

Now that it was cold, the wasp had returned. That was how she thought of him, as a single being, though she knew it could not be so. A single stripy person waiting, somewhere, for the North Wind to pick up and squeeze him back into her life. She had no idea where he had been waiting, or how he found himself by the same window day after day, every day, almost. She could only imagine the sharp coldness of the wind woke him each winter and drove him inside to her bedroom.

That he could not be the same person, not precisely, she knew, for each time she found him she was obliged to terminate his forays quite suddenly, with a book or a shoe pressed hard against his body. He was easy to catch. He flew in slow loops about her room, alighting on a wall or a shelf for some moments at a time, as though his body was a little too heavy, the effort of casting off again exhausting. She had taken to watching him for a while, the book idling by her side, letting him lift off and settle back a last few times before lunging at him with the fatal object. She thought of him, in those last moments of life, as performing for her; a miniature male Scheherazade, spinning out his final breaths with wild tales told by his body. As the weeks passed, it grew harder to kill him.

The last winter, she invested in a fly swatter. The swatter had a long handle and was certainly very efficient, but it wasn't to distance herself from the moment of impact that she bought it. She hadn't minded the clumsy literary dispatch or picking up the crumpled body between her finger and thumb, pinching at a wing or a sturdy leg and dropping him neatly into the wastepaper bin under her desk. But one day she bade him farewell against her window and as she pulled her book away she was shocked to see a copious white substance spilling from his middle. Worse, she felt it, sticky and oozing against the book. It wasn't, she thought, so much the quality of the substance that shocked her, as the existence of it at all. Until then, he had always seemed so dry, her lazy wasp, almost desiccated. He was fat, certainly, but she considered him made of the same stuff all the way through, like a biscuit, his crispy little shell containing more of the same crisp and air and fuzz right through his body. The next day she drove into town and bought a white plastic fly swat at the pound shop.

The first year of the wasp, she had still been married. It was in November, not long after Guy Fawkes Night, that she went into the bedroom looking for her husband

and found the wasp hovering there instead. She was stopped, staring at him when Dennis came up the stairs minutes later.

“What’s that? A hornet? Bloody hell. You gonna kill it?”

He went into the bathroom and she looked around for a suitable instrument. There were plenty of small hard objects to hand, photo frames, hairbrushes, but a book seemed to offer the most traditional and satisfactory wasp-killing experience. And so it proved. When Dennis emerged from the bathroom the wasp was gone and he had either forgotten about the insect or was not interested enough to ask about its demise. They didn’t speak of it again until the next morning when the low vibrating whine of the wasp followed by intermittent muffled thuds as it threw itself against the window, woke them both up.

“I thought you killed it?”

“I did, last night.”

“You left the window open, then.”

But she hadn’t. The window was closed tight, it was cold and damp outside and she didn’t like to leave windows open at night anyway. She pulled at the curtain and tried to get at the window latch to let the wasp out, but it flew off as soon as she put her hand out, brushed past her arm and into the room.

‘What are you doing? Helen? It’s on the loose now.’”

She knew he wouldn’t like it, that he had a bit of a thing about most insects, but she couldn’t, for that moment, move. The wasp had flown right past her, the same wasp, she felt sure, she had killed the night before and, as it swept by it had collided, very gently, with her bare arm. The briefest of touches but it had electrified her and she gazed at it now, bobbing slowly up and down around the room, in stunned silence.

Behind her, Dennis swore and got out of the bed, stumbling across the room towards the door.

“Want some tea?”

Alone with the intruder, she released her breath and started to look about. In the wastebasket the body of last night’s victim lay intact, its legs and wings fully extended as if in exhibition. She stood on the bed and examined the window. It had a metal frame and was only single glazed, but though it rattled a little in strong winds there did not seem to be any gap big enough to allow a wasp through. From below came the muffled noises of

Dennis calling her. He wouldn't come back in until the wasp was gone. She looked at it crawling over the bedside lamp and decided to run a bath. She wasn't sure why she chose the wasp over Dennis.

The third night the wasp came Dennis lost his temper. She had seen it flying about earlier in the afternoon when she was changing the sheets, but she didn't mention it to her husband until they were getting ready for bed. She made a great show of trying to catch it and in the end Dennis left and slept in the spare room. In the morning he insisted on seeing the dead wasp and then he called the council.

"It's not right. There shouldn't be wasps now. There must be a nest right here, some sort of weird, mutants. Climate change, that's what it is. Bet they've come over from somewhere."

The council told Dennis to call a private company, but nobody wanted to come out unless Dennis had seen the nest. It was too expensive, they said, to spend time looking for a nest, they charged by the part hour. Dennis said it was up to him how much he wanted to spend, but he put the phone down when they gave him a quote.

"Printing money, they are. I'll find it myself."

He borrowed a ladder and had her hold it while he inched tentatively up the side of the house. The ladder was too short to reach the eaves and Dennis found he had no head for heights anyway.

"You go up. You don't mind that sort of thing."

Though she wouldn't have minded the ladder, or looking for the nest, she refused to go.

"I'm allergic to wasps, Dennis, a whole nest of them could kill me."

"You never said. How d'you know?"

"I got stung before, when I was little. My whole arm swelled up. They said I better be careful, try not to get stung again, in case, you know, it got worse."

Dennis glowered at her suspiciously, but he gave the ladder back to the neighbour and didn't mention the nest again. That night, he fell asleep in front of the television, though it was a Friday and his usual night for going out. She sat with him until the chat shows finished but he shrugged her off when she went up to bed. He avoided the bedroom for the rest of the weekend.

On Monday, he came back from work armed with print outs from the office. They were covered with Googled information about wasps: pictures and descriptions, life cycles and habits.

“I told you it’s not normal. They don’t look like any of the pictures and why’s there only one at a time?”

He pointed at the diagrams and waved the wads of paper around, shouted about the council and the wasps and then about wildlife in general. She didn’t listen. She made a cup of tea and nodded at him when he seemed to require it but she was thinking about the bedroom and where the wasp was now.

She was telling the truth about her allergy, she had a bad reaction as a child and now she kept tablets in her handbag. But Dennis disliked discussing illness. It made him depressed, he said, everyone going on about their aches and pains. So she tended not to mention any matters medical and she found it was easier, really, to deal with all those issues on her own. After two years of marriage, she didn’t feel the need to talk about her body with Dennis at all.

The wasp upstairs had arrived in the morning. She left him while she was at work, but she knew she would have to find him and kill him if Dennis was going to return to the bedroom. She wouldn’t care to go sleep herself, with the wasp about, probably it wasn’t safe for her and yet she had no real fear of him. She had quite enjoyed his company over the weekend, letting him busy around while she read or got dressed. When she felt like it, she squashed him with her book. The choice was hers and perhaps because she knew the wasp sting was dangerous for her, or perhaps because she knew he would return the next day, she experienced no guilt about the transaction.

Dennis was still talking. He was looking down at his papers on the kitchen counter, his back turned to her and for a moment, she found herself comparing his activity with her wasp’s. She rather enjoyed the idea that they were fighting over her, wasp and husband and she allowed that her new suitor had the advantage.

That night and for the next few nights, she killed the wasp before Dennis came to bed. They slept uncomfortably, a barrier of resentment between them and when, one night the following week, she told him there was no wasp to kill, no body to view, he refused to believe her and returned to the spare room. The next morning, he came in to

get his clothes and was met by a wasp hovering in the middle of the bedroom. He called his wife a bloody cow and packed a suitcase. While she was at work, he collected the rest of his things, which didn't amount to much. Almost, she thought when she came home, almost as though he had never been there.

And that was that. How quickly he had given up. The little fight over who was to live with his wife, a minor domestic squabble between an insect and a man, had been so easily won and although she was surprised at the swift turn of events she found she wasn't sorry. The house seemed less empty now he was gone than it had been with him in it and she was free again to sit with her books and her thoughts, stare out of the window and say nothing. As for the wasp, he only came back a few times more that winter. By Christmas, he too was gone.

The following winter was the year of the fly swatter, a development of sorts. It was a mild November and the wasp didn't arrive until late in the month but one day, just as the afternoon light was fading, she heard him behind the curtain and lifted it back. He flew out and into the room as though he had never left. She couldn't say she was expecting him, but frequently and that month particularly, as she was lying in the bath or going downstairs, she wondered if he would be waiting for her when she returned. She was so glad to see him she ate her supper in the bedroom and waited until 'Newsnight' was finished before picking up her book and smashing him into the bedside table.

In December she bought the swatter and she thought his visiting pattern changed. He seemed to arrive late at night, after she was asleep and sometimes she slept through and woke to find him already up and about. One morning she found him on the bedspread itself, crawling along quite confidently but only that one time and she tried not to worry unduly as she turned out her light at night. She started to wonder why she had to kill him at all.

The balance was in the sacrifice each made. However hard she sometimes found it and however much she put it off, she felt sure she was behaving correctly. But when one day he didn't return and the evening drew on with no sign of him, she felt some of her confidence slip. When he had still not emerged two days later she felt the first twinges of dread. Who, after all, had made the most sacrifices? Hadn't she just succumbed to her own desires, jeopardising little of any value to her? While he, who had fought off his

rival and braved the elements, surrendered his life every time they met. She had been fooling herself, and now she might not have another chance to show him, her perfect lover, what she had learned.

That night he came back and she was ready. Cold had frosted over the garden and the windows were icy, but she had brought in an extra heater and the condensation ran in fat rivulets down the glass. The wasp was slow. Considerate, she thought, mindful of the occasion and of her feelings. He hovered absently about the room, over the furniture. Mostly he crawled along the curtain pole or rested beside the lamp.

She took a long bath and washed carefully, soaping her body with long tender strokes and dipping her face in her cupped hands. She cleaned her teeth and drank a cold glass of water enjoying the tiny aches in her cheek as the water and the toothpaste mixed. Lying damply on her bed she closed her eyes and let her thoughts drift. The wasp was beside her, how patient he had been. All this time he had been waiting, sure of her, knowing that one day, one day she would be ready. She reached out her arm and placed her fingers gently on the table by the light. On the other side of the pedestal the wasp shuddered and eased toward her proffered hand.