

## Half-Thumbs

### (The Myth of Vespidae)

My grandpa was a big, bald man with nine and a half fingers. He lost the tip of his thumb when he got stung by a wasp while repairing the barbed-wire fence around his ranch on the outskirts of Dallas. The stinger snapped off inside, his hand ballooned, hives wiggled up his left arm, and his very own throat tried to strangle him. They rushed him to a hospital and managed to save his life, but it cost him half a thumb, fingerprints and all.

All of us started using it as a unit of measurement.

“I missed my sales quotation ‘by the tiniest bit,’” mom said, pinching her thumb to her middle finger and holding it in the air. “Just half a thumb shy.” Hamilton and I also put thumb to middle finger to explain away bad grades and failed try-outs; all kinds of rejections and coming up short were transcribed into the code of thumbs.

It probably goes without saying that wasps bedeviled my adolescent mind. My thumbs ached when one of the bizarre creatures flew by. My skin shivered at the thought of their sting. But I was also drawn to them and their papery nest, fashioned from gobbled up wood and gooey saliva, so in science class, while my friends presented projects about scorpions and spiders, I created *The Myth of Vespidae*.

I put the title right there in the center of the board, using big, bold letters. The rows of yellow-jackets, wasps, and hornets dangled from one end to the other. I fixed them to a thick square of Styrofoam, using color-coordinated pins for each type: an abacus of reds, yellows, and oranges with a blank space between them. I studied the board, made sure the pins were even, and

angled their bodies so that they were all paying homage to the titled queen. But something was missing and I knew what it was. I grabbed mom's Polaroid and went out back.

The metal storage shed had always been a favorite spot for them and this nest was a doozy, nearly as big as a horse apple. There must have been twenty eggs nestled in the honeycomb cradles. A pair of wasps crawled over it, so I approached slowly, crouching down a little to make myself small, then I took a picture and paused to look at it. When the photo faded into being, I knew I'd need to get closer.

One wasp flew off, but the other one still patrolled.

I looked around, hoping for another way. But I didn't see one. My hands were shaking, but I still took two more steps, aimed the camera and took a photo. I sat it on the ground and took another before retreating to the house. I pinned the polaroids on either side of the title and nodded. The photos were like those Cracker Jack tattoos. The colors weird, not quite right, not quite true. But I was no expert on real tattoos. The only ones I had ever seen were on my grandfather's pale feet. Old navy jobs, a pig on one foot and a rooster on the other. They're all faded and blurry, but grandpa pointed out which was which, and said he got them fighting the Nazis.

I didn't talk about my grandfather or World War II in third period. Family day and social studies had come and gone, so I kept it scientific. I sat the display on the chalk tray with my sweaty palms and began. I went over the different types of wasps and then turned to the anatomy. "These are the antennae," I said, pointing them out with a sharpened pencil. "And this is called the thorax." I paused for a moment, checking my notes, "and right here, at the tail-end of the abdomen is the stinger." Most everyone snickered, except Jill Onstaught, and Miss Kendrick corrected me. "Abdomen," she said slowly. I was always messing up my bs and ds.

It was only hours later, when I was walking home from school, that it dawned on me, this thing that I had done. I looked at those strange, lifeless wasps, almost golden in death, and my heart crumbled into itself. I ducked down an alleyway, sat my project on the dirt, and removed the pins. A breeze fluttered the wasps a little, but they didn't crawl or wiggle. They didn't wake up. I knew they wouldn't. I squatted down and brushed a tiny, auburn one from head to stinger with my index finger. I was trying to be gentle. I meant it in a good way, but it didn't matter. The body parts flaked off. The wings drifted off the thorax, and then the wind picked up and kited them away. I left the myth sitting where it was, scrambled to my boot legs, and sprinted all the way home, pausing every once in a while, to catch my breath and make sure that I was not being followed.

My grandfather's ranch was no Southfork, and he was no J.R. He was famous, but only in a small way. Other vets from the war, also with roosters and pigs on their feet, knew him. They had all transported the soldiers who had stormed the beaches of Normandy. His small fame was not limited to the war. Parts of his cows landed in grocery stores and restaurants all over the metroplex, from little mom and pop joints to wide-aisled mega-stores with gigantic meat freezers. After they were slaughtered, they weren't called cows anymore. Now, they were steaks and hamburgers, T-bones and rib-eyes. They were cradled in a Styrofoam tray and wrapped in see-through plastic. Each one had a little white label that listed the net weight, the unit price, and the total price. Nothing hidden. Decimal points and pennies printed in clear, black numbers for everyone to see. My grandfather liked to pick the package up and sniff it. Right there in the grocery store, with everyone looking.

“Go on, Enki. Give it a smell.”

I squirmed a little, but did as I was told.

“I don’t smell a thing,” I said, handing the meat back to him.

My grandfather laughed. “That’s because your nose,” he said, flicking it with his good thumb, “your nose needs more schooling, that’s all.” He pushed the shopping cart away, chuckling, and I followed like a child. I never understood why my grandfather’s name was not on the label, but he told me they were his and I believed him. Chunks of his cows must have ended up in all those bellies, most every night. He could barely keep up with demand, and with the population booming in the 1960s, he must have thought that he’d always be running his fingers through wads of crisp, dollar bills. How could he think otherwise?

But one day, not long after the Styrofoam wasps, my grandfather’s cattle started dying off. Every morning, he discovered a single carcass next to the creek, and each day he’d wonder about the thousand and one red welts piercing the murdered cow. He couldn’t figure out who or what was doing this to him. He didn’t have any enemies, “at least, none that would do something like this,” but he wasn’t so sure about those bearing a grudge from what he called “the checkered career” of our ancestors.

“History may not repeat itself,” he told my brother and me, “but that doesn’t keep the past from changing its clothes and making a guest appearance.”

It didn’t take long for him to decide that we needed to help him put a stop to it. “No sleeping in the house,” he announced. “We’ll sleep right down by the creek. Each man will have his own gun, and I’ll give a \$20 bill to the man who first spots the poacher” he said, poking me in the ribs with that half-thumb of his.

After we pitched our tents, Hamilton and I went down to the creek for a swim, relieved to escape the stench of the campsite. The pasture reeked from the discolored horse apples rotting all around. When we got down to the water, we undressed and slipped right in. It was crystal paradise. Goose pimples tingled up and down my legs and my arms. I stood there for a minute, thigh deep, petting the water with my fingers and letting the creek move in and around me. Then I waded in deeper, until the water was almost up to my neck. I shivered for a moment before squatting down, putting my head under water, and holding my breath for as long as I could. I never once shut my eyes: the water was that clear, that clean. Hamilton was a few feet from me. He kept diving down to the bottom of the creek looking for arrowheads. I thought about doing the same, but for now I let my legs rise to the surface and floated on my back, just listening to the concert of the creek: a symphony of chirps, chatters, and croaks.

I was staring up at the sky, watching shape-shifter clouds morph from a wolf into a coyote when Hamilton shouted: “Enki! I found one.” He stood there belly button deep in the water looking like he’d just been baptized. His whole face smiled, and his blue eyes glowed as he showed me the most wonderful arrowhead I had ever seen. An absolute gem, tinged so red that you could see the history of blood gushing everywhere.

“There are tons of them,” he said.

I dove down, and sure enough found a few resting on the creek bed. I picked out two of them and came to the surface. Hamilton did the same.

“Arrowhead River,” I said, wishing it were true.

“Just imagine what it must have been like,” Hamilton said, “scouting around on a horse with a weapon in your hand.”

“I don’t know,” I said, looking at our row arrowheads, “looks like an awful lot of dying to me.”

As we sat around the campfire that evening, my grandfather told us about the different tribes that used to roam around these parts and figured that this must have been the site of a mighty fierce battle.

“This was a kind of no man’s land, a buffer zone, a goulash of shifting cultures. Everyone borrowing, and sometimes stealing, from everyone else. In a way, it has always been contested land. Guess it always will be,” he said.

“Mom says we’re half Comanche,” I said.

He nodded that it was true. “On her side of the family,” he said. His eyes darkened a bit and his half-thumb twitched.

“The Comanche were known as wasps because they swarmed in and stung their enemy to the quick,” he said, poking Hamilton with the point of one of the arrowheads.

“You been stung by a wasp, haven’t you, Enki?” he asked me.

I shook my head that I hadn’t, but he ignored me and plowed on.

“Well, it feels kind of like that to get killed by an arrow, only a whole lot worse.” He pushed the point of the arrow into the rind of a melon and held it up for our eyes to see.

“You see, when the arrow pierces your flesh, it feels just like the stinger of a wasp. Only with the arrow, it’s like the whole wasp flies right inside of you, stinging you all the way through, from one side of the body to the other. From here,” he said, indicating his chest, “to here,” he finished, pointing over his shoulder at his back.

My brother and I shivered with delight. “A full moon night like this was their favorite time to raid an enemy encampment,” he said, “so keep a sharp look out.”

When we turned in for the night, Grandpa held up a crisp bill with President Andrew Jackson’s face right in the middle and reminded us why we were here. “Anything suspicious and you wake me,” he ordered.

But who could sleep on such a night? An owl kept hooting about something or the other. Every sort of leaf, twig, and branch creaked and crinkled like a wadded-up old deed. And every once in a while, one of the cows would make its solitary sound. Eventually, I must have drifted off. I don’t know how long I slept, but I woke slowly, not to a loud noise, but to a misplaced sound that hung in the air. Hamilton was snoring lightly, murmuring nonsense from time to time. I tried to go back to sleep, but the humming grew a notch louder.

I reached over for my B.B. gun and pointed it at the front flap for a long while, trying to decide if I should wake up my brother.

“Hamilton,” I finally whispered. “Hamilton.” He didn’t budge, so I pulled on my boots and crept outside on my own.

Curly brown hair, scrawny, baby blue pajamas, and cowhide boots. I fashioned a tough look on my face, but inside I was trembling.

The moon was so bright that I didn’t even need a flashlight. I could see one of the cows on the ground down by the creek. That humming, buzzing sound grew louder and louder. I was surprised it didn’t wake up Grandpa. I had intended to go to his tent, but the song lured me into its bosom. I don’t so much remember thinking that I’d head down to the creek as finding that I was walking down there.

It wasn't exactly hypnotism, but the tug was irresistible. My flesh tingled and crawled from the haunting symphonic chants: "O fortune, changeable as the moon." I felt alive, pure, dangerous, and angelic. The sound seemed to be coming from the creek itself. "Come, come, my love. I implore you. I implore you." When I got near it, I noticed that our pile of arrowheads was gone. The cow had red blotches all over it and was not moving. I felt something land on me and I swatted at it. I edged closer to the creek, pointing my BB gun at the water. Then I felt another land on me and another and another. They'd touch down and fly off before I could hit them.

When I got to the bank, I squatted down like a catcher and tried to look beneath the surface. It was bubbling and rumbling into a bellowing volcano. The liquid harmonics rose from the water-- misting in the air: "Vain, monstrous Fate, you turning wheel." The waters churned to a pitter-pat of feverish, drumming chants. The beat took on an edge. Then the creek belched once, sputtering smoke rings. I inched back and eyed the ripples. A minute later, it burped a second time and a cloud of wasps shot at me like a blast of steam.

Their black eyes locked on to my green ones for a scalding second, before they swirled around me, brushing me with their wings and grazing against me with their bodies. I fell backwards, dropped my gun, and tried to scoot away, but they kept gushing towards me, tumbling all over me. I sat there wide-eyed and paralyzed with my legs pulled up to my chest petrified with fear, unable to scream, unable to speak. A blur of bodies. A seductive, buzzing chant. A few bounced into me, but they didn't sting me. I kept expecting them to arrow right through my chest, but they didn't. Instead, they brushed against me, leaving a wet, sticky film. A sprinkling moistened my eyes and bathed my body in dew. And then the funnel cloud dissipated and faded



into the foggy banks of the creek. I sat there wrapped in a quilt of saliva as fear transformed into wonder.

I told Hamilton and my grandfather all about it.

“No more spooky stories for you,” Grandpa said.

“I tried to come for you. I really did, but I couldn’t.”

“It was just a stupid dream,” my brother said, rolling his eyes.

“No, it was real.” I wouldn’t let it go. I kept after them. It took a while, but I could see they were getting won over.

“Why didn’t they sting you?” Hamilton asked.

“Beats me.”

“I’ve known some bee charmers in my time,” said Grandpa, “so I suppose it’s possible.”

Enki, the Vespidae Charmer, I thought and smiled. They studied me up and down like human lie detectors, and then looked at the welts all over the cow. Finally, when I saw my grandfather massaging his thumb, I knew he was persuaded.

“Stranger things have floated down the creek,” he said, handing me the \$20 bill.

I didn’t know what I had set in motion. I had no idea of my betrayal. I guess I just didn’t think. But even so, I can’t avoid responsibility, not for this crime.

Next week, my very own grandfather hired a crop duster to carpet bomb his ranch with every insecticide known to our species, an air strike rivaling the bombardment of Vietnam. Agent Orange for wasps, poison dust scattered over the symphony, drowning out every last note, every last song.

I wish I could say that I felt it when they died. That we had that sort of mystical bond, but I didn't feel it. At least, not like that. And to think I had been walking around thinking of myself as a charmer, bragging to my friends. Now I saw that it wasn't true. But something about me had changed. All those papered over loyalties about species, property, race and family were unmoored by the swirl of wasps, releasing a curious and unsettled boy:

Don't get me wrong, I almost always root for the human team, or at least, for some of the more thoughtful ones to persevere. But I have to admit, it's no longer automatic, it's no longer guaranteed. A lot of shoulder shrugging. Seems my head can't figure out which way to shake. It's bobbling a lot these days. Even the occasional threat. "Okay, but screw this one up this time, and there ain't no next time. Fuck it up and dollar bills won't come to the rescue. Not anymore. Oh, and by the way, it's a good offer that's a-coming. More than fair, really. Barely half a thumb when all is said and done."

It was weird to think that I only found out about the killings when it was all over, when it was too late. Grandpa presented it as a prologue to his, real story, but when he mentioned the wasps, I snapped. "How could you? I thought you believed me. I thought you understood. I thought you were on my side." Hot tears rolled down my cheeks, and even though his face twitched with confusion, I still looked him right in the eyes and said, "you have murdered something mythic."

I stood there for a moment, wiping my tears, shaking at my words, then I turned my back on him and made the long walk to my bedroom (second door on the left). I shut the door behind me, with forced composure, took five more steps, bent down, and crawled beneath my bed. The cambric was ripped and drooping, so I found myself staring up at the innards of the

boxsprings: wood slabs, cobwebs, and under the bed stuff that no one wants to know about. At last, my eyes lighted on a gleaming sack of *Bottle Caps* candy. That's right. I hid it here last week, so Hamilton wouldn't eat them all. I pulled it loose from the spring and emptied the soda pop flavored candies into my mouth. I chewed on it a little, tasted the soda, but it didn't taste right. Everything was kind of off.

Truth is, I stewed with rage. I made these crazed, elaborate plans for revenge. Lots of stabbing. And I do mean a lot. Too many. I took a deep breath, said the alphabet backwards in my head, and finally managed to shelve all thoughts of assassination. But I felt it as a betrayal. I could not just do nothing. But try as I might, I could never figure out what to do. I could never solve it, so I glared at my grandfather with a baffled disgust that I kept hidden beneath my face of grandchild ignorance. I kept studying him, though, his every gesture, his every habit, and his every pose, until I finally found an answer.

Before supper that night, Mom coaxed me out into the open and told me the rest of the story. Apparently, not only the wasps, but most all the creatures on the ranch had been killed. "The man didn't just spray for bugs, he poisoned the creek. The cows went down for drink and they all kicked heels before the dawn. No way that's a coincidence."

We didn't head out to his place immediately. I was stuck in the elementary universe of review time, going over everything that we'd done before, and I do mean everything. As if anyone didn't get  $E=MC^2$  the first time around. So anyway, it must have been about two weeks before mom got around to driving me out to his ranch. She made it clear that I owed him a heartfelt and sincere apology for my rudeness and my disrespect.

She parked the station wagon and we stepped out into the midday sun. The heat shimmered from the ground. There were no dead cows lying around, no riddled carcasses of any kind. No wind. Not even a whispered breeze, only a black and white Western movie silence. A sinister stillness hung from the branches of the trees. A separateness from the sky. Cremation, I suppose. Lots of charred patches. Flame licks here and there. Some horned skulls basking in the sun. The creek slogged by in a thick, oily sheen. Not gooey, more syrupy. I only saw shafts of blurriness moving along the bottom. It was liquid all right, but I swear it was a whole other stream. Hardly a shadow of Arrowhead River. Someone must have swapped our creek for another. Otherwise, I could not explain what this flowing thing at my feet was doing here.

“You’d think the water would have diluted it by now,” my grandfather said, walking up to us, “but it hasn’t. I’ve been up and down this godforsaken creek and the story is the same everywhere. The level drops a little each day,” he said, shaking his head, “like the ground can’t get enough.”

The horse apples still moldered, fading from lime green to blotchy yellow. Grandpa accepted my apology with a grunt. “God only knows what the bastard used,” he said. “I bet my bottom dollar it was an enemy chemical. He had the weaselly look of a traitor in his eyes. And worst of all, I can’t even find the son of a bitch. He’s a ghost. Just vanished with all my money.”

My grandfather tried to sell the land, but no one would touch it. Tales of the wasp invasion and the poison rolled like a thunderstorm through the ranching community, and you couldn’t have paid others to use a cursed land. Grandpa was stuck with it.

The land kept changing clothes. Over the next few years, he finagled loans and managed to get all the land zoned for housing. He built nice looking, one-story homes. The streets were

named after trees, bushes, and flowers: Oak Street, Ivy Lane, and Rose Avenue. And each street had a curb and gutter system. He was very proud of that. “See that Enki. That’s the way you do things right.”

But the debts kept piling up and the banks pressured him for payment, threatening him and hounding him, but the people just weren’t interested. It wasn’t that they had heard the rumors that had spooked the ranchers. I mean, the wasp story was never in the papers or anything.

“It was too far from Downtown,” they said.

“It was a cow pasture, for God’s sake.”

Only a few vaguely felt that the place wasn’t quite right.

Then, without even knowing my grandfather, James Swann came to the rescue in 1971. In the case of *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, the Supreme Court unanimously approved of busing as an acceptable remedy for segregation. My grandfather’s bald head turned red with anger, and his diatribe was tinged with all the racism and fear-mongering of the time: hordes and swarms. From sun-up to sun-down, that’s all he talked about, “hordes and swarms coming in and stabbing us in our sleep.” Hamilton parroted his words, and my mother bolted the doors. But I thought of the wasps and heard another camp fire story, another Styro-foam abacus. I was not blind to the differences, but I was also not deaf to the beat.

It only took about a month for our family, and hundreds like them, to flee Oak Cliff in search of immunized school districts, towns where blacks didn’t live, where busing would be a moot point. My grandfather, so infuriated at the judicial activism of the court, knew an opportunity when he saw one, so he played up the fears and exploited the weakness. White-flight families barely even bargained. They forked over their savings relieved to escape their nightmare of

integration, and one by one, the For-Sale signs turned into dollar bills. By the end of the summer, the man who was being chased by debtors, the man who was staring at ruin, could now boast of a seven-digit income.

“A full million dollars,” he liked to say, “all thanks to the Supreme Court of the United States.” Everyone laughed. “That’s a good one” and “that’ll teach ‘em.”

Talk about reparations for slavery and genocide, what about the untold millions pinched by the likes of my grandfather? Why isn’t that part of the equation?

I remember the day we moved into one of those houses that he built. We pulled up to a yard that looked like a checkerboard of grass squares. Lava rocks flanked either side of the front door and the windows were guarded by wrought iron bars. Grandpa was standing there waving at us with his storied hand.

I got my room all set up. Same thing as every other kid in town, posters of Dr. J and Roger Staubach. A mobile of The Pioneer 10 Space Mission hung my ceiling fan and a second hand guitar waited in the corner. The latest issue of *New Gods* gleamed from the bedside table. I waltzed around the room, squishing my toes into the soft fibers of our beige shag-carpet. It felt good, burned a little. After giving my room a final nod of approval, I clicked off the light and closed the door. I went out back through the kitchen and sat down next to the strangest man I’ve ever loved. The man who became a guardian and provider when my father died. The man who always gave me lemon drops and buffalo nickels. The man who had such a way with words, even if they were mostly swindled. The man who let me steer his chocolate-colored Cadillac. But the

sting of the drought punctured all excuses, and the second week of the heat wave promised new and imaginative cruelties; the dust devils danced a jubilee.

“My room is really neat,” I said.

“I’m glad you like it, Enki.”

My grandfather’s bald head was beaded with sweat and he was sitting there with the top half of his shirt unbuttoned.

“You remember this place?” he asked me, wiping his face. “Right down there,” he pointed. “That’s where we camped out. Remember?”

I could almost smell the history in the horse-apple trees. I cupped a hand over my green eyes and looked down toward the nearly-vanquished creek, trying to see the slaughtered pasture in a place that I would come to think of as my *Wiffle* ball diamond, my soccer pitch, and my tackle football field. The strange and ceaseless morphing of the land and its creatures spread out before me.

“That’s right,” I nodded. “This is the place.”

There’s the spot where we pitched our tents, I thought. And that’s where the cow was lying down. There’s the place where I became a nest. I strained my ears, listening for the symphony, listening for the wasps, but I only heard television sounds. My grandfather surveyed his land with a contented smile, and then he patted me on the leg with a hand that had only four and half fingers.