

Drownings from a Queen Bee

Angels with Real Wings

By Charlotte Hubbard

I'm a beekeeper because my husband feared all things medical. He never had regular check-ups, and ignored family history, extensive nagging, and significant signs that something was terribly wrong with his body. When he finally went to a doctor, his until-then-undiagnosed colorectal cancer was at a very advanced stage IV, having spread throughout his body. (It's highly treatable when detected early.)

If you're reading this, you're probably a beekeeper. If you're avoiding a doctor out of fear, please get over it! Facing thousands of stinging insects is much scarier, and they (and your family) need you. End of lecture.

August 28th marks the one-year anniversary of my husband Tom's death. Tommy left me with many things—including fantastic memories, a huge disorganized garage of tools, more bee escapes than hives to use them on even if I used them, and his beloved bees.

When life gives you lemons, you're supposed to make lemonade. When life gives you bees, they're supposed to make honey.

They're working on that; I'm trying to help.

In 2008 and 2009 I met nurses and doctors who proved repeatedly that angels walk among us, wearing surgical scrubs and carrying charts.

Since then, I've met dozens of beekeepers who've proven repeatedly that angels walk among us, wearing protective veils and carrying hive tools. They've helped me come to peace with "managing" the intriguing but sometimes overwhelming gift of bees my husband left me; they've also helped me come to peace with issues that can't be readily analyzed or fixed, like spotty-laying queens ... or grief.

In April of 2008, having just endured a second emergency surgery, Hubby insisted I keep his bees alive until he could get home from the hospital to care for the winged darlings. I said sure, but we all knew there was no point. Tommy would never keep bees again. The oncologist projected that we'd take him home to live a final few weeks. He was too weak to endure more treatment ... not that treatment offered much hope anyway.

Thinking I'd be burying my husband before summer '08 even started (and really needing him to tell me a few essential things, like how to program the sprinkling system and where the safety deposit box key was), I wasn't happy about his spending his wee bit of energy instructing me on something I considered non-essential: checking brood patterns. But, Tom was gaining weight instead of losing it, with a goal to get down the yard to visit his bees. The least I could do was feign a little interest in them, even if they were scary. And buzzing loudly. And increasing daily in numbers.

June 2008 slipped away; Tommy—defying all medical predictions—did not. And somewhere, in that blur of medical appointments, chemotherapy side effects, and the daily miracle of his surviv-



Tom and Charlotte, with 2008's honey



The hives, shrouded with black Tom's Bee-Loved Honey t-shirts

ing, my keeping his bees became less of a chore and more of a blessing. When you're working with bees, it's best that you only work with the bees, and leave your worries elsewhere.

Tommy gave cancer the good fight for 19 months, but its defeat was not to "bee." A year ago, we held Tommy's visitation service in our backyard. As the sun slipped down over the lake, hundreds of people gathered with us at the top of the yard—hugging, crying, and laughing.

At the bottom of the yard, thousands of bees gathered in their hives. I don't know if they were laughing or crying, but I think they sensed things had changed. They respectfully gave us space, and vice versa. And, a few weeks later, they gave us pounds of glorious goodness that we sold to raise money for Tom's favorite charities (see www.tomsbeeloved-honey.org).

It's been a year since his death now. I never thought I'd be a widow before age 50; nor did I EVER think I'd be a beekeeper! I'm alone, but I'm not, for there's this whole community of beekeepers advising me, and there's a lot of peace and companionship in my now half-million buzzing friends.

There are angels among us, and sometimes they come in the form of fuzzy, amber, perfect winged insects.

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