

Alert
Benjamin Kessler

“What I don’t understand is how they’re never where I left them the night before.” The old woman rooted through her overlarge purse, the kind bought at any one of the tourist shops along the beach.

But Lily wasn’t listening. Her mind was instead full with the singing of bees, the memory of that fat Doberman, the way it ran laps around the hive, mouth open in anticipation. She could still will back into sensation the apiary gloves upon her hands, made from fine goat leather. She’d bought them with Cameron on the Big Island. They’d gone away for the weekend, made out clumsily in the backseat of a gleaming seaplane. They’d seen whales, they thought.

“Does that happen to you?”

“All the time,” Lily replied. With the tip of her finger she broke the paper ring and began peeling away twenties. The antiseptic new money smell spilled over her hands. She slid the bills into an envelope and passed them to the old woman, who immediately took them back out and began to count in little whispers beneath her breath.

“Is something wrong?”

The old woman looked up. Her eyes were blocked by round sunglasses. “It’s nothing. I’m sure some just stuck together.”

Had Lily miscounted? No, she would have known, the rhythm so clearly counted off in her head. *Twenty. Forty. Sixty. Eighty. One.* Perhaps this old woman thought her simple. Mainland retirees always seemed to suspect Hawaiians of trying somehow to undermine them, as if Lily didn’t herself enjoy the same corporate coffee and box wine and campy television.

“Well, have a nice day,” the old woman said, and she walked over to a bench on the other side of the room. There she hunched and counted the bills once more, laying each individually on the turquoise vinyl.

Bitch.

South Shore Bank of O’ahu had been open ten minutes, but Shannon, the other teller, was just now strolling in. Lily pointed admonishingly towards her watch but Shannon responded by sweeping her hand across the uncrowded lobby, a gesture as if to say, *who fucking cares.*

Valid. Hour upon hour of counting wadded singles or sorting mason jars full of change felt so insignificant. Especially after Lily’s last job. She’d been a teacher’s assistant in a kindergarten class, everyday greeted by a sea of tiny brown and white hands pawing up her legs as though she

were a great tree. *Miss L! Miss L! What did you bring me?* She'd had responsibility, those who depended on her for some small something, however intangible. One of the little girls had drawn her a picture—the two of them on the playground swings, sketched in crayon—and Lily gave it space on the fridge as though it had been created by her own imagined child. But that was before she had to move, before she could no longer afford the house on her own, the commute, the bees she and Cameron had raised together. He took the car and that fat Doberman and she assumed that both were now dead. But she had the drawing still, somewhere at the bottom of a still unpacked moving box, one of many.

As Lily walked to the bank that morning from the bus stop, low heels dangling in her hands from their straps, she thought to pass the front door and keep going. She could go somewhere else, somewhere old men cashing handwritten checks wouldn't stare so obviously at her breasts as she reached for a deposit bag. She could walk all the way to the north coast, find a stretch of empty beach. She wouldn't need a bathing suit—the only one that still fit cinched up around her groin and underarms—and instead wade into the warm, calm ocean in her smart teller's outfit. She would float on her back, her clothes, her hair, her body growing heavy with saltwater.

Though just as the thought had fully formed in her mind she felt the cool brass of the bank's door handle beneath her palm, the rush of air conditioning pricking at the nape of her neck.

The whoosh of the heavy front door announced another customer, and a man in dark sweatpants and a black hooded sweatshirt walked quickly towards the little island with the pens and deposit slips. For a moment he rifled through pamphlets about retirement, punched random numbers on the cheap plastic calculator. Then, suddenly, he approached Lily's window. His hood was pulled down low over his face. He smelled like tobacco, burning paper, coffee.

“What can I do for you today?”

He spoke softly down at the countertop. “I'm, uh, I'm robbing you.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, wait, hold on. I know how to do this.” He reached into the back of his waistband and placed a small handgun onto the counter then motioned to it as if pronouncing it to her. *See?* It was a snub-nosed .38, the kind seen on television in the hands of Prohibition-era gangsters shaking down men in suits. *Ol' Beelzebub* was clumsily carved into the steel with a knife, and the fluted edges cradled the overhead light. Lily couldn't be sure, but on the grip there seemed to be a white sticker that said ‘125.’ A price tag, perhaps?

Lily looked to the old woman for some kind of affirmation that this was actually happening, but she was still staring at the bills, humming a little something to herself.

Lily's finger had been resting on the little button below the till since the man had walked in, ready to incite the silent alarm, the quiet calling of police, of firemen, other men with other guns. She and her fellow tellers had been trained for just this situation. She was to be calm, to comply, to adhere. She wasn't afraid of the gun. She'd seen one before, or at least its shadow spilled out across the brick wall in Boston.

It had been snowing. She was coming home from the drugstore, dandruff shampoo and disposable razors in a plastic bag. Someone jumped out from behind an empty phone booth and pointed an unremarkable gun at her, snatched away her bag and demanded her wallet, her keys, her phone. She fumbled through her pockets, dropping each item onto the ground and watching as they were eaten up by white. He scooped them into his arms and then ran off, slipping on ice while rounding the corner. She'd gone back to the drug store after that, sat in the bleach-scented public restroom. Her fur-lined boots squeaked on the tacky linoleum. She cried a little, but not much. There was a dark stain on her leg. Had she been shot? No. It was urine.

She hadn't told anyone. She'd been too embarrassed, afraid she'd lost control of her life. A little part of her brain told her over and over again that her targeting was random. It could have happened to anyone. But it had happened to her, and it was happening again.

It was in Boston where she met Cameron. They'd both gone to Northeastern, twin biology majors. She was going to be a vet and he was going to work with, something. Was it possible she had forgotten? This was before she decided to come back home to the island, ancestral homeland, where it rained more than she recalled. But it was home, and she missed it dearly. And he had accompanied her, the two of them having abandoned their plans for graduation. They'd make do, they told themselves. When they separated a kernel of guilt bloomed within her. He'd come out for her, and now what? *He made his own choice*, her friends said. Though hearing it and feeling it were two different things entirely.

Lily pressed the alarm button, then pressed it three more times before bringing her hands to her face. Her fingers smelled like change.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Just the money, please." He smiled at her large enough to reveal a missing molar.

She could see his face now: white, chubby cheeks and a clefted chin, faint blonde mustache. Erase the mole from above his eyebrow and he could be mistaken for Cameron. He even had a similar fidget: drumming his fingers on the countertop, then again on the little plastic stand where Lily stocked lollipops in wax wrappers for children brought in with their parents. It brought her a special little joy to see it filled and then gradually emptied throughout the day, energetic children pacified if only for a moment. Though she didn't enjoy the act of eating the candy. The cracking of the hard shell made her nervous, all those sharp shards rattling inside her mouth near that soft, delicate flesh.

“Are there bills bigger than a hundred?” the robber asked.

“I don’t think so.”

“Can you check?”

On Saturdays the teller’s windows opened up an hour before the personal bankers arrived. So it was just her, Shannon speaking loudly on her phone in the break room, this man robbing her, and the old white woman.

Lily began to place towers of cash onto the counter. Benjamin Franklin’s pained expression looked up at her in judgment before disappearing into the pockets of the robber’s sweatshirt, the waistband of his sweatpants.

“Do you have a bag or something I can use?”

“You didn’t bring a bag?”

Then around her there was the vibration of cell phones: whirring on a tabletop, inside a pocket against keys, against change. Shannon sped around the corner, nearly bumping into Lily, who held in each hand nearly five thousand dollars.

“Oh, hello.” Shannon, holding her phone in her hand, looked from Lily to the man to the gun.

“What?” Lily set the money on the counter.

“You haven’t seen?”

“No, I’m with someone right now,” Lily said through gritted teeth. “What’s up?”

“It’s nukes,” the old woman said, clutching her flip phone in one hand and a tube of lipstick in the other. “Goddam nukes.”

Lily grabbed Shannon’s phone. *MISSILE THREAT INBOUND*. An ammonia taste bubbled up at the back of her tongue, just at the curve before the muscle disappears into the throat.

The old woman laid down on the bench and pulled her knees up to her chest. “Goddam communists.”

“It’s not communists,” the robber replied.

“We need to go somewhere. I need to go home.” Shannon typed hurriedly. “I’m calling a car service.”

“It’s not going to matter,” the robber said, palming rolls of quarters into the hammock of his sweatshirt.

In that moment, Lily thought not of herself, her family and friends, Cameron, but of the bees, to wherever they had swarmed off. She longed to feel them again, each furry body, even the stings on her arms, her neck, the tip of her nose. Then she imagined the queen immolated, her plump figure vaporized in an instant.

“I always knew it would be communists,” the old woman said, rocking on her back, thighs clamped firmly to her breasts.

The robber threw a stack of ones in her direction and they fluttered in the air. “It’s not communists.” He pulled back his hood and bleach-blond hair, black at the roots, spilled out over his forehead. He wasn’t white. No, he was native, with dark skin and long, girlish eyelashes. “They’re socialists.”

“We can hide in the vault! It’s lined with lead, right? Lead is good?” Perhaps because no one had any better idea they agreed, and Shannon waved everyone back behind the counter. The robber stuffed one final stack of bills inside his sweatshirt and began to walk away, though not before picking up the gun and allowing it to dangle loose in his hand.

The four of them stood single file as Shannon levered open the heavy vault door. There had been rhetoric lately, more so than usual, a lot of geopolitical windbagging, goading and finger pointing. And now the tip of that finger pointed at Lily’s little island. She had expected sirens, panic, people pawing over one another, but instead there was only the faint hum of the air conditioner, the coffee maker in the breakroom’s sputtering gurgle. She looked back one last time at her window before the vault door closed behind her. One of the lollipops—green apple—was missing.

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They say that a bee’s ability to fly violates the fundamental laws of physics. But that’s not true. It’s just something to say.

“Are you going to shoot someone?” the old woman asked.

“I hadn’t planned on it.” Since they had entered the vault, the four of them having each claimed one corner, *Ol’ Beelzebub* had hung limp from the robber’s hand, his wrists resting on his hips as though waiting for a bus, the check at a restaurant.

“Well, isn’t that how this usually goes?”

“I’m not sure.”

“If not, then for the love of god, put it down.” She motioned towards the large stainless steel table with a folded newspaper she’d found in her purse.

Lily counted the rhythmic blinking of a loose fluorescent. The four of them were surrounded by small drawers, safe deposit boxes, and as she leaned against them the proud locks prodded her back, imprinting little keyholes into the imitation silk of her blouse.

She thought about Cameron, if he was hunkered down somewhere, if he knew of his imminent demise. Was he even on the island anymore? In the state? Had he gone back to the mainland, back to Boston, all their haunts: that bar with the striptease video poker, the Mennonite church converted into a movie theatre, the reptile house at the Franklin Park Zoo? She thought of the skin melting off his face, dripping onto his kitchen tile. Then she wasn’t thinking of him at all.

“If it will make you feel better.” The robber placed the gun on the table, the tinkling of the metal on metal echoing around their makeshift bunker. The four of them stared at the gun, the way it sat there like a wart, presenting itself. *Hold me. Touch me.*

“I need to call Mark. I need to know he’s okay.” Shannon stared deep, almost through, her phone. Mark was her ex, recently divorced. She had only just stopped wearing her wedding ring, the pale, untanned skin like a brand upon her finger. “Who has reception?”

They all shrugged back at her.

Lily instinctively patted her pockets. Nothing. Her phone sat in her locker inside the break room. Its screen lit up in her mind, messages from the government, from her mother, the national weather service. *Where are you? Stay indoors. Don’t you know what’s happening? Seek shelter. Couldn’t you come home, this once?* She could imagine the hammering it made on the locker floor, messages inciting vibration after vibration, the near-constant buzzing, the buzzing of bees, bees as they swarmed out from beneath the phone’s cracked screen, throng of humming bodies, cloud of yellow, legs swollen with pollen—hibiscus, birds of paradise, plumeria—wriggling around the hinges, the coat hook, inside the cavern of her tennis shoes. When humanity was gone—how long would it be now?—the bees could let their great combs drip from the break room’s dropped ceiling. Reclamation of a dead planet. She took a deep breath, then another. Her legs felt knotted, though when she looked down they were straight iron.

She suddenly remembered the sandwich she had brought for lunch, and pictured it moldering in the fridge, if there would even be a fridge after *it* happened.

They conspicuously avoided talking about *it*. *It* seemed to be happening outside of themselves.

“Can we get into these?” The robber ran his fingers across the metal fronts of the safe deposit boxes.

“You need a key,” Lily replied.

“For each?”

“Do you mind?” Shannon was on tiptoe, reaching her phone up towards the ceiling as though to touch it would broadcast her thoughts, her desires, out into the world. “Some of us are trying to talk to our loved ones.”

“I was just asking.”

Somewhere above their heads a dehumidifier kicked on.

“So, how much do you suppose is in here?”

“Really?” Shannon charged up to him, the table separating them. She looked at him, then at the .38 on the table, dark reflection in the stainless flat like a knife’s edge. *It only takes a second. Try it.* After a moment, both of them silent, Shannon walked back to her corner.

“Just seems like probably a lot, is all.”

Lily had seen many of the patrons who stored things in the boxes. One, an aging heiress—to what Lily was unsure—kept in them her fine jewelry. She had once let Lily try on a platinum bangle. It was cool on her skin and brushed against the hair on her forearms. The woman had cinnamon skin and vacuous brown eyes, so dark they became indistinguishable from her pupils, which were large enough that Lily could imagine herself climbing into them, falling through, lid closing over her like a mouth.

Though surely the boxes couldn’t all be brimming with jewels, ancient stock, thin gold bars hiding their weight. Many must hold ashes, report cards, deeds to decrepit houses. Important and unimportant affectations of a lived life. Cameron had a book safe, she could recall, cover decorated with snow-capped mountains, and in it he stored only one thing. She reached back into her memory. A stuffed animal from childhood, his passport, baby teeth rattling inside a film canister? His absence lived most soundly in that now vacant space on her shelf, a little empty rectangle.

For a moment she thought she could feel something upon her arm. It were as though a bee’s small hairs were sweeping her skin, stubby body crawling up her neck, over her lips and resting upon her tongue, vibrating its sorrows into the cavity of her mouth, singing to her its song, and it

was beautiful. She opened her mouth to speak, to intone it into the world, but as she parted her lips there was only the gentle drone of the fluorescents.

And crinkling.

The robber took something out of his pocket, unwrapped it, and placed it into his mouth.

“Where did you get that?” Lily asked.

“Nowhere. I had it already.” The cardboard stick jutted out from between his lips and he spun it between his fingers.

For a time they were silent, leaning against the boxes as Shannon tapped out text and text and text. Lily imagined the signals bouncing off the walls, accumulating their spent energy on the floor and pooling up to their ankles. *Are you somewhere safe? Are you somewhere safe? Are you somewhere safe?*

“How long has it been?” The old woman asked. “Shouldn’t it have happened by now?”

“There would have been a noise,” the robber replied.

“Maybe someone should check?” Shannon said.

The question floated in the air like caustic gas. Lily looked for a moment at the .38. Had it moved? It appeared closer to the robber than it had before.

“Well it should be someone who’s alone,” the old woman said, looking from the robber to Lily.

“Or maybe someone who’s lived a full life,” Shannon retorted.

“Or maybe someone who’s just going to rot in jail anyway.” The old woman peered at the robber from over her sunglasses, which she had yet to remove. “Do your family a favor and be a hero, or do us a favor and get vaporized.”

They began to bicker, talking over one another, and in the commotion the gun vanished from the table. Lily thought she could see its outline, just so slightly phallic, faceted, up the robber’s shirtsleeve.

In that moment she wanted desperately to sit on the edge of her bed, to fling away her shoes and peel off her stockings. Though home—a small apartment above the Hi-Lo Market—seemed as solemn as the bank vault, as solemn as anything. At night she could hardly sleep within the *beep beep beep* of scanned groceries below her, the constant rhythm not unlike the counting of money, the firing of a gun, children reciting the alphabet in unison. Apart from the noise, her apartment

was still. She'd had a cat but it ran away, though not before tearing a hole in the bag of food and gorging itself. Every so often Lily would find mice in various states of decay hidden around the house. And there were also the many totems: a photo of her and Cameron smiling in front of a waterfall, the fine leather apiary gloves, that last mason jar filled with honey still sealed and dated, little sugar crystals forming on the underside of the lid. Every time she rifled through the kitchen cupboards she moved it to a new spot, where next time it would appear like a specter.

"I'll go," she finally said.

"You'll go?" Shannon said. "Out there?"

"To check, yeah."

The arguing stopped, and the only sound was the occasional clacking of the lollipop against the robber's teeth.

"And you're sure?"

But Lily was already taking off her heels, setting them on the table and walking toward the vault door, its heavy metal latch smooth from use.

"Well, be quick about it," the old woman said.

Air whooshed into the room, a great held breath finally released. Lily squeezed between the crack in the door and shut it behind her. She was in the antechamber, a little coffinlike room, walls plastered with safety posters. *Keep hands and fingers away from door. Area under surveillance. Tsunami shelter in place.*

Perhaps she was fine with death. It would be instantaneous, nothing left of her but a shadow painted permanently onto the concrete subfloor. She would be remembered for some modicum of heroism, a periscope into a changed world. And wasn't that okay, heroism? Wasn't that the highest form of memory? Though who would be around to write of her, this act of stewardship? Surely not her mother, who, upon hearing Lily say she was depressed, wrote it off instantly. *Who doesn't get the blues? You should go outside more.*

She pressed her stocking foot into the door's kickplate and flung it open, prepared for annihilation.

But it was all still there.

Her window, the row of lollipops, the wall-mounted television which scrolled through slides about refinancing. Cars passed by on the road, and through the tinted glass everything looked the slightest shade of green. She walked through the lobby and out the front doors, struck by the

sunlight and the mushroom-cloudless sky. In the distance there was nothing, only the same squat buildings blocking the view of the ocean, an ocean which relaxed onto the beach, little bits of foam deposited in the holes left by a sandcastle moat. The broad, plasticky leaves of trees bloomed from their trunks like accepting, open hands. A small brown bird sang on a fence finial across the street. Everything smelled like everything. It was wonderful.

There was droning, a murmuring something that seemed to ride a wave of noise. Perhaps it was her bees, many generations away, running to meet her, to again land upon her and suck the sweat and sugar from her skin. Though it was probably just a leaf blower. Then came a louder, sharper sound. A gunshot? No, a car backfiring, the slamming of a screen door, cinder blocks dropped and broken.

Inside the bank the phone in her locker buzzed in its metal cage. *Repeat. False Alarm.* There would later be investigations, buck passing, a heightening of tension and of doubt. Though now there was only this little moment of calm. She imagined children huddled in a school hallway, oblivious, simply happy to be out of class for even a moment.

She sat upon the wooden bench just outside the bank entrance and lingered in the sunlight. Perhaps she wasn't okay with dying, with being vaporized, or shot, or starving in the confines of the vault, hundreds of little keyholes like aggressive eyes.

She thought of going home and unsealing the jar of honey, that satisfying release of pressure, and spreading the golden sweetness onto bread, watching it drip slow and then licking the knife clean.

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