

The Alchemist

by DJ Young

The pedigree of honey
Does not concern the bee;
A clover, any time, to him
Is aristocracy.

- *Emily Dickinson*

She knew the house would be hers, the woods, the pond, and the bees. She knew these places better than anyone. Her father wouldn't have it; nothing made sense now that his own mother was gone. She had wanted her ashes scattered, but he just couldn't, not yet. He wanted to say something at the service, he would have, he meant to, but whenever he started to speak, that choke would climb up from his stomach and seal off his throat. Tamsin spoke instead. She knew the words. She knew, just like that.

She had grown up in her grandmother's home, halfway up the mountain, bordered with firs and pines, dandelion fields, crab grass and clover. In the summer, the sun rose and set from the pond and barely a breeze paid visit. It was perfect for the bees. Her grandmother showed her everything. They were apiarists.

She would care for them now.

They lost her in June, on the longest day of the year. Tamsin had been tossing wood chips in the pond, her grandmother slicing the cappings from the combs. They were always quiet in their work, absorbing the sound of the bees, their fragile hum. The sun dripping over the tree tops, running sticky down their trunks. Touch the bark and you'd sink into the amber. Wait a millennia or so until all your saplings sprout wings. They'll fall for the first blossom of spring. You'll see. We all come home sometime.

She never wears gloves anymore. She did at first, when she was learning how to be gentle; how to move when lifting the supers, how to be slow and deliberate, in the moment. She'd never been stung in her life. Some vocations are a calling.

Some are written in the skin.

Two days later Tamsin woke early, dressed, and wandered into the back garden. *Pyrus salicifolia pendula*: the weeping willowleaf pear. *Nepeta faassenii*: Catmint. Walker's Low. *Alchemilla mollis*: Lady's Mantle - her grandmother kept wildness in order. The white/yellow/green/purple blooms had been tamed. Standing near, her fingers grazing the green, she felt she might take root there herself. Let the lichen and the mosses swallow me whole, give me disguise. Translate me.

Half way up a mountain, even in summer, smells of snow and smoke and rose. And honey. Smells that start on your tongue. The sweet and the well fermented. Nothing begins, but all things show. From the smallest part to the tallest, seedling to root, to leaf, to bloom to seed again, all things. Her grandmother was out there, somewhere, just a sprout - another scent. Her bees would find her, summon her nectar, and make her gold again.

She walked to the old barn her grandmother used for storage. The large extractors and storage containers lined up in a dark corner, and the tables covered in glass jars with a simple white label. Red lettering spelled out Midsommer Honey. In another, darker corner, the small meadery with long racks of wine bottles: Midsommer Mead. A low shelf held small containers with hand-written labels. On the labels was a single word: Must.

Yes, she's nodding to herself. Yes you must.

A thick book lay across a desk. She flipped through the loose, hand-written pages, each noting a different recipe: metheglin, rhodomel, capsicurnel and assorted melomels. There were notes on fining and final gravity; the process of clarifying, of completion. There's a trick to it, but it's simple. Just takes practice. Dusty bottles on the racks have been there for two or three years. Their time has come.

Behind the desk an old, oaken cabinet, all glass in front (replaced twice in the last three or four years, not easy to do) held trophies and medals. 1945 — Second Place. 1946 — 1957 — First Place. Back when she cared to enter. When having a medal sold a few

cases more than not having a medal. No one knew what mead was back then. She had given them her apple-pear melomel. Such a surprise it was, she'd said. She often used blueberries and cranberries and loganberries. She tried cantaloupe once. Once. Her grandmother had been a scientist, an alchemist. She could turn almost anything into gold.

Her grandmother worked alone, for years. Her husband took his leave early on. Her son was no help. His wives were never interested. His only child would sneak in the pantry and fall asleep licking her fingers. Every summer she stayed here, growing up. Every summer she wrote out Midsommer Honey on small labels and affixed them to jars. Every summer she went with her grandmother to the Farmer's Market and sat on a small stool, smiling, offering a sample. Her grandmother told her that freckles were sun kisses. Summertime always meant freckles, labels, samples and the bees. She was the alchemist's apprentice.

She closes the book - none to follow now. We'll sell the place and keep the recipes, she thinks. The bees will need a new home. The trees will be forested. The pond will cloud over in mud. The streams will send silt to the rivers, to the oceans. It will settle on the surface, blocking the sun from everything below. Everything below will die. This is how it works. The bee brings the nectar, laces the comb and the comb is extracted, filtered, pressed, preserved, sold, consumed and synthesized. This is how it all works.

No and no and no and no. Home is home, for us all. Work it out. There is a way. Nothing owing on the house or the land, taxes will be paid somehow and the bills will be paid too. There is enough left over to last awhile. Someone needs a summer job, some kid from town, nothing to worry about right now. Just turn the bottles, get the boxes, it's not too much for you to do today. Check the hives. There's gold to mine. You could use the company.

You could use the company. Don't get lost.

Grandmother repeating herself again; peculiar habit, she loved it.

Tell me something else. What else should I know?

She watched sunset dappling along the branches and purple wings here and gone. The hives were kept in the widest clearing of the copse; light speckled in drops all around, the outdoor cathedral impression, so quiet, ethereal and comforting. The supers arranged in rows, waist-high from their foundations, their siding flecked and peeling. Hat and veil hung off a branch, but she didn't reach for them this time. She closed her eyes and listened.

You can hear anything in it, just concentrate. Sound is vibration, just vibration and frequency. So many voices, so many little vibrations and all you hear is one, complete sound. A perfect sound. Everyone in accord. A chord. A chorus. We could all use some company.

They used pine straw and burlap for the smoker to gentle the bees. She lifted an outer cover and set it on the ground. Slowly, she reached in and lifted out a frame. Here's company. They drifted up, just hanging there, around her hands and elbows, distracted. Like bathing in — what exactly? It is like washing up in a way. You feel clean doing it, yes? Yes. This is what you do. You're not afraid. You've never been afraid. She was never afraid. This is the sweetest thing. The combs are full and red. You can almost see through them.

These are Italian bees, *apis mellifera ligustica*. They are yellow bees, very gentle and very popular. We tried German black bees once, but they are too aggressive. Nervous bees.

Once, a long time ago, her grandmother just scraped them off her arms. You have to scrape them off. Trying to pinch the stinger off just pushes the poison further in. But you can't be too careful. She always kept epinephrine handy just in case.

The clouds are drying up the sky. Static sparks on the power lines.

Do you know what today is?

It's midsummer night's eve. It is also St. John's Eve, the patron saint of beekeepers. The full moon out there, if you can see it — is called the mead moon, or the honeymoon. Not many people know that.

Mead is older than the hills. Before anyone knew how to do anything to grapes or barley, they were making mead. Like someone just took the sun, bottled it up, and said: 'now wasn't that easy?'

Her grandmother once went all around Indonesia, India, and drank her first mead at a Buddhist festival. She could never remember the pronunciation, but it meant something like 'festival of the honey moon.' There was a story about Buddha and a monkey out in the wilderness. That's what the festival was about.

Buddha went into the woods for some reason and while he was there this monkey gave him honey to eat. The monkey was so happy when Buddha accepted his gift that he went flying around from tree to tree — until he missed a branch and fell to his death. As his reward though, he achieved *Nirvana*. At this festival, people went around giving the Buddhist monks honey as a gift.

Must be a fable they conjured up so the people would offer up their honey — there was a time when it was very rare and difficult to obtain. Nice scheme though, so they wouldn't have to work or pay for it.

There's a story about the Heliades - they were the daughters of Helios, the sun god. There were eight of them and a boy. One of the daughters was named Merope and there's actually a lot of Meropes, but the one in this story had a bee-face or a bee-mask. It meant that she was like honey. She was a goddess of Crete, where mead came from, they say.

When their brother Phaeton was killed, the sisters mourned so much that the other gods turned them into trees and their tears turned into amber that fell into this river. It's funny sometimes how everywhere in mythology there are people being turned into

something else. Rocks, trees, flowers and stars: Narcissus becomes a flower. Merope became a tree. The bee becomes the honey. The honey becomes the bee.

There is another Merope, though possibly the same one — a Pleiades. They were virgins protected by Artemis, the goddess of the Moon. This Merope married a mortal, a king, but she must have lived to regret it. The Pelaiades were turned into stars. You can see them in the constellation Taurus, the seven sisters. They are very bright, but Merope is only the fifth brightest, all because she got married.

What's interesting about the Pleiades is all the gas that surrounds them. They're not hot enough to make them glow so all those tiny dust grains embedded in the cloud scatter and reflect to make this beautiful blue reflection nebula. It's at its highest around Merope. They're pretty young as far as stars go: only around 100 million years or so.

Tamsin is seven years old. The sky is the bluest she has ever known. Her grandmother's voice, distilling, everywhere:

I never hear anything but the bees. Do you know why bees hum? They don't know the words.

Did you know that honeybees are mostly female? They don't live very long, just a few weeks really. It's the female that delivers the sting and dies.

Hindus believe honey gives ever-lasting life.

But they believe there really is no beginning or end, so there is no life or death.

She's got her finger in the jar again. Sounds like they just want an excuse to have lots of honey.

Summer will always taste like this.

This is what she said - and all there was to say.

Fine white speckles, like petal blossoms, swarm in the breeze, the last drips of the sun setting them ablaze, like fireflies.

Tamsin watches the remains as they drift into the darkness, a hint of lavender. A new constellation in the sweet hereafter.

END

