



PAUL A. TOTH
HONEYBEE

The kitchen was sunny with light sloping down the mountain as Sudhakar slapped his hat on the table. He watched Aghanashini wrap her little hands round the honey jar and lick what remained at the top. Then he snatched the jar from her hands and slammed it on the countertop. Honey-bead tears formed in her eyes. She blinked them away.

"No more honey, Honeybee," Sudhakar said. "And I don't want to call you Honeybee any longer." He sighed and touched his sun-burnt wrinkles. "Let's pick a new name. How about Nash? That's good, isn't it? Short and cute."

She wiped her mouth, but her hand stuck to her lips. He found a napkin and cleaned her face.

"Nash from now on, okay?"

She nodded. "Honeybee," she said.

"Nash. There's no more honey, so no more Honeybee."

"Honeybee."

He watched the bees hovering outside the screen. He kicked the door. They scattered but soon returned.

He went outside and saw that some of the colonies were dead from the spray, but a few refused to die. They were ghettos to him, filled with honeybees who had no jobs, who expected welfare from him. Later, he would spray them again. What use were they now? The Chinese, the Germans, even the goddamned Argentineans from halfway around the planet all managed to export their honey to India cheaper than he could make it. Honeybee—Nashhad—just licked clean the next to the last jar. He knew he would surrender to her brown eyes and let her enjoy the very last jar. Then she would have to eat the Appam balls his mother brought on Sundays. They were sweet enough. Nash would adjust. And she would be safer without the bees around.

Honey: their whole world seemed to drip with it, from the honeydew sun to the honey-tinted fields, from the honey-scented air to his honey-coloured skin. He was no longer a religious man, but he was sure he was being punished by his own senses. At night, he dreamt of bees, which carried him away to a citadel. The city was as far from his home as the nearest real town, and he would cling to the bees' rumbling wings for miles and miles. When they approached the city, the air stunk with dead wings and stingers, the gutters below rolling with rancid honey. The skyscrapers swarmed with hoards of bees engaged in vile acts of reverse bestiality. He knew his fate when the bees that carried him zoomed downward toward the tallest building, for the smoke pouring from its chimney smelled like burning human skin.

"Bastards," he said, thinking of Chinese, German, and Argentinean men with bee-faces and striped skin. "Nash, come here," he said.

He waited. She did not appear.

"Honeybee? Get out here now."

She ran to him and slipped her hand into his.

"Soon, we will move and forget about bees. This land can be used for something else, but I'm old and tired. I'm too old for that kind of work. We'll go to your grandmother's house in town and stay there a while, long enough for me to find a little office job. Then we'll find a new apartment."

"But this belongs to us."

"Don't be sad, Nash—Honeybee. Don't cry, Aghanashini. They'll have better schools there. Instead of three children in a dirty room, you'll have a hundred friends in a building as big as our land. You won't have to run from bees, either."

"I like them chasing me."

"They're dangerous. My body has stings all over it. I made the path to the car and covered it with screening, but you get stung, too. You don't like that, do you?"

Her lips twisted into a frown as she thought about the bee stings. "They don't mean to sting me."

"Yes, they do. The bees are crazy, honey-crazy. They might turn on us one day. They already have. Bees from another place invade without ever landing here. Their honey is like nuclear missiles sent from a place far away. It destroys us without the people who mean to harm us even looking us in the face. They're cowards. They can't make a living in their own countries, so they come here." He looked down, the distance between his eyes and her black hair reminding him of her youth. "Aghanashini, I won't have you working for them when they arrive. They'll send their factories here and make little girls like you put their honey in jars, and for so little money you won't even be able to buy a piece of candy with it."

"Ow," she said.

He released her hand and squeezed his right fist. He wanted to punch the importers. He wanted to beat them down and kick their stomachs until they vomited honey on the mud. Then he would reach into their pockets and remove their wallets. He would take all the money and throw the wallets on their faces. That was the closest to a burial he would provide. Their corpses could rot in the bee-happy sun. First the bees would swarm around them, seeing the little pools of blood as flowers without stems. Then the vultures would arrive. But by that time, Sudhakar and Aghanashini would be gone. He would spend his last years earning next to nothing, but every rupee would go to his daughter's education. He would demand that she study international business. Then, just before he died, he would send her to China, Germany or Argentina, where she would take over their businesses and refuse to sleep with them. She would come home with their money and build a citadel. Then she would summon the bees, and they would embark for the foreign lands she had visited, returning with those who had tried to seduce her. She would lord over the sacrificial rites.

"Go inside, Nash, and eat the last jar of honey. Then there will be no more."

"No more ever?"

"No more honey, forever and ever."

She ran to the house, while Sudhakar grabbed the hose attached to the tank of chemicals.

There was really only one active colony left. The others buzzed with bees that had simply refused to admit their homes had been condemned. But the active one was as alive as ever, swarming with the bees of his dreams and all their insect pornography.

He carried the hose toward the colony, feeling like a revolutionary about to burn the czar's palace. So was this colony a ghetto or an empire? It seemed somehow both. He had no respect for their cultures. He knew what happened there, how the children climbed over each other in filthy alleys, while just miles away the wealth accumulated. He would destroy all of it, with mercy and ruthlessness.

He opened the hose and let the spray cloud the colony, a tornado of chemicals rushing sideways across the sky. At first, there was little reaction, but then the bees began abandoning the honeycombs, scattering in the poison. He moved closer, the spray knocking a few to the ground, but the rest fought for the clean air just beyond the radius that sickened them.

Then he had too many choices, as some were shooting left and right and others straight down, and he could not cover all of them. Soon they covered him, and in his rambling thoughts about exporters and bees and ghettos and empires, he hadn't put on his protective gear. It wasn't the ten thousand pinpricks of pain that took him to the ground but the dizzying confusion of the swarm.

"Aghanashini," he yelled. "Nash! Honeybee!"

He was glad to open his eyes and see his brave girl running to his side. Then he closed his eyes at the same time he closed his hand around hers. The syrup bound their hands together, but when he tried to let go, Aghanashini's palm remained with his. The bees swarmed upon them, aiming for the tiniest roses that bloomed on their honey-coloured skin.