

High School Short Story Winner

Aliya's Abejorritos

By Cathryn Russ

Bumblebees are remarkable creatures. According to all laws of aerodynamics, their teeny wings are too small to keep their large bodies afloat. Yet somehow, bumblebees can, and do, fly. Instead of staying rigid, they twist and rotate their wings while flapping, like a helicopter. The short, rapid sweeping motions from front to back and back to front, and the angle of their wings create vortices in the air like small hurricanes, the low-pressure eye of their mini-hurricane pushing them up and keeping them aloft.

Aliya knows this. She's been studying bumblebees—*abejorritos*, as Abuela fondly calls them—for exactly 64 days now. Each morning, well after the first rays of sunlight have squeezed through the crack in her curtains, the low buzzing begins, a quiet work song signaling the start of a new day. The bees wriggle single file out of the penny-size hole in the side of her nightstand, marching one by one across the purple shag carpet until they reach the wall, where they ruffle their wings, preparing for liftoff.

Every morning, Aliya watches them fly up, up, up, to where the top of her wall meets the ceiling, and disappear through some invisible crack in the corner. She's never seen them return; doesn't know how they get home at night. But every morning they emerge from their hive like they never left the previous day, ready for another day's work. Aliya's EpiPen lives in the top drawer of her nightstand, resting safely above the very hive that would trigger its use. It's resided there for the past seven years, untouched.

She used to wonder if she should be scared of the bees. She used to contemplate asking Tío Martin to call an exterminator, but eventually, the fat, fuzzy insects grew on her. She became accustomed to waking up to the steady hum of wings flapping 230 times per second and found comfort in knowing she wasn't alone. Besides, exterminators are expensive. Tío had been kind enough to take her in, and the last thing Aliya wanted to do was be any more of a burden than she already was. Speaking of Tío...

Aliya smiled to herself as she read over the sticky note he had left for her on the fridge this morning. *Mija, your lunch is packed on the top shelf and there's leftover udon in the freezer you can defrost for dinner. I'll be working til 11, so don't wait up for me tonight. Te quiero mucho, Tío.* Although they weren't related by blood, and he wasn't nearly old enough to be her father, Martin had begun calling Aliya "mija" as a term of affection when he first fostered her, and it stuck, even now that she was nearly 17. It always made her smile when Martin called her that in the special soft voice he reserved just for her. It made her feel like maybe she wasn't as unlovable as her real parents had deemed her to be.

“Ya!” A shout from outside, followed by the doorbell ringing repeatedly, snapped Aliya out of her thoughts. “Hurry up!”

Aliya shoved the sticky note into her jacket pocket and grabbed her backpack, slinging it over her shoulder as she ran for the door.

“Sorry,” she breathlessly apologized as she hopped out the door on her good leg, attempting to tie her Converse while walking down the front steps. “Overslept.”

“So, how are the boys?” Logan skipped down the stairs two at a time, waiting for Aliya at the bottom. “Good to see you’re still alive.”

“I’m a little worried about them.” Aliya thought back to the bees. They had been stumbling haphazardly out of the hive for the past three mornings, unlike their normal single-file march. “I wonder if something is wrong with their queen.”

“Maybe she’s dying,” Logan suggested, falling into step beside her as they started off to school. “I read online that most bumblebee nests only last for a couple of months. It’s been awhile since you first found the hive, hasn’t it?”

Aliya hummed an affirmative, troubled by the thought of the nest dying out. “I’m sure they’ll pick a new queen, though. The whole colony can’t possibly die so soon.”

“If you say so,” Logan shrugged, beginning to dribble the soccer ball he’d been carrying in the crook of his arm. “You’re the one who lives with them.”

“Do you have practice today?” Aliya changed the topic, not wanting to think about her bees dying.

“Nope, we’re holding tryouts!” A wide grin stole across Logan’s face, a special shining smile reserved only for soccer. “They’re so much more fun, now that I’m a captain.”

“Cool.” Aliya cringed inwardly at the wistful tone that crept into her voice, biting her lip as Logan cast a pitying glance at her from the corner of his eye.

“You know, you could try out—”

“Don’t,” Aliya cut him off, quickening her pace as their school came into view at the end of the street. “I don’t want to.”

“But you obviously do—”

“Please, stop.” Aliya looked down at her shoes as Logan fell silent. She was unable to look him in the eyes, knowing they were clouded with all the words he wanted to say. Her sneakers glared back at her, as if daring her to do it, go on, give it a shot. What are you, chicken? “I’m sorry.” The apology was unnecessary, uncalled for and altogether meaningless—Logan hadn’t done anything wrong—but it was the only thing he could think to say in the oppressive silence that stretched between them.

“I was the one who brought it up.” Aliya waved away his apology, scuffing the tip of her left shoe against the sidewalk just to feel the vibration run up her leg. “Maybe I’ll come watch.”

“You don’t have to, really—”

“I know.” Aliya smiled lopsidedly at her friend. “I said maybe.”

“*Oi*, Logan! Think fast!” A shout was the only warning they got before a blur of black hair shouldered between them, stealing the ball clean from beneath Logan’s feet. Aliya’s knee buckled and she stumbled forward, her right leg unprepared to suddenly hold all her weight as she was pushed off balance. The sidewalk came rushing up to meet her face like an old friend, and she barely had time to fling her hands out in front of her as she crashed to the ground.

“Aliya!” Logan was by her side in an instant, worried hands tugging at her elbow to help her sit up. “Are you OK?” Turning around, he lashed out at the culprit. “Chloe, what the heck?”

“Sorry.” Chloe had the decency to look ashamed, rubbing the back of her neck sheepishly and resting her foot on top of the soccer ball to keep it still. “You good, Ali?”

“I’m fine.” Aliya pushed herself up in a huff and dusted her palms on her jeans, suddenly frustrated by Logan’s hovering. He was just being nice, but it was infuriating. “It was just a little fall.”

“Give me that.” Logan grabbed his ball back from Chloe, tucking it safely under his arm again.

“You’re coming to tryouts today, right?” Chloe sidled up to Aliya’s side, leaning into her excitedly. “They reappraised coed teams after the budget cuts!”

“I don’t think so.” Aliya turned away from her, rolling her eyes as she found herself face to face with Logan’s pitying concern. “I don’t want to risk hurting my leg.”

Chloe bit her lip, pace faltering as she cast a furtive glance at Aliya’s right leg. “Right. I...of course. I wasn’t thinking, sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Aliya snapped, the words coming out a bit more harshly than she intended. “Just drop it.”

An awkward silence fell as both her friends avoided her eyes. Aliya didn't blame them. Ever since they'd met, soccer had been the topic of choice that united them. Back in fifth grade, she'd been little more than a prepubescent, anti-social, self-proclaimed hater of everyone her own age. Kids at her new school had quickly grown bored of her once they realized the new girl was simply introverted rather than "just shy," as their teachers insisted. She'd spent countless recesses alone with a book until a puny little boy with impeccably combed hair had demanded she play on his team because *Jennie's on the monkey bars, and now the teams are uneven*. Logan had always hated when things were unfair.

Chloe hadn't come around until seventh grade, when she'd mistaken Aliya for a cheerleader at the first team practice of the season. The star of her school's girls team in France, Chloe had been perplexed about why boys and girls played on the same team in New Jersey, until Logan and Aliya explained budget cuts and Title IX. The three of them made an unusual friend group, that was for sure: the anti-social foster child, the trust-fund kid and the international student. But with soccer, they worked. Until this summer.

Aliya winced as a flare of phantom pain shot down her leg at the memory of the crash that had taken away her limb below the knee, and thereby her soccer career. She reached down to massage the plastic of her right calf through her jeans. Ever since the accident, Logan and Chloe walked on eggshells around the topic of soccer, like Aliya was a trip wire that could be triggered with the slightest motion. This morning was the first time in months they'd been so open about soccer, forgetting in their excitement the restrictions they'd set upon themselves.

For a brief second, it felt like before, like they were back in sophomore year, with the excitement of tryouts looming on the horizon. But just as quickly as the feeling came, it was gone, and reality came rushing back in. Aliya waved goodbye to her friends as they reached the school, feet carrying her to first period on autopilot. She kept her head down as she walked through the crowded halls, not wanting to see the eager freshmen carrying their soccer duffels with hands trembling in anticipation, or any familiar jerseys from years past, proudly displaying their name and number.

She winced preemptively as someone with bright green sneakers stepped on her toe in their haste to make it to class before the bell, but it didn't even hurt. *Why would it? That's not really your foot. It's just another piece of duct tape to keep a broken girl looking whole*. Pursing her lips, Aliya sat down heavily at her desk and laid her head in her arms. Today was going to be a long day.

When Aliya arrived home, there was a van in the driveway. That in itself wasn't an irregular occurrence. Ever since Martin's faithful old '05 Camry had been trashed in the crash, he sometimes borrowed his mother's van when he couldn't take the bus or train to get to a client. But this wasn't Abuela's cheery white van that she used for delivering flowers. No, this van was

a gritty gray and splattered with mud. *Phil's Pest Perish!* read the obnoxious neon lettering on the side of the van, in big bubble letters that had Aliya's blood running cold.

Why are they here? Who hired a pest service? What if they're not really pest control, but someone trying to break in!

Dropping her backpack on the ground, she followed the distant hubbub of voices and ran around to the backyard. Finding the gate already open, she dashed through. Her heart pounded in her chest as she found herself face to face with seven or eight men in full uniform. Full-body white suits, complete with matching hats and netted face coverings, not an inch of skin exposed. Aliya gasped as her eyes found a ladder, following it up to the window by her bedroom, where a short, pudgy woman was spraying something at the corner of the roof.

The bees!

"Hey!" She startled at the sound of her own voice. Her feet carried her over to the nearest worker as if they had a mind of their own. "What's going on here?"

The man looked up from his phone in surprise. "Lo siento, chica. No te entiendo." *I'm sorry*, Aliya's mind translated, the few Spanish phrases she'd learned from Martin over the years finally coming in handy. *I don't understand you.*

"¿Que...está pasando aquí?" she demanded, hoping he'd take her and her Spanish seriously. "Does anyone here speak English? ¿A-alguien aquí habla inglés?"

"Ah!" The man's eyes lit up, and he pointed at the woman on the ladder. "Amelia!"

"Gracias." Aliya stomped over to the ladder, squeezing her hands into fists to quell her nerves. She'd never liked confrontations. "Oi! Amelia?"

The woman on the ladder paused and looked down, eyes widening in surprise, before a flash of recognition sparked. "You must be Aliya." Her voice had a musical lilt to it, smooth and calm, a complete contrast to the angry cacophony of buzzing around her head. "Martin mentioned you might come home around this time. Please don't come any closer, you might get stung."

"Who are you? Why are you here?" Aliya crossed her arms and glared as best as she could at the unfamiliar woman.

"I'm a friend of your tío," Amelia explained, resuming her work while she talked. "He called me the other day with a concern about there being a hive in the wall and asked me to come check it out. You know, with your allergy and all."

"What are you doing to them?" Aliya hated how her voice trembled as the buzzing slowly decreased in volume. "Stop it, please, you're killing them!"

“They were going to die anyway. The queen has died and most of her sons are dying out.”

“But they can rear a new queen! And move to a new hive!” Aliya’s vision blurred as her eyes teared up. *Why are you crying? They’re just bees.* “Can’t you just use smoke to make them drowsy?” she begged. “Then we can relocate them!”

“Do you know how expensive that is?” Amelia began to lose her patience. “Your tío asked me to do this to protect you. Normally I charge a much higher fee, but because I know him, I gave him a discount. Anyone else would have jacked up the price because this house is falling apart, and a hazard to work on.”

No.

Amelia began to descend the ladder, and Aliya backed up on instinct as the few remaining bees followed her down.

“You should go inside,” Amelia suggested as she and her workers began to pack up, the command thinly veiled beneath her saccharine voice. “We already took care of things in your room but some survivors might still be hanging around outside. It’s not safe for you to be back here.”

No. Aliya stumbled into the house in a daze, locking the door behind her. She had no idea when she’d picked up her backpack again, but she jumped in surprise as it slipped from her grasp and landed on her good foot, sending a real jolt of pain up her leg.

No. It felt like she was running a race, but falling hopelessly behind, her chest constricting tight, tight, and tighter, as she tried to suck in a breath but couldn’t. Her brain refused to accept what was happening, rejecting reality as everything around her spun. She didn’t know where she was, her right leg hurt, it hurt so badly. And somehow she was upstairs, and her prosthetic was on the floor across the room, but it still hurt, and her lungs were collapsing in on themselves.

Aliya’s mind flashed to her EpiPen, lying safely in its drawer—but she couldn’t be having an allergic reaction. She hadn’t even been stung. She crouched down on her hands and knees and peered into the hole in her nightstand to see if there were any survivors. All she was met with was a hardened white substance completely filling the hole and reeking of insecticide. *No. No. No.*

The room spun around her. Aliya wheezed for breath. Too tired to lift herself back onto her bed, she curled into a ball right there on the carpet and cried, mourning the loss of the small oxymoronic animals who’d never cared for her the way she cared for them.

“Mija?” Aliya awoke to a gentle hand running through her hair. It was dark out, and her pupils dilated slowly as they adjusted to see in the faint light from the moon outside her window. If Martin was home, that must mean it was past 11. Tryouts were long since over. And the bees were still dead.

“Why are you on the floor?” Martin asked softly, helping her sit up. “And still in your school clothes? I noticed the udon is still in the freezer. Did you eat anything?”

Aliya just looked at him tiredly in lieu of answering. Martin’s suit was rumpled and his hair tousled; his tie was nowhere to be found. There were dark circles under his eyes, and a small worried frown played on his lips, making him look much older than his actual age—just two months shy of 30. *He’s just trying to protect you.* Amelia’s words from earlier slammed back into her mind, and Aliya felt a tsunami of guilt wash over her. Who was she to pitch a temper tantrum when Martin had only been looking out for her best interests? Ever since he’d run into her all those years ago—a ratty, bratty little girl called to testify in court in his very first trial—he’d always looked out for her. He’d talked to the judge, begged the prosecution, and pulled so many strings with the help of the lead defense attorney that Aliya couldn’t even begin to fathom, just to get her away from that toxic foster family.

The then 10-year-old Aliya, who had no recollection of her parents and no concept of family other than the train wreck of a foster home she’d grown up in, had tried to call him Dad, but Martin swiftly put an end to that, complaining it made him feel old. “I’m barely 23!” he’d protested with a rueful grin. “I’m still a student myself!”

“You were born in the 1900s!” Aliya shot back as if he’d committed a criminal offense. “That’s a whole century ago!”

In the end, Tío Martin was the name that stuck, even if he had always behaved the way Aliya figured a real dad would. *He always looks out for you. And this is how you repay him?* Martin had grown up in a foster home as well, Aliya knew. Although he was an American citizen, born in Texas, his parents were not. From what Martin told her in small stories over the years, Aliya had guessed that they were deported sometime after his 16th birthday. She knew Martin had been adopted by Abuela Kate, a kind lady in her mid-40s who could never have kids of her own, when he turned 17. With Abuela’s help and encouragement, along with a passion to right the broken legal system that had stolen his family away, Martin graduated from high school a year early and went to law school. Aliya knew he’d been at the top of his class; it was the reason they allowed him to sit in on the defense team in the trial between her old foster parents.

Tío has always wanted to be for you what Abuela was to him. Yet you continue to make his life difficult.

“I can see you thinking bad thoughts,” Martin murmured, pressing a kiss to her brow. “¿Que pasó? What happened? Talk to me.”

“The bees,” Aliya whispered. “They’re dead. And I, I don’t know why I care so much but it’s making me so *sad*.”

“Are you sure you’re sad about the bees?” Martin pressed cautiously, his analytical mind cleverly cross-examining her words. “I know...tryouts were today. Perhaps your feelings are misdirected?”

“I know what my feelings are,” Aliya snapped, feeling Martin startle beside her. “Don’t—don’t try to tell me what I’m feeling.”

“I’m sorry.” Martin changed track and apologized sincerely, not wanting to upset her further. “I didn’t know removing the bees would upset you this much. They’re dangerous—”

“They’re just bumblebees! Bumblebees don’t sting unless provoked! They don’t swarm, and most of the time they want nothing to do with humans! They just want to suck nectar and pollinate flowers.” Aliya’s voice trembled with fury. “Despite the laws of nature quite literally forcing them to stay grounded, they still manage to fly. They just want to live their lives like everyone else. And you took that away from them.”

Martin was silent for a long time, his face pensive. His hand mindlessly patted her back, as was his habit to tap whatever was nearest as he tried to translate his thoughts. “Do you think you’re upset about the bees because you feel like you are a bee?” Martin asked, finally having gathered the proper words in his mind. “Because you feel that nature is trying to keep you, like them, from flying?”

“What?”

“Aliya.” Martin put his finger under her chin and gently tilted her head so they were eye to eye. “Do you know why I took out that loan to get you this leg, even though there was a less expensive prosthetic?”

Why? Aliya wanted to ask, but her lips felt glued shut.

Martin answered anyway. “Because I know how high you are destined to fly. You have a gift, and one little accident can never steal that away from you.” Aliya’s eyes stung with tears, but Martin wiped them away as quickly as they fell.

“It’s too late.”

“¿Por qué?” Martin shook his head. “It is never too late.”

“Tryouts were today. It’s over. I’m out for the season.”

“Logan is a captain, is he not?” Martin arched an eyebrow. “I am certain they won’t announce the final lineup for many weeks. More than enough time for them to add you onto it.”

“But my leg—”

“Did you know that Mia Hamm was born with clubfoot?”

“What?” Aliya was so stunned that she forgot what she was going to say.

“They corrected it with a cast when she was little,” Martin continued. “And look at who she grew up to be: one of the most famous soccer players in the world. You are not broken, mija. Just like Mia, you were a victim of factors outside of your control. Just as Mia did not allow her unfortunate birth circumstances to hinder her, please, don’t let that driver take away your wings. There is no law against playing on the team with a prosthetic.”

Aliya took in a shaky breath, casting her gaze across the room at her leg, lying on the floor. It had been so long since she last kicked a soccer ball, but she yearned to feel the impact running through her leg again, the grass firm beneath her feet as she ran... *How do you know you can even still play? How can you play with only one real leg?*

As if he could read her thoughts, Martin whispered, “It will be just like when you learned to walk again.” He held out his hand, offering Aliya her phone. “Just have *paciencia y fe.*” *Patience and faith.*

Her phone lit up; the lock screen covered by a newly received message.

Logan [sent: 11:32]

ronnie dropped a huge bomb on us today

she’s moving to virginia next week

i know u’ll prob say no but IF U WANT there’s a spot open for u...

Without overthinking it a minute longer, Aliya took her phone and began to type.