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What the Wasp Said

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McMann slept slumped in his office, his head on a stack of student essays, a thread of drool spooling to the desk. Outside, the tendrils of the clematis uncoiled in the spring sunlight according to some mathematical formula that mediated the distinction between algebra and geometry. These congruences might have reassured McMann if he had recognized them, but he had not. Instead, his irregular breathing (like his irregular thinking), followed its own irrational pattern, neither odd nor even, but a pattern nonetheless, one with its own congruences, in this case, to the inbuilt flaws of the seven-story building where his office occupied a portion of the fourth floor. The building, Morrill Hall — a tottering, rotted-brick structure from the late 1800s — housed both his beloved English Department and the combined faculties of the Mathematics and Logic Departments.

His vague feeling that the confluence of disciplines represented an opportunity was shared by no one else in the building, or, indeed, by anyone in any of those disciplines at any institution. The vortex of faulty concepts filling his imagination was akin to a poster that a sophomore might hang in a dorm room, a poster picturing a mirrored sphere floating in a glass box and claiming, “Everything is Connected.” In fact, exactly that poster hung on the wall behind his desk, but it was not clear if it was the remnant of the office’s previous occupant or something McMann himself had installed. Neither McMann’s idea, the sophomoric poster, nor the building itself offered any solace to would-be transcendentalists.

The failures — that is, the building’s failures — were particularly evident in the crumbling brick that sifted down in a fine red dust that left the building surrounded in a ring of tinted grass. Occasionally, a brick would break loose, revealing that the facade was attached, not to some sheathing, but only at intermittent points to the building’s wavering studs. If there were any consolation in the shoddy construction techniques, it lay in the spiraling pattern of the brickwork itself. The mason seemed to have begun at the center of the building’s surface, something so impossible that the term “seemed” seems especially important here. Using a variety of offset bricks of different lengths and widths, he (McMann assumed the mason was male) had created a spiral pattern that filled the surface except at the corners where the curved lines only approximated the building’s edges.

Like the uncoiling clematis or the drool spilling from the corner of McMann's mouth onto the piled papers of his students, the repetitious pattern offered itself as something reassuring. Of course, it was not reassuring at all because the coiled pattern gave the building the appearance of a gigantic flushing toilet set on its side. The likeness was so great that students referred to the building as "Flushing Hall," and those students who had endured one of McMann's classes noted that the window to his office was at the precise point where the swirling toilet seemed to drain away. McMann wished that he knew something about Fibonacci sequences, but he did not, and he knew that he did not, so he avoided discussing Morrill Hall.

Inside, the professors were required to place their bookshelves along the outer wall to prevent the collapse of the rotting floor beams. For these reasons and others having to do with his officemate, McMann loved the English Department, the Mathematics Department, and the single member of the Logic Department with whom he shared an office: Lucy Curt. However, neither Lucy nor the department returned his affection, but for very different reasons. For the English Department, the flames of their self-doubts were fanned by their blunderchoice to tenure him for his mistaken notions about mathematics, literature, and neurology. Like McMann, they had no expertise in any of these fields. Thus, they assumed that his claims about their "intersection" were legitimate, that he had indeed described a common feature of their "logic," and that his claims were not the bizarre intuitions of a man who had been befuddled since the age of five by the elective mutism of his mother. Of course, McMann did not know that his love for the department was unrequited, and besides, he enjoyed the view of campus from his office window. Neither did he know that Lucy's courtesy was that and nothing more. Thus, we might believe that McMann was happy, and from one (or several) points of view, this might have been accurate, albeit only a true statement that an error had been made.

McMann's office faced west, overlooking the college's tennis court. In the afternoon, the sun would broadcast its photons through the window and warm McMann's office, a warmth that usually threatened to put him to sleep, not as one puts a dog or a cat (or even a sickly, elderly parent) to sleep, but to sleep in the sense of a drowsy nap punctuated by dreams of feral dogs and stinging insects. Today, his nap took place inside of a pair of cheap blue jeans and a plaid shirt, two buttons of which were opened where he had begun to inspect the flesh of his belly before he had dozed off. He had just begun a dream about biscuits and honey when a distant door slammed, prying him from sleep and back to the contemplation of the curve of his middle-aged gut.

The arc of his belly was perfectly parabolic, or more precisely an elliptic paraboloid, punctuated with white dimples where a pediatrician's needles had cut cores of fatty flesh from above the circular scar of his bellybutton. A set of misplaced dental cells had ignored the physiological curriculum of his body to produce misplaced incisors and canines in the flesh of his little belly, and the pediatrician had been in been in pursuit of these trespassing teeth whose horror he controlled by calling them "teratomas." Through the haze of his nap, McMann dimly recalled the hospital, but he lost interest in the small victories of modern medicine and shifted his attention back to his bellybutton. He poked at the ring of flesh and then stopped to consider three possibilities: first, that the bellybutton was simply a scar, evidence that his mother had once been connected to his future; second, that in its formal sense, it was some kind of cartilaginous spiral; and third, that it was some sort of tightly sealed passage into the secrets of his abdomen. This last possibility he immediately dismissed because it made him think of "the" vagina, and his imagination was simply unable to countenance the idea. But between cartilage and scar he could find no difference, in part, because he did not understand the difference between the two in the first place.

McMann drummed his thumbs on his belly, alternately tightening and loosening his abdominal muscles to produce a set of drum tones, if there is such a thing. His attention drifted to a grey clump of lint that seemed to have found a home in his navel, and he remembered that someone had told him that the Germans have a word for the phenomenon, but he could not remember the term, in part because he could not speak German, and in part because he supposed that it illustrated something about the limits of language in the same way that Eskimos have hundreds of words for "snow". But then he remembered reading somewhere that the "Eskimo" story was supposed to be called an "Inuit" story and the intuition about their words for snow was, like most intuitions, mistaken. It was as flawed as was the supposed moral superiority of using "Inuit" as the term for those-various-people-living-in-arctic-environments-who-have-four-or-five-languages-and-cultures, when in fact, the word "Inuit" is merely an English-ism of some word of a language that most users of "Inuit" probably don't speak. Such was the rush of words inside McMann's head. He concluded his meditation by returning his attention to yet another set of scars on his belly, a set of fading punctures left by yet another pediatrician's large-bore needles when he was only five years old, injections necessitated by a bite from a baby skunk he had found napping beneath his parents' front porch. Curled up on an abandoned tarp and dreaming happily of skunkish things, the creature had nipped McMann's forefinger when he tried to scratch behind its tiny ears.

Only later in life would McMann come to understand that the cute little squirming *Mephitis mephitis* had then been taken to a veterinarian's office, decapitated, and a slurry of its brain cells cultured for rabies. With tin snips, probably, he eventually decided, they had performed the deed. For his part in this event, he had endured a series of injections designed to protect him against the disease. Fortunately, his family was well organized, and made sure that it was the skunk that was sent to the vet, and the child to the pediatrician.

McMann did not think of all these things while sitting in his office, but he did think of some of them, and he did remember the small stuffed figure of a skunk given to him by his grandmother to alleviate his sense of loss. He often thought of these skunks, and others, but mostly of the stuffed skunk from his beloved grandmother, the one who overvalued his intelligence by giving him her copy of Spinoza's *Ethics* (which he never read). McMann sank into another doze saturated with half-truths that he would later record in his journal. His vague dreams of the injections were grainy, black-and-white projections, the brittle film of childhood experience passing through his dozing brain while he sat stunned by the afternoon sunlight. Except for the first injection, each of the rabies shots came one week after its predecessor, and by the third injection, his father had come along to hold him down while the doctor stabbed him with a thick steel needle. Prior to his fourth injection, McMann had resolved to mount a heroic resistance to the needle, and when the doctor approached with the dripping needle, he began as he had planned by kicking the doctor, ripping at the nurse's smock, and screaming for Bambi to rescue him. Because he was small, his fury occupied relatively little space, and everyone stood back, watching his wild kicks and thrashing arms, waiting for him collapse from exhaustion. When the inevitable seemed possible, his father approached him, and McMann made one last ill-considered gesture: he gathered up all the saliva he could find in his little throat and spit on his father. He remembered watching the little clump of spittle arc toward his father's face before landing and sliding down his cheek like a ruptured snail on a wet window. Had McMann been dreaming of that moment, he would have smiled, but he was dreaming in a different sector of his brain where different stories were being told.

The doctor had not minded the kick. The nurse's modesty had not been offended when he ripped at her smock. But his father's boundaries had been crossed by the arc of the glob of spittle. The room became still, and everyone stopped as if to discover a meaning for the outrage. Both doctor and nurse stepped back from the table where McMann sat glaring at his father's scarlet face.

McMann had heard stories from other first-graders of parents who hit their children, and it suddenly occurred to him that he might encounter that catastrophe. He eyed the giant arms of his father, the clenched lips, and the head cocked slightly to the side. If his father was going to hit him, he wanted it to be worth it. McMann's little face became serious, and he rubbed his little chin with the palm of his hand while he thought carefully before speaking. "Fuck you," he said to his father. He made a tiny fist and shook it at him, "Fuck you . . . you skunk."

He had never seen his father laugh, so he did not understand why his father's shoulders shook and his face was crossed with tears. He thought for a minute before balling up his fists and assuming what he thought was the crouched position of a boxer. "You are a stinky skunk."

McMann's father looked at the little clenched fists. "I am not a skunk," he said. "Let's get out of here."

The ambivalence of forgoing the injection was not lost on McMann neither then nor later in life.

So, they left the doctor, the nurse, and the hypodermic and bought ice cream at a Sanders lunch counter just around the corner from the doctor's office. The ice cream came in a cone-shaped aluminum vessel fitted with a paper liner. And beside the dish of ice cream was another aluminum cup, but this one filled with water. Every two or three minutes, his father laughed, and McMann glared at him for reasons that neither of them could fathom.

At last, his father spoke. "Where'd you learn to talk like that?"

McMann shrugged his little five-year old shoulders like a ruthless old man and held his palms up. "Flower was a skunk."

His father shrugged back at him.

"You're not really a skunk," McMann reassured his father. "I was just mad."

"That's good to know. You know, I was a little bit worried. I looked in the mirror, and I didn't see a skunk."

McMann imagined his father staring in a mirror and a skunk staring back from behind the glass. This pleased him because the idea of re-presentation was still an open question in his five-year-old mind.

The air in McMann's office was stale, a thick blanket of undisturbed air, saturated with the slow rumbling of his snore. He snorted, and the noise almost woke him, but before that could happen, a finger poked him in the ribs, and a voice that was not his own commanded, "Wake up. You're snoring." At first McMann thought it was the voice of a wife saying, "You're boring; you're boring," but he knew — or at least was confident — that he was not married, so he assumed it must be Lucy Curt, a belief proven correct when he opened his left eye and saw her standing over him. "I'm sorry," he said. "I was dreaming of skunks."

"*Mephitis mephitis*," she said. "Kin to the vile weasel, the charming otter, and god knows what else."

Any response at all would have heartened McMann, but this verged on the personal. "Expanding its range northward," he started to explain. "And into inhabited areas . . ."

"By the reality of global warming," finished Lucy.

"Despite the denials of certain political factions," McMann tried to create an opening for further conversation.

Lucy Curt ignored him and his linguistic ploy by returning to her desk and opening her heavily annotated copy of some obscure *Tractatus* from the last century.

He knew that much about her book because the cover had that word and a few others that had worn away under her thumbs. He had not been able to bring himself to open the book when she was out of the room because it did not seem like the sort of voyeurism with which he wanted to be associated, whatever that other, acceptable kind might have been. Steeling himself against rejection, he tried again: "If you live-trap a skunk, and quickly cover the trap with a tarp," and here he realized that "trap" and "tarp" were anagrams. "They don't spray . . . and then you can take the trap and put it in the river and drown them." McMann's heart leapt up further and further with each word they exchanged. He felt the sounds threatening to rise up, to take root, blossom into whatever blossoms become. He felt them transforming into a life of evenings spent sitting side by side in rocking chairs as they read by the light of a fireplace, snow drifting down outside the shuttered window while Lucy thumbed through Gödel's notes from some class he had taught at Notre Dame. He imagined fixing two cups of chamomile tea, but he was not certain how to spell the word, so he changed the tea to Lapsang souchong which he did know how to spell, but which did not offer the same sense of a cozy winter evening spent reading before a fire.

Lucy was annoyed, but patient. “First, I don’t trap skunks, and second, if I did trap a skunk, I would not drown it because such deaths are cruel.”

“Skunks aren’t on the list of the thirteen animals with consciousness,” McMann noted.

“I assume the list — supposing that it exists — also excludes humans, so it is a list with limited value, but whatever, drowning is not a death to be wished for,” Lucy commented. She tapped her knuckles on her desk for emphasis.

As if in response, the building made a slight rumbling noise, and a red brick from its rotting facade broke loose and fell onto the sill of their office window. It perched on the sill like a bomb or perhaps like a dead bird, demanding the attention of both Lucy and McMann.

Lucy looked warily at the brick. “I’m not sure what this has to do with skunks, but something is afoot.”

McMann imagined the tiny black claws of the tiny black skunk that had bitten him when he was a child. “A skunk bit me when I was a child,” he announced.

Another brick came loose and landed atop the first one. But this one broke in half when it hit, and the smaller piece slid off the sill and to the soil four stories below.

“This seems to be the beginning of the end,” McMann suggested.

“A single sparrow does not make a spring,” Lucy countered.

“A pair of bricks does not make an apocalypse,” McMann attempted to reassure them both.

“But a pair of corpses is a decent start on a tragedy,” Lucy offered.

“The reader would have to work backward from the corpses,” McMann added.

“Romeo and Juliet,” Lucy countered.

For obvious reasons, McMann’s heart rose up at the thought that the two star-crossed lovers had crossed her mind while they were speaking to each other.

The building made a slightly louder noise, and a small cascade of bricks began to launch themselves from its exterior. The sheathing was mushy with the gnawing of the carpenter ants that infested the walls, and a scattering of planks began to join the cascade. Bricks fell for a while, and then some boards, and then some odd combinations of wood and brick made the suicidal leap.

The collapse probably took about fifteen minutes, each filled with the various expectations of logicians, mathematicians, and literary critics trapped in the building where they suddenly found a shared interest in death. Of course, none of them died, but those on the building's west side found themselves stuck in offices with no outside wall. Students strolled past, confident that it was all intentional, more interested in the puddled planks and bricks at the base of the building than by the violation of the fourth wall that exposed the terror of the faculty.

After the bricks stopped falling, McMann sat looking out through the old wooden studs at the tennis court. He was surprised to find that there were, in fact, two tennis courts, not just one, but he refrained from talking about this to Lucy Curt who was sitting at her desk, annotating her book.

The building lurched again, and McMann panicked slightly (if panic is something that can be expressed in degrees of intensity). Lucy stood up and edged over to the door, but it was firmly stuck closed. "I am going to die," she said to no one in particular.

McMann saw a chance to soothe her troubled soul by returning to the subject of skunks. He steeled himself, and spoke to Lucy. "Before I die, I would like to tell you about going to visit the skunks with my deaf grandmother." It occurred to him that he might die and she not, or that she might die and he not, or that both might die, or that both might live. This last alternative cheered him considerably. Perhaps she would remember his concern and speak to him more frequently. Of course, that assumed that they would still share an office somewhere else on campus. It was all too complicated.

Lucy went back to her desk, closed her annotated copy of Wittgenstein's *Whatever*, and took two folders from her desk. A sparrow flew across the skeletal remains of the building and landed on top of the brick that still sat on the sill.

"Feel free," she said. "Tell me your story. The consolations of narrative and all that. I guess they can't be held off much longer."

McMann's first decision was to omit the story of the baby skunk, the bitten finger, the rabies shot, and his relationship with his father. He firmly believed that such a story should not come first, and thus he strategically focused on skunks as intrinsically interesting. "For various reasons that I will not go into," he began, "I early on developed a slight obsession with skunks."

Lucy Curt nodded for him to continue.

“At one time, I was bitten by a baby skunk,” said McMann, “but that is a story for another time.”

“If there is one,” she noted. Then she added, “You have said the thing that cannot be said.”

“The Liar’s Paradox,” he suggested, hoping to impress her.

Wearily, she shook her head. “The skunk story?” she inquired. “Please, distract me.”

“After I became obsessed with skunks . . .”

“For reasons that will go unsaid,” Lucy Curt reminded him.

“The obsession became so acute that my family began to despise me.”

“I can imagine,” Lucy Curt said.

“Skunks, things that smell like skunks, summer nights when the odor of a squashed skunk wafts from the freeway to the suburban yards where families sit swatting mosquitoes in the dark. Films . . .”

“The Disney thing about the deer,” Lucy remembered.

“Yes. Bambi. and Bambi’s friend Flower-the-skunk,” enthused McMann. “And Pepe Le Pew. My father introduced me to . . .”

“You promised me a story about a deaf grandmother and skunks,” Lucy reminded him.

McMann quickly righted the little ship of his narrative. “Right. So, my Swiss grandmother took pity on me.”

“If she was deaf, how did she know you were obsessing about skunks?”

“Partially deaf . . . mostly deaf unless she was interested in what was going on.”

“So . . .” Lucy tried to interrupt.

“Please,” begged McMann, “let me tell the story. It’s not a very good one to begin with, and you’re only raising expectations that will give it further to fall.”

Both of them looked through the crumbled wall of their office. A fire truck with a long ladder was now parked at the curb.

“So, my grandmother took mercy on me, and she offered to take me to the Children’s Zoo.”

“And for this act of kindness, I assume she was punished?”

“Ambiguously,” McMann attempted to reassure her.

“We took the bus because my grandmother did not drive. I also believe we took the bus because the part of her deafness that was not elective was exacerbated by the diesel roar of the engine. The Swiss are like that, you know.”

“Partially deaf?”

“Perhaps morally deaf . . . many of them. But she was Jewish and subject to the acute moral sensibilities absent in many of her countrymen.”

“Let’s get to the skunk,” Lucy suggested.

McMann felt a glimmer of hope, that Lucy, despite herself, was beginning to see him as slightly larger than the annoyance with which she had usually received his attempts at language.

She looked at the gaping spaces in the collapsing wall.

“As you might imagine, I was out of my mind with excitement. I would ride on a bus with my beloved grandmother, and I would look on the face of the Skunk God, feel the heat of the burning bush that was what it was, and I would dare to . . .” At this point, McMann realized he hadn’t a clue why he had been so taken with skunks.

“Go on,” Lucy encouraged him. “This is almost interesting.” McMann had a moment of desperate happiness at such faint praise.

“I remember the turnstiles, and that my grandmother went first. She deposited a quarter and then pushed against the bar. And then she did the same for me, and at that moment I felt as if I had entered a temple, a shrine, the holy of holies, the . . .” McMann didn’t know the name for other holy sites, but the memory had struck him silent, and he could see his grandmother’s creased fingers searching through her change purse, and he could hear the sound the quarter made, and then he heard the distinct grating sounds of the turnstile as they made their way into the zoo.

Lucy checked to see if the ladder truck was meant to help them escape the crumbling building, but nothing had changed. “Perhaps,” she said, “the rescue workers are taking a coffee break.” She seemed reassured by the idea of her rescuers taking a coffee break. “After all,” she added, “if it were really an emergency, they would use sirens and megaphones, and who knows what else?”

McMann kept on with the skunk issue: “The skunks were kept in a strange, circular exhibit that looked like an ear, an ear lying sideways on the ground. A pathway ran around the inside circumference, and there was a second, spiral pathway that wound down toward an opening where I suppose the skunks slept.”

“Okay,” Lucy summarized. “They kept skunks in an oversized cement ear. I suppose an oversized cement nose would have been too obvious?”

McMann channeled his excitement into more attenuated narrative: “So my deaf grandmother boosted me up on the edge of the cement wall, so I could hang over the pathway and watch a line of not one, but five skunks perpetually trudging around the periphery of the cement circle. Wheels within wheels, circles within circles and at the center a spiral ramp leading to some sort of *mysterium* into which I was about to be initiated. The whole thing looked like a gigantic ear, and — miracle of miracles — my grandmother was (sort of) deaf. I was blessed, a Saul on the road to Pauldom. It was a confluence of forms.”

“Help me out,” she said. “What’s a confluence of forms?”

McMann silenced her with a raised forefinger. “And then . . .” he paused for effect, “as I hung over the top of the cement circle, a wasp flew into my ear.”

Much to McMann’s relief, Lucy Curt’s eyebrows shot upward, an uncontrolled gesture that he assumed meant that she was both alarmed and sympathetic.

“. . . and unable to escape, it stung me inside my ear.”

“Oh, my goodness,” she said.

“I immediately lost my grip on the concrete, slid backward and fell flat on my back, arms outspread.”

“Your poor, deaf grandmother,” Lucy said. “She must have been so frightened.”

McMann had hoped that Lucy would have had the most sympathy for him, but such was not to be the case. “I began screaming, leaped to my little feet, and took off running around the circular cement ear that held the skunks. The pain was horrible, and my screams were so loud that even my grandmother could hear me. Dozens of times, I ran screaming around the skunk exhibit.”

“No good deed goes unpunished,” Lucy reminded him.

McMann interrupted his narrative to give her a confused look, and then re-straddled the narrative horse: “She later said that she believed that one of two things had happened: 1) that I had suffered some sort of psychotic break at the sight of the skunks and had gone irretrievably mad. She thought that this was her most reasonable conjecture, perhaps because, 2) she thought that I might have let my eyes follow the spiral of the ramp down to the mysterious, looked upon the face of the Skunk God, and lost my mind.”

Lucy considered the two options. “I notice,” she said, “that in either sequence, the conclusion was that you had lost your mind. Was she always more interested in conclusions than in processes?”

“Did I mention that she used a cane?” McMann asked.

“No,” Lucy Curt said, “but I can easily imagine that she had one.” McMann picked up the story where he thought it had left off. “At eighty-seven, she knew she could not catch me, so when I came around again, she snagged my ankle with her cane and sent me sprawling.”

“And then?” Lucy wanted to know, and her wanting to know made McMann very happy indeed. He did not see her walk over to the crumbled wall again and look down at the fire truck. The rescue people were beginning to extend a ladder toward the gaping holes in their office.

“I don’t remember,” he admitted. “After that, I only remember the bus ride home and a little girl who pointed at my swollen ear and laughed. She was by herself and got off when the bus stopped in front of a little coffee shop.”

McMann stopped to consider the small possibility that the girl had been Lucy, but then he remembered that she and he had grown up in different cities. He wondered if she had ever visited his hometown, a question that might be a bit too intrusive or too personal. McMann finally did make up his mind to risk the question, but when he looked over at Lucy’s desk, she was gone and nearly halfway down the ladder, her book tightly tucked under her arm.