

The Bee Whisperer

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Best of Fiction

When I close my eyes, what I remember most about the farm is the mornings and how the sunlight came through the sheer curtains and the breeze blew through the screens. The earthy smell of the farm: hay, horses, chickens, manure, would blow in too, but it was a good smell. A rooster would crow, and I'd hear the coffee percolating downstairs. I always woke up sticky and my hair greasy. My older sister Meg complained and constantly examined her face in the mirror for new zits. The rest of the time, Meg flipped through the latest edition of *Cosmo*, taking quizzes, and avoiding explaining to me what some of the words on the cover meant. I didn't really want to know anyway, after I thought about it, but sometimes my curiosity won out and I'd ask her questions about boys and she'd pretend to be uninterested. Meg was sixteen that summer, and I was twelve.

In early June, we loaded up the car and drove for two hours to Grannie and Grandpa's farm, except Grandpa passed away a couple years before, and Grannie slept in the recliner most of the time with a patchwork quilt over her legs. She couldn't gather the eggs from the chickens anymore. It was my job, and she gave me a quarter for it every day. Dad worked forty hours a week back home at some plant. I think they made engines for Ford. On the weekends, he drove down to the farm and tried to keep it under control: he mowed the lawn, cut the hay, and attempted to keep the brush from taking over the fence lines. It wasn't much of a farm anymore, really. But we called it that out of necessity—even though it wasn't a farm anymore, it had to be to us.

Some mornings, mom cooked a big break-

fast. Usually on the weekends when dad was home. By the end, the kitchen would be covered in flour and grease and the left over scent of bacon.

One such morning, I sat at the table, drawing a picture of the tree out back, the one with the tire swing. The tree was picturesque. Mom bustled into the room, her hairline sweaty. Meg pulled her blonde hair up in a ponytail and took some eggs from Mom and cracked them into the skillet. I sat my sketchpad down and walked over to the stove.

"How do you make pancakes, Mom?" I asked.

"Can you crack an egg?" she said. I nodded. Mom placed the mixing bowl in front of me. "Now scramble it in here and I'll add the flour." She gently poured in the flour and I kept stirring.

"Don't stir too hard," she said. "Pancake batter needs to be a little lumpy. That's how they're fluffy." Mom brushed her hair out of her face and smiled at me. Meg stood at the stove, flipping bacon with a fork and drinking black coffee. I knew she hated black coffee, but it was vogue. Whatever that meant. The month before, cappuccino was vogue. That was before it had too many calories.

"When do I flip them, Mom?" I asked.

"See how this one is getting little bubbles in it?" She took the spatula and lifted up the bottom of the pancake to check the its progress. Pleased, she flipped it over in one swift movement and a perfect golden-brown pancake stared up at me. I flipped the rest by myself, sometimes making a mess, but I placed the plate, toppling with pancakes, on the table proudly.

"I guess you are growing up, aren't you, Kiley?" Dad said. I looked up from spreading but-

ter on my pancakes and didn't know what to say. I'd never thought about growing up, really. It was inevitable and I had dreams and things I wanted to do and be, yet it seemed so far off, so I didn't bother with it much. What about making pancakes signified growing up?

By mid-June, I was sick of the house and the smell of old wood and paper. I wanted my own bed and bathroom. I wanted central air. It rained sporadically and steadily for nearly two weeks. Grannie slept or watched her soaps with the sound blaring. If you turned them off, she'd know immediately whether she was asleep or not. While Mom and Meg organized the attic, cleaned and cleaned until they smelled like bleach and lemon, I collected the eggs from the twelve hens, trying not to think that I was taking away their children. Every morning, I wore my red rain boots and rain jacket to collect the eggs, I washed them and wrote the date on them in pencil, and placed them in cartons. After my chores were done, I stared out the window and drew whatever I saw.

Then my aunt called, and said her and her son Danny were coming to help out. I'd never met Danny, and I hadn't seen my aunt since she was pregnant.

I was in the chicken coop, trying to coax an irritable black hen away from her precious eggs when I heard the car rumbling over the gravel driveway. I ran out of the coop, letting the creaking screen door slam behind me, and into the barn lot, where dad stood, brushing the Appaloosa, Joker. I skidded to a stop when I saw them getting out of the blue SUV. Mom ran outside and hugged my aunt, her sister.

"Come on, Danny," Aunt Janet said.

"Come meet your Aunt Molly." He was small, smaller than I'd imagined, but I didn't know many four-year-olds. He had red-brown hair and freckles and wore khaki shorts and a blue t-shirt. Mom bent down in front of him and said something I didn't hear. Instead of giving her a hug, he shook her hand at first. His mom gave him a nod and he wrapped his arms around my mom. They both laughed.

"Oh, Kiley," Mom said. She waved me over. "Come say hello to your Aunt Janet and Danny." I walked over, my boots sloshing in the yard and the pail of eggs creaking with very movement. I felt strange, as if I'd taken on some persona.

"Hi, Aunt Janet," I said.

"Look at you," she said. "You look so grown up. Danny, this is your cousin Kiley."

"Danny," I said. "Would you like to see the chickens?"

"Can I, Mom?" he asked. His bright blue eyes opened wide, excited at the prospect of real-life chickens.

"Of course."

I held out my hand for Danny to take, it seemed like the right thing to do, and led him over to the coop. A couple chickens clucked outside, eating the rest of the corn I'd thrown out earlier. Inside the coop, the air was dusty. Bits of feathers floated here and there. It wasn't anything exciting, but Danny let go of my hand and walked slowly up to the ornery black hen.

"Be careful," I said. "She doesn't know you yet."

"Hello chicken," he said. "I'm Danny. Does she know me now?"

I laughed. "I guess she does." She ruffled her feathers, stretched, and hopped off her nest, leaving two brown eggs. Danny's eyes were wide. He asked if he could carry one, and I said yes. He

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held it with two hands, as if it were the most precious thing he'd ever seen. I wondered if I ever looked at anything that way before.

I'd come to understand that everything was precious and exciting to Danny. Everything he'd never seen before and everything he had. While the adults took care of the farm and Grannie, I watched Danny. I didn't mind.

The first day I saw him do it, it was so hot that I didn't want to move. We sat in the shade under the oak tree, drinking lemonade. I heard the muffled TV from inside and marveled at how Grannie still had a quilt over her legs and longed for the days when she too sat out in the yard drinking lemonade. I decided I would never get old if I could help it. Danny sat next to me, coloring a picture of some superhero, and I sketched him with charcoal. I couldn't get his hair right. It fell in waves across his ears and forehead, especially in the heat. When I looked back over at him, he was gone. Crayons sprawled in his place.

"Danny?" I said.

"Shh." He turned around and put his fingers to his lips. The overgrown flower garden we called the jungle was in front of him and he tiptoed quietly and slowly toward a light pink peony. I joined him, careful not to make any noise, and curious whether he was simply playing a game, or whether he was after something. He pointed his finger to where a fuzzy bumble bee sat on the flower. He inched closer and closer, his eyes focused.

"Don't Danny," I said. "You can't touch bees. They sting." What would Aunt Janet say if he got stung and I was supposed to be watching him? What if he were allergic and I didn't know?

"Not me," he said. Just before I grabbed his arm, his finger touched the bee gently and it stayed there. I stared, mesmerized, puzzled.

How did he pet bees? How did he not get stung? When he removed his finger, he grinned up at me and clapped his hands. The bee buzzed away. I couldn't believe it.

"How did you do that?" I asked. The humming echoed in my ears.

"Gently."

"But Danny," I said, chasing after him. He tried to pull himself into the tire swing. I lifted him under his armpits and he flung his legs into the opening. "Why didn't it sting you?"

"Bees never sting me," he said, as if it were obvious. "I like bees and they like me."

"Sure. I guess so. But isn't it scary to try and touch bees?"

Danny turned around and glared at me. "I don't try. I touch them every time and it isn't scary at all. Wasps are. Bees are just tiny and fuzzy. You can touch them too, if you try." He slid off the swing and ran inside. It didn't make any sense. I never heard of anyone touching or petting bees. Why was Danny special?

"Aunt Janet?" I said. We sat on the front porch, savoring the cool breeze and watching cars pass by. Danny sat in the yard, waving his arms back and forth, trying to get the cows across the street to look at him. Aunt Janet looked over at me and smiled. Her and my mom looked a lot alike: long wavy, brown hair and green eyes, freckles speckled across their noses. I liked to think that I looked like them. They were pretty in a classy, down to earth sort of way. Aunt Janet was supposedly wilder than my mom, though. She dropped out of college and ran off with some guy, Danny's dad, and no one heard from her for quite a while. She didn't seem so wild anymore; I guessed having a kid made you grow up.

"Did you know that Danny can pet bees?"

She laughed. "It's curious, isn't it? The first

time he was only two, and I turned my back for one second and when I looked back around, there he was, with his little finger on a bee. I picked him up immediately, but he was okay, happy even. He looks for them now, whenever we're outside."

"But why do you think he can pet them?"

Aunt Janet thought for a moment and watched Danny, who was trying his hardest to sound like a cow. His moos got deeper by the second.

"I've wondered that, but I don't have an answer," she said. "He always says he isn't afraid and that he touches them gently. It's almost like someone coming up to a dog or a horse for the first time. Maybe bees are just misunderstood. Sometimes the most brilliant things in the world are the ones we can't explain."

I may not have understood everything about Cosmo, or why my sister needed to take tons of quizzes to know her personality or know how to get the "perfect guy," who according to her was some guy named Jeremy who played guitar and wore Converse tennis shoes. But I did understand that at some point, my body would change and I dreaded the thought.

It was supposed to be a good day. Dad said I could finally ride Joker, as long as he held a rope and I held on tightly to the reins. Joker was old and a little temperamental. Everyone stood at the gate, watching. I put my left foot in the stirrup and my left arm up on the saddle. Dad hoisted my other leg over, but I slipped a little and my chest fell on the saddle.

"Ouch," I said. I rubbed it, despite everyone looking. Mom and Aunt Janet looked at one another. Dad was oblivious. He led me around the barn lot at a slow trot. The wind blew through my

hair and Joker seemed happy. Dad ran and Joker picked up his speed. I laughed and held on tighter. I felt high off the ground and invincible. Joker was majestic and beautiful, even mysterious. When Dad helped me down, he gave me a couple apples to feed Joker. I put them in my palm, fingers straight, and laughed when he took them in one bite. His big, brown eyes looked at me and he shook his head, trying to get the flies away. I wondered what he thought about and what he saw. Was the world only apples and straw to him?

My stomach hurt a little all day, but I didn't think much of it. I thought I'd eaten too much at breakfast or maybe I hadn't eaten enough. I was too focused on riding Joker to think about anything else too deeply. But when I went to the restroom, there was blood.

I stared at it, confused and scared at first. Why was I bleeding? Was I hurt? Did I need to go to the hospital? Through the panic, I realized I was fine—I'd started my period. But I cried anyway. I cried harder than the

time Meg accidentally hit me in the face with a softball. Ever since I heard about periods, I dreaded getting it. It seemed a nuisance and that it came much too soon—I was only twelve. I wasn't ready to be a woman, yet.

"Mom," I said, through the crack in the bathroom door. She rushed over, concerned. When she came, I closed the door behind her and told her I'd started my period. She didn't say a word, she just wrapped her arms around me and let me cry.

"I know," she said. "I'm sorry. I know. It'll be okay." I washed my face, changed, and pretended nothing was wrong. I couldn't make eye contact with Dad. We girls loaded up the car, drove to a Super Target, and got everything I needed, and a

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training bra while we were at it.

"Do you like this one or this one?" Mom said, holding up two different colored bras.

"Mom, people will see," I said. I pushed them down and out of the way. "It doesn't matter."

"I'll get both."

When Mom and Aunt Janet were out of ear shot, Meg took me aside in the cereal aisle. No one was around.

"I know it sucks," Meg said. "It actually, really sucks. But you get used to it. Everyone understands, so you don't have to be embarrassed."

"You weren't embarrassed?" I shifted from one foot to the other and pulled at my shirt.

"Of course I was," Meg said. "Remember that pool party Cam had a few summers ago? You thought I was sick, but I'd actually started my period. I was the first of my friends to. It was awful. But I know now that you don't have to be embarrassed or anything. Every girl goes through it some time."

"But doesn't it mean..." I choked on the words. "Doesn't it mean I'm not a kid anymore?"

"I guess so, but that depends on you, I think."

On Grannie's good days, we played gin rummi. She always won, no matter how hard I tried. At seventy-nine, she was still as competitive as a teenager. I didn't mind though. I guessed it gave her something to feel accomplished about.

"Oh Kiley," she said, after she'd just squashed me in a game. She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. Danny ran past the window trying to catch a butterfly. Aunt Janet ran up behind him and swung him around in the air. It was a rare day in late July when the heat wasn't sweltering. "Will you promise me something?"

"I guess," I said. Grannie and I didn't talk

much, not since she'd gotten sick. When I first saw her after the stroke, I didn't know who she was. I wondered if that was what happened when you got old: you forgot who you were and not just your name, but what made you, you. Like when you're a baby, you don't know who you are yet and you discover yourself and make yourself over time, but in reverse. Her eyes were usually far off after that, but the real Grannie sparked in them that afternoon.

"Don't ever let yourself forget how beautiful the world can be. That's what happens to a lot of grown-ups. Even me. There's always something to appreciate."

"Okay, Grannie. I won't." She fell asleep after that, leaving me confused. I wanted to ask her what she meant. What had she not appreciated? Before I could ask, she clutched her chest and gasped for breath. The adults crowded around her and gave her oxygen, while I backed away, picked up the cards, and joined Danny and Meg outside. Danny kept saying, "Push me, Kiley! Push me!" He rocked the swing back and forth impatiently.

My stomach tightened and my ears grew hot. Meg and I exchanged a look of wide eyes and fear. I held my breath and watched everyone through the window. It wasn't the first time Grannie had an attack, as we called them, but they were never easy. I pushed Danny, slowly. He kicked his small legs, trying to do it himself. Inside the house, it calmed down. Grannie was okay. I exhaled, relieved. Mom handed Grannie a glass of water and helped her drink it through a straw. Grannie's hands shook, and Aunt Janet rubbed her shoulder.

I heard a bee buzz by my ear and backed away. Even though we called Danny the bee whisperer, I was afraid they'd sting me. He heard the bee too and stood in attention. The bee landed on a red rose on the side of the house. I didn't think anything of it. I'd seen Danny pet bees a dozen times

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by then, but this time, when he ran toward the bee, he must've frightened it. When he screamed, I jolted out of my day dream and ran after him. Did he prick his finger on the bush? Did he step on something? He was always running around barefoot. Did he trip? Meg reached him first and picked him up. He held up his finger—it was red and swelling by the second. The bee stung him.

He wailed, more out of his feelings being hurt than anything, I thought. Aunt Janet ran outside and took him from Meg who couldn't get him to calm down. We followed aunt Janet inside. Grannie sat in the recliner, her hand still on her chest, but okay. Still here. I watched as Mom mixed baking soda and water together and to make a paste to relieve the sting. I felt as if I were witnessing some alternate reality. How could Danny get stung by his small, fuzzy friend? I didn't understand how everything could change so quickly. Or maybe I didn't want to accept that it could, even though the evidence was in front of my face.

Danny didn't pet bees the rest of the summer. I tried and failed to coax him to. I searched and longed to hear the familiar buzzing. But he wouldn't budge. He looked at his finger and shook his head. He preferred to run around and play tag or swing. I realized he was afraid. He'd been hurt and his little life had changed, too. I didn't want him to be afraid; I didn't want to be afraid.

On our last day at the farm, I collected two dozen eggs. A farmer down the road bought the chickens and Joker. We couldn't stay and take care of the farm. We had our own home and lives to get back to. I said goodbye to each chicken, fed Joker an apple, and packed the cards Grannie and I played gin rummi with in my bag. They were worn, brown at the edges, and flimsy. But that was what made them special. We took Grannie to a nursing home, and I figured we could play when

we visited.

I sat near the garden, watching Dad and the farmer load up the animals, and I sketched a bee. It looked harmless on paper, lovely even. I flipped through my sketches and came across the one of Danny coloring. I ran my hand over the picture and watched Danny draw with a stick in the dirt. That's when I heard the loud hum of a bee, and I knew what I had to do.

"Danny," I said. The bee landed on the pink peonies. Danny walked over, hesitant, sure I was trying to get him to touch a bee again. But I wasn't.

I held out my finger, and slowly, gently moved it forward. The bee moved over the flowers and I winced, but smiled at Danny. I had to go through with it. I felt the fuzzy bee underneath my finger and I laughed and Danny did, too. The bee flew away without stinging me. I had pet a bee.

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