The Hood River Fruit Loop

Pine filters sunrise. Opus of starlings and the lonesome trickle of creek over log. Smoldering campfire. Ear on earth. Night retreats like a tide.

"You'll keep this quiet, won't you?" His brow is furrowed; his ball cap: askew. Day breaks over left shoulder of strawberry farmer's son.

That's right – I said *son*.

And now I'm in trouble with my old man – sneaking off with a quarter liter of his sour mash whiskey, like I tend to do. A rough-edged, Daniels-pickled chip off the old block. Biggest difference between us: I won't be getting anyone pregnant any time soon.

(All I really know about *her* is that she took off a few months after I was born, and that according to Pop she was out of her ever-loving mind.)

He asks: "Where the hell've you been?"

I shrug. "Out."

"We're due in Odell."

"I know."

"Should've been gone by now."

"Should've left without me."

He swings and cuffs me at the ear with the palm side of his fist. I don't see it coming – because I'm hung-over and tired since what's-his-name had me up all night, talking. I stagger backward and tumble out the tinny trailer door.

Pop's not far behind – red-faced and blaming me for jeopardizing the raspberry contract, or eighteen years back scaring off his woman, or both. He skips the stairs and finds me dazed and splayed on the trampled dirt. Here, he stomps my groin and catches his breath while I roll onto my side and curl in around the pain.

Do it, I'm thinking.

Kill me already.

I was cutting teeth the first time he tried. Honey on the gums – he claims for the swelling. But have you ever heard of infant botulism? Pop swears up and down he hadn't, either.

According to him, I went limp. Weak neck, floppy limbs – and the strangled mew of a barn cat's blind runt. Pop just figured I was some kind of sissy and let the poison run its course.

I survived, obviously. Doesn't mean he's given up trying in the meantime.

Today, he pummels me like he's got something to prove. I've learned: better to take it once it's started – because the only thing he likes more than a liquored-up blonde is when I fight back and he gets to show me who's boss. I can't ever seem to keep my big mouth shut, though. So I guess I was asking for it. He was due to erupt soon, anyhow.

But Pop wears himself out and lurches away to puke in the brambles before he can finish me off for good. From where I'm lying, I use a chrome hubcap to assess the damage. Swollen eye? You bet. Bottom lip's split down the middle. Nose: bloody. Probably broken.

Pop's on his knees, wiping spit off his chin, staring me down from the other side of the lot. The way he's scowling, you'd think I'd grown horns and a tail. He watches as I hoist

myself up, wincing at the pain behind my fly, and limp away into the woods.

Time's running out – and he knows it.

I'm old enough now to be on my own. Pilfered almost enough over the years to buy a set of wheels and split.

My old man knows: the odds are good I might actually get away from him after all.

He's in the trailer, transpiring ethanol on the Slumberdown like some over-watered houseplant. You couldn't pay me to go in there with him. So I take the truck, the leftover Jack, and make myself scarce until nightfall.

That's ten hours from now. I don't feel much like talking, but I could probably stand some company – so I'm off to kill time with the bees. The single-digit supers, specifically. Hives A through C.

I drive east, to the place where forest meets farmland, and leave the old Chevy ticking like spring beetles on the loamy shoulder of the road. I keep both windows down. The keys are dangling in the ignition. Whiskey? Nah. I'll save that for when I really need it.

I plod a trampled row, proud because those girls on the blossoms – they're mine. Ours, I should say. Dispero bees. Making the most of what they've got, like always.

Strawberries, in this case. Nothing special. Tiny flowers, timid crowns, and stolens so tame they don't dare leave the ground. We'll all be happy to move on. Like Pop said, we should've been gone by now. Thanks to me, we're stuck here until the bees stop foraging for the day.

I reach Hive A: Supers 1, 2, and 3 – stacked a third of the way into the field because two colonies per square acre gets the job done. That's 30,000, give or take a few. Multiplied by 26 equals three quarters of a million bees.

I tip the hive – a fraction of an inch. It's heavy, which is good. I count the girls outside the entrance. Fifteen. Also good. My gear's in the truck, and my undershirt's a dingy shade of white, so I figure, *What the hell?* Might as well take off the lids and inspect the interiors, too.

I go back for my smoker – down an aisle of boot-packed mud, between parallel rows of obedient strawberry blades. Birds are chirping. Bees are buzzing. And me? I'm ducking through taut strands of barbed wire at the edge of the field – whistling.

See? See how fast they distract me from my misery?

I remember, five or six years back, finding a half-eaten bologna sandwich in a garbage can outside the Meriwether Lewis Middle School cafeteria. I couldn't even take a bite before someone was squealing, and pointing, and coming up with the nickname that followed me around until tenth grade, when I finally stopped going altogether. *Trash Mouth.*

I might've been good at something other than trouble if I didn't have to spend all my time taking punches from people lined up at my locker like paying customers. Science or baseball or the cello – who knows. All I ever really learned how to do was fight, and drink, and steal, and lie. The bees are my one saving grace.

Lucky for me, business is good. We've got five more gigs lined up between now and the end of May. At $3,000 per farm, we'll finish the season with just under twenty-grand. Eight weeks, all told. Two months. Starting with the strawberries. Ending with the apples.

After the apples, I swear to God, he'll never see me again.

Waiting there beside the truck – guess who? What's-his-name, from last night. Night before that, too.

He says, "Saw you drive by the house." He tips his cap and squints into a pillow of thick grey clouds over the sun. "Figured you were probably packing up your bees."

"I told you already – we can't move empty hives."

He hums and points out my black eye. "When'd you have time to get your ass kicked?"

I shrug him off and reach into the Chevy's bed, and take my time finding the smoker underneath a brittle blue tarp. "Your dad?" he asks, and I flinch – pausing to remember exactly what I let slip. Last time, Oregon Child Protective Services got involved. You can imagine how that went over with Pop.

"Maybe."

He respires – a sharp breath out through his nose. "Bastard." Me, I'm thinking, *What the hell do you care?*

And yet he keeps hanging around. "You okay?" he asks.

"I'm fine."

He reaches over, and I wince because it looks like he's going to handle the welt on my brow. Instead, he snakes his hand over my hair and palms the top of my head. Quick – like he's patting a dog. I duck away, pissed.

He wants to know: "What's that you've got there?"

"This?"

He nods.

"A smoker."

"What's it for?"

"What else – making smoke."

"Mmm."

He watches while I rummage around a bit in the bed – for my veil, my hive tool, my gloves. "Hey," he says. "I've got some time. Maybe you can show me what my family's paying you for."

He grins.

Noah.

That's his name.

Yeah – I knew it all along.

I figured, first time I saw him, he'd pick a fight or two before the week was over. You know the type. Baby-faced but farm boy strong – with arms built for catching footballs and throwing punches and pretty much nothing else. Ignored me Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. On Thursday, he lifted his chin to say hello. Friday night, we're slugging hooch

a mile inside the Mt. Hood National Forest, playing it cool and inching along toward some sour thrill.

He said, for the record, that's all it was. I might've been convinced if we weren't back at it last night, when Pop and I should have been on the move. And look at him now – showing up to make sure I don't leave without saying goodbye. Which is exactly what I'd intended to do, by the way.

"Take this," I say, tossing him my veil. He simpers and tosses it back. He tells me: "I'm not afraid of bees."

"I'm not either. But they're afraid of you. And a scared bee's a stinging bee, and a stinging bee's a dead bee – so shut your damn mouth and put it on."

I get his arms covered and find an extra pair of gloves, then stoop to gather a handful of dry pine needles. I stuff them into the smoker and feel inside my hip pocket for a lighter. "Alright," I say at last. "You ready?"

He nods and follows me into the field. Twenty yards deep, he asks, "Any advice? About the bees?"

"Yeah," I tell him, over my shoulder. "Try not to fall in love."

I know a thing or two on the subject. What I've learned comes mostly from experience, but also from books – when I'd sneak down to the library on State Street and read up while Pop slept off ten jiggers in the trailer. I've checked out everything they've got at the central branch, plus what's in the basement at the community center in Parkdale. Twenty some-odd in total. If I'm not an expert by now, no one is.

We keep Italians – the sweetest race by a mile. Carnies have a better sense of direction, and native feral stocks are usually a bit more resilient. But you'll only ever find *mellifera ligustica* in Dispero mobile hives.

A's just like all the others: standard Langstroth, with two deep supers for brood and another, about half the size, for honey. Three white wooden boxes, stacked one on top of the other, filled with vertical frames like files in a drawer. We've got twenty-six, as I mentioned before. Hives A through Z.

I give my old Bic a flick and start the tinder burning. "Smoke calms them down," I explain. I pause to reach around the front of the hive and puff a few clouds in through the entrance. Then, I use the smoker to bang twice on the wood – to scare the queen deep into hiding. I hinge the lid and deposit a couple puffs there, too.

"They know smoke means fire – and fire means abandoning the hive. So they gorge to fuel themselves for the move. Which of course they don't need to do – but by the time they realize that, it's too late. They're already full. And when a bee's full, she's friendly."

I remove the outer cover. A little more smoke, and the inner cover comes off, too. "These are the workers," I tell him, of the beauties crawling over the tops of the frames. "Drones are bigger. Males. Freeloaders, basically. I don't see any here." I reach for my hive tool – a small, flat prybar slid into the back pocket of my jeans. "They're probably in one of the deep supers, bugging the queen."

Noah watches as I pull one of ten frames from the honey super. It's still early in the season, so there's not much too see: just a few hundred hexagonal cells of honeycomb; white caps and liquid gold; a handful of patient Italians waiting for me to leave them alone so they can get back to work. "This whole thing'll be solid by the end of summer. Ten pounds.

Times ten frames. Times twenty-six hives." I return it to the super and add, just in case he hasn't figured it out, "Twenty-six hundred pounds."

Noah gives a dismissive nod. "So what do you do with it?"

"Sell it," I say. "Cappings and wax, too."

"People pay for that?"

"Yeah. To make candles and black powder bullet lube and whatnot. Six a pound for the wax. Twelve for the honey."

He considers all this. "Plus what you get from the farms?"

"Yeah."

"That's a decent living."

I shrug. "If you don't mind moving around a lot."

"You don't?"

"Nah."

Noah just toes a strawberry plant and hums.

I hoist the honey super off the brood box. "Take this a minute," I say. "And be careful – it's heavier than it looks."

His eyes go wide, but he accepts it – cautiously. The liar. It's obvious: he's as scared of bees as anyone.

I pull a frame from the deep super and smile as I breathe out through my mouth. It's twice the size of the other; saturated with wax and honey and, more importantly, pupae. One per cell. Another generation, preparing for another nectar-fed season.

Another seven weeks.

Doesn't sound like much.

But it's a lifetime, if you're a bee.

I'm surprised, third day in a row, he doesn't taste like strawberries. I know, I know: why would he? I sure as hell don't taste like honey. Salt or alkali makes a lot more sense.

"Lift your arms," he says, raising my shirt. Dirty cotton catches around my ribs.

"Christ's sake, Noah – hold on a minute." I push him back, righting myself on the Chevy's springy bench seat so that I'm facing forward again. The steering wheel brushes the tops of my knees. I tug my shirt back down over my belt. "You're like a piglet at a teat."

That makes him laugh. But it's true. He's been at my neck, his lips on my jugular. He's been biting, sucking – leaving a mark, I'm sure. Fine if he does. Pop's never asked, and I've never told. He'll just assume it's from a girl.

Noah sits back and lets his skull rest on the window behind him. "Funny," he says, to the stained upholstery on the ceiling. "But if I'm the piglet, you're the teat."

Now I'm laughing, too. Outside, a light rain's pattering – on the hood and on the roof, and on the tarp stretched over equipment in the bed. In here, we're fogging up glass with hot breath, sweat, and testosterone.

"I don't know," I tell him. "I guess I'm just not in the mood."

Noah lets his head roll – ear to shoulder. He looks at me sideways. "What gives?"

I don't answer. But I do flick my eyes to the rearview mirror and focus in on my bruised and battered face. It's a couple things. He wouldn't understand.

"You're leaving tonight, then?"

I nod.

"Where to?"

"Odell."

"For?"

"Raspberries."

"Then what?"

"Guess."

"Apples?"

"Nope. Apples blossom last."

"I don't know," he says. "Pears?"

"Wrong. Cherries. Then blueberries. *Then* pears."

Noah closes his eyes and smiles. "Look at us," he says, dreamily. Drowsily. "Two fruits, talking fruit."

A distant rumble, like thunder, stays steady and nears. I'm aware of it a few seconds before I open my eyes – when I sit up and use my palm to swipe condensation off the window. One pass, left to right. "Shit," I hiss – flinging open the door and jumping out onto the road. The rain has passed. The clouds have parted. It's sunny and sultry. Warm. The bees are out in droves.

"Hey – stop!" I shout, waving my arms, running alongside the tractor making its way down the acreage. Noah's old man doesn't hear. Or, more likely, he doesn't care. I double my pace and get ten yards ahead – then jump a row and station myself in his path.

He brakes and kills the engine. "Out of the way!"

Like hell. I holler, "You're not supposed to spray. It's in the contract."

"The contract ended yesterday," he yells back. And, yeah – he's right. My fault. I've really screwed things up this time.

"What is that?" I demand, indicating the liquid sloshing inside a tank hitched to his John Deere.

"None of your damn business."

"Pesticide?"

"No."

"Fungicide?"

He doesn't answer. So it is, obviously. I say, "That's toxic. It'll kill the bees."

"Tough shit," he says. "I've been holding off spraying all week." He fires up the engine and waves me to the side. But this conversation's far from over.

"Let's work something out," I shout, over pistons pounding steady and loud. I plant my feet and raise my arms. He's going to have to run me over if he wants to proceed.

Noah's old man purses his lips and flares his nostrils. He sets the brake and hops out of the seat. He stalks toward me, fuming, and all of a sudden it's like I'm dealing with Pop. *He's going to hit me?* I wonder. What is it with grown men thinking they can do that all the time?

This one definitely means business. If there's something I've learned about asshole fathers, it's that their hands always betray their tempers. Whether they're round and doughy and middle-aged, like this guy, or lean and ruddy and popular with women, like the one I left passed out in the Airstream a couple hours back, two clenched fists usually mean someone's about to get bulldozed. And usually, that someone is me.

"What're you going to do about it?" he yells, posturing for a fight. I think I could probably take him. Lord knows I've had enough practice. This time, though, I let my wits do the talking.

"Easy," I say. "Let me make you a deal."

He gets close. I smell copper sulfate and sweated-out liquor. Maybe Noah and I have more in common than I thought.

"I'll refund you some money," I tell him. "Five hundred. That's fair, right? Five hundred bucks if you wait a few hours to do this until we're gone?"

He considers this. Five hundred dollars – that's going to hurt. It'll set me back a few months. Keep me stuck with Pop until about the time he heads south, to California, to overwinter and make good money later on pollinating almonds. So it goes. I'm always figuring things out the hard way.

I hold my breath – a count of three. But he shakes his head. "A rotten crop'll cost me more than five hundred."

What can I say? He's right. "All of it, then. All three grand." Sure, I've got that much – rolled up in two tight wads and hidden in an old flashlight's battery barrel back at the trailer. But the truth is I have no intention of refunding him a dime.

He shifts his gaze to the field – scanning his sprouts and settling his eyes on the closest hive in the distance. Then, he studies me. He's tempted, I can tell. But unconvinced. "Don't you need to run something like this past your dad first?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Because he wouldn't go for it. Not in a million years. I lie: "We're partners in this business. Co-owners. Fifty-fifty."

Noah's father smirks. "Bullshit," he says. But I can sense he's bending.

"Tell you what," I continue. "I'll throw in ten pounds of honey for being so understanding. Fresh – from your very own fields. You ever tasted honey made from Valley Rouge strawberries?"

"Didn't know I could."

"Sure can. And believe me: it's a hundred times sweeter when you know where it came from."

The words – they're in his mouth. Ready to tumble out. *You've got until nightfall*, or, simply, *Alright, then.*

But that stupid son of his has to ruin everything by waking up and stumbling out of the truck, shirtless and striking impressive wood, to look for me on the road.

First of all, it's true: honey really does take on the flavor of its source. A jar from, say, an orchard of apple blossoms is nothing at all like a jar that comes from a field of lavender or sage. It's possible, if you know what you're doing, to taste the difference between early April perennials versus sweet peas or cosmos at the end of an Indian summer. It's possible, even, to taste the difference between flowers grown in full sun versus flowers grown in the shade.

Next: believe me – I have no problem with who I am. I know I'm not perfect – but it's got nothing to do with whose hands are touching me where and why. So what I say, to break the dangerous silence, is for Noah's sake – simple as that.

"And I won't make you reimburse me for the frame old butterfingers here ruined and got all over himself, either."

Noah's smarter than he looks. He catches on quick and elaborates: "Where'd you say you keep that extra shirt? I didn't see it inside the cab…" He turns his back – to fake another search and call, over his shoulder, "Dad – Jake showed me one of his hives." There's a nervous tremble to his voice and a red flush radiating beneath the skin on his neck. He leans into the truck and rummages around a bit. "I'll bet you didn't know they only take honey from the top." He turns back – empty-handed and decent now inside those blue football shorts. "The other two are just for eggs."

Noah's old man's still suspicious. Still unconvinced. I say, "He wanted to see it up close. I gave him a frame – and, well, long story short, he got stung." Noah demonstrates what that might have looked like – flinching and fumbling with an imaginary frame; making sure to smear pretend honey on his make-believe shirt. "He's not so tough, this one," I conclude. "Hey – you want to see inside a hive, too?"

Yeah – he guesses he does.

And just like that, by some grace of God, I've wriggled my way out of not one potential disaster but two.

We never do get a shirt on Noah, but we find a third veil for his old man and end up huddled around Hive B – a third of an acre deeper into the strawberry plot. Noah explains how the smoker works while I puff, thinking to myself, *Hey – he was listening after all.* He identifies the honey super; identifies the two brood supers – then pauses to wonder, out loud, "What is honey, anyway?"

His dad laughs – like *he* knows. But it's a good question. It's never what people think.

I say, "Nectar." I pocket my hive tool and take the frame two-handed – tipping it sideways so the sun shows each individual cell. "A bee'll choose a blossom and drink herself full, with a tongue that's actually called a proboscis. Kind of like an elephant's trunk. But she's only storing it until she gets back to the hive. And when she does, she passes it off to another bee, who fans it with her wings until most of the water's evaporated, and *voila*: you've got yourself some honey."

I could go on and on. But instead I open my pocketknife and scrape off a single square inch of wax cappings. Honey flows. "Here's another way to taste your fruit. One hundred percent Valley Rouge strawberry gold." I offer up the frame. "Go ahead," I say. "Give it a try."

They help themselves. I act cool, but I feel myself wobble a little when Noah pulls off his right glove and uses his pointer finger to hook a thick glob from the comb. He parts his mouth and extends his tongue. He bites around his fingertip, just below the top joint, and lets it slide back out, sticky and glistening, over the natural split in his lip. His lashes close – longer than a blink. Neck sinew and muscle move. He swallows. Smiles. Looks me in the eye. A twinkle, lodestar in black sky, winks out through his squint.

Alright. I'll admit it.

I'm going to miss this one when I'm gone.

Honestly, that first night, I didn't like him very much. He tried too hard – first with the whiskey and then with the story about some city girlfriend in Portland whose name changed from Anna to Kat sometime after swallow number five. I didn't call him on it; but I did tell

him to take it easy with the Jack. He slowed down a bit and asked me where I went to school.

"I don't," I told him.

"Why not?"

"Because who's going to pollinate your strawberries if I'm trapped in a classroom?"

We were lying in the bed of the Chevy, side by side – arms folded behind our heads, propping them up; legs stretched out; breathing in that clean, damp Mt. Hood forest air and staring at a patch of sky above us between the trees. "Come on," he said. "Even I know that's just a couple months. What about the rest of the year?"

"Pop filled out papers. Now I get my education at home."

"Where's home?"

I shrugged and sat up so I could take another slug. "Wherever the piece of shit trailer's parked."

"You got family?"

"Just Pop."

"Friends?"

"Nope."

"You ever get lonely?"

"Who doesn't?"

"I don't."

"Lucky you."

Noah sat up, too. "I guess." His tone had changed. Slurred, now – but serious. He said, "I'm taking over the farm, you know. After I graduate in May. My dad's been training me for three years. He's retiring early. Moving my mom up to a condo on the Columbia,

overlooking the gorge. They're buying a boat. Going to travel and leave me here to get married and have kids and be a strawberry farmer whether I like it or not." He looked at the stars, squinting. His forehead was troubled. His mouth was puckered. Then, out of nowhere, he asked: "Hey – you want to mess around a little?"

I just about choked on my Jack. "*What*?"

"Never mind."

He stopped talking, then. Just kept looking up at the sky. I felt sorry for him – all soused and honest and rejected like that. I cleared the air by passing the bottle and asking, "So if you don't want to farm strawberries, what *do* you want to do?"

"I guess I don't know," he said. He waved off the whiskey. "Doesn't matter, whatever it is."

Poor kid.

Only because I knew he's in for a long, lonely life, I said, "Alright, Noah – let's mess around a little."

I work in the dark. I haven't been back yet to check in with Pop – but I know from experience he's got no intention of helping me load up the hives. That's my job. My job to unload them, too. He's more of a stay-in-the-office-doing-paperwork partner – if the office is a local bar and the paperwork's a local woman who's right about now giggling into his neck, three sheets to the wind.

I back the truck in as close as I can get it, and start the process I'll repeat twenty-six times before midnight. A process I'll undo twenty-six times, then, in Odell, before dawn. Six times per season. More seasons than I can count. I could probably do it by now in my sleep.

I use fine wire mesh to close up the entrance – a strip folded ninety degrees and stapled in place so no bees can get out. They're irritable at night; twice as likely to sting. I've already looped a ratchet strap beneath a bottom board in the Chevy's bed – onto which I stack the supers, in reverse order, one at a time. That's so they'll be in the right order when I put them down in the raspberries. I secure them with the two-inch nylon strap and add a few more staples for good measure – eight total. Tie-downs across the front and over the top; one final inspection before I hop in the truck, ten minutes later, and creep a third of an acre closer to the next colony.

By the time I finish, four hours from now, I'll have all twenty-six loaded and ready to move – in two layers, towering over the cab like dense and rickety tenement buildings. I'll hitch up the old Airstream, with Pop most likely still passed out cold inside, and crawl south on 35, to Odell, where the raspberries at the Stoutfrau collective are just starting to blossom. Except for the fifteen acres of freshly pollinated industry standard Tillamook strawberry blossoms at the Valley Rouge farm, it'll be like we'd never been here at all.

That's the only problem with this mobile beekeeping gig. The only problem with hauling these hives around the valley, renting out brood to pollinate fruit – from here in Pine Grove down to Odell, to Parkdale, to Dee, to Rockford, and back up to the Hood.

Like it or not, you never get to stick around long enough to see anything actually start to grow.