

The Mayan calendar ends December 21, 2012. In this story of love and adventure, a modern retelling of the ancient creation myth Popol Vuh, women and men, animal spirits and ancestors, race together to the end of time.

2012: Under the Witz Mountain

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2012: Under the Witz Mountain

A Novel

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Part I

Birth

Chapter 1

“Don’t you judge me,” Filomena said to Willadean. “Life is a suicide. We all die; we do it by living so long.”

“You didn’t live that long,” corrected Willadean.

The girl looked at her friend sadly. “If it wasn’t for the mescal,” she said, “I never would have fallen.”

“Don’t you mean jumped?” the older woman asked.

The cavern air was brown, but it was clear. There were no shadows. It was as if light came from the air itself, as if each atom suspended there was a light particle. And it was true, what her friend had told her. Filomena felt much too young to be an ancestor.

“Jumped, fallen, I didn’t think about it like that. I was falling when I was sober, the second that lasted so long, like it was my whole life.”

She knew, of course, it had been her whole life, or what was left of it. She didn’t remember the part when she left the balcony, or the part when she suddenly wasn’t falling anymore. She only remembered the part when she was flying.

“The hands of Gravity are the hands of God,” said Willadean.

And that was true also. The physics of that world were undeniable.

Filomena exhaled slow, the air with its light and warmth passing through her lips. When she woke up here she had thought herself in hell, the place people go when they jump. But it was not hell. It was just under the mountain. And here the heart of time does not beat steady. She felt young, but couldn’t even say how long she had been here. Some days the two sides go hand in hand, but then a minute would last for days, and a year like an eyelash, blinked out with a tear.

She and Willadean sat on a cold slate ledge on the bank of a river. The stone step continued across to where water fell over its

edge in a little waterfall, one of many, as the water continued from the slopes above down into the earth. There were small pools where bowls in the rock trapped the water, and in one of these pools a speckled brook trout was listening to their conversation. Others had overheard also. There was a man washing his face in the water as it flowed down above where the women sat, and there was a bumblebee the size of a hackey-sack ball hovering next to the fish, cooling its several feet in the little pool.

"I don't see what difference this all makes," said the fish. "You both came to the same place."

Filomena knew it had been years. It had to have been many years. She and the other ancestors, and the animal spirits, the *kanulob*, were living together, and their living together pleased Filomena very much, because in the living she had been unable to kill herself, to extinguish herself, even though her sister Mina and her mother, and the boyfriend who had been celibate for almost a week after she was gone, didn't know it. Filomena still felt alive.

The *kanulob* were her friends, better friends than she had when she was above the mountain, and certainly better than when she was on her own, in the town of the college, and of the balcony, and of the men who were her friend for their own purpose. An animal spirit, a *kanul*, shares a soul with a living person, and by sharing the soul they share a fate. Animal spirits can be injured and even killed, and when they are dead, as far as Filomena could tell, they were really gone. She had never known her own *kanul*. She was always busy with other things. She wondered about those days above the mountain, and if a bumblebee like Kasper had been her companion, if she would have hit so hard -- if a flying insect could have helped her hover a little above the concrete. It wasn't a question she was ever going to answer. Her *kanul* was dead. She had killed him too.

She saw her friend Willadean trying to ignore the fish, but the little trout just swam in circles. It was Willadean who had first told her about animal spirits, about how they help their people through perspective. Animals are good observers, and the perspective from under *Witz* Mountain gives them a sense of one's surroundings. They can visit their two-legged half siblings in dreams, or nudge them in one direction or another, unless the human has the rare talent of *puz nahual haleb*, of becoming an animal, and being able to talk things out directly.

In the modern world, this talent is almost extinct.

“If you can tread water down there and still say we’re in the same place,” said Willadean to Paco the trout, “then you have a better imagination than I do. That’s like saying everyone above the mountain is living in the same place.”

Filomena thought back to that other life. Her friend was right again. People never live in the same place. Her place had been in the dusty countryside, a land of dirt and scrub and agave. Her only ambition had been to be around people from the other places, the places where people had enough of everything. She wanted friends with enough clothes and enough to eat, enough money and enough time to enjoy it. She had looked for men with enough, but had become just one more of all the things they had.

And now she was an ancestor, and ancestors help through experience. How many times had her friend told her this? It still seemed absurd, since she had died so young and couldn’t think of one experience that might be useful to anyone. Ancestors are the memory of a life, kept alive for a descendant who, one can only assume, will need to make use of it someday. Unlike the *kanulob*, the ancestors cannot take the initiative to buzz in the ears or snap at the heels of a human like the animals do. The descendants come to them for help. Of course, there are exceptions to every rule, and Filomena assumed this one was no different. She took it on faith. Laws of physics are provided for each of the worlds according to its need, but other laws, like the law that laws are made to be broken, are universal, and reflect the personality of God.

She would never say that to Willadean.

The older woman was still glowering at Paco, making circles in his pool. “You always think you’re above everybody else,” said the fish, straining to look up at Willadean.

“Even in heaven,” said the woman, “the deathbed conversion doesn’t go to the same place as the person who was a saint all her life.”

“You’ve been to heaven?” said the bumblebee, looking wide eyed with all of his five eyes, including the eight thousand compound eye facets.

“Of course she hasn’t been to heaven,” said Paco.

The two women stood up and the bee strained to follow their movement. Filomena knew he couldn’t see very far under the

mountain. The ultraviolet light he saw could penetrate clouds, but not rock.

"You don't need to be there to know heaven," said Willadean. "I was a churchwoman and a contemplative all my life, and caught more than one glimpse at God's face."

Shocked, his four wings slowed from two hundred to one hundred and fifty beats per second, and the rest of poor Kasper's legs and his furry bottom were dunked into the water. He began to beat with dizzying swiftness, splashing and sending spray across the ripples in the pool. It was like his feet were glued to its shining surface, and the trout had to come up beneath him and give him a boost with his nose and little lower mandible where the overbite pushes up.

"Thanks," said the bee, drying his wings and spraying the women.

"Hey!" the two ancestors shouted.

The insect ignored them. "You really saw his face?"

"It was pure, blinding white," said Willadean.

"I don't see white too well," said the fish. "Mostly I see blue, and I always pictured him with blue and yellow spots." He was swimming in circles again. "Something's going to happen," he said.

"Have *you* seen him?" the bumblebee asked, ignoring the fish, and buzzing over to young Filomena and hovering inches from her face.

"My mother always said we see him in strangers," said the girl, "and especially in the poor, and you know, it always seemed like he was usually a she, and his face, I mean her face, was usually dirty; the women were always the poorest."

The older women just shook her head, the spots of water drying on her long white gown. "It's no wonder your poor lost soul couldn't find its way."

Filomena was going to point out that, for being lost, she had ended up standing right here hip-to-hip next to the older churchwoman, but she already realized Willadean would not accept that from her any more than she would from a fish.

The old man was still bent over the swirling pools above them, still washing his face, and the man was laughing.

The ground shook, and pieces of debris filtered down like dust from rafters. Suddenly, Paco started to jump and swim in circles.

“Damn,” he said, the words bubbling out of the now bubbling water. “I hate it when it does that. This one could be a pyroclastic flow. Ouch!”

The trout flipped out of the pool like a jumping salmon, except he headed downstream through the current, away from the hot mountain.

The bumblebee was rubbing dust out of his multiple eyes.

The old man wiped his face, using the tail of his white tunic. He was still laughing.

“If it’s hot enough old man, maybe you can finally get some of that dirt off,” called Willadean, looking back over her shoulder.

“It’s plenty hot,” he chuckled.

“What is so funny?” the woman asked.

“It’s just funny,” the face-washing man said. “All your life you thought you were going to die and know all the answers, but you don’t know shit.” Something caught his eye in the reflection in the pool and he let his tunic front drop and bent over to see. Filomena stepped up over the ledges of rock and stood next to him, looking into the water. Mancha padded up and sat down next to her. The three of them peered down, blinking, then the dog leaned over and put her muzzle into the pool and lapped up warm water.

The surface was turned to ripples.

“Do you mind?” asked Filomena.

“Sor-ry,” said the dog, with the accent on both syllables. “Don’t you ever get thirsty?” She stood at the edge of the pool and wagged her tail, as the others went back to looking.

Filomena saw a woman and a man lying next to each other in bed. In river eddies and shallow pools under the mountain you could sometimes see people above, see them and hear them and sometimes hear their thoughts. Just then another tremor hit. The water turned to ripples again as the mountain shook, Filomena almost slipped, and the woman in bed reached up to grab the headboard and steady herself.

“What was that?” the woman asked.

“The tremors of our love,” said the man. “You make the world tremble.”

“I’m getting up to see,” she said.

“No. Stay. It was nothing.”

“Javier might come back, if he felt the earthquake.”

"Forget Javier. Come with me today."

"I want to," the woman said. "But I'm afraid he would find me and kill me." With her hand she swept the straight, jet black hair away from her dark eyes. "He said he would kill me if I ever cheated on him. I want to leave him, but I'm so afraid around him it's like I'm paralyzed."

"He cannot paralyze you unless you let him," the man said.

"He paralyzes me." She swung her legs around and off the bed, pulling a wrap around her beautiful form and tying it with a woolen belt.

"Don't go," the man pleaded.

"Please, let me go."

"Aren't you afraid you're going to break my heart?"

"You should go," she said.

Under the mountain Filomena watched the scene above, playing out in the reflection in the pool. The man reached for the woman, but his hand made it only halfway before the universe stopped. Half of the building disappeared, and all the atoms in all the universe he had ever known were condensed down into a single point, a point of infinite weight, and time itself came to a halt. Filomena was more than watching. She could almost feel what he felt, feel the shift, the brief tug at time's unpredictable fabric, before, slowly, the universe began expanding outward again.

His legs were gone. There was a roof and a block wall, and a piece of the *Witz Mountain* the size of a car, sitting where he used to keep them. There was no blood, as if the arteries had been sealed under the tons of rock. If there was any pain, it was not there in his face.

The woman had just swung her legs off the bed and they had been spared, but in that instant when matter had been folded and unfolded, and sorted out in new ways, the blast had slammed her head against the headboard, her neck snapping and her eyes closing tight.

The man in the bed watched her. She was still breathing.

And her beautiful right arm had broken off.

It was broken off above the elbow, and the sharp edge of bone pushed in that instant between the man's ribs and lodged where his heart lived. He lay still. It was as if the plug of bone was holding tight, wedged deep in his chest. The woman's head and neck were

awkwardly bent. Blood flowed freely from her severed arm, spurting forcefully, then less forcefully, as the red patches of dimpled skin around her frightfully beautiful nipples began to turn pale.

The man was careful not to turn his body, and took the tie from around the woman's woolen wrap and tied it tight around that stub that was left of her arm. He pulled the knot tight, and the pulsing blood eventually stopped.

He lay motionless.

Finally, she was his woman. Even when his eyes were closed, his lips almost curved up into a smile. Amazingly she continued to breathe even though she lay unconscious. His breathing was hard and labored. He would turn his eyes to look at her every now and again. When he breathed in, a tear of pain appeared in the corner of his eye. You could almost hear the scraping of the woman's bone against rib, shooting pain through the man. She was as close to him as any woman had ever been to a man. Time passed. The familiar universe was back, with people crying and the sounds of ambulances outside in the street. You could see him concentrating on his breathing. He never tried to cry out for help, as if he didn't want the moment to come to an end. How could he know if his woman would live? How could he know if, outside of this moment, there would be anything left of him at all? He couldn't know.

And then Javier came home.

He found his wife on Izek's chest and in his arms, or rather, found her arm in Izek's chest. He stood over them, looking horrified.

"I would kill you," Javier said to Izek, "if God had not already done it!"

Only half of Izek remained, and it was breathing so fast he could say nothing. He was trying to breathe without moving his chest, but as if suddenly craving air he would suck it in jealously, only to have the tears of pain well up in his eyes. Perhaps Javier thought they were tears of fear, but Filomena knew they were tears of pain, and only came when the poor man tried to claim a portion of air for himself. Even knowing that the air belonged to a world he no longer had any claim to, that soon he would have no part in at all, there was no fear.

But he was clearly afraid for her.

The husband went to pull the woman Melva off the man, grabbing her by the head. When he pulled her head the body didn't move, like the two were not connected. Then the woman's arms and legs jerked in rigid spasms, like the legs of a pithed frog. The arm flew up, and, even wedged tightly between the ribs, it pulled free of the man's chest, leaving the ventricle of his heart open to the wide world.

It took less than a second and it took forever, to the end of his life. The man Izek saw the spastic limbs of his lover, all three and a half, go flaccid. He saw his blood covering Javier's work clothes. He saw his woman's face, still calm, a million miles away, unaware of what was happening in her convulsing body. He must have seen the darkness coming.

Filomena heard Mancha whimper, and saw tears well up in her eyes. "I knew his *kanul*," the dog said, sadly. At that moment, somewhere in the forest on the side of the mountain, an emerald-billed toucanet fell from its tree.

When Izek woke up, he was staring into the eyes of an old man standing over him. The man was holding the sleeve of a tunic like it was a towel, and he must have looked like he was washing his face with it. There was warm breath on Izek's face, and a street dog the color of corn *masa* leaning down to sniff him. It must have seemed a strange way to be welcomed into death. There was nothing so earthy as the breath of a dog.

"What is this?" asked Filomena, "a morality play? I thought they were a good couple."

"Not a morality play," said the old man. "God's own physics."

And then, with the understanding of an ancestor who had been to college, and had watched the moving world's actions and reactions, the girl Filomena saw it for what it was, applied mechanics, no more and no less. The compressive load applied by the small surface of broken bone-edge had simply exceeded the elastic limit of the strength of the tissue between the ribs. It was a simple college physics problem, and elastic limits and shear forces were as much the hand of God as the law of gravity, and the forces that her own body had arrogantly and clumsily tried to cheat. She had deserved her death no more than this beautiful man had deserved to have his heart emptied of its blood. It was simply their mortal inability to resist the will of God.

And Filomena thought of her mother, and something she had said. In old Mexico, the symbol for the present age of man was the same as the Aztec symbol for earthquake. She guessed it was about twenty more years until the end of that age, until that year they spoke about, 2012, and wondered how many more earthquakes she would see, and how many more deaths. Filomena looked down at this man Izek with friendly eyes, eyes that might have had more in them in another world, above the weight of this mountain, but here under the brown sky what they had in them was compassion.

Chapter 2

Kasper watched the woman, the rise of the chest that somehow kept her alive. He couldn't tell if she was awake or asleep. In her dream she might be laughing, running up a hill of grass and clover. He was afraid to hope for that much.

Two flies walked her stomach, lapping grime and sweat from a pool so shallow it was no more than a sheen, like newly laid honey.

If only she was dreaming. A *kanul* can speak to their above-mountain people in dreams, speak plainly and directly, carrying on a conversation as well as anyone. But even with Melva, the woman who shared his soul, he could only buzz and make a fuss if she was awake. He supposed he could sting her, if getting her attention became a matter of life and death, but he hadn't tried that one yet. It seemed unlikely he would need to, now that the woman was paralyzed from the neck down, except for her breathing, and the moving of her small and ring fingers on the left hand in the most slow and clumsy fashion. He wondered if she was aware of them moving, if she could feel them, and if she thought she was moving fingers on both her hands, the real, blood-fed one and the phantom one, the one that only existed in the nerve-severed part of her brain where its memory still lived.

The black and bristly bumblebee was accustomed to being out of sync with his soul partner. For one thing, his best vision was in seeing ultraviolet, a world of light completely invisible to Melva and all the other people who lived in what they called visible light. He had difficulty appreciating their gloomy moods on gloomy days, and the effect that an overcast sky could have on them. Ultraviolet passes through clouds like the white stuff passes through a window with the shutters open wide. To Kasper, a cloudy day was still bright and sunny. And it was beautiful too, to see the folding of the shadows of multiple hues past mauve and periwinkle, and the way the intensity could blink and take a lilac light beam past lavender blush and back again, and then into the ultra range, the colors Kasper called brightshade, and all in fifty beats of a wing.

He sat in a hole in the wall, like a wood-boring bee. The wall was a thin coat of plaster that unevenly covered the vertical sticks of the original wall and the dried mud between them. From his hole,

Kasper could see her lying on the dingy thin mattress in the makeshift bed, the only movement her chest rising up and down and her eyes blinking. And the occasional twitching of the two fingers. Her beautiful black hair, the same black as the bee's black pile, was dirty and matted. The doctors had said it was a miracle that Melva was breathing, and that God had been with her the day of the great eruption because she hadn't been killed like the others. She was still alive. The bumblebee had known her all her life, from the time she was a mischievous child who always wanted her own place in the world. He shared much of her mood, since mood was one of the languages of the soul they shared. He watched her, hour after hour and day after day, and he didn't believe she thought God had been with her that day. He didn't believe she felt blessed.

He didn't believe this was the place in the world she always wanted for herself.

The room was dirty and dark. The girl hadn't been washed in more than a week. Javier hired the woman Irma from the town to cook and to clean, but washing his crippled wife was extra and he wouldn't have it done too frequently. The scraps they used for her diapers were soaked through, and even with the dim light of the morning coming through the front room of the house and through the doorway, he could see that her skin at their edges were red and chaffed. There was a thin feeding tube snaking its way from her nose to a hook where a glass bottle hung next to a picture of Saint Sebastian on the wall, pierced through with arrows like the arrow of her bone had pierced her own lover's heart. Twice each day, Irma would fill the stained bottle with thin corn *atole* that she made on the stove with the tomares and tortillas. The room was a dismal sight; Kasper knew from the dog *kanul* Mancha that the room would smell very bad, and he was sure the humans would know that.

He remembered when the broken woman had been a young girl. She used to run everywhere. She would run to the *pila* where her mother washed her clothes and she would run home again. She would run to play. During the years she went to school she would run there and run home, her torn and tattered notebook under her arm, and during recess she would run and run. The child Melva had two speeds, run and stop, and it was not lost on Kasper that bumblebees like him were built the same way. He appreciated his similarity with the girl. He was either flying or not flying. His small

wings would lift him only if he was flapping them as fast as he could; anything less and he would fall out of the sky like a nut from a tree. When it was cold outside he sometimes couldn't even flap fast enough to get off the ground, not until Kasper buzzed and buzzed, warming up his flying muscles to get ready to flap his four wings at their one, full speed.

He loved to fly. He knew he wasn't always as careful as he should have been around the cute girl with the pigtail flying behind her like the tail of a racing horse. When she was running on the path from her house to her mother's patch of corn the bumblebee would sometimes fly right beside her, weaving in and out of her airstream with glee. He had loved the feeling, more like two friends than a human and an animal, a pet. The first few times, when he would catch her eye, she was frightened and tried to get away. He would let her, but the next time he would see her, the sight of her running, her legs moving so fast they made their own wind, was too much to resist. He didn't know if she realized how often he had been there, but then one day she just stood in the grass behind her mother's house. She was just standing there, looking.

"Where are you little bee?"

Kasper didn't know what he should do. Little Melva didn't need any special help just then. She wasn't in any danger. What she needed was a friend, another girl to run with. But he knew she didn't have another girl to play with, not running games or any game. Even the other children at school didn't seem interested in her. It was just Melva and her sisters, and her mother.

"Are you here?"

That afternoon Melva learned that Kasper's soft pile was not hard and bristly. He wondered if she thought he was softer than the North American dog he had heard her talk about, on more than one occasion, the one she saw while washing clothes with her mother at the *pila*. She said the long hair shaggy animal had appeared out of nowhere, and was the softest thing she had ever felt. He had heard Melva tell the girls in the playground at school about the animal, and how she saw no people with it talking strange words or taking pictures of the old ladies, and Kasper had heard the girls laugh, and call her *loco*.

Perhaps Kasper had been a little careless with the child.

Her finger had felt strange, that first contact with the other creature that shared half of his worldly soul. It was the pad of her right index finger, a finger that didn't even exist any longer, a finger that might only exist in the phantom memory of her right arm. In her brain she must still be right-handed. She was a right-handed woman without a right hand, or a right elbow. She could have squished him, as big as she was even as a little girl, but she was strangely gentle. Kasper didn't think of humans as particularly gentle. He had seen too much to ever make that mistake. It had been his first impression after leaving the nest, formed when his soul was formed, when Melva was deep in her mother's abdomen, and the male drone that was her father found out about the girl. The man could have squished the mother as surely as Melva could have squished the bee's little body, and Kasper was glad that something held him back. He had not completely squished her, but he had left her so bruised and bloody that it was hard to recognize her face.

He never knew what held the man back, seeing how he seemed to so completely want the woman dead. Kasper was glad for it, not understanding much about humans at that young age. It was enough to know that humans were brutal by nature, and enough that he knew to fear them. He knew that most other bees feared them as well. Kasper had never known his own father, and that was something else he and Melva had in common, but then he had never really known the queen either. Nobody really knew the queen.

The small pad of the girl's pointing finger had been surprisingly gentle, and in its own way it was soft. Kasper felt the small stinger at the end of his avocado-shaped abdomen push out and become erect, quivering, under the girl's touch. He knew it was a reflex, and that he would not sting her, would not pump his venom into this child. The girl had giggled. He saw her surprised eyes, the surprise of petting a bee the way she had petted the strange long-haired North American dog, and she giggled. Kasper could only bear it for so long, the soft yet intense pressure, the flowing soul that was neither particle nor wave, the instinctive need to push his stinger into this strange finger-covering, the warmth of the girl's mammalian body, and the sound of the girl's giggling, and he started his flying muscles so abruptly that the loud buzzing startled Melva, maybe frightened her a little, and he had flown away as fast as he could.

The bumblebee had seen and listened when the girl told her mother what had happened.

"The bumblebee is the gentlest of creatures," the woman had said, "but it is still a wild creature and you should not touch it. You should treat it with respect."

And so he had learned something else about humans. He learned they could be wise.

From his hole in the wall, Kasper could see the woman's chest rising and falling. He knew he could not outlive her, no *kanul* could outlive its human, but he didn't watch out of fear for himself. He just watched. Melva had stopped being the running girl child a long time ago. She was a woman like her mother had been a woman. Yet her mother had been so lively. She had been sad very often and cried when her daughters slept in their beds, but the morning always found her at the mill with her corn to be ground, then there were tortillas to make and children to wake up, the garden to tend and clothes to sew, and wash, the lunches to make and the house to clean. As a bee, Kasper appreciated the industry and efficiency of the human woman, and felt a kinship there that he could not express to her. Melva had never been industrious like that, even before she lost all ability to move her body, save the two twitching fingers, below her beautiful neck.

He needed to stretch his wings. Irma came in with a pan of watery *atole* from the kitchen to pour into Melva's hanging glass bottle. Kasper could tell by the grimace on the woman's face that the stench in the room was awful, but apparently she had not been paid to clean that day because she made no attempt to change the soaked diaper or the loose, watery stool staining the dirty blanket. It occurred to the bee that he and the soul-mate had something else in common now. They both lived on liquid. He realized he was hungry. The thin *atole* was nothing like the nectar he hunted, but they were both liquid. One thing he could smell was sweet, but that left him with nothing to smell in this grim back room, shut off from the light and what joy might be left in the world above the mountain.

He left sad. The buzz of his muscles sent the woman Irma running toward him with a faded, stained and folded newspaper, faded to the color of Saint Sebastian and his arrows. He pushed off from the edge of the wall-hole with his legs, and dipped a little until

the flying muscles connected with the wings and came up to speed. The newspaper came down on the wall with a loud 'thwack,' and he flew straight for the doorway. There were no windows in the room. He looked down and many of his eyes caught the sight of broken Melva, her own eyes fluttering. Whether she was listening to his buzzing or had heard the *empleada's* loud attack on the bee-hole he was not sure. The woman chased him through the front room and out the door.

Even though it took longer to warm his muscles and beat his wings in the cool morning air, the colder air was denser and easier to fly in. It took less energy, fewer sips of nectar, to generate the same lifting force. However, when fumarole vents on the side of the volcano put steam and heat into the sky, it could be hot enough that the rising air above the vents, up and out of the sickening gases themselves, could carry him up and through the colder atmosphere. Those were the only times Kasper went higher than a few feet above the ground. It's not that he didn't fly higher because it was too much work; it was because he couldn't see well enough. Even with a nice cloudy day full of bright ultraviolet sunshine, the bee could only see a couple of yards in front of him.

Kasper had a favorite clump of thistle flowers growing behind the outhouse in the field behind Melva's house. There seemed to be something about the privy that made the nectar extra sweet. He was sitting there drinking when Mancha came over to sit with him.

"You've been with her?"

"I can't seem to do anything else. It's like the less she can do the more I need to be there, in case something happens – in case she does something."

"The smell of death is on her," said the dog. "I can smell it from here, even next to this shit house."

"I'm sorry," said the dog. Kasper saw the look in Mancha's sad dog eyes, and knew what she was thinking. Kasper was waiting for his death too.

"Is that all you smell?"

"No," said the dog. "There's something else too, but I don't know what it is."

"I feel it," said the bumblebee, "but I don't understand it either."

They sat there, the bee and the bitch, Kasper drinking his thistle cocktail and Mancha licking clean the hair between her legs.

Already the morning coolness was beginning to burn off. They could see the woman Irma walking back down the dusty street toward the town. There was no one else in the house, only what was left of the broken woman. It was just three months since the pyroclastic flow, the river of hot ash and rock, had come down the slope of the *Witz* Mountain. The solid stream had not made it down this far, but there were rocks that had been thrown down from the mountain, and though cooling, they were still too hot to land on. Not much farther up the slope were the ruins of the house, that shattered and burned out shell of stick and adobe and block, where Kasper's soul partner had left her youth. From here he could fly there in a few thousand beats of a wing.

"Are you coming under?" said the dog. "I'll walk with you."

"No," said Kasper. "I think I'm going to fly outside here a little first. I just filled up on nectar, and the ultra is especially bright this morning, brighter than brightshade."

"O.K., I'll see you later."

Kasper hoped that he would. He thought of what Mancha had said, 'the smell of death is on her,' and he hoped that he would see the dog later. He said a little prayer. He knew it, even without smelling it.

But there was something else there too.

He buzzed up the mountain slope, feeling a little bump whenever he passed over a pyroclastic rock and the heat rising from its baked interior. Soon he found the field of fumaroles, and got above the stream that would cook him like a corn kernel and the gases that would choke him, and found the air rising like he was falling straight up. He didn't dare go too high. Gliding was not in a bumblebee's vocabulary, and even with all four wings outstretched, he would glide like a rock. Still, he wanted to find the true sky. He wanted to be alone in the sky beyond anything that he could see. He wanted to find the blinding whiteness, the nothing and everything that Willadean had said was the face of God. He didn't know if he could see it, but he wanted to fly so high that he might be inside of it.

And when he nudged himself forward, leaving the column of rising air and falling into the vast atmosphere, it was like being in a bright darkness. It wasn't white of course, but the most beautiful fullness of violet and ultra, not moving and not flowing, but just

surrounding him like the inside of a perfect flower bloom. It was beautiful. That's when he realized that the face of God would not wear the same expression for everyone who looked on it. The churchwoman Willadean might have had a special moment, but that didn't mean that her moment was the only true one. At first he didn't know if he was floating, or falling up still or falling down. He had found a perfect place where ultra surrounded him like warmth. But like all special graces, he later thought, it was contained, and was over in a moment.

Suddenly, there was a darkening on one side that contrasted with the lightness on the other, and the darkening was growing fast. Kasper all at once felt himself falling, and beating his flying muscles as fast as he could didn't seem to change his predicament very much. He wondered if he was to die, if Melva's short life would suddenly end also. Should she fear him more than he feared this power she had over his fate? He had never known it to happen, when the *kanul* was the first to die. He had never considered it before, but then he had never consciously considered fearing the woman, although he knew Mancha was right in seeing it there.

He was falling from the sky like a pyroclastic pebble. Like the missiles thrown out, he too came from under the mountain. Suddenly, it was like a soft hand taking him up and lowering him, more and more slowly, down to the earth within his short range of sight. He knew it was the air, and his own wildly moving wings and the lifting force that was finally slowing him a little, but it still felt like something outside of himself. It was all he could do to put out his legs and catch himself as he fell, slowly now, above the scrub bushes in the *campo*, the countryside, and when he had caught hold of one, he rested.

It was the sweet smell of thistle that finally took him back to the house. There was something about the thistle flower behind the privy that gave it a distinctive sweet smell. When he was back, he had to consciously slow his buzzing flight muscles to calm himself. It was a nervous habit common to bumblebees. Exhausted, he sat and drank.

Melva was alone and asleep when Kasper re-entered the ramshackle house to sit with her. Irma's newspaper had knocked off some plaster around his hole, and he wasn't as well hidden as he had been before. He thought of rebuilding it, the way a mud-

dabbing wasp might, but had no idea of how to begin such a construction project, and working alone it would be very difficult. Bees were not accustomed to working alone, unless they were looking for nectar or collecting pollen. He watched her sleep, his Melva. As long as she was breathing he was too. But he truly cared for the woman, and like all true *kanulob*, his concern was for her, and not solely because of what it might mean for him. The line on the arm stump where the sutures had been removed was healing very well, he thought, but the red streaked groin was worse, and seemed more swollen than it had been that morning. There was no sweat on her face, and Kasper didn't think she had a fever. He sat with her like a friend would sit, not making a sound so as not to disturb the woman's rest.

The only sounds were from the street outside the house, through the front room and, whenever a vehicle went by, through the thin walls. Every now and then her breathing would gurgle. Kasper knew the woman could not cough, and the liquid would just sit there, sending her breathing into sharp spasms, until it evaporated or soaked into something somewhere. If a skin infection didn't kill her, pneumonia would. He prayed that her yellow-gray *atole* would not find its way into her lungs. But now her breathing was quiet. She was quiet.

He climbed out of the hole to hear better.

There was another sound, a tapping. He couldn't tell at first where it was coming from.

She was not quiet. He went to sit on the side of the bed. It had stopped when he was flying, when his buzzing had been in the air. But the bumblebee was sitting now, quiet as a rock, and slowing, lightly at first, the tapping started again. He could see it, the bottom of the left ring finger, lightly and slowly moving up and down, tapping on the stained plastic mattress.

She was not asleep.

Kasper was nervous. He didn't know what to do. He had revealed himself to this girl before, or at least she had been a girl then. She was a woman now. She was awake and tapping, like she was in a box, and wanted to see if there was anyone there, anyone outside of her box. He knew she couldn't speak, couldn't call out. He didn't know what to do.

'Tap.'

It was one short syllable, like a wink.

'Tap, tap.' Two, like an up and down handshake.

'Tap, tap, tap.' Three, like a rich, three course meal, like coffee and a *tomal*, and desert. She was still communicating like persons who are people, only in a new language. Kasper was confused and didn't know if he should answer.

'Buzz.'

It was one short syllable. The tapping stopped.

'Buzz, buzz.' Two, like the up and down of a wing.

'Buzz, buzz, buzz.' Three, like the *kanul* and the human, and the bright, ultraviolet face of God. Like the father and the daughter, and the animal spirit.

'Tap.'

'Buzz.'

'Tap, tap, tap, tap.'

'Buzz, buzz, buzz, buzz.'

Then she held the finger out but didn't tap. She stopped halfway into her tap. The finger was shaking a little, like she could only hold it extended with difficulty. At first, when nothing happened, it started to fall, relax tired and fall to the mattress, but then she extended it again, as with a great effort. Again, Kasper didn't know what to do, but he knew what he wanted to do.

Slowly as first, he walked on his six shaking legs to a place just below the trembling fingertip. Again, he placed himself below a lever that might come down and squish him, if there was enough strength in this weakened ring finger to squish such a large bumblebee. But again, it didn't try to squish him. Kasper, trembling himself, raised up so that his soft pile lifted, a full body erection, rubbing against the woman's fingerpad, and it came down gently on top of him.

And for some minutes he sat next to her, conscious of the rhythm of her breathing, and again amazed at the softness of the woman's fingertip.

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