped up his pants. Willa was almost back to the motor coach when the world began to turn again. The sound of laughter exploded behind her and then immediately died away. A man said, "Did that girl just fuck Joe?" A woman's voice said, "That ain't Joe."

When Willa opened the door to the motor coach, Cass wasn't in the driver's seat. She looked around the RV but didn't see him. But what she did see scared her. All of 'Midas artifacts from the Amazon—the fishing lure, the mask, the bowl, and of course, the basket, were vibrating. Visibly. And the motor coach was filled with a terrible, thick smell. Sulfuric, miasmic. She felt nauseous. She thought she heard one of the artifacts calling out to here, but it was only

her father Cass, who was in the lavatory. His voice seemed far, far away. She watched as the inside of the motor coach went around her once, twice, three times before everything went black.

Willa stayed silent on the stage. She felt Mutte's fleshy finger pads dig deeper into her neck. A dog barked someone under the tent. Then another. Amy Turner was still passing in waves over their heads. *Fear is a muddler.*

"My girlfriend!" the man yelled up. "She was there that day," he said to Willa. "You met her. Or you saw her at least. The day, with Crazy Joe."

Willa nodded. Mutte moved the microphone under her chin. "I remember the man in the wheelchair," Willa said into it.

"Can you come back to Valentine?" the boy yelled.

Mutte used the microphone to relay the message to the crowd. "He wants Miss. Willa to return to Valentine. But first I want to know what you mean by 'ground up'? Is this another infiltration of your perversions, Babylonian?"

"I'm sorry for that, Preacher," the young man said. She climbed up into his wheelchair with him," the young man said. "You the one did that, right? Rubbed up on his dick?"
Mutte nodded at them with a false, eerie solidarity. Willa could see he was sizing them up. The filament that normally floated between crowds of people seemed fixed, stagnant, like mist hovering over the ocean. Then Mutte nodded quickly, almost imperceptibly, at Dane before he and the other men began to pull the boys out of the tent.

The short, stocky boy was looking at Willa, desperate now as they pulled him away, a hand under each armpit. “Tell him! Tell him what you did!” He slapped his friend next to him on the chest with the back of his hand. “Tell them! Tell them what that girl did!”

Mutte put the microphone under Willa’s chin again, and this time Willa felt the stab of his fingernails as he bent his hand in toward her. “Redeem yourself now, child. Confess,” Mutte whispered into her ear. “Tell everyone what you did so we can get on with this wedding.”

“I laid hands on the man. He was ill. I’m glad he’s better.”

At this, the Earthers began clapping and cheering. Many cried out her name. Each person, Willa noticed, although only speaking her name was saying something different. Behind each exclamation was a different desire.

Mutte was silent as he watched his men escort the boys from Valentine outside the tent. All was silent, until a woman called out, “I hear she does revelations! She has the gift of clarity!” Willa did used to do revelations in the RV on Wednesdays and Fridays, but in the Earthers’ sect, only Mutte was allowed to see into the future.

“Peace people!” Mutte yelled out the crowd. “We are gathered here today for a wedding and a wedding is what this day is reserved for. One way or another, it’ll happen. Anyone else among us got a Crazy Joe story they’d like to share?” The Earthers laughed heartily at this. Willa wondered at how easily people were distracted. She felt Mutte’s hand release the back of her neck.

“Revelations aren’t to be taken lightly! We aren’t meant to know the future. Jesus sweat blood because he knew what was coming next!”

But then a small, grey-haired woman, skinny with thick glasses held up a single finger. Willa saw her immediately. She heard the words before the woman yelled them. *No,* Willa told her in a silent voice, but she knew as she said it that this particular woman wasn't going to hear Willa's silent voice. This woman had far too many voices in her head already. Willa could see the confusion and clutter behind her eyes, even from the stage.

"For God sake, Francis, let her tell us the future! What in the world have we got to lose? She's standing right here in front of us and we are going to pretend she's not! Let us experience her gifts!"

Willa had never heard anyone call Brother Mutte by his first name before. Immediately as the woman spoke it, she felt the hot flash of anger pass through Mutte like the blast of a furnace. Mutte began pacing the stage, clapping and whistling. He was angry and Willa could feel it. He was walking to keep from exploding, she could feel that, too. She watched as one balled little fist tapped his thigh as he walked.

"Okay then," he yelled, anger evident in his voice. "All right then! My people! My people have spoken! Let us put aside the life and death business of the wedding. Let's come right back to that matter of *life* and *death*! Let's witness what gifts the Lord bestowed upon this child, once and for all! Let us see if she is true, or if she is false." He looked at her then, a sly sideways glare. "Is this a child, or is this a serpent? When I was a child, I spoke like a child! I thought like a child! Has this child given up her childish ways?"

Chapter 6: Serpents

A serpent? The frenzy in Mutte's voice scared the shit out of Simon. He thought about going back to the Mesa for his pistol. Willa looked frightened, too. She'd closed her eyes. Where was this going? Where was this girl's father? The fucking coward! He looked around to see if he look locate Cass and saw him on the porch of Bossman's cabin-slash-office. Cass was always looking to ingratiate himself, insert himself, gain proximity to the Earther leadership, but mostly, Simon noticed, Dane, Boss, and Mutte treated Cass like gum on their shoe. Simon assumed the boys from Valentine were inside the cabin with Bossman. Simon imagined Boss interrogating them, searching them with his penetrating eyes, operating from underneath a shelf of brambly eye-brows. Bossman wasn't really an Earther. He was what he said he was: the landlord, the master of the house, the boss.

Simon's attention was suddenly drawn away from the stage to western bone of the horseshoe that encircled the clearing, one row back, where Tipper's door exploded as if blasted open from the inside. The door smacked the trailer's side and bounced closed again. Tipper had to open it more slowly a second time to let herself out.

The dirty orange light of Tipper's trailer was illuminating her from behind, and she had a hand on her narrow hip. She was wearing her floral skirt and yellow tank top, the same clothes she'd had on the last time he saw her. The clothes he had so gratefully taken off of her slender body. Her hair was piled haphazardly on the top of her head. Tipper made the small leap from her threshold to the first cinder block step. She landed it perfectly and took off in strides toward the clearing.

Without knowing why, this had Simon on his feet. Something was being threatened although Simon couldn't be sure what, his stability maybe, perhaps his intentional ambivalence toward the Earthers? Whatever it was, something was surely being compromised by Tipper's crossing the clearing at this clip, in this particular moment. Simon was moving toward her, maneuvering around the tent poles.

Tipper had disappeared momentarily behind two red canvas tents that extended to the edge of the clearing from the side of a camper. She came back into view a moment later and walked through a terrain littered with blankets, coolers, and dogs. She nodded at people as she went, and they nodded back. Simon thought he saw her look over at him and quickly look away. She stepped over the legs of two boys engrossed in a game of tackle-one-another-to–the-ground-and-pummel. She was walking in the direction of the stage. Simon followed, abandoning the cluttered route under the tent and instead jogging along the outside.

Willa was at the microphone now. Mutte thrust it up under her chin, too close, and the crackle of her frightened breath registered along with her words. "I can tell there will be a change in the weather," she said, too formally. Simon stopped walking for a moment and looked up at her. He tried to meet her eyes, to reassure her. He felt some responsibility for her. She had come to visit his bees on every break she had from the seed silos and the grain elevator. And she signed up for pollination duty, supplementing the work of Simon's struggling hives, transferring pollen with a small paintbrush, agonizing and meticulous work that most children hated. But she always signed up. As did Joss, Simon remembered with a pang of regret.

The terrified look on her face broke Simon's heart, like a child trying too hard to be a grown up. "Howlers are coming, some of the worst we've seen," she said. "The dust will block out the sun

for two weeks. There is someone here who is considering stealing an animal, a horse. It's important that you do not steal this particular horse. Simon will die in the campground soon, and another in the Hills. These deaths will bring the Peacekeepers. Hide all that you don't want known."

At the news of the Peacekeepers the Earthers became unsettled. A woman stood up abruptly in Simon's path, wild eyed, glaring at him as if he were in fact a Peacekeeper. Everyone had a story about a Peacekeeper, usually involving the census they continuously conducted across the country, counting the deaths and keeping track of the now increasingly nomadic and scattered population. Everyone had at least some unfairness or indignity to report, other recounted stories of violence and abuse.

"When?" Someone else called out, "Can't you tell us when they're coming? And who is going to die?"

The census began as a way to keep track of the dead after the famine. The Peacekeeper Census Division drove across the country in caravans marked with red crosses, reaching most areas every three months or so. In some places, where things were too violent for even the Peacekeepers to enter, they'd leave large wooden slats, linked together like a row of fencing, and the people were to come and add a tally mark for each person they'd lost. Willa told Simon they'd done this for her mother, outside the entrance to Myakka State Park. Simon had done the same for his oldest boy outside of Seattle, Washington.

Neither Mutte nor Willa noticed Tipper until she was directly behind them. She strode with purpose across the stage and whispered something in Mutte's ear. He hardly looked startled but turned on her with a sly grin, the pink tip of his tongue dipped out of his mouth for just a

moment and it made Simon's stomach turn. Simon had just joined the crowd of twenty or so directly below the dais when Mutte handed Tipper the microphone.

Tipper wasn't really an Earther, not really. But she was allowed to stay there, for reasons Simon struggled to grasp. She seemed to have a relationship of sorts with Mutte, but she also came from a Have-town, which made her both an outsider and an object of constant scrutiny and fascination. The Earthers seemed to lean in when she began to speak, even the band was paying attention.

"Amy Turner was my friend," Tipper said, proudly, nodding her head at Mutte as if speaking on this stage was some big honor he'd just bestowed on her , "even though she was young enough to be my daughter. I see her real mother here. Hello, Joan. I'm so sorry for your loss." The woman still bent in the Earther "c" at the foot of her daughter's raised up just long enough to flash them a gaunt visage of bereavement.

"Let us not get sidetracked here. The Peacekeepers are tomorrow's worry. There'll always be a fresh worry tomorrow, people. But today, we must proceed with this ceremony! Our reason for gathering today. The ghost weddings are a sacrament designed to honor a human life cut short! Those millions who've died without living. No kind of life. Disregarded. No marriage, no children, no home, no chance. And so let's turn away from revelations, turn away from the future, and focus on Amy Turner and Joss Payne. Soon to be husband and wife on this Earthly plane and in the world of spirit!"

There was a silence among the Earthers. The wild-eyed woman who was still standing next to Simon whispered, "Fucking whore. She's going to suck Mutte off for her moment in the

spotlight, just you watch." A man in the back of the tent yelled, "Let the kid speak! She's trying to warn us! We're all in danger!"

There was a small rumbling amongst the people in the crowd. He thought Tipper was comfortable enough on the stage. She had a presence. She had abandoned her life in the Have-town of her own free will, which dismayed the Earthers. She'd lived in what was once Dallas, Texas. Dallas was now two enormous Have-towns, one run by a technology company and the other an energy giant. She was the only Earther to have ever lived in a Have-town, and for this offense, it seemed as though she'd been deemed a perpetual outsider, of sorts.

Tipper had a little affect she did with a wide stance and a squinty-look, tilting her head forward. Simon had seen these before. It was her teasing look. She was trying to captivate them, and it was working. Mutte was taking her in, looking triumphant, nodding in agreement. Willa was standing shyly off to the side, her eyes closed. Tipper saw Simon standing below her and shot him a cold look, which Simon chose to also receive as seduction.

Mutte, paying close attention, followed her gaze. Simon felt Francis Mutte's his eyes land on him. He looked directly back at him. Mutte tilted his head down in acknowledgment, silently, as if to say, *Do not to disturb Tipper-the-witness*.

"This is what I'm willing to bear witness to—here—at your invitation." With this, she gave a little head dip to Mutte, a single mouse-brown curl falling into her eye. Mutte nodded back in appreciation. "I bear witness to so much death. And we know who's responsible. It's not God. Oh no! For we were given the Earth to keep hold of! Were we not? Oh no, it is the Haves!" She wagged a single finger around in the air, as if the Haves were circling somewhere above her. "And yes, I was once one. It is the greed, and the consumption, and the talking, talking, talking!

The lies! Anything to sell people their sheephood. And those they couldn't hook into their flock, or who couldn't afford to, they'd lock out! Or threw out. Like trash. We all know it was Have-truck that mowed Amy down! Some shiny eighteen-wheeler packed with their goods and food. We know this why? Because they didn't stop." She paused here for effect. Someone in the crowd yelled, "Let's mow them down!"

"Amy was inconsequential to them," Tipper continued. "A floater would have stopped to help! A floater would have crawled down into that canyon and carried her up herself!" At this, there were some whoops and "Hell yeahs!" "And it was their doing that destroyed the honeybees! Poor Joss. He was another Have-casualty if you think about it. Their way of life set the world ablaze. And Earth itself rose up in retribution!"

The woman next to Simon stood with their arms folded, glaring up at Tipper.

"Here…" Tipper began again, and when she did she made an expansive gesture with her pale, softly furred arms. When her arms were at the highest point above her head, Tipper teetered. Not much, just a little bobble. Simon found it charming. He wanted to hop up onto the stage and scoop her into his arms.

"So let me tell you a story of what it was like growing up in a Have-town," she said. Everyone seemed to lean in a little further. As far as Simon knew, Tipper never spoke on stage at the Earther gatherings. She felt her difference, she'd told him. "The important part, the *point* of my story, is that it's all first hand.

"My parents had a two-story bunker in one of two Have-towns in Dallas. We lived in the one owned by the oil company. It was the biggest Have-town at the time, but not anymore. Not with the elaborate ones they have now. The part above the ground, the house part, had little

bathrooms tucked around everywhere and smelled like dried flowers and baby powder. Little toilet under the stairs. Little toilet on the landing. Even out in the garden. My parents owned Big Ed's shoe store. It was one of the only two shoe stores in the town and my dad was the sole-proprietor. I had a big bedroom. It was the top floor of their house, under the pitches of the roof. My mom, being clever, wallpapered every one of them with a different kind of paper. My room could make you dizzy with its patterns.

"I had a record player, which was already an ancient artifact by then but I had in my bedroom. I think it made my mother nostalgic. Made her feel safe. It made her feel connected to the larger world, the old world, before we were all shut into a bubble. My mom only had one record and gave it to me to play. She'd said, 'This is the song your father played for me that made me fall madly in love with him.' And we both sat over that record player and watched the record spin round and round and listened to the song.

"It was an ordinary old-timey song. I remember thinking the men singing it sounded like they had marbles in their mouths. I thought of my father in the wide-open world, before the collapse. A young man out to make his mark in business. And I thought of him as I knew him then, trapped in the Have-town, in an antiseptic bubble that closed over the sky when the weather, or anything, really, posed a threat.

"In the Have-town, people are all pale like pampered ghosts! All the men wear khaki pants with creases, and they all wear golf shirts and have this pickled smell. Or at least my dad smelled like pickles. And feet. And old shoes. He handled woman's feet all day. Men too. But mostly, he liked to wait on the women. But with his own wife, he was always so impatient. And with me, too.

“And so for some reason, all that wallpaper and the crystals hanging in the windows, casting rainbows everywhere, all that made the house grotesque not beautiful. All those little bathrooms. That old record. Even then I knew one day I’d have to leave. I’d be a floater. And I’d find God.”

She looked at Mutte, gratefully, and he smiled at her, exposing his little pointy teeth. Simon pretended to cough, tried to get Willa’s attention again with no success. “And one night, after I’d worked at Big Ed’s helping Dad do inventory, he took me home in his car. All the cars in the Have-towns are just the same. They just come in different colors. They run on batteries and gas, for longer trips, which no one takes. The seats smell like a room that’s been closed up too long. And so before my dad backs out of the parking space he turns the volume up on his digital music player, and what song do you think comes on? Yep, you guessed it. The marble-mouth love song. And then my father puts his hand on my knee.

“I’ll spare you the details. But the point is…” She seemed to think about this for a moment. Simon thought maybe he’d heard her voice crack. “Maybe what I mean is, when something’s wrong, it’s wrong. Where’s there’s trouble, you tell it! Here we know God, and we live by his ways. But not in a Have-town. There’s no trouble to be told in the Have-town. Do you hear me? There’s no freedom in a Have-town. There’s no truth in the Have-town. Be grateful for this wild, open world. Let us all ascend together!”

The Earthers looked on in riveted silence. Tipper handed the microphone back to Mutte and he nodded at the band who immediately struck up a soulful soprano version of “The Angels Wanna Wear My Red Shoes,” with a ukulele leading the way.

The woman with whom Marlene had been sharing her wine was now singing, and Marlene had moved directly in front of her. The singer had a fat bun of strawberry hair fashioned low at her neck. Her mouth was open in a perfect little quivering "o" as she sang through an otherwise still face. She moved, mid-song, from Costello into "Waiting in Vain" in a kind of compellation-transition, blending lines from the two songs.

Leaning back in a green foldout chair, lace-up work boots propped up on a cooler in front of his camper was Dane, apparently finished with whatever business had transpired with the boys from Valentine in Bossman's office. Dane was sitting alone with his terrier, tapping his mammoth foot to the beat. Simon looked around for the boys from Valentine but didn't see them. He didn't notice Tipper walk back to her trailer, but he couldn't find her among the crowd, either.

The woman with the bun had an astonishing, heartache-y voice. The generator's buzz obscured a few of her words but Simon could still hear the lilt, the training and motion in her voice. She was flattening her voice in places to a sweet effect, intentionally dropping notes. Marlene was concentrating, scowling up at her with an intense fixation. She'd taken a seat atop a picnic table. Her thick legs were crossed and she was flicking a high-heeled shoe out slowly in time with the music. She had one elbow propped on her knee and was supporting her head on her hand, her black braid bisecting the length of her arm. Her wine glass was now mostly empty, and her eyes were half-closed. Joss and Amy were temporarily forgotten, still laid out at the front of the tent.

Accompanying the woman on an amped-in ukulele was a small, wiry woman with liver spots all over her knobby arms. Her sheared head was down and she was adding cascading notes to the song's rhythm, little dripping bell sounds.

The woman with the bun was singing, "*Please come back to me. Please come back to me*." Simon was pretty sure the lyrics didn't belong in that song but they sounded good all the same. She sang this line a few more times, eventually letting her voice go tinny and fade. Then she just stopped singing with an abrupt close of her little-o-mouth. The ukulele took off on a little closing riff, an outtake from a Beatles' song.

The wedding party took the stage alongside Mutte. The Earthers all stood then in a reverent silence. He began reciting the wedding vows in a deep monotone but not before whispering something in Willa's ear after which she turned and walked down the steps and across the horseshoe road to her RV.

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"Get off my stage," Mutte whispered in Willa's ear. She turned and took the steps quickly, stepping out the back of the tent flap and crossing the. She didn't respond to her father, who she heard behind her. She was angry with him. He'd made her go up there even after she'd told him she didn't want to, that she was afraid. A woman chased after her, calling her name. Willa tried to speed up but the woman caught Willa by the back of her sweater dress. She pinched her flesh lightly as she grasped the material between Willa's shoulder blades. Willa turned and politely asked the woman to talk to Cass, who she could see coming around the side of the horseshoe with Hormidas' basket.

Tipper yelled something to the woman from the steps of her trailer. It sounded to Willa like, "Fuck you dress." The woman just glared back at her but she ceased in her pursuit of Willa. Tipper was kind. Willa felt gratitude toward Tipper for intervening when she did. But she was angry. Angry at Mutte, her father, Max, the Earthers. Champion whined up at her. He'd shown his teeth to the woman who'd grabbed Willa's dress, but of course that stupid woman couldn't see him. "I know," Willa said, reaching down and running a hand lightly on the outside of his whiskers, "I want to go home, too."

There would be no party raging into the late hours that night.

The howlers, as Willa predicted, had come. There's a hum and shimmy to the air when the temperature's about to change. Hormidas had taught her this on the roof of the ranger's cabin in Myakka State Park while they waited for a hurricane to come in off the Gulf. And not long

after Willa left the stage and returned to the Tuscany Motor Coach, she felt it, then she heard it. Hum and shimmy. And even though she had warned them, the Earthers were caught off guard. That night, the air moved with a singular purpose, as if a great mass of it was being swept toward them by a giant broom. Something powerful was behind it. And that something hummed and shimmied and if Willa paid close enough attention, she could even make out what it was saying, not that she liked to listen to the howlers. They did not speak like *Tu-ha*. To listen to the voice of a howler was to listen to something spiteful and vile.

The Earthers scurried across the campground packing up and securing their cabins, tents, and RV's. They gingerly lifted Amy Turner's body in the air, four men on each side, and placed her in the back of a truck. Joss they kind of crumbled into a long white cooler, and watching from the window, Willa saw that Joss once again looked like a loose pile of trash. They would bury the two of them together on the Sleeping Giant, after the winds died down.

After midnight, sediment swirled through the air. The temperature began to drop. And despite the howling wind, Dane and two other men banged on the door of the Tuscany Motor Coach. Cass wrapped a t-shirt around his head to protect his eyes and nose from the dust and stepped outside with them. When he came back in, even in the small light coming from under the cabinet's of their kitchenette, Willa could see he was afraid. He looked as if he'd been sweating. He smelled of iron, which was they way he always smelled when he was scared. The side of his face was red and there was a small trickle of blood in the corner of his mouth.

"You're gonna have to do everything with Mutte from now on. Healings, preaching, everything." Her father sounded embarrassed. "He has to be present. And when you do healing, he wants to be the one to go. Alone. I'm needed here in the campground."

Willa turned away from him in her pull-down cot and faced the beige, plastic wall.

"It's gonna be good, Willa. You'll see. Everything is good."

Chapter 7: Howlers

There was still beauty. Even when the wind howled and blew the trees until they gave up and began to grow sideways, even when the sky was clogged with dust, even when the honeybees, weak, exhausted, struggled along for the sake of one determined beekeeper. There was still beauty, all the same, even in a collapsed world.

For starters, Simon found nothing more gorgeous than a particle sunset. When a howler blew so much sediment that the setting sun's light reflected off billions of tiny particles, adrift in the thickening atmosphere, that was really something to behold. Streaks of red and crimson, lit like gold dust. The beauty of a particle sunset was deceptive, though, to be sure.
After the howlers ceased, everything would be would be covered with dull, colorless silt. But backlit by a star, high above the majesty of the Black Hills, even colorless silt could be heartbreakingly beautiful.

Simon and Tipper watched the sunsets out the window of her trailer. He'd snuck over to her place shortly after sundown the night of the ghost wedding. He'd known the likelihood of being locked inside during the spate of high winds; in fact, he'd counted on it. That night, they'd watched the Earthers hustle around, resembling a colony of efficient ants, packing up the wedding as the wind tossed the campground around them. The tent was stretched out and then re-folded and fitted to a flat bed trailer pulled by an out-sized pickup truck and stored in a long outbuilding that the Earthers kept locked and well-guarded.

Tipper and Simon watched Marlene Payne cut slices of pie for Mutte and some of the children. They watched her carry, in what was clearly a tipsy gait, a neat slice over to Joss' crumpled shroud and place it next to him.

"Enjoy your cherry pie. You poor, sweet cinnamon dusted boy," Tipper said, referring to Joss' red freckles. "A Sioux-Irish boy with freckles. That has to be a first."

The howlers were just gathering steam, not yet at a full gale. Marlene stumbled off with the soprano with the little 'o' mouth and disappeared into a cabin on the far side of the campground, not to emerge again that night. Much later, Tipper and Simon sipped whiskey and watched Dane and his cronies visit the Walkers' Tuscany Motor Coach. They heard shouts, angry voices, but because the Walkers' site was at an angle behind Tipper's, they never saw what transpired. Just after midnight they watched as the boys from Valentine, Nebraska rush out of Bossman's office, hop into their late model Ford and zoom away.

"They'd certainly did not get what they came for," Tipper said, laughing.

"Do you really think Willa can heal people?"

"I think that she believes she can. I think in reduced circumstances people believe all sorts of things. Even me." She looked off, out the window toward the west, the Hills. There was something comforting about the windstorms. They were almost serene, like a snowstorm might have been in another time. Soon the strongest winds would arrive and they'd have to seal up the doors and the windows, but for now, Tipper and Simon would take advantage of the time alone.

"And that story you told on stage?" he asked.

Tipper smiled, she tilted her whiskey glass at him for another pour. Aged whiskey, another rarity that only Simon could provide. Everyone else drank grain alcohol or home brew.

“I made it up,” she said. “I knew nothing would shut them up faster than something torrid and shameful about me and my Have-town.”

“So none of that was true? The song, the hand on your knee?”

“The bathrooms were true. My folks had a bunch of bathrooms. My mom modeled their shelter after some kind of 1950’s Americana. I don’t know why. The bathrooms were true.”

“Do you really think Mutte’s dangerous? I mean, did you think that kid needed rescuing? I’ve known Mutte a long time now, and well, I’ve always kind of thought of him as a flim-flam man.”

“Ha! Yes, I think he’s dangerous. But only because he is a slimy, snake-oiled bastard.” Tipper was half his age, but she had, as they say, and old soul. A difficult life had put a strain on her delicate features. A hardier beauty, someone with blunter features, might have fared better. Tipper had told him about the drugs, about the men, about the way she had made her own way after she left the Have-town. He didn’t pry. Everyone had a story, and Simon believed people were entitled to their privacy. It was just that he’d worried the length he would go to gain her adoration, to be allowed once again to grasp the hair closest to her scalp as he pulled her down to him.

“Mutte’s a bully,” she said. “But even I could take him. The kids, however, that’s a different story. These Earther kids are petrified of him. Did you see Willa’s face up there?”

“I did.”

“What I really worry about are some of these other folks. If Mutte had let her go on with those revelations, or worse yet, try to heal someone. If they’d smelled blood in the water, who

knows? One of those other zealots could end up hurting her. Or her skinny little dad. Anything can happen out here. They married two ghosts together today, Simon."

"Mutte seems taken with you."

Tipper thought about this, took a drink of whiskey then shook her head. "He thinks I'm gentle, *and* he thinks I'm stupid. He doesn't realize that I have him figured out. You can't go straight at the crazy in people. You have to seek it out, make friends with it, reinforce it a little. Then you have them. Gentleness is my disguise."

"Oh really. You could've fooled me."

"Maybe I want to fool you. Gentleness is foolishness in this haunted wilderness. This here's devil's territory," she said in a mock-country accent.

"My wife would agree with you." Simon felt some strange obligation to remind Tipper every now and then of his marriage, as insignificant as it was. "She got into a Have-town as quick as she could. A big tech company founded it right at the start of the collapse. One of the first."

"Your wife, huh?"

"She cashed and signed over our IRA and turned it all over to the Have-town. Good thing she did, too. Those pre-collapse stocks would be worthless now."

"Most people who've actually *lived* in a Have-town don't refer to it as a Have-town."

"Well, I never lived there, technically. I just stopped through a lot, in the beginning. I don't even have official I.D. If I were to get sick, or hurt out here, I couldn't travel to a corporate city for treatment. I'd be stuck out here with the floaters, in some two-bit float-clinic."

"I'd take care of you."

He didn't believe her. He was glad to hear her say she'd care for him, but he didn't believe her. Not in this world.

Tipper and Simon spent the next two weeks of whipping wind together. Tipper's trailer had a trap door underneath, taking her straight into her bunker. She had Mexican blankets scattered about down there, and old books, and she'd even bring down her bonsai plants.

Every identical day during the howlers was spent the same way and ended with Simon and Tipper in her pull-down-bed together. Simon acclimated easily to the routine and marveled at the sheer adaptability of the human being. Almost anything could become normal, he thought, given enough time.

It went like this each morning: Simon opened his eyes and looked over at Tipper. She was usually asleep, snoring her little cat-purr snore. His first daily thought: my bees. He'd get up, drink the black market coffee he kept stocked for Tipper, hot and a little spicy, straight from the press. Then he'd put on a gas mask. Tipper had two, an old technical-looking white one that she said was hers from the Have-town and the one Mutte had issued her, army green. The risk of chemical warfare had long abated. Warfare would take far more organization than the world had to offer. No, now the real threat was the Mother Earth herself. Simon took the green one and layered a t-shirt over the mouthpiece. Then he tied a t-shirt around his head to keep the dust out of his scalp and ears. He'd stagger through the wind down to the beeboxes and see them there, a few scouts and guards buzzing about the bottom, some brave foragers heading out and flying low to the ground, only to turn around again. Diligence. Bravery. It brought him to the edge of tears. He had two healthy hives now and one that was struggling along. He'd had a five up until last month. He'd killed the one, after Joss, and the other had a queen that began laying only drone,

the male bees whose only task was to impregnate the queen. They didn't forage. They didn't make honey. They were, for all intents and purposes, a drain on the hive, apart from their one singular task. A queen laying only drone wasn't a sign of colony collapse disorder. It was not a mite or a fungus or some other bee devastation. This one was just regular old death and decay, part of the course of life. As always, life brought sickness with it, for people, for bees, for the Earth. Simon had been able to integrate much of that hive, which was otherwise healthy, into the other three.

After he visited the hives, he'd come back to Tipper's trailer. He would drop under the trailer from the back and roll underneath and she would open the flap and pull him up. Or, if the day was particularly windy, she would leave the bunker door open and he would crawl down into it with her. She would fuss and carry on at him about being seen, which he wasn't. She was worried about what Mutte would say. Casual sex was overlooked but casual intimacy never was. She'd complain in her nasal-voice about having to seal the doors and about the dust he tracked in. And then she would clean him up and make love to him. Just like that. Every day. Simon thought, out here, even this was enough to for a life.

He wasn't worried about being seen with Tipper. No one was out and about. The Earther with no shelter, the ones in the tents around the campground, went underground in the shared shelters. Simon avoided passing these on his morning outings. He hated to think of all those people, kids, and dogs crammed down there. The Earthers believed the howlers made people crazy, or angry, or both. Simon, of course, thought this was nonsense. There was no scientific explanation that could account for wind making people crazy. What made people crazy was

locking themselves up inside tiny bunkers painted like airplanes and turtles. That made people crazy.

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Simon had just left to check on his bees when Tipper heard a flat palmed pounding at her trailer door. She thought it was Simon, taunting her, not coming in through the door beneath the trailer but brazenly knocking on her door for all the campground to witness, making a show of their being together.

It was a particularly windy day. She looked out the lace curtains above her tiny kitchen table and saw her yellow truck coated in a thick layer of dust. She saw the boots of the person standing on her metal steps. Not Simon.

"Who's there?" she yelled through the door.

"Francis. Open up."

Francis Mutte. He was here to collect his payment. Regular as the planets around the sun. How could she have thought the wind would keep him away?

"Good morning, Tipper," he said through his mask. His watery eyes blinked at her through the round circles of his goggles.

"Come in, Francis. Why are you out in this weather?"

"I came to see you, of course. I smell coffee. Where on Earth would you get coffee this time of year?" Traders came through the campsite twice a year, people who gave a cut to Mutte and Bossman. They'd bring green coffee beans in large brown sacks from far away places.

"I had some leftover." Tipper told him. In truth, it was Simon's coffee.

Mutte took an appraising look around. He pulled his mask up onto his head and his horrent hair peaked in sweaty chaos.

She steadied herself on the edge of her sofa, worn silk chintz. The idea was to decorate the trailer like a dollhouse, her own play space. As a kid Tipper played in the closet of her house-bunker, the one fitted with all the tiny bathrooms. Even with the fortified walls, the security guards, the underground bunkers with digital displays mimicking any landscape a heart desired, it was only in her closet that Tipper ever felt safe. And now, the trailer on Bossman's 10-Acre Campsites had become its own kind of safe, with the exception of these intrusions from Mutte. Bossman, as far as she could tell, didn't care what went on as long as Mutte kept bringing in the people. Bossman wasn't an Earther. He was the Boss and Mutte was like one of his employees. It appeared Mutte was there to talk, at least for now. He plopped down on the sofa next to her. "These people," he gestured out around him. "The New Earther compound is all the have in the world. Poverty, fear, hunger. *Death.* It's the great equalizer. Oh, how they love to talk about the past, though. The good old days. Most of them aren't old enough to remember the greed, and the discord, and the inequality. Everyone trying to game a system that was rigged for them to lose."

He studied her carefully. Propped his feet up on her little coffee table. "Are you a believer, Tipper?"

Although she'd been waiting for this question, anticipating it every time they were together, she wasn't prepared to answer. She wasn't required to worship with the Earthers. Her arrangement with Mutte also got her out of that, but now she felt inclined to give a satisfactory explanation lest he decide she needed saving. "I grew up Baptist. Everyone in my Have-town had to attend church. It wasn't a rule, but people would look at you sideways if you didn't. The youth minister would lock us up in the church supervised by other teenagers who'd earned some status as youth counselors. We'd have these thirty-hour fasts. Kids that age are already manic,

you know? I'd get so tired and dehydrated. I'd start hallucinating, hags and shadow forests." She knew she was rambling. She could feel his eyes penetrating her, but she thought if she kept talking, she could delay the inevitable. "We'd lay out our sleeping bags like refugees but no one was sleeping. I didn't really know anything about the world, outside of the corporate bunker that is. Everyone inside attends church, so yes, we were believers."

The wooden heel on Mutte's boot dug into the cherry veneer of her coffee table, perhaps the nicest piece of furniture she owned, but she didn't say anything. He had on starched jeans and an outsized poplin shirt. His cowboy boots were worn but polished, maintained, despite the layer of silt.

She was aware of her trailer most when he was in it. She was aiming for an old New England parlor in miniature, complete with lace curtains, which she was still in the process of sewing. Somehow when Mutte entered her trailer she saw only the grime and shabbiness of it, how suffocatingly small it was. She hoped Simon would be somehow detained. She watched the open door in the kitchen floor, nervously, willing him to stay away. Mutte had made it clear he did not want her having sex with other men in the campground.

"There's terror at the heart of worship," Mutte said. "No matter what."

"I believe that."

Mutte picked up one her glass angel figurines, studied it, balanced it on one finger. "You got any of that wine?" He leaned over the edge of her settee and slid a hand up her skirt and tugged at her panties and pulled it back out again. She flinched and then tried to relax herself. It was easier if she remembered to breathe.

He grinned at her. "That red wine? That beekeeper's wine?"

She took a sharp inhale of breath. She did have wine. Wine was tough for most people to find but Tipper always had a little. From Simon, of course.

Tipper retrieved the decanter from the chiffonier and poured it into two small, crystal port glasses. She continued to steal glances at the kitchen floor. She had taken some things, furniture and keepsakes, from her parent's bunker in what was once Dallas. She took them at her mother's insistence. If it were up to Tipper, she would have fled with nothing but the clothes she had on. But her mother had detained her, made her take things, heirlooms, things that once belonged to her great-grandmother. She had very few things but they were purposeful. Every one of them, small, delicate and chosen. Chosen on the night she fled the Have-town for the Hills of South Dakota in one of the Have-town's delivery vans, which she traded for her first six month's rent on the trailer. The trailer she lived in was a hard-docked mobile home. Before her first six months in the campground were up, Mutte had found out about the circumstances under which she left the Have-town, and it was since then that he had been collecting his rent more creatively. Mutte got up and moved across the trailer to the kitchen. He shifted around in her kitchenette and the floor vibrated beneath him. The German figurines she'd placed along the walls on tiny walnut shelves, the ones with the impossibly red cheeks and hopeful faces, moved visibly when he did. He was looking around, inspecting things. A pair of Simon's jeans, the only evidence of him in her trailer, was strewn casually across her bed, which was a pull down in the nook at the end of the kitchen.

"You should keep this closed. Don't want any creepy crawlers getting in now, do you?" He bent down and flipped closed the door leading to the bunker under her trailer. "You took a chance telling that story on the stage the other day. You aren't looking to unburden yourself now,

are you Tipper? I wouldn't want you to go and do that. Someone would be bound to call in the Peacekeepers. It wouldn't be me, of course. But someone. Personally, I was hoping we'd all get a look at what that kid can really do. She was brought up by a man I knew once. A special man."

This peaked Tipper's interest but she didn't intend on prolonging his visit. "Well, I'm sorry, but I thought you wanted to carry on with the ghost wedding. I thought I was helping you out. And besides, I was moved by the spirit."

Mutte shot her a scornful look. He strode across the trailer and kissed her, deeply. His tongue probed the roof of her mouth, sought the depths of her throat. With one hand he held his wine glass, with the other he grabbed ahold of one breast. He twisted the nipple so hard she thought he'd rip it off.

"I gave a revelation once. I told of a child who was going to come to our sect and bring with her the troubles of the old world. The troubles of the world of the seekers, the Haves. If I recall, she was to have dark curly hair, black as ebony, and blue eyes and skin like snow." Tipper didn't believe in Mutte's revelations any more than she believed that the howlers made people crazy. He looked deflated, exhausted, ready to challenge someone, anyone. She could tell he'd made an attempt to come-over his thinning hair but the wind and the protective mask had thwarted his best effort. A swoop of hair clung to the top of his head, adhered with some kind of gel, but thin wisps, stiff with the same substance, stuck out on either side.

"Isn't that what the magic mirror said to the queen? About Snow White? Skin like snow, hair like ebony?" Mutte stared at her stone-faced. "And besides, her hair looks red to me," Tipper said. "Auburn. And she has those strange eyes. Cat eyes. Like mirrored marbles."

“Perhaps.” Mutte crossed back to the kitchen and sat down on the pull down bench in the kitchenette and patted his lap. Tipper went to him. The knot of his knee penetrated the soft flesh of her thigh but she sat still, trying to hold her already insignificant weight up with her toes. “But tell me, my dear. What I really came to find out was this—“ He must have picked up Simon’s jeans while she wasn’t looking. He pulled them from underneath the bench. He draped them across her lap. He rubbed the denim, stroked it across her thighs. “Do you still belong to me?” She never belonged to him, but she owed him. He knew the truth about her exit from the Dallas Have-town, and he was the only line between her and the Peacekeepers, who, while they didn’t care about justice for floaters, certainly cared about their bounties from the Have-towns. And there was a considerable bounty on Tipper.

“Yes,” she said, flatly. “Sure.”

Then Mutte dipped his finger into the red wine and slid his hand up her skirt again.

Chapter 8: Omens

The campground had been upended by the howlers, which blew for two weeks, just as Willa said they would. The Earthers came up from their underground bunkers, simple cement tanks stocked with food and water. They'd been building them around the campsite for years, and there were a few larger ones hidden up in the hills. They topped them with cheerful metal covers that they painted and fashioned into ladybugs, racecars, fruits and vegetables. All nostalgic in one way or another.

The dust blown in by the howlers resembled snow. It was light and came in hard and fast and blew too fiercely to accumulate anywhere other than doorways and windowsills. Willa thought what made the howlers truly terrifying was that they teased you. They'd back off for a day, or even two, and then they'd descend again without warning. Unlike the dustbowl of a forgotten American century, weeks of unending rain wasn't uncommon in the middle of the continent, so the quantity of dirt blown around wasn't as bad as it might be. Unless, as Simon explained to Willa, the winds blew in from the east where the Badlands had eroded so much that the howlers were able to carry their prehistoric dust into the lungs and eyelashes of every animal and Earther on Bossman's 10-Acre Campsites.

Two weeks after the ghost wedding, the eastern winds suddenly ceased, like a dragon retracting his jagged belch of flame. The weather vane on their trailer was spinning softly. It whistled into Willa's chest and spun there, too. *Tu-ha* was back. Willa took comfort in her words.

Willa and Cass had stayed in their trailer the whole time. They didn't have an underground bunker. Her father said he wasn't going to waste precious time building one. He liked to stay mobile. Ready to leave at any moment. A bunker was a permanent, and permanence wasn't something Cass was interested it. They hung wet blankets on the windows and across the doors of their Tuscany Motor Coach and stuffed every crevice and crack with moist rags and old paper.

Never had anyone seen so much dirt. Several dogs and horses went missing, lost in the storm. Mutte was furious because they'd neglected to seal one of the water containers, and it was now contaminated. And a metal flap along the side of one of the seed silos had been left down, so debris had blow in. It was going to be the job of Willa and several of the other Earther children to clean it up. The tasks in the Earther camp were well-divided, and children were the ones who did they jobs no one else wanted to do, the tedious, monotonous tasks.

In the seed silo later that morning—one of several grain silos left behind from a bygone era— Willa and Wren swept and organized the windblown seeds. Willa told Wren the news, that now that the howlers had subsided she'd probably have to go away with Mutte to do a healing. Wren stopped what she was doing and sat down cross-legged on the floor of the silo. Her face turned red with anger and then wet with tears. Several of the Earther dogs that slept in the hay inside the door of the silo made their way over, nuzzling her with curiosity. Wren reluctantly stroked a dappled pitbull mix and then tucked her hands under her armpits as if in protest of affection.

Willa liked Wren's smell. She was pure, like sweet clover and clean wind. The filament around Wren was flocculent, cloud-like. She was powder white, like the dust that had

accumulated at the door of the silo. She had curly dark hair and a milky constellation of freckles. Wren turned abruptly to stare in the opposite direction and Willa could just make out the profile of a bird. Wren had a bird spirit.

"Why are you crying?"

"I'm afraid you won't come back," Wren said.

"Why would you think that? Brother Mutte just wants to take me out to meet people, to bring them into the body and the light." Willa didn't believe this but she didn't want to frighten Wren. She only told Wren because she was afraid herself, and she wanted to share it, to make it half.

"What do you know about the body and the light?" Wren said suddenly, snapping her head up at Willa. "You don't know anything. You're like what Max said. A faker. A big faker." "I'm not. I wish I were sometimes." Over the last two weeks, when it seemed like the howlers would never die down and Willa and Cass spent days staring at each other in the RV, Willa wished for the unthinkable. She'd wished it with such force that she had to do a cleansing ritual with amulets from the basket to undo the future she feared she'd set in motion. While holed up in the howling dark with Cass, who had stayed drunk most of the time, Willa had wished that the world would succumb to one final, continuous howler. She thought perhaps this would sound good to Wren, too. "Maybe it'll start again and never stop howling! Maybe, Wren, it'll never stop and we won't have to clean the silos, or the chicken coops, or work the crops anymore!"

"And you won't have to go with Mutte." She said, looking up, a sly recognition on her face.

Of course, never-ending howlers would mean certain death for everyone not under the protection of a Have-town with their bio-domes and elaborate underground bunkers, complete with swimming pools, saunas, and media rooms. And even they would die eventually. All the money in the world couldn't keep even the Haves alive if the howlers never ceased, let alone them. But the girls chose not to focus on that.

Willa never told anyone what she heard in the wind. The howlers had furious voices. They were minatory and full of power. They blew all the way from the high-altitude oceans, over the sunless Arctic. The bore the smell of a now unstable, polluted ocean. The howlers were carried hundreds of miles across the desert and mountains in the bellies of miasmic clouds. Despite their wish, Willa would never want to die that way, listening to their haggish screaming. But no matter. They were gone now. They pushed down into what was once Nebraska and Kansas and Oklahoma.

"Willa," Wren said, as if something important had just occurred to her. She brushed a dark, sediment-coated ringlet out of her eye and pushed herself up from the ground. She dusted her thin, fragile legs with her hands. "If Mutte reaches into his pocket, and pulls something out. Gum, or money, or maybe like a seahorse stuck in the center of a bouncy ball, don't take it. Don't take anything from him. No matter what it is, okay?"

"Okay. I promise."

Max's perturbed little face appeared in the door of the silo. They boys had been mucking the old grain elevator, which was filled with rotten grain and rats. They would be harvested grain soon, if all hadn't been destroyed by the howlers. The boys, too, were coated with dust. Max had a shovel-full of both and he was holding out towards the girls. It was time to start harvesting the

wispy blond grains the Earthers had managed to grow in the season of wind. The children all knew the work that was to come. It made them anxious. Max was no different. Willa could smell his resentment and hatred. He had Mars with him. Willa wondered how Mars could have been born to a man like Dane. She tried to meet his eyes, but he avoided looking directly at her. She wondered if he still thought about the day Max had pulled down her pants, and Willa had made the world come to still. She breathed in deeply, and even over the scent of dust, she could smell him. Mars smelled like river rocks baked in sunshine.

"Get your shit together, you two," Max said, "or I'll shove this shovel so far up your asses you'll have to pull it out your mouths." Max flipped his load of rats and hay onto the ground at the girls' feet.

"You will not," Wren said. "Mutte'll kill you if you do. Just like he killed those two boys from Valentine, Nebraska. Chopped them up and put them out for the pigs to eat." Her sweet blue eyes were defiant, strong. She was Willa's only friend in the campground, other than Simon, other than the wind.

"Mutte will feed *you* to the pigs, Wren, as soon as I tell him what a lazy shit-eater you are. Or maybe I should do it myself? Here piggy, piggy!" Max poked the broom handle in towards the girls.

Wren moved behind her. Willa reached behind her and held Wren's small body close to her. Mars stepped inside the silo, placing himself between Max and the girls and holding out his hands, smiling as if this was all one big joke.

Mars had long hair. Earthers kids all grew out their hair, but his was particularly lovely, wavy and exotic. He had intelligent eyes, unlike his father Dane's empty ones. He was gangly and loped about with a loose-hipped gait. All the Earther girls had a crush on Mars.

"Get out of the way, Mars. I'm not kidding." Max took a step forward and wound up like a baseball player but just smacked Mars lightly on the shoulder. When Mars didn't move, Max took the broom handle and rammed Mars hard with it, up the backside. Mars let out a girlish scream.

Willa saw then in Mars what she felt the day Max pulled down her blue underwear. It was as if she could see the shame change places between them, the filament between electrified with the earliest and most destructive human emotion.

So Willa closed her eyes and did what Hormidas told her never to do. She summoned the power from Hormidas' basket, which was locked away safely in their RV, and willed retribution upon Max. She called upon *Tu-ha* to protect them.

In the next moment, Max flew forward into the silo, knocking Mars ahead of him. Willa felt the prsence of *Tu-ha*. She heard her voice, telling Willa to be still. But then Willa felt a rage enter the room, not the rage of a *bugaloo* but rage all the same, and behind it the mottled, burning face of Brother Mutte.

"Boy, if you bite and devour one another, take care that you're not consumed by one another!" Mutte pushed the boy forward with both hands.

"Yes, Sir," Max answered. His shame was apparent. He righted himself and then crossed both hands across his chest tightly, looking ashamed.

Simon entered behind them. He looked at Willa carefully, as if he were aware that he'd been summoned and that she was responsible. She beamed up at him, proud to have saved them from Max's cruelty. She was grateful for the kindness in Simon's handsome eyes. She thanked *Tu-ha.*

"You seen my bees around here?" he asked them gently.

Wren stepped out from behind Willa. "There," pointing outside the door of the silo, "I saw a bunch of bees by that tree an hour ago," she said.

"Bees? Why didn't you tell me you saw bees?" Willa felt wounded. She knew that, of all people, Wren understood how much Willa cared about Simon the beekeeper and his bees.

"Step forward, girl," Mutte said. "I can't hardly hear you. Come here. What they look like?"

Dane stepped into the silo behind Simon. He was hovering over Mars, looking unstable. Willa heard Dane mutter a question to his son about "faggot stuff with that shovel?"

"They looked like honeybees," Max piped up. "I saw them, too. Over by that tree."

Simon turned and Dane followed him out toward the tree line at the edge of the campground. Max ran off behind them.

Mutte turned to Willa. "What about you? What does our little Sibyl have to say on the matter?" She just stared into his pale blue eyes. She didn't know who Sibyl was. He wasn't sure Mutte was even talking to her. "Speak, prophet!" he yelled into her face. He leaned in so close that Willa could feel the soft hair at her temple lift with the weight of his stale breath. Somehow, she had summoned Mutte to save them from Max, but she couldn't seem to make him leave.

Willa felt Mars' burning shame, which still lingered in the room. It had attached itself to her. The filament was strong. Willa concentrated as hard as she could, and after a few slow seconds, Mutte sauntered away. Not before telling her, "Tomorrow, it's you and me, Sibyl. We ride out to Rapid City."

As Mutte crossed paths with Mars, the preacher tossled his hair, too roughly, Willa thought. Then, Mars looked at Willa will such disdain, such humiliation, she felt terrible for summoning Mutte, even if the summoning had stopped Max's tirade.

It was strange. It was like *Tu-ha* to save her. But it was unlike *Tu-ha* to bring such a bad omen.

Chapter 9: The Red X

Although Simon's father, and other beekeepers and scientists had warned people it was coming, no one was prepared when the honeybee quickly moved from endangered to extinct. The weather had already begun to change. Gradually at first, and then abruptly. It began with signs hung out in front of certain items at the supermarket—no more cherries, apples, sprouts, or almonds. Then, more signs appeared. Eventually, they took down the signs and whole departments emptied out. Stores began to downsize or close altogether. Small, boutique farms made a fortune selling to wealthy produce dealers. Everyone grew food but there were limits. A generation was born and grew and was now enchanted by the very idea of a cherry.

But death had begun decades before; Simon's grandfather had fought the first signs of the honeybee's demise in 1989: pesticides, fungus, climate change, and ultimately, the mite. The dreaded *Varroa destructor*. The cursed red dots, the honeybee's mark of death. Tenacity, perhaps even fool-heartedness, resided at the heart of any migratory beekeeper worth his salt. Simon imagined it was this quality that kept the bees struggling along as long as they did, powering the Goliath that was American agribusiness. Bees were as vital to the food source as water, air, soil and tractors. The truth was there was a time when commercial farming was limited only by the number of bees it could attract, or pay for, to pollinate its crops. But the wild honeybee became extinct in North America. Not long after, the commercial colonies were all but gone, too. Soon, after that, the weather began to change. Not the small gradual changes the world had become used to, but devastating jags: extended winters, droughts, fires, tornadoes, floods, winds that

came and never subsided. People began to starve. Governments destabilized. Economies crashed. The collapse.

Simon's grandfather had been a cynic, still rich in trucks and bees and pollinating fees; he had the luxury of cynicism. He liked to say that Americans were fat, lazy, and apathetic. They had no idea where their food came from and didn't care as long as it was cheap and plentiful: a dozen varieties of apples, cherries, strawberries, grapes, enough to throw away when bruised or just plain unwanted, enough to pile up in the trashcans in the school cafeteria. Unlike his grandfather, Simon's own father had been too busy fighting the mite and keeping the twenty families who worked for him afloat to be a cynic.

And so it was at men like Simon's father that people pointed when the honeybees all but disappeared for good. The stress of moving the bees, the intermingling of strains, the pesticides introduced by commercial farming. But all those people had to eat. And the bees left the Old World, too. The honeybees had exited the Earth. Simon thought all of humanity was to blame. Simon had grown up during the famine. Americans were no longer fat, or lazy, and they were more than aware of where their food came from. Private and commercial beekeeping was illegal. Only the government kept bees now, a few ancestors of the heartiest strains, and they struggled to keep them alive for long.

In a recessed alcove of his heart, where optimism still resided, Simon thought there had to be a path back. He told himself that as long as he could keep one scraggly hive, he'd persevere. As long as queens were still being born from time to time. Honeybees were near impossible to keep alive, they rarely made honey, but he kept going all the same. Beekeeping had always been a terribly tough business.

Now Simon crisscrossed the country with his ailing bees, incognito, still following what was once the honeyflow: Florida to southern Texas, to California, to Washington, to Montana, Wyoming, and back to South Dakota. The bloom used to begin in Florida in late winter and end with alfalfa and sweet clover in South Dakota in August, honey-making season. All that had changed now, but he still travelled the route, mostly out of habit and hope. He visited small farms, old family friends, people who once had huge farms. So many people were dead now, or had abandoned their land. Many groups, like the Earthers but smaller, certainly less successful, had food and dry goods to trade. He sold his meager honey.

At night, he'd lie in the Mesa's pull down bed and engage in night science. Night science was different from his steady, empirical, daily bee work. Night science was fanciful thinking, mind experiments: this strain with that strain, an Egyptian queen with an Italian brood, maybe a bee from the Amazon basin, a new recipe for the sugar syrup that feeds the bees overwinter, if he could get it.

Simon knew it wasn't just about honeybees. The warming oceans had become an incubator for bacteria and disease. The bees were just the first casualties in a spate of extinctions, a planet resettling itself. It seemed only lunatics, criminals, and the wealthy were going to survive in the end. And mosquitoes. There were always plenty of those, spreading more and more disease. He thought about staying put. The identical days spent with Tipper in the shelter of her trailer had made him think that perhaps he could stop moving now. Travelling had long become too dangerous. He was getting old, and lonely.

A week after the ghost wedding, they were all deceived by the sun. Simon had gone to visit his bees. Mutte had gone to visit Tipper. Simon sat in the wind, hidden behind a single

boulder and waited for him to leave. He never told Tipper. After he saw Mutte disappear into this cabin on the north side of the campground, he reappeared underneath Tipper's trailer, feigning ignorance. He'd figured out a long time ago that there was something between Mutte and Tipper that she wasn't telling him, but he didn't feel entitled to press for answers. It wasn't like that. People did what they had to do. Tipper did what she had to do. He was certain it wasn't fair, but it was her problem. She was a big girl in the big, bad world. Besides, Simon didn't really consider Mutte a threat, not a real one, at least. Simon had known Francis Mutte a long time, longer than most people in Bossman's 10-Acre Campsites.

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Twenty years ago, they'd called themselves preppers and set up impressive compounds in isolated locations, close to water, clandestine, cloaked by geography. Simon would come into towns and see them, cagey and secretive, buying seeds, looking over their shoulders And armed, Simon couldn't believe how well these fuckers were armed. Wyoming, Montana, South Dakota.. Over the years a few had approached him wanting to buy hives. Twenty years ago, Simon still had hives to sell, for a price. The end was coming, they'd say. It was most certainly coming. And they said they weren't going to be caught with their dicks out. They told him this was the United States of fucking America. And in the United States of godamned America, you'd better believe there were still plenty of places to dig in for Armageddon. And even though Simon told them they definitely needed his help setting up hives, that they needed to be taught how to take care of them, they'd always refuse. No strangers allowed on their property. It was painful for Simon to watch them go, driving off with tens of thousands of precious honeybees, headed for certain death in the hand of amateurs.

But Simon did take hives out to a group of preppers once, right around the time that *Apis Mellifera* began their final deep dive into extinction. This was when he first met Francis Mutte. Back then Mutte was a young preacher, maybe thirty-five. Energetic. He lived in a canal city, what was once St. Petersburg, Florida. Driving out to meet him, to take his group four hives of healthy Minnesota hygienic honeybees, it occurred to Simon that the world had reached a kind of tipping point. Everything—the weather, the government, the climate, the honeybees, the content of people's very minds—was in certain peril. For the first time it occurred to him that groups like

Mutte's weren't fringe, they weren't lunatics. They were going to be the foundation of the new society. The world had once again reset itself and human beings had, predictably, fallen back into blind obedience.

The bees he'd sold them were, at the time, the only bees that seemed to be standing up to *Nosema ceranae* or *Varroa destructor.* So little did anyone know back then. Mutte and his group lived on the top floors of two undulating, mold-dotted buildings, but they had gardens on the roof. And they had, a short canal ride away from their home base, several other impressive gardens. And they needed honeybees.

Mutte was heavy then, a tall man with a rock hard belly and red, wooly shoulders. Simon had parked his truck three miles inland, and Mutte had come to pick him and the bees up in several small canoes. It was, technically, Simon's first ocean voyage with his bees. He'd insisted on riding along with them, making several trips. Bees are not naturally sea-hearty. This fact, Simon thought, made the journey of the American colonists, bringing the first North American honeybees across the ocean in their skeps, even more remarkable. That day, he'd held the hive boxes steady as one of Mutte's disciples rowed the canoe thought a bright yellow St. Petersburg morning. The canals, maintained by Mutte's sect, were also policed by Mutte's people. There were only a two canals entering their area of the city, and, therefore, there were only two ways in. Simon remembered Mutte mainly as a dark, able figure rowing next to him, seemingly as concerned about the bees as Simon was.

Simon delivered the bees to the rooftop gardens that day and spent the night atop one of the buildings, out in the open air. He'd shown them how to use the hive tools, how to clean the hive, how to collect the honey, how to prevent swarms. He never thought for a moment thought

that those people could manage any of it. Beekeeping is tough business, not for amateurs. But they paid him well.

Years later, when he needed a place to hide with the honeybees, Simon found Mutte again. Or maybe it was Mutte that found him, this time in South Dakota.

Mutte approached Simon in the parking lot of what was once a grocery store that now served as a trading post for black market goods: mainly bread, batteries, flour, and cornmeal. Simon was looking for corn to make syrup to overwinter the two flailing hives he'd had at the time. There was a time when Simon could buy that stuff from the local soda-pop plant, but not anymore. There were no more soda-pop plants.

Mutte came up behind him, silent as a cat and suddenly in his ear. "You've been marked," he said. "You're not going to make it much longer on your own."

Simon turned then and saw the eyes. Clear blue to the bottom. And he registered the voice, more gravel than sand now.

"Is that your Mesa right there?" Mutte asked. But Simon didn't yet recognize him as the preacher in the yellow tank top from twenty years earlier, the king of the canals. He was thin, tired-looking. He took Simon over to the Mesa and showed him a red X placed discreetly to the left of my door handle. There were two others, larger ones above both of his license plates.

"You put those there," Simon told him.

"No," Mutte said, real patient, as if talking to an idiot or a child. "Look how old they are? You can see they've peeled off with the paint in places."

“Go to hell, buddy.” Simon knew how these guys worked. These groups would recruit people by putting these X’s on their vehicles or front doors and claiming later they’d been “marked” by the Peacekeepers in some government conspiracy.

“I’m already in hell, buddy. And so are you. How’s the bee business, Simon?” And then he remembered. Francis Mutte. What a name, Francis. It was a name for a dog that sits with its paws crossed and drinks like a cat. But no one called him Francis anymore. They called him Brother Mutte.

Brother Mutte liked having Simon around because Mutte had the survival instincts of a wild animal. And with this savvy he saw before most that with the howlers— winds that blew straight through the center of the country and across both coasts, lifting trees from their roots— and the droughts and floods, the violent storms, the eroded soils, that he needed honeybees to grow any kind of crops from the piles of seeds he had filling his silos. He’d learned the value of bees on the rooftops of St. Petersburg. Mutte was willing to let Simon stay in relative seclusion on plenty of land, as long as he used what healthy hives he had to pollinate the Earther gardens. And Simon did. He did it because he needed a safe home for his bees with access to pollen and nectar, not because of the off-chance that he had been marked as a dissident, a trouble-maker, a person of interest, with the Peacekeepers red X.

Chapter 10: The Hunt

It was two weeks after the ghost wedding. One week after he'd watched Mutte skulk back into his cabin after leaving Tipper's trailer, looking smug, even in his gas mask.

Simon had just slid the lid back on the box of what had been, up until that morning, a promising colony only to find what he'd found so many times before: nothing. Well, close to nothing. The hive was empty but for a few stragglers and a dying queen. The frequency with which this happened did not make it any easier. Simon kicked at the dirt and pine needles. He stomped up and down like a child. He expelled a profanity-laced tirade. He cried. He'd lost another one. Damned if the honeybees weren't determined to exit this fucked-up ball of windy dirt.

Despite the howlers, these honeybees had hung on. But at some point between yesterday morning and now, the colony had just exited the hive and flown away. Bees don't do that, Simon thought. Honeybees work harmoniously, in unison, together for the betterment of the hive. Each one has its role.

In the hive, a few female workers, loyal, somehow not influenced or swayed by the deserting mass, still tended to the queen. A few fat drones—whose job it is to impregnate the queen—wandered around, bewildered, approaching the queen only to be rebuffed. The brood, in the absence of the warmth of the hive, had already started to die. The queen herself appeared addled, flying back and forth in confusion. Soon would come the rot, and the stink, and the moths, and the mice. All the trappings of death.

"Motherfucker," Simon said in defeat, not noticing Mutte who had sidled up to him.

“Simon! King of Bees!” Simon could feel the air that had once been inside Mutte graze his ear. He spun around to see him, Cass Walker, and Dane standing in a row.

Simon was embarrassed by the tears still drying on his face. As a means of explanation he said, “The hive is gone.”

“Are they sick?” Mutte was looking over his shoulder. He fancied himself a beekeeper in his own right. And to his credit, he’d managed to keep a line of bees—descendants of the bees Simon had set him up with decades ago—well past the collapse, longer then experienced beekeepers Simon knew.

“No dots,” Simon told him. The dots, the dreaded red dots, would have been too easy. Losing the bees to the mite was one thing, but this was entirely another. Well-kept bees vanishing from the hive, abandoning the instincts they’d displayed faithfully since before human beings were drawing on the sides of caves, should not happen.

“Cass Walker here saw some bees over by the chicken coops. You think that’s them?” Boss smiled through his sarcasm. Simon looked at Cass who was looking at the ground. Something had shifted in Cass Walker since the night of the ghost wedding. He seemed afraid of this own shadow now.

“What did they look like?” Simon didn’t trust Cass to know a bumblebee from a twig bee from a honeybee. There were huge bumblebees around the campground, hanging about on the hardy weed plants. The bumblebees were far too heavy for the leaves, but they hung onto them all the same. Their huge, furry awkward bodies would slip down the leaves. They would sometimes tumble a few inches in what seemed like shock before they would apparently recover the knowledge that they indeed had the gift of flight, and then they would buzz off to the next

unstable leaf. Simon had never seen anything like these bumblebees before, but Nature had definitely become mercurial at best, vengeful at worst. And insects were excellent at adapting to their environment, so who knew? Maybe this insect was here for a reason? It had obviously survived in a hostile environment.

Simon had caught one and put it under the microscope and discovered it was a common bumblebee like any other except that it had a deformed kind of honeystomach for transferring nectar. Its honeystomach was small, like that of a honeybee. Simon imagined these bees had blown in from some far away climate—somewhere where the leaves and fat and firm on thick stalks. Where the pollen was so huge these enormous bumblebees transferred it from plant to plant as an inevitable consequence of their everyday activity. Perhaps these bees had another carbohydrate source, other than nectar, upon which they thrived.

"They looked like that." Cass pointed down into the bee box, at the pathetic remnants of Simon's hive. "They were honeybees."

Simon slid the top of the box closed and went to the shed to retrieve his tools and capturing jar. Mutte followed him.

"What do you want, Brother?" Simon asked once they were alone inside the shed.

"What do you think of Cass Walker and his daughter?" Mutte asked, quietly, standing in the doorway of the shed. His deflated body rested on the frame. In moments like this, when he was this close to Mutte, Simon felt a kind of respect that he couldn't account for, despite what Simon imagined had transpired between Mutte and Tipper. Simon didn't ask. In this world, he thought, people make all kinds of arrangements.

Before the collapse, a man like this would be a pariah in respectable circles. In *sane* circles, he would be discounted and dismissed as a lunatic. And yet here he was. He'd persevered and saved the lives of nearly everyone who followed him through years of devastating famine and violence. Years when you could look to your left and your right and guarantee that one of the three of you wasn't going to make it.

"What do you mean? What do I think? I think nothing." Simon wasn't, not for one second, going to let on how he felt about Cass Walker and his little girl.

"Kids shouldn't be preaching. He's exploiting her." This was rich, Simon thought. Hilarity, really, coming from Mutte. "He's putting up fliers," Mutte said. "Attracting people who don't belong here. He's trying to make money off us. People are going to pay him, too. I saw Belinda J. and Sister Caitlin approach him this morning."

"I thought you wanted to increase your numbers. Don't you want people to join you? What do you care how it gets done?"

"Through births. Through *organic* means. Through red X's. Not cowboys from Valentine, Nebraska looking for a miracle."

"Give me a break. Organic means? Besides, I don't think they were planning on staying."

"Even so." Mutte picked up a pairs of old barbecue gloves Simon used from time to time to handle the supers. "Let's go hunt some bees."

They set off toward the coops: Cass, big dumb Dane, Mutte, and Simon. The Hills were falling to shadow. Everything was covered in dust and silt: the campground RV's, the tents, the picnic tables, the whimsical bunker doors. The orange dust of the Black Hills had spread itself

across them like a layer of cinnamon and the white sediment blown in from the Badlands mixed in like sugar. It had happened before.

Deep down in the Hills, under the pumpkin dust and layers of sedimentary rock was the Sioux quartzite, exposed in places. Much of it had been buried during the mountain building that came four hundred million years after the Big Bang. The gentle dome of Earth's virgin crust was thrust into colossal peaks, only to be eroded later by violent winds. A stretch of time passed. Sediment blew in from the west. Powerful winds carried dust through sixty million years of darkness. When the wind finally receded, the hills, buttes, and rolling dunes of South Dakota remained. It seemed another season of wind was coming. Another season of dust.

"Are there going to be more howlers, you think? Maybe we should go back for masks and goggles," Cass asked.

"Fuck that shit," Dane said. "No one needs that shit. I don't use that shit."

Mutte gave him a disapproving look. It seemed the Earthers in the campground weren't taking any chances. They kept their sandbags and coolers tied to the corners of their tent. They kept the shoring up on the windows of their cabins and RV's.

"Look at the clouds," Cass said. The clouds had descended in rows that resembled pristine, white molars. "What do you think this means?"

"What are you afraid of, Cass?" Mutte asked him. "A few little puffy white clouds?"

Out at the seed silo, Willa and a group of children were cleaning debris that had blown in through the side vents. Max, the kid with the mowhawk who loved to hassle Simon about his bees, was standing outside the metal structure, leaning a shovel, barking orders at Will and a

lean, disheveled-looking girl with blond hair. “Get your shit together,” the kid said, “or I’ll shove this so far up your ass you’ll have to pull it out your mouth.” The boy had his back turned to us. Mutte approached him stealthily and smacked him in the back of the head. The kid flew forward several feet before catching his balance.

“Boy, if you bite and devour one another, take care that you’re not consumed by one another!” Mutte righted the boy by the shoulders with two hands.

“Yes, sir.”

“You seen any bees around here?” Simon asked him. The kids looked scared, like they had been up to something. Dane walked in and hovered over his son, a brooding, gangly kid named Mars.

Wren, the wiry girl with a thin stretch of white skin that was poked through everywhere with brown freckles stepped forward from behind Willa. “There,” she said. “I saw a bunch of bees by that tree an hour ago,” she said.

“Step forward, girl,” Mutte said. “I can’t hardly hear you. Come here. What they look like?”

The girl stepped out from behind Willa. She wiped her hands on her tattered dress and took three steps toward us. Then she dropped her eyes to the ground. “I heard them but I didn’t see them,” she said. “I’m sorry I lied. I was too busy working to stop and see. They roared loud. Like a train.”

“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God,” Mutte said to her, placing a flat palm on her head. The kid, Max, looked disgusted. The girl seemed to freeze under his touch, as if she were balancing something precarious on her head.

Simon turned and made my way around to the lone pine tree behind the silo, an equally sad but much heartier answer to the dilapidated oak in the clearing. He looked past it to the Black Hills, to the rich vegetation and tall trees that adorned Spearfish canyon. He knew that the bees would head that direction, if they hadn't huddled somewhere to die. They would fly when there was sun, and the sun was still bright that afternoon. They would fly toward pollen, toward nectar. Mutte's crops needed pollinating, but it was still too early in the season. Nine miles was the limit. Nine miles toward the Hills.

"Fuck." Dane slapped at his arm. A stinger. A death. The corpse of a worker bee lay at his feet. A Minnesota hygienic bred with Simon's smuggled Italian queen. The wide back legs designed for carrying larger amounts of pollen back to the hive, the wide eyes, the deceivingly clumsy, almost bumblebee-ish body.

Simon wanted to slap this man. If Simon had to choose a life to conserve, it wouldn't have been Dane's. Simon stomped past him and examined the tree, and there, high up, he saw them. Three bees.

"Hold my foot," Simon said to Dane, who was standing next me, still nursing his forearm.

"But I got stung," Dane said, frantically rubbing his arm. "I might be allergic."

Simon wished they could only be so lucky. Cass walked over and got down on the ground, steady, certain, like he'd done this many times before. He had an innocent face, open. He was still a very young man, after all. He cupped to hands at the base of the tree and Simon placed his foot inside. Without much warning, Cass said, "Now hop up on my shoulders." He

immediately hoisted him up with a strength that belied his size. Cass secured his weight against the tree with an assuredness that told Simon he'd done this before.

It had been a long time since he'd climbed a tree. Hand to instep, instep to hand. The tree waved above him, like panicked arms protesting to the sky. In a quick swoop Simon netted the bees on the second try. He descended the tree, handing the net to Cass before jumping to the ground, his knees firmer than he expected them to be. The art of honey hunting was ancient, and it all started with capture. The wrangled the bees into the capturing jar and closed the lid.

"Thanks," Simon said, squaring his face into Cass's. "You seem like you've done this before."

"Yes. Many times, man. Mainly to steal shit. Always to eat. Well, occasionally for drugs."

For the first time it occurred to Simon how hard this kid's life must have been. "To eat, huh?"

"Willa's mother was light. I could almost throw her straight up if I wanted to. There was a time when we did that once a week. We'd drive to Sarasota and get groceries." He gave Simon a wink and there was something endearing and familiar in his young face. At sixty, Simon, technically, was almost too old to be this kid's father. Simon thought about Willa, how she was when she came to see him and his bees, how she seemed deceptively untouched by the world of which she'd so obviously been a victim.

"What happened to Willa's mother, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I don't," he said. "We left the city together, fifteen. We'd both lost our parents. We had Willa by the time we were sixteen. We lived hard and alone with some other kids. She didn't

make it. A lot of people didn't make it. Fucking life, I guess." He held the jar up to the light. Four foragers banged about inside and Simon was worried they were going to rip themselves to pieces. He took the jar from Cass and put it inside a nylon sack to calm the bees. Darkness was a salve.

"Now what do you do with them?" Cass asked.

"I let the bees tell me where to go."

Mutte and Dane had walked out of the clearing into a line of trees, apparently to look for more bees. Dane was still cradling his arm from the sting. Mutte walked beside him with purpose, his old work pants riding high above his cowboy boots, exposing small swatches of his creamy white calves.

They returned a few minutes later. "Didn't see anything that way," Mutte said. "But someone's been taking a crap out there. Someone's has been fucking out there, too. You know anything about that, Cass?"

Cass seemed anxious. "No sir," he said. Mutte got close up on him and looked him in the eye.

"You seen Tipper lately, Cass?" Mutte asked him.

This got Simon's attention.

"No, Sir," Cass said. "Haven't seen Tipper in a good long while. Not since the ghost wedding."

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Simon would bet on the senses nearly every time. Senses may have evolved but they're still guided by the old instincts, especially in a collapsed world. Humans now relied upon those instincts, evolution wisely keeping them intact, stored up in the generational marrow and fired off from sleepy DNA. Simon knew that the primal mode, from which the fight or flight instincts were merely a diluted residual, was once again becoming front and center. The bursts of adrenaline required for everyday living hardly left people time to contemplate, ponder, consider and reflect. Simon noticed that now there were only two modes of life: survival and relation. Worry was becoming extinct. Besides where did worry ever get him, Simon wondered, or his father, or his father's father?

Men like Mutte and Bossman never worried. Simon knew they called upon the survival sense of their most distant ancestors, an urgency to exist at all costs, and culled the primal fluid from their milder, domesticated blood. And one solution was always at their disposal: seek and destroy any threat preemptively and with perfect ferocity.

No, people like Mutte and Boss didn't rely on reason. They were guided by knowledge. And knowledge was of the senses.

Bossman was a man of indecipherable lineage. Simon speculated at different points he might be Sioux, or Mexican, or Middle Easter. He couldn't tell and he wouldn't dare ask. Simon heard that he'd been born into terrible poverty, the son of a drunken drifter. He had some luck playing cards, craps, and such, and with that money he'd opened a poker room in an abandoned convenience store outside the Hills. Pretty soon, he got into making booze.

And so, when farmer and ranchers began fleeing, selling what they had to scrape together enough to gain admittance into a Have-town, Boss started buying what they had to sell. Everywhere but the Hills. The Hills belonged to the Sioux. He owned most of the farmland around what was once Spearfish. But he lived with the Earthers on his 10-Acre Campsites, a fortified, defendable patch of earth that no Peacekeeper had ever set foot on. It occupied the largest parcel of farmland sold after the first collapse, just north east of the hills. The only entrance, to the south, was fortified with trenches, the west butted up to the Hills—Sioux territory now—and along the north and eastern borders, razor wire atop fences demarcated the campground lines. But with the boundaries, there was considerable variety: the former farm-land now dotted with tents and lean-tos, the north west corner, near the Hills, where Simon kept his bees, and the section that was formerly an RV park and campground, where the year-round cabins were built, where the ceremonties were held, and where Simon, Tipper and the Walkers kept their trailer.

Bossman, it seemed to Simon, was becoming some sort of mogul. He kept the Peacekeepers at bay with free booze and women in his poker room. And there were rumors, although Simon had never seen any evidence of it, that Bossman and Mutte were selling woman and workers to other compounds.

They were in Bossman's office, whirring fans all around them. Here, one could satisfy nostalgia for old desktop computers, fax machines, and dot-matrix printers. Boss had cleared off his desk, and the men stood over a map of the area. Using a compass, Simon drew a nine-mile circle around the silo where they'd collected the foragers. That was about the max distance for a honeybee in clear weather.

Simon used a marker to discard the areas that were now barren, dust-blown, flatland prairie. He remembered traveling through this land as a child, with his father and his father's bees. Back then, the land was rich with alfalfa, sunflowers, and sweet clover. There was little left for bees anymore, just dirt and thick, stubborn grasses. They'd concentrated on the area that was still fertile, up in the Hills. But first they'd need access. The Hills belonged to the Oceti Sakowin.

While the ideal home for a honeybee, from the perspective of a beekeeper, was in a bee box near the ground, with easy access points and removable trays for gathering honey, the ideal spot from the perspective of a honeybee is thirty feet up—safe from marauding predators—in a container of adequate size and volume, southward-facing. The history of beekeeping had never been one of domestication but of accommodation. At one time, a swarm from Simon's boxes had just as much chance of making in the wild as any feral hive, but not anymore. As far as Simon could tell, the Earth was no longer hospitable to honeybees, wild or otherwise. Still they had to look, keep looking.

They took off toward the Hills in Bossman's old extended cab truck. Dane rode up front. Cass, Simon, and Mutte rode in the back. Simon held the bees in his lap, covered to keep them calm. They bounced through the great limestone canyon, past the entrance to the Sleeping Giant, past Bridal Veil Falls, and into a small turn in that was once used by millions of vacationing families as a picnic park and scenic overlook. Simon thought this was a fair distance for the bees to travel, but here, in the protection of the canyon, the howlers had done the least damage and there were still blooming plants, so maybe. The Sioux had made progress with restorative planting and the elimination of mining and grazing, and the fortress of ancient geology made the

Black Hills a haven for many species of plants that had gone extinct nearly everywhere else. So maybe.

Bossman stopped the truck alongside a perilous slope, edged with a crumbling metal railing. Simon hopped over the edge of the truck, feeling electrified, buoyed by the hunt. Besides, he couldn't resist a few demonstrations of virility in front of Mutte. While Simon and Mutte were close in age, Mutte was flabby and decrepit. His hair was always greasy and he was all jowls and loose skin. Simon had seen Mutte in Tipper's trailer. He'd watched as Mutte tucked his shirt back into his pants as he left. Simon couldn't understand it.

For his part, Simon had stayed lithe and trim. In all fairness, he'd had uninterrupted access to the full spectrum of dietary requirements during the famine while others had gone without; he knew he had no right to be smug.

Mutte hopped off the tailgate and landed with a reflexive wince, Dane quickly appeared at his side, steadying him. Cass launched himself off the side of Boss's truck like a superhero. He rubbed his hands together and smacked Simon on the back. "All right man," he said, "let's go find your bees." Bossman got out of the truck's cab, appraising the spot.

"Should we be concerned about Sioux?" Simon asked him.

"No," Bossman said with certainty. "I radioed and let them know where we'd be." Simon knew it wasn't wise to underestimate this soft-spoken businessman.

Spearfish Creek was sludging along below, just past the old footpath. It was once livid with trout brought in by the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries, who'd kept it stocked year after year, the old fish hatchery only a mile away, long gone now. The monsoon-like rains and heavy winds carried untenable amounts of sediment and debris into the creeks and rivers, killing off the fish.

The men stood around Simon as he pulled the jar out of the nylon sack. Despite his careful transporting, two of the bees were dead. They looked as though they'd gotten into a confrontation and nearly ripped one another apart. They were still, dark shapes on the bottom of the jar, wings and bee parts strewn around.

"Damn," Cass said, "those dudes fucked each other up."

"They're female," Simon said.

"I thought that was just the queen."

Simon started to answer but Mutte interrupted him, always the expert.

"All the work is done by the females," Mutte said, taking another swig from his flask. "They raise the babies, forage food, serve the queen, make honey, fan the hive, scout, guard. You name it. The males just mate and eat." Mutte glared at Cass. "I'll bet you'd take that life, son, wouldn't you? Mating and eating. Fucking and eating. But that's the kind of living that brought hell down upon us!"

"And the queen bitch just gets worshipped. Typical," Dane said.

Simon wasn't going to let Dane's ignorance go unchecked. "Oh no. She serves the hive. She lays up to three thousand eggs a day. Sometimes more than a million in her lifetime. And then, when she becomes too old, or sick, they rip and sting her death. Not exactly a pampered monarchy." Simon said a little prayer to himself, one his mother had taught him years ago, something he hadn't thought about in ages: *Thank you for the world so sweet, thank you for the food we eat, thank you for the bees that sting, thank you God, for everything.*

He instructed the men to step back. He waited until one of the two remaining foragers made her way to the top of the jar and then he released the flap and up she went. She moved

through the air, first hovering above them, momentarily diving toward Mutte then Dane, and then toward the silt-clogged creek. She alighted on some weeds, some long-fallen rocks, then moved up into the air again, searching, searching. She drifted off to the south, disappearing into the gorge, down to the once mighty Aspens, Birch, and Oak along the creek's edge at the lowest point in the canyon. Many of the trees along the outside had been shredded, sacrificed in exposure to the violent wind. Simon thought they'd lost her before she flew into view again, lifted by the drafts in the canyon. Simon used his binoculars to confirm her direction; he watched until he lost her in a crevice at the base of a layer of the PahaSapa Limestone.

"That way," he said, pointing at the sheer, gray cliff licked through with orange streaks.

They piled back into the truck.

The honey hunt, an art perfected by the ancient Egyptians, was made more difficult by the fact that they had only two foragers left to direct them. And if Simon was honest, he held out little hope for wild bees. No, this was definitely not pharaoh's land. Honeybees were ubiquitous in the Nile Valley. So much so that Ramses III was able to offer 30,000 pounds of honey to the Nile God as sacrifice. Simon thought of his own grandfather's honey warehouse, the lean years at the start of the collapse. The machine scraping the ever-dwindling honey from the supers and sucking it into the great steel pipe. Simon had loved to climb his grandfather's honey drums, which he kept stacked up at the end of summer, ready to ship. Year after year, those drums became fewer and fewer. By the time Simon's father took over, there were summers when they were lucky to get five full drums. All the same, the drums still buzzed with the stragglers who refused to relinquish the nectar they'd passed from tongue to tongue in the hive until all the

excess water had dissolved and what was left was pure, unadulterated honey. To think of that now, so much abundance, so much work, so much lost.

So with a single honeybee directing them, the hunt was on. They followed the washed-out road uphill toward the limestone cliff. Mutte, his hat in his lap, passed around a leather flask filled with his abominable, homemade, hooch. Simon choked down a mouthful of fire.

"Here's to the Second Collapse," Mutte said. "He will make a new heaven and a new Earth!" The First Collapse was characterized by famine and climate upheaval, instability, widespread panic and death. The next one, Mutte often assured his flock, would bring the rapture.

The truck maneuvered through a narrow, hairpin turn, and they were surprised on the other side by a Peacekeeper blockade.

"Oh, hell no, hell no," Cass said, looking terrified. He squatted in the back of the truck as if he were prepared to jump.

"Relax," Mutte said, putting his hand on Cass' shoulder. "Calm down."

Bossman slowed the truck to a stop and was greeted by two Peacekeepers, both brandishing automatic weapons. They had full fatigues and headgear, dark battle goggles obscured their eyes. There was a muffled exchange, and Simon slid the jar out of the nylon sack and peeked at the remaining forager. She was sitting at the bottom of the jar, still alive.

Recruited mainly in Have-towns and working two-year stints, the Peacekeepers attracted a certain temperament. Simon had never seen them in the Hills before. He strained to discern their conversation, and he wondered what kind of young man would leave the comfort of a

Have-town to police the vast, unstable middle of the country. He'd had few encounters with Peacekeepers but they were famous for their cruelty.

There was an uneven burst of laughter, the smack of a hand against the side of the truck. As they drove through the blockade, the Peacekeepers who'd been speaking to Bossman raised their guns in a half-salute to the men in back. Passing through the blockade Simon noticed a line of Peacekeepers sitting across the back of a supply truck, the tarp rolled up revealing more guns and supplies. They were eating something out of metal bowls. One looked up and locked eyes with him—a young man with blond hair and splotchy red cheeks. The black empty stare gave Simon the chills. The kid grinned at him, exposing a row of tiny, sharp-looking teeth.

"What are they doing in the Hills?" Simon asked Mutte.

"Who knows? Maybe the government is reneging on the Hills again." Mutte smirked and looked away. "This place is too good for them, if you ask me."

The Oceti Sakowin, the Great Sioux Nation, had been given back the Black Hills National Forest by a president in the twenty-first to the chagrin of many who claimed archeological history proved the Sioux were not its rightful owners. Even so, after the first collapse, the Sioux bought back much of the property that wasn't given them in the restoration. Technically, Peacekeepers had no business in the Hills, and yet, here they were.

Simon looked out into the still-dense trees along the canyon walls and gathered the sensation of being watched. Bossman, for his part, had an agreement with the Sioux that allowed the Earthers to travel back and forth to the Sleeping Giant, high in the canyon. Bossman seemed to have an agreement with everyone.

Simon noticed Cass visibly relax as they passed the blockade and it disappeared behind them. As they crisscrossed the canyon, they were still less than a mile from where they let the first forager out. Simon estimated the place where the first bee had disappeared and knocked on the back window. Bossman pulled over on the shoulder of the road, alongside the bottom layer of the canyon, Deadwood sandstone, which in places was four-hundred feet thick.

Bossman stepped out of the cab of his truck and came around to them. His dark eyes flashing at the honeybee in Simon's jar. "Dane's going to stay in the truck. He says he's had some experience with a few of those assholes back there. Do you really think there's a chance of a swarm up in this canyon?" he asked Simon.

"It's possible. Oh, it's possible. There was a time when this canyon was filled with honeybees. There's a slim chance my hive raised a second queen and the swarm followed her up here. Or, who knows? Maybe it is a wild hive."

"Wouldn't it be something," Mutte said, "to see life in the midst of all of this destruction. This would be a story we could tell the people! A sign that the Kingdom of God is truly near! There have been signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the Earth. Distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea, and the waves, and the wind! Our people have fainted from fear! Oh but our redemption is near!"

Cass rolled his eyes and made a jerking motion above his crotch that only Simon could see.

Without warning, Mutte snatched the jar from Simon.

"What the hell, Mutte?"

Mutte released the forager, and this time, the bee didn't hover. She flew in the infamous beeline, shot straight up above them, forty feet, where a ledge crested out over the creek and the road below.

"Holy shit," Cass said. "She had somewhere to be."

They watched for a while but she didn't appear again.

"Well, seeing as we are out of foragers," Simon glared at Mutte, "our best bet is to climb this cliff and see what was so interesting to that one." Simon went back to the truck for his hiking boots and his gloves.

"Why don't you send jimmy-legs here?" Mutte said, referring to Cass. "Let him scale that cliff like the ape he is."

"I'll go up with you," Cass said, more than willing. "If there's a swarm up there, you'll need my help to capture it."

Cass and Simon prepared themselves for the climb. Bossman loaned Cass the gloves from his toolbox and a small pick-ax to keep in his back pocket. Simon retrieved the bee suits but left them by the truck. Both men set out from a small brush clearing at the base of the limestone and set upon the cliff face from there. The limestone uplift protruded from the canyon like a raised fist but at the small plateau where the bee had disappeared, the ledge crumbled into the cliff's face like a collapsed, toothless mouth.

Cass went up the sheer side of the limestone as if he'd done it a hundred times. His hands found every hold, his feet swung impossible arcs and propelled his skinny body upward. His baggy pants fell down around his protruding hips. He stopped once to wipe a thick strand of dusty hair with a sinewy, rippled forearm. Simon struggled along at least fifteen feet below him,

dust in his mouth and nose, slowly making his way up the cliff. At about a quarter of the way up, Simon lost his footing and slid down five feet, and was smacked in the face by a spruce sapling clinging to the cliff face. One of the needles gorged his eye and the shock of it caused him to lose his handhold. He fell the remaining five feet to the ground.

Simon lay sprawled at the foot of the cliff, winded, regretting that Mutte was there to witness it. Bossman came over and gave him a hand up. Simon thought he'd cracked a rib. His breath felt like a fishhook deep in his chest.

The three of them stood watching Cass as he reached the ledge and in one swift motion, he disappeared over the lip.

After a moment, just his head reappeared over the ledge. His animated face was engorged from the exertion of the climb and his current inversion. "There's a huge fucking mountain lion carcass up here! A little above me. It's this fucking white, mountain lion with blue eyes! I'm going to try and reach it."

"But do you see any bees?" Simon yelled up at him. "How they hell does a carcass have eyes?" Simon asked nobody in particular.

Instead of answering, Cass' head disappeared again.

Mutte was breathing heavily next to him. "Out of the eater…" he said to no one in particular. "Out of the eater, something to eat."

Simon was looking up the cliff face, trying to imagine what Cass planned to do with a mountain lion carcass.

"Out of the strong, something sweet." Mutte shielded his eyes from the sun.

There was a yell, a sharp whoop, and then a dark blossoming mist exploded from the ledge above them. It was the sound of a hot hive humming with anger. Simon could interpret the temperament of a hive by their frequency, and this was the sound of aggression.

Cass Walker fell in the shape of star with the velocity of someone blasted backwards by a detonation. His voice held a single note, a clear bell of alarm calling out to the universe in protest of his lost cause. He hit the ground with a resolute thud, at least two-dozen bees still clinging to him. The deep red of his cranial blood flowed out from a long dark slash in his skull. His eyes open. His lips stretched in that careless smile. There was still life in him.

Simon and Bossman rushed to him. Cass spoke one last time, not of Willa or of himself or the wild bees that apparently drove him of the cliff, but of someone named Hormidas.

"Hormidas," Cass said, his voice choked with blood. "He was wrong. Tell her that. Till Willa that."

Chapter 11: The Fall

Fourteen years earlier.

Cass Walker had seen enough by the time he was a teenager to know that nothing happens in isolation. No act goes unaccounted for, unmeasured or un-receipted, whether payment be due now or later. The honeybees affected the commercial crops, which affected other plant life, which decreased some animal populations and increased others. The weather changed. The average annual rainfall totals in Myyarka State Park had gone from fifty-five inches to over one hundred inches in the last ten years. The federal and state governments froze spending for the national parks. And soon after, people fleeing the cities moved in.

Cass Walker and girlfriend Katherine panhandled people and ripped them off if they stayed overnight in the park. They stole food from government stockpiles in warehouses in Sarasota. He wasn't proud of it, but once he did more than rip a guy off. He came out of a public restroom and found a guy rifling through their car. He'd grabbed Katherine's hand to run after the guy. He wasn't sure why he'd grabbed her hand, as if they had to chase him down together. He was high; she was not. She was pregnant, early on, with Willa. She began running alongside Cass, looking at him with the strangest face, the shock of the moment animated her in profile. She was amused, not afraid. He could tell. It was funny, the notion of someone rifling through their car, which they lived in most of the time: their camping stove, their underwear hung between the rungs of a mini-trampoline Katherine kept for exercise.

The man didn't notice them running toward him, holding hands like children. He was bent over the passenger seat, presenting to them only the worn-out seat of an ancient pair of

Levis, an old comb protruding from the back pocket. Cass assumed he was armed because everyone in the park was armed, unless they were so far-gone homeless that they'd already traded their gun for something more important.

Just as they arrived at the curb, Katherine tripped and fell on her backside, in a kind babyish way, with a big thud and a wide-eyed look of surprise. When Cass saw her fall like that, his mind went clink-clink. The energy he'd gathered running down the hill transformed into something else: rage. He just ran around to the other side of the car and starting kicking the shit out of this guy. Just kicking him over and over. Crystal. This was park living. It was a forest full of tweakers.

It was the most pride Cass had ever felt in his life, the time when he was his most meaningful, or so he thought. He was the smartest person in the world, the one with the secret knowledge, the one with that laser focus, a singular insight that set him apart from all other human beings. He was energetic and enthusiastic. That was meth. They were living in an abandoned state park with a hundred other people just like them. Katherine called it living in "beast mode."

Everything was a fight. Food was scarce, processed food was abundant but expensive. Gasoline was impossible to find. Riots and an unstable energy grid had long been the new normal. Most people, except for the Haves, just gave up their lives in the city and hit the road. Those that weren't armed were fools. Drugs were cheap and simple and everyone's favorite past time.

The universe had closed in and simplified everything. Cass's decision to leave Atlanta was easy. His parents were dead. Katherine's parents were dead. The city was embroiled in riots. The world was going to straight to hell and he was glad for it.

They were just teenagers. They took Katherine's parents old car and left one night. The power had been out in Atlanta for almost two weeks after a rash of unseasonal storms and riots in the streets. Katherine said they'd been born in the last civilized decade on Earth and it didn't matter what they did next. The Haves could keep their problems, fuck them, they said. Katherine had a cousin in Florida already living in Myakka State Park. So Katherine and Cass had happily surrendered what was left of the city, along with its twenty-four hour news cycles and disaster preparation drills. When Katherine turned up pregnant it seemed somehow impossible. A baby was an intrusion from a future they'd already denied.

They were living in Myakka State Park and sleeping in the abandoned ranger's cabin. Cass was on a landscaping crew with Katherine's cousin, mowing lawns and planting flowers in the Have-town ten miles away in Venice. Rich people paid thousands of dollars for flowers that used to cost a couple hundred bucks, but the guys on the crews didn't see any of the money. Landscapers made out big on black market flowers. The woman with most flowerbeds was queen.

Their cabin was rank but at least they didn't share it with anyone. This was because Cass had a reputation as a viscous bastard, small but determined. Everyone in the park knew he'd crippled that man at the rest stop.

The cabin always seemed to be wet, no matter the weather, and filled with stuff they'd stolen or things other squatters had left behind. On this particular afternoon, the road that led up

to the cabin was still washed out from the last storm that covered it with six inches with water. They hadn't seen another person in days. They were running out of food. Katherine was always hungry. They'd lost track of how far along she was and kept thinking that she could have the baby any day, but they'd been saying that for a while.

They were lying on the cabin floor, playing cards. Cass had just smoked and was feeling the peak. Katherine had been off crystal since she found out about the baby. While Cass admired her, he didn't attempt it himself.

During the detox, she shook and sweat with such force Cass was worried she'd blow apart. He laid her out on the cabin's porch with a sleeping bag and a gallon jug of water so she could vomit off the side. He stayed with her as much as he could, but he had to leave her alone for a day when he left to score at the former state park museum-slash-gift shop. When she was feeling stronger, she got up and walked in circles on the porch and ate the protein bars he'd traded for.

More than once, he tried to get her to take a hit just so she would stop moaning. She moaned every word she spoke to him when she spoke at all, and squinted her eyes all the time, as if blinded by some invisible light. But she never smoked again.

In the end she was fine, as serene and placid as the Myakka River. But her stomach hadn't grown like it should, even Cass could see that. That afternoon, he'd just laid down jacks and aces when someone knocked on the cabin door.

No one had ever knocked on that door. Cass was slow to react so Katherine got up before he even thought to stop her. They weren't supposed to be there, of course, but the state had long since abandoned the cabin, so no one was checking.

Katherine opened the cabin door to an old man in a blue linen dress. Something flashed in his hand, and Cass figured a knife, so he jumped. He flew over, bowed up, and said "What the fuck?" to this old man, right in his face.

The old man took a step backward, serene as can be. Whatever the man was holding that had got Cass' attention was now out of sight. But behind him, hovering over his head like a thought bubble was a small swarm of fuzzy, black and orange bees. The bees had iridescent green goggles for eyes and their upper bodies were covered with what looked like fur. The same brown fur crowned their heads and split their shiny eyes in a single strip like a mowhawk . Their huge bodies were fortified with a sugar-coated black armor and they had what looked like hind legs, man-ish legs, which dangled behind them. But it was their size that stunned Cass. They were close to four inches long, with eyes the size of tackheads.

Cass slammed the door in his face. "What's with those bees, man?" He yelled loud enough for the man to hear him.

"I have strawberries," the man said, raising his voice to be heard through the door. "Apples, tangerines, and cucumbers."

Cass had been an Oreo-cookie man, himself. He adored Cheetos, the hot kind. As a kid, he'd trade junk food with his friends and left the fruit from his lunch sack in the garbage can. But even on meth, the denial of living food, just the notion of its scarcity, drove him wild. The apple became the portent of his every dream. He and Katherine had tried many times to make friends with a fruit seller, but fruit sellers were dangerous, selfish bastards. They had no use for drugs, or electronics, or anything Cass and Katherine had to trade.

Cass opened the door a crack. Katherine moved next to him, pushing the door all the way open to get a better look. Outside, a wild mix of shrubbery and trees was growing ever closer to their cabin. Nearly gone now were the grasshopper sparrows, bobcats, opossums and the muskrats whose little drawings were etched into the metal placards illustrating the animals of Myakka State Park at the museum-slash-gift shop. In their place, the swamp creatures began to thrive: the nutria, lizards, snakes, and caiman. The alligators, of course, still ruled the river. The white-tailed deer populations grew but were being pushed to the perimeter. There was a family of deer just to the left of the man's vehicle, gnawing at the washed up brambles along the disappearing road.

The man looked Hispanic but his face was red-ish, black pinpricks dusted his nose and cheeks. He had long tangles of white-and-grey hair. The bees moved in unison above him. The outer extremities pulled the group into roughly the shape of a waxed mustache; then in one motion they tucked in their flanks and assumed the form of a loose figure eight, undulating, flapping, buzzing away.

"I'm only going to ask you one more time," Cass said, reaching into his back pocket and readying his pistol. "What the fuck is the deal with those bees?"

The man was maybe seventies, in a long blue linen shirt, not a dress as Cass had originally thought, over faded jeans. He had on cowboy boots. Behind him, parked on the road that had somehow dried to passable in the last hour was a motor coach, sparkling. Hardly any mud. Cass figured the fruit was just a cover. Maybe a pervert-euphemism of some sort. He probably had women or children for sale. It wasn't uncommon. People made their money however they could.

“I’m glad you asked.” Hormidas opened his mouth soundlessly and the bees flew past Cass and alighted on Katherine, spraying across her pregnant body like buckshot. They had landed there, arranged in what looked to Cass to be a kind of pattern. The old man opened a gap-toothed smile at Katherine and asked, “Aren’t you the lucky one?”

Chapter 12: Loss

"Your dad startled a swarm. It had collected in the carcass of a mountain lion," Simon the beekeeper said to her without preamble. "He wasn't expecting it." Simon had clearly been crying. He was obviously trying to be gentle. "I'm sorry Willa, but he died. He fell from a cliff in the canyon."

A veil of red dropped before her eyes. The scream of a thousand voices. Then silence. When she opened her eyes she was surprised to see Mutte and Simon were still standing in front of her and the Earth had not gone to still.

Willa knew what had happened. What she didn't know was what was going to happen to her. Her father had been killed by a *bugaloo*. That much she knew.

She'd been taught about the Amazon by Hormidas on those many nights travelling across the country in the Tuscany Motor Coach. The bees in the Amazon would self-generate from the corpse of an animal, or sometimes even a person. And the hive would take on that creature's spirit. In most cases, it was a terrible omen. The worst. She suspected the *bugaloo*.

"No ghost wedding!" Willa screamed at them. She didn't care how she sounded. She didn't care what anyone thought of her anymore. "No ghost wedding! My mother was his wife even if they never married. That's all that he needs!"

Mutte assessed her with cool contempt, eyes full of hate, his almond smell laced with the smell of death, the mountain lion, her father. With his lying mouth Mutte told her that she'd be well cared for. But Willa knew what he meant.

It meant she would be adopted out to an Earther family, which had happened before. *Tu-ha* whispered to her. She tried to tell her comforting things, but even so, Willa felt what was an already deep, resounding anger surge when Simon and Mutte sat down at the kitchenette table as if they were settling in for a long chat. It was surely the kind of anger that could certainly make the world come to still but it defiantly turned, creaking along. She saw the shadow of an animal, a bird, glide past along the side of the cabin across the road. Then it lit up as if on fire and disappeared. *Tu-ha* said, *Put your attention here and now.*

"I'm staying in my trailer," Willa said. She felt afraid but she counted on *Tu-ha* for guidance now, and *Tu-ha* said, *Stay.*

"You can't stay here alone,"Mutte said.

"I'm staying here."

"You can spend the evening alone in the trailer. Then get your things together and meet us in Bossman's office. Dinner. Then we'll make a plan," Mutte said.

She could see him there, her father, on the ledge in the canyon. The fear, the panic, the regret, all at once. She saw him falling backwards. She watched her father die at Mutte's feet over and over again. She heard his cry in her inside voice. Tu-ha whispered again, this time about the *bugaloo*: *The bugaloo has always been and will remain here for a long time yet. There are ways to live alongside it.*

Maybe Mutte himself had a *bugaloo* or the power to summon one? She could find out if she could just touch him. She wouldn't be surprised after the way he treated her, how scared Wren was of him, the way he looked at Willa, Tipper, and all the women in the campground.

“I’ve decided, Willa,” Mutte said, wiping a few greasy strands from his forehead, “that you can come and live with me. In my cabin. I have the best cabin on the campground.” He looked genuinely proud of this. “I think I have a lot to teach you. About the Good Book. About Jesus.”

“I had the best teacher ever lived!” She did, too. Hormidas knew all about what Mutte knew and much, much more.

“Hormidas taught me a few things, too,” Mutte said, and Willa couldn’t read him through the steel veneer of contempt.

Simon the beekeeper shot Mutte a look of surprise. “Willa, we all need to talk about this. And we can. We will.”

She considered Mutte across the table. He had long fingernails that ended in rough little points, like raccoon claws. She reached over and placed her hand on Mutte’s arm. He jerked it back as if she’d burned him. Simon watched this exchange, looking confused. But she’d felt him. She felt the inside of Mutte.

And what she felt was now the weight of a deep, paralyzing presence in her stomach. She closed her eyes and the tears escaped from the corners, burning little fiery paths down her cheeks. Mutte stood, crossed the small distance to their front door and left. He took with him the dense weight.

Simon the beekeeper stood and Willa stood, too. He came around the table hugged her. *Her blanket, the one they’d left behind in the swamp. Her mother’s fragile arms. The river. The humidity. Hormidas. Fresh arepas*. All of this was inside him. This beekeeper was so strange.

“Loss. Willa, I know it hurts. Did I ever tell you that I lost two of my kids?”

“No.” But it didn’t surprise her. Everyone had lost someone, most people many someones.

“When you lose someone you love, it’s a prolonged punch to the gut. Makes you afraid to breathe. When you breathe, it hurts worse. It’s like you have something lodged in your chest, something you want to wretch out but you can’t seem to shake it loose. But you have to breathe, kid. You have to keep taking breaths, promise?” He smiled at her. His tanned face so handsome, so relaxed. “The sunlight will hurt, too. Happy people, if you can find any these days, will be like arrows to your heart.” Simon wiped the tears from her cheeks with his thumbs. His thumb was cold and hard. Hormidas, she thought. “And the tears. They aren’t regular tears. They aren’t the tears you cry when you’re happy, or feeling sympathetic, or watching a good movie.” There were tears in his own eyes, now. Simon’s voice was unsteady. “These tears are the hot stinging kind. They burn don’t they?”

She nodded yes. Yes, they did. They burned. She was sure they would leave permanent streaks of red on her face.

“They burn like that because of all the pain they’re carrying away. Because it hurts like hell to lose. To lose someone you love. This is loss, Willa. You’ve lost everyone, honey. I’m so sorry. I’ll be at Bossman’s waiting for you. It’s going to be okay. You’ll see.” He crossed the trailer and left out the door and with him went her blanket, and the swamp, and the fresh arepas.

And then the buzzing began. All of the things Hormidas had brought back from the Amazon—the basket, the lures, the rattle, the leather satchel, the knife with with bone handle—all vibrated in their cupboards, or in their place on the wall, or tucked away under the bed. And then, just like that, the world finally came to still.

There would be time now for sleep. Bossman's office, his dinner, her new home could stay away as long as the world was at still. And so she curled up in the corner of what was once Hormidas' Tuscany Motor Coach, and she put out her hand for him, and there he was. The weight of Hormidas' calloused hand put her to sleep, and when she awoke much later, she was hungry. Starving. The world had begun to turn again. Time had passed, and the sun was just starting to drop behind Hills to the west. Coyotes howled and yipped and hunted not far away. And she heard in them the same angry voices she'd heard every night for the last two weeks: the howlers.

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Tipper heard the news about Cass Walker from Simon. It hurt to think of him dying that way. She couldn't help but think of Cass as simple, like a child. Hopeful, optimistic. Cass Walker was designed for one thing in life and that was survival and that one things had finally played itself out. Tipper reasoned that survival meant staying instinctive, more like an animal, which is what a child is really after all. She was sure that she'd read that somewhere. Tipper believed that children might just be more animalistic, but they were likely more human, too.

She'd later listened, as much as she could, from her trailer when they broke the news to Willa. There was shouting."You tell them, girl," Tipper whispered to herself, listening under the pretense of smoking on the metal steps leading up to her trailer. "Let your feelings be known." They'd stopped to talk to her on their way over, Simon and Mutte. It was strange to see them together, two men she'd been sleeping with, one for pleasure and one because he was bribing her. She wasn't sure if Simon knew or perhaps suspected she was sleeping with Mutte. She had considered telling him the truth.

Simon hadn't come back that morning. The day Mutte had visited her without warning, during a time when she'd least expected him to, a time Mutte himself had dictated for all Earthers to stay indoors. Gratefully, Mutte had been quick that day. He'd wanted her mouth and not her body, which meant she had some control of her own time.

Mutte was pathetic and lonely but who wasn't? And he had her. The Peacekeepers still had her on their most-wanted list. Mutte took it upon himself to remind her of this once a month when he came calling. He knew he had her and he took advantage of it, plain and simple. Sure it was deplorable but who wasn't deplorable? And because this life had taught her to rationalize

just about everything, Tipper figured she was able to live in Bossman's 10-acre campground for free.

She offered to go with them to tell Willa about her dad. "Perhaps the girl would appreciate the comfort of a woman?" she'd said, but they declined her offer. What did Tipper know about girls, after all, except how to be one?

Now, hours later, the sky stirred. Low-slung clouds had arrived, mixing, blending, sliding up into one another, heaving out the weight. The expelled clouds formed their own low, dark bulge. Everything in nature reminded her of sex.

She blew a steady stream of spoke into the air and then several small puffs. She loved a good cigarette. She considered the tobacco shortage to be as tragic as the lack of food. Many nights she thought, *if I could get a cigarette, just one fucking cigarette, I could make right all that is fucked up in the world.* That night, she had plenty of tobacco, and she was savoring every ritualistic detail: the breathing, the flame, the habit and ashes. So what if it was unpopular by society's standards? None of that mattered now. The Have-world as it existed on the computer at the town library, where she'd take her yellow pickup on days when the weather seemed clear, was far in her past. The library had an occasional internet connection and a single old television in the lounge that could, on a clear day, pick up the Have-town station broadcasting from what was once Minneapolis (talking, talking, talking). That's where she went to confirm the world of the Haves was still as she left it. Fearful. Delusional. Full of hate and hypocrisy. A place where everyone looked the same, dressed the same, acted the same way. Tipper had no choice but to leave the Have-town, but she came to believe that isolation had become her self-preservation.

She'd exiled herself to the Black Hills of South Dakota, a place she'd learned about in ninth grade American history and hardly thought of again. She was surprised to find that in reality this place was nothing like the history book in the Have-town school, which only mentioned the gold the European-Americans found in the Hills. She'd read about Jedediah Smith and his valiant tangle with the grizzly bear, his skull laid bare and his ear tossed across the bottomland at the basin of the Powder River. She read how Americans carved the visage of their heroes in the very rock of the Hills. It didn't mention once that the Hills rightfully belonged to the Sioux, per a treaty with the U.S. government in a forgotten century. The books didn't even mention the Native Americans. In fact, the didn't mention any of the myriad races and ethnicities she'd learned about among the world of the floaters. But she had since learned that a treaty had been dishonored, a long time ago. Now the Great Sioux Nation had the Hills back, and they decided to share, on their own terms, certain places like the the Sleeping Giant with the likes of Bossman and the Earthers.

For the last two years, home had for Tipper had been a narrow patch of dust with chemical toilet hook-ups and a preacher collecting blackmail in the form of sex, just so she could live bedeviled in her old mobile home.

She'd snuck out of the Have-town, with her mother's help, and driven her father's car alone from what was once Dallas to the Hills. The car wasn't designed to drive that far, and it had struggled along. In constant fear of Peacekeepers, she drove through the night. When she'd stop for gas—which was only available at Peacekeeper waystations— if anyone happened to be around, she'd use her old unworking cell phone as a prop, holding a conversation with an

inevitable someone about how she was going to visit her sister in the Billings Have-town. Driving, of which he'd had very little experience, made her nervous.

At night, while driving, she'd listen to the book on CD her mother had left in the car. As she crossed the flat of Kansas, she'd listened to an Indian man with a spiky accent explain that humans expel a vast number of atoms with every breath, breathing away their own heart, lung, and brain matter. People are literally particlizing away every second, and at the same time, breathing in the detritus of others, all the time making themselves anew. A new skin every few years, a new lung every ten. This idea came to Tipper often, the erotic nature of being in someone's close proximity, the cannibalistic act of breathing in.

Now, she was thinking about this very idea when, after nearly ten cigarettes, the door of the Tuscany Motor Coach two trailers down rattled and Willa came out looking terrible. The girl took the wooden steps her father had built up against the trailer, and wound with plastic ivy, in fragile little steps. She stared down the road encircled the campground's clearing without glancing at Tipper.

She had straps across her chest and attached to it, on her back like a papoose, was that basket she carried around from time. Willa abruptly stopped once to reposition the basket behind her and again bent to adjust the tongue of her dirty, white sneaker.

Had Tipper even been so young? That kind of young. So soft and promising. The girl's sadness had flushed her. Her eyes were swollen and blood shot. She had on a frayed tanktop. A ragged jean jacket was tied around her waist. Tipper considered her as she pulled on the tongue of her sneaker.

“Willa,” Tipper yelled across the road to her, “where you headed? You want to stop for a minute? I’ve got some homemade vanilla wafers.”

Willa turned away and a wall of dark, red hair fell between them. “No thanks.”

“You sure? You want some orange soda?”

“No.”

“Sweetie, I’m really sorry about your dad.” There’d been so much death. So many people dying for silly reasons or good reasons or no reason at all. And here was this kid, an orphan. But even this, orphan-hood, had become normal. “You have to let me know about your dad’s funeral now, okay? I’m so sorry sweetie. Are they gonna bury him up on the Sleeping Giant?”

The Sleeping Giant. What a creep-o place. Tipper’s mind always summoned a mountainous giant, much like the Gulliver of her childhood picture book, stretched out across hills, captured and subdued by thousands of rope-wielding Earthers. Tipper figured she’d probably end up in the Giant herself someday, in some plastic shroud, maybe even dumped in a single hole with her beloved “ghost husband.” But she knew she had no other choice. The Earthers meant security, food, survival, protection from the Peacekeepers.

Tipper stubbed out her cig on her ash-dotted mobile home, pocket-marked with rusted dents, and crossed over to Willa who stood up and started to walk away.

“Just a second. Just a second. Wait.” Tipper told her, steading her by the shoulders. Her shoulders were firm, too tense for someone so young. “Sweetie, where are you going?”

“I have to go live with Mutte,” Willa was robotic, flat-toned, dead-eyed.

Tipper tried not to betray her panic.

“Really, says who?”

“Says Mutte.” Willa mouth twisted up then exploded into a long, sing-song wail. “I have to live with Mutte! I’m all alone. And my dad went and got killed and now I am all alone!” She screamed this just a few inches from Tipper’s face. She seemed more angry than sad. “And I have to go and *live* with the guy who *killed* him!”

“Sweetie, your dad was killed in an accident.”

“Like hell he was.” Willa’s disco-ball eyes looked, for just one moment, maybe it was the light: empty. She suddenly seemed older than thirteen. “That lion was used by an evil spirit. It’s Mutte’s fault.”

Tipper wasn’t really surprised as much as curious.

“A spirit got into that lion. And when it died the hive was born from its brains and its blood. That hive is cursed.”

Tipper didn’t know what to say. She thought it best to just to let her continue. Willa stared up at her and when Tipper didn’t answer she yelled, “You’re all such fools!” and walked away.

Willa’s retreating form moved away and down the road toward the dirt trail that led back to the tree line, behind the campground, and to Simon’s bees. A few tall weeds and grasses, bent from the wind, seemed to curve dangerously in on her. Not a trace of a prophet or a healer. There was just a girl.

“So where are you going?” Tipper yelled at her back.

“I’m going to kill a *bugaloo*.”

Chapter 13: Tu-ha and The *Bugaloo*, Part 1

Deep in the Amazon. Many years ago.

Hormidas was disappointed to learn that Earth's deepest, darkest jungle had already unfolded herself for the world. He was a young pastor in his mid-twenties, and on this particular Saturday morning, he badly needed to use the latrine. The Chip-pos, however, were blocking the door outside his hut. As a rule, Hormidas didn't interact with the Chip-pos without his translator present, but Pikko hadn't shown up that morning to escort him to breakfast, a trip that also included Hormidas's morning constitutional. To assuage his bladder, Hormidas tried lying face down on his straw palette but only succeeded in raising a burst of heady Amazon dust into his lungs.

"Saturday" was a meaningless designation to the Chip-pos, but it mattered to Hormidas. Since arriving in the Amazon, he'd begun tracking the days to Saturday in his pocket diary. As guilty as it made him, feel Hormidas looked forward to Saturdays because it was on Saturday that the riverboat tours came through, bringing with them a few dozen tourists, most of them American. He was sad to see the indigenous people performing for the tourists, but it was money. And they put the money to good use.

Even so, Hormidas developed a crackling anticipation for the tour boats, the familiar roundness of the anglo-eye, the sound of English being spoken casually around the Chip-po's fire. It was just that he was so lonely. Since the rest of his mission left a month ago for a long expedition upriver, no one but the translator Pikko and his wife had spoken to him.

On this particular Saturday morning, Hormidas watched with mild terror as more than fifty Chip-pos gathered in the garden outside his hut just after sunrise. Other than Pikko and his wife, only a handful Chip-pos had visited the missionary hut in the six months since they'd arrived.

Hormidas opened the door and tried to step out to greet them, but two young Chip-po warriors made it clear that they expected him to stay inside.

They sat down and began preparing one another for the boat's arrival. From his thatch window, he'd seen a tall, hawkish woman with a damp face loop a beaded neck-stretcher around the throat of a little girl. It looked painful, but the girl was laughing. Ignoring the woman's swats and efforts to keep her still, the child squeezed grey fish paste through the considerable gaps in her teeth and grinned at another girl sitting beside her.

As far as Hormidas could tell, the Chip-pos only donned their full tribal adornments when the tours came through. Amazon boat tours brought mostly graduate students and their professors and other like-minded, legitimate Earth-sandal-types. The rest of the passengers fell into two categories: the startled retirees duped by the promise of lush landscapes and intricately embroidered quilts and the single men, usually middle-aged and empty-eyed. The Ayahuaska tourists came, too, looking for their spiritual trip. But Hormidas never saw them. They came on different boats, and the Ayahuaska shaman kept their lodges hidden in the jungle.

At the dinner ceremony, which included a dance and warrior display, the Chip-pos would roll a collection of carved tree stumps out into the clearing and all the visitors would settle in, nodding in anticipation. When the ceremony began, the earth-sandal-types would watch, looking serious, occasionally taking notes while the retirees would smile uncomfortably at one another

and chatter about the Chip-pos as if they were watching a television show in their living room back in Ohio. The lone men sat, arms crossed, and glared at the Chip-po women and children with cold appraisal.

For the Saturday evening ceremony, Pikko usually came for Hormidas wearing his own version of a tribal costume. Pikko wore his embroidered tunic over blue jeans and a pair of tattered, blue suede Nikes.

At the traditional dinner, Hormidas would get to sit on a mat where he was served fish and vegetable paste alongside the Chip-pos' shaman—a young woman they called Ni-kai, or "the next one"—and the other tribal leaders. It was the only time Hormidas was allowed any contact with the tribe.

When Pikko's wife introduced him to the audience—Pikko's wife Luci was a beautiful young woman who, like Pikko, spoke excellent English and served as a kind of emcee of ceremonies along with the guides from the tour boat—Hormidas would stand up and face all the spectators and wave. And from all but the most extreme earth-sandal-types, who would sit flint-faced and mildly accusatory, Hormidas would accept his applause.

Hormidas felt conflicted at these moments, mainly because he felt a kind of unwitting participant in these spectacles, and because he'd made such little progress with the Chip-pos. He'd only counseled five people since his arrival.

After the ceremony, there'd be some mingling of the English-speaking Chip-pos and the tourists. Sometimes, the lone men would approach Hormidas and ask him how they might get work as a missionary in the Amazon. Often during these encounters, Hormidas could sense their eagerness. He wanted to believe it was only loneliness that drove these men into the jungle, but

he saw them around the fire, their appraising eyes, and he recognized in them a kind of incipient desire, one he knew from the shadows of his own heart.

Sometimes, if Hormidas was feeling particularly churlish about his predicament in the Amazon, he would refuse to attend the Saturday ceremony. When Pikko would come to summon him, Hormidas would politely decline. Instead, he would sit on a dusty mat in the center of his the clearing in front of the missionary's hut, regretting his decision to skip the ceremony, and watch for the smoke from the bonfire. He'd listen as they made their offering to the river gods in song and dance. On these nights, there was no sky above him, just a tall canopy of restless, emergent, victorious trees. No sky, stars. Hormidas thought this must be the reason the Chip-pos' gods never resided in the skies or the heavens. They worshiped gods that could be found in the soil and the plants, animals, and insects. But mostly, the Chip-po gods lived in the rivers.

In the teeming Amazon, the creeping cycle of birth, death, and decay was on display everywhere. Trees, vines, grasses, animals, insects, and the ever-increasing by-products of Chip-po life was rotting in musky layers that collapsed and fermented to create the dense jungle floor around him. After some time, mostly alone in the jungle, Hormidas began to obsess about his own life, his stagnating vitality, the turning over of his cells at an ever-slackening pace. While still a young man, he worried that he'd have no family, no legacy, no real job or money when he returned to the United States. He worried he'd reach the end with nothing to show for his life, and then there was the matter of his desire. His tiger's heart.

When Hormidas was seventeen, less then ten years before, he had taken a youth trip with his church to the desert near his hometown in Arizona. On the last morning, after they'd packed their sleeping bags and loaded the trucks, they met to form one last prayer circle before driving

home. They stood, eyes closed, and prayed, and their youth leader had said, “Anyone who feels they are now ready to walk with Christ, take two steps into the middle of the circle and open your eyes.”

Hormidas had taken two long-legged steps forward, but when he opened his eyes, he was the only one in the middle of the circle. When his friends began to clap, and pat him on the back, and inquire into his plans, Hormidas realized he might have misheard the man. The direction, it turns out, was for anyone interested in joining the ministry to take two steps into the middle of the circle. This was not what Hormidas heard. He was sure of it. He never told anyone, partly from embarrassment, but mostly because he felt some relief that this matter had been decided for him. It was, after all, a question he’d put to God on more than one occasion. And so that was what he did. He went to seminary and was ordained. After serving as relief minister in some wayward southern parishes, out of sheer boredom and dissonance, he ended up in the Amazon.

Two hours later, Pikko still hadn’t arrived to escort Hormidas to breakfast, and Hormidas had to urinate so badly he could hardly straighten to stand. He heard the Chip-pos still squatting and chattering in his modest courtyard. He could hear their sharp voices clicking across the octaves.

Finally, he opened his hinged thatch door where, just outside his doorway, a large Chip-po woman was sitting, laughing into the ear of another woman who was old and bent and looked as if she’d turned the last century in the jungle.

“Pikko?” Hormidas spoke down to where they were sitting. “Please. I need to use the bathroom.”

The younger woman said something back to him in Spanish. Some Chip-pos spoke both Spanish and Panoan, but for Hormidas, they were equally impenetrable.

Hormidas began to take a step forward.

"No!" the old woman said, her mouth appearing from the middle of her face under a rippling mass of brown flesh. "No." She had a long, thin bone through her nose. It looked like a finger bone and the sight of it gave Hormidas a shiver. The woman passed a twisted finger through the air in front of her face. "No. No Pikko," she said.

Hormidas looked out beyond his garden, beyond the rows of chattering Chip-pos to the clearing and, just beyond that, the jungle. Even if he'd parted the wall of Chip-pos in his garden, he had no idea which dirt trail went where. They all seemed to lead to another trail, which then led to yet five more. Even Chip-pos had been known to walk out into the jungle and get lost. In fact, it had happened only the week before.

The sprawling Chip-po tribe lived in clearings cut in intricate patterns along both sides of the Amazon. And embroidered on everything—their clothing, their quilts, their skin, were maps to one another. Ornate designs directing isolated Chip-pos to each other and showing them how to avoid the enemy along the way. The tradition was born back endlessly in their misty jungle origins and was passed down from mother to daughter, sister to sister. The Chip-po women kept the maps.

On the Chip-po map, which was hardly recognizable as a map but instead looked like thin, concentric patterns and lines, the *Río Amazonas* was depicted as a series of fluid triangles.

The landmarks along its banks resembled pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Pikko had shown him on a tattered, but exquisite quilt they'd presented to Hormidas upon his arrival.

"Old shaman," Pikko had said, smoothing the quilt over Hormidas's wooden table. The table was the only furniture in Hormidas's hut, with the exception of his considerable straw palette. Pikko pointed down to the black shapes drawn next to the river, identifying each location on the map. "This is called New Shaman- he was the Puma. He's dead now. Very powerful. I knew him. Warrior's camp. Gi-ja's tribe. Pu-ma's tribe. Sacred tree, sacred rock, waterfall…" and on and on he went.

Pikko showed Hormidas the location of the Kei-ai tribes, depicted on the maps as red, uneven bulls'eyes. The Kei-ai's and Chip-pos had been mortal enemies, but in recent decades, they'd maintained a peace and managed to build a port on disputed land where the eco-tours disembarked.

"A centuries old tribal feud solved in pursuit of commerce," Hormidas had said. "That seems ironic, considering." The oil companies had recently brought their own commerce to the basin. The explosions and ground quakes were ever-present, coming from the path-clearing equipment less then two miles away.

Pikko shrugged. Hormidas was fairly sure Pikko was biding his time in the jungle, waiting for Luci to agree and return with him to California. Luci didn't accompany them every day, just on Saturdays. Hormidas often found himself waiting impatiently for Saturday.
Just as Hormidas was about to turn back inside and urinate in the corner of his hut, he saw Pikko emerge into his clearing. Hormidas pointed to his watch. Pikko said something in Panoan, and the Chip-pos parted, allowing Hormidas passage to his translator.

Pikko waited for Hormidas outside the latrine hut while Hormidas made sure to take his time. He was sulking. He'd brought his missionary field guild with him in his satchel, and he sat on the steel latrine and read it, tilting the pages into a lopsided beam of flimsy jungle sunlight. He didn't need to use the latrine, but he was angry at Pikko, and he wanted to make him wait. While on the latrine, Hormidas considered that, in the void of human contact, he'd become irrationally attached to his translator.

At breakfast, Pikko and Hormidas sat together on a mat and ate porridge and melon. Hormidas thought Pikko was acting sheepish. Pikko avoided his eyes and only shrugged when Hormidas asked him what the hell the Chip-pos were doing in front of his hut all morning.

As they prepared to leave, Hormidas was collecting the sparse coffee grounds from their breakfast for his garden, when the shawoman approached from the direction of the river. Behind her were the four of the five Chip-pos that had come to Hormidas's hut over the past six months to seek his counsel. They hadn't all come at the same time. One had come early on before the rest of the mission had departed downriver. Two came together about four months ago, and one was his most recent visitor, a young girl, Tee-tum's little sister. Tee-tum had come to see Hormidas, as well, weeks before. And then she disappeared into the jungle and no one had seen her since.

Pikko stood, looking startled, and when Hormidas remained seated, he tapped him on his collar and told him to rise.

The shawoman, who was about the same age as Hormidas, immediately began yelling at him in Panoan. Pikko kicked in almost instantly with a translation. Her brown nostrils flared, and

her face was both terrible and exquisite. Her voice had a vibration to it, a tuning fork against the trees.

"This is a dream," Pikko translated, mimicking the timber in her voice, training it up an octave, despite the fact that Hormidas had asked him several times in the past to stop doing this. "This thing that divides your world between slave and king. Between saved and damned. We don't need this dream. We—." She stopped and waited for Pikko's translation to catch up with her before gesturing to the four people behind her. "—all of us go together when we go." She came very close to Hormidas and whispered, "We all go to the river. *Bugaloo. Tu-ha*. We don't come to you." Pikko had leaned in close behind him to mimic her whisper, and Hormidas could feel his breath on the back of his neck. Then the woman walked back into the jungle's understory with the four Chip-pos following, contrite, behind her.

"What the hell did she say?" Hormidas demanded of Pikko after she'd left. "What was those words she said? Bugaboo?"

"I don't know the English for it," he said, a bit too abruptly. Pikko spoke solid English. He'd lived with a host family in California for nearly five years before he came back to the Chip-pos to fulfill his marriage promise to Luci.

"Try. I need to understand what's happening here. Does this mean she's kicking me out? Do I have to leave?"

"No. You can stay. But she wants you to stay away until the boat comes for you next month. She sent them this morning to sit a *maldolmo* around your hut." Pikko looked bored and took a brown leather wallet out of his pocket. He idly retrieved a small, tattered business card and held it up to examine it.

“A what?” Hormidas asked.

“A curse. A protection curse.”

“Why do I need protecting?” Hormidas felt the steady pulse of alarm begin along his bottommost vertebrae.

“From you, Hormidas,” Pikko said, laughing, turning the tattered business card over in his hand. “They are protecting themselves *from* you.” He held the business card up close enough for Hormidas to see.

Hormidas read it out loud. “ Larry Oldrich. Hubbard Chevrolet.” It had a Chicago address and telephone number.

“Do you remember him?” Pikko asked. “This man, Larry Hubbard?”

“No why?”

“He was here last week on the Mecca Viking Amazon. I thought you spoke with him?” Hormidas shook his head.

“Larry gave me this wallet.” Pikko slapped the wallet a few times against his thigh, displaying its hardiness. “Said he did not need it. Told me I should come to Chicago to buy a car. I told him Luci and me would come and stay in Chicago and we’d eat pizza and drink lemonade with him.”

“Great, Pikko. That’s great.” Pikko paused a moment before retracting the card. Hormidas was determined to press him. “Is this about Tee-tum? Cause I had nothing to do with that. Is that what she’s angry about?”

“She’s angry with you for taking sacred plants from near the river for your garden.” Pikko flipped the wallet over in his hands again before slipping it into the back of his blue jeans.

Pikko said he wore blue jeans because after his time in America, he'd lost his born immunity to the jungle's ever-present stingers. "*And* she's angry about Tee-tum," he said.

Tee-tum had come to see Hormidas during his counseling hour. She had surprised Hormidas and Pikko, who'd both fallen asleep on Hormidas' wide palette. It was Hormidas' dedicated counseling period, but no one had come to see him in almost a month, so in the afternoons Hormidas and Pikko would play cards, or washers, or nap on Hormidas' palette.

Tee-tum was small, maybe nineteen, with long brown hair and thin, curious eyes. She told Hormidas through Pikko that she'd met a young man, not a Chip-po, and she wanted to make him fall in love with her. She asked Hormidas for his help.

Hormidas asked her if it was one of the men from the tour boats, but she just giggled. This concerned him a bit. He thought back to the parade of white, podgy, slightly balding men he'd seen at the Saturday programs.

Hormidas had tried to steer the conversation toward the Gospel of Christ, asking Tee-tum how she felt about herself in relation to Jesus' teachings, of which he tried to explain in elementary terms. The girl giggled at him, blinking in her odd little way. She asked him if he had any breath mints.

"I'm sorry. Breath mints?"

She said the man she'd fallen in love with had given her breath mints that made her throat go numb. When Hormidas said told her no, he had none, she simply stood up and walked into the jungle and hadn't been seen since. The Chip-pos added her to the Saturday program, a sacred rite for souls lost to the river.

“Should I be worried?” Hormidas asked. His mission was clearly a failure, but on top if it, now he was beginning to feel afraid.

Pikko leaned forward. “Listen, Hormidas, there’s no reason for you to be scared. This is only play. Her father, the Puma, would have set your balls on fire with his eyes, but she can’t do shit. At night, the shawoman plugs hair rollers into the electric generator. She has a poster of Michael Jackson in her hut. She showed me her ta-tas when we were eleven.” Pikko turned to leave. “No shit.”

“Hey Pikko,” Hormidas said to his translator’s lithe back and they ducked through the jungle. “You and Luci stay away from this Larry Oldrich from Chicago, okay?”

That night, Pikko didn’t come back for Hormidas. He would have liked to join them on that night. He sat in his clearing and prayed to God. He asked for Jesus for forgiveness. He did not want to be along in the jungle anymore. He didn’t want to be a missionary anymore, or even a minister. He wanted to go home and find a wife, and get married, and maybe open a store in Arizona nearby his parent’s place. Hormidas could hear the music thumping in the jungle beyond, and ghostly smoke twirled into the canopy. He strained to listen for American voices, a flat tone amidst the staccato, jumping sound of the Chip-pos.

Hormidas had been sitting in his garden for an hour, listening to the ceremony, when they appeared in his clearing. Pikko and Luci looked wet and frantic, and Pikkos’ blue tennis shoes were covered in dark fluid. Behind them, a large Chip-po in a bone skirt was carrying the shawoman over his shoulder. He laid her flat on the mat in Hormidas’s garden before backing up quickly out of the clearing.

Her brown face looked yellow, and her eyes were bulging with protruding veins. A black trickle slipped down the side of her pillow lips, which were pulled back in a terrible smile. She was murmuring and became agitated at the sight of Hormidas.

"What's wrong with her?" the pastor asked. He kneeled next to her and took her hand, which she brought violently to her lips and held there.

"She took the Ayahuasca," Luci said. "The *real* Ayahuasca this time."

The Ayahuasca is a long-standing Chip-po tradition. The shaman takes the drink as part of a ceremony to commune with the spirits and gods, to protect the tribe, and to exact revenge on enemies. The shaman's soul was said to take the form of a bird or puma and return when it had completed its mission. Hormidas had seen her do this a dozen times. She would dance and shimmy and lie down on a mat and roll around and then get up and dance some more. It was lovely, really.

"She drinks it every Saturday, doesn't she? What's happened?"

"No," Luci said softly. "She every Saturday she drinks only aguaje juice. Only juice, Mr. Hormidas." She pulled on her husband's shirt, nudging him.

"She drank the Ayahuasca tonight for the first time, Hormidas," Pikko said. "The Puma, her father, was a powerful man. She was terrified of him. She never wanted his kind of power."

"Then why tonight?"

The young Chip-po couple looked at Hormidas with patient, gentle eyes. "To protect us from you, Mr. Hormidas," Luci said.

Hormidas sensed a ripple in the bushes at the edge of the clearing. He was certain he saw the wet, slick back of a black animal pass between the shabby stalks.

“Did you see that?” Hormidas asked, but Luci and Pikko didn’t answer. They were looking up, their proud jaws dropped as if singing the same note. Hormidas followed their gaze, above the smoke from the bonfire to where the canopy parted just enough to expose a dappled silver hook of moon.

Chapter 14: Old Bee Lore

Simon had waited with Mutte and Bossman for Willa to show up. They'd managed goat cheese pizza, orange soda, and homemade vanilla ice cream. Earther families had come inquiring and offering their help. Marlene Payne had been pacing outside the office for the last half hour. Dane's son Mars and Willa's skinny friend Wren were sitting on a rock outside of Bossman's cabin.

While they waited for Willa, they played gin rummy and drank Simon's whiskey and wine, a welcome diversion from Mutte's hooch.

"Samson's riddle," Simon said. "Wasn't that what you were saying before Cass died?"

"Um-hum." Mutte laid down three aces, three tens, three sevens and discarded. "Gin," he said. He always did that. Held all his cards and never laid down until he could do it on the sneak when all you had was deadwood. "Out of the eater something to eat. Out of the strong, something sweet. That heathen wild boy didn't even know to look for bees in a lion."

"It's a rare find. Not unheard of. I figure they were blown in during the storm."

"Or perhaps God put them there so that Cass' death would remind us of the lesson of Samson. Rebuke Phillistines. Obey. Do not trust the untrustworthy," Mutte said, blandly. He was drunk. It knocked some of the conviction out of him.

"The old bee lore. Virgil picked it up. Florentitus repeated it. What was it… bring into this building a bullock you will find it full of bees?" Simon gathered the cards up and shuffled

them. “They used to think the queen, they called her a king, came from the brain and the worker bees came from the flesh. But, hell, that dried-out lion, upright and cemented in silt the way she was. She was a perfect home at the right time, the right size holes, the right volume, the right height from the ground, southern-facing. It was just Cass’ shit-luck.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that it’s *lore* for a reason? There is a message there, in Sampson. In what happened today on that hill. And the message is clear, God’s plan triumphs!” Mutte was only temporarily enlivened. He turned his cards over on the table and looked at Simon as if he was considering very carefully whether or not say any more. He cocked his head to the side—blood-shot eyes watering a little—and leaned in. A flash of confusion passed over his face momentarily, as if he’d lost the thread of the conversation. “Never mind,” he said, “I’m going to bed.” Mutte tottered off toward Bossman’s hat rack, took his hat, and patted the inside of the doorframe twice to confirm his departure.

After another hour of waiting, they went looking for Willa. Instead they found Tipper. Her thin face was clouded by one enormous exhale. She didn’t seem to see them coming. She was sitting on the metal steps of her trailer, knees together, the triangle of her legs finishing in cheap flip flops. There was a pile of cigarette butts at her feet.

“Have you seen Willa?” Bossman asked her, unkindly, Simon noted. “She’s not in her trailer.”

“No,” Tipper said, now blowing smoke at the ground.

“We need to find Willa, Tipper,” Simon said, gently as he could. “She didn’t show up at Boss’s for dinner. She knew everyone was expecting her.”

“Mutte said he was taking her to live with him? Did I hear that right?” She was still looking at the ground but now stirring the butts with rubber tip of her flip-flop like she was looking for something small among them.

“How would you know that if you haven’t seen her?” Simon asked, in a kind of gotcha-voice that he immediately regretted.

Tipper looked up at the two of them. She looked exhausted.

“Lucky guess.”

Simon mouthed, “Come see me,” to her before turning and following Bossman. He glanced backward, and she gave a limp nod in response.

They checked Cass’ RV again, searched in the under-storage, climbed up on the ladder and checked the roof. Simon couldn’t get over the fact that skinny Cass Walker owned one of the finest RV’s on the lot. Another data point in the mystery that was Cass and Willa Walker. How they ever afforded that high-quality RV—rounded leather kitchenette, inlaid lighting, separate bedroom in back—was anybody’s guess. But it seemed Willa Walker was nowhere in it. Things had been upended, her clothes, their fold-down storage. All those strange tribal artifacts she and father kept were strewn around.

She’d been upset, visibly shaken, when they told her about her dad but Simon reasoned she was a mature thirteen, all the hocus-pocus aside. She’d seen a lot in her young life and she’d asked to be left alone. He thought it was the right thing to do. What did Simon know about kids?

“The Peacekeepers do have a child-services unit,” Simon said to Bossman as they crossed the campground back to his office to engage the kids in the search.

“No one, not even you, Simon, really wants that.” Bossman looked at him, impossible to read. “You know that, right?”

“No, you’re right.” It was just reflex, perhaps. The innate desire to appeal to some kind of authority.

“I’m going to check out by the hives.”

Simon had to send for two Earther kids to climb the cliff and help him collect the wild swarm from the carcass of the mountain lion. He did so with a muted excitement incommensurate with the tragedy that precipitated it. It was a full hive, maybe thirty thousand. Wild honeybees. Not his lost hive. They were far too corpulent and furry but honeybees all the same. *Apis Melifera,* Simon could hardly believe it, alive and well in the Black Hills.

He’d used a net to scoop bees out of the decaying lion, a simple enough task, considering she was in a fair state of decomposition. Her eyes, however, were not blue like Cass had thought. They were empty-silt filled sockets All her soft tissue and fluids were long gone, absorbed by an ecosystem that was an island unto itself: death. The maggots had all flown away, transfigured, rewarded for their putrid opus with the gift of flight.

The mountain lion had not really been white but nut-brown. Her face and hide were coated, mummified by the silt blown in by the howlers. And a lot of silt too, unprotected as that ledge was on the south side of the canyon, southern-facing but open to the east. Simon thought a hoodoo, somewhere a hundred miles away in The Badlands, was likely missing its top.

The climb up to the ridge had taken the boys and Dane—a reluctant participant but the only one left who could be of any help—five times as long as it’d taken Cass, partly because both of the

shock of the event but mostly because of the awkwardness of climbing in bee suits. But there was no leaving without the bees. Everyone had agreed.

While Simon had heard of wild swarms taking up residence in the carcasses of animals, and he was familiar with Sampson's riddle, he'd never personally seen it in his lifetime, nor had he heard his father or grandfather tell of it.

Simon scooped into the carcass of the lion several times, and each time the remainder of the swarm stayed put inside the rigid white shanks, tucked inside the dusty rib bones, combs already constructed in an elegant weave, fused to the inside of the hide in places with wax and propolis. This hive had been foraging. They were preparing to thrive. The bees had forgotten all of their previous fury and were in protection mode, matted down on top of the queen. Dane stood some distance away, looking nervous and too big for the bee suit Simon had lent him.

After several tries, Simon scooped a netful that was finally followed by the mass, a near complete mountain lion-exodus, and he knew he had her: the queen. It took him two hours to move them from the net into the transport hive he'd brought with him and he and Dane another hour to successfully lower it down to Bossman and Mutte down. They placed Cass in an old blue rain tarp and put him in the back of the truck with the bees. The mountain lion they'd left in the canyon. They travelled back the long way, avoiding the Peacekeepers.

Willa was waiting for him out by the bees in the dusk. She was a curious shape rising from the deep shadow outside the pre-fabricated shed where Simon kept his supplies. Her small shoulders hunched, she lifted herself out of his camping chair when she saw him coming.

"Are you alone?" she asked.

“Does anyone know where you are?”

“You do. I’m not going to live with Mutte. You’ll see.”

“Okay,” Simon said. “We can talk about that.” He had no idea what to tell her. There didn’t seem to be much choice. Marlene Payne had offered to take her in, as had Wren’s mother Belinda. But he didn’t feel it wise to mention that just now. The shock of the day, dark shadows and sadness, still clung to her face.

The bees were quiet, docile in the dark. He glanced over at the bee boxes, a familiar configuration of cubes arranged in the grass. Most were empty. He had two struggling hives and the one he’d just caught. The wild hive he left to recover from the ordeal in the transport box. It looked like any other box in the spreading blue of the night. It gave him comfort to think of them there buzzing, humming, warming their brood.

“What are you doing out here?”

“Waiting for you.” Willa was wearing ill-fitting salmon-colored sweatpants and a denim jacket. She had her hands tucked under her armpits in a kind of protective stance.

“I sincerely hope you haven’t been messing with these bees.”

Simon had long suspected his bees knew him by sight. Some colonies were better at this than others. Honeybees could, after all, recognize and retain complex visual patterns—why not a face?

Last week, when Willa came out to the apiary, the bees swarmed but never touched her. They danced around her. Willa had helped him check the supers, and in one instance, the bees became especially agitated. When he’d pried off the lid to the super, they all exited the hive. The

field bees, the young field bees, even the drones. Simon moved quickly to shield Willa but stepped back when he saw them take a single, unified formation right in front of her. She never got stung. They undulated in and out, signaling the way the field bees do when they come back to the hive. Both the drones and the queen had exited the hive, so Simon had assumed they were mating. But it was highly unusual for the rest of the bees to leave the hive in such case.

And those bees worked especially hard that day. Most making as many as ten trips to the fruit trees adjacent to Boss's land, flying back to the hive slowly, weighted down by their swollen nectar-stomachs. She'd helped him feed the bees with cotton balls. Simon had been experimenting with sugar water laced with RNAi molecules. It was an attempt to disable the mite RNA, to kill them without harming the bees.

So far, it hadn't worked, at least not consistently. It was an old method, something that had sufficed for a time but the mites had quickly evolved around it; he thought it was worth trying again. Willa held the cotton squabs and watched intently as the infected bees extended their proboscis into the soft cotton and drank.

"Why do you put the queen in a little box like that?" she'd asked.

He'd introduced a new queen into a relatively healthy hive whose queen had recently died. He'd placed her in small box made of sugar-resin, a kind of edible container. It took the bees over a week to chew their way to her.

"They have to get used to her. Otherwise, they'll kill her. They have to work to get to at her before they can appreciate her. Such is the way with the birds and the bees." He smiled at Willa but she was oblivious, face set in a little frown.

"And why is she different from the rest?"

“The queens are bigger, anyway. But she’s a different species. We’re going to combine two species here. Several, if you count the fact that many of these bees are descendants of different hives, Konas, Buckfast, Minnesotas. No one lineage has all the good stuff. Some have good vision, some are good at foraging, some speed. Some are resistant to weather, others pesticides. Some, like the Buckfasts, are good at resisting the mite but can’t do some of the other stuff as well. And so it goes. No such thing as perfection.”

“Why don’t you just marry the Buckfasts to the ones that are good at the other things? Why not do that?”

“Because it doesn’t work that way. I mean, it *can* work. It has. But it doesn’t always catch the best traits of both species. You can get a lot of other stuff, too, stuff you weren’t expecting. It would be like smashing two beautiful pieces of pottery together and trying to make something better from the result.”

Now, the sun had long dropped below the flat prairie to the west, spilling the last of its molten gold along the hills. Simon held his field light up and examined her. Willa’s shiny cat eyes were set deep and had a curious glint in them. She looked amused, or perhaps just self-conscious, a weird little smile twitched at the corners of her mouth. Her long red hair looked dirty; it clumped in twiggy strands. Had she been out here with the bees the whole time? Stuck in Simon’s mind was what Cass had said out in the canyon, about someone named Hormidas.

“Willa, who was Hormidas?”

“He was my teacher.”

“What kind of teacher?”

“A teacher. A spiritual guide. He found me even before I was born. When I was still in my mama’s belly. He was guided to us by a spirit. He knew Mutte. He was the one who told us to come and find him after he died.”

This got Simon’s attention. “He knew Brother Mutte?”

“Yes. In Florida. He had lived with him back when the Earthers lived in the canal city. Mutte found me. His bees brought him to me. *Tu-ha* brought him to me. He told my parents about me, and after I was born he watched over me. He became my teacher. He protected us.” Simon thought about the last thing that Cass had said to him, *Hormidas was wrong. Tell her.*

“Your dad liked him? Were they friends?”

“Of course. He took care of us.”

“Did your mom like him?”

“I don’t remember. He wasn’t around as much when she was alive. He would come out to our cabin in the RV to bring us food and check on us. He came to live with us after my mom died. He gave us a nanny goat. And now he’s dead. I feel more lonely for him than I do for my mom or my dad. They’re all together, watching me, I can feel them.”

“I don’t imagine death to be lonely. Just longer.” He tried to get her to smile.

“It’s not the same kind of lonely.”

“It’s not? Tell me what it is then.”

“Hormidas lived in the Amazon. He was a missionary there. And he told me that it rains, and rains, and rains. And everything is always wet. And they worship gods in the river. And gods in the rain. But they also have gods, spirits, that take different forms. Animals, insects. Sometimes even people.”

“People worship all kinds of things. We’ve had sacred cows, and trees, stones, wind, water, mountains, churches. We’ve been putting our faith in things for a very long time.”

“What do you put your faith in?” she asked. The smile was gone now. But it was clear she was anxious. There was an agitation just below the surface, tension in the way she kept tugging on her earlobes or bending over, her forearms tucked into her belly. She’d taken a seat again in his camping chair.

“I put my faith in not thinking too much about faith. Willa, how did Hormidas die?”

“First tell me what you put your faith in.”

“And then you will tell me?”

“Yes, I will tell you.”

“I put my faith in myself, I guess. And in science. Sooner than later, we’ll have to right this earth and start anew. Maybe we’ll have to leave the earth altogether someday if we want to survive. It’s looking more and more that way. It’ll be science that raises up whoever is left into space. There are still scientists out there, people working away on the big problems. Scientists, not governments, across countries, working together, working on this mess we’re in. There must be.” He had no evidence of this. He used to subscribe to all sorts of magazines, science journals and such. There were no journals, but there were still scientists. There was still hope. There was no telling what the world was up. “I’ll put my faith in them. We’ve come too far to slip into the dark ages.”

“What are the dark ages?”

“A period of time when humans forgot all we’d learned and had to start over.”

“Like after the ancient flood that cleansed the earth?”

“Probably, if that really happened.”

She shook her head as if she wanted to deflect his doubt. He’d noticed that the kid didn’t seem to appreciate anything that contradicted what she believed to be her knowledge.

“The have-towns will still be around, won’t they?”

“Have-towns are about hiding. They’re about clinging to what’s totally defunct. Everyone knows they’re eventually going to bust. Solutions that are designed for only a chosen few won’t last. Can’t last. But forget them. We’re talking about you. You should know superstition never got anyone anywhere.”

Simon crossed over to the outbuilding for which he had his own small generator. Mutte and Bossman had hoarded more propane than Simon thought possible. Willa followed him inside. The outbuilding smelled of honey and beeswax, although Simon had seen neither in some time. Honey harvest would be at the end of summer, if these bees could make it until then. He hung the hive tools up alongside the tiny paint brushes kept in cups secured along the corkboard tool wall. The children, Willa among them, had been moving pollen by hand all spring, alongside Simon’s struggling bees. It was an agonizing task that Simon despised but agreed to oversee. It gave him a chance to watch the bees forage. “So now tell me how he died.”

“Hormidas taught me to see things. You just don’t understand the spiritual world. I could help you to, you know?” She paused, looked down for a moment. “Can I please live with you?” Simon studied her. She looked tired, exhausted really. Veins floated just below the surface of her pale skin.

“I’m not sure, Willa. Mutte has plans.”

Willa sat down on the floor of the outbuilding near the little drain in the center of the floor. She crossed her legs and slumped forward. “Did you know there’s a type of bee, in the Amazon, that’s born from the spirit of person? Sometimes an animal.”

“Willa, you’ve had a long day. You’ve lost your dad. You’re probably starving. Let’s get out of here and go get you something to eat.”

“No. I have to tell you this.”

Simon took off his coat and sat down on the floor across from her. “Shoot.”

“The spirits came from an ancient place. From the beginning of time, a place far, far away where time and people began. They had been wicked and so were punished by the Great Flood.” She looked at him, anticipating his dissent. When she saw he’d intended to stay silent, she continued. “And afterward there were two groups of people, two sets of cities.”

“Willa, let me stop you there just a second. Are you talking about the Bible? Have you read the Bible?”

“No, but I know all about it from Hormidas. And I’ve seen what Mutte does with the Bible. I know all the parts of the Bible Mutte wants me to say when I go with him places. My dad gave me a paper with them written out and told me to memorize them. And I know that Mutte is evil.”

“Mutte isn’t evil, Willa. He’s a man, a person. He’s like everyone else. He kept a lot of people alive through a very dark time. He may not be a good man, but there’s no such thing as evil.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I know myself.”

"In the Amazon there *is* evil. And I've *seen* evil. I have. And there are lots of evil spirits let loose into the world that even that flood couldn't clear. They're here, too, but there, in the Amazon, people didn't hide from them, or pretend they didn't exist. And they would take the form of animals and people, and then, when those people died, they became bees."

"Bees?"

"Not just any bees. You'll know these bees when you see them. Different. Acting more like a single person than thousands of bees. Just like that hive that killed my dad."

"Willa, no."

"Willa, yes! And you brought that spirit, the one that killed my father back into this campground and put it in a box. And you're going to feed it sugar water from cotton balls and let it make honey. Oh, and it will live! It'll do anything you ask it to. Until you eat its wicked honey. And more and more spirit bees will come." She was shaking, her skin exploded in a flush constellation of blotches.

"Willa, calm down." Simon stood up, his knees cracking and the weight of the day and the sadness that seemed to accompany so many of his days now, this one nothing special. He crossed over to his old library on the metals shelves above the sink and used a retractable claw to pull down a book called, *The Truth About Bees.* It was published in 1988 by the Scientific American Library. It belonged to his great grandfather. It was a marvel, a relic. It did not, anywhere in its three hundred pages, mention colony collapse disorder. In 1988 there was no real concern around the honeybee, but there was wonder, adulation, and fascination, or at least the memory of those things when Simon, just a boy, handled this book for the first time. He handled

it carefully now, brought it over and sat down again, wincing back into his cross-legged position on the floor. Willa was rocking back and forth.

"For starters, all bees act like a single creature and not thirty, forty thousand individual ones. They reproduce together. They feed one another. They move as one." The old book made a dangerous crack when he opened it along its spine. "Do you see this here?" He showed her a cave painting of stiff legged Egyptians with swimmer's builds making honey in neat stacking baskets. He showed her a young bull, a hive sprouting from its wasted corpse. "This is how long people have been living with bees. These ideas about bee spirits already came and went, Willa. Passed on as stories, probably all over the world. No doubt they were able to make it to the Amazon jungle. What you're describing is a myth. An old myth. Something passed from person to person, group to group, town to town, and so on? See." He showed her the illustration of Samson's Riddle, an image of Samson kneeling next to the lion carcass filled with bees, his hands deep in the bees and the honey pouring from the lion's belly. Willa lingered on this for a bit.

She looked up at him suddenly with a look that said she thought he was an ignoramus extraordinaire of the first order. "This doesn't prove the myth isn't true. It only proves it's *old*. And didn't I tell you it was old? This only makes it more true."

Simon sighed and offered her a hand to help her up from the floor. "We've got to get you some dinner."

"I can't go."

"I guess I could bring something out here. But first I need to let someone know where you are."

At this, Willa shook her head at him. She walked towards the door as if she intended to block it. “No, no. You can’t.”

“Why don’t I go and get you something to eat, and me? I’m starving. Then we can eat here and you can help me check on the new hive.”

“No.”

“You don’t really have a choice, I’m afraid. I’m asserting myself as the adult here.” Simon walked over to the door and attempted to cross her.

“I have to tell you,” she blurted out. “I killed your bees.”

He didn’t waste a moment interrogating her. She started sobbing, a dam of sadness bursting forth. He grabbed the light and the hive tool off the wall. He pushed past her, perhaps harder then he’d meant to. He’d only gotten five steps from the door when Willa said, almost in a whisper but loud enough for him to hear, “And to answer your question, *I* killed Hormidas. And I think I may have killed Mutte, too.”

Chapter 14: Swamped

Simon deposited Willa at his Mesa and made his way to Mutte's. The concern he'd felt for the bees had quickly gave way to serious worry for that foolish, brainwashed girl. A quick confirmation told him that while not all the wild bees in the transport box were gone, at least half were missing. Including the queen. Willa said she'd brought that old Amazonian basket, which Simon never recognized as a skep, as small and oddly shaped as it was, and collected his bees in it. She said Hormidas had taught her how. This guy was really beginning to come into focus as one twisted bugger. Simon had checked her for stings. Not a one. He'd asked her where the basket was. She said it was at Mutte's cabin.

Mutte lived in the second largest cabin on Bossman's 10-Acre Campsites. It was painted every year by the Earthers in a color called "red cedar." It looked more like red clay than cedar. And Mutte's was the only cabin with any elevation. It sat on a little hill at the north side of the campground. Mutte had his own picnic table in the front and a small barbecue grill next to it. Everything was neat and tidy. There was a swing on his porch and it was swaying gently in the wind. There was a single light on in the kitchen. Mutte was also the only one who had the luxury of leaving a light on. He had a five-hundred-gallon propane tank all to himself, buried on the back of his property.

Simon made his way over with his flashlight. The stars had been clouded out for some time under the particle sky; everything was black. Once on the porch, he could see into Mutte's living room. His glasses rested on a small side table. It seemed he'd poured himself a glass of his acid-producing hooch when he'd gotten home from their card game and never quite made his

way through it. Simon banged on Mutte's door. He stood for some time contemplating the cabin and tried to imagine Mutte willingly sharing this space with an unknown quantity. A child. What could he possibly want with this kid who seemed so intent on hating him?

She'd told him that she didn't kill Mutte, directly, but had left the bees to do so. Something about a *bugaloo*. The more he talked to her, the more concerned his was for her mental state. Her carrying the bees across the campground in that old skep was a fool's endeavor. She's lucky she didn't get stung to death. She probably took at least a few stings. Simon would be surprised if any of those precious, wild bees had survived.

He made his way around to the back of Mutte's cabin, overgrown in saltgrass. Gone now was the buffalo wheat grass and the blue grama that once carelessly covered the area. Not even those tough perennial grasses could withstand a lack of pollinators, coupled with the wind and dust from Howlers going back ten years now. But snakes were still a problem, the prairie rattler and the blue racer, harmless but quick, were still at home here at the base of the Hills. Simon stomped as he walked to alert them of his presence.

The cabin, being a kind of four-square plan, was cut up the middle by a long hallway. There was a window at the end of the hallway and Simon could see from a distance that it was open. Buzzing in and around it were a few dozen bees. Fat and hairy. He traipsed through the high grass, stood on his toes, and put his head inside. The bees interrogated him for a moment and then quickly let him alone. He could see the skep lying on the floor of the hallway, as if Willa had just haphazardly pushed it through the open window and retreated. The skep was only about eighteen inches from top to bottom and was woven with a slick, dark wood. It was rounder than a typical skep, strange, like nothing Simon had ever seen before.

“Francis?” Simon called into the cabin. No response. He walked back around to the back door and knocked again. The door was slightly ajar and he pushed it open and let himself in. Walking through the house, he was surprised by its simple domesticity. The kitchen towels were folded neatly. There were a few bees buzzing around his kitchen sink, taking quick dives at the droplets of water. Who knows how long they’d been without a food source or water in that windstorm? Simon steadied himself against the anger he felt toward Willa. Those bees had to be thirsty and hungry. He reminded himself that her carelessness was a result of her superstition, which wasn’t her fault. If she’d managed one lucky scoop into the transport box, he figured she could’ve hooked the queen and caught a good chunk of the hive in that squat little basket. Mutte had photos of his relatives on the wall in the hallway, an old woman and man sitting on a tractor in a brimming field of blonde wheat, another of Francis and a child standing atop top of one of the buildings back in St. Petersburg. Simon recognized the roof-top garden, his bee-boxes in the background.

Down the hallway, bathroom, nothing. Bedroom number one, nothing. Bedroom number two, Mutte. He was naked, as if he’d sat on the edge of the bed and fell backward, pants around his ankles. No honeybees in sight. But Mutte was most certainly dead. There was blood all over his bedspread, a design made to look like the ocean, sand and waves and shells. His throat had been cut.

Simon thought it strange, the space that stretches out in front of a person after something collapses, even something minor like a soufflé or more major like a marriage. In that space, one forgets from time to time that the collapse took place. Simon in the past might have blinked in disbelief at the soufflé or still considered his wife’s preference every time he chose a tie. In this

moment, Simon reasoned that the sound and sane thing to do would be to call the police. He considered this for a moment until he remembered the collapse. No more police. The Sioux Nation had their own police force but no one out there concerned themselves with the crimes of the floaters, no one was going to come and investigate Mutte's death. The Peacekeepers only interceded in lawlessness that meandered into the way of the Have-towns, even though their official purpose was purported to be the protection of all in the contiguous lower forty-eight. No, Simon understood that in Bossman's 10-Acre Campsite, law and order was a private matter. And the time that Simon spent looking down at Mutte's body might not have been a full minute but it felt like an eternity. There was a kind of suspension attached to the moment, a period when Simon contemplated what his life had, up until that point, measured up to and what he had to show for it. And in asking himself what he had to show for his life, he wondered exactly how should his life be measured? He certainly couldn't claim his family as the product of his life. Their bond had all but destroyed by the collapse and perhaps, if he was honest, by his own relentless pursuit of an extinct insect. It wasn't money. He had long given up his attachment to money, as difficult as it was to find anything to buy. Was it the bees? Was that what his legacy was to be? If so, he'd done little if anything to rescue them from extinction. It was just so hard for him to let go of the idea that something that had been evolving longer than humans had couldn't adapt. Honeybees had learned, after all, a language. One that satisfies all the criteria imposed for true language, more so than language observed in other primates. And they'd evolved into the most difficult of circumstances, executing an arduous task, and doing so in perfect synthesis. And evolving in such a manner rendered honeybees incredibly resourceful. Other animals, like humans, had evolved into the kind of mindless comfort that left them dim-

witted, and yet, it was the honeybees that must depart the planet? It was such a travesty, he just couldn't let it go. And what was left for him now, two scraggly hives and an old RV full of memories. And so standing there, observing Mutte's lifeless body, Simon made up his mind.

It didn't look like what he imagined it would. Simon moved closer, just a bit, to inspect him. Mutte's ice blue eyes were still open, pristine, still considering. Simon said a little prayer for him. Honestly, Mutte was nothing if he wasn't sincere, it seemed, about his vision of the afterlife. There was so much blood. He'd drained out into his neat little queen-sized bed, made that morning with such precision. The sad ocean comforter was polluted with pints and pints of what Simon imagined to be some of the hottest blood ever to run through a human being. It wasn't a neat slice, either. It wasn't one of those perverse little throat smiles like he'd seen in old digital movies, back before the internet fell away. It was a jagged upwards gash that gave the impression that the knife really had to struggle through the flesh. The wound sagged downward, his gouged windpipe was visible, as was a mess of pink flesh. Simon couldn't help but wonder if Mutte had gotten the salvation he'd predicted. Was it really a new heaven and a new earth? Simon suspected the Earthers wouldn't harm a child but he couldn't be fully confident. They would certainly put an adult to death for this, shoot him without a second thought. And right now, standing as his was in Mutte's cabin, Simon would be the Earther's best suspect.

He refused the obvious question. It couldn't have been Willa. She was just a child. But they would accuse her. They would most certainly look at her, especially if Mutte had told anyone else of his plan to bring Willa to live with him.

He went back down the hall to the skep. Its lid had been knocked off in the fall but the small hive still matted down upon their queen in protective mode. Simon noticed then the cross,

above the window. It was hard to deny that Mutte was a believer, despite the way his belief had become twisted up with his desire to save his people during what he believed to be the final cleansing of the Earth. Poor Francis.

"Okay then," Simon said, "you're coming with me." He'd already made up his mind. He was going to pack up his bees and supplies and hitch them to the Mesa and leave.

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Willa waited for Simon in his Mesa. It was a small RV, nothing like Hormidas' Tuscany Classic Coachman. It smelled of mildew and socks. Books and clothes were strewn all over. Old spreadsheets lay out on the kitchen table, notes from ten and fifteen years ago when Simon still had two hundred healthy hives. He kept a record of every failure, every queen he'd ever purchased, every breeding method he'd tried. Willa read the notes he'd scribbled in the margins of his spreadsheet with interest. Hormidas had taught her to read and she could read better than most of the other kids in the campground. One note, made eleven years ago, read *H.L. Linden. Sioux Falls. Rotten, fucking corn syrup. Killed three hives*. *Will kick his ass if I ever find him.* It made Willa laugh, despite her exhaustion, despite the long day, despite the fear she felt now about what the *bugaloo* had done to Mutte.

Tu-ha had told her of Mutte's death, and Willa knew that Simon would find him and perhaps he would take her away if she could persuade him. Maybe he would want to take the Tuscany Classic Coachman? It was big enough for the two of them and smelled better than Simon's Mesa. She would suggest that they travel to Myakka State Park and find the old ranger's cabin. The thought of the swamp music and the rain, the universes existing in the soil, made her feel safe. She had held her hand out for Hormidas several times that day and did so now in Simon's Mesa, but this time, Hormidas didn't come. She wondered if she could only summon him in the Tuscany Classic Coachman, which after all, had belonged to him and was filled with all of his things, his treasures, from the Amazon.

She saw the filament less and less now. The connections between people, the borrowing and sharing of mind, spirit, and information taking place all around her, all the time. It was such

a beautiful thing to behold and defied all imagining. It was tragic to live beyond the only other person with whom she shared a vision.

To be told all people are connected is one thing. Mutte said that kind of stuff all the time, but to see it, to be able to share it with someone else, well that was something else all together. To see the filament was to know the shimmering effervescent transaction of life and to rest in the knowledge that she was part of it. But now the filament was reduced to shadows and vapors caught occasionally in the corner of her eye. It evaporated under the blunt, oblique scrutiny of her human senses. She could make it out occasionally only around people she loved and trusted, like Wren or Simon. But it used to be that she could see it around everyone, snaky soft white light, like a silken spider's web reaching from the belly or the mind of one person and slipping into the body of another. And on and on it went.

Champion, her dog, wouldn't come inside Simon's Mesa. She'd given up trying to coax him. She saw him less and less now, too. But he'd been with her today, by her side, when she captured the *bugaloo* and took it to Mutte's.

Champion had whimpered when she set the wicker skep down on the ground at Simon's apiary and opened the lid. She had brought out Simon's hive tools, his net and headgear. But she didn't need it. The *bugaloo* had remembered the basket, just like Tu-ha said it would. All Willa had to do was open the lid and lay the basket sideways next to the transport box. She used the hive tool to open the transport box and before she could scoop into the hive with the net, they just flew in. They didn't all come in, but she knew she had the queen by the way they bedded down inside the basket, so she put the lid on the skep and set off for Mutte's, Champion following behind her, slowly. He was so old now that he had trouble keeping up.

Simon the beekeeper had a honeybee wall clock. It's legs and wings and antenna symmetrical in the center; it was dissected into little quadrants, depending on the time of day, by the minute and the hour hand. The clock said it was ten-thirty at night. Willa had no use for time, and as she'd slept earlier in the day when she'd brought the world to still, she figured she might have slept a whole night's worth, or more. Either way, she wasn't tired now.

A moment later, the door to Simon's Mesa was assaulted by a frantic pounding. The coffee cup on his pull-down kitchenette did a side-ways jump step and slopped out onto some of his old notes. Willa couldn't see the visitor from her vantage point at the window. She thought about hiding, being silent, but the pounding continued.

"Simon!" A woman's voice. A screech. Something familiar. Tipper. She'd wanted to give her vanilla wafers and orange soda. She'd wanted to keep her from the *bugaloo*.
Willa walked carefully over to the door as to not make any sound and slipped the curtain to the side, peeking out, and there, right against the glass, just a few inches from her was Tipper's round, exhausted face.

Tipper had deep charcoal grooves under her eyes and a few pores were stretched-out with visible grime. Even so, Willa thought she was pretty. She looked like a pretty woman made up as a ghoul for Halloween. She blew a long, steady stream of smoke into the small glass square in Simon's door. It ricocheted back into her mouse-brown curls and set them steaming. She was flaring her nostrils, considering Willa.

"Yes?" Willa asked. The glass was thin enough for the two of them to converse through and Simon had said, absolutely, under no circumstances, should Willa open the door.

"May I come in?"

“Simon said I wasn’t to open the door.”

“He’s not here?”

“No. He’s gone. He’ll be right back. You can wait for him outside if you want.”

Tipper just raised her eyebrows and dropped her chin an inch or two. She steadily lowered an open palm and gestured toward the doorknob. Willa didn’t really want to be alone. She opened the door slowly.

“Hi,” Tipper said, as if they were old pals and she was just dropping by for a visit, “Whatcha doing?” Tipper was on her toes, craning around Willa, looking inside the trailer as best she could. She was smiling but the smile was forced, tense, a stark line across her usually expressive face. She made Willa think of a doll that had been left outside for weeks, like the kind Cass would find for her in the dumpster outside the Venice Have-town back in Florida. They were weathered but still pretty. Not always ruined, sometimes better.

“I’m not doing anything.” Simon had been so angry at her for taking his bees, such a quiet bubbly kind of anger, the smell or iron and sulfur, anger on the breath. He’d said “absolutely, categorically, under-no-circumstances” do not to let anyone in. And she’d caused so much trouble for him already, and after he’d been so nice to her telling her about his sons and all. Nicer than anyone had been since Hormidas. Simon had been nice to her dad, too, she’d noticed. Always speaking to him with respect when Mutte and the other Earthers treated him like he wasn’t a person. She wasn’t going to let Simon down again.

“Can I come in?”

“Sorry, Simon said no.”

“Where is he?”

"I don't know."

"With his bees?" She was holding something behind her back. She looked tired like she'd been up for days. From every pore of her seeped the funk of cigarettes. She was tapping her foot, shimmying her hips a little, shifting her weight back and forth, which set what little meat she had on her into motion.

"No, maybe. I don't know. But I have to close the door now because he said not to open it." Willa spoke with more force than she'd intended and it made her feel immediately embarrassed.

"Sorry," Tipper said, reaching forward and pushing the door open firmly, not violently, moving Willa out of they way. Tipper's small size was deceptive. She was strong, and as she passed, Willa picked up her scent, the one deep underneath all those cigarettes. It was the feral reek of a fox. Yes, most definitely a fox spirit.

She came into the trailer and immediately looked around. She was carrying what looked to be scarves tied together, but with closer inspection Willa saw that this was, in fact, a bag of some sort. It looked like it weighed at least twenty pounds. She swung it around her as she made a small, appraising circle of Simon's trailer.

"Hmm. Never been in here before. Can see why."

"Will you please tell Simon you made me let you in."

"You bet."

She sat at one end of the kitchenette and dropped her bag down in the center of the table. The drawstring strained a bit and out popped an old can of hairspray and blue scarf with ethereal little black-and-blue butterflies.

“So, you’re a prophet?” she asked, matter-of-fact. Willa could see she was serious. The smile was gone from her face.

“No. I’m a healer.”

“A healer, huh? That might come in useful. But you can’t tell the future?”

Willa wasn’t sure how to answer this. “Not really. I have ways to think about the future.”

Tipper patted the bench seat next to her but Willa took a seat across from her.

“What do you see for me?” she asked.

Tipper was a fox spirit. But there was something else. She was swamped. That was what Hormidas said about people who couldn’t see above the rim of their sadness. Tipper, despite her attempt to conceal it, lived in the mother of all archetypal swamps, canopied under a ceiling of vegetation, knee deep in millennia of fossilized bugs and plants, swimming in silt. And Willa noticed her irises slid right when she told a lie. And she lied a lot. “I see peace in your future,” Willa said.

“Huh?” Tipper eyed her suspiciously. “That’ll be a first.”

The two sat in silence for only a few minutes before Simon came through the door.

Chapter 15: No Moon

It was dark, too dark. No moon. The sky was filled with sediment. They'd agreed on the Tuscany Motor Coach. Only because it was filled with gas, and the Mesa would need to be filled up at one of the pumps Bossman kept on property, and because it was by far the nicest. Simon had stacked the two remaining hives, along with the transport box in which he'd restored the wild hive, onto the back of his single axel utility trailer. They went in without too much trouble, so he assumed he'd captured the queen. He didn't have time to check. He didn't have time for a bee suit. He hadn't even rolled down his sleeves.

He'd tossed Willa's wicker basket up on the top of the hives, not even bothering to tie it down. He packed his hive tools, his books, what corn syrup and sugar water he'd managed to accumulate, and put those on the trailer, too. He had two suitcases of clothes and Tipper and Willa had helped him pack all his papers, books, and photos.

He was sorry to leave The Mesa. He'd travelled the country many good years, following what was left of the honey flow, in the Mesa with one of his sons, the one who went on to die alone from the prolonged effects of drug use and starvation in the forest of what was once Oregon.

He didn't have to do much to undock the Tuscany Motor Coach. Cass Walker seemed as though he kept things tight, ready to fly at a moment's notice. And, Simon had to admit, it was a really nice rig. The thing looked like it had been kept in a garage most of its days. And the manual, pristine as the day The Tuscany was purchased fourteen years ago, was tucked neatly away in the glove compartment.

Willa had asked him the moment he came through the door of the Mesa, as if she'd read his mind. "Can we take our RV? My dad said it costs a lot of gas, but it's big enough for the both of us."

Tipper was sitting at the kitchenette at the edge of the bench, poised and ready to flee She looked terrible. She looked scared. She opened her mouth when he came in as if preparing to sing, or yell. She scanned his face for a signal. She looked at him as if she was wondering whether or not she needed to spring up and disappear into the night.

"Mutte's dead," he announced. "We got to go."

"I'm ready," Tipper said.

He was relieved but a bit surprised. He'd already made up his mind that he was going and try and convince Tipper to go with them. But here she was, anticipating him, looking scared. He thought of the gaping upward slash in Mutte's cut throat. It hadn't occurred to him before that whoever killed Mutte had been on the bed, standing or kneeling behind him. There had been so much blood. He looked Tipper over and found her to be completely disheveled, but decidedly blood-free.

"Aren't you going to ask how he died?" he asked.

"No."

"You aren't curious?"

"No."

Willa had been standing in the kitchen, waiting for his answer about the Tuscany Classic Coachman.

"Do you know if you've got any gas?"

“My dad always kept it filled with gas.”

“Help me pack up my things,” Simon said, finally. “I’m going to go and hitch the trailer to Will’s RV. Willa, do you know where your dad keeps the keys?”

It wasn’t until they pulled out the of parking pad, where Cass had so haphazardly parked their RV, that Simon saw the lights blazing in Mutte’s cabin. It was now 3:15a.m. Someone had found Mutte’s corpse, likely Dane and the other men. Simon hadn’t turned a single light on when he was in that cabin but relied on the single kitchen light and his flashlight, but he was only partly sure they hadn’t seen him.

Bossman’s 10-Acre Campsites was really one dirt road around a single clearing with little dirt trails, like tributaries, jettisoning in every which direction to parking pads with hookups, campsites, cabins, and the open tent and sky area for the numerous leather-tramp Earthers who had only their shoes to carry them. Mutte’s cabin was at the northernmost point, but it was at some elevation. The road leading to the highway was south, but one had to make the loop to get to it. Simon took the loop the wrong way, heading southwest toward the exit. He kept the headlights off. But even so, in his rear-view mirror, after they’d made it only two hundred yards, he saw a small army of flashlights disperse from outside Mutte’s cabin. Two flashlights joined up with a much larger headlight and began moving at a considerable speed in his direction. An ATV. He heard the dogs. Not the simpleminded terriers and the pea-brained half-breed Chihuahuas, but the real dogs.

Simon had made it to the end of the loop and turned left onto the single road that led to the highway. Bossman had made sure that these ten acres remained a defendable position. It was

fortified on the west by geography, the Hills and Bossman's agreement with the Sioux. On the east was a high, barbed wire fence, rolled at the top with razor wire and patrolled at all times by the Earther's army of canines. To the north was Mutte's cabin and Bossman's lavish multi-level one. Behind them, out in the four open acres, was the old grain elevator, the seed silos, the water and propane and the storage building and what was once Simon's apiary. Another five hundred yards behind that, an even taller barbed wire fence. The single road, the only one that led to the highway, had been dug out in fifteen-foot trenches on either side. The very trenches that Joss and the other teenage boys had spent month digging out. The large gulches provided cover and allowed for the Earthers to blockade the road into the campground should the need arise.

Simon drove evenly, carefully. He didn't want to frighten Willa or damage their RV, and of course, he didn't want to risk the bees. Moving them was stress enough. If the Earthers caught up with them, he'd face the consequences. It occurred to him that he hadn't actually searched the cabin for evidence. The Earthers, probably led by Dane, certainly would have. They likely knew more about who killed Mutte than Simon did, even though Simon had a pretty strong suspicion that person was in the RV with him.

Tipper was in the cab next to him, leaning back in one of the leather captain's chairs. She had her shoes off and her knees pulled up to her chest. She was watching out the window, gazing into review mirror, her face, placid but interested, was reflected back in the huge elephant-ear of a side mirror. There she was, Simon noted, with a smile twitching at her sides of her thin lips. "What's so goddamned funny? I'm not even going to ask you the question I so desperately want the answer to. "

She looked straight at him, the small twitch now an open-mouthed grin. “Have you ever considered that when things get real, like now, is when you feel the most alive? Like there’s something really exhilarating about insecurity?”

“It’s called your brain signaling your adrenals and shooting you full of adrenaline. You feel alive because you are likely *running for your life, Tipper.”* He’d whispered the last bit as not to alarm Willa who, he suspected, might be only pretending to sleep on the small settee in behind them. She had to be as wired as he was.

“There’s a truck behind you.”

Sure enough, there was an old blue pick up behind them, its lights also off. Five hundred yards from the highway, while Simon passed the old cattle guard, slowly as not to disrupt the bees, the truck behind him slung itself into a series of tight maneuvers and rendered itself sideways between the gulches on either side of the road, effectively blocking the road behind it. The driver’s side door opened and Simon saw a figure emerge, obscured by shadow. Just then, Willa appeared at his side.

“*Tu-ha* said to stop and wait for her,” Willa said in his ear.

“Who said what? Wait for who? Who is that?”

Tipper said, “Stop. Stop, Simon. Whoever it is running toward us. They’re clearly not chasing us or they wouldn’t have pulled over.”

In a few seconds, Marlene Payne appeared at his open window. She had run a flat sprint from the truck to the RV and she wasn’t even the slightest bit winded. She tossed the keys to her truck into his lap. “I’ll take you somewhere safe,” she said. “They’re waiting for us in Khê Sapa.”

Chapter 16: Tu-ha and The *Bugaloo,* Part II

Deep in the Amazon. Many years ago.

It'd been two weeks since the shawoman collapsed outside of Hormidas' hut, and it would be two more before the boat with the rest of his mission would arrive to take Hormidas away. He'd been preparing for death. He'd seen into the future, with the help of his mother, in a dream in which she gave him a chance to be forgiven, which of course he took. By this time, he was accustomed to his mother visiting him in dreams. She would be pale figure on a park bench in a city, or appear next to him in a fast food restaurant, but most often, she'd rise from the Amazon River. She'd appear to be a tree at a distance but upon approach, Hormidas would see that it was her, his own mother, hag-ish and huge before him, shouting mainly mundanities about the weather or the Chip-pos, but sometimes warnings about the secret darkness he'd managed to keep sealed in his heart.

He'd developed a fever. After the near-death of the shawoman, Pikko and Luci didn't come back. Occasionally, someone would leave a small pail of food on a nail outside his hut. Some days, like today, he'd been too weak to rise and check for it. He no longer worried about the latrine but used the toilet whenever he needed to, out behind his hut. He'd fade in and out of sleep, sweating, the straw of his mat clinging to him like tiny razors on his feverish skin. He prayed some. He asked for forgiveness some. He asked to be returned to God, and if that wasn't his fate, he asked God to make him His. And he knew that the secret darkness in his heart would have to be surrendered. Even his mother had told him as much, in a dream. He begged for a sign, anything, to let him know what to do with his life if he were ever to make it out of the Amazon

jungle. Insects came through the window and zinged him with their piercing pitch, their sudden presence by his ear had the effect of a slap across the face. They would often wake him from dreams, for which he was grateful. He did not always dream of his mother. He had terrible dreams, too. There would be bodies of women, Chip-po women and children, strewn in pieces all around him. Spiders and snakes would drip from every corner of his hut. He would sweat and shake, unsure of what was real and what wasn't. Dreaming and awake, he heard voices in the jungle.

The night Pikko and Luci had brought Ni-Kai to his hut, they tended to her with medicine plants, a few that Hormidas had unwittingly picked and replanted in his own garden. Under the direction of Luci, who knew about healing plants, they ground the *tawari* bark and the *pusangade motelo*. They made a healing brew that they administered to Ni-Kai once they'd calmed her. Luci asked him to pray over the shawoman, and he did. But every time Ni-Kai—whose eyes would fix on him but remain clouded, distant—came up far enough out of her fog to recognize Hormidas, she would become enraged again, scratching and clawing at him and herself, roaring at him like a jungle cat, slicing at the air as if she were holding her prized blade. Later, when the shawoman was sleeping and Pikko, Luci, and Hormidas were sitting outside in his clearing, Hormidas asked them, "Why did you bring her here? To me?"

"Because we didn't want anyone to see her this way, taken over by spirits, without vision," Pikko said. "Her father had been a powerful man, and the tribe has not put their trust in her. Unlike her father, she gets sick when she takes the *ayahuasca*. She doesn't have visions. But she took it tonight, anyway, to ward off the demon she thinks you brought to the jungle. We

knew no one would look for her here. Here, she could recover in peace. She will keep her standing."

"And we knew you would pray over her," Luci said. "And we knew you would care for her. You are a great man." She placed her smooth hand on his. Hormidas tried not to look at Luci for fear he'd betray his swell of emotion. Even so, he knew her face too well, every line of the firm cheeks, the small hairs on her throat, the swell of her breast, the flat of her stomach. She was, he thought, the most beautiful woman in the Amazon, perhaps the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

And so Hormidas had prayed over Ni-Kai. He'd tried to abandon himself, gave himself over to God in her presence, and asked the Holy Spirit to heal them all.

That was over two weeks ago. It was shortly after Pikko carried Ni-Kai out into the jungle that Hormidas began to feel the fever coming on. In that time, he'd gone out to the edge of the tree line, trying to remember the plants Luci had selected.

He drank half of his water on that first day, hoping to flush the infection, expecting Pikko to return in the morning to take him for breakfast. When Pikko didn't return on the third day, he began to ration. On the fourth day, he tried to set out into the jungle to find his way on his own. His fever had abated somewhat, but he had a twisting ache in his gut. He dropped small stones he'd collected from the river along the path to help guide his way back to his hut should he get lost. He set out three times, each time becoming too ill or dizzy to carry on, kicking his stones along on his return, too exhausted to pick them up and place them back in his satchel.

On the sixth day, he'd found a sack of pressed corn patties and fish hanging from a nail outside his door, along with a pale of water. He set his whole head in the water and drank and

drank. It was three more days before he received food again, and by this time, his fever had abated and returned.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been asleep. The light in the Amazon is strange, diffused under the canopy. When he opened his eyes, he couldn't tell if it was dawn or dusk. He'd been dreaming of his mother. This time the two of them were on a roller coaster. An old wooden one, one she'd taken him on many years before during a summer vacation decades earlier. They were rattling along, up the steep incline, and Hormidas had asked her, as he did most every time she visited him in his feverish dreams, about death. He wanted assurance, above all else, that he'd done well and he didn't have to come back. "Mama, I do not want to come back here. Please tell me that I can stay with you. Please do not let them return me here to this Earth. Please let me stay."

"Oh, 'Midas," she said. In this dream she was smiling, talking excitedly. The gap between her teeth, which matched his own, made her all the more beautiful. "You get to choose! Aren't you the lucky one?" They flew down the hill of the roller coaster, both laughing, his mother's hair blowing in the wind. He'd looked away for only a moment, and when he looked back, she was gone. Her seatbelt flapped against the side of the coaster, a steady beat, like a drum, like a heart.

It was then that he opened his eyes then into the strangest light and saw what had been making the beating sound in his dream. A limb of a tree was brushing against his window, a steady sound. Wind was unusual under the dense canopy of the jungle, but the limb was beating against his window frame all the same. Underneath the sound was a dull roar, like a torrent of water but at a higher pitch. It was the sound of machinery, a tinny kind of growl, maybe a buzz.

He stood and, despite his significant weight loss, his legs felt sturdy. He looked in the small tarnished mirror above his washbasin and saw his hair had grown long, thick. He stared at his reflection in wonder. He wasn't sure how long he'd been asleep. His face looked full, as though he'd been well fed and rested. Gone was the sickly pallor, the bags beneath his eyes.

It wasn't until the limb began to brush against the window frame again that Hormidas realized what was so strange about the light. He'd had, up until this point, a struggling garden with a few unhappy transplants, for the sake of which he'd sullied his relationship with the Chip-po. Now, the shadows of trees and full foliage spread out along the floor of his hut. He walked carefully outside, feeling a vigor and vitality unmatched in his recent memory. When he reached the doorway he froze in surprise and latent terror.

The entire courtyard was filled with plants and trees. It was the most beautiful array of nature he'd ever seen. The *Passiflora* tree, still shuffling softly against his window, was heavy with passion fruit and large, tissue-like yellow flowers. Vibrant *Philodendrons*, like the ears of enormous mammals, unfurled in nearly every direction. *Camu Camu* and *Guanabana* trees lined the edge of the courtyard, laden with their abundance. Purple, white, and striped orchids cascaded down the posts that held up his little fence. Tiger ears, heart shaped horns adorned in purple giraffe-like patterns, pointed like a regimen of trumpets at the canopy above. And in the center of it all was an enormous *rafflesia*, a single red flower, low to the ground, spanning at least four feet across. It had raised little white bumps and a slick, almost wet -looking surface. It looked as though it belonged on the bottom of the ocean. And happily amongst all of these plants were the furriest, most extraordinary looking bees he'd every seen. It was their buzzing he'd mistaken for water, or machinery. He stared out at this vernal bounty in perfect astonishment.

He had been there a few minutes when a figure emerged from behind the cover of an enormous fruit tree. It was Ni-kai, the shawoman.

She was as beautiful and abundant as his new garden. She moved seductively through the plants toward him, lifting them with her fingertips as she passed. She brought her fingers to her mouth in a gesture both erotic and childish. Her beautiful brown skin glistened and her own ample beauty nearly paled her copious surroundings. She looked different from how he'd remembered her. She was all fright and hard angles the last time he'd seen her, and now she was softer, fuller everywhere. She wore a simple, short dress, a single layer of fabric knotted behind her neck. She laid a hand out flat and one of the insects, a huge mannish looking bee, alighted on her for a moment, its stinger bent dangerously close to the delicate skin at the center of her palm. Hormidas felt an exhilaration for life like nothing he'd ever known before.

Ni-Kai lifted her hand and the bee flew away to join the others. She gestured over his garden, at the flowers, trees, and bees and said, almost shyly, "*Tu-ha. Bugaloo*."

Chapter 17: Kȟe Sapa

Simon's father used to say, in a time when people still tried to conserve things, that conservation meant killing. Kill the weasels and the rats and the porcupines to save the trees, or the fish, or the deer. Whatever it takes. We as humans get to decide what stays and what goes. Simon would return to this idea many times over the next two weeks.

Marlene Payne climbed into the Tuscany Motor Coach and sat down on the floor between the two captain's chairs in the cabin. She was serene, no sign whatsoever that her blood pressure was raised even a fraction by the fact that a small army of men were in pursuit.

Tipper spoke first. "They're gonna push your truck into the ditch, you know that right? To get past it?"

"Let them," Marlene said. "I'm not coming back. That can keep that old truck. I renounce my Earther status, not that I ever had any."

He eyed Marlene sideways while trying to pilot the Tuscany Motor Coach carefully yet swiftly out to the washed out highway. This wasn't the same woman from the ghost wedding. There seemed to be yet another version of Marlene Payne. She saw him eyeing her and reached up and touched his knee.

"Thank you for all you did for my boy. I know you did what you could to make it right. And that God forsaken Ghost Wedding of theirs, what was I to do but play along?"

Simon nodded although he wasn't sure what she meant. The travelled in bumpy darkness, along what was once a well-maintained two-way highway, toward the canyon. They barreled through the night in silence. It was almost as if they'd forgotten about the Earthers and were just

cruising down a scenic American highway in a recreational vehicle, like so many had done before them in long-ago decades. It was a few minutes before Tipper brought it up again. “How long do you think it will take them get by that truck?”

“Maybe five minutes,” Simon said. He searched in front of him for The Hills but he couldn’t yet make out their shadows in the distance. He slowed to twenty miles an hour to avoid jossling the bees over a stretch of road dappled with cracks and potholes. The fact that the road was still covered in sediment from the howlers made the maneuvering all the more difficult. More than once, he felt the RV slide across the packed sediment. His imagined his bees dormant in the dark. They’d be aware of the motion of the trailer. They’d be flapping, humming, collectively warming their large, furry queens, who languished trancelike at their centers.
He kept an eye on Willa in the rear view mirror. She’d sat up, almost dreamily. She said, “Thank you, Marlene. *Tu-ha* told me you were coming to save us.”

Marlene received this with perfect stoicism. She smiled weakly, still staring forward. She reached over from her place on the floor and patted Willa’s bare foot without looking back at her. “Try and sleep sweet girl.”

“What’s your plan?” Tipper asked him, a scrunched-nose, concentrated look on her face. She studied the side mirror outside her window. “They’re going to be behind us any minute now.”

“Just go steady toward the Hills,” Marlene said.

After a few minutes, headlights, still pinpricks in the darkness behind them, did indeed appear. They were less than a mile from the entrance to Spearfish Canyon, the demarcation between open land and the dominion of the *Oceti Sakowin*, The Great Sioux Nation.

They moved south into the canyon like a great, slow whale gliding through a dark, underwater abyss. The entrance, a gorge cut by Spearfish Creek and adorned by thousand foot limestone palisades, rose up in front of them. The sheer pre-Cambrian limestone walls menaced in the dark. The Earthers, three pairs of glowing lights, closed the gap behind them. As the Tuscany Motor Coach glided past the old sign that announced the entrance into Black Hills National Forest, Simon noticed the ghostly shadow-men standing alongside the entrance.
The *Oceti Sakowin* kept the old sign in tact, the one that announced Black Hills National Forest as the domain of the United States of America. But right next to it they'd erected their own sign. It read, 'Kȟe Sapa. Ancestral home of the Oceti Sakowin. Reestablished May 11, 2025. *Leela ampaytu keen washday*.'

Just beyond the sign, silt-covered trucks lined the road on both sides of the entrance. As soon as the Tuscany Motor Coach was safely inside the entrance, their truck doors opened and men began piling out from the cabs and the beds, at least fifty of them, taking post along the entrance. They maneuvered an orange saw-horse barricade into the road.

"Marlene?" Simon was slowly becoming aware of his error, presumably an error he'd made alongside Mutte and the rest of the Earthers.

"Keep going," she said, calmly. "To David Bullbear."

"What about the Earthers?"

"Iron horse will deal with them. He's in charge of the warriors. It's no worry."

They climbed the canyon. Simon had desperately wanted to stay behind and watch Bossman and the Earthers confront the Sioux at the canyon's entrance. He wanted to know who they suspected in Mutte's murder, what they were willing to do to gain entrance into the Hills.

He tried to imagine the confrontation with Bossman, who seemed capable of getting whatever he wanted. Simon wanted to interrogate Marlene on the voracity of her ties to the *Oceti Sakowin*, to affirm that they would be indeed be safe, protected. But the weight of the day had finally crashed down upon him. The last of his circulating cortisol and his reserve of fatty acids had ceased travelling through his body. The panic had abated and he felt completely depleted. Tipper, next to him, still fixated on the mirror outside her window, looked beautiful but also spent. He bent across the considerable distance between their two chairs and brushed his fingertips across her knee. Her goofy, panicked smile was gone. She had a faraway look. She twisted a brown curl around her fingertips. Marlene sat vigil between them as they climbed the canyon, higher, higher, then out of the canyon and deep into *Kȟe Sapa*, to Marlene brother David Bearbull and the rest of Marlene's clan.

In the land of the blind, Simon remembered, the one-eyed man is king. They would all looked to Simon for a plan, and he didn't have one. He had some money and his wife and daughter lived in a Have-town in Minneapolis. Perhaps he could persuade her to take Willa in? She could go to school, meet other kids, be safe. Be normal, if there was such a thing anymore. In an uncertain world, a native compound high up in the Black Hills, protected by the Sioux, was about as safe as one could get.

Simon thought the Sioux had thrived because they'd become accustomed to needing very little. They never cared about money or property, cars or mines. They just wanted the Hills. Many generations passed, until finally, an American president signed the land over to them, dissolving the national park. They had, early on before the collapse, built a university, a law school, and a community center in the Hills. They had their own water system and electric grid.

Theirs was a fortified and hidden land, still fertile and relatively protected from the every changing weather. They had a society that insulated them, not based on their ability to pay like in the Have-towns, but just because they considered themselves to be one.

Simon drove passed the old gold mine that had, a very long time ago, attracted the feral-lawless to the unincorporated Dakotas and to a nearby mining outpost aptly named Deadwood. These were the very gold miners whose passage into the Hills came after the U.S. reneged on the original treaty they'd signed, giving the Hills to the Sioux two centuries ago. Simon steered Cass Walker's Tuscany Motor Coach up the small dirt road to David Bullbear's crooked house on the bluff.

Willa was now perhaps really asleep behind him, or at least in a daze, and Tipper was staring into the distance, dropping her head occasionally then jerking it back up in alarm. Marlene, still alert and watchful, directed him to through the dark. Once they were docked on Bullbear's precarious driveway, Marlene stood without a word and went inside her brother's house leaving them alone in the RV where Simon slept a stone cold sleep, the sleep of the dead.

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The next morning, there was a knock at the door of the Tuscany Motor Coach. Simon and Tipper were in Cass Walker's considerable bedroom in the back of the RV. It had a full sized bed. Simon hadn't slept in a bed that big in at least ten years. He could get used to it. He'd spent the night in dreams, chase dreams where he felt like his feet were tied to cement blocks, or where he was helplessly driving blind and, it seemed, somewhat drunk, or where he was trying to flap his arms to fly away from the Earthers but couldn't take off.

Fitting this way through the night, his jaw now ached from the tension. He opened his eyes to see a rippling pool of soft satin emptiness where Tipper had been, and he heard her voice at the trailer door. She appeared a moment later with two cups of coffee and passed one to Simon. It was good coffee, rich and robust. Simon couldn't imagine from where they were getting it. Coffee like this would cost a fortune. And it had milk in it. And honey! It had honey in it, too. "What is this? Where did you get this?"

Tipper shrugged her shoulders and grinned like a little girl. "I know right! And you should see this," she said. She took him by the hand, they tiptoed past Willa who was sound asleep on the pull down sofa, the bones of her shoulder blades poking out into the fabric of one of her father's white undershirts.

"No seriously, where did this coffee come from?"

"The Bullbears gave it to me, silly."

He took a sip and smelt the deep chocolate aroma, maybe even some cherry. Arabian probably. Delicious.

They stepped out into David Bearbull's driveway. Simon glanced back to make sure the parking brake was in place, even though he'd checked it twice the night before. The slope of the Bearbulls' driveway was enough to launch the RV out over the row of houses on the ridge just below them.

Tipper took him around to the front of the RV to where David Bullbear's vintage sportscar was parked. There were two dead honeybees on his windshield. A thick secretion could be seen around each of them. He looked at Tipper in astonishment and she smiled back at him, obviously pleased with herself for making the discovery. Tipper ran her finger across a thick smear and held it out for Simon to taste. He closed his mouth around her firm little fingertip. Nectar. It was nectar. It wasn't alfalfa, or sweet clover, or sunflower nectar. It was something else, wildflowers, perhaps? Wild honeybees.

"Wild honeybees. They're up here. And they're *working*."

She shook her head giddily. "I know. Marlene wants us to come inside once we're dressed." There was a sun window in the kitchen overlooking the driveway and Simon saw Marlene sitting there in her pajamas with the little-"o"-mouth soprano from the Earther band. He put his hand on Tipper's shoulder.

"What are we going to do with this kid?" he asked. He looked down at Tipper who was still smiling.

"What do you mean? Why can't we all stay together? The three of us, get out of here. Far away."

"I need to know. Did you kill Francis Mutte?"

Tipper gave him her most desperately wounded look. The night before, after they'd made a plan to leave, Tipper hadn't even returned to her trailer to retrieve anything. She'd had it all with her. She'd said she brought everything she needed to the Mesa with her in her rag purse. She'd left it all, everything it seemed she'd worked so hard to possess, all her figurines, her crystal bobbles and tchotchkes, even her bonsai plants.

"No."

"So are we to believe that Willa killed him?"

"I don't know. " Tipper said, and he knew there was something she was holding back. "For now, let's just have breakfast. The Earthers aren't getting back up here today, or any day, unless the Sioux say so."

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In the swamp, Willa used to sleep very deeply. She would, of course, always leave a window open for her spirit to escape and fly at night. In the swamp, it had been difficult to stay in her body, even when she really wanted to, like when her father would have friends over after her mother died and there would be strangers in the cabin, sleeping all around her. Even when she tried as hard as she could to will her spirit to stay inside her body she couldn't. She was afraid for her Willa-shell. She knew she could easily be violated while she was out flying her spirit in the world, unaware of that fate of her body back in her bed. But even then, even when she tried with all her might to stay put, her spirit would still manage to slip out of her body to fly at night. So for this reason, Willa always made sure to leave a window open when she slept.

It's a terrible and frightening thing to exit one's body in a closed-up house. When there's an open door or window, a person's spirit will immediately whip into the air and out the nearest window like a shot, propelled by the sheer momentum it built up while pushing through the sludgy middle of the body, packed as it is with dense organs and flesh and stuff. The whole body fills with pressure, a deep vibrating, a high frequency buzzing, and then, *pop!*, the spirit flies right out and seeks a window or an open door. And if she made the mistake of not opening a door or window, her spirit would fly right up to the ceiling, close enough to graze it with her eyelashes, if she had any. Without an open window, you can only stare at the ceiling. The other option would be to turn and look down at her empty shell, which really is an awful sight.
Since they'd left the swamp, and after Hormidas died, Willa hardly ever flew her spirit at night. But that night, parked on David Bullbear's driveway after fleeing the Earthers, she did.

Gratefully, the window in the back of the RV had been open, cranked out just enough for Willa to slip through. She flew out over the Hills, back through what was once the town of Lead and up into the canyon. *Tu-ha* had not come with her. All was peaceful. Willa was gratefully alone. It was the wind that gave her the most pleasure. She could feel the wind, just the same as if she had a body.

These weren't howlers but the up-and-down drafts of clear, simple wind. And she rode their currents, following the road that snaked through the canyon. She didn't want to stray too far from the road because she didn't know the Hills well enough, and it's a terrible thing to get lost when flying in spirit.

She would, of course, end up back in her body as a matter of course, but even so, it's a scary and very lonely thing to be lost outside one's body.

Willa flew out over the canyon to the spot where the Sioux had put up their blockade. It was still there, along with two trucks and four men. The men were standing around smoking and laughing. Their truck engines rumbled and their silhouettes were lit in profile. She flew in close, hovered over them. She couldn't hear them but she could see in their faces and in their demeanor that they were not afraid and so she was not afraid. And she followed the road some distance, through several turns through the deep, limestone canyon until she saw the line of Earther cars parked alongside the highway far outside the entrance to what was once the national park. She landed atop a cliff above them. She couldn't hear them, she couldn't hear anything in her spirit form, unless of course you count other spirits. But she could see them. She could see them huddling together, speaking to one another as if relaying some big secret. The sun was just starting to come up. Willa would have to turn back.

On her way back, heading north and following above the road that lead deep into the canyon, she saw it. The mountain lion. It was decomposing on the cliff. The blood from her father's fall had left a lung-shaped stain on the earth below, and it was still there, even visible from a good height. Willa alit upon the cliff where the mountain lion's body lay crumpled in on itself. The bees were gone. Dust from the howlers was piled up against the base of the cliff's face. Willa stayed there for a moment, shapeless, nothing more than consciousness. And it was then that she realized that someone was there with her. *Tu-ha.* She was more of a sensation than a figure, more of an orb, a small concentration of benevolence. When Willa was in her body, she had to strain to hear *Tu-ha*. But when she was flying her spirit, *Tu-ha* could speak clearly to Willa with a voice that was both that of a man's and a woman's.

The bugaloo was indeed here, *Tu-ha* said. *You were right about that. But you were wrong about other things*.

"What was I wrong about?"

But the sun was just starting to peak out above the rim of the earth. It red ring was visible along the horizon. She listened for *Tu-ha,* who was still speaking to her but her voice became more and more distant. Her spirit was being pulled back into her body, back in the RV. This was less like flying and more being a fleck of steel, sucked from the sky by an enormous magnet. Out in front of David Bearbull's house, on the way back to her body, she stopped just a moment to hover over the bee boxes in the trailer behind the RV. The bees were just beginning to gather in a collective kind of waking with the sun. They kept a schedule that was just the opposite from Willa's spirit flying. The same speck of sun that whisked her back to her body was beginning to stir the bees from their hive.

Everything felt more powerful in her spirit form without the smell and the sounds that plagued her when she was in her body. Her knowledge was complete but not at all sensual. And she knew what *Tu-ha* told her on the cliff was true. The *bugaloo* had been on the cliff, and now it was here on David Bearbull's driveway.

Amidst the bee boxes, the tubs with Simon's equipment, everything he had shoved together before fleeing the night before, was Hormidas' basket. The Amazon skep. The one she'd used to carry the bees over to Mutte's the night before. And inside was the *bugaloo*. The very evil that Hormidas had accidently brought back from the Amazon, along with *Tu-ha*. She wasn't sorry Mutte was dead. She had seen Wren's face when she talked about him. She saw her fear. And she knew what kind of person he was, and that he'd summoned the *bugaloo* to kill her father. And she wasn't sorry she'd left the Earther compound. She was with Simon and Tipper now. And she had *Tu-ha*. The same *bugaloo* that killed her father on the cliff killed Mutte, too, which was justice in her mind. She wasn't wrong. She knew by the way that those bees eagerly entered Hormidas' basket that they were none other than the *bugaloo*. Your average honeybee wouldn't behave that way.

She'd taken the bees, and their queen, to Mutte's cabin and thrown them through the open window. No matter what, whatever had happened next, she knew it would be because of the *bugaloo*. Of that much she was certain.

By the time the sun had fully rose, Willa was deeply asleep, back in her body, in her pull down bed inside the Tuscany Motor Coach. And during her nocturnal wanderings, she'd formulated a plan. Shortly, she would wake with a resolution to rid them of the *bugaloo* once and for all.

Chapter 18: The Bearbulls

David Bearbull, his wife, his brother Daryl, and his sister Marlene were all at the nailed-down kitchen table and chairs waiting for them. They were eating eggs and oatmeal. Willa had been difficult to rouse, Simon had to shake her for some time, saying her name over and over, and she had drooled all over the pillow and sheet. But now she was standing directly behind him, staying very close.

David Bearbull had had a small girl on his lap, who was whispering something in his ear and glancing at Willa. He rose and swung the girl in one motion to place her on the floor, taking a moment to confirm she was sure-footed on the sloping floor. Bearbull had on starched jeans with a white line distinct down the front from multiple creasing. He is sister Marlene looked unworried. Simon thought for the first time she seemed at peace, at home right where she was.

Bearbull's wife Peg was a tall blonde woman with a deep tan. She had on a soft, chenille running suit and suede tennis shoes. She had a small charm that hung down in between her breasts, a crystal encrusted cat. It sparkled against her lightly wrinkled skin.

"Please sit down," David Bearbull said. "You've had quite an ordeal." He pointed to the chair he'd just risen from for Simon. Peg brought over two stools, both secured on one side with sandbags. Tipper took the one closest to Simon. Willa remained standing, hovering between the two of them.

Simon couldn't resist looking down at the sturdy, fat legs of the toddler who was following Bearbull to the other side of the kitchen where he filled his coffee. The child's legs, while impressively stout, also looked precisely the same length. Simon thought back to what

Bearbull had told him about the slope of the house and his children's resulting lopsided appendages. Simon looked up at the man as if seeing him for the first time.

"Thank you for what you did for us," Simon said.

"Marlene got word to us just in time." He was dusting what looked like flat crepes with powdered sugar, shaking it from a metal canister. "But you need to know, they are going to be at all the exits. They are going to be waiting for you to leave. Our sources tell us that Bossman is seeking retribution. Their stock in trade is the fact that the place is a fortress, and those people are protected, chosen. As self-sustaining as they are, and growing crops, they were the poor man's have-town. Did you know they were looking to start up another compound in Valentine, Nebraska? Mutte had sent those two boys back that interrupted my nephew's *ghost wedding*—" He stopped here and mugged a kind of quick, deadpan, along with a tilt of the dead. His wife snorted with laughter. "—to Valentine with the task of recruiting people for another New Earther compound. With the added promise to install young Willa there as the resident healer. Anyway, Bossman is none too pleased. Boss needs his cheap child labor and his work force, girls for the poker room, etc. Mutte delivered on all of that. Mutte brought them in and kept them put with his firebrand. You've got a lot to answer for."

Willa's eyes were round with surprise. Tipper leaned into her. "Honey, no one is sending you to Valentine, Nebraska. You are staying with us."

"It's not that." Willa has that faraway look she got, her thousand-mile stare. "I thought those boys from Valentine, Nebraska were dead. We thought Mutte killed them. We all did."

"Oh no, sweetie. Simon and me saw them leave later that night. I'm sure they roughed them up, a bit. Who's the 'we' that thought he'd killed them?"

"The kids. All the kids."

"Well, I am sure that is what they'd like you to believe. Keep you scared. Mutte was a bully. He got what he deserved," Tipper said, looking around for affirmation.

There was a silence. Simon sensed the unspoken question between them all.

"We sent someone to exact justice. She was one of ours," Bearbull finally said. "A woman. She had asked specifically for the job to avenge her sister, who Mutte recruited and Bossman sold into one of his poker rooms in Rapid City, which was the last anyone ever saw of her. We recently learned her fate. That's all I say."

Simon thought of Mutte's gaping smile of a neck, the pants down around his ankles. *A woman.* He looked over at Tipper who was picking at the skin along the nail beds of her thin, dry hands; her eyes were fixed in her lap.

"I asked my sister and her son to move on to the campground," David said. "I regret it now. Bossman and Mutte did so much good for people, kept people fed and clothed, and safe. And we had other reasons for keeping up relations. And yet, these stories persisted. About the kids working. About the girls and the poker rooms. About them *selling* people. We don't call the law on people. But we can't stand by idly. So Marlene went in and took Joss with her for protection."

Marlene had clear eyes and an expressionless face. She seemed an entirely different creature here at her brother's table, occasionally sipping her coffee.

"To what end?" Simon asked. He could feel the anger building in him. Joss had died, and Simon had killed the most promising hive he'd had, although he wouldn't dare compare the magnitude of the two losses. "What were you thinking? And Joss? They worked him like a dog."

"He was strong enough for it." Marlene's eyes flashed for a moment at him.

"And he *died*. Oh, God, he died." And it was as if it were the morning Joss died again. Not just the act, not just the failure, but the shame of the act and the failure. All of he was upon him at noce. Willa seemed to sense this and stepped closer to him, put a hand on his shoulder. Bearbull took notice of this, too. Simon thought he also seemed ashamed. Simon began to cry, big stain-your-shirt kind of cry. He felt the rush of release from the stress and fear from the day and night before, the death of Cass, the sight of Mutte, the fleeing with the bees, and the certainty that Willa and Tipper were going to be killed in front of his eyes, or worse.

Tipper stood up and held him for a quick moment, a gesture so intimate and knowing that Simon felt another surge of sadness inside of him for all that he'd missed in life. There was silence all around the room. Willa moved in front of him and placed her hand above his chest, right above the solar plexus. Immediately, Simon felt a surge like an elephant kicked him in the chest, like the time the some faulty equipment in the honey factory had shocked him and blasted him back three feet. But his feet said on the ground. Like the fish who jumps out of the water toward the sun, so went Simon's heart. And then, there was a squeeze. Simon felt the air escape from his lungs.

"Oh Marlene, and then they dug him up like that," Tipper said. "Girl, I am so sorry. And I got up on stage and pushed for it to go on like I did. I'm so sorry. For all of it." Tipper leaned forward and placed a raw hand on the table. "I'm telling you right now I did that because I had no idea what was about to come next. If they kept that kind of attention on Willa, who the fuck knows what they'd do next." She reached back and hooked Willa's slender bicep without

looking back at her. “Sorry, but it’s true. And Marlene, I thought you were an Earther. I thought Joss was an Earther. Oh, Lord, I am so sorry.”

“Thank you, Tipper,” Marlene said. “I already knew this about you.”

Willa seemed to be swaying, her hand still above Simon’s chest, just hovering there. Bearbull sat a plate of crepes on the table. There were grooves and small brackets in the top of the table to which he secured the plates to keep them from slipping down the table, not dissimilar from the brackets one would buy to hang plates on the wall. Simon thought about the Tuscany Motor Coach in the driveway and willed the parking brakes firmly in place.

When Willa didn’t move, or even blink. Simon reached out and grabbed the hand in front of his chest and he immediately felt a shift, as if he’d been plugged in to something and someone had abruptly pulled the plug from the wall. Peg came around and slung an arm over Willa’s rigid shoulder. “Sweetie, you want a chair?” she asked her.

“No.” Her voice sounded weak, tinny. Simon grabbed by the shoulders. Her irises slide up into her eye sockets. As recognition drained from her eyes so did her balance. Willa tilted unsteadily toward the front of the house. Tipper and Peg had hooked her round the back before Simon even fully understood that Willa was falling. He and Tipper laid Willa on the floor, and Bearbull whispered something into Peg’s ear. She retrieved a telephone from its cradle on the counter and climbed the stairs at the back of the house.

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David Bullbear lifted Willa's head up onto his worn, denim lap. Tipper held a rolled, soaked cloth to Willa's forehead. Her cheeks were red and her white neck and chest were splotchy. She had dark, chalk smudges on her cheeks. She was filthy. Simon was embarrassed now that he hadn't thought to tell her to take a shower.

"She does this, apparently." Tipper looked directly at Simon for affirmation. Simon nodded but Bearbull wasn't looking at him. "I've seen her faint twice now."

"What's wrong with her?"

"She seems easily overcome. I think she might be diabetic," Simon said.

Tipper rolled her eyes at him. "It's related to the other thing. Or at least Willa thinks it is. And that's all that matters, really, in situations like this. What one *believes*."

Simon gave Tipper his best flat stare. "What matters is what is *real* and what is not. She may be *really* ill."

Bearbull was a handsome man. Joss had favored him, considerably, or at least Joss had channeled whatever it was in both of them that made Simon felt exposed in their presence. With both Joss and Bearbull, it was as if the sun was shining directly out of them, kicking up the dust in all Simon's secret corners. "What other thing?" he asked Simon this time.

"Tipper is referring to the prophet-healer thing."

Bearbull nodded, taking this in with easy contemplation. "Well, Peg is calling the doctor now. We'll have her examined. He can run some blood-work on her."

"Blood-work?" Tipper asked him. "I didn't know there were hospitals out here. I didn't know there were doctors."

Bearbull smiled at her. “We have many things here, Tipper. We have a hospital. We have a university and an animal conservatory. We have museums and libraries. We have an agriculture lab. We have—“ he dropped his voice in a mock-whisper—“ a honeybee program *and* a space program.”

“A space program?” Tipper asked. Simon gaped at him for a moment.

“You have honeybees?” he asked, choking on the words.

David Bearbull smiled and nodded. “Kidding about the space program. But yes, we do have bees.”

Within thirty minutes, the doctor’s dusty sedan was crisscrossing its way up the cliff to the Bearbull house. It passed Marlene as she drove in her little hatchback, headed for their cabin on the east side of the Hills. The sedan parked sideways just behind the Tuscany Motor Coach. Willa was awake now, resting on a worn, chintz settee in the front room. Tipper was sitting with her, flipping through an old volume on the Renaissance. Simon could just make out the spine of the huge book from his place in the kitchen. He wondered when, if ever, Tipper might have come across art before, or even history. So much was lost to the wind.

The Have-towns, like the one Tipper grew up in, had no reason to teach people the notions of the past. They only cared about protecting what little money and life they all had left and controlling their environment as best they could. Simon’s ex-wife had walked unquestioningly into the arms of ignorance and paranoia, the closed society, the airtight dome of privilege. Have-towns were founded on the fact that they could afford to isolate themselves.

Simon had hated every minute he passed in the Have-town, the few times early on he'd gone to visit Gloria and their daughter. It felt to him like the set of an old television series or like a street in the old Disneyworld parks. These people, the Haves, used their resources, the very ones that were once the great engine of the Earth: oil, technology, industry, to recreate only the sallow veneer of a society under a dome of protection. They cut all the nonessentials, like music, art, and natural sciences. They cared about weapons, technology and reestablishing trade. They traded in platitudes and denial.

A figure zipped past the bay window and, a few seconds later, a quick double crack on the door announced the arrival of the doctor.

Simon looked around for Peg and David Bearbull. When no sound seemed to resonate from anywhere in the house, Simon hopped up and went to the door himself.

The doctor was a young man. He looked to Simon more like an Asian Indian, not a native American. He had a narrow face and a long, Roman nose. He had on blue surgical pants and a black t-shirt with words *Spiritual Gangster* on the front of it. He had tattoos down both of his arms and wrists. His workboots were open at the top, the tongue agape obscenely and the laces askew to either side. Simon figured him for mid-twenties, at most.

"I was at the entrance last night when you guys rolled in," the doctor said, studying Simon's eyes. "That was a close one. Those guys were furious."

"Who did they want?" Simon blurted out before he thought better of it. The young doctor have him a strange, cautious look and preened around him for a better look inside the Bearbull house. Simon realized he was being rude and stepped aside and let the man pass.

Once inside, the doctor said, “They wanted the girl. They offered a substantial amount of money for her.”

“And?”

“And we said to hell with them,” the doctor said. “We don’t have to let anyone in here.” He strode towards the parlor like he knew his way around.

Bearbull and his wife were in the parlor now with Tipper and Willa. Willa was sitting up in the settee, smiling, clearly enjoying the attention. “Simon,” she said, cheerfully when she saw him walk in. “Do you feel better now? The sadness? It was choking you. I could feel it.” Everyone was turned toward him. Simon felt immediately defensive. It wasn’t his fault she was lying there, despite any sensations he may have felt in the kitchen earlier. He decided if he were every to get Willa out of the Hills alive, and able to make a life for her elsewhere, he would rid her of the burden of this foolishness once and for all. He would shine the light of knowledge and science into her. If she wanted to heal people, he would find a doctor to train her in real medicine. “Yes, Willa,” he said. “I feel better, I do.” She looked satisfied with this. And in all honesty, he did feel better, if not embarrassed for the torrent of emotion he’d let loose back in the kitchen.

“Michael,” Peg said, standing up. “You made it in good time.”

“I drove quickly,” the doctor said, crossing and shaking Bearbull’s hand before kissing Peg once on each cheek.

“Tipper, this is Michael Eagle Eyes,” Bearbull said. “He’s the head of internal medicine at our hospital.” The head of internal medicine, Simon thought? He’s just a baby. “Simon, I’m assuming you two met at the door?” Michael nodded back at Simon.

“Willa,” the doctor said, pulling up a straight-backed parlor chair and flipping it around, so he was leaning across the back of it. “What seems to be the trouble?”

“No trouble,” she said. The rest of arranged themselves in an interested posture behind the doctor. Bearbull, Simon thought, was most interested of all. He leaned in and watched Willa’s face intently. His deep-set eyes narrowed in concentration.

“But I understand from the folks here that you passed out?”

“I didn’t pass out. One can either pass in or pass out or stay put. And I have been *in* the whole time. I’ve stayed put. I didn’t fly my spirit. My energy is just gone, so my body had to shut off. I used all I had to heal Simon’s sadness. Well, *Tu-ha* did. She uses my energy to heal people sometimes because it’s hard for her to gather energy when there is no wind. But I have been here the whole time, in Chief Bearbull’s house.” She smoothed the blankets around her legs and lifted her clear, honest child’s eyes at them. Tipper was smiling, as if she were a proud mother. Bearbull looked over at Simon and he rolled his eyes in response. It was dangerous nonsense.

“I think you may want to check her blood sugar,” Simon said.

Bearbull hooked Simon around the shoulder and led him back toward the front of the house. “Let’s let Michael Eagle Eyes tend to her. He’ll do what needs to be done. How about we go and see some honeybees?”

Chapter 19: Earth's Shortest Epoch

"Why do you even let them up here?" Simon asked Bearbull. They were climbing through the canyon in Bearbull's old sports car, a gas-guzzling relic from the past. Simon wondered where he got the gas. The only person around with cheap gas was Bossman, and he had a side deal with several Have-towns. "Why do you even let them use the Sleeping Giant?"

"To keep them close, of course," Bearbull said. "We dug Joss up a day after they buried him on the Sleeping Giant, just so you know. We put him in our sacred burial place. Too bad Amy Turner's ghost had to marry a Rocky Mountain elk."

Simon thought back to the cherry pies, to Marlene and the wine. There was grief the day of the ghost wedding, to be sure, elk or no elk. "There has to be more than keeping them close. You don't have to let anyone into *Kȟe Sapa* if you don't want to. And I know enough to know that every part of these Hills are sacred to you."

Bearbull nodded slowly but kept his eyes forward on the road. "Gas," he said. "For one thing. We need their fuel connections. No way around it. Bossman has the local Have-towns in his pocket, people he helped out. These people have things we need."

They were passing through deep, ancient walls of Precambrian limestone. The Hills proudly displayed stills of earth's infancy all around them, the geology of four and a half billion years. The time before creatures, Simon thought. He marveled at the height of the pine and the spruce. The Hills were lusher than they'd once been, on account of the rising temperatures, and their walls fortified large parts of the vegetation from the howlers. Simon remembered something he'd read once: the farther back you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see.

Simon regarded the earth as a lonely place now, with so many people gone. Two hundred and twenty million fewer people in this country alone, and their numbers dwindling all the time. When he ventured out, travelling the honey flow, smaller encampments, farm communes, religious groups like the Earthers, seemed fewer and fewer. More and more people were becoming nomadic, moving towards temperate climates and fresh water. The south was too hot, and power outages affected even the Have-towns. The coasts were flooded. Severe droughts made both the west and east coasts uninhabitable. The northern tier of the country was the safest and most predictable now, despite the howlers. And Simon could sense the people coming, converging on them from all around, looking for refuge.

They'd be searching for places like the Earther compound, which had become quite the legend. No wonder Mutte and Boss were looking to expand? No wonder they needed Willa so badly? It had become a business, and a profitable one, too. Simon was beginning to understand that Mutte and Bossman had created a legend around the strength of his compound and the magical origin story on the canals of St. Petersburg. And all the children they managed to rear for labor and numbers. Pregnant women needed nutrition for healthy babies, and the Earthers were able to provide for them what the cheese-cloth of a government could not: food, security, the promise of life.

But it seemed there was darkness, too. Right before Simon's eyes and he didn't even know it. The selling of women and children, if this was in fact true. And then, in contrast, there was the Sioux.

"Are you having a lot of babies up here in *Kȟe Sapa*?"

"Oh yes," Bearbull said, proudly. "You better believe it. We are having plenty of babies."

Bearbull took two steep turns up into the Hills, deep to the top of the highest peak, what used to be a ski resort.

"Bees don't like it up this high," Simon said.

"These do."

Perhaps the most unexpected consequence of the collapse, Simon thought, were the regenerative ecosystems. When the climate changed, and the park services stopped pruning and cultivating and preserving, when hundreds of millions of people starved to death and stopped mowing their lawns, and when those that were left abandoned their cities and towns, everything started anew. But what came back wasn't exactly what was there before. What began growing where there were once lawns, and farms, and crops, and ranches, and buildings, and national parks was not the same indigenous flora that was there before.

Bearbull maneuvered his car up a small embankment, and they took a narrow road through a copse of trees. They came out in a small clearing, a shank of high ground overlooking the confluence of the Spearfish river and two smaller tributaries.

Simon could hear them before he saw them: honeybees. The sun was visible in a blue expanse above him, clear of sediment. Simon thought, here in the Hills, it was as if they existed under their own, separate sky. There were dozens of bee-boxes scattered throughout the clearing.

"How many bees do you have here?" Simon asked.

"Fifty hives here. Another five hundred scattered across our farmland in the eastern Hills."

"Can I see them?"

The two men got out of the car and stood in the clearing, thick with the motion of honeybees. Simon could tell by the sound they were making that they were working. Unlike the listless flying the flailing bees often engaged in, these bees were on task. Bearbull rested slightly against the car and crossed his arms over his chest. He looked up at the sun and back at Simon. "So is this little girl a real prophet?"

"Of course not," Simon said. "I don't know. I don't believe in hocus-pocus." But Simon was thinking of Willa in the Bearbull's kitchen, the sensation he'd felt with her hand over his heart. And he did feel better now. There was a deep ache in his chest, but it was as if she'd gone in and pulled something from the deepest part of him, a second, broken heart.

"But she has gifts? Things that can't be explained?" Bearbull asked.

"I wouldn't go that far."

"Marlene said Willa told her she can make the world come to still? Has she told you this?"

"No. Well, yes, kind of." Simon hesitated. "She experiences the relative slowing of time in comparison to the people and objects around her when she is in a heightened fear state. Another leftover from the caveman days. It ain't magic."

"And she listens to a wind spirit?"

"Even I hear voices in the howlers sometimes, don't you?"

Bearbull just looked at him, plainly, without expression.

"My grandfather and I used to go up in his prop plane, many years ago, when I was a young boy," Simon said. "And sometimes, when we were up in the air, I would heard singing, like a chorus. And the song would be very specific. It was wind but it wasn't. It was music. As a

kid, I thought they were angels, singing to me. I learned later that this was a well-documented auditory illusion, something to do with the propeller and the wind."

"Is that so?" Bearbull said. "I've never been in an airplane."

The two men leaned on the hood of the car for a minute, in silence. "So about the bees," Bearbull said, eventually. "The ones up here are relatively small. But there are others, in the east Hills, well, I don't know what to say other than…they're huge. But they *are* honeybees. They've been producing. And once we caught and attempted to keep them, they began hatching queens that were smaller. We bred those with the few average-sized hives we had, and the result is what you see up here. These, too, are producing, but they're not as strong. And, well, the larger bees are aggressive. And some of the hybrids are, too."

"What do you mean?"

"They are prone to collective attack. I have a beekeeper over there who hasn't opened his eyes for three days on account of the swelling. He still can't use his hands. They look like raw hams."

"I think I caught one of your swarms," Simon said. Things were beginning to make more sense now. "They were the most promising hive I'd had in ten years. Until they killed Joss."

"Yes," Bearbull said, and Simon could detect his sadness. "We need you, Simon. To help us breed the aggression out of them."

"I don't know. It doesn't always work that way. There is no telling sometimes. It's like throwing two pieces of sculpture together and expecting great art." It was true. He had had little luck, despite his many attempts, at changing the bees' traits long-term.

"It's not quite that hopeless, surely?"

“There is a way to better manage them, probably. But if they evolved up here, and they are making honey here, then there’s a reason they are the way they are. This is a new ecosystem. The *Anthropocene* is coming to an end, my friend. The Earth is moving beyond man.”

“The shortest epoch in history,” Bearbull added.

“Sure as shit. The Earth will evolve however it will, and much of it is a mystery, but the bees are evolving, too. Honeybees can’t survive out there. If these bees can survive in the Hills, then they will thrive here. They belong to the next epoch, whatever that is. And if they’re strong, then they may evolve into other climates, too, but we can’t force them. It’s clear to me now that we are not in control.”

Bearbull smiled at him. “You may be wrong about that, Simon. We believe it is *our* time now. This is the new seat of civilization.” Bearbull held his arms out and gestured at the rows of bee-boxes. “Sadly, it will get worse before it gets better. And we can no longer stand by and watch the Earthers attract followers and denigrate our progress. We’re going to send missions to the campgrounds and bring people in to the Hills.”

“And what about the fuel? You said you needed the fuel?” Simon asked.

“We are working on that. The howlers seem full of energy, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I do.”

“And we will build society again slowly, with education. And no one could offer more education on honeybees than you. I want you to consider staying.”

They crossed to the nearest bee-box, and Simon lifted the super. The boxes were expertly constructed and the super lifted easily. The hive was healthy, full of wax and, he could see,

honey. The bees were indeed large, with those same strange eyes, much like the ones he'd killed the day Joss Payne died.

Bearbull turned and left Simon alone at the super. He had made it only a few steps before turning and saying, "I hope you, Tipper, and Willa will considering staying." He lifted his arms out, gesturing at the bees in the clearing. "We have brought you into the world to be rulers of the hive, kings of yourselves and other citizens."

"Old Testament?"

"No." Bearbull laughed. "It's Plato." He made his bow-legged way down the slight hill, across the clearing to his car, leaving Simon alone. And for the second time that day, Simon cried.

Chapter 20: The Gift of Sight

Michael Eagle Eyes had a gift. He was a healer. His power was immediately clear to Willa. He was someone special, too. His eyes were clear to his soul, and his soul was still. *Tu-ha* whispered the truth, and Willa watched Michael Eagle Eyes to see if he could hear her, too. He could. She was sure of it.

Michael Eagle Eyes asked Tipper and Mrs. Bearbull to leave the room, and they did, but Willa could tell Tipper wasn't happy about it. Mrs. Bearbull said it wasn't too early for wine, and Tipper nodded and asked for a cigarette, to which Mrs. Bearbull said she would "roll one up." Tipper kept looking back at Willa, and at one point, she whispered, "I'll be in the kitchen." When two women left the parlor, the weight of their worry left with them. And now there was only air infused with the lightest tinge of pine, and lime, and something else. Horses. It was the most peaceful energy she had sat in since Hormidas died. It was safety.

"You lose consciousness a lot?" he said, turning his head down slightly to look into his worn leather shoulder bag. His eyelashes from the side were impossibly long and licked upward in delicate curls at the end. Willa gather herself inside so that she could absorb as much of his energy as possible, to soak him up while she was close to him. It was like sitting in sunshine. He reminded her of Joss.

"I do."

"And then what happens?" the doctor asked.

She wasn't sure how much she should tell him. "It depends on what was happening just before. If I'm afraid, sometimes the world goes to still. It'll look like I'm asleep, but *you* are actually the one asleep. I'm moving real quick around you."

"Interesting. That's some trick." Michael Eagle Eyes' face was placid and distant as the moon. It was perfectly proportioned, she thought, with the exception of his rather long nose. His countenance was perfect patience. "Go on."

"If I'm healing I go to the in-between-place where I carry all the pain and leave it there to be redistributed. When I'm in the in-between-place, it feels like I am there a very long time. I've been gone as long as a month before. But usually it's just a day or two. I have to work through their pain in the form of stories, like dreams. Like being in someone else's dream. I have to look at all the things the other person can't look at, things that were too painful for their mind. Things that got hid in their bodies. Made them sick. Or stuck, frozen, whatever. Sometimes people are just numb and don't know they're sick. It's always different. And then, sometimes, I fly my spirit. Less and less now."

"Tell me about flying your spirit," Michael Eagle Eyes said, and he seemed particularly interested in this.

"When I fly my spirit I can travel, up to ten miles. Only at night, after the sun goes down. My spirit knows all directions, magnetically. But I still am afraid I'll get lost and get locked out of my body. I'm scared of that now. Being scared makes it harder to do."

"Okay," the doctor said. "You seem to be on top of that."

"I am."

"I understand you lost your dad?"

She thought of what Simon had said about the choking pain. Loss. Like a hairball that a cat spits up, but you can't spit it out. "Yes. And I lost my teacher two years ago. And my mother, along time ago. I can't remember how long. It seems like a really long time. Do you think that when I have other people's dreams, and I go away for months, do you think I am getting older on the inside? I sometimes feel like I am getting older on the inside."

"I'm not sure. But I can look at your insides and find out. But let's start with listening to your insides." He pulled out his stethoscope.

"Listening is good. But can you *smell* when someone is sick?"

Michael Eagle Eyes just stared at her. She thought she saw a smile lift the corners of his mouth. His top eyelashes took a long dip down and up again.

"Can you *hear* when someone is sick?"

"You mean can I hear your wind spirit, Willa? Is that what you're asking?" He turned his back to her and Willa could tell her was buying time, trying, she figured, to decide whether or not he was going to tell her the truth. He turned back and was now holding a soft cloth, which he used to wipe the stethoscope.

"Yes, she told me about you," Will said, coaxing him.

"Hmm. Take a deep breath in and out." He lifted her father's old cotton t-shirt and pressed the cool, steel instrument to her chest and then her back.

"Don't you want to know what she told me?"

"Sure," he said.

She could sense he was a very patient man. He angered slowly if at all. He leaned in and focused his bottomless brown eyes on her.

“She said that your gift was sight.”

The doctor smiled. “That’s true,” he said. “I can’t deny it. Everyone knows that. That’s how I got my name.”

“So can you see the filament?”

“What do you mean by filament?”

“The clouds that follow the people. The connections between them.”

“We call it something else.”

“What?” Willa asked him.

“Our people came to the Hills long ago, not the Lakota but our ancestors, going back to ancient tribes, long before the Kiowa. But we have kept the ancient stories alive. Like, the story of Falling Star.” He took out a black instrument with a cone on the end and a small light. He stuck it in her ears and instructed her to stick out her tongue. “Falling star was a god who fell from the heavens. And he had many adventures in the Hills. And he taught us that all that takes place in the Hills has its mirror in the heavens, but in the heavens the picture is clearer. The same actions take place in the heaven as they do in the Hills. The same souls exist in the heavens as they do in the Hills. But in the heavens, one can see the infinite nature of cause and effect. In the heavens, the actions of souls reveal their consequence, their connection to the all other things. There is nothing hidden, and all moves with one purpose. On Earth, it’s different. Our perceptions are limited. It’s just shadows of those connections that can be seen on Earth. Just traces, like movement in the corner of the eye. That’s our faith tradition. Perhaps you can see more clearly than others?” He patted her gently on the knee and began to rise.

"But can *you see them?*" She knew the answer to this, but she persisted anyway. She wanted to hear him say it, to hear someone else confirm for her what Hormidas had told her was true.

"I want to bring you to the hospital to take some images. Just to rule out anything else, other than your energy depletion of course, that might be contributing to your dizzy spells."

"Okay, but first tell me can you see them? The shadows of the things happening in the heavens?"

"I need to make another stop but I'll meet you at the hospital in an hour. I'll see if one of the ladies can drive you."

Willa wasn't going to the hospital or anywhere else until this man admitted to her what she already knew. "*Can you see them*?" Willa was surprised by the power of her own voice.

Michael Eagle Eyes remained very still. "Willa," he said, slowly. "Your wind spirit told you something else, something else besides my gift of sight, right? Didn't she?"

"Yes," Willa admitted.

"What was it?"

"She told me I could trust you," Willa said, and she knew *Tu-ha* only told the truth.

"So trust me."

Just then Peg and Tipper came rushing into the parlor. "Are you okay?" Tipper asked, looking between the doctor and Willa.

"She's fine," Eagle Eyes said. "She seems pretty healthy to me. But I do want to take a CT scan at the hospital." To Peg he said, "I have to take a trip out to see Flying Tree, but I will

be back to the hospital by one this afternoon. Do you think you could bring her and meet me up there?"

Peg looked back toward the stairs. Her children were playing somewhere up and in the back of the house. Their laughter muffled. Willa longed to join them. "I need to find someone to watch the kids," she said. "But sure. I don't know when to expect David and Simon back?"

"I can take her," Tipper said. "I'll drive her there. I want to go anyway."

"Are you sure? I'm worried," Peg whispered, ineffectively, as Willa could still hear her.

"I'm worried *they* are going to get in here somehow."

"Doubtful," the doctor said. "We're watching pretty closely."

"Maybe just take my car to be safe," Peg said.

"And by the way, Willa," Michael Eagle Eyes said. "You can bring your dog to the hospital with you."

Willa felt relief. She reached down and stroked Champion's gray muzzle. "You can see him," she said quietly.

"Eagle eyes, remember?" he said before turning and disappearing down the hall and out the front door.

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Tipper and Willa were in Peg Bearbull's old jeep, traversing the washed out road once used by workers going back and forth, to and from the Homestake mine. Willa wondered about the treasures of the Earth. What made certain things valuable and others not? The Sioux, she'd been told, valued quartzite. They used it to fashion jewelry for their women and headdresses for their warriors. But they didn't care about the gold. The quartzite—Joss had explained to her one day while they were pollinating a row of ailing fruit trees, standing on ladders, moving pollen from sparse white bloom to white bloom with tiny brushes—had been exposed by erosion. "The Sioux would never," he'd said, "penetrate the Hills to dig something from its womb."

She thought about Joss as Tipper drove Mrs. Bearbull's car passed the entrance to the mine. The remnants of the mine were troubling to the Sioux, it seemed, but they kept the entrance preserved, placing a historical marker next to it. Willa put a finger on the glass of the window as they passed by, marking the mine's entrance like a bull's eye. She glanced behind her at Champion in the back seat, sitting in between Peg's handmade child seats, both lined with soft lamb's wool. He was sleeping. Champion could sleep through anything.

"Do they have lambs up here?" Willa blurted.

"Willa," Tipper said, not seeming to have heard her. Tipper had been deep in thought since they left the Bearbull's. "Tell me about Hormidas? I understand he knew Brother Mutte."

"Yes, he did. He told me and my dad that if anything ever happened to him we were to find Brother Mutte. And so we did. Go find him, that is. After Hormidas got sick."

"You drove from Florida to South Dakota to find Mutte?"

"Well, we drove to St. Petersburg first, right after Hormidas got sick. He told us to go there first to look for Mutte. He had met Mutte on his travels, when Hormidas was still looking for me, for *Tu-ha*. But by the time we got to St. Petersburg, the Earthers had left, and the whole city, even the rooftops, had been covered by the ocean. We met someone at a campsite who told us where Mutte had gone."

"And then you drove to South Dakota?"

"We did, but Hormidas died on the way, and we stopped to bury him. In Nebraska."

"That's where you met those boys? Who came to find you at the ghost wedding?"

"Yes." Willa didn't really want to talk about that. Tipper seemed different to her. Her energy had shifted. Her smell had changed, too. Candy. Like sugar. Tipper had begun to smell sweet. And her raw, red hands were shaking, almost imperceptibly, but there was a nervous energy moving through her that Willa could clearly see.

Tipper had rolled down the window and she was chain-smoking hand-rolled cigarettes. She had a row of them in a worn metal case etched with black flowers, and she kept flipping the case open with one hand and shaking another one loose. They were south of Lead now, heading through what was once Deadwood. They made a turn west at the bottom of the road and headed back up again, around the outside of the Hills.

"And how did he die?" Tipper asked. "Hormidas, what made him sick?"

"He had cancer. I know what made him sick because I dreamed about it. I had tried to heal him, and instead I killed him."

"What do you mean you killed him?"

“I had tried to heal him, and dream his dreams, but Hormidas’ dreams were too powerful for me to push to the in-between-place. And so I killed him, or maybe something else did. He had a *bugaloo*.”

“What do you mean you dreamed his dreams?” Tipper asked.

“That’s what happens, sometimes. When I heal people. I fall asleep and dream their dreams. Like in the kitchen earlier, with Simon. I dreamed his dream. I lived his sickness.”

“What sickness?”

“Simon is sad. He has something choking him on the inside. A memory. Something he did, or thinks he did. But it wasn’t his fault. I’m going to tell him that when I see him. I dreamt Simon’s dream, about his son. And it wasn’t his fault. I pushed Simon’s sadness to the in-between-place. I think I *healed* him.” She could feel Tipper looking at her.

Tipper pulled the Jeep into an overlook that dipped out over the canyon and down into a dry creek bed. This side, the west wall of the Hills, was exposed to the winds and the dust had covered all the rocks and the dying trees. The river was gone, absorbed by dust. Tipper blew smoke in Willa’s direction. “What do you mean you healed Simon?” The engine was noisy. It didn’t like standing still. “What wasn’t his fault?”

Willa hesitated to tell her. She didn’t normally share with people what she felt and saw in other people’s dreams.

Tipper was changed. Her eyes looked wilder than usual. Willa wanted to put a hand over her chest and feel Tipper’s energy, but instead she folded her hands in her lap and concentrated on them. She listened for *Tu-ha* in the wind. “Simon’s son died,” Willa conceded. “That was

Simon's dream. His son's death. His son was little. Simon was driving a truck, pulling his bees on a trailer, and they took a turn and the truck tipped over, the trailer and

And Simon's bees exploded into a dark cloud all around them. And Simon's son was dead. His body had flown through the front window of the truck. And in Simon's dream, there was a slow explosion of glass, and blood, and bees. And in the dream, his son broke apart into tiny pieces and fell, all mixed in with the bees, like rain. They fell like a sticky past, cold jelly all over him. All over the grey pavement. They covered Simon's grey overalls, they clogged his eyes and his nose and his ears. Everything." Willa was crying, but it wasn't until a round drop hit her hands that she noticed. She looked over at Tipper who was also now concentrating on her own hands. She, too, was crying.

"He never told me that."

"It's okay," Willa said. "I pushed that dream to the in-between-place. I gave it to his son to hold. His son is still there, you know. Still connected to him. I saw him in the in-between-place. He had blond hair cut straight across his forehead." Willa made a gesture across her own forehead but Tipper didn't look up. "Everyone we lose is still connected to us, you know."

"No," Tipper said.

"It's true. They are," Willa told her, and she could sense the anger rising in Tipper. "No, Willa. They are not. We can severe ties. Ties can be severed."

"I don't think so," Willa said.

"Willa, what's a *bugaloo*?"

"Why?"

"Because I want to know. You said Hormidas died when you tried to heal him. You said he had a *bugaloo.*"

"Yes, he did. It was when I dreamed Hormidas' dream, when I tried to heal him, that I finally learned about the *bugaloo."* Willa thought to mention *Tu-ha*, to tell her that Hormidas also had *Tu-ha* inside of him, but she thought better of it. It was best not to tell too much.

"Hormidas had a *bugaloo* all along, I guess."

"And so what is the *bugaloo*?"

"I don't think I really know anymore. I thought I did. I thought it was an evil spirit. But then, it turns out, Hormidas had always had it with him, and Hormidas wasn't evil. And I thought Mutte had one, too, but maybe I was wrong."

"What did your teacher say it was?"

"That it's an ancient spirit from the Amazon. The *bugaloo* can take the form of people and animals for a little while, but mainly it lives on Earth as an insect."

"Let me guess. A honeybee?"

"Bees, yes. Not sure about the honey part. And when the *bugaloo* visits a person, it can kill them. And even when it doesn't kill you, it gathers a part of your soul. That's all I know. I'm afraid of the *bugaloo.* I don't think I know how to stop it. "

"That's nonsense," Tipper said, abruptly, and Willa was hurt. But when she looked over at Tipper she could see she was frightened. Her lips were painfully chapped and her lack of sleep was showing in the pillow-patches of gray below her eyes. Even tired, she was still pretty. Willa saw her fox spirit. "We need to get you to the hospital." Tipper put the hand on the wheel as if she was going to drive away but she didn't.

Willa had never told anyone about the *bugaloo* before, but her encounter with Michael Eagle Eyes had renewed her faith in herself. This man, a doctor, had confirmed it. She could see the filament. She did hear *Tu-ha*, and she did dream people's dreams.

"But there was one person who willingly gave *all* of his soul to the *bugaloo*," Willa said, turning now to face Tipper. Tipper was still looking at her hands, but they were now on the steering wheel. "He lived in the Amazon, and when he was alive, he was a powerful medicine man. His people thought of him as a god. I saw him in Hormidas' dream. His name was Shaman Guild, the Puma."

Chapter 21: Tu-ha and The *Bugaloo,* Part III

Deep in the Amazon. Many years ago.

Hormidas stood in his courtyard, filled with lavish plants, and marveled at the light, so strange and beautiful. The scent was heady, pollen-filled, and the sweetness of it was velvet in his nostrils. Ni-kai moved seductively in front of *Passiflora* tree. It's heavy fruit hung dangerously above her head. Ni-kai, as far as he knew, spoke only the Chip-po tongue. But she spoke to him now in English, and he wondered if he might still be dreaming. She told him, "Come." And he did. He crossed the courtyard to her and his toes sunk into the lush moss below him. Smooth rocks were nestled into the corners of the garden, adornments in and of themselves. The rocks were chosen, it seemed by color and shape, to accentuate the plants. How did the rocks get in there, he wondered? He didn't remember bringing them in, and besides, they would have been far too heavy for him to carry.

"Did the Chip-po bring these in here?" Hormidas asked her, somehow confident now in her English. "The rocks?"

Ni-kai didn't answer. Instead, she sunk down into the moss at the bass of the tree. When he wasn't looking, she must have plucked an orchid bloom from the plant curling around the fence post because she was wearing the bloom now in her hair, tucked above her ear. She pressed her back straight against the tree's trunk and opened her legs, exposing the most inevitable, luscious triangle of flesh. It was as if Hormidas floated the short distance between them, and in the next moment his lips had taken hold of his fixation, and he devoured the sweetness of her, and in his turn, she devoured him.

The limb began to brush against the window frame again and woke him. This time, he was asleep under the *Passiflora* tree. The light had changed again. It was less filtered, as if the canopy had parted and let more sun in. It seemed as though there were fewer plants in the courtyard then there had been before he fell asleep. His head was in Ni-kai's lap. He looked into her brown eyes, into her face, which now seemed somewhat gaunter. Her hardness had come back, or maybe it was the satiation of their passion that hardened her to him. He immediately felt the shame of what he'd done, making love to Ni-kai, someone to whom he was there to minister.

"Does it seem like some of the plants have disappeared?" he asked her. He could still taste her. The musk of her coated his throat like honey.

"No. These are the same plants as before you fell asleep."

Hormidas sat up on his elbows. He felt hungry again. Starving, really. He looked at the fruit dangling above them, hanging enticingly from the tree's laden branches. "Is that fruit safe to eat?" he asked her.

"Of course," she said. "Let's eat it. And after we eat together, I have something I want to show you. We have decided to introduce you to our gods, Hormidas. This is a great honor. The garden you have grown proves to me that you are indeed chosen, and so I will take you to them, and you can ask for their favor be bestowed upon you."

Hormidas and Ni-Kai ate and ate. The skin of each fruit seem ready to burst, barely containing the plump flesh and juice inside. His stomach felt distended, but still, he wanted more. The food awakened his appetite for sex, and he ran an exploratory finger up Ni-Kai's thigh, but she placed a hand over his finger and said, "No. We need to walk now."

And so they walked. Hormidas' stash of pebbles that he'd kept for his ventures into the jungle were still in the pockets of his hiking pants, weighing down the sections above his thighs. He began dropping them along the path as they went. He trusted Ni-kai, but if the two of them were to become separated, Hormidas would be lost to the jungle.

He was anxious to visit the Chip-po gods. It meant he was being accepted into the tribe. He had learned, had been instructed before he left for the Amazon, that the Chip-po gods were in the river, but the river was behind them now, and they were moving farther away from it with every step.

His hunger returned, as did his shame for making love to Ni-Kai. He followed her as she sliced a path in front of him through the lush jungle. The branches and fronds kicked back into his face, and bugs tormented his ears with a piercing frequency.

They walked for what seemed like hours, stepping over narrow streams and through small clearings, passed Chip-po huts and small, miasmic pools of water. They were surrounded by insects, lizards, birds and beetles, all the life of the Amazon. Universes, Hormidas thought. Universes could exist here and we wouldn't know it. Suddenly, a hut appeared in front of them. Ni-kai said something in her native tongue.

"Is this it?" Hormidas asked her, but she only shook her head.

She began unwinding a twine door-fastener, and once she'd unspooled it, the door swung open to the inside. She repeated the same perplexing words again and gestured impatiently toward the opening. The entire structure wasn't more than ten feet wide.

"This is it?" he asked. "Your gods?"

Ni-kai said nothing. She stood beside the entrance and let him pass. The hut was dark, except for small strips of light coming in from the thatching. The smell was overpowering, succulent but sodden. “Your gods?” he asked her. The darkness disoriented him. Ni-kai was standing by the door as though she was afraid to enter. She nodded back at him.

“Shaman Guild in life,” she said. “The Puma.” She pointed up in the darkness to one corner of the hut. “Now he is the *bugaloo*.” She gestured to the other direction. “Nishmat,” she said. “The other one was Nishmat. His wife in life. Now she is *Tu-ha.* The only power equal to his. They must be kept together. For balance. *Tu-ha*,” she said, “and the *bugaloo*.”

It was then that a power overcame him. A sensation like electricity. It was as if time had stopped. The air was turned thick like water, maybe it was water, because Hormidas felt as though he was drowning. There was a buzzing all around him. He felt a deep vibration down in the marrow of his bones.

The opening to the hut, the light, and Ni-Kai all disappeared, and Hormidas found himself on his knees. His eyes adjusted and he saw, on two altars at opposite sides of the hut, strange-looking baskets. Smallish, contoured, woven from thick vines. The light of day began to shine inside the hut, and Hormidas heard a voice, a man’s: “Hormidas,” the voice boomed in accented English, not unlike the voice of Pikko. “What is it that you desire?” Then there was a softer voice, a woman’s, from the other side of the hut. She said, “The wonderful thing, Hormidas, is that you get to choose. Aren’t you the lucky one?”

“Mother?” Hormidas asked, confused by the light, the sound, the smell. Hadn’t his mother said that same thing to him once? Or maybe that had been a dream?

“What is it,” the man’s voice asked again, ”that you desire?”

And while Hormidas tried to hold the good firmly at the front of his mind, something deep within him had already made a choice. In a sort of vision, sped up in time, he saw all the things he'd ever hoped and prayed for, the earnestness of his desire to change, the will he had to serve. But ultimately, he lacked the faith to choose differently.

Life, as he saw it there on his knees in the hut in the jungle, seemed too unjust, too corrupt, too short for him to choose for anything but himself. And so his will made the choice for him. He closed his eyes and the image of his desire burned a visage into his mind, a glowing shadow that appeared before him in exquisite detail: Luci.

When he awoke again, he was back in his hut. The garden, while still impressive, was now only ordinarily so. He was hungry but not starving, and within an hour, Luci appeared at his hut with her pail of fish and bread. She also had a note for him. It had come ahead on one of the small fishing boats. His mission was returning for him. They were sending a boat, a charter. It would arrive in two days.

And as he expected she would, Luci said, "Hormidas, I want to come with you." They were the same age. She was beautiful, and married, and he was there doing God's work, or so he thought. But as he knew he would, he kissed her deeply, and she tasted of rain, and he thought of the universes in the rainforest and wondered, perhaps, if he existed there again and again, many clones of himself? And if he did, would he be stealing another man's wife from the Amazon jungle, or would he have chosen differently?

And so he arranged for Luci to follow him, not on his charter, but on one of the riverboats. He hadn't spent any of the cash he'd brought with him on the mission, and so he gave

half of it to one of the shadier tour-guides to sneak Luci out of the jungle. She crept out of her hut on a rainy night, leaving Pikko sleeping on their cot in the dark.

But the night before Hormidas left on his charter up the Amazon, he went deep into the jungle again. Intoxicated by the power of the Amazon gods to grant him Luci, he followed the stones he'd cleverly placed on the path the day he followed Ni-kai to the hut. This time, the door was already open. He didn't feel the same power upon entering as he did on his previous visit, but there was a presence all the same. He climbed up on a small stool that was turned over inside the hut, and he took down one of the baskets. What before had seemed an altar was now only a shelf.

He knew immediately this time what was in the basket, and he wondered how he could have missed it before? Bees. He didn't dare open the lid to the skep, which seemed to be fused shut anyway with some kind of sticky substance. He put the basket down and waited to see if he would hear the voices again. He closed his eyes. Nothing. The other basket was up on the other shelf, across from him. From it also came the sounds of bees. He did not know that day which was *Tu-ha* and which was the *bugaloo,* so he took them both. He would soon learn the difference.

Tu-ha left them early on because, Hormidas thought, it had become their habit to ignore her. He and Luci woke up one morning, and the basket was empty. The *bugaloo,* however, they could never shake, even when they tried.

Many times, over the decades to come, they tried to rid themselves of those bees, leaving them on railcars, dropping them in rivers, but to no avail. The huge, black, mannish bees would

always return. And Hormidas remembered what Ni-kai had told him: that they must be kept together.

He and Luci did indeed live a good life, with all the abundance and frivolity that money could buy, thanks to the *bugaloo*. Until the famine came. Even the *bugaloo* struggled against the changes that came upon the Earth. And it was around this time that Luci disappeared. She had gone alone to hike in Mesa Verde canyon. Luci liked to be alone.

After all their years together, Luci would still, on occasion, wake up momentarily lost. She would think she was still in the jungle and ask for Pikko, and then she would remember. Hormidas was tormented by her confusion and, despite their comfortable happiness, was always ashamed of what he'd done. And although he was hardly able to admit it, Hormidas felt some relief when Luci disappeared. Because along with Luci went the *bugaloo*.
Hormidas, although distraught over Luci, was relieved to be free of the bees. He thought, finally, with the *bugaloo* gone, he could repent. There was still time.

And then, one morning, Hormidas got a call from the Peacekeepers that a floater had found Luci sitting under an overhang in a carved out structure tucked into the shadows of the mesa. "Not too remote a place," the man said. "Easy enough for the guy to find her without much trouble, but just kind of tucked away, as if she had sat down to take some shade." Luci had his phone number stitched into her backpack, the man said. Hormidas still had a cell phone then, one of the last they made.

She had died, the Peacekeeper said, seated where she was. The cause of death looked to be a heart attack. Hormidas thanked him and told him he'd be on his way to collect her. But before the man hung up he said, hesitantly, as if he couldn't decide whether or not he wanted to

mention it, “Luci had been positioned perfectly, I guess, in that dry environment…” He seemed to want Hormidas to coax him on. He wasn’t going to. He knew what the man was going to say. “Well, I don’t know how you’re going to take this,” the man said, “but it was the oddest thing. A hive of bees had found their way inside of her.” The man coughed into the phone uncomfortably. “The oddest thing,” he said again.

“What did you do with the bees?” Hormidas asked.

“We had someone come and collect them, take them somewhere else.”

“Okay,” Hormidas said and hung up.

It was two days before the *bugaloo* returned to him. It was only then that Hormidas realized he was stuck. And so it seemed there was only one thing left for him to do: find *Tu-ha.* And so, Hormidas did what he and Luci had never thought to do. He set out in search of *Tu-ha.* And it was the *bugaloo* that led him to her, after many years, too many years, to a ranger’s cabin in Myakka State Park. It was there he found a woman. Not just a woman but a womb. Not just a womb but a child. And sure enough, the child brought about the thing that Hormidas needed for his salvation. The balance was finally restored, and together, Willa and Hormidas found the power to set his wrongs to right: *Tu-ha.*

Just as Hormidas knew she would be, Willa was a gifted healer. She had *Tu-ha* always on her side. And this is because, that young woman upon whose belly his bees had alighted, loved her daughter with all her heart and set her whole spirit to love and protect Willa, and so that love transcended Katherine in death. *Tu-ha* had chosen Katherine through which to work, and after Katherine died in the ranger’s cabin, Hormidas and Cass had set her body on a cliff, twenty-feet

up, southward-facing. And after a few weeks, a hive of fat, luxurious honeybees had collected in her corpse. And with the *bugaloo, Tu-ha* brought balance into their lives.

Tu-ha was, Hormidas learned, once he was no longer fixated on the material longings of life and flesh, much more powerful than her counterpart, the *bugaloo*. Once invited into his life, he began to see that she had been there all along. She was so ubiquitous, he found her easy to overlook. She came again and again in honeybees, but also in other animals and people, in the wind, and later, moments before his death, into his own heart. But there were some who freely gave her their whole soul, those to whom *Tu-ha* remained the closest. People like Nishmat, and Katherine, and Willa.

But Hormidas had been wrong. He'd tried to be rid of the *bugaloo* and its constant craving and depravity, its selfishness and rage. He thought, perhaps, that Willa was the answer, perhaps she would be the one who could unshackle him from his burden? But in the end, Hormidas finally accepted the two things he had been told in the jungle: first, you have to take them together, and second, you get to choose. Wasn't he the lucky one?

Chapter 22: Lambs

Willa watched as Tipper flipped the cigarette case open again. The car continued to protest their idling.

"Do you know how to get to Doctor Eagle Eye's hospital?" she asked Tipper.

"Sure," she said. "We'll go in just a minute." She flipped the case closed. She turned on the car's old radio, tuned into the static, then turned it off again. "Willa, do you really believe that people stay with you, even after they're gone, after they die?"

"Yes," she said. "Of course they do. The connections are always there. Even if you can't see them."

"Have you been to a Have-town before?"

"Sure," Willa said. "A few times, to heal people."

"Did you know that they are full of savages?"

"What do you mean?"

"This thing, the *bugaloo*, I think they closed it in with them."

"Maybe." Willa thought of Mrs. Cassavant and her tissue-paper skin. "I felt a *bugaloo* in a Have-town once."

"Everyone has guns and they are always afraid, trying to keep people out, trying to keep their way of life in. They are experts at pretending." Tipper's voice was hollow. Two eagles turned a sideways "eight" in the sky above them.

"I think those birds just made an infinity sign," Willa said, craning to watch the birds as they disappeared into the tree line at the top of hill in front of them.

“Birds do that,” Tipper said, dreamily. “Birds aren’t supposed to struggle in the wind.” But birds did struggle against the wind now, and the sediment, many died or were disoriented by the howlers. But at that moment the wind was still, and the sky was blue.

“Do you think they have lambs up here?” Willa asked. She wanted to see a lamb.

“Probably, they seem to have everything, don’t they? Willa, do you think I have this thing, this *bugaloo*?”

“I don’t know,” Willa said. “I would have to feel inside of you.”

“You say you killed your teacher. Do you really believe that?”

Willa thought about this for a minute. “No,” she said, finally. “I just couldn’t heal him.”

“I killed my father,” Tipper said, and now she looked over at Willa, her eyes were searching, seeking. Willa wondered what it was Tipper was looking for.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. I’m really not. I had to do it. I couldn’t stand it anymore.”

“Is that why you left the Have-town?”

“Yes. It is. I left and came to live with the Earthers.”

“Why did you kill him?”

“Because he was going to kill me. Well, at least I thought he would. He had made me—“ She stopped here, as if considering what to say. “He made me his second wife. Do you know what that means, Willa?”

“I think so.”

“And the Peacekeepers will take me back to the Have-town, and who knows what they’ll do to me. And I can’t stay here in the Hills. The Earthers will eventually get in. They will keep

trying. This place isn't a fortress. We will have no peace here. They will keep trying and trying, unless…"

"Unless, what?" Willa asked.

"Unless you go back with them. They need you, Willa. They need your power, or the power people think you have, to keep them together. To give them hope."

"Simon won't go back there now. Bullbear will protect us."

"No, Willa," she said. "He won't. Because he can't."

It was then that Willa noticed four figures walking through the dusty canyon, crossing the dry riverbed. Tipper saw them, too. She looked from them to Willa, but she didn't say a word.

Within a minute, Willa made out the smallest figure, a girl. It was Wren. She started to open the door. Tipper put a hand on her knee. "No," she said. "Wait."

It took about ten minutes for Dane, Mars, Max, and Wren to ascend the forty-foot canyon along an old, stone footpath. Willa watched and listened, and she felt the fear rise in her, the familiar humming: the *bugaloo. Tu-ha* whispered to Willa. She was near, and Willa knew that she must be still to listen for her.

Wren came straight to Willa's window and tapped on the glass. "Open," she mouthed. Her lips were white. She looked tired and as if she hadn't eaten. Willa looked over at Tipper, who was getting out of the driver's side and walking over to Dane. Mars waved a hand to Willa but stayed at his father's side. Willa looked to Tipper, but when she didn't turn around, so she got out of the car and fell into the arms of her friend.

"Mutte's dead," Wren whispered. "You can come home now."

Willa pulled away from her friend. She had one of Wren's dark hairs in her mouth. It tasted of sweat. Willa could feel Wren's fear, her hesitation. "What are you doing here?" Willa asked her.

"We came on a bee-hunt," Wren said. "We parked the truck down below. Dane said we had to come on foot."

"Where's your net? Your capturing jar?" Willa asked.

Wren considered this for a moment, and then said, softly, "I don't know."

In that moment, Willa thought she heard *Tu-ha* speak to her, but she couldn't be sure. Dane came around the front of the car, Mars and Tipper behind him. He put an arm around Wren, and said, without emotion, "Willa, you need to come back to the campground."

"No," Willa said. "Simon wouldn't want me to."

"Sorry, but you don't have a choice."

Willa closed her eyes, she tried to summon her anger, her fear. She needed, begged, the world to come to still. She opened her eyes again, and she met Wren's startled gaze. Dane had grabbed Wren by the collar of her old flannel work shirt and he had thrust her out over the precipice of the canyon, a sheer drop underneath. Wren's oversized work boots shuffled in the dirt below her. "Come with us, or I toss her."

Willa looked over at Tipper, who was crouching in the road in front of the car. She had her hands over her ears, a cigarette dangling from her lips. She was rocking back and forth. Mars, standing next to her, held his hands out toward Wren, his face strangled in terror. He looked as if he were trying to pull Wren to him with his mind. Max was grinning, looking between Dane and Mars. He was enjoying this.

“Wren!” Willa yelled. “No! No!” She took a step toward Dane, and he thrust Wren forward further. Wren was panicked. Tears and mucus ran down her red cheeks. Wren was biting her bottom lip, and a small trickle of blood flowed down her chin. Champion was growling, fur on end. *No,* Willa said in her silent voice, *heel.*

“Okay,” Willa said. “I’ll go with you.”

Dane looked satisfied. He relaxed his grip and let out a stream of air. “Good,” he said, and as casual as if he were tossing a pebble into a stream, he threw little Wren off the edge of the canyon. The world didn’t come to still although Willa felt some of the same sensations: the slowing of time, the changing of light. She held her breath and closed her eyes. Wren made a single, squeaky bark and then all Willa heard was the breaking of the dried branches and a distant scattering of rocks, and then nothing.

Tipper launched herself up from the ground. “Dane, what the fuck? What the fuck? What the fuck? You didn’t say anything about *killing* anyone?”

“Didn’t I?” he said. “Max, you drive. Tipper hop in the passenger seat. Me and my boy and the new prophet will get in the back.” To Willa, he said. “Got that puppet? You gonna be our new carnival side-show.”

No one spoke. Willa had avoided Mars’ face. The tears, the hot stinging kind, cut flaming paths down her cheeks. Now, in the backseat, she watched Max’s profile. Dane had thrown Mrs. Bearbull’s lamb car-seats over the cliff, the same way he’d thrown Wren, and he was next to her now, breathing heavily, his t-shirt tight across his belly. She felt Mars next to her, too, but she refused to look at him. Champion they’d left in the road, but Willa knew he’d follow. He always knew how to find her.

“I hate you,” Willa said. “I hate you all.”

“Good,” Dane said. “Drive slowly. Park at the base of the Hills and we’ll walk out. They aren’t looking for anyone leaving. We can go out the way we walked in.”

Tipper stared out the window. Silent. Willa noticed she wasn’t smoking anymore. *Tu-ha* was silent, too.

At the base of the Hill, the four of them climbed out of the car. They had walked in silence alongside a small tributary that led out of the west canyon. Willa walked directly behind Tipper. Tipper’s flip flops had broken, and they made a slapping sound against the dry ground, slapping at the fallen pine and spruce needles. “I hate you,” Willa said to her back. “What did they give you for this?”

“My freedom, Willa. All I want is my freedom. I get money, and an RV, and a promise that no one is going to come looking for me. That’s what I got, okay?”

“And what about Simon?” Willa asked.

“Shut up,” Dane said. “Just shut up. Walk, don’t talk.”

Willa noticed as Tipper’s shoulders slumped. She reached into her rag purse and fished around for something, probably her cigarettes, but she didn’t seem to find what she was looking for. She looked back at Willa, and her face had changed. The anger and wildness were gone. Her eyes were pleading. *Tu-ha* spoke the truth. Willa decided it was best not to trust.

There was a narrow ledge that jutted out above the canyon ahead, about three feet wide and a hundred feet long. It was at least another hundred feet down. “It’s narrow but it’s safe enough. It’s the way we came, right kids?” Dane said. “That little Wren sure was brave, wasn’t she boys? Couldn’t wait to catch some bees.”

Dane stepped out onto it first. Mars stepped on after him, but Dane turned quickly and admonished his son. “No, dumbass. Tipper first. Then the prophet. Then Max and then you.” Tipper fell in line behind Dane. Willa tried to ignore Mars’ presence, but she sensed his shame. She felt the hate swell in her chest. She wished she had Hormidas’ basket. She wished for a *bugaloo*, something into which she could thrust the hate and rage she felt. Somewhere she could grow her pain, so she could make it manifest into the world. So she could punish someone for Wren, for her father. She wanted Simon. She thought of Michael Eagle Eyes. He had said to trust him. There was no one she could trust, anymore. Not even *Tu-ha.*

Halfway across, the wind picked up and the four of them stopped and pressed their backs against the limestone cliff face. Ten yards ahead of Dane, the ledge widened to about five feet. Willa thought maybe she should jump. Maybe she could fly her spirit in just the right moment, let her body fall, live in the air with *Tu-ha.* Just maybe. The wind abided and they began walking again. Dane called over his shoulder, telling them to slow down. He edged his big body to the side and stopped for a moment to assess their progress. With only twenty feet left before they reached the other side of the crevice, Willa could see a howler-ravaged hill with a footpath leading down the other side of the canyon to the road below.

And just as Dane stepped into the wider space, Tipper launched herself on him. The two spilled over the edge in a tangle. Tipper’s floral skirt filled with air, and it seemed for a moment as if they might fly, lift with the air in the canyon and soar to the other side. But they didn’t. They separated, two distinct shapes, and fell straight to the bottom. Unlike Wren, this time there were screams, and the rolling thud of their landing reverberated in the canyon. Willa had fallen to the ground and grabbed dirt and rocks with her fingertips, clinging to the loose earth. She

tucked her face under her arm, and below her, in the canyon next to a small, bubbling creek she saw them.

It was then that she heard the struggle behind her. Max was making his way toward Willa and Mars had pinned him to the canyon's face. Both boys were red-faced and tearful.

"I'll kill that little witch," Max screamed in Mars' face, spit gathered frothy in the corners of his mouth. "Your dad! What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"No."

They made their way across the remainder of the ledge to a footpath that lead to the road. Max had Willa by the back of the shirt collar. She was having trouble breathing. She kept thinking of Wren and Tipper and gagging through tears and Max's pull at her neck. At the base of two pine trees, Max through Willa onto the ground. With one hand, he unbuckled his pants. Mars grabbed him by the shoulder and Max turned and hit him square in the jaw, sending Mars to the ground. Max pointed a finger at her. "Undress, little—"

But Willa never heard the name that Max had selected for her. Champion burst from the treeline, jaws agape, teeth bared, flank flexed, and despite his age, he managed an impressed vertical leap. His jaws connected with Max first on the upper arm, then later, once he was on the ground, around the throat. Mars and Willa tied Max up using both of the boys' belts and began walking back to the car. Willa was silent, scanning the bottom of the canyon for Wren's body. It was there next to the confluence of two streams that she saw them: sheep. They did have sheep.

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Willa had started school in the Hills, with Mars. She still wouldn't speak to him, and he didn't speak to her, either, but they stayed near one another, at lunch, after school. They road home together on the bus: backpack, lunchbox. Willa went home to the Tuscany Motor Coach, which Simon now kept parked at the bee-glade, and Mars to Marlene's cabin, where he now lived. Mars was a new son, not a replacement, for Marlene. Willa knew someday she would forgive him. Mars had, after all, also lost a great deal. They'd returned Max to the Earthers, but Willa had heard, around Bearbull's table when she wasn't supposed to be listening, that Bossman had left the compound, taking Max with him, and while some of the Earthers were still there, trying to raise up a new leader, trying to grow crops and stay alive, they were struggling.

In the evenings, Willa would study with Michael Eagle Eyes. He taught her the ways of the *Oceti Sakowin*. He showed her the sacred places in the Hills, and their corresponding points in the heavens. She still heard *Tu-ha,* and even Hormidas sometimes, but she heard them both less and less. Eagle Eyes assured her that all is perfect in the Heaven, in the *Khê Sapa* above, and that she could rest now. And at night, he would teach her to see the connections, the Earth and sky and all the people and creatures in between. They would look in the sky for Katherine, Cass, Hormidas, Wren, and even Tipper. She would try and show Simon what she'd found in the sky, too, but he rarely wanted to look. But she could sense Simon was happy, happier than he was after Tipper died. Willa thought it was because she was going to be a doctor, a scientist like him. They buried Dane on the Sleeping Giant with the other Earthers. It was the last time they used that sight as a burial ground. Simon buried Tipper under a tree near his bee-boxes, somewhere he could keep an eye on her. Willa forgave her right away. She had done the best with what she

knew, and after all, she had a fox spirit. Hormidas said that while foxes are excellent at deception, they themselves are easily mislead.

She went, many times, with Bearbull and Simon, looking for Wren. They never found her. Bearbull said an animal probably drug her away, but Willa imagined other possibilities. Perhaps she was able to fly her spirit, or maybe she became a hive of bees, or a bird? Willa would go on looking for her. She would know Wren when she found her.

And the Earth no longer came to still. Instead, it continued to turn, and change, and evolve. And people came and went. And in the Hills, bees would come and go. Plants and crops would bloom and turn again to seed, despite the howlers and their frequent rages. There were still plenty of people to heal, but Willa left that work to Michael Eagle Eyes. And she still had *Tu-ha* and, yes, the *bugaloo.* But Willa knew she had a choice. And for that, she thought she was the lucky one.

PART II

TRUE FOR BEES: A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

The novel *True for Bees* sets out to tell the story of two drastically different characters—Willa, a child preacher, and Simon, an entomologist and former migratory beekeeper. It is set in a dystopian future, one in which food scarcity and climate change has brought about a regressive society marked by fear-based isolation. The setting alone dictates *True for Bees* a "speculative novel," one that considers a world in which a certain set of conditions have been changed or altered in such a way so as to be outside generally regarded objective-experience. But even without the futuristic dystopian setting, a human with preternatural abilities—the character of Willa—moves the novel firmly into the realm of the speculative. And although the plot draws heavily upon myth, archetype, and symbolism, *True for Bees* is ultimately a story about the very human experience of its main characters. Because a novel should be, at its core, about the journey of its characters, the decision to focus a close narrative perspective on a magical character like Willa Walker ultimately altered everything about *True for Bees* and forced me to consider more carefully the implications of narrative point of view.

True for Bees began as a short story, one that was never completed, about a missionary in the Amazon. The impetus for the story was a sermon I had heard long ago about a missionary in the mid-twentieth century who had been stranded, separated from the rest of his mission and was then ostracized and abandoned by the tribe he was ministering to in the remote Amazon jungle. In the sermon, the missionary eventually wins over the tribe by growing a remarkable garden outside his hut, a feat he achieves, the priest told us, with the aid of prayer. The missionary's sudden, spectacular garden earns him the attention and respect of the tribe. As a reward, the tribe's spiritual leader takes him out into the rainforest to visit their tribal idols, which they kept in a remote hut, high on a shelf in a basket. The priest told us that when the missionary stepped

into this hut, he became immediately ill, overwhelmed by a menacing presence emanating from the basket, so much so that the he had become temporarily paralyzed.

The homily was, of course, about faith. It was about perseverance in the face of persecution and the danger of worshipping idols. It was a warning about the presence and temptation of lesser gods in the world. According to the priest, these gods in our modern society could come in the form of greed, ambition, vanity, and other cardinal sins. But at the time, and perhaps still today, I was mainly focused on the plight of the missionary than the homily.

And at the end of the priest's story, the missionary rushes from the hut as soon as he regains the use of his limbs, again through prayer, and is affirmed in faith through the victory of his God over the lesser Amazonian gods. As a consequence of his incredible garden, he was able to gain the respect of the tribe he was there to convert. And all these years later, I have never been able to cast this story from my mind.

Although captivating, the tale of the missionary is, of course, somewhat implausible. It is a parable encasing some kernel of truth. Also, it seemed unfair that the Amazon tribe was preemptively doomed by their belief in "lesser" gods; the story is also bigoted in many ways. But what gnawed at me most was this: *What on earth was in that basket*?

I wrote the first version of the Amazon short story six years ago in an attempt to answer the question of what was in the basket. The short story was a dramatically reimagined version of the missionary's experience. Added to the story were supporting characters: Pikko, the missionary's translator; Pikko's wife; and a shawoman, who was struggling to take the place of her father, the former shaman who was revered by the tribe. In my version, popular tours of the Amazon River bring tourists to the rainforest, and a young tribal girl goes missing. The

missionary, who I called Hormidas, is blamed and ostracized. After a series of trips out into the jungle to find plants, he manages to grow a garden to sustain himself.

Originally, my short story ended in the same way as the priest's. Hormidas wins over the tribe and is taken into the rainforest to visit the tribal gods where he is subsequently overcome by illness and flees the hut. Afterward, in my short story, he realizes the real power of the basket. The trial with the tribe, the garden, the basket, the entire situation, revealed to him that he was not much different from the tourists on the Amazon River tours, and he leaves South America a changed man.

While I was somewhat pleased with the story, I found it dissatisfying. I still did not know what was in the basket. The basket, I told myself, was ultimately symbolic. It could be open to interpretation, much as in the original story told by the priest. I had a vague notion that in the basket was a kind of mystical fog, an energy center, the collective power given to false idols. Nevertheless, I felt cheated.

Until that point, I had only written realistic fiction. Influenced by my study of Gustave Flaubert, Leo Tolstoy, James Joyce, and Henry James, I was most interested in fiction that demonstrated complexity of character and attempted to capture the nuance of human consciousness. I defined realistic fiction as fiction in which the characters experience situations in keeping with generally acknowledged sensory-experience, or objective reality. I understood that the lines in fiction, between categories, were often blurred. Yet, I sensed myself on the edge of a critical decision. I very badly wanted to put something magical in that basket. I did not want the basket to be a metaphor, a fill-in-your-own symbol. Much as I had the day I heard the story in church, I wanted the basket to contain something *explicit*.

The question of what was in the basket turned out to be more important than I ever could have imagined. It was my intention to remain faithful to the realistic fictional techniques I found so compelling; yet I was determined to make a choice that would dictate the work be, on some level, speculative. The decision I made about the basket, in the end, decided for me what kind of book I was going to write and the result is *True for Bees* in its current form.

The Amazon short story serves as a sub-plot in the current version of the manuscript. It is broken into three parts, and in the basket are bees, very powerful ones. American agribusiness and the plight of the honeybee had been, and still are, a subject of interest to me. I felt that the specifics of honeybees and their evolution alongside that of human beings, as well as our dependence upon them coupled with the rise of Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD), made for an interesting situation for a novel. In writing *True for Bees*, I relied upon and borrowed from ancient stories and archetypal characters in order to tie the plight of *Apis mellifera*, the collapse of the western honeybee, to a speculative, dystopian novel about a child prophet and a beekeeper. In the novel, I depend upon narrative perspective to navigate between the realistic elements and the speculative ones.

In his book *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner calls fiction that borrows technique from both the realistic and speculative "expressionist"; he writes, "the expressionist heightens or intensifies reality by turning metaphor into fact" (50). Gardner explains the confluence of realism and the fantastic as a straight line from Edgar Allen Poe to Franz Kafka. Franz Kafta wrote, "Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams found himself transformed in his bed into a giant insect" as the opening line of his 1915 short story, "The Metamorphosis" (467). A realist, Gardner argues, would have written, "One day Gregor Samsa woke up to the realization

that he was like a cockroach" (50). The difference here is the simile. Gardner concludes that expressionist writers begin not with exterior situations that needed amelioration but with internal ones. According to Gardner, it is their desire to convey perspective through character that leads them to express the internalized in the form of the speculative. Gardner writes, "The world is whatever we feel it to be, so that the situation character must deal with is partly character" (50). Gardner is not suggesting that Gregor did or did not become a cockroach in the story, but instead he is arguing that perception influences situation in the novel, and a metaphor—like awakening as a giant insect—expressed as objective reality, borrowing techniques from realistic fiction, can be incredibly effective. After all, every person experiences a different reality.

In my novel, Simon's narrative point of view resists the speculative. He represents the realistic in the book. Willa, on the other hand, has a decidedly speculative perception. The world as she "feel[s] it to be" is one in which she could slip from her body and fly in her spirit form at any moment. Using a close third-person perspective, I attempted to demonstrate two entirely different experiences taking place in the same world. In *True for Bees,* the situations the characters find themselves are, as Gardner suggests, "partly character," in that they are perceived through the lens of a particular character and often shaded by their particular bias and perspective.

As Wayne C. Booth points out in *The Rhetoric of Fiction,* fiction must pass through the consciousness of a teller, whether that consciousness be presented as an "I" or as a "he or she" (151). The matter of point of view and the positioning of narrative distance are often the most critical choices a writer will make as she sets out to craft a work of fiction. While plot, setting, and character development are key elements in good fiction, character is perhaps the most

important of all. It is through narration that the reader will ultimately experience the story; narration is the very medium through which the story, and its characters, will be understood.

In order to convey character as completely as possible, I attempted a close, third-person narrative point of view. While writing the character of Willa, I endeavored to think like a child her age. When I chose which details around Willa to render at any particular moment, I tried to imagine what would be most important to her.

For instance, in opening scene where Willa is driven out of the swamp to heal Ms. Cassavant, there were critical elements of plot that I was tempted to convey, often wanting to drift, in earlier drafts, into backstory and narrate things that were far outside of Willa's immediate sphere of noticing: specifics about the dystopian world, her father's actions and motivations, the story of Willa and her family's earlier years. Because I wanted the magical, spiritual things that Willa experienced in that scene to be perceived by the reader as character-reported, or in other words the world as Willa experiences it—while still filtered through the narration—I attempted to keep the third-person narration within the sphere of her noticing as much as possible, particularly in the more speculative scenes. In these sections, it is Willa's experience that drives the story. Although the prose is rendered in third-person and occasionally distances itself from her to make broader observation, it is mainly focused on Willa's internal concerns. An example of this occurs early in the novel, during a scene that takes place in Myakka State Park. In the scene, Hormidas and Willa's father, Cass, are preparing to take her to heal a sick woman in a nearby Have-town for which Willa will receive fifty dollars, money the family desperately needs for food:

> Willa thought of the alligator tracks like giant tulips pressed into the silt outside the ranger's cabin, the impression of a tail slicing through them. An alligator had come up out of the swamp and taken their last nanny goat the week before, and they were nearly out of what was left of her milk…Soon the headlights of a car came over the trailhead and illuminated the secret flight of millions of swamp insects. Mrs. Cassavant's son had arrived to pick them up in his convertible. She could hear the engine after he passed the trailhead… There was one other kid who lived nearby in the swamp, at the bottom of the road heading to the highway, and Willa so desperately hoped she would be out front of her camper when they drove by in the convertible. She wasn't.

In these sections, I attempted to filter the narrative through Willa's point-of-view. By doing so, I wanted the situation to remain close to Willa and her immediate concerns. Her family needs a new nanny goat, and Willa's services as a healer will provide money for that, something Willa understands and does not question. She also knows what it means to be hungry and for her family to be to be almost out of their goat's milk. I imagined Willa as concerned with feeding her family as she awaits her ride to the healing.

Still childish, she is excited to be picked up in a car, particularly a convertible. She seeks the attention of the one other child in the swamp, and she hopes to be able to show off during her ride. The comparison of the alligator tracks to tulips, and phrases like "so desperately hoped," I think of as belonging to Willa while the words "illuminated the secret flight of millions of swamp insects" are, in my mind, carrying the weight of third- person narration. While I often tried to free Willa's perspective from its narrative weight, the narration, in third-person, was at

other times indispensible. The flexibility of the third-person narrator allows for broader comment on the scene, a few sentences later:

> Cass had repurposed the ranger's wildlife cameras to create surveillance of their section of the swamp, keeping the system alive with car batteries he'd traded for at the museum's gift shop. Cass came out to the porch after the car passed the first camera on the closed circuit in the kitchen. "You ready, Bear?" Her father called her "bear" back then.

However, in the speculative section that comes after the ride in the convertible, I brought the narrative distance ever closer to Willa's point of view:

> Willa climbed up into Mrs. Cassavant's bed. The two were about the same size, and the old woman immediately curled into Willa like a kidney bean. This didn't bother Willa. Mrs. Cassavant was warm and she felt waxy, like the film that formed on the top of the stagnant water at the edges of the Myakka River. She had tissue paper hands and hard bones protruding everywhere. Willa put one hand on the woman's head and the other on her back, behind her belly. She listened for her silent voice. *Tu-ha* whispered a warning. *Be careful*, she said, *Go slow*. Fluid rattled through Mrs. Cassavant's lungs as she took breath, and Willa felt her struggle. As Hormidas had taught her, she must start with smell. At first there was nothing familiar in Mrs. Cassavant's smell. There was anger to be sure. And something else. Something far worse than anger. And like that, it was upon her.

In this section, it was my intention to make the narration almost imperceptible, attempting to fuse it with Willa's perspective. For this reason, the narration does not pull back for commentary at this critical moment or attempt to take in the scene from a distance. The narrator does not attempt to explain the fantastic or speculative. The desired effect was narration that flowed more freely

through Willa's point of view. The lines "There was anger to be sure. And something else. Something far worse than anger" I hoped would be read as reflecting Willa's consciousness and reporting, perhaps, her private thoughts.

Whereas I wanted a more distanced third-person narrator for many sections of the story, I appreciated its flexibility many times throughout the writing of *True for Bees.* The more speculative sections were designed to be fully realized through character in order to create a sense that the situation itself was, as Gardner puts it, "partly character," not construed by an all-knowing author but passed through the consciousness of the character. And this type of narrative technique, one in which the third-person narrator at times seems synonymous with character, is one that came into prominence in the nineteenth century through practitioners such as Henry James and George Eliot and was perfected in the twentieth century by James Joyce.

In *The Mill on the Floss*, George Eliot was aiming for realism in order to approach as closely as possible the experience of Maggie and the circumstances of her impending tragedy. At the outset of the novel, the first-person narrative perspective quickly blends into the story itself, melting naturally into the opening, giving us an almost cinematic view of the Floss and the surrounding countryside as it appeared before the insidious materialism of the city. Soon after describing the Floss and the mill, the narrator wakens in her armchair, remembering she was about to tell the story of the Tullivers before she fell asleep and dreamt of the sweeping view:

> How lovely the little river is, with its dark changing wavelets! It seems to me like a living companion as I wander along the bank…and this is Dolcote Mill, I must stand a minute or two here on the bridge and look at it…my arms are really benumbed. I have been pressing my elbows into the arms of my chair, and dreaming that I was standing on the

> bridge in front of Dolcote Mill, as it looked one February afternoon many years ago. Before I dozed off, I was going to tell you what Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver were talking about, as they sat by the bright fire in the left-hand parlour, on that very afternoon I have dreaming of. (George Eliot 6)

This bit of meta-narrative shifts into the perspective of conspiratorial storyteller, relaying the story of the Tullivers and their daughter, Maggie. The character in the armchair quickly disappears into the narrative and becomes a limited, third-person narration. Later, she has the ability to report on the intimate thoughts of the her character of focus, tilting her narration into the very mind and perspective of the child, Maggie, "She held her doll topsy-turvey, and crushed its nose against the wood of the chair…She began to dislike Mr. Riley; it was evident he thought her silly and of no consequence" (20). The narrative attempts to capture the very experience of Maggie and words like "topsy-turvey" feel as though they could have originated with the character herself. *The Mill on the Floss* will anticipate Henry James' narrator in "What Maisie Knew" and later the narrative style of Modernists like James Joyce.

James Joyce's novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), he makes use of sounds to mimic the experience of a young child in third-person narration. The novel opens from the perspective of a young Stephen Dedalus:

> Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo…his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face. He was a baby tuckoo. The moocow came down the road where Betty Byrne lived: she sold lemon platt. (Joyce 19)

The cadence of the language, and the repeated assonance in the words "tuckoo" and "moocow" recall the kind of speech used between a parent and a young child. These sounds contribute their own independent meaning to the text, that of the recollection of childhood, the memory of "a very good time" when young Stephen was put at ease by the rhythm of his father's voice. In *Portrait of the Artist*, the third-person narration grows up alongside Stephen Dedalus and renders an experience that is filtered through the consciousness of its point-of-view character. For instance, an older Stephen, in a scene where he is reflecting on the errors he had made in regard to his education and youthful exploits, considers his life as he walks through Dublin on one of his "wanderings." While walking, in the realist style of the *flâneur*, the third-person narration reports on Stephen as he considers his life:

> How foolish his aim had been! He had tried to build a breakwater of order and elegance against the sordid tide of life without him and to dam up, by rules of conduct and active interest and new filial relations, the powerful recurrence of the tides within him. Useless. From without as from within the water had flowed over his barriers: their tide began once more to jostle fiercely above the crumbled mole. He saw clearly too his own futile isolation. (Joyce 106).

Portrait of the Artist is arguably a novel in which effects are achieved through its close, third-person narration. The single word, "useless," clearly belongs to Stephen. And by remaining a filter through which to sift character, the narration becomes infused with character. James Joyce elevates narration to an art form in this novel, and as a result, positions third-person narration as a key element of finely tuned craft.

In an example from contemporary fiction, in Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement,* a close third-person narration with subtle shading of character sets up the dramatic irony, and later the situational irony. In the novel, naive, young Briony witnesses the rape of a friend, for which she accuses an innocent man. In the rape scene, rendered in third-person with Briony as the point-of-view character, McEwan writes, "the bush that lay directly in her path—the one she thought should be closer to the shore—began to break up in front of her or double itself, or waver, and then fork…It was changing its shape in a complicated way, thinning at the base as a vertical column rose five or six feet…The vertical mass was a figure, a person who was now backing away from her" (210). In the novel, the reader knows at this moment only what the character Briony knows, as the point of view reports only from her experience. Yet, when it is later revealed that the rapist is not the person Briony suspects, the reader is still able to sympathize with her, even after the terrible chain of events she sets off with her false accusation. The irony, and thereby the reader's sustained sympathy, comes about because the scene is rendered in third person as Briony experienced it, using a close narrative distance.

In another contemporary example, Charles Baxter's short story "The Disappeared" relies on the close, third-person narration reporting on Anders—a Swedish man bewildered by his experience in Detroit—to communicate a dramatic irony that is complicated in an interesting way by the narration because the reader must speculate from the limited rendering of Ander's experience in a close, third-person experience. Anders' apparent misreading of flippant sarcasm, combined with a kind of self-created American mythology, leads him to believe there is a mysterious condition in America called "disappeared," a condition which he himself manifests

when he is later attacked on the street, apparently by an organ-thief of some sort. Yet, Anders assumes this ordeal was what was meant by "disappeared" (Baxter 68-71).

Before I had even conceived of the character of Willa Walker, the fate of *True for Bees* was sealed by my decision to turn "metaphor to fact," as Gardner puts it, moving from a realistic perspective to a more expressive one. This shift occurred when I decided that inside the basket was to be a colony of magical bees. This decision also led to my creating the character of Simon, the entomologist and beekeeper.

In an early draft of the novel, Simon is hiding out in the Black Hills with a religious cult, attempting to cultivate honeybees and using the group as both cover and support. The character of Willa the child preacher had yet to be folded into the narrative. It was around this time that I read an article on *nytimes.com* by Samantha Shapiro called "The Child Preachers of Brazil."

The article was about an eleven-year old girl named Alani Santos who began performing miracles when just a few months old. Before that, while Alani's mother was still pregnant with her, her parents, Pentecostals, were told that the baby was going to be " a pearl…used by God " (qtd. in Shapiro). As in the story of the missionary, I found myself thinking often about the little girl from this article. Her diligence and faith, as well as her spiritual perspective, certainly seemed astounding, even otherworldly. The young girl's workload was heartbreaking. But what I found most compelling was how completely and resolutely Alani believed in the miracles and revelations she performed. It seemed her only goal or interest in life was to help the pained and suffering, those who begged her on a daily basis for healing and called out to her with appeals they would otherwise direct to God.

While ultimately the character Willa bears no resemblance to Alani Santos, I think of their motivations as being the same. They both had been reared from birth to believe they were gifted, endowed with special gifts and chosen by God, and they both experience the world as a mystical one. Their perspective of the world reflects their experience in it.

In early drafts, I attempted to render Willa's sections in first-person. I finally abandoned this after a year because the perspective was too limiting. The speculative scenes, without a third-person narrator through which to filter them, were too surreal and disjointed. The realism in the novel was abandoned, and the perspective shift between my two main characters seemed jarring, too divergent to be effective. Willa was also less sympathetic in first-person. That point of view made it more difficult to appreciate her from Simon's perspective because the distance between them, in terms of their view on the speculative, was too vast a chasm.

Narrative point of view can be either dispassionate or dramatically invested, it may be omnipotent or limited, presented as a character in the work or an outside entity, and it might tell the story in the first-person or third, or perhaps a combination of the two.

In realistic fiction, writers like Henry James, Honoré de Balzac, and George Elliot, developed conventions and standards for narration and demonstrated an evolution in thinking about the rendering of character. Although difficult to draw a definitive line between narrative technique and literary movement—for instance, symbolism is present in Romanticism, Naturalism, Realism, Modernism and beyond—realism in the novel, as represented by the close rendering of a character's internal life, is generally thought to commence with European Naturalism, or Realism in the United States (Matthiessen 365).

During these movements, narration begins to address the intimate, internal mechanisms of character—the psychology of complex understanding and motivations—that are synonymous with the modern novel. With a standard set by Gustave Flaubert, and further developed by Henry James, Jane Austin, James Joyce, and others, the novel turned its focus to the internal working of character, and much of that work is done through choices in narration.

Narrative theory and practice draw their earliest influences from the classical theories of Aristotle and Plato. These mimetic theories, where art strives to imitate life, remain the primary model for literary theory and practice up through the Romantic period (roughly 1790's-1860's). American Realism and European Naturalism of the nineteenth century coincide with the emergence of psychological and early Marxist approaches to literature, as well as Darwinism, the rise of industrial nations, and the challenges of urban life.

Before Realism, transcendentalists placed all possibilities within the realm of the human soul, which finds its inspiration in nature. Heavily influenced by Plato and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Romanticism, Ralph Waldo Emerson believed that possibilities are not located in religion or in the realm of the supernatural but are within one's self and manifested through artistic expression. F. O. Matthiessen explains that Emerson believed in "the superiority of the spirit to the letter, of the vision to the words, of the soul that lies behind all expression to any embodiment of it" (Matthiessen 25).

For Emerson, the artistic expression of the human soul communicates deity itself: "the basis of poetry is language, which is material only on one side. It is a demi-God" (Emerson, "Society" 43). In a sense, language is as much a creator of experience as it is a reflection upon it. Emerson and his contemporaries, who influenced Realists like Henry James and William

Dean Howells, moved away from a supreme deity and toward the power and possibility of the human being, himself.

In his essay on James and William Dean Howells, John W. Crowley's asserts that Henry James' belief was that identity transcends the material world, and he attributes this to a residual transcendental influence on James (2921). Crowley argues that James' preference for the interior world can also be connected to the new psychology being ushered in by his brother, William. The result, Crowley claims, was a lot less of what William Howells called "framing the picture," or what is also called setting the scene (2932). His conclusion is that James had a tendency to dismiss exterior setting in favor of what for him the real setting of the novel: the rich internal life of the human being.

Donald Pizer presents the onset of Realism in the nineteenth century as a debate between the everyday and the ideal. He claims that although many authors, both canonical and non-canonical, can claim inclusion in the movement, the exemplars of American Realism are William Dean Howells, Henry James, and Mark Twain. He makes another distinction between the terms "Realism" and "Naturalism" as they relate to European Literature: in European Literature, the terms are used interchangeably, and the emergence of European Realism happened earlier, with Émile Zola's *realisme*, and included a heavy emphasis on determinism that is lacking in American Realism but will emerge later with American Naturalism.

In Louis J. Budd's essay "The American Background," he gives historical context and explains the rise of American Realism as the result of a more complex set of factors including: Darwinism and the idea that all experience operates under laws, the Scientific Revolution, the rise of psychology and work of William James, and a middle-class schizophrenia, "the split

between laissez-faire economics and denial of the brutality it entailed," which was a split between professed religious views and their actual expression in mainstream life (Budd 916). While embracing the role of writer as a member of the cultural elite, something Mark Twain rejected, Budd claims that Howells was a gentle force for social change. Howells offered an objective, realistic look at American life including myriad religions, ethnic groups, and economic hardships. Howells' 1882 novel *A Modern Instance*, for example, was unique in that it dealt with a character who was unabashedly agnostic, Bartley Hubbard, and depicted realistic life in an increasing capitalistic and urban Boston. It features an honest depiction of marital struggles brought on by the pressures of modern life, addressing the issues of divorce and infidelity in realistic terms.

William and Henry James' father, Henry Sr., was a freethinking, utopian socialist with an independent income, somewhat apart from New England society (Kazin 4402). Kazin writes that this led both men to become "exceedingly mental beings," which led William on a journey of self-exploration that would eventually result in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). This would lead Henry to develop a solidly interior form of character development.

Mark Twain does not ascribe to James' form of psychological realism, but instead uses humor to debunk lingering Romanticism and satirize the hypocrisy and moralizing conventions of late nineteenth-century life in the post-Civil War south. In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court,* Twain exposes the savage cruelty of human nature while at the same time commenting on the ameliorative and necessary nature of culture and society, as demonstrated by our progression out of the Middle Ages.

In contrast to the psychological realism of Henry James, Mark Twain's biting social critique, and exposure of the hypocrisy and racism of the post-Civil War south becomes clearer when he moves from third person in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* to first-person in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In his essay "The Realism of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*," Tom Quirk points to Mark Twain's realism in the use of the vernacular. Written in Huck's first person—a child whose conscience is not fully developed and who is guided quite often by instinct and naivety—Mark Twain a narrative filtered through the consciousness of a child. This narrative filtering gives a realist impression of Huck's experience as the reader moves through his mental processes along with him; and in doing so, the dramatic ironies, the hypocrisy of Aunt Sally's blind bigotry for instance, play out on their own. Alfred Kazin describes Mark Twain's realism as his ability to "catch on paper, as he did in speech, the exact cadence of words as they fall within the mind" (Kazin 3907).

Kazin explains that Ernest Hemingway had acknowledged "the great precedent" to his attention to detail, the realistic effects of his close narration, the detailing of his assemblage of objects in "Big Two-Hearted River," was *Huckleberry Finn.* Kazin offers two paragraphs, Nick Adams assembling his dinner and Huck preparing to flee from Pap Finn, for comparison (Kazin 7515):

From Hemingway:

The beans and spaghetti warmed. Nick stirred them and mixed them together. They began to bubble, making little bubbles that rose with difficulty to the surface. There was a good smell. Nick got out a bottle of tomato catchup and cut four slices of bread. The little bubbles were coming faster now. Nick sat down beside the fire and lifted the frying pan off.

From Mark Twain:

> The old man made me go to the skiff and fetch the things he had got. There was a fifty-pound sack of corn meal and a side of bacon, ammunition, and a four-gallon jug of whiskey and an old book and two newspapers for wadding besides some tow. I toted up a load, and went back and sat down on the bow of the skiff to rest. (qtd. in Kazin 7515)

While it is easy to see here the similarity in rhythm and style, it is also possible to track *Huckleberry Finn*'s influence in Hemingway's third-person narrative filtering from the perspective of a child—a youthful Nick Adams—elsewhere in *In Our Time*.

In "Indian Camp," a young boy takes a boat trip with his father to an Indian camp to attend to a pregnant woman. The narrator renders the harrowing experience by choosing details much in the way a child's perception would naturally select and omit things: "Nick heard the oarlocks of the other boat quite a way ahead of them"; "The Indian who was rowing them was working very hard"; "a dog came out barking" (Hemingway 15-16). These details are not encumbered with adjectives, much as a child in this situation would not attach descriptors to every element of his experience. The tools his father and the doctor is working with, things with which a child would not be familiar, are described as "several things." The difficult, gruesome, portions of the event—the makeshift caesarian and the father's suicide—are described in choppy detail. This might be, as the narrator tells us, because Nick's "curiosity had been gone a long time" (17). Although Hemingway himself points to Mark Twain as his influence, he may have just as easily followed the continuity of the realism of Henry James in the appropriation of a child's narrative perspective. Yet in Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," there are also dreams and visions inspired by nature, much as suggested by Emerson. In Hemingway's

hands, and coupled with his trademark style, the effect is a realistic one. The source of Nick Adams' experience is always understood as originating within himself; the effect may be similar to the supernatural but the realism is maintained.

According to F.O. Matthiessen, realism underscores the importance of the individual personality and rejects "the romantic exploitation of personality"; he argues that this idea was foundational in Henry James and Gustave Flaubert (365). Gustave Flaubert—particularly in his portrayal of the Charles and Emma in his 1865 novel *Madame* Bovary—represents European Naturalism in both its emphasis on natural, versus romanticized, personality and the deterministic nature of his characters' circumstances, their families and inherent individual qualities. Flaubert demonstrates in painstaking detail, at the opening of the story, the elements from Charles' childhood that, in their determinism, laid the foundation for his becoming a cuckolded husband later in life: Charles's difficulties at school, his stutter, and his smothering, domineering mother and resentful, over-compensating father, who Flaubert describes as ashamed of a son who did not live up to his "manly idea of boyhood" (pp. 19-20). In this way, Charles Bovary's situation, the experiences he finds himself in, are indeed "partly character." The nature of Charles' experience is defined, in part, by how he feels about himself.

While European Naturalism's origin—its tenants similar to those of American Realism but with the added quality of determinism, which didn't appear until the emergence of American Naturalism of the late nineteenth-century—is usually attributed to Flaubert in the 1850's and Zola in the 1860's, some critics place it earlier with Balzac in the 1830's. In her 1925 book *The Writing of Fiction,* Edith Wharton argues that the first step toward Realism, "when the 'action' of the novel was transferred from the street to the soul," was taken by the

aristocratic Madame de La Fayette in her 1750 work "The Princess of Cleves" (7). Wharton argues that this early work succeeded in rendering "agonies succeeding each other below the surface" (7).

Another direct connection to *Huckleberry Finn* can be found in the realism of experience, conveyed through language and rendered through point of view, in William Faulkner's 1929 novel *The Sound and The Fury.* The effect is achieved through the rendering of the interior consciousness of Benjy, in first-person:

Caddy uncaught me and we crawled through. Uncle Maury said to not let anybody see us, so we better stoop over, Caddy said. Stoop over, Benjy. Like this, see. We stooped over and crossed the garden, where the flowers rasped and rattled against us. The ground was hard. We climbed the fence, where the pigs were grunting and snuffing. I expect they're sorry because one of them got killed today, Caddy said. (Faulkner 4).

Alfred Kazin attributes Faulkner's influence in *The Sound and The Fury* to "the Freudian emphasis on the interior consciousness and… the already inescapable influence of Ulysses" (Kazin 7145). Wayne C. Booth points out that Faulker would not have been able to write the entirety of *The Sound and the Fury* from only Benji's perspective: "Faulkner can use the idiot for *part* of his novel only because the other parts exist to set off and clarify the idiot's jumble" (152).

While the deployment of language, in the first-person, heightens the realism of the novel—as is the case in *The Sound and the Fury*—it also offers the unique perspective of a character whose experience of the world differs from the norm. The same could be said for Willa's perspective in *True for Bees.* Her perspective deepens the speculative nature of the novel and

presents a contrast to Simon, whose perspective represents the realistic, scientific, and objective in *True for Bees*.

Eric Auerbach describes the fundamental tenants of realism in narrative as "the serious treatment of everyday reality, the rise of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter for problematic existential representation, on the one hand; on the other, the embedding of random persons and events in the general course of contemporary history, the fluid historical background" (491). This form of realism still dominates contemporary, literary narrative; yet as John Gardner points out, realist techniques are often combined with the fantastic in works of speculative fiction.

Beginning with the Greeks and through the Romantic period, literature often featured the supernatural—deities, ghosts and other preternatural phenomena, while realism and naturalism moved distinctly away from the inclusion of supernatural elements. It was not until later in the twentieth century that writers began taking up, with greater frequency, a blending of realistic technique with supernatural elements. A blending of supernatural and realistic elements can be found in the work of Franz Kafta, Vladimir Nabakov, Ray Bradbury, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Douglas Adams, Flannery O'Connor, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, and others. More recently, writers such as Junot Diaz, Octavia Butler, Cormac McCarthy, and Thomas Pynchon have used realistic, literary narrative combined with fantastic elements. Writers such as Denis Johnson have used drug-induced hallucinations on the part of their characters to render a kind of speculative narrative. A distinction can be made, however, in each of these cases between the types of supernatural elements used, how characters perceive them, and whether or not they are explained. Beyond plot, these differences often rely on craft elements such as point of view and

narrative distance, and the effect is either to distance the narrative from an experiential, and often speculative, aesthetic or bring it closer.

An example of this blending, which marries objective realism with elements of the supernatural, is particular to South American writers such as Columbian Gabriel García Márquez who is generally considered the master of magical realism. Márquez uses the technique for the purpose of "parody and historical re-conceptualization…register(ing) social protest against the lingering effects of the process of colonialization" (Ahmad and Afsar 1-2).

In Márquez's magical realism, what is unique is the lack of response on the part of the characters to supernatural phenomena. Stephen Hart writes that Márquez's magical realism "emerged from the gap between the belief systems of two very different groups of people. What for the inhabitant of the 'First World' is magical is real and unremarkable for the inhabitants of the 'Third World'" (260). The townspeople in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* readily accept a gypsy dissolving into a puddle of tar, for example, but magnets and ice baffle and surprise them.

The supernatural, in a broader sense, has been employed throughout the Western Literary Tradition. From the time of Aeschylus, through the Middle Ages in the work of Sir Thomas Malory, and later in the plays of Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare, ghosts, magic, and deities are common. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Romantic and Gothic writers often included elements of the supernatural.

Gardner points out that the blending of realism, as defined by Auerbach, with elements of the supernatural came later. One early example would be E.T.A. Hoffman's 1816 short story "The Sandman," held up by Freud as an example of the supernatural in keeping with realistic human perception and psychology.

In his 1919 essay "The Uncanny," Sigmund Freud offers an aesthetic analysis of certain supernatural elements as perceived in both experience and fiction. The uncanny, according to Freud, occurs at the juncture of the familiar and the unfamiliar; there is something inherently familiar in the uncanny occurring at an unconscious level that makes it a powerful sensation in both fiction and experience. Freud attributes the sensation to repressed childhood fears and emotions, the resonance of old, primal beliefs, and intellectual uncertainty. Incidents that create these preternatural sensations in human experience include omnipotence of thoughts; loss of and/or animation of dismembered limbs; the animation of inanimate objects; the personification of animals; the presence of "the double"; repetition, both in time and compulsive, involuntary actions; the return of the dead; spirits and ghosts; and various forms of mysticism and magic (Freud, "Uncanny" 232-248). Freud points out, though, that the effect in fiction is diminished or non-existent when the writer uses the supernatural to humorous or satirical ends, or within an obviously fictional, fantastic world, such as in fairy tales. He argues that contemporary audiences do not feel mysterious sensations in response to the ghost in *Hamlet* because the fantastic elements are occurring in an obviously imaginative context. In an extended analysis of E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story "The Sandman," Freud asserts that limited point of view, realistic setting and events, and maintaining uncertainty regarding the true nature of the sandman results in highly uneasy sensations for the reader (Freud, "Uncanny" 240-248).

In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey contends that art's universality is not a result of any timeless theme or archetype but instead is a work's ability to register recognition in its audience of some long-lost, primary communion with universal human experience, regardless of the individual nature of the subject matter. Dewey writes, "The characteristic human need is for the

possession and appreciation of the meaning of things" (Dewey, "Experience, Nature" 272). He defines art, in particular literature, as the best possible means of extracting meaning out of human experience, something he understands as essential to human nature (Dewey, *Art as Experience* 237). It is, however, upon narration that a writer must rely in order to capture experience in a way that most closely resembles what it means to be alive and in the world. Dewey uses Santayana's term "hushed reverberations" to describe the fullness of lived experienced captured through the narration of George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* (Dewey, *Art as Experience* 17).

Wayne C. Booth describes close, third-person dramatized narrators as "the most important unacknowledged narrators in modern fiction…the third-person 'centers of consciousness' through whom authors have filtered their narratives" (Booth 153). Booth points out that Henry James sometimes referred to these kinds of narrators as "reflectors" that mirrored the mental process of the character at times. James Woods, in *How Fiction Works*, calls this type of close, third-person narration "free, indirect style" (15). Erich Auerbach refers to free, indirect style by the term used in German criticism, *erlebte Rede,* and locates its source as far back as the *Decameron* (213). Yet the technique is often described, as it maintains in contemporary fiction today, as originating in the Realism of Henry James.

The narrative mirrors in James' work appropriated a character's narrow perspective on a situation, often conveying their limited understanding and matching their diction. James Woods holds up Henry James' *What Maisie Knew* as an excellent example of "free, indirect style," which he characterizes as being "most powerful when hardly visible or audible…a marvelous alchemical transfer" where the narration becomes both character and narrator, "free from

(authorial) flagging and quotations marks…much like the pure soliloquy of eighteenth and nineteenth century novels" (9-10).

Henry James, in his 1897 novel *What Maisie Knew,* uses a close third-person point of view to capture the perspective of young Maisie, a child being used as a pawn in her parent's tumultuous divorce. Her perspective is limited by her experience; Maisie can perceive only portions of what is going on between " the mother" and "the father." Yet the reader is able to process Maisie's perspective in a way she cannot and, therefore, interpret for themselves the selfish willfulness of her parents, allowing the dramatic ironies at play in the novel to land squarely on the reader.

Many have described narrative distance in the third-person as a camera lens that can at times move in closely describing a character's thought or motivations and then moving out for a wider shot that takes in the entirety of a town, or forest, or the broader social and political climate that pertains to the situation of a character. This ability to narrow or broaden focus describes the flexibility that makes third-person appealing to writers. While an effective first-person narration is limited to the understanding, educational level, and physical location of its narrating character, third-person allows a writer to survey a larger scene and comment at a higher level. It offers the opportunity to consider the broader implications of character and setting; it provides an opportunity to develop dramatic and situational irony.

The challenge I encountered in *True for Bees* was managing the perspective of Willa, whose view and impression of the world is often a supernatural one, alongside that of Simon, who maintains a rational, reasoned point of view. It is the contrasting points of view of the two characters that underscores the role of perception in the novel.

John Gardner quotes James Joyce in his discussion of realistic narration in regard to the speculative when he writes: "[T]he writer's imitation of reality's process ('the ineluctable modality of the visible', as Stephen Dedalus puts it) is accurate; that is our feeling of the work, even if it contains fabulous elements, is in some deep way 'true to life'" (50). James Joyce's use of "free, direct discourse" to convey the "modality of the visible"—in *Portrait of an Artist* and "The Dead"—served to elevate the use of James' realist technique in the Modern period.

True for Bees toys with the line between the real and the magical, or speculative, mainly through the perspectives of its two main characters. The sorts of things that happen to Willa—altering time, astral projection, summoning wind spirits, etc.—all rely upon her perspective. Her character experiences the world as "coming to still" in moments of intense fear and shame while Simon explains this as a natural perception for someone in a heightened state. As Simon describes it, "She experiences the relative slowing of time in comparison to the people and objects around her when she is in a heightened fear state. Another leftover from the caveman days. It ain't magic."

Despite Simon's opinion, the world has indeed stopped turning from Willa's perspective; the experience is completely "real" from her point of view. And accordingly, she behaves as if the world has come to still. And in the close third person from Willa's perspective, I do attempt what I hope to be the "alchemical transfer" that Woods describes: a third-person unacknowledged, dramatized narrator as a "center of consciousness" that is both Willa and a separate observer at the same time, a kind of two in one. In those, more speculative, sections, instead of filtering the experience through a narrator which reports on Willa's experience, making itself known in phrases such as "she thought" or "she imagined," I attempted to close the

narrative distance so that its function as "reflector," mirroring the mental and physical experience of Willa in the third person.

As an approach to a preternatural character, this kind of narrative technique increases the speculative nature of the novel. I tried to limit the "free, indirect discourse" mainly to the most speculative experiences of the characters, for instance attempting to render the experience of the world "coming to still" from Willa's perspective by focusing on the sensations and feelings of Willa without calling attention to the narrative presence.

Simon's perspective is decidedly more scientific, objective. He councils Willa on the nature of myth, superstition, the auditory tricks played by fluctuations of wind, the truth about bees (as opposed to her notion that they are often reincarnated spirits). Willa's perspective, like that of James' Maisie, is childish. While Willa is incredibly sensitive and loving, she is also desperate to be loved and to feel the intimacy of human relationships. And while it is her deepest desire to heal people, she still maintains the naturally selfish perspective of a child. Her scenes are rendered from the point of view of a person who sees herself as the subject of all that happens around her, the bright center of the universe. Simon is altruistic. He constantly worries for others, for his bees, and he even puts himself in danger to protect Willa and Tipper. Her explicit and persistent belief in myth and the supernatural, despite Simon's pleading, elevate some of the key elements in the novel: the bees, the wind, and magical spirits: *Tu-ha* and the *bugaloo*. It is through Willa's perspective that metaphor is made into fact and incorporated into the character's experience. Her perspective emphasizes the key symbol in the novel: the honeybee.

In the famous key passage of his 1917 essay "Art as Technique," Viktor Shklovsky argues “that art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged (Shklovsky 12). The defamiliarization (*ostranenie*) that Shklovsky argues for positions the extraordinary within the habitual-everyday in a manner that illuminates both. Defamiliarization can extend beyond unique or unexpected metaphor and description; it can extend to narrative perspective. It is can include the unique narrative point of view. Indeed, in *True for Bees*, the way that Willa uniquely perceives the bees, or the wind, strives to make them unfamiliar in a way that heightens the aesthetic of the novel and ultimately imbues these things with more importance. Her perspective enlivens the bees and the wind and elevates them, perhaps, to the level of symbol.

While Romanticism focused heavily on symbolism, the turn that was made in European Naturalism and American Realism was to make even the symbolic work in service of character. In European Naturalism, symbolism, like that of Marcel Proust, is what Edmund Wilson describes “symphonic” in its layering of meanings and “multiplied associations” (132). Proust’s recollection of the madeleine cookie from *Swann’s Way* from *Remembrance of Things Past* can be read as explosive multiplicity:

> No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate, a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with

> no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory--this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was myself. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, accidental, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? (Proust 33)

The symbols of the cake and tea can be interpreted as erotic, sensual, timeless, metaphysical, and underscoring the futility of identity, among other readings. It is passages like this that lead Wilson to declare Proust to be a Symbolist and, by extension, an early Modernist (132).

Matthiessen describes factors such as war, violence, and social disintegration as playing a role in the evolution of symbols. Also influential is the work of Sigmund Freud, whose emphasis on the symbolic nature of the sub-conscious. Matthiessen locates Freud as the source of the symbolic shame, alienation, and isolation in Franz Kafta's Gregor Samsa (313). Matthiessen also points out that for a time Realism and Symbolism were considered mutually exclusive until James Joyce unites the two in *Finnegan's Wake* (315).

In addition to symbolism, *True for Bees* relies heavily on ancient stories and concepts arising from other, often ancient, cultures. There is a scene in the novel where the characters take off on an Egyptian honey hunt. The hunt culminates in an encounter with a mountain lion that results in the death of Cass Walker. The mountain lion carcass secretly houses a colony of aggressive bees that attack him. It is the second such bee attack in the story. The scene where Cass falls from the cliff and dies after his encounter with the mountain lion alludes to the story of Samson from the Old Testament.

In the story of Samson, who is one of last judges of the ancient Israelites, he holds a feast for a group of Philistines, of which his wife is one. Samson, who had valiantly killed a lion and later found it had become a refuge for a colony of bees, gave his guests a riddle: *Out of the eater, something to eat. Out of the strong, something sweet.* The Philistines were able to guess the riddle after persuading Samson's wife to betray him by telling them the story. This ignites Samson's fury and, some scholars argue, sets off the series of events that lead to the conflicts between the Israelites and the Philistines. It is also read as a dictum to obey the will of God, rejecting Philistines, who were synonymous with non-believers, notoriously narrow of mind. In *True for Bees*, Preacher Mutte takes Cass' death as a sign that he was rebuked by God for not non-belief.

But the Samson story is also credited as being the source of the bee lore and the ancient belief that bees were propagated in the corpses of animals, which is, in truth, a rare phenomena; however, this idea plays an important role in *True for Bees.*

In addition to myth, *True for Bees* also relies on basic plot archetypes. The concept of basic plot archetypes originates with Aristotle and finds expansion in the work of Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp. An archetypal focus also carries forward to the French Structuralist Tzvetan Todorov's narratology and in the theory of the American literary critic Northrop Frye. Using Propp's archetypal distinctions, Simon is most certainly the "hero." Willa could also be seen as the "hero" and Mutte the "villain." Hormidas is both the "dispatcher" and the "donor." He sends Willa on her journey and gives her the tools that will ultimately aid her. Marlene Payne and Simon could be seen as the "helpers," who aid Willa in her in her journey. And Tipper emerges in the end as both a "false hero" and a "betrayer." Someone who is vulnerable

and needs rescuing in her role as princess, and who seems to be on the side of the "hero" but in some ways deceives her. Ultimately, however, Tipper redeems herself and transitions from "false hero" to "helper," alongside Simon.

For Russians like Propp, the arrangement of the basic archetypal elements was part of their "insistence on form and technique as part of content," which marked their "key distinction between 'story' or *fabula,* the raw chronological events of a narrative, and 'plot' or *syuzhet*, the artistic arrangement of events, frequently out of chronologic order" (Eichenbaum 923). And equally important in *True for Bees*, is the chronology, or the role of time.

E.M. Forster takes up the discussion of time in fiction in his series of lectures that were published in 1927 as *Aspects of the Novel.* Story, Forster writes, "runs like a backbone—or may I say a tapeworm, for its beginning and end are arbitrary. It is immensely old—goes back to Neolithic times, perhaps Paleolithic." It recalls an ancient oral tradition that resonates with us as humans, "we are all like Scheherazade's husband, in that we want to know what happens next." Its merit lies in its ability to persuade a reader's interest. Story is inexorably linked to the "time-sense" and the time-sense is what makes it common to daily life. But for Forster, "there seems to be something else in life besides time, something which may conveniently be called "value," something which is measured not by minutes and hours but by intensity, so that when we look at our past it does not stretch back evenly but piles up into a few notable pinnacles." The arrangement of these "pinnacles" constitutes a plot (Forster 26-28). Where the story is primitive, "it reaches back to the origins of literature…the voice of the tribal narrator, squatting in the middle of the cave, and saying one thing after another until the audience falls asleep among their offal and bones," a plot has "nobler agencies" such as character and "comments on life" (Forster

40). In *True for Bees,* the story is told out of chronological order, but the arrangement of scenes follows Forster's conception of "value," where intensity and the relationship between incidents—the "comments on life"—dictate the order of the story.

Therefore, while *True for Bees* could be read, in essence, as archetypal characters following their traditional journeys, the plot attempts to convey the characters' experience in the world. For this reason, the plot moves backward and forward in time, attempting to increase tension by intentionally eliminating certain information until absolutely necessary in an attempt to draw the reader along in suspense. Also, the backstory is sometimes presented at key moments, serving both to release and suspend moments of tension. For instance, it is not until Cass encounters the mountain lion and is killed by the fall that the backstory of his teenage years in the swamp is given. Cass as a character appears first as unsympathetic through Simon's eyes, and perhaps childish from Tipper's perspective. Willa has, as one would expect, a childish relationship with her father in which she simply wants his attention and affection. But it is not until after his death that the reader is made aware of his difficult and tragic beginnings, his feral existence in the swamp and his heartfelt, if misguided, affection for Willa's mother. With this new plot development, Cass becomes someone who has done far better by his daughter Willa than anyone would have expected him to. His character is enhanced and inherently changed by the arrangement of the novel out of chronological order.

True for Bees is ultimately a novel of perspective. It attempts to combine realistic narrative technique as established by Henry James and perfected by James Joyce with speculative, supernatural elements and characters. The supernatural functions both as symbol and a manner of human experience, as the supernatural situation is, in itself, "partly character."

Regardless of one's beliefs, the inexplicable and seemingly magical persist in human experience and resonate with our primary desire for meaning and understanding. Fiction that aims to capture the authentic experience of a character moving through the world can also include the supernatural without compromising its relationship with reality, or at least by pushing the boundaries of what "objective reality" can include in fiction. Both the narrative technique and the inclusion of the supernatural heighten the sense of authentic human experience in the novel.

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