

A LONGING FOR BUZZ

BY BARBARA DEMARCO-BARRETT

ONE JUNE WHEN I was in my early twenties, my best friend and I drove from the suburbs of Philadelphia to the hills of West Virginia to spend the summer with friends. Ten days after we arrived, I spent the weekend at a crafts fair selling handmade jewelry—how I made my money in those days. I met a sizzling hot hippie dude who crafted handmade furniture. We were attracted to each other like honeybees to clover.

When the fair ended, Tony invited me to stay at his cabin in a nearby holler for however long I liked. The cabin sat in an idyllic setting, surrounded by trees and wildlife. It was my summer to try new things, so I said, why not?

Tony parked his truck near his work shed off the highway. I carried my backpack and tote filled with clothing, a journal, and books—*Be Here Now*, *The Dharma Bums*, *A Movable Feast*—and followed him down a dirt path to a clearing, beyond which stood a cabin built with repurposed barn wood.

“Here it is,” he said, gesturing widely, as if this were a castle and not a one-room cabin sans electricity or indoor plumbing. The cabin was clean but unfinished. The cardboard insulation would eventually be covered with knotty pine, but ensconced in the fog of lust, I could not have cared less about home design.

Tony had a six-pack before they were called that, eyes green as lime juice, and talented fingers. He’d escaped a bad marriage in Brooklyn and a job at his family’s restaurant and moved here to work the land.

“My wife went out with my best buddy,” he said in his West Virginia drawl, no hint of Brooklyn anywhere, “and I decided right then and there to leave that life and stop thinking deeply about anything because I couldn’t make sense out of what happened. The land doesn’t betray you.”

I couldn't imagine what thinking deeply had to do with cheating wives, but I was astounded. He'd never said so much at one time, and it gave me hope that there was a thinker and talker beneath his handsome exterior.

After a tour of the property, he showed me how to fetch water from the well, how to start a cook fire with twigs and a match, and how to roll the perfect cigarette using Bugler tobacco. All of it was new to me, so different from my life in the suburbs.

Just before sunset, Tony and I sat on the stoop by the open door.

"Lookie there," he said. I closed my book. Behind a grove of birch trees, the setting sun cast a golden, honeyed light, leaves edged in gold. As he lit a hand-rolled cigarette, a great hum filled the air, as if just beyond the trees, musicians were tuning their instruments.

A moment later, an orderly swarm of honeybees arced over us and into an opening in the cardboard wall beside the bed. Tony puffed on the ciggie. I froze.

When the last bee disappeared into the wall, I said, "What the hell was that?"

"They was bees," he said.

"Do they stay in there all night?"

"Yep," he said. "In the mornin' they leave to do their work pollinating flowers."

"They're in there all night, then." I'd never heard of humans and bees co-existing like this.

"All night," he said, as if it were the most natural thing.

My heart jitterbugged against my rib cage. "I'm afraid of bees."

"Then I guess you best get over it fast-like."

Fifteen minutes later, what had sounded like an orchestra became a vague hum that felt soothing to my ears, like the ocean at night.

As if living with bees wasn't bad enough, I had to make my way in the dark to the "bathroom," a weedy area one hundred feet away.

"Any wild animals out there?" I asked.

"Just some garter snakes in the beyond. They tuck in early."

I grabbed the roll of toilet paper by the door. "If I'm not back in 10 minutes, call 9-1-1."

He let go a laugh. "You're funny. We don't have a phone."

As I ambled along the dirt path, I wondered what I'd gotten myself into. No phone... a bathroom in the weeds... snakes in the beyond... bees.

When I returned, I read by candlelight as Tony polished a newly carved stool. Then he blew out the candle and pulled me to him. He smelled like the rosewood he used in his woodworking.

The next morning Tony gardened while his donkey, Harold, and I headed for the general store down the hill. Harold's back felt solid and warm beneath me as we moseyed along at two mph. The clomp-clomp of hooves and the music of songbirds made me understand how this lifestyle could grow on you. Only one truck passed us during our forty-five-minute trip, a contrast to the mad rush of the Southeastern Pennsylvania expressways. A cardinal alighted on a branch, its red feathers signaling something, but what? That only good things were in store for me here in the holler?

At the store, I packed the side-bags with eggs, apples, milk, flour, and beans, and Harold and I trekked back up the hill. Those four hours were heavenly, but I wondered how I'd feel if I did this all the time, how long it would take to grow tired of spending so much time with Harold for the purpose of acquiring groceries.

I grew unafraid of the bees and began looking forward to them. Their arrival tested my mettle, as did cooking with wood, hauling water from the well, and living without anything extraneous. I could live without stuff, but I could not live without books, without connection, without people.

One morning, Tony and I hiked to a lookout point where hills and trees stretched for miles. There was no denying the pristine beauty of what lay before us, but it left me feeling empty.

"Don't you think the view'd be better if there were a house or church plopped in there to contrast all that natural beauty?" I said.

"It's paradise the way it is," he said. "Don't worry—you'll grow to love the holler, too."

"I hope so," I said, but already I could see that our concepts of paradise were about as far apart as fresh-picked peaches and that fruit in the can.

If only we talked about books and writing. Tony's reading material extended to owners' manuals for woodworking equipment.

One day, I returned from picking berries to find Tony sitting by the firepit absorbed in a book. This excited me, like finding an overlooked gift under the Christmas tree.

"What're you reading?"

"Oh, this is pure poetry, darlin'," he said, and he proceeded to read me a passage about how to make box joints with a router.

Chemistry with a hot dude lasts only so long when the brain disengages.

A week later, I asked Tony to drive me back to my friends—not because of the bees or lack of plumbing or electricity, but because I was bored out of my mind. I needed to talk about something other than crops or wood. He never spoke so much again as he had on that first day.

It wasn't the last time I got involved with the wrong guy, but it was the summer I realized books and writing were more important than I knew. I returned to college with a dedication to writing that would last throughout my life. As would my fondness for bees.