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My Life
Among the Electric
Tower Giants

Bumblebees

That summer he had told me he loved me. I called him a liar and he laughed, kissed me with a mouth full of cigarette smoke beneath a star filled moonless sky.

When he spoke the words pricked my heart with bumblebee venom, and I winced when his lips pressed into my own. The venom spread throughout me, and his bumblebee words dropped dead moments after they had stung.

We sat upon the hilltop, beneath those old and ugly power lines, smoking cigarettes and sipping pink wine from a plastic canteen, until the hum of the cables, like gigantic slow-motion bees' wings, had put us both to sleep.

Young men had loved me before, or said they had. I had danced with them in school gymnasiums, in the light of a thousands small white light bulbs. They have breathed upon my face with breath sweet-sour with stolen bourbon sips and spearmint gum, as they thrust their bodies onto mine in the back seats of their fathers' cars, blue jeans down around our ankles, bare thighs wet with sweat and exaggerated lust.

When I first saw him my eyes had almost filled with tears, knowing the years of pain that surely would ensue if I did not heed my instincts. But still, when he approached me, leaned his shoulder gently into my own, I did not reject his attempts. Instead, I sat there beside him basking in the radiant warmth of his body, the scent of his dirty hair, the smell of the dirt that dusted his face and shirt and blue jeans.

We had met in the town pub, in late spring. He had just moved to the town alone, and he'd taken a job as a landscaper, caring for the lawns and gardens of some of the town's wealthier inhabitants.

I told him I was attending college for entomology, and had no intentions of squandering my future on a gardener. And he told me that it wouldn't be a problem, because now he would do whatever it took to meet my requirements.

"What do you want me to be?" he said, his eyes digging deep into my own. "If you tell me, I'll be it." His eyes were wide, and it made me feel so sad to see that he was serious.

We sat for a while and drank cheap beer, and chatted. His bare arms dappled with hundreds of tiny scratches from briar bush thorns, and tiny red dots of insect bites and stings.

Days later he was at my doorstep; his old truck parked in the street in front my parents' large white home. My father had called up to my room, disdain and annoyance in his voice. "Some kid's here to see you," he said. Something in my chest heaved because I knew it would be him.

He stood outside upon the porch, in dirt-covered jeans and tee shirt, his dusty brown hair hanging down over his eyes.

"He didn't invite you in?" I asked.

“That’s okay,” he said smiling. “I’m dirty.” And he slapped his jeans gently with the side of his hand.

I pulled my sweater shut and stepped outside, closed the door behind me.

“Would you like to go for a ride somewhere?” I asked.

“I’d love to,” he replied.

We drove around for a while, along the dark unlit streets that weaved across the hills beyond the town.

We drove with our windows open, and the soft song of cicadas and katydids mingled sweetly with the bluegrass mandolins and fiddles that sang from the cab’s speakers.

“I want to show you something,” he said, touching my palm with his fingers, and I took his hand into my own.

He pulled off the road beside some woods, and we got out and walked in the darkness until we had reached a clearing.

There was an old water tower beside the electrical towers, and he told me to climb the ladder to the top, and he said not to be afraid because he would be behind me and he wouldn’t let me fall.

I climbed the ladder easily, feeling as if I’d grown somehow lighter his arms upon the ladder at my waist.

When we reached the top, he stood behind me, steered me by my shoulders to face the town.

“Look at that,” he said. Pointing toward the soft orange glow of our town.

It was beautiful, hundreds and hundreds of lights, all shades of yellows and oranges and whites. And I turned around and kissed him and he kissed me back.

For the next few months we met on nights after he got off work, and we would drive out to the hills where the electric towers stood. And he told me he loved me, again and again, until I broke down and confessed without embarrassment that in my heart I loved him too.

“I guess it all worked out,” he said.

The end of August came quickly. I sat in my room, waiting for his arrival, raindrops smacking intermittently against my bedroom windowpane. The fall semester would soon be starting, and I would have to leave again for school. I was anxious. He had told me all summer long that he would come with me, move to the city to be with me while I continued my studies.

I always refused; told him he would be a distraction, that I needed to concentrate my time on schoolwork, not on some boy.

But secretly, I longed for him to come with me. That I didn’t care about school anymore, that all I cared about was being with him. That night I intended to tell him the truth.

He arrived later than usual, and before he did, the clouds had opened up and rain was falling in sheets.

Something seemed wrong. He was quieter than usual, and his shirt and pants were soaked as if he’d been standing in the rain for hours.

We got into his truck like we'd had so many times before, and drove on through the falling rain. But this time we took a different route.

"Where are we going?" I finally asked.

"Out to the river," he said quietly.

We drove on out toward the power plant substation beside the river on the outskirts of town.

"I have to talk to you about something," I said. "I've given it some thought, what you said, about coming with me, to the city."

He remained silent, his eyes peering out through the rainfall, focused on the road before us.

"I want you to come with me," I said. "I don't want to be without you."

He didn't reply, but slowed the car to a halt. Putting it in park in the center of the road.

"Get out," he said. I didn't ask why.

I stepped out into the rain, pulling my sweatshirt hood up over my head. Fat drops smacked down upon me, cold and heavy. The sound of the rain on the hood and roof of his truck rang out like a gigantic snare drum, and the truck's wipers screamed out as they frantically scraped across the windshield, and in the distance I heard a strange sound like thousands of tiny birds singing.

He stood in front of the truck, illuminated by the headlights.

"Look," he said pointing out at the street yards in front of the truck.

"What?" I said, not being able to make anything out.

"Look," he said again. "The road."

I looked again and suddenly it came into focus.

Beside the road, beneath the power lines, there was a small gully filled with water. A pipe that jutted out from the hillside was gushing water, hundreds of gallons a minute. The gully had overflowed its embankment and the water was coursing out onto the road. Downhill the road became like a river itself and it flowed down past the power plant parking lot and spilled into the river.

It was another moment before I saw them. There upon the road, the hillside, everywhere, were thousands of tiny frogs. I looked closer still, and then I could see that each one was horribly disfigured and malformed.

"They're mutants!" he shouted above the noise. "Look!"

His arms were down tight at his sides, and his tee shirt was thoroughly drenched; he was shaking. I grabbed him in my arms, and held him tight, and he pressed his face hard into my shoulder and it seemed as if he was crying.

I put my arm around his shoulders and walked him back to the truck, helped him climb inside.

We just sat there for a while, among the sounds of rain and windshield wipers and deformed frogs chirping.

“I can’t go with you,” he finally spoke. His eyes down in his lap, his hair drenched and dripping hanging down over his face.

He drove me home in silence and I left his truck without a word. The rain had stopped, and as I watched his truck roll slowly away, I saw shapes like many tiny frogs compressed into the dull and rounded treads of the truck’s old tires.