

Melipona

“Jefe, don’t move,” called my uncle. “There’s a bee on you.” He seemed almost happy about it. I was curled in a ball on the edge of the pool. My cousins and I were competing to see who could make the smallest cannonball splash, and I had a duty as the oldest to always win. The bee landed on the sleeve of my bright blue swim-shirt. My mom had forced me to wear it so that I wouldn’t get sunburnt. The sun and I hadn’t realized I was brown yet, after all, or it wouldn’t have been a problem. Brown kids can’t get sunburns.

I froze in place. Chlorinated water and sweat ran down my forehead, nose, mouth, chin. Dripped onto the concrete. The bee wouldn’t leave. It loved how bright my shirt was. Must have reminded it of flowers. My uncle loved how bright my ears were. Uncles like to laugh when their nephews get scared. I stayed balled up and dripping wet for ten minutes. If there was anything I hated more than bees at six years old, though, it was boredom. Time to get rid of it. I leaned into the pool, letting the water envelop me for a few seconds—No sting! I was free! As soon as I began to swim over to rejoin my cousins, though, I felt a flash of pain tear through my shoulder.

Three years later, I sat in the most boring room on the planet. White walls, white drawers, white floors, a white bed covered in paper, a white phone—even the chair I was sitting on was white. I wore white that day too, having learned to never wear bright colors lest the bees find you. Boring was a part of life; pain, on the other hand, was the worst. Especially the

kind that went inside you, that your body had to fight and spit back out lest it infect you and your soul. A nurse walked in, first speaking with my mother, then turning to me:

“I’m going to give you a flu shot now. It might sting a bit. Would you rather keep your eyes closed?” She looked bored too.

I nodded, and closed my eyes, but I could still hear the nurse buzzing around, opening a drawer, screwing on a cap, flicking a stinger, lifting my sleeve up, wiping my shoulder down with an alcohol wipe—my shoulder was wet again. Sweat dripped down my forehead, nose, chin; it smelled like chlorine. I couldn’t breathe. I felt her hold my arm in place. “NO!” I opened my eyes and screamed, jumping back in my chair. The nurse flinched, but then moved towards me, grabbing my arm again. I karate-chopped her in the hip. She sighed and went to the white phone. Two more nurses burst into the room. She told me to calm down—struggling only made it worse. They might have to give me another one if they messed up. But what child in their right mind would be calm when two adults held them down and a third came at them with a giant translucent bee? So I fought back as much as I could. Then I felt a flash of pain tear through my shoulder.

The tattoo parlor my boyfriend and I waited in wasn’t like the cool ones you see in movies. It had tap-to-pay. The walls were an ugly off-white. Like what you see on those Adobe missions they make you learn about in elementary school without really telling you how many people got stung while building them. “C’mon, it would look so good on you,” he pleaded. He had wanted to get matching flower tattoos to celebrate my 20th birthday. I was hesitant. When I told him why, though (because bees love flowers), he looked at me like I was the crazy one.

He didn’t get it. He and his body were used to bees with stingers. Where I come from, bees are ancient, divine, soul-cleansing, and—most importantly—stingerless. But the European

bees with stingers wake up at five in the morning, and work all day, and they make more honey, even if it's worse. So my family's bees are mostly gone now, and because they're gone, he didn't get it, and because he didn't get it, he cried when I told him I didn't want that tattoo. It scares me when grown men cry over other people's bodies. More than potential bees and their potential stingers. I agreed to get the tattoo. As I sat down in the chair, though, and they rubbed my arm with an alcohol wipe, I realized that if I got the tattoo, I wouldn't be able to swim with my family again for months until it healed. So I got up and left.