

something

like the

end

stories by ashley morrow hermsmeier



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When the Bees Come Back

Rayna used the last of the duct tape to seal up the kitchen window. She'd have to settle for packing tape on the front door. That is, if the handyman ever left—how long could it take to seal air vents? She wiped sweat from her upper lip.

He entered the kitchen. He wasn't a large man, yet he managed to fill the narrow passage.

"Welp, that's the last of 'em. Fingers crossed, those little buggers won't be bothering you. At least not from the ducts."

"How much do I owe you?"

"How 'bout a beer instead and we drink to life while we still got it," he said and laughed. She forced a laugh, out of kindness, and opened the refrigerator door between them. She'd have to make small talk now—why couldn't he just go?

"I have Corona or IPA—which do you prefer?" she said, smiling even though he couldn't see it. She thought of her mother: *Let me hear the smile in your voice*, she used to say.

"I love a cold blonde," he said. "Though a hot one like you's even better."

She rolled her eyes then stood up with the Coronas and gave each one a crack against the kitchen counter.

"Impressive," he said.

"I don't have any limes."

“To all the buzz about the end of the world,” he said and laughed so hard the windows might have rattled if it weren’t for all the tape and boards. They clinked bottles.

“You have anyone coming to sit with you when they pass through?” he asked.

“My family, all of them, lived—*live*—in Salinas. So . . .”

“Ah, shit,” he said. “I’m sorry. Survivors?”

“Haven’t heard yet”—she took a swig and blinked hard—“but you know . . . just want to get through the next twenty-four hours, then I’ll drive up there and deal with it. What about you?”

“Aw, yeah. I’ll probably go to my mom’s house. I’ve got it all situated and sealed up. Haven’t touched my place yet, so . . .”

“Better hurry. The swarm’s only a few hours away, right—if the wind doesn’t change?”

He didn’t budge. “Have you thought about trying to outrun them?” he asked. “You’ve got the legs for it.”

She smiled again, this time without her eyes. She shifted her weight and hid one leg behind the other, feeling exposed in her thin running shorts.

“I did actually.” His eyes were steady on her, so she kept hers down as if studying the linoleum. “But, you know, the reports of people getting caught in their cars . . . just awful—so awful. I figure I’ll just stay and listen to the reports, you know? At least that way I won’t be taken by surprise out on the road. God, what a way to go.”

“Sure-sure-sure.”

He moved into the small kitchen. Rayna took a step back and leaned against the fridge.

“It sure is creepy once the houses are all sealed up like this, isn’t it?” he said. “How everything is so muffled all of a sudden?”

“Like the snow,” she said.

“How’s that?”

“You know, like, how after a snow the world outside gets all quiet? Like, nature realizes how beautiful it is or something and just kind of stops talking.”

“Nature stops talking, huh?”

“Well, you know what I mean. It’s like the world knows sound would ruin it.”

“Never been to the snow. Don’t see the need for it,” he said. “But I get it. Kinda like, right now: you know people are out there, but are they really? I mean, I don’t hear any cars going by, do you? Nobody walking their dogs. Not even any planes overhead. Everyone’s got themselves all locked up, sealed up tight in little boxes. Nobody in. Nobody out. Would we even hear the neighbors’ screams if it all started going down right now? Would they hear ours? We could be the only two people alive right now for all the silence.”

Rayna looked at the radio on the counter. She wanted to hear someone else’s voice. To feel as if someone else were in the room with them.

What she really wanted was to hear that all those bees that disappeared so long ago weren’t really coming back. That they weren’t aggressive. That they weren’t wiping out entire towns. That a single sting didn’t mean death. She wanted to hear that Salinas was still standing. Fresno and Bakersfield and Visalia too. She wanted to hear that the world was right again. That it was safe once more. But it wasn’t. And, really, had it ever been?

She reached for that other voice. He stepped in front of her and placed a hand on her arm. His fingers wrapped all the way around her bicep. His neck hadn’t been shaved. He smelled of gasoline and something metallic. His grip tightened. A ringing in her ears. Maybe a buzz. This was how the world would end, not with the sound of a trillion wings pulsing through her brain, but by the storm standing over her.

His Adam’s apple bobbed with the last gulps of beer. He set the bottle on the counter and lowered his face toward hers. “Be sure you seal that front door real good when I go.”



Photo: Lyn Rosten

Ashley Morrow Hermsmeier holds an MFA in fiction from Pacific University. Her short stories, essays, and flash fiction have appeared in journals such as *phoebe*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Streetlight*, *Front Porch*, *Weber*, and many others. She has won two previous fiction contests (2015, 2017) and is a Pushcart Prize nominee. She currently teaches English and writing in San Diego.