

Bees

By Patricio Pron, translated from the Spanish by Kathleen Heil

My grandfather noticed that the bees had been disturbed. Even though they acted the same as always, buzzing from one place to the next, he was certain that someone or something had disturbed them. I knew something was up because he scrunched his nose the same way my father used to after his accident in the factory.

I remember it all very clearly because nothing much ever happened in Blaustein. When something did, it stuck in your memory for years. It happened in summer, when bees are at their busiest making honey, and they fly around endlessly in flaxen arcs like inhabitants of a sprawling city.

In the days following, my grandfather stood there staring at the hive, neglecting the housework. In a way, he was like one of the bees, incapable of getting anything done when something worried him. My grandfather had a plan. In the morning, I'd listen to him do battle with the dishes, fill a thermos with coffee, and head out. Then I'd get dressed by myself and head to the kitchen to eat what was leftover of his breakfast. Through the window I'd watch him disappear among the trees behind the house.

At the time we lived on the outskirts of Blaustein, and grandfather's hive was situated at the edge of our property. I imagine that's where he'd hide, keeping watch for the intruder. I'd eat and do my homework or just sit on the back stoop so I could watch grandfather work. That's why I saw it before he did. It was the eldest Fischer boy, who was leaving his bike on the path and taking the long way around to get to the back of the property. I knew grandfather always took his rifle with him, so I ran to let him know what was going on, and found him lying down on a green tarp. The rifle was resting on his right forearm, and he motioned for me to lie next to him, which I did, and then we saw the eldest Fischer boy jump over the fence and disappear momentarily among all the tree trunks. When he reappeared, he was right next to the hive. My grandfather didn't let go of the rifle, and I wanted to tell him not to shoot, it was only the eldest Fischer boy, but he motioned for me to keep quiet. So I looked up again and saw him standing there, taking it all in. Even though he was just another one of the townspeople, and he often led the group of kids who insulted me at school, I thought he looked really brave standing there, indifferent to the threatening buzzing of the bees around his blond head. Then the eldest Fischer boy turned around and headed back toward the path.

That afternoon we ate in silence. Afterward, grandfather put on his beekeeper suit and went out to the hive. I stood on a stool and washed the dishes. At dusk my grandfather motioned for me to get on the truck. I noticed the bed of the truck was covered with a tarp but didn't ask any questions. My grandfather drove through town and then a bit further on. We stopped in front of a dilapidated wooden house. Two children younger

than me came out to greet us, but I could see the timid blond head of the eldest Fischer boy sticking out from behind them.

“Frank,” was the only welcome we got from the man who came out of the house. He was huge, and he kept bringing his hands to the seat of his pants, as if they were dirty and he wanted to keep us from seeing them. I noticed his face was as red as a cherry, and that he looked a lot like the eldest Fischer boy, I guess because he was his father.

The man invited us in.

“Maria,” he said to a woman who came out of the darkness from the back of the house when we arrived, “do you remember Mr. Steuer?”

“Of course,” the woman said, “How—” the woman hesitated for a moment, which allowed me to imagine she was thinking about my father, my grandmother, about some of our dead, “—are you?”

“Fine, thanks,” my grandfather said.

We sat down in some uncomfortable chairs, and my feet dangled there. For awhile no one said anything. All I could hear was the coughing of one of the three boys, who sat in a terrified huddle in the back of the room, and my own breathing. Maria served three cups of coffee. She put milk in mine, even though I hate coffee with milk. Then she stood behind her husband, continuously drying her hands on her apron. It was like wiping their hands was some kind of family tic.

“The coffee’s really good,” my grandfather said. The years since my grandmother’s death had left him rather bad at small talk.

Mr. Fischer nodded gravely without taking his eyes off the bottom of his coffee cup, as if my grandfather had just spoken one of life’s great truths. Maria was startled and we all looked at her, surprised. She turned around and took three cookies out of a box, placing them on a plate in front of me. The Fischer children craned their necks and I could tell that these cookies meant a lot to them.

“Eat,” my grandfather said. Even though I wasn’t very hungry, I brought one to my mouth to be polite.

We went quiet again until, out of nowhere, my grandfather began to speak: “Something’s wrong with my bees.” When he said this, I saw the eldest of the Fischer boys duck his blond head behind his siblings. “One of your children was nosing around the hive,” my grandfather said. “Look, I don’t want you to punish him. That’s how I got into this line of work myself. But my bees don’t like outsiders, and they stop producing honey when they’re disturbed. I thought that perhaps he could stop doing it and, in return, I’d help him learn the business. In my truck,” my grandfather turned his head and gestured behind him, “I have a box with fifty bees and a queen ready to set up another hive. If it’s all right with you, I’ll leave it with him and stop by twice a week to

help him disinfect the bees and extract the honey, in exchange for him staying off my property.”

Mr. Fischer looked at his wife, who was still wiping her hands on her apron as if she'd never finish drying them. Then he looked at his son.

“How does that sound?” he asked. “Do you think you could look after them?”

The eldest of the Fischer children nodded, a perplexed smile on his face. Then we stood up to leave. As we did, I saw the children throw themselves on the uneaten cookies. My grandfather put his gloves on and took the box of bees out of the back of his truck. He came back followed by a few bees that had escaped from the box and flew in circles around him, creating a kind of yellow cloud above his head. Then he tied the box with the hive in it to a tree, at the same time explaining how it worked to the eldest Fischer boy, who listened attentively, staring at the box with that serious expression often seen on adults, but rarely on children.

No one moved. Even the air seemed to pause over my grandfather and the eldest Fischer boy, who were chatting next to the tree, and behind them, over that of his brothers, who looked frozen with surprise. Then the youngest broke free from his mother's arm and began jumping up and down around the hive. No one seemed to notice at first, because they were all hanging on every word my grandfather said. We all went quiet, holding our breath as my grandfather took the hive from the box, but then the youngest Fischer boy got scared and started running toward the house. We looked back and saw that a swarm of bees was following him. It must have escaped from the hive when my grandfather took it out of the box. My grandfather shouted at him to remain still, but the boy tried to shoo the bees away with his hands. Then they started stinging him. On his neck, his arms, his face. A huge cloud of bees kept stinging the boy's face. “That's enough! That's enough!” his mother shouted, as if she could actually make them stop just by shouting. Mr. Fischer had begun heading toward the boy but the way I remember it he never managed to reach him, as if he were moving in slow motion, or through wet sand. My grandfather, who had run to his truck, brought his smoker and sprayed it in the boy's direction to scare the bees away.

Nothing much ever happened in Blaustein but, even if it did, I'm sure I would still remember what I saw that day. The boy was lying on the ground, crying, while around him lots of bees were slowly dying. I stared at the bees and felt sorry for them, because their lives were so short and had to end so stupidly. But I also felt sorry for my grandfather, whose wife had died several years before, shortly after my mother's death and just before my father had the accident in the factory. He came back with me to Blaustein to die slowly while he stared at a monotonous landscape which wasn't the one he grew up in—a landscape of minarets that, come to think of it, might have also smelled of sesame and tea and mint, of things I could look at if I went through his old boxes but would never understand, things he had brought from the other side of the world—it was the landscape his wife had grown up in.

My grandfather quickly treated the youngest Fischer boy while Mr. Fischer embraced his wife, who wouldn't stop crying. The eldest boy had hidden behind the house, as if everything were his fault. I thought I should feel sorry for the little boy, but actually, I only felt sorry for myself, because my father had died and had never really managed to learn German, beyond the few words I had heard him say and maybe others he said to my mother, other words whose meaning I could only now understand but that I never heard him say, since I was very small when my mother died of a disease that, I'd like to think, killed her in the same way the bees died that afternoon: suddenly and almost without realizing it.

When I looked at them again, the youngest of the Fischer boys was smiling. His brothers had come around him and he was showing off his stings with a survivor's pride. My grandfather muttered an excuse that I didn't manage to hear to Mr. Fischer and his wife, who kept hysterically wiping her hands on her apron. As we headed toward the truck, I looked around and noticed that there weren't any bees left, and that the air was clean and cold. Behind me, I could hear Mr. Fischer's wife saying something to him. Not much ever happened in Blaustein, but, even if it did, I would still remember the words she said, because it was the first time I'd heard them used, and their meaning, the parentheses they opened in my German existence every time someone used them, shocked me and made me feel like an intruder. The woman said: "We don't need anything of his. Tell him to take his bees someplace else. And that goddamn filthy Turk, too."