

The Bee

By T. E. Stazyk

As he was returning to the office after his grandmother's funeral, a bee flew into Jeff's car.

He swatted at the bee with his cell phone while keeping one eye on the road. As usual, the Southern Motorway alternated between a parking lot and drag strip. He groped for the window buttons on his new BMW, hoping the bee would fly out, but the roar of the air rushing by drowned out the sound of his assistant on the other end of the phone. Swearing venomously to himself, he closed the windows.

He was in line for a promotion at work and was under a lot of pressure. And missing an important meeting because of a funeral didn't help. His boss had told him to take as much time as he needed, but Jeff told him it wasn't necessary.

Jeff gave a slower driver the horn, passing the miscreant on the inside. His assistant, Linda, continued to read off his messages. ". . . Ian and Bill need to see you on the Foxton proposal. They say it's urgent. Colin called from Neotech. He say's he needs to see you ASAP. Jillian from Pilkington wants to talk. That one's urgent, too."

"Got it," said Jeff. "Thanks. See you in a few." He slowed down a little, wondering why he was in such a rush to get to the office. *Everyone wants of piece of me, and they want it now.* It used to make him feel important, but now it was irritating him.

His grandmother hadn't been sick for long. He had seen her over the holidays when the family got together, but he hadn't found a chance to visit her since then. He'd gotten a call a few weeks back saying that she was in the hospital. He planned to go see her. Unfortunately, between work and travel, he

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never made it, and he had felt badly when his mother called two days ago to say that her mother had passed away.

But he'd helped since then. He went with his mother to make the funeral arrangements. His grandmother had two sisters and a brother who lived down south. Jeff picked them up at the airport and had taken them to dinner.

The funeral was on a warm November morning and Jeff was somehow disturbed by that. Funerals should be on grim, grey July days, not when spring is so full of promise. During the church ceremony, he was surprised at the number of people. When the priest described his grandmother and all the things she had done and the people she had touched, he realized that he hadn't really known her that well, even though she had been a major part of his childhood. A few people were crying, including his mother, but Jeff found that didn't feel all that sad.

Jeff drove his grandmother's brother and sisters from the church to the cemetery. They were all showing more emotion than he was. But that didn't stop them from telling him how proud they all were of him for having achieved so much at such a young age. That kind of talk always made Jeff feel uncomfortable, even though deep down he found it gratifying. Plus it was true, especially if you compared him to his two sisters and brother. "She would have understood that you were too busy to visit her much. She was the same way. That's why she moved up here to Auckland when she was young. The only one of us. She always said this is where the opportunities were. We never kept in touch much after she left. The city will do that to you."

And then his great aunt said, "You know, Jeff, you were your grandmother's favorite. Ever since you were a baby, you were the apple of her eye. And she always talked about you when I called her. She was so proud of you."

Jeff just smiled.

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Now, alone in his car on the way to the office, those comments came back to him. He swore at the taxicab in front of him. He was angrier than usual. Why did his aunt have to say that? She was probably just trying to be nice, but it had made him feel bad. And at the cemetery, when he walked past the coffin for the last time and put a flower on it, he felt a burning sensation in the back of his throat for the first time.

His mother had invited him back to the house where she was having drinks and sandwiches for the funeral guests, but he told her he couldn't take the time. He needed to get back to the office. Everyone was disappointed, but understood how busy he was.

I should have gone, he thought to himself as he got off the motorway and entered downtown traffic. *I'll never find a car park at this hour.*

The bee was still with him, and now, off the motorway, he opened the windows again hoping it would fly away. He swore out loud when he saw that the parking garage was full. He drove two blocks further from the office and found a spot in an open car park. He hurried to the office and for lunch bought two granola bars from the kiosk in the building lobby.

He picked up his message slips and started to return calls. Later that afternoon, his boss stopped into his office. "Sorry to hear about your grandmother."

"Thanks."

"You OK?"

Jeff looked up sharply. "Sure, no problem, why?"

"Just asking. I was really close to my grandparents. It hit me hard when they died. Guess not everyone's the same."

"Well, I hadn't seen her much lately."

"Anyway, I'm glad you're here. I've got some news. We heard back on that proposal you put together for the Warner project."

“Oh? What happened?” Jeff felt an adrenalin surge. Thanks to his efforts, the firm had been invited to propose on a huge project for a major company. It had been a long shot and no one really expected them to be successful, but just being invited to propose had been a major coup for Jeff. If they got the work, he’d be hero.

“You’re not going to believe it, but we got the job! Expect a call from the managing director. He wants to congratulate you personally. The Warner people specifically mentioned you and your team as the reason they picked us.” His boss stood up and extended his hand, “Congratulations, Jeff!”

Jeff stood and returned the handshake, “Hey, thanks!”

His boss sat back down. “It’s going to be a lot of work and you’re going to have to devote a lot of time and resources to it. I had a talk with the managing director. We agreed that a project this size will need a vice president to head it up.”

Jeff’s euphoria vanished. *Typical. I do all the work and they bring in some guy above me. That’ll block my chances for sure. I should have been at the meeting.*

His boss continued, “And we figured that since you have the contacts and the knowledge, you should be that VP. Congratulations, again, Jeff!”

It was the promotion he had been hoping for. Just like that. “Really? Thanks. This is great!”

“I’m happy for you. And proud. I think you would have gotten it anyway, but this Warner thing made up everyone’s mind. Now I’ll get out of your way and let you celebrate.”

“Thanks again.”

Jeff sat down. Something was wrong. He should have been happy. He had been anticipating this moment for years. But he didn’t feel special, different, relieved or even glad. *It’ll probably just take time to sink in. Plus it could have come on a better day.*

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He wanted to call someone to share the good news. But he couldn't call his parents. It didn't seem right to interrupt them. He ended up sharing the news with Linda and two of his staff. They decided a celebration was in order so they all went to a bar across the street from the office.

No one could stay long and after two drinks, the party broke up. Feeling more lonely than jubilant, Jeff walked back to his car, barely noticing the warm spring sunshine. Opening the car door and sliding behind the wheel, he glanced at the dashboard. Curled up near one of the speakers was the bee. Dead. Jeff looked more closely. Still not starting the car, he stared at the bee, thinking. It looked so pathetic, lying on its side. He should have taken the time to let it out of the car.

Then he put both hands on the leather-covered steering wheel, laid his head between his hands and broke down sobbing.