



Remember the Bride who got Stung?

by Adam Marek

They'd only been walking for ten minutes, but already Victor was red and puffing. It was the fault of the picnic hamper that he was carrying. A real monster. Big enough to hold a body and so heavy that the leather handle had mangled his palm. Hefting it along the dirt track between the hedgerows and beneath the humming pylon cables, Victor could only take pigeon steps. His sandals kicked up dust clouds and sent little stones flying. There was no controlling this hamper. It had a will to swing in Victor's hand and he was powerless to stop it, even when it came for his shin with one of its pointy wicker corners.

Alerted by Victor's yelp, his wife and son, Tara and Nate, stopped and looked back.

'It's bloody lethal,' Victor said. He set down the hamper, lifting his leg to show Tara the bloody scrape. Now that he had stopped walking, his face leaked fresh sweat, heightening his skin's sensitivity to the faint breeze

idling across the rape field.

'Nate just told me something very sad,' Tara said, making her baby face. When she pouted her lips like this it made Victor think of a cat's bottom.

'What's that?' Victor said, touching the edge of his wound and flinching.

'He said his imaginary friend died.'

Victor snorted. 'Oh dear,' he said. '*Quel dommage*. How did he die?'

'How did he die, pumpkin?' Tara asked.

'He killed himself,' Nate said.

'Oh for goodness' sake,' Victor said.

'What an *awful* thing to say,' Tara said. 'Why on *Earth*...'

'What's wrong with you?' Victor said.

Tara pushed her razor-straight fringe away from her forehead with both hands. She twisted the corner of her mouth to blow up onto her brow.

Nate picked at a scab on his elbow until Tara slapped the back of his hand. 'I keep telling you,' she said. Nate's bony knees, elbows and shins were all covered in the kind of pink skin you only find beneath scabs. He hooked one finger into the pocket of Tara's jeans. The hedgerows about them were dead silent.

Victor started to sit down on the edge of the hamper, till Tara stopped him with a single uttered

syllable. 'Err!'

Victor rubbed his aching palm against his good one.

'We've got a way to go yet,' Tara said.

The wicker hamper groaned as Victor took up its weight again and followed behind them.

'Nate,' Victor said. 'Do you know how genuinely miserable some children in the world are? There are kids living in war zones who've seen soldiers shoot their parents. There are kids in third world villages without food and clean water. They don't have PlayStations. They have flies and diarrhoea.'

'We're about to eat,' Tara said.

'I just can't bear it,' Victor said. 'This *perpetual* gloom. You know, when there's a knock on the door now I'm terrified it's the bloody social worker.'

'You do over-dramatize,' Tara said.

Nate watched the ground as he walked. 'Head up,' Tara said.

'Is there an *actual* problem Nay-Nay?' Victor said. 'Because you know we can fix anything. Your mum and I are smarter than most parents, and you're better than both of us put together. There's no problem this world has to offer that we can't solve.'

Nate said nothing. He kicked a flint along in front of him.

This was the first time Victor had worn his shorts

this year, and since last season he'd added a little girth to his thighs and belly, so when the phone buzzed in his pocket, he found it difficult to take out; so difficult that by the time it was free, his voicemail had got there before him.

'I thought you weren't working today,' Tara said.

'You're lucky I'm here at all,' Victor said. 'Dave's off sick and I've got two on leave, so there's only six today. I should be there. But I promised you, so I'm here. My phone may ring once or twice and I'll have to answer it. That's the situation.'

While Victor stopped to see who had called, Tara gained ground and practised Nate's French.

'Ça va?' she said.

'Ça va mal,' he replied.

'Oh Nay-Nay, why always *ça va mal*?'

The phone call had been from Steph, the longest-standing member of Victor's team, which made her the most senior at the orchards today.

'Sorry to bother you,' Steph said when he called her back, 'but he's insisting we're supposed to be pollinating all six orchards today.'

'Just tell him that's not what we agreed,' Victor said.

'But he keeps waving the order in front of my face.

He keeps asking to speak to you,' she said.

'Don't give him my number. Just say that as far as you're aware, you're just pollinating four orchards today and you've only got the people to do four. Tell him if he keeps wasting your time going on about six you won't even have time to do four. But say it nicer than that. Just make sure you don't give him this number. I'm off the radar today.'

'He's not happy.'

'Just claim ignorance and tell him I'll be back tonight to straighten it all out.'

All the way through the fields, over the hill and then down the other side, was a small wooded area. Here in the luxurious shade of the trees, Victor stopped to take a bottle of water from the hamper. He should have drunk twenty minutes ago when thirst had first played on his tongue. Now, in the heat, with the sweating and the strain of carrying Tara's new hamper, a headache was announcing itself in his temples. He took a few mouthfuls, then wiped his palm over the bottle's chilled surface and applied the condensation to his face.

'Honey, remember we're going to have to walk the whole way back too,' Victor called after Tara.

'Oh shut up,' she said. 'We're almost there.'

'Anywhere here would be lovely, don't you think?'

Tara ignored him and carried on. It was 1:45pm, already way past lunchtime.

Deep into the wooded area, a steep bank dropped down from the left side of the path, and from the bottom of it came the sound of running water. Victor could not see the stream because metre-high ferns covered everything, but the sound alone had a restorative effect that allowed him to walk faster and catch up with Tara and Nate. Only when this sound was far behind them did they reach the little archway of trees that led out into a Tara's glade.

The feathery grasses here were so tall that Victor had to walk back and forth over an area to flatten it enough to lay down a blanket. And before they could sit on it, they all had to march about the blanket on their fists and knees to break the stubborn stems beneath.

'I can't believe there's not a closer parking space,' Victor said.

'When we used to come here,' Tara said, 'that car park was always full, and you'd get cars parked up the verges the whole way along the road. One time, Nay, your grandpa parked on a verge that was so steep the car almost rolled over with us all in it. I can't believe how quiet it is now.'

'Well, it's a nice spot,' Victor said. 'Once you get here.'

He flopped onto his side. The sun-warmed blanket was a great comfort to his aches. With his eyes closed he could just about hear the drone of the motorway a couple of miles away, before it was obliterated by Tara opening the hamper's creaky lid, tearing plastic wrappings from the baguette and tomatoes, and popping the vacuum seals of Tupperware boxes.

'You know,' Victor said. 'You can almost imagine that we're the last people on earth.' As if to contradict him, the phone in his pocket buzzed again.

'If you answer that,' Tara said, 'I'm packing up and we're all going home.'

'Don't be so ridiculous,' Victor said, rolling onto his back so his fingers could access the tight pocket. He got up and answered the phone, heading back towards the path and shade. But before he got there, he stopped.

'He what!' he said.

'He told us to go away and come back when we're ready to do six orchards,' Steph said. 'He's mad.'

'Well what did you say to him?'

'Nothing!'

'Where are you now?'

'We're just getting in the van. I can still see him. Do you want to speak to him?'

'Not now. Jesus. Look I'll...' and then, for the first time ever, Victor hung up on her. Regret came instantly

and held him there for a moment. He stared at the still tops of the tall grasses, little flies in dogfights, and high above, wispy cirrus clouds bleeding streaks of ice. He cursed it all.

Back at the blanket, Tara was smearing houmous over a lump of French bread with the back of a spoon.

‘Can you switch it off now?’ she said.

‘Why don’t you use a knife?’ Victor asked, pushing the phone back into his pocket.

‘You didn’t pack one.’

‘I clearly remember putting it in.’

‘Well, between that moment and this, it’s gone missing.’

Victor rummaged in the hamper, feeling inside the red canvas pockets but found no knife except his Leatherman.

‘So will you turn off your phone now so we can have lunch in peace?’ Tara said.

‘You know I can’t, but she won’t call again now. I had to lie to a good customer to be here today, so you can at least be a little bit grateful.’

‘We are grateful, aren’t we Nay-Nay,’ she said, sinking a black olive into the thick houmous and then passing it to Nate. ‘We’re very grateful.’

Victor cut off a long piece of baguette with the

Leatherman. The sharp blade went through it in a couple of easy strokes. Holding the bread in his hand, he sliced along its length, being careful to stop the blade before it got close to his palm. He wiped the knife on his hip, folded the blade away, then peeled open the pack of salami and stuffed five slices inside the bread. ‘Meat,’ he said, in his deepest voice.

Using Tara’s spoon, he scooped a great dollop of houmous into the sandwich and spread it around. When he took his first bite, the houmous leaked out the side and needed licking away.

‘Ahhhhhh,’ he groaned, closing his eyes. ‘It’s amazing how good simple food tastes after an hour of pain.’

‘You do exaggerate.’

Victor’s enthusiasm for his sandwich left him breathless. ‘Now, Nate,’ he said, caching his mouthful in his cheek. ‘This imaginary friend of yours. Is he gone forever, or can you bring him back to life somehow?’

‘Not now,’ Tara said.

‘It’s a serious question...’

‘Not today.’

‘You’re right. I’m sorry. This is your special day.’

‘This *is* a special day for mummy,’ she said, screwing the top back on the apple juice. ‘If your granddad were still alive, Nay, he would have been

seventy today. Do you remember your granddad?’

Nate squeezed his lips into a thinking shape and nodded.

‘When I was your age, my parents used to bring me and your aunties here all the time, and our cousins. I don’t think you’ve ever met them. We’d have a big group of us, seven children, and three blankets all joined together. My parents didn’t have any money for fancy picnics like this, so we just had marmite sandwiches and apples, but it was so good. And when all the grown ups were having a sleep in the afternoon, we’d go down to the little stream over there and catch freshwater shrimp in crisp packets. We used to pretend they were seahorses. We’ll go exploring after we’ve eaten, and see if it’s still there.’ All the while Tara talked, her smile widened. But then she stopped suddenly and her face dropped back to its default setting. ‘Victor,’ she said. ‘Is that your phone *again*?’

Victor had felt no vibration, but took out his phone to check.

‘No,’ he said.

But there *was* a buzzing sound.

‘It sounds like a bee,’ Tara said.

‘It can’t be.’

But then, there it was, however improbable. A honey bee. Just like the bees Victor remembered from his

youth. Its appearance between them caused both Victor and Tara to leap up and draw their heads back to the full extent of their necks to distance themselves from it. Nate jumped up too, arms wrapped round himself for protection.

Victor looked around the blanket for a weapon. ‘Give me something to hit it with,’ he said.

‘No!’ Tara said. ‘You’ll make it angry.’

The distance between the three of them widened as each backed away from its advances. The bee expanded the zone of its patrol until it claimed the whole airspace above the blanket as its own. It amplified its buzz as it flew at each of them, performing a triangular attack pattern that caused them to shriek when it came near.

They were pushed back to a distance where they needed to shout to communicate with each other. The beast teased them for a minute more, before swooping down onto the pale skin of Nate’s bare shin.

Nate’s hysteria was so fully brewed by now that he heeded none of Victor or Tara’s contradictory instructions and swatted it with his hand.

Victor and Tara ran to him, their speed accelerated by his explosive yell of ‘Ow!’

‘Show me!’ Tara said, trying to pull his hands away, but Nate resisted.

‘Let us see,’ Victor said.

‘No!’ Nate said. ‘It hurts. It hurts really bad.’

Victor wrapped his hairy fingers round Nate’s wrist and pulled it away so he could get a good look. Nate’s other arm was around his mother’s neck. He hopped on one foot, holding the stung leg aloft.

‘Keep still a second,’ Victor said, putting one hand under Nate’s knee to hold it steady.

On the front of Nate’s shin, the small brown lance of the bee’s sting was still sunk into his skin. At the end of it was a butter-yellow glob of goo. Tara leaned in closer and said, ‘Good God it’s still pulsing!’ She smacked it with her fingers till it was gone, leaving behind a fierce red dot surrounded by a ring of pale swollen skin.

‘Please tell me you brought the syringe?’ Tara said.

‘Where the hell did a bee come from!?’ Victor said.

‘Did you bring the syringe?!’ she said again.

‘When was the last time we needed it!’

‘We have to take it everywhere!’

‘Well, we always kept it in the old hamper, but now we’ve got your new one.’

‘Well why didn’t you transfer it over?’

‘I wasn’t the only one who did the packing!’

Victor shifted his weight from foot to foot, looking from the wound to the direction of the car.

‘How long does it...?’ Victor said.

‘I don’t know!’ she hissed, ‘And be careful what you

say, don’t make it worse! Pick him up, we have to run.’

‘It took us an hour to get here. And even when we get to the car, do you know where the nearest hospital is?’

‘Why didn’t we pack the damn syringe!!’

Nate’s tears were flowing readily now. He forced noisy breaths through his teeth. ‘It hurts!’ he said.

‘It’s okay honey,’ Tara said. ‘Just relax. Everything’s okay. It’s just a sting.’

As soon as Tara had named it ‘a sting’, Nate’s howling doubled in volume.

‘We have to move!’ Tara said.

‘Wait,’ Victor said, his fingertips on his temples. ‘Remember the bride who got stung on her way to the church?’

‘What bride?’

‘The story, you told me, you read it in a magazine somewhere. The bride got stung on her way to the church and she was allergic and she didn’t have her shot with her, but she was so nervous about the wedding she had already pumped herself full of adrenaline, so she survived.’

‘Victor, we need to go.’

‘No, this is the only thing to do.’

‘What is?’

Victor knelt down beside Nate and put his arm

around his waist.

‘Nay-Nay,’ Victor said. ‘I’m going to be honest with you. This is bad. Do you remember how we always said when you were little, if you ever happened to see a bee, to keep away from it?’

‘What are you doing?’ Tara said, brushing hair from her sticky face. ‘Pick him up. We have to hurry.’

‘You’re allergic to stings,’ Victor said. ‘*Very* allergic. So we’ve got two choices. We can make a run for the car together and try to find the nearest hospital, but there’s a good chance we won’t get there in time, or...’

‘Good God Victor! Shut up! Here I’ll pick him up.’ Tara bent low to scoop her hands under his legs, but Victor barred her way with his outstretched hand.

‘There isn’t time,’ he said. ‘Our other option poppet, is to deal with the poison in your leg before it gets any further into your body. If we do it now we might just catch it.’

‘You can’t suck out bee poison!’ Tara said.

‘No we can’t suck it out. We’re going to have to do something more drastic, and you’re going to have to be brave Nate, because this is going to hurt.’

Tightening his right arm around Nate’s waist to hold him firm, Victor reached down with his left hand and picked up the Leatherman knife from the blanket.

‘No way! No way!’ Nate yelled, using both hands to

push against the side of Victor’s face.

‘Get off him! What the hell’s wrong with you!’ Tara’s shout filled the whole clearing. She grabbed Nate under his arms and tried to pull him away, but Victor’s grip was solid.

‘It’s the only way! We have to do it now!’ Victor winked at her, but she was blind to it, still trying to pull Nate from him. ‘You have to help Ta. Come on, remember the bride and the bee. We’ve got no choice!’ Victor wrapped both his arms round Nate’s waist and pushed Tara away with his foot. She fell on her bottom. Nate scratched Victor’s face, raking up sore streaks. ‘I’m trying to save your life!’ Victor said.

‘Victor for fuck’s sake!’ Tara howled as she got up.

Nate fought his way to his feet, but Victor tackled him down on the ground again. Thick grass stems jabbed into his side where his polo shirt had ridden all the way up to his armpits. His face was throbbing, especially his left eyelid which he couldn’t open properly.

Nate screamed into Victor’s ear. Tara kicked his back, and when she saw him dig his thumbnail into the groove of the blade and pull out the bright length of it, she grabbed him round the throat and squeezed.

‘Get off him!’ She said. ‘What’s wrong with you?!’

‘For God’s sake woman,’ he gurgled. ‘*Play along!*’

Victor leaned on Nate’s stomach and pinned his

ankles down with one foot. He put the blade against Nate's skin, just below the knee. Nate hit the back of Victor's head and scratched his neck, bawling all the while.

'Hold still!' Victor said.

Something sharp jabbed into Victor's right eye and it filled up with tears. 'I can't see!' He yelled. 'You've fucking blinded me!' Victor dropped the knife and put his hands to his eye.

Nate pummelled Victor with his knees, elbows and knuckles, scrambling to get free of his father's weight. Tara grabbed Nate's wrists and helped him out, lifting him to his feet. Together they fled through the long grass.

'I'm pretending you stupid fuck! I'm pretending!'

Victor rolled onto his back, heaving for breath. The ring of trees in the clearing was a blurry mess to his scratched eyes. Welts rose all over his face and neck. His lips were too tender to touch with his tongue. 'I was pretending,' he said again.

Tara and Nate's fleeing footsteps cracked twigs at the edge of the glade. They were moving fast. Victor winced, wondering if he'd done too much, if he'd done enough.

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Adam Marek is an award-winning short story writer. He won the 2011 Arts Foundation Short Story Fellowship, and was shortlisted for the inaugural Sunday Times EFG Short Story Award. His first story collection, *Instruction Manual for Swallowing*, was nominated for the Frank O'Connor Prize.

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