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Telling the Bees

Written by Peggy Hesketh

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Telling the Bees

PEGGY HESKETH



O N E W O R L D

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*To Don the Duck, a drunken, pinball-playing,
Thanksgiving dinner's last-night stand*

To Leroy the Goon, the fearsome bouncer at Dave and Jake's Snake Pit

*To George Washington, the motorcycle-riding red-haired madam who
was so ugly her face looked like a cow stepped on it and her nose came
up through the hoof*

*And to the gazillion other memorable characters in the heartbreakingly
goofy bedtime stories my father used to tell me*

Telling the Bees

By John Greenleaf Whittier

Here is the place; right over the hill
Runs the path I took;
You can see the gap in the old wall still,
And the stepping-stones in the shallow brook.

There is the house, with the gate red-barred,
And the poplars tall;
And the barn's brown length, and the cattle-yard,
And the white horns tossing above the wall.

There are the beehives ranged in the sun;
And down by the brink
Of the brook are her poor flowers, weed-o'errun,
Pansy and daffodil, rose and pink.

A year has gone, as the tortoise goes,
Heavy and slow;
And the same rose blows, and the same sun glows,
And the same brook sings of a year ago.

There's the same sweet clover-smell in the breeze;
And the June sun warm
Tangles his wings of fire in the trees,
Setting, as then, over Fernside farm.

I mind me how with a lover's care
From my Sunday coat
I brushed off the burrs, and smoothed my hair,
And cooled at the brookside my brow and throat.

Since we parted, a month had passed,—
To love, a year;
Down through the beeches I looked at last
On the little red gate and the well-sweep near.

I can see it all now,—the slantwise rain
Of light through the leaves,
The sundown's blaze on her window-pane,
The bloom of her roses under the eaves.

Just the same as a month before,—
The house and the trees,
The barn's brown gable, the vine by the door,—
Nothing changed but the hives of bees.

Before them, under the garden wall,
Forward and back,
Went drearily singing the chore-girl small,
Draping each hive with a shred of black.

Trembling, I listened: the summer sun
Had the chill of snow;
For I knew she was telling the bees of one
Gone on the journey we all must go!

Then I said to myself, "My Mary weeps
For the dead to-day:
Haply her blind old grandsire sleeps
The fret and the pain of his age away."

But her dog whined low; on the doorway sill,
With his cane to his chin,
The old man sat; and the chore-girl still
Sung to the bees stealing out and in.

And the song she was singing ever since
In my ear sounds on:—
"Stay at home, pretty bees, fly not hence!
Mistress Mary is dead and gone!"



THE COLONY



One

*APICULTURE: The art and science of raising
honeybees.*

The bees travel along the high-tension wires, just as surely as one true sentence follows the next. I am not sure why the bees took to this peculiar mode of travel, but I suspect they have their reasons, and their reasons have everything to do with the Bee Ladies' murder.

There is a family living not far from my home that mistakenly holds the electricity that hums and buzzes over their heads responsible for all the people in our neighborhood who have chanced to die in recent years. It is a complicated theory based on the deleterious effects of electromagnetic fields. I hardly know this family beyond what I have been able to discern from the slogans on the handmade signs they display in their front yard. I know they believe the overhead wires that run above our homes cause all manner of human ailments, and for this reason they have planted a growing

field of carefully tended crosses in their lawn, one for each neighbor who has died since they began keeping track of such things shortly after moving into one of the newer housing tracts not far from my home nearly eight years ago.

I only spoke to them once, not long after they'd begun planting crosses in their lawn. It was one of those impossibly warm Southern California days that almost always occurs in early February, the sort of day that sings to those who wish to leave behind the bone-chilling heartbreak of winter and make a new life for themselves in the promise of eternal sunshine.

I probably would not have stopped to talk to this particular family, except that I was driving slowly past their home so that I might get a better look at the crosses and the curious signs on their lawn. Because of the heat, my car windows were open.

"Hey, Grandpa!" I heard a man shout. My initial instinct was to press my acceleration pedal down. But then I heard another voice. A woman's voice. It sounded determined yet vulnerable at the same time.

"You will help us?"

I know it seems foolish. They were strangers. But they were my neighbors as well. I pulled to the curb. The woman smiled and rushed to the edge of her lawn. She was thin and agitated, with dark, lanky hair and an oily copper complexion. She held a clipboard in her hand.

"Can you sign this?" she said, running around to the driver's side of my car. She handed me the clipboard and a pen through my open window.

"*¿Por favor?*"

"May I read it first?"

She glanced back at the man who stood thirty feet away in the gape of the open garage, a beer in one hand and some sort of power tool in the other. She nodded quickly at me.

As I read through the xeroxed copy of the petition which would ban all manner of overhead electrical wires in residential neighborhoods, it seemed prudent to ask the woman who stood so desperately by my car door why she was doing what she was doing, but that wouldn't have been polite.

Instead, I inquired where she was from. That is what new neighbors do. At least, that is what they used to do. This is how I learned she was originally from Texas, somewhere south of Dallas, that she'd moved to California with her father, who was in the military. It is also how I learned that she loved sunshine and open spaces, and that she feared the overhead power lines, which she said reminded her of barbed-wire fences.

When I was finished reading her petition, I told her I was very sorry but I did not wish to sign it. I told her it made no sense to me. She squeezed her eyes shut, and she thanked me just the same, scurrying back to the garage and handing the clipboard to the man I can only assume was her husband. I heard shouting as I pulled away from the curb. It was only later that I realized I'd forgotten to ask her name.

The following December my neighbors took to stringing their crosses with winking colored lights to mark the Christmas season. The spring after that they tied pastel pink and blue and yellow ribbons on the crosses at Eastertide. Independence Day is now demarcated by tiny American flags, and every October they drape their crosses in orange and black crepe paper and set a lighted jack-o'-lantern in their midst. And all the while, their field of crosses continues to

grow. I found their agitated theories rather ludicrous, disturbing even. But what disturbed me for far too long is that I did not recognize a single name on any of their crosses.

My neighbors are no longer my neighbors. There is no longer any visceral connection between us other than that they are the strangers who live nearest to me. Day after day all I hear are leaf blowers and cars with pounding speakers that cruise slowly down my street, and night after night sirens wail and helicopters beat the air over my home with a roar that makes my head hurt.

So much noise.

I suspect this is why my bees no longer produce as much honey as they used to, nor does it taste quite as sweet as it once did.

Though I am an old man and my memory has begun to fade, I still recall a quiet time when the road in front of my home was made of dirt and gravel, and my dear mother could rock on our front porch swing and greet each and every one of our neighbors by their given names. But that time is long gone, and with it a definition of home and family that inextricably linked bricks and mortar and genes and bloodlines.

I have tried to adjust as best I can to this modern era, and I have found that thankfully my bees continue to wax and wane with the seasons. They remind me that the hundreds and thousands of births and deaths that occur each honey season are the natural life cycle of the hive, and this in turn has helped to ease my pain at the passing of all of the people I have held dear. Death is a constant in life. I thought I had long since made my peace.

But then, last August, I saw a new cross on my neighbors' front yard. I noticed it because it was different from the rest.

Not the cross itself, which was fashioned from the same t-shaped slats of wood, nailed together, scrawled with a name and date of death, and planted in the ground. What *was* different were the flowers and candles and stuffed animals and balloons crowded around its spindly stake. In all the times I had driven past this house on my way to my honey consignments, or the library, the grocery store, the gas station, and whatever other random errand drew me less and less frequently from my home, I had never seen such a singular display on their lawn. Summer was just ending. There was no holiday to commemorate.

Had my neighbors been gathered in their garage workshop with what had become over the years a progressively more menacing group of friends, shouting, listening to loud music, and imbibing liquor, I surely would not have stopped to examine this curious memorial. But on this particular evening their garage door was down, as were my automobile windows, and I thought I caught the faint scent of eucalyptus and orange blossoms in the air. Despite all my better instincts, I pulled to the curb with a firm twist on my unpadded steering wheel, climbed out of my old Ford Fairlane, and approached what was from my rough count the twenty-first cross on the lawn.

There was a flickering phalanx of tall glass candleholders painted with pictures of saints that made the cross appear more like an altar than my neighbors' usual generic protest. Scattered around the candles were prayer cards and hand-scrawled notes. Many were written in Spanish and attached to sprays of carnations and baby's breath wrapped in grocery store cellophane. There were also bunches of roses, geraniums, calla lilies, and hydrangeas that clearly were snipped from backyard gardens, and two or three plush bears and a

cheap felt pirate's hat piled among the flowers. Though the memorial was crude, there was no mistaking that the grief expressed was both real and personal.

I bent down to read the hand-painted lettering on the cross:
Christina Perez: 1974–2011.

That I did not recognize the name when I first read it saddened me as none of the other names on the crosses before it had. When the name finally struck a chord, some months later, it shattered what little faith I had left in all I still held dear. And yet, it brought me some small measure of comfort at the same time. The first I'd felt in far too many years.

My neighbors continue to blame the electricity for all that has gone wrong around them because they need something to blame for what they have found lacking in their own lives. They never knew the Bee Ladies, or a time not so long ago when the wires did not whine and sputter over their heads like an angry swarm. They do not recall quiet summer evenings thick with the sweet scent of eucalyptus, jasmine, and orange blossoms as I do. They believe malevolence needs a scientific explanation that can be measured in voltages and magnetic fields.

I do not subscribe to my neighbors' strange theories, or their garish memorial displays, but I am no longer as inclined to judge their scientific folly as harshly as I once did. Perhaps our need to make sense of profound loss is what makes us not so different after all.

Two

*APIS MELLIFERA: A mixed zoological nomenclature meaning “honey-carrying bee,” it is used to designate the so-called Western or European honeybee. **Apis** derives from the Latin word for “bee.” **Mellifera** combines the Greek words for “honey”: **melli**, and “to carry”: **ferre**.*

The bees began speaking to me through the utility wires that crisscross the sky above my home nearly twenty years ago. It was an unseasonably warm Sunday morning in early May—May 10, 1992, to be exact. I was at the kitchen sink scouring the remains of my usual breakfast of two poached eggs and a slice of toast from my plate when I heard a low-pitched hum that sounded at first rather like a small group of monks softly chanting their matins, but before long there was no mistaking the collective whine of wings that denotes an angry swarm. The hum seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at once. Drawn outside, I expected to see a great dark cloud of bees. Instead, my eyes

were drawn to the five black utility wires that overhang my house—the wires were alive with the sound of this feverish, disembodied hum. As I walked beneath the wires, the deepening hum grew louder and more insistent as I approached the house next door where the two women I had once called my friends lived.

The Bee Ladies' house was clearly at the epicenter of this strange disturbance, and so I knocked on their front door, and when there was no answer, I knocked again. It was not altogether surprising that they did not answer at once, but given the persistence of my rapping, it concerned me that I heard no response, not even a curt command to go away, and so I went around to the rear of the house and knocked this time on their kitchen door. Again, no answer.

In days gone by, the next place I would have looked for them would have been in the farthest reaches of their almond orchards. Their family had once owned nearly five acres of land, and the Bee Ladies spent hour upon hour deep within the groves tending their hives. But over time, my neighbors had slowly sold off all but a small sliver of their family's former property, holding on to just a small copse of almond trees, their three remaining hives, and the modicum of privacy they craved. While I had been forced to make similar concessions over the years, thanks to my family's thriftiness and the success of our long-standing honey business I'd managed to hold on to more than an acre of our old groves, which were more than enough to sustain the sixteen hives and the simple distribution network of farmers' markets, consignment stores, and mail-order sales that continued to support my modest needs. I do not say this to boast. Business was the last thing on my mind that awful morning. Since I could see that the

Bee Ladies weren't in their backyard, I assumed they were most likely in their house.

Putting my ear to the Bee Ladies' door, I heard tinny radio voices projecting from inside, and I thought for a moment that perhaps they had gone off to the market and left the radio playing, as I myself do when I run errands, so as to lend the appearance of occupancy in my absence.

I cast this notion aside, however, as soon as I peeked through the side window of the little garage at the end of their driveway and saw their Rambler station wagon parked inside. I knew that neither of the Bee Ladies cared to stroll the neighborhood for pleasure or need, nor were they likely to travel about in the company of anyone other than themselves. I began to fear something was truly amiss.

I knocked again at their back door, and then I jiggled the doorknob; that was how I discovered the door was unlatched. Opening it slowly, I hesitated on the threshold for a moment, but only for a moment, as I was unable to dismiss the foreboding that urged me past my more cautious self.

I called out their names as I stepped into the service porch just off their kitchen. Still, there was no response, and so I called again, louder, as I proceeded into the kitchen proper.

An iridescent yellow and gold-trimmed china tea service that I keenly recalled having once been served from when I was a boy sat oddly abandoned upon their chrome-edged dinette, leaving the eerie impression that the two women had been enjoying a cup of tea together one minute and had disappeared into a rapture of thin air the next.

A skin had formed on the milky liquid that floated atop the tea. I picked up one of the half-filled china cups. It felt

cold, though the liquid in the matching creamer felt warm, which I am sure was more a matter of my own expectations as to what should feel warm or cold than it was an actual temperature differentiation.

Then I noticed the smell. I was not so much struck at that time by the unpleasantness of the sour odor I perceived as I was by its ability to overpower the memory of disinfectant and camphor that had been the dominant aroma in my neighbors' home for as long as I could recall.

Standing in my neighbors' kitchen, I remembered a conversation with my father.

I was six years old. I asked him why we hated the Straussmans. My father was a man of few words. He said that *hate* was a very strong word. He explained simply that there were two kinds of people in the world: those who love bees and those who fear them, and that these two types seldom found common ground. The flowering hedgerow my father planted between our property and our next-door neighbors' was the concrete extension of his philosophy: Out of sight, to him, was out of mind. For the first dozen years of our coexistence, this seemed to accommodate both our families' fairly reclusive natures.

Then one April morning in 1932 we were roused from our breakfast table by the sound of a sharp rapping on our front door. When I was sent to answer it, I found our neighbors' two daughters standing uncomfortably on our porch.

The smaller, and the bolder, of the two girls was more than a year older than myself, though she stood a good six inches shorter. Her roan hair was parted in the middle and plaited into two neat braids that hung just below her shoulders. Her sky blue eyes were wide set and frank in their expression.

From her pale complexion I surmised that she did not spend nearly as much time out of doors as I did.

“My name is Clarinda Jane Straussman,” she said, which of course I knew, having watched her from our back porch since I’d grown tall enough to see over the hedgerow from that vantage. She cleared her throat rather ceremoniously and nodded to my parents. “But you may call me Claire.”

The tone of her voice, even then, was more commanding than permissive. She said she needed to speak to my father, and so I bade her and her sister to follow me into the dining room, where I presented them to my family.

“How do you do,” my mother replied, a bit more formally than I would have expected until I noticed she wore the same indulgent smile she displayed when sampling one of my sister’s more problematic culinary experiments.

“I’m very well, thank you,” Claire replied curtly. She turned to the taller, silent girl beside her, whose name should have seemed familiar but did not. With a sweeping gesture that bespoke as much theatricality as maturity she said: “This is my sister, Hilda.”

Whereas Claire’s features were delicate and finely molded as a porcelain doll’s, Hilda’s face, and indeed her entire body down to the tips of her limbs, appeared to have been shaped from modeling clay by a child’s clumsy fingers. Hilda’s short-cropped hair, which sprouted like tufts of dried corn silk from her head, was more lifeless than straight. Even today, I can only guess at the color of her eyes as she so seldom looked directly at anyone.

Hilda curtsied rather stiffly, to my father’s seeming bemusement. My mother, who stood by my father’s side, gave him a reproving glance.

“How nice to meet you both, at last,” she said. “Of course you must already know Albert and Eloise from school.”

Strictly speaking, we did not. Both the Straussman sisters were at least several grades ahead of me, and in all the years we had attended the same grammar school we had scarcely spoken to one another, and only in incidental passing. I was only ten years old. I did not understand the reason behind my sister’s practiced indifference toward Claire and Hilda any more than I understood the festering power of the insult my mother had been nursing against our neighbors since her initial gift of huckleberry jam had been received indifferently. All I knew is what my father had told me: They weren’t bee people. As my father’s son, I had been content up until that moment to more or less leave well enough alone.

“Mr. Honig,” Claire said, fashioning an expression of impatience at having her clearly rehearsed speech interrupted, “my mother has sent me to ask if you would be so kind as to come with me now to our house. She says there are bees living in our parlor wall and she would like you to remove them at once.”

To my young mind, our neighbors’ assumptions were manifest: Bees were troublesome creatures to be avoided, the swarm of bees that had taken up residence in their parlor wall must have come from one of our secluded hives and therefore they were our responsibility to remove.

I found such wrongheaded assumptions particularly irksome as the swarming season was nigh upon us and for that very reason my father and I had been particularly watchful that week for signs of restlessness from our hives and we had not yet seen the slightest indication that even one new queen was ready to hatch from any of them. I was prepared to point out to the Straussman sisters that even the most overcrowded

hive does not produce a swarm until a new queen is born either to lead the excess bees or, in the case of a weaker regent, to push the old queen and her loyal escort out to search for a suitable new hive.

Perhaps sensing my agitation, my father gently suggested it was much more likely that a wild swarm, freshly emerged from a nearby hollow log or abandoned shed, had chanced upon a tiny crack or some other such entry into the space between the inner and outer walls of the Straussmans' house, which was, unfortunately, where this particular colony had chosen to establish a new hive.

I say "unfortunately" because there is no easy way to remove bees from a wall once they have decided to take up residency inside such awkward quarters. Removal usually requires great skill on the part of the beekeeper, and even more patience on the part of the homeowner, unless of course the homeowner doesn't mind having his wall torn apart and the unwitting home invaders summarily murdered for no good reason other than human convenience.

My father chose not to belabor this point to our young neighbors. Instead, he motioned for me to follow him out to our honey shed where we kept a store of prepared hives ready to receive wild swarms.

I should explain that while beginning beekeepers generally get started by purchasing established hives from a reputable supplier, experienced beekeepers whenever possible prefer to add to their stock by acquiring wild swarms each spring; wild swarms are usually quite robust and free of disease, and they are always without cost. For this reason my father was careful to keep a goodly supply of empty hives ready for new colonies to occupy come the first of April, which is when the Valencia

oranges that used to surround our property began to bloom. This way we were ready to act at a moment's notice when the groves reached full blossom and the bees began to swarm.

My father explained as much to Mrs. Straussman when he came to her door with his hiving equipment in hand and me and the Straussman sisters in tow. I was expecting to help my father set up the catcher hive, but Mrs. Straussman had other designs.

A remarkably large woman with gray hair and matching gray eyes the color of winter clouds, Mrs. Straussman came out onto her front porch and leaned heavily on a polished wooden cane as my father told her that it would likely take up to a month to lure the entire colony out of her wall and into the catcher hive. With her permission, he said, he would place the catcher hive just outside the crack in the wall the bees were using as an entryway. The catcher hive was already equipped with two fully drawn brood combs filled with honey and pollen, as well as young brood and larvae and eggs and nurse bees to tend to them all.

My father then showed Mrs. Straussman the ingenious cone he had fashioned from a twelve-by-sixteen-inch piece of window screen that he planned to nail to the opening of the telltale crevice where the brick facing of the chimney met the roof. The wide end of the cone would cover the opening in the wall, he explained. The other end, just about a half inch in diameter, would be wide enough for the bees to exit when they left the hive in search of nectar and pollen.

"Reentering the hive will be another matter entirely for our tiny friends," my father said with a knowing wink. He explained how, after crawling around the wall of the house in search of the screened opening, the disoriented worker bees

would eventually give up and turn to the primed catcher hive, which would stand invitingly unimpeded beneath the cone. In this way, the great bulk of the hive's inhabitants would gradually transfer themselves to our new hive to combine with the starter brood.

"The new hive is queenless at present," my father said. "But the workers will soon rear a new queen from the brood cells to preside over the bees in the catcher hive and, God willing, the new queen's scent should over time lure the rest of the old colony out from inside your wall."

Mrs. Straussman appeared uninterested in the intricacies of my father's inventive procedure.

"I can hear those bees buzzing inside the wall, right there next to our chimney," she said to my father, pointing peevishly around the side of the porch with her cane. Beckoning to me with her free hand, she said: "Come have a cup of tea with me while your father gets rid of them."

Like the rest of the neighborhood children, I was more than a little cowed by Mrs. Straussman, who passed many an afternoon hunkered down on the large rattan chair on her front porch, only to rise ponderously and shout invectives at any child who strayed onto her front lawn. I tried to politely decline her invitation, explaining that I did not much care for tea, and that my father would certainly be in need of my assistance, but the woman would have none of my excuses.

"We wouldn't like to see a nice-looking young man like you get all stung up by those nasty bees," she said, beckoning to me with her cane as she turned to go back into the house. When I protested that honeybees were not in the least bit nasty, and that they were, in fact, my dearest friends, my father cut me short with a stern glance. A gentleman to the

core, he would brook no disrespect by me toward my elders. And so I was hooked.

Following Mrs. Straussman reluctantly indoors, I was assaulted for the first time by the sharp camphor tang of mothballs as I passed the hall closet. I took a shallow breath and held it in as I trailed her monstrous wake through the hallway. The Straussman sisters followed close upon my heels.

The kitchen was a spotless white room at the back of the house. It was furnished with a pale pine table and four unadorned chairs, an icebox, and a small stove. Glass-faced white wooden cabinets encircled the upper half of the room, and white tile covered the countertops beneath. Not a plate, a dish towel, or even a single bread crumb had been left lying about the Straussmans' perfectly ordered kitchen. Nor were there any lingering odors of bacon or toast or even boiled oatmeal. Certainly nothing of the sweet aroma of my mother's homemade scones and honey. I smelled instead the acrid blending of pine tar and lye soap.

As Mrs. Straussman eased herself into the chair nearest the door, I climbed into the chair across from hers and observed what I could only conclude was a particular Straussman family ritual. Hilda began it by lighting the stove's back right burner with a long kitchen match and setting a hammered-aluminum teakettle to boil while Claire withdrew two fine yellow-and-gold china cups and saucers from a cabinet shelf and set them on the table next to two silver teaspoons. Claire next set out a matching gilded china teapot and creamer between us, scooped several teaspoons of loose tea into the pot, and fetched fresh cream from the icebox, which she poured into the smaller pitcher beside it. When the water came to a boil, Hilda filled the porcelain teapot with the steaming water

from the aluminum pot and waited several more minutes before pouring the steeped tea through a metal strainer into her mother's cup halfway to the brim, and then she did the same into mine.

I had never taken to drinking tea, nor had I been trusted to sip from fine china at home, so I could only follow my hostess's lead as she reached for the china creamer and topped off my cup and then her own.

"It cuts the bitterness," she said, swirling the sweet cream with her silver spoon and urging me with her eyes to do the same. "Take care not to clink the side of the cup with your spoon."

"Why?"

"It's rude, boy," Mrs. Straussman said, setting her spoon gently onto the saucer behind her cup with its handle aligned with the cup's handle. "It's bad luck, besides."

Hilda and Claire were not invited to join us at the table but rather hovered about ever ready to refill our cups with more steaming tea.

"Is this real gold?" I recall asking Mrs. Straussman as I raised the teacup to my lips. Surprised by my own boldness, I stared into the cup's brilliantly gilded rim.

"Twenty-two carat," she replied. "That's why we only take it out for special company, young man."

I took a certain pride in being deemed "special" by the imperious Mrs. Straussman—more special, if truth be told, than her own two daughters, who seemed to have been relegated to our personal serving staff. As the youngest in my family, I'd never experienced such polite deference before.

Staring once again into those teacups and the dark liquid reservoired within, I found it painful to reconcile the reflection

of the gaunt, bespectacled old man I'd become with the innocent boy who'd sipped from that startlingly iridescent tea set for the first time sixty years before.

I don't know how long I would have stood gazing at that abandoned chinaware, dawdling like a schoolboy in my recollections, had not the baleful hum of bees that first drew me to my neighbors' house finally penetrated my reveries. I realized then that the hum seemed to be coming from the front end of the house.

Once again, I called out to my neighbors as I moved cautiously past the kitchen table and on into the narrow dark hallway leading to the parlor. Oddly, the odor of sour milk grew stronger as I moved forward. With rising dread I made my way to the front room, where to my everlasting sorrow I found the Bee Ladies at last.

Lying like rolled rugs on the polished hardwood floor, they stared into each other's faces with blank, unseeing eyes. There was no blood or marks of injury on the women that I could detect from where I stood at the entrance to their parlor.

Nothing appeared to be out of place in the room, nothing at all except of course for the Bee Ladies, who lay face-to-face on their sides with strips of silver duct tape binding their wrists and ankles. It appeared that red bandannas had been stuffed inside both their mouths and fastened in place with more silver tape. My distress continued to mount as I noticed the disquieting gray-green tint to both women's complexions.

It was at least a minute or more before I saw the first bee flitting about the fireplace opening, and perhaps another half minute after that before I spotted three more bees crawling about the framed photographs that were set in a tidy row on the wooden mantelpiece above the hearth.