

Black Magic

Blake Fields

I roll out of bed and plummet to the unforgiving floor below. In a tangled knot of blankets, I thrash in my room made black by the curtains so that not even the orange glow of the street lamps touches the walls. Salty sweat streams into my mouth as I scream out for help. Exhausted from fighting invisible adversaries, I pause. I was hallucinating. There is no swarm of yellow jackets in my bedroom; there is no buzzing but that from the ceiling fan. I can still feel the stings all over my body. The sites still throb like countless tiny little hearts dotting my skin. I untie myself from the blankets, fan them out over my mattress. I decide not to cover myself when I climb back to my pillow. I'm hot anyway. Hot like I was earlier that day.

It was one of those days in southeast Missouri when you debate even taking a shower; as soon as you leave the bathroom you immediately sweat so much due to the combined heat and humidity that you begin to suspect you forgot to dry yourself off. So I didn't. My 15-year-old body was used to staying sweaty from football practices anyway. Pops and I were going out to the deer woods to make a salt lick anyway, so there was really no sense in freshening up when a day of dirt and salty sweat were ahead of me. Besides, there was no time for a shower as I could already hear Pops calling out in his daily search for his "goddamn keys."

My father excelled in three practices beyond any other man that I have ever known: hunting, misplacing his keys, and cursing. Of all these, he was most talented at this last item. Roger Fields was always a true poet when it came to profanity. While most angry men simply strung together lists of random obscenities, my father drew his out in combinations of true sprezzatura that could make any sailor worth his salt blush as he cut him with each precisely placed syllable. He was a sorcerer, and these words were his black magic. After reciting these incantations, my kid brother, Kyle, and I were instantly silenced when we bickered too loudly while the latest episode of *24* was on television; his long lost keys, wallets, and tools would suddenly appear in places we had already searched. These words held a special, mysterious power; his powers never failed.

Nor did they this time. As I walked into the kitchen, he ordered me to go grab the pickax from the shed while he pulled the truck around. I wished I could master those incantations myself, for I knew the command of those words would allow me to harness the powers of fear and authority that my father held behind his teeth. Of course, like any teenage boy I practiced while I was out on the football field or with my cousins



feeding their hogs slop and throwing rocks at the longhorn bulls, but my parents were very traditional: Pops had made it clear with a hand around my shirt collar lifting me three feet off of the ground that his sons were never to speak like that in his house. So I never practiced around him.

With both windows down we spat salty sunflower seed shells all the way to our hunting spot nestled in a sharp bend in the Mississippi river. We rode in his big, blue Ford F-150 in our typical silence. When it came to hunting whitetail deer there was never much conversation outside of where he had recently found a new rub or scrape, or how the sheriff's boy had just seen a monster twelve-point stomping around nearby. We pulled into the clearing and hopped out of the truck and then trekked for what seemed like miles up the steady incline to the spot where we would eventually set up a tree stand in about two months; I could still make out the scars in the old abandoned telephone pole where the stand had rubbed into the wood the season prior. We walked about 50 yards more and he stopped, both of us sweating and panting in the July sun.

"Reckon this as good 'a place as any?" he gasped between breaths as he wiped his brow with the belly of his stained Bass Pro Shop t-shirt.

"Yup."

"Well, I'll sit here and mark the spot. You go on down and grab the pick."

I didn't understand why we hadn't carried up the equipment with us, but I jogged back down the long hill to the truck without question. I grabbed the pickax by its splintered handle in one hand and the bag of Swamp Donkey salt lick mix in the other and started hiking back up. With the added weight of the mix and the pickax, my travel was a bit more intense, and I realized why Pops wanted no part in carrying the stuff. I focused my eyes on his silhouette standing at the top of the hill and tried to power through each step.

Then the Earth and Sun vanished, consumed by a jet-black cloud. First there was a deafening buzzing noise that sounded like someone was firing up a chainsaw right next to my face. Not a second after, the stinging began. In my focus I had stepped on an underground nest of yellow jackets. At this revelation, I dropped everything and began to sprint back down the hill into the clearing, yelling as loud as I could. The bugs were everywhere; I could feel them stinging every inch of my skin. As I opened my mouth to scream they climbed inside to sting my tongue and cheeks. They stung my eyelids, and I felt their legs scratch as they wriggled under my clothes to violate even the most intimate parts of me to ensure I would be completely covered in their venom-wounds.

I couldn't outrun them, so I tried another tactic. I threw myself to the dusty earth and began to roll down the hill, hoping to crush those under my clothing with my weight. But the seemingly invincible vermin



held fast, stinging me time and time again. I resolved to strip down to my boxers as I reached the bottom. I ripped off my shirt and pants and sprinted as fast as I could far into the clearing until the buzzing and stinging eventually subsided. I bent over and gripped my knees in pain until my fingertips were white. After about five minutes my father came shambling up to me, his head swiveling on his neck, searching for the insects. He could see that I was holding back from showing any pain or rage. He knew I wanted to use his forbidden magic spells. He knew I was afraid to do so in front of him.

“Go on and say whatever you gotta say,” he looked at me and said, “it’s just us men out here.”

I couldn’t believe it. My father was talking to me like I was a man; he was permitting me to talk like a man, too. And I did. I emptied the book of all the words and phrases I had soaked up listening to him through the years. I swatted a few stragglers from the swarm that still hovered around me standing watch as I unleashed my long-kept power. The incantations I chose made the whole hive the illegitimate sons of whores, fornicators damned by God, eaters of feces, rotten motherfu-

“Whoa, whoa, son. That’s enough,” Pops caught me. I hadn’t realized I was marching back up toward the hive in my fury. “Let’s get on back and doctor you up.”

I realized in that moment that I couldn’t see out of one eye, and my vision in the other was just a sliver due to the swelling. The visor mirror in the truck revealed the damage. We counted about forty different sting sites. My blood was still boiling on the way back. I even had the nerve to break the sacred silence. I asked him accusingly where he had been the whole time I was being attacked. He explained that he started to run to me at first thinking I was snake-bitten, but when he saw me flailing my arms in the air he knew exactly what was happening. He explained that when he was my age he had flipped a hay bale containing a bumblebee hive. He was also stung about forty times, but he went into anaphylactic shock and his throat swelled shut. He had almost died in a hospital bed. He couldn’t come to my aid because just one sting could put him in the hospital. I felt in that moment that we understood each other better than we ever had, and I rather enjoyed the silence for the rest of the ride.

The next day we returned to the hill with a Mountain Dew bottle filled with gasoline. With still-swollen fingers, I turned it upside down in the entrance to their earthen hive, uttered one last incantation, and lit a match.

