

Poles

I first saw it through the window. It was a pole in the driveway, tall and shiny in the morning sun. It had appeared overnight. Our research suburb's apiculture had already been let out. The bee clouds furled all around the house, plinking off of the windows and drumming over the siding and boiling up the drainpipe. My wife, Sandi, was asleep in her room with Syd, and Sandi's brother Jacob was asleep, too, on the couch downstairs, half-naked. He was a hive-tree trimmer who'd seen someone die in a fall at work so he'd left to come spend time with his sister. I wasn't sure how long he would stay, though Sandi said she thought he'd leave soon after holiday week. I didn't press her more. She hadn't been happy with me. I couldn't defend it. Simple things like cooking dinner together set me off. Once I'd thrown a lamp at her head. Once she'd kicked over an expensive glass cabinet that was my dad's. We yelled. I called her terrible things. She was a goddamn child. She talked bad about me to her bosom friend Maiha. We slept in different rooms. I wanted to think it was love at the bottom.

Downstairs, Jacob spent the days watching old sports reruns. I didn't understand why he had come here. He was big but nimble. It was weird when he kept staring at you. How his lips moved when he talked made it hard for me to feel good about him here with Syd. I pictured him out in the hive forest. He quivered as he dug the blade in the crotch of the dying limb. He watched it gyre far down. He licked his sloppy lips, tugged the harness on his groin.

So now the pole was here. I went out in my bee suit to see. It had a cone up top horizontally affixed. A stamen poked from the cone like a flower. Bees billowed dark gusts through the street. I kicked the pole's base with the heel of my boot, and it rang hollowly. Bees knocked off my visor. I followed the line of the curb and swung my arms to clear the air. A pole loomed in every driveway. I walked back toward my house. I stood in the buzz and felt confused. My torn ear ached on my visor band. When I took off my glove and gripped the pole, the metal was warm and throbbed from far down. I gently shook the bees off of my wrist. Syd once told me they barked at her. She meant their overall sound. Syd loved animals, but it made us nervous. She loved with

violence. She treated the dog, Juan, like that. We scolded her. I tried to explain the helplessness of dogs. I saw how Juan was pushed to his limit without having a say. I wanted to touch him, but he disliked me. He showed sweet brown eyes to other people. Syd kept playing rough with him, hitting him or taping his tail down, though Sandi said Syd's excess energy was the mark of an artist. My grandfather was a genius who'd patented durable hive tape. Syd did have a wonderfully high forehead. Shakespeare, I thought.

My neighbor Staples came out in his suit.

"You sleep okay?" he said.

"Fine," I said. "Why?"

"Because I slept like a goddamned baby," Staples said. "And what? No jackhammers outside. No men."

"Phone towers or something?" I said.

"Nah."

"Moisture regulation?" I said. "It was a very wet summer."

"I ain't seen nothing like this."

"Me either."

"Some top secret shit."

"Secret?"

"Life in the research zone, eh? Fuck me."

"Who knows, right?" I said.

The more I thought, the worse I felt. Even if we did not own our home or the land, per se, it was where we lived. I dialed public works but was put on hold. Violins shrilled. Perhaps the poles better enabled the amplification of our colonies' vibration patterns for energy conversion. Perhaps the poles improved the bees' health; workers only live around thirty-five days, but we hoped to extend that. Perhaps the poles were for the atmosphere; wet weather often kept the bees shivering in their hives even when artificial nectar scents were blown in the caves where they nested. Did other zones have poles too? It's absurd what we do for low rent.

The receptionist came back on and she said zonal resonant diodes, nothing I'd need to pay for. Resonant diodes? She reminded me I live in a research community. I said, but wouldn't the word "community" imply cooperation? She hung up. "Fucking bitch!" I screamed into the phone. I lay on the carpet. I hoped Syd hadn't heard me yell but hoped Sandi had. I fingered my torn ear where it ached. I breathed

in the itchy carpet fibers. I got sentimental. I remembered Syd's tiny bare feet on the floor. When Sandi's body was younger, her toes were browner and finely muscled. I would hold her feet spread when I moved over where she lay open for me in the dark. She was a dancer once. We used to have such times. I'd lifted her visor to kiss her at the honey fair while the Ferris wheel climbed higher. I guided her by hand through the park in spring. I breathed in her hair behind her. Jacob caught us nude once but was too young to know. You wouldn't have believed her without clothes, all skin and light, and it was hard to think of her old boyfriends sliding on her with their musky body wool. I used to bother myself about it, even lying in bed by her. Maybe I held myself apart now to make up for who I was or who we'd been. But she hadn't felt close in a long time. At night I listened to her talk on the phone to Maiha in her room down the hall, but I could never understand with just her half.

"Dad?" said Syd. She fell heavily on my back. I pushed her off.

"That really hurts me, honey," I said.

"Do you have a phobia?"

"A phobia?"

"People have phobias of chickens, of outside, and of water, and of rooms, and of numbers. Is yours of people sitting on you?"

"Did you read that?"

"You have a very big bottom," she said close to my ear. I gently knocked her away. I pretended to stifle her with my sleeve. She screamed. I tickled her. She was screaming and laughing.

"Is your mother still asleep?" I said. She swung a fist at my face and I dodged.

"Let's fight!"

"I don't want to fight you."

"Why not?"

"I'm tired."

"No you're not!"

"I have a phobia."

"No you don't!"

Other workers speculated on the research suburb's rail to the municipal fields where I am Trainer III/Lead Harvester, where the big colonies thrum the community's grid to life. One man said his friend in an unregulated zone reported no poles. Another woman said that where she was from, a flatland town in the middle of the country, similar poles were sirens to alert residents of storms. "But why weren't we

asked?" her seatmate said. "We don't have storms like that. Why so many poles?" What could we do? Nobody knew whom to ask.

Today the egg harvest was especially rich among the ground cavities. Some said maybe it was the poles. There was so much bounty that my back weakened from stooping to harvest it. Pain filled my tailbone on the rail home. I could see my spine crooked in the meat around it. I could see decayed vertebrae. We couldn't pay for surgery, but I was getting old, and sometimes my back popped or shifted painfully and didn't budge back in place for hours. My father got way smaller right before he died. I remember how his head shrunk down. I'd seen him in his coffin. It wasn't him. It was folds of skin and fabric. I held my mother's hand while we looked. Candles burned a sweet hive-forest smell. I think about that sometimes.

"Things are weird out here," I told my mother on the phone.

"Just a moment, honey," she said. I could hear a doctor talking sternly to her.

"Is this an okay time?" I said.

"What were you saying?"

"There are poles everywhere. You should see it!"

"I know about the noise weapons," she said.

"What do you mean, noise weapons?"

"That's what they've planned for us," she said.

"Okay."

"I wish I could help."

"I know."

"I'm sorry, son."

"Okay."

"They say I got to go now."

"Bye, Mom."

In bed, I heard someone downstairs opening doors. The floor squeaked heavily. I crept down with my hands trembling. Someone big stood in the refrigerator light, a man, not moving. It had to be Jacob. "Jacob?" I asked.

"Hi, Mr. McGraw," Jacob said. "I was just hungry."

"Did you find food?"

"Yes, I'm sorry."

"What was all the damn noise?"

"Just making a sandwich."

"This late?"

“Actually, I just wanted water. Is that okay with you? Sorry to wake you up.”

“Okay,” I said. I went back to bed. I could hear Jacob’s heavy steps go down to where he stayed. I didn’t like him wandering at night.

A few days later, after work, the poles began to drone a high needling tone. I could hear the sound from in my room. The research apiculture was back in the caves, so it wasn’t that. It made Juan run around the living room yelping. He agitated me. “It’s okay, boy,” I said and tried to pet him, but he ducked under my hand and sprinted down the hall barking wildly, sliding into the walls. Noise weapons. The noise weapons! My hands were shaking again. I went out to stand in the lawn, and Sandi joined me. Her hair fell around her in the light. I touched her shoulder, but she shrugged me off. “What’s this?” she said.

“I don’t know.” It was louder now. I could see inside where Jacob was holding Syd to watch through our window. Other neighbors were out. Everyone was talking, walking quickly around with hands over their ears. But then it stopped. Wind blew pine shavings from the hives’ moisture quilts over the street. Everyone waited. Sweat cooled my chest in my T-shirt. It was quiet. At last we went back in. Juan was asleep on the carpet.

“Maiha says it’s something to help improve device reception,” Sandi said at dinner the next night. “It was a test of it yesterday.”

“What does she know? What does that even mean, ‘device’?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I was told something totally different when I called.”

“Probably not worth worrying anyway.”

“Mom thinks it’s a big deal. Weapons or something.”

“She’s batshit nuts, though.”

“Fuck you,” I said before I could stop myself. “Sorry, Syd.”

“Sorry, *Sandi*,” said Sandi.

“Sorry, Sandi.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Syd said.

“Nothing, honey,” I said.

“May I be excused?” Syd asked. Sandi nodded.

“Why weren’t we asked about it?” I asked.

“They don’t need permission.”

“Isn’t that terrifying, though?”

“I guess.”

Sandi phoned Maiha while I washed dishes. Earlier, Jacob had said he felt poorly so Sandi had carried food down. I could hear an audience shriek and cheer on the screen he watched downstairs. "What's Jacob sick with?" I asked Sandi, when she'd hung up.

"He feels nauseous."

"Bet he's not really sick."

"He's seen terrible things recently, and he's delicate. Be nicer."

"Where's Syd?" I said. She shrugged. "Goddamn it," I said.

I found Syd watching baseball downstairs on the couch with Jacob. Juan was asleep on Jacob's lap, on a blanket. It was weird to see Juan like that with Jacob. Syd wore shorts and was sitting near where Jacob leaned back under Juan. She was chewing gum. When Jacob saw me, it looked like he shifted guiltily away from her.

"Syd, come upstairs for a minute to help me with the dishes," I said.

"Not now."

"Everything okay?" Jacob said. His lips quivered moistly.

"Just wonderful. But I need her to help clean up."

"Maybe you should listen to your dad," Jacob said.

"No," Syd said, staring at the screen.

"Syd."

"Dad." She snapped her gum. Juan actually growled low in his chest at me. They all wanted me gone. As I climbed back up the stairs, Syd and Jacob laughed together loudly. I slammed the door hard.

"What was that!" yelled Sandi from the kitchen, but I put on my suit and went out to rake pine shavings.

I had to train three recruits at work. I showed the holograph. It had vivid colors and swelling music and slow-mo close-ups of bees landing on flowers with clouds of pollen billowing up from their hairy black legs. The voice-over talked about how we'd discovered how to harness bees' vibration into infinitely cheap energy and suddenly found ourselves in overabundance of high-grade honey, how it was now our pride, our national identity. The holograph covered how to use the artificial scent machine, how to prepare flowers by hand, how to lower raw honey's water content to increase its purity, magnifier maintenance, etc. The workers were fresh young boys. Behind the two-way glass I fingered my bad ear while the trainees holographically wandered the monofloral boutique gardens under the east dome. They slapped each other's shoulders and laughed. It looked fun. My ear hurt. It always hurt when I got warm.

My mother did it to me back when she lived with us. She'd snipped my ear with scissors while I slept. I remember I'd been dreaming my father was washing my body, and when I woke up I could hear my blood pattering out on the covers. My mother sat by me looking scared. I called the agents on her. Over the phone from mental rehab she explained she'd used her pension for vials of drugs to sniff up in our bathroom, with Syd here and everything. She said sorry. I said I missed her.

Our holiday week finally came. When I arrived home from work the light was off. I switched it on and saw a note: "Went to see Maiha." I could hear the screen downstairs. I could hear Syd laughing. I went down. The screen showed a game show. Jacob was singing and bouncing Syd on his knee like a horse and she was laughing and laughing. When Syd saw me she jumped a little. She somersaulted down and pretended to slowly collapse on the floor. "I crashed and I'm dead," Syd groaned. "You killed me." Jacob muted the screen and stood up.

"Will you go upstairs, Syd?" I said.

"Dad?"

"Now!" She sprang to her feet and ran up the stairs. Jacob sat and crossed his legs. He was looking at me calmly.

"Is everything okay, sir?" he said.

"How much longer are you staying here?" I said.

"Your daughter came down to play," he said. "I'm not a pervert or anything."

"That's not what I asked," I said.

"To tell the truth, it depends what my sister says I should do."

"I'm saying on behalf of both of us that you have to leave before the holiday week's over. We're not running a goddamned fucking hotel service here."

"Let's see what Sandi says."

"Don't challenge me. Are you challenging me?" I said.

He sat with a smug little face.

"Did you understand what I said," I said.

"Yes, I heard what you said."

"Good."

His chest filled out his white T-shirt. He could hurt me if he wanted to. But this was my house. I climbed upstairs. Out the window, I could see Syd and Juan on the lawn playing fetch with one of my boots.

Later my mother called. "There are alien cities underground," she said. "There are prisons in them. The noise weapons are the start. They want to use us as slaves. I'm sorry, honey."

"Okay."

"You won't have any choice."

"The way you talk is scaring me."

"I'm sorry, son."

"I know."

"I do love you. I'm sorry it has to be like this."

"I love you, too."

That night I was lying in bed. I could hear Sandi jabbering on the phone with Maiha down the hall. I kept thinking about the poles, what my mother had said. She was crazy. I knew it. But I didn't like not knowing anything. I didn't like that no one seemed to care enough. Now I was downstairs, turning on the garage light. I found a hacksaw and a flashlight. I went outside. I set the teeth of the saw against the pole about shoulder height. Vibration rattled the blade, but I sawed and sawed. I shone the light over the pole. Mirror-smooth. I sawed until all the teeth had broken off and I sat in the grass by the driveway holding my back, breathing hard. A light went on in the house. Sandi was looking at me through the kitchen window, still on her phone. I waved. She shook her head. She gestured at me; she wanted me in. I mouthed, "No." She came out to the porch with her arms crossed, slim and pretty in the kitchen light. Finally, I went in.

Jacob was gone the next day. His comforter was neatly folded on top of the couch cushions, and the sheets were in the machine already washing. Sandi knew I'd done it. She wouldn't listen to me explain. Syd pulled on her suit and ran outside, away from my hugs. She was upset, too. I heard Sandi talking angrily to Maiha on the phone all evening in her room. In the morning, Sandi packed a bag. She and Syd were going to take the rail to Sandi's father's house. Sandi wouldn't say when they'd come back. Syd hugged my leg quickly, with a sullen face, and they left.

It's not like Staples would ask me over for dinner. I was too old for that. I found a string of lights to decorate the window. I cooked a hash and ate it from the bowl and watched out through the blink of light. It made colors smear the edges of the glass. I looked at the pole in front of the moon, how it lined a shadow on the lawn.

"I didn't feel safe with Jacob," I told Sandi on the phone.

"He didn't feel safe with you," she told me.

"Oh, because I'm so dangerous."

"I don't feel safe with you either."

"Whatever."

"If we're being honest."

"Like you're the model of consistency."

"Hold on a second," said Sandi.

"Hi, Daddy!" said Syd.

"Hi, Syd," I said. "I love you."

"Why don't you come over?" she said. "Jacob's here."

"I'll see you soon," I said.

The pole was out there in the evening. I watched it. I felt angry and angrier. I got tools from the garage in a trash bag. Outside, I knelt in the lawn by the pole and beat it. I snapped a hammer's claw. I cracked the oak handle of a hatchet. I bent the shaft of a torque wrench. I whacked with a tire iron until my hand couldn't hold any longer, so I picked it up with my other hand. Staples appeared in his doorway. "Goddamn it, man," he said. I kept on. "Hello?" he said.

"Hi," I said, panting. "Hello, Staples." I set the tire iron down and felt over the pole's unmarred surface with my trembling, aching hand. "I'm working."

"Well, don't. That's not your property," he said.

"It's on my property," I said. "So it is kind of my property."

"You don't know what that is," he said. He crossed over to my lawn.

"What are you doing?"

"Fuck off," I said.

"What's your problem?"

"Go away," I said.

"You are troubled, man."

"Don't worry about it."

"I'm calling agents on you if you don't stop. I ain't kidding."

"Do it," I said.

"Keep it up, asshole."

"I will, asshole."

He went inside, but I could see him lit up in a window. Other neighbors were at their windows to watch my spectacle. I rested my tender spine against the pole. My teeth hummed. Had it grown roots underground? The gnarled network of wire would bud out through

the earth for more electricity. I wondered if the pole were maybe filming me. Though who would want all the useless film of us?

Something snuffled next to me in the dark. Juan! They had forgotten Juan. "Juan," I said. He bared his teeth and backed away, wagging his tail. "Come inside, boy. Are you hungry?" He was crouched on the ground. "I'll give you some food," I said. "What do you say, buddy?" He stood up carefully but was wagging. He followed me at a distance. Inside, I filled his bowls with food and water. I tried to pet him while he ate, but he dodged my touch. I left the kitchen door open. It didn't matter. They shouldn't have left him behind.

I sat on the couch downstairs in the dim light watching a cartoon about a vacuum cleaner making friends with a blender to explore a kitchen. The phone rang. It was Maiha. "She's already gone," I told her. "Thank you so much for asking." Later the phone rang again. It was a nurse. My mother had bit someone in the neck again, and they had locked her up alone in the clinic's safest wing. I asked the doctor what he meant by safe and for whom the wing was safest, and he said for her.

I folded out the couch and lay myself down carefully on my sensitive back.

I had a dream that felt as real as anything. Syd had tied Juan to the base of our pole and I told her to let him go because he was sad like that. She untied him, but Juan disappeared in the street. Syd cried on my leg until my pants got wet from her.

"Will you be nice to Juan if we can find him?" I said. She nodded on my thigh. "Got to be nicer to Juan," I said, "or he runs away." We jogged down the street through clouds of bees. "Juan!" I yelled.

Syd raised pine-shaving bin lids. "Juan!" she shouted in each one. We passed a park where children were gathered around a table surrounded by balloons, with a lit-up cake in the middle. A boy had sat to blow out the candles. His mother beat bees away from the frosting with a broom. "Oh," said Syd. "Look at the party." We walked closer holding hands. Bees tickled our necks and our hair because we'd left our suits back. The boy lifted his head from the cake. I could see the boy was me. I woke up crying. It was early. The apiculture was already ping-pong off the siding and rattling through the gutters. Upstairs, bees climbed on the walls of the kitchen cabinets and wormed the seams of the refrigerator. The kitchen door was open. It didn't matter. Through

the doorway I saw the pole in the morning light. I felt the angles of my ragged ear. I was alone. My mother was alone, too, somewhere in a quiet room. Maybe I had what my mother had. Maybe it would ruin me inside. Maybe it had. Maybe I needed a drug. Maybe it could be another way for Syd.

I lay on the couch downstairs in the dark. I didn't move.

Bees bounced off the house. They hummed outside. They hummed upstairs. They stopped at night. They started in the morning.