
FICTION | FALL 2020

Bees

By Michael Lund

It was one of those doctor's visits when you hope to just sit and read as you wait, not be drawn into conversation. But this time Aaron couldn't ignore the person sitting to his right, who asked, "Do you know where I can get some bees?"

Aaron did try one evasive maneuver, feigning an inability to hear. The condition was believable, as the great majority of his fellow patients in the VA clinic were seniors. Some were ambulatory, but many were in wheelchairs or behind walkers. All, it seemed, were communications impaired. He kept his eyes on his book.

The man recognized, assumed, or ignored any hardness of hearing and just leaned closer to ask more loudly. "Do you know where I can get some bees?" The voice was raspy but had a pitch that traveled. Several heads turned toward the corner where they sat.

"No," Aaron responded simply. He started to return to his reading, but the insistence of the questioner and the nature of the voice made him turn. He saw a woman of indeterminate age whose face was badly scarred from age and what he assumed was severe teenage acne. She had on worn jeans, a man's blue workshirt (not tucked in), and heavy outdoor shoes. She also seemed to be twitchy, her hands lifting, finger gripping.

"You just can't find 'em these days," she explained in the husky voice of a smoker. (He could smell the tobacco.) "When I moved down to Lake Gaston, I had six hives and could have had more. I have over two acres with open space along the shore, which bees like."

"Ah," he agreed and turned back to his book.

Lake Gaston was one of those rivers (the Roanoke) damned for electric plants and vacation homes along the border between North Carolina and Virginia. That much land on the water would be costly, though the area had never achieved the success the developers had intended. Still, it not the sort of place where enlisted vets who got their medical care with the VA were likely to own waterfront property. She must be, Aaron concluded, a spouse or a daughter accompanying a vet to an appointment.

Undeterred by his lack of interest, Aaron's conversational partner continued, "They don't know what's killing them, but I'm betting it's pesticide or herbicide. You know, like Agent Orange."

With so many gray complexions, such labored breathing, and strained movement in the waiting room, a visitor might conclude that this was the geriatric ward. But it was just the Green Clinic, one of five (along with Blue, Red, Yellow, Brown) to which patients are randomly assigned for primary care. Aaron was here for a routine checkup. His doctors monitored him carefully, more because of heart problems in his family history than because of specific symptoms—or so he told himself.

"You had relatives over there?" Aaron asked, thinking her father, brothers, or cousins had served in Southeast Asia.

"Yup. But I was there myself, too. You? You're about the right age and have . . . um, the look."

“1970,’71. Not the worst times.” Aaron knew women had volunteered for duty in Vietnam, mostly as nurses. But this was the first time he’d met one. “I hope you weren’t exposed to Agent Orange.”

“I was a personnel clerk but went with a crew out to fire bases from time to time. We took the office to the field, so to speak. Anyway, the VA says—*now* it says!—that I was where Agent Orange was.”

After many years and many lawsuits, the Veterans Administration had finally recognized the health hazards for soldiers who’d been exposed to the herbicide in Vietnam. Not, however, before that generation began dying in unpredicted numbers. Aaron wondered if her scarred face was connected to exposure.

He folded up his book. “I’m lucky so far myself, no signs of bad stuff.” This was a lie. “You?”

“Who can say? I haven’t treated the temple,” she tapped her chest, “that well over the years. Smoked, drank, ate badly like most of us.” Her laugh made her cough. She shifted her legs, the knees lifting and falling.

He nodded. He’d always claimed he was in pretty good shape despite a handful of metal fragments permanently lodged in his torso.

A man entered the waiting room pushing one of those walkers that, when turned around, became a stool. As he twisted to sit, Aaron saw that he was bent over with osteoporosis, his back a large capital C.

Aaron had had many waiting room discussions that underscored how his generation suffered in the war and ever after. Although the agency was trying to catch up in their care, too many senior bureaucrats saw it as a safe haven on the way to a comfortable retirement. Quality staff were being drawn to the more lucrative private sector.

Recently, he’d wondered if a woman ought to be put in charge. He liked his female doctors more than the male ones. They took more time and listened more carefully. But the job would probably exhaust someone who cared.

With his neighbor, Aaron tried to be understanding. “Well, the temple tends to be less strong as it ages, no matter how well you treat it.” He turned in his chair and held out a hand. “Aaron, by the way.”

“Beatrice, Trish for short. Nice to meet you. You live close?”

He saw no ring—or untanned circle—on her finger. “West, about an hour’s drive, small town, really a village.”

As the same time he was speaking, Aaron wondered what strange set of forces had put him next to this woman wanting bees when he happened to be reading—or trying to read—Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*: “The bees circle round a queenless hive in the hot beams of the midday sun as gaily as around the living hives; from a distance it smells of honey like the others, and bees fly in and out in the same way. But one has only to observe that hive to realize that there is no longer any life in it.”

Trish asked, “Ah, an hour. That might be Cotton, then? Driven past many times. Never stopped, though.”

Aaron chuckled. “Yeah, well, true of many on their way to other destinations. Why do you travel that route?”

“Up and back to a family place in West Virginia.”

“Children, cousins in the area?”

“No, not anymore.” She chuckled. Her shoulders jerked a bit, her head turning this way, then that, though she kept her gaze on him.

"I'm the heir to an abandoned West Virginia kingdom," she joked. "The children of my generation, those who were able to, moved away. Others—well, they're gone, thanks to black lung. My realm has no subjects."

Aaron clucked his tongue. "Similar to where I am. The land's farmed out, and there's no industry, light or otherwise, within thirty miles. But, if there's no family, why do you go? Nostalgia for the old home place?"

As they talked, Aaron also watched nurses step in the doorway, call patients, lead them away. But more vets were arriving at the same time, so the population declined only slowly. He'd come early because of how far he had to drive. Trish, her place at least an hour south, would have likely done the same thing.

She shrugged and said, "I go to check on . . . a few things. It's 100 acres more or less."

Aaron wondered, "What sort of work you do down on Lake Gaston. Or are you retired?"

She looked up as a nurse stepped into the room and called, "Royal?" Trish stood. "That's me. Well, good luck to you."

Aaron assumed he would never see her again, though a number of questions had spring up in his mind. What skills or training enabled you to leave the mountains and live on several lakeside acres? What's to check on a place that's been abandoned? Did she come with a man or a partner?

He returned to Tolstoy. "There is no longer the measured quiet sound of throbbing activity, like the sound of boiling water, but diverse discordant sounds of disorder. In and out of the hive long black robber bees smeared with honey fly timidly and shiftily. They do not sting, but crawl away from danger. Formerly only bees laden with honey flew into the hive, and they flew out empty; now they fly out laden."

He heard his name called and rose stiffly to follow the nurse.

"You find a place to park today?" she asked pleasantly. This was a standard topic of conversation. A new garage was under construction, yet seemed to be no nearer completion each time he visited. The three-story concrete structure rose up behind a plastic orange fence, but the dark empty spaces between upright columns were not an encouraging sight.

"My usual, far edge of Lot 10B. But at least I didn't have to bounce my car over a curb and onto the grass to create a space." The lots filled up with early appointments, then emptied steadily as the day wore on.

Walking through the orange cones on the way to the entrance, he'd passed many vans with wheelchair lifts, which outnumbered the handicapped parking places. At the last place traffic could reach were food trucks. Why the staff came out for the "Great Balls" and "Honey Rings" food trucks, when they had a fine cafeteria inside with more healthy menus, baffled him.

She nodded. "They say the garage will be open . . . soon."

"You must be new here," he chuckled.

"You got me," she admitted. She was scanning his chart as she walked. "Vietnam, I see. I've seen a lot of you in my first month, which is odd as there are fewer of you in the world."

"I'm pretty fortunate—some hypertension, probably pre-diabetic, skin cancers now and then, here and there."

She clucked her tongue. "Well, we see a lot worse. Try to keep your prostate healthy."

Aaron knew there was a high rate of prostate cancer among Vietnam vets, but was surprised at her blunt reference. She was probably just letting him know there would be a rectal exam and a PSA blood test, repeats of the ones done a month earlier.

While he was standing on the scales in the hall to be weighed, Trish, a folder of paperwork clutched in one hand, walked past him. She winked and mouthed, he thought, “lunch” to him. He nodded. A rendezvous!

His marriages, two of them, had come apart quickly with his explosive temper and their limited understanding of mood swings. He’d lived alone the past twenty-five years but still hoped for the rare one-night stand.

In the examination room he asked his primary care physician if the woman with a pockmarked face was another of his patients. “Beatrice,” Aaron explained. “We got to talking in the waiting room.”

“I know her, though she’s not my patient. Kind of famous around here.” He gestured for him to lie back on the exam table, then cranked up the extension on which his calves rested. Dr. Flowers went through the motions of his exam mechanically, following a checklist with little enthusiasm and, Aaron thought, less interest.

“How so?”

“Well, she has no reason to come here. She’s rich and could get care anywhere she asked. Probably, should.”

“Rich? She doesn’t dress like it. Ummph.”

He gasped a bit when Flowers pressed down on his abdomen.

“That giving you trouble?”

“Naw,” he laughed. “Only when you punch on it.” The spot was where the biggest piece of shrapnel lay. “How did Trish get rich? Win the lottery?”

“Not exactly, but it was a one in a million thing. They found oil and gas on the family farm thirty, forty years ago. She shut down her tombstone business and moved to a lakeside house somewhere else. The lease guarantees she doesn’t have to work the rest for her life. If she’d had children, they wouldn’t need to work either.”

“Ah, the West Virginia property she was talking about. She . . . um, looks as if she’s lived a hard life, though, as if she worked the mines herself.”

“That’s the bees. Marked her up and almost killed her.”

“Bee stings? She told me she keeps bees.”

Dr. Flowers explained. “She was stung over 100 times in a VC attack. They catapulted several beehives of *apas dorsata* onto her mobile unit. One landed right on her.”

As he spoke, he was entering data into the computer with a steady machine-like rhythm. His records would be available in any of the clinics Aaron was referred to—or, so it was believed. He always carried the list of his prescriptions and the results of his previous physical to any appointment.

“Whoo! I never heard of that—beehive bomb. She survived, though, and, I guess, is thriving.”

“Well, I can’t say about that. I only mention the original injury because she tells a lot of people about it. It’s not part of her confidential medical record.”

He told him to get up, drop his pants, and bend over.

An hour and a half later, his test results and blood lab order in hand, he scouted the cafeteria, betting Trish would be long gone. But he saw her in a booth by the windows, a tray of food in front of her. She caught his eye and smiled. He waved, pointed toward the cafeteria line, and gestured that he’d join her shortly.

When he slid into the booth across from her, he observed, “I see you have your share of paperwork.” Her folder was on the table by her tray.

“Same-same,” she said. “Tests showing that I’m dying.”

“Oh.” She said it so matter-of-factly that he assumed she was referring to the general condition of all living things. “Well, we all are, right?” He had tucked his test results inside his book.

“Me faster than others, I’m sorry to say.” She pushed her tray back with a jerky gesture.

“I’m sorry . . . to hear.” He unwrapped his club sandwich.

She sighed. “It’s kind of relief, knowing what will happen. And I’m good case for the VA to study.”

“I see.” He didn’t, and didn’t really want to; but she went on,

“I’ve got some sort of weird autoimmune, nerve thing, brought on by an attack by a swarm of bees.”

“I thought you were looking for bees?”

“I am. The world will still need the bees when I’m gone, know what I mean?”

That he did understand. Pollination, agriculture, the beauty of flowers.

“It’s probably because I got stung years ago. In ‘Nam, in fact. Then I got a bunch last year when my smoker failed me. I was trying to divide a brood, get a second hive.”

“I didn’t know the . . . the enemy did that, another booby-trap device.”

“We bombed the shit out of them. It only seems fair. They used what they had, poor beggars.”

Aaron couldn’t be as sympathetic as she was. “Nice of you to invite me to lunch. I always have a book so I can sit and read without looking . . . abandoned.”

She chuckled. “*War and Peace* in your lap discourages conversation with strangers. But for some reason I kept pressing in on you.”

He smiled. “That you did. We have a few things in common, I guess.”

She nodded. “It’s always kind of surprised me, the comrade thing. Across branches, eras, even genders.”

“We all endured similar stuff.” He decided he was not going to tell her his MRI confirmed that the cancer, revealed by the sudden jump of his PSA score, had spread beyond the prostate.

“Why are you reading this?” She picked his book up, thumbed through some pages, dropped it back down. Again, her movements were uneven. Her shoulders quivered. “It’s huge.”

“I’m not sure I can say exactly. It’s a famous book, and I’ve never understood the subject.”

“Yeah. What’s there to say on war and peace?”

He shrugged. “I can say I like the peace part better than the war part.”

“I share your view, brother, even when the war part has slipped into the peace part.”

“There it is. Okay, need to get on the road. I hope you find some bees.”

“You never know. Maybe when I see you here again, I’ll have good news. Second date?”

He laughed. “Why not? I might have finished this,” he hefted his book, “and have some profound thoughts to pass on.”

Michael Lund, a native of Rolla, Missouri, lives and writes in Virginia. He is the author of *At Home and Away*, a Route 66 novel series that chronicles an American family during times of peace and war from 1915 to 2015; he has also published a number of short stories related to military experience. A US Army veteran, he directs a free writing program for military, veterans, and family members that is healing for both authors and audience (<http://homeandabroadva.com>). He gets excellent healthcare at the The Hunter Holmes McGuire Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Richmond, Virginia. His short story “Bees” appears in the Fall 2020 *Intima*.