

BEARD OF BEES

BY MATT DEBENHAM

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“Try not to think of the bees as stinging you, I tell my son.”

 **Beard of Bees** 
MATT DEBENHAM

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“Try not to think of the bees as stinging you, I tell my son. Think of them as snuffling. Like a dog would do!”

“But it hurts,” says Jasper. His eyes still hold the last of his tears. The real waterworks are only minutes gone, the boundless, shameless wailing of a six-year-old.

“Okay, well, to them you’re a giant flower,” I say. “You like flowers, right? Pretend that.”

“I won’t!” he yells. “It hurts!”

“Your mother used to complain the same way when you were at her boob, by the way. ‘Ow, he’s biting me!’ she’d say. But you know what? Mom stuck with it. She didn’t run away from you.”

“But she’s run away now,” he says.

“Yes, but not because of you.”

“I miss mom already,” says Jasper. “How come she left us?”

Try not to think of mom as having left, I tell him. Think of us as staying put. Like a dog would do.

If I say I miss her, then the terrorist has won.



When the bees came, they did not come in swarms. They came in crates. Unfortunately for me, they also came while I was at work. My wife Gayle was home, though, and signed for them, thinking they were the frozen steaks I was supposed to have ordered. Then she put them in the coffin-sized ice-chest in the garage and stacked the four old snow tires back on the filthy white lid.

Those were the first bees.

The second batch I had sent to my work. In hindsight—I teach 4th grade—this probably wasn’t the best idea. Ms.

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Gaultieri, our secretary, came hustling into my classroom and whispered, through a strained grin, “Mr. Baron, your packages are here.”

“Oh, great!” I said. “I’ll pick them up at the end of the day.”

“No,” she said. “There’s something wrong with them. They’re crackling.”

“Oh, that’s just the bees. They’re fine.”

Three minutes later the principal pulled me out of my classroom. She didn’t even pretend to smile for the kids.

“You had bees sent to an elementary school?” she hissed. “Are you out of your head, man?”

“I wanted them to be safe,” I said. “You should see what my wife did to the other shipment.”

“In my office, Mr. Baron, do you know what’s hanging on the wall?”

Principal Riddick is thirty and wears boxy black suits every day to go with her spiky black hair. She has a PhD and

used to work in advertising. There’s some talk about her sexuality, though I notice that’s usually among the people here who are the furthest away from thirty and who don’t even have masters’ degrees. Me, I respect anyone who’s been through a graduate program. I could never have stood that much school.

“There are pictures of two dozen children on the wall next to my desk,” she says. “The severe-allergy kids. I need to know their faces in case something goes wrong while they’re under my watch. Do you know the life-threatening allergy that twenty of them have in common?”

I indicated that I did not.

“Beestings.”

“Jeez, really?” I said. I’d been sure she was going to say peanuts. “So, what then, you have to use those pen-things on them?” I was genuinely curious. Unfortunately, I also then made a motion like I was plunging a needle into her chest, and she took a sharp step back.

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“Just get that shit out of the building,” she said.

Behind me, the room burst into giggles. “Miss Riddick said ‘shit’!” someone yelled. More laughter, some shrieks.

The principal turned white and looked like she wanted to swallow herself from the inside. I felt for her. Every educator remembers his first time being pinned, helpless, by the laughter of children.

“I’ll pull my car around back,” I said. My son’s classroom was in the front. I very much didn’t want him seeing what suddenly struck me as a weird and shameful act, like I was loading up my car with mail-order pornography.



As easy as it would be to blame the bees, I refuse. Obviously the problems were deeper. They had to be. Was our marriage really built on some unspoken vow that we’d live a bee-free life together? When Jasper and I showed up after school that day in a Hyundai full of bees, the thing Gayle said

to me was, “This is not what I signed up for.” Which, in hindsight, seems less like a complaint than a pox. She didn’t take Jasper with her, she didn’t ask for a divorce. She just went, leaving that phrase behind for us to enjoy in her absence. We eat our breakfasts with it, sleep with it, share the shower with it. It’s been a long spring for the left-behind.

Jasper won’t be in my grade for another three years, but I keep an eye on him throughout the day via Kelly Bargain, his first-grade teacher. Kelly is about five minutes out of college, chubby-cute, with blonde corkscrew hair and that impossibly wide smile all new teachers wear, the one that breaks the hearts of the rest of us. One afternoon in May, she tells me Jasper’s been painting some troubling scenes in the Creative Expression Lab.

“Can I see?” I say.

She wrinkles her nose and shakes her head. “I wouldn’t if I were you,” she says. “Though I think he’s advanced for his

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age. When his people are chopping with axes? They really stand as if they're chopping."

That night I invite my dad and his third wife down for the weekend. It takes every ounce of strength I have. Even though we're not close, I figure it'll be good for Jasper to have some extra family around to help plug the Mom-hole.

Turns out I did the right thing, inviting them. On Friday, only hours before they're due at the house, Kelly Bargain reports more worrisome activity.

"Your son's pretty into this one girl," she says. "Annabelle." It's lunchtime and we're sitting side-by-side on the front of my desk.

"Yeah, Jasper's never done the whole girls-are-icky thing," I say. "Heredity, I guess." I add this with a slight lift of my left brow. It's feeble, I know, but I could use the practice.

She giggles—apparently I was being ironic. "Anyway," she says. "Today he told her he'd kill for her."

I swallow. "That's sweet, in its way."

"Then he asked her how many heads of his enemies it would take before she'd agree to be his concubine."

Hmm. Gayle used to read him *Go, Dog, Go!* and *Stuart Little* at bedtime. In the weeks since she left, I've been reading him things I thought were more boy-ish, in hopes of kick-starting the masculine bond between us. We just finished *Conan the Barbarian*. Maybe now I'll hold off on the Raymond Chandler. I'll admit, I've been having a little trouble with some of the less tangible aspects of parenting. I do remember being really good at diapers.

"John?" says Kelly Bargain. She's never used my first name before. Or any name, I realize. Usually she just comes up very close and starts talking as if she'd just turned away a minute ago. Six months ago, a trait like this might have annoyed the crap out of me. Now it's a huge turn-on. How low does a person have to get before enthusiasm qualifies as an aphrodisiac?

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“Yes, Kelly?”

“What’s with the bees?”

“Ah. You heard.”

“I heard.”

It’s as if Gayle is watching me from some other dimension. Yeah, John, what is with the bees? To spite her, I try directness for once. “To make a beard,” I say. This is the reason I gave Gayle for getting the bees; maybe Kelly will be as excited as Jasper was. “Who wouldn’t want a beard of bees?”

Kelly laughs, so I laugh with her: Of course we’re kidding!

“Really, so what’s the whole deal?” says Kelly Bargain.

“You have, like, a special suit and everything?”

“Just gloves and a bonnet.” I smile at her. “Why?

Would you like to see them?”

She smiles back. Then she nudges my thigh with hers.

“Would you like to see me in them?”

Oh.



When Jasper and I get home from school, my dad and his third wife are waiting for us on the front porch.

“You’re early,” I tell them.

“We peed on the bushes out back,” says my father, rising to shake my hand.

“It was a double emergency,” says his third wife. Okay, her name’s Lottie. She’s a permed, perfumed expanse of woman. Whenever I see her, I experience a feeling of extreme dissonance, and then I realize it’s because she looks like she could be my mother’s older sister. “I watered the Hostas while Lou did the Rose of Sharon,” says Lottie. “Jasper, do you have a hug and a kiss for your grandmother?”

Jasper gives me a look—Have I really met this person before?—and then disappears into the front of her dress.

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We get them inside, dump their luggage in my former bedroom—after Gayle, I made the couch my fort—and proceed to sit in the living room and stare at each other politely for a quarter of an hour. In between, my father looks intently out the window, as if he’s spotted a really interesting squirrel. Lottie hums to herself and smooths the thighs of her mint-green slacks.

Finally, Jasper says, “Oh, hey. We got bees!”

Lottie points a finger-gun at me. “You call someone about that, pronto. Once you see one, you know there’s dozens more, probably.”

“Or thousands,” I say. I wink at Jasper.

“Eh?” says Lottie.

“They sting like hell,” says Jasper.

“Hey!” I bark. He recoils. My father remains looking elsewhere, but his ears have gone red. Lottie pats the cushion next to her leg, and Jasper crawls right up next to her. I remain in my seat, feeling spineless and mean.



You don’t get a third wife, of course, without having driven two others off first. And this is not counting the ones my father dated in between, the ones who smelled bad electrical before the smoke showed up. Whatever he did, I apparently took good notes—and then threw them out. I mean, bees? As they say in the kung-fu movies I’m no longer going to let Jasper watch, the student is now the master.

My dad and Lottie nap, then we go to a Pizzeria Uno for dinner. As we walk in, Lottie says, “How about that? There’s a place near us named this, too.”

I open my mouth, but my father’s already staring at me, shaking his head with short, violent strokes.

After we’ve ordered, I ask them how their nap was.

“Splendid,” says Lottie. She pats my father’s arm. “This man was born to spoon.”

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“Anyhoo,” says my dad, quickly. He’s easily embarrassed. I wonder why you would marry someone like Lottie, then, if you were someone like my dad. But of course, I’ve been feeling unbalanced since we sat down, as if I’m in a car with the wrong-sized tires on one side. And then I get it: Jasper, who’s next to me now, was across from me the last time we ate in a restaurant, and every time before that. He’s too little to fill the hole where the other person used to go.

“What should we do tonight?” says Lottie. “Paint the town red?”

Jasper cups his hands over my ear and whispers: “Can you do the beard for them?” He really means for him, too, since I haven’t actually done the trick yet. Nor do I really want to. Then I remember: Kelly Bargain is coming by later. Our cover story is that she’s returning some drawing that’s incredibly important to Jasper. Then, after he falls asleep, we’re escaping my dad and Lottie and going to a movie.

Kelly Bargain wants to see a beard of bees, I can tell. It might make the movie even better.

Finally, I whisper to Jasper all the words he is allowed to say about it.

“We have something truly amazing planned for you,” he tells them in his best announcer’s voice. “An after-dinner show. And that’s all I’m saying.”

“Well, now,” says Lottie. She makes an expression that’s a mix of impressed and curious, a hard thing to do without looking patronizing.

It’s funny how other people can make you like your children more. Maybe sometimes you need to be reminded, Hey, got a good kid there. Or maybe it’s that you realize how little you think of them as anything but question-machines, sleep-deprived. When the waitress comes back, I order Jasper a hot-fudge sundae. No one says anything about the missing woman.

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Back home, Jasper and I lead them to the bees. The hive boxes are stacked at the far edge of our property, where the low stone wall abuts the old dairy farm. Which, word has it, has finally been sold. This time next year, I'll probably be looking into someone's kitchen. Or, if it's condos, many kitchens. Jasper's all wired up on sundae-power. In the dusk, the fudge smeared around his mouth looks like what Jasper says is the blood of the vanquished. I make a note to find Charlotte's Web when we get in. He whirls around sloppily, hacking at the long grass with a bald, brittle stick.

"Wowie zowie," says Lottie.

While Jasper does his Barbarian thing, I watch my dad walk along beside the wall, inspecting the colonial-era craftsmanship. Every now and then he'll pat a stone, maybe to see if it wobbles, maybe for encouragement.

The beard trick? Hold the queen between your lips. That's it! Or so I've read. I've been a little negligent with the

bees; they seemed so important a few months ago, so worth fighting for. Tonight will be a combination dress-rehearsal/premiere performance. Apparently, though, bees only know to go where the queen goes. If you've got a hive box full of bees and the queen dies, you have to replace her right away. Otherwise, the whole hive falls apart—the field bees won't know anymore to go out and get pollen or nectar, and the workers won't know to keep producing honey. Thousands of bees starving to death, all because one is missing.

I think I can pull off the beard-of-bees trick. I'm just trying to remember how to get them all back into the hive without getting yourself sent to the hospital.

"Aargh!" yells Jasper, and I look up to see him leap onto my dad, pointy stick still in hand. He's crept along the top of the wall just to ambush the old man. I cringe, picturing me at six, doing this to my dad. But instead the old man laughs and lets Jasper ride him crashing to the ground. Jasper tosses

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his weapon aside and pretends to eat his grandfather's face. Lottie shouts encouragements. When he finally stands up, they're both wearing the sundae-fudge of the vanquished.

Lottie turns to me. "You're awful quiet."

"I'm expecting someone," I say, not looking at her. "A friend."

"Oh," she says. Then she looks at me. "Oh! Well, isn't that nice?"

"Maybe. You don't think it's too soon? Jasper kind of knows her."

Lottie shrugs. "My husband was in the ground a month when I met your dad. If you could time these things better, you would. But you shouldn't."

I suddenly want her to crush me in a perfumed hug. More than that, I want to tell her things, want to grind my tears into her auntly shoulder. But why, though? Why this person I fail to recognize every time we meet? Gayle used to say I was like a bad driver in the seat of my emotions, that I

had a knack for choosing the least appropriate route. "You'll cry over the dog you lost at 16," she'd say, "but not at our son's birth. Or you'll stew for days over the disgusting imbalance of a 30-second political commercial, but you won't give 30 seconds' thought about why I'm so unhappy all the time."

In the end, I just tell Lottie she's probably right, that you can't mess with fate. Then I excuse myself to go inside while Jasper and my dad trade barbaric growls.



I have the telephone handset in my fingers to call Kelly Bargain, getting the bullet points down: Bad timing...difficult days ahead...try again in a few months? Really was looking forward to this. And she may be her usual understanding self, maybe even continuing the flirtation. Eventually, she'll drift away from me in school, fall for some substitute gym teacher, making me regret ever making this call. But the fact is, it really

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isn't time to start liking/loving/driving-off someone new. It's time to be around Jasper more, time to be fixing things at home.

Outside Lottie is laughing and shrieking. The copper smoker device sits on the counter, packed with tightly-rolled cardboard for a slow burn, ready to subdue some bees so I can reach in and get to the queen. The phone rings in my hand.

"Hey," says Gayle. My wife. I can hear traffic in the background. She could be two miles away, or in New Delhi. She sounds warbly, nervous. "I left a message earlier. You didn't get it? I thought maybe you guys hit the road and joined the circus. Ha ha! Anyway, I just wanted to check in and let you know where I've—"

And here her words get swallowed by the screams from outside, much louder than before. Through the kitchen window I see my dad and Jasper still rolling around on the ground. I should yell out the window, tell Jasper that's too hard. Clouds of dust swirl around them, a dark, busy dust.

Lottie is running back and forth, waving her hands like she's putting out a fire. She's okay, that Lottie, a good sport. Then a chunking sound from the side of the house—a car door—and I see Kelly Bargain running across my lawn, toward my crazy little family. Boy, she's a game one. Maybe I should give it a chance. I thought I'd fall apart when Gayle finally called, but as it happens, I haven't heard a thing she's said; all her little words have been swallowed up by the sound of my family. Right now everyone's calling my name. It's nice to be wanted.

Then I see the hive boxes, tipped and splayed on the ground. An angry little cloud hangs in the air. Beneath it, my dad is on all fours, vomiting in the grass. Kelly and Lottie are hauling Jasper along by his arms, the whites of his sneakers flashing in sleepy, rhythmless steps.

And in the phone, Gayle says, "Anyway, that's me. What about you, John? Are you a new man yet?"