
Sweetness

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Sharon Oard Warner

Sweetness

This brilliant Sunday morning in September finds Sophie winding her way across the lot behind her house, a rectangular plot of land laid out lengthwise, something less than an acre. Strangers might say this piece of earth doesn't amount to much, a stretch of sand rippled by the wind and dotted with clumps of chamisa, cholla, and sage. But what do strangers know? Above and well beyond her floats an ocean of sky, clouds billowing and scudding across a vast blue surface before disappearing to the west. As she makes her way toward her father, Sophie reaches out to finger the tops of the brushy sage, covered now with tiny purple flowers. They're like straw to the touch, so dry they crumble into the cuticles of her nails. When she thrusts her hands into the pockets of her jeans, she deposits papery purple specks in the white seams. Her chin is raised, as though for a stage entrance, her mouth held slightly open. A glob of honey rides, trembling, on the tip of her tongue.

Only moments before, she spotted her father from her second-story window. Sophie's bedroom offers an excellent view of the line of boxes in the foreground and the five bumpy volcanoes on the horizon. The volcanoes are called the Sleeping Sisters – dormant for thousands of years but still not extinct. Her friends who sleep over never fail to take notice. "What the hell are those?" they ask, noses pressed to the pane of glass. For these teenage girls, the Sleeping Sisters have long since ceased to be of interest, but the hives are another matter. The hives resemble small chests of drawers and are all the more arresting because they're painted not white but primary colors – red, green, yellow, and two shades of bright blue. For all the girls know, the boxes hold something precious, and indeed they do, something rich and golden that lures Sophie's father back to her.

For the time being, Jack takes no notice of his daughter's approach. He's busy searching for his queen. "Where are you, little

lady?" he mutters, head bent to the frame of brood, bustling with the brown bodies of hundreds of worker bees. His white bee overalls trail the ground – someone's castoffs or else bought to accommodate his belly – and he moves slowly, both to reassure the bees and because it's his nature. Beekeepers are a contemplative lot and Jack more than most. When he walks, talks, makes love to his wife or now to his girlfriend, he appears to have all the time in the world.

He doesn't wear a veil, though he keeps one handy on the ground beside him, in case his bees are out of sorts. Just now, he finds it difficult to gauge their mood because he can't see them well enough – they're little more than a blurry mass of movement. He's done it again, come out to the hives without his reading glasses. Pursing his lips, Jack scans the surface of the frame and watches for a path to open. That much he can surely make out. Typically, the workers defer to the queen and scramble over themselves to get out of her way.

Determined to see, Jack holds the frame back, but not far enough to bring their small world into focus. Tiny legs tickle as dozens of bees clamber over his thumbs and index fingers before scurrying back to the security of the wooden frame. They pay him no more mind than he pays his daughter, who's just behind him now. "Come out, come out, wherever you are," he sings to his queen, but it's no good. Even holding it out at arm's length, he can't see for shit. "I need elbow extenders," he mutters to himself.

A few feet from the hives, Sophie stops and stands motionless. The air is still, but an occasional breeze tousles her hair, a mass of brownish black curls bobbing gently about her shoulders, one startling lock of white tangled among them. Sophie's stomach grumbles with hunger, and saliva pools under her tongue. She's paying penance for yesterday's lunch, when she perched in a pink plastic booth at Blake's and consumed a Lotta Burger and a huge mound of curly fries with her best friend, Tamara. Such a feast! One after another, they dunked crusty orange curls of potato into a bloody puddle of catsup, sipped diet Coke, and giggled over high-school gossip.

Sophie stands and waits for her father to take notice, and when he doesn't, she attempts the word "Daddy." The syllables come out slurred, the D sound missing. She's trying not to flatten the honey against the roof of her mouth, trying vainly not to taste it. The truth is Sophie doesn't care for honey, not that she's admitted this to her father.

Jack turns his head at the garbled sound, still squinting, though Sophie is far enough away to be clear in his sight. He tracks the freckles on her nose, reassures himself of the clear green of her eyes. "Sophie, girl," he sighs. When she was small, she surprised other adults by referring to her parents as "Jack and Peggy." Now that she's a senior in high school and nearly grown, now that Jack has moved out of the house and into an apartment across town, Sophie has taken to calling him "Daddy." Both father and daughter pretend not to notice the change.

Lowering the frame, bending to prop it against the hive, he asks, "What can I do for you?" He's preoccupied and more than a little frustrated.

The bees continue to boil over the comb; most don't notice the change of situation, but a few rise into the air. Inevitably, one or two drift toward Sophie. To the bees, her red T-shirt must resemble some impossibly large flower. There she is, the sort of miracle bees don't think to question. She shrugs, and with a huge silly grin, opens her mouth wide and sticks out her tongue. The honey is melting, dripping over her chapped lips and pointed chin. For a second, Jack suspects she's been smoking again. Pot reduces her to mindless hilarity; to use sixties lingo, she finds it impossible to "maintain." Just a few weeks back she lost her job at Movies West for stunts related to smoking marijuana. Then Jack spots the first bee, hovering in the air about her face, homing in on her tongue, and he begins to laugh, a huge guffaw he reserves for what truly delights him.

This is a trick he taught Sophie long ago, only of course she's taken it the extra mile. That's Sophie for you. When she was three – a doll of a daughter, all black ringlets and gleeful giggle – he brought her out to the hives. Peggy protested, naturally, but Jack was adamant. The child must learn her lesson, he insisted, or there'd be no way to keep her safe. So, he spread a towel across the sand and instructed his daughter to sit on it. He still remembers the way she settled herself – plump little legs crossed, hands in her lap – and gazed up at him in that dazed state of daddy devotion. "Hold still," he warned. "Don't move a muscle." And kneeling beside her, he worked a small plastic squeeze bottle from his pants pocket and squeezed three golden drops into the crook of her elbow.

Solemn little Sophie held her arm extended in front of her face, and her eyes went a little crossed as she watched the honey trickle

off her arm and onto the towel. "Tickle!" she cried as the first bee lit on her arm to take up honey.

"Sh-h-h. Hold still," Jack warned, and Sophie tried. She fought off fidgeting until the bees began to rise off her skin and buzz about her ear, filling her with their flat humming song. Agitated, she couldn't help herself: she shook her head and waved her pudgy arm. Naturally, the bees were bothered. Biting his lip, Jack waited for the inevitable, a heartrending and pitiful scream. That first day Sophie was stung four or five times, more than Jack had bargained for, and Peggy refused to speak to him for days on end. "Bastard," she whispered into his ear that night. "You and your damn bugs can go straight to hell."

But look at Sophie now, standing there with her shoulders thrust back, her mouth wide open. Her tongue is a landing pad for bees! They hover about her head, alight, and gather on her cheeks, lips, even the tip of her nose. Five, ten, then twenty or more, until the lower part of her face is covered with their brown, bustling bodies. She's fearless, his daughter, and Jack's heart swells with love. "I wish I had a camera," he exclaims, a feeble gesture because he isn't the sort to document family life, and they both know it. Even when he was living among them he did precious little of that sort of thing.

When the honey is gone and the last of the bees have departed for other flowers, Sophie gives a nervous shake of her shoulders and raises the hem of her T-shirt to her mouth, scrubbing her lips until they turn a rosy red. Catching Jack's eye, she grins. "I know, they're cleaner than we are, but, damn, their feet itch." A second later she follows up: "I know, they don't have feet, but it feels like they do."

The lean expanse of her belly is visible, and as she resumes rubbing, the shirt hikes higher, exposing the bright white of her bra. Jack's gaze catches then releases. This sort of thing makes him uncomfortable, and Sophie knows it. He wishes she wouldn't insist on such intimacy – the way she runs to the bathroom in her underwear, for instance, or curls some nights into a single bed with her brother Ian, eleven now and too old for that sort of thing. "If I can't talk to him, the least I can do is sleep with him," she's explained.

"Where's Ian?" Jack asks when Sophie's finished her display and smoothed the T-shirt back into place. Ian is a sore subject. Peggy leaves messages on Jack's machine nearly every day now:

Ian won't do his homework. Ian won't do his chores. Ian won't get out of bed. This is crazy, Jack. You can't just abandon us this way!

"Ian the Terrible was still in bed, but don't worry: I woke him. He's probably in the shower by now." She casts an anxious glance toward the house because in fact she hasn't yet tried to rouse her brother. It's such a chore. These days, Ian sleeps rather than eats, sleeps rather than watch television, talk to his friends, or do his homework. His teachers complain that he dozes off in class. Awake, he appears to be sleepwalking, a bed-head blonde with heavy lids and a disheartening habit of gazing blankly over the shoulders of all those who bother to speak to him.

"Ian the Terrible?" Jack asks. "Why do you call him that?"

"Because it gives him hope he might be terrible some day. If I call him terrible often enough, he might grow a spine and pulverize the people who've hurt him."

Jack hunches his heavy shoulders and squints off toward the horizon. "Is he getting picked on at school again?" he finally asks.

"Don't know," Sophie says, sighing. "Probably. Listen, I'm fixing breakfast for everyone. Please stay and eat."

"I don't think I have time."

"But it's Sunday, and we haven't seen you all week. You come for the bees, but to hell with your family."

"That's not true, Sophie," he says, though there's something to it after all. The bees don't make him feel guilty for living the way his daughter and son do. But then the bees don't really know him, nor do they care. At best, he's a benign presence to the hive; at worst, he's a meddler. If not for the mites and the measures he takes to control them, the bees would be better off without him. A great big bear stealing their honey, that's all he is.

"Tell you what," he says. "Go get my glasses from the car, and I'll be forever in your debt."

"Does that mean you'll stay?" She's holding her ground; she hasn't moved a muscle, except that somehow her hands have arrived on her hips. While he watches, she thrusts them into her pockets so that her elbows jut in the air like exclamation marks.

"Shall I put it in writing?"

"Maybe."

"Come here, Sophie, girl. Give your daddy a kiss."

She considers for a second or two; he can see it in her eyes. She's not sure whether to trust him, and there it is: the knowledge that he's hurt the one he loves best. For now, for this moment, he regrets everything he's done this last year, absolutely everything.

His daughter is short, only a little over five feet, and he's a large, slack man spilling over in every direction. When he goes to kiss her, he often throws an arm around her waist and scoops her off the ground. He does that now, the scratchy bee suit pressing against the underside of her arm.

"Go get my glasses, please," he says when he's set her down. "They're in the glove compartment."

"Okay," she agrees. After backing away a safe distance, she turns and runs a drunken path through the brush and in the direction of the low-slung adobe house, its pitched metal roof gleaming in the sun. Jack's dusty green Taurus station wagon is parked on the gravel wash behind Peggy's Toyota. Giddy from the kiss, Sophie runs clumsily over the rocks and throws open the driver's side door, diving inside and disappearing. When she emerges, a grimy khaki bucket cap is pulled over that wild head of hair. Her eyes are hidden, but she is grinning madly.

As soon as Sophie hands Jack his glasses, he gets back to business, holding up another frame, eyes scanning the comb for the queen. She's bigger than the workers, with a long pointed abdomen, and she moves slowly, her carriage dignified and, yes, royal. Still, she is a bee like the others and therefore difficult to pick out, which is why some beekeepers glue a colored disk to her thorax. Not Jack. He's contemptuous of such measures, likening them to painting the backs of turtles. It's not natural, he's explained to Sophie on any number of occasions, nor is it necessary. The trick to finding the queen is not to look for her.

"Scan the surface," he reminds her now. "Don't look at the parts. We're talking gestalt here, Sophie."

While he talks, his daughter stands a few feet away, gazing out at him from under the brim of the cap, which smells reassuringly of Jack. Overhead, clouds billow and sweep across a smooth blue surface, passing one after another. At this rate, they'll reach the Colorado Rockies by nightfall. Sophie is only half listening. Her father's been schooling her in bees since she was a little girl. She knows more about bees than she does about the Revolutionary War or algebraic formulas, more about bees than about similes or syllogisms. Too bad bees don't show up on the SAT, she thinks. She'd have aced that section for sure.

"Same thing I did with you," he tells her, "when you ran off and lost yourself in a crowd."

Sophie perks up. "Lost myself?" she asks. Before Jack moved out, she had no patience for this sort of nostalgic nonsense, but

these days she can't get enough of it. Tell me stories, Daddy, she thinks, amused at the two of them.

Jack has finished examining yet another frame, and he leans it with the others, propped against the side of the yellow hive body. Four down, five to go. "When you were three or four, you used to just take off. Once we lost you in the big hall of the State Fair," he continues. "I kept telling your mother not to panic. Not that she paid a damn bit of attention – "

"Weren't you scared?" Sophie interrupts. She doesn't want to get him started on Peggy.

"No," he says grudgingly. "I knew how to look for you, just like I know how to find this queen. She's not hiding. She's just going about her business, same as you were." His voice dies away. He squints and peers at the frame. Sophie waits a minute or two for him to resume the story, but he's forgotten his intention.

His hair looks awful, Sophie thinks. There's not much left of it, and the breeze has teased what he has into tufts here and there and pasted a few strands to his wide, lined forehead. In the last few years, Jack's hair has turned an ugly steel gray color. It's a wonder that he's found a girlfriend so quickly, but then she *is* middle-aged and fat. Her name is *Maybe*, which Sophie finds hard to believe. Who could be serious about someone named *Maybe*? At the very least, Sophie's mother, Peggy, is better looking and possessed of a presentable name, not to mention a respectable business. So far as Sophie's been able to figure out, *Maybe* is a professional scrounger. She scours garage sales and estate auctions for dusty doodads she resells to losers.

Although Sophie feels sure her father will come to his senses and return home soon, she's made it her task in life to gently urge him in the right direction, just as he's nudging the bees off his thumb and back onto the frame. If she didn't believe she could turn this thing around, she'd sink right down in the sand and sob her heart out. "Where did you find me?" she asks, determined to see this story through.

He hesitates, then finds his place and answers: "Next to a cage of rabbits. Standing there with your hands on your hips, just like now. Trying to run everyone else's business." He raises his large head and gazes off into the past. "'My bunnies,' you were saying. The man who owned them insisted on giving you one."

"I remember that bunny!" Sophie exclaims. "It ran away, didn't it?"

"We told you it ran away." He's returned his attention to the frame, so his answer is an afterthought. "More like a coyote got it."

"That's not true!" Sophie cries.

Jack shushes her. "Come take a look," he says. "I think I've found my little lady."

"I remember that bunny, Jack," Sophie insists, "and I'm certain he ran away." She hasn't thought of the rabbit in years. He was black, with long floppy ears that felt like velvet, and he had the bad habit of pooping in her hand, little brown pellets that seemed like an offering of sorts, that is if you didn't know what they were.

Her father has raised his eyes from the comb and turned his steady gaze on her. "And here I thought you were old enough to recognize the truth." He's joking, but it's a little prod as well, this comment. Along with his generosity, Jack tends toward a sort of brutal honesty. Over the years, he's wounded Sophie by insisting on his version of truth, by admitting, for instance, that he's happier living in a studio apartment across town. "Are you going to look or not?"

She doesn't say what she wants to – that she has better things to do. Instead, she edges forward until she can lean over the frame, thinking all the while that this bee looks pretty much like the rest of them. She may be called the queen, but her pitiful little life is drudgery. After a few weeks of excitement – mating in mid air with a succession of drones who drop dead afterward – she has a lifetime of laying eggs to look forward to. How much fun can that be?

"Snap out of it, Queenie," Sophie instructs the bee under Jack's thumb. "I'm here to tell you they're making a fool of you. *He's* making a fool of you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jack asks, but Sophie whirls around and stomps off to the house, kicking up sand as she goes.

Sighing, Jack returns to his bees, plucking up the queen out of the mass of worker bees. It's just as he thought, and he knows what has to be done. He doesn't hesitate but smashes her between his thumb and index finger, then flicks her on the ground at his feet.

"Are you trying to kill your father?" Peggy asks, sidling behind her daughter at the stove. "Is that the plan?" Breakfast is almost ready. Together, they peer into the soupy contents of the cast-iron skillet, a bubbling cauldron of crumbly meat and fat, all of it stained a brilliant, peppery red.

"Of course not." Sophie's busy breaking up chunks of chorizo sausage with a table fork. She stands storklike, one bare foot propped on top of the other, and even in the half-light, her red toenails gleam. During the summer – and in New Mexico September certainly qualifies – Sophie goes barefoot in the house. They all do. No matter how hot it is outside, the brick floors retain a comfortable chill that cools the body from the ground up.

"It certainly *looks* like you're trying to kill him," Peggy persists.

"I didn't fix bacon," Sophie says, "He's not supposed to eat *bacon*."

"What do you mean? Chorizo is worse than bacon. Have you ever seen so much grease in your life?"

Sophie's back stiffens. "I can drain it."

Peggy knows her daughter and recognizes it's time to back off. "Let me help you, sweetie," she offers.

"Then behave yourself," Sophie replies, jabbing the bottom of the skillet with the fork. "If you're looking to help, that's what you can do."

"Behave myself?" Peggy can't help feeling indignant. "Just what's that supposed to mean?" She leans in to whisper in her daughter's ear. "Afraid I'm going to ruin the family breakfast? *Mais non, Mademoiselle Sophie*. Wouldn't dream of it." Tugging at her daughter's sleeve, she makes a quick swipe across her scarlet breast, silver charm bracelet jingling up a tiny metallic storm.

You're not Catholic, Sophie thinks, and you're not French either.

In the sixties, Peggy was a flower child – flamboyant and fanciful – and she still dresses as though daily existence is a drama requiring costumes. "Life's a stage!" she's exclaimed to Sophie more than once. With the proper musical accompaniment, Peggy would whirl across the long room, an aging sprite. It's the sort of thing she's prone to: delirious twirling in the morning followed by crying jags at night. Today she's in a tropical state of mind. Dressed for work in a red printed sarong skirt and a matching sleeveless leotard, she wears her long, unruly, mostly-gray hair pulled up off her neck and clipped with a silver barrette shaped like a feather. Unlike most women nearing fifty, whose bodies force them into accommodations, Peggy still wears her jeans low-slung, her necklines plunging. Her clothes are so hip that Sophie often plunders her mother's closet late at night, preferring Peggy's taste to her own.

Jack hasn't come inside yet, but he's standing on the porch and

perfectly visible through the narrow window next to the door. At the moment, he's struggling with the bee overalls, which he can't seem to strip off. Wobbling and hopping, he jerks one leg over the tops of his work boots. Peggy glances anxiously toward the window. It's been more than a week since she's laid eyes on her husband, and she hasn't the first idea what to say.

A minute later, the back door shudders open with a loud creaking complaint, and he shoulders his way inside. Their elderly golden retriever, Lady, lurches to her feet and clatters across the brick to the door, barking ecstatically. These days, only something truly exciting draws her out – the bone from a pot roast, say, or the FedEx deliveryman. Evidently, Jack's appearance has made the short list of events in Lady's life. It's embarrassing, the way she greets him, wagging her tail so strenuously that her backside sways. To keep from flopping over, she has to plant her legs and extend her claws.

"Lady!" Sophie yells over the racket. "Will you shut the fuck up?"

"Sophie, please," Peggy admonishes in a small voice. Jack and Peggy are pushovers as parents, and at this late date have resigned themselves to the futility of pretending otherwise. Sophie doesn't bother even to acknowledge the complaint, and Peggy moves on. "How about I crack eggs?" she suggests brightly, edging around her daughter to the refrigerator. This last she mutters to herself: "How about I treat your daddy to a nice big helping of cholesterol."

Jack has dropped to the floor where he is hauling the fat old dog into his ample lap. "Hiddy ho, Lady Luck," he crows, calling her by her complete name, the one they used to register her. Years ago, Peggy intended to breed golden retrievers, another of her projects that went by the wayside. All that's left of that scheme is this elderly dog. "I miss you too, darlin'," Jack says, cradling Lady's head in both hands. Peggy takes note of the fact that Jack misses the dog. Better than nothing, she supposes.

The eggs are assembled on the orange linoleum counter, and she begins cracking them into a large green bowl. These are freerange chicken eggs, brown-shelled with tough exteriors. She whacks them against the hard edge of the bowl, once and occasionally twice before they give way. Over the years she's quieted many the frustration in just this fashion. As a little girl, she cracked eggs for her mother, and given the continual round of church activities – cakes for birthdays, casseroles for Friday-night

socials, cookies for Sunday school – they went through several dozen a week. She recalls the shells of those Waco eggs as white and paper-thin. If she gripped too tightly, they gave way, plunging the ends of her small fingers into cold yellow goo.

Peggy hears her husband get to his feet, and she freezes in place, one last unbroken egg cradled in her palm. The orange countertop blurs in her vision. I'm good, she tells herself. I'm valuable.

"Morning all!" Jack calls out in his hearty husband voice. The sound bounces around the room, knocking off the stucco walls on either end before dying somewhere in the big empty middle.

"Morning," she replies, swinging round and holding out the egg. Although she has no idea why she's made this offering, it's too late to retract it. The egg is perfect, after all, and perhaps her impulse was prompted by Jack's appearance: he looks the part of a rooster this morning. His forehead is sunburned, his hair wind-blown and spiky, and he's leading with that big belly of his – Foghorn Leghorn, she thinks. Why on earth do I still love him?

"Is that hardboiled?" he asks.

She's tempted to say yes, to hand it off and see what happens next: Jack with a mess on his hands, the sort of thing that might cheer her. But, she knows the ruse wouldn't go anywhere. Her husband is savvy, and a hardboiled egg has a different heft to it, is either heavier or lighter than its sloshy kin. She can't recall which. In any case, it's changed on the inside, the sort of thing Jack takes note of. When he packed up and left six months ago, he blamed her, contending she'd changed over the years. "What happened to the little hippie girl I married?" he asked.

And so Peggy simply withdraws her gift, pulling away and turning her back on Jack. Before he can ask again, she whacks the shell on the side of the bowl, so hard that it shatters on impact. Several pieces wash into the bowl along with the whites and the large, quivering, brilliant yellow yolk. She stands staring at the mess before taking the whisk and whipping the contents into froth.

"Where's Ian?" Jack asks.

As though in response to a summons, the boy appears in the doorway, clad in baggy green sweatpants and a white T-shirt, stretched at the neck and the hem, as though someone has grabbed hold of the shirt and held on tight while the child inside tried to run away. "Hey, Sophie," he complains in a small voice. "Thought you said breakfast was ready."

"It's almost ready," Sophie calls cheerily over her shoulder.

She's busy dumping warmed tortillas from a foil packet onto a pottery plate with matching lid. The dining table has been hastily covered with a white cloth, anchored in place by a large bowl of fruit – oranges, apples, and speckled bananas. The Grangers aren't really fruit eaters, but Peggy keeps it on hand anyway. Most often, the apples develop dark sores, the bananas go soft and smelly, and the kiwis shrink to hairy pebbles. Typically, it ends up in the trash.

Jack waits for some sort of acknowledgment from his son, but Ian refuses to look his way. "Good morning, Ian," he finally concedes.

"Morning," Ian echoes, a blanket greeting meant for the whole family or perhaps only for the dog, who's left Jack's side to rub her flank against Ian's soft sweatpants. Idly, the boy reaches down and runs a hand through Lady's soft red fur.

Jack bristles at being ignored. Because he was raised to believe that children owe their elders a measure of respect, he can't help expecting more from his son. Deference wasn't something *his* parents had to ask for or earn; it was their due, regardless. At least, he recalls it this way, and his parents are dead now and in no position to argue.

The Grangers take their traditional places, Jack at one end of the table and Peggy at the other. Lucky reestablishes her outpost underneath, and when Sophie sits down, she's forced to nudge the dog aside to make room. In recent months, they seldom have meals together, so Lady's gotten used to the extra space. She gives it up grudgingly.

"Tortillas?" Sophie asks, hefting the plate and passing it off to Peggy, who shakes her head repeatedly, as though Sophie's just offered to shave her head. Despite herself, Peggy ends up accepting it. Now the plate is hers to get rid of, and she leans over and hands it to Ian, who makes a show of taking two tortillas before offering the plate to Jack, who intends to refuse and then thinks better of it, fishing out one doughy white disc and dropping it onto his plate.

The eggs come around next, heaped on an earthenware platter, yellow clumps that Peggy categorically refuses. She dislikes eggs and they all know it. Ian inquires as to whether they have cheese in them, and when Sophie admits that she forgot about the cheese, he takes only a bite or two. Jack follows suit, shaking a scant spoonful onto his tortilla. Can't be much shell in that, Peggy thinks, and her heart sinks. The plate of eggs travels back to Sophie, and, dutifully, she bends her head to the task, ladling spoon-

ful after spoonful onto her plate. "You all aren't eating much," she remarks sadly before returning the platter to the middle of the table.

"We forgot the sausage!" Peggy cries, filling the quiet room with small, shrieking syllables. She's embarrassed at the way her voice has betrayed her, and so she slips out of her chair and hustles to the stove with her head down.

The drained chorizo is still in the castiron skillet, and Peggy slips on a mitt before raising it from the stove. She's not much of a cook, and it's been a while since she's experienced the dense weight of this skillet. Picking it up, her first impulse is to drop it again. As she progresses around the table, her wrist droops from the strain so that the skillet tilts, the meat sliding to one end. As Peggy passes, Lady raises her head hopefully and maneuvers into place. Sure enough, one spicy morsel, then two, drop in front of her nose, manna from dog heaven.

"You're spilling," Sophie comments, reproof in her tone. Peggy can do no right these days. It's one of the things they've all learned to live with.

When there's nothing more to pass and nothing left to do but consume their meager portions, when the scrape of forks and the squeak of wooden chairs sound too loudly in her ear, Sophie pipes up and asks the obvious: "What were you doing out there, Daddy?"

Jack replies without thinking. "Re-queening," he says. He's busy moving food around on his plate, taking the occasional bite. Whatever he puts in his mouth is nearly tasteless, even the chorizo sausage, which normally has a kick to it. Briefly, he wonders if he's coming down with a cold, then realizes that he simply isn't hungry. He's already had breakfast. Several hours earlier he consumed a huge meal in the company of his girlfriend, Maybe, who craves grits and gravy on Sunday mornings and entices him to a breakfast buffet on the other side of town.

Peggy clears her throat before speaking. "What is re-queening?" she asks.

The room is full of shadows, even this early in the day, and Jack squints to get a better look at his wife. Peggy's earrings shimmer in the morning light, long dangly things she no doubt sells in her shop in Old Town. Tourist trap is how Jack thinks of it. Is she serious? he wonders. Can it be that Peggy doesn't know the answer to her question? For years the air in this room has buzzed with bee

facts and lore. It's the one subject he's truly passionate about. Can it be that she never heard a word of it?

"What it sounds like," he finally says. "Replacing the queen." An uneasy silence follows, which Jack feels honorbound to fill. "Has to be done from time to time," he explains. "The queen gets old, or injured – loses part of a hind leg, say – and the egg-laying suffers. Puts the whole colony in jeopardy."

"So you play God?" Peggy's long thin fingers are spread on either side of her plate. She looks feral, ready to pounce. Shit, Jack thinks. He walked straight into this one. His impulse is to flee, but Ian and Sophie are waiting on either side of him, forks poised in mid-air.

"God doesn't meddle in the lives of bees, Peggy," he responds patiently. "Nature takes care of itself. If I didn't replace the queen, the bees would get around to it eventually. They might swarm first or the hive might die off afterward. Nature takes its chances, but beekeepers don't. We can't afford to. Let nine days go by and I'll introduce a new queen. Most of the hive won't notice the difference."

"Is that right?" Peggy asks brightly. "Well, it all sounds so neat and efficient." Her hands rise off the table and flutter in the air about her head before finding the solace of her hair. She begins to rearrange it, smoothing the coarse strands with her fingers, opening and closing the barrette. "Too bad it doesn't work that way with people," she goes on. "We'd all be so much happier, or at least *most* of us would." Slowly, she gets to her feet and stands swaying before them in her platform sandals. Clutching her thighs with her hands, she repeats the mantra in her head – I am good, I am valuable – then offers a wan smile all around. "Thanks for the breakfast, Sophie sweetheart," she says. "I must be off." And she totters out of the room.

Jack stares down at his plate. Nothing to be done, he thinks. There's not a way in the world to make this right.

"Fruit, Ian?" Sophie asks, her voice a clear bell. "I forgot to pass the fruit."

"Sure," he replies, lifting his face to the light for the first time all morning.

Sophie's begun clearing the table when a short, loud rap on the side door signals her boyfriend's arrival. All's clear: her parents are long gone. Will raps again, harder this time. "Coming!" she

cries, tossing a handful of cloth napkins into the air and darting across the hard brick floor.

As it happened, Peggy's exit was anticlimactic. She slammed out of the house, only to be forced to return a few tortured minutes later. "Your car's blocking mine," she reported stiffly, and that gave Jack reason he needed. "Better be heading out, myself," he said, lumbering around the table to trap each of his children in a brief bear hug. As the sound of tires on gravel died away, Sophie and Ian retreated to the refuge of his room. Together, they burrowed into stale sheets, companionably sharing the same flat pillow. Neither spoke, which was fine. Sometimes breathing in unison is enough. After Ian returned to the world of dreams, Sophie slipped off the edge of his single bed and hurried out to the kitchen to call Will.

Now, she throws open the door and invites him inside. Will smiles shyly and speaks in a newly deep voice that gives her the shivers. She catches a glimpse of his feet, clad in yellow and white running shoes, but that's about it. She can't bring herself to look into his eyes just yet; that would do her in. Will's presence brings on the urge to pee; it's all Sophie can do to hold it. Without a word of explanation, she whirls away and rushes down the hall to the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. It doesn't matter. Will expects this sort of thing, or rather he doesn't expect much at all. He simply drops into a chair at the dining room table and, straddling Lady's front paws, bends to run his fingers through the golden red fur of her haunches. She's dozing now, and even the touch of a stranger doesn't bring her back to life.

Perched on the toilet, Sophie catches her breath. Will's done the trick: she feels suddenly hopeful again. They've got the house to themselves, she thinks, and Ian won't be up for hours. Will is diverting, and Will is hot – six foot and slinky. His body has liquid grace to it, like a waterfall finding its shape as it moves. His hair is dark like hers, only straight, and his skin turns a burnished gold in winter, a copper brown in summer.

After flushing, Sophie turns on the tap and, rinsing her hands, leans in to commune with herself in the water-specked mirror. Briefly, she is irked at the shiny state of her face. Have the bees left some sort of residue on her skin? She tugs a Kleenex from a box on the counter and rubs it roughly across the bridge of her nose. If she were to lean in and look closely, she'd notice a few small blackheads along the ridge of her nostrils, but Sophie isn't the sort to

scrutinize. She sees herself as a boyish beauty in blue jeans and black boots, an image her mother has helped to cultivate. Except for the occasional slash of eyeliner or a coat of burnished lip gloss, Sophie doesn't wear makeup. She prides herself on being natural, and so does her mother, who wears plenty of makeup, but draws the line at dying her hair.

Taking a deep breath, Sophie opens the bathroom door, having decided to do something daring. The decision came at the instant she reached for the toilet paper, and dabbing it against her groin, experienced that odd buzzing sensation, the same feeling that made her rush to pee in the first place. For a second or two, she was as good as paralyzed, her hand poised against the mound of her pubic hair. She yearned to touch herself, something she learned to do before she started school, but even better, she yearned to let Will touch her. Gentle, beautiful, mixed-up Will. His mother is a bitch, which isn't his fault, although it's messed him up pretty good. In a few hours, Will has a job to go to, bussing tables at Garduños, but until early afternoon he's all hers.

When Sophie returns to the kitchen, Will has helped himself to eggs and chorizo, which he's scooping off the plate with a cold tortilla. He isn't picky; he doesn't insist on warm food or wet kisses. He's happy with whatever he gets. Right now, he's draped over a plate, shoveling food into his mouth, but when Sophie enters, he straightens up and slides back in his chair, giving her a sly grin.

"Hey," he says. "These eggs have shell in them." He opens his mouth and sticks out his tongue, and Sophie sees it there, a hard brown fragment against the pink background. He wags his tongue, and she's suddenly embarrassed, which is why she doesn't throw herself on his lap, or lean over and thrust her tongue in his mouth, or any of the other things she might ordinarily do. Instead, she simply reaches into his mouth and plucks away the shell, flicking it to the ground, or in this case into Lady's fur.

Will bends to the plate again. For him, eating is serious business. "I wish my mom would cook like this Sunday mornings," he says.

"Peggy didn't cook this," Sophie replies, all sudden indignation. "Since when does Peggy cook?"

Will eyes her warily. "I wouldn't know," he says, "because I don't live here."

She ignores him. "That's part of the problem, in my opinion," she continues.

Will screws up his face and tries to follow Sophie down this bumpy road. He'd follow her anywhere, even when it makes no sense to go there, as seems to be the case now.

"Everyone knows men are happiest when they have a woman to cook for them," she explains. "For instance, look at you. You're happy aren't you?"

He's chewing slowly, and, he hopes, thoughtfully. After swallowing, he gives her his best smile. "I'm delirious, Sophie. Cook like this for me and I'll never leave you."

"I did cook like this, Will," she says impatiently, bending over to grab a napkin off the floor.

"But you didn't cook for *me*."

"I called *you*." Her hands have arrived on her hips. "You're here eating, aren't you? What more do you want?"

"This is leftovers, Sophie. Don't get me wrong. I'm happy to have them, but you cooked for your dad. Where is he, anyway?"

"Gone," Sophie answers bitterly. "He wasn't hungry."

Will's young face softens, and he reaches out his arms. "Come here, Sophie," he says, his voice a warble of desire. "Come give me a kiss." She holds off an instant, wanting to punish him if she can't punish her father, but the need is too strong.

In a few minutes, they're climbing the stairs to her bedroom. Will's never been up to her room before, and for a minute or two he forgets himself and simply gazes around in wonder. A bank of windows along the south wall let in all the available light, which in New Mexico amounts to brilliance. What furniture there is – a mattress on the floor covered with a purple Indian print bedspread; a chest of drawers; a cedar chest and overstuffed chair – has been pushed against the walls. The long rectangular space is empty in the middle, revealing a stretch of scarred and faded hardwood floor. The sharp sweet smell of patchouli lingers in the air.

"This is where I dance," Sophie tells him and to demonstrate, twirls out and across the floor.

Although light on her feet and graceful, she's reckless in her whirling. On her tenth or twelfth revolution, her feet tangle and she collapses, laughing. She's not hurt. Anyone can see that. But she's not quite in control, either. Will stands over her and watches her convulse. He's noticed this before, the way Sophie loses herself in laughter, taking it from giddy to goofy and then beyond, to something that looks very much like grief. For a split second, he pities his girlfriend, but he shrugs off his discomfort and kneels

down to embrace her. They kiss, their bodies twining tightly, before Sophie breaks away and scrambles up, retreating to the windows. Will is startled, but he doesn't take offense. Instead, he simply sits on the floor and watches her reverie.

Finally, he understands that he's the pursuer and raises himself to his feet – one long fluid movement. He edges up behind her and presses himself against her buttocks. At first Sophie doesn't respond, and so he waits, staring out over the top of her head at the Sleeping Sisters. Since boyhood, Will has wanted to see a real live volcano; thus, he prefers not to believe what he's heard about the inert nature of these five humps. They're sleeping, he tells himself, and what's sleeping can certainly wake. It could happen one day: they could just boil over. Aroused, he runs his hands down the sides of Sophie's jeans before working his wide, flat fingers into her pockets, caressing the insides of her thighs through the soft white cotton, and, in the process, embedding a few purple specks of straw flower under his nails.

Sooner or later – they have time, plenty of time – the two will find their way to her mattress, where they will tumble down together and make long, satisfying, unprotected love. "We don't need one," Sophie will tell him when he reaches into his pocket for a condom. "I want to do this naturally." She won't know why, and neither will he, though later in his car on the way to Garduños it will cross his mind briefly: Did she start taking the pill or something? He'll have to remember to ask. But he won't. Not for some weeks anyway. All evening long he'll be filled with her sweetness. He'll carry it away with him, taste it on his lips.