

EMILY PAPE

Caught in Circles

The kitchen floor felt sticky and tactile beneath the soles of her feet, humidity clinging to the nape of her neck like a small child's sweaty palms. And the screen door leading to the backyard was wide open for no logical reason she could discern, ushering the heavy air and summer noise into the house. Cora watched the door stutter back and forth on its groaning hinges in a dispassionate breeze. The gaping doorway was a green light for all the outdoor entities one would rather not have in the house to enter, but she felt no inclination to shut the door. Cora merely stared at it. There was something oddly appealing about observing untidiness and choosing not to fix it, to merely let it exist as a nagging blemish, quietly, without the pretentious airs of details put right. And so she watched the metal door sway, waving at the grass that rustled in the yard, and at the fields and houses beyond the property line.

Cicadas perched on the trees in the backyard and screeched together in a nasal pitch, a choir of raw voices that echoed through the open doorway and into the kitchen where Cora stood silently. Sometimes the sound of droning insects clamored over all other thoughts and claimed Cora's attention forcefully, a crescendo of white noise, when the house was thrown open like this. Whether she found it unpleasant or soothing depended on whether glasses were half empty or half full that day. And then there were times like this, when she did not care one way or the other about much of anything, much less a few screaming insects.

The exception to her indifference was the black hornet that had invaded the house, grabbing the spotlight and leaving open doors and cicadas forgotten. She heard its droning flight, found its weaving

form, and backed away from it to the opposite side of the kitchen. The sound of a hornet's flight doesn't pick away at the back of the mind. Hornets don't require an army to immediately draw alarm. Rather, the sound of a solitary hornet instantly jumps to the foreground of our thoughts and demands fearful attention. The sound of that low, predatory purr seared over Cora's head as she ducked lower than necessary to avoid the unwelcome guest. Her soles squeaked against the sticky tile floor as she abruptly flinched from the disturbance.

"Jesus Christ, Cora. It's just a fucking bee." Noah was looking over his shoulder from the next room, smirking at her from the computer chair and pouring irritation into her thoughts. A greasy twist of lips with gray-streaked stubble, bulgy eyes painted bloodshot with bad habits and age. That was the face Cora's uncle always wore for her anymore. Smug and annoying, always poking fun at her while avoiding real conversation. Years ago when she was still small, Cora would have described Noah as disappointing, because he was constantly raising her hopes with that rare day at the zoo or the uncharacteristic suggestion for a movie and then dashing any faith she placed in him with cruel comments designed to fracture a child's self-esteem. She came to understand that he did this when he was feeling low and that she just happened to be there, but the hurtful words remained as bookmarks in her memory; she could visit them anytime and rehash Noah's dysfunctional lurch between hints of kindness and a healthy serving of scorn. And so the disappointment Cora felt towards her uncle faded to angry acceptance. She no longer had any optimistic hopes that her uncle would ever gain any sort of stability, but she knew that he would always circle back to take out his insecurities and failures on her.

Noah said it was just a bee, but Cora knew he had only looked back when he heard the menacing buzz. He too instantly noted the dark insect as it panicked around the kitchen, a blotted dash of ink against pale walls. And even now, his eyes followed the circling hornet around the room rather than settling on his niece. It shot high over the cabinets. Swung low and glided over the stove. Turned slightly towards Noah, who tensed, before looping away towards the sink.

Cora's face was unsmiling as she stared at her uncle and his twitching eyes. Her brows were smooth, lax and without the tell-tale signs of hurt. It was good to show no weakness to her uncle. It irritated him, she knew. "Sorry." But she spat the meaningless word bluntly, almost without inflection, betraying the simmering, lurking undertone of resentment.

Noah's gaze snapped back to Cora for a few seconds, drawn by the coldness of her voice. His smug expression shifted into what Cora

instantly recognized as the disappointment she had felt years ago. He wanted back the small child who looked at him with both hesitant fondness and watery humiliation, not this opaque wall that stared at him with empty orbs. His face pinched around the mouth, almost angry, Cora thought, the eyes tired. But it was a fleeting expression, one that dropped back into a mask of brittle pride.

His brows lifted and he let out a short, pointed breath. The chair creaked as he turned away from Cora, facing the computer screen once more, as he always did.

Cora studied the back of Noah's head. Her arms were limp at her sides as she repressed the urge to clench her fists, resisting the fleeting temptation to do something impulsive and instantly regrettable.

This was how it always was now. Both dissatisfied with the characteristics of the other and not saying anything about it. Never changing. It was understood that as soon as Cora turned eighteen, she would probably disappear as suddenly as her mother had dumped her at Noah's feet. The two of them would move on and go about their lives and occasionally think back to moments like these with a bitter taste in their mouths, Cora thought.

The ceiling fan ran in circles upstairs. The cicadas screamed and the hornet scratched away at her composure.

She turned away from the back of Noah's skull and walked towards the open door. The skin of her feet stuck and peeled off the sticky floor like Band-Aids as she crossed the kitchen and walked out into the open air, to escape the hornet and Noah and go barefoot into the territory of a hundred dozen more translucent wings and barbed threats. Cora hoped that Noah got stung, hopefully without provoking the hornet in the slightest. That would be far more satisfying than if he tried to kill it and was attacked as recompense, for some reason.

The sun blotted her eyes like white computer screens as soon as she crossed the threshold and stepped into grass that needed to be mowed. The cicadas drowned out the deeper-voiced hornet that had invaded Noah's house, and she felt her shoulders ease because the distraction of background noise was suddenly comforting. Cora moved towards the dappled shade of the single elm slumping like an old man in the thick heat. She rolled her weight onto the outer edges of her feet as she walked, like that could prevent her from getting stung on her soles. And she looked down and scanned for bees and their nastier, older cousins, sidestepping the ugly clover flowers.

Cora blamed the pear tree at the far end of the yard for the multitude of hostile insects. The fruit rotted as soon as it hit the ground, with a cloyingly sweet stench, and the hornets and wasps and everything with stingers seemed to regard the decaying failures as finely aged wine. They invited all their friends and even the coworkers they

didn't really like, so Cora was constantly watching the ground as she kept far from the rotting fruit beneath the pear tree. She should have worn sneakers, even if they were too small and pinched her toes. Flip-flops at the very least. But she never wore shoes during the summer, so it was a vicious cycle of stressing over easily avoided fear and wondering why hornets existed in the first place.

But there was a lawn chair resting under the poorly postured elm, in the patch of shade that was thickest at this time of day. That was the refuge where Cora liked to sit to avoid her uncle and his computer desk. She walked cautiously to the chair, a leaning collection of white planks. She paused, brushed the leaves from the seat. Then she kneeled on the seat and craned her head at every angle to make sure she hadn't missed some unwelcome surprise. Nothing. She sighed and twisted her body and sat on the cold wood smoothed by paint, feet pulled up from the ground with her chin rested on bony knees.

Cora had been looking down at the grass as she had walked to the chair, but now she was looking across the yard with her chin propped up. She was watching as the road in front of the house stretched on and away. The heat shimmered and meandered like lake waves above the burning surface of the pavement. It stretched the siding of the white, two-story house across the street. Cora tilted her head to the side and watched the black of the road leak up into the white, melting.

But the white of the house was uncomfortably bright in the sun, so she looked up only to find that there was nothing interesting to be found in the crumbling branches of the elm. So she looked next door, to the gray brick ranch house to the left. Dark windows. She looked right, to the house with peeling yellow paint. The windows were open, but still and quiet. Cora was not surprised that the neighbors were not at home. Normal adults worked on summer Tuesdays and the day after that and so on, rather than sitting in front their home computer day after day.

There was nothing in her surroundings to distract Cora from her own discontent. The whole thing made her not want to sit still and the lawn chair was no longer peaceful. So she stood, but she didn't want to go back into Noah's house.

So she walked across the yard, pointedly avoiding the clover flowers. Cora crossed in front of the gray ranch house and walked onto the uncomfortably bright road. The sun had cooked it so thoroughly that it flared hot against her bare feet, but only enough to flush her skin a lively shade of pink. She walked down the road, past the white house and away from Noah's house, loose gravel from the shoulder biting hard against her feet. She began to follow the weaving patterns of the sun-softened tar, balancing on the black curving

stripes with her arms extended like airplane wings to keep her upright. The tar molded satisfyingly beneath Cora's weight, black patch jobs that wove together and extended until she reached the curve of the road. She drifted away from the yellow lines in the center, realizing that she had been walking around in the middle of the road. Sweat had already begun to cling to the back of her shirt.

The road sloped up, too bright in the sun, and took her to a stretch with trees on either side. The world softened under the shade of branches. The hard surface cooled against Cora's flushed feet. As the shade from the trees washed against her, she felt like a glowing coal suddenly cast in water and sighed accordingly. There were no houses here, just the road and thickening trees on either side and their branches that reached for one another with mangled fingers. That's all there was for a while on this scarred road laced with tar stitches, just trees and pavement. Fewer distractions, just when she needed distractions from the feeling that sat tight in her throat and pulled at the back of her tongue. But Cora was determined not to acknowledge the troublesome feeling and the key, she knew, was to walk fast enough that exertion was distraction enough.

Splotches of sunlight dappled her body through the branches of the trees as Cora rushed down the road. She paid no mind to the protest of her soles against the rough pavement. She looked away from the ground, up at the gaps of sky that showed through above the world. The tops of the clouds puffed up, their bases smooth and cast in shadow, hiding from the sun. It seemed to Cora that they floated along an invisible barrier and she thought they resembled algae resting on the surface of some nameless lake. The trees swayed like pondweed in a current. And here she was at the muddy, murky bottom, staring up towards the surface she would never breach. Something heavy settled in her chest, looking up at the surface of the sky, and she jerked her head back down. She did not need thoughts like that. It was a good thing she had looked down when she did; she quickly avoided the roadkill squirrel smeared on the road, its eyes gone and its guts strewn out brightly by some other passerby. That, Cora reminded herself, was the penalty for not paying attention on a road with no shoulder, and so she set her gaze in front of her. Her breathing, which had at first struggled with the increased pace, now settled in a steady rhythm.

A strong gust roared in the distance, grew louder, and swept over the trees. The leaves rustled together. Cora thought it sounded like an applause under radio static. The wind brushed past her as well, snagging her hair as it did, but it died quickly and the trees quieted. She was left only with the sound of distant birds—one she had not noticed before, echoing from deeper parts of the woods—and her rhythmic footsteps, and she tilted her head back and breathed in—

A sharp pain shot through her left foot.

Cora gasped and lurched all her weight onto her right leg, recognition dawning as the pain pulsed and grew stronger. And sure enough, there it was. Along the arch of her left foot, a small pinprick swelled white while the skin around it colored in painful irritation.

On the pavement, a black hornet thrashed with broken limbs, consumed in its final death throes. Round and round in circles it went, struggling desperately, carried by its pointless momentum. Cora stared at it in silence, the corners of her mouth tugging down uneasily as she watched the hornet try to avoid the looming truth of the situation. The wind rushed back, more softly this time, and the leaves cackled far above her. And it occurred to her that she could walk as far as she wanted. She could walk the whole day, even with the pain in her left foot. But she would eventually have to circle back to Noah's house. Back to the house where her mother had left her. Back to the house she would leave in a couple years. Back to a place where she had once placed her hopes, only to have them stolen away by the cruel twist of greasy lips and the reality of bonds that could not be tied again.