

1 Ashley massaged the fragile skin from the flesh of a
2 boiled peach. He braced the spine of the knife with his
3 thumb, blistered but numbed by the ice bath, and rolled
4 the blade around the pit. Thoughts of his wife pooled in
5 the hollow the familiar work hollowed out.

6 The fire had just never gone out. He gave the knife
7 a little twist and split the peach in two. It was hard
8 to stand in the same room as her, now. He scooped up the
9 gleaming slices of fruit and they slipped like goldfish
10 into the jar. It was hard to really get used to these
11 things and his thoughts moved in circles. They revolved
12 around his wife and the fire, eclipsed now and then by
13 Javier. Javier, the nurse, who looked after her now.
14 Javier, for whom he collected the pits, in a sun-beaten
15 two-litre ice-cream pail, as a small, yearly favour.



16

17 His flip-flops puckered as he walked to the stove and
18 the jars that honeycombed the countertop tinkled. He
19 lowered the flame. He stirred the syrup. The pine walls
20 beaded with varnish and warmed the light in the kitchen
21 into which the peaches and carmelized sugar had been
22 steadily luring wasps. On three separate occasions he'd
23 had to dump an entire jar of peaches into a colander in
24 the sink, turn on the tap, and - with his thumb against

25 the faucet to concentrate the spray - hose their twitch-
26 ing, brittle bodies through the slits. Each time it made
27 him shudder. He'd pause to collect his nerves and look
28 out across the orchard from the window above the sink.
29 Sheila's collection of beach glass lined the windowsill,
30 translucent little livers of white, brown, and green.
31 The afternoon light was an overcast grey that found the
32 grey in everything. A glider turned in patient arcs, so
33 close to the clouds in colour that only movement gave it
34 away. Something twitched up close in the corner of the
35 screen. Brassy, frantic legs and antennae, and a black
36 as oil abdomen with a wispy ovipositor that urgently,
37 intimately coiled and uncoiled. "Stumpfucker!" he wheezed
38 before he felt his mouth move, everything out of sync
39 now, scrambling about for a weapon. He wrapped his hands
40 around a bottle of Joy and bludgeoned the thing with
41 the butt of bottle before it could crawl into the house
42 through the widening rip in the screen. Lemon ropes of

43 dish soap shot in his direction. He smashed the thing
44 again and again and when he had separated it from its
45 abdomen and it still wouldn't stop twitching he dropped
46 the bottle and with his face in a knot he yanked the can
47 out from under the sash. The window slammed so hard and
48 so fast for a second he thought it had cracked.

49 The peaches in the colander were covered in detergent,
50 which now was all over everything. He could taste it! The
51 scalp-prickling memory of his mother hearing him cuss,
52 squeezing shut his nostrils as she washed his mouth with
53 soap. The comotion had scattered the beach glass across
54 the counter, sink and floor. He heard a voice behind him
55 as he crouched to gather them up.

56 "Ash?"

57 He unclenched the fist of his face and stood. Javier
58 was there in his sneakers and scrubs.

59 "Ash, are you hurt?"

60 "No, no, sorry, no, it was just a stu - just a wasp.

61 It was just a really, really big wasp. In the, uh, fuck

62 -" He felt his face getting hotter.

63 "Ash, you appear to be having a reaction. I need you

64 to answer me, Ash," he said, in painfully clear and

65 measured tones. "Are you allergic to bees?"

66 "No. Sorry," he said. "No, sorry, it's... I'm... it's

67 fine, I'm okay. Wasp."

68 "It's okay, Ash. Here," he said, unzipping a burgundy

69 fanny pack and rooting around inside it, "we'll put some

70 calamine on it."

71 "No, sorry, I'm, I'm okay, I didn't get stung. I'm

72 okay. I got it."

73 At this Javier appeared to relax and his broad smile

74 returned. He snapped a finger gun at Ashley and winked.

75 "I'd hate to see the other guy!"

76 "Oh, huh, yeah, haha, yeah, yeah, haha, yeah, oh

77 yeah," said Ashley, "haha, yeah, he, uh, I mean she,

78 uh, yeah, he won't be bothering us anymore! Haha!" He

79 crouched to pick up the lumps of glass. "So how's she
80 doing?" he asked. "Sheila, I mean."

81 "Oh, she's doing very well," he said with a chuckle.
82 "She's a very intelligent woman, you know, very wise. But
83 it's clear. You know this."

84 "The, uh..." Ashley trailed off.

85 "No, of course," he said, "yes, she's still on fire,
86 of course," which wasn't, of course, surprising, but
87 there was comfort in routine. He let his eyes drift shut
88 and his nostrils flare. "Mmm... it smells absolutely divine
89 in here, Ash," he said, as Ashley rinsed off the beach
90 glass and arranged it on the sill. "Sheila and I can't
91 wait to taste this year's peaches, Ash. This means so
92 very much to her, you know." Javier paused and cocked
93 his ear as he raised and lowered his foot. He fished a
94 wet-nap from the fanny pack and wiped off the soles of
95 his sneakers before returning at last to the bedroom.

96 It had been three years now, since the fire began,

97 which was, in itself, peculiar. Of course even one year
98 would have been strange. Even a day in flames is odd.
99 Unharmed, all the moreso. As for the restrictive diet of
100 peaches, whether it was under these circumstances normal
101 was something he had no way of knowing. He did ask his
102 nutritionist cousin about it. "I really don't know what to
103 tell you, Ashley. It isn't something I've seen before, if
104 I'm going to be honest," she'd said. "In your practice,
105 you mean?" he asked, deferentially. "No, I mean, not at
106 all," she said. It was unclear what to expect with these
107 things.

108 The strange thing, it was widely agreed, was that
109 the fire didn't burn her, that, according to Javier, it
110 caused no tissue damage. Nor did it spread to things she
111 touched. When she'd first come down with it and for quite
112 some time, they were extremely careful not to burn down
113 the house. For a week she lived in the bathtub. Ashley
114 brought her meals but she'd leave them untouched, until

115 finally they hit on the peaches. The bathwater, disap-
116 pointingly, had no effect on the flames, besides making
117 them noisily sputter. This became such an annoyance to
118 Sheila, in time, that she would drain the tub and just
119 sit there, on the dry enamel. When she noticed, quite
120 by accident, that the curtain didn't burn, they gin-
121 gerly began to experiment. The fire, it seemed, clung to
122 Sheila alone. Or possibly only to flesh. The chance of it
123 spreading to another human body was simply too dangerous
124 to test.

125 The difficult thing was his asthma.

126 The fire never produced any smoke, or anything resem-
127 bling smoke. But something was somewhat off with the air.
128 He started to develop an allergy - hayfever, he assumed
129 - but it persisted well into winter and on a certain
130 afternoon in February he started to notice the threads.
131 They hung in the air all around her and had a way of
132 sliding slowly about that distinguished them from dust

133 motes. "They had a purposeful way of moving," is how he
134 might have chosen to describe them were he still at home
135 in language.

136 Unlike the fire, whose existence and gravity no one
137 any longer had occasion to doubt, these ephemeral, glassy
138 filaments bothered him alone. Not only were they hard to
139 see, and under most angles of light imperceptible, but
140 his symptoms were idiopathic. Every doctor was a sceptic
141 and friends would only humour him. Neither loratadine
142 nor cetirizine hydrochloride provided any relief at all.
143 Fexofenadine made the symptoms worse and diphenhydramine
144 made him drowsy. An exposure of just a few seconds would
145 have him coughing the rest of the night. When he spot-
146 ted the tiny red specks on his sleeve after a night of
147 tossing and coughing on the living-room hide-a-bed, he
148 decided the matter was serious and decided to hire a
149 nurse.

150 They both took a shine to Javier, who was always con-

151 scientious. He brought gifts for the couple on every
152 solemnity, including many of which Ashley was ignorant.
153 On the Assumption of Mary, for instance, he gave Ashley
154 a bottle of Lepanto brandy, and Sheila modest pearl
155 earrings. On All Saints' Day, he gave Ashley Resolí and
156 Sheila a brooch, from whose hammered silver foliage
157 bloomed seven baroque pearls. On the Solemnity of Our
158 Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, Ashley received
159 a green liqueur in an undulating bottle labelled, Hierbas
160 de Mallorca, and Sheila got a pearl necklace. And so it
161 went, consistently and uncereemoniously. Ashley tried to
162 demur, at first, on the occasion of the first Assumption,
163 and called Javier into the sun porch while Rigoletto
164 played loud on the radio. He mumbled something about how
165 Sheila, these days, had no use for jewellery, and how
166 the fire would probably damage it (it wouldn't, he knew;
167 the fire clung to her jealously and had never scorched
168 a thing she wore), and that they couldn't, in any case,

169 accept these gifts, it's enough that they pay him so
170 little, but Javier only shrugged and smiled and said
171 it was no trouble at all. The jewellery, he said, was a
172 hobby of his, and the pearls had come to him cheaply. The
173 liquor was something he inherited, and he never drank a
174 sip, himself.

175 Once the last of the batch of peaches was sliced up
176 and jarred, Ashley washed his hands. He dried them off
177 on his khaki pants and slipped on a pair of oven mitts.
178 He carefully lifted the pot of syrup from the stove and
179 poured it into a watering can, from which he poured the
180 syrup into each jar, leaving a half-inch of headspace.
181 Here and there some star anise would slowly bob to the
182 surface. After shooing the remaining wasps away, he
183 lidded the jars and screwed on the rings. The big canning
184 pot took ten at a time and he wrapped each in a thin
185 cotton rag, torn from a worn-out bedsheet, so as to keep
186 them from cracking when the water boiled and jostled them

187 against one another.

188 He reached into a flower pot on top of the fridge,
189 fished out a Red Bird and struck it on the side, and
190 with it lit the hissing burner in the front right corner
191 of the stove. The ignition switch had been broken for
192 years, despite his vows to fix it. There was a time,
193 in the first six months, when he'd blame the stove for
194 what happened, or at least make an effort to do so, as a
195 means of blaming himself. He'd occasionally find himself
196 saying things like, "I should never have let you use that
197 stove, not in your condition," but his voice would lilt
198 at "condition?" as if the apology were some sort of plea.
199 It was not for lack of feeling that the words lacked all
200 conviction, being less an empty vessel than a sieve. What
201 condition, after all, could he have possibly meant? What
202 dull-witted meaning would crawl from the woods and get
203 caught in that apologetic net? If his intention was to
204 draw out an avowal of guilt, or of the Hand of God at

205 work in this world, he wriggled on that hook alone. What
206 bothered him most, as he heard himself speak, was the
207 peculiar tone of his voice, which he judged irredeemably
208 mewling. He tried to correct it. He tried to speak with
209 his chest, like an actor. This, the critic he once was
210 would've written, had him "delivering the his lines
211 histrionically," or in a crueller temper, "hamfistedly,
212 failing to stoke the slightest conviction and leaving the
213 audience cold."

214 His theatre critic days were behind him. This was due
215 to the withering of the fourth estate, in truth, only in
216 part. His way with language had left him. The diaries
217 he still kept and scribbled in daily he could no longer
218 bear to read. His worries clattered out of him in clunky
219 blocks of cliché. Coarse cries of pain collaged from
220 commercials. He was no longer at home with words.

221 There was a pulse of flickering light in the hall and
222 an unmuffling of bright conversation, which swiftly gave

223 way to goodbyes.

224 "You know, Ash," Javier said as he returned to the
225 kitchen, "she cares for you a great deal. She has such
226 appreciation for you. Do you know that?" Ashley bob-
227 bled his head and smiled as the mason jars clattered
228 and the canning pot boiled. Javier removed his tennis
229 shoes and placed them neatly next to the door. He stepped
230 into his tall rubber boots and hoisted a raincoat from
231 a peg by the door. Gripping the cuffs of his sleeves so
232 they wouldn't ride up, he slowly pulled it on, without
233 taking his eyes off Ashley. "I do hope you know that."
234 Fiddling with a peach pit he'd just finished scrubbing,
235 Ashley fumbled for words. "Oh, Javier, the, uh... they're
236 ready for you," he said, in a voice that felt flustered
237 and stilted. "The peach stones, I mean." He nodded at
238 the bucket on the edge of the table. The label read
239 "Neapolitan", still, but the picture was bleached by the
240 sun, leaving the strawberry white and the chocolate dull

241 green. "Ah, I almost forgot!" Javier said and started to
242 pull off his boots.

243 "It's fine," Ashley said, "I have to do the, uh," he
244 made a gesture that looked like tugging a rope, "the
245 mopping, still, it's, it's fine."

246 Javier shrugged, checked the seal on the bucket, and
247 then pressed it tight til it clicked on one side. He
248 shook it gently and said, "thank you, Ash!"

249 "I've... I've been... sorry, I've been meaning to ask,"
250 said Ashley, "what do you, uh... I mean, do you garden?"

251 "Truly, Ash, thank you!" Javier gripped the bucket
252 with a single hand as if it were a cup of coffee. "I
253 appreciate this."

254 Something in the orchard caught Ashley's eye.

255 Javier hoisted his backpack from the peg where his
256 raincoat had been hanging and heaved it over his shoul-
257 der. He swung it to the front and unfastened the flap.
258 "Ash, I almost forgot," he said, "I have something for

259 you." He withdrew a bottle of Gusano Rojo and stood it in
260 a clearing on the table.

261 "Thank you, you didn't have... no, I mean, thank you,"
262 said Ashley. Javier smiled broadly and left.

263 Behind the muted clatter of jars it was quiet. Ashley
264 cleared out the sink and ran the tap, and waited for the
265 water to warm. His eyes impatiently scanned the sky. It
266 was a while before he could see it, its colour already so
267 close to the clouds'. But there it was, tracing another
268 generous arc over Sheila's father's orchard. It vanished,
269 for a while, behind the house, and circled the orchard
270 again. Ashley was still holding the pit he was holding
271 when Javier left. He unclenched his hand and caressed
272 it, moving the blistered pad of his thumb in tiny, cir-
273 cular motions. He considered pouring a shot of mezcal.
274 He wondered what pearls he gave Sheila this time, and
275 how the colour of the flames would slightly change in a
276 blue areola around them, as if they were bruised by their

277 weight. Their delicacy left him shaken. He leaned against
278 the sink and felt a crease of soapy water on his waist.

279 He tugged on the knob of a drawer, jiggling it a bit
280 to jostle loose the ladle that seemed to be jamming it
281 shut. He rummaged around till he found it: an oyster
282 knife with a two-inch blade and a green, textured han-
283 dle, which made it easy to grip. He looked away from the
284 window screen and the chitinous mess in the corner. He
285 strained to focus his eyes on the pit. He cupped it in
286 his hand and squinted, then set it back on the counter.
287 The threads of pulp that clung to it moved like air above
288 a barbeque, or algae underwater. He fished his reading
289 glasses from the wicker basket that he kept by the pot
290 on top of the fridge. He polished them with the edge of
291 his shirt before he put them on. He cupped the pit in his
292 hand and gripped it. He held it steady with his thumb and
293 squinted. He trained his eyes on the seam.

294 Yes, yes of course. Of course. Yes, of course.

295 He pressed the tip of the knife to the crease and cau-
296 tiously - cautiously - twisted. The knife slid loose. His
297 pulse pounded at the base of his ear and his follicles
298 itched on his scalp. His clothing, damp with sweat and
299 syrup and soap, now felt knotted and twisted. The running
300 hot water was fogging his glasses and so he wiped them
301 off with his right hand while he inspected his left for
302 cuts. There were none. He drew a breath and once again
303 clenched the pit in his hand. He pressed the knife to
304 the seam. A little bit firmer this time. An opalescent
305 droplet beaded on the crease. He levered the knife a
306 little, tilting it up and down, and waited to feel it
307 find purchase. A shard chipped away. A sharp hiss of
308 brine. A startled frill of greyish flesh withdrew into
309 the pit. He wedged the blade deeper and twisted.