

# Yellowjacket

This is a simple story. It has a philosophy student, a secretary, a nurse, a sprinkling of other persons as necessary or convenient, and an insect. The insect is one of this simple story's eponymous hymenopterae.

This story also has a coffee maker, a plank, and a nail. The nail is rusty. It sticks through the plank. The coffee maker is quiet and cold.

There is very little love in this story, except insofar as every story is a love story when boiled down to its bones. Such sex as there may be in this story is an echo of a muffled longing. There is death, of course—there can be no sex without death—but such as there is, it is a memory and a threat.

There is also a cloudy sky.

This story has buildings and rooms, as many do. In one of the buildings is a room known as the “Philosophers’ Lounge.” This does not seem to be its official designation, which is likely some innocuous room number, sterile and uninviting. One wall of this “Philosophers’ Lounge” is glass, in which there is a sliding glass door opening onto the roof of the building wherein the “Philosophers’ Lounge” is located, and which building contains many other rooms, most of which are classrooms, offices, and lavatories. This building has an official name, being called the Humanities Building. The “Philosophers’ Lounge”—let us call it the lounge—in this building of more than a single humanity contains tables, various chairs, an empty refrigerator, and the coffee maker.

At the edge of the roof onto which the lounge opens is the “Philosophers’ Overlook,” from which site philosophers and philosophy students and more ordinary persons can look down upon everyone passing by on the campus below. For a time this roof's edge was referred to as “Philosopher’s Leap,” due to the misfortune of a student who had taken some philosopher, perhaps Nietzsche or Sartre, too seriously one fall. The Overlook/Leap is some sixty or more feet above the pavement at the base of the Humanities Building, making the terminal velocity of any falling philosopher or student, or even more ordinary person, an approximate, and fatal, forty-five miles an hour.

On the morning when most of this story takes place, under the cloudy sky, there is no death—in the immediate sense—but there is also no coffee. There is never any coffee. There is simply the coffee maker, all but pristine among the philosophy students too poor for coffee and the philosophers with other priorities. There is in an analogous fashion and for much the same reasons never anything other than cold air and wan light inside the always spotlessly clean refrigerator.

Buzzing around in the the lounge this cloudy morning there is the hymenoptera: the yellowjacket. Very few living things are possessed of a greater innate quality of menace. Even the manner in which the hymenoptera breathes, its black and yellow abdomen pulsating, is menacing.

The secretary referred to near the outset of this story is a woman who is tall and thin and not very pretty, but the philosophy student, likewise initially referred to and likewise tall and thin and not very pretty, and who has a beautiful life—one means to say “wife”— has considered wanting to have sex with the secretary for reasons which have nothing to do with anything other than the having of sex with a woman who is neither his wife nor his life.

So we see here the very little love and the echo of the muffled longing. We’ve already considered the terminal velocity of a leaping student.

The philosophy student is between classes this cloudy morning and ought to be studying in some quiet, far corner of the Library Building that stands just a hop, a skip, and a leap away from the Humanities Building, but he is in the lounge. The secretary, worried expression on her face of less-than-wifely-beauty, has told him of the hymenoptera. He has immediately sensed an opportunity for what may appear to be some sort of chivalric behavior. (He is young and of the Idealistic school of philosophers, while at the same time horny as a hound-dog.) He will open the sliding glass door and convince, through appropriate gesture (the waving of arms), the hymenoptera to leave. He hopes to be able to accomplish this without himself being injured by the hymenoptera’s highly-evolved ability to defend itself: the frightful ovipositor modified for stinging and outfitted with venom in what would seem an almost perverse vengeance for the non-regal social insect’s inability to lay eggs.

He opens the door. The hymenoptera buzzes about the lounge, landing here, landing there. The philosophy student waves his arms, holding notebooks in his hands. The right hand holds the slender notebook he uses in his Studies in Pre-

Socratic Speculation class, which class meets just after the break of day on Mondays and Tuesdays, while the left holds the somewhat fatter notebook he uses in Deconstructing the Space-Time Continuum, a seminar which may meet as many as five or six nights a week, but that has not yet been determined. The covers and pages of these notebooks flap and flutter as he waves them about. The hymenoptera pays him no attention that he can discern, though the face of any yellowjacket could be said to be an inscrutable mask, not unlike the face of God.

Outside the lounge, on the roof containing the Overlook, there is near the Leap a bench. The frame of the bench is concrete, but its seat is made of two planks of pine, each about yag long and so wide. One of these planks is loose, warping up at one end. The philosophy student pries this loose plank free. This is the plank which contains the nail which is rusty. This nail punctures the hand of the philosophy student as he seeks to gain a better grip on the plank.

Ow! he says, in a short and pointed statement of which only he, the universal subset of one, can know the truth.

He looks at the puncture. It is small. Even though he is a student of philosophy, he is aware of tetanus. He sucks the puncture hard as he can for a minute or so. Then he carries the plank inside, to where the hymenoptera has given a new teleology to the coffee maker by perching on its pristine pot. The student eases the long, somewhat splintery plank with its rusty nail towards the hymenoptera. Easily, easily, taking it slow, he coaxes the somewhat weary insect onto the plank. Carefully, carefully, moving with finesse, he carries the plank towards the opened sliding glass door. The secretary watches from the perceived safety of the lounge's interior doorway, where a standard academic wooden door opens into a hall and can be slammed shut in an instant. She looks as though she may be impressed if the student manages to pull this off.

And he does. He carries the plank onto the building's roof. The yellowjacket flies away. The secretary, as it turns out, is more grateful than impressed, but she is still somewhat impressed—though she is not impressed enough to offer sexual favors to the philosophy student in return for his bravery and enterprise. He is almost immediately sorry he asked.

The nurse mentioned at the opening of this simple story is the nurse at the student health clinic who gives the philosophy student a tetanus shot after he has returned the plank to its bench and has pressed it as back into place as he can get its

warped end and rusty nail to go. The nurse has a rather noticeable pimple on the bridge of her nose. The makeup she has applied to it to mask it has quite the contrary effect, leaving it looking like an oddly chalky highlight on the portrait of an extraordinarily ordinary face.

That night, it seeming not to be one of the several nights during which the Space-Time Continuum is being Deconstructed, the philosophy student tells his beautiful wife the tale of the hymenoptera and its gentle eviction from the Philosophers' Lounge, his gallant wounding during same, and his subsequent visit to the student health clinic, where medical care is free if somewhat basic. Left out of his recounting is any mention of the secretary and his unmuffled lust, or of the nurse and the chalky punctuation between her eyes.