

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

Emile Estrada
The Apiarist

The box was labeled Ivy with a heart over the I. It now rested on top of all the other boxes in the dusty shed at the back of Foster's house. All the boxes were labeled. Christmas stuff. Halloween stuff. Old wires. Old electronics. One of the boxes though had no label on it.

Inside the unlabeled box, Foster found two old canvas bee suits. They were yellow but Foster suspected they had been white at one point. One of the suits had a gold watch in one of its pockets. Its seconds hand still ticked. There was a bee smoker in the box too. It was made of tin, and rust stretched all around it. Inside the smoker was a letter.

*"I hope you come across this box one day. Beekeeping is actually pretty easy. You can learn everything you need online. It kept me busy when your mother and I split. Take care of the watch. It was my father's.
Love,
Dad."*

It took Foster less than a week to build the apiary. The frame he built out of plywood, and it was divided into four sections: A pollen trap, slats for honeycombs, a brood chamber, and a small space for the queen at the very bottom. The beehive stood on a stone foundation at the center of the garden.

Foster introduced bees shortly after. Twenty male drones, eighty female workers, and a queen. He checked the hive every morning, and the bees would sting his canvas suit in a desperate attempt to protect the hive.

On the tenth inspection, Foster noticed the queen had stopped laying eggs. Many of the wet hexagonal burrows in the brood chamber were empty. Underneath the chamber, the queen sat alone and she danced from side to side in a lethargic frenzy.

After removing the bee suit and storing the smoker back in the shed, Foster pulled out his phone and Googled "queen bee sick," and while the browser loaded the phone rang in his hand. The screen flashed the name Ivy and under it was a photograph of Foster with his arms around a girl with flowing red hair and shallow dimples on her cheeks. He did not answer.

The queen died overnight. Her dry husk rested on the yellow dirt behind the apiary.

Foster picked up the carcass and brought it to the kitchen in the early Arizona morning. He placed the dead queen on the countertop and hunched over it. The queen's attendants had stopped feeding her. This had gone on for a while too, he deduced, otherwise the carcass wouldn't be so dry.

The drones had pushed her body out during the night. Without its queen, the hive would surely fail. There were a few larvae in the brood chamber, but no new young being hatched. With the short lifespan of a bee, the entire colony would soon die out.

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

Foster opened his web browser and went to an online apiary supplier. He thought about buying a new queen bee. That would perhaps save the hive, but he'd have to wait a few days, and by then it may be too late. He thought about ordering new drones and workers too, and starting fresh with a new colony.

Foster closed the browser without buying anything, and his finger wandered down to the contacts app. He scrolled down until he reached Ivy's name, her number staring back at him. He hadn't erased it. It sat there in his phone, protected by some organic impulse.

"Perhaps it wasn't meant to be," Foster said to his reflection on the phone screen. Maybe the best thing to do is to let the colony die out. He put his phone down on the counter and picked up the dead queen. He held her in the palm of his hand and looked at her for a while. "After all," he said to the dead queen, "I'm not any good at it."

It had been four weeks since Foster last checked the beehive. It had been four weeks since the last time he had tried to delete Ivy's number from his phone. He was done with the bees. He was done with Ivy. Yet her number remained in his phone and the hive stood in the center of the garden.

On that fourth week came the first rain of monsoon season, the rain-drops vertical machine gun fire. Foster sat on the porch listening to the rain drill the roof above him. Amidst the storm, a light buzz near his feet caught his attention. A little bee laid on its back, and its wings fluttered in violent desperation against the hardwood.

The heavy rain gave way to a dim gray sky and soft showers. Foster grabbed the smoker and put on the yellow bee suit. He went out to the garden and removed the apiary's lid. He pulled out the pollen trap and the honey slats. The colony buzzed with newfound life.

The bees charged at Foster and stuck their stingers deep in the canvas suit, and he calmed them down by gently gassing the hive. Then, he reached into it and pulled out the undermost layer. Newly hatched white larvae sat motionless in their wet burrows. Underneath all this, there she was. A queen. Healthy. Royal attendants gently feeding her.

Foster put the hive back together and cut out a small piece of honeycomb before closing the lid. In the kitchen he squeezed out as much honey as he could out of the honeycomb onto a silver spoon. He went to the porch and sat back down on his chair. He placed the spoon on the ground next to the injured bee and watched as it desperately dragged itself toward it.

Foster pulled stingers out of the canvas gloves while the bee drank from the little silver spoon. Twelve stingers he pulled out. Twelve dead bees, and here he was nursing one back to health.

A brief Google search taught Foster that once a queen bee dies, the hive replaces her. The process begins almost immediately after death. As soon as she dies and her body is removed, larvae are reared to become queens. In less than two weeks, the first larva to reach maturity kills the rest of the would-be-queens and takes her crown.

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

"Hello, Foster," said a quiet voice from the sidewalk.

Ivy stood in front of Foster's porch, baptized by the gentle Arizona rain. She smiled and a cigarette teetered on her bloodied lips. Her red hair was down, blond roots weakly invading it. The hair covered most of her face. Once shallow dimples had grown deep and cavernous. Her cheeks were empty and the skin on her face was thin like wrapping paper. One eye peeked through the hair like a shy child looking into a crowded room, and the skin around it was black and blue.

"What the hell happened to you?" Foster asked hurrying to his feet.

"It's nothing."

"It doesn't look like nothing. What are you doing here?"

"Can we talk?"

"That's not a good idea, Ivy. Last time I saw you, things got really bad."

"Please," she said. Tears trickled out from her bruised eye. "I don't really have anywhere else to go."

"Fine," Foster said. "Rain's about to get bad again."

Ivy ran up the steps and followed Foster on the porch. She stopped halfway and let out a loud shriek followed by a heavy stomp on the ground.

"What's the matter?" said Foster turning around.

"A bee," Ivy said. Her boot trailed back and forth on the ground. "I got it," she said proudly, pointing at the streak of yellow and black on the wooden porch.

Foster went to the shed to store the bee suit away. Ivy went upstairs and took a long shower. When she was done, Foster made dinner. They ate on opposite sides of the table.

"Are you still-," said Ivy.

"Still what?" Foster interrupted.

"Going to the meetings?"

"I was for a while. Not anymore."

"How come?"

"It wasn't for me."

"Are you-,"

"I'm not," Foster interrupted again. "Not for a while."

After they finished eating, Ivy and Foster sat in the living room. *Requiem for a Dream* played on the television. They sat on the couch, and Foster's arm was around Ivy's shoulder. She nested deep in his chest as they watched the movie. Foster ran his hand up and down Ivy's left arm. Scabs and scars covered her skin. They were dry and rough.

"It's not that easy," Ivy said.

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

"I know."

"I've been trying."

"Have you?" Foster said picking at a loose scab on Ivy's elbow crease.

"How long has it been for you?"

"72 days."

"Right after I left," said Ivy turning around, and she began to cry with her face buried into Foster's chest. "It's all my fault. You were doing so well too."

"It's not your fault. I did it to myself."

"If it hadn't been for me..."

"I'm a grown man, Ivy. I made the choice."

"I don't know what to do anymore."

"There are places you can go. Groups and meetings, you know?"

"You don't go anymore."

"It wasn't for me. I have my own system."

"Maybe it's not for me either."

"Maybe it is. I can help too."

"You can't."

"Why not?"

"You just can't."

"Let me help, Ivy."

"I shouldn't have said anything. Can we stop talking about this?"

The night was long and warm, and the soft showers turned into heavy artillery once more. The two of them slept on the couch under heavy blankets, and Ivy shivered in Foster's arms. Sweat poured through her shirt. Her skin was cold to the touch. Outside, the beehive rattled in the night.

The east sun peeked through curtains of gray clouds and wakened Foster. The morning sun burned his eyes. He had fallen asleep despite Ivy's tremors. The rain had stopped, and the bees buzzed in the garden.

The living room was bathed in pale light. Foster walked around the house and called out to Ivy. There was no response. He sat back down on the couch and wrapped the blankets still wet with Ivy's sweat around his shoulders. There was a piece of paper on the coffee table. It read:

*"I'm sorry about the gold watch. It was in the bathroom. Know that I hate myself as much as you hate me. You won't see me again. I promise.
I love you,
Ivy."*

Monsoon season came to an end, and Foster checked on the hive once every two weeks. It was thriving. It had been the right choice to leave it alone.

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

The apiary was covered in wet rot. Three months of heavy rains and the wood now bent and twisted. Foster had yet to buy new sheets of plywood to replace the rotted wood, but a phone call had pulled him into the dull, fluorescent lobby of a police station.

Ivy walked into the lobby in handcuffs. Two policemen walked beside her. Heavy tan lines kissed her shirt at the collar and sleeves. She signed her release form still in handcuffs. A policeman returned her valuables. A pre-paid cellphone with a cracked screen. An empty lighter. A Velcro wallet with a bent ID card. An opened bag of Skittles.

The purple sunset greeted them in the parking lot. Foster drove with the windows down in the Arizona heat. They drove east for a good while before either of them spoke.

"I didn't know who else to call," Ivy said.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Ivy?"

"It's fine. It wasn't a big deal."

"The hell it wasn't," Foster said.

"You didn't have to pick me up."

"I didn't just pick you up. I posted your bail, put my car down as collateral."

"You didn't have to do any of that."

"You're right. You'd be better off in jail."

"You can go to hell, Foster."

"Something needs to change, Ivy. You can't keep this up forever."

"Fuck you, Foster. What I do is none of your business."

"You make it my business when you call. You make it my business when you show up at my doorstep. You make it my business every damn time."

"You can just drop me off. You won't have to see me again. For real this time."

"That's what you always say."

"Please, let me out of the car."

"You better show up to your court date. I'm not losing my car over your bullshit."

"Let me out of this fucking car," Ivy shouted. "Let me out!"

Ivy tried to open the door but the lock wouldn't give in. She then took off her seatbelt and tried to climb out the window, the car still moving. Foster reached out and grabbed her by one of the belt loops on her jeans.

"Cut it out, Ivy. Tell me where to go, and I'll drop you off."

"You can drop me off right here," she shouted halfway out the window.

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

Foster pulled Ivy hard and she fell back onto the passenger seat. "Where do you live now?" he asked still holding onto the belt loop.

"Here is fine."

"Goddammit, Ivy."

Foster drove back home with Ivy. She did not say much for the rest of the drive.

The bees buzzed under the Arizona night unbothered by the dry heat. Ivy slept on the couch under several blankets. They had to be wrung of sweat in the morning.

Before they went to sleep, Ivy told Foster that she'd be alright this time, that she would stick with it. In the morning, she was gone.

That afternoon Foster bought the slats of plywood. He measured them carefully and cut them to the exact size of the hive. He worked in the garden. He cut the wood using a handsaw. He wore the bee suit and the smoker was by his side.

Foster removed the back panel of the hive first. The inside of it cracked with soft splinters. Then he smoked out the hive and removed more of the wood paneling, each panel scarred by the water rot. Afterwards, all that was left was the wooden frame and the small divider between the brood nest and the queen's chamber. There was no wet rot on the frame.

Foster worked at replacing the old wood. He held the new slabs in place while he drilled them onto the frame. The rotten wood he stacked neatly against the stone foundation of the hive.

It wasn't night yet when Ivy returned. From inside the house, she could see the cloud of smoke dissipating in the garden. She went outside as the bees buzzed around in a disoriented laziness, and Foster told her to go into the shed and put on the second bee suit.

"Give me a hand," Foster said to Ivy when she came out of the shed.

"What are you doing?"

"We," Foster said, "are replacing the wood paneling. Kinda hard to do it on my own."

"What do I do?"

"Grab the smoker and blast the beehive. Move slowly too. Otherwise, the bees will sting you."

"Isn't that what the suit is for?" Ivy said disappearing behind the heavy smoke.

"The suit protects you from the bees, sure, but it doesn't protect them from you. They die after they sting."

"I'm sorry," said Ivy from inside the smoke.

"It happens all the time. That's just the way bees are."

"I don't mean about the bees."

"When you left this morning, did you take anything?"

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

"I took some cash from your wallet."

"How much?"

"Just enough for the sickness."

"Grab this," Foster said and he handed Ivy a new slab of plywood. "It's easier if you hold it in place while I screw it in."

"You're not mad?"

"Would that make any difference?"

Ivy held the slab of wood against the opened side of the beehive. The smoke had begun to clear. The drill whirred the screws into place.

"You'll have to do this one again," Ivy said. "It's crooked."

"I'll seal it tomorrow. I need to waterproof the whole thing anyways."

"Why didn't you waterproof the wood before installing it?"

"I don't know."

"You could fix it right now though. It shouldn't take long to remount this panel."

"It's best if we finish fast. Too many bees are dying."

The smoke was all but gone, and the disoriented drones would land on Ivy and Foster and stab deep into the old canvas suits, and after, the bees would fly away leaving their stingers behind in a miniscule puddle of sinew and guts. One after another, Ivy watched them die while Foster finished drilling the last screw into the last slab of plywood.

"Do you think they know they'll die after they sting?" Ivy asked.

"I think so."

"Why do it, then?"

"What do you mean?"

"If they know they'll die, why even sting in the first place?"

"They have to."

"I don't understand."

"They do it to protect the hive and the queen. It's the only thing they can do. Something inside tells them to do it. It's an instinct."

"Look at them, Foster," Ivy said as she pointed at a bee that struggled to fly away while its stinger was stuck on the canvas of her glove. "They're stupid little creatures, aren't they, Foster?"

"Yes, Ivy. Stupid."