

Tomato-Basil Bisque

Help out. Those were the magic words that had colored my whole existence. You could always count on Daisy to help out. Some people might have paid attention to the words, *would you like to*, but it was the last few words that made me say yes. And Henry was right. I did like honey.

He had phoned on a Friday morning in late August. “Look, I know how much you like honey and I was wondering. Today is the perfect weather to harvest it and I was wondering whether you’d like to come with me to help out.”

“Sure.”

“It’ll take most of the day,” he said. “But I could drive you back after lunch if you have plans.”

Dear God, my plans for the day included Oprah mostly, and planning next week’s soup. Although with an abundance of tomatoes and zucchini everywhere, I had a good idea already

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what next Wednesday's soup would be. Which left me with Oprah on a hot late August afternoon. I thought maybe she could do without me for the day.

“What should I bring?” I asked.

“Wear long sleeves and pants. White if you've got them. And a hat. I've got water at the cabin. And we can pick up some hamburgers when we need a break. Would you be ready in an hour?”

I'd always been an early riser, which made my days even longer these days, so other than changing my clothes, I was more than ready now.

“Sure,” I said, reaching into the fridge for the half-dozen eggs I had boiled last night, egg salad sandwiches being one thing I didn't mind eating alone. I would make devilled eggs to bring along.

It had been a long time since a man had asked me out, and this, I was fairly certain, was not a date. Henry's wife had multiple sclerosis. I gathered Jane was largely confined to her bed although she could move around by wheelchair. Henry had taken early retirement to look after her.

Jane had worked at Cornell as a secretary, and for a while she had worked in the geology department where Arthur was. It was then that she and Henry had started coming out to the Wednesday suppers. After Henry started his beekeeping, he had begun bringing honey, small bottles of it, to Wednesday night suppers.

By the time Henry showed up an hour later, the devilled eggs had become part of a full picnic lunch. As I climbed into his minivan, I realized it was the first time I could remember

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being in the passenger seat since Arthur's funeral. It felt like such a kindness not to have to drive, not to have to watch where I was going. For the first time all summer, I could look outside and see the tall grasses on either side of the car, the tangle of wildflowers, the dust of insects flying above them. It made me think of our task.

“So,” I said, smoothing my slacks. “Tell me what we do.”

Henry looked over at me and I was reminded what a distinguished-looking man he was. Most of us faded or sagged as we got older, but occasionally there was a man like Henry.

“You mean the honey?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Well,” he said. “First of all, we hope that the bees are all taking advantage of the beautiful weather to go out and gather nectar, so we can take racks of honey. And then, we smoke out any bees that are left inside. And then, we carry the racks to the car.”

Henry had a small sliver of property on a small lake about fifteen minutes away from Ithaca. As we drove, he told me about the process of making honey, and how he had gotten into beekeeping in the first place. I knew it had to do with Jane but I wasn't sure how.

“When we found out she had MS,” he said. “We read everything we possibly could and we heard lots about royal jelly being a great healer for myelin sheath damage.” He reminded me of Arthur, who taught me geological terms simply by using them in context. Oprah always explained things. I could feel my brain opening up for the first time in months. I stretched my legs and asked more questions.

That was how it worked: a catechistic conversation, where I asked questions and Henry answered. We passed a succession of homemade signs that said No Fracking, and I idly wondered what they meant, but I was trying to pay attention to what Henry was saying. By the time we reached the property, I knew a number of new terms and facts, about bees and honey and multiple sclerosis.

Henry's beekeeping vocabulary, like Arthur's geological terms, was a matter of choice, words lapped up in a quest for knowledge and understanding. How different the words that came with illness, words that labeled worries, that gave amateurs a professional vocabulary in a field in which they were victims, or worse, helpless bystanders. My vocabulary was cardiology, Henry's was multiple sclerosis, and my friend Cecily's was oncology. Even to label it thus—rather than heart or cancer—showed that we had negotiated the system and learned enough of the local language to be able to barter and beg.

Henry turned off onto a rutted laneway and raised dust as he went. We had driven with the windows up and the air conditioning on—I hadn't wanted to ask whether he minded if I opened the window as I always did when Arthur and I drove—so it was only after he turned the car off and I opened my door that the smells and the sounds hit my ear. And the heat. I had forgotten that it was a day that promised intense heat and when I opened the car door, the whine of the cicadas hit my ear along with the smells of new-mown hay and fresh lake water. I left my picnic basket inside the van but I brought my water bottle and my hat out with me. Henry moved to the back of the van and began carrying out equipment. I stood by, nurse to his doctor, ready to help if he needed it. I looked about me and saw no evidence of hives but I could see bees in the morning sunlight, and a small cabin, lower on the property near the water that was sparkling below us.

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“It was a fishing camp,” Henry said, as he reached for the last of the equipment. “They divided it up fifteen years ago, and I bought my section eight years ago.”

I nodded.

“Here,” he said, and handed me a veil. I put my hat on and my veil on top. A veil. Arthur had died seven months before our fortieth wedding anniversary. Ruby. That was how grief went—unexpected, private wells and weeks of emptiness. But Henry was handing me equipment so I blinked and tried to focus.

“Can you manage this?” he asked and it was small and lightweight.

“Of course,” I said. I could always manage.

“Of course you can,” he said, and a pained look crossed his face. I knew he was thinking of Jane and I didn’t know how to feel.

“So where are the hives?” I asked to distract him.

“Up the hill,” he said. “Do you see the path?” He pointed at a well-trodden lane.

“I run out here sometimes,” he said. “It’s what keeps me sane. People say you tell your secrets to the bees but I like to come and listen to them. I run out here and fall asleep, listening to the hum of the hive. And then I can face it again.”

It. He made me realize there were different kinds of grief, different ways to lose someone you loved. It could be utterly unexpected as it was for Arthur or slow and excruciating as it was for Jane and Henry. There was sometimes a competition between caregivers of sick people—I had seen that after Arthur’s first heart attack—but there was a surprising absence of rivalry between

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those who grieved, and a lack of curiosity too. It was as if bearing our own burdens was more than enough—there was no space for prurient interest or one-upmanship. There was also one slight surprise: what I had to remind myself each time I heard someone else’s story was that they did not have to bear what I did in addition to what they carried—each of us had our own burdens and managed them as best we could. I wondered whether the hum of bees would be good for me too.

He collected a handful of pine needles from the ground under a stand of trees and squashed them into a small canister, releasing the unexpected scent of Christmas.

“It’s a smoker,” he said, pulling out a lighter. “It calms the bees.”

He looked otherworldly in his gear, gently spraying puffs of smoke into the hives, and I stood back and watched. He was stung twice—and he sent me for meat tenderizer and water from the cabin after the first sting—but he considered it both a small price to pay and a relatively unscathed harvest. The first year, he said, he had had thirty-seven stings—Jane had counted them and treated them. He had not known about meat tenderizer, but she had known and had driven out to get some from town. That was when she was still driving, was still able to come out to the cabin.

The cabin itself was thin-walled, with sunlight seeping through the spaces between the boards. There was a kitchen sink and a toilet, and a single camp bed with two army blankets and no pillow. There was a shelf where honey tins and glass jars sat next to several warped books. There were two mousetraps. I found the jar of meat tenderizer and I refilled my water bottle at the sink. The smell of lake water came out of the tap and I let it run a minute to try to get colder water, but it stayed the same temperature so I filled my bottle and shut the door behind me.

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Henry stopped when he saw me coming.

“You mix it in your hand like a paste,” he said. He rolled up his shirtsleeve where a bee had gotten between his gloves and his shirt. His arm was hairy and muscular. I wondered if he meant for me to make the paste but I handed him the jar and the water bottle.

When he was properly anointed, we carried frames of honey, set in tubs, down to his van.

“Don’t you love the smell?” Henry said as we opened the door with the final, third frame. I breathed in greedily.

“Sunshine and rain, clover and wildflowers,” I said and then I felt silly, like I had recited a poem.

“You have a good sniffer,” Henry said, then, closing the trunk and reaching in his pocket for his keys. “So can I take you out for a hamburger?”

“I made lunch,” I said. “I made a picnic lunch.”

He looked at me then with eyes of wonder.

“It’s in the front,” I said and I found the insulated oilskin bag, red plaid, from where I had put it at my feet.

“I thought that was your purse,” Henry said, taking the lunch bag. “Come on—let’s sit down by the water. The bees’ll be riled up for a while. I’d rather give them their space.”

I followed him down the path. My sniffer could smell him then too, the one element that wasn’t late summer meadow, a smell of clean sweat and musk, a morning’s hard work. We

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walked past the cabin and I saw a low, dilapidated wooden dock, hovering just above the water, in the shadow of a willow tree. I must have hesitated because Henry turned.

“Oh,” he said. “Did you want to freshen up?”

“I just need to wash my hands,” I said.

“Well, you can do that up there or down here. It’s the same water.”

“But you have soap up there?” I said.

“Dish soap,” he replied.

“That’s fine.”

Someone once said that we all had a limit of words each day. I felt like I had been storing mine up and today was a day to spend them—and yet, I’d become used to economizing.

Henry waited outside while I washed my hands. I washed the back of my neck too and felt cooler. I wished for a mirror to know whether I needed to brush my hair or not, remembered that my brush was at home, and I ran damp fingers through it, patting it and shaping it as I would bread dough, into what I hoped was some degree of order. Then I washed my hands again and stepped outside.

Henry was watching something. He raised a hand without looking back at me. “Look, Jane,” he said. “A hummingbird.”

And there it was, a shimmer of grace, green and red.

It was not until Henry went inside and I heard him relieving himself—which was such an intimate, normal sound that I walked down toward the dock to offer him some privacy—that I heard his words again. I had heard the “Look” and I had looked, but he had called me Jane. He could not have known. He was thinking of Jane who was at home in her wheelchair. My head started to throb and I wasn’t sure it was the heat. He could not have known what the J in Mrs. J. Daisy Turner stood for. No one had called me Jane in more than fifty years.

The cabin door banged shut above me and Henry had rolled up his sleeves and pant legs. “Look,” he said again as he caught up to me. “I’ve got root beer to contribute.” He picked up my lunch bag and stepped carefully onto the dock and turned to reach out a hand to help me aboard. Everything in me saw the scene in judgment, and the wood bobbed and swayed under our feet.

He squeezed my hand. “Don’t worry. It’ll hold. Well, it’ll hold one of us at least.” I froze. “And it’s all of a foot of water. Two feet at the end.” I relaxed and let go but then I stepped on a rotting board and Henry was at my elbow. “I usually sit here,” he said. “put my feet in the water and call myself lucky. Do you want a chair?”

“Would this dock hold two people and a chair?” I asked.

“Good point. Well, I’ll help you up again afterwards.”

Would he help with getting moss stains off my white slacks, I wondered, but I sat and watched as he peeled off his shoes and socks and sank his feet into the water.

I opened the picnic bag and I felt like a conjuror—a jar of pickles, the devilled eggs (still freezing cold in the ice pack), half a loaf of pumpernickel bread left from Wednesday night, and some hummus. I had wrapped peaches in paper towels to keep them from bruising.

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Henry unwrapped his peach and set the paper towel on his lap. My legs felt awkward—it had been a long time since I had sat cross-legged. I tried sitting side-saddle but we almost lost the root beer then.

“You’ll have to join me,” Henry said, waving long brown feet through the water. I turned away to take my shoes off and my socks, and I stacked them behind me, a little something to lean against. I felt shy about Henry watching my feet so I pointed out across the lake and asked about a bird I could see as I slid my feet into water my son Nick used to call room temperature water. Nick liked his water icy cold, so cold it would hurt my teeth. This water was fresh as springtime and without thinking, I sighed with pleasure.

“See,” he said, handing me back my bottle of root beer. “I told you.”

We broke off chunks of bread and dipped it in the hummus. Henry finished the pickles and poured the brine into the lake—“salt water”—and fished out the garlic and the dill and chewed them both.

My peach was perfectly ripe and dripped on the paper towel in my lap and I licked my fingers clean.

“That,” he said, leaning back. “That was a feast. Thank you.”

“Can I ask you something?” I said, watching my feet appear and disappear in the dark water. “Why did you ask me today?”

“To come here?” he said. “I needed an extra pair of hands and I thought you could use something different.”

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I drew my legs out of the water, suddenly chilled and wrapped my arms around my knees. My back would ache tonight.

“How are you doing, Daisy?” he asked.

It was the question that could dissolve me, the question I dreaded. I watched a dragonfly over the water and I decided he had no right to ask.

“Did you know that people believed that after someone died, if the deceased had been a good man, a daisy flower would begin to grow on its own?” I had heard people do this on NPR, ignore a question, take the conversation to the ground they wanted. I didn’t want to cry.

He looked at me then, distracted from his question, and I looked away. “I know that bees collect pollen from daisies,” he said.

“So, what happens now, to your honey?” I asked, tired already of flower trivia.

“Now, I take it home to my garage. I use an extractor to spin the comb and extract the honey and then I bottle it up. Want to watch?”

“Thanks, but there are things I have to do, things I planned to do today.”

“And I’ve kept you out. I’m sorry.”

“No, no. I’ve enjoyed today.” I started to feel blood rise in my cheeks and then I remembered that Henry had asked me out of pity and at least there was nothing to apologize for. But neither did I want to face Henry’s Jane.

“We’d better go then,” he said, and he pulled me to my feet.

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“Thank you,” I said and I slid my feet into my shoes. I gathered up what I had brought and Henry collected the bottles.

The smell of the honey was almost overpowering when we reached the van.

“Like it?” Henry asked, inhaling.

I could only nod. Daisies come up faithfully each year in the garden, even if children pick them. They are cheerful in drought, constant in rain and wind.

“What are these signs?” I asked when we had passed our third or fourth “NO FRACKING” sign.

“It’s that oil drilling thing,” Henry said. “They found pockets of oil and gas in the shale here and they think they can get it out.”

“But people think it’s a bad idea?” I said.

“There’ve been letters to the editor about it in the paper.”

All I had read of the paper in the last four months were the obituaries—largely keeping track of who had joined the widow club and at what age people died. I had stopped circling sales, even.

“What’s the problem?” I asked. It was a question, really, for Arthur, not Henry, I realized with a sting.

We were turning on to my street. “I’m not sure,” he said. “Some people think it can wreck the water or cause earthquakes.” He pulled into my driveway. “Do you want a chunk of comb?” he asked. “Or should I just bring you some of our honey later?”

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“Thank you,” I said, as he handed me a small piece of honeycomb that dripped on my hands. “I had a nice time.”

Something had shifted in me, something deep. I had forgotten I was alive until that day. It might have been the simple pleasures of a picnic and a conversation, of a man who smelled good and honey that carried the scent of every wildflower in the area. It might have been sunshine and lake water. It might have been helping and sitting in the passenger seat, having a man carry my bag again, having my hands drenched in honey. It might even have been a coincidence. Henry had said earthquake and as I walked toward my house, I felt a small tremor, something that reminded me I was still alive.



I walked around to the back of my house where I knew I had a stack of yoghurt containers. Carefully, I put the honey in one, and licked my hands clean. Then I turned on the garden hose and washed them in icy water, wiping my hands on my already-filthy pants.

I took my shoes and socks off when I got into the house and I didn't even look through the mail. I put the small stack of envelopes on the table and the container of honey. I walked through my house barefoot, which was something I almost never did. My feet felt new-baptized, sensitive, and I felt the thick shag of the gold carpet Arthur had put in when we first moved there, the carpet Nick laughed at. I felt the coolness of the linoleum in the kitchen, the patio stones in the backyard. I sat in the backyard for a while, watching insects at work, unsure what to do next.

Henry had told me about the bees and how they worked. I confessed that I had only ever seen the bees as individuals, and predators really—out to sting you if you weren't careful—with

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honey as a by-product. He had told me about the queen, the drones, the workers. How a bee might make a teaspoonful of honey in her lifetime—which was only six weeks. How bees fanned the nectar until it made honey. How bees would never eat the honey they had made themselves—they stored it away for those to come and ate that which had been left to them.

And what had been left to me? This house. And Wednesday nights. And Arthur's papers.

That was what was next, I realized. It was time to open the door to his study. When Arthur died, I had closed the door to his study, as I often did when he was traveling, simply so that I would not have to face the chaos of his papers. I had helped him type his papers, but the study had been his world, not mine. I had quickly gotten rid of Arthur's clothes, had thrown them away in black garbage bags, and I hadn't regretted my haste, but it had been easiest to keep the door to the study closed.

I wondered if we had any more soft drinks. I could use some sugar to bolster me. I went inside and down into the cool basement where we had a small old refrigerator humming away. Arthur and Nick had stocked it with soda for when they watched television. Occasionally I used it if there was no room for soups upstairs. But I hadn't stocked much food the last few years. I really should unplug the fridge in the basement, I thought. It must be costing a fortune in electricity. There was no root beer in the fridge, but there was a pair of Cokes. I didn't think soft drinks went bad, so I took one and carried it upstairs, unopened to Arthur's study.

I stood outside Arthur's study a minute before I took a deep breath and opened the door. The room smelled stale and it smelled like Arthur.

I opened the window and leaned against the sill. I could hear a lawnmower up the street and the light coming in was dappled green and gold, and I needed the present to hold me very

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close because the past was threatening to engulf me. There were notes on the desk where he had laid aside his pen. There was a suit jacket on the coat-tree. There were the printouts I had typed for him the day before he died.

What survives us, I thought. The wind could pick up the papers in a moment. I could set fire to every one of them and they'd be gone. And yet, they remained and my husband was gone.

I sat down at the desk, feeling as I always did that I was invading Arthur's privacy, his sanctum. I thought of the bees and how Henry had subdued them into letting him take trays of their honey, with smoke. Henry had said that tending bees took courage and stillness. How could I do likewise, I wondered?

Arthur had never taken food or drink into his study, I remembered as I sat there with my can of Coke. I put it on the nape of my neck and it was blessedly cool and then on my forehead. I was going to take the can downstairs because I was thirsty, and suddenly it came to me that this was my study now, that these were my papers, my books, my room, my choices, my life.

There were reasons not to eat or drink in the study, though, or at least not at the desk. I went back to the window sill and opened my Coke and drank it down. And then I wondered how to start. I remembered being a teenager, having to clean out my granddaddy's garage and having literally no idea where to start, paralyzed by the enormousness of the task ahead of me.

I still felt sticky with honey and dirt. I left the door open and I went and washed up properly.

And then I circled the room again, damp and still uncertain. I sat back at the desk and adjusted the seat so that it was comfortable for me. I stood up again and took Arthur's coat out

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into the hall where I wouldn't be distracted by it. I looked at the paper on top of the rest and saw again the word I had seen on the signs.

“OK, Arthur,” I said, probably aloud. “So what's fracking?”

It was when it became hard to read that I looked up and realized it was evening, that I had missed Oprah, supper and most of the day. I was hungry and I had to pee desperately. But I knew what fracking was and why so many people were concerned about drilling through shale.

I went downstairs as if I was waking up. The heat had broken and my feet were cold now; I found slippers. I looked in the refrigerator and the cupboards and I didn't want any of the choices. I thought of what Henry had said about a hamburger earlier in the day, and I decided to walk downtown to get a burger. I put on a sweatercoat and locked the door behind me.

The sky was violet, the beautiful time of day. I had always liked that time, when the day's work was done and peace descended and yet I didn't remember when I had last walked after sunset. It wasn't dark yet and I felt safe. I exchanged greetings—“beautiful evening” “yes it is” “nice night” “hello there Daisy”—with several neighbors sitting on their porches and I wondered whether they wondered at me.

The streets in late August were filled with impossibly young faces, away from home for the first time, dazzled by new tastes, sights and smells, whether a visible thong or a Thai restaurant.

I found myself in a fluorescent-lit restaurant, dazzled by the choices. Good cooks rarely go to restaurants. The teenager behind the counter asked what I wanted on my burger and it was

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mine to choose. “For here or to go?” he asked. I was not ready to sit alone in a molded-plastic seat. “To go, thanks.”

I carried my little paper bag down to the lake, the big lake. It was full dusk now, and I wondered if it was safe, but I had the cell phone Nick had bought me in my pocket and that seemed safe enough.

I found a glider swing by the water and watched the ducks settling for the night and some still out on the water. People rollerbladed past—another sign the students were back in town—and nodded to me. I opened my hamburger and took it out with an appetite. I could see the market building, dark, not far away. Within a few hours, vendors would be setting up for the market the next morning. I hadn’t thought about the menu for Wednesday night yet, I realized with a start. But then I remembered a recipe I hadn’t made in years, a tomato-basil bisque. It called for sugar to soften the acidity, but I thought maybe I could use honey instead. Yes, I could.

I looked out across the water. It had been a long day but time had not weighed on me for more than a few moments. And my hamburger was delicious.

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