

Behind the (Beekeeper's) Veil

by Sandra Knauf

Tony kept calling me Marsha.

“Look over here, Marsha,” he beckoned. My attention was fixed on the activity going on above my head so I didn't look over until he called again. Then it dawned on me--he thought *I* was Marsha. The mistake was understandable. Although he'd helped me dress just a few minutes ago, he didn't know me. We'd just met the night before.

I turned on the ladder step and looked down. I was about seven feet up, underneath a white pine. The wind blew slightly, cool and crisp, typical for a April morning in front range Colorado.

A few feet above my head was a swarm of five thousand bees.

I smiled down at Tony, even though it wouldn't show, from behind the veil. Tony took my picture.

I've always liked insects and bees are one of my favorites; attractive, industrious and socially complex, they live in amazing hive-cities, and create one of nature's most perfect, delicious foods. While I'm not a beekeeper, yet, my curiosity has been taking me in that direction. Just the spring before I'd attended a Beginning Beekeeping class, held by the Pikes Peak Beekeepers Association. The two days of instruction covered every-thing from bee anatomy to honey extraction, but what really made my antennae stand up was the session on swarm capture. From what I gathered, capturing a swarm of bees was a profitable, yet nearly risk-free adventure--and as easy as stealing candy from a baby.

A jolly, bearded, ursine man by the name of Mike presented the session, starting by telling us why swarming occurs.

“The primary reason is overcrowding,” he said. “To keep the hive healthy and to increase their population elsewhere, they divide.”

First, he explained, they have to begin the process of producing a new queen for the existing hive. The nurse bees do this by feeding a few of the larvae royal jelly. The larvae eat and grow and then soon enter their final metamorphic stage into adulthood. The first queen bee who hatches usually wins, by dispatching of her still-pupating rivals; in fact, a queen's stinger is used only for that purpose. But even before this, the old queen, who first had food withheld from her so she'd stop laying eggs, and then was further harassed by her hive-mates so she'd get down to a trim flying weight, has left with at least half of the hive.

Since it can take several days to find a location for a hive and become settled in, the departing bees gorge themselves on honey for the trip. They're so stuffed their bodies are taut, making it nigh-impossible for them to curve around and sting. The binge also renders them docile. Usually the swarm will land within one to two hundred feet of the old hive, and they'll hang on a tree or shrub branch together, with the queen protected near the middle, while scout bees make a final decision on their new place to live. During a warm period, they release and fly together to the new digs. While the entire process can stretch out over a period of several weeks, the swarming itself usually occurs during a single day.

"All you really need for a capture, if the swarm is in a convenient place, is a couple of cardboard boxes with lids," Mike said. He stroked his dark beard while looking around the class, a motley group of young, old and middle-aged participants. I could see he was fully enjoying our surprised expressions. "I use paper boxes, the kind reams of paper come in. You can also use an empty hive super, which is the box-like section of a commercial hive. Of course, any openings have to be duct taped. Then, if the swarm's in a bush near the ground, where it's easily accessible, you can just put the box directly underneath it, give the branch they're hanging on a good jerk, and they fall in." He grinned. "It's like one bee's holding onto the branch and then someone's holding on to him and so on, in a big chain, so when you shake it and the one lets go, they all let go."

Mike's grin doesn't leave as the class chuckles at the image. "Within a few minutes the remaining bees will form a smaller cluster, so you just have a second box on hand to get those. You can even have a third box, but the bees that are left will return to the hive."

He told how he typically wears only a veil for protection (no gloves or suit) while capturing a swarm. "The bees are sluggish from all that honey," he said, "they're really almost incapable of stinging you."

He talked about bait hives that bee catalogues sell to capture swarms. "They don't really work very well, but I did find something that does. It's a huge paper pot with a lid that you hang from a tree with wire. In it you place a lure, artificial queen pheromone, that's also available through the catalogues.

"The scout bees will find the pot and look around for the queen but won't find her. They'll measure the pot, to make sure it's adequate in size, then they'll report back to the swarm that they've found a home. Two years ago I captured five swarms this way, but when I tried to use the queen pheromone again a year later it didn't work. Apparently it doesn't work if it's not fresh."

Mike said the Beekeepers Association worked with the County Extension Office, the Department of Wildlife and the Humane Society each spring, taking calls from frantic homeowners who notice a swarm on their property and want something done about it--immediately. It doesn't matter that the bees will leave on their own in a day or so at the most; the swarms are perceived as a serious threat. So he or another beekeeper on the "swarm list" goes out and captures the bees to add to their own colonies. Mike said it was fun to have people watch, impressed with the apparent bravery of the swarm catcher.

"One morning I got a call," he told us. "There was a swarm at an elementary school, in a bush near the front door. By the time I got there, they had several classes standing out on the sidewalk to observe. I decided to give them a good show. There I was, standing close to the swarm, showing them my beekeeper's suit, my veil and

my gloves and taking my time putting them on, all the while talking about the bees. After I finally dressed, I turned to begin the capture--and the bees took off," Mike snapped his thick fingers, "just like that." He laughed, a deep belly-laugh. "I had taken too long. Boy, I can tell you, that was very impressive."

By the end of the presentation all I could think was-- *This is so cool. I want to capture a swarm one day.*

A year later I attended the Pikes Peak Beekeepers Association's spring meeting. I went knowing it was almost swarm season and the beekeepers would be putting together a swarm list. I wanted to be on that list. The meeting, one of only four each year, and the first one I had ever attended, took place on a pleasant mid-April evening at a neighborhood church. After the informal used beekeeping equipment sale in the parking lot, the thirty to forty members and their guests moved inside. While we settled into our folding chairs, waiting for the meeting to begin, I listened to the two men sitting in the row in front of me talk.

The older of the two, who looked to be in his seventies, was thin and grizzled. He wore loose faded jeans and a worn madras print shirt. "The tree was taken down," he said, in a tone loud enough for surrounding beekeepers to hear, "and about five hundred pounds of honey was recovered."

"Five hundred?" repeated the man next to him. He was nice looking, neatly dressed, appeared to be in his mid-to-late fifties, just a little younger than my dad. He paused for a moment, considering. "You'd have to scrape it off, then filter it. There'd be a lot of junk in it; dead bees, stuff from the tree."

"One time I captured a swarm in the woods, then found the tree it came from," said the old-timer. "I knocked the tree down, took the rest of the bees and the honey, then cleaned up the honey and fed it back to them."

The buzzing quieted down as the president of the Association opened the meeting. He asked for guests to introduce themselves,

and when it was my turn I told the group that I was a writer and gardener; that I had attended the beekeeping class the year before and was interested in observing a swarm capture.

I took my seat and the two men who had been talking turned to me.

The one closest, the fifty-something man, whispered, "There's a swarm by the Country Club. We're going to capture it tomorrow. Do you want to go in the morning, if they're still there?"

"Sure," I answered, stunned by the immediate gratification of my heart's desire. The man introduced himself as Tony and drew a map showing how to get to his house. He said he'd call me by 8 A.M. and let me know if the bees were still there. He said he had a veil I could borrow and instructed me to wear light colored clothing.

The next morning I awoke early, wondering about the swarm, hoping it was still there. I dressed in khakis, cowboy boots, and a long-sleeved white shirt. In the class we were told beekeepers wear white clothing because bees don't like dark colors; big dark shapes outside of the hive look too much like hungry bears. Moving on with my toilette, I discovered that for deodorant I had only a natural brand, honeysuckle rose scented, or lavender talcum--both no-no's in beekeeping. They'd mentioned this particular commandment as well the year before in bee school. Do not perfume thyself before bee handling, be mindful of all scents, even those in hand lotions. I knew from personal experience how much they were attracted to floral scents and didn't wish to take the chance of arousing even honey-sedated bees.

My bee bouquet adventure took place in fifth grade. It was springtime and I was sitting at my desk while a bee explored the surface of my hand. While a few kids shrieked, "Look, she's letting the bee crawl on her!" I patiently waited for her to leave, and she did, flying out the window. My teacher, Mrs. Bernie, asked if I was wearing perfume and I admitted I was, something floral and secretly borrowed from my step mom's dresser that morning.

It wasn't the first time I'd been up close and personal with bees, either. At age six I discovered the fun of trapping them in baby food jars. I even got my sister Karen, who was a year younger, to join me. It was an exciting game, tracking the little creatures as they landed on dandelions and then slowly lowering the inverted jar over them, sliding the metal lid under. I'd stare at them in their little glass prison, mesmerized by the buzzing sound that came so strongly through the holes I'd punched in the top. The bees were always perturbed; it was as if they were giving me a good cussing. Nevertheless, I always enjoyed the sensation of my power over the bees, even while experiencing a definite prickle in my conscience that what I was doing wasn't really right. We always let them go, after a little while. That game ended when my little sister fell and cut her hand on a glass jar (not badly, but enough to end the game).

As I prepared for the 8 A.M. call I thought about how, in the beekeeping class, we were taught to move calmly and slowly around the bees. Bees didn't have great eyesight but responded to the threat of motion near their hive. I could handle a zen-like state, the floral-free requirement, and the light clothing. People who panic easily would not be doing this anyway, I mused, envisioning the cartoon image of a person running away from a hive, a swarm of bees following in heavy pursuit.

Tony called. The bees were still there, I could come right over. Driving down a picturesque road to an older subdivision sandwiched between the country club's lush green grounds and the towering white sandstone bluffs of one of our city's natural vistas, I found Tony's two-story brick colonial with the late-model truck of the second beekeeper parked out in front. Both men were standing by the truck talking. It was 8:40 A.M.

"Sorry I'm a little late," I said as I closed the car door, my camera over one shoulder and a notebook and pen in hand. "I had a hard time getting out of the house this morning--had to tend to the kids, you know."

"Oh, that's all right," said Tony. He nodded at the camera and notebook. "You'll be too busy for those, though. We thought we'd let

you hold the bucket under the swarm. It's just next door, in the backyard of the house next to mine.”

“Sure. . . okay.” I smiled good-naturedly while my mind raced in regard to the magnitude of the comment--as in, this changes everything!

Tony led me to his tidy garage where he had the gear; a veil, rubber gloves, and a white jumpsuit made of paper. All ready for me to put on.

“I got this from the place that makes chips,” he said, handing me the jumpsuit.

Still dazed by my change from observer to active participant, I wasn't quite with it. My first thought was, huh? Potato chips? A second later I thought, no, you idiot, *computer chips*.

I took the suit and stepped into it, pulling it easily over my clothes. Yes, I thought, this could be a little Microsoft™ outfit. I'd never thought of the similarity in dress between beekeepers and chip makers. Then Tony handed me thick orange gloves to put on while he tied strings around my pants bottoms, making them tight against my boots and bee-entry proof.

Tony handed me the pith hat/veil combo and then helped me with the long strings of that too, carefully bringing one under each arm, crossing them in the back, then coming around to the front, tying them around my waist. The experience had a sweetness to it, as if I were a little girl being carefully dressed by her father.

Then he took a picture of me standing by his garage and I just felt silly.

“I feel a little overdressed,” I said from behind the veil as I trudged through his front yard. I was a space-girl, a chipmaker, a bona fide bee-person. What about all the stuff I'd learned about the impossibility of being stung?

“No, you're fine,” Tony said.

We walked to the backyard next door. Tony's partner and the homeowners, a pleasant-looking middle-aged man and his wife, stood about twenty-five feet away from the pine tree where the swarm had congregated, up on a branch about ten feet off the

ground. There were two ladders set up underneath the tree, two five gallon "bee drums" (modified paint buckets with lids) and a shop vacuum. Tony's grizzled beekeeper friend looked to be wearing the same faded outfit of the evening before, along with rubber gloves and veil. I was puzzled by shop vac until the old-timer explained that he used them in swarm capturing, his own invention.

The homeowners greeted us. They were ready for the show. At some point Tony called me Marsha and I, in another dimension in my bee suit, didn't notice. The atmosphere behind the veil was dark and isolating, other-worldly, adding to the surrealism of the event. I learned that the swarm came from one of Tony's two hives.

I went to the tree. There it was, the first swarm I'd ever seen, ten feet above my head. It was beautiful. There were actually two clumps, one about the size and shape of a football and one in the same shape, next to it on the branch, about one-quarter size. Pulsating and java-colored, the bees hung amid fresh green pine needles, lively but relatively quiet. I imagined something larger, so much more menacing.

After taking a couple of pictures, I asked the neighbor lady, "Does it bother you at all that there are bee hives next door?"

"Oh no," she said. "I give them sugar water."

Her husband smiled in agreement.

The older beekeeper, whom I noticed was called Rev, walked to the tree, ready to begin. I handed my camera to Tony and followed.

Tony took my picture, then Rev handed me a bucket and lid. "I'll get the big clump with my bucket. You hold this one right under the other, and put the lid on it when the bees fall in.

We climbed the ladders and positioned ourselves. Rev gave the limb a shake.

"There they go," said someone from down below.

Many bees fell into the bucket, but hundreds didn't.

"Now they're starting to move," I heard someone say. The voice seemed far away.

Bees started flying, buzzing, covering my veil, my gloves, my clothes.

I tried to absorb all the sensations while simultaneously trying, with slow haste, to get the lid over the top of the bucket. I did, but it was upside down. I felt like a screw-up and I didn't want to turn it over for fear the bees would escape. While I tried to work calmly, internally it was a non-Zen zone. I was experiencing a major adrenaline rush.

I climbed down the ladder with the bucket and confessed about the lid. Rev nonchalantly turned it over and sealed it. I looked at him through a veil blotched with bees. He was covered in them too, there were bees flying all around us, on top of the buckets, on the ladders, on the ground. How many did we get, I wondered. It seemed like a zillion still buzzed around.

Rev turned on the shop vac and began vacuuming bees off me, then I did the same for him. I told him about the bee inside his veil, near the back of his head; he said he knew. There wasn't anything either one of us could do about it anyway, not yet. It felt weird to suck up bees with a vacuum. I tried to be as gentle yet as swift as possible. My emotions were definitely mixed--I was aware that some were probably being injured, but I was also determined to do my part as a member of the *homo sapien* bee team.

"I'm going to vacuum the rest of the bees out of the tree," said Rev.

I looked up to see they'd returned to form several very small clumps. Rev climbed up the ladder and I held the machine while he worked. When he came down again, we repeated the process of vacuuming each other, then the containers and ladders. I saw the many bee corpses on the ground, on the ladder and on my clothes. Some were squished, but many seem to have died for no apparent reason. Their bodies looked abnormally large, full and taunt, just like they'd described. I felt very sorry for them and said so, asking how many they guessed had been killed.

"We've probably got about five thousand--what's a few here and there?" was Rev's sentiment. He was obviously excited, like me. In

spite of the carnage, I shamelessly thought: This was fun! I want to do this again! I was back to age six. At that moment it was all about the rush. The rush of facing nature and claiming superiority over it. Purely animal, even more purely, human. We were the tamperers, in the middle of everything, and wild with the excitement of it.

A few bees flew around while I helped Rev pack up. He'd already shed his gloves and his hat. Then I went back to the garage to take off my costume. My long hair was partially in my face, had been since I'd descended the tree the first time, and I hadn't been able to push it away. The thrill had died down by then. I had had enough of the bee suit.

By the time I dressed, Rev was gone and Tony had returned to the garage. He confirmed my suspicions that the capture was messy. "If we'd waited awhile, they would've formed one large swarm that was longer. You can usually just work your bucket right under them, practically place the whole swarm in it. And I give the branch one good hit, I don't shake it. The best way to do it is to cut the branch off and bring it straight to the hive. That way you'd probably have no deaths, but of course I couldn't do that here."

"What about the vacuuming, does it hurt them?"

"Naw, not really."

"And what's the likelihood we got the queen amid all that?"

"Oh, about 99.9%."

"Really?"

"Oh, yeah."

I asked about Rev, who had taken the bees and left.

"I just met him last night," Tony said. "I joined the Beekeepers Association about four years ago and last night was the first meeting I've been able to attend. They've always fallen on dates when I've had other engagements. By the way, Rev's a reverend."

"You're kidding!" I said. "Another surprise. I thought you two were long-time buddies."

"Nope. Never met him until last night."

I wondered at the loose communities we humans could create. Join up with some strangers who share a common interest, go out

and wrangle some bees. So unlike the structured bee communities, where each stayed in their specialized tasks for a lifetime. The bees worked with the flow of nature, we seemed intent on making nature work with our flow.

Tony told me he got into beekeeping when his daughter was in junior high and they decided it would be a good science project. She soon went on to other things, namely, horses, and he kept with the bees. He showed me the barrel-like, three-foot-tall, stainless steel honey extractor in one corner of the garage that he'd bought used for five hundred dollars, explaining that even with this state-of-the-art piece of equipment it was a time-consuming project every fall, extracting and bottling his bees' work, which he gave away as gifts to his friends and neighbors.

We took a quick tour of his orderly backyard where I admired his vegetable garden with pvc bean trellises, a pond with a spouting carp fountain (Tony said the bees liked to drink from it) and, in the furthest corner, two white hives, wood boxes on stands about two feet off the ground. The hives looked so non-threatening, a working part of his garden and a positive addition to the surrounding ecosystem. As we walked up, Tony pointed out the half-dozen or so bees crawling on the landing boards near the hive entrances and said, "You see, Marsha, it's still too cool, there's very little activity right now. Later on it'll warm up and they'll start flying."

We'd already been busy bees that morning, but that was where the analogy ended. I wondered what type of flying insect we might best compare to. Sure, we had cities like bees, and drove our cars and flew our planes along pre-ordained paths, much like the flight patterns of bees from their hives out to the forage, but that's about where the similarities ended. If there were a species of unusually self-centered insects, ones that did believe in community but were pretty much loose and free, and did whatever the hell they wanted--well, then, we'd have our mascot.

I thanked Tony for the experience, got his phone number in case I had any more questions, and we parted.

And I never told him my name wasn't Marsha.

