

The Bee Factory

by Dawn Corrigan

The tourist season hasn't yet begun, so the beachfront inn has only a few guests. Some of us walk on the beach; each leaves the others plenty of room. Along the edge of the water eight sandpipers play tag with the waves. They look like birds on film played at a too-fast speed.

I turn away from the water, walk up the beach and over the wooden bridge. I wander through town. The streets are deserted. At one house the gate leading to the backyard is left open. Tools and children's toys are scattered on the lawn, a domestic still life.

I look for the faded pink houses that are always found in towns by the sea. I'd like to live in such a house.

Eventually I arrive at the bee factory, a six-story brick building as tidy as the neat homes around it. There's employee parking around the building, and an archway covers the entrance. *Honey-tongued is this innocent labour*, reads the inscription over the arch. Just beyond there's a guard booth. I ask the guard for a tour; he directs me to the Foreman.

Inside are corridors with offices branching off in all directions. I find the Foreman and he tells me the factory's history. "For centuries humans kept bees for honey, but always outdoors in small hives. Then more was learned about the bee and her habits: the time she spends cleaning the hive, how long it takes to extract nectar from each flower.

"Someone figured if humans did these extra tasks, the bees might adapt and make more honey. Of course, it would have to be on a large scale to make money. So the first bee factory was opened in Europe. When it was clear it would succeed, someone built this factory."

Now he leads me into a booth from which we can look down into one of the giant hives. The room is cavernous; its activity tiny and swarming. Several humans in protective clothing move about on the floor below. "What are they doing?" I ask.

"The bees are making honey," he replies. "Notice how they continuously fly back and forth from the feeder, which is filled with nectar, in the middle of the room. The humans perform other tasks essential to the hive, such as feeding the young and cleaning out dead bodies. Up to half a million bees a day may die in here. In nature, ridding the hive of corpses is the first job bees perform as adults."

"I guess these bees don't pollinate any flowers," I say.

"That's right," the Foreman agrees. "But don't worry, there are plenty of bees left outside to take care of the flowers. I'm surprised you haven't mentioned the noise," he adds. "Most people comment on it right away."

I've been so busy observing the bees that the factory's sound has not registered on my consciousness until now. I realize my head is full of a continuous murmuring. "People either hate that noise or love it. There's no in between," the Foreman says. "Of course everyone who works here is of one mind about it."

We continue on to other parts of the factory, where the honey is blended, processed, jarred. Then the tour is over. "Come back whenever you please," the Foreman says.

I return the next day. On the third day the Foreman offers me a position. Working on the floor, cleaning the hive. I accept the job.

That night I speak to my husband on the phone. At first he doesn't believe me when I say I have a job. "Melissa, what are you talking about?" he asks. "You have three kids here. Is this a joke?" Then he puts my mother on the phone. She's there helping with the children.

"What's this all about?" she says. She's moving into another room so my husband can't hear her. "Do you want to leave him?"

I say that I have found something interesting to do, that I want to stay where I am and do it. *Honey-tongued is this innocent labour*. My mother says, "All right, baby. We'll call you tomorrow, okay?"

At the other end of the line my husband has entered the room and is staring at my mother. "Don't look at me like that," she snaps, after she's hung up. "Of course I don't think it's all right, but I can't

tell from here what's happened, if she's had a breakdown or what. Someone has to go to her."

The next day after work when I get back to the hotel I find my best friend standing outside, smoking a cigarette. "Hello," she says. "I've been sent to rescue you. Not that I'm inclined to do so. I hope you're leaving the bastard."

I ask her, "Do you have a car?" I've been walking to and from work each day.

"I rented one at the airport. Let's go shopping," she says. In the car she asks a lot of questions. I don't answer. I'm thinking about how the bees look when they emerge from their birth cells.

By the time we arrive at the mall I can see my friend is worried. She tries to be gentle. "Why don't we buy something to send the kids?"

Yes, I should send them something. I pick up a pile of postcards, but all the pictures are of bees. One shows the factory just as it looked the first day I saw it. There are close-ups of the bees and their perfect anatomy. My favorite picture shows the bees swarming, and I am at the center, their queen.

But I can't send this picture to the children; they'd be afraid. There are many things I'll have to shed before I can go home, including this woman, gently nagging because she thinks it's her duty. I set the cards down and begin looking for gifts for the kids, sun and some honey.

