

Lady was feeding Old Moses his annual banquet. When this had started, I didn't know; it had been going on long before I was born. You might think, as Reverend Blessett at the Freedom Baptist Church did, that it was pagan and of the devil and should be outlawed by the mayor and town council, but enough white people believed in Old Moses to override the preacher's objections. It was like carrying a rabbit's foot or throwing salt over your shoulder if you happened to spill any; these things were part of the grain and texture of life, and better to do them than not, just in case God's ways were more mysterious than we Christians could grasp.

On the following day the rain fell harder, and thunderclouds rolled over Zephyr. The Merchants Street Easter parade was canceled, much to the dismay of the Arts Council and the Commerce Club. Mr. Vandercamp Junior, whose family owned the hardware and feeds store, had been dressing up as the Easter bunny and riding in the parade's last car for six years, having inherited the task from Mr. Vandercamp Senior, who got too old to hop. This Easter the rain doused all hopes of catching candy eggs thrown by the various merchants and their families from their cars, the ladies of the Sunshine Club couldn't show off their Easter dresses, husbands, and children, the members of Zephyr's VFW unit couldn't march behind the flag, and the Confederate Sweethearts—girls who attended Adams Valley High School—couldn't wear their hoop skirts and spin their parasols.

Easter morning arrived, cloaked in gloom. My dad and I were compatriots in grousing about getting slicked up, putting on starched white shirts, suits, and polished shoes. Mom had an all-purpose answer to our grumbles, much the same as Dad's "Right as rain." She said, "It's only one day," as if this made the stiff collar and the necktie knot more comfortable. Easter was a family day, and Mom phoned Grand Austin and Nana Alice and then Dad picked up the telephone to call Granddaddy Jaybird and Grandmamma Sarah. We would all, as we did every Easter, converge on the Zephyr First Methodist church to hear about the empty tomb.

The white church on Cedarvine Street, between Bonner and Shantuck, was filling up by the time we parked our pickup truck. We walked through the sloppy mist toward the light that streamed through the church's stained-glass windows, all the polish getting soaked off our shoes. People were shedding their raincoats and closing their umbrellas at the front door, beneath the overhanging eaves. It was an old church, built in 1939, the whitewash coming off and leaving gray patches. Usually the church was primed to its finest on Easter day, but this year the rain had defeated the paint-brush and lawn mower so weeds were winning in the front yard.

"Come in, Handsome! Come in, Flowers! Watch your step there, Noodles! Good Easter morning to you, Sunshine!" That was Dr. Lezander, who served as the church's greeter. He had never missed a Sunday, as far as I knew. Dr. Frans Lezander was the veterinarian in Zephyr, and it was he who had cured Rebel of the worms last year. He was a Dutchman, and though he still had a heavy accent he and his wife Veronica, Dad had told me, had come from Holland long before I was born. He was in his mid-fifties, stood about five eight, was broad-shouldered and baldheaded and had a neatly trimmed gray beard. He wore natty three-piece suits, always with a bow tie and a lapel carnation, and he made up names for people as they entered the church. "Good morning, Peach Pie!" he said to my smiling mother. To my father, with a knuckle-popping handshake: "Raining hard enough for you, Thunderbird?" And to me, with a squeeze of the shoulder and a grin that shot light off a silver front tooth: "Step right in, Bronco!"

"Hear what Dr. Lezander called me?" I asked Dad once we were inside. "Bronco!" Getting a new christening for a day was always a highlight of church.

The sanctuary was steamy, though the wooden ceiling fans revolved. The Glass sisters were up front, playing a piano and organ duet. They were the perfect definition of the word strange. While not identical twins, the two spinster sisters were close enough to be slightly skewed mirrors. They were both long and bony, Sonia with piled-high whitish-blond hair and Katharina with piled-high blondish-white hair. They both wore thick black-framed glasses. Sonia played the piano and not the organ, while Katharina did vice versa. Depending on who you asked, the Glass sisters—who seemed to always be nagging each other but lived together on Shantuck Street in a house that looked like gingerbread—were either fifty-eight, sixty-two, or sixty-five. The strangeness was completed by their wardrobes: Sonia wore only blue in all its varying shades, while Katharina was a slave to green. Which brought about the inevitable. Sonia was referred to by us kids as Miss Blue Glass, and Katharina was called...you guessed it. But, strange or not, they sure could play up a storm.

The pews were packed almost solid. The place looked and felt like a hothouse where exotic hats had bloomed. Other people were trying to find seats, and one of the ushers—Mr. Horace Kaylor, who had a white mustache and a cocked left eye that gave you the creeps when you stared at it—came up the aisle to help us.

"Tom! Over here! For God's sake, are you blind?"

In the whole wide world there was only one person who would holler like a bull moose in church.

He was standing up, waving his arms over the milling hats. I could feel my mother cringe, and my dad put his arm around her as if to steady her from falling down of shame. Granddaddy Jaybird always did something to, as Dad said when he thought I wasn't listening, "show his butt," and today would be no exception.

"*We saved you seats!*" my grandfather bellowed, and he caused the Glasses to falter, one to go sharp and the other flat. "*Come on before somebody steals 'em!*"

Grand Austin and Nana Alice were in the same row, too. Grand Austin was wearing a seersucker suit that looked as if the rain had drawn it up two sizes, his wrinkled neck clenched by a starched white collar and a blue bow tie, his thin white hair slicked back and his eyes full of misery as he sat with his wooden leg stuck out straight below the pew in front of him. He was sitting beside Granddaddy Jaybird, which had compounded his agitation: the two got along like mud and biscuits. Nana Alice, however, was a vision of happiness. She was wearing a hat covered with small white flowers, her gloves white and her dress the glossy green of a sunlit sea. Her lovely oval face was radiant; she was sitting beside Grandmomma Sarah, and they got along like daisies in the same bouquet. Right now, though, Grandmomma Sarah was tugging at Granddaddy Jaybird's suit jacket—the same black suit he wore rain or shine, Easter or funeral—to try to get him to sit down and stop directing traffic. He was telling people in the rows to move in tighter and then he would holler, "*Room for two more over here!*"

"Sit down, Jay! Sit down!" She had to resort to pinching his bony butt, and then he scowled at her and took his seat.

My parents and I squenched in. Grand Austin said to Dad, "Good to see you, Tom," and they shook hands. "That is, if I *could* see you." His spectacles were fogged up, and he took them off and cleaned the lenses with a handkerchief. "I'd say this is the biggest crowd in a half-dozen Eas—"

"Place is packed as the whorehouse on payday, ain't it, Tom?" Granddaddy Jaybird interrupted, and Grandmomma Sarah elbowed him in the ribs so hard his false teeth clicked.

"I sure wish you'd let me finish a single sentence," Grand Austin told him, the red rising in his cheeks. "Ever since I've been sittin' here, I've yet to get a word in edgewi—"

"Boy, you're lookin' good!" Granddaddy Jaybird plowed on, and he reached across Grand Austin to slap my knee. "Rebecca, you feedin' this boy his meat, ain't you? You know, a growin' boy's got to have meat for his muscles!"

"Can't you hear?" Grand Austin asked him, the red now pulsing in his cheeks.

"Hear what?" Granddaddy Jaybird retorted.

"Turn up your hearin' aid, Jay," Grandmomma Sarah said.

"*What?*" he asked her.

"*Hearin' aid!*" she shouted, at her rope's end. "*Turn it up!*"

It was going to be an Easter to remember.

Everybody said hello to everybody, and still wet people were coming into the church as rain started to hammer on the roof. Granddaddy Jaybird, his face long and gaunt and his hair a white bristle-brush, wanted to talk to Dad about the murder, but Dad shook his head and wouldn't go into it. Grandmomma Sarah asked me if I was playing baseball this year, and I said I was. She had a fat-cheeked, kind face and pale blue eyes in nests of wrinkles, but I knew that oftentimes Granddaddy Jaybird's ways made her spit with anger.

Because of the rain, the windows were shut tight and the air was really getting muggy. The floorboards were wet, the walls leaked, and the fans groaned as they turned. The church smelled of a hundred different kinds of perfume, shaving lotion, and hair tonic, plus the sweet aromas of blossoms adorning lapels and hats. The choir filed in, wearing their purple robes. Before the first song was finished, I was sweating under my shirt. We stood up, sang a hymn, and sat down. Two overstuffed women—Mrs. Garrison and Mrs. Prathmore—came up to the front to talk about the donation fund for the poverty-stricken families of Adams Valley. Then we stood up, sang another hymn, and sat down. Both of my grandfathers had voices like bullfrogs battling in a swamp pond.

Plump, round-faced Reverend Richmond Lovoy stepped behind the pulpit and began to talk about what a glorious day it was, with Jesus risen from the dead and all. Reverend Lovoy had a comma of brown hair over his left eye, the sides of his hair gone gray, and every Sunday without fail his brushed-back hair pulled loose from its shellacked moorings and slid down over his face like a brown flood as he preached and gestured. His wife was named

Esther, their three children Matthew, Luke, and Joni.

As Reverend Lovoy spoke, his voice competing with the thunder of heaven, I realized who was sitting directly in front of me.

The Demon.

She could read minds. That much was an accepted fact. And just as it dawned on me that she was there, her head swiveled and she stared at me with those black eyes that could freeze a witch at midnight. The Demon's name was Brenda Sutley. She was ten years old, and she had stringy red hair and a pallid face splashed with brown freckles. Her eyebrows were as thick as caterpillars, and the untidy arrangement of her features looked like somebody had tried to beat out a fire on her face with the flat side of a shovel. Her right eye looked larger than the left, her nose was a beak with two gaping holes in it, and her thin-lipped mouth seemed to wander from one side of her face to the other. She couldn't help her heritage, though; her mother was a fire hydrant with red hair and a brown mustache, and her red-bearded father would've made a fence post look brawny. With all those red kinks in her background, it was no wonder Brenda Sutley was spooky.

The Demon had earned her name because she had once drawn a picture of her father with horns and a forked tail in art class, and had told Mrs. Dixon, the art teacher, and her classmates that her pappy kept at the back of his closet a big stack of magazines that showed boy demons sticking their tails in the holes of girl demons. But the Demon did more than spill her family's closeted secrets: she had brought a dead cat to school in a shoebox with pennies taped to its eyeballs for show-and-tell; she had made a graveyard out of green and white Play-Doh for her art class project, with the names of her classmates and the dates of their deaths on the headstones, which caused more than one child to go into hysterics when they realized they would not live to see sixteen; she had a fondness for bizarre practical jokes that involved dog manure pressed between sandwich bread; and it was widely rumored that she was behind the explosion of pipes in the girls' bathroom at Zephyr Elementary last November, when every toilet was clogged with notebook paper.

She was, in a word, weird.

And now her royal weirdness was staring at *me*.

A slow smile spread across her crooked mouth. I couldn't look away from those piercing black eyes, and I thought *She's got me*. The thing about adults is, when you want them to pay attention to you and intervene, their minds are worlds away; when you want them to be worlds away, they're sitting on the

back of your neck. I wanted my dad or mom or anybody to tell Brenda Sutley to turn around and listen to Reverend Lovoy, but of course it was as if the Demon had willed herself to be invisible. No one could see her but me, her victim of the moment.

Her right hand rose up like the head of a small white snake with dirty fangs. Slowly, with evil grace, she extended the index finger and aimed it toward one of her gaping nose holes. The finger winnowed deep into that nostril, and I thought she was going to keep pushing it in until her whole finger was gone. Then the finger was withdrawn, and on the tip of it was a glistening green mass as big as a corn kernel.

Her black eyes were unblinking. Her mouth began to open.

No, I begged her, mind to mind. No, please don't do it!

The Demon slid her green-capped finger toward her wet pink tongue.

I could do nothing but stare as my stomach drew up into a hard little knot.

Green against pink. Dirty fingernail. A sticky strand, hanging down.

The Demon licked her finger, where the green thing had been. I think I must've squirmed violently, because Dad gripped my knee and whispered, "Pay attention!" but of course he never saw the invisible Demon or her act of prickly torment. The Demon smiled at me, her black eyes sated, and then she turned her head away and the ordeal was over. Her mother lifted up a hand with hairy knuckles and stroked the Demon's fiery locks as if she were the sweetest little girl who ever drew God's breath.

Reverend Lovoy asked everyone to pray. I lowered my head and squeezed my eyes shut.

And about five seconds into the prayer, something thumped hard against the back of my skull.

I looked around.

Horror choked me. Sitting directly behind me, their pewter-colored eyes the hue of sharpened blades, were Gotha and Gordo Branlin. On either side of them, their parents were deep in prayer. I imagined they prayed for deliverance from their brood. Both Branlin boys wore dark blue suits, white shirts, and their ties were similar except Gotha's had black stripes on white and Gordo's had red. Gotha, the oldest by one year, had the whitest hair; Gordo's was a little on the yellow side. Their faces looked like mean carvings in brown rock, and even their bones—lower jaws jutting forward, cheekbones

about to tear through flesh, foreheads like slabs of granite—suggested coiled rage. In the fleeting seconds that I dared to look upon those cunning visages, Gordo thrust an upraised middle finger in my face and Gotha loaded a straw with another hard black-eyed pea.

“Cory, turn around!” my mother whispered, and she tugged at me. “Close your eyes and pray!”

I did. The second pea bounced off the back of my head. Those things could sting the whine out of you. All during the rest of that prayer, I could hear the Branlins back there, whispering and giggling like evil trolls. My head was their target for the day.

After the prayer was over, we sang another hymn. Announcements were made, and visitors welcomed. The offering plate was passed around. I put in the dollar Dad had given me for this purpose. The choir sang, with the Glasses playing piano and organ. Behind me, the Branlins giggled. Then Reverend Lovoy stood up again to deliver his Easter sermon, and that was when the wasp landed on my hand.

My hand was resting on my knee. I didn't move it, even as fear shot up my spine like a lightning bolt. The wasp wedged itself between my first and second fingers and sat there, its blue-black stinger twitching.

Now let me say a few things about wasps.

They are not like bees. Bees are fat and happy and they float around from flower to flower without a care for human flesh. Yellowjackets are curious and have mood swings, but they, too, are usually predictable and can be avoided. A wasp, however, particularly the dark, slim kind of wasp that looks like a dagger with a head on it, was born to plunge that stinger into mortal epidermis and draw forth a scream like a connoisseur uncorking a vintage wine. Brushing your head against a wasps' nest can result in a sensation akin to, as I have heard, being peppered with shotgun pellets. I have seen the face of a boy who was stung on the lips and eyelids when he explored an old house in the middle of summer; such a swollen torture I wouldn't even wish on the Branlins. Wasps are insane; they have no rhyme or reason to their stings. They would sting you to the marrow of your bones if they could drive their stingers in that deeply. They are full of rage, like the Branlins. If the devil indeed ever had a familiar, it was not a black cat or monkey or leather-skinned lizard; it was, and always will be, the wasp.

A third pea got me in the back of the head. It hurt a lot. But I stared at the wasp wedged between my first and second fingers, my heart beating hard, my

skin crawling. Something flew past my face, and I looked up to watch a second wasp circle the Demon's head and land on her crown. The Demon must've felt a tickle. She reached back and flicked the wasp off without knowing what she was flicking, and the wasp rose up with an angry whirl of black wings. I thought sure the Demon was about to be stung, but the wasp must've sensed its brethren because it flew on up to the ceiling.

Reverend Lovoy was really preaching now, about crucified Jesus and weeping Mary and the stone that had been rolled away.

I looked up at the church's ceiling.

Near one of the revolving fans was a small hole, no bigger than a quarter. As I watched, three wasps emerged from it and descended down into the congregation. A few seconds later, two more came out and swirled in the muggy, saccharine air.

Thunder boomed over the church. The noise of the rain almost drowned out Reverend Lovoy's rising and falling voice. What he was saying I didn't know; I looked at the wasp between my fingers again, then back to the hole in the ceiling.

More were coming out, spiraling down into the steamy, closed-up, rain-damp church. I counted them. Eight nine...ten...eleven. Some of them clung to the fan's slow blades and rode them like a merry-go-round. Fourteen...fifteen...sixteen...seventeen. A dark, twitching fist of wasps pushed through the hole. Twenty...twenty-one...twenty-two. I stopped counting at twenty-five.

There must be a nest of them up there in the attic, I thought. Must be a nest the size of a football, pulsing in the damp dark. As I watched, transfixed at the sight as Mary must have been when a stranger on the road showed her his wounded side, a dozen more wasps boiled out of the hole. No one else seemed to notice; were they invisible, as the Demon had been when she picked a nose grape? The wasps spun slowly around and around the ceiling, in emulation of the fans. There were enough now to form a dark cloud, as if the outside storm had found a way in.

The wasp between my fingers was moving. I looked at it, and winced as another pea stung the back of my neck where the hair was stubbled. The wasp crawled along my index finger and stopped on the knuckle. Its stinger lay against my flesh, and I felt the tiny little jagged edge of it like a grain of broken glass.

Reverend Lovoy was in his element now, his arms gesturing and his hair

starting to slide forward. Thunder crashed outside and rain beat on the roof. It sounded like Judgment Day out there, time to hew some wood and call the animals together two by two. All but the wasps, I thought; this time around we could fix Noah's mistake. I kept watching that hole in the ceiling with a mixture of fascination and dread. It occurred to me that Satan had found a way to slip into the Easter service, and there he was circling above our heads, looking for flesh.

Two things happened at once.

Reverend Lovoy lifted his hands and said, in his loud preacher's cadence, "And on that *glorious* mornin' after the *darkest* day the angels came down and *gakkkk!*" He had raised his hands to the angels, and suddenly he found them crawling with little wings.

My mom put her hand on mine, where my own wasp was, and squeezed in a loving grip.

It got her at the same instant the wasps decided Reverend Lovoy's sermon had gone on long enough.

She screamed. He screamed. It was the signal the wasps had been waiting for.

The blue-black cloud of them, over a hundred stingers strong, dropped down like a net on the heads of trapped beasts.

I heard Granddaddy Jaybird bellow, "*Shitfire!*" as he was pierced. Nana Alice let out an operatic, quavering high note. The Demon's mother wailed, wasps attacking the back of her neck. The Demon's lather flailed at the air with his skinny arms. The Demon started laughing. Behind me, the Branlins croaked with pain, the peashooter forgotten. All across the church there were screams and hollers and people in Easter suits and dresses were jumping up and fighting the air as if grappling the devils of the invisible dimension. Reverend Lovoy was dancing in a paroxysm of agony, shaking his multiple-stung hands as if to disconnect them from the wrists. The whole choir was up and singing, not hymns this time but cries of pain as the wasps stung cheeks, chins, and noses. The air was full of dark, swirling currents that flew into people's faces and wound around their heads like thorny crowns. "Get out! Get out!" somebody was shouting. "Run for it!" somebody else hollered, behind me. The Glasses broke, running for the exit with wasps in their hair. All at once everybody was up, and what had been a peaceful congregation barely ten seconds before was now a stampede of terror-struck cattle.

Wasps will do that to you.

"My damn leg's stuck!" Grand Austin shouted.

"Jay! Help him!" Grandmomma Sarah yelled, but Granddaddy Jaybird was already fighting his way out into the clogged, thrashing mass of people in the aisle.

Dad pulled me up. I heard an evil hum in my left ear, and the next instant I took a sting at the edge of my ear that caused the tears to jump from my eyes. "Ow!" I heard myself shout, though with all the screaming and hollering one little *ow* was of no consequence. Two more wasps, however, heard me. One of them got me in my right shoulder, stinging through my suit coat and shirt; the other darted at my face like an African lance and impaled my upper lip. I gave a garbled shout—*owgollywowwow*—of the kind that speaks volumes of pain but no syllable of sense, and I, too, fought the churning air. A voice squealed with laughter, and when I looked at the Demon through my watering eyes I saw her jumping up and down on the pew, her mouth split in a grin and red whelps all over her face.

"Everyone *out!*" Dr. Lezander hollered. Three wasps clung, pulsing and stinging, to his bald skull, and his gray-haired, stern-faced wife was behind him, her blue-blossomed Easter hat knocked awry and wasps crawling on her wide shoulders. She gripped her Bible in one hand and her purse with the other and swung tremendous blows at the attacking swarms, her teeth gritted with righteous anger.

People were fighting through the door, ignoring raincoats and umbrellas in their struggle to escape from torment into deluge. Coming into church, the Easter crowd had been the model of polite Christian civilization; going out, they were barbarians to the core. Women and children went down in the muddy yard, and the men tripped over them and fell facefirst into rain-beaten puddles. Easter hats spun away and rolled like soggy wheels until the torrent slammed them flat.

I helped Dad pry Grand Austin's wooden leg loose from under the pew. Wasps were jabbing at my father's hands, and every time one would sting I could hear his breath hiss. Mom, Nana Alice, and Grandmomma Sarah were trying to get out into the aisle, where people were falling down and tangling up with each other. Reverend Lovoy, his fingers swollen like link sausages, was trying to shield his children's faces between himself and sobbing Esther. The choir had disintegrated, and some of them had left their empty purple robes behind. Dad and I got Grand Austin out into the aisle. Wasps were attacking the back of his neck, and his cheeks were wet. Dad brushed the wasps off, but more swarmed around us in a vengeful circle like Comanches

around a wagon train. Children were crying and women were shrieking, and still the wasps darted and stung. “Out! Out!” Dr. Lezander was shouting at the door, shoving people through as they knotted up. His wife, Veronica, a husky Dutch bear, grabbed a struggling soul and all but flung the man through the doorway.

We were almost out. Grand Austin staggered, but Dad held him up. My mother was plucking the wasps out of Grandmomma Sarah’s hair like living nettles. Two hot pins jabbed into the back of my neck, one a split second after the other, and the pain felt like my head was going to blow off. Then Dad took hold of my arm and pulled and the rain pounded on my skull. We all got through the door, but Dad slipped in a puddle and went down on his knees in the muck. I grasped the back of my neck and ran around in circles, crying with the pain, and after a while my feet slipped out from under me and my Easter suit met Zephyr’s mud, too.

Reverend Lovoy was the last one out. He slammed the church door shut and stood with his back against it, as if to contain the evil within.

Thunder boomed and rolled. The rain came down like hammers and nails, beating us all senseless. Some people sat in the mud; others wandered around, dazed; others just stood there letting the rain pour over them to help cool the hot suffering.

I was hurting, too. And I imagined, in my delirium of pain, that behind the church’s closed door the wasps were rejoicing. After all, it was Easter for them, too. They had risen from the dead of winter, the season that dries up wasps’ nests and mummifies their sleeping infants. They had rolled away their own stone and emerged reborn into a new spring, and they had delivered to us a stinging sermon on the tenacity of life that would stay with us far longer than anything Reverend Lovoy could have said. We had, all of us, experienced the thorns and nails in a most personal way.

Someone bent down beside me. I felt cool mud being pressed against the stings on the back of my neck. I looked into Granddaddy Jaybird’s rain-soaked face, his hair standing up as if he’d been electric-shocked.

“You all right, boy?” he asked me.

He had turned his back on the rest of us and fled for his own skin. He had been a coward and a Judas, and there was no satisfaction in his offering of mud.

I didn’t answer him. I looked right through him. He said, “You’ll be all right,” and he stood up and went to see about Grandmomma Sarah, who

huddled with Mom and Nana Alice. He looked to me like a half-drowned, scrawny rat.

I might’ve punched him if I’d been my father’s size. I couldn’t help but be ashamed of him, a deep, stinging shame. And I couldn’t help but wonder, as well, if some of Granddaddy Jaybird’s cowardice might be inside *me*, too. I didn’t know it then, but I was going to find out real soon.

Somewhere across Zephyr the bells of another church rang, the sound coming to us through the rain as if heard in a dream. I stood up, my lower lip and shoulder and the back of my neck throbbing. The thing about pain is, it teaches you humility. Even the Branlins were blubbing like babies. I never saw anybody act cocky after they got a hide full of stingers, have you?

The Easter bells rang across the watery town.

Church was over.

Hallelujah.

5

The Death of a Bike

THE RAIN KEPT FALLING.

Gray clouds hung over Zephyr, and from their swollen bellies came the deluge. I went to sleep with rain slamming the roof, and I awoke to the crash of thunder. Rebel shivered and moaned in his doghouse. I knew how he felt. My wasp stings had diminished to red welts, but for day upon day no ray of sunshine fell upon my hometown; only the incessant rain came down, and when I wasn’t doing homework I sat in my room rereading old *Famous Monsters* magazines and my stock of comic books.

The house got that rainy smell in it, an odor of damp boards and wet dirt wafting up from the basement. The downpour caused the cancellation of the Saturday matinee at the Lyric, because the theater’s roof had sprung leaks. The very air itself felt slick, like green mold growing on damp stones. At the dinner table a week after Easter, Dad put down his knife and fork and looked