

'A World Without Bees'

A Short Story by Niall Carroll

The grey mist of the night now settled on the fields of the Chinese countryside of Yangsho. The crisp winter morning brought an eerie mix of sunlight and fog. The colour green dominated the landscape. Trees could be seen, dotted all over the ground, by the few birds that still flew over this pretty area.

Ji-Sung woke up from his light sleep. He slowly crept out of bed, conscious of his every move. His back didn't work the same anymore. In the kitchen, he turned on the electric radiator, the only one in the small house. Its job was to heat all the rooms; the two bedrooms, the kitchen and the tiny bathroom. The interior was mostly grey, meaning on these dull Sundays, it felt like a prison.

Ji-Sung turned on the wooden stove and began to boil water for rice. As he waited for the water, he began to contemplate, as he did every morning, "Why?" But he knew the answer to this because he'd asked himself the same question every day for the last twenty-two years. "It's what she wanted," he answered to himself. He ran a wooden spoon through the rice and declared it ready to be eaten. He scooped half of the rice into a wooden box and he scraped the other half into a wooden bowl. The box was for later; the bowl of rice he ate now.

He finished the rice in five minutes, leaving no crumbs, and started to prepare himself for the day. It was second nature to him now. He put on his cotton trousers and baggy t-shirt. He pulled on his green wellies and grabbed his waterproof coat; the clouds signalled rain. Lastly, he took his worn out 'Yankees' cap and positioned it on his head in the mirror. Kai had got it for him when she visited their two boys in Manhattan.

Once he finished affixing the cap, he took a deep breath, gazing into the mirror. He looked at his almost white, grey hair. The brown and strings of blonde were a distant memory. The bags under his eyes brought nothing out but his bushy eyebrows. The wrinkles on his forehead and cheeks had more lines on it than a toddler's doodled page. However, his jawline looked like it could cut anything; even in his old age his slim body was never capable of changing.

Ji-Sung opened the front door and began on his way. He stopped at a little shed five minutes down the uneven, stone road. He undid the lock and took his penyang and a bucket from the shed. The penyang, a long wooden stick used in Kung-Fu in the cities, served another purpose for him. He shut the steel door and secured the lock, not that there was anyone around that would try and rob the shed. He

continued down the country road for another eleven kilometres. He passed all the trees, big and small, that he had already worked on. He could see that they had begun their journey to death. "But at least I did what I could with them," he thought.

He reached his work place after about half an hour. About two and a half dozen tall untouched trees stood in front of Ji-Sung. He placed his bucket beside the nearest tree, took his penyang and began to work on it. He began to poke at the shoots in a way that Kai had taught him. "Less is more," she used to say. Slow, gentle poking got more pollen out of each shoot.

Just as the orange sun disappeared under the mountains, Ji-Sung finished pollinating the last of the thirty trees. He was quick, but what he had done today was what the bees used to do in a minute.

There was about an hour of light left so he decided to get to work on the next group of trees. He picked up his two tools and walked past the last tree he'd pollinated, but then stopped suddenly in shock. Past that tree there was nothing; plain green fields were all that could be seen by the naked eye. "This can't be it," he thought as he swallowed heavily.

He dropped his bucket and sprinted anxiously down the road. He stopped at the tree house that he had made with his boys many years ago. He used it as a watch tower now. He climbed the ladder to the top floor as quickly as possible. Ji-Sung gazed over the ex-floodplain, fists clenched and tears beginning to fall.

Back at his home, Ji-Sung swung open the door, breaking the bottom hinge. His baggy t-shirt was now wet with a mixture of tears and sweat. He thought about the millions of people left in the world, the ones that didn't help once the bees became extinct. "They deserve nothing!" he shouted. "They just didn't understand. They thought they were fine in their bubble."

He was sprinting around the house now, smashing objects in his way. Half his arm was dark red with blood. Eventually his back gave up and he fell face first onto his bed. He turned as best he could, now facing the ceiling. He took one deep breath and shut his eyes, wondering whether they would ever open again. The bees were the only thing that could save them now.