

# Honey Bee Men

by Michelle McEwen

"Men can be good," Ma said this morning. "Take Ebbie for instance--he raised you like you was his own from two months old." But every time she tells somebody else about Ebbie, my age changes: sometimes I'm a week old, sometimes three months old, or four months old. Although it has been sixteen years since I've been a baby, I will never understand how a mother could forget such things. When I ask her how come she can never remember what age I was when she's talking to other folks, she just says "How you expect me to remember that long ago?" Sometimes, I think she makes me younger when she's talking to people she doesn't really know or who don't really know her-- trying to make Ebbie seem good-er than he was. He wasn't too good, I like to tell her, since he took off when I was six. Left Ma for a woman carrying his own baby. "He's my flesh and blood," Ebbie had shouted from the driver's seat of his long, brown car as he backed down the driveway. Me and Ma missed that car at first, but then we came to remember how we used to love walking to the store together in the evenings for ginger ale and scratch tickets. One evening, on our way back from the store, Ma had told me that Ebbie only left us 'cause *that woman* was carrying a boy and would probably name it after him like all clingy women do.

And she did: Ebenezer Louie White, Jr.

I don't know why my mother considers Ebbie one of the good ones. Maybe because he never left a palm print on her face (like how she say Randy did). Maybe because he never yanked hair from her scalp or scratched her so hard the mole under her right eye came off (like how she say my real daddy -- before he was my daddy -- did). Maybe because Ebbie never really left for good. He just left our house. He still came around to check on Ma and me and he would run her to the store sometimes if it was pouring down rain or lightning out. His

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new woman didn't like that too much and she told my mother so down at the post office. Ma swears *that woman* followed her there. After that incident (the police were called), Ebbie phoned more than came over, but he still came, up until now, at times-- drunk, frowning, and complaining about E.J.'s mama. Ma swears she hasn't touched a man since Ebbie-- and not even Ebbie since that last time before he took off. *That woman* would've had you thinking otherwise, though.

I don't know why she brought up Ebbie this particular morning except that she's been seeming like she's been dreaming while awake lately: slow-walking (floating?) and standing at the screen door looking out but looking at nothing. Most times, these days, since he hasn't been by our place in almost a year, she only brings up Ebbie when she sees him out with his woman and son.

Last night, in the driveway, she was talking to one of the newer neighbors. I, nosy and listening from the porch with the neighbor's younger sister, Bev, heard Ma say that she wished men were more like honey bees. "I just wish they would sting me and die!" I knew what she meant by sting. I've been stung a couple times (by one boy) and I would never want *him* to die. I told Bev this and she said that that was my youth talking. Bev (five years older than me) said, "I get what your mom means" and her smile, the one that seemed to never leave her face, left. She just sat there nodding and listening to my mother talking to her sister.

"When they're dead," Ma had said, "all you have to do is miss 'em; you don't have to worry about 'em or nothing!" Bev left my side then and joined her sister and my mother in the driveway. Ma's curls had fallen from the nighttime humidity. "It's..." she started to say but paused and looked down the driveway toward the road as if she had seen somebody coming. "It's when they're living and breathin' somewhere else and loving someone else while you're still loving them," Ma continued, "that makes it so hard." By this time, Ma was

fussing with her dress straps like she always does 'cause they never stay on her shoulders. "Sting me and die," she said again-- almost singing.

