

See?

by David Ackley

Thousands of swarming Carnolian honeybees have collected on a shrub behind the garden fence in a seething football-sized cluster around the old queen. Smaller blobs of bees dangle from the bottom of the cluster; with every one in constant motion it's hard to tell whether they're climbing aboard or dropping off. From a whirling vortex circling the swarm-cluster comes the pulsing roar of beating wings. I imagine the old queen's call: *Arise, ye masses, arise! We must flee, the usurpers are already within, gathering strength, grooming a newer, sleeker me. I go to seek a new home in exile. Arise, and come with me!*

This is only Ellen's second year of beekeeping and we're not really ready for a swarm.

The first year had been inauspicious; when she'd taken off honey in June, one of the hives, collectively enraged at the piracy of the stores they'd been putting by since April lay siege to the house and garage for a full day, buzzing the car whenever we drove in or out. I swore I could see them hovering at the picture window scouting our next move so they could head us off.

Next day they went sullenly back to business but they never really forgave us and carried on a brushfire insurgency for the rest of the summer. In August I made the mistake of walking barefoot in the backyard and one of them with a long memory for my pheromone thrust her venomous little lance into the tender sole of my right foot and dropped me howling to my knees.

A week or two later, I came directly from work to meet her at a dinner party. I saw Ellen across the room and sat down beside her on the couch; she was pink-cheeked and seemed mildly excited.

"What you been up to ?" I said, once I'd hit the hostess up for a glass of wine.

"Nothing much," she said. "Working the bees. Had to go to the emergency room. The usual stuff." She'd neglected to clamp the leg of her protective suit and taken the cover off the nasty hive, heedless of the cry of *Arise, ye masses, arise!* that went up from the sergeant of the watch.

They boiled over the top, enveloped her and gave her fifty or so stings on and around her exposed ankle. She'd recognized the early symptoms of anaphalactic shock, and driven herself to the emergency room where she was given a shot of adrenaline and a prescription for an epinephrine pen in case it ever happened again. And that was it. She was fine.

But I was not and though we lost that hive over the winter and it was replaced by a package of gentler Carnolians, I'd been giving both hives a wide berth this summer, while trying to stay within sight when she was working them.

Life seems a risky enough business in the normal course of things without harboring creatures of unpredictable disposition that have the capacity and occasionally the inclination to do you serious harm. But she loved beekeeping and I liked her love of it, even though it made me nervous.

I liked to watch her, from a safe distance, of course. Once she'd completed her work on the hive, she'd sit close by on the old kitchen chair I'd put out for her, her long amber hair draped over the shoulders of her white suit, chin in hand, watching their comings and goings. I didn't know exactly what she was seeing or thinking that put a slight frown and a half-smile on her face at once, one of her

mysteries I'd yet to solve.

So now I've been recruited to help her hive this swarm. Since we have just the single protective suit and she's the one with the allergy, I'm wearing only a t-shirt, Sox cap, jeans and sneakers: no gloves, not even socks. In for a dime, in for a dollar.

She's brought one of her beekeeping manuals from her library. We consult twenty feet from the swarm-cluster, trying to match our situation to the diagrams and text. According to the book, the procedure is simple.

You cut the branch the swarm cluster is clinging to, dropping branch and cluster onto a sheet prepositioned on the ground along with a super containing a few frames of brood--the bees' larvae. Responding to the scent of the brood, the swarm begins to settle on the frames with a little help from the person on the ground; eventually, drawn in, the flying outliers follow. When the queen goes in, they've accepted it as their new home.

I could imagine, however, another scenario: The call to arms, *Arise, ye masses, arise!* sounds as the cluster-bomb hits the ground and all hell breaks loose in the form of a few thousand highly pissed-off and heavily armed honeybees with one convenient target in their sights.

"They don't sting when they're swarming," she says.

"Where does it say that?"

"Here." She puts her finger on the page. "It says they're full of honey and there's no home to defend, so they have no reason to sting."

Sometimes it doesn't hurt to be an English teacher, especially when it comes to the close reading of texts. I move her finger. "It says they

usually don't sting."

"So?" she says.

It isn't a big enough hole to wiggle through. I'm going to have to do it in a way that's a far cry from the clips on television of swarms in half-evacuated football stadiums with teams of beekeepers dressed like Hazmat workers.

But oddly, despite last summer, I'm not really scared. The swarming bees seem preoccupied, some at the top of the whirling cylinder, winging off in all directions, others diving back into the vortex. Everything is about their new home. *There? No. Over this way? No, not there. Where? Where?*

Why would they even see or care about me? For all their interest, I might be in another dimension.

And then it hits me that I want to be in there with them, just to see what it's like and and at that I walk forward and step into the vortex, with only a hint of tension in the double bump of my sometimes erratic heart passing through the outer ring of bees to within a few feet of the swarm-cluster.

There's no sign they even know I'm there. Only one touches me in a little collision against my cheek, a light pop, politely discounted as if we'd bumped on a London Street.

Inside there's a dark, deep fragrance of honey, and other faintly bitter traces that must be their intensified pheromone, and the undulating roar of their millions of wingbeats.

The skeins of their flight rise and fall, expand and contract, circle above, cross and recross, the light altered by their dark little bodies in the shadow and the ping of refracted beams off their wings when

they zip across the open yard. The forms are only glimpsed, a little filament of quick strung behind in the air, what surrounds me an interrupted silken net perpetually reweaving in three dimensions while violently shaken to make the strands vibrate and whip. I feel more than understand the purpose informing it all, bees nothing if not purpose, the motion merely the incidental but stingingly resonant song to which we write words like home and exile and us and all and soon.

After a while I turn to look at Ellen through the whirling net of bees. She's moved closer, her face exposed, her veil and the closed book held to her chest, that half-smile half-frown on her face, her eyes glistening. I read the question she needs neither to speak nor let form on her lips.

