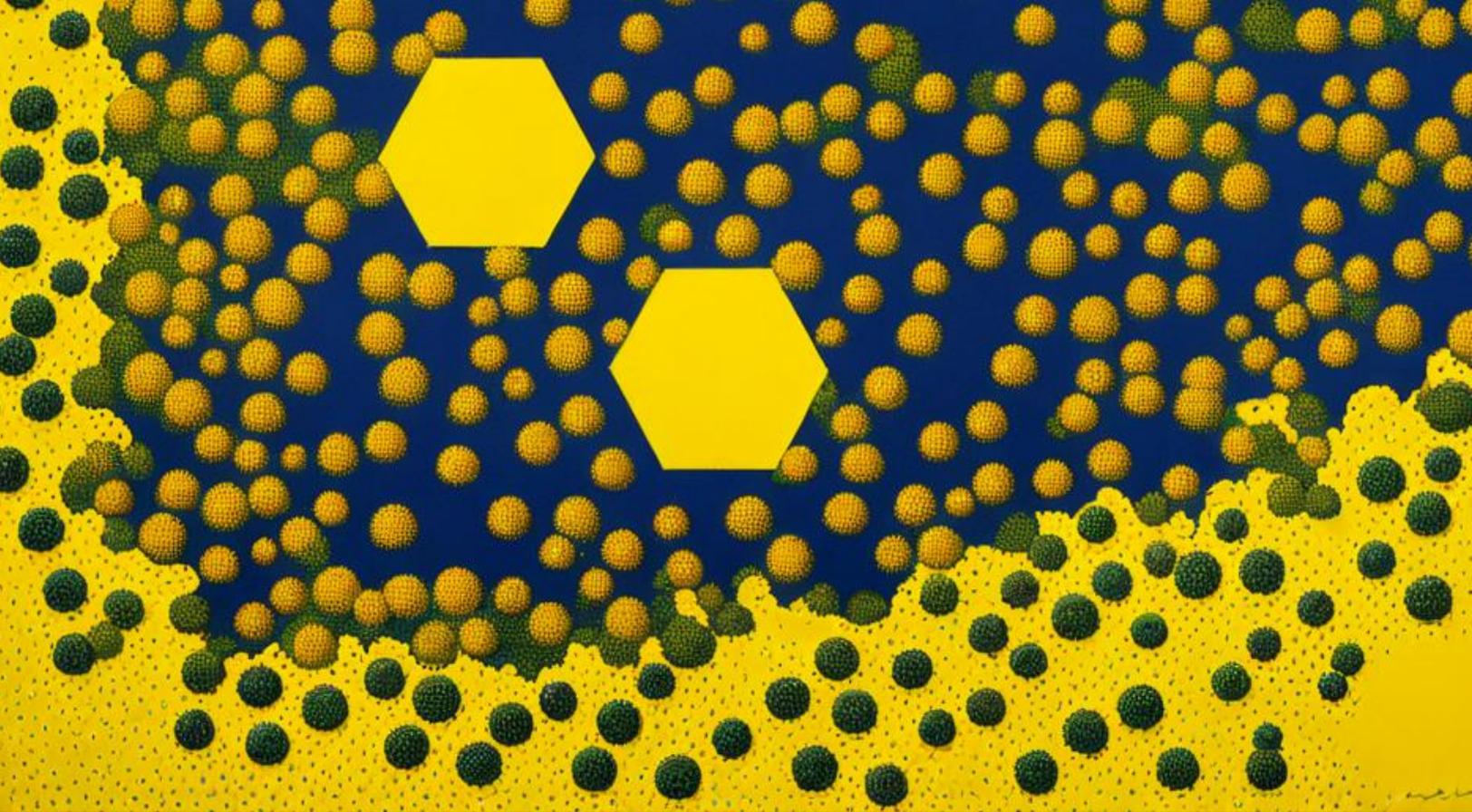


miniMAG

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deer in headlights





How I Got Through The Swarm

Ebony Haywood

I arrive at Staples in a hurry, in need of ink. I step out of my car and into a swarm of bees. I scream, collapse back into my seat, and shut the door.

Through the windows, I see dozens of bees zooming aimlessly. Fuzzy, yellow, black aircraft are zipping in circles, whirling in figure eights. I hear a buzzing behind me; it is a bee orbiting my back seat. I scream. Quickly and calmly, I step out of the car, through the swarm, into the store where it is serene and quiet, relaxed and spacious.

I look around. Only a handful of people are inside— a few clerks and customers. Nobody has noticed what just happened outdoors. Everyone has their back to the window. Nobody bore witness to my calamity or, heard my screams or saw my terror. I have entered an oblivious, air-conditioned world of copy machines and card stock.

I find my ink and move toward the checkout. I fixate my eyes on the windows as I watch the fuzzy aircraft fly around my car. Why did I park in that space? How had I not seen those bees?

I tell the clerk, a young lady in her twenties who is noticeably pregnant and looks exhausted, that a swarm of bees surrounds my car,

and I am scared to go outside. She turns around to look out the window. (Finally, I have a witness!) She turns to me and says, “They have been here since this morning. That’s so weird.” But I am scared, and I have to go back to my car to go home, and they are there and what am I supposed to do? Her tired eyes blink at me. She almost shrugs her shoulders before giggling nervously and blinking at me once again.

I step outside the sliding doors, keys in my hand, heart in my throat. I stand here, paralyzed under the crackling sun. Oh, my God. What do I do? A man who works here walks past me as he exits. I say, “Can you help me?”

He mumbles to me through a thick beard, “Sorry, I’m off work.”

He is too busy to help, eager to go home, anxious to sit on his couch stained with gravy and hot sauce, and keen to turn on the six o’clock news and scratch his crotch. Murders. Accidents. Wicked politics. Meanwhile, the bees keep buzzing. And I am still standing frozen in fear with beads of sweat invading the private territories of my body’s landscape.

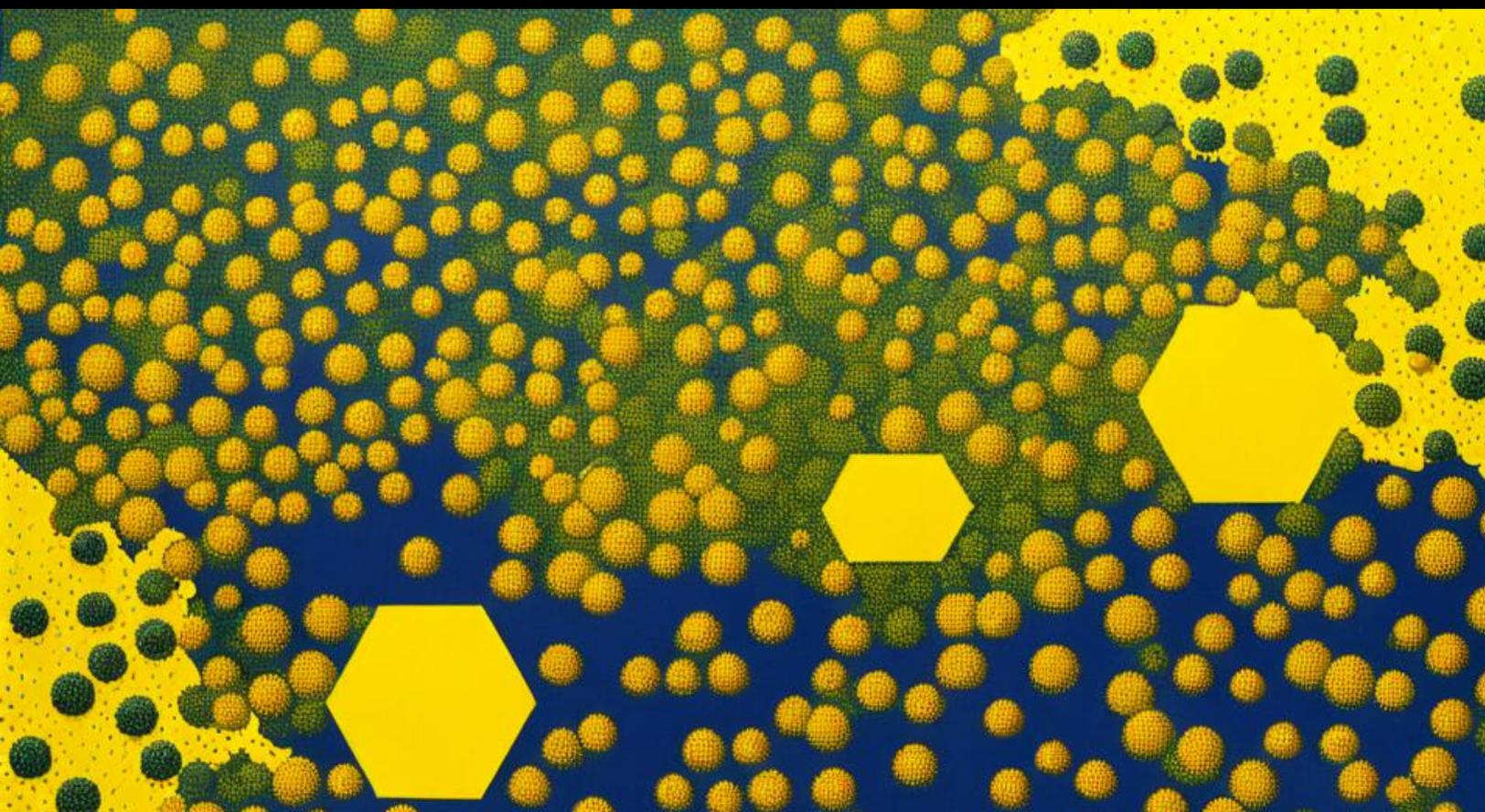
“Please,” I say.

He helps me begrudgingly. His crotch is itching, and I am an inconvenience. He walks into the swarm of bees with the calm confidence of John Wayne and peeps through my car windows. “Come,” he says, “There is nothing in your car. It is safe. Come quickly and drive.”

“Do not leave me,” I say.

“I won’t,” he says, “Come, you are scaring me more than the bees.”

I dash into the car and speed away. My cheeks are wet. I hadn’t even noticed that I was crying.





Found in a Hotel Ice-bucket at the Crime Scene

Pixie Bruner

The happy hooker goes to a party with a soul on ice.
Asks the client ““Can you feel anything when I do this”?”
“Chocolate Jesus!” he screams.
The walls came too, tumbling down.

A gun with occasional music,
The stars her destination, not chandeliers.
Say you love Satan, not the light fixtures crystal tears.
She picked up a forgotten hitchhiker
Who spoke the forgotten English.

Midnight dreary lambs with mint sauce,
William Reich in Hell, she’s going solo.
A clown show, singing Jean Genie,
The books of Sand and Imaginary beings

Misery passion and betrayal
The victims of duty
The bride ablaze.
The gods themselves
look on from the eye on the pyramid

Crash, false hope
And then there were none
Having a wonderful crime
With the now unhappy hooker.

To kill a mockingbird, little birds
The dharma bums poisoned the corn in the cornfield
Brief Lives puzzle the players.

Cosmically Triggered
Going Postal
Dead Ends
Let's put the future behind us.



The Balloon and The Bullets

Kushal Poddar

The gun knows nothing.
The hand does. The index finger
pulls no trigger, rises
to touch the lips, signal, 'Hush'.

The gunman passes;
the child cocoons within the silence
and the noises.

In a motion picture there would have been
a piano and a cello and a balloon
buoying in the blue, amidst the ions,
a drop of joy, sadness, hope and loss.



The Boy Left In The Attic

Kushal Poddar

Some nights we don't hear
the boy in the attic, his feet
and his imaginary obstacle race

because we receive the call
from our son in the other land
where sun's already varnished
the planks and the laths.

Perhaps we speak too loud
for a short conversation.
Perhaps the child soul in the attic
is the glee our son he left behind.



Cars

Claudia Wysocky

When it begins to sink—
When it pains me to believe
that something won't change even though you try,
And all your words mean nothing
all these words are tossed aside
—And any light I may have carried, drowns
It was a phase we all need to go through.
Some of us learn sooner, others later—
but we will break out into the other side of this.
Take it step by step—
for it's not easy walking on your own.
But it helps to know that the sun will rise
no matter what happens tonight.
—Except certain death.
Maybe it's my sadness hitting me
maybe I'm too afraid to move on.
—Or maybe it's the lights in front of me—
blinding me from what's real.
But don't worry about me.
I'll be fine. I promise.
I know you'll find your way in the end—
just breathe it all away
and know that nothing lasts forever.
—I should probably get off the road.
—Sooner yet, I should find my way back home.
But I'm not lost. Not anymore.
I'm just finding what's real;
And for now, this feels so right.
—The car's gonna hit me, isn't it?





Blind Date

Petra Baille

‘Blind dates are always awkward, aren’t they?’ Jane giggled, blushing behind her menu.

‘Hmm... is that not a bit offensive?’ Tom frowned.

‘Well, I just mean you don’t always know what to say to someone...’

‘You mean someone like me?’

‘What? No. I just meant in general...’ Jane trailed off, taking a sip of water. ‘So what do you like to do for fun? Reading? Going to the cinema? Taking a walk on the beach and watching the sunsets?’

‘Is that meant to be funny?’ Tom continued to stare right at Jane.

‘I-I’m sorry if I’ve offended you, Tom. It really isn’t my intention. I shouldn’t have presumed you like all of those things. What do you like to do then?’

‘Nothing much.’

‘Oh, right.’

‘And have we decided what we would like for dinner?’ The waiter interrupted the glacial tension.

‘Ah yes, thank you. I would like the duck, please.’ Jane handed the menu over to the waiter.

‘And for you sir?’

‘Uh... whatever that is.’ Tom pointed to something on the menu.

‘The chef’s special? Certainly, sir.’

‘Oh, I know what we can talk about! Did you see that programme last night on Channel Two? It was about baby monkeys. Oh I would just love to go trekking in Uganda to see them for real!’

‘Don’t watch TV.’ Tom uttered.

‘Well I don’t watch much either, but it’s better than staring at a computer all day at work.’ Jane played with the napkin. ‘Look, I’m sorry, but do you want to even be here?’

‘Well, to be honest, when Mark set us up he said you were lovely, had known you for years. So I went out on a limb and I’ve just found you incredibly insensitive the whole night.’

‘Again, I’m sorry if I’ve done anything to offend you. Why don’t we start over and go to the late night exhibition at the museum, they have a lot of Monet in right now.’

‘THAT IS QUITE ENOUGH!’ Tom yelled.

Jane began to get teary. ‘I don’t know what I’ve done wrong! I’m never going on a blind date ever again!’

‘You just don’t stop do you?! That’s it! I’m out of here!’ Tom got up from his chair, extended a white cane and walked out of the restaurant.

Jane sat bemused, ‘Oh.’



Winter Rain

D. C. Nobes

Cold wet dripping
runs down my head
my neck
my back
down bare branches.
I shiver against the chill,
water and wind
drum on the roof.
Dark naked trees,
my bones ache
in the sou'west storm.
We retreat to a warmer place,
occasionally
looking out at the rain
stare at the grey day
from the pages of a book
distant refuge,
hibernation,
blanket wrapped
rapt in music
in words
in one warm room,
sanctuary.



The Tibetan Numerologists of Appalachia: Part 5

Toni Kochensparger

“Arthur! It’s Peter!”

Arthur’s mother stood at the bottom of the stairs with the phone while Arthur came tumbling toward her.

“Hey,” said Peter.

“Hey.”

“What are you doing right now?”

Their lunch table slowly grew. First, there was Marcus, whose brother Cal was still in middle school. Then Marcus’s friend, Chad, then Danny and Tom, who sometimes came over to Peter’s for football games.

“There’s no rule that says we have to be there,” said Marcus. They were debating about the assembly.

“Okay, but there is a rule that we have to be in the school,” said Chad.

“Who’s going to notice?” Marcus asked.

“Marc has a point,” said Tom. “Point to Marcus.”

“There’s gonna be five hundred kids there,” said Marcus. “They won’t notice if a few of us dip.”

“Okay, but. If they *do*, we’re *fucked*,” said Chad.

“If we go to the *assembly*, we’re fucked,” said Marcus.

“Well, what do you propose we do, instead?” asked Peter.

“Point to Peter,” said Tom.

“*Finally*,” said Marcus. “Okay: here’s what I’m thinking. I think we follow the path behind the football field until we hit Eric Donahue’s house.”

“I’m not hanging out with Eric Donahue,” said Peter. Arthur grinned.

“No, no: Eric will be at the assembly,” said Marcus, “with all of his other gay friends.” Arthur winced. “*We’ll* be out, swimming in the creek.”

“So, what?” We just show up to school in our bathing suits?” asked Danny.

“Don’t be an idiot,” said Marcus. “We wear our suits under our jeans. We can change when we get there.”

“And what happens if a teacher sees us?”

“Two points to Chad.”

“We just pretend we’re, like, going to detention, or something,” said Marcus. “Look: the assembly starts at two. By the time it’s over, it’ll be three, and the whole school is going to leave, anyway. As long as we make it out, quietly, we’ll be fine.”

“Arthur, you’re awfully quiet,” said Peter. “What do you think?”

The tall grass lining the path to Eric Donahue’s house scratched their calves.

“Missy Spence is a *slut*,” Danny said, trailing Marcus, at the front of the pack. “She gave two of the guys on the basketball team blowjobs. At the *same time*.”

“That’s disgusting,” said Chad.

“Well, it’s true.”

“Wait, so like: they *both* put their penises in at once?” asked Marcus.

“No, like, they took turns,” said Danny.

“Ew,” said the boy called Tom. “That means she still had one guy’s splooge in her mouth when she gave a blowjob to the other guy.”

“*Exactly*,” said Danny.

“Who actually *told* you this?” asked Peter. Peter and Arthur made up the tail-end of the group.

“That girl Kylie,” Danny said. “You know: the student council girl.”

“Kylie *hates* Missy,” said Arthur. “Kylie’s *always* hated Missy.”

“Point to Arthur,” said Peter. Arthur smiled. “Look, I just mean: maybe she made up the whole thing.”

“Kylie wouldn’t lie,” said Danny. “Not about something important like that.”

“But why is that important?” asked Arthur. Peter’s knuckles grazed his own.

“In case Missy offers one of us a blowjob,” Danny said. “Who knows how many dicks she’s had in there. She probably has splooge in her mouth all the *time*.”

“Jesus,” said Chad. “That’s *so* gross.”

“Okay, but: that’s the kind of thing girls who don’t like each other lie about,” said Peter.

“Was Kylie *there*?” Arthur asked.

“Another point to Arthur,” said Tom.

“No,” said Danny. “But one of the guys she gave a blowjob to said it really happened.”

“That’s *exactly* the kind of thing one of the basketball players would lie about,” said Peter.

“Why would one of those guys purposefully lie about getting another basketball player’s splooge on his dick?” asked Danny.

“She probably swallowed the splooge, first,” said Marcus.

“Okay, but there’s still, like, bits of it in her mouth.”

“Point to Danny,” said Tom.

“Tom, we’re not debating splooge, we’re debating whether or not the double blowjob *happened*,” said Marcus.

“I’m just trying to warn you guys,” said Danny. “Like: *regardless*.”

It took an hour-and-a-half to make it from the school to the creek.

“Holy shit. Where did you get *that*?” Chad asked. Marcus had produced a bottle of Boone’s Farm from his back pack.

“I took it from my mom,” said Marcus.

“Isn’t she going to notice?” asked Arthur.

“Nah,” said Marcus. “I took it, like, a week ago.”

“And she didn’t say anything?”

“I don’t think she *cares*,” Marcus said, opening the bottle. “It’s, like, *super-alcoholic*.”

Marcus took a swig, then passed the bottle to Danny. Marcus removed his shirt and jumped into the creek.

The boys passed the bottle around.

“You don’t have to drink it,” Peter whispered to Arthur, watching him hesitate, when it was his turn. “You can just pretend.”

Arthur nodded. He put the bottle to his lips and tilted it up. He used his tongue to block the alcohol. “Arthur, take your fucking shirt off and *get in*,” yelled Danny.

“Why do you want him to take his shirt off so bad?” asked Marcus, taking a big swig from the bottle.

“Danny’s *gay*,” said Chad.

“No, I’m *not*,” said Danny. He pushed Chad.

“Danny’s, like, like probably *jealous* of those basketball guys,” said Marcus, laughing.

“Point to Marcus,” said Tom. “He probably wishes *he* could mix *his* splooge.”

“Shut the *fuck up*,” said Danny. The boys were now playing keep-away with the bottle and Danny was the monkey in the middle.

“Maybe he’s jealous of *Missy*,” said Chad.

“Hey, *fuck you*,” said Danny. He pushed Chad, again.

“Fuck *you*,” said Chad, pushing him back.

“Peter! Arthur! Get the *fuck* in the water!” shouted Marcus.

“You don’t have to take it off,” whispered Peter. “But I’d. I’d *like* it.”

Arthur looked at the boys in the creek and then looked at Peter. He took a deep, slow breath. Then he unpeeled his Reba and got in the water.

“Marcus can’t bring any alcohol,” Arthur said. Arthur and Peter were doing homework at Arthur’s house, for a change. Peter’s dad was out-of-town for a conference.

“My mom would, like, *freak out*,” said Arthur.

“I don’t think he would,” said Peter. “I think he only brought it to the creek because it was the creek.”

“Is your dad gonna let you come to the party?” Arthur asked.

“I think so,” said Peter. “I’ve been helping him, like, *extra*, around the house. And he knows about it, already. He isn’t usually cool with my friends, but. I mean, it’s you. And he’s been cool with that, so far.”

“So: maybe,” said Arthur.

“I mean: everything’s like maybe, with him. But he didn’t seem too-weird about it, when I told him.”

“My mom said we could order Little Caesars pizza, said Arthur. “And there’s gonna be pop. And cake.”

“I don’t want to miss it,” said Peter. “Like, even if there *weren’t* those things.”

The boys all saw less of each other, when it started getting too cold for football. Arthur still did homework at Peter’s house, but he only saw Marcus, Chad, Danny, and Tom at school, at lunchtime.

“Is your party gonna have any girls?” asked Danny. “We need to get some *ladies*. There’s too many dicks, here.”

“Danny’s *obsessed* with all our dicks,” said Marcus.

“I *am not*,” said Danny. “*You’re* the one who’s friends with those basketball players Missy gave the blowjobs to. You’re probably always trying to ask about the splooge thing.”

“A rare point to Danny.”

“My mom won’t let me have girls,” said Arthur.

“A wise woman,” said Chad. “It’s your birthday. They would, like, *have* to give you blowjobs.” “Besides,” said Arthur, “I don’t think any of them would come.”

“Alyssa Mogul might come,” said Peter. “And that girl, Kelsea.”

“Kelsea would rather be caught dead than go to Arthur’s party,” said Danny.

“Only if she found out *you* were gonna be there,” said Marcus. “She thinks you have b.o.”

“Ten points to Marcus.”

“Fuck you, she does *not*,” said Danny.

“She *told me*,” said Marcus.

“Eleven points. No: *twelve*,” said Tom.

“Kelsea actually *does* seem to like you,” Chad said to Arthur. “She talks to you in math class all the time.”

“Why don’t you ask her for a blowjob?” asked Tom.

“You can’t just *ask* a girl for a blowjob,” said Marcus.

“Why not?” asked Danny. “That’s how Devin and Jake got Missy.”

“You’re fucking *obsessed*,” said Marcus. “Look, Danny, if you’re gay, you can just tell us.”

“Yeah, we’ll only make fun of you a little,” said Chad.

Arthur helped his mother hang streamers. The party bags they put together all had snap n’ poppers and candy cigarettes and homemade brownies full of actual cigarette ash, special requests Arthur made because “these guys are too-old for little plastic harmonicas, Mom.” His cake was double chocolate with cream cheese icing.

Peter was the first to arrive.

“My dad isn’t letting me stay the night,” Peter told Arthur. “But he’s also not gonna pick me up till nine.”

Peter had appeared on Arthur’s porch in a really nice shirt and khaki pants. He was brandishing a small box.

“It’s for later,” he said to Arthur. “Like tomorrow morning, after everybody leaves.” The living room was filled with country music.

“Can we turn off this crap?” Danny asked, pretty much the moment he got there. Danny was the last boy to arrive. “Let’s put on some Led Zeppelin.”

“Hey, gaywad, it’s *Arthur’s* party,” said Marcus. “Arthur gets to pick what kind of music.”

“Your music blows,” Danny said to Arthur, with a smile. He took a big bite of Little Caesars pizza.

“Not as much as *you* do,” Arthur said.

Peter nearly spit out his root beer, laughing.

“Way to go, Arthur!” shouted Marcus. “Guys, Arthur’s finally learned to give shit.”

Arthur smiled. He looked around the room at all the people, who’d shown up for him. He thought about the party he was supposed to have, the Just The Three Of Them party. The party he’d been having for years.

This was better.

“Your house is cool,” said Chad, looking around. “I bet if you took

Kelsea back here, she'd give you a blowjob for *sure*."

"I don't think that's how blowjobs work," said Peter.

"No, for real," said Chad. "My older brother told me it's all about, like, the environment they're in."

"Well, just don't play this stupid music," said Danny.

"Shut the fuck up," Marcus said. He punched Danny in the shoulder, *hard*. Point to Arthur.

The boys played Texas Hold 'em with fake poker chips, ignoring Danny's many complaints about Arthur's lack of a PS2. Arthur taught everyone the rules, as they'd been explained to him, by his grandmother, when he unwrapped the casino set, the night before. His mother had gotten him a radio that had a CD player and a greatest hits CD of Reba songs.

You know, your house is probably big-enough for Sardines," said Marcus, placing his plastic bet in the middle of the dining room table.

"What's Sardines?" asked Arthur.

"It's basically hide-and-seek," said Danny, looking at his cards. "It's a fucking kids' game."

"So?" said Marcus. "It's fucking *fun*."

"This whole party is *dumb*," said Danny. He turned to Arthur. "I thought you were fifteen, not *five*."

"You know, Danny, if you're not having a good time, you can leave," said Peter. Peter rearranged the cards and, without looking up, said "Just don't expect us to come looking for you when we play Sardines."

Danny didn't talk for the rest of the game and drew the short straw for Sardines, which meant that he had to look for everybody, first.

Arthur hadn't played hide-and-seek in *years*. He was thrilled, at the prospect. When Danny started counting and it was time for everyone to scatter, he made a bee line for the laundry room and hid in the closet downstairs, next to the water heater.

Arthur could hear Danny skipping numbers, through the vents, but he didn't care. Danny was Danny, and this was Arthur's party, and Arthur's party was *fun*. He was having *fun*.

"Ready or not, here I come!" Danny shouted so loud, Arthur thought it might wake his grandmother.

Arthur heard footsteps. He held his breath and watched, through the grate, as a pair of legs came down the basement steps and began walking around the unfinished level.

Arthur could feel his lungs constrict and tried to let out the air as slowly and quietly as possible, before taking another one.

Then, the pair of legs walked into the laundry room. Arthur stepped back, but bumped into the shelves, where his mother kept detergent and blankets, making a sound.

The legs turned toward the closet.

Arthur closed his eyes, as if not being able to see, himself, would make his body invisible, to Danny.

Arthur waited. Seconds felt like minutes.

Then the closet door opened.

“Well, well, well,” said Peter. Arthur opened his eyes.

And then Peter stepped into the closet, too, and closed the door.

“It’s a good spot,” he whispered.

“I think it’s the last thing you’d notice, if you looked in here,” Arthur whispered back.

For a moment, they just looked into each other’s eyes.

“Happy Birthday,” Peter whispered. “Are you having fun?”

“I’m having a *lot* of fun,” Arthur whispered. “I’m having *more* fun, now.”

“It’s a good party,” Peter whispered. “I mean: not *Kelsea Eckhardt* good, but *good*.”

Arthur tried to laugh quietly.

“I mean, that’s not even. Like, I wouldn’t want that,” Arthur whispered. “That’s just *those* guys.”

“I know,” whispered Peter.

“Okay, good.”

“Would you want it, if it *wasn’t* Kelsea?” Peter asked.

Arthur felt a bead of sweat, out-of-nowhere.

Arthur closed his eyes.

A moment passed. Then Arthur nodded his head, and Peter dropped down to his knees.

Arthur looked at the bottles of detergent, while his childhood turned

into something new. He looked at the towels, then down at Peter.

Arthur studied the cowlick on the crown of Peter's head and thought of the streamers he and his mom had hung, upstairs. He thought about the steel guitars that swirled around the boys, while they played poker. This was *his* party. His. And everyone was having *fun*.

And then Danny opened the door to the closet.

"I found you!" Danny shouted before freezing, at the sight of the two of them.

Peter turned and abruptly stood up. Arthur felt his blood slow to an absolute *still*.

"Sorry," Danny said, finally. "Um. Yeah, sorry," he said, before turning and running out of the laundry room and upstairs."

To Be Concluded in Issue85

(Parts 1, 2, 3, & 4 of The Tibetan Numerologists of Appalachia can be found in Issues 80, 81, 82, & 83)





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