

The Society of Southwestern Authors



Story Snacks

Volume 4

The Bee Connection

by Lynn Nicholas

"I've reached the Equinox of my life." She swept greying bangs from her eyes, revealing enchanting crinkles. "The contentment I feel is a comfortable balance between joy and sadness. I'm neither old nor young, but in a good middle space."

I smiled but didn't respond. I'd learned that much of her "conversation" was simply her mind working things through. It was good to see her in a happy space today.

"Look over there, at that rosemary bush. Can you see all the bees at work?" Claire pointed to a patch of garden a few feet away. "Did you know that the bee is the only living being that it is not a carrier of any type of pathogen, regardless of whether it is a fungus, a virus, or a bacterium?"

She turned towards me, eyes wide and unblinking. It saddened me to see her so expressionless. Her brilliant mind was active enough, but her intense intelligence no longer shone in her eyes.

"That's a fascinating bit of information," I said. By now I was used to her abrupt changes of topic, and knew better than to react.

"I was stung once," she continued, "when I was a child. I tried to capture a bee with my hand to get a closer look. My hand swelled up, and I had to get a shot. It hurt." Tears welled in her ocean blue eyes. She was eight-years old again. "I understand how that bee felt now."

"How did the bee feel, Claire?"

"Trapped. Scared. Like it would never be free again. It's programmed by its DNA, you know. It lives to fly from flower to flower, to do its work."

"Do you feel trapped," I asked.

She lowered her eyes and didn't answer. She busied herself examining the back of one hand, tracing the prominent bluish veins with an index finger. She turned her wrist over, exposing the scars that had finally faded to thin, white lines.

"How old am I? Can you tell me? I think I'm close to forty, but...." Claire dropped her hands into her lap turned toward me, expecting an answer.

"Claire, you recently celebrated your sixtieth birthday. Do you remember anything about that night, about the party?"

She stilled—the calm before the storm. Her hands fisted. She began a low moaning, swaying from side to side.

“Claire?” I touched her shoulder. She unfurled one hand and shoved me away.

I signaled for the orderly.

“Please take Claire inside, Samuel. I think she’s had enough for today.”

“Certainly, Dr. Hanks.”

I saved my notes on Claire’s genetic psychosis and closed my laptop. Samuel administered the sedative and wheeled my patient up the path to the sanitorium.

I walked over to the buzzing rosemary bush. Claire was my most heartbreaking case, lost to the research she was known for, linking psychosis to DNA. She had more in common with her beloved worker bees than she’d ever know.

Her Secrets
by Solomon Cantanio

The porch light's on. She left Max here. David sprinted up the glistening sidewalk in the damp night breeze. His hands trembled as he fumbled with the front door keys. *Keep ahead or they'll find me with it. Then what? If I'm caught they'll kill me.*

He cranked the lock hard and snapped the key. "Damnit!" Wind flung the door but he caught it before it hit the wall. He closed it quietly, locked it, and listened to the dim-lit house. *Anyone?* His coat shed droplets as he stomped a doormat protecting the hardwood. He watched the back door and listened.

"Ma-ax!" Moments later the chocolate labrador's collar clinked down the green-carpeted stairs. Max rounded the corner into the room. His nails clacked across the floor toward David. The beast nuzzled into his outstretched hands. "Guboy gofora walk?" Max's tail slapped the wall repeatedly and he belted out a low rumbling bark.

David reached for the leash hanging on the wall and grabbed a nylon pouch labled *Walkies*. She affectionately called him "dumb animal" --and adored Max as well. He squashed the contents feeling four corners of a flash drive and exhaled away the anticipated stress of searching. "It's here Max, lets go to the park." Max replied with another melodious bark. They hurried to the back door through the kitchen, to the car.

Once inside his silver SUV, he hesitated to turn the key. The rain had only paused. Whatcha think Max? A wet nose pushed into his shoulder between excited panting and nasal squeeks. "No turning back." He rummaged the pouch, removed the flash drive and opened the under-seat drawer for the revolver she gave him. *At least i'll give 'em a fight.* "Don't kid yourself, she said they're pros." Max nosed his ear this time. "Okaaay."

The ignition clicked to the first position, he released the break and the vehicle coasted down the driveway into the street with momentum. He turned on the engine and drove past the intersection before pushing speed.

The storm intensified on the dark street so much that the windshield wipers struggled to keep up. Danger made him keep the needle under fifty. The park's covered picnic area came unto view and he pulled into the nearest parking space. Now there were two cars in the lot. She was alone at a cement table. David pocketed the gun and flash drive. Wait here, guboy." He left the engine running and went to meet her. Max howled.

David sat across from her. He put the flash drive and weapon on the table. "Here, now what's the plan?"

She smiled and seized both items. Lightning flashed. "Good boy." The thunderclap perfectly covered the gunshot.

A black sedan pulled into the lot as she walked. Rain flushed blood from her trench coat. She passed the SUV and her cold eyes met Max's. He marched in place on the seat and bobbed his head. The sedan stopped and the door opened. She stepped inside. "I've got it. Drive."

Chagas

by Bobbie J. Herring

Mama saw an insect on the pillowcase, its back legs touching her daughter as it headed away from little Nicole's neck. Mama saw a spot of blood there and snatched up her five-year-old daughter, awakening her from a deep slumber.

"It's alright baby girl. I need to change your sheets," she said as she laid Nicole gently on the living room couch and covered her with a lap blanket.

She grabbed the bug jar from the bottom of the kitchen cabinet, unscrewing the lid as she rushed back to the bedroom. She always kept one jar handy, and at this moment was glad for this handed down instruction from her father.

"Learn to identify insects," he said when she was younger. Years later, she graduated top of her class as an entomologist and was well respected in her field. She knew damn well the insect in her daughter's bed was a Kissing Bug.

Luckily, these insects moved slowly. Mama moved the pillow aside, lifted the sheet, then quickly set the jar over the bug. She loosened the bottom sheet, slipped her hand underneath and held the sheet tight as she turned the jar right side up. She shook the bug down and screwed the lid back on. The typical cone-shaped head and snout identified the profile of the Kissing Bug. The doctor might want to confirm the bug was, or was not, a carrier of Chagas.

Back in the living room, she saw the red spot on the side of Nicole's neck and cleaned it with an antibacterial wipe. She checked her arms, legs, torso and found no other spots. She checked for any rise in temperature. It was normal. Mama went back to gather the sheets and pillowcases and tossed them in the washing machine on the hottest setting. She sat in the living room, sorting facts on Chagas in her mind. She was missing something important.

The blood sucking insect carried a protozoan parasite in its gut. Just before inserting its proboscis into skin, it excreted a liquid that dulled the site so the person, or prey, would not feel the bite. It was a border crosser, found mostly in Mexico and other countries south of Arizona. The ones in Arizona were exactly the same as those south-of-the-border, but not often found in the Northern Sonoran Desert, likely due to more chances of freezing winter weather.

The protozoa could cause flu-like symptoms, headaches, anaphylactic shock, and heart failure even years later if not treated with medicine early on. Mama's eyes began to water.

She loaded Nicole into the back seat of her SUV, strapped her snugly in place and drove to the emergency room.

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“Antibodies to Chagas are in her blood work.” Doctor Procter said “We’ve started her on benznidazole. If she tolerates the medicine with no side effects, she will be fine. We have to monitor her for a few days.”

Mama slept next to her baby girl’s bed and said a prayer.

The Traveling Fedora
by Bobbie J. Herring

Yesterday your call pulled me from the tomato plants I'd been setting out here in Springfield, Missouri... the fragrance still lingering on my hands. I thought of your children back there in Arlington, as they say, "Daddy, Daddy! You're home. For how long?" I wonder too.

Dorothy and Toto were in a tornado. It did not hurt like this.

Your Fedora often hangs from my four-poster bed where we've soared to high places: Machu Picchu, the Alps, the mountains of Mars.

No one wears a Fedora, anymore, but yours hangs above our heads, waiting to leave for more places from which you will call for me.

"Come right away." You will lure me there with your loving urgency.

"My plane will be waiting for you at 3 a.m. Wednesday. You'll be back at work on time where you wait on people who don't like waiting for their chicken-fried steak. I'll make sure you're back for the busy weekend, so Mr. Boss won't be in a bind. He likes me anyway. He'll allow you time to linger here at Cancun in clear moonlight just outside our hotel on the Thames or watch the sunset on Monterey Bay when we go there."

I bought a fedora from a store. It smelled like others' clothing. I sprayed it with your English Leather and hugged and bent it in fitful sleep. I dreamt of you wandering down the hall by the plastic tree near the living room. Each time you walk by it, you flutter the leaves with your fingers.

I felt you sleeping against me, warming me with your chest, your thigh, your breath. Later, I rise and walk two blocks where I wipe tables, make coffee and weather my own tornado.

You slipped into my apartment once in black tie and tails, dangling a shimmering, forest green dress and matching spike heels with straps and diamond buttons for me to wear. With your help, I styled my hair into ringlets. You remarked how they looked like burgundy ribbons.

“I need a break from Washington’s rule making,” you said as we flew to Miami for two nights of Cuban Mambo dancing. I often wonder whether we enjoyed that more than Australia’s Gold Coast.

Before I went to work this morning, I read the newspaper that shook in my hand and blurred your wife’s picture, touting her recent filing for divorce. The side bar said you are

contesting the proceedings. I quickly turn the pages and see: “SWM, fun loving, eager to meet you.” I reread every single one of those words signed with your first name and I wonder.

Later, coming home to a doorstep full of roses, Italian wine chilling in an iced-down cooler, summer sausage and rye bread warm in a padded package, I know you’ll be here soon.

I hang your fedora on the poster bed and feel warm as sun on sand when you and I soar again.