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## Plan Bee

Jacqueline Bull  
*Grand Valley State University*

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*Jacqueline Bull*

## Plan Bee

In Michigan, summer is more than a season or time of year; it's a Friday afternoon, a beer at the end of a trying day, an orange sunset fantasy. Of course, the reality of the Great Lake state is four months of winter and five months of almost winter. Summers in Michigan are a beautiful spell that melt all memories of the brown slushy roads.

This particular summer was supposed to be an adventure far away from my hometown—a chance to breathe some different air. But there I was. I was left with an empty summer and I needed money.

After a brief dance with naivety, I settled for looking anywhere that would hire me that wasn't retail or fast food. I went to the local temp agency, the working man's headhunter—the kind of place that could find work by the week and required drug testing. I was offered a job at a bumble bee factory.

At that point, all I knew was that the factory was a five minutes' drive from my mom's house and it had regular Monday-Friday hours 7:30-3.

Full of questions, I drove to a plain rectangular building. In the tiled and dated break room there was a prominently featured whiteboard. I saw my name and the name "Priscilla" with a dash next to the word "Wash". All of the different stations had a different title like this "Phase 1 Installation", "Queen Production", "Phase 4", "Pollen". The Wash was the room that held the industrial dishwashers to clean the different parts of the hive that needed to be sanitized for the bees' health. Being in the Wash meant generally cleaning up after the bees and being dead last in the social hierarchy.

I sat down on a cracked vinyl chair and wondered how on earth this became my Plan B.

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I fell in love with London the second I stepped out of the cab into the busy Picadilly Circus. The waves of people and cars nearly drowned me. My sister, Korinne, rescued me and led me to her apartment. Seeing London in person was like seeing the ocean or the Grand Canyon. You can know what it looks like from pictures, but you don't really see it until you see it in person. It was spring the first time I visited London

and it is was somehow lush and green, while also grey, rainy and cold. I fell in love anyway.

I was seventeen and in my senior year of high school, visiting my older sister with my mom. We spent the week with her seeing all of the typical sights and even made trips to Manchester and Oxford.

Spending the week with Korinne in the spring was a rare treat. She is eight years older than me and went to university in Vancouver when I was ten. Since she graduated high school, she'd only been in Michigan for some summers or during the holidays. Korinne was always looking for the next horizon and could always get herself where she wanted to be.

She conquered this huge city with the same finesse and confidence as she had with Ann Arbor, Vancouver and Phoenix. Korinne showed me London the way only someone who lives there could. She had a way of making the city feel hospitable without downplaying its character. Somehow I felt more like a house hunter, imagining a life and seeing myself in a space, than a tourist.

It might have been jet lag and exhaustion that lead me to cry in a Heathrow T.G.I. Fridays about to leave London. It felt like homesickness. My mom stared at me with her dark blue eyes. "I don't want to leave," I said. "I know," she said.

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Bumble bees are funny little creatures. They are fatter and fluffier than honey bees and don't produce honey. The only function they serve to humans is to pollinate our crops. They are also nicer than honey bees. Honey bees release a pheromone when they sting you then die. This pheromone triggers the other honey bees to swarm you. This is in part why honey beekeepers wear suits to work with them. Bumble bees on the other hand can sting you plenty of times without losing their stinger and do not swarm, so they are safe to interact with minor occasional stings.

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The life cycle of each day in The Wash was basically the same. Priscilla navigated the routine with ease and cheeriness. First, vacuum out the rooms that held the majority of the bees, clean out the big industrial washers and get it heating up, then spend the rest of the day trying to make progress on the mountain of parts.

My first day we started vacuuming out the bee rooms. What kind of mess were we vacuuming? Dead bees. The hive parts were built to not

let bees out, but a portion of them do. Unfortunately, it's impossible to make it back in. Dead or dying bees lined the perimeter of those rooms. A bee flying right by your face sounds loud and scary, but a room filled with them all lazily rustling sounds like rain.

The parts were stacked on pallets and fit about 2000 pieces. My first day we had about eight dirty pallets overflowing in the room and every day or every couple days we would get a few more. Priscilla and I, alone, faced this challenge.

Priscilla was incredibly strong and incredibly thin. She had the hair and skin of someone who had been smoking most of their life. And she did smoke as did practically everyone but me that worked there. Once before work, at first break, lunch, second break and immediately after the day was over. They puffed into the summer heat.

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Many a Skype call was spent scheming with Korinne on how to get me back to London. Study abroad was researched and analyzed. She asked her friends to see who needed help or who could offer me an internship. She has a friend that does PR and event planning for Universal. I could picture myself helping her set up a mock barricade for the premiere of *Les Miserables*. The well-dressed office would go out to the pub after a job well done I imagined. Another friend works for the BBC, pitching show ideas, writing content, and interviewing possible contestants. Bringing coffee to the set of *The Graham Norton Show*, around the buzz of television while observing from the background popped into my head.

I couldn't shake the feeling of being out in the streets of London that seemed more like a park than an incredibly populous city or the homeyness of a dark 300-year-old pub or the quick dry wit of the English where I finally was understood and funny, not just pompous and strange.

None of them could take me on as an intern, but we kept looking.

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Only the female workers and the queen can sting. The queens are much much larger than the others and are more relaxed. Unless the hive is under some sort of attack, the queen is happy to saunter around in between breeding. The female workers are quite nasty and sometimes will seek you out to sting you. The males don't have stingers and only function in the hive to breed with the queen. Male impatiens (the species

at the factory) have yellow noses. They could fly right onto you, hitch a ride on your sweater and you would be none the wiser until they went on their merry way.

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The items being washed were placed on a contraption made for this particular purpose. It was a big metal cart that had slots for the different pieces to be placed into. Dirty items were placed on the cart, inserted into the machine and began their wash. The machine would finish, the cart would be pulled out, the clean items would be stacked in the dry room and then dirty items would be placed on the cart again. This cycle would continue the whole day with some exceptions for additional duties. There was an element of satisfaction—watching the dirty pile dwindle and the clean built.

Priscilla worked quickly and efficiently. When I started, she was more than twice as fast at loading and unloading the pieces than me. She maneuvered the large carts with her impressive arm muscles that seemed at odds with her very thin frame. Sometimes it looked like her skin was stretched so tightly around her bones and muscle that it could break at any second.

When the machines are going, it is too loud to have much of a conversation, but she was always talking with our other coworkers and the handymen that would come in and fix the machines every other week or so.

She talked to me about the work mostly, about how she so wanted to keep the room clean and progress through the mountain of dirty parts. Other than work, her favorite topics of discussion were her family and past job at Speedway. She had an unremarkable cohabiting boyfriend that did not share her work ethic and two teenaged sons. She looked like most mothers talking about their children, smiling and exaggerating accomplishments or proficiencies. Priscilla told me about being a cashier at Speedway for a number of years and told me she was often recognized around town from working there for so long. Her tone was never dismissive of the old job, but she often mentioned being grateful for the Wash and how it kept her busy.

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I returned to London for the second time a few years later to be my sister's Maid of Honor. We spent the first couple days in Oxford with my mom's friend. There are great expanses of fields and farmlands,

lengthy walking trails and pubs whenever you need one. The majority of the week was spent in the small village of Sherborne. Sherborne had the abbey for the ceremony and grounds for the reception. The whole wedding was elegant and fun, like Korinne.

The trip showed me other shades of England and the more I discovered, the more I liked. Even though I had only spent a couple weeks there in my whole life, it stirred up more a feeling of belonging than the other twenty years in Michigan ever did.

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Bumble bees are also quite fragile. The hive has a very particular homeostasis that it must maintain for the health of the individuals and the colony. For everything to be in working order, the environment and social structure have to be consistent. They need to maintain a certain temperature to survive. If the hive overheats or gets too cold, the whole colony dies. They also can't live away from the hive for more than a couple days.

Like most genera of bees, bumble bees have a complex and rigid social order. Besides the distinction between queens and workers, each bee's place in their society is determined by their size. The smaller workers are closer to the hive and are tasked with tending to the larvae. The larger workers function as guards or foragers that move and collect pollen in a methodical manner. Each bee will remain in the job they started at for the life of the hive.

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A few weeks into me working there, Priscilla was hired in. Her wages went from \$9 to \$10 per hour and she had options for health insurance. More importantly, she was no longer a temp and wouldn't worry about not having work on Monday every Friday.

Priscilla and I would ask our boss to move people around to give the Wash some extra help. Our coworkers whined openly about the prospect. Most of them had started in the Wash and after several months they were moved into the more specialized parts of the factory, working with the bees in the cool air conditioned rooms.

What was so bad about the Wash? It was only slightly more repetitive than all the other tasks and only slightly more uncomfortable. Priscilla and I wondered this aloud frequently. I mentioned it in passing to the shipping manager. He and I had gotten to know each other from proximity and his general friendliness. I was asking him why did they

whine and complain. I was thinking I should be the one complaining, aching with foreign muscle from manual labor. I was never supposed to be here in the first place.

“This is only a summer job to you,” he said. “You get to go back to your life in a couple months. This is their life. Getting taken out of the Wash is a reward to them. They don’t want to go back.”

Eventually as their busy season died off, we got to a point that we were able to clean more each day than was given to us dirty. We were catching up. Priscilla showed off the near clean room to our supervisor; the room that was overflowing with dirty parts for so long. She stood in the now tidy Wash, strong hands on her thin hips taking pride in the praise for completing the insurmountable.

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Shortly after I returned to the U.S. from the wedding, Korinne had discovered that the best man’s PR firm was looking for interns. The firm is in Mayfair near streets of great white estates and immaculate pink rose bushes. I asked her if she knew anyone that lived in the area, “No I don’t know any sultans or princesses.”

After I finally found my excuse to go, I spent the rest of the school year planning and stressing. I was meeting with advisors and administrators. I was talking to family members about logistics. I was crunching numbers in Excel. Every time I had solved an issue like getting my department on board, another would pop up like finding cheap housing with tube access. This cycle of problem and resolution happened every couple weeks that entire year.

When people asked me about my plans, I would always use “maybe’s” and “hopefully’s”. I was paranoid of jinxing it; so many things could still fall through, something could still go wrong. It was a big scary puzzle that kept moving and changing that all parties involved struggled to help me with.

But when I found out that student loans would feasibly cover my expenses and my plane ticket was booked, I finally let myself believe it was really going to happen. I finally let myself get excited. The extra cortisol in my system and a near stomach ulcer was actually going to be worth in.

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The queen isn’t the only one laying eggs, but she is the only one that can

have fertilized offspring. Fertilized eggs become female and unfertilized become male. Female workers can lay unfertilized eggs that turn into males. The queen holds the sperm in her body and then can choose to fertilize them into females or not.

The queen will choose to lay fertilized females in the beginning of the life cycle of the hive. The female workers help get the hive started. The queen will choose to lay male eggs toward the end of the colonies' life. When she starts to lay male eggs, a strange thing happens. The pheromones that are the main form of communication change. The command to raise all fertilized eggs as female workers is switched off and then the female workers are then raised as the next generation of queens. The other thing about the pheromone switching off is the queen loses the dominance she has over the workers. Female workers are now more likely to get away with laying their own eggs and the new queens and the new males can go off on their own and start their own hives. A queen will always witness her own mutiny and won't live to see her predecessor's new hives.

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About seven weeks after starting at the bee factory, I got the call from my employment agency that I wouldn't be returning to work the following Monday. I was no longer needed.

I considered trying to catch my coworkers at the bar that they went to some Thursdays to say goodbye. I wanted to know how Priscilla felt about me leaving. Perhaps my leaving was evidence that we had done the job we had set out to do—that she found her place in the hive.

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When the time came to actually get the federal money to go to London, everything fell apart in a matter of hours in the most spectacular fashion. To approve the federal money, I had to be approved by a different department. The person that I had to meet with informed me that they would not approve me because I didn't have a visa.

It didn't matter that I had been told by countless people that my circumstances didn't warrant a VISA or that my plane was in ten days.

To account for the time change, I woke up at 4:00 in the morning to get the PR firm at the start of their work day. They were sorry, but they couldn't hold my spot long enough for the visa to be processed.

I held out for one last hope that I don't even remember. I do remember

making that last phone call to some administrator or other.

It was all over.

I couldn't go.

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One day close to the end of my job at the bee factory, the mood there was completely different. I heard rumors of something going wrong with the bees. At first break, we were informed by our boss that over that weekend the air conditioners failed. And the alarm system to catch that also failed. A huge number of hives overheated and died. For my time left there, the feeling of progress left behind a quieter emptier place. What had felt like the energy of an assembly line was replaced with the mood of a museum.

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When working at the bee factory, the thing that I forbid myself to think of was London. I banned myself from thinking of all that I was missing out on. I couldn't think of the fun coworkers and their very London accents, my sister's fabulous friends and evenings, all of the impeccably dressed pedestrians, the tube, the lush English gardens, the parks, and the pubs. I forbid myself to make the comparison of the fantasy of what was supposed to happen and the reality of manual labor.

I tucked away that grief deep inside of me and focused on the repetitive work. I told myself often that the sweat and struggle and exertion was my penance. Who knows what exactly I was apologizing for? That thought kept happening. It was a struggle and baptism of steam and bee shit.

Eventually, the hives are self-sufficient and strong enough to make the journey outside. They are placed in special shipping containers and sent off to farms all over the world. They might end up in Sweden, South Korea, Ireland or even England. They all start out at the same place and have no way of knowing where they will go. They just land somewhere and can't know where that place is until they are released.

I'm still in transit.