A Small Clearing

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Late afternoon settles. Vera leans against the marble kitchen island, the one she had chosen two years ago, after extensive deliberation. Heaviness accumulates in her arms, as if dust from the cave in her chest—the one housing murmuring bees.

Loose sounds crawl and bump around the house: soup bubbles, Todd Chavez on TV, whistles from the radiator. A moment of sunlight rests on her, the press of it against her frame gathering warmth, then so much warmth that she shifts an inch to the side. The bees forage deeper into the belly. Vera bows her head, holding the slopes of her neck, tightening after the body's reflexive bob. Ear to shoulder, pull back. Other ear to other shoulder, pull back. Back to center, but there is a slip in her breath. Bending. Bent. Bend. She cuts her slow exhale short with a heavy, exhaustive one. The sun had shifted over, its warmth finding her again.

A cellphone goes off in a different corner of the house, then, goes silent mid-ring.

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Ronan's love had always been a quiet one, and Vera had been okay with that when they married four years ago. In fact, Vera found his presence serene, a welcome change from the rambunctious —loving, but incredibly loud— house she had grown up in. But the quiet ones, she discovered, tend to get quieter. And the loud ones, like Vera, feel inclined to get louder in response, until one day, they go silent too. Dinner for two was now two dinners, going to the bedroom was now to retreat into parallel rooms, and for Vera, waking with the bees raging in her chest, was now ritual.

Still against the kitchen island, her strained gaze holds some branches beyond the thick windowpanes framing suburban Cranston. The shadow of the large oak tree in the front yard splays across the kitchen landscape, providing temporary company. The slower Vera tries to breathe the harder the bees thrash against her ribs as she wonders who called Ronan, then tries to ignore her incessant obsession with his life. The bees nudge her to stand up straight, and she obeys. Then, in an act of rebellion, she sits down on the chair instead, taking chugs of lukewarm tea, translucent drops slipping down her jaw. Flavored water currents through her throat, a momentary distraction.

She watches the scene through the window—a girl in layers of pink who pauses her striding to throw a tantrum, then pauses her tantrum to re-evaluate the situation when her mother doesn't entertain it. Deciding against her earlier whims, the child trods forward to catch up. It feels like watching forgiveness happen faster than she could ever manage. Vera wipes her chin and continues watching the passers-by. It is an afternoon ritual to distract her from the ghost of her marriage overshadowing this house.

The bubbling tomato soup is suddenly the only sound. The radiator is no longer hissing, and the TV has been muted. Ronan is in the living room. Vera is in the kitchen. Her ears are in the living room. The bees think they have found what they're looking for. They pound against Vera's trunk in all different directions trying to get her to move towards him. She shifts her body back to center from the intrusion, and her eyes back to the tree.

To the grass behind the tree. To the sky behind the grass. To the white frame of the windowpane. She keeps her gaze in a straight line, though it tries resisting focus. Her ears in living room pick up the closing of the office door, and Ronan is again two walls away. The air feels stuffy with the smell of tomato soup.

Vera's spine bends for a moment, trying to fence in the heart that aches for more. She straightens, and a deep breath forcefully

escapes her. A bubble of loud teenagers comes into view, and she looks at them passing. A few feet away, two upright still figures, then one of them doubles over.

Bees swarm towards Vera's throat.

Beyond the oak, near the neighbor's fence, a boy and a girl. No, a young man and woman. Vera observes as the man in plaid just stands. Something in the woman's posture catches Vera before she understands it— the bend of her shoulders, the surrender in it. The woman in the red cardigan leans forward at the waist, heaving. One of her hands holds the fence for support while the other one grips her chest as if physically holding her guts in, visibly shaking from the pain. The ache that Vera has resisted feeling— by changing her perspective, reframing it, altering it to see the good— floods into her bloodstream, her hands are pulsating with bees. She can feel their wings.

Like Ronan, in the last conversations they had that resembled anything real, the man in plaid just stands, indifferent, no, exasperated, looking down at her. His hand comes to rest on his temples, then drags down his face. The bees rest for a moment to give way to visceral rage in Vera's heart that propels her to the door, an impulse with which she has not been able to demand more for herself, at least not in recent memory. Her voice travels loudly across the lawn as she says, "Are you okay?" Her voice cuts the air open.

Red unbends and faces Vera. The man faces her too, both of them caught off guard, sunlight flashing off their damp cheeks— and Vera sees it. Both, with remnants of deep laughter on their faces.

The woman clutches her chest, still, and the man's face contorts to a shyness at being caught in vulnerable happiness. She nods vigorously, affirming her okay-ness, the smile in her voice too as she says yes.

Vera is confused at how it stings.

Vera begins to understand. A bee flies out.