

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/1

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Asystole

DR. LASKARIN SCANS HIS SCREEN and filters air through a mass of nostril hair, barely visible from straight on, but I've seen him from below when he listened to my heart, so I know what he's dealing with. He rakes his throat, "there's nothing wrong with you, Pauline, except that your heart has stopped beating. This happens from time to time." He pushes aside the screen, bounces his palms on taught thighs, and reads the confusion on my face. "There's nothing mechanically or electrically wrong with your heart," he repeats, "this is not a physical issue." He leans forward, pinches my shoulder a bit too hard, and rises to indicate our appointment is over. "I'll send the results to Dr. Singh and the two of you can take it from there. In the meantime, keep moving. Stand on your head several times a day. You know, keep the blood circulating, with vigor." He flexes his arms like a sideshow strongman.

I jog home, uncomfortable and silly in my office pumps and wool coat and contemplate whether I'll tell Simon the truth or another lie. I pause to catch my breath at the park. The air is hazy, suburban, too warm for April. I locate a patch of grass near the duck pond, drop my purse, and try a handstand. The ground is soft with guano. I fall before I can kick my legs up, and a nearby gaggle of girls unleash wild sounds. They lean together; one spits a red candy onto the pavement in a parachute of saliva. More cryptic laughter. I wipe my hands on the grass and resume my jog.

The smell of stale coffee and an overweight black cat greet me at the door to our row house. Can Gordo detect the absence of my heartbeat? I reach for him; he rubs my leg instead. It was my idea to adopt him from the shelter as an ersatz child after three years of trying for a human one. I thought it might calm Simon's loins, but Gordo is no solace. What Simon wants is to add more of himself to the gene pool, "where's that big Italian family you promised me?" I did not. My grandfather may have been Italian, but the rest is pure fantasy. In fact, it was hardly that amicable. He said, "you've ruined my life." To which I replied, "pfft." He cupped a hand across his forehead and squeezed, "You don't want kids with me. If you did, you'd try anything. You don't love me. What hurts most is how much I love you. I would do anything for you." I tried to point out that if that was true, he would stop pressuring me to give him a child. "You have no heart," he groaned.

I strike a headstand against the living room wall. Simon will question my headstands, winkle out the truth. He's almost always at home, practicing his trumpet, making little crumbly messes with muffins and croissants and buttery knives. The only time he goes out is to get more honey Jakeman's or to busk with musicians I've never met – Lotar or Liam or Euan or Vaughn. Gordo settles around my head, purrs. Sorry kitty. I drop down and put the kettle on for tea. Simon likes a cup before supper. I jog upstairs and rifle through the desk, find my mother's old Timex, wind it, and place it in my bra near my silent heart. That should fix things until I decide what to tell him. I practice in the kitchen with the teapot while I do jumping-jacks, "the doctor definitely said I was healthy. He said it's nothing to worry about. It happens from time to time."

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The kettle whistles as Simon shuffles in, buzzing, "Pauly, now don't be alarmed." A roiling monster pulsates in front of me. It takes a few seconds to stitch together the voice and shape of Simon with the churning creature. He teems with bees. "They were swarming," he says, "by the time I reached the corner, I was covered."

"You should take them outside."

"I just want to sit for a bit with a cup of tea," he pushes past me. I flinch at the vibrations. He lumbers to the living room and drops a packet of Jakeman's on the coffee table. "I don't want to upset them," he rests on the edge of the wingback armchair, "I'm afraid I'll get stung." Bees drip from his head, shoulders, and arms. They thrum, hover, and reposition. "How did it go with the specialist?" he asks.

"Fine, fine... I'll get the tea." Foragers follow me to the kitchen. Gordo stalks and swats unsuccessfully.

"So that's it?" he calls after me, "nothing wrong?" The swarm seethes each time he moves. "There's no reason to stop trying then? All this light-headedness and fatigue, it's nothing to stop us from trying IVF?"

That's what I did out of guilt. Promised something I will never deliver. I could not make my mouth say the smallest and easiest of all words, the one even babies can say. My lies are tangled like the secret strands of a long-chain toxin. Venom, probably. If you unfurl the chains they will reach to the frigid edge of the solar system. Each one contains basic flabby things like my general dissatisfaction, my unbeating heart, my complete confusion of how I got here. One strand holds the bloated lie of fathers, the stifling lie of mothers. Another grips the small tickling lies of the watch in my bra and secret headstands. Together they bloom and multiply into the perplexing lie of *yes*.

I hand him a mug of tea, "the doctor said my heart is perfectly healthy." Mechanically, electrically. Simon lifts the cup to his lips. Bees perch on the rim, take sips with long hollow tongues. I put my cup down and do sit ups, watch the bees crawl in circles and stroke their tiny beaks with shiny claws. "You should really take them outside," I say.

"It's not entirely unpleasant," he says, "to be at the centre of all this female attention."

I try the internet for a local beekeeper, ring two numbers, leave messages. I stand on my head against the wall, in the hallway this time so Simon won't notice. I put on the radio and twist in the kitchen while I cook and sweat over steaming linguini. I feed him dinner. Each forkful is a challenge to deposit in his mouth without a bee or two getting in there. I give him the "all clear" to chew when they exit. The inside of Simon's mouth is the only part of him I recognize. His sharp lower right incisor bends inward against his sprawling tongue, and his two front teeth fold slightly over one another, crazed like antique China. A gold crown on his lower left flexes beside the other molars. I fork food in. Block questions. He stands outside for a few minutes after dinner but comes right back in with the bees still attached. He's not even trying. I call one of the beekeepers again, Mr. Norman Webb, and elaborate on the nature of the emergency in a confusing message.

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Simon agrees to sleep in the armchair. "Tomorrow, I've got an appointment with Dr. Singh at nine," I say on my way to bed, "you should take the bees outside first thing." He fumbles for my hand and rubs my back, tries to pull me in for a kiss. I squirm away. "So now you won't touch me? You use every excuse. I didn't ask to be covered in bees. You don't love me." It's an argument I can't win. The bees hum, spread over the chair. I slip away and tiptoe up and down the stairs for an hour. I should have asked more questions of Dr. Laskarin. The internet is a cache of exotic heart conditions: arrhythmia, cardiomyopathy, myocarditis, Eisenmenger syndrome, Prinzmetal angina, Tetralogy of Fallot. Nothing fits. I set my phone to vibrate every fifteen minutes. Each time it goes off, I do three sit ups.

All night the bees have been just as busy, constructing faceted combs, building layers of wax on Simon's head and left shoulder. He provides a stable foundation, and now they need to be fed. They lift off, hover in my face, and land on my fingers. I fetch a jar of honey and leave it on the coffee table. He didn't do this to irritate me, I remind myself. He is trapped within a primal force. He can't help what is happening to him. I offer him a lozenge. He opens his mouth. "I'll be back in an hour," I say as I pop it in.

At Dr. Singh's, I pace in the waiting room and draw looks from a young woman with a tattoo of a spider on her arm and a fussy toddler that fidgets and breaks into a feverish whine every few seconds. Pale hair sticks to its budgie forehead like wet straw. The woman glares when I'm called before her. Dr. Singh meets me in the examination room. Her black braid bounces against the small of her back as she turns and closes the door. "How are we today, Pauline?" she opens a manilla folder. Short, fine hairs form a wave pattern from her temples to her ears. Lanugo, it's called on newborns.

"Confused."

"This can be difficult to talk about," she trains molten eyes on me and holds up a purple, meaty diagram, "the heart is a muscle that contracts according to electrical signals. That is how your circulation system works." We nod at each other, and she continues, "you might be wondering where these signals come from? Pacemaker cells send each other electric messages that keep your heart beating. A communication problem can create a conduction disorder – often called a heart block." She pauses.

"But Dr. Laskarin said my heart was normal."

"It is. There's no sign of a disorder because there's no irregular heart-beat, no arrhythmia, no atrioventricular blocks. Technically, the only thing wrong is the complete absence of a heartbeat, and there is no disorder of that kind." She opens a drawer and unpackages a lightbulb, holds it against my chest. It glows, brightens, and wavers. "See?"

"Is that good?"

She drops the bulb in the garbage, "Some physical symptoms can have emotional roots. Takotsubo cardiomyopathy, for example, is caused by a broken heart. Did something happen to make your heart stop?"

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"I don't want to have a baby," I bite down on my lower lip to keep the rest from pouring out.

"Are you sure?" She searches my face, "infertility can be defeating, but many couples get results from IVF. There isn't a lot of time left to make up your mind. You're thirty-six, thirty-seven?" The last time I was here with Simon, she watched me lie. She had held up a different diagram, explained the injections, the egg harvesting, the fertilization and implantation, the possibility of multiples. She watched me nod and exchange smiles with Simon. She saw Simon's look of relief. She heard me say yes.

"I don't know how to tell Simon."

She writes something in the folder and hands me a pamphlet with the words "Child Free" in bold block letters. Below, a smiling woman gazes at snow covered mountains. "Have a look at the literature. Talk it over. For now, keep up the headstands – or better yet, get an inverter – and exercise, exercise, exercise."

"I'm really tired."

"Try an inverter. It's good for your back and your circulation," she hands me another pamphlet with a diagram of a man strapped upside down into a contraption, his face red with pleasure or effort, it's hard to tell. I slide both pamphlets into my purse. On the bus, I stand in the aisle and shift from foot to foot, get off early and jog the last four blocks. At each intersection I bend over and touch my toes. My phone rings as I round the corner to our house. Norman Webb, Apiarist. He's at the National Honey Show, he explains, some interesting queens, propolis for healthy hives, the earliest he can help is this afternoon. Don't call anyone else. His parting words: "I want those bees."

I tell Simon the good news about Norman, and he asks me to please feed him again.

"What did Dr. Singh have to say?"

"Went over the same tests, gave me pamphlets. Why don't you play your trumpet while I make oatmeal?" Put something in your mouth. Stop asking questions. I offer to fetch it for him.

"The bees don't like it. I tried. When did you say this Norman is coming?"

"Two, three?"

I drop my purse on the couch and head to the kitchen, boil one cup of water, add half a cup of oatmeal, do squats. Simon hisses from the living room, "child free?" He has discovered and spread the pamphlet on the coffee table in front of him, reads out loud, "*patriarchy demands a family. The insecure male will seek validation in the authority of fatherhood. Powerless, he clings to the symbolic rule of father to feed his ego.* Jesus Pauly, you twist everything around until it suits your perception. You want me to be the bad guy, some patriarchal asshole, but it's you. You're the bad guy. This isn't politics. This is about us." The bees fret and churn. He crumples the pamphlet and throws it at me, "and you're breaking my heart."

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I gesture with his bowl of oatmeal, "what do you think? I wrote that pamphlet? Dr. Singh gave it to me."

"For a reason! She gave it to you because of something you said. Why can't you tell me?" The bees pulsate and thrum their fuzzy abdomens, embrace his torso.

"This might not be the right time."

He stifles a groan between gritted teeth. "When these bees come off, that's it. I'm leaving."

"That'll be hours from now," I say, "do you at least want the oatmeal?"

"You're like a robot," he slumps and the bees flare, "don't you have any feelings? I'm ending our relationship. Divorce papers will follow. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

What I love about Simon is that he's always worried about something. Every few months he thinks his teeth are loose. If he gets a sliver, he worries about lockjaw. A hole in his sock is a sign of societal collapse because no one, absolutely no one, can make a decent cotton sock anymore. He's certain there are parallel universes peeling away from ours every moment, in all directions. There's proof, he told me, in hundreds of reddit stories. In one, a woman wakes up and goes to work, but no one recognizes her. Colleagues she's known for twenty years insist she doesn't work there, send her away. The next day, everything is back to normal. This proves, according to Simon and thousands of others, that she temporarily jumped into a parallel timeline. Every moment is the peeling away of lost opportunities until we are stuck with just this one path. But the collision of worlds offers hope.

"I don't want to have a baby," I hold up a spoonful of mush. He waves it away. I perch beside him, "not just with you. I don't want to be a parent or make a family. I don't want to tell kids what to do or teach them right from wrong. I don't want to force them to eat broccoli when they'd rather have candy. I don't want to make uneaten breakfasts and stupid lunches that get tossed in the trash and cook nutritious dinners every day. I don't want to suffer through tantrums at the grocery store. I don't want to defend my child's psychopathic drawings when the teacher calls me in for a chat. I don't want to pay for music lessons and fancy schools or explain later to my deadbeat son why I didn't do those things for him." I pause to let it sink in.

"But the whole point" he says, "is that when you love someone you share a life together and have kids and they'll love you and you won't grow old and die alone. It won't all be for nothing. What else is there, Pauly? You're basically saying this is it for you. The end."

"I have everything I want. I don't need to love more people or have more people love me." I do a few sit ups and offer him another bite. He opens. "All clear, you can chew. And anyway," I explain, "you're probably married to someone else with a big family in a parallel timeline that peeled off before you met me. Imagine. You might be happy there or maybe you're wondering why life turned out to be so hectic and disappointing. You might be divorced and paying child support for kids you never get to see because they're so busy with piano and gymnastics. You

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might meet me at a cafe and wish you had a sensible child-free girlfriend who would feed you oatmeal when you're covered in bees."

He flicks away my diversion, swallows, "I'm not ready to give up on my future. I don't think it's pointless or egotistical, and it's not something that you get to decide for me." Another timeline has sidled up to Simon. It's just beyond the bees, already real, and I am the past. A faded fragment. His cold first wife. He closes his eyes and whispers, "she was like a robot."

"Who are you talking to?"

He opens his eyes, "why are you doing a headstand?"

A knock at the door snaps us both to our feet. Norman Webb holds out a gloved hand. A protective veil filters his tanned, creased face. If Jesus had lived to seventy, bent a little over time, gone bald on top, and put his remaining thin grey strands in a ponytail, he would have looked just like Norman. "I decided to come back early. I can't miss this opportunity," he beams at Simon, "that's a big one! I'll reckon you're ready to get out of there."

"Should we do this outside?" I say.

"If you don't mind, I'd rather not lose them. They seem docile enough in the house." He gestures to his car, "I'll just grab a box."

"This is it," I say to Simon, "you're about to be free."

"I'll miss the company," he says, "I did like the warmth."

Norman examines Simon and locates the queen. He calls me over, "see how they circle?" He scoops her and her entourage, shows them to Simon, and gently places them in the bottom of the box. He stands up straight, lifts his veil, and wipes his forehead with the back of his hand, "you've witnessed a beautiful moment with this swarm. They left the mother colony to create a new one and with it a new generation of bees. Now, in a minute, I'm going to brush them off you, Simon, and into the box. It's possible you might get stung. Paula, I suggest you step back and stay still."

"Pauline," I say.

He nods, pulls down his veil, and positions the box at Simon's feet. "Lean over," he says and sweeps the bees with cupped hands in long confident strokes. They fall away in sheets. They splatter like a tub of baked beans, cluster, and churn into one another. "All done," says Norman. The room is hazy with pissed off workers. "They'll settle. Pheromones."

A few misshapen wax combs lay on the carpet where Simon once stood. Gordo claws at one, passes it back and forth between his paws. I pick up the larger piece and turn it around. Some of the cells are sealed. "Do you think these are baby bees?" I show it to Norman. The comb is curved to the shape of Simon's forehead. My chest stutters, stings a little, thumps. Norman pats me on the back, "I can take them with me, if you like." He lifts the comb from my hands, "they're off to a good home. You did the right thing."