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The Queen Bee

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The Queen Bee

Cody McCoy

“Who all is going to be at the family reunion?” Debbie asked while she sat in the back seat of her grandparent’s car. Despite starting her copy of *Charlotte’s Web* copy once the road trip started, she finished reading its last page a few minutes ago, and talking was the best solution to help her following boredom.

The road was starting to get narrow, bumpy, and windy with its edges weathered away from a time long before the three’s arrival. Untrimmed foliage was drooped around faded and twisted road signs. Managing through the road required her grandpa’s attention, so her grandma decided to answer instead. “Ah, well... Let me think. Uncle Tyler and Aunt Ashley are coming. Most of the Beckett family will be there. Similar to the one Grandpa went to last year. So Papaw and Granny will be there. Anybody you know who’s not coming, honey?”

A bump bounced Debbie from her seat. “No one told me nothing of the sort,” Debbie’s grandpa said. “Uncle John and Aunt Denise, Aunt Linda and Uncle Gary, Uncle Tim and Aunt Judy. Expect them. Emily, Austin, Sean, and Kelly might make it. They was there last time. Beyond that, not sure.”

“Is Emily bringin’ the baby?” Debbie asked.

Through the front view mirror, Debbie saw her grandma’s expression tighten before turning to her husband. “You think she would?”

“That would be hell,” Grandpa Beckett said. “Maybe if it was cooler. No baby should sit through this hours on end under ninety-degree weather. I reckon that showing off a child named Hurley wouldn’t be the best idea, anyways.”

“Mark!” Grandma Beckett chided. “It’s not that bad of a name. It was apparently more popular back when we were young.”

“I like it,” Debbie said.

“The only thing that name makes me like to do is hurl,” Debbie’s grandpa said. “I bet that one ain’t even the worst of what’s coming up. The internet is starting to give people weird ideas. I was talking to my barber last week, and he said that his cousin named his boy Brantley. Brantley! What does that even mean? Sounds like hippie hogwash. You wouldn’t name a child Brantley, right? Lisa? Debbie?”

“Absolutely not,” said Debbie’s grandma.

“No...?” Debbie said. Thinking of baby names had never been a topic of interest for her. Yet, when she thought about the differences between the meaning of Mark, Brantley, and Lisa, she never understood why one name disgusted her grandparents noticeably more than the others.

“Good,” Mark said. “We should be here in a few minutes. Just gotta make this turn... And up we go.”

“Is my name ‘hippie hogwash?’” Debbie asked.

“I’d say the opposite, really,” Debbie’s grandma answered. “A bit old fashioned, but we like it. That’s one thing your mom got right.”

When their car turned into a field of parked cars near a large house, Debbie knew that this was the destination. They opened their own doors and got out of the car. Debbie noticed one striking piece of information that ignored everything else: bees. *So many bees*. The grass had grown with all sorts of flowers to bloom such as dandelions, daisies, and white clovers. Most of the bugs were bumblebees, but the few honeybees and sweat bees did not escape Debbie’s sight.

“Oh no,” Debbie said, hopping back inside the car. It was an awful day to wear a yellow dress.

“What’s the matter?” Debbie’s grandpa asked. Debbie’s eyes darted between various parts of the ground around her, tracking every movement of all the bees nearby. “Oh. Reckon you’re still not over that. Thought you would by now. Well, you know you’re gonna have to move sooner or later, right?”

Debbie nodded. “We can’t go back to drop you off after a two-hour drive,” her grandpa continued. “And you’re not going to stay in this car the whole time. I’m getting too old and you’re getting too big to carry you.” He looked towards the field in deep thought until his attention went back to Debbie. “Alright, how about this: We’re going to walk through the field together. You’ll stay behind me, and Grandma will stay behind you. If bees are gonna be pissed off by anyone, it would be me. We’ll be nearby to prevent anything happening to you.” He extended his hand towards Debbie. “How’s that?”

After grabbing the food Debbie’s grandparents prepared for the family reunion, the three started their way through the field with each of them carrying a bag of food stored in Tupperware containers. Debbie’s eyes still focused on whichever bee buzzed closest to her, and the varying vibrations of their wings couldn’t put her at ease. When she heard a set get rapidly louder, her body jerked, but she still moved forward without stopping.

As the three made a straight line through the field, Debbie realized that they were passing by the house. “Is this... Not inside?”

“No, dear,” Debbie’s grandma answered. “There would be too many people for it to be indoors. I assume it’s on the other side of the house, right, honey?”

“Yeah,” Debbie’s grandpa said. Debbie’s focus diverted from the buzzing of bees because she started to hear a mixture of many conversations, none of which she could make anything out of. When they walked around the house, Debbie saw a gathering of over a hundred people taking a seat in or standing around scattered, white folding tables. Immediately after noticing the group of people, Debbie’s focus shifted to a short yet wide redbud tree adjacent to the back corner of the house. With such a large amount of flowers within the fairly small tree, the dozens of swarming bees were no surprise. The grass in the area with dining tables had been cut not too long ago, at the very least. Also, there could have been more bees near the tree, but the tree started to be withering from the looks of it.

After dropping off their food to the long line of adjoining tables to further add to the buffet, they walked to a table away from the redbud tree that seated people Debbie recognized, such as Uncle Tyler, Aunt Ashley, and the rest of the family Grandpa Beckett previously predicted would be there. A few minutes went by through introductory chatter.

“Where’s your mom?” Uncle Tyler asked Debbie.

“She’ll be here sooner or later,” Debbie said. “She’s at work right now.”

“Is she now?” This time Uncle Tyler’s face looked at Debbie’s grandparents.

“She promised us she’ll come eventually,” Grandma Beckett responded.

While initially distracted, Debbie realized that a few weeds stood tall around and under the table despite most of the gathering area being trimmed. Those weeds were enough to attract the occasional bee, so Debbie lifted her legs up from the ground and put herself in a cross-legged position upon the seat of the chair. While she had a feeling that the long, yellow dress covering her legs and feet would not be effective as protection for her skin, her wishful thinking gave her some comfort. She knew she looked strange (the stares from Papaw and Granny helped confirm her suspicion), but she couldn’t help herself. She saw a group of children around her age play in an open space nearby. If Debbie had been asked if she was interested in playing with them, she would have to turn down that idea. Not only did she shudder at the idea of meeting kids who,

despite being related, felt like total strangers to her, but the idea of walking through more bugs and flowers would have made her a bumbling mess by the time she reached them.

Besides, Debbie reluctantly socialized with other people regardless. Every few minutes a person who Debbie had no memory of would stop and say something along the lines of “Wow, why isn’t it Debbie! You’ve grown so much”, and she would just sit there not knowing what to say. They would try to continue talking, and the mix of guilt and discomfort of having somebody know you for years without even knowing their name or how they were connected within the family tree in return made Debbie wish they would just buzz off. Sometimes one of her grandparents or another family member she was more familiar with would chip in, which, to Debbie’s relief, helped put off attention towards her.

Around thirty minutes after Debbie arrived, an organizer of the reunion whom Debbie vaguely remembered asked for everyone to join in prayer for grace to thank God for the harvest before the feast began. Once the prayer ended, she sat in place as the line began to form. Her grandparents rose but noticed that Debbie did not follow before they got in line themselves.

“Are you not coming?” Grandma Beckett asked.

“I’ll wait for the line to get shorter,” Debbie said while waving her hands. “It’s fine. I’ll be in line at some point.”

With a shrug from Grandpa Beckett to his wife, they and the rest of Debbie’s family went off to the line without any further conflict. In the meantime, she thought of things she could perve herself once the time comes. *“I mean, KFC would taste good right now,”* Debbie thought. *“Bless whoever brought that. Wait, I only see a few buckets left. Would it run out? Shoot. Maybe staying here was wrong. I probably need water, too. I’m starting to see more sweat bees fly near less lucky people. It sure is hot. I’ll be burning up soon. Ah geez, but now the line is actually long. Maybe I can skip the line without anybody caring if I just get a—”*

“Debbie?” a familiar voice called out. It was her mom with her slightly disheveled red hair and sunglasses. “Why are you sitting like that?”

“Hi Mom,” Debbie said, using some bravery to force her eyes towards a strange metal cylinder held in her mother’s hand.

“Oh, this?” Debbie’s mom asked using her other hand to point to the cylinder. “One of my party friends showed this off yesterday. It’s kind of like a cigarette. So I breathe in.” She put her lips between one end of the cylinder and audibly inhaled. She then breathed out a clearer,

thinner type of air than the smoke she normally breathes out. “Breathe out. It’s vapor instead of smoke—I guess people are calling it a vape.”

“Cool!” Debbie said.

“Yeah, I kind of expec—” Debbie’s mom stopped herself with a coughing fit. Debbie thought she sounded old when she did something like that in front of her in a way that betrayed her looks. She looked young. Maybe a little too young, Debbie was starting to realize. “Wait. Where is everyone?”

Debbie pointed to her grandparents in the back of the line, who had not yet noticed their daughter’s arrival.

“And why aren’t you with them?”

Debbie started to answer, but a sweat bee flew and landed on the table in front of her. She scuttled away from the bee as much as she could.

“I swear to God,” Debbie’s mom started. “Not this shit again. I keep telling you that you shouldn’t even worry if you’ve never even been stung before. Grandma’s allergic for chrissake, and she’s alright. Why can’t you just grow up already?”

Debbie tried to look at her mom while keeping the sweat bee in her peripheral vision in hopes of calming her down, but Debbie’s eye movements failed to fool her mom.

“Here,” Debbie’s mother fumed while walking and grabbing her daughter’s wrist. “Let me show you why they’re harmless.” Her grip was tight as usual. The only resistance that came from Debbie was her rigid walk, which Debbie’s mom seemed neither to have known nor cared about. They arrived a few feet away from the redbud tree.

“I’m going to smoke a cigarette,” her mom said, pulling out a pack of Marlboros from the purse dangling upon one of her elbows. “I need to see if ditching these can actually happen. If a bee so much as even touches you, I lose. Then I can say, ‘You’re right, and I’m wrong.’ But I’m going to enjoy this moment because I know that won’t happen. I’ll stop when this cigarette bud falls.”

“It’s called a cigarette butt,” Debbie said.

Her mom’s face twisted into a glare. “What?”

“Grandma told me about that on the way here. She corrected me. Told me it’s a cigarette butt, not a bud.”

“Nobody likes a smartass, Debbie Downer,” her mom scolded.

“Sorry.”

“Again—if you were truly sorry, you wouldn’t have said it.”

Her mom ignited her lighter after her thumb gave a few hurried flicks upon the sparkwheel to enkindle her cigarette. She placed the tip of the cigarette filter inside her mouth and inhaled. She coughed on the first inhale, but eventually found her old groove. Debbie stood still. There were so many bees. Which ones would move the most? Which ones looked more curious or hostile than others? Which ones looked like they could be interested in the two? Which one looked to give the most painful sting? Questions like these swarmed her mind repeatedly until, finally, her mom got bored.

“See?” Debbie’s mom asked. “What did I tell you? Nothing. They’re a natural good. So you better stop that shit from now on. Look, I can even throw this cigarette into the tree, and they wouldn’t care about us. Come on, let’s go.” She threw her cigarette into the flowers of the redbud. The two started to turn away, but a few family members distanced between the two looked alarmed in, or rather, beyond their direction. Debbie, turning her neck, soon realized that the end of the cigarette still had heat. First, a trail of smoke flowed upwards. Everyone seemed to feel too stunned to move. Then, a flare emerged from a redbud petal. Once everyone snapped out of their daze, it was too late: the tree was rapidly being engulfed in flames. The bees, fleeing from their former gathering place, seethed with a vicious collective droning and started targeting the one who threw the cigarette.

Debbie started to hear buzzing around her, so she ran. Yet, none of the bees were targeting her. She felt no stings. She looked back to see her mom in welts. Other family members were trying to put out the fire. They seemed to be in no mood to help Debbie’s mom, and admittedly, she didn’t care either as she rushed towards her grandparent’s car.