

The long fingers of the wind clutch and rattle omens in the night, but it's already morning by the time Helen wakes and discovers that her fertile bush is covered in parasites. Dumb with sleep she observes the seething mass of purpled greens, which moves in place like a stream does.

As the proprietor of the fertile bush, she is of course the last to know of its misfortune. Everywhere in the yard neighborhood kids marvel at the infestation, which was not here yesterday. They confirm to each other: this was not here yesterday! As Helen watches, a tall brave girl prods the mass with a stick, and the stick is like your arm probing a dark hole: it disappears. The younger kids are spitting with excitement. The big ones make elbows for a better look.

Careful as a scientist, the tall girl retracts the stick. It is pale and gouged. The outer layer of bark has been eaten away. The chorus of little voices swells.

Correction, Helen's almost the last person to know. She leaves Gravy still comatose under heavy blankets like a lump of coagulated turkey gravy. Of course Gravy's no help. In the mudroom Helen rummages for ant-killer or rat poison, settles for lighter fluid, and walks outside with the long stride of an exterminator.

Outside it's grass-killing hot, lemonade-hawking hot. And the sun not nearly at her zenith. On the shaded path leading to the yard Helen, sun-blind, in her hurry, steps on a butterfly. A sound like paper sighing.

She lifts her left foot gingerly. The wings are brown and wilted flat. It's quite dead. The second bad omen since she woke up like 45 seconds ago. A red spark dances across her vision; she wants to rip up some grass, just to throw it.¹ But she swallows the urge and mingles into the crowd now gathered around her bush.

The bigger kids are sitting in a ring around the bush/seething mass like it's storytime. They greet her with shouts, waves, but obviously their attention is on the bush. The littler kids are wiser and have given the bush/seething mass a wide berth- every few seconds a rogue beetle careens out of the seething mass at speed- suppose it flies into your hair- then what?

And but so the tall girl who is pigtailed and twelve and brave, she is curious about this new parasite, and upon her unbroken shoulders the crowd heaps its frenzy. The tall girl (her name is Olivia) cracks her stick over her knee and grins at the foam of kids; like foam they love her by touch and cling.²

¹ But like, at what? Grass is unsatisfying to throw, anyway.

² She is a really good babysitter.

Nobody else has dared to violate the seething mass's personal space yet. Helen measured up the tall girl- she knew she had to be the oldest kid there, like twelve- and asks her to do something very stupid:

"Do ya think you can catch one a those, ah, beetles?"

Quiet falls over the kids. "Course I can."

And with a shrug of arrogant smooth motion she does: she sticks her bare hand in the seething mass and pulls out a clump of wriggling live beetles.

The beetles are green-winged brown and large as a nipple and mad, like rusted needles they dig with their runty heads down into the sweet spots, between the fingers, crawling under Olivia's hand with tickling grips and parachuting to the sun-spiked grass. She holds the live clump out to her comrades; it is true that an unpopular brat cries. "Wow they're bigger than I thought." "Can I hold one?"

"See it's easy. Here, take your own," and Olivia holds out her clump of knowledge, and her shorter friend quickly steals a beetle, and squeezes it. Everykid watches, and Helen- are the beetles impenetrable, like Heaven, Heaven-sent?

No. The beetle collapses like a bouncy-house at dusk. Brown juice dribbles from unexpected joints. The girl who squeezed it grins at the chastised crowd. Beetlejuice runs down her arm.

Like the runner who strategically holds second-place til the final lap, and then drops the hammer, the shorter friend (her name is Lydia) shows her crumpled beetle to the crowd and demands more; (Olivia looks a bit put out)

She licks the juice from her arm like a triumphant athlete; (the crowd shouts)

And she grins with her mouth open; but her tongue is swollen and brown-patched.

Lydia swallows, and her eyes roll in her head like the eyes of a buck that smells fire; and her mouth flutters meaningless, like chickens cluck; and they close (her eyes) of their own accord, and her knees give way, and she goes down sideways with hardly a sway, like dry timber.

All this happens in less than a piss's time. The crowd of kids is still quiet: realization settles on them uncomfortable like dust in the hot sun. But to Helen it's obvious that Lydia is faking, with a faint like that. A real swoon.

Olivia is the first to move. She takes Lydia's wrist and finds her pulse- what a good babysitter she is. "Her pulse is 62. It's like she's asleep." Dead asleep. "I'm worried she hit her head."

"We all saw her fall on her bum. She's fainted. Just shake her," Helen says, and then realizes what she's said. "Or something." The kids, like dogs, are starting to worry.

"I'll get my mom."

"I'm going home."

"I'm going home to get my mom and then I'm coming back, she's a bug professor. So don't lick anything without her."

"Fucking. Hell, you stay here," Helen says to Olivia.³ "We need a doctor, I'll call 911."

"Sure."

Helen turns to the house and who's plodding down to the yard but Gravy, still rumpled gray with sleep and characteristically suspicious of melodrama. Her bowl-cut hair is flat on one side, cuz when Gravy sleeps she shoves her face into her 'holding pillow.'

Helen exhales. She suddenly feels much calmer.

"Wait! She's waking up."

And so she is. Olivia supports her head as Lydia flounders about. "Hold still."

"You fell!"

"Yeah, you fell on your ASS!" Says a rabbitty boy with a fist-sized head.

"Holy tamales, I feel perfect." Says Lydia, kinda loud. The crowd, which never left, comes close.

"Just hold on a minute." Olivia says as she eyes the crowd, baiting them with her narration.

"What do'ya mean, perfect tamales?"

"So warm. So cozy and warm." Lydia says, sitting up with the worn look of a swimmer, a swimmer-in-dreams. She addresses the crowd. "I dreamed I was floating. I was so warm, it was like I wasn't alone." Somebody laughs and Lydia frowns and struggles on: "You all should try it..."

"I'll try a beetle!" says rabbit boy.

Olivia looks happy as a demon with a new soul. She couldn't have planned this show better herself.

Gravy sidles up to Helen and shows her the lighter fluid. "What'd ya bring this out for, gonna burn the suckers out?"

"Shit, yeah," Helen says, "Do'ya mind? I mean it's our bush and all,"

"You're the one who waters it and shit,"

³ Again with the overreaction, Helen thinks to herself. It's always when she's stressed that she lets herself go.

“Prunes it, fertilizes. I even mulch it in the fall...”

“If love is smothering, you’ve got it covered.”

“Love is not smothering.”

“Sure, sure. Love is sleeping, I think.”

“I mean do’ya mind though?”

“Babe, this rosebush was a wedding present from my mother, may she rest in power, to guarantee our fertility.”

“So you mind.”

“So we don’t got any kids. It didn’t work.”

“What I mean is- burn it. Lookat these kids, they need a show.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

So Helen is obliged to douse the bush in lighter-fluid.

“Stay back,” she says to Olivia and Lydia, but the two of them are already safe, one behind each of Gravy’s hips.

“Got a light?” And Gravy hands her one. “Thanks babe.”

“Cannit,” says Gravy, cuz her smoking is a sore subject.

And so obviously the bush lights easy because it’s so hotdamn cough hot you could roast an egg on your thigh, and the beetles make exodus like kids out of the high school, buzzing a fuss.

Some of the kids capture beetles in their oily hands to try the Beetlejuice for themselves, and invariably they all faint and have cozy dreams and wake up weteyed and quenched like swimmers.

When their worried moms dragged them away (and glared at Helen: quite a few witnessed the burning bush) they would take one look at their kids and accuse them of crying.

“Smoke in your eyes?” the kids would deny, deny, or else turn the blame: “No you’re crying!” That one always works.

And but so no explanation ever came about for the beetles. Two weeks later Olivia would argue convincingly (she’s taller) it had all been a dream; Lydia’s only rebuttal is that she remembers the dream, too; but Olivia counters that’s only because she told her about it in the first place; anyhow there was nothing to be done but to go back to the yard where the bush once stood; and there the two girls found a rosebush young and green; smaller than the previous bush had been; but then again who could really say?

“Where’d do ya think they came from?”

“Does it matter?”

“Well, no but I wanna know.”

“Maybe they did come from God,”

“As do all invasive species,” Said Helen to Gravy as they curled to sleep. It smelled of mouth, neither had their eyes open.

Helen felt for Gravy’s hands in the dark. For the first time in months they fell asleep holding hands, just like they used to.

With her face full of holding-pillow: “Based on wombs, I can say the most basic human desire is to be warm.”

“The sexiest part about you is that you’re so consistently 98.6.”

“Right. That’s not too warm.”

“Right. That’s hot.”

“Cannit,” said Gravy, and they sleep soundly.