



Booth

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Bees

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Bees

Abstract

Harrison's truck bumps over something he didn't see, and his eyes flint into the rearview to watch his father's beehive come off the bed a couple of inches and slam down again onto the metal. The hive is a manmade box just barely too large for Harrison to carry by himself and painted white. Inside are slats made out of a tightly woven chicken wire and of course, bees and their honey. It's not the honey that his father wants, though. It's the bees and their stings, which are the best treatment that his father knows for his rheumatism.

Keywords

bees, pain, sting, divorce, rheumatism



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April 29, 2011

Bees

A short story by John Brantingham

Harrison's truck bumps over something he didn't see, and his eyes flit into the rearview to watch his father's beehive come off the bed a couple of inches and slam down again onto the metal. The hive is a manmade box just barely too large for Harrison to carry by himself and painted white. Inside are slats made out of a tightly woven chicken wire and of course, bees and their honey. It's not the honey that his father wants, though. It's the bees and their stings, which are the best treatment that his father knows for his rheumatism.

Harrison's not sure about the idea of a bee cure. He's watched his father stick his left hand into a jar of bees and let them sting him swollen, wincing with a virtuous grimace. It's the kind of pain that the man would enjoy, the kind of pain that would prove to himself and everyone else that he's vital and strong, the kind of pain that tells the world he can stand up to anything that it gives. There's a metaphor somewhere in all of this, but Harrison doesn't know what it is, and he's not sure he has any way to get inside at it.

He's also not sure that he's going to have any bees left by the time he gets to his father's place. When he left, he told himself that he'd just go there slowly, taking the drive easy, and he has been going as slowly as he can, but there's no taking anything easy out here. His father lives off the main road, off any road really, down this dirt trail that no one else drives with the exception of Harrison's mother occasionally. He stops for a moment and looks back. Maybe none will be left when he finally arrives, but they're there now. He can hear them droning in their anger. He can see them swirling around the box in their rage. The windows have been rolled up for nearly a half hour now, the inside of the truck getting warm despite the fact that it's a brisk forty degree November afternoon.

What's going to happen to these bees in a month when the snows come? Surely they can survive the winter, or there'd be no bees anywhere that there's snow, but if these creatures hibernate, what is his father going to do for his rheumatism alone in a cold house, his wife down off the mountain and teaching her classes?

He puts the truck into gear and bounces forward a little. There's nothing for it. The road is rutted from little rivulets that run through it in spring, and it's full of rocks and tree roots, so he just drives the last five miles bouncing along the road. By the time he reaches his father's place, he hasn't lost the hive, and by their angry drone, it's clear that there are still a lot of them left, but they're swirling around the truck, reminding him of a number of horror films from his childhood in the 1970s. Bees, coming up from Mexico, killing people in a horror of a million tiny stings. Those movies were always more horrific than shark or slasher films. He has the image of all those movie bee victims writhing in pain as he drives up to within two hundred yards of his father's house, far enough Harrison hopes, that the bees won't wander in their anger to the house. The man wants to be stung but not that many times.

Harrison considers his options, but there's only one thing he can see for it, and he knows it. He pulls his windbreaker over his head to protect the back of his neck, and he jumps out of the car, running up hill towards his father's two story cabin. He registers that there's smoke coming out of the chimney. He registers the cold. He even notices how nice it smells out here at five thousand feet in amongst the giant redwood trees whose scent fill his lungs, but mostly he's just running and trying not to think of those movie deaths, trying not to listen to the droning behind him.

He hasn't been stung in a hundred yards, so he turns around to pant in the thin, high-altitude air and look back where he came from, realizing that he could have and should have simply put on the bee keeper suit that his father had sent him and that now is resting on the passenger seat. "Where's the suit?" his father asks.

Harrison turns to see the man leaning against his axe. It's a beautiful moment, his father, the retired forestry service man, taking a moment to rest. His once red hair is now white and patchy, his wrinkles have become crevasses, and his knuckles are swollen, but he's vital, still strong enough to split a piece of wood in a single blow. Harrison wishes that he had his camera. If he could take this picture, he'd have a shot of what America could and should be — this man and the beautiful forest expanding behind him.

"I just realized that I should have put it on," Harrison says, "but I'd forgotten it was sitting there next to me. I took it off when I got into the truck and just forgot about it."

His father smiles and comes over to Harrison, putting his arm around his shoulder, and for a moment, he is the man that Harrison remembers from his youth, the unstoppable laughing force that he always knew. "I suppose," he says, "that's natural enough."

The cabin on the inside is clean and well kept despite the fact that Harrison's mother is down the mountain at the university. She hasn't been here since August. It means that his father is getting better at taking care of things by himself. Harrison's father waves for him to sit down while he makes the coffee. "It'll be a while before the bees are calm enough to move," his father says.

So they sit at the kitchen table and sip coffee and watch the cold day move along. They talk about family. Harrison asks about his mother even though his mother believes in telephones, so he's spoken to her more recently and more often than his father. He asks how it's been to live without his wife for so many months in a row. He asks him about retirement and rheumatism. He asks him about books and the bear population in the area.

Harrison's father asks Harrison about living on his own as well. He ask

about the divorce and his work with the forestry service, which is essentially the same job that he used to have, and which has Harrison on his own so often. He asks about how Carol, Harrison's ex-wife, is doing. He asks about Harrison's son, Stanley. Does Stanley seem to be taking the divorce well? What's wrong with him? Well then, has Harrison been taking Stanley to a therapist? Does the therapist think that Harrison and Carol should get back together for the child? No, of course not, but is that the kind of advice the therapist is giving? They aren't medicating the boy for that kind of behavior are they? Well then they're not thinking about hospitalizing him, are they? What does Harrison think is causing him to act out this way? Can Harrison afford to keep up this kind of intensive therapy? Does Harrison need a little help in the way of money?

Harrison's begun to sweat in his pits and his crotch. When he wipes off his forehead with his fingers, his father pushes way from the table. He's been hunched over his coffee all this time leaning forward and listening to Harrison's answers with the zeal only he has. He blinks twice and is out of intense mode. "I've been interrogating you," he says.

Harrison smiles, relieved that it's over.

"I didn't mean to do that," he says. "Listen, I just wanted to know because he's my grandson, but I didn't mean anything by it."

"It's all right. It's perfectly understandable, and you have every right to know those things."

"I don't want you to think that you should get back together with Carol. That'd be a mistake. It'd be a huge mistake."

"Not even for the sake of Stanley?" Harrison asks. Outside the sun has begun to lower a little, filtering a late afternoon light that becomes dappled on the forest floor. There's a metaphor out there, Harrison knows, but for the life of him, he can't get at it.

"No," his father snorts a little laugh. "God no. That's what I did." He pauses a moment in his usual dramatic flair. "Listen, I haven't loved your mother for a good thirty years. Maybe I never loved her, I don't know. We told each other that we were staying together for your good, but you've been out of the house now for twenty years, so you're not the real reason we

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stayed together. It's not good for some people to stay married, and it's not good for the kids."

"Why did you stay together then?"

His father thinks about it for a moment. "I don't know. I guess it's because I never outright hated her, and it's always been easier. When I was your age . . ." his voice goes away into himself for a moment. "Anyway, I'm glad that you had the courage for divorce. It was the right thing, and I wish that I'd done it when I was your age."

"Are you and Mom thinking about getting divorced now?"

He shakes his head and smiles. "No, God no." He stares at his hands for a moment. "What's the point now? Besides, I like her all right when she's up here, and she's doesn't hate me. When I was young, it was painful, and I always thought that I had to push and make everything in our marriage right."

Harrison leans back in his chair. It's not what he would have expected, but at the same time, he's not exactly surprised. That his father and mother never loved each other — well that's no surprise. That his father pushed too much when he was young — that's no surprise either. So much of life is like that, understood but not stated because saying some things out loud is just too difficult.

Anyway, Harrison is thinking these thoughts and others like them, a kind of meditation, as he watches his father put a bee suit over his regular clothing. Harrison's ready to run to the truck and grab his suit too, but his father puts a hand on his shoulder to stop him. His father already has the suit on, and it's easy enough for him to walk out there and walk back with the suit for Harrison. When Harrison is finally covered in the white suit, his father takes the smoker, and they walk out to the truck.

The bees seem to have settled down a bit, and anyway, what does it matter with the suit on. Still, his father is careful to smoke them calm, and they pull the box hive from the back of the truck and carry it on either end. It's heavy with honey and wood, and in twenty or so feet, they place it on the ground. "It's all right," Harrison's father says. "It's not a race. We're in absolutely no hurry."

In a few moments, they pick it up again and carry it a little farther. They do this for as long as it takes, and it's not much longer than it would have taken if they'd pushed it and tried to carry it the whole distance at once. They eventually get it where it's going — a metal cage specially constructed so that the bears can't get at the honey. It's getting dark here when they put the hive in the cage, and Harrison realizes that there's a metaphor here too. He stands a moment watching his father and the bees in their cage under the giant redwood tree on a breezy November night right before winter begins, and he just can't seem to pinpoint what the allegory is or what it should be.

He doesn't push it, though. It's enough for now that he's going to have a quiet dinner with his father followed by a long game of chess.

John Brantingham has published hundreds of poems, stories, and essays in the United Kingdom and United States in publications such as Garrison Keillor's Writer's Almanac, Tears in the Fence, Confrontation, and The Journal. He is a fiction editor of The Chiron Review, and his chapbooks are available through Pudding House Press and Finishing Line Press. He teaches at Mt. San Antonio College in Walnut, CA.

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