



## BEESWAX

Paul Gorman

Tom crouches at the edge of the clearing, watching the beekeeper. His breath seems loud in the sudden stillness. The man is like an astronaut, bending and rising and slowly stepping forward as if obeying a different gravity.

He pulls boards from the hive, thick and heavy, and turns them slowly to inspect. Time after time he does this, without ever moving faster or with less deliberation. The air is thick with bees, and glistens like dust motes caught in a window-shaft of light.

It's the smallest of the boys, with a football near his feet. He lives upstairs. In a clearing from which the sun has bleached all colour, he's barely there; an after-image. Robert wonders how long he's been watching.

—Stay back.

The boy stops as if caught in headlights. He gives the beekeeper a look, doubting the command applies to him. Robert replaces the frame he's holding, flexes his fingers.

—What are you doing that for?

—They're bees, Robert replies. The words come slowly, thick in his throat. He doesn't know what the boy is referring to. This is what they live in, he adds.

A distant shout alerts the boy. He looks back at his companions and then, as if for the first time, at the ball. Minding the man's warning, he reaches out and pulls it with fingertips, rolling the ball noisily over leaf-mast and sweetie packets. The humming of insects is stuffy in his head like a fever, and he shivers.

Tom feels for the key in his pocket but the door is ajar. The air in the close is cool on his body after running. His skin feels charged by the sun. His step-dad lies on the sofa, a roll-up pinched between thumb and a tobacco-tanned finger. A drip of ash leans precariously over his palm. He starts as Tom walks in. The ash explodes, vanishes. His eyes are heavy, red-rimmed.

—Where've you been?

—Playing.

The beekeeper's grace has gone. He stammers when speaking and shifts his weight uneasily, directing hesitant jets of smoke into the top of the hive. He motions for the boy to avoid the slit from which the bees issue. The bees also seem affected: restless and irritable. Further puffs of smoke, sent by Tom, do little to calm or distract them.

Alarmed, Tom drops the smoker and runs. With flailing arms he staggers a few paces. He cowers on the edge of the insect cloud, on the

cup of a decision. His new white trainers are smeared with green. He lifts a hand to sweep perspiration from his face and hits the gauze of the veil. The beekeeper has relaxed into the slow, definite motions of his job, and has raised neither hand nor voice against his young companion. Tom pulls the veil into position and picks up the smoker. The man levers out something like a tray, but bulging at the centre and crawling all over.

—What's that?

—This frame is called a super. He turns his face away from the board before speaking. The bees ripple over smooth brown lumps. He lifts it higher, inspecting.

—In a few weeks all of this should be honey.

—Honey?

Tom moves closer.

—The hive is in two parts: top and bottom. All the honey is up top; the bees' eggs are downstairs. You stop the queen bee moving between the two floors and laying eggs all over your honey. He lowers the super back into place, picks another one up.

—She's not really a queen, he continues. She just lays the eggs, and decides whether they'll hatch into workers, or into drones. You can see the workers in here.

—He's good, isn't he?

Stevie was sitting in his chair, the football sticker album on his lap. Tom had dutifully peeled open the packets and placed the numbered stickers in the corresponding places in the book. He saw no point in trying to complete the collection. It would take forever.

Tom looked up, saw the footballer his stepdad was indicating, and nodded without interest. He switched his attention back to the television. Dimly he heard the flapping as Stevie leafed through pages made heavy with stickers.

—We could go to a game sometime. There's plenty boys your age go.

Tom shrugged, fanning his lips with a duplicate sticker.

—That'd be good, eh?

The exposed adhesive tickled as he peeled it from the pad of his thumb. He pressed it to the backing paper but the glue no longer stuck and the corner curled back on itself. The adhesive now bore his thumbprint in minute relief.

There was a blow to his cheekbone. The album landed nearby, pages spread like wings, a dead bird.

—What do you do, Tom? Tell me. I buy you this: you sit sticking them to your fucking thumbs. I offer to take you to a game: no.

Tom crawled to retrieve the album.

—Leave it!

—It's ripped, said Tom.

Chin on his chest, he regarded the quivering pages in hands whose bones had suddenly shrunk.

—I'll rip you, you little shit.

Stevie dug into a pocket for cigarettes. He flicked the lighter into life, took a drag and shook his head. Tom watched the burning tip glow a deep, angry red.

—Go on. Bugger off to wherever it is you go.

Robert recognised the figure sitting, chin perched awkwardly on his knees, outside his front door.

—What’s the matter? Robert set down bags of shopping. The boy looked up at him with dry red eyes.

—Can we go and see the bees?

—They’re not pets.

The door next to Robert’s opened, and a short man in blue overalls came out. A tool-belt hung low around his waist. Tight curls of grey hair clung to his scalp. Robert gave a curt nod in greeting. His neighbour’s bulging eyes flitted from boy to man as he passed. The boy stood up, wiped dust from his arse. Robert unlocked his own door and shouldered it open.

—What do you do if someone hits you but you can’t fight back?

The beekeeper regarded him a moment before stuttering a reply.

—Tell your Mum or Dad.

The boy walked away slowly, slapping the cool stone walls with his palm as he climbed the stairs.

It felt soft, but didn’t give under pressure, and when you rubbed your fingers together after holding it, they took on a sort of roughness. Tom would set it down and pick it up again, fascinated. It had a sweet smell. He sat on the edge of his bed, turning it over endlessly. He traced smooth dimples with his fingertip, ran a nail down grainy bulges. Standing by the open window he held the shimmering flame of his Mum’s old lighter, watery in the evening sunlight, to the lump of wax. It softened and ran and dripped to the windowsill. The scent caught in his throat, thick and wild and powerful. He nudged the

fallen drops with a finger. Like the football sticker, the tiny print of ridges and whorls and knots transferred to the soft warmth of the wax. It gave under his touch, warm like skin, a tiny self-sufficient lump of flesh. He crushed it and the skin burst. Globbs of wax adhered to his finger and hardened fast. He peeled it off. The tiny casts lay on the windowsill; an eggshell from which something secret had just hatched.

The boy wasn't with them this time. They strutted like pigeons on the corner of the street. All eyes turned to Robert as he crossed the road, still wearing his beekeeping gear.

A wolf whistle, a lasso of sound, split the evening air. Laughter. The boys ran about with buzzing noises and arms spread like wings; fighter planes engaging in a dogfight. Watching girls laughed and smoked.

Robert hurried up the close and dead-locked his door. From behind the curtain he watched them until he faded from their thoughts and they turned on each other once more.

The knock on his door woke Tom. In came Stevie, reeking of drink. He knelt by the bed.

—Tom.

Every stubble hair was a tiny black needle. Tom dared not move.

—I'm sorry. I shouldn't have hit you. He reached forward to touch the bruised cheek but Tom pulled away. The face in front of Tom struggled to stay fixed. The eyes moved without meaning. It was

as if there was someone behind the mask, unable to operate the controls.

—We're pals, you and me? Stevie picked the words carefully, but they fell into each other.

—Suit yourself, then.

He pushed himself upright. The door was closed, much too slowly.

—Come out, Tom. Please. You've been in there long enough. Don't you want some honey? Robert held up a small plastic bucket. He stood by the open door of the cupboard under the stairs and tapped his fingers on the steel drum of the honey extractor he'd just dragged from its depths. He wiped away dust. Does your Mum know you're here?

—My Mum's dead.

—I'm sorry. Robert's voice softened. Will you come out? I want to show you how this works.

—Euch. Tom emerged into the dim light of the close. There's spiders in there. Can't we go back to the bees?

—There'd have been a schoolboy in there too, if you hadn't come out. Robert switched off the cupboard light and waved the key in the boy's face.

Tom turned at the sound of footsteps coming from the closemouth. Robert's neighbour took in the sight of man and boy in their huge beekeeping gloves as he passed to reach his front door. He opened his door, sniffed, rubbed his thick nose carefully, and looked at Robert.

—You should be careful what you say.

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Again, they're at the corner of the street. Robert hears the suck as a lollipop is pulled between lips. The oldest looking boy calls out, a smug grin on his narrow face.

—Alright, Robert?

—Yes thanks, the beekeeper mutters, white knuckles struggling with the zip on his jacket. His eyes begin to water. He squints as he peers into the distance.

—Yes thanks, comes a mocking echo.

He produces a hard smile and aims it at the smallest boy, who breaks eye contact.

—Morning, Tom. He hauls up the zip with a flourish and passes. His heart pounds with a violence he can barely suppress.

Almost imperceptibly, the boy's shoulders drop.

—How does he know your name? someone asks.

Tom shrugs. Don't know.

The oldest boy takes the lollipop from his mouth, trailing a thread of saliva, and raps the bulb of the sweet hard against Tom's forehead.

The lollipop is red. The paper stalk is furred, its shape wrinkled by the sweat of the hand that once held it. Crudely inverted it stands, a conqueror's flag, on the roof of the hive. Around the tacky residue that has softened in the sun and which now coats the wood, stray insects pry, taste and move on. Against the pale surface of the hive, and the green of the sun-parched clearing, this red and white exclamation

hooks the eye of the beekeeper as he approaches. Though small, its efficacy as a beacon bears no relation to its size. The colour is an irrelevance. Its presence alone is all that concerns him.

He looks around; nobody will be there. The lollipop is a sign of a past presence, a haunting. If he was being watched, no upturned sweet would advertise the fact. It is a sign of power already exercised, a secret revealed.

The stick slides from the sweet with a gentle sucking sound, and he scrubs the sugary gloop away. A small ghost of red remains.

The gang appeared the following evening. He was powerless to chase them away: Robert knew it, and they knew it. He raised a hand, a surrender, and turned back to the honey frames, selecting those that were full and swapping them with clean new ones. The gang moved nearer, watching him. He struggled to control his breathing, worried that the bees might notice the change in his mood and become aggressive. He turned to face the crowd before speaking. Beneath the veil his eyes were closed.

—Stay downwind of them.

—Eh?

—Don't let the wind blow past you towards the bees. If they smell you, they might attack.

They moved to the side, and now the hives were between him and the three of them.

—Where's Tom?

A shrug was the only reply.

The beekeeper nodded. Stay right there, he said, and bent

forward to his work.

Stevie knew the wee man's face but not his name. He recognised the curly hair, sagging jowls and thick nose. The man wore a polyester jumper on which a stubbly chin caught and tugged. He sidled along the bar towards Stevie, pushing his whisky before him. Stevie looked straight ahead, reluctant to engage with the man.

—You live upstairs, don't you?

Stevie nodded minutely, hunting for change. The man seemed encouraged.

—I thought so. I was sitting there and I was looking at you and I was thinking "is that him or is it not?" but it is. The wee boy—

Unsettled by the sudden pause, Stevie turned to look, but the man was merely sipping his drink and unpicking parabolas of thread from his jumper, snagged on his chin. Stevie paid for his drink and made to move away.

—Your wee boy. He's a braw wee lad. Tom, is it?

—What about him?

—It's just that I saw you and I couldn't help wondering. Is he getting plenty of free honey?

Stevie raised the pint to his lips.

—Sorry, pal. I don't know what you're talking about.

—Free honey? From the beekeeper?

Robert dropped the smoker and their howls echoed across the glade. With trembling arms he levered up the queen excluder, but dropped it. It snapped into place, catching a worker as it fell. Her legs kicked in a feeble reflex. He picked her off the grille and crushed her between bare fingers. A chorus of jeers rose from his audience. As he pulled out further boards they lost interest and began to run about the

clearing. They returned to crowd him as he replaced the lid of the hive and laid two frames, heavy with amber caps of honey, on top. He stole glances through the veil. Faces swam and shifted in the rippling mesh.

His path from the hive was blocked. The stares of the gang fell upon him. They were all around, hyenas hovering beyond striking distance, waiting for the prey to fall. He damped the smoker, stuffed the tools blindly into his bag, and lifted the first two honey frames. The gang swarmed after him.

Their noise echoed behind him as he stumbled into the flat. He scraped the wax from the supers and slotted them into the extractor. Shaped like a huge galvanised rubbish bin, it tapered to a hole at the bottom. A plastic bucket stood underneath to catch the harvest.

The letterbox flapped open and a volley of high-pitched abuse poured into the hall. He turned the handle of the machine to smother the sound. The frames span and gradually the centrifuge emptied their contents into the metal drum. It filtered into the bucket below. After a while he paused, examined the emptied frames, and noticed the silence.

Then someone hammered on the door, again and again.

Tom stands by the window, melting the scraps of beeswax with a match. As they soften, he tries to press them back onto the nugget they came from. But the effect is ruined. It no longer looks like a lump of beeswax, but what it is: small pieces stuck together, like a broken plate glued together, on which the crack is clearly visible. He pushes the window open and hurls it to the ground.

A mess of insects fills the clearing, picking over honey frames

open to the sun. One of the hives lies on its front. The walls are splintered, exposing gashes of young red wood. The broken roof is lost in the long grass. From the other hive protrudes a length of rusted metal, jammed in a ragged groove ploughed by the force of the impact. Fewer bees surround and cover this colony. The basin from which they once drank lies upturned on the roof, and a slow trickle of water gathers with the corpses, curled like punctuation marks, at the mouth of the hive. Each drop catches the sun, a gleam of yellow. It could almost be honey.

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