



A Coup of Owls
Summer 2023



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Foreword**Page 5****Weather For Three by Dorcas Akobundu****Page 7**

A peculiar portrayal of mental illness.

Dorcas Akobundu is a pharmacy student by day and a writer by night. She lives by God and curiosity. Other things fall into place after. She weaves music, food, individuality and mental/personality disorders into [most of] her stories while simultaneously exploring mundane Nigeria. Her short stories have been published or are forthcoming in *Kalahari review*, *Afro Literary Magazine*, *Pabpub*, *Illino*, *49th street* and more. She writes from Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

A Wall's Embrace by Tom Okafor**Page 14**

Timothy and his crush are brought together by some surprising incidents.

Tom Okafor is a Nigerian writer, a reckless daydreamer who loves to spend his time reading, writing, shuffling through Beyoncé's discography on Spotify, and—obviously—daydreaming. He won the *Smile Calls Writing Contest* in 2023, and made the Longlist for the *2023 Bold* contest. His stories have been published and are forthcoming in *Entropy Squared*, *National Flash Flood*, and *Ibua Publishing Journal*. You can reach him on Twitter [[@tomnotes1](#)] where you'll find him obsessing over The Queen, Beyoncé, and celebrating writers' achievements.

Lazurite by Drake McDonald**Page 18**

A man attempts to describe his favourite colour.

Drake McDonald is a storyteller. He makes videos, designs art installations, and sometimes he even writes short fiction and poetry. He is interested in the stories that connect us. His work has previously been published in *The Pearl* and *New College Review*. You can follow his blog on [LIVE-BETWEEN.com](#), where he explores the tense intersection of queerness and Christianity (through living it); or find him on his youtube channels: [@DrakeMakesArt](#) and [@DrakeMakesMovies](#).

Metempsychosis by Gabriel Lampert**Page 19**

When a gay man answers the door he is taken on a journey of exploration to his “next station”.

Gabriel Lampert, now living near the ocean in San Francisco after 40 years in the desert southwest, is a retired maths professor. His stories have appeared in various small publications, as well as the *Alan Turing Centenary Anthology* from Edinburgh University's Informatics School. He is involved in both queer and Jewish literature groups, has often

chanted Torah and prophetic pieces, and also taught chant to others.
inaformertime.wordpress.com

Sno-cone by DS Oswald

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It begins to melt during the hottest summer on record.

DS Oswald is a nonbinary lesbian writer, illustrator, and animator. They decided they wanted to be an author in the third grade, and their extraordinary stubbornness has kept that dream fixed in their head ever since. They have been an obsessive creator since the age of twelve—books, short stories, audio dramas, video games, comics, illustrations, short films, and terrible songs that nobody should listen to—and they intend to go on this way forever. They're on Twitter, tumblr and Instagram as @writingpun.

Kapre by Emmily Magtalas Rhodes

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Lost in a British forest, Raffy is haunted by a tree-dwelling, cigar-smoking monster from his homeland.

Emmily Magtalas Rhodes is a freelance writer of Filipino heritage, currently living in an English spa town. Her debut YA novel, *What It Means to Be Malaya*, was published in the Philippines in 2020. Her short stories have appeared in *Corvid Queen* and *50-word stories*, while her story, “Dwende”, got an Honourable Mention in the *Storyshares 2022 Story of the Year Contest*. Her mini-chapbook *Split Bamboo* (part of the New Cosmologies series from Sword & Kettle Press) is coming out in the US this year. She is fascinated by folk tales, horror, witchcraft, and magic.

B Movie by Leigh V Twersky

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A director's approach to film-making gives a whole new meaning to “never working with animals”.

Leigh V Twersky lives in London, where he was born. Short stories of his can be found in the anthology *A Boxful of Ideas* from Paradise Press and, under the name Micky Silver, in *Chroma*. He is currently finishing a novel set in a dystopian Britain, which could be described as gay insect body horror. Leigh is delighted his work is being published in *A Coup Of Owls*.

Foreword

Summer is here in all its heat-fuelled glory (at least on this side of the globe; apologies to all those going into winter, but bear in mind that your winters still mostly beat our summers!). I am not usually a fan of heat. I'm never a fan of sweat. I'm more a fan of, well, a fan. Or a nice cool breeze. Fortunately, now I live by the river, water and breezes are easy to come by, which I don't mind at all. Us forest dwellers need shade and limited sunlight to survive, after all!

Anyway, enough of my summer-based woes – let's take a tour around this hothouse of an issue! We have been hiking in unknown territory and meeting goddesses pretending to be trees. It's been so hot we have melted into the pavement, dripping like ice cream on a summer day. We have been reborn through ecstasy and waded through blue-tainted memory. The solid walls around us have witnessed our loves and losses. We have travelled through the weather – desert-hot and alien-cold. We have been embroiled in bees, inside and out. My mind will never be the same again.

This issue's stories have filled me with joy; they are all so complex, thought-provoking and unlike anything I have seen written or published anywhere else. With pride month in full swing as I type this, I am proud to be a part of this forest. Where else would all these beautiful, soul-exploring, vibrant birds hang out? And I wouldn't want them anywhere else. I'm selfish like that. I want them all in this forest, dancing, prancing and dripping around me. I look at the world, which is trying its absolute hardest to break us every day, all the time, and I try to look for joy wherever I can find it. Not the toxic self-help positivity that claws at your self-esteem and hollows you out, but the simple joys. Human contact. A smile. A shared understanding. Learning and sharing something new. Or just a really good iced latte. As I was writing this, I heard a rustling outside and looked out to see a doe deer having a munch on the greenery outside my window. Joy speaks to us; we must listen even when it's just a whisper and take it when and wherever we can.

The other day, I was reading a Matt Haig book about a man who has lived for hundreds of years and all the things he sees, all the things that stay the same, and all the things that change. And it made me think about how, no matter what era we live in, we always think it's the end of the world, we're always hell-bent on terrifying ourselves with disastrous decisions. But you know what else is a constant? Kindness. It is out there; I promise you it does exist. As much as I read the rage in the words of the media and social

media, the fight, the fury against the oncoming storm, I also read hope, humour, laughter and joy. They are all in there too.

In this forest, with the solstice just gone and the full moon approaching, we should all join wings and dance, fly, hop, slither – whatever you want! You see, kindness, love and acceptance are at the core of the rage. The basic human need to be loved, to be seen and to be treated as equals is what drives that rage. Remember that as you step into our forest: look for the passion, the heat and the sun. They're there, and we can all bask in them together.

Rhiannon Wood, Editor in Chief

Weather For Three

by Dorcas Akobundu

Content Warnings: Mental illness.

Not your thing? Skip to page 14 for the next story.

0.5

Since the very awareness of my existence, I have been twice my number. One personality multiplied by two equals two. Makes for a double package: buy one get one free sort of thing.

I'm not mad, I promise.

I know they say if you say this, it only means you are, but trust me, I'm not.

Trust: a strong word Friend doesn't like. But Friend is asleep, and I'm free to use it. I trust you'll find this of utmost importance because even as we cohabit in this body, we differ, and it's in our differences we thrive. (Speech of the week. And the crowd goes wild!)

This is the first time I'll do this: sit in front of a camera and *#walkthetalk*. But this country I live in and its misconceptions of what it means to deviate from the *regular* tear me apart – me and Friend. There's Twitter to voice our grievances and Instagram to post our bizarre pictures. But, doing this – staring into a camera to create a video where we'll share who we are and remember how it all began – is a first.

Here's to firsts.

There's a half-eaten beef burger on the table-in-disarray with all kinds of books and make-up and sticky-note packs (one can tell that I own neither of the last two), and Roommate's ring light is shining brightly as I sneak a little bit of the more-bun-than-beef burger into my big mouth – the one Tope said is too big and the lips too fleshy to call me his friend (but that was in Level 100, and I should let it go). I should cut this part out while editing. *Should*. But since Friend's the one with the editing skills, I doubt that will happen.

A slow, laboured breath. I lick my lips and count how much equipment I'm using in this square corner, trying to calculate how not to leave any trace of what I'm doing when Roommate comes back.

Now, I look straight at my phone's selfie camera dot.

Where do I begin?

from

the

damn

beginning,

Chetachi.

1.

It starts as a whisper.

friend.

have you smiled today?

I am five, underweight and short. I know this because Mami keeps shouting, *Cheta, you better eat so you'll stop looking like I don't feed you!* I clutch my pillow, tiny fingers caressing the silk. Mami insists all females should use satin pillowcases so that our hair's moisture is not stolen by cotton. So, I clutch the pillow, embracing the feel of satin on soft skin, wondering why I've been hearing things. Do all females hear things?

pssst.

don't you want to... escape?

I put my hands on both of my ears, my stomach in a knot.

I want to scream, not escape. But Dadi is at home, and he will not be happy if I make noise. He says noise is bad and little girls are to be quiet and good and not disturb their parents. Dadi has to be happy. He has to know I'm a good girl, see?

but I am your friend.

I can still hear her.

hi. friend.

She's still talking.

I frown. I am somebody's friend?

My cheeks are cool when I touch them. I smile, feeling the movement of my lips with my fingers. I am somebody's friend.

Then I reply softly, conscious of the open door and hoping my voice doesn't drift down the corridor and into Dadi's room, 'Hello, friend. I cannot read, so I won't be able to read stories to you like Mami does.'

There's a soft giggle, and it doesn't seem entirely in my head.

I like lullabies, not stories, silly.

smile again.

My lips don't need much coercion to move.

yes!

I count to five before I ask, 'What's your name?'

friend. I'm your friend.

2.

After the whispers comes the choking pressure of something sneaky and frightening altogether: sleep paralysis, they call it.

Pressed.

Held down.

What wrong did I do to deserve this? Are Dadi's hateful words not enough? Did Mami not arrange my room right? Am I beginning to die? Have I been a bad girl? Oh, no! Is it because I finally hit Lola for always calling me a weird fool in the school's general girls' bathroom?

Fifteen now. Friend is ten. We are best friends for life. But I am dying. I'll never make it to Senior Secondary Three. I'll never be loved or held or tour the world with Friend and somebody we love.

I'll never *live*.

Usually, it occurs in a crescendo. Sudden realisation that I'm on a bed, then the scream that never makes it out of my mouth. Next comes that choke-hold of I-cannot-move-help-me. Then, I'm floating out of my body, frantic, confused, falling. It's like that fat bully, Lola, is sitting on my chest. Like she's finally coming to haunt me day after day for reporting her to Mrs Sarah even after hitting her into silence. It's like Dadi is coming to beat me for eating that meatloaf he forgot before his trip to Abia State. It's like Mami is coming to squeeze me into one of those suffocating hugs while whispering those godforsaken words: *My sweet, good girl. My good girl. Stay good for Mommy. Chetachi, don't forget Mommy.*

Then I'm an old woman, tagged crazy for always talking to herself.

Don't they understand that I'm talking to Friend?

Then I'm no longer here. Segregating. Handing Friend the reins to my body.

I'm.

here

until
I'm
not.

3.

And the scream is released.

I
scream
down
my
world
into existence
and
destruction
like it's the easiest thing to do.

Friend's whimpering always brings me back to Earth.

you're hurting me!

My chest is not yet empty: there's still a truckload of fear left over from my night spent struggling with the monsters that press me down.

stoppp.

I obey. And lose consciousness.

4.

I start going for deliverance services on Mami's demand when we move to Elioizu Town, to another part of Port Harcourt City – this city that reeks of familiarity and unpredictable rainfall. It's definitive: familiar black soot, market and road-side shops, bus park crammed by the side of the bridge we pass every day, every time. And one of the days, as Mami drives us to another service, I fantasise about running away with the big *ABC Transport* bus that passes by. I cannot do it, but I can wish. Friend loves it here (temporary, as is her control over my body some days).

Dadi has never believed in going to church, but Mami, she never ceases the church-going expeditions, never ceases the prayers. My rife memories of her are *akara* balls, round to almost-perfection, on Saturday mornings, satin this and that, speaking in tongues.

It's something of a scattered process, this deliverance service in the wooden-structured church with its countable lightbulbs that always have flies hovering around. Mami throwing herself under the anointing, not caring when her turban head wrap comes undone, then she's crying in that voice that haunts me in my dreams, saying, *God, please deliver my daughter. God, please deliver my family. God, please help me. Please!* then more language I cannot decipher.

I believe in God. Friend isn't so sure about Him. We clash in this area.

I believe in Him like I believe in a dream that's hazy yet bright at morn. I talk to him sometimes, when Friend relegates to the background, and I know that most times Mami talks to him the wrong way: you don't beg God; you communicate with him – like a friend. And He gifted me Friend.

But this deliverance pastor, with his sharp, red eyes and piercing stare, fills Mami's head with lies and holy coconut water.

I cannot allow myself to lose guard. Never.

Until I awake in my bed, smelling like incense, with no recollection of the last four hours.

5.

Eighteen. I pack my things to head off to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, under the guise of getting a degree in English and Literary Studies, the first week of seeing my name on the admission list. The preparation happens in a flurry: booking off-campus accommodation through a friend of a friend of Mami, opening a student bank account, packing my endless books on nature, *The Philosophy of Life* and *Why Were You Created?* The goodbye is strange: Dadi is not present, of course. Mami cries and fills me with akara and coconut milk, whispering prayers on my head covered with a flowery satin scarf.

See, English fascinates me and Friend, but it is more like an excuse never to return home again.

run.

It's the first time I obey Friend without question in a long, long time.

I run.

we run

off

into

an unknown

future.

5.5

It's strange here: I have met people. The earth is red, red, muddy. I have a friend called Mide who's brutally fine – finer than all those boys that taunted me in secondary school for my big lips and fragile demeanour – and he thinks I have haunting eyes that pin him down to the spot (his exact words). I coexist with a girl named Tee (everyone calls her this) in a four-by-four room outside the university's campus.

It's strange here: I feel I blend in. I'm still double, but it's not so obvious anymore. Everybody minds their business (unless it's their business to not mind their business).

Just as I'm done packing up everything I used to make the video and trying my best to tidy the room, Roommate comes back, and thunder and lightning follow suit outside the door. She sighs softly, untying her afro from her signature pineapple updo with shivering fingers.

'*Chineke o. Chetachi, it's so cold,*' she says, rubbing her skin beneath her native sleeves. *God o.*

'Welcome. Yes, it's cold.' I've never bothered to learn Igbo. Friend is given to Igbo more than I am, so I just sit there and watch Roommate undress, fascinated at how free she is about it, how welcoming she is of her scars.

She dumps her damp clothing on the floor near the bathroom, and just before she puts on the robe she uses for her skincare and make-up tutorial YouTube videos, I see the stretch marks that decorate her shoulders and breasts, and I hug myself closer.

cold. bold.

I rub my palms together. Would've been cold and wet like her, but I skipped class because nobody, not even Roommate, can tell me what to do in this place. She lifts the blanket that has stayed useless at the edge of our shared bed, and we huddle together to keep warm. I stay silent, listening to her even breathing as she falls asleep. My phone rings, but I don't pick up. Only Mide calls me. I make a side note to call him back for shawarma when the rain has subsided – he doesn't want to give up on a possibility of an us (which involves going to church together, nothing more *o*), and I want free food.

you miss what his innocent touch does to you: it revives your dead heart.

Maybe that, too: revival.

The blanket is not as big as Mami's at home, but it covers us. I allow it to because I have a choice now, and I choose warmth.

Friend sighs. *this is nice.*

And it is.

It's like weather for two, except for the fact that only I am aware of:

we

are

three.

A Wall's Embrace

by Tom Okafor

Content Warnings: None.

Not your thing? Skip to page 18 for the next story.

Timothy is seated in church on a sun-rid Sunday. The grey skies above the chapel's corrugated roof reflect the listlessness sweeping the folds of his heart. This listlessness has a tune. And this tune is a valley, where only thorns grow. Where light would be humiliated if it dared show its face. Where tales of bliss can never find a way in. Where dreams are too big a dream to be dreamt. In this valley, he dwells, and I long to embrace him until all my colours steal into his heart and those colours quench the thirst of darkness.

In this church, I am painted white. I am adorned with linens: blue and red. I surround the congregation with my beauty, and everyone who walks in marvels at the brilliance of my brightness. Some dare run their fingers across my torso. Others stand in yawning awe. 'What beautiful walls,' they declare. And their eyes sparkle as they receive my radiance.

All this beauty, I will gladly bequeath to Timothy; if I can behold the light on his face, if I can find love blooming in that valley, then it'll be beauty enough for me.

Timothy is crushing clay in his mind when the preacher asks the congregation to look at their neighbours. He does not look. He crushes clay to dust, and with the dust, he moulds a young man. The man has his face, and the man is smiling. Timothy has forgotten how to smile.

He does not hear when the preacher says, 'Everyone, say "*I love you*" to your neighbour.' But he jerks to reality when someone screams into his ear.

He flings his head to the side, and the first thing he sees is light. The brash light of a hearty smile. Then he sees the most beautiful dentition. A white so perfect even heaven would envy it. After that, he sees another light. This light: the warmth of two sparkling eyes. The last thing he notes is the face.

Makuo? His eyes widen.

‘Everyone, look at your neighbour again!’ the preacher yells. ‘Say: I love you, neighbour!’

‘I love you, neighbour!’ Makṣo yells into Timothy’s face, smiling.

Timothy does not respond. He’s too shocked to respond. And that shock draws his eyelids apart and leaves his mouth hanging open.

The joy on Makṣo’s face stales. ‘Come on, Tim... Don’t you love me?’ He tilts his head and makes a sulking face.

‘I—of course. I, I love you. I love you, Makṣo.’

The light of Makṣo’s smile returns, unabashedly bright. ‘I love you too, brother.’ He embraces Timothy.

‘Everybody, shout Hallelujah,’ the preacher commands. And a roar follows. Makṣo roars too. Timothy does not. At least not his mouth. But his heart: it roars. Surges with inexplicable passion. I observe him. His feelings smash against my form, and I note every emotion, every desire, every hunger.

He wants Makṣo to hug him again. He wants to be looked upon afresh with such beautiful, blinding brightness. He wants the stirring he felt in his belly to go on forever. He wants the tune in his heart to morph into the smoothness of Makṣo’s voice. He wants to tell Makṣo he loves him again. He does not hear a word of the preacher’s exhortation. He focuses on the tune in his heart as it changes and lifts him from the valley. Higher, and higher, and higher...

*

At home, he leans his back against me, and though he does not know it, I soothe him. He slides down to the floor. He’s sinking. Without Makṣo’s light, he’s sinking once more into the valley. That deathly tune returns, resounding in his heart, and its echo is gloom.

In his house, I am a fading yellow. We commune a lot here. He leans on me time and time again, and I try to rid him of every crippling load. So heavy a load, no matter how much of it I carry, it never seems to be exhausted.

I hold every unuttered groan. Every unspoken sigh. Every repressed desire. Every suppressed fire. As his mind roves his past, I pick up every pain and strain. The strain of homophobia ingrained deep into the fabrics of not just his family but his nation.

As a child, his father flogged him for his effeminacy. His mother hurt him with her words.

He waded in an ocean of toxicity. They broke him. Into pieces. He has since tried to assemble those pieces, but all he finds is pulp.

He tells himself he will never be loved. No. Love is not for a queer Nigerian boy. He will plod through life unnoticed. Unloved. Broken. Shredded and emptied of vigour.

All these lies I try to carry, but they're lodged too deeply into his mind.

He falls asleep sitting on the floor. I stretch out my arms and wrap them around him. I pull out my head and lean my stale yellow face against his. When he wakes, he will feel a warmth in his chest, a stillness, a calm, at least for a while. He will never know it was my embrace. Yet, I will be satisfied.

*

It is a spring-perfect Monday evening, and the clouds chameleon Makuọ's smile. Timothy has made his way to the market from the bank where he works. Everything reminds him of Makuọ. The oranges, neatly stacked on trays, remind him of the fairness of Makuọ's skin. The breeze caressing his body testifies to the warmth of his embrace. Then he thinks of his name: Makuọ, which means *Embrace*. How apt. And he hopes to receive a hug from him for every time he has thought of him that day.

He makes it to the vegetable stand, close to the part of my body that encloses the market. In the market, I am a bare concrete with algae climbing my feet.

He picks up a bundle of pumpkin leaves and is about to pay for it when a voice sneaks into his ears.

'Timothy?'

Timothy gasps, and the vegetables fall from his hand. He knows that voice.

'Hey... Makuọ, what's... up?'

'I'm great,' Makuọ says. 'I saw you and came to say hi, but... wow! Did you go to work today?'

'Yes. I did?' Timothy tilts his head, trying to understand Makuọ's point.

'I mean, you work in the busiest bank in town, yet your face looks... perfect. Even after a long day. Just... beautiful.'

Timothy's knees buckle. The marketplace is a galaxy of noise, but a certain silence canoodles them. Their eyes hold each other's; there's something in their gaze. Something pure, raw. Something that can only be felt. And they feel it, both of them.

'Thank you.' Timothy breaks the silence. A mist gathers in his eyes.

‘Yeah, welcome. I have to go. Text me. Okay?’ Makuḡ turns away and leaves.

Timothy watches him get dissolved in a concoction of bodies. He wipes the tears collected in his eyes and buys his pumpkin leaves. As he goes home, there’s no abysmal tune, there are no thorns, there is no gloom. All there is, is an embrace of hearts, the scent of love, diffusing and filling up Timothy’s world.

Just two months ago, Makuḡ was the agent who helped him find a house here in Port Harcourt City. Now, he is everything Timothy wants.

Timothy gets home and texts him.

I’m home. Can you come?

Almost immediately, Makuḡ replies: *Sure... On my way.*

Timothy takes a deep breath and curls up on his sofa, waiting...

*

...And they dance. Hand in hand. Eye to eye. Breath against breath. Beyoncé belting out *At Last* in the background. The air is charged. If a seed were suspended in it, it would sprout in an instant. Such is the love in the room, love that gives life. Love that mends and heals.

I look away, and they kiss...

They have a great time. Makuḡ pecks Timothy and says goodbye. Timothy leans against me, his joy washes over me, and I do not take it from him. I multiply it, and soon, he is overwhelmed. He falls asleep once again on the floor, his back against me.

*

Makuḡ walks into the night. A smile ensconced on his face. He walks to the outskirts of town where no one dwells at night. His eyes zigzag to an abandoned building before the cul-de-sac. He walks to it. There’s a hole in its walls. He leans against the hole. And then, he changes form, shifts into a mass of bricks; a piece of me is restored. The hole in the wall closes.

Tomorrow, a larger hole will be there. Timothy will be visiting Makuḡ’s house. I will give every piece of me. As long as the child who leaned against me years ago and cried night after night finds his happiness, I shall give everything, whatever it takes, until there are no walls left in the world.

Lazurite

by Drake McDonald

Content Warnings: None.

Not your thing? Skip to page 19 for the next story.

His favourite colour was blue – but not really. Not really. Not at all. That wasn't the right word for it. His favourite colour, really, was the colour of the sea. At night.

No... that wasn't right either.

There had to be a moon. A full one. And no land in sight. And a tiny sailboat rocking in the waves. There had to be cards and poker played by mast light. There had to be Tommy. And chewing gum because they were two thirteen-year-olds smart enough to know that smoking would kill you but too dumb to think of raiding a liquor cabinet. It had to be the last night of a long, hot summer. His last night in town.

There had to be fear. Because high school was starting. And he was moving. And they'd probably never get another night like this.

There had to be tears. There had to be. No posturing, no talk, no false pretences of early manhood. Only tears. There had to be.

And when it was over, and the boys simply held each other in their cradle 'midst the waves, that was when he had to look up, to gaze out over the bulwarks, and see the sea. And he would love its depths. And he would be safe.

'You all right?' She gazed at him over the top of her salad.

He smiled back, picking up his fork. 'Yeah, I'm fine,' he said, stabbing a tomato.

She eyed him for a moment, then returned to her greens. 'That was strange,' she said. 'Your face went all slack like you were having a stroke or something.'

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'It's just been a long day. I didn't sleep well last night.'

'Aww, that's too bad,' she said.

For a moment, there was only the sound of forks and cabbage.

'Oh, wait!' her hand flashed to her mouth as if the urgency of her words might send croutons flying. 'You never answered my question! What's your favourite colour?'

'I think I like blue,' he said.

Metempsychosis

by Gabriel Lampert

Content Warnings: Death, mild sexual content.

Not your thing? Skip to page 23 for the next story.

I open the door. I'm not expecting anyone, but there he is, this young kid, no more than thirty. He says, **'I'm Azra'el.'** His features fit no ethnicity: skin an indeterminate tan, hair and eyes brown. He's handsome, lightly muscled, two-piece uniform, olive drab, form-fitting. He says he's here to take me to my **'new station.'**

'Tell the agency I'm not going anywhere!'

'I'm not from the landlord. It's just time for you to move on.'

I'm dubious yet unable to stop his beautiful body from entering the apartment. 'I'm not expecting...'

'I understand. It makes it awkward, but – believe me – it's better for you this way.'

'Okay. What are you selling?' I feel my hackles rise.

He sighs. **'I'm not selling, but you've already bought. I'm here to guide you to your next location.'**

'Where is that?'

'I don't have that information.' He waves away my concern but gives me a hug, strong and intimate. I'm confused but surprisingly aroused, more solidly erect than I've been for decades. **'As I said, I'm here to guide you. I leave when you get there. But here and now, you have a lovely erection. Would you like to use it?'**

All his crazy talk is nothing compared to having a hard-on again after so long. Apparently, I nod 'yes' because he strips down, instantaneously, and gets my clothes off, too. He's so smooth, a contrast to my wiry greyness.

'Face up or face down?' he asks.

'Face up! I want to kiss you.'

'You can't kiss me yet, but I'll be face up.'

He lies on his back. I climb on and enter, so easily.

‘Take your time.’

We move around a lot; he wraps his legs around me. I switch up the pace back and forth, calling up old moves and caresses. How is this ancient body of mine so flexible? When I can’t hold back, I climax and lose track of the world, it’s that strong. When I’m back to normal, he is smugly smiling.

He gets up and says, **‘My turn!’** I’m happy with that, too, and lie back. He begins to massage me, then uses strange penetrative strokes with his fingers. I feel my body changing with each push. My chest is lumpy, then his fingers are *in* me, in my... *vagina!* Not even thinking, I’m pushing my hips up to meet his hand!

It was noon when he showed up, but now the only light is a glow from his body. Thinking I finally understand what is happening, I mutter, ‘Angel of Death.’

He stops working me. **‘I said “new station,” not “end of line.” We’ve moved many times, and I don’t know how many more we’ll do.’**

‘But I *am* dead, right?’

Another sigh. **‘Yes. Long buried. I know it seems I’ve been here only an hour, but... And now we’re on the way to the next station. But I want you to have this experience first.’** Then he gets on the bed and enters me, just as easily. **‘Too heavy?’**

‘No, you’re... you’re just fine.’ I automatically try to kiss him, but he brushes me away.

‘You’ve wanted to know what it’s like. You’ve fantasized about being fucked as a woman how long?’

‘Years.’

‘Well? How is it?’

‘Wonderful.’ I see the outline of his face smiling down at me. Amazingly, I climax again, and it’s as all-consuming as before.

When I can return to conversation, I ask him, ‘So I’m going to be a woman in the next “station?”’

‘I don’t know yet what you’re going to be, or where, or much about your situation. But I can tell you this: it’s men you’ll be attracted to. Men have been your desire every time. That’s what you’re headed to. You just took too long this last time, worrying about whether it was okay or not.’

‘So, I fucked up by staying in the closet.’

‘No, I fucked up. I didn’t give you enough support to let you move into your sexuality. That’s why we’re doing this. You won’t remember what we say, but I’m hoping you can take these feelings with you.’

‘Is this what life’s about? Sex?’

‘One thing, anyway. Physical Connection. You’re good on other Measures. Artistic Connection: singing, calligraphy...’

I’m scowling, I know, because my songs and scribbles were amateurish, but Azra’el says, **‘People love your work! And Intellectual Connection – you taught. And you score well on Compassion: people say you’re sweet, some people anyway. It’s only Physical where you need to bone up.’** He giggles at his joke.

‘What about happily-ever-after?’ I ask.

A sigh. **‘I’ve seen you through many lives. Deep friendships. Passionate affairs. No happily-ever-afters, no forever-lovers. Society says you want that, but I don’t think you do. What I want for you is *happy*, happy now and happy later, too.’**

‘Do you do this with all your clients?’

‘You are my only “client.” I follow you through every station, every lifetime. But I can’t do much while you’re in life, so, *again*, that’s why we’ve done this *just now*.’

‘You lurk through my whole life? You’re not a guardian angel?’

‘I occasionally get the chance to interfere, but with strict limits. For example, remember when you were walking the dog, and the dump truck fell over and spilled rocks fifty yards ahead of you?’

‘Yes! It could have killed us!’

‘Right. I can’t move objects, like trucks or rocks. Instead, invisible, I urinated on the fire hydrant in your path, so your dog sniffed and sniffed, and you didn’t catch up with the truck.’

I laugh. ‘Thanks!’

‘Part of the job. And remember your friend who said he’d sleep in your arms but without sex? I impersonated him; I needed to remind you how important touch is. *That* was my limit.’

‘I remember! It was the best night’s sleep I ever had. I didn’t even have to get up and pee.’ Now I realise why the real guy stared at me whenever I mentioned that night afterwards.

Azra’el’s weight is now a burden, and his light fainter. **‘Now I will give you that kiss; you will forget this whole conversation, but not the feelings.’**

Now alone, in the dark. Very comfortable dark. Long time. Then something is pushing. I am going somewhere? Yes, I am going!

Sno-cone

by DS Oswald

Content Warnings: Body horror, gore, animal death (briefly mentioned).

Not your thing? Skip to page 28 for the next story.

I noticed it first one evening when I was on a walk at the beach. It was summer, the year the record heatwave hit so hard even Target's industrial-grade air conditioners broke. Birds dropped out of the sky dead of heat-stroke so often that kids started making a game of how far they could punt the corpses. There were dead birds and fish on the beach then, too, but they'd been picked pretty dry. Still, it smelled awful while I walked down the unlit beach, hands swinging loosely, listening to a song that kind of made my ears hurt and gazing at the flat black mass of the sea. There was no wind, and aside from my music, it was quiet.

I reached up to my ear – I forget why. I think I was worried a mosquito had landed there, or maybe the sound from my headphones wasn't coming through quite right. Whatever. I reached up to my ear and touched it, and when I pulled my hand away, something came with it. I felt this weird sensation from my ear like it was being tugged on and pulled my fingers further away. By the time I held them up to my face, the tugging sensation had stopped, but there was still something on my fingers. I couldn't see too well. It was dark. I rubbed my fingers together. The stuff on there was like putty. Smooth and slightly damp and rubbery. I held my fingers close to my face and still couldn't tell what it was. Finally, I got out my phone and turned the flashlight on.

It was my skin. Rubbery and growing soft under the manipulation of my fingers like playdough but the same colour with the same tiny dark hairs sticking out of it that I grow pretty much everywhere. I held it up and smelled it. It smelled like sweat.

I decided it wasn't my skin. Not because there was a lack of evidence surrounding the matter (it was pretty definitely my skin aside from texture) but because that's not how bodies work. I threw the nasty bit of whatever it was onto the sand and began trying to come up with different answers about what it was. It was late, though, and I wasn't at my sharpest, so the

best I could come up with was that it was a prank or some sort of, like, scab thing that I'd accidentally picked off, and that was it. I finished my walk and went home.

My house was dark and quiet, much like the beach I'd just left. I live in a gated community, so it looked identical to the rest of the houses, to the point that several times after going on a walk late at night, I'd pulled into the neighbour's garage and set off their burglar alarm trying to get in. That night I knew I picked the right house because my older brother's piece of shit bike was sitting out in the driveway, and nobody outside my family owns a motorcycle that ugly. I went inside, went to bed, and forgot about the incident entirely.

The next day, I woke up at seven and went to work. I work at a big-ass department store that sells clothing and stuff. My manager, Noel, put me on the registers at first, but after a bit, they switched me to the back rooms moving boxes. It feels like a secret back there. It feels like someone took the space and twisted it open and put something new there, and the only reason for this miracle was so that Bealls could put boxes of the same brown-grey cardigan (\$19.99 plus sales tax) somewhere the customers couldn't see it. It's often dark. There are automatic lights that are supposed to turn on, but they don't work all the time. I don't mind. I don't like the light; it flickers in a weird way that gives me a headache.

My favourite room amongst the collection of back rooms is the mannequin room. It's a smaller room towards the back of the back rooms, and it's where we keep all the old or not-in-use mannequins. I like their painted faces. Their blank bodies with limbs smoothly chopped off where convenient. I like how close they are to people. Sometimes, in the dark of the malfunctioning lights, I will sit very still with my back to one wall, look at their outlines, and imagine they think I am just as beautiful as they are. I don't always have time to sit in the mannequin room because there are so very many boxes to unpack, but that day, I did. The delivery truck was late. They usually arrived when I got to work and unloaded the boxes onto the loading dock, but this time, nothing was there.

The mannequin room was warm and humid. Everywhere was warm and humid that summer. But at least it was dark, and I had my mannequin friends. I felt uncomfortably sweaty and sticky. I made a game out of pressing my fingers together, spreading them apart and checking to see how much they resisted, how much the flesh clung to itself and stretched to stay together. It was fun until suddenly it wasn't because I was thinking of last night and the feeling of my skin pulling away from my head. I slapped my hands against my ears, though that didn't do much to block out my thoughts. And then, with all the caution my brother gives his ugly bike, I gently moved my fingers down into the crevice between my ear and my head where last night I had pulled away a lump of flesh that felt like putty.

I had expected to find the hardness of skull and bone and the fine down of hair that grew back there, but instead of hitting against anything, my fingers just kept going. Into the pliable, sweaty warmth of my skin and in and in and in up to my second knuckles. In up to the place where my palm started, and the mannequins were staring at my wide-open eyes and listening to my soft animal gasping as I withdrew my hand and felt my flesh stretch with it, unwilling to part, unwilling to let me go, dripping, melting under the extra warmth that my palms carried and dripping down my neck. I held my hands up in front of my face, and slick streams of skin hung from them, phlegmatic things not quite liquid yet but close. I wanted to vomit. I did not. I felt embarrassed. The mannequins had seen me melting. They'd be disgusted if they could be. I looked up at them with hands dripping, the flesh I could still feel running down the back of my neck mixing with sweat, and I told them I was sorry. As if in response, the lights flickered on, casting the whole room in a sickly fluorescence that made me look almost yellow. I remembered that the mannequins were not alive. They could not think of me. They could not be disgusted.

A secondary problem presented itself: what to do with the mucus-like skin that webbed my hands. I moved them vaguely towards my shirt for one moment as though to wipe them there, but then I looked down and remembered I was still in my work polo. They'd be mad if I fucked it up. I thought about my pants and decided no, they'd be mad about that too. And I couldn't picture anything worse than someone being mad at me, so I eventually put my hands together and gathered it all up into my palms, all the melting flesh, and slowly, carefully stuck it back behind my ears.

At that point, Chrissie walked in to ask me what I was doing, the delivery truck had already arrived, and I got up to go move boxes. And the whole time I moved boxes, I was shivering despite the heat, 'cuz I had no way of knowing how much of what was dripping down my back was actually sweat and how much was the same ooze of mucus-y flesh I'd stuffed back in there earlier.

When I got home, my parents were making dinner. They asked me when I was going back to school again. I told them around mid-August. They nodded. I was going to be a senior. I was close to moving out. I'd selected a college. One of the local ones so I could stay home and help out.

In my room, I took off my employee polo shirt and clapped my hands over my mouth to stop from screaming. The inside of it was smeared with my skin. I put my hands to my stomach; they sank in. I pulled them away, and my breathing got fast, and my thoughts started repeating, and my breathing got fast, and I started feeling nauseous, and my breathing

got fast, and I wanted to do something, and my breathing got fast, and I went out into the living room to tell my parents, gasping and crying, and they looked alarmed, and my mother pulled me into her arms, and my father asked what was wrong, what had happened, and I just stared at him.

How could he not know? How can you not see?

I pulled away from my mother and saw my skin stick to hers for just a moment and saw my own body deform and smudge like I was a wax seal she'd stamped, and I wanted to say to my father, what do you mean? I'm melting, I'm melting, but I didn't. I shook my head and sucked it up.

Sorry, I said, it's just stress. The job is a lot.

My parents looked worriedly at each other.

You don't have to take it, my mother said. You can stop if you want.

I shook my head again and went back to my room. I was shaking almost. I couldn't believe they couldn't see it, but if they couldn't see it, did that mean it was nothing? Maybe I was just hallucinating, maybe it really was just stress. I resolved to live with it, and I have only reversed that decision now when it is far too late.

The heatwave was surging again, and I spent more time indoors and more time in the mannequin room. Nobody missed me too much anyways. Noel did come in to check on me when she was working, but she wasn't always working. The store had switched to rotating in some other managers. The new ones didn't like me. Too odd, too out of sight, too happy sitting in that creepy room with all those creepy mannequins, dreaming of a world where I was not melting, and I was perfect just like them. And on the day when my teeth dripped from my mouth on long strings of gums, I went to the mannequin room and looked at my teeth on the floor and thought about my face slipping down and my bones feeling achy and messy like they too were melting and sobbed. The saltwater of my tears carved twin canyons down my cheeks, and it hurt.

When I looked down at my teeth again, they had melted as well. All that remained of them were a few white droplets on the ground. I went on, though. I cut food into tiny bites and swallowed the pieces whole. I ate in my room. My parents thought it was a puberty thing. My brother was barely around, so what did he care? I went to the beach at night for a while since it was easier to exist there without hiding my melting body, but then at some point, a bit of sea spray hit my hand, and three of my fingers dropped into the wet sand and vanished amidst the tides. So, I don't go there anymore.

The next day, I could barely get out of bed. I was scared. I managed to get my phone and lay whispering to it, not because I was trying to be quiet but because there was a strange pressure in my lungs. My teeth were gone. Half my hand was gone. When I turned on my camera, I could see that at some point in the night, I'd missed my nose and lips collapsing in because my face was a flat, oily morass with only my dark eyes glinting out of it.

I remember once, earlier in the summer, before everything, I went with my friends to the boardwalk, and we all got sno-cones. We walked along the hot wood planks. Every so often, one of us punted a dead bird and watched it sail off into the distance. Sometimes someone else told us to knock it off. Sometimes nobody said anything. The heat was a kind of blanket over the town. It made everything muffled. It stifled action.

I don't remember what we talked about. I don't remember what else we did. But I remember that at the end of the walk, I'd forgotten to eat my sno-cone, and it was dripping thick red syrup all over my hand. I wondered – when I finished melting, would I be red at all? I have seen swirls of blood amidst the parts I dropped. I have seen red enter the whites of my eyes, swirling like ink dropped in water. But I have also seen my flesh on the ground, not red, but pale peach, as though that's all I was: just a slab of skin, moist and damp and already soaking through the dirt until it disappeared.

Kapre

by Emmily Magtalas Rhodes

Content Warnings: Swearing, abuse, violence, murder.

Not your thing? Skip to page 37 for the next story.

That stench. So strong, acrid and suffocating. But it can't be. It's impossible!

It's only exhaustion. I've been hiking for miles around these godforsaken woods. I was told this circular route was scenic, but all I've seen so far are trees... ugly, gnarled trees that seem to grow bigger and thicker as I fall deeper into this forest. They block what little light and view I can see.

And this useless map and guidebook! It said this walk was for intermediate ability, even suggesting that children from the age of twelve can do it. I don't know what kind of children they have here in England, but if I were a twelve-year-old, I'd be throwing a tantrum by now. The ground is so uneven it feels like it's shifting, even as I walk.

And yet, the map tells me I should've finished the route hours ago. How can that be? I've followed the path to the letter, only leaving the trail to piss behind a tree. I couldn't have gone off track. I retraced my steps. I double-checked the map.

Maybe I should've told someone where I was going and what I was doing. Who will look for me if I get lost?

My stupid, so-called smartphone doesn't even have a signal here. I know the area is very rural and remote, but this phone is the latest model and so expensive that it should at least manage to get a signal anywhere. But it's worse than a dumb phone. It's so dumb it's useless. I can't call, I can't text, I can't access any useful apps.

My legs ache. I go to the gym every day, yet I'm still huffing and puffing like a weakling. But I can't stop. Mustn't stop. The sun will set soon, and it'll be too dark to make it out of here.

Why did I even think going for a walk alone was a good idea? Was it to prove I was macho to my foreign colleagues? *Raffy, you're the foreigner here.* They often boast about having done the hardest walking routes in this area. And though they don't say it, I can sense

it. *Poor, short, stocky Raffy, he won't be able to hack it. He looks quite soft. A posh city boy. I bet he's never been in the woods, even in the Philippines.*

And this particular forest, they said it's haunted. They said strange things happen here. *Like what?* I asked. *Raffy, you'll have to go to find out,* they laughed.

They thought I wouldn't be up for the challenge. They thought I'd be scared. But they don't know the things I've done in my life to get here. They don't know the hardships I've been through, the heartaches, the humiliation. But I rose to those challenges. It took guts, but I wasn't afraid. I have never been afraid.

They think I'm effeminate, good with the spreadsheet and the paperwork, but not in the wild. Sure, I was educated in America and Europe and travelled the world. They've read my CV; they've witnessed my promotions. They know my father's an important businessman in Asia. But to them, I'm only a pampered and privileged boy from Manila. I might look refined and gentle, but I've hunted. I've known what it's like to hold a living thing and squeeze the life out of it – see the fear in its eyes. I've felt that power. They don't know.

That stench. I can still smell it. A pervading odour of shit, of rotten flesh and cigar smoke. It's invading my nostrils, constricting my throat. Could it be a fire?

Fuck! I keep tripping on these protruding roots. They're a mass of tangles on the earth, and I have to be very careful not to trap my feet in them. The ground is mucky too. *Where the sun don't shine.*

My boots, my designer hiking boots, are now covered in mud and weighing my legs down. Why didn't I notice that I'd entered a bog? My feet are wet, and my socks are squelching inside my boots. I'm no longer walking, I'm trudging. And it's so much effort to move.

And I'm getting hungry. And thirsty. I haven't had anything to eat since breakfast. I was going to time it right, do the circuit, and reward myself with a pub meal and a pint. The guidebook said it would only take about three hours, four at a slower pace. That's why I didn't bring any food with me. Not even snacks. But it's now seven hours later, and I can't see a way out. Plus, I've drunk my water bottle dry. If only there was a river or a lake nearby. But there's only muddy puddles, squidgy earth.

What's that? There's rustling in the trees ahead. Maybe there are other walkers. I know my colleagues said it's not a very busy walking route. *But it's in the guidebook!* I said. Apparently, they're trying to entice people to this area. It would be a boon to the local businesses. But it's clearly not working. *Despite the scenic views?* I asked. They said it was because it was haunted. *People are scared, Raffy.*

I was told a small group of walkers in the '80s went through this route and never came out of the woods. They were never found. The way those guys talked, it sounded like a stereotypical urban legend. *No fucking way!* They were obviously pulling my leg. Let's pick on the rich Asian kid, the foreigner. Those fucking bastards!

'Hello! Anybody there?! Hello!'

Maybe it's just birds. Or a squirrel. Although it's quite weird that I didn't hear any tweeting of birds when I entered the woods. I've done walks before, easier routes, yes, but I remember always hearing birds. And I've not seen any animal, not even insects, on this walk. Maybe I just wasn't paying attention. Woods without insects. Ha! That's a laugh.

A laugh. Now I hear someone laughing. It starts out as a giggle. Then it grows louder. A belly laugh. Now it's guffawing in a big, booming voice like it's heard the *funniest joke ever*.

'Hello!'

It vacillates between a cackle and a guffaw. And it keeps on going and going like it's on a loop.

'Hello! Please answer me!'

More roaring laughter. It sounds like it's getting closer. But I can't pinpoint where it's coming from. It sounds like it's taunting me.

'Stop it! Stop it!'

I turn around, but there's no one behind me. The trees rustle again, this time from a completely different direction. But when my head follows it, everything stands still. Then, suddenly, the laughter stops, and it's quiet.

Was I only imagining it? I'm tired and starving. My throat is parched. Maybe I'm hallucinating.

Then, the penny drops. My colleagues, those guys, are playing a trick on me. They're hiding in the trees. They've followed me, and they're trying to scare the shit out of me. But how could they have known I was accepting their dare? I didn't tell anyone about this journey. I was going to take selfies when I got to the right place. I was going to surprise them. Show them I wasn't afraid.

I had already picked the first location for my selfie – one of the many scenic spots the guidebook mentioned. It's called the Floating Rock because it looks suspended in the air. The write-up says the legend is the fairy folk cast a spell on it, and whoever moves it will unblock the portal to this world and theirs. I was going to take a picture of myself on top of that rock, or maybe pretending to push it to open that portal. It would've been hilarious.

But I don't see the rock. Nor do I see the Weeping Ladies (a cluster of stone columns), or the Cursed Lovers, a rock in the shape of a man entwined in a petrified tree trunk. There are only trees. Massive trees with their rough and wrinkled barks, their long and twisted branches, wounded and scarred by the changing seasons. Many are pockmarked with disfigured eyes, glowering at me, not daring to blink.

Don't stare at me.

Now I'm talking to goddamn trees. I didn't say it aloud, but shit, I thought it. I'm getting paranoid. Must be the effects of hunger. I try to spit, but my mouth is dry.

The leaves on the branches high above me swoosh violently, but there's no wind. The air is still.

'Har! Har! Har!'

There it is again. That deep, bellowing laugh that appears to come simultaneously from the ground and the sky.

'Rahffeee...'

Is that someone calling my name?

'Quit fucking with me! I know you're there! Guys, I know what you're doing, but I don't scare easily!'

No, I don't scare easily. And I'm up for a challenge. They think they can scare me, but I've been tested in the past, and I've proven myself. There have been times when I've hurdled obstacles, when I've triumphed.

They don't know what I'm made of.

That thunderous laugh surrounds me now. And that foul smell, that nauseating mix of decaying meat, unwashed groin, and the reek of strong tobacco. Like an unhygienic, chain-smoking butcher. It's making me gag.

'It's not funny anymore, guys! I'm getting tired of your sick joke!'

From above, twigs fall one by one, hitting me on the head. I put my arms up, but the sticks become larger, turning into branches as big as my legs. I slide my rucksack off my back and use it to shield my head.

'Are you trying to kill me?! You've gone too far, you know!'

I look up to catch my colleagues. But it's difficult to make out solid forms. It's twilight now. The little bit of orange sky peeking from behind the lush shade of leaves is turning red and purple. And I can't trust the shadows.

'Har! Har! Har!'

It's one of those sound effects machines kids use for Halloween, I'm sure. It's only that. They're trying to freak me out, but I'm not afraid.

'I'm not afraid! Fuck you, guys! I'm not scared!'

No, I am not scared. I was never scared. Even last time.

Not the last time I was in the woods, but the last time I felt this way. Not scared, but maybe agitated.

It was so long ago. I want to erase it from my memory. But it's worming its way into my head.

Her face, such an exquisite face! Carved like a pagan goddess. There was something so primal about her, so... exotic.

I had taken her to my dad's island resort in the south of the country because we would have privacy there. No more sneaking her into my bedroom at night when everyone was asleep.

I knew the staff might talk, but if they did, they would never work again. My dad would've made sure of that. He had connections in high places – government officials, scary people.

Besides, I couldn't have been seen in Manila with her. She wasn't from the right family. I was class A; she was class D. She was just a peasant's daughter, a mere maid in our house, for crying out loud! But god, she was beautiful. That flawless mocha skin, that curvaceous body – ripe, yet virginal. I was beguiled, maybe bewitched by her.

But if my friends had found out I was fooling around with our young maid, I would never have heard the end of it. Sure, I had noticed them surreptitiously checking her out, making suggestive gestures whenever she served them. But that's all she was to them. An object of their rude fantasies that they would never touch for fear of catching something terrible, like a ruined reputation. Oh no. They would never act on it.

Which was why it was of utmost importance to keep our affair a secret. Otherwise, I would be the butt of jokes. I had a reputation to protect. And if word got out, my dad would never forgive me. He'd never pull strings for me again.

I was going to have my fun like my dad said. Satisfy my curiosity, taste the fruit of the countryside. She was going to be my guilty secret. My love slave. No, I wasn't in love with her. It was never love. I wasn't stupid. I wasn't going to fall for a provincial girl, completely unsophisticated and ignorant. We had absolutely nothing in common.

But she fired up my flesh. I couldn't stop thinking about her face, her body. It was pure lust, that was all. I just needed to get her out of my system.

My dad had a plan. He was always brilliant with ideas, this astute businessman. He was going to pay her to keep quiet. After all, we're not monsters. She was going to live in the resort as a chambermaid. And whenever I visited, she would be there to lavish her attention on me until I no longer wanted it. That had been the arrangement. And it should've all worked out had she not started being silly, having her delusions.

I knew she did it to make me jealous. Maybe she got greedy and wanted leverage. What else could it be?

A *kapre*. How utterly backward. Idiotic. What a country bumpkin she was!

She said a *kapre* in the resort's woods befriended her. A dark, hairy giant perched on the trees, smoking a cigar in his loincloth, stinking like hell. An ogre in a nappy. A coarse mythical creature concocted by uneducated minds. *My dad doesn't employ ugly creatures*, I told her. *Unless he's a trespasser, then we'll have to shoot him*, I laughed.

He said he'll protect me, she insisted.

Oh, so that was it. She'd found another lover. An illiterate country boy, one of those boorish oafs harassing the resort staff while waiting to be handed a job. Protect her. Protect her from what? He wouldn't be able to offer her anything because he was nothing. Just another lazy peasant.

And well, she was mine. And I wasn't sharing. Not with some crude yokel. Not with some imaginary cryptid. Not with this *kapre*.

So, I watched her. Every night, I checked the resort's security cameras. I went to her room and inspected her things, looking for love letters, gifts, pictures, any incriminating evidence I could throw in her face.

I interrogated the staff. What did she do today? Who was she with? Who did she talk to? Where did she go when I wasn't around?

They pointed me to the woods. Of course, it would have to be the woods. That was where she would meet her hillbilly lover, in the cover of darkness. They thought they would be safe there, protected by those colossal old trees.

And that was where I found her, deep in those woods, under an acacia tree. She was waiting for him. Against the enormous trunk of this ancient giant, she looked so small and fragile. She was looking up, just as I am now looking up.

It could be the same tree. Do acacias grow in this country? Even if they do, I'm sure this is an oak. What do I know? I'm not a botanist.

'Rahffeee...'

That voice, again, calling my name. And that horrible smell!

I need to get out of this forest. It's messing with my head. I grab my bag and run to my right, but it feels like I'm in slow motion. My bag, it's so heavy and drags me down. I shake the contents onto the ground until it's empty. Then I pick up what's fallen, identifying the objects by touch because I can hardly see anything now – a pen, a notebook, my water bottle, my wallet, my keys. I don't really know what I'm looking for. So, I throw everything indiscriminately in all directions. My phone, its screen now cracked, is dead. My useless phone.

I hurl it at the towering tree in front of me, and it shatters.

'Har! Har! Har!'

'Enough!' I scream, though I'm no longer sure who I'm addressing. I kick off my boots and peel off my sodden socks, then I sprint, so fast my feet barely touch the ground. My face, arms and legs get whacked by branches jutting into my path, and I flail my limbs as I battle my way forward. When I finally stop to catch my breath, I examine my surroundings.

Silhouettes of imposing trees all around me, big and black and endless. My legs give, and I fall, kneeling on the mud.

'Please!' I say like I'm praying to some mischievous god.

I'm so tired I can't do anything more than lie prone on the mud.

I won't be defeated.

Slowly, I crawl on the soft, wet earth until my hand touches something. I pull it closer to my face. My deflated backpack! I raise my head, and things take shape. My discarded stuff is scattered on the ground. Then I feel a sting on my thigh, and as I lift my bloody leg, I see a jagged piece of my phone's broken screen embedded in my skin.

'Fuck!' I shriek.

Don't lose it, Raffy. I close my eyes to centre myself. *Think, Raffy, think! You're the son of a shrewd businessman. You're educated, you're from a prestigious family. This is just a stupid trick. Sue those bastards when you get out of here. Yes, they'll have it coming. But for now, focus. Remember how powerful you were! Remember what you did!*

She did not see me. Her face was turned upwards, beautiful and beatific, like she was communing with God. I rushed towards her, grabbed her, pushed her to the ground. Then I slapped her face savagely. *You're mine!* I screamed. *You're mine!*

Please, Raffy, stop, she begged. She didn't scream back. She just lay there, crying softly, so pathetic.

Rahffeee...

That roaring voice, it's the same voice I heard as I pinned her down.

Raffy, please don't hurt me, she pleaded.

Don't tell me what to do! I shouted at her.

You don't have to do this, Raffy. You'll make him angry, she entreated.

I don't care if he gets angry. Why should I care what he feels? He's just another useless peasant. He's not stealing what's mine!

RAH-FFEEE!

The voice shook the ground and threw me off her. She scampered away from me and was about to run, but I was fast. I wasn't going to let her go. I snatched a clump of her hair and yanked her towards me.

We paid you! You're mine!

My hands closed around her slender neck. And I saw the fear in her eyes. It gave off an awful smell. This fear, it stank. It smelled of excrement and rot and pungent smoke. The sharpness burned my eyes and made me gasp for breath. But I held on, I tightened my grip, I squeezed as hard as I could until her eyes closed, and her body hung limp from my grasp.

The stench – that acrid smoke, so strong and suffocating, pervaded the air. I dropped her and ran. I ran and ran, but the forest seemed to expand. And the voice kept calling my name.

Rahffeee...

Fire! I yelled. Help! There's a fire!

Eventually, a resort staff member bumped into me. *Sir, what's wrong? Are you ok?* he said. I told him a villager had started a fire in the forest after I saw him strangling her. *Call the police,* I ordered him.

The culprit was never found. My dad carted me off to the airport and put me on the next plane to Europe. *I'll fix this, Raffy. But lie low from now on. I don't want any more of this from you,* he warned.

I stayed away. I never went back to my own country. I tried to erase the episode from my mind. I hadn't thought of her in ages.

But now, here I am, trapped in these woods. Darkness has descended, and it feels like I'm back there, thousands of miles away in that tropical forest. My eyes are smarting from the stench, and I'm gasping for breath.

'Har! Har! Har!'

That jeering laugh. It's coming from those thick branches high up. I must get to it. I must stop it.

I pull myself up and take off my torn clothes, a hindrance to my progress, until I'm only wearing my shredded underwear. My fingers claw into the rough tree bark as I desperately try to get a grip. I climb up, apelike and clumsy.

'Har! Har! Har!'

My legs wrap around the fat, scratchy trunk, and I propel myself upward. The tree is very tall, and the first branch seems so out of reach. But I won't be defeated. I won't be humiliated.

'Rahffeee...'

That taunting voice spurs me on. My fingers find crevices; it's just like rock climbing.

'Rahffeee...'

'Stop it!' I holler. 'Rahffeee! Rahffeee! Rahffeee!' I mimic it in frustration.

I reach a branch substantial enough to support my weight and perch on top of it to catch my breath. I am so high up now; the ground below me is miles away. My legs dangle as I sit, and I notice dirt smeared all over them. I'm covered in mud, matted with sticks and dry leaves. I try to rub it off with my hands, but it won't come off. It's stuck to me like a fake tan gone horribly wrong. And that stench.

It's coming from this branch. No, it's coming from...

I sniff around me. But it can't be. It's impossible.

That overwhelming stench. It's emanating from me!

The realisation makes me wobble, and I grab hold of a branch to steady myself. But it's not a branch. There's smoke coming out one end. When I bring it closer to my face, it's...
a cigar?

The whole situation is so absurd I put the cigar in my mouth and laugh.

'Har! Har! Har!'

My voice thunders across these woods.

'Rahffeee!'

I shout my name, and it reverberates, causing the trees to shudder.

'Har! Har! Har!'

I guffaw so hard, spittle spews everywhere. Then my head hangs down, and I see her. Down below, standing on solid ground.

She's looking up at me, a primordial goddess. Her beautiful face blissful and beatific.

B Movie

by Leigh V Twersky

Content Warnings: Bees, body horror, forced medical procedures, violence.

Not your thing? Then you have come to the end...

Hello? Is that Anthony Houghton? Thomas Ifield here... Fine, thanks, and you? Good. Look, I'll get straight to the point. I liked your audition piece very much and would love you to play Tom... Oh! Fantastic! I'm so pleased... The next step? I'll send you a contract, and then you can come up here for the shoot.

*

It's easy, Anthony. Take the Weymouth train from Waterloo as far as Poole and get one of the frequent ferries from the harbour. Dunmere Island is only twenty minutes away. Just let me know when, and I'll be ready for you.

*

Great to see you again! You know, the minute you walked in the door at the Actors' Space, I knew you were the one I wanted for Tom. Funny, isn't it, how one develops a gut instinct for these things? But you're right in every sense: not too tall, so more of the antihero, easy on the eye, London accent... people'll identify with you.

Pleasant trip? Yes, we are close to the mainland but also cut off, so hopefully, there'll be no interruptions, and we'll be able to get on with the filming undisturbed.

I'll show you to your accommodation. Just one thing – please go outside if you want to smoke. There's ample space on the grounds and even a covered porch if it rains... Here's your room. Nice view of the sea through the pine trees. Very different from London.

Sure you can stay for the duration of the shoot?... Good. I want to finish so I can get on with editing. Any other commitments at the moment?... No family? I vaguely recall an

interview you gave some time ago... Girlfriends?... Just split up?... Oh dear, that's a shame. It is for her? Well, if you're unattached and not hung up over it, that's fantastic.

*

Thank you. Marks and Spencer. Wanted to make your first meal a bit special.

Erm, before I go through the script, I think it's only fair I should tell you something about myself and why I'm not eating with you, so you'll understand if I suddenly need to go and lie down or rush away for no apparent reason. Several years ago, I had cancer... of the colon... Mm, it's always a dreadful shock... Well, I had the lot: surgery – famous surgeon – chemo and radiotherapy and a colostomy bag... I like to be open about it as soon as I meet people. It's best to be honest about such things, don't you agree? Saves a lot of problems and awkwardness later. However, it does mean I get tired every so often, and the blasted thing gurgles a fair bit occasionally, but hey! Shouldn't knock it – it's keeping me alive!

*

Relax, I'll pour you a nice coffee. Been up for hours. Always rise with the sun, me. So I've already had my breakfast.

You've read the script? Not all of it. I suppose some of it is tough going, but it'll be worth it.

Jam? Honey? I recommend the latter, locally produced, organic... Good, I thought you'd like it... Sure. Help yourself.

The other actors are coming later. I wanted to do your scenes first. Oops! Hear that? That's my bag. Doesn't put you off, does it? Sure? Glad to hear it. I know it's not really a proper script yet per se, more a collection of ideas, so I can't expect you to understand straightaway what the film'll be about. I'll run through the plot with you over lunch.

*

More salad?... Okay, I'll keep it for tonight.

As I promised earlier, the plot. Tom, your character, is a bit of a recluse. You're a surgeon at the local hospital and very successful too, but the work's been getting to you for some time. You quit and move to a big old house, not unlike this one, on the edge of town.

You've got a huge garden, with a pale green beehive hidden in some bushes. You don't remember seeing it when you first viewed the property but are instantly drawn to it.

As time passes, you acquire more hives and take up apiculture with a passion. Your beloved bees are all you have in the world besides your home. Your honey gets sold in a little grocery store down the road, the neighbours are tolerant, life is good. But when the old boy next door dies, his widow sells to a widower, who takes an instant dislike to you and the bees and starts complaining. His two sons, about eighteen or nineteen, run amok in your garden, disturb the bees and get stung. There's uproar. You, however, stand your ground and refuse to get rid of your bees. The new neighbours say the hives are dangerous and try for an injunction, but it's turned down. More cake? Yes, I imagine it is nice. Anyway, they're livid and one night break into your garden and poison all your hives except your original one, which they don't see. Next day, you're devastated to find most of your bees dead. You have a terrible row with the neighbours, who taunt you and gloat at your misfortune. Just put your plate in the sink. Thanks. And because you haven't got so much money, you can't afford to replace them and have to sell the now-empty hives.

Time passes, and you keep very quiet about the remaining hive. You tend to these bees in secret and allow them to keep their honey, for you're afraid that the neighbours'll guess what's going on if you sell any more in the corner shop. Heartbroken, you fall ill...

You'll find out later. Today I merely wish to set the scene for the story. I'm not going to divulge the whole plot until you've got used to acting with the bees. That's one of the reasons I got you here earlier.

So you could meet your fellow stars.

*

Don't worry, Anthony, they won't sting you. They've been lightly tranquillised with an alcohol spray... Just try and stay calm when they swarm round your face... Yes, I know it'd be safer if you had protective gear. You will have in some of the early scenes in the garden, but I have to show you bonding with the bees to the point where you allow them to buzz round your unprotected head... That comes later on in the film...

It's a company that specialises in hiring out swarms of bees for movies... Their name? Rent-A-Swarm... Just outside Bournemouth, not far... No, of course they don't count them, but they expect a hefty number to be returned safely... Yes, the queen is with them... They're well accommodated here...

You see, they're quite docile, they've been in your hair for about five minutes now, and you haven't flinched... Anthony! You're a natural! I'm very impressed... Oh, there's one on your neck... Don't touch it... Well done! See? It's flown off... I'll carry on with the plot this evening... Great work! You'll be able to act unhindered by the bees humming around you. My instincts were spot on. What's that? I can't hear you, they're buzzing so loudly...

No, you're all right, go off now and leave me to clear up. I must ask you always to let me sort everything out at the end, please. It's easier for me to do than to explain where it all goes.

*

What I love about the end of September, Anthony, is the gentleness of the heat. The fierceness you get in August is over, and everything is slowing down and transforming into the autumn explosion of colour. And here on Dunmere, I'm privileged to be all alone in this gorgeous Victorian villa with the wisteria – so lovely in spring over the porch – and this delightful patio. Sunshine gives the wine something extra, don't you agree? Oh, go on! Another glass won't hurt! And your cigarette smoke wafts harmlessly away. I even like the smell of it here. No thanks. Just look at those trees! No, the deciduous ones, the reds, yellows, golds and browns. Apparently, the heatwave produced extra sugars in the leaves or something, and that's why the colours are so intense. Heard it on the telly.

Oh, sorry about that. Tummy rumble! I do hope you're not embarrassed. I'm not, and I think that's the important thing. If I'd been coy about my colostomy, you'd have found it buttock-clenching, but my frankness has made it easier for you. You see, it's not such a terrible thing. Okay, it can pong a bit from time to time, I know, and that's why you turned away just then, isn't it, to spare me that little wince, but don't worry. Over the years, you develop a thick skin and grow so accustomed to the smell that, eventually, you stop noticing it altogether. Anyway, if you'll excuse me for a moment, I'd better go and... Help yourself to more wine in the meantime... Shan't be long!

*

Where were we? Oh, yes! The plot. The actual scenes where you're interacting with other characters still have to be scripted. Don't worry, ideas are constantly buzzing – oops, sorry, forgive the pun – around in my head, and it's just a matter of writing them down.

So, you've fallen ill. Bad stomach pains. Flashback to a series of unpleasant colonoscopies. They find bowel cancer. Unusual for someone in their late twenties, but anyway, this is exactly what I went through. You wake up in the ward, drips and catheters in every orifice in your body, and the consultant explains you've had a colostomy and will have to learn how to use a bag.

Of course, your trials aren't over. You have to undergo chemotherapy, which makes your hair fall out and gives you the worst nausea you've ever had, followed by exhausting radiotherapy.

Eventually, you're given the all-clear and can return to some sort of life, but a lot of shit happens... You'll find out later.

Anyway, you go home, walking slowly in your garden, taking it easy, wearing loose-fitting clothes to accommodate your bag. You check your clandestine hive of bees. They're fine. But as you hobble towards your house, you see your neighbours glaring at you from their kitchen window, intent on rekindling the vendetta. You nod at them, but there's no friendly response. Then their back door opens, and out storm the dad and the two sons. Confrontational... and I'm getting very tired, Anthony. I'm afraid I'm going to have to lie down... Oh, that's very kind of you. Normally I'd say leave it for the morning, but it would be so lovely if I could get up without having to deal with dirty crockery first thing. I'm really worn out. See you tomorrow. Have a nice evening.

*

Breakfast in the garden's one of life's special treats, I always think. Thanks so much for doing the dishes. I hate having to clear the sink before I can make coffee in the morning. One of the joys of solitude. Nobody else's mess cramping your style.

I can see you really like that honey! Heard you go out last night. Yes, Poole's a smashing town, especially along the waterfront, so lively... Bit rowdy sometimes, I worry I might get knocked or jostled, so I rarely go there. You got the last ferry okay? Have to be careful. They leave at eleven-fifteen sharp. Heaven help you if you're a minute late. And of course, high season, all the hotels are fully booked.

Why would you want to check out Rent-A-Swarm? I told you, didn't I? Oh, Anthony, you've upset me now. Don't you trust me? Well, why else would you look them up? I thought we had a good thing going here... They're moving premises as far as I know, that's why

they're not listed at the moment. But you saw for yourself yesterday how safe the bees were... Look, I promise you'll be okay with them. I'll take care of you.

I suppose it's best to get this out in the open now rather than later... Anthony! I think you're fantastic, and I'd be very sorry to lose your collaboration on this film. No, you're overreacting, I've been perfectly honest with you. Check with your bank, you'll see I've already made the first payment... If you had an agent, it'd still be the same. Equity rate, but you'd be losing commission and waiting ages to receive the money. Don't complain, this is a good deal. Trust me... Do you really need another cigarette? I'm worried about your smoking, that's all. All right, this is what I suggest. Take the morning off, go into Poole, potter around, have a think, and if you want, return for lunch. You'll realise I'm being reasonable. Then we can start over again... give each other a second chance.

And before you go, clean your teeth. Get the smell of stale ash out of your mouth.

*

So glad you came back, Anthony. Sort of knew you would, somehow. After all, whatever else has happened, this is still a job. I don't blame you for having second thoughts or cold feet. My working methods are unconventional, to say the least. But they'll be rewarding. Believe me.

Now, today, I'd like to film you with the bees and carry on with the plot after dinner. So, this is the action. That cupboard over there'll represent your neighbours. They've just threatened to burn your sole remaining beehive. You're defiant and yell, 'Over my dead body!' while the bees are clustering around your head. You add, 'You'll never kill my bees!' and with that, lift your hands up... No, like this, in front of your face, yes, that's it, and the bees'll rise and hover, right there above your head... Amazed? Well, I told you, they're specially trained. And they seem to like you, which is the main thing. So, remember the lines, camera rolling, and action!

...And cut!

Not bad, for a rehearsal. It's *my* bees, not *the* bees... Yes, very important. The script has to be exact. And I'm sure you were comfortable – you looked most relaxed. I'm relieved we had that little contretemps this morning. It's just what we needed to clear the air.

The next bit of this scene has to be done with the other cast members, so we'll call it a day. Thank you, Anthony. A good afternoon's work. No, and I can't repeat this too often,

please allow me to do all the clearing up. The equipment has to go in that room opposite, and I've got the only key. Thanks anyway.

*

I thought we'd eat inside tonight, as it's a bit cooler now. Afraid it's just a ready-made chill-cook meal again. Don't worry about me, I ate earlier. I have my special times, you see, but there's plenty of wine. Here's to us! And the success of the film!

Title?... I've decided to call it B – no e's – Movie... Yes, I think it is rather witty.

At least with this supermarket stuff, there's no washing up.

Right! Now, we already looked at the next bit of plot. Your neighbours have leapt over the fence and are going to set fire to your hive. You defy them and shoo the bees into the boughs of your surrounding fruit trees, but the neighbours beat you up. Three on one, and you've only just got over major surgery, so you're pretty weak, but you chase them off with a stick. However, the father runs behind you and torches the hive. You scream as the lads pull you to the ground. As they do, they rip your shirt open and see your colostomy bag. They are disgusted and go, 'Ugh!' and call you a shitbag. The father kicks you in the side. They leave you lying there.

When you get up, you struggle over to the hive, but it's a smouldering write-off. With tears in your eyes, you search frantically for your bees and are overjoyed to find them in a dense huddle in a tree far from the smoke. You apologise to them: 'I'm sorry. I couldn't protect you or save your home. Please forgive me. I'll do anything you want.'

Their buzzing gets louder and louder, deafening you. You put your hands to your ears as if they are telling you something unbearable. You say, 'No, you mustn't thank me. I didn't save your lives or your hive! I am unworthy!' You collapse to your knees. The bees are still hovering round your head without harming you. 'Thank you!' you say. 'Whatever you wish.'

You get up and slowly stagger back to your house, the bees following you inside. You check none have been left behind in the twilight and then close the door... Yes, we'll film that outside, in my garden, with the trained bees, exactly as I've described. The fight with the neighbours will be shot separately. It gets a lot darker, Anthony, just you wait... But right now, I'm ready for bed. Knackered, as I'm sure you are. It's been a very tiring day. See you at breakfast. Night night.

*

I wonder if that's the end of the fine weather, Anthony. More toast and honey? It's no bother at all...

Finished already? I suppose in a minute, you'll need to go and make use of those bowels you're still blessed with... Oh, am I embarrassing you? Sorry, don't mean to, it's just I can barely remember what it's like to sit down and have a good old shit. Not that I miss it... Of course not, I agree, it's not really an appropriate conversation topic for the breakfast table, but then you know all about the workings of my inner self, so it's only fair... No way, Anthony, I'm not bitter or jealous, just admiring the sturdiness of your digestive tract. You should thank God for your good health, it's the most valuable thing you have... Well, as I'm not hung up about all this and just speak my mind, I don't expect others to be... Okay, call that naïve, but you know the score here... And now, if you'll excuse me, I think my bag's full.

*

Fucking brilliant, Anthony! You really had me thinking you were in a trance then as the bees spoke to you. I've always been in awe of actors – the mystery of your talent is spellbinding.

I'm hoping to get it distributed with another British film as a double bill, but if that doesn't work out, there's always television. Plus, of course, all the independent festivals. Anthony, one way or another, I'm going to make you a star.

You don't have to apologise. Put it down to artistic temperament. A great actor's allowed to throw a little tantrum every now and then, isn't he? And you see, I'm not obsessed with your bodily functions. I'm obsessed – if that's the right word; I prefer preoccupied – with bodily functions per se. And you can't blame me for that...

No, you must be patient. The other actors won't be here for some time. I haven't cast all the parts yet. Remember, I've still to finish the script. I've been thinking we'll complete your solo scenes now, and there'll be a gap before we do the rest of the film, during which you can either go back to London or – and there's absolutely no pressure at all – stay here with me. Keep me company. Have a little holiday. Or help me with the screenplay. It's up to you. Don't mind either way...

Anyway, see you later. It's okay. I'll tidy up if you don't mind. No, please. I prefer to do it myself. I don't want you tripping over stuff in there and being unable to work.

*

Mm, they are quite good, aren't they, even if I say so myself! Tasted them earlier. Not supposed to, really. Bit too rich... Couldn't resist, though. Always been good at making pastry, and there's nothing like homemade sausage rolls. The secret's in keeping everything as cold as possible. Go on, finish them, Anthony, they can't be reheated, and you're eyeing the last one...

Thank you for the praise. And in return, I like to think I'm stuffing quality grub into your strong stomach... There's no need to bang your cutlery down like that, I'm merely paying you a compliment, visualising the passage of my cooking through your gut. Oh, Anthony! I didn't realise you were so touchy. Thought you were over that. Look, it doesn't matter about the plate, I've got plenty more.

*

Are we going to sulk all night? I simply said... Is that what you think, what all this is about? You stupid, fucking wanker, Anthony! If I fancied you, I'd have made my move by now, believe me! You're young, not even thirty, and think you know it all, but you don't. What have you seen of life, eh? You reckon I envy you your robust innards and am obsessing over fucking you up the arse to steal a bit of my lost health back? You do! I've seen it in the way you look at me, Anthony. No, you're afraid, uneasy with me, scared by my brutal tongue...

How many times do I have to tell you, I DON'T FANCY YOU, ANTHONY, AT ALL. I'm not that way inclined, and even if I were, you're not, so... Come back and help me clear up this mess – your mess, I hasten to add. There's a good fellow. Then we'll have a drink. I sure could use one.

*

You get what you pay for, Anthony. This brandy's good but costs enough to make you break into a sweat in the off-licence. Bloody worth it, though! Let's drink to the bees!

LONG LIVE THE BEES! CHEERS!

Mm, this is certainly the bevvvy for the long winter evenings... Another? Sorry, must be the stress of fighting, what's left of my insides is making one hell of a racket. Whining,

gurgling, rumbling... Get a lot of wind. Uncomfortable rather than painful, that's why my face is a perpetual grimace... Sure! Help yourself. You're welcome! It's there to be drunk.

What happens after you let the bees in and close the door? Ah, Anthony, that's something you have to deduce from later events in the story. I'm not planning to show that on film, but you'll find out soon enough. Do you have to have a smoke? It's just I want to tell you the subsequent plot developments... No, if you must, then I insist you go out.

*

No more interruptions, please. I loathe the smell of tobacco in closed spaces. The mucous membranes in my nose and throat react immediately. Most unpleasant. Now, where was I? Oh yes! The mystery of what goes on behind the closed door. Well, forget about that for a moment, Anthony, and think forward a few days.

Your vile neighbours have got it in for you still. They've seen the bees swarming in your garden, despite thinking they'd killed them all off, and put two and two together. Now they're after your blood. But they won't come for you during the daytime because the bees are hovering around your door, and they're cowards. They've been watching your house and seen the bees take up their position every day as if they're guarding you. But after dark, the bees disappear. They don't know where they go because they burnt the last hive and think they must sleep in one of your pear trees. So they plan their attack accordingly.

They come for you one moonlit night.

The three of them steal into your garden. Silent, like beasts of prey. They scurry past the back of your house to the kitchen door. It's bolted, but the sons kick it down and, with blood-curdling cries, invade your home.

Cut to your living room. You're watching telly, but the noise disturbs you. You get to your feet, ready for the onslaught.

'Who's there?' you call out, the fear in your trembling voice obvious, but there's no need to ask. You know who your assailants are. When they appear at the door, you realise you're trapped.

The sons scream at you, 'Hey! Shitbag!' and smack your face and pull your shirt out of your trousers. The houses are detached in this street, so nobody can hear. You beg them to leave you alone. 'Please,' you say, 'I've done nothing to you. I've been ill.'

But they won't listen.

‘We told you to get rid of those fucking bees,’ yells the dad, ‘but you defied us, Shitbag!’

The sons take up the echo, ‘Shitbag! Shitbag!’ They hit your colostomy bag till it bursts and the contents are sprayed over your clothes and spill onto your threadbare carpet. They groan in disgust and hold their noses. The father punches you right on your jaw, so you fall backwards.

‘You’re pathetic,’ he says, and the three intruders burst out laughing and kick you, but carefully so as not to get your half-digested excrement on their shoes.

You are crying from shame and pain. ‘Please, leave me alone. I don’t want any trouble.’

‘Well,’ says the father, ‘you should’ve thought of that before you allowed those fucking things to rampage round our neighbourhood and sting my boys.’

‘They were provoked!’ you protest.

‘A fucking danger, that’s what they are. We were right to burn the fuckers. We tried to warn you, but you wouldn’t listen, and now you’re gonna pay.’

You open your eyes wide and scream. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘Hold Shitbag,’ he orders his lads. ‘Make sure the cunt stays still. What we done to your bees, we’re gonna do to you too. Gonna make sure you never get in anyone’s face ever again. Let’s go, Shitbag!’

You struggle to free yourself from the sons’ strong arm-lock but in vain. ‘Where are you taking me?’

‘For a ride,’ answers the father. ‘One-way trip!’ They burst out laughing and frog-march you out your back door into their white transit van. The dad drives while the boys sit on you. It’s a bumpy journey, and you don’t stop yelling – you’re in great pain from the beating you’ve sustained, and you’re embarrassed to have your stoma exposed. Plus, it’s highly unpleasant being soiled. Eventually, the van stops, and they drag you out, pushing and hitting you all the time.

You’re on the brow of a hill on a nearby deserted heath. The father clears his throat and mumbles, ‘It’s all over, Shitbag. This is as far as it goes. Say your prayers.’

The boys are holding you as you tremble at the sight of the dad drawing a long knife, the blade glinting in the glare of the headlights.

‘No!’ you scream. ‘Don’t!’

‘Shut it!’

The older son leaves you in his brother's grip and punches you in the mouth, splitting your lip. You start sobbing, pleading for mercy, but suddenly feel sharp metal on your throat.'

'No, Dad!' says the younger son, all excited. 'Rip his belly open. Let's see his guts fall out!'

'He ain't got no guts!' retorts the father, and all three of them guffaw again.

You look up and say, 'Please, God!'

Suddenly, there is a strange noise, a whining hum, getting louder and louder, like the revving of an approaching chapter of motorbikes.

'What's that fucking racket?' asks the father.

'Never mind that, Dad!' says the older son, 'Cut him!'

'Wait!' interrupts the younger boy. 'I think it's old Shitbag himself!'

They look at you and push you violently to the ground, trapping you under their feet.

'Fucking hell!' remarks the older son. 'Sounds like it's coming from his belly.'

'Ugh!' replies his brother. 'That's disgusting! I bet it's all the shit inside him about to explode 'cos of his nerves!'

The three of them snigger and start pulling your trousers and underpants down to have a look.

Then you hear them shriek and watch them stagger back.

As you lay on the ground, supine, legs in the air, knees bent up to your chest in an attempt to cover your leaking stoma, you notice them staring at where your arse once was, a huge gaping hole that stretches right round to your scrotum. You're feeling terribly ashamed now, and exposed, and try to cover yourself up, but the noise crescendos. Your enemies have their hands on their ears, desperate to drown out that infernal sound, their eyes popping in disbelief at what they see coming out of your hole without warning.

Bees. Hundreds of them, angry, buzzing with hate.

Your foes freeze, but they wouldn't have stood a chance had they legged it. Within seconds they're carpeted by dozens of the insects, stinging away at their hands, eyes and noses, blinding them and rendering them incapable of fending off the attack. Some block their nasal airways, forcing them to open their mouths and gasp for air, then in fly others, going for their throats, which swell up. And so, the victims suffer a slow, agonising death by suffocation, spread out on the grass, faces swollen and puffy from the bee venom, dark blue tongues hanging out of gaping mouths.

Satisfied you are out of danger, you get to your feet and salute those that died to save your life and their home. The surviving bees – and there are still a few score – swarm back

through your anus into your hollow abdominal cavity. ‘Thank you!’ you say and pull your trousers up. You nod in contentment, knowing that the police will get most of the story right. Forensic science will identify the little killers but no more than that.

It’s about three miles back to your house, and although you are in a frightful state, you have to walk. You’ve no money for a bus, let alone a cab, and besides, you don’t want witnesses to spot you near the scene of the attack.

Safely home, you clean yourself up and dress your wounds.

Next morning, a bright, sunny one, you crouch down by your open kitchen door and drop your pyjama trousers to allow the bees out. You smile and wave to them as they fly into your garden for nectar. From that day on, you know they’ll always protect you. Then the camera zooms out to an aerial shot of the town, and that’s the end.

Anthony? What are you thinking? Please, say something! Do you like it? I suppose it is a little far-fetched, but that appeals to me. It probably is my reaction – my rationalising of what happened to me, to make it positive, the sweetness that shall come forth from the strong, haha... You’ll still do it, won’t you? Oh! Thank God for that! I know it’s a bit creepy, but I want that sort of shuddery twist at the denouement... No, don’t try and persuade me to change any of it. As long as you’re cool with it, Anthony, I’m happy... Don’t worry about special effects, all under control... Fine, have another cigarette, but not indoors.

*

You have a wonderful way of conveying emotion with the tiniest flicker of your eyes. Do you know that, Anthony? I’m your number one fan. I really believed your glee at your enemies’ demise... No, honestly, and I hope you can recreate that when we come to shoot the scene with the other actors. But what has really gladdened me is how the bees seem to like you and follow you around on set and – this is really weird – go to you when you beckon them. I think your relationship with them is going to make this film a classic. You see, now they’re hovering by you as though something within you attracts them... Plus, I’m also chuffed because some of the close-ups from the rehearsal footage are more than usable.

I’ve made a start on the dialogues. As you must have realised last night, I’ve got a pretty good idea what the precise words will be and the action. We’ll make a great team, you and me.

Okay, you go and have a rest, you've worked hard all afternoon... No, really, I can clear up myself. It's good exercise. Plus, I have to gather up the bees for the night... I'm positive. Please, Anthony. See you at dinner... Goodbye!

*

ANTHONY!

WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU'RE PLAYING AT? DIDN'T I ASK YOU NOT TO?

OH MY GOD! SO NOW YOU'VE SEEN!

*

Don't fucking moan, Anthony, you asked for that punch! Yes, I can see your nose is bleeding. Couldn't give a toss if it is broken.

What did you have to come back in here for?

YOUR CIGARETTES?

You mean you disobeyed me for a lousy smoke?

Here, take the fucking things! Oops! Wasn't meant to hit you in the eye. Sorry. Smoking really does damage your health, haha... I told you not to come back in here. You know my secret now. Before you were meant to... Well, you had to find out sooner or later. Just didn't want it to happen like this... Anthony! Where are you going? Don't run away. Come back... PLEASE, ANTHONY, I BEG YOU, DON'T LEAVE ME!

You won't get far. They'll make sure of that. They'll protect me, like they always have, ever since that day...

*

How's the patient? Shan't stay too long. Mustn't wear you out. Don't worry, you're being well looked after. You've been out for a long time.

You're in the equipment room, opposite where we rehearse. No, you've never been inside. I suppose you've wondered what's in here. Now you know.

Bet you feel nauseous. It's only natural. Don't be alarmed at all the tubes. You'll be grateful for them soon enough.

Oh dear, Anthony! You do look drowsy. Okay, mate, get some sleep. I'll come back later.

*

Well, that's better, isn't it! No solids, I'm afraid, but you are allowed a drink of water. Just a couple of sips to quench your thirst... There! How does that feel?

The swelling's gone down, but then, they didn't sting you that much. Because they like you. Didn't want to kill you, just make sure you didn't do anything stupid, like run away. Not now you've forged such a great rapport.

Anyway, they're sorry they went for you and wish you better. I'm sure you forgive them. They'd be so happy to know you've put it all behind you, yes? I know it's hard for you to talk right now, but a gentle nod would suffice... Oh, thank you. They'll be so relieved, delighted in fact. I suppose you're concerned about your job... Thought you might be. Well, don't worry, I still want you in the lead role and have postponed casting the other parts indefinitely until you're back on your feet again. So there's no need for any actory tantrums. Stay put – not that you've got much option – and concentrate on the film, and you'll be fine.

Meanwhile, I've been paying a regular salary into your account. You're incapacitated but still earning, so being laid up is not all bad... Don't try and struggle, mate, you'll disconnect the drips and catheters...

Hey! Don't cry! Everything's going to be all right! Yes, I'm sure it's sore, rather painful, in fact, but believe me, it does get better, I know... And when you're up and about again, I'll make you your favourite. That's a promise.

*

Calm down, Anthony! I can't speak to you while you're like this. Unless you shut the fuck up this very instant, I'm walking out that door.

Temper! Temper!

Right. Suit yourself.

*

Have we cooled down? We need to talk, but not when you're on the verge of hysteria.

This has all happened because, quite simply, my dear boy, you were chosen.

Before we met.

I'd known you were right ever since I saw you on telly and read that interview. How my heart went out to you, young kid growing up with no dad. When I found out you were an actor, between agents, as they say, whose career needed a bit of a boost, Anthony, my – our – destiny was spelled out before me. The casting requirements were tailor-made to lure you here. So easy, but then, you were perfect. At the audition, my choice was approved. By them. The bees. From inside. They could tell you were the one. Agreeable. Unfazed.

But you wanted to leave us, run away, like we always knew you would. You'd have blabbed, and we couldn't have that, could we?

You see, Anthony, once they'd picked you and bonded, there was no way they'd let you escape. That's why they pursued you. You'd never have got away. They'd always have found you.

No, you fool! Don't you see? They didn't want to kill you, just sting you enough to knock you out, so you wouldn't abandon them. They want you to be together.

Forever.

They're getting ready for you even as we speak. Better get used to it, mate. And now, I'd say it was time for a nap.

We'll chat again. Later.

*

Nice little sleep, Anthony? You look agitated. I hope to remove all the tubes and drips as soon as possible. You're doing very well; you were an exceptionally strong, healthy patient. But it was a major operation... No, stupid, not the bee stings, they were nothing. I'm talking about the surgery, why you've got all those catheters... You mean you haven't noticed anything? Well, I suppose in all fairness, you have been very poorly, but now you're a bit more alert, put your hand on your stomach... That's it, there on your left, lower down... Feel that? Don't look so surprised, it's your stoma... Stop shaking and fidgeting, if you dislodge those drips, it'll be much more unpleasant fitting them back while you're conscious... Oh, come on, Anthony, give us a smile! It's not that bad, is it? You're still alive... Yes, I did, I removed it – the final touch to prepare you for your new role. I still remember it all, like I gave it up only yesterday... No, it can't be reversed... It is rather funny, isn't it?

You don't appreciate the joke.

Just think of it as method acting. We're identical now, we'll be able to share the same experiences, and both have bags... Hmm, it was a tiny bit naughty, not getting your consent first. No, there was nothing wrong with you, quite the reverse... but there was no option. It was urgent.

They were getting impatient.

Rest now, mate. I'll explain when you wake up.

*

How are we feeling? I've brought you some mineral water... Oh, Anthony! You're not mad at me, are you? After all I've done for you. Okay, I haven't been entirely honest. You see, there is some more plot background I've so far omitted, and yes, I lied about Rent-A-Swarm, but hey! I can explain, and then you'll understand... You see, you've already started to...

I am Tom, or rather, Tom was me many years ago. You saw, Anthony, with your own eyes when you barged back into the film room for your miserable packet of fags, me, Thomas Ifield, collecting up the bees into my own arse. Every word I told you about Tom is true. Even the bit about having once been a surgeon. And very handy that has been too.

I saved the bees from those bastards, and they thanked me by building their home inside me, where I have a... *vacancy*. They bit open the scar tissue – it didn't hurt too much – and flew in, promising to look out for me, which they did and still do. We protect each other. They punished those assholes and have made sure you won't desert me without first doing something in return... I'm coming to that.

You see, what I failed to tell you before – and this is the really hilarious part – is that my notes got mixed up with someone else's. I had that operation for nothing. My condition was not life-threatening. Found out later. Colleagues, eh? What's the world coming to when you can't even trust a renowned surgeon with a knighthood to get it right? Sir Julian... Damn! Surname's on the tip of my tongue... Strange! I can remember his FRCS, but not...

Anyway, he was so apologetic, abject really, offered me a fortune in hush money. Only I wasn't going to keep quiet. Should've settled out of court, but I wanted to destroy him. He was so powerful, and I'd left the profession. He must've bribed the top brass... They closed ranks. I lost everything.

I could do nothing. Bad enough having my life ruined by an unnecessary op, but it didn't stop there. I was left infertile. That's why I so wanted to kill him.

However, even that was denied me. Fate beat me to it. He died in a car crash one year later, leaving a widow and baby boy. Divine retribution. I was incandescent. That accident wasn't sufficient revenge for me.

But there is a God. A just one who brought the bees into my life and helped me succeed as a director. And an evil one with a cruel sense of humour. Now I really do have cancer.

I haven't got long, Anthony. That's why I'm making this film. While I still can. A few more summers in this idyll and my three-score years and ten will be up. Besides, I'm getting weaker – even though I managed to land a decent punch on your nose!

The bees need a new home. They've got used to my abdominal cavity, but they aren't stupid. They know when I die, they'll be up for eviction but could never go back to a hive. And that's where you come in. Because they love you, and you're still young and strong, they'll have a secure roof over their heads for many years, and I can die happy knowing I've provided for them. Of course, I can't write that in my will, but I have left this island estate to you on the condition that you house the bees, as agreed between us verbally.

You must admit, it's a fantastic deal for you: financial security, and I'm still well enough to nurse you through your convalescence and teach you to get used to your colostomy bags.

You're very quiet... Thinking it over?... Suing makes no sense. They'll track you down and kill you. I know because they're part of me, and we understand each other... as I'm sure you'll find out in due course. And simply turning me down is pointless – after all, you've already undergone surgery.

Have a sleep on it. We'll pick up where we left off in the morning.

*

So glad you agree, Anthony. Saves such a lot of bother. Look! I've brought you the treat I promised... No, dumbfuck, these aren't sausages. They're pieces of your bowel I removed, thought you might like to see... In the freezer... Oh, if you really want me to, I was going to keep them... Never mind, then. Don't know why I bother sometimes.

It will soon be time to prepare you for your tenants. They're getting restless and impatient. Can you hear me over their buzzing? They're simply letting you know they're not far.

I removed sufficient loops of your gut to leave enough room for their combs. Don't be alarmed if they sting you a few times at first. You get used to it. Honestly. Like the biting. That itches more than anything, but resist the urge to scratch.

That'll be the last bit of filming, which you're still contractually obliged to complete. The other actors won't be needed now, after all! Surprise change to the script I thought you'd like. Your op's all in the can – Director's Cut – and, hope you don't mind, I took the liberty of inserting a tiny camera in you during the surgery, so we should get some great footage of the actual homemaking... Oh, and you'll love this. I'm thinking of a close-up of bees clustering round your bare buttocks. Could call that section '*Honeymoon.*' Geddit? You're right, it is rather coarse... Hey, was that rumble you or me? You'll have to keep tremendously still while they nibble their way through your scar tissue, but you're a man of considerable self-control. You can view it all later on the widescreen monitor when you're able to sit up.

If I've inadvertently severed certain vital nerves, I'm afraid you'll have to kiss your sex life goodbye... Oh, it wouldn't have been deliberate. Shaky hands, you know, at my age. Happens with this op sometimes... You won't know for definite till some beautiful girl grabs your interest. For what it's worth, I find the bees always keep quiet whenever I masturbate now, and I no longer risk getting stung if I fancy a wank. But that takes time. Like any relationship, learning to cohabit needs work.

Just one thing. You'll have a restricted diet... Well, what do you think I've been living on? Every dawn, I wait for them to fly off and then scoop it out. You won't be able to at first because of the nausea, but you go off solids, and starvation forces you. It's like wiping your backside without paper, only instead of shit, you've got a handful of honey. All the nourishment you require.

The cravings are the hardest part. I call it the 'sucking chips' phase. Eventually, you won't want to swallow anything else. Give it time. Remember how much you liked it on your breakfast toast. So you won't need groceries. Only drinks.

Oh, do make an effort to quit smoking. The smell bothers them. Nicotine affects their productivity, and we don't want to die of malnutrition now, do we?

You know what's been bugging me all day? That bloody surgeon's name. *Howard?* Sure it begins with H, though.

*

It's strange, but you'll know when it's time to move them on. They'll inform you somehow, and you'll make the sequel. B Movie 2?

Joking aside, Anthony, I know you'll accept your fate. As I did. You're not dumb. You know damn well what awaits you back in London. Loneliness and poverty. Your career's over now. Okay, you've got me to thank for that... so it makes sense to claim your inheritance... which comes with a couple of tiny strings.

Yeah... It's all yours, as long as you let me adopt you, be the father you were so cruelly deprived of, and you the son I wanted so desperately, who'll carry on his dad's legacy and provide the bees with a home. It's the least they deserve.

A human hive.

Let them in, and you won't have to worry about anything. They'll manage everything for you...

Tut tut! Banish all such thoughts! Don't try and end it all, like I did in the beginning. They're always one step ahead. They get inside your mind and sting you often enough you won't even be able to think about topping yourself. But why would you want to? Everything you need is here: never-ending food supply, drinks delivered on standing order, your own built-in minders... The greater good of the hive subsumes the individual will.

Aha! That confounded name's come back to me at last, you'll be glad to hear.

The man who got away with fucking up my life.

Sir Julian... HOUGHTON!

Mean anything?

Escaped my wrath getting killed in that stupid accident. But I haven't been left entirely empty-handed...