



Wild Honey
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Wild Honey

There was no summer without the fear. And without that fear the grass just didn't seem as green, the sun not so bright, the smell of a flower not so enticing.

Well what was summer without bees? Without running for his life? Without that first faint buzz, the bright yellow and black stripes that to most was inconvenience, and to Tom Farrelly as threatening as the hangman's noose.

Nobody knew why they were gone. In faraway places, in sterile white rooms, doctors and scientists had theorised, dissected and written formulas. Some said disease, one that they could not find or locate. Others blamed the warming planet, melting polar ice caps and the nearness of the sun.

In fevers, waking from dreams where he could hear the buzz of wings, Tom had read all the theories, searching for answers. And then one fine morning when the first flowers had opened he came up with a plan of his own.

"You know that you could be considered quite insane?" his wife Lisa said from the back steps. "Tell me again why you're doing this?"

Dressed in the finest second-hand astronaut looking bee-keeper costume he could find, Tom stood a few feet from the cobbled together hive, that was part dog-house and yard gate.

"Why?" he said, his voice a buzz through the front mesh of the suit. "Because you can't have a summer without bees that's why. Don't you even miss them?"

Lisa shrugged, taking her folded arms with her in the movement.

"I tell you what I don't miss, rolling up newspapers trying to swat those damn things. And I quite like being able to sit in the garden without having to worry that one of them has drowned in my tea."

Tom sighed inside the costume.

Why had he expected her to understand? Everybody else was the same, whoever you asked, they didn't notice that summer wasn't summer any longer. Too busy tanning themselves and drinking lemonade to care.

"Don't you see how crazy this is?" Lisa said. "What happens if you do actually get one of those things to come into your hive, huh? And what if

one of those bees stings you. What if I'm not around to take you to the hospital, did you think about that?"

He'd thought, he'd done nothing but think over the last few years.

All his life he'd run from the sound, terrified, but now it was gone he missed those summer runs. This season couldn't be called a season without the annual sprints, winding up exhausted in the house, checking windows to see if they were locked.

"It's worth the risk," he said.

"Oh it's worth it is it? Will you be saying that once you're in the ambulance and you can't breath?"

"I bought the suit didn't I? I'm being careful."

"You're being crazy."

"You won't be saying that when you hear them coming, when you—"

She was gone, the backdoor flapping like wings in her wake.

Tom turned back to his makeshift hive.

There was no movement inside, no matter how many times he checked. The honeycombs were empty. Where there should have been a teeming throng of life, there was nothing but stillness.

I did it all correctly. I checked the books, made sure, he thought. And three weeks in there's nothing.

Maybe I am crazy. Nobody else in the world has an answer to this problem, nobody else can make them stop dying, and here I am building my wishes with old wood thinking I might solve the problem.

But it wasn't just summer that Tom had on his mind.

What if this spread? What if spring birds stopped singing, what if dogs no longer barked on the long autumn nights? What if there were no more seasons? How could any man mark his time when he had nothing in front and nothing behind. Pigeons needed landmarks to guide themselves home, and men needed seasons, he believed.

Days passed, grew longer. The nights cooled and before he knew what had happened, he saw a leaf drop, burned gold.

Summer was almost gone. He thought he could smell burning leaves in the air, and mornings were colder, they pinched at his cheeks.

Still no bees.

And then one midnight, too far from sleep and not close enough to waking, he heard the sound.

At first he thought of rain tapping gently against the window panes.

But this was not rain.

Out of bed he ran to the garden without his astronaut suit, and stepped out onto the cool moon touched surface of the lawn.

He saw first one, then a second shadow. A brief flicker of something out there in the night.

Did bees fly at night, he thought? Could they? Did they sleep?

He had read the books and then forgotten in the wake of his disappointment. Now he wasn't sure one way or the other. But that sound, he knew that sound now he was so close.

Bzzzz.

And more, added to the first and the second. They came from the cloudless ink of the night sky, a cloud of their own forming.

Tom's heart beat as fast as any wing. Tears shined his eyes. He wanted to run forward and embrace that sound, take it into him.

He took a step forward.

Froze.

Tom crossed his eyes to see the fat black-and-yellow insect sat on the end of his nose.

She was right all along when she'd said he was crazy. He'd wished for his own death, and now it was here, twitching at the end of his nose.

He wanted to cry out his wife's name, but dared not open his mouth.

Would it sting? He had read, or maybe he had known, that running was the worst plan when faced with a bee. But he could not deny the memory in his muscles. They ached for flight not stillness.

And he dared not blow at the thing. They had been gone too many summers, but that didn't mean they didn't have the same memory in their bodies as him. They would remember earlier attacks, rolled newspapers and chemical sprays.

Had they come back for revenge, he wondered, his mind in a panic? Stayed away only to return for vengeance when everyone had relaxed and stopped covering their drinks?

The bee gave a shrug of its wings, and then he was sure it gave him a pitiable stare before it jumped off his nose and took off into the night.

It took him too long to thaw his frozen body. The bees buzzed, filled the night with their song.

He lock stepped backward into the house, closed every window he could find and then watched them from the window, those magnificent summer beasts come late in the season.

Beautiful, but there was one last thing to do.

Weeks later, out in the garden he scraped the honey from the comb into a jar, and like the astronaut he'd become, he returned to the house one heavy step after another.

He sat, waiting, the jar of wild honey on the table before him, until his wife returned.

"A present," he said, sliding the jar across to her as she sat down.

"This doesn't mean you're not still crazy," she said, dipping her finger into the thick gooey liquid. She sucked the end of her finger. "It's good."

"The best," he said, his smile too big.

"Doesn't change anything though," she said, pushing the honey back toward him.

"What do you mean?"

She pointed to the window and the buzzing garden beyond.

"They're out there, but nowhere else, haven't you noticed that? Go to the park, anywhere there's flowers and there's not a bee in sight. What happens if they leave again and don't come back again?"

"Maybe this is just the beginning of their return," he said, hope in his voice.

"And we have bees in the middle of the autumn. It isn't summer any more, Tom. No matter how much you want it to be."

His smile faded, and so did Tom in the chair, paling with the realisation she had brought.

Summer had returned for him, but not anyone else. There were flowers heavy with pollen all over the world, honeycombs without the honey, children never stung. Was this just a momentary reprieve? Next summer would it be the same, or would the parks and gardens be silent once more?

He pulled the jar toward himself and dipped a finger inside.

He ran the sweet liquid over his lips, tasted with his tongue.

Wild honey tasted better than any manufactured, chemical laced, test-tube grown concoction on the store shelves. But it was a taste that soon might be forgotten like the seasons, like the fear.

He stood.

"Where are you going?" Lisa said.

He walked to the back door and undid the latch, then faced her.

"If you're right, then I've got to get the most out of this, don't I?"

"I don't get what you're driving at?"

Tom swung the door wide. He stepped out into the garden and watched the buzzing hive. Soon one of those black ink dots peeled away from the stain and came toward him.

This was it.

The season was coloured orange and brown, burning leaves took the place of fresh cut grass, but he would have one last summer if it killed him.

As the bee got closer, Tom turned and ran.

He ran until he hit the bathroom, where, heart pounding in his chest, hands flailing, he locked himself inside.

The bee buzzed outside and settled on the window, waiting.

Tom laughed and cried.

He had his summer, but would there be any to follow? Would there be any for his children or their children on down the line? Once the bees were gone, what would follow, what desolate unseasonable landscape would be left behind?

"Tom? Are you in there?" Lisa said.

Her shadow grew across the window.

"It's okay," she said. "I'll get rid of it for you."

The shadow grew an arm, and that arm was rolled death.

Tom leapt forward, his hand reaching for the door as Lisa brought the newspaper down upon the bee.

"There, all taken care of, you can come out now," she said.

Her shadow retreated.

The buzzing stopped.

There was nothing left on the glass but a full stop where the bee had once been.

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