

What Bees May Come

Charlie Dims

It was her last chance. A girl just out of college, she needed to find her identity before entering the world. Since birth, she had been in search of a name that she could be satisfied with. She needed to understand who she was as a person, which had not come easy. During her high school years, just like all the others, she had gone through multiple accounts of identity-searching: drama club, cheerleading club, debate club, minority awareness club (which she got kicked out of once the officials realized she wasn't a minority). Each time she entered a club, she was so sure that she belonged there. But as soon as she swirled a pomp-pomp or gave a theatrical shout, she was met with failure.

Those were the old days. Now, with her expiration date approaching, the foolishness had to end.

While in her car that day, she believed that she had found her life's calling. Yes, this time she *just knew* it was where she belonged. It was the perfect place for her, a place where everything would 'click in' and feel right. Yes, this was the right, perfect place—most likely. There was always the chance she was wrong. That, of course, was what the meeting was for. There was no reason to be alarmed. As soon as she found out that this was what she was meant for, she could join the gossip club and begin the meetings.

She had high hopes that day. She believed the meeting would go well.

Before she could make it in the door, before she could even get out of her car, a bee flew up and smashed itself against her side window. She screamed and drew back. Then, embarrassed by her stupid reaction, she let out a breath and looked for the bee. The stupid thing was nowhere in sight. And it was a stupid thing! It had just come out of nowhere and practically attacked her.

Do not be melodramatic, she told herself. You don't have the time to be melodramatic. You're panicking. Now is not the time to panic.

Opening the door a crack, she peered over her shoulder to make sure the bee was nowhere in sight before half-walking, half-sprinting to the inside of the café.

She had believed the meeting would go well.

She was wrong.

The other woman was already in the café waiting for her. They gave a brief handshake, entirely businesslike, and sat down. There were no introductions made and no introductions needed. Once she met her, names were invisibly established: First Woman and Second Woman. She, the nervous little girl who played with her hands under the table, knew she had the lower position. First Woman, a woman who squeezed the life out of coffee cups and breathed like she was already disappointed, was a type of person Second Woman feared. She avoided these people at all costs because of how jittery they made her feel. In male or female form, they were all the

same. Business was everything to them. They didn't know how to live or breathe anything but a contract. They were lost in their work and anyone who came remotely close to jeopardizing their position were instantly killed off. They were getting older and weaker, which only gave them more fuel for their fierceness. Second Woman watched her in admiration (could she one day be this strong?)—and overwhelming fear. Mostly fear.

There was reason to be afraid. First Woman had an effect upon Second Woman. Their eyes met and Second Woman had a sudden sinking feeling that she was unprepared. Totally unprepared. Why was she even here? What was she trying to accomplish? Would it be possible to even accomplish anything? The answers to these questions came just as fast: she had no reason to be here, she didn't know what she was doing, and it *would not* be possible to accomplish anything.

It wasn't until she looked away from First Woman that she could think rationally. It wasn't true. She knew herself. She was a very organized person. In fact, just before coming to the meeting, she had checked over all of her materials that she would need, checked them again, and then checked them a third time in the car. There was no reason to feel this way.

"You're early," said First Woman.

"I wanted to be—I didn't want to be late."

"No, you wanted to change the rules. The meeting was scheduled for nine, but that didn't suit you, did it?"

"I'm sorry," she said. Her apology came out weak.

First Woman just stared at her, not accepting the attempt at the apology. In those seven words that she had uttered, Second Woman felt lower than the dirt on the ground. She was so stupid. How was First Woman supposed to prepare in such a short amount of time? Couldn't she have followed the rules? She was not a good girl. She didn't care about others. Seven words. That was all it took to change her entire opinion of herself.

"You'll need your red manual for this," said First Woman, pushing aside all sympathetic moments and diving straight into business.

"The red manual?"

"Yes, the red manual."

First Woman stirred her coffee. Second Woman, of course, did not have this manual and First Woman knew it. First Woman was just waiting for the nervous response she was bound to get with someone like her. Not trying to make a fuss, Second Woman reviewed the last few days in her mind. A red manual? When did she get that? *Did* she ever get that? She could see little fragments of her day (getting the mail, going to work, watering the plants), but it was if she had been in a coma and had not lived her life.

Her eyes scanned the café. There was a *red* purse clutched by an elderly woman, *red* lipstick being applied, a *red* lamp, a *red* tablecloth, but no manual. Only when she looked at the floor, about to give up, did she see it: the *red* manual, lying at her feet. She put all seven hundred pages of it on the table.

"Here. I have it. Right here. It's right here."

“Funny,” laughed First Woman.

“What’s funny?”

“It almost seemed like you didn’t know what I was talking about.” She gave a look of curious amusement. “Didn’t you have it all along? You walked in with it.”

Second Woman laughed too, now cautious of the mind-tricks being played on her. Because, of course, this was the *same* manual that had been delivered to her in the mail, the *same* manual she had started to read, the same manual that she had triple-checked before coming in.

“Am I right?” said First Woman. “Didn’t you have this all along?”

Second Woman nodded.

This would not be an easy meeting.

“You’ll be glad to know,” said Second Woman, feeling the need to redeem herself, “that I really am prepared for this meeting.”

“Is that so? Glad to hear it. Shall we move on?”

“I’ve even started reading the manual,” she insisted, so intent on pleasing her. “I’m already on page twenty- three.”

The amused expression disappeared from her face. She dropped the coffee stick, letting it splash into the burning coffee below. Her eyebrows rose. She tried to make her voice sound controlled, but failed at it. “You’ve *started* reading it?”

Oh no. It was another sin to add to her shameful pile: reading ahead. But she couldn’t have known! How was she supposed to have known? There should have been signs. There should have been black markings across the fronts of the manuals that restricted curious onlookers from flipping ahead. There should have been warnings in the emails she had received. There should have been something much more substantial.

She understood soon enough. This was not about her being prepared for the meeting, but about First Woman being prepared. For all she knew, the whole meeting could have specifically been set up to discuss pages one through five. What would she do for the whole hour? She was already on page twenty-three. She, the stupid little girl who didn’t consider the feelings of others. This was not high school, after all. This was serious. This was business. This was life. She could feel herself being pulled away from the scene, pulled away from the moment, pulled away from her final opportunity to find herself. In a moment of improvisation, she did the only thing she thought would help. Grabbing the manual, she closed her eyes and swung it across her forehead. It nearly knocked her out.

“See! Look at me! I can’t remember what I read!” There were tears creeping into her eyes as she hit herself again. “Can’t remember!”

First Woman was not impressed. “Don’t hit yourself with the manual.”

“Yes.”

“It’s not needed here.”

“Okay.”

“It’s really not needed.”

“I’m sorry.”

First Woman considered, then frowned. “You’re right. You should be sorry. You came in too early, you had—and have—this little blank look on your face, you don’t seem to be comprehending *anything* I’m saying, you just *hit* yourself with the manual, and you didn’t follow my instructions about reading.” Somehow First Woman grew taller in the moment while Second Woman grew much shorter. “You’re not doing so hot right now.”

“It’s okay. I mean, it’s not okay, but I can forget what I read.” Second Woman paused, then continued. “Forget all of it! Forget every last drop!”

First Woman set down her coffee. She went into speculative mode, studying and drawing conclusions until she decided upon something.

“You *really did* read up to page twenty-three, didn’t you?”

Was First Woman laughing at her or judging her? Or both? It didn’t matter. Second Woman had read up to page twenty-three and she confirmed it to First Woman.

“Amazing,” said First Woman, almost laughing.

Slowly, out of some strange part of her body, came a foreign feeling that she clung to: hope. Hope that she would be okay and that First Woman, despite her comments and her looks, would forgive her client for the little mix-up. But then First Woman showed her page five.

“And I’m assuming,” she said, still performing that laugh of hers, “that you read this part?”

Under her fingers were the words, “All new members **MUST** read the **ENTIRE** manual before entering their first meeting.”

“What’s that?” she asked while Second Woman grew shorter. “Is that a no? How strange. You just told me you *really did* read up to page twenty-three. This is only on page five.” And shorter. “Is there a reading problem that I should be aware of, Second Woman?” And shorter. “Aww, don’t look so embarrassed, Second Woman. I have a nephew who can loan you his *Hooked on Phonics*.” And shorter still. “He’s three.”

Those words must not have been there before. They must have been concealed by invisible ink. She, such a careful reader, surely would have seen them before. Surely she would have! She didn’t have a reading problem and she told that to First Woman.

“It’s nothing to worry about. I just need to know these things up front. But I’m also going to assume that you didn’t bring in a story to share with the rest of the group? That part was on page six, by the way.”

Her palms were starting to sweat. Everything smelled of vinegar, everything nauseated her. Someone needed to find her heart, place it on an operating table, check its vital signs. She could feel it dying each moment she stayed there. Time was running out. Time was running out quickly. And so she said yes, yes she had a story to share. It was a risky move, but there was one particular story, something she had overheard a while ago, that had been camped out in her mind and would not leave her alone.

She was allowed to tell the story, which was about a middle-aged woman who had gone shopping at her local grocery store. It was National Chimpanzee Day and the mayor, as a special

treat to all of the children, had managed to get a real-life chimpanzee to put on display. The children did fine. She did not.

There was a sign behind the monkey that warned children not to jump up and surprise him. The woman thought it would be cute if she did. When talking to reporters about the story later on, the woman said that she had wanted to give a big, exaggerated look of surprise when she snuck up on him. She was hoping the monkey would return the look, so she stored her shopping cart in the next aisle over, walked behind the monkey, counted to three with her fingers, and tapped the chimpanzee on the shoulder. She gave the look of surprise. He did not. And she spent the next three weeks in a hospital. The National Chimpanzee Day was scrapped and had not been used since.

First Woman sighed and wrinkled her nose, obviously annoyed at Second Woman's feeble story, which wasn't worth any energy going into it. "That's it?"

"Yes."

"And the point?" She sighed again, her voice growing higher.

"The point?"

"The point of the story. What's the point of the story?"

"It was about a silly woman," she said, then added, "A stupid woman." 'Silly' was not a fierce enough word for this type of environment.

First Woman, amused at her own joke, smiled and scoffed. "So it was about you?"

"No. It was a real story about a stupid woman."

"Another stupid woman, you mean?"

"I—" She started to speak, but didn't know what it was she wanted to say. The tears were coming in her eyes again.

"That," started First Woman. She stopped herself, looking like she was having trouble comprehending the mess Second Woman had made with words. "*That* was not a real story." She laughed a wicked laugh. "That wasn't even a half-hearted attempt at a story. Honestly, my nephew could have done better. He's three. Three! And he would have used a much larger vocabulary. Hooked on Phonics, you know." She laughed again. "How about this? I'll tell a story and you can listen in like a trainee, which is what you are, and learn from me." She considered the option, then nodded her head. "Yes, let's do that, shall we?"

"Okay." Would she rather have been laughed at or yelled at? It was hard to tell and didn't matter either way. She assured herself that she still had time to listen, grow, improve. There was still hope. Her expiration date was not over. Not yet.

"This is a story that's going to make you feel good. It's going to make you feel alive. You'll be so transfixed that you won't be able to look away. Do you understand what I'm saying?" Second Woman, who was already leaning in, definitely understood what she was saying. There were powers within First Woman, powers within this meeting, powers she was ready to be swept away by. "Now...you'll..." She cleared her throat, but what she wanted was not obvious. She threw a finger at something, which did not help either. Finally, she said,

“Notes! I want you to take notes! I want you to take notes on everything that I’m saying. How do you expect to learn if you can’t write down what I’m saying?”

Notes. What else would she have meant? Notes were reference points. You studied from them, remembered from them, learned from them. During lectures like these, notes were essential. And Second Woman, rummaging in her bag, pulled out an object and, with great pride, held it high enough for First Woman to see. She had brought notes. At last, she had come prepared. (At least somewhat. The notes were not so much official notes as much as pieces of sticky pads purchased at the discount section of a local dollar store [the price tag still visible] but they were still paper and still usable!) First Woman must have seen the price sticker because her eyebrows went up. She refrained from commenting and told Second Woman to open up the notes so that the meeting could begin.

Second Woman felt mighty. Proud. Not afraid of anything. She, opening up the package just like she was instructed, knew that she had not embarrassed herself or stalled the productivity of the—shoot. The notes were stuck. The stupid discount section. She pulled at the plastic, but it refused to move. No, no! She would stall the production of the meeting. Again. Too worried to think rationally, she bit into the plastic, ripped it open, spit out the plastic, set the notes on the table, smiled, and declared herself absolutely, totally ready.

First Woman’s jaw visibly dropped. She still had that disappointed sound in her voice, but there was now an additional sound of shock. “What was that? Are you related to a baboon? *Are you a baboon?*” All her confidence, in the space of those three questions, popped away. “Oh, don’t take it as an insult. You might get more out of this story if you are. It might do you well to be related to a baboon.” She considered. “Or a farmer.” Second Woman said that she was not related to either a baboon or a farmer, which seemed to disappoint her. Her voice became edgier, stricter. “You’ll still love this story. I just *know* you’ll love this story.”

“I’m sure I will.”

“Write that down.”

She grabbed her pen. Her confidence was still damaged, but she was ready for her first assignment. “Write what down?”

“Write down that I just said it’s a great story.” Second Woman scribbled ‘this=great story’. “You need to get into the habit of recording things like that. That was an example of key information that’s essential for you to write down in order to fully comprehend the story.” She paused. “You do know what key information is, don’t you?”

Of course she knew what that was. She just didn’t know the key information for this particular story. Could a piece of cloth be a key concept? An untied shoe? Greeting the mailman? How would she know until she had heard the story in its entirety? But she knew she could not bother First Woman with these questions.

“Yes,” she said, “I know what key information is.”

“Good.” First Woman smiled.

She was sucked in.

Literally.

The café and the customers, like a great pop-up book, bended backwards until they were too thin to be seen and were replaced by fields of grass, in the middle of which was a blanket with milk, cookies, and algebra homework (the algebra homework placed on the side and ignored completely like it should have been). Both women jumped onto this blanket, nothing but instinct driving them. Their ponytails and buns unraveled and were twisted into two pigtails, one for each side of their head. Braces snaked into their mouths. Freckles popped over their bodies. Their clothes became school-checked uniforms. They looked at each other.

It was frightening, terrifying, until Second Woman understood what had happened. They were thirteen again.

Thirteen was a great age. Being thirteen not that long ago, Second Woman remembered herself and her peers being lost in tabloids, being lost in the latest gossip, constantly changing different sources to make sure they had the most accurate information. If you didn't know about the private lives of others, you were just wasting your days away. You had to know these facts because it felt so *important* to know. There was pressure in that age, but it didn't matter. Second Woman could have stayed thirteen forever.

First Woman, looking shockingly young, checked her surroundings, approving of the changes made. Everything had been set. The story could begin.

And it did.

What came out of First Woman's mouth was too beautiful, too mystifying, to be human. As she began, Second Woman had a strong sense that the story told would be one of power and triumph. There was a way in which First Woman was telling it. She had cherished this story, held onto it throughout the years, like a childhood toy with too many memories to be abandoned. It seemed that only the privileged were allowed to hear it.

The story itself was about a farmer and his wife. They lived in the south of town and had a modest, quiet life. Unless new soil needed to be bought or tools had to be replaced, the other farmers never saw them. This was not out of choice. The farmer wanted to leave the house and explore, but his wife wished to stay there, so he stayed. He could not worry about his isolation because he didn't have the time. He was a busy man with two full-time jobs: tending to the farm and keeping his wife happy, both of which could be accomplished by saying very little. When he said very little, more work in the fields got done, which meant his wife had more time to complain to him about her various problems.

To some extent, both of them wanted to leave, but it was the company that made them stay. The farmer had convinced himself he could live like that.

He was wrong.

"Now," whispered First Woman, not wanting to break the mood, "what did I just say about the farmer?" She was too excited to wait for a response. "I said he's a man! It's an insult. Remember that for later on."

(Other than this small interruption, the story had not been lost. She was still craving to hear more and First Woman kept on feeding it to her.)

It. Both had been able to survive each other until 'it' occurred. And 'it', that night, began with a single object located in the back of his closet: a black and yellow sweater. It did not look harmful or destructive. The sweater had been purchased sometime in his college years and had moved with the couple when they got married. It probably would have been forgotten about all together if the wife had never mentioned it.

She *had* mentioned it, though. That was the problem. She mentioned it over and over again. She hated the sweater and gave him all the reasons why. ("It looks horrible on you." "No one wears those colors." "The neighbor's will think you're crazy if they ever catch sight of you in that.") Her biggest fear, which she told him over and over again, would be that the sweater would attract the bees and that the bees would get into the house. He thought it was a stupid fear. Bees were smarter than that. He was a grown man. It would be impossible to confuse a grown man with a bee.

"Can you believe that?" said First Woman. "His wife was only trying to look out for him and do what she thought was the best thing, but it was 'too stupid' for him. His wife is a woman. Remember that for later. It's not an insult."

The farmer had had a hard day in the fields the night 'it' happened. Throughout the day, he discovered that the birds had eaten the fertilizer, the squirrels had stolen the nuts, and the hay had gotten ruined. All he wanted to do was sit down, have a beer, and "be a man." He did not get his wish.

The wife was angry, which translated into her complaining. Today she was complaining that the peas had not been properly cooked and would need to be re-done before dinner could be properly served and consumed. He promised her he would get to it—after a ten minute nap. Frustrated, the wife excused him from the dinner table and allowed him to go upstairs to take his small nap. He did not hesitate to leave.

When he got to his room, he closed the door, plopped onto the comforter, and was about to fall asleep when he saw that his closet door was still open and the light still on. When he went over to turn it off, he saw it: the black and yellow sweater, swinging on an iron hanger. He felt like it had been calling him. It wanted him to try it on, just for old time's sake. And how could he refuse? He remembered the sweater well. He remembered finding it at a garage sale, buying it, wearing it and being glad that he didn't waste any more money than he needed to. He couldn't look at the sweater without trying it on, so he tried it on. But then he couldn't try it on without looking at himself in the mirror, so he did just that. He found that it was too baggy, as were almost all of his clothes that he wore, but he didn't look *that* bad.

A thought went through his brain: his wife would not know. How could she know? She was all the way down in the kitchen and he was up in the bedroom. Independence. It felt so nice to keep this secret. Lately (or ever since they got married), his wife had been driving his life. He had not been the passenger. He had been the flat tire at the back of the flooded trunk. Now he was the driver. Now, for these ten minutes, he was in control.

Being independent was magical. He, wearing the sweater, sorted the mail, put away a pair of boots, made the bed, not really paying much attention to what he was doing but simply loving

this freedom he now had. Having the sweater on was comforting. Being free was comforting. It was so comforting that, ten minutes later when he went downstairs, he forgot he was still wearing it. His wife smacked the counter.

“Just great. That’s just great. You’re trying to mock me, right? Trying to make me feel stupid? Like my opinion is worth nothing?”

It took him a moment to register what she was talking about. When he noticed the sweater still attached to him, he rolled his eyes. “Please don’t start up. Five minutes. I just had it on for five minutes. That’s all. I’m not going on national television here.”

“Go on national television if you want. I don’t care. That’s not the point. The point is that it’s very hurtful that I SPECIFICALLY asked you not to do something and then you went ahead and did it.” She snapped her finger. “Like that. Like it was no big deal.”

“He just gave her the usual,” said First Woman, rolling her eyes. Second Woman said that she wasn’t aware what this ‘usual’ was. “Oh, you know, just the usual.” She still didn’t understand. “*You* know. The “you don’t understand me” and “you never loved me” and “I just can’t be a man in this household” crap that they all say. But that’s not the point of the story. No, no, I’m getting ahead of myself here. I’ll get back to telling what I need to tell.”

The farmer and his wife argued over who was wrong and why and who was right and why. The wife won the argument. She said something that he couldn’t immediately give a comeback to, so therefore she was correct and the winner of the game. According to some rule book unknown to him, that was how it worked.

He felt ready to snap. He couldn’t handle it. The rules, the arguing, the restrictions of what he could and could not do. He went to the back door and slammed it shut. The wife screamed for him to get back inside. He refused. He was not willing to leave the one place where he was, if only momentarily, free.

“It wasn’t a bad night to be out, either,” said First Woman. “All purple skies. They were dark, but they weren’t, you know, *super* dark. You could still see things if you wanted to. You could still see people and objects.”

“What are you saying?” asked Second Woman. She leaned in.

“Oh, I don’t know,” shrugged First Woman. “I’m simply stating a fact.”

“Are you?”

“Yes. If you just happened to be out on this night and wanted to see certain colors, you might have been able to, on this night, see those colors.” She was smiling. The curved braces in her teenage form made her look more wicked than ever.

“No!”

Now they were truly sucked into the middle of the story. The sky under the meadow became purple and dark, though not too dark. Grass was replaced by fields of corn stalks and dirt roads. A woman, who must have been the wife, was standing on the back porch of a nearby house. Her arms were up and she was screaming for a man to get back inside. But the man was far from her. The man was skipping away, his hands up in the air, shouting, “Free! Finally free! Finally I’m free!”

Bees were coming in. Bees, from all regions, were swarming in.

Power and triumph. A story of power and triumph.

The bees buzzed in the background. The farmer continued to run away, oblivious to what was going on behind him.

First Woman smiled. Panic set in. Second Woman clutched a piece of her uniform, breathing more heavily. This wasn't good. First Woman wasn't a woman to smile unless there was trouble.

Power and triumph. Power and triumph.

It would be okay, wouldn't it? Wouldn't it be okay? The story was of power and triumph. She had known all along what the story was about. But that smile was never a good sign. It meant danger. And then, in an instant, Second Woman changed her mind. She knew who the hero was. She knew who would end up victorious.

She was correct.

It was beginning. The bees were gliding toward him, no intention of stopping or changing direction. The wife cried for him to come back and listen to her. He didn't listen, perhaps because he didn't know how. He was too deaf by his newfound freedom. Second Woman turned her head once more to First Woman. Same expression.

A single second.

It happened. The bees were upon him. There was a scream, either from the wife or from the farmer she couldn't be sure, that flew into her head and drilled holes into her brain. He was no longer human but instead a landing ground that all of the bees in the area could socialize on. His basic shape was not detectable. The wife was doing something. Screaming? Crying? Something. Her hands were up in the air and her eyes shut tight, but she was not crying. She was too hysterical to be crying. Second Woman gasped. She, instead, was laughing. First Woman was laughing, too. Both woman laughed like this moment was what they had been waiting their whole lives to see. It was sickening.

"Is she just going to stand there and laugh while her husband gets attacked by bees?"

"H-h-help. E-eff-ephentually!"

"What if he dies? What if he's allergic to the bees? Could he die right there? What's going to happen to him?"

This only made First Woman laugh harder. The sound of the laughter combined with the screaming made her feel like she would be sick. Both sounds were terrifying in their own way. This, Second Woman now knew, was the moment of triumph in the story. First Woman had set out to tell the tale of a wife who proved her husband wrong and was proud of her accomplishment.

The magic, the meadow, the pigtails, nail polish, uniforms, husband, wife—gone. Vanished. They returned to the café. They were no longer thirteen.

"Right," said First Woman, the smile waiving off of her face. She returned to the businesswoman that she was, her previous self gone forever. "Let's get back to the proper

business: the story. I assume you took notes on the critical key points of the story as discussed earlier?”

Second Woman was left shaking. Why did that have to be the ending? Couldn't there be something more? The farmer was left for the bees to feast on. What had happened to him? How did he get help? If only the story could continue. If only First Woman could remember some large detail (such as the farmer conquering?!) and the story could end on a happy note. First Woman went into her discussion mode, but Second Woman couldn't stop herself when she interrupted to ask, “That's it? That's all there is?”

First Woman seemed to take it as a compliment. “For the story? Wasn't it just marvelous? Or are you too disappointed that it ended? *Everyone* always wants to hear more. It's just a natural reaction. But forget about that. We're in discussion mode now.”

“But is he okay? At least tell me that he's okay.”

“Aww, are you worried about the farmer?” First Woman pulled out her phone, scrolling through the different applications. “There's *always* someone who worries about the farmer. There's *always* someone who has a fit making sure he's okay.”

“And is he?”

“Of course. He's fine.” First Woman handed over the phone. She smiled.

She should have known by that smile. She let herself believe, for a fraction of a moment, that everything really was okay, that the farmer really was the hero of the story. She looked at the images on the phone.

Of course. Of course he was not okay. His face looked like a flesh-colored balloon, over which his eyes, swollen as well, could hardly be seen. He looked like he was in a perpetual state of pain, his moaning nearly audible. In the background were white walls, which she assumed were the walls of a hospital. How sad. He was in a hospital, he had been assisted by doctors and nurses, yet he still looked so bruised, so torn. Second Woman felt her heart break. First Woman just laughed.

“What's wrong? You don't feel bad for him, do you?” She laughed. Second Woman did not laugh along. First Woman leaned in closer. Her question was asked in the form of a secret. “You don't actually feel bad for him, do you?”

“Of course I do. Shouldn't everyone?”

First Woman stared at her with a blank expression, then howled. “Of course not. Of *course* not!” She swung back and clapped her hands together. “Oh, Second Woman, you are *such* a trainee. You have *so* much to learn.”

“His head is covered in bandages.”

“Uh-huh. And his face is as swollen as a whale. Who the hell really cares? You think I care? I don't care. You shouldn't care, either. Come on, look at this.” She took back her phone and scrolled through more photos. These new ones were variations on the original. The farmer could be seen from the left angle, the right angle, from an overhead shot, to the side, facing a mirror. Whoever took the photos must have enjoyed their photo session. “Look at that. See how miserable he is?”

“Exactly. That’s why I feel bad.”

“No! You should be laughing. It’s funny because of how miserable he is.”

“I don’t like to laugh at him.” She ducked down lower. Why couldn’t First Woman understand? “It feels wrong.”

She shouldn’t have said it. First Woman took a sip of her coffee, her sour eyes staring directly at Second Woman. Second Woman began to feel shaky again. She was instructed to read page eight of the manual. She obeyed.

Page eight wasn’t just one piece of the manual. It was as if all of the pages had been chopped, gathered, and brewed into this single page of rules and tips. The heading on the top read, “It doesn’t matter if it’s fact or fiction, just as long as there’s always friction!” This led into the various rules and tips a true gossip was supposed to use (“Reference everything as a ‘valuable source’. It makes your story more official.” “Yes, dogs and cats count as witnesses.” “Don’t worry if your characters are cardboard cut-outs or not. The only thing that matters is the pace of your story.” “Plot holes must be filled in with your own imagination.” “Melodrama is the key.” “Don’t just go for the main characters. Find the dirt on everyone.” “The people in your stories are no more than characters. Do not worry about them.”) First Woman held her finger under the last tip.

“See this?” She dragged her finger underneath the last line. “See this rule?”

“Yes, I see it.”

“What does it say?”

“Not to feel bad for the people in the stories because they are just characters.”

“Exactly. Live by that. It will do you good.”

“I—I—”

“You—you—you what? You have to grow up. That’s what you have to do.”

An espresso machine went off in the background. There was screaming. Was it from the machine or from herself? She could not be sure. She, in many places, was screaming. Acting terrified.

To just fit in. That was it. That was all she wanted. She wanted this to be the last club she had to join, the last round of introductions, the last time she had to prove herself. Could she stay here? Could she be free here?

Time was running out. Her expiration date was approaching.

First Woman thought some more, then added, “Yeah, you really can’t be feeling bad for Farmer Joel.”

“Farmer Joel?!”

A waitress refilling a man’s water put down her pitcher and rushed over to their table. The man leaned forward in his chair to listen. The waitress asked again if they were talking about Farmer Joel.

“You know who he is?” said First Woman.

She dropped her jaw in the shape of an O, insulted. “Do I know who Farmer Joel is? Honestly, I’ve read everything I can about him. Honestly, *everything*.”

“Are you talking about *the* Farmer Joel?” asked a woman at the other end of the café.

“*The* Farmer Joel.”

“Oh, what a classic. What an absolute classic.”

“And *she* feels bad for him,” laughed First Woman, pointing directly at Second Woman.

***“Why would she feel bad for him?” said a teenager near the muffin counter. “He’s, like, Farmer Joel.”

“He was in a hospital,” said First Woman, putting on an exaggerated sad face and using her fists to wipe away the pretend tears. “She doesn’t like that. It makes her feel sad.”

There was an explosion of voices. They came and bounced in all directions, making it impossible to tell who was saying what and when and where. The voices flew and broke into one another, each one fighting over the other to be heard. Everyone had an opinion.

“—a mere trainee—”

“—needs to grow up—”

“—so stupid—”

“—just kick her out right—”

“—doesn’t deserve to be here. Should go straight—”

“—just laughable—”

“—if I were her, I certainly—”

“—so pathetic, so—”

The voices were crushing her. The images of the café were blurring. Her breathing malformed into wheezing. Her body was sticky and hot. She couldn’t stay there. She couldn’t.

“Don’t you worry,” said the waitress, putting a hand on top of hers. “I used to be the same way.”

“And what happened to you? What did you do?”

“I grew up.”

Everyone in the café looked at the waitress. They processed what she had said. There was a moment of total silence. Then, acting as one, they craned back their heads and laughed. Not just laughed, but cackled. Wildly.

Time was almost up. Her expiration date was approaching.

The laughing did not stop. They could have gone on forever. By now, they were unhinged. They had no control. They were dangerous.

Time was almost up. Her expiration date was approaching.

The walls of the café were stripped of their color and became green. Vomit green. The tables deconstructed into broken pieces, pieces which flew into the walls and became lockers. The customers of the café popped off their heads and swirled about her, their eyes looking manic. She was trapped. No way out.

Time was almost up.

From their heads grew hairy black legs and round backs. A fore wing and a hind wing sprouted from their backs. Two antennas grew out of their heads and went in opposite directions.

The stingers, the thoraxes, the scopas, the black and yellow, they were all there. The creatures were approaching.

Second Woman looked around, shocked at what she saw.

She had been there before.

She had been there many times.

Overwhelmed, she saw broken images that, just like the voices from before, flew and broke into one another, each one demanding to be seen. There was Farmer Joel running away, the bees attacking his flesh, the wife laughing, the red manual on the counter, the steam from the espresso machine, the clubs she tried to join in high school, the bees, Farmer Joel, the sour eyes of First Woman, her own hands shaking underneath the table, heads swirling around her, bees swirling around her, and she couldn't take it. She *screamed!*

"Stop it, stop it, stop it!" she said. "Everyone just stop it. Stop looking at me. Stop laughing at me. I don't want to join your club. I can't join your club. I can't. I don't know how. I'm not you. I don't know how to be like you. Please stop punishing me for it. Please!"

"Oh, Second Woman," began First Woman, who was still recognizable even in her new form.

"Don't call me that. I'm not Second Woman. I'm not!"

"Of course you're not. Uh-huh. Whatever you say, Second Woman."

"No, no, I'm not Second Woman! I have a name. Does everyone hear that? I have an actual name. Laura Lindsey. That's my name. It always has been. And I'm not here to join your club. I refuse. I refuse to be here. I refuse to gossip. I refuse to be Second Woman. I'm Laura Lindsey. Not trainee, not secretary, not business client, and certainly not, certainly *not*, Second Woman."

Her time was up. Her expiration date had found her.

Knowing this, she remained in her seat until she had calmed down. Then, very calmly, she rose out of her chair, walked past the bees, opened up the door, and went to her car. She pulled out her car keys. She opened up the car door. She got inside. She closed the door. She breathed in and out. Only then, looking back, could she see what she had done.

Farmer Joel would have been proud, she thought.

She started up her car and drove away. There was no need for any more clubs. She had found her name.