

The Secret Life of Bees

By Sue Monk Kidd

Scene from Chapter 14

The next morning I showed up in the kitchen with the whale pin fastened to my favorite blue top. A Nat King Cole record was going. “Unforgettable, that’s what you are.” I think it was on to drown out all the commotion the pink Lady Kenmore washer was making on the porch. It was a wondrous invention, but it sounded like a cement mixer. August sat with her elbows on the tabletop, drinking the last of her coffee and reading another book from the bookmobile.

When she lifted her eyes, they took in my face, then went straight to the whale pin. I saw her smile before she went back to her book. I fixed my standard Rice Krispies with raisins. After I finished eating, August said, “Come on out to the hives. I need to show you something.”

We got all decked out in our bee outfits—at least I did. August hardly wore anything but the hat and veil.

Walking out there, August widened her step to miss squashing an ant. It reminded me of May. I said, “It was May who got my mother started saving roaches, wasn’t it?”

“Who else?” she said, and smiled. “It happened when your mother was a teenager. May caught her killing a roach with a flyswatter. She said, ‘Deborah Fontanel, every living creature on this earth is special. You want to be the one that puts an end to one of them?’ The she showed her how to make a trail of marshmallows and graham crackers.”

I fingered the whale pin on my shoulder, picturing the whole thing. Then I looked around and noticed the world. It was such a pretty day you couldn’t imagine anything coming along to spoil it.

According to August, if you’ve never seen a cluster of beehives first thing in the morning, you’ve missed the eighth wonder of the world. Picture these white boxes tucked under pine trees. The sun will slant through the branches, shining in the sprinkles of dew drying on the lids. There will be a few hundred bees doing laps around the hive boxes, just warming up, but mostly taking their bathroom break, as bees are so clean they will not soil the inside of their hives. From a distance it will look like a big painting you might see in a museum, but museums can’t capture the sound. Fifty feet away you will hear it, a humming that sounds like it came from another planet. At thirty feet your skin will start to vibrate. The hair will lift on your neck. Your head will say, *Don’t go any farther*, but your heart will send you straight into the hum, where you will be swallowed by it. You will stand there and think, *I am in the center of the universe, where everything is sung to life*.

August lifted the lid off a hive. “This one is missing its queen,” she said.

I’d learned enough beekeeping to know that a hive without a queen was a death sentence for the bees. They would stop work and go around completely demoralized.

“What happened?” I said.

“I discovered it yesterday. The bees were sitting out here on the landing board looking melancholy. If you see bees loafing and lamenting, you can bet their queen is dead. So I searched through the combs, and sure enough she was gone. I don’t know what caused it. Maybe it was just her time.”

“What do you do now?”

“I called the County Extension, and they put me in touch with a man in Goose Creek who said he’d drive over with a new queen sometime today. I want to get the hive requeened before one of the workers starts laying. If get laying workers, we’ve got ourselves a mess.”

“I didn’t know a worker bee could lay eggs,” I said.

“All they can do, really, is lay unfertilized drone eggs. They’ll fill up the combs with them, and as the workers naturally die off, there are done to replace them.”

As she lowered the lid, she said, “I just wanted to show you what a queenless colony looked like.”

She lifted back the veils from her hat, then lifted mine back, too. She held my gaze while I studied the gold flecks in her eyes.

“Remember when I told you the story of Beatrix,” she said, “the nun who ran away from her convent? Remember how the Virgin Mary stood in for her?”

“I remember,” I said. “I figured you knew I’d run away like Beatrix did. You were trying to tell me that Mary was standing in for me at home, taking care of things till I went back.”

“Oh, that’s not what I was trying to tell you at all,” she said. “You weren’t the runaway I was thinking about. I was thinking about your *mother* running away. I was just trying to plant a little idea in your head.”

“What idea?”

“That maybe Our Lady could act for *Deborah* and be like a stand-in mother for you.”

The light was making patterns on the grass. I stared at them, feeling shy about what I was going to say. “I told Our Lady one night in the pink house that she was my mother. I put my hand on her heart the way you and the Daughters always do at your meetings. I know I tried it that one time before and fainted, but this time I stayed on my feet, and for a while after that I really did feel stronger. Then I seemed to lose it. I think what I need is to go back and touch her heart again.”

August said, “Listen to me now, Lily. I’m going to tell you something I want you always to remember, all right?”

Her face had grown serious, intent. Her eyes did not blink.

“All right,” I said, and I felt something electric slide down my spine.

“Our Lady is not some magical being out there somewhere, like a fairy godmother. She’s not the statue in the parlor. She’s something *inside* of you. Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

“Our Lady is inside me,” I repeated, not sure I did.

“You have to find the mother inside yourself. We all do. Even if we already have a mother, we still have to find this part of ourselves inside.” She held out her hand to me. “Give me your hand.”

I lifted my left hand and place it in hers. She took it and pressed the flat of my palm up against my chest, over my beating heart. “You don’t have to put your hand on Mary’s heart to get strength and consolation and rescue, and all the other things we need to get through life,” she said. “You can place it right here on your own heart. *Your own heart.*”

August stepped closer. She kept the pressure steady against my hand. “All those times your father treated you mean, Our Lady was the voice in you that said, ‘No, I will not bow down to this. I am Lily Melissa Owens, I will not bow down.’ Whether you could hear this voice or not, she was in there saying it.”

I took my other hand and placed it on top of hers, and she moved her free hand on top of it, so we had this black-and-white stack of hands resting on my chest.

“When you’re unsure of yourself,” she said, “when you start pulling back into doubt and small living, she’s the one inside saying, ‘Get up from there and live like the glorious girl you are.’ She’s the power inside you, you understand?”

Her hands stayed where they were but released their pressure. “And whatever it is that keeps widening your heart, that’s Mary, too, not only the power inside you but the love. And when you get down to it, Lily, that’s the only purpose grand enough for a human life. Not just to love—but to *persist* in love.”

She paused. Bees drummed their sound into the air. August retrieved her hands from the pile on my chest, but I left mine there.

“This Mary I’m talking about sits in your heart all day long, saying, ‘Lily, you are my everlasting home. Don’t you ever be afraid. I am enough. We are enough.’”

I closed my eyes, and in the coolness of morning, there among the bees, I felt for one clear instant what she was talking about. When I opened my eyes, August was nowhere around. I looked back toward the house and saw her crossing the yard, her white dress catching the light.

ANALYZING THE SCENE

A STORY EVENT is an active change of life value for one or more characters as a result of conflict (one character's desires clash with another's).

A WORKING SCENE contains at least one story event.

To determine a scene's story event, answer these four questions:

1. What are the characters literally doing?
2. What is the essential action of the what the characters are doing in this scene?
3. What life value has changed for one or more of the characters in the scene?
4. Which life value should I highlight on my Story Grid Spreadsheet?

HOW THE SCENE ABIDES BY THE FIVE COMMANDMENTS OF STORYTELLING

Inciting Incident (causal/coincidental):

Turning Point (revelatory/active):

Crisis (best bad choice/irreconcilable goods):

Climax:

Resolution: