

A Keeper's Telling

By

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We feel his footsteps long before we hear his voice. They echo like the patter of spring rain, singing throughout the hive. We clot together, a whispering mass, expectant for his telling. We wiggle and dance to our keeper's words, sometimes mournful, others reverent or exultant, and secrete them into our honeycomb histories.

Midsummer's eve our keeper cradles us in the warm, still air. His breath, hot and heavy with mead, murmurs, melding with ours. He tells how they are both safe: his beloved and her new baby, more precious than jewels. He tells us of his dreams, a lifetime of peace for his little son, a future of freedom and prosperity without prejudice or fear. Our wings hum, a synchronous beat bestowing a colonial blessing, sharing his elation. This is a sweet telling.

His baby is carried to us, a plump ripe blossom, swaddled in sun-kissed arms. We dive and spiral, weaving a crown of pollen dust around the child. Our chants promise allegiance to the boy if he is kind, considerate to our needs and foibles. More footsteps approach, a torrent of hailstones thrash through the seeding grasses, and the red-faced woman snatches our new prince away. We smart at the bite in her telling,

her angry barbs vent a mother's love. Foolish man, she chastises our keeper, your bees will sting my baby and make him cry.

Better to be stung now, get it over and done with, he tells her calmly, than face a lifetime fearing allergies and reactions. His words fly out in a flurry of sweetness. We have to tell the bees of his arrival, he says, the telling keeps both the child and the bees safe.

His lady spins on bare toes; long shining threads tumble from her head trapping the sun like hungry petals. We taste scorched earth in her voice as she laughs. You daft beggar – where do you get these silly notions? She strokes his face and tells him she loves him anyway, despite his empty head.

Later he brings his prince on stubby, stumbling legs to visit our dozing colony. Cherry blossom sticks to their black heavy feet as they come close enough to touch the wooden slats. It's just an old wives' tale; I know that, son, but I'm a believer, he says to the boy. You always tell the bees. Some people say you should only tell them of loss, when a loved one passes. But that's a bit sad, isn't it? The boy with sunshine on his head nods knowingly, wide eyes listening to his father. There's enough doom and gloom in this world, he carries on, the telly and papers love to scare us. Making us think it always ends in violence and death. I think we should look for the brightness, not hunt out the dark. That's what the bees do they follow the sun. I come down here to tell them happy thoughts, share our good news. Shall I tell you a secret, son? Again the little prince nods. It makes the honey sweeter, he whispers. His words float on the curling breeze, seep into our hive, into our golden seams, as he tells of how his lady carries more life. We huddle together absorbing this new telling, then ask - will she bring us another prince? He doesn't answer, but lifts his chuckling boy,

with cherub dimples, into the sky like an offering. We sing our thanks, wings fizzing in a simple harmony, for such a joyous telling.

The sun is low, heading home, when he returns without the boy. His footsteps tremble, unsteady in a meandering path that takes him round and round our hive in a diminishing circle. He's telling us there will be no more princes. The baby, eager for this world, came too early and left quickly. A tiny bundle, as precious as royal jelly, which he held for a heartbeat before giving her up. He tells of complications, it will be too risky to try again. No more babies for his lady. A mournful telling that shrouds our hive in silence; sadness taints the air stilling our wings.

We watch the sun soar and fall again. The leaves flame, first scarlet then orange to crackle and twist from their branches, obscuring the stagnant grass with a carpet that crunches under their footsteps. Why did we bring a bag of icing sugar? The prince holds out a white packet for our keeper. Mum won't be chuffed if she needs to do so some baking.

Our keeper answers, a smile in his voice, that Mum won't miss a spoonful or two. It's just like decorating a cake, he says, we sprinkle the icing sugar inside the hive. We must try to dust as many bees as we can. This is to protect the colony from varoosis disease. The boy beside his father, head now level with broad shoulders, face hidden behind the mesh mask. Two knights in white armour, they hush us with smoke and pull back our sky. He talks on as they work of how the destructor mite can wipe out whole colonies. He pauses, as if allowing his thoughts to solidify in their cells. We have to look after the bees, son. *Apis*, the proper name of the bee, is derived from ancient Greek, it means healer. The medicinal properties of honey have been known for centuries. Again he stops, perhaps distracted by the blackbird's stuttering warning.

And the Greeks would also use bee ash, gathered from burned dead bees, in their medicines.

Our prince winces in sympathy. Ugh, that sounds disgusting. What about the poor bees – did they burn them deliberately?

Man has kept the honeybee for thousands of years, drones his father. Remember, Einstein warned the human race would die out within four years if the bees ever disappear. The bees are our pollinators. Without them there is no harvest, only starvation. Like the prince we hush to listen, entranced by his story telling. In ancient Egypt Pharaoh was named as king of the bees. Our keeper's voice hums like a well-feasted hive. The Egyptians believed that the bees were the sun's tears. Honey was as precious as gold to them.

We cough and splutter onto the floor of the hive as the sudden storm whirls around us. It sticks to our bodies. Tastes sweet, sugar snow falling from heaven. His words blur into a distant humming as we tumble into one another like drunken ghosts.

He returns shortly with the boy, now their shoulders are level and the prince can easily look into his father's eyes. Their voices buzz like a disgruntled swarm. The prince blocks out the sun, peering into our half-empty hive. It's cruel, Dad, I'm sick of it.

Clipping off the queen's wings stops the colony swarming. If she leaves then we lose the lot, says our keeper barely hiding his frustration. We feel the weariness in his words. He loves his son, but yearns for a quieter life. Though it could be coming soon, he tells us on his solo visits, if the prince's results are good then it will be time for the boy to seek fresh challenges, new arguments, away from home. He lies about

how this makes him feel. Proud. Happy. We hear the ache of absence as he prepares to let his son leave.

You've always preached that our duty is to look after the bees, says the prince.

Our keeper bows his head to study the cropped grass at his feet. Yes, son, he answers, I have tried to teach you everything I know about beekeeping.

And I've listened to everything you taught me, says the prince. One day I hope to keep my own hives, but I want to work with them in harmony. Not wage a war of smoke and mutilation.

We see his cheeks flush with shame as these thorn-sharp words prick his core. How can his son believe him capable of cruelty? Our loyalty falters, hanging between one keeper and the next as we secretly salute the prince's challenge.

All year you devote love and time to the bees, continues our champion, so why not trust them to stay. They have it cushy here: a smorgasbord of flowers in spring and summer, and sucrose when the food supply is low in winter. Please, Dad, try an experiment this year and let the queen keep her wings. Trust her to stay.

Our keeper shakes his head, a tired sigh slips out, but he agrees not to clip her wings. An experiment, he says, I'll go along with it, if you do something in return.

The prince laughs. Okay, what do you want in exchange for the queen's wings? Don't do drugs or start smoking?

Our keeper smiles, says gently, No son, but once you've left for Uni your mother's going to miss you like hell. One phone call home a week is all I ask, she'll need more than emails or texts.

The prince holds out a hand. The two men shake on this deal. An understanding has pulled them together. We click our wings to tell of our delight. Our

keeper is wise indeed, to offer this proposal. The prince hugs his father before whispering: Now I don't want you to get angry or anything, but there's something I need to tell you.

The air chills as dirty clouds mass together like a black swarm. Rain is coming, so we wait in the dry warm hive as the prince approaches. Rarely, he visits alone but this evening he shares the confession that made his mother cry. His father is disappointed that he kept the secret for so long, but not angry, though we know this is a lie. The prince is not going to university. He wants to travel, see the world and experience other cultures. Joining the army will achieve this much quicker than any poxy degree. The telling is brief. We taste all the colours of his dreams and let him go with our blessing. We feel his youth; fuelled by hope, bounce against the grass, springing him forward.

Our keeper tells of his long, lonely days. His boy is overseas but never out of mind. Fighting a war we don't understand.

We feel his footsteps long before we hear his voice. They are slow deliberate thunderclaps. Our collective heartbeat stalls sensing the unbearable weight of sadness he carries. He lifts up our sky, throws it to the ground. You can go, he tells us; your queen is dead so you're free to swarm. Go start a new hive.

Our queen died days ago we shriek at him. We're here because you trust us.

The misery of his not telling sinks into the hive. We listen. We wait. We have time.

He crumples, curling like a child onto the damp earth. He tells us of baked sand, amber like lavender honey, a desert landscape where dust storms turn day to night, where vicious winds deafen and dull the senses to danger. He tells us of a

roadside ambush. He tells us that our prince, his golden boy, is coming home in a box.
Plain and wooden, not slatted or painted like our hive.

The old queen is dead, but another already grows fat in her brood cell. We
have no need to mourn her passing. Neither will we swarm. We will not leave him.

We understand the telling. We drown in its meaning.

Circling the hive we etch a trail of pollen to float above his bowed head, a
shimmering halo of devotion. He can't feel us, nor taste our misery, but we tell him
anyway. We will always tell.

Ends