



American Hoverfly

Greg Sanders

Armine is remembering his last afternoon with Billi. He was under their favorite apple tree, lying on his back, looking up past the blossoms, past the honey bees that fed on their nectar, at a window of sky being bisected by a contrail. The jet was drawing its chalk-line through the center of the only patch of sky visible through all those branches. Billi stood over him and shook the branches so that apple petals rained down. She moved

up and down on the balls of her bare feet. Her calves, which faced him, compressed and then elongated. She was laughing up there, her head hidden from view in the dense leaves of the bottom branches. She might have been laughing at him or she might have been thrilled with the whole damn scene.

“The bees are going to be very unhappy with you,” he said.

“The bees can eat me,” she said.

“They might do that.”

Billi had taken to calling the tree Babushka. Shaped like an old lady who’d had a tough time, it grew out of a hillock and was bent in an arc of about fifteen degrees. The soil around its base was eroded, roots sticking out like bony elbows and shins.

On that afternoon other things were happening: goldenrod, globethistle, fiddlehead ferns were beginning to push up out of the meadow that surrounded the tree. And down below in the valley, in the couple’s weekend bungalow, all those ladybugs had finished

overwintering. The survivors were finally lifting their spotted elytra and unfurling their membranous wings and flying into walls like tiny, drunken biplanes. They had to be guided out, either through the porch door or an opened window. He and Billi had found the weightless corpses of the unsuccessful lodgers during the course of the winter—rolled up in the shades, under the dish-drying rack, in the light fixtures, dead on every window sill. And they’d seen the live ones crawling under the Mr. Coffee, lethargically moving up patches of sunlit wall, seeking any semblance of heat. He and Billi deposited the colorful, pill-like bodies of the dead ones in a jar they kept on the kitchen windowsill. From a distance it looked like a jar of candy. In drunken moments they planned an elaborate funeral pyre in the fireplace.

They’d shared a big mug of black tea with maple syrup and milk. Wild leeks they’d picked from the hillside and rinsed in the creek were drying on a dish towel in the

shade. That was it—that was precisely the setting. Under Babushka, the earth was cool and bare in spots. They'd done it here before, braced securely between sections of thick root, only this time Billi wasn't on the pill.

They liked to talk dirty—filthy, really—to each other while screwing. Usually. But the idea of going about their routine seemed like it would foul up the kid somehow—if she were to get pregnant this go around. Make it a pervert or malcontent. Sex under the banner of procreation is not at all the same beast as the porn-influenced screwing they'd grown accustomed to. So they were quiet now, and the sex seemed weirdly quaint, and Armine thought he ought to think tender thoughts to influence the outcome of the kid. But all he could think about was what a dirty fucking couple they'd become. That they were asking a lot of themselves. How could they be expected to switch gears so suddenly and create something tender, with tiny organs and limbs, and a cerebrum the size of a plum?

Armine kept his thoughts to himself and felt her

bucking, and heard the animal slapping of their bodies against each other, and felt her short nails pinching his nipples. He looked at her fine body, honed by years of gentle exertion—yoga, rollerblading, swimming, sex, ultimate Frisbee. And the insects were making a racket, as if stimulated by the action, as if acting in inter-species concert, their feral shrilling rising up from the valley and descending from the tree tops, coming at them from every direction.

When he was about to come—and it had taken longer than usual—she grabbed his shoulders and began pushing him off. She looked terrified.

“Pull out,” she whispered under her exertion.

“What?”

“Armine, pull *out*.”

“I lost my nerve,” she said afterward. “Something felt wrong. I don't know—*are* we ready?”

He turned toward her and cleared her bangs away from her eyes.

“We’re not wed to this,” he said. “I could’ve used a condom. Or, you know, we could have done other things.”

His semen was settling into the stringy grass next to her and had pulled along loose grains of earth and a struggling katydid. She stood up, bent over, and kissed his forehead. He watched her get dressed.

“I’ll want to hear about those other things in detail,” she said, “but now I just need to get out of here. Maybe go for a walk or something.”

Get out of where? he wanted to ask. Get out of the outdoors?

“Well then I’m gonna be a guy,” he said, and began to doze off theatrically. She piled his clothing on top of him and disappeared over the ridge and down the wooded incline. A few minutes later, half asleep, he turned to see that an army of ants had surrounded his semen and were carrying off tiny globules of it.

When he came down to the house he saw her note on

the fridge: “Went for swim, sleepy boy.” It was late spring and not yet quite hot enough for most people to swim in a pond, but that was her style. She liked the invigoration, the shock of the water on her body, the bracing air, and it meant she’d probably have the pond to herself. It was a ten minute walk. She’d take her usual quick dip, he figured. And, knowing her and her moods, she’d probably do it in the raw. He wasn’t sure when she’d left, but he figured he had about an hour to kill.

He started to mow the lawn with the old two-stroke walk-behind that came with the cottage. It put out a huge cloud of oily smoke when he started it. Something about that he enjoyed. So much the opposite of how he’d been raised, with his parents getting the first electric mower on the block. Those old two-strokes, the pattering of the camshaftless engine, all the chrome-plating—he was pushing around nostalgia on wheels. A half hour passed before he came around to the stunted, shaded section of “lawn” behind the house under the firs. It was really just weeds, bedded pine needles and

forget-me-nots. That part of the yard gradually sloped down to the edge of the creek where things became weedier still and where frogs often hung out on chic pieces of “uncut bluestone,” for which city people were now paying through the nose.

He turned the mower off and took a look at the hill, and above, at the glowing fringe of the meadow in all its Universal Studios garishness. He could see the apple tree’s crown of blossoms peeking over the ridge a little past that fringe. The sun was still high but it struck the young things growing up there—the saplings and tender grasses—at an oblique angle and lit them up with a green that seemed, paradoxically, unnatural. And the hill wept where springs broke through the rocky facade, marking their paths with algae and throwing tiny clouds of silt into the clear creek, like smoke. The late afternoon bugs were coming out, chirping, whirring, seeking mates.

Suddenly a small insect hovered in front of Armine’s face, fixed in space as if frozen in time. The American hoverfly. He’d looked it up in *The Gardener’s Guide*

to *Bugs and Grubs* the previous summer. It had been rated with a “B” in a circle, for Beneficial to Gardeners. Its larvae eat aphids. That previous summer he’d also discovered a trick. When you saw one hanging in the air close by—and it seemed that’s exactly what they liked to do—you held your finger out as if you were pointing at it, and you sternly moved that finger close to it until you found that the American hoverfly was drawn irresistibly to your fingertip, like iron filings to a magnet. So that’s what Armine did, lifting his finger, moving it toward the insect until the insect was locked into position. Under exactly what environmental pressures the insect had evolved this talent for hovering sarcastically so close to an object he could not imagine, but it surely had to do with eating or screwing.

As he wagged the finger, and then spelled his wife’s name in the air with it, the hoverfly followed the motions precisely, as if attached by an invisible rod. It kept a fixed distance from his fingertip. Not 1.5 inches or 3 inches but, Armine felt certain, a precise number of

insect units-of-measure. Then, as if it had had enough of the game, it moved to hover beside his left ear. He could hear the zuzzing of its tiny wings. Was it trying to tell him something? And then it shot off into the torrent of the spring air like the world's smallest projectile.

He turned to see Billi standing in the front yard, among the tire tracks that crisscrossed the lawn. She'd been watching him. She held a fern in her hand. She'd probably dug it up from along the path to the pond. Its roots were heavy with soil, its fronds collapsed. She always found some shady spot on the property and replanted them. About half survived. He felt some affection in her now, from the way she looked at him as he walked toward her. The tilt of her head, the way she stood with one knee behind the other—girl-like and vulnerable; observant without being judgmental; Edie Brickell in that first video she did.

She wore loosely laced hiking boots on her sockless feet. He drew in a quick, shallow breath as if something were about to go wrong. As he got closer he could see

she'd braided an aquatic plant or a cast of algae around her wrist like a bracelet. Her face shone with the sun she'd picked up these weekends in the country; it shone with the exertion of her swim and walk; it shone with everything that differentiated the two of them. She looked as if she wanted to say something to him. Something waiting in those dark irises of hers.

He heard a rumbling that got steadily louder until a Ford dualie flatbed laden with quarried bluestone worked slowly past the house, trailed by a cloud of rock dust and diesel exhaust. The driver downshifted as the truck hit the turn in the road past the house. It was on its way to the mill in East Branch, about ten miles farther on. When the quarrymen returned from their deliveries, the unladen trucks would speed past the house in the opposite direction, their leaf springs bowed and rigid, the trucks, celebratory, hopping over the smallest of bumps and sometimes shooting pebbles into the yard like BBs.

Billi used to cover her ears when they passed, more

because she was offended at the quiet being shattered than to protect her hearing. He could see her think about it now, but he had told her a while ago that he thought it was offensive to the drivers, who were just trying to earn a living. So as the truck passed she kept her hands at her side and rolled her eyes instead.

Finally, silence fell on them again.

“I was hoping you’d come to the pond,” she said. “You won’t believe this. I was about to dive in when I heard this *snoring*. I looked across the pond and this man was on his back on that little muddy beach on the other side. His feet were in the water and his head was on the shore. I could barely make him out, but it was definitely a man and he was making quite a noise.”

That little beach—Armine knew it well. An ancient water slide whose fiberglass tongue had delaminated long ago was sunk into the silt not ten feet from the shore. It looked like the kind of thing that would kill you if you tried to use it. They had no idea who owned that little beach and it always seemed draped in shadows

and cloudy with gnats.

“He was really pale and I thought maybe he was dead. Except he was snoring of course. I feel like we’ve seen him around.”

“Where have we seen him?” Armine said.

“I don’t know. It’s just a feeling, like I said. But I don’t have anything to back it up. Anyway, he must have been dead drunk. So, here’s the thing. He was stark naked, not a stitch. I just stood there knee-deep in the pond watching him snore.”

“I’ll bet,” Armine said.

“Should we see if he’s still there? We should make sure he’s okay. He could have, what do you call it, inhaled his own vomit or something since I saw him.”

“This is absurd,” Armine said.

“What is?”

“Talking about our naked neighbor. Can you think of another topic. Anything more pressing?”

She was silent for a few seconds and shook her head as she watched any hope of levity vanish before her

eyes. It was a beautiful day. Why did she always have to talk to him about so much *stuff*? It wasn't that she couldn't be completely open with him, it was that she was tired of *having* to be open with him at the drop of a hat. He'd always known that was a bad habit of his—the need for humorless meditation on any recent mishaps in their relationship. And her frontline weapon in these instances was sarcasm.

“Of course, honey. Let's talk about *us*,” she said. “Is that what you're getting at? You want to know why I asked you not to come inside me, don't you?”

“Now that you bring it up, you *commanded* me not to come inside of you.”

“Like I said, I don't *know* why. Maybe nerves. Anyway, I don't want to talk about it now.”

“That's pretty damn obvious. Did you come at least?”

“No,” she said. “I did not come. Why do I have to come every time? And you should have asked me then.”

“Did you want me to go down on you?”

“Enough already,” she said.

He'd done it yet again, pointed out some petty violation of hers, brought it to a head, and then diffused it by changing the subject to something cute, as if the whole thing wasn't really worth worrying about in the first place. How she could have stood for it was a mystery to him.

“Please let's go to the pond and make sure that guy's not dead or something,” she said.

They parked the Jeep in front of the path that led to the pond. Billi got out and lifted her foot onto the bumper to tighten her boot laces, then the other foot. She never tightened the laces on one boot without doing the same on the other. It was always a matter of symmetry and evenhandedness with her, even when it came to inanimate objects.

Armine was already in the woods, on the path, watching her and waiting for her to finish with the laces,

noticing, perhaps, the smooth musculature around her Achilles tendon where it emerged from the boot. As he likes to imagine it, he was about to tell her something—it's fine, let's not worry about kids or no kids and let's never again get into the nitty gritty of procreation.

But a truck, headed back to the quarry, empty of its load, celebratory, etc., came down the dirt road at full throttle. She never even finished tying her other boot.

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The path is overgrown, barely passable, and splits a quarter mile from the road, one branch heading straight to the edge of the pond, the other, forking left, ending in a mossy clearing where a disused rowboat is chained to a hemlock. That's where Armine is now, hidden from view by a storm-felled honey locust, waiting for the ghost of his Billi. He'd heard from a neighbor that she'd been spotted here before, but couldn't get up the nerve to make a visit. But with the help of some Jack Daniels

and on the anniversary of her death, he's managed to give it a go. The only action on the pond so far involves dragonflies, which seem to be spending all their time mating in flight, tandem style.

But sure enough, after having perched for forty minutes in the shadows and drinking from a flask all that while, he sees her. She is not, as he'd both feared and hoped, naked. She wears that old orange bikini, its elastic frayed and its color bleached out from swims in chlorinated pools. She stands motionless a few feet from the shore. She is about twenty yards from him.

Oh god, he wants to shout her name, to hear her name echo through the valley. He also wants to know, should he have an erection? Because he does have one.

No wake spreads behind her as she moves forward. No concentric circles dissipate around her. Nothing. The surface of the water is so still that it's difficult to see where her body meets its reflection. The freckled cleft of her lower back is doubled below her and fades into the water.

From what he can tell at this distance, her gaze is fixed on a point across the pond. Then she turns to look around her. When her face sweeps his way, Armine's heart begins to beat so hard he can feel his mitral valve clicking. Prolapsing, the cardiologist calls it. He may be in actual danger if it doesn't subside. She turns her gaze back to the opposite shore and Armine follows it. He imagines the man she saw passed out there. Eugene Daigle—pink, cirrhotic, snoring.

The sight of that physique of hers: how he loved to lose himself in her. Why is there no fear in him? It is broad daylight. Might his neighbors—the Bosches, the Quinns, the Goulds—also be out here for the sighting, squinting through binoculars as he squats so idiotically under cover?

She immerses herself and sidestrokes toward the little beach with the old water slide. Then she stands in the water ten feet from the beach on which Eugene Daigle was once sprawled. Armine moves along the water's edge to get a better look at her. He enters a

private yard—whose, he doesn't know—where he hears muffled news channel voices coming out of the woods. The United States is contemplating bombing Syria. He moves past the yard and into some brambles until he sees her clearly again. Her hair, flat and black against her shoulder blades, sheds no water.

“Hey,” she says to the empty beach, not loudly. “Hey there, sir?”

It seems, he can't be sure, but it seems like she might be touching herself through her bathing suit.

She looks around again. She must have been considering whether or not to get out of the water and wake up Eugene Daigle. It would have been a hell of a vision for him to awaken to, her standing over him, dripping wet, and it would have saved her, too. But instead she swims back across the pond toward the path, getting smaller and smaller. She rises out of the water and fades into the woods at an altitude of about twenty feet. On ascending from the water, she seems not to exist below the knees.

Armine stares at the vacant beach, imagining Eugene Daigle waking up and meandering unevenly into the water up to his thighs, peeing and letting out a grand fart that he finds amusing (it makes a small ripple in the water). Then getting out, dressing, and leaving by a narrow path.

He had parked his flatbed a quarter mile away on an old logging road. According to his testimony, he passed out again in the cab and then, the sun getting low, tore ass to the quarry to pick up one last load of bluestone. That had been his intent, anyway.

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Toward the end of that first summer after Billi died, Armine had regained his bearings and went back up to the meadow for the first time since her death. It had been a dry August and the creek was low—a trickle. He climbed the hill and pushed his way through the tall, brittle grass to the old apple tree. Beneath it, between

its roots, he believed he could still see evidence of having been there with Billi even though a few months had passed. Something about the way the ground was compressed and how the grass growing there looked different. And when he took a look at another spot a little farther away, a strange little plant was unfurling itself, neither fern nor reed nor sapling. Something dark-hued with an iridescent tint to its single curled leaf. He hadn't suspected it was anything special, just something new.