

SPECIES OF LEAST CONCERN

John Yunker

SYNOPSIS

On the historic day that entomologist WAYNE HATFIELD discovers a bumble bee widely believed to be extinct, he is run over by a reckless mountain biker high above the hills of Ashland, Oregon. The absence of proof of the bee sighting drives WAYNE back up the mountain as his frustrated wife, NANCY, a science writer, is courted by their new (and newly divorced) neighbor DAN, a young retiree and startup publisher.

Meanwhile, someone has begun laying traps along the hiking trails, injuring bikers and making WAYNE (who believes that bikers threaten bee colonies) a prime suspect. BRADY, an injured biker, and ETHAN, a local reporter eager for a big story, conspire to elicit a confession out of WAYNE.

When DAN offers to publish NANCY's next book, we learn that NANCY and WAYNE are still grieving their late daughter, whom WAYNE believes speaks to him on the mountain. As WAYNE's mental health weakens and the bikers' case against him strengthens, WAYNE retreats yet again to the mountain, where tragedy and the truth converge. SPECIES OF LEAST CONCERN tackles issues of conservation and extinction, and what it means to be among those left behind.

CAST LIST

DR. WAYNE HATFIELD – Late 40s. Eyeglasses. Sunburnt. Spends more time looking through a magnifying glass than in a mirror.

NANCY HATFIELD – Mid 40s. Fit. Dresses and looks younger than her years. Her smiles are infrequent and often forced.

DAN MORGAN – Mid 40s. *Tour de France* fit. Every day is casual day.

DR. ELAINE MARCUS – Early 50s. Wears the weary look of a university department chair.

ETHAN CARTER – Late 20s. Dresses like an old-school reporter.

BRADY LOGAN – Early 20s. Muscular, loud in clothing and in voice.

KATIE JENSEN – Early 20s. Attractive, though heavy on the makeup.

PRODUCTION NOTES: The play requires between two and four skilled mountain bikers to ride across the stage and in formation. Ramps may be positioned offstage to enter at higher speeds, as if descending a mountain. Bikers wear motocross helmets obscuring their faces, along with full body padding.

A projection screen positioned above the stage will display Wayne's PowerPoint presentations as well as helmet-mounted mountain biking videos.

TIME: Early Summer.

SETTINGS:

- Hatfield living room (a couch and a back wall hung with photos of birds and bees)
- Hills of Mt. Ashland
- College auditorium (consisting of podium and projection screen)
- A café table for two
- Hospital room

ACT ISCENE 1

(Hills of Mt. Ashland. BRADY pedals onto the stage on his mountain bike. He is suited up for a serious downhill run, wearing full body padding and a motocross helmet with a camera fastened to the top.)

BRADY

Okay, dudes. This is Brady Logan reporting from the top of Mt. A. Check out this killer view.

(Pauses, then removes his helmet and switches on the camera. Puts on his helmet again.)

Okay, dudes. This is Brady Logan reporting from the top of Mt. A. Check out this killer view. How about a panorama?

(He pans his head from left to right.)

And how about a sneak preview of the trail?

(He shakes his head up and down quickly.)

Just messing with you people. Hope the motion stabilizer doesn't fry on the way down. Because we're about to drop 4,000 vertical feet at an average speed of 25 miles per hour. Brace yourself for sick ruts, gnarly jumps, and switchbacks that'll give you whiplash. Right. Time for a final run-through. The camera's recording. I've fired up the GPS app. And I've got tunes queued on the headphones.

(Then)

Man, there is nothing like leaving civilization behind and getting back to nature.

(BRADY stands on his pedals and pedals off stage.)

ACT ISCENE 2

(Hatfield living room. Evening. NANCY is pacing. Knock at the door. She opens the door to find DAN, a backpack over one shoulder.)

NANCY

Oh. Hi, Dan.

DAN

I saw your light on. I'm not dropping by too late, am I?

NANCY

No, not at all. Come on in.

(DAN follows.)

DAN

Where's Wayne?

NANCY

You tell me.

DAN

He's usually home by now, right?

NANCY

Of course. You can't exactly observe bumble bees in the dark. Particularly since they tend to return to their nests when the sun goes down, something Wayne seems incapable of doing.

DAN

Did he tell you where he was headed?

NANCY

He mumbled something about the Time Warp trail when he left this morning.

DAN

We could go look for him.

NANCY

You're kidding.

DAN

I've got an extra mountain bike next door. We could go together. It would be fun.

NANCY

Fun? That's several thousand feet up a mountain.

DAN

I know the trail.

NANCY

Even in the dark?

DAN

I've just published a trail guide to Mt. Ashland. I know those twists and turns so well I don't even need a bike light. Besides, I enjoy biking in darkness. Adds a bit of drama.

NANCY

That's just what we need right now. More drama. No. No. I'm more frustrated with the man than worried. We had plans this evening. Dinner reservations. Theater tickets. I really needed to get out of this damn house.

DAN

What's the big occasion?

NANCY

Oh. Sort of an anniversary.

DAN

Wayne missed your wedding anniversary?

NANCY

Something like that.

(Then)

Was there a reason for stopping by?

DAN

So. I just wanted to drop off your manuscript.

(Removes manuscript from his backpack and hands it to her.)

I'd be happy to talk about it if you'd like.

NANCY

I appreciate you taking the time to read it. But I'm not sure I'm in the right frame of mind.

DAN

I also brought this—

(DAN removes a bottle of white wine from his backpack.)

NANCY

Opener's in the kitchen. Drawer next to fridge.

(DAN takes the bottle into the kitchen.)

It's a wonder I even notice he's missing; he spends every waking moment traipsing around those meadows. Between days up there and nights spent on a computer I'm not sure he sleeps anymore. Last week, I asked him what the big deal was, why the sudden urgency.

DAN (off)

What did he say?

NANCY

He said, "I'm running out of seasons."

DAN (off)

For him or the bees?

NANCY

Until this evening, I assumed the bees.

DAN (off)

I'm sure he just got sidetracked.

NANCY

Every time Wayne sets foot outside this house he gets sidetracked. Every lavender bush, every lupine, and he's a man hypnotized. Off in his other world. It's a wonder he makes it to his own class on time.

(DAN enters with two well-poured glasses.)

DAN

To the prodigal entomologist.

(They toast.)

Doesn't he carry a phone?

NANCY

He says that if it were to ring at the wrong time he'd risk losing a bee specimen.

DAN

Can't he just mute the phone?

NANCY

And have it buzz on him?

DAN

Oh. That's got to be the one profession where buzzing is a design flaw.

NANCY

Other entomologists carry phones. I think Wayne enjoys being out of reach.

DAN

Out of reach in general? Or out of reach of you?
(NANCY gives him a look.)

I loved your book.

NANCY

I'm not sure I should believe you.

DAN

I mean it. I had no idea there were so many scientists around the world devoted to studying endangered species. Talk about a career path with little to no growth potential.

NANCY

You sound like my agent. Or, former agent.

DAN

I take it that's why it hasn't sold yet?

NANCY

Two reasons. First, my previous book, a collection of essays on birds of the Pacific Northwest, sold only a few hundred copies, which by itself can be the kiss of death. Second, this manuscript is part of a genre that publishers believe is already too crowded.

DAN

Genre?

NANCY

Extinction-lit.

DAN

Extinction-lit? That sounds ominous.

NANCY

Every generation gets the genre it deserves.

DAN

Maybe the book just needs a new title.

NANCY

Funny you mentioned that. I have been doing some brainstorming. *Endangered Species, Endangered Scientists* doesn't exactly feel mainstream.

DAN

So what do you have in mind?

NANCY

What do you think of this: *I'm Taking You With Me: Scientists and their Endangered Species*?

DAN

I like. What does Wayne think?

NANCY

Wayne hasn't even read the book. Though I already know he'll hate it, given my position on his beloved *Bombus franklini*. Between you and me, it's time he declared that bee extinct and got on with his life.

DAN

When did he last spot it?

NANCY

July 2006. In fact, he has that bee upstairs in his office, mounted in a box on his desk. He still worries that he took the last one.

DAN

Surely he's aware of the odds against finding any more?

NANCY

Of course, but he still buys the occasional lottery ticket.

DAN

Is there anyone else looking for *franklini*?

NANCY

The mountain used to be crawling with them. Post-docs, grad students, undergrads. But Wayne burned through them all, or they themselves burned out. I understand why he resists using the word extinction. It's so absolute, final. He's like one of those ER doctors who refuses to call time of death.

DAN

Are there are other endangered bees he could devote his life to?

NANCY

Plenty, sadly. *Occidentalis*, *terricola*. But *franklini* is special. And Wayne has never been good at goodbyes.

DAN

When I worked in software nobody ever shed a tear for a dying technology. Or, if you did, you were smart enough to keep it to yourself. Spend too much time looking in the rearview mirror, or use phrases like “the good old days,” and you’d risk being labeled a luddite, which is a firing offense in the Valley.

NANCY

You never told me why you left.

DAN

So. In Palo Alto, everyone’s rich and yet everyone feels poor. Because you work for billionaires and side by side with multimillionaires. And a three-bedroom house costs more than a suburb of Cleveland. And since everyone’s younger than you are, or pretends to be, there’s this feeling that you’ve already been left behind, or are about to be left behind. So you work all hours and you tell yourself and anyone who listens that you’re reinventing the future, even if all you’re really doing is reinventing new ways for people to waste their evenings. And, if you begin to question the party slogan, you remind yourself of all that unvested stock. Six months ago, I realized that I had more than enough vested stock and that I should spend time at last with my family. Which is nice in theory until you realize your family doesn’t want to spend time with *you*.

NANCY

Ashland is the perfect place to reinvent oneself.

DAN

If that’s the case, I’m most definitely still in beta. I haven’t gotten used to waking up to deer outside my window feasting on the landscaping. My kids have yet to visit because their mother believes bears roam the streets. And it’s surreal going from a job where you never thought about where the money was coming from to a job where I debate endlessly with myself whether to charge \$.99 or \$1.99 for an eBook. So I guess I would say this little reinvention project could still crash at any moment.

NANCY

From where I’m sitting, you’re doing fine. Those trails guides you’ve published are beautiful, not that I’m the right audience for them.

DAN

To be honest, the best part about Ashland so far would be my new neighbor.

NANCY

Wayne?

DAN

Very funny. Wayne hates me.

NANCY

No, no. Wayne just doesn't like anyone on a mountain bike. It's not personal.

DAN

So what's this big anniversary he missed?

NANCY

Dan, for the remainder of this evening, there will be no more looking in the rearview mirror.

DAN

To reinvention.

(They toast.)

(WAYNE enters and stands at the doorway. His clothes are torn and he has bloody scratches on his arms, legs, and face.)

WAYNE

You didn't have to wait up.

NANCY

What on earth happened to you?

WAYNE

I'm okay. A bit ruffled.

NANCY

Ruffled? You're bleeding.

WAYNE

Hard to tell in the dark.

DAN

Were you attacked?

WAYNE

In a matter of speaking, yes.

DAN

By what?

WAYNE

It's not important.

NANCY

Not important? You could have rabies.

WAYNE

This animal didn't bite me. Mostly just ran me over.

DAN

Was it a bear?

WAYNE

No.

DAN

Mountain lion?

WAYNE

You're getting close.

DAN

Mountain...goat?

WAYNE

Mountain bike.

DAN

What in the world was a mountain biker doing up there at night?

NANCY

Maybe he wanted a bit of drama.

WAYNE

It was still light out when he hit me. I didn't hear him coming until it was too late. Damn kid. Knocked me down the hill and into a bed of blackberry bushes. Hence the lacerations. When I woke he was gone.

NANCY

Woke? You were unconscious?

WAYNE

I wasn't taking a nap.

NANCY

Wayne, this is serious. We have to get you to a hospital.

WAYNE
I'm perfectly lucid.

DAN
You could have brain damage.

NANCY
He may already have brain damage.

WAYNE
You're missing the point, both of you. When that speed demon came along I was this close. This close!

NANCY
To what?

WAYNE
What do you think?

NANCY
I have no idea.

WAYNE
Guess.

NANCY
No.

DAN
What?

NANCY
You're kidding.

WAYNE
I never kid about *franklini*.

DAN
You saw the bee?

WAYNE
At 7:37 pm, just north of the Time Warp trail. A worker bee, by the size of her, obsessing over a lupine. *Bombus franklini*.

NANCY

Did you see others?

WAYNE

Just the one. But I was losing light. Most were probably back at the nest.

NANCY

Did you capture her?

WAYNE

No.

NANCY

Pictures?

WAYNE

Did I mention the mountain biker? I was bent over studying this bee when I got intimately acquainted with a bicycle tire.

NANCY

And you're sure the biker hit you *after* you identified the bee?

WAYNE

I know what I saw. And war has officially been declared. Up there, somewhere along the ground, in an abandoned rodent hole more than likely, could be the last *franklini* colony on this planet. I'll be damned if I'm letting it get run over by some deathwish manchild on a bike that cost more than our car.

DAN

Wayne, speaking on behalf of all mountain bikers, we don't all drive like that.

WAYNE

True. Normally you people shout at me right before you run me over.

DAN

You know, it's late. I'd better be going.

NANCY

Dan, thank you so much for stopping by. Sorry for all the—

DAN

I had a lovely evening, of reinvention.

(DAN exits.)

NANCY

You have some nerve treating him like that.

WAYNE

Hey, he's a mountain biker. He can take a little abuse.

NANCY

Dan was kind enough to read my book. Which is far more than you've accomplished.

WAYNE

Does finding *franklini* count for anything? *Bombus* fucking *franklini*! Can you imagine the news this is going to generate? Think of all the people who've been mourning the loss of this bee all these years.

NANCY

All two dozen of them.

WAYNE

Don't mock me, Nance. This is big news. It's going to throw a wrench in the plans of all those people who had declared *franklini* dead and gone.

NANCY

You can say that again.

(NANCY exits.)

WAYNE

Nance? Where you going?

NANCY (off)

Looking for the Neosporin.

WAYNE

I'll be fine without it.

NANCY (off)

You need to be more careful up there.

WAYNE

They need to be more careful up there.

(Sounds of items dropping)

NANCY (off)

Dammit!

WAYNE

Everything okay?

(Then)

Are you upset with me?

(NANCY pokes her head back in.)

NANCY

Upset? Up until a few minutes ago I was prepared to tear you limb from limb, but it appears as if you did a pretty good job of that yourself.

WAYNE

What's wrong? I don't understand.

NANCY

Of course you don't. Because you forgot what day it was. Because you're obsessed with a bumble bee. And now I find myself wishing you *had* sustained brain damage because then you'd actually have a legitimate excuse.

WAYNE

Anniversary.

NANCY

Yes, that.

WAYNE

Jesus, Nance. You know this day is important to me, just as much as you.

NANCY

You have a funny way of showing it.

WAYNE

(Gestures at wine glasses)

Well. Looks like you did just fine without me.

(NANCY exits.)

WAYNE

Nance, I'm trying to explain. I was so close. *B. franklini*. Can you blame me for getting a little distracted? This bee. Back from the dead. Lazarus with wings.

(Cautiously approaches the kitchen doorway)

I am sorry. What can I do to make it up to you?

(NANCY enters.)

NANCY

Here's your Neosporin. You know where to stick it.

(NANCY throws it at him, then exits. WAYNE begins to follow, then thinks better of it.)

WAYNE

Franklini.

ACT I

SCENE 3

(Hills of Mt. Ashland. A MOUNTAIN BIKER darts back and forth across stage in choreographed precision, as if descending switchbacks on a mountain.)

Back and forth, relying on the offstage ramps to maintain momentum, the BIKER creates a rhythm of leaving and entering the stage until at one point BIKER exits the stage and, instead of re-entering, is followed by a loud collision between the bike and stationary object.)

ACT I

SCENE 4

(College auditorium. WAYNE stands at the podium with projection screen behind him.)

WAYNE

When I say the word bee, what comes to mind? This?

(Screen displays photo of a jar of honey)

Understandable. The honey bee produces more than 150 million pounds of honey every year. The honey bee also pollinates crops such as cucumber, walnut, watermelon, and grapes, to name just a few. The environmentalist Aldo Leopold once wrote: *We grieve only for what we know.* We would grieve deeply if we lost

WAYNE (CONT.)

honey bees. But would we grieve for bumble bees? Do we even know the difference?

(Screen displays a series of close-up photos of bumble bees)

These are bumble bees. They do not produce honey. Their colonies are smaller than honey bee colonies. And they have far shorter lifespans. But look at them. They're beautiful. There are 46 species of bumble bee native to North America, each with a unique look, variations of black, yellow, red and white. And though they may not give us honey, they are ferocious pollinators, responsible for this.

(Photos of flowers)

And this.

(Photos of tomatoes)

Tomato plants require a form of pollination known as buzz pollination, in which the bee grips the flower and vibrates its flight muscles to cause the flower to release its pollen. *Bombus*, which is Latin for the buzzing sound these bees make, is the genus name for bumble bees. Roughly 8% of the world's flowers require buzz pollination. Honey bees do not offer this type of service.

(Screen displays a terrain map of Southern Oregon/Northern California)

We live in one of the most diverse ecological regions in the country. And, as such, we have been blessed with a wide range of bumble bee species and one species in particular that is native to this region and no other: *Bombus franklini*.

(Photo of Bombus franklini)

This is the last known photo of a *franklini* in the wild. I took it nine years ago. Bees tend to return to the same flowers, so I do as well. For nine years. We know so little about this bee. I had only just begun to study it when its number began to fall. And if the bee were indeed extinct, would anyone know? Would anyone, with the exception of yours truly, grieve?

(WAYNE steps out from behind podium and becomes more animated.)

Two days ago, I saw *franklini* in the wild. Sometimes I wonder what it would have been like to be alive during the last days the passenger pigeon, the Tasmanian tiger, the dodo bird. Would I have appreciated the significance of the moment? Would I have done something—anything—to change the course of history? And so I ask you. Are you willing to help change history? I need volunteers to assist on Mt. Ashland. The season will be over soon, the colony gone, and we need to cover a lot of ground before that happens. We need to find the colony. We need to find the colony so we can protect it. After class I'm heading back up there, and anyone who wishes to join me is welcome.

(Glances at watch)

So let's cut things short today, shall we? Oh, and a number of you asked about midterms, which I believe are next week. I realize I've provided no guidance, no clues on how to study and, to be honest, I haven't even prepared the test yet!

(Forces a laugh)