

Keeping Bees

On the morning Gerard admitted that something must be done about his queen bee, his niece, Julie, appeared on the front porch. It had been thirteen months since Julie's mother Zara, Gerard's younger sister, had been killed by a head injury. She'd inched into the swollen intersection of Perk Avenue and Beauregard to a green arrow, and her clownish Toyota Yaris was then plowed by a Tacoma hustling through the red light. Things hadn't seemed so bad at first; Zara had a contusion to the left orbital bone and a minute subdural hematoma, but the latter discretely blossomed after her hospital discharge and twenty-four hours later, she was gone.

Swinging the front door open to abrupt knocking, Gerard closed it halfway again when he saw that it was Julie. He leaned against his wooden doorframe. If a storm swept through, he imagined his stance could deflect its gusts from the carefully swept wooden floorboards behind him, the clean and bare walls, the conditions not spartan but spare and tended. He could also deflect her.

Julie, with heavy dirty blonde eyebrows that matched her disheveled ponytail, hoisted a blue canvas backpack higher on one shoulder and tossed her bangs away from her eyes with a head twitch. She replicated this again and again even after the offending bang was cleared. She was scrawnier than he remembered. It had been several years since he'd last seen her—she hadn't attended her own mother's funeral. A white tee shirt with sweat stains at the armpits

drooped from her shoulders, and her denim cut-offs dangled tendrils of shorn thread. Mid-morning Arizona sunlight filtered through the sycamore leaves at the porch perimeter and cast dappled shadows over her sharp features. Pointed cheekbones pressing from sunken cheeks, a hawk's nose and jutting chin. She must be eighteen now—one year younger than Zara had been when she'd given birth to her.

A smatter of woodpecker drills erupted against the sycamore's trunk. Gerard blinked. If Julie was eighteen, so much the better—he wouldn't have to call anyone to collect her.

“I'm here for my mom's video collection,” Julie said in greeting. Her fingers twined through the belt loops of her jean shorts in restless movements. He caught himself before snarling at the drawl of her voice.

“I've got nothing for you,” he said.

She bounced on the balls of her feet. “She wrote me last year and told me she was making them. She said they were like a diary and that I could see them if I wanted. I'm not moving till I get them. They're mine by right.” She halted her bobbing, cocked her head to one side. “And law.”

Gerard pressed into the doorframe. “I'm very busy.” And this was true: his time with his hive was leaking away. “You're not getting anything from me, so just go back to wherever you came from. I'll pretend you were never here.” He closed and bolted the door against her, knowing as he did that they weren't rid of each other. But the seconds were coalescing to minutes, the minutes sloughing away, the day nearly half gone, and still so much to do. He followed a path through his living room, over the hardwood floorboards he'd swept first thing that morning with the pine needle broom he kept at the side of his refrigerator. From there,

through the kitchen with its bare countertops and stovetop which shone from recent wiping, and out the back door to the hives.

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The backyard beehives stood fifty yards from Gerard's back porch, at the end of a curving walkway he'd lined with bursts of lavender verbenas and the overmodest, tightly clustered bluemink which declined to splay its petals. Red salvia, with paprika-colored stalks, sprawled in patches away from the path. Six months before Zara's death, at the peak of her anxiety and sorrow which she claimed had no source, she'd moved in with him so he could take care of her. He'd bought a threadbare copy of *Beekeeping in the Twentieth Century* at the Nickel & Dime and together they'd cultivated a backyard beekeeping habit. With the handheld video camera he'd never used, she documented their progress on homemade DVDs.

After a series of false starts, they'd nurtured a successful hive under the domain of a queen bee that Zara named Justina. The hive outlived Zara, and Gerard had sustained it and two others after her death. Whenever he infiltrated Justina's hive for honey, he crooned to her.

"Justina, your highness the queen bee-na," he'd sing, "may you have a long and healthy reign." And she'd lived a productive life in bee terms. Justina had survived, fertilized thousands of eggs, and was now, after all these months of partnership, posing an unforeseen problem: she had outlived her utility. Gerard had done enough research to know that if the bee colony itself wasn't ousting her, he'd have to do it, but the thought of killing her gnarled him.

He slipped into his cotton beekeeping jacket, laundered with an unscented laundry soap to prevent bee agitation. He struggled to organize his thoughts as he dressed. Zara had entrusted her belongings to him, sacred things, items Gerard was privileged to safeguard. He stretched a

rubber band over his boot, pressed tightly against his ankle to prevent entrance by a curious colony guard.

The eager buzz from the hive displaced his reverie. He lifted the ivory hat and veil over his head, settled it against his shoulders, and pulled black nitrile gloves over each hand. Though the gloves made his hand movements clumsier, Gerard had never crushed a bee. With no nearby wood to knock on, he crossed the fingers of both hands.

Fully suited, he picked his way toward the hive on tiptoe. He dipped down for the stainless-steel bee smoker he kept a yard from the hives and which he'd pre-packed with a pinecone. After a few moments of feeding in pine needle kindling and twigs, he nursed a small, steady flame.

Sunshine pooled at the sage-colored leaves of the tipu trees surrounding the hives. Dozens of lemon-yellow flowers burst from their boughs and released a spiced, citrusy scent he hoped his bees associated with home. The buzzing thrummed as he stepped forward. He swallowed uncertainty and glided toward the nest, churning plumes of smoke toward the slit at the hive's base near his shins—the hive's entryway. A handful of bees whisked the air above.

An image of Julie at his door stalled him. She'd come all the way from Tennessee, her last known state of residence, for what purpose? Julie, who'd abandoned home when she was sixteen. His bitterness was a bone to gnaw and crunch. He thought of her demands that he owed her Zara's possessions, the most precious and vulnerable glimmers of his little sister. Julie, who never called to check in, who only re-appeared now when it was all too late. There was no debt between them.

He'd stopped sending smoke toward the hive. A lone guard drifted upward from the entrance toward him. She alighted on his forearm and crawled toward his elbow. He caught

himself before brushing at her and drew a bellyful of air. No time to flounder in Julie's flawed character. He exhaled through pursed lips and the bee lifted from his arm, returning to the hive in a graceful arc.

He hefted away the dusty cinderblock which prevented the top of the hive from loosening in wind or rain and then, wielding his hive tool, carefully pried the outer and inner covers from the honey super, glued together by the bees' propolis. He slid from the super one of the ten honey frames on which the bees stored their honey comb. Revealed now before him was dozens of furry-bodied, black and gold banded gems with glistening wings hustling this way and that.

This hive inspection was bittersweet—he stole through his tasks as a member of their community, if only briefly, before the smoke he unfurled toward them sent the bees scurrying to gorge honey. But he uncovered signs of decay. There were far fewer bees on the frames than there should have been and in the brood box were several cells containing multiple eggs. He had lifted the second brood frame into the sunlight to search for Justina when a foot slushed against gravel behind him. He turned to see Julie with her surfeit of exposed flesh.

“I guess no lawyer is going to help me get a bunch of DVD recordings,” she said, “but I should be able to see them and you know it.” If Julie noticed that Gerard held a frame with dozens of crawling bees attached, she offered no sign. She cradled the elbow of her dangling left arm as though it were broken. “They're all that's left of her for me to see.”

Gerard held his breath as he slid the brood frame back into the chamber. “Julie, I'm not going to just drop everything and scurry to do your bidding. This might surprise you, but I don't much care what you want right now.”

She eyed him, then peered over his shoulder toward the hive. “What's that?”

“Nothing for you over here, either,” he said, shifting into her line of vision. His pulse quickened. He motioned behind her, along the path that ran parallel to the house which he’d lined with palest green, skeletal palo verde. “It’s not safe for you to be out here looking like that. Get back to your car and go on.”

“I don’t have a car,” Julie answered. “Someone dropped me off. That’s your work?”

“Dropped you off?” Gerard repeated, bewildered. He’d built his house at the end of a mile-long driveway on seven acres, ten miles east of the nearest interstate. “Who?” She shrugged and tucked a lock of frizzed hair behind an ear with six tiny hoops. He put his hands on his hips and looked around. “Call them back, then.”

“I can’t.” She stood on tiptoe, still holding her left elbow. “Are those the bees? Mom wrote about those, too.” She frowned. “They’re kind of gross.”

Gerard threw up his hands. “Am I talking to myself here? Go on now, you’ve got to get out of here. I have work to do, I have nothing for you, and it’s dangerous to linger around like this.” His thoughts were with his bees; every muscle ached to return him to them. The smoker sat abandoned by the hive. Foragers flew in, some from as far afield as eight miles away, and alighted at the entrance to their home.

A sharp heat spread along his left thigh. He raised his hands reflexively and stared down at the pant leg of his bee suit. She’d crawled her way in without any sign. His first sting in three months.

With watering eyes, Gerard sighed and walked toward the front of the house, ushering Julie ahead of him as though he could corral her. At the point of path which curved toward the house front, Gerard paused at the bench he’d built with storage space inside. He removed the veil and peeled himself out of his khaki gear. The end of the bee’s abandoned stinger poked from his

jeans; the rest was buried in his thigh. He looked up and blocked the sun behind Julie to see her face. She'd folded into herself. The skin of her face seemed to sag with a new weight. If nothing else, she looked like she hadn't slept in weeks.

When she caught him studying her, she said, "I just want to get to know her better." She pulled her shoulders back. "You shouldn't have the monopoly on her."

Maybe this was true. But there was nothing of Zara in Julie. He had no sense of kinship with the ratty teenager standing before him. Most of all, the whole thing tasted inauthentic. Pressing his hands heavily against his knees, he stood. He was already so tired, and he'd accomplished so little. He continued toward the house.

"If you don't have a ride, I'm calling you a cab," he said without turning.

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A farmers' market was held every Saturday from September to May. Gerard stood behind his booth with crossed arms. He never sat and didn't bring chairs on principle. Short strings of patrons—mostly in their sixties and seventies, the men wearing striped button up shirts tucked into belted trousers and the women in neon green or pink sun visors—wound through the modest market space. Gerard sold batches of honey here; nothing fancy "with added essence of lavender" or cultivated anti-allergy mixes, but he ensured the quality was good and charged a reasonable price. He enjoyed talking to customers about his bees and beekeeping; he liked the fact that as the months had passed, he'd grown more competent in these discussions. Now that Justina's productivity had halted, though, his contributions felt fraudulent.

Several shoppers pooled around a new vendor Gerard had never seen before. "Trent's Honey Tree" was printed on his banner in block letters beside a drawing of a knotted old tree with a globular bee hive dangling from one bough, straight out of the Hundred Acre Wood.

Deborah, the woman who sold fig marmalade to the right of Gerard every Saturday, shook an unopened plastic water bottle in his direction with a raised eyebrow. A dozen silver bangles at her wrist jingled. “Thirsty?”

Gerard pointed toward the new vendor’s stall. “Do you know much about that seller?”

Deborah shaded her eyes. “That’s Trent. He’s the only other honey vendor I’ve seen here besides you.” She scrunched her nose and rolled her eyes to Gerard. “I’m not crazy about his stuff. It’s too raw.” She swung her auburn curls over her shoulder and made a show of fanning herself while leaning back against her foldout table. “And you know me, darling. I’m a filtered broad.”

Gerard smiled and shook his head. “Ah, lest I forget. You’ll only squeeze your honey from a plastic bear.” Across the square, Trent leaned over his table toward a woman whose white hair stood up in all directions like a dandelion puff. He was twenty-something with sandy brown hair he’d twisted into a low bun. Gerard could hear his laughter over the distance.

Deborah stifled a yawn behind the back of her hand. “What’s new at the honey farm?”

Gerard cleared his throat. “For starters, my sister’s daughter showed up from nowhere demanding I hand over her mother’s belongings to use for who knows what purpose.”

Deborah turned to Gerard and made a soft clucking noise. “She’s in a rough spot, huh? Poor sweetie. It’s always such a tragedy when kids lose their parents.”

“She’s eighteen. An adult. She shouldn’t need me to coddle her or relinquish her mother’s belongings without a second thought.”

Deborah loosened her flowing violet skirt, bunched against her knees in the heat, to a fresh breeze. “You know who refers to eighteen-year-olds as adults? Cigarette companies and military recruiters. This is your niece, right? Your newly motherless niece?”

Gerard narrowed his eyes. “I don’t care how old she is; she’s old enough to be responsible for how she treats people. She couldn’t be bothered to show up to her mother’s funeral. She’s spoiled. Good-for-nothing.”

“All right, Ger. You sound sufficiently heartless.” Deborah raised her eyebrows and turned away with a bemused head shake.

Gerard fumbled for a response, but halted when he spotted his honey-making competitor approaching from across the square. The man grinned, displaying perfectly aligned teeth, when he reached the patron’s side of the table and gestured toward Gerard’s spread of three honey types: light, medium dark and bold. “Nice set up you’ve got here, man.” He thrust his hand to Gerard for an energetic shake. “Thought I’d introduce myself to a fellow craftsman. I’m Trent.”

“Haven’t seen you here before,” Gerard said. “What are you getting at with the name? ‘Tree honey’?”

Trent mulled this over, bobbing his head as he scanned the sky above, his eyes sliding back and forth. “I’ve learned a lot from studying bees in nature. I use the lessons of wild bees to perfect conditions for my colonies. Most of the hives my bees have built are in trees in my backyard.”

Despite himself, Gerard was impressed. “Ever do any consulting work? I could use some suggestions.”

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A week later, Gerard hadn’t had time to feel guilty over his attempts to oust Julie because she was still with him. He’d sent her off in a cab and the next day, she’d been waiting for him when he returned from the market. As he couldn’t muster the energy to send her away a third

time, he didn't protest when she told him she planned to stay. She said she'd sleep on the back porch if she had to, and that's what she did.

It was a Sunday morning and he stood several yards from his three hives with Trent and Julie. The March breeze slid over his skin like silk. A verdin swept back and forth between two Chinese elms; the feathers on its head shone yellowish gold like it had shot between a painter and her canvas mid-brushstroke. Smoke leached out from the smoker which Julie held. Trent wore no protective covering, but Gerard had insisted, against Julie's protests, that she don the full garb. As Trent described different parts of the hive to Julie, Gerard had the sense they'd all been here before.

Trent approached Gerard and hiked a thumb over his shoulder to the hives behind them. "Those are great hives, there," he said, and Gerard glowed with pleasure. He'd worked tirelessly to create a home for his colonies. "I do have a few suggestions we can go over."

"Already?" He'd assumed Trent would need time to assimilate to his bees' habits, taking several days to learn the inner workings of the hives. Gerard had spent so much time reading through manuals and online forums and sifting through YouTube to unearth the possible problems in the hive dynamics.

"Sure, if you've got time." Trent rocked back on his heels. "That queen has to go." Though he'd expected it, this lanced Gerard, and his breath caught. Trent continued. "I'm not sure what's going on with the hive—bees aren't typically sentimental, you know? They tend to boot their own queen or swarm to a new hive if she's getting long in the tooth. But yours aren't moving on. That's going to kill the colony quick because she's not laying new eggs. She's an old bee, anyway. You've got to get rid of her." Gerard tried to nod, but his head felt loosely attached to his neck. "There are a lot of things beekeepers can do differently to make their hives healthier.

The shitty part is they've got to start from the beginning; build on a new foundation. For you, that beginning is the death of your queen." Trent laced his fingers behind his head with his elbows out. "You could say she's the beginning and the end. I would find her and pinch her."

Gerard bent into his knees, rocking back on his heel. "I've put a lot of effort into building homes for my bees so they can do their work and thrive."

Julie looked away when their eyes met. Trent smiled. "It's not the nicest feeling, that's for sure, but you've got to imagine this is the best thing for the hive. Small sacrifices for the health of the community." When Gerard squared himself to face him, Trent raised his hands with open palms. "Okay, I meant *big* sacrifices." He lowered his arms. "But listen, there are other ways than and killing her yourself, though that would be the quickest. We could do something else."

Trent outlined the alternative process for de-queening the hive. The thought of doing anything to disrupt the hives pained Gerard, but he hated more the idea that an entire colony would be condemned to deterioration if he did nothing. Where did his involvement begin and end? All the work Zara had put in to sustaining homes for these bees crumbled before him.

Trent's voice ebbed, and Gerard looked up to see that he and Julie were watching him. "I'm sorry," Gerard said. "Say that last one again."

"If we're going to do it, we should probably get started early because it might take the hive a week to re-group," Trent said. "What do you think?"

Gerard saw himself from Justina's perspective: a looming figure camouflaged by khaki clothing, snatching the fruits of her hive's labor, engorged forefinger and thumb reaching toward her to extinguish her and wipe away all the hard work she'd done for him month after month. Anything would be better than that. "I'm ready now. Let's get it done."

Julie and Trent had apparently struck up a friendship of sorts, and she would help them. Trent carefully reversed Gerard's truck down the side road which circled the house, toward the section of the backyard where the hives stood, and as he did, he leaned from the driver's side window and explained the hierarchy of a bee colony to Julie. She listened to Trent without interruption and Gerard was grateful for the reprieve from the unspoken weight of her demands for the videos. She hadn't mentioned it since the day she'd arrived, but it was leaden in the air and made it difficult to take breaths when she was nearby. He didn't have any better idea what to do with her than that first day, but, as he watched her now, taking an interest in bee life, the idea nudged him that it might not be so bad to share a few with her.

He sorted through his mental catalogue of the videos he'd watched. There was the video of Zara building their first hive using the drawers of an older dresser, but she had to stop recording after clutching her chest in the early stages of a panic attack. But she was so much more than any of the disparate parts these videos suggested; how to capture who Zara truly was, and how to ensure there was no ambiguity about this? To release any of these videos to misinterpretation was unbearable.

After thirty minutes, they'd loaded Justina's hive into the back of the truck. The plan was to deposit the hive one hundred yards away: a world away.

When they reached the drop site, they dismantled the hive, placing each frame on the ground, gently brushing bees from the frames so there were none left on the hive when they re-assembled it in the back of the truck. When they'd finished, Gerard peered through the masses of confused bees in the dirt, some lifting from it and drifting back toward the direction of the hives. Trent had explained that the entire colony would dazedly return to their known home in the

backyard, but Justina would be stranded because she was too heavy with eggs to fly. The hive would then be queenless and forced to nurture a new one.

Gerard was unable to spot Justina. A dense layer of honey bees carpeted the desert soil, and it was critical to replace the hive body as quickly as possible. When they'd driven the hive back, there were already dozens hovering in the air waiting for them. As the day went on, greater numbers flooded back. After they'd put the structure back together, Trent inspected Gerard's two remaining colonies and outlined suggestions based on wild honey bee models to promote the health and longevity of his hives. As Trent talked, with periodic breaks to lounge in the shade with Julie, Gerard's mind drifted to Justina. The sun had risen high overhead and there were no clouds to shade her from its unrelenting rays. Justina would bake to death if she hadn't already.

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At dusk, when bats swung overhead for suppers of mosquitoes and gnats, Gerard walked first along his pathway and then down the driveway, to the space where they'd left the bees. Julie trailed behind him, but he had no thoughts to spare for her. Several bee carcasses littered the ground when he reached the site; fallen warriors who hadn't survived their temporary displacement. He used a flashlight to scour inch by inch but after an hour of searching, stooped to the ground, he couldn't find her.

Julie hailed him from a crouched position several feet away. She pointed to an unmoving bee beside a small cluster of sage brush. "Is that her?"

This bee was nearly twice the size of a worker and her abdomen narrowed at its end. When Gerard brushed his fingers against one of her wings, she trundled to the side, away from his touch. Warmth pressed behind Gerard's eyes and his throat tightened. To his horror, Julie wavered before him behind a film of unshed tears. He turned away as they flooded from him.

This bee, and the hive he and Zara had nurtured together, was about to die. He thought of the video Zara had made when they'd first purchased Justina and introduced her to the colony. It was the happiest Gerard had seen her, and she glowed with the pride of something she'd managed to accomplish despite her burgeoning fear of the world. With a deep inhalation, Gerard withdrew a small cloth sack from his pocket and, as gently as he could, ushered Justina into it and cradled her within open palms as he walked back to the hives.

Julie matched her pace to his and spoke softly. "This isn't about property, you know." She hesitated. "I miss my mom. I want to feel like she's still around, like I can talk to her or learn the way she thinks about the world." She waved her hand through the air as though she was churning words, working to sift through to the right ones. "It's not like I want to own these different parts of her. Just to know." Her voice was steady and clear.

When they reached the hives, Gerard re-lit the smoker, churned smoke into the disoriented masses, and replaced Justina into its depths. He fought the doubts that crowded him as he placed her back inside and closed his mind against the certainty that he was condemning the entire colony by reinstalling her.

Gerard trailed back toward the house. When Julie didn't follow him this time, he beckoned to her. They reached the house and he held the back door for her and then walked to the bookshelf in the living room. The top shelf held nothing but a long line of DVD disks which Zara had labeled with black Sharpie. He withdrew "Keeping Bees: Day 1" and placed it in the DVD player. He perched on the edge of the couch as Julie settled cross-legged on the floor. Together, they watched as Zara appeared on the television screen, stepping back hurriedly from the video camera before waving. "Welcome to the first day of our beekeeping journey," she said, and seemed to speak directly to them.