

BEE HAPPY

Synopsis

A minimum wage contractual worker at a fast food restaurant is resigned to the uncomfortable standstill that his life has come to. However, when he glimpses his old ex-girlfriend from across the counter at his job, nostalgia and regrets begin to creep in. The resurfaced feelings, failed dreams, and unsatisfying present all come at him in full force. He struggles to return to normalcy, but his health and sanity waver. The weight of all this and years of underpayment, overwork, and unhealth all come to a head in a dance of vomitus and tears inside a mascot suit at a strangely familiar child's 7th birthday party.

Rain was imminent. I hate the rain. It always made the garbage and all the filth in the alleyway sort of sizzle, the rancid fumes rising to mix with the stagnant city air. Not to mention that it floods a little in the alley when it rains, making the loose bits of garbage drain out into a gutter, and even to the street. When that happens, it's notoriously difficult to move boxes whenever there's a delivery. It covers the uneven and jagged concrete in a dangerous thin sheen of slick filth. One time I slipped and cut my hand on a sharp rock, earning me a trip to the hospital, untenable with my meager salary.

Working here, I at least thought there'd be free food. But no, they don't even let you take home the leftover food at the end of your shift. All that food just ends up in black garbage bags, none of it trash, just unwanted. That doesn't stop me, but stale burgers and fries get old after a while. That towering neon bee's smile felt warm and welcoming as a kid. Now that I work here, that grin looks sadistic. It's just oil, heat, machines, and bodies behind the counter.

The alleyway by the Happy Bee I work at may be filthy and disgusting, but sitting on a damp cardboard box and having a smoke for 15 minutes is the closest I get to peace on a work day. Even then, all I do is smoke and stare out at nothing. Well, not entirely nothing. Concrete. Trashcan. Paper. Today is a nice change of pace. Wet concrete. Wet trashcan. Wet paper. Wet plastic bag. Indeterminate brown mush. If it wasn't for these swirling small clouds of smoke, my brain would have rotted from boredom. An ember lands on my hand to my painful shock. The expensive scar on my hand is nothing more than a white streak cutting through all my palm lines now.

The weighted door hisses open. "Get back in here, the place is filling up." My manager says. She looks behind her and then flicks her head back at me. The eternal vein on her forehead pulses, attempting to burst from her tightly pulled ponytail as she screams. "Have you been smoking again? This is a family restaurant! We can't have the customers smelling cigarette smoke in there!" I can see her face lines crack through her thick foundation as she screams at me from a foot away. "Calm down, I'm usually in the kitchen anyway." I take a drag from my cigarette. "Nowhere near them." My tone and enthusiasm are in direct opposition to hers'. I purse my lips at one of our discarded generic family ads by the shipment of napkins. The little boy's saccharine smile distorted by a line of brown sludge from the dust and rain, his mother with half a face of soggy paper sagging from the weight of cyclical moistening and drying. My manager shoots a glare at me. I flick my cigarette. It sparks down and sputters out into a puddle on the ground. She turns into the kitchen and the door follows behind. I barely catch it before it latches back in. It fights me every way, hissing, as I squeeze through the door back into the kitchen. The honking and screeching of cars in the streets outside crescendo into a dull click of a door latch.

"Number 11. Number 19. Ready! Number 78 spicy sauce, no lettuce!"

My brain switches on, registering orders before I can even get to my station. Rows of stainless steel run parallel with rows of bodies. The kitchen isn't a human space, there's no room for that when efficiency is the concern. The heat embraces me as I walk down the aisle. On a busy day like today, near-constant sizzle fills your ears. A white noise drone of continuous frying. I take my place at the assembly line, in between the fryers and the ovens. My job is to make sure that the drone doesn't stop. I fill buns with meat, cheese, sauce, and onions onto plastic. I wrap, fold, and repeat. Again and again.

I try to imagine a child opening one of the burgers I build and wrap. Their small hands pull away excitedly at the wax paper. Eyes wide with an even wider grin at the reveal, a small piece of paradise for those who behave. The ecstasy as the delicious aroma of fried beef fills their snotty noses. Then, that first bite. Merry Christmas, Happy Birthday, the second coming of Christ. The idea of a burger bringing me anything close to joy is faint. But I don't need to enjoy them anymore. I just need to make them.

The machines beep in agreement. For the next few hours, all my world is just burgers. Bun, lettuce, onion, tomato, cheese, sauce, patty, bun. Variations and special requests don't matter, they're burgers all the same. I'm pretty good at this now. My hands slide and flow as if possessed, freeing my mind to go to other places. I turn up and away, out beyond the light haze of hot fast food.

At the end of the aisle, is the counter. Past the counter, is an almost different world. Brighter, cleaner, happier. A long line from the counter leads almost to the double glass door. Each person places an order, pays, and walks away quickly. It's fleeting, but I catch glimpses of smiles. Light in their eyes. I mimic them on reflex, but my cheeks strain. Then as if coming into a spotlight, the exiting extra in line ahead of her, like a curtain pulling away, selling the reveal. Her body lightly pressing to the edge of a counter, a star coming into full focus. Someone familiar. I cock my head away from the light, brain straining my head to make the connection as to where I know this woman from. Distant, as if they knew a version of me. Then she parts her lips into a kind smile as if it were the easiest thing for her to do. Teeth white and gums glistening. Sunshine.

Lettuce, sauce, onion, bun. She was staring at me with those same big brown eyes, gently fluttering open and closed. Burning my image into her brain and burning her own into mine. Bun, patty, sauce, bacon, bacon, onion, bun. A supercut that won't stop. Bun, patty, bun. Her nose snorts when she laughs, nostrils flaring in competition with an even wider grin. Bun, bacon, lettuce, sauce, bun. A wordless groan and a little laugh would escape right after I had done extra well. Bun, bun, sauce packet, bun. Bun, sauce, sauce, bun. Bun. Bun. Bun. Bun. Bun. Bun.

I feel a pressure grip my arm and shake me. "What the fuck?" My manager hisses in my face. I catch a strong whiff of strawberry. I do nothing but leave my jaw open. She looks to the side, "Take over for him." Her eyes slice back to me. "Go clean the bathroom or something, shit."

I push the yellow bucket along on its rollers with the mop to the bathroom. I glance around at the full restaurant. Bodies move in slow motion as my focus pulls to Sunshine. Laughing and animated with life, burger in hand. The image turns to cold linoleum. I pour the cleaning solution out onto the tile. The harsh smell burns my nostrils. Especially mixed in-house to force most anything clean. I scrub hard on the floor. The last time I had seen Sunshine was seven years ago. We were fresh grads with plans and degrees with guaranteed employment. I had bought her flowers to soften the blow. We had our whole lives in front of us. What good would it do for us to close ourselves off from the possibilities? It's not you but it's not me. It's us and I want more for us. Her smile crumbles. I don't know how. Or why. But even in that crushing moment, she somehow finds the strength to pull that smile back up. Eyes red and wet. She says nothing as she sniffles her way into a hug. Flowers crushing flat in between us. They lay on the

floor, watching her walk away. I put the mop back in the bucket, and the floor glistens. Finally clean, in the same way, bleach is clean.

Nothing alive is on it.

I spray the solution on the mirror.

As I wipe, I see my reflection grow clearer. Heavy eyes with no light behind them. Hair greasy with frying oil condensation. A light layer of sweat on my worn face. My nostrils are red from the cleaning solution fumes. I lock eyes with my reflection and keep wiping. I look like shit. I've looked better. I think. Before losing my old job. When time and money were in abundance. Before Mom had gotten sick. Before my Lola would pass on. Mom would soon follow after her. She had the foresight to leave me some money but the medical bills took all of it and even then, the bills were still there. I squeak to a stop, the mirror is spotless. I look down into the sink. I take a deep breath. That chemical scent overflows from my lungs into my mouth and I taste it. I retch what little I've eaten today into the sink. More burgers. More work.

I push the pneumatic door open to the alleyway, full garbage bag in hand. I walk out into the dark alleyway and look around. The concrete glistens with reflected light from headlights zooming by. The coast is clear, so I open the bag. A mound of untouched leftover burgers and fries inside it. This is my lifeline when the bills leave nothing for me at the end of the month. I shovel them into my bag and when they can't fit anymore, my pockets. I had taken a few sauce packets earlier for good measure. I tie it back up and throw it in the dumpster. I fish a cigarette out of my pocket and put it in my mouth. I light it up and breathe deeply, savoring the nicotine rushing to my brain. I feel a lightness in my head and the soles of my feet feel like they'll lift off

the ground. There's a faint warmth from the glowing tobacco at the end of my mouth. A cold kind of warmth. Tomorrow is more of the same shit. But that's for tomorrow. I walk out the alleyway and wait for a jeep to take me home.

I open the front door to my house.

The silence welcomes me. I flip the kitchen light on. I haven't cleaned in a while, but things don't get too dirty when you don't use them. I throw a stack of envelopes onto the dining room table. More bills. I head to the ref and open it. The warm light washes me with cold air. Empty, except for a pile of sauce packets and two beer bottles. I offload my stolen fast food into it. I don't understand why they don't let us take these home if they're going into the trash at the end of the day anyway. No one will miss thrown-out food. I take a beer and close the ref door. I pop the cap off my dinner beer on the edge of the table, the wood worn away from routine. This is an heirloom, but no one's around to get mad at me for it anyway. I take a sip, turn the light off, and walk upstairs.

The door creaks open. I sit on my bed and turn on the tube TV with the remote. Static. I turn the VCD player on and switch inputs. The screen goes blue then black and white. A woman sings an old jazz standard to a leopard on a German Psychiatrist's roof. "I can't give you anything but love, baby". I say under my breath, singing along. I was seeing a psychiatrist when I could afford it. I would try to talk about my life, but he would direct us back to symptoms and medication. Like I could just pay to be happy.

I can barely afford to live.

I sink into my sheets and kick my shoes off. I look at a framed photo turned down to face the desk. I prop it up. I remember why I put it down. I would sneak Sunshine in here sometimes during summer break. We'd put on old movies for noise while we feel each other up in the dark. In the moments in between, we'd remember that the tv was on, get sucked in, and forget about getting off. The fan would hum along the entire time, turning its head.

"They don't make movies like this anymore." She turns to me. "Mm," I say, eyes still on the screen. "Then again, they probably can't make them like this anymore." I face her. My gaze rests down at her breasts. I look up at her face. Her mouth hangs open. A faint glow on her sweaty face. I wipe away some sweat from her forehead. "Why?" I say. She doesn't look at me. "Because they're all dead." I raise my eyebrows at the morbidity. "Well, they were all alive when they made this," I reply. "Of course, you have to be alive to live." She replies. I say nothing and look back at the TV. The fan keeps humming as Katharine Hepburn argues with the German psychiatrist about the existence of a leopard on his roof. She continues, "We remember them like this. In black and white." We both stare at the screen for different reasons. She shifts in her position and taps my arm, "Oh shit, I'm leaking." She reaches for a box of tissues next to the framed picture of us together. She finds it empty and goes for the tissues in the bag of leftover Happy Bee takeout. "Fuck, I told you not to cum inside." It runs to my leg and I recoil. She laughs. "Why are you grossed out? It came from you." I help her wipe the stain dry. Just as we finish, she looks at me. "Where do you keep your sheets?"

It would only be a week after that night that I'd end things with her. I only realize now that I've been watching the same movie we saw that night. I pull out my phone and swipe at the cracked screen. The app takes a bit longer to load than usual, when the screen does load in, my

phone vibrates for a solid minute with notifications. I roll the feed down. Countless births and weddings from people who no longer know me. I tap the search bar and look Sunshine up. Her profile picture is a photo I took of her at an Americana café we would frequent when we were together. Her gums are a shade lighter than the ornamental gas station pump in the background. I tap the 'message' icon and our chat loads in. 'Where are you, sunshine?' in blue text on the left side of the screen. Below it in a white box, 'I'm here, baby. Hehe'.

I press the button on the side of my phone and the screen goes black. My reflection looks back at me past the fingerprint smudges. I throw it on the bed and I flop down on my side. I close my eyes and try to sleep. Suffering is only funny when it's on a screen. The sounds of Cary Grant being arrested are my lullaby.

The days would go on much the same as they did before. As if I hadn't even seen her. I think I catch glimpses of her, here and there. Or I wish I had. The back of the head, a fleeting side profile, a laugh from just beyond my attention. Characteristics as much hers as every other person on earth. Everything is still the same. My world is still very much burger. But the boxes I sit on in the alleyway behind the kitchen don't prop me up as well anymore. The burgers require a little more of my attention than they did before, and the smoke I watch dance on my break no longer moves me. My eyes can't seem to help but look past it. And what good does that do me when all there is beyond it, is a concrete wall, rain-streaked and bare? I close my eyes.

"You got another?" It's one of my coworkers, a few years younger than me. He wears his dumb little work hat to the side, a failed attempt to look cool. Acne scars still line his cheeks like freckles. He's still new, only a few months in, so of course he looks more alive than me, if only greasier. He mimes smoking a cigarette as he stands above me. I pull a wrinkled pack of

cigarettes out of my pocket and shake one loose until it pokes out. He takes it and smiles sheepishly at me. "Can I have a light, too?" I feel around for my lighter, but I can't seem to find it. I stop looking for it and just pass him the lit cigarette from my mouth. He puts the burning tip to the end of the one in his mouth. He puffs up a small cloud and hands me back my cigarette. "Thanks," he says as he exhales. He squats beside me like he's expecting a conversation. I just stare out. "I've always wanted to work at Happy Bee. So cool to see how everything's made. Even better, I get to eat burgers for free." he smiles at me as he produces a burger from his pocket and starts eating. "I can't imagine someone wanting to work here," I say. He laughs, "Well, I mean, as a temporary thing. I'm just trying to make some money while I review for my board exam." He taps ash out onto the ground from his cigarette while he takes a bite from the burger in his other hand. "I can't imagine sticking with this for more than a few years." I stay quiet and let barking dogs, blaring kitschy jeepney horns, and his loud chewing fills the silence. "How long have you been here?" He asks in between bites. "7 years give or take," I say back. "Oh." He goes quiet. He even stops chewing. I feel the air change. He doesn't say anything for a while.

He just eats.

He drops his cigarette and stomps it out. "Well, I'll go ahead." He gets up and wipes his hands on his pants. He takes out a small bottle of rubbing alcohol and splashes it out on his hands. "Someone booked a birthday for later. Can't wait, I always wanted to know what it was like to be Happy Bee." He rubs the alcohol on his hands, making sure to get in between his nails. "What's it like anyway? Being in the suit?" He stands with his hands on his sides. I crush the light out on the end of my cigarette on the ground. "It's fun the first time." He smiles as he looks

down on me. "I bet." He walks back inside. The door clicks in behind him. I look around, no one.

I get up and walk to the dumpster. Time to restock. I rip one black plastic bag open and start filling my backpack with burgers. I zip it closed and walk home, all the way home. It's not far, but it's not near either. Can't afford to pay my bills and commute this month. By the time I get to the street my house is on, it's already dark. Streetlights tangled with wires line my path. My stomach grumbles and I stop under one of the poles. I unzip my bag and take a burger out. I unwrap it. I sniff it, I can't even smell it. I bite down, chew, and swallow. I taste nothing. My stomach still rumbles. I take another bite. Rancid. I spit it out and throw the burger down on the ground. Fuck, I should have been more careful. The taste still lingers in my mouth. No amount of spitting will get rid of the taste. I put a cigarette in my mouth, light, and inhale. Bitter. Thick saliva latches like cobwebs on my cigarette, stretching it longer, the farther the distance from my mouth. It's not much better. I squat down as I still try to sanitize my tongue by smoking. The crackling of burning tobacco fills my ears.

I close my eyes.

"Break's over!" My manager screams at me. I open my eyes. I'm not in my street anymore. I'm in the alleyway again. How the fuck did I get here again? I look around, everything is the same. But this growing pit in my stomach churning my insides seems to say otherwise. I didn't get any sleep last night, but I've barely slept for what seems like weeks now. That rancid burger from last week is still fresh in my mouth. I feel a hand on my shoulder. I look up at my manager who gives me a single nod. "It's your turn." "Wait, can someone else-" She stops me before I can even rebut. "You know the rules." Her eyes shift to the side. She reaches a hand out

to me. On reflex, I raise my cigarette to her and she takes it. She takes a deep drag, the ember on the end blazing a red so bright it ignites into a small burst of flame. It burns out quickly into a cloud of smoke. She flicks it away when she's done. "You know the rules. Or I could just not renew your contract." Smoke flows out with the words. A steady and small stream in my face. It stings. I taste no strawberry as I swallow my bitter spit. It does not go down easily. "Okay." I sigh.

I wrench myself up from the boxes I've been sitting on. I stagger a little as I stand. My vision shakes and my eyes stick to the wall to center myself. I look for patterns I've already seen, as if there were answers in the concrete, hoping they'll show me something else. A thought crosses my mind, 'That's just a concrete wall. The only answer it can give you is inside you.' I look for anything vaguely resembling Jesus Christ in the splotches or cracks. People see Jesus everywhere all the time. He'd be here. 'If you're looking for Jesus here, you'd have to engrave him on the wall with the blood from your cracked skull.' I blink my eyes as fast as I can, trying to will my eyes to see something, my head tipping slowly to the side. Nothing. Just a burger.

Today is different, it's some kid's birthday and I'm the unlucky one. You'd think they'd treat the person in the mascot suit better, but no, it's the worst part of the job. We take turns getting in the suit and now, it's my time. I flip around, the door slowly hissing closed behind her. She stops and turns to me, "Shit. You smell like cigarettes." I stare back, "They won't smell me with the suit on anyway." She shrugs. I walk through the door. I should have had lunch. But that just would have been more burger. I should have gotten more sleep last night but old movies aren't enough to soothe me to sleep anymore. Tired again.

Tired still.

In the kitchen, my coworkers begin surrounding me. They cradle pieces of the suit as if presenting them to me. I am engulfed in foam and felt, one fluffy hand and foot at a time. I stand still, my coworkers moving fast, methodical, and expressionless. Their eyes are on me, not as a person, but as an obstacle. I hear and feel one of them zipper the back, feeling less and less air on my back as they get closer to the top. They step back. I move my arms and legs, good enough. The new guy steps in front of me, dumb little hat now resting right side-up on his greasy head. We lock eyes. The light in his is dimmer, closer to mine.

He says nothing as he raises the mask. I lower my head to receive it. The world goes black. This must be what it feels like to be in a coffin. I remember Mom and Lola. I flex my fingers and rub them together through the fuzz. Softer than dirt. Probably.

I screw the mask on to find the eyeholes until I can see. My manager walks into view of the left eye hole. She raises a thumb. I raise a foam one in response. They lead me through the door into the dining area. The light was always brighter out here. I look around at the people, their eyes glisten as they smile and point. My reflection in the glass wall meets me, I lock eyes with it.

I am Happy Bee.

The big family-friendly cartoon face of fast, affordable, and especially delicious burgers, fries, and more of your comfort favorites. I do them all the happy way, for your very happy day. your children have grown up with me, they love me like family. You tolerate me like family. You all scream for me just the same. I am an empire. The harbinger of happiness in 231 countries and 5 continents. Try our new BeeBowl®. A happy mix of fries, discarded burger meat, and chicken

nuggets, all topped with our Happy Sauce™. Add 20 pesos for a single slice of cheese and a happy-sized drink. Weep at my feet in happiness. I am the highlight of every children's party.

No.

Fuck you. I am the children's party.

I can feel myself slowly cooking in my sweat as they lead me up the stairs. The chatter comes through the suit dull and muffled. The light streaming in through the eye holes gives off a faint glow inside the suit. It's distant, but I can hear laughter. There's a children's party upstairs and they need the Happy Bee now. Every step I take in my bee feet is a rediscovery of human locomotion. I've done this a few times, but not enough to be great at it. I'd rather not be great at it. The kids are louder now.

They stop me just in front of a glass door. I'm standing just past the faded wall print of a family sitting down at one of our tables. I turn my whole bee head to look at it. The young have their hands holding burgers high, mouths agape to receive, seemingly in one bite. The old have their faces twisted in forced smiles. The first time I saw this, it was brand new, and so was I.

The host sees me past the glass door and nods to me. I can hear the kids counting down. "5, 4, 3, 2, 1!" I feel a tap on my shoulder as one of them opens the door. I rush through, and an eruption of cheers and applause greets me. The host shouts into the mic, "Here's Happy Bee, kids!" it's so loud the speakers strain to project it. The kids bounce around. I exaggerate every motion to make up for the suit, jumping and gyrating to return the enthusiasm. My head feels heavy and I have to force myself more than usual.

I see the cake. It has "Sunshine" written on it in yellow icing and a birthday candle in the shape of the number 7 on it. I frown. Outside, they probably see Happy Bee go completely still for a moment. I remember where I am and I do a few poses. I jerk my body and my foam feet hit a few of the party balloons on the floor, they bounce around the room to the kids' delight. A kid catches one of them. The balloon is almost half her size. It's this little girl with pigtails in a yellow dress. She runs to someone and presents the balloon like a gift, all the while, smiling a gummy smile. The woman squats down to her level. Sunshine.

She's here.

Knelt to the floor in a sundress, she flashes her gums in reply, "Thank you, Sunny!". I guess this must be her niece or something. The little girl perks up and replies with a smile, "You're welcome, Mommy!"

'Mommy? She's a mom? When did that happen?' The idea swirls in my head. Did I do that? Why'd she never tell me? Was she ashamed that I was the father? I do the math. She's in my room again. The old movie with the two leopards is on. Dead people on screen, alive again, immortal in black and white. I'm helping her clean the mess I made inside her that dripped all over my sheets. Oh, Jesus, the math adds up.

Is this my daughter?

What was bubbling in my gut before, returns with renewed force. My senses suddenly feel alien. Did I always breathe like this? This is normal breathing, right? The foam and cotton smothering me start to feel suffocating. The collective smell of dried sweat wafts through my nose. I could ignore it before but not anymore.

“Wow, a balloon from Happy Bee!” I grab it with both my arms ‘cause I need both my arms ‘cause it’s so big. It squeaks funny when I hold it and it’s yellow! Just like my name! Mommy says she named me Sunshine because seeing the sun makes her happy. I asked her why, because, because, when I look at the sun, my eyes hurt pretty bad. Also, it looks like the color white to me. A really really really bright white. But Mommy said the sun is yellow and she say that when I draw the sun I color it yellow. I do! Because yellow is a happy color! And she said yes! The sun makes her happy because it’s the color yellow and it’s a happy color! And that’s why she named me Sunshine. I should give her this yellow balloon, it’ll make her happy! I run to Mommy and give her the balloon. “Oh, for me, Sunny?” Mommy looks at the balloon. “Yes, because Mommy looks a little sad.” I play with the balloon. Mommy doesn’t look too happy. Since Friday mommy hasn’t looked too happy. But it’s Friday now, so the Friday before this Friday. I don’t like mommy not being happy. ‘Special on my birthday! “But mommy should be happy. Because I’m happy! No one should be sad on Sunny’s birthday!” I say. Mommy makes a frowny face, but then she smiles. “Thank you, Sunny. This does make me happy.” Yay! Succ-Sucks- Sucusus- Win! I do a little dance. Mommy says you should dance when you do something because it’s a celebration.

Mommy taps me and points. “Look, Happy Bee is looking at you!” I turn around. Happy Bee is big! His head is also big! I think he wants to play. “Happy Bee!” I shout and run to him.

Focus. Inhale. Exhale. What the fuck did that therapist say? Shit. That doesn’t matter now. You’re Happy Bee. You’re an institution. You need this job. Glomp. A child is at my feet. The big family-friendly cartoon face of fast, affordable, and especially delicious burgers, fries, and more of your comfort favorites. I do them all the happy way, for your very happy day. your

children have grown up with me, they love me like family. You tolerate me like family. You all scream for me just the same. I am an empire. The harbinger of happiness in 231 countries and 5 continents. Try our new BeeBowl®. A happy mix of fries, discarded burger meat, and chicken nuggets, all topped with our Happy Sauce™. Add 39 pesos for a single slice of cheese and a happy-sized drink. Weep at my feet in happiness. I am the highlight of every children's party. Ok, a customer. Remember your training. Get to work. That's all that matters. I look down.

A gummy smile. She wraps herself around my fuzzy thorax, savoring the soft fuzzy feeling. All the while, eyes wide and upturned at me. Is she mine? I search her features for proof, to exonerate or damn me. I don't know. Would she even want a Bee for a father? I blink, and my eyes grow wet, not from my increasingly drenched forehead, but from inside. Tears start welling up in my eyes. I raise my arms, and they shake all through the motion, to reciprocate her hug.

But a man swoops her off her feet. My gloved bee hands hang in the air. She squeals and laughs through the air, her little dress flowing in the spin. The smile on her face was somehow even wider, revealing more of her gums than I thought possible. She gives the man a look. I don't know what that look is. No one's given me that look. I reach my hands out for her.

A swarm engulfs the bee suit. The kids push and shove as they surround me. I try to turn, wary of the ones punching at my stingerless tail. They throw their little bodies at my felt body with every ounce of strength they can manage. Balloons and confetti push up in the storm of little bodies. My target demographic claws, screams, pulls and laughs. Some hold on to my feet. Some try to climb on. I can only watch her smile. That smile.

"Daddy!" she wraps her arms around him, the fabric pulling at his shirt collar with all the force her small arms can exert. The man gives this debonair look. "Happy birthday, Sunshine!" Hair flowing in the wind. Not that his hair was long enough to do that, or that there was even a breeze blowing in this air-conditioned function room. Clean cut, no effort, as if looking good comes naturally. And it did. Tall, light skin, mestizo features. No line on his face points to hardship or strife. The look of ease that came with being born with wealth. Good clothes. Expensive ones. Reptile on the cut pectorals of his chest. Silver automatic watch with multiple smaller dials for God knows what on his wrist, shining. The same wrist braces the back of her neck as he dips her down, her pigtailed whipping around.

They smile and laugh. And Sunshine, my Sunshine, rushes to his side. She plants a kiss on our daughter's forehead. Then she plants another one on the man's lips. They linger. Lips collide and almost merge. You can almost see the short breath she lets out into his mouth. Their lips almost look like they're tearing apart as she pulls away. As if their bodies being separate was an unnatural state.

Happy Bee is a cuckold.

They look at each other, smile, and laugh. A happy family smiling and laughing. No streak of brown sludge, no past of rain-soaking and air drying, shiny and printed new. This could be in a commercial. This is the happiness they sell you. I drop a hand to my side. If I had pockets, they would be empty anyway.

I retch a bit on the inside of the suit. I didn't know I even had anything left to retch out of me. Chunks of softened bun, twice processed beef, and twice fermented malt sprays in the walls

of the suit. All an indeterminate brown mush. The acidic smell stings and assaults my nose. But the resulting smell would be the least of my problems. They'd deduct my pay to cover the cleaning costs of this goddamn suit. Sweat, cigarettes, and puke. My eyes burn. The tears do nothing to stop the pain. I bawl out in more than one kind of pain, more than I can take. I wail in my suit. It fills my ears. Outside, it's nothing more than faint indiscernible mumbling. I am drowned out by kids running, laughing, and screaming.

The mic screeches on, "Ok, kids! Happy Bee wants to dance for the birthday girl, Sunny!" Oh no, no, please. I can't even speak, I blubber through slowly drying spit and puke. My nose dribbling snot to my lips. I hold my head in my hands. They hold my mask aloft, unable to even envelop the permanently smiling face of plastic. "Happy Bee is shy, kids, let's give him a round of applause to encourage him!" The crowd cheers. I wave my hands to her that I don't want to. "I think Happy Bee needs more! Come on, I can't hear you!" The kids start screaming. "Happy Bee! Happy Bee!" They clap and cheer for me. The cacophony fills my ears. I can't block it out. I scream inside, hoping it'll drown it out. But no one hears me. No one can.

The sound stops.

Silence.

The Happy Bee theme song slowly builds up. "Happy Bee, the place to be, where you can be happy..." I'm stuck. I'm powerless to do anything. I have nothing. Nothing but a job I hate and a suit that smells. I'm not a man. Not a person. Just a body in this suit. This is all I am now.

Then, I remember. I remember that I can't lose this job.

In all my despair, I still must dance.

I jerk and gyrate, throwing my striped behind around. Fast enough to make me sicker, filling my suit with more spit and whatever I can. I puke so much it burns my throat. Their laughter and cheers swell to a roar. I'm a zoo animal. An unhappy bee. I watch the family I never had, laugh and smile at my spectacle. This is how they'll remember me, bopping around in black and yellow. They clap along as I dance to the sound of my cries. I cry loud enough to drown out what little of the music gets in my suit. But no matter what I do, I can't cry loud enough to be heard by the crowd.