The Viscosity of Honey

by drawlight

Summary

Castiel Novak, a historian of American witchcraft and ritual, comes to a New England town to write about the strange deaths of four accused witches in 1693. He expects to find books and lore, a lobster dinner or two. He does not expect to find the confusing figure of Dean Winchester leaning against an oil-slick car, dipping his unprotected hand into honey, letting the bees lick it from his touch.

"I want to go to the mountains, I want to go to the sea,
I want to go to a place where no one knows me,
I want to be lost among people who speak a language
I don’t understand at all."

Takuboku Ishikawa, “Romaji Diary & Sad Toys”
What do you know about sailing?

Not all ships make it home to port. He runs his hand over a stubble-rough chin, thinking about Odysseus. Yes, Odysseus on the water, casting forth from Troy and seeking his long-ache home. How many interruptions had the sailor had to endure before he'd gotten there? Odysseus, Odysseus, who asked you where are you going and what do you wish? Tell me, who then waited to hear your answer?

He is tired of wandering. Tired, then, of packing up his razor and its four blades, packing up his shaving cream, his bit of soap. It doesn't matter, he is here now. This little rented room with the slanted wood floor and the timbered ceiling. The odd reproductions of famous paintings framed and matted on the walls. Matted with care yet dusty too. The bedspread is that awful florid muck of his grandmother' preference, yet it really doesn't matter. It is a room. It will do.

The fog he had driven into still sticks to him. That bit of still-cool humidity right there in the bones. It is the first of June. It takes a good long while for summer to properly come to Maine, up here in the corner of nowhere and nothing. Winter may have no hope but it still clings with needy claws. There had been overnight frost two weeks ago and a dusting of snow the one before. It is warming rapidly now. Castiel had driven long highways with signs warning for moose. Meandering streets with their bits of busting dandelions and green grass, winding wisteria and explosions of late daffodils. Tulips here and there, thoughtfully tended. You would hardly find the town on any spit of a map but there is care in everything. Yes, the whitewashed fences and the mended gates, the thoughtful gardens. Addresses carefully affixed to houses and businesses as if to say yes yes yes we exist and the post service knows us too.

He frowns at the reproduction of Christina's World hanging above his to-be bed. It is odd and eerie in this quiet room, his nose still sick with fog. He's seen it before. Online, in books, even in real life on a visit to New York. Here it is, grey and tawny, that empty treeless stretch of field looming out to a distant Colonial-style farmhouse on the horizon. The presumable Christina and her unsettling twist, her uneasy reach for the house. Castiel is never sure that she will get there. (He realizes that he knows nothing really about it beyond that it had been painted by Andrew Wyeth. Art history has never been his strong suit.) It is a beautiful piece. It makes him antsy and tense. I could turn it around. He bites his lip, leaving the decision for later.

His two bags are heavy. Take out the pressed shirts from the first, the assortment of ties (mostly blue), his slacks. Hang the trenchcoat up behind the door. Khaki gabardine. Rain-spotted. Fraying at the sleeves. He fingers the little threads coming undone, weighing them against his next paycheck. No one accuses teaching of making you wealthy, I suppose. No, no one with a slipshod awareness of the misery of the adjunct would dream of accusing Castiel Novak of wealth. He gets by, his bit of paycheck, grants and such. His research this summer may have been funded through the university, yes, but still, the reins are tight. He'd had to argue the case for this room even. As if a shared bathroom might be considered the height of luxury.

His square fingers loosen the tie, choking at his throat suddenly. Let free the half-windsor, unbutton the shirt, roll up the sleeves. Breathe, yes, breathe. Shake the last stretch of the road out from you. Brush the McDonalds' coffee off and the french fry salt too. Lay back against the pillows and bleach-starch sheets. He stares up at the ceiling, at the idle fan. The late-afternoon sun casting long and golden light into the little corners of the place. His hair black as treebranches and wild against the
white pillow, skin already tanned from early summer sun. His brows are square and dark as a hyphen, yes, black as a mark on a permanent record. Pale-eyed and easy-frowned. He has lines already from furrowing his brow too much, early now at age thirty-four. His penchant to be too serious has already worked against him.

The university system, academia, is more of a popularity contest than outsiders realize. More than Castiel had realized before he had already gotten one foot too deep in the swamp. He is rarely a sought-out professor. Students flock to other classes, taught with more energy, more humor. Castiel sometimes wonders about how to spice things up. (He had said this once to his sister, had used air quotes for it too. Anna had laughed until she had cried and had fallen off of the sofa. "You're ridiculous, Cas, you know that, right?")

Castiel closes his eyes, weighing the possibility of a nap. He shouldn't. He should call his father and tell him that he's arrived safely, that he'll find a church here before the weekend. His father and his little battles. They circle each other, Castiel and his father. In 1859, Charles Darwin had published a book titled *On the Origin of Species*. It was not long, not compared to the thick Bibles in other men's hands. A bit over five-hundred pages. A bag is heavier, a pail of water. This book was different, it would change the world. “What do you make of all this evolution nonsense?” Carol Novak, (Chuck to his friends) had asked, tapping his pen against the wooden desk. There had been no question in the tone. Castiel had shrugged then, his broad shoulders were not yet carrying the world.

“Not really sure, Dad.”

“Seems God’s pretty clear on the Garden,” his father had said, scowling. Castiel could only nod. "You still going to church over there? They got a church at your school?"

"Yes, Dad." (He does not go.)

Yes, on and on, amen. Castiel punches the unlucky pillow with his fists.

Roll over then, fall asleep.

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Scale back, scale back. Where has Castiel found himself?

Let us look.

Knucklebone, Maine is nine-hundred miles from the university. Castiel had done the drive in two days. He could have flown but there's just something about tearing out onto freeways and highways, something about the promise of pit stops and exit signs, about mystery spots and diner coffee. When his stomach begins to protest, Castiel peels himself from the bed to the shared bathroom. The tile floor and the claw-foot tub in the corner. The medicine cabinet. (Castiel peeks in the medicine cabinet. He always does. It not that he means to pry but he always looks. He is too curious, needs to know too much. These little glances into other lives, into other purchases of soap and deodorant, somehow gently telling him that he is not alone. That others live their lives one bottle of shower gel at a time.) Splash cool water over the face, turn the head this way and that again, tallying up the little imperfections like doing a home inspection. The bags under eyes are the most noticeable, though he's never found sleep to seem to manage them. His hair is wild as ever. The nap hasn't helped. He wets his hands, runs them through the spider-dark hair. Fiddles the comb a little through (it doesn't do
In the end, he still shrugs the trenchcoat back on and stumbles down to the center of town, a little nothing of a crossroads. Blinks and looks about. Have you ever been to the little nothing towns of America? Let me tell you about them. Knucklebone, Maine has two proper streets. Main and Superior. The only thing that might resemble a town is at their intersection. A small grocery store and a tractor and feed supply. A BP gas station. A bar with no windows and a faded sign. A little corner cafe styled the Good Food Cafe. Castiel bites a smile in. He can guess what kind of greasy spoon the cafe is. He loves it too.

Brushing scarce dust from his coat, he pushes the door open. A bell jingles. Bells always jingle in these kinds of places. He breathes in the smell of coffee and Coca-Cola, the Moxie soda advertisements hung up on the walls. The server nods at him, a little dip saying sit anywhere you like, I'll be with you shortly. So he sits. He is a single, so the counter will do. The chrome-edged Formica, vintage reproduction. The laminated menu sits tucked between squirt bottles of ketchup and mustard, a little jar of syrup, a bit of honey. Sugar shaker and napkins. Fold open the menu. Take a look.

Interesting. What Castiel sees surprises him. A greasy spoon, yes, but a creative one at that. The menu is surprisingly limited for this type of place, kept to only a single page. The way the listings are written makes him think more of a mom-and-pop establishment, a holdout of decades, than any Sysco-fueled diner he had stopped at along the road. Interesting place, Knucklebone. (A good thing too, he will be here all summer. Here, flung out at the edge of the nation, the edge of the timbered state, out along the Atlantic coast. He cannot see the ocean from right here, sitting in this gold-sunlit restaurant, but he could smell it already. The salt in the air, the encroachment of seagulls, ready to divebomb a man for the hope of bread.)

The honey is a unexpected color. What does he know of honey though? That it is sticky and sweet and comes from bees. It has been used for millennia. Where there are human histories, there is honey too. Think of the ancient Egyptians and their honey-sealed jars. Think of the Sumerians and their clay tablets, writing down the various medicinal uses for honey. His fingers pick up the jar, turning it over in his hands. The blue and white checkered lid, the little tag around the neck with a scribble of a bee on one side and on the other, in a simple, loose hand, there are only the words Sweet Yellow Clover.

"Hey," the waitress says, friendly-voiced. "You know what you want? We have specials too."

"What kind of specials?"

"Today's a lobster roll. Start of the season. Bit of mayo, celery, lemon juice. On a brioche roll."

"Yes," Castiel says, folding the menu up, tucking it back, "That sounds good. I'll have that. Who says no to a lobster roll in Maine?"

"And to drink?"

"Water."

"Got it."

He fiddles with the paper from the straw. Tears it up. Pulls a book out of his bag and his notebook too. Histories of New England Witchcraft 1550 - 1800. Opens it to his last-marked page.

"A discussion of the Salem Witch Trials of 1692-93 would be incomplete without the
inclusion of related occurrences. Regrettably, most treatments of these trials prefer to view these other events as mere copycats rather than the violent and turbulent times that they truly were. Of particular note are the Carson trials, held in Knucklebone, Maine between November 1693 and June 1694. These were smaller, resulting in the hanging deaths of two women and two men. However, we must note the unusual violence of the period and the resulting and unsettling hysteria."

He has read this paragraph before. He has read all the paragraphs he could find relating to the Carson trials (of which there are very few). It is simply too small, too copycat, to stir up any real interest. Should he publish on this, god-willing, it will be no tenure bait. Does he care? No. (A little, maybe. Perhaps. He will do it anyway.) This isn't even, really, his usual area of focus. Yet something has fascinated him for the past few years, something odd and off-center about the stories. There is something there, something unfinished and untold. Castiel is a historian. A keeper then of stories, the famous and the secret too. There is a story to be heard and there is no one else to tell it.

"You're the professor, aren't you? Up for the summer?" The server puts his plate down. Silverware wrapped in a white paper napkin. Castiel looks up at her, at her easy face and blond hair. She has the direct friendliness of the too-blunt. He likes it. It's easy. He shifts a little in his seat, looking around at the few others at the counter. A man sits at the end with a cup of coffee, picking at peanuts. There's a woman here too, reading a book with her bit of red hair tucked behind listening ears, fiddling at a salad.

"Yes. Castiel Novak," he says. A pause, wondering what he should say. "I'm doing research for a book."

"On the trials then? Is that what you teach? Like witchcraft?" She grins, "Don't worry, Sam's told us all about it. He's pretty happy as shit to be working with you."

"Yes, on the trials. But no, I usually study the Civil War period. And teach introductory American History survey classes to huge groups of glazed-eyed eighteen-year-olds. He pauses. "Wait, I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"I'm Jo. I'm here on Tuesdays and Thursdays." She grins, leaning against the counter, a dishrag tucked over the string around her apron. "Sam's cool. His brother Dean actually owns this place. You'll see him around. It's a small town, you know. You'll see everyone around eventually. But take it from me and don't listen to a word he says. You know, the other day, he told me one of his hens laid an egg with a ten-dollar bill in it. You believe that?"

Castiel smiles, a bit amused. You believe that? No, but he can imagine the sort of man who might tell those stories. Older, likely. Greying, maybe. Small town folk and genial. Jo wipes the counter down. "You want anything for after? Pie? We've got a great pie. Cherry today. Or coffee? I'm about to wash the percolator."

"No, thank you, Jo," Castiel shakes his head, smiling finally. He laughs a bit, curious about the pie. Pie can go one of two ways and he isn't quite ready to know which way this one leans. Best to wait a bit, draw it out. Let us hope for an all-butter crust made with eighty-two percent butterfat. Let us hope for a crust that flakes, that shatters like glass falling on concrete. Let us imagine perfectly cooked down cherries stewed, perhaps, with a little bourbon and let to thicken with a little bit of cornstarch slurry. Maybe, maybe the baker in this cafe has secret hints, the way his mother did. His mother, lining the bottom of her cherry pie with the thinnest layer of marzipan so that it would not turn soft and wet. His mother, cooking the cherries down with strips of orange peel and a bit of lemon, with almond extract and a touch of allspice too. He dreams of pie. Of strong black coffee. He'll come back in the morning.
"What time do you serve breakfast?"

"Cafe's open every day, Monday to Sunday. Breakfast's from five-thirty to eleven-thirty."

A nod, a smile. He picks up the buttered roll, the smell of salt and of the sea. Good god. (He may have moaned.)

Jo grins. "Good, ain't it?"

The redhead looks up finally, a smirk on a red-lipsticked mouth. "Tell Dean his food is passable. Or you'll never hear the end of it."

A sharp laugh from Jo, a crack of the towel. "Stuff it, Rowena."

He is not quite ready to head back. The cafe is closing, the few patrons have gathered up and paid. He has long since finished, put his knife and fork on the crumb-spattered plate, has taken a final drink. He wanders through the little streets of Knucklebone. Passes the small park and its pond. Fireflies and streetlamps come on together, interruptions of light in the dark. It is very different than the place Castiel had seen in the morning. The white fog had cast a strange air over the place. A hint of malevolence and oddness. Now, now it is different. As simple as any quiet town might be. He kicks a rock; picks up the little stone. It is not a stone at all. It's a fossil, some little creature preserved in death. He thinks of his father and his obsession with Charles Darwin, fossil-hunter. Fossils, this strange record of time, preserved in stone. It is smooth in his hands. A skilled eye, trained to nuance, could pick out the little bones, name the creature, tell us what it had for lunch. Our physical traits are always preserved but the records of our thoughts, our weavings in and out of love are not.

What had his father said? "Where is that? Knucklebone? What kind of a fool place names themselves Knucklebone?" Castiel had shrugged, his blackhaired knuckles white against the beer bottle. "It's just for the summer," he had said.

"You'll call?"

"Yes."

(And that, of course, was that.)

It is not easy, this seesaw balance of adulthood between son and father. His mother is not there to buffer them. They do not talk of her. Castiel tells his father that he needs to have his eyes checked, suggests that he might like living somewhere less isolated than his little cabin on the lake. His father grouses, bites off remarks about professors and their ideas. Still, they cook his mother's food. They make sarmale, those old cabbage rolls stuffed with rice and pork, sometimes with a bit of beef. Grilled trout from the lake, caught that morning. Braised veal. Castiel and his quiet father. When he visits, Castiel mows the lawn and fixes the mailbox. He mends the fences, brushes the sand from the stairs. In the spring, he puts the dock into the lake. In the fall, he takes it back out again.

"You should be closer," his father says.

"My job is there," Castiel mutters, troubleshooting his father's decade-old printer. (This thing is more useful as a doorstop, I swear to God.) Yes, his career and his little apartment, two hours away from his father here, perched on the edge of Lake Michigan. The other side of the state. Safe. Isolated.
Maine is further still. As he walks, Castiel watches the fireflies like little bonfires. Little fireworks everywhere. A tape recorder is heavy in his pocket. It is his long habit of summing up the thoughts of the day, mainly of his research (though other things creep in too). He fishes it out now, as he passes somewhere between a sourwood and a hawthorn. Flips it on.

"Diane," Castiel says into the recorder (it is also his habit to pretend that there will be someone else to hear his words, to pretend that he is not a thirty-four-year-old single madman talking to himself). "I've made it to Knucklebone. Good time, got in by one-thirty. I'm staying in a room in town rented to me by one Ellen Harvelle. Sharp woman, no-nonsense. She'll be easy to work with, I think. Rested. Got dinner at the only place in town I've seen. Good Food Cafe. Seems like it might live up to the name. The lobster roll was good. Perfectly seasoned. Might have a good pie there too, we'll have to -"

A pause. An interruption. It is the oddest thing. There at the edge of his vision. Castiel turns, drawing a bit closer. What are you doing? Look with Castiel. Look there at the long oil-black car. At the man in the faded, torn jeans and the red flannel. Sleeves hiked to the elbows, the frown-curled lip and concentrated, nearly sullen set to the eyes. They do not make eye contact, Castiel is not important. What is important is the way this man is reaching into a beehive with his bare hands and bare arms. What is important are the ways the honeybees cavort around him, landing on him, his skin, his closed lips, his eyelids too. Bees in his hair, on his shirt. The man does not panic. Castiel knows that he would have panicked; he would have opened his mouth and sucked the air in, sucked the bees in too. Would have felt the stingers in his nose, in his throat, there under his nails. But this man, this man does this with easy confidence, gentling his hand into the hive, humming under his breath to the bees, pulling out the chunk of comb dripping with pale honey.

A bee-charmer, Castiel thinks. This nameless flannel-man, with his oil-stained hands and his hair the odd color of wet sand, yes, this. A bee-charmer.

It rolls through him, this sudden too-much awareness of the other man. Light into a cave, a canary in the mine singing out. Danger, perhaps. Castiel is good at compartmentalizing. He is here now as he plans to be, as he has introduced himself to Jo and to Ellen, to Sam Winchester on the phone. Yes, Castiel Novak, the thirty-four-year-old adjunct professor of history. A simple man of short dark hair and khaki pants. Blameless, easy, unobjectionable. This odd beekeeper knocks there at the other door to him. The side-door. No one comes to the side-door but those you like best, those who hope to know longest. Which version of Castiel answers that knock? A version with heat in his cheekbones and a cotton-dry mouth. A version with a sudden rush of water, a musical chairs heartbeat, clamoring over himself and his sweaty palms too.

The beekeeper looks up, paused in the middle of charming the hive. The two men catch each other, sight to sight, eye to eye, breath to breath. That proud lift to the square chin, the shadow of the strong Adam's apple at the throat. His hand drips with honey. The bees settle there, drinking it from his available skin.

It's nothing, he tells himself. (Of course it is nothing. What is there to tell? A man and his honeycomb, a professor and his tape recorder, passing each other on an unnamed street.) It is nothing, nothing, nothing. Yes, this hum of nothing, stuck in his throat, stuck between his teeth like a bit of corn. He is too aware suddenly of the bags under his eyes, of the mess of his cave-dark hair, of the unpleasant sour milk cast of his skin. He crosses his arms to hide his wrinkled shirt, bites his lip to conceal their chapped and peeling state.

Not that it matters. It is nothing. Remember that then, Castiel. (This is the sick of it, this wretched
part. That he will take this bit of *nothing* home with him, tuck into the pocket of his heart, jangling about with coins and lint. He will fish the memory of the beekeeper out later when he is alone in bed, hot and irritated, forgetting why he *does not do this*. Fumble at himself with one hand below the band of his boxer shorts, only remembering later, sticky and frustrated, why he should not.)

Castiel blinks. *Keep walking, Novak.* Shoves his hands into his coat pockets, rolls his shoulders slightly to clear the odd feeling of being out of place and out of time. The unsettling feeling of something there that he cannot name. Keep walking, get a move on. Consider what is left, consider what remains unknown. It is 2019. Not too long before (in the scope of the universe) in 1846, an astronomer named Johann Gottfried Galle had looked up at the sky, thinking of stories about gravity, about mass, about movement, had spied a distant spot, and called it Neptune. Yes, we cannot rule anything out, we are still discovering our own backyard.

Strange town, Knucklebone.

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