

Honey Mouth

by Samantha Henderson

I know she is here when I taste it. Just a hint at first: saliva turning sweet. Then a thick sugared whisper across my tongue. I know she is standing behind me, although I'll never see her, no matter how quickly I turn.



When I feel like complaining, I remember I got the house cheap because of the ghost. Or rather, first because it was a fixer, which begs for ghosts, and second because of the missing girl, which implies a ghost. That the ghost came should not surprise me.

They wanted to fix it up too, the Keenes.

“What?”

The realtor looks at me, owl-eyed behind round glasses. “The Keenes. The previous owners.”

“The one with the...”

She doesn't let me finish. “The little girl. Amanda. Yes.”

“She was never...”

“No.” Sharply.

She turns from me to bustle about with the lockbox.

“Was there any idea that someone...well, killed her?”

She frowns at me, knowing I know already, and strains at the lockbox. It falls open. “They never found a body. And there were no signs of violence.”

“But if they never found...”

“Yes...well...” she hands me the key. She's angry at me for spoiling her little ritual, handing over the keys, and I'm a little ashamed of myself too. Which makes me angry, which makes me cruel, and I press her.

“They searched the woods?”

Her lips press together and turn pale. “Of course.”

I press the key tight in my palm, until it bites, and open my hand, looking at the red crease.

“And the neighbors?” Her forehead creases and she turns away, pretending she didn't hear me.



She first comes in the afternoon, on a day so hot the stripper dries too soon and bubbles hard and yellow on the redwood and I have to chip it off with the shaver. Carefully, so as not to scratch the wood, and still I leave some fine grooves. The wood dries silvery, like a weathered fence, and I'll have to sand it to find the ruby-red warmth beneath.

Beautiful heartwood, with a sheen like the gloss on chestnut horses, but the work is harder than I remembered. Harder, and I'm getting older, years of rough work breaking me down before my time. Years of pulling down old barns for the heartwood inside, breathing dustbowl ash. Years of wrangling river rock boulders into fences and arches for semi-retired CEOs, getting ready to retire into their own piece of paradise. Time for me to have mine, and I'm almost too worn out to do it.

So hot the air wavers outside the window, over the asphalt at the end of the walkway, over the small pond beyond that. I look out, careful not to wipe my forehead, the gloves clotted with stripper. A mirage floats in the hot air over the water. It looks like a black-clad woman with a parasol. Her feet shimmer three feet over the water.

The wet itch on the back of my hand turns into a burn and I look down. A thick caustic blob has oozed beneath the rubber glove, and I peel the worn rubber away and dab at it with paint thinner. A couple weeks working on this house and already my hands are scarred with chemical burns and mistimed hammers and rough as sandpaper.

Suddenly the honey-taste floods my mouth, thick in my gullet, and I choke a little on the saliva. I force my cramped knees straight, holding out my hands so I don't get stripper on me, and stagger to the kitchen sink, spitting and spitting.

The taste fades, from buckwheat to clover, and I peel off the gloves, wipe down with paint thinner, and walk back into the living room.

Nothing is there. The smell of chemicals is sharp in the hot room. Out the wavy window, over the pond, the woman with the parasol is dead black in the clear heat flicker.

I look at her a long time, waiting for her to fade, but she sticks.

From the corner of my eye, a flash of red.

Nothing there when I turn, though, and now the air over the pond shimmers, empty.

Someone's playing tricks on me.

Somebody's beginning to remember.



The neighbors: the Mullins to the east, Orioles to the south, me in the middle in the crook of the main road's elbow. Behind us a deep hollow in the cleavage of the foothills swells with cedar and pine.

I try not to be unfriendly. Maggie Mullins' children are away at college and she brings me a loaf of banana bread with cranberries, and I make us tea in cracked, coffee-stained mugs. We smile at each other politely and uncomfortably, and now I'll talk to her husband over the fence and be invited over for Thanksgiving and sometimes Christmas. They'll give me cookies and hand-knit scarves.

The Orioles work in town: he's a dentist, I think, and she's his office manager. We talk when she's weeding the front and he's fixing the brickwork. I want to tell him he's got the wrong mortar and it's going to crumble away after the first hard rain, but there's time enough for that later.

They have two sons. Austin's the youngest, an average kid, sixteen perhaps. He's not fat, particularly, but his face is doughy for his age, soft. When I start hacking at the Lantana that's grown into a tangled mass on my side of the property line



Austin comes out to watch me, and I let him see at the thick stumps. We uncover an old, low retaining wall, made of clinker brick. Some have come loose, and I set Austin to digging up the soil around it, looking for more of the red and black glazed ceramic. I tell him we'll restore it when I clear the Lantana and stop the river-rock porch from crumbling away. He digs with an archaeologist's interest.

I don't see much of Bobby Oriole, who's eighteen, spiky looking, and always wears black. Bobby, who got questioned twice by the police in the disappearance of Amanda Keene. Bobby, who before it happened got in trouble for selling a little pot at school. Not once, but two or three times. That's what Maggie Mullins tells me, with a tiny crumb of banana bread clinging to her cheek.

"The day she went missing he was pretty much accounted for," she says, looking surprised that she told me this much, but maybe there's something comfortable in recounting a stale tragedy to someone new. "He was at school, or in town, afterwards, playing videos."

"So why question him twice?" I stop myself from reaching over and brushing away the crumb.

She shrugs and I know the answer: he was such a good suspect. Punk kid, into Goth and pot, and she was a sweet neighbor kid, there for the picking.

Feeling morbid, I check the microfilm at the tiny Carnegie library in town. The librarian's suspicious look fades when I explain I bought the old Keene house; she smiles kindly and tiptoes around me, as if I'm a bereaved relative.

Amanda was seen walking home from school, and Bobby went straight to the video arcade with his friends, defying his parents, as he was on academic probation. It must have been frustrating for the police: a small town like this, knowing everybody so well, yet so few details. A girl goes home after school. When her mother gets home from her Tuesday-Thursday stint medical billing, she is not there. There's an idea she might have gone into the woods, looking for a plant for a school report. Mariposa Lilies. I've heard of those. They're rare in the south of the state, more common up here.

She was wearing a red sweater, since the spring was still young and chilly. She had new white hightops and a gold charm bracelet she got for her birthday.

I reel through the speckled, black and white images for a while, trying to ignore the sweet taste of my saliva.



I almost tell Maggie. But I think she might already know.

I do mention, casually, the woman, the black woman, the woman with the parasol over the pond, and she laughs.

"That pops up on hot days," she says. "It's a sort of fixed illusion. Scared me to death the first time I saw it, because it reminded me of that movie, with Deborah Kerr. Where she's a governess in a haunted house, and she sees the ghost across the lake. The Innocents."



Another hot day, like the day she first began to remember. Before it gets too hot I take the pick-mattock out to the front yard and start to chop at the rich, dark earth and now it's too hot to garden but bodies in motion tend to stay in motion and I keep at it, feeling the skin on the back of my neck burn. Bees are thick in the red and yellow lantana that remains between me and the Orioles. It's a noxious weed, and I wonder if it poisons the honey. I don't know much about bees.

I do know they dance in circles, to tell each other where the flowers are, and now one's on the fresh

clumps of dirt in front of me, crawling round and round in a figure-eight. I lean on the pick and watch it. It looks different from the other bees, plumper, and it waggles its fat, black striped bottom as it circles.

I go inside for a glass of water and as I turn on the faucet it's as if I took a spoonful of honey and sucked it down in a big glob. I take a big swig of water and it fades, then comes back strong and buckwheat. I turn to look for a girl in a red sweater but no one's there, and behind me a big-bodied insect taps on the picture window.

A bee. It lands on the glass, and I see its underside and delicate clawed feet and it circles, left, right, left, wiggle.

The taste lessens as I go outside, and the bee flies at me, almost hitting my face. It circles round the back of my head and in front of me, and as I take a step forward it continues, slowly, to the back of the property, where the woods begin and a rough path leads between the trees. It's flying so slowly it has no problem following it, although sometimes I lose sight of the yellow body.

It's cooler in the woods, but stuffy. The bee leads me down the main path. I see arteries leading off here and there, well traveled. There must be enough hikers and pot farmers around to keep them clear of fallen branches.

Now the bee swerves off the path, landing on the white bark of a fir long enough for me to catch up with it. I have to step carefully to avoid tripping on the litter of branches. Again and again the bee flies, lands, waits, flies again.

Soon I settle into a cautious half-trot. The smell of decaying leaves is thicker here, in the heart of the woods. My vision narrows, and I see the bee at the end of a dark tunnel; I avoid rocks and fallen trees by instinct. We must be two miles away from the house by now. There are no well-trodden trails now.

My foot turns on a slab of stone, and I hop to save my ankle. This breaks my concentration and the rest of the forest comes into focus. Although it must be noon it seems like twilight: shafts of green light strike slanting from spaces between the pines and the leaf litter is ankle-high. It's so quiet -- I might as well be a hundred miles from town, and not even the wind is stirring.

I've lost the bee, and stand still, looking for it. After a while I see it, crawling in circles on the bark of another fir. It's waiting for me.

I look at the tree, and about shoulder-high there is a white scar in the tan bark. Curious, I finger it. Something ripped sideways, skinning it, and there are burn marks above and below the gash. The edges have healed and are beginning to grow back.

The bee circles back. I still have my hand against the rough bark, and it lands on my shoulder. It buzzes under my ear, and tickles, and I raise my shoulder to shrug it off.

It stings me where the shoulder joins the neck, and in the first fraction of a second it's a mild itch, and then a burn, and then pain shoots up my neck and down my spine. I curse and brush it away: it falls into last year's leaves, dying. I feel for the stinger.

I get it, but must've squeezed the poison sac, because fresh pain rockets through my bones and

suddenly I see her, a flash of denim and red t-shirt and blonde hair dashing past the tree, and a flare of heat and power and the shotgun blast tears past the tree and spatters the undergrowth with shot, and she swerves to the left and keeps going

The stinger is smeared across my fingers. I brush it against my jeans and follow her, follow that flash of blonde through the undergrowth. The ache of the sting still pulses through my joints.

I push through the seedling oaks and gooseberry and bracken and there it is again, the slight figure of a

girl, vanishing between two tall cedars. And now, the taste of honey swells in my mouth.

I kneel on the ground at the edge of a clearing. I can't go on; I can't even breathe. The thick stuff clogs my throat, and I can't cough it up, because there's nothing there.

Please, I manage. "Please stop. I can't breathe."

It fades, leaving a tang.

On the other side of the glen, a flash of red. She's waiting.

The chirping of birds cuts through the heavy drone. The hum gets louder as I cross to the other side of the meadow.

Bees. The hum centers in a tangle of old branches, bleached white by exposure to the elements. Slender twigs branch curving from the center stalk. There is no trace of peeling bark.

They aren't branches. Nestled in the soft bracken at the forest's rim is a ribcage. It's human. I want to make it something else, but it'll always be human.

I inch closer and see the curve of the spine half-buried in the fresh grass, and the hipbones, spread apart. A few feet away is a round, mossy rock that could be a skull.

Between the hips and along the bones of the upper leg are small flowers, simple five petal blooms, white with a faint touch of pink in the center. Mariposa Lilies.

How did I know that?

The bee sting still pulses in the side of my neck. In answer, the hum of the bees grows. It draws me closer.

For a horrible moment I think the heart is still suspended inside the cage of ribs, huge and brown, not beating but vibrating.

Then I realize the dark mass is a beehive, the golden surface crawling with bees. Old wax and dark honey rope the brittle bones.

Bees come from the flowers in the clearing, big orange and yellow balls of pollen on their back legs. They land on a rib, and crawl inside.

I go a little closer, and I see that while the leg bones on the left lie smooth and straight, those on the right are shattered. I circle around the skeleton and the hive imbedded inside and crouch as close as I dare. Small grasses grow underneath and between the bones, and the ground is loose and damp. I kneel and poke at the loam and find tiny fragments, like bone needles. Something shattered her leg like a hammer into ceramic.

Something like a shotgun.

The bee sting burns a little, and there's a voice
watch out

clear as a bell, a girl's voice

watch out he's here be careful

in my ear, and I look behind me, and there's a boy, a doughy-faced boy, leaning on a tree with a shotgun tucked under his arm, his finger on the trigger.

Austin Oriole.

Her voice, again

i remember now

in my ear, not a whisper, and I feel a sharp little chin dig into my shoulder.

i remember the woods, the lilies and i knew where to go, but i found the plants, and i saw pictures at school, so i knew what they were, and i got out of there, but he saw me



I get up slowly, and Austin raises the gun. He has that interested, expectant look he gets when he's digging for clinker brick. He looks as if he's waiting for me to go first.

So I do.

"Bobby had some marijuana plants in the woods," I said. "And you knew all about them. I bet you helped with them. And I bet you held for him at school, and got a cut yourself. Made sure you seemed clean-cut, so no one would suspect the good little brother."

He grinned.

"And then Amanda went in the woods to find her lilies, got lost, and found your big brother's patch instead. Did you follow her? Or did she find you by accident? I don't suppose it matters."

"I followed her," he said, in a voice still squeaky with adolescence. "I didn't know she'd find the patch."

"Why bring a gun? Were you planning to kill her?"

He looked indignant. "No," he said, defensively. "I take it, sometimes. Sometimes growers are in the woods. It's better to have a gun."

"You could've stopped her before she found it."

His head tilted. "Yeah, I guess. But I didn't. She didn't see me behind her. I pretended I was stalking a deer."

In the back of my throat I taste not honey, but vomit. I swallow it and nod. "And?"

The muzzle of the gun never wavers. "She went to the patch like she was looking for it. And she figured out what they were. And I jumped out, like I was going to scare her. And she looked at me, like, I was this *thing*. And then I saw she knew. And I don't know what I would've done, but the stupid bitch *ran*."

"You chased her."

He's frustrated at my stupidity. "Well of course I had to chase her. I was yelling at her to stop, and she wouldn't stop, and I just wanted to talk to her, and finally I just took aim and shot. I thought she might get scared and stop."

The tree.

"But she kept on going."

"Yeah." He smiles. "And so I gave her the other barrel."

I'm still holding a fragment of bone.

"She crawled right through the clearing."

He's still smiling. "Yeah. She crawled a long way."

He glances, almost fondly, at the bones beside us. Still training that gun, both barrels loaded, on me.

"Do you come here a lot?" I say.

His eyes flick back. "Sometimes. Not for a long time, after the police were done with Bobby, and the dogs didn't find anything. I take a look, to see if it's still here. I had blood all over my jeans, and I was thinking about putting them in Bobby's closet. But I threw them away in a dumpster out of town and I guess they never found them."

"Did you take the bracelet? The charm bracelet?"

Something seems to conclude in his face and he raises the gun to his shoulder.

"I'll never tell," he says.

He aims, and I'm about to jump when the hum of the bees swells around us. They're boiling in a golden-brown mass out of the hive.

i remember now

Austin's eyes go wild, and I half turn, thinking she must've appeared behind me.

I only see bees darting about in the clearing, and when I turn back Austin's covered in bees. He drops the gun and swats at them, beats at his body. He's gasping, and his face is turning purple.

His eyes are mere slits now, and he reaches out to me with mottled, sausage-fingered hands. I feel a few stings on my arms, but no pain.

“Get them off me. Please. Get them off.”

I had blood all over my jeans.

He staggers against a tree and I bend close. My voice sounds remote. Calm. Too calm. Mildly interested: clinical.

“After you shot her, Austin, when she was lying there, in the middle of the woods with no one to stop you, did you do her?”

He looks at me. His eyes bulge. For a second I think he doesn’t understand. And then I see his tongue is swollen.

“No...” I can barely hear it. I turn my ear towards him and see a cluster of trees and a flash of red between them, and the honey floods my mouth again. I rub at the bee sting on my neck and

pain, and the feeling of bone crushed into splinters, and the claustrophobia of sprawling on the ground, helpless, and the looming soft face, and the sharp grinding stab when jeans are yanked down

I straighten and know he’s watching me walk away. I guess there’s a fighting chance he’ll live. Like there was a fighting chance somebody would’ve found Amanda, broken and dying, alone in the woods.



The Keenes came back to town to retrieve the body. I’m glad they took her home to bury her. If the funeral was here I’d have to go, and I had an idea she’d leave once her body was buried, if I didn’t want to confuse her by being at the graveside.

They did come to the house, and Amanda’s mother said some nice things about the renovation, and they thanked me for finding her. If they tasted honey, they didn’t say.

I went to Austin’s funeral, couldn’t get out of it, really. After all, I found his fresh body. Got the bees off, but it was too late.

It hangs over all of us that he was found with a shotgun, that Amanda’s leg was full of buckshot, that he had her bracelet of charms in his pocket. The police are letting the Orioles alone for a few days, to let them grieve, but they’ll be back and reality will break over that family like summer thunder.

It’s my imagination, perhaps, but the honey-flavor is weaker. I never see that flash of red. Perhaps she’s fading, slower to forget than to remember.



Nighttime, and I’m standing in front of the sink. It’s still hot, so I’m wearing pajama bottoms only, and that sweet taste comes. But also, the touch of a hand, small and cool against my bare back, and the feeling of a cheek laid against my skin. I’ve taken down the mirror to be re-silvered, so I don’t see anything.

I don’t turn, just wait, and soon she goes away. The honey taste fades, and I think I should brush my teeth again, but I don’t.

I’ve finished stripping the redwood in the living room. Sanded it smooth and stained it back to its original color. Maggie Mullins comes to see it, and brings me scones, and homemade jam from her blackberry bushes.

I like the scones, but the jam is too sweet, so I eat them plain.

