

The Beekeeper

by Patricia Shorter

They said that the turning point of society was the creation of the bee. Greater than its ancestors by leaps and bounds, it was specially designed to pollinate only what was needed and was physically unable to sting.

Iliana loved the bees. She would watch them the way normal children watched clouds go by, identifying them by their sockets and bronze shades, catching them and taking them apart. So artfully they came to pieces, but she could never make them fly again once they had been dismantled. Her mother did not approve, constantly cursing that she was going to ruin the population and that things would be back to the way they were in the twenty first century, when people starved in areas with few or incompetent bees. But she was a child, and to children, past terrors mean nothing since they simply were not a part of them.

“How can everyone ignore these creatures?” she would think. “So perfect, so inquisitive, so almost alive.”

Things that were alive were a rare find. The air ships, while beautiful with their shining bronze, did not substitute for the birds that Iliana read about in books. The grass, while perfect, was not quite as green as the water color versions of children’s stories from days past.

The past. So young with so little past, but yet that was all she could think of. The park was her playground, but not the metal structures that imposed themselves upon the land and against the sky. She laid on the grass and observed, disappearing into what most resembled life.

There was only one other person in the park who acted the way she did. Mother did not approve of the woman either, and Iliana found her scary,

keeping her distance.

She sat on a bench, facing away from the playground.

“She went to school with your uncle,” Mother would say. “She never quite had all of her gears in line.”

But her gears were in line. They covered the right side of her face, bronze, silver, and gold disappearing into her copper hair. Even her eyes appeared metallic, shining a blue that was too silver, too penetrating, as she watched Iliana from a distance, never making eye contact, but still ever knowing the child’s position.

She had watched the girl for years, ever since she dismantled the first honeybee. And she would continue to watch until the day she got up the courage to risk everything on a child.

That day came on Iliana’s ninth birthday. The woman did not know that the child was celebrating a completion of another percentage of her life on earth, but something deep inside her said that the risk was to be taken now, or she was to perish with her secret.

Iliana’s first observation was that the woman wore no shoes. Bare feet were odd, and although hers were covered in the customary tattoos of someone her age, she was not quite sure what to think. Looking up and discovering who it was, she gasped and stumbled backwards, dropping the bee whose wings she had been removing.

Before she could turn to run back to Mother, the woman bent down and picked up the broken insect, quickly replacing its wings and antennae. She then gave it a simple nudge from the palm of her hand so that it could take off and fly.

“Deborah” was all she said, and then she began to walk away.

The child followed.

She could hear Mother calling behind her, but still she walked, following Deborah, the woman who could put a bee back together again.

They walked for a long time, past the edge of the park, past the bridge that would be walled off after night fall, separating the community block from the residential.

Iliana found herself holding onto Deborah's hand. It was cold and bony, but the woman walked so fast that the child feared she would be left without a foothold.

The stop was abrupt. The turn was as well, 45 degrees to the right. The house looked normal, a dwelling made for a large family, of brick and mortar, older than the majority of what surrounded it.

The interior was humble, as though built for someone who invested their whole life savings in the structure, not what furnished it. Iliana did not mind.

Deborah brought her a cup of hot tea in a porcelain mug. Iliana touched it and then held on to its warmth. She had never seen the material before, and the lack of insulation soothed her. The sweetness within the drink itself would be one she cherished. It was sweet, but not too sweet, milky and smooth. It was the taste of honey, but honey on another level.

"They took the hymenoptera away when I was ten," Deborah started, choosing not to sit but to stand in the open doorway to the kitchen from once she came. "And they replaced them with bees."

Iliana looked up at her, starry-eyed, ignorant of the terminology but feeling the story as it left the older woman's lips.

"Too dangerous, they said. Too unreliable. They die in cold weather and move freely. Colony Collapse Disorder could take them tomorrow! You cannot truly domesticate an insect, they said. Why hold onto something that can betray you, kill you? What good is a wasp if it cannot produce? Why have ants only to destroy

them as pests in our homes? We'll take the best, they said, and then we'll make it better."

Deborah's eyes had glazed over as she went to another place. She moved from the doorway, leaving Iliana with an empty cup and a room that had not been used in years.

She followed down the hallway done in faded wallpaper that had once resembled flowers. The pictures on the walls used to hold memories, but now they were just a dusty lens into a past that hurt far too much to discuss even in private. Iliana stopped at one and admired it. Behind the dust was a family. The faces of the parents were distorted with age, but the child had such bright blue eyes...sky eyes.

"That couldn't be Deborah," Iliana thought. "She doesn't look anything like that."

She almost regretted looking.

The doors were shut and probably locked. The lights looked solemn in their silken gowns weaved especially for them to die in. The carpet had a few worn places, but even those were pocketed with dust.

This house was dead. Even an adolescent could feel it.

The end of the hallway harbored a staircase, looking almost like an elevator on a landing, for its spiral continued up and down but had an extension on which one could cross from the floor to the strand.

Iliana followed Deborah down.

And down.

And down.

Her breathing echoed. She could see little more than the steps in front of her, but still she followed with blind faith in the woman who could put a bee back together again.

"My parents were entomologists," the voice called from somewhere far below. "They're gone now."

Entomologist? What was that?

The end of the staircase came, and with it was a door, light penetrating and filtering into the stairwell.

Deborah opened the door and led the child in.

It was bright, brighter than any natural sunlight Iliana had ever experienced. The grass at her feet looked different. She could not feel it through her shoes, and she quickly removed them, taking step after step in bare feet. It was soft, cool, and so different. The resistance it gave was lacking, and the blades slowly reshaped after being tread under foot. She bent and picked a piece, observing the bumps and imperfections. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

“I loved them so much,” the woman said, “that I simply could not let them go.”

She extended a finger to Iliana, holding on its tip a small creature.

The child came closer and slowly registered it. It was familiar, but everything was wrong with it. It was a yellow color and fuzzy, not bronze and hard. It had black stripes instead of the inlays where bolts should have been placed. Its antennae moved and served a purpose. Its eyes contained a soul.

“What...” Iliana spoke slowly, feeling herself withdrawing from her usual silence, “what is it?”

“This is a honeybee—a living, breathing honeybee.”

She transferred it to her finger and watched as the child was overcome with insurmountable joy. It welled up inside her and brought tears to her eyes. It was as though her entire existence had led up to this point, seeing the grass of old days, the sun that once warmed the earth, and the bee that was more than almost alive.

Observing the sky, Iliana saw hundreds of them, and she ran to them. Wasps with steely eyes, ants that tread upon the ground, and bees that flitted from flower to flower with no regards as to the species or color.

This is what the past must have been like. What could have possibly been wrong with this?

She cast herself upon the grass as Deborah looked on with a shining tear in her eye. She had shared her secret with the only person in the world she thought could truly appreciate it, and appreciate it Iliana did.

When the bee on her finger decided that she was not a flower and that it should go find a better one, she thought nothing of reaching up and trying to catch it.

She felt the stinger slowly pierce her skin. She felt her mouth and throat began to swell. She heard Deborah screaming and running to her, holding her in her arms and shaking her, looking at her with those steel blue eyes. And in those moments, she realized that they weren't gray because they were unfeeling, but because there was so much sorrow behind them that only the gray shined through—the girl with the bright sky eyes...

The officers would come a week later. They would find the girl, enshrined among the creatures that she had loved so much. And there would be Deborah, attending to them as was her duty. The blue was completely gone from her eyes as they took her hives away and covered the secret grass in poison.

They would say that this was a classic example of how the new system saved lives, how the government knew better than an individual ever could.

But to the Beekeeper, it simply meant the end of all joy.