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Bees

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Bees

Amanda Babcock

Runner-up for the 2023 John Little Fiction Scholarship

The clock reads 15:26. The glaring red numbers offend Julietta. The recessed image on the wall, embedded there for office usage, is the only reminder of time she can see. She doesn't even wear a watch: it isn't allowed. Like every employee in the honeycomb of desks around her, she adheres to the same dress code and sits in the same hexagonal one meter space and listens to the same bland music. The honeycomb covers most of the floor. Their building's footprint occupies almost a square kilometer, more than half of which is occupied by hexagons.

Julietta looks down at her desk, the rhombus shape built into half her hexagon. Below the screen leaning onto her hexagon wall is a tiny object she manages to get away with having at her desk: the plump, cheerfulness of an extinct bumblebee. As a child she used to have a bee sewn of nylon stuffed with polyester. She hugged it every night till it lost its brightness. She loves bees. Nowadays she feels like one.

She cranes her neck over the hexagon sides and sees several other bees peek upward as well. The red numbers turn over to 15:30. She just manages to keep herself from smiling.

Almost as one unit her section stands up from their desks and stretches. They have fifteen minutes. Her hexagon and the five it links with and the five others their six link with form a group of workers. This is their designated time slot.

Quietly and without haste they funnel their way to the central elevator shaft. If not for their faces you would think they were all the same person. Same clothes: grey pants and white shirt worn by both men and women. Tiny variations occur in cut and texture, but they all look mostly the same. Few accessories accentuate their outfits. The extreme shortage of metals led to a trend about five decades ago away from wearing metal wedding bands. The jewelry you see these days are fake or heirlooms. Like the one ring Julietta wears, an anorexically thin band of copper entwining a single shard of quartz.

A soft tone announces the elevator's arrival to the 144th floor. The elevator easily accommodates them. It rises briskly heading for the roof of the building. By the time they pass the 177th floor, Julietta's ears have popped from the rapid change in altitude. After the 181st tone the elevator comes to a stop, doors opening to the rooftop landing. Just beyond the doors, over the heads of her coworkers, through the glass walls, she can make out the hints of green.

The rooftop garden is an island of green in an ocean of concrete gray. Their building is shorter and older than most of the buildings around them, but the light is still enough. Up here, just above the highest floating traffic line, the sounds are all distant echoes of their bold counterparts below. As Julietta steps outside with her colleagues, she pauses to close her eyes and enjoy the calm. Her ears ring a bit in the quiet. She doesn't remember what silence really sounds like.

"Julietta," a voice calls her back. She turns to Dan, the person who sits opposite her in the beehive. She takes what he's handing her. The kit in her hand consists of a spray bottle and a tiny, delicate paint brush. The brush is sheathed to protect the soft bristles. Up here in the rooftop garden, this is not a break. This is a different kind of work. Patience and delicacy are key.

"Where today?" she asks Dan. Their schedule lights up the glass walls.

"One forty-five did the tomatoes," Dan says. "We're on to the peppers."

She follows her coworkers across the vast rooftop and to the place

near the middle of the east-facing side of the building. Here the raised beds contain densely growing plants, all with tiny blooming flowers. Their job is to pollinate.

The last break group covered a section with all the towering bell pepper plants. They each take a spicy pepper plant and swap pollen, careful to match species. A delicate touch of one flower stamen, switch places with Dan at his plant, a gentle brush of pistil. They repeat this dance over and over, deep concentration focusing their moves with expert precision. This isn't just a job. This is a way of life.

"A bird!" a hushed voice breaks the concentrated silence.

Anna, the redhead who sits in the next hexagon group, stares fixedly at the object in front of her. Julietta cranes to get a peek at the rare sighting. The bird's singing peeps are the only sound breaking the awed silence.

"It must have come from Whitehall's aviary," Dan whispers, his voice low to keep from startling the bird.

Julietta glances up at the towering building directly across from them. The aviary is on their roof, interlaced with their gardens, some hundred plus stories up. They used to house beehives up there, some decades ago before all the bees died off. No one can keep bees alive anymore. When the insects started dying off, the birds weren't far behind. Not many animals survived the fall of the pollinators.

The bird flies away. Almost on cue Juliette and her coworkers let out a sigh. Only when it disappears around the corner of Whitehall does the spell break. One by one they return to their plants.

Once they finish pollinating and watering, they head back to the elevator. The red numbers above the elevator read 15:47. A couple minutes late. No one will mind. Birds are rare even with the aviary one building over.

The honeycomb of workers returns to the 144th floor in silence. Gradually they return to their busy work, but the sighting of the bird stays with them. And Julietta cannot stop thinking about the sharp chirping of birdsong and the long-silenced buzzing of bees.

*Starting in fall of 2023, **Amanda Babcock** will be a PhD student in aerospace science. She completed her master's in space studies in May of 2023, focusing on human factors. In addition to her science background, she has an undergraduate degree in English. She has previously worked as a science writer for APS News and for the Department of Energy's Office of Science. She currently works as an analyst for the Department of Homeland Security.*