

Bees and Chickens

One day we found a bee in my brother's room. It was confused, not aggressive, and looking for the nearest emergency exit. My mother cupped it in a glass and set it free outside. The next day there were three bees, buzzing around up in the corner where the ceiling meets the wall and we knew we had a problem. Outside, under the eave, there was a small hole, a portal to a bee super highway. The bees took turns going in and out in an orderly fashion. The avocado trees were in full bloom in the warm Miami sun and they had a lot of work to do.

My father, being brought up in Colombia with maids and nannies, squirmed and said, "I'm allergic," so my mother called her father, my Grandpa Arthur. We loved our Grandfather, an eccentric man full of stories. We could never quite figure out if they were true or not. He was a bit of a mad genius, an inventor, a collector and now an amateur fruit tree farmer. He invented the pull-tab for soda cans back in the 60s and sold the patent to Coca-Cola for peanuts. The workshop on his 15-acre property was a wonder of trinkets and doodads. His most recent obsession at that time was metal. Antique metal bugs, old brass cookware, and random scraps of steel littered a corner of his overgrown yard. My dad called it junk but we knew better. He had big plans for everything.

For the last few years Grandpa had been experimenting with apiculture, a fancy word for beekeeping. He came over dressed in a space suit with a net over his face. I almost always wore my hair in pigtails back then and he would pull one gently to say hello. My brother was greeted with a light punch in the shoulder. He climbed a ladder and peered into the hole with a flashlight.

"Mel, you got a big problem here!" he shouted down to my mother below as we watched from the sidelines.

"Yeah Pop, I know. Can you help?"

"All right, but it's not going to be pretty,"

he said. He got down off the ladder and rummaged around in our garage until he came out with a small power saw. With the bees swarming around his head and covering his suit, he cut the eave open and let the rectangular piece of wood fall to the ground. He reached into the side of the house and pulled out a honeycomb dripping with translucent golden honey. My mouth watered. He looked it over, carefully climbed down and dropped it into a tupperware he had set aside. The bees were more frantic now, we could hear the hum of their buzzing. He climbed back up and this time the honeycomb he took out was covered in much darker goo, mostly a ball of bees. He dropped this into a second container, popped open the trunk to his '79 Oldsmobile Cutlass, placed the open container of bees inside and slammed the trunk shut. We stood there flabbergasted. He said, "Sorry about the mess!" took off his gloves and got in the car. He drove off slow at first, the diesel fuel wafting through the air as the swarm of bees followed like a cloud. We looked at the empty hole, the power saw on the ground, the chunk of extracted wood and the melting honeycomb, but there was not one bee left behind. Later, Grandpa Arthur called our bees "good pollinators." The honey was delicious and I learned the wonders of honey cinnamon toast in the morning before school.

"The bees are a family," Grandpa explained, "and they'd do anything to stay together, even if it means following my old rust trap for eleven miles."



A few years later my parents' relationship hit the skids when my father moved in with a girlfriend he had been seeing. Grandpa Arthur never talked bad about my father except for once telling my brother not to "be like him." Instead he talked about our late Grandma Lois, who died before we were born. "I'd swim an ocean to have her back.

She'd know what to tell you, Mel. I don't understand people and how some of them don't have feelings." This only made my mother cry harder.

Years later, Grandpa Arthur wasn't able to move around as much. He kept chickens in a large coop under a mango tree, but he wasn't able to tend to them as he once had. For a while I volunteered to muck out the coop, clean up the dead leaves, wash out their water trough and trim branches to let the sunlight through. My reward would be the few gleaming white eggs I'd find in the hay. My grandpa made the best omelets. We'd sit at the table outside and he'd hand me the comics section of the newspaper. As I got lost in my teenage years, I realized how precious Saturdays were, so Mom had to convince Grandpa to give away the chickens before they wasted away from neglect.



My mother was having a hard time with me once I reached tenth grade. I went from making straight As to skipping school constantly or showing up high or drunk. My friends and I all felt there were more important things to do than hear a lame teacher talk about the ground state of an atom. We preferred to listen to punk music and cut up our shirts. Pierce each other with rusty safety pins and drink malt liquor. Jump off bridges into canals and freebase off the top of coke cans.

My hair was cotton candy pink and I had gotten a job at Dunkin' Donuts. I fought with my mom constantly for the freedom to go out whenever I wanted and come home only to sleep. She kicked me out in a barrage of tears and I was staying at my friend Nancy's house.

I was working behind the counter when Grandpa Arthur walked in. I hadn't seen him

in close to a year. It wasn't something I had thought about much, lost in my own drama concerning friends and money. I was expecting a plea to call my mother and brother, to stay in school and pull in good grades for college, to consider my future, but I didn't get any of that.

His eyes lit up when he saw me, green eyes that could shine right through droopy eyelids. He wore a ratty baseball cap and a flannel t-shirt.

"Hi, Sammy," he said as he limped up to the counter. He probably needed a cane but refused to carry one. "I'll have two old-fashions and a small black coffee."

I couldn't even smile as I pulled the tray out; my feelings were as jumbled and confused as my life in that moment.

Then Grandpa Arthur took his baseball cap off and threw it down on the tray, almost spilling the coffee. He searched my face for a reaction. One side of his formerly white hair was dyed bright purple with drips running down the sides of his forehead. The back of his head, as he turned I could see, was a dark blue, as if an afterthought. The other side of his head was shaved. I was speechless.

"We belong to the same clan, you and I. When you were born, you were an itty bitty little thing. Hardly ever cried. I bet you still don't ever cry." But it was too late, a tear had slipped down my cheek. He invited me to live with him and I did, until I graduated high school. We bought chickens, took care of them together and every once in a while I would sleep out in the coop. Sometimes, I realized, I didn't want to be free, I wanted to be wrapped up tight, secure in my surroundings, like hens sleeping peacefully in their coop under a star-filled sky, or bees all balled up together, encased in honey.

