

Busy Bee

By James Farish-Carradice

When I was 6 years old my grandmother told me a story about 3 bee siblings who could tell you your future. When I was 6 and a half she repeated the story, but she told it in a way that made it seem like it was my destiny to encounter these bees at some point in my young life. When I was 7 years old, I went on a picnic with my grandfather, my older brother, and my younger sister. Up until that point in my life it was the most wonderful, magical day out I had ever experienced. I loved the outdoors, I loved running around with my brother and sister, and I loved spending time with my grandfather. And then I was stung by a bee.

A bee sting is never a pleasant thing, let alone for a 7-year-old child. For me it was even worse because I thought the bee had come to tell me my fortune. I didn't think about the three bee siblings with the power of divinity after that. I didn't think about bees at all. But my interest in bees wasn't the only thing that changed after that day; that was also the day I went from being an outdoor person to an indoor person. It's funny how such a small thing, when experienced by a young, impressionable mind, can have such a huge impact on the choices a person makes for the rest of their life.

I was 19 years old when my grandfather passed away. It happened suddenly and it was the last thing I was expecting. My grandfather was a superman in my eyes, he was brave and strong and capable of just about anything. He was in his 72nd year when he passed. In those days, 72 was ancient. Whenever someone mentioned in passing another person over 70, even over 60 years of age, I would think that person to prehistoric for all intents and purposes. Not my grandfather though, my grandfather was in his prime. Or so I thought.

On the day of his funeral, after the service had concluded, I was sitting in the front garden of my parents' home, reminiscing with my brother, my sister and one of our cousins. They all wanted to know what I planned on doing with my life now that I had graduated from high school.

"The world is your oyster," they told me.

"You're the smartest person we know."

"You received the best grades in our school's history."

I wanted to be modest, to tell them that they were being hyperbolic, but they were right. Through my late childhood and adolescent years, while my peers were joining sports teams, frequenting parties, and generally making the most of their youth, I was holed up in my room, or in a quiet corner of the school library. Ostensibly I was avoiding the twin intimidations of the great outdoors and those aforementioned peers, but at the same time I was reading, learning, acquiring all the knowledge I could. To what end I had no idea.

We'd been quiet a couple of minutes when my sister leapt to her feet with a startled cry.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I think something bit me," she said, rubbing her arm.

"A spider?" my brother offered.

"I don't think that was a bite," my cousin said, pointing to a beehive hanging from a branch of a nearby tree. My brother responded to this by making a beeline for the house.

"Since when has there been a hive up there," said my sister incredulously; she still lived at home with my parents, so it would make sense for her to have noticed a beehive.

"Here, let me help," I said, leading my sister inside and proceeding to treat her sting.

Once we were done my sister looked at me with an odd expression on her face.

"What, does it still hurt? I asked.

"Not at all," she said, "I just think you'd make a wonderful doctor is all."

My grandmother outlived my grandfather by almost 7 years; she was 75 years old when she died. Unlike with my grandfather, my grandmother's death was expected. It was also a painfully drawn-out affair that took a toll on our entire family. The most difficult part of my grandmother's final years wasn't the times that she didn't recognise us or got us confused with someone from her past, it was the times that she knew exactly who we were, when she Not long before she ultimately left us my grandmother, in one of those more lucid moments, asked me if I remember the story about the three bee siblings. I told her the truth, that I had almost completely forgotten that story. She looked disappointed with my response.

"Bees are our friends," she told me.

"I'm not so sure that's true, Nan."

"You can trust your grandmother," she said, "and you can trust the bees."

I completed my medical degree a few years after my grandmother's funeral. My parents, as well as my brother and sister, told me that my grandparents would be tremendously proud of what I had achieved. I was 26 years of age and had already accomplished so much. Not only was I the youngest person to graduate with my qualifications from my school, but I was also one of the youngest in the country. I could walk into a position with any number of prestigious hospitals tomorrow if I so pleased. But I wasn't fulfilled. I couldn't tell you why, not at that moment, but something was missing.

After going through the motions of interviewing for a handful of jobs, I switched gears and decided that I was going to take a year off before launching into a career. My grandparents had left me a modest inheritance with the instructions to live my life and to follow my heart. On top of this I had worked consistently throughout both my under-graduate and post-graduate studies, so I could afford to take a bit of a break.

Another thing my grandmother told me not long before she passed, something as on brand as it got for my grandmother, was that the Western Honeybee lived an entire life in just 60 days. I wasn't entirely sure what she was getting at, and I didn't know enough about the lifespan of bees, so I accepted what she told me at face value, with the understanding that my grandmother had an odd affinity for bees.

Two weeks into the first period of unadulterated leisure I had allowed myself in close to 20 years I was bored. So bored that, had my sister not persuaded me otherwise on multiple occasions, there was a high chance of me calling one of the several hospitals who had been headhunting me only a fortnight ago and asking if they were still interested in bringing me on board. Fortunately, my sister convinced me otherwise and followed that up by convincing me to let her stay with me in my modest apartment indefinitely. I was glad she did.

Having my sister around on a near permanent basis gave me access to all kinds of experiences that I had missed out on, or more accurately, carefully avoided, while I was growing up. I didn't necessarily regret any part of the life I had led up to that point in time, but it did make me reconsider how I was going to live my life moving forward.

One cold and miserable Sunday afternoon my sister decided that we should take a trip.

"What kind of trip?" I asked.

"Let's go somewhere warm," she said.

As it turned out, the place we went was warmer, but it wasn't exactly warm. Someone she knew, a friend of an acquaintance or vice versa, owned a piece of property up north, somewhere relatively remote with a small, two-bedroom abode that lacked just enough of the everyday luxuries we take for granted to make it seem like we were getting away from it all, but not enough so that we felt dangerously cut off from the world in case there was a serious emergency.

At the last minute our brother decided to join us on the trip, which was exciting because I very rarely got to see my older brother. In fact, the only recollections I had of spending time with him were tied directly to the deaths of my grandparents. This would be a great opportunity to create some happier memories. Much like myself, and in sharp contrast to our younger sister, my brother was a bit of a workaholic, but he each banked up a not inconsiderable amount of annual leave over the past few years, and a trip to the country was something that appealed to him at this point in his life.

"Don't worry, I'll sleep on the couch, and I'll cook a nice meal for us every evening," he said, even though at no point did we argue against his inclusion in the trip.

The getaway was everything I hoped it would be, and I think my siblings felt the same way. We even decided to extend our trip for an extra week, such was the enjoyment we were getting from our semi-disconnecting. Once it was confirmed, we decided to go on a bit of a trek; nothing too ambitious, a trip around the property because we were curious as to how much land this person actually owned and, from a personal standpoint, I also wanted to see how well I would respond to an extended period in the great outdoors.

Unfortunately, and rather unexpectedly, my sister picked up a bug of some sort the morning of our planned excursion and therefore couldn't join me and my brother on the walk.

"You two scout ahead and I'll join you tomorrow when I'm back on feet," she told us, "and don't worry about me, some green tea with honey and lemon is all I need. That and a full 24 hours in a big, comfy bed."

My brother and I set off on our little adventure, grateful for the chance to spend some time together and to bring each other up to speed on what was happening in our respective lives. As it turned out, the property was much bigger than we had anticipated, giving us ample time to catch up with the drama, or in my case the lack thereof, that had been occurring in our lives over the past half-decade or so.

"I'm enjoying this," my brother said, "You've been such a busy little bee for so long that I forgot what it's like to hang out with you."

"Same," I replied.

After a time, we fell into an easy silence and began to simply take in our surroundings. It was a beautiful area with a wide array of terrain – one moment we would be walking through a small forest, the next we would be crossing wide open paddocks. Despite being quite clearly on another level of fitness than me, my brother started to fall behind.

"Are you alright back there?" I yelled without turning around.

"Just enjoying the wide-open spaces," he shouted back.

Not much later we came across what we thought was a small farm, only the land wasn't populated with crops, it was populated by what appeared to be miniature wooden homes.

"Looks like we might have wandered into an apiary," my brother said, still trailing me by a few metres.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Bees," he said.

This unsettled me and I started to move in the direction that would take me as far from the bees as possible. My brother noticed.

"Don't worry," he said, "they'll all be asleep or hibernating or whatever it is they do this time of year."

He sounded pretty confident, which gave me just enough confidence to not veer off too far in the wrong direction, but less than a minute later he spoke up again,

"Hey sis," he said, "you're not going to believe this."

"What, what is it?" I asked.

"I think I've been stung."

"Of course, you have," I responded.

We sat down on the grass and my brother rolled up the leg of his trousers to give me a better look.

"This looks pretty bad," I said, "Like, worse than a regular sting. Do you think you could be allergic to bees?"

He shrugged his shoulders, a little theatrically in that way that some men do when you ask them something they should definitely know but don't. Like when you ask your dad what your blood type is, or your grandfather what time you are supposed to be home for dinner. Despite this shrug I could tell from the look of concern in his eyes that he was pretty sure he was allergic.

“Alright, let’s get you somewhere I can have a proper look at this,” I said, taking his hand and leading him in the direction of the human house in the middle of all the little bee houses.

We reached the porch with my brother leaning heavily on me for support. I remember thinking that if there is no one home, we could be in a lot of trouble. Fortunately, before I even had a chance to knock the front door opened and a man in a ridiculous outfit appeared.

“Are you the beekeeper?” I asked which, looking back, could be seen as a bit of a silly question.

“I am,” was his reply and the fact that there wasn’t even a hint of sarcasm in his voice endeared me to this man immediately.

“Do you have something on hand in case someone gets stung?”

“I do.”

“Okay, great, because my brother has been stung and we’re pretty sure he is allergic.”

“Let’s do something about that then,” the man said, transferring my brother’s weight onto his and leading us inside.

The rest of the holiday was a lot more relaxing. There were no more bee stings and no more unexpectedly long walks. Instead, the four of us enjoyed basic but fulfilling meals, wonderful conversations, and a handful of shorter, more manageable walks.

Oh, right, I just mentioned the 4 of us, didn’t I? Well, somewhere in the middle of helping me save my brother’s life, which was far more dramatic in the moment than it seems now looking back, our friendly neighbourhood apiarist and I developed a bit of a rapport. That rapport to develop into a little more by the end of our stay in the country and, thanks to repeated returns visits by me over the next few weeks and months, quite a lot more by year’s end. We were married just over 12 months after we met.

I still don’t like bees – this is something my loving husband, who’s occupation dictates that he feels quite the opposite, must come to terms with every day of our lives – however, I no longer hold the opinion that bees could not be trusted. To this day I have only ever been present for 3 bee stings. The second of these was when my sister was stung at our family home, an incident that indirectly led to me choosing to pursue medicine and the most recent of these was when my brother was stung badly on the leg, an event that led directly to the meeting of my husband.

I’m not a grandmother – I’m not yet a mother by the strict letter of the law, though that will change in approximately 2 months’ time – but if and when I am a grandmother, I already have a story prepared for my grandchild or grandchildren. It’s a story about 3 bee siblings who can tell you your future. It’s a story I am planning on telling them one afternoon when we’re picnicking in the sun.