

STUNG  
By Adam Aresty

1.

“It lives in the cork.”

Paul Wimmer ran his fingers over the ice pick he had just been handed by the son of Mrs. Perch. A yellowed wooden handle with the name PERCH carved into it ages ago. And an old, crumbly cork stuck on the end so nobody put their eye out, no doubt. Mrs. Perch was very fastidious, Paul had heard.

“And don’t go putting it through your hand or nothing. I don’t want blood all over the beer and the wine now.” Mrs. Perch’s son adjusted his glasses – the kind that tinted themselves dark in the right light. Paul was going to be serving the kind of people who wore glasses like Mrs. Perch’s son.

“Son, could you come and help me flip this breaker for a moment?” Mrs. Perch was up in her bedroom window overlooking the back lawn, yelling down at her son. She had herself wrapped in a towel and even from this far down Paul could see the lumpy, fleshy wrinkles hanging over the top of the cloth. Before he could ask himself if those were indeed her breasts, she vanished into the darkness that must have been her bedroom.

Mrs. Perch’s son eyed Paul for a moment. “Good luck with the ice,” he whispered and trudged up the lawn to the screen door leading into the house. Paul heard the rusty spring *pang* home as the door swung shut and he was blissfully to himself for a moment.

This was not what he bargained for. It was supposed to be a weekend free from work, free from sweating and grunting over collapsible tables and chairs. Free from worrying over chilled wine and beer and nuts. But the job paid twenty-five an hour, so he accepted. He was warned about Mrs. Perch and her annual lawn parties before he left the catering center.

So now Paul found himself situated on the edge of the lawn and a slate patio where his bar was positioned. The slate was twisted and tilted unevenly, as if something were underneath trying to get up. Little mounds of rocky dirt were scattered along the cracks of the slate – along with a few weeds and wild flowers poking through – and Paul

wrote them off as anthills as he bent down and uncorked the ice pick and opened the Igloo cooler.

As he began chipping away at the logs of crushed ice that had become whole pieces in the afternoon heat, there was a buzzing. Not a mechanical buzzing, not like a cell phone or a gardening tool. Not a friendly buzzing either (for Paul's sake, there were friendly insects that buzzed – crickets, cicadas). This was a dastardly, dull, bass buzzing that could only come from an insect that stings – a bee.

Paul dropped the ice pick and stood up quickly. It wasn't the idea of getting stung that brought him to his feet; he had been stung before. While not a pleasant experience, Paul found himself frozen more so by the sound than anything else. Like a small B2 bomber flying low overhead, it made him want to run for cover.

All this before Paul had even seen the insect causing this din. He turned and watched the largest, fattest, brownest wasp he had ever seen bounce off the slate patio a few times, the buzzing sound popping as it did so. This was a strange breed of wasp – perhaps an inch and a quarter long, with dark wings and a striped black and white abdomen. When it wasn't hovering, it was standing on the ground with thick, formidable black legs that made it look like an armored tank. This was no wasp that Paul had ever seen. It looked more like the ones you might find in Africa or the deep in the Amazon, not in the North-East corner of New Jersey.

The buzzing was incessant until Paul watched the wasp land on top of one of the small mounds of dirt that was filling the cracks of the slate porch. Somehow, the creature wiggled and stretched itself thin enough to crawl beneath the slate and into what Paul had first mistook for ant hills. The series of dirt mounds dotting the slate were the wasp's nest. Maybe there were more of them—

Paul was suddenly snapped back to his duties as bartender this evening. There were glasses to be polished and he still had the rest of the ice to chip away at. Guests would be arriving shortly. There were things to be done.

And here came Julia...

Paul had met her this morning when they arrived at the catering center. She wasn't Spanish, but she wasn't American either. Portuguese? Paul had forgotten her

name by the time they had arrived at the Perch's to set up, but now, in this instant, he remembered.

"How you doing out here?" she asked. She was a catering veteran, she had said in the car. Been doing it for fifteen years and through two ex-husbands.

"I've got all the glasses, but there's only white and red wine and some beer."

Julia set a bowl of mixed nuts on the edge of the bar. "Well, don't try the nuts. They're stale. Mrs. Perch is fucking crazy you know? I've been here before, oh yes. She does this every year. A gathering for friends. More like an excuse for them all to get drunk and celebrate their wealth. And to talk about horses."

Paul wasn't so sure that Julia should be talking this loud. Behind them, in the old brick house that loomed over the property, all the windows were propped open to let in the summer breeze. There wasn't an air conditioner for miles.

"She shouldn't be living on her own, but she insists. You met her son?"

Paul shook his head.

Julia tossed her hair with her hand. "The apple doesn't fall far, let me tell you. Was he drunk?"

Paul noted the bright afternoon sun overhead. "I hope not. I don't think so." He just wanted to get back to chipping ice and cleaning glasses.

Julia looked at her watch and puffed out her cheeks. "Thank *god* we're making twenty-five tonight. I'm just so over qualified for this, you know? I'd hate my talents to go to waste."

"Yeah, I'm just looking for some extra money..."

"You know what she's serving? Beans and *rice*. That's it. Well – some salad, but all the lettuce is wilted. Beans and rice. I hope her guests know she's...cukoo."

Paul was just taking it all in. For a moment a flash of his future as a caterer glazed over his vision – thirty years from now, he would be fat and sweaty and unshaven and perhaps owning his own company. Would there be any solace in it? Does this kind of work shave the years off of your life one mixed drink served at a time? No, this was not a life Paul wanted to live. But, for the summer, he'd take the extra cash.

"You know who she is, right?"

Paul knew. Everyone who went about their lives and kept healthy knew who Mrs. Perch was. The widow of Kirby Perch, the pharmaceutical mogul, if there were such a thing. Paul remembered taking the antibiotic when he had his ear infection that wouldn't stop pounding in his head. The small, white pills were stamped PERCH, like the ice pick he held in his hand. This family could afford to be eccentric and weird. They could serve white toast and unsalted butter at their garden party for all Paul cared. There was so much money in this place, Paul imagined they chopped it up and mixed it into the fertilizer for the grass he was standing on. Only fifty's and hundreds. Twenty's and ten's just wouldn't make everything grow so green.

"Yes, I know who they are." That was all he needed to say, he supposed.

"Yeah. I guess everybody does. They're legend, right?"

Paul shook his head.

"I'm going to get back to setting up the bar," he mumbled, and bent down to chip away at a large chunk of ice. Julia was now a dark spot in front of the waning sun from his point of view.

"Yeah, don't hurt yourself honey. Guests arrive in, like, forty-five."

Paul checked the clock on his cell phone – the only watch he had. He never wore one on his wrist. It was 4:47 pm.

"Oh, yeah. This woman is so crazy – you'd better keep that in the car or don't take it out of your pocket." Julia was glancing at Paul's Nokia.

"What, this?" he asked, shaking the phone a little.

"She'll snatch it out of your hand if she sees you using it. She thinks they make your eyesight bad or something."

Paul shrugged, smiled and returned the phone to his pocket.

Before Julia could step away, Paul heard the return of the B2 bomber wasp emerge from its underground nest. He stood bolt-upright and mocked wiping some sweat from his brow – but he knew why he'd had this reaction again. That buzzing. That whirling concussion of insect wings.

As Julia walked back into the house: "Is that a fucking bee? Biggest one I've ever seen..." And she was gone and Paul and the insect were left alone again.

Paul was still frozen in fear as he watched the black thing take off from a mound of dirt – a different one than he'd seen the thing land on. They must be interconnecting, Paul thought, as the wasp headed right for his direction. Suddenly, this paralysis Paul had been feeling moved down his body in waves; his arms and legs were twitching. He could even feel his eyebrows moving up and down, as if his expression of shock would deter the insect. Paul finally jumped out of the way, scraping his shin on the ice bucket as he did. The wasp merely hovered by him, paying him no attention, and flew off towards the Perch's garden behind a large set of shrubs.

Paul suddenly registered the thin pain in his leg and hiked his slacks to investigate. A small scrape and a couple of drops of blood dotted his skin. Nothing to write home about, but a stinging reminder that garden parties were for the nimble and quick.

2.

The glasses were set. The white wine was chilled. Everything was in order for the party. Paul found himself standing under the warm afternoon sun wondering what to do in the half an hour before the guests were to arrive. For a moment, everything around him was peaceful. The Perch's property was spectacularly large and grandiose, tucked away in the hills. But it also had a very homely feel, as if they had lived here for generations (for all Paul knew, they might have done just that.) The wind moved through the horse paddock behind him and he could hear them whinnying, their tails swatting pesky insects away from their hindquarters.

There was nobody around, for the moment. So Paul began to wander. Down from the patio and behind a tall brick fence that led to a sprawling garden of summer flowers. This was an image of old-money decadence that Paul had expected when he got the job only hours earlier. Julia had prepped him on the ride over, but upon further inspection, the home and the people only seemed a little left of ordinary. Well, he had only met the son and the Cuban housekeeper on the way in. But this garden was immaculate and glowing. Right then, Paul wished he were unemployed for the moment and perhaps had free reign of the grounds to himself. He often found himself thinking these impossible thoughts when working these large dinner parties or cocktail hours at

private homes like the Perch's. What if, lowly Paul thought, he could have the place to himself for some time? What would he do? The impossibility of this reality always brought him back to ground.

There was a rustling behind a large orange flower. The stalk of the thing was easily Paul's thumb's width – it looked almost mutant to him. But he was no expert in plants. The rustling ceased, and then, almost from within the plant, burst forth a little white Jack Russel terrier. It cocked its head at Paul for a moment, then turned to the plant and barked – more like yelped – and out came yet another dog. Paul immediately laughed at them. They were funny looking little things that nipped at each other playfully.

“Lulu!” A thin, smoker's voice came from the other side of the garden. The dogs dispersed and Paul watched them head back toward the house. In between two rows of potted ferns, strolled Mrs. Perch. She was dressed and ready to indulge her guests. And she eyed Paul with a certain malice that he had never encountered before. As if her mind were telling her he was a threat to a certain wellbeing she had lived comfortably with her whole life. Her twisted face and mouth were perhaps a reaction to her decaying body that could not flick this annoying fly out of her garden.

“Excuse me, I was just admiring your property,” coughed Paul.

Here was a perfect image of old age and old money. Mrs. Perch stood well below Paul's chin, if not for her poof of white hair jutting toward the sky. Her back was arched ever so slightly forward and to her left. This gave her a kind of awkward stance, as if she needed constant support from a cane she refused to carry.

Instead, she supported her weight with yet another terrier – this one wizened and grayed like the woman holding it.

“You can admire all you'd like. I know how you people like to look. Just don't touch the flowers.” Mrs. Perch turned to go, slowly, and stopped herself. “You're the boy they've sent to tend bar?”

“Yes, ma'am.” Paul wasn't nervous, he was more frightened about encountering this woman in her own garden. On a whim, he said, “Can I get you something to drink?”

This amused Mrs. Perch, to what extent Paul would never know. But she chuckled nonetheless.

“No, thank you, you’re very kind. I’ll let you know when I want something.”

Paul’s gaze shifted to the elderly dog resting on Mrs. Perch’s forearm. It looked sickly, as if its legs were no longer working – a husk of an animal, a torso that only had the will to eat and shit on its own.

“This is Percy. He’s sixteen, aren’t you?” She spoke to the dog with a higher-pitched, pout-riddled voice that Paul should have expected. The dog merely lifted its eyebrow and regarded the woman with vague interest.

“Cute dog,” Paul said. He enjoyed dogs, had owned a few over his life. But this one was the least likable he’d ever come across. It was lame, simply, and looked drained of every ounce of life-force.

“He’s not *cute*, he’s *handsome*,” Mrs. Perch corrected. “He’s sixteen. The puppies are only three months.”

Paul approached the dog, perhaps to pet it, or simply to get a closer look. Mrs. Perch promptly swung her arm out of range.

“Sorry, he doesn’t like to be touched unless it’s by me.” Paul recoiled his fingers. The dog, meanwhile, hadn’t made a peep. “It’s like the flowers here...I’m sorry, you’re name?”

“Paul.”

“Paul, you’ll find that you can come to this house and do your job, and you’ll be paid finely for it. You see these flowers here? I grow them, with my own batch of fertilizer.” Mrs. Perch ran her slender fingers over the thick stalk of the plant beside her. It’s orange bulb bobbed under her shaky, frail touch. “They are healthy and strong and they survive because only I care for them. Only I touch them, Paul.”

“I completely understand, ma’am.”

Mrs. Perch moved to pass Paul, keeping the lame dog at arm’s length. “I think I hear some guests arriving, Paul. Better tend to the bar. They’ll be wanting drinks, no doubt.”

3.

And so they came. In drones, four or five at once, until the entire back lawn was filled with a truly amazing assortment of buzzing people. They wanted drinks – all kinds of drinks that only Paul could make. That is, they would not have dared serve themselves. These people were so used to being waited on, they would wait and wait forever if they thought they would receive some delectable morsel or swig of nectar.

And every so often, Paul would watch the wasp. He would watch it climb out of its underground nest and zoom around the patio and maybe dip into Mrs. Perch's garden. Then, after he had poured a few more glasses of wine or popped open a few more bottles of St. Paulie's Girl, the wasp would return to its nest, burrow into a random mound of dirt and repeat the process dozens of times. Paul began to wonder what it was doing. Feeding on the pollen from the garden – but the patio was huge, dotted with mounds of dirt leading to the creature's underground lair. Surely the entire kingdom did not belong to this one lone wasp...

Dinner was served, promptly, with Mrs. Perch waiving her arms indignantly toward the house in order to get people out of their seats and into the serving space that Julia had cleared for the lonely beans and rice being served by this senile old woman to her party guests.

Before they got up to be served their food, Paul sized them up. There was the former Governor, hair graying more than the last time Paul had seen him on CNN. He wore a tan suit and his teeth were white against his red face. Paul wondered, naively at first, what a slick politician like he was doing at the home of a pharmaceutical giant – and then the question was answered in his own mind as quickly as it had been asked. This was how things worked, he supposed. These people were rich off their own scent, let alone their connection to powerful people.

And then the British horse trainer who asked for some vodka through thin lips.

"Just a little swig, won't you sonny? With a splash of flat water."

And the kids. There was a pair of twins – maybe four or five – who loved antagonizing the little puppies who ran around the yard. And there was a young girl who



came in with her stalk of a mother. The girl ordered a ginger-ale and sipped it from the sidelines, eyeing Paul every now and then.

Other than that, the guests were standard fair in Paul's eyes. Yes, they were snobby, yes they were judging each other in their own little heads. But Paul never interacted with them unless it was filling their glass or letting them know that the bathroom was the third door on the right.

They were getting up now. They moved toward the back of the house and slowly trickled into the dinning room. Paul's duty was to now, while they were away, clear their empty drink glasses. He began to do so. As he edged back around toward the bar, he saw the wasp return to its nest yet again. He even stopped to watch it, when a rustling of the grass behind him alerted his attention to—

Percy, the lame dog, came running through the back door of the house and through the lawn, over the patio. He was smelling, now with more energy than Paul had seen even in the playful puppies. He began rooting among the lumps of dirt that led to the wasp's nest, tossing them this way and that.

Someone should stop that dog, Paul thought. But before he could will himself to action, for fear of arousing the creature that lurked below the slate, a few more guests began trickling out of the house, ready to take their seats. Paul faithfully returned to his perch behind the bar and eyed the dog as it began to dig furiously at one of the dirt hills. All of a sudden Percy stopped digging and shoved his nose under, effectively uprooting one of the slate stones covering the patio.

More people were shuffling out of the house now, crowding around the bar for drinks. "Could I get some white wine with ice?" the bitchy Brit was asking.

Paul thought he heard a short *yip!* from the dog, but he couldn't afford the time to look away from his drink duties. When he finally did, the dog was gone and the piece of slate he had been fooling with now layed askew, a dark chasm gaping beneath it.

4.

More drinks were served and finally everyone was seated. Paul wondered how Julia had fared in the kitchen – he hadn't seen her come out since before all the guests arrived.

There was a clinking of silverware to glass and Mrs. Perch's son stood up to make a toast. Everyone hushed themselves or their neighbor – one woman in particular was the last to stop speaking; a big, fat, jolly red head who was amongst the youngest there. She covered her mouth and then there was the real silence of the evening. This was a perfect moment – the air was still, the sun was just below the roofline of the house – as if the whole evening were holding it's breath.

Mrs. Perch's son cleared his throat, and began: "Well, mother and I are just delighted you could all make it this evening. These gatherings have certainly been the tradition through the years, I mean I can just remember – when dad was still with us – I can remember coming back on the boat from Spain after those delightful little holidays and coming back to this very house for the fall and winter and having all the holidays here and it was just marvelous."

Mrs. Perch herself nodded in agreement and seemed to, at this very moment realize that Percy was missing, or had been for some time. Even from where Paul was standing, he could hear her mumble something about her Percy.

"So, just enjoy the evening, you know you're all welcomed to stay as long as the night lasts, our home is your home, right mom?"

By now, Mrs. Perch was thoroughly confused as to the whereabouts of her dog. She was beginning to stand when, to his surprise, her son let out one of the most creative string of profanities Paul had ever heard: "Shit cock ass motherfucker piss brain cunt!"

He swatted at something on his face, something dark and segmented, something that Paul couldn't see clearly. In either case, it dropped off his cheek and bounced off his stomach on its way to the ground where Mrs. Perch's son began to furiously stomp his feet. Whatever it was, it was obliterated now.

The moment passed and he realized that everyone was still staring at him – including his own mother – with an expression of either disgust or confusion.

“What? The little fucker stung the shit out of my face. *Goddamn* it!” His hand was again nursing his upper cheek.

Paul, meanwhile, was stifling laughter like he couldn’t believe. The serenity of the evening, even from his point of view, was suddenly shattered in one outburst of nasty words. Everything about this gathering was so fragile and on-edge, Paul couldn’t help himself but gag on a few bouts of laughter.

And then came the screams. There were two – the first was high-pitched and came from a woman on the other side of the lawn, and the second came from a child near her. Now, like spectators watching a sporting event, all eyes shifted to that side of the party. Paul was too far to see clearly, but he did see one man leap out of his seat (tumble backward was more like it) and dash across the lawn and out the front gate, away from the commotion, away from the party. Paul was the only one who watched him go, as people were now getting up to investigate the source of the screams.

And then: “Help! Fucking help him!” Now chaos was in the air and Paul found himself moving across the lawn to where people were gathered around whatever was happening there—

One of the twins. His mother was shaking compulsively by his side, murmuring something about his face...

And when Paul saw the boy’s face...it was swollen, almost pulsing red underneath. Something *wiggled* beneath the boy’s eye, and then the eyeball swelled – suddenly, it popped out of the socket. His sister, blonde like the little boy, let out a yelp and was now clamoring for her mother.

Paul could clearly see what he thought was impossible: one of his B2 bomber wasps was crawling its way into the boy’s skull. Just wiggling and buzzing like it did upon entering its nest. With his good eye, the boy was struggling to investigate but, more than anything else, was probably trying to examine the shocked faces of all the people around him.

Paul noticed immediately that no one was speaking. Everyone was just breathing, heavy sighs as they watched this insect invade this young boy’s head. It was as if nobody could believe what they were watching – but Paul could. He had spent all afternoon

watching these marvelous creatures and he was perfectly sure that they were capable of just this.

5.

The young boy looked at his mother with his one good eye.

“Why are you crying, mommy?”

The hysterical woman didn’t know what to say, she could only look at her one-eyed son and goggle her words.

“Something’s wrong with my face—“

The boy jerked his body back, out of reach of anybody crowding around him, and began to spasm. This sent more people into shock.

“Call an ambulance!” someone screamed. “That thing is inside him.”

A tall man, with slicked back hair, silently ran from the crowd and trotted into the house. Everyone watched him go. Nobody else moved.

He’s escaping, Paul thought, like the other man who ran from the party.

Whimpering. The boy’s mother – as well as his twin – were on the ground, caressing his lifeless body, his bloodied face, as if this kind of contact would revive him.

Nothing much happened, and people began to mumble questions to themselves.

The first one to speak up was Mrs. Perch’s son.

“Hello! I got fucking stung too!”

Now the ball was in his court – the guests at this lawn party swung their heads to the back of the crowd where he was standing. His mother was right by his side, and Paul imagined that she had always been by his side forever and ever.

“Now, everyone,” began Mrs. Perch behind Paul, “help is on the way. Why don’t we all just sit back down and enjoy our meals while we wait—“

This infuriated the boy’s mother. “You eccentric cunt,” she snarled.

“*What?*” asked Mrs. Perch, as if she hadn’t heard.

The mother stood up, wiping a few shocked tears from her face. People backed up, gave her room, as if she was going to make a grand speech.

“You heard me. You invite us here, all of us, every year. And we come. But only out of pity. Only out of pity for your sorry family and this decrepit house! And my son is hurt. The least you can do is offer us some place to let him rest! But this has destroyed your peaceful little garden party—“

Her daughter began to moan and whimper: “Mommy, something’s happening to Danny!”

Something was happening to Danny indeed, and Paul – who had made it a point to change into his white dress shirt before these guests had arrived and suffered through the heat in it – suddenly felt a cool sweat break out along his back and wished he had a change of shirt.

Something was moving inside the little boy’s mouth. A segmented, stalky, shiny *claw* – no, a leg, then four or five more – came jutting out of his cheek. There were tiny hairs on the joints. Another came out of his bad eye socket. Then another out of his *good* eye socket. And boy did his mother begin to scream when she saw this. Oh, a thin wail that could shatter glass – rippled with terror and fear and all that came along with seeing her son used as a cocoon.

This is what Paul first thought when he saw what was happening to little Danny – he was being used as a cocoon! He had seen it on the nature shows – a wasp lays her eggs inside of a caterpillar and a few weeks later, the eggs hatch and the babies crawl out of the husk. Certainly not a few minutes later. But this was how Paul was rationalizing it.

And then came the long, slimy stalks out of the boy’s ears. People seemed frozen, almost planted to the ground as Danny’s head slumped over and the segmented legs began to drag his body along the grass.

It can’t get out of his head, Paul thought. It can’t break out of the cocoon!

But the ear-stalks shed their slime and sprouted wings. Large, shiny, yellow-brown wings, as big as row boat oars. Paul listened as they flapped for the first time, producing a sound he had become familiar with over the course of the afternoon – the sound of the B2 bomber wasp, only magnified ten fold.

The head of the boy had become, in effect, a hairy, bloody mess of insect and skull. These wings were powerful – Paul could feel the wind from them on his face – and

they jerked the head away from the ground and up, up, up...little Danny's body was just too heavy for whatever was trapped inside his skull...until, finally – and Paul could *hear* the wings being to flap faster, as if there were a higher gear for this kind of thing – little Danny's head lifted the rest of him into the air and above his mother and hysterical twin sister.

They carried little Danny up over the roof of the house and away from everything. His mother immediately collapsed. What followed was a silence so thick and sudden, Paul wasn't sure what to do. Should he run like he'd never in his life? His car was parked only a few hundred yards away behind the green house. Or should he stay and wait? Perhaps he could be of some help.

"Well, wasn't that just a bitch." Mrs. Perch's son was prodding his reddened cheek with his fingers. "Do you think that'll happen to me, mom? I don't want that to happen to me."

Mrs. Perch was wringing her fingers as if she were trying to impress Lady MacBeth herself. Her gaze kept following the path of Danny's flight over her house and back to his mother who had collapsed on the ground in shock.

"Well, let's see," she began, her head bobbing nervously, "can't we just go and sit and enjoy the evening..."

Suddenly, she looked to Paul.

"Let's get some drinks made for everyone. Yes! Drinks all around!"

Paul was waiting for somebody to start laughing at the woman. Mrs. Perch's eyes were dilated, he could see that from where he was standing.

"Well," started her son, "you heard her. I think we could all use a drink."

Paul looked down at where little Danny had been laying only moments ago. There, in his tan suit, was the former governor, standing by as he always had when he held office. Even he looked shocked at what had just transpired. But he spoke up.

"I think we should all move inside. Come, Mrs. Perch. Let's get inside. Bring the puppies." The former governor removed his jacket revealing sweat stains in a remarkable Rorschach pattern on his back. He glanced down at little Danny's mother, who was still passed out on the grass. "Could someone see about getting her up?"

"But, where is *Percy*?" pleaded Mrs. Perch. Again, she began to wring her hands.

Paul turned to the slate patio behind the commotion, to where he had seen Percy moments before. From that general direction there came a dim moaning. Like a generator sputtering in the freezing winter.

It was coming in waves, or pulses, Paul couldn't tell. The sound was clear to him suddenly, like it had been clear to him when little Danny took flight.

He could see the hole that Percy had dug, the piece of slate that had come open, revealing the darkness below. Out of this hole few two or three B2 bomber wasps – then five more, then ten, then Paul turned away.

“Everybody get into the house, like the Governor said!” Paul screamed.

Nobody moved. Well, their heads did, to look at Paul, but they stared at him in a kind of blank-shock that he remembered seeing before in these frightened guests.

Paul's mind began to obsess over these wasps and little Danny and Percy. What was it that Mrs. Perch had said about her flowers? Her own batch of fertilizer?

They didn't swoop in with a coordinated attack. Very much *unlike* a squadron of B2 bombers. Paul was concerned so much with getting these people into the house, he had forgotten why, precisely. What good would it do? What was the danger again? When one of the creatures landed on the bitchy British woman's scalp and arched it's back and dug its stinger into her head – Paul remembered.

Nearly everyone saw this happen. Those who didn't, were caught in the aftermath. First, the woman let out a startled: “*Hey!*” as if the wasp could take back what it had just done. Then she mashed his hand on the top of her head like she was playing a child's game and crushed the creature instantly. A grey-orange goo ran down her forehead and stuck on the palm of her hand.

Three more wasps landed on little Danny's mother – two on her arm and one on her face and they stung her all at the same time. She was up for sure now. She let out a yelp, then regarded the bugs on her arm and sat bolt-upright, whimpering. Five more wasps promptly landed on her face and began to sting her.

For obvious reasons, this image of a woman with inch or two long bugs burrowing who knows what kind of poison into her face, got people moving. But the wasps were faster and still emerging from their underground lair. Paul watched in awe as

nearly everyone around him was stung – they mostly stood still, flailing their arms, trying to swat at the things – this, of course, did no good.

First two or three of them – the British woman, two men who had arrived at the party together with matching sport coats – they attempted to take off toward where the cars were parked. They tripped and fell in shock, perhaps, or pain at the sting of a mutant needle. Then the former Governor grabbed Mrs. Perch’s arm and yanked her with him toward the house. Most everyone else followed suit.

It was Paul who remained one of the last to abandon Danny’s mother, who’s face was swollen and oozing a kind of yellow puss that was new to him. She couldn’t stand up, for reasons unknown, but she managed to shove her daughter at Paul, one of her eyes bursting open like her son’s had before.

She managed two words, “Go...luck!” before a series of jointed insect legs severed her vocal chords and began to scratch their way out of her mouth and face. Paul caught the girl with his palms out against his knees, like a catcher in a bloody baseball game. She leapt at him as dozens more wasps descended onto her mother’s body, stinging through clothing and hair.

Paul hoped to god that the little girl didn’t look back at her mother. It was an image so startling and truly horrific – Paul admitted to himself that he would be haunted by Danny’s mother for however much longer he managed to survive.

Paul turned to meet a swarm of wasps, which he dashed through toward the bar he was supposed to be manning had this lawn party remained stagnant. The air was thick with the din of buzzing and charging insects and Paul waved his arms furiously in the air to get through them. What set him apart from most everyone else was that he was moving, and fast, diving through the swarm now. Behind him, he faintly felt the weight of the little girl on his arm. He didn’t know how hard he was tugging her, or even if she were still alive back there – he didn’t care to look. Pounding in his head was “Go...luck! Go...luck!”

Paul headed parallel to the house – toward his bar – in an effort to cut out of the swarm and land himself (and the little girl he was tugging) a window to charge the house and get out of harm’s way.

“Go...luck!”



He crossed the lawn. The noise of B2 bombers was in his head, but Danny's mother was louder.

"Go...luck!"

He was at the bar now. It was crawling with wasps. They were buzzing in and out of soda cans he had opened only minutes before. Half drunken wine glasses were now brimming with pulsing, stinging insects.

"Go...luck! Go—"

The weight behind Paul suddenly doubled and he was forced to turn and check up on Danny's twin sister.

Now her face was a mess of wings and antennae. She had been stung dozens, maybe thirty times and her ear dangled messily onto her cheek. Her hair was matted down in places with blood, but it was hard to tell where skull and...Paul searched for the word. What was happening here? Was there a word for this – incubation?

In an instant, the girl's face fell away, revealing a swirling, twitching hive of bone and exo-skeleton. The wings jutting out of her head were deafening to listen to and Paul finally let go of her limp wrist to cover his ears from the noise. Like her brother, the little girl was light and whatever was crawling and flapping its way out of her head could lift her off the ground. Unlike her brother, however, the girl did not fly away. She hovered there, her body swaying a bit in the breeze, as if waiting for something...

A large gout of blood and bone squirted from her back. Paul could see some of her tiny spine dangling from behind her sun dress. And then something else appeared from behind the girl. Out of the wound that Paul could not see but he thought he could *hear*...mushing, crunching noises.

A Stinger! It must be a stinger! Paul did not have a fear of needles (he would admit to friends that he actually enjoyed receiving shots at the doctor) but the sight of this sleek, black probe curling its way out of this little girl's spinal column was enough to send a mega dose of adrenaline coursing through his body. He stumbled from the head rush a moment, then caught himself on the bar behind him, sending a few glasses crashing to the ground.

Paul's hand shuffled behind him grabbing first to a shard of glass and then onto something his mind found familiar.

“It lives in the cork,” Mrs. Perch’s son had said.

The little girl suddenly zipped across Paul’s field of vision as if she had no weight at all, just as he brought up the ice pick marked PERCH and slid the moldy piece of cork off it’s point.

Her wings were really going now, and little flecks of blood were sprayed into the air and dotted Paul’s face. He slid back further on the table, the setting sun suddenly dropping behind the branches of a massive tree guarding the lawn. Paul was nearly blinded by the intense burst of light on his face, but he moved his arm and struck anyway. The light, the impact that felt merely like a tap, the warm blood and orange puss running down his clenched fist, the sudden limpness of the creature’s body—

This had actually started off as a nice afternoon, Paul thought.

6.

There were seven alive in the house when Paul made it through the back door. They were hunkered down just off kitchen, in a mud room for the dogs.

The dogs, Paul thought as he slammed the door behind him. Where had little Percy gone after all?

Standing, clutching anything they could get their hands on, were Mrs. Perch, her son, the former Governor, the Perch’s Cuban housekeeper, and Julia, who Paul ran to first.

“See, *he* made it. It can’t be that bad out there!” Mrs. Perch was clawing at her son to get out of the house.

“Mom, no. You’ve already got stung – we’ll wait for the ambulance.”

“I’m not going to any damn hospital,” she spat.

Paul and Julia exchanged glances.

“What is going on out there?” she asked him. “I was in here, I heard screams...”

Paul listened for a moment to the noise outside. Mrs. Perch moaned and Paul hushed her. She took offense to this and began to pout – Paul got what he wanted nonetheless. Silence in the house. Outside, Paul could hear three distinct sounds – a humming noise, like a small engine muffled by an enclosed space, a whimpering kind of

moaning that Paul mistook for a dog at first, then – a yelp from, Paul had no doubt in his mind, a dog.

Mrs. Perch herself let out a cry at this noise, but then the noise died down and all that was left was the humming and the whimpering, which now sounded distinctly human compared to the dog.

“The bees just came out in drones. They started attacking everyone.” He thought back to the dog for a moment. “*Everything.*”

“Fuckers got us too,” cried Mrs. Perch’s son. He was clutching his cheek with a cupped hand. Paul now examined everyone else in the room. Mrs. Perch had indeed been stung on the arm in two places – the wrist and the elbow. The former Governor’s head was thick with ooze, which had begun to crystallize on his forehead. Paul couldn’t tell if the creature had actually stung him or not, by looking at the gore-smeared bald-spot on his head alone; for one thing it didn’t look swollen.

Julia and Mrs. Perch’s housekeeper seemed fine, physically. The Cuban woman, portly and wearing her hair in a net, was clearly shaken by the events thus far, and sweating like a pig, but hadn’t been stung.

Paul glanced around the mud room, noticing that a single wasp had made it through the door behind him. A bright fluorescent light hung above their heads and Paul noticed the creature because it was *tap-tap-tapping* on the dome of the light as if the bright spot afforded the creature some way out of the room.

They think like regular wasps, Paul thought, remembering all the dead ones he would find in his parents’ basement when he was a kid. Trapped and dead in the plastic covering over the fluorescent lights in their basement.

The ceiling was too high for Paul to reach up and kill the insect. Instantly, he looked down to his fist, in which he was still holding the PERCH ice pick. It was dripping with blood and puss from his encounter with Danny’s little sister. He slid it into his pocket.

“Did you call the paramedics?” Paul asked the room. “A man ran in here to call...” Everyone looked down for a moment, as if the group had suddenly realized some stupid mistake all at once.

“I haven’t had a working phone in here for *years*,” said Mrs. Perch, as if this was supposed to be commonplace. She spoke as if the telephone had suddenly become a thing of the past – Paul knew that she only rejected it as a thing of the future. “Don’t *you* have one of those...”

“Cell phones, mom.” Mrs. Perch’s son winked nervously at Paul, like they shared a bond of youth because he knew what a cell phone was called.

“Don’t like ‘em, you know.” Mrs. Perch was crossing her arms now.

He looked at Mrs. Perch’s son. “But, you told all those people out there that you called for help. How could you—“

“I didn’t know how...how serious this was. I thought it was a fucking bee sting and that was it. I didn’t know...” Mrs. Perch’s son inched his way back toward his mother. As if she’d do him any good.

Paul plunged his hand into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone.

“You’re not going to *use* that, are you?” Mrs. Perch was scratching at her sung elbow now. “I spoke on one of those things back in eighty-seven, I swear that my eyesight started going that very next day.”

*Tap-tap-tap*, and Paul looked up. If one could get in, then so could the whole lot, he thought. Still running on that bolt of adrenaline coursing through his body, he glared at Mrs. Perch with, what he thought later, to be a look of too-much frowning – it was the muscles twitching in his face, he later convinced himself of. She quieted down as fast as she began to scold him, in any case.

Paul punched 9-1-1, and waited.

7.

Paul pushed toward the kitchen. He eyed Julia as he passed her, almost summoning her to follow. The paramedics were due in the front yard any minute. Paul had only just hung up the phone when Mrs. Perch began complaining about a tingling in her elbow.

The former governor spoke up: “Well, young man, what do you expect to do in there?” Paul stopped by the door.

He hadn't guessed that, in a room where he was the absolute youngest person still alive, that he would have to inform and take charge and perhaps lead these people to safety. It would be a manner of leading them through the house and toward the front door and out the big metal gate that lead to the street outside. Simple. He was willing to take this seemingly menial task upon himself—

“We can get through the front. We can get them,” meaning the Perch's, “into the ambulance right away.”

“I'd rather just wait here, honey,” Mrs. Perch was sitting on the little plastic dog carrier that was near the corner. Her arm was rigid with pain. “You just let them know where I am when they get here.” Mrs. Perch's Cuban housekeeper was doting on her even now, covering her legs with a towel to keep her warm. “Thank you, Flora,” Mrs. Perch muttered.

Paul glanced up at the wasp, still perched on the light. Just sitting there like a plump, twitching invader. Why wasn't it attacking? Was it watching them, waiting for any sudden movement? Would it then silently alert the rest of the squadron? Paul didn't know how insects communicated – certainly not in any way similar to how humans do – and these wasps were bigger, faster...who knew?

“They're not going to come through here. They're going to come through the back or, if we're waiting there, the front door. We don't want to go back outside and wait, do we?” Everyone shook their heads as if they were children in a classroom.

“Now, those wasps seem to be nesting beneath your back porch. That means the front might be clear for now.”

“I'm with the kid,” said the former Governor. He stood up.

“Were you stung?” Paul asked him.

“Oh, no. I'm fine. Really. I got *him* before he got me.” The former governor rubbed the top of his head, feeling the sticky residue of the squashed bug there.

“Mom, we should really go to the front like he says,” Mrs. Perch's son was still grasping his cheek. “Look at your arm. You saw what happened to that fucking kid back there...”

“Who knows what we saw,” his mother snapped back at him. “Oh, you're getting me too excited.”

Flora patted Mrs. Perch's thighs, whispering: "No, ees okay Meesis Purrch."

Julia hissed in Paul's ear. "If they don't want to come, *we* should go."

"That's right," Paul started, "I'm going to have a look at the front yard. We'll come back for you." Paul shot a glance at the former Governor. "Are you with us?"

"You bet your ass I am!" he stood on swollen, wobbly knees, but stood nonetheless.

Paul, Julia and the former Governor trotted through the back of the mud room, through the yellowed kitchen that was covered in heaps of food, to the grand foyer with a set of staircases leading to the upper floors and a door leading to the basement. Paul ran to the front door and cried out at the sight:

The front lawn was like that of a prison – long, wide, and enclosed by a ten-foot high brick wall that opened in the middle with a wrought-iron fence. A Range Rover had made a mad dash for the open gate and plowed into the side of the brick wall instead – it's hood crumpled and littered with a few rotten bricks. The driver, who's shirt Paul could recognize from this distance to be that of the little man who made a dash for the phone, wasn't moving nor was he breathing.

Had the Range Rover been the only thing obstructing this gate, there would have been a way out. However, a yellow sedan – yellow like a bee – had merged with the Range Rover head-on and blocked the other side of the gate. It had taken a chunk of brick wall with it as well, and the rotten, crumbling red blocks bled onto the sedan and the lawn proper. The passenger's side door of this car hung open and the driver was nowhere to be seen. The entrance and exit to the Perch's driveway was completely blocked off – there was no way in or out.

How was it possible that Paul hadn't heard a crash of this magnitude from the back of the house? He remembered hearing the revving of an engine and then – mostly the din of wasps. Paul's heart had been running a mile a minute from the adrenaline shot coursing through his body, but it was subsiding now. At the sight of this glass and metal entrapment, Paul was hit with another spike of adrenaline. It was time to move.

"I'll be damned – how are those paramedics going to get their way in here?" asked the former Governor.

Paul suddenly wasn't concerned with how the paramedics would get in. He was just dying to get out – go and start up his car and get the hell out.

He was about to answer the former Governor when a shrill scream came wafting from the mud room where the Perch's were still hiding.

Now it was Paul who was playing tennis spectator with his neck. First his gaze was upon the driveway through the front windows – now he found himself looking desperately toward the mud room, into the dim light there.

He immediately took one step toward the hallway leading to the back of the house where the scream came from.

"Don't go," whispered Julia. "I don't want you to go."

"What if they've turned into one of those...what if they've already gotten like...that little kid?" The former Governor offered his two cents.

Paul hesitated for a moment, and in his mind debated with himself a question to which he already knew the answer. Would he go or wouldn't he? He would go, something inside him proclaimed. Because he had taken it upon himself to be in charge – something he had never before imagined being a connesieur of – he also desperately wanted to know more about this lawn party, this specific incident. Not because he wanted to endanger himself, or even become a lone expert were he to survive. Paul simply needed leverage on the other part of his brain, the part telling him not to go, to start his car, to run. If he were leading some kind of expedition, a grueling task of survival, he could imagine himself returning to the mantra that got him from the back lawn inside the house: "Go...luck!" But Paul also knew there must be a key to what was happening outside and might as well be happening in the mud room down the hall. If the Perch's had indeed begun to transform (*hatch*, Paul wondered if this were more correct a term) then Paul also wanted to learn a weakness, or a flaw in their terrible design.

He took another step, then another, then rushed the darkened room at the end of the corridor. As his feet thudded on the wood floor, then stopped only inches from the door way – a thick, dripping, wheezing sound could be heard coming from within.

All at once, the lights in the room came on, flickering and buzzing at first and then finding their fluorescent foothold. Paul immediately noticed Mrs. Perch's son

standing by the light switch, still clutching his face and staring hopelessly at the scene playing out on the floor.

Mrs. Perch was lying on top of her Cuban housekeeper, her elbow square in the woman's stomach. No, Paul realized that it was not just her elbow – something had sprung from the elbow and whatever new appendage this represented, was now lodged in the woman's stomach. The Cuban housekeeper looked desperately at Paul, pinned by this previously frail woman. Mrs. Perch looked as if she had the strength of ten men in her now.

"She's done it! She's fucking...done it!" cried Mrs. Perch's son from the far wall. He took his hand away from his face for a moment and Paul could see something writhing beneath his cheek. He must have felt it too, because his hand immediately returned to his face and he looked at Paul, begging: "Don't let it come out of me too."

Suddenly, Mrs. Perch's son rushed his mother and knocked her over with the weight of his body. She collapsed at Paul's feet, her housekeeper lying motionless on the floor, her stomach a pool of blood. Now Paul got a look at what had jutted its way out of her arm – a slender stinger, like the one that had emerged from the little girl out back.

Her son eyed the stinger as his mother began to rise – and he stepped on it. Just planted his foot right in the middle of the thing (it was about a foot long from her elbow) and it snapped in half, crumbling into a few tiny pieces under his feet. Mrs. Perch smarted at that and jumped to her feet again.

"You fucked me over! You cunt! You greedy cunt!" Mrs. Perch's son was slapping his mother across the face again and again, till she pinned him against the wall. He was now the second person to call her a cunt this evening.

Mrs. Perch let out something of a growl, throaty and wet. She swung her arm out, her broken stinger jutted and raw, and slid it in under her son's neck and through his head.

Paul didn't know why Mrs. Perch's son had called her a greedy cunt. For all he knew, she had been. But now – whatever was hatching its way out of her arm and, Paul guessed, waiting to emerge from the rest of her body, was not concerned with material goods or money to keep from her only son. It was concerned with something much more elemental, primal. A will to infect and to survive.



As soon as she was finished offing her human son, his head began to twitch and a half dozen stalky feelers emerged through his eyeballs and mouth as he slid to the ground. Mrs. Perch's son began to writhe his way over to their former Cuban housekeeper and feed on her face while his mother leaned against the wall for a moment with her arms – as if she were trying to stretch her calf muscles. Paul remembered this position from his high school days of basketball in the winter and baseball in the spring. This stretch was always the last he performed before practice or a competition and it always gave him butterflies a bit when he did it – like a gladiator before an encounter with a fierce warrior in battle. He knew he would be putting his body through extreme tension and fatigue, and these butterflies were a way of nervosing over the pain that would follow.

Now, watching Mrs. Perch perform this same stretch, Paul recognized that feeling creep back into his stomach, and prepare him for the worst.

Her back twitched, her legs gave way for a moment, and Paul watched as the most magnificently large set of wings sprouted bloodily from her shoulder blades. They sprouted as stalks of shiny exoskeleton and then unfolded into prismatic, paper-thin membranous wings, tipped with sharp barbs.

Then they began to flap, to move beyond the speed of any normal human appendage. The wind and noise was spectacular and loud and it sent Paul running back the way he came before Mrs. Perch had the chance to spin and see him there.

The queen! The queen! Every footfall resounded with this thought in his head like a pang of surprise. The wings gave it away, Paul thought. And he didn't have to be a bug scientist to know this. The queen was the strongest, the most valuable, the biggest bitch in the hive. And Mrs. Perch received high marks in all these categories in human form. But how could all the other wasps only produce drones, and Mrs. Perch – the most ironic candidate for Queendome – receive this special sting?

*Only I touch them*, she had said of her precious flowers. Whatever she had used to grow them tall and strong had translated ten fold into the wasps on her property. Perhaps the love and attention she afforded her flowers in the summer also translated like her fertilizer into these creatures – and they could sense her as their creator like a child when he first gazes into the eyes of his own mother.

Paul was approaching the end of the hallway, into the foyer. Julia waited next to the former Governor, by the stairs.

“Go!” Paul shouted, and behind him he heard the shifting of wings and the change of direction in wind.

“Go where?” asked the former Governor. Then, from the shadows behind Paul, he must have seen Mrs. Perch emerge. Paul could hear the familiar B2 bomber sound – higher pitched for the Queen – but within the same range as her lesser creatures.

Paul stopped in the foyer for a moment. They could go upstairs, but that felt like running from a problem that could only ascend the staircase faster than they could. He eyed the front door and then wreckage beyond. Not yet, Paul thought. They couldn’t make their escape yet. Not without time to formulate a plan and to think hard about what they should do. For all he knew, there were only three live *human* bodies at the Perch’s lawn party – and he would do everything to keep the number at three, no less.

There was a door beneath the stair case that Paul had earlier assumed lead to the basement of the house. He slammed his body against it and hoped to all hell that he was right. He threw the door open and below him was a dark set of stairs. This hole was their escape for the moment and he gestured for Julia and the former Governor to dash down them as fast as they could.

They took his lead just as Mrs. Perch emerged from the darkened hallway across the foyer. She had changed even more – her head now a pulpy mass of antennae and mandibles, twitching and buzzing like the rest of her. Her summer dress was torn to shreds by a bulbous thorax painted blue and bright white by this ungodly meshing of human and insect.

Paul didn’t wait to gaze any further – he slammed the door in the creature’s face. A persistent thumping of flesh and exoskeleton followed but, for now, they were all three safe.

8.

They dashed down the stairs in the dark. Under their feet, the floor felt loose, sandy – and the former Governor confirmed this when he snapped on the light bulb overhead.

“There’s the wine cellar,” the former Governor pointed. “I’ve been down here before.”

“Great. Now we can drink,” Julia quipped sarcastically.

Paul caught his breath for a moment and took a look around the dank basement – surprisingly cool for the summer; refreshing even. Behind the stairs there was a wall of tools, shovels, a small workbench that was dusty and old. Mrs. Perch’s son didn’t have much of an affinity for power tools, Paul guessed.

To the left was a collection of frames – some filled with paintings, some filled with mirrors. They were stacked against the wall and Paul could clearly see one at the very end of all the rows – a portrait of the Perch family. Mrs. Perch next to Mr. Perch next to their son. None of them wore smiles on their faces in the painting, Paul noticed. By the looks of it, Mr. Perch was a very handsome fellow. The painting was old, however (Mrs. Perch wasn’t gnarled with age and her son looked to be around the age of twelve) and Paul guessed he looked twisted and wrinkled at the time of his death. It was strange to him that Mrs. Perch would keep such a family monument deep down in her basement. Perhaps she couldn’t bare the sight of her complete family in tact and healthy now that it simply wasn’t either of those things.

Seeing Mrs. Perch in the portrait in her normal state (not her face pulled back in a grimace and her tongue a deep black) reminded Paul his thoughts on the insect invaders.

“They’re mutants,” he puffed. “They’ve got to be some kind of mutation. They get inside you and crawl their way out!” Paul hadn’t yet caught his breath, and his speech was heavy and labored.

The former Governor took a seat on the stairs, his knees bulging from the L in his pant legs. “The flying. That’s the damndest thing I’ve ever seen. How did *you* make it into the house?” he was pointing to Paul.

“I’ve got this,” Paul said, removing the ice-pick from his pocket. The handle was crusted with who knew what. Chunky, like brain matter, Paul guessed. “I nailed one of them in the head and she went down. She was just a little girl.”

“No, she was something else besides a little girl by the time you got to her, I’m sure,” the former Governor said.

The wine cellar that he spoke about lay in the darkest corner of the basement that Paul could see. The bottles reflected what little light was given off by the swinging light bulb. But his attention was turned to the furthest wall of the basement – little more than a dirt mound that came sloping down from the house’s foundation. Small holes pocked the surface of this brown dirt, and Paul guessed this dirt was dusty to the touch, like soot.

Next to this mound were several canisters of fertilizer, many different kinds. Red ones and yellow ones, giant paint-bucket sized ones. They were in English, some of them, but most of the writing on the canisters looked foreign, perhaps Chinese. They were caked with a kind of crusty resin, like battery acid rotting the inside of a remote control.

Above this mound of dirt was a small window that looked across the back lawn – more of a slit, really, on ground level. Paul tried to see through the dusty glass, but found that he could only make out a few blades of grass and...what looked like a hand, sprawled a few yards out on the lawn. He couldn’t get his head high enough to try to look around the edges of the pane, so this was all he saw. The lawn, from his point of view, looked relatively calm. Nothing was flying around, nothing was buzzing or humming.

“Those wasps came from under the slate, they must have been nesting there.” He approached the dirt mound. “Do you think they could have burrowed their way down here as well?” he wondered aloud.

“If they did, some good you dragging us down here would have done,” muttered the former Governor.

“Would you rather us run upstairs where she could fucking *fly*?” Paul asked. “Or make it to the front yard, only to be ambushed?”

This shut the former Governor up, but Paul could see his lips pursed in the expression of disdain that Paul was sure he had seen before on local television. Maybe

when he made some of his bullshit remarks in front of the state legislature about pollution. Paul was sure that, when he had first noticed the former Governor and Mrs. Perch together at the party, whatever gave way to these mutant B2 bombers surely slipped through the eyes of the local environmental authorities. A compound in some kind of fertilizer? He glanced at the rotting barrels again. Whatever the explanation, Paul wasn't going to point fingers.

Paul began wondering if he'd make it as far as he wanted to – out of the house, out of the front lawn, onto the road in order to flag down the paramedics who were surely on their way already. It was a matter of him simply not knowing how to deliver himself to safety – every alley seemed wholly blocked.

The former Governor struggled to stand from his perch on the stairs. His knees wobbled and he patted his forehead with his palm.

“Are we the only ones...alive?” he asked.

“For all we know – yes,” replied Paul. “And I'm sorry if you didn't like my decision to head down here, but it was split-second. Maybe I didn't think—“

“No,” Julia spoke up. She wiped her hands on her dress slacks uneasily. “I think this was a good place to start. But where do we go from here?” She was pacing opposite Paul.

Paul listened for a moment and thought he could hear the twitching of Mrs. Perch's wings. Then the snapping of wood and the smashing of glass and more buzzing, toiling. He couldn't be sure, of course, from this deep inside the house.

Paul was still twirling the ice-pick in his hand. “And I've got this.”

“Great! An ice-pick versus two bee-people with stingers out of their elbows,” said the former Governor. He walked behind the stairs and began to examine the tools hanging there – he ran his fingers along shovels, power tools, a garden hoe, a rake – finally settled on a flat-nosed shovel with a wooden neck that looked like it was rotting. The former Governor took a few swings with his new weapon, then a few jabs, then turned to Paul and Julia who were staring at him and said: “I was over in Korea, you know. This is giving me the feeling back in my knees,” he paused while they said nothing to him. Paul thought of a snide remark about the Korean war and how the former Governor could probably *blame* his bad knees on that particular war, but he decided

against it. Based on how the former Governor was judged for his voting on veterans' rights, he didn't want to cross the man with a comment that could send him reeling.

"I'll stick with the ice-pick, thanks," said Paul. "You want one?" he asked Julia, who was still cowering behind him.

"I'll just stay between you two, how's that?" she replied, watching the former Governor twirl his new-found weapon.

Paul turned his gaze up to the top of the stairs. For a moment the house was quiet and he could think. Then another succession of snapping wood and one more broken splinter of glass.

"They've got to be up there still, waiting. The front door was only a few yards from the basement. We can make it, I know." He said, planting one foot on the first step.

"And if it's an ambush?" asked the former Governor. Julia's face seemed to be asking the same question. "They're waiting there, silently, like they did in the jungle?"

"These things don't know emotion or what it means to be human or how to value life. They just want to reproduce and build their...nest. So, we have that advantage over them," Paul said. "When we make it out alive, we can tell everyone else what's happened here and they can come in with real weapons and kill these fuckers for doing what they did. But we have to make it out. And all we got to do is run, as fast as we can."

A look of worry washed over the former Governor's face at this. But he did not protest or whine – he was willing to go and fight, Paul thought. The resolve in his face told Paul this.

Paul began to head up the stairs, then Julia like she had intended to, and then the former Governor. Paul held his ice-pick like a dagger, the former Governor his shovel like an axe.

9.

The door slid open silently, and the house beyond was bright for a moment while their eyes adjusted. There was no buzzing, no B2 bomber sounds.

Since Paul was the first one out of the door, he was also the first to cross the foyer to the front door leading out onto the lawn. He could feel Julia right behind him, panting.

Slam! The basement door closed behind them and both Paul and Julia spun to see the former Governor with a look of terror on his face. He had slammed the door, perhaps out of habit or perhaps out of fear – fear tinged with a random spasm of muscle.

Everyone froze at the loud bang, and for a moment nothing happened. Paul gazed around the foyer anxiously, looking for signs of life – insect or otherwise. He now had a grand view of the middle room in this house – the stair case led to the upstairs (pieces of the banister missing, a mirror on the landing broken) and the hallway that led to the mud room now took on a forced perspective so as to seem smaller and more narrow.

And then, behind the former Governor, Paul saw what he had perhaps known he might see, had he waited around long enough. The nest, made from pieces of the house and a kind of glue that dripped and then solidified like ice – brown, sticky, ice.

There, in the middle of the tangled mess of window frames, wood paneling and octagonal growth that certainly looked like a bee's nest to Paul (were those egg casings filling some of the gaps?) hung Mrs. Perch, now fully emerged from her fleshy cocoon and realized in the form of a twitching, hulking mass of exoskeleton and bone. She now had wasp legs, wasp eyes and wasp intentions to protect her nest. Paul could see her through the dangling chandelier above them, twisted and prismatic in the crystal.

She took flight, effortlessly, swooping from her perch and then hovering for an extended moment. Where is she keeping her son, Paul thought. Where is *he* hiding? The ice-pick in his hand began to feel more heavy as he held it aloft.

Mrs. Perch's bulbous body turned to the dark hallway that led back to the mud room. From the shadows, emerged her former son, now retched and just as malformed as she was. However, he could only walk as, Paul noticed, his wings had not developed correctly. They were full of holes and one of them was bent at the end, like it had been burned or hadn't finished growing. The wings twitched and flapped nonetheless, but they did not offer him the power of flight.

Now was the time to move. They were at a disadvantage, yes, because Mrs. Perch had the higher ground. But they were at the door – he and Julia. The former Governor was still wearily standing by the basement, a few yards across from them.

As Mrs. Perch just hovered there, her wings deafening, Paul whispered: “We can make it. Run to us,” he signaled to the former Governor. “On three...”

“One,” he grasped the door knob behind him slowly.

“Two,” he leveraged his arm to be ready to push or pull – he didn’t know which way the door swung.

“Three!” Paul twisted the knob quickly, then pulled. No dice. He finally put all his weight against the door and heard it click, then felt its glorious weight fall underneath his hand – it swung open, revealing the front lawn beyond.

The former Governor took about three steps in their direction, and Paul watched as his knees gave out and he – and his precious shovel – came clanging to the floor.

Then, it was Mrs. Perch’s time to move. She simply dropped to their level, her wings fluttering, and dashed through the air toward the former Governor. He lifted his head and shot a look at Paul and Julia – a look that could have said, Please go! And it could have said, Save me!

In an instant, his head was severed from his neck and his body went limp. Mrs. Perch dove onto the former Governor’s body and began to sting him in quick jabs – she had three stingers now, one on her abdomen and two on her arms, the one that her son had broken with his foot was still jagged and wet.

Then her son leapt into the air and, despite his inability to fly, made it across the room in a single bound. He landed with surprising agility in front of Paul and Julia, who let out a sharp scream at the sight of his face. Most of his skull had been broken away and the toothed, antennae-sprouting *thing* that was underneath was bent and caved like the face of a freak Paul had seen on television – *elephantiasis*, he remembered in an instant.

While his mother was infecting the former Governor’s body (his head had rolled across the floor), her son advanced toward Paul. His arms were raised and his throat still could make a few gurgling sounds—

Paul remembered, in his state of utter fear, the metal spike he wielded in his right hand. It lives in the cork no more, Paul thought, as he leveraged his hand against Mrs. Perch’s son’s body and pushed him back toward the wall. In a swinging motion, Paul lodged the ice-pick through his chest, where his hand had rested only seconds before, and



then Mrs. Perch's son was stuck to the wall like a dead fly in a shadow-box. He hung there, oozing and grasping for his failed prey, and Paul knew now was the time to go.

Paul grabbed Julia's arm, who was entranced by the gore in front of her, and dashed out the front door. He turned to shut it, and he had missed the moment when Mrs. Perch had realized her son was compromised. She was already in the air, leaping toward the opening that was the front door, leaping toward Paul and Julia.

Paul kicked the front door closed, and watched as Mrs. Perch came crashing into the prism glass that made up the elaborate door. The glass cracked but, as it was soldered together, it did not break. Paul and Julia took a few steps down from the front perch and watched as the hideous creature clawed and scrambled to get out of her own home, her own nest, but she was trapped.

10.

Paul had felt them in his pocket, but never thought they were a possible escape route. His car keys had jingled and clanked against his thigh, there in his pants, all along. He had *wanted* to drive away, but when he had seen the awful wreck in the front of the Perch's yard, he had thought this an impossible tactic. Now, on the front lawn, away from the Perch's and their mutant party guests, he wondered for a moment.

It was when he glanced over at the auto wreck that he had the idea – who needs an open gate? The yellow sedan had taken a serious chunk of the brick wall with it; the thing was old, perhaps as old as Mrs. Perch herself (she had been reborn, now, hadn't she?)

He and Julia stood in the middle of the driveway, Mrs. Perch still scrambling and buzzing to break through the front door. If she had any remnants of her mouth left, she would have been frothing at it.

"Listen!" gasped Julia. Paul stopped moving for a moment – a faint, rising sound caught his ear: sirens. It had been about ten minutes since Paul had called the paramedics and their response time was accurate. They would be here any moment—

Paul turned his attention from the road back to the front door, where Mrs. Perch had managed to break through; she was bulging through the soldered glass, as if she were

emerging from a beveled cocoon. Her bulbous abdomen, however, was preventing her from actually moving through the space. Behind her, her wings were dashing the door frame to pieces and Paul could tell that they had a matter of moments before she broke through.

Before he expected her to, Mrs. Perch gave a final push and out of her house she flew. She flew up above the thatched roof and perched herself there, watching. Her wings twitched and her legs – part human, part insect – grappled the slate roof for balance.

He grabbed Julia's arm again and began to lead her around the side of the driveway toward the greenhouse. A hundred yards at best, but a long hundred yards to Paul. Thankfully, the massive oak tree in the front yard provided some cover before they had to pass beyond another, smaller, brick wall next to which his car was parked.

This was a Toyota Camry with absolutely none of the fixins. Meaning no power door locks. So Paul began fumbling for his keys the instant he began running with Julia. She didn't need to be dragged, he knew this much, so he let go of her arm and plunged his hand into his pocket to grab them.

It was like clockwork: he slid the key into the driver's side door, and turned it like he had hundreds of times before.

"Get in!" he shouted to Julia, who was a few steps ahead of him, already tugging on the passenger's handle.

Behind him, Paul could hear the frantic buzzing of Mrs. Perch flying higher than she had ever before – finally free of her own home and able to stretch her wings and move at full speed.

Paul leaned over to the passenger's side door and flicked the lock up manually. Julia opened the door and jumped into the car, filled with heat and mugginess, in what seemed like slow motion. Everything was slowing down now, the motion of Paul's wrist, his inability to get the key into the ignition, Julia mouthing the words "Go, go, go!"

Splat! Mrs. Perch came crashing into Julia's side of the car and knocked herself senseless for a moment – splayed out on her back, legs squirming.

Paul's head turned from Mrs. Perch to Julia as she buckled her seatbelt.

"What the fuck are you waiting for?" she asked.

Paul slid the key into the engine now, and started the car up. Instantly, ZZ Top's "Tush" came blasting through the radio that Paul had tuned into before coming to the Perch's. Paul confused the incessant base of the song for the flapping of B2 bomber wings, but then realized his error. She revved as much as a Toyota was capable of, and then Paul paused. Where would he go? How would he get there? It was a blank for a moment, and then: the wretched sound of nails on a chalkboard, except that Paul realized this was the sound of exoskeleton on car door. Slowly, at first, Mrs. Perch's head, still layered with tufts of grey, bloody hair, rose from beneath his window. The mandibles in her mouth were twitching and clawing quickly at the glass as she righted her body and leapt up and out of sight.

Paul glanced at Julia, thinking the beast was gone – crunch! – she landed right on top of the car, denting the inside of the roof a little under her weight.

Slice! A barbed stinger came through the roof and nearly missed Julia's shoulder, had she been leaning back only a few more inches. This action finally propelled Paul into gear. Without his trusty bartending weapon in his hand, Paul now felt the last of his adrenaline rocket through his body and directly toward his driving foot. That was all it took for the car to jump into motion and speed – gravel flying – out onto the main circle of the driveway from behind the greenhouse.

Immediately, the plunging of Mrs. Perch's stinger halted and Paul could see her reeling in his rear-view mirror on the dusty driveway behind them. Before he could look away, she righted herself and took off into the air. Paul drew his attention from behind him to what lay ahead of he and Julia – nothing but lawn, twisted car wrecks and brick wall.

Even from inside the stiflingly hot car, with the engine on full blast and ZZ Top wrapping up their hit single, Paul could hear Mrs. Perch's wings. He slammed on the gas now, and – right before choosing a final direction to head in – realized that Mrs. Perch was flying *away* from them, the din of "Tush" fading on the radio and finally allowing him a chance to listen to this one sound of mutant insect wings. And the sound of sirens was almost at its peak.

Good, Paul thought. Let the creature leave us be. Let us make it through this final act... He almost headed right for the two crumpled vehicles blocking the gate, when Julia's throaty gasp made him swerve at the last moment—

*"I said, Lord take me downtown, I'm just looking for some..."*

The sound of car hood against brick and mortar was deafening, a kind of screeching roar that Paul would never forget. The entire afternoon – now he noticed that the sun had managed to drain the entire sky of light and only a pale blue remained – could be summed up in this one, single sound that should have produced nothing but death and one more twisted wreck of a car on the Perch's front lawn. But, instead, the rotten brick wall gave way under the car's speed (Paul had made it to perhaps thirty-five miles per hour by then) and bowed under the pressure of nearly a decade of weather and vines. The airbags deployed and suddenly Paul realized the immense damage he was doing to his car for the sake of escape.

Paul's Camry plowed through the blockade and onto the street, sending a cloud of dust and chunky brick before it. Paul slammed on the breaks and the car came to a halt as quickly as it had begun its short, destructive path across the Perch's front lawn.

In the evening light, through the dust, the car was filled with white, red and blue lights, colors Paul had never thought to represent the kind of relieve he now felt. He looked to Julia, whose white shirt he never remembered to be as dirty as he now saw it, and let out a kind of war cry that he surprised even himself with.

Paul jumped out of the car and waved his arms in the air, crying out loud for the wailing ambulance to stop in its tracks. In truth, this action was unnecessary; the sight of a car rumbling through a brick wall would give pause to any vehicle, let alone an emergency one sent to this very address.

And they did stop. There were two ambulances and two police cruisers, and all at once every officer and paramedic jumped from their respective vehicles. Three of them came running to him, probably speaking but by now Paul could not hear anything over the thankful din of sirens and evening crickets.

"Sir, are you the one who made the call? The call about the hornets? Are you able to stand?"

Yes, Paul had collapsed onto the dirt road. Yes, he had made the call. No, they were not hornets. All of this through a nod of his head to the examining paramedic.

“How many are inside?” Paul heard. He ignored the question and glanced over at Julia, who was leaning against his wrecked car, a flashlight being shone into her eyes by another EMT.

For a moment, the decision to take control of this lawn party seemed like a good one to Paul. Yes, the former Governor had lost his head. Yes, countless others were missing, dead, mutated...but Paul had saved at least one person. Julia, in his heart, meant absolutely nothing to him. On a normal day, he would wait with her to receive his night's earnings from Mrs. Perch and then they would part ways back at the catering center. Perhaps they would have seen each other on a later job, perhaps not. He had been working three summers before and she claimed a lifetimes of catering experience – yet the two had never crossed paths until now. He didn't even catch her last name, he couldn't even remember if she had mentioned it. But she was alive. He was alive. And now it was time to sort this mess out.

A scream. An unfastening of an officer's gun. The report of a revolver. The splatter of liquid. The thumping of dead carcass. Paul heard all of these, even in the deafening sirens. He looked; there in the headlights was a tiny creature compared to the massive, hulking Mrs. Perch. Blonde, by the looks of it. Twitching. Little Danny, now fully grown into his insect form.

The officer who fired the shot regarded the creature with young boy hanging off of it in bloody chunks with wide eyes and then, perhaps out of primal fear or perhaps out of sympathy, fired another shot into its head before it could get up again. Little Danny was finally and horribly still.

The officer, fat and balding, looked to his coworkers. There wasn't time to react, as they all covered their ears to a new sound. New to them, but Paul recognized the din of the B2 bomber wings, flapping and coming for all of them.

In the fading light of the evening, Paul watched as all of Mrs. Perch's dinner guests rose from behind her house and into the royal blue sky. Mrs. Perch herself, the largest by far still, rose highest of them all. Their wings all shifted in unison – unlike the random attack of their wholly insect predecessors – this was still a little bit human and

fully calculated. The squadron of bugs headed for the swirling lights gathered just outside the broken brick wall, stingers glistening.

Paul desperately wished for his ice-pick to be heavy in his hand once again.