A CATHEDRAL OF BEES

A Short Story

By

Catherine Ryan Hyde

We’re sitting at the dinner table at my parents’ house on Long Island. But my parents are not in attendance. Just me, my husband Tim, and our adopted son, Stanley.

 And yes, let me pause for a moment to applaud the world. How far have we come? Tim and I are legally married, and we got an adoption agency to give us a child. Granted he was five years old and fresh from Malaysia, but he’s smart as a whip, his English is coming along fast, and we love the hell out of him despite the fact that at age six he refuses to let us call him “Stan.” What’s that about, right? But he’s ours, and we adore him.

 And while I’m applauding how far the world has gone, I’d be remiss not to notice how we slammed into reverse and seem to be barreling backward, hell-bent on 1955. I keep expecting some jackbooted thug to come to the door, narrow his eyes at us, and say something along the lines of, “You boys really didn’t think we’d let you get away with that, did you?” Then, in my twisted brain, he’d tell Stanley to pack his things and come along.

Probably on the way out the door he’d demand our wedding rings.

 But I digress. We are successfully flying under the jackboot radar so far.

 Stanley is eating frozen fish sticks—well, formerly frozen; we’re not monsters—and baked beans. For reasons that escape his two dads, this is his hands-down favorite meal.

 He sets down his fork and looks up at me. Drills a very serious gaze right into my face. Not Tim. Me. He seems to have a good read on us. Spooky good. He knows I’m the more vulnerable of the two. The less sure of myself. So he puts me on the spot a lot.

 “Daddy,” he says.

 Tim is Dad and I’m Daddy. I have no idea why, but I can’t help noticing that Tim’s handle has a more masculine vibe. Or am I reading too much in?

 “Yes, Stanley,” I say, because for the moment he’s not going further.

 “What religion are we?”

 “Religion?” I ask. Yes, I understand the word “religion.” Truthfully, I’m buying time.

 “Yeah,” Stanley says.

He is a man of few words. It’s truly disconcerting.

 I glance over at Tim, who’s watching me with sly amusement. Just for a moment I want to strangle him. Granted, I adore him. I suppose I want to strangle him with great love.

 “Well…” I say. Then I fall more deeply into my pit of parenting deficiency. “We don’t really go to any church.”

 “What church would we go to if we did?”

 I reach inside myself for a parenting miracle. I will find an answer that shines in its beauty and simplicity. Tim will bow to my mastery of fatherhood. In the dark pit of my imagination, even the jackbooted thug will surrender and leave our door with no children or wedding rings.

 “Do you know who the Dalai Lama is?” I ask my son. My son. Blows me out of the water every time I say it. Or even think it.

 “Pretty much,” he says, chewing a fish stick with his mouth open.

 “Good. The Dalai Lama says ‘My religion is simple. My religion is kindness.’” There. I did it. See how good I am? Take that, Jackboots. “Does that help answer your question?”

 Stanley shakes his head. “Not even close,” he says.

 Did I mention that the kid is smart? I mean, too smart. Like, problematically. He’s going to race past me any day now. A year later he’ll leave Tim in the dust, and then what are we supposed to do? Let *him* raise *us*?

 It probably goes without saying that Tim has an amused look on his face. The bastard.

 “Don’t laugh,” I say. “Help me.”

 He opens his mouth to do as I asked, but Stanley beats him to it.

 “What religion is the Dalai Lama?”

 “Um,” I say. I can feel my face redden. I know this. Well. I should know this. Damn it. Why don’t I know this? “I think… Buddhist?”

 In my peripheral vision I see Tim nod.

 “Are we Buddhist?” Stanley asks.

 “Well… we could be Buddhist.”

 The kid rolls his eyes. “I’m not asking what we *could* be. I’m asking what we *are*.”

 “We are…” I shoot Tim a desperate look. “You can help with this, you know,” I hiss at him. Under my breath. As if he’ll hear and Stanley won’t. But the kid hears everything. He has something like bat sonar.

 “I would,” Tim says. “But he specifically asked you.”

 I mouth the words “I hate you” at Tim, then proceed to struggle through the question. “We are… good people. Who don’t really go to any particular church. Because a lot of churches don’t want to accept us for who we are.”

 “There’s the Unitarian-Universalist fellowship down the block,” Tim says. “Less than a mile from here. They’re very socially liberal. They even have a rainbow on their… what do you call those outdoor church signs?”

 “No idea,” I say. “But it’s nice to see *you* at a loss for words for a change. Stanley. Would you like to go to that Unitarian-Universalist church sometime?”

 “I don’t think they call it a church,” Tim says. “I think they like to call it a fellowship.”

 That news, combined with the rainbow, makes me like the place better.

 Stanley says, “I really like the big cahedrals. But I guess that’ll do.”

 “The big whats?”

 “Cahedrals.”

 For a moment, I actually think this six-year-old knows something I don’t. It sounds like a geometric shape that I never learned about in school, or don’t remember learning. Why didn’t I pay better attention in school?

 “I think you mean cathedral,” Tim says.

 “Yeah,” Stanley says. “That.”

 I’ll take him into the city to walk around in a big cahedral. But if we’re going to an actual service, I insist on the rainbow.

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I take dinner upstairs to my mom. Bizarrely, she’s also a fan of formerly-frozen fish sticks and baked beans. Ever since my father died, she’s been aging backward on the inside. And I have to care for her like a child, more every day.

 My father died of a sudden, massive heart attack about a year ago. And in the wake of that loss it became painfully clear that my mother can’t live alone. Not doesn’t want to. Can’t. So Tim and I moved in, which is weird in a small way and good in some very big ways. It’s a huge house, she’s mostly in her room, she doesn’t seek us out much. And Long Island really is a great place to raise a kid. We have an actual fenced yard. Grass. Beach. It’s like Heaven but just with that one little Mom-glitch.

 “Where’s my grandson?” she asks, sounding weirdly like a petulant child.

 “Which one?”

I’m not trying to give her a hard time. She might have meant my colorful nephew, Chuckie.

 “What do you mean, which one? The one who lives here.”

 “Oh,” I say. “Did you not know that Chuckie is living in the treehouse?”

 “You’re imagining that,” she says.

 Which is kind of funny, because she most definitely imagines things, and I most definitely do not. That I know of. I’m pretty sure. Tim would have pointed it out.

 “Actually, I’m not. He’s in between bands, and… you know… gigs.”

 “You’re speaking a foreign language, Brian.”

 “Bands. Musical groups. Gigs. Musical jobs. It’s English. It’s just… musical.”

 “Well, you give him a message for me,” she says, and then stuffs her mouth with a huge bite of baked beans. Actually two huge bites at once, but who’s counting? “You tell him he’s a grown man and he’s to get a job and pull his own weight in the world.”

 I sit a minute, marveling over how effectively she channels my late father, even with a mouth full of beans.

 “Okay,” I say. “Whatever.”

 “No, not whatever. You tell him.”

 “You have feet too, you know. And a mouth. We’ve definite established that your mouth still works.”

 “But I get so tired,” she says.

Her voice sounds… tired. But more than just tired. Dispirited. On the bottom of her life force tank. Running on fumes. She goes to bed at 6:30 now. Well, to sleep. She barely gets up during the day, so going to bed a night is a bit redundant. I feel bad for her.

I sigh. She has successfully sucked me in. It’s a bum deal, but I’ve just bought a part in it. It’s a crystal clear look at my childhood. It’s also still my life in a nutshell.

 “Fine,” I say. “I’ll tell him.”

 Then, just as I’m leaving the room, I remember what my son Stanley was asking me over dinner. Much against my better judgment, I purposely dive back into a conversation with my mother.

 “What religion are we?”

 She lets out a laugh that sprays through her lips like a Bronx cheer. “You know we don’t go in for that kind of stuff.”

 “I guess I meant more… theoretically.”

 “How can you have a religion theoretically?”

 “Somewhere back in our family tree, somebody must have been something.”

 “My family was Methodist, but we never went to church. Your grandparents on your father’s side were Episcopalian, but your father rejected everything about it. You remember how he was.”

 I remember. We used to argue bitterly about it when I was in my teens. He claimed a bunch of atoms were flying around in the universe and one must’ve hit the other just right or something. And the world’s grandest accident ensued.

 “Aha!” I would say, thinking I had him flipped and pinned. “But who made the atoms?”

 “They were just always there,” he’d say.

It was a way of utterly dismissing me. Making a sweeping blanket statement that I could never disprove, because no one could.

 There was just no winning with that man.

 “Yeah,” I say. “I remember how he was.”

 I leave the room before she can see on my face how much that was not a compliment.

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At somebody else’s house, a relative living in the treehouse would be a flight of imagination. This is not somebody else’s house. This is my parents’ house on Long Island. The treehouse is completely enclosed, an actual sealed, house-like structure. It’s constructed and painted to be an exact copy of the big house, only small. It even has shingles on its slanted roof. It has no kitchen, so I have no idea what he’s been eating. It has no bathroom, and I refuse to go there in my head. I don’t want to know.

 “Chuckie,” I call up.

 Then I stand there in the dark and wait to see if anybody’s home. In a treehouse. It’s kind of bizarre, but that’s my life. I don’t know what to tell you.

 He opens the door and sticks his head out. Steps out onto the porch. Yes, there’s a porch. I know. But there is.

 “Hey, Uncle Brian,” he says.

It’s been a long, long time since he called me by that other name. The one I won’t mention, because there’s no point dredging up the sins of anybody’s past.

“Chuckie,” I say. “Here’s the thing, Chuckie.”

“Watch out for the bees,” he says.

“What bees?”

“There’s a hive. Didn’t you know there was a hive? You’re standing right in front of it.”

Needless to say, I take several steps back.

“I don’t hear any buzzing,” I say.

“They’re more active during the day.”

“Does the yard guy know about them?”

“He must. He does the yard.”

“Maybe he wants us to call an actual… a service that removes bees? I’m surprised he hasn’t just sprayed them or something.”

“I think he doesn’t want to kill them.” Chuckie says, leaning on the porch railing. Yes, there is a porch railing. On a treehouse. Yes. I know. “I mean, who would? They’re not hurting anybody.”

“They sting.”

“Not if you leave them alone.”

“I’d hate to have Stanley get stung. He has allergies.”

“Is he allergic to bee stings?”

“I don’t know. That might be one we’ve never asked him about.”

“You could just tell him to cut a wide path around them. So what did you want to talk to me about?”

“You know what?” I say. “Never mind. It was nothing.”

Suddenly doing my mother’s bidding as a treehouse eviction service sounds about as helpful as gassing a hive of bees for the crime of existing. It just doesn’t feel like the right way to walk through the world.

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The morning finds me sitting cross-legged in the grass, eating granola from a china bowl, and staring at the bees. With non-dairy milk. (The granola is with non-dairy milk, not the bees. In case that wasn’t clear.) Yes, I have become an almond milk person. I have embraced the lifestyle. No, not that one. The other one.

 I don’t know that Tim is behind me until he says, “Whatcha doing?”

 It makes me jump, but I try to keep it under wraps so he won’t notice. Maybe sitting so close to so many bees makes me edgy.

 “I’m staring at the bees,” I say.

 “What bees?”

 “How can you stand in front of a whole hive of bees and ask ‘What bees?’”

 He sees them then. Takes a step backward. It’s really quite a reasonable thing to do.

 “Oh, dear,” he says. “Guess I’ll have to ask Isidro to take them out.”

 Tim is the kind of person who knows the yard guy’s name, and remembers it. I’m the kind of person who calls him the yard guy.

 “Don’t do that,” I say. “They’re just living their life. They’re not hurting anybody.”

 “What if Stanley gets stung?”

 “He says he’s not allergic to bees. Just everything else on earth. I asked him this morning.”

 “What if he’s wrong?”

 “I think you have to trust a guy to know what he’s allergic to. He’s the owner of the body in question. After all.”

 “He’s also six.”

 “A pretty savvy little dude, though,” I say.

 Tim sits beside me in the grass and stares with me. The hive is constructed to hang down from the bottom of a branch under the treehouse. It looks like some kind of brown sack. But if you look more closely, every single bump on its surface is a bee.

 “And we’re watching them why?” he asks after a time.

 “They just have me thinking.”

 “Do I even want to ask what about?”

 “I was thinking about that question Stanley asked us.”

 “About religion? He asked *you*.”

 “Whatever. I was thinking about it. Wondering why humans are the only species who build churches and then go inside and worship in them. Every other kind of being seems to worship right where they are. Like they’re just living and worshipping at the same time. There’s no division.”

 “How do you know they’re worshipping at all?”

 “I might be reading too much into their routines.”

 “*Might be*?” he asks.

 “And I also might not be. I think I think it because they seem to know what they’re doing. And they’re completely devoted to it. It’s like they know exactly how to play the exact role in the universe that nature planned for them to play. And if being a working part of the universe isn’t worship, then I don’t know what is.”

 My bowl is sitting in the grass, and Tim picks it up and sniffs it. As if there might be something more subversive in there than almond milk and granola. But I know he’s just trying to be funny.

 “Speaking of Stanley,” I say, though we haven’t been for quite a while, “is anybody looking after him?”

 “He’s having breakfast with Chuckie.”

 “Oh. Good. I mean, I think that’s good.”

 “So are you thinking you can just give Stanley a tour of the bee cathedral and get off the hook?”

 I say, “I believe the correct pronunciation is cahedral.”

 Good thing I’m funny while I have the chance. Because a second or two later things get so completely unfunny that I think maybe nothing will ever be funny again. Never in the history of the world.

 Chuckie comes rushing out into the yard carrying Stanley in his arms. Chuckie is babbling loudly, and at a truly alarming rate, but I can’t make sense of a single word.

 I look at Stanley, and his mouth is wide open. Because his tongue is so swollen that he can’t close it. We know from experience that the next step in the progression will be his throat closing up.

 Tim grabs him and runs for the car.

 “The keys,” he yells over his shoulder. “Get the keys, Brian.”

 I experience another parenting miracle. I actually remember where I left the keys.

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We have an Epipen in the glove compartment. We have them everywhere. But there’s still a problem. Tim is driving. I’m in the passenger seat with Stanley on my lap. Which means I’ve got to stick the kid with it.

 “Can I drive?” I ask Tim.

 It’s a preposterous question, because we’re barreling down the street at about fifty miles per hour, with Tim behind the wheel. And time is not our friend.

 He shifts his head in my direction and speaks to me in a voice I’ve never heard before. But I don’t blame him. I deserve it. And he’s right. “Brian. Do it and do it *right now*.”

 I have the Epipen in my hand, which is weird, because I have no memory of taking it out of the glove compartment. Stanley is wearing the cutest little khaki shorts in the history of children’s shorts, but that shouldn’t matter now, and I don’t even know why I’m registering it.

 Time stretches out.

Speaking of things I should not register, we fly by the Unitarian-Universalist church. Fellowship, I mean. The rainbow catches my eye. I make a lightning-fast vow that I’ll take Stanley there as a way of saying thank you. After he survives. Which I am forcing myself to believe that he will. Because the alternative is too horrible to allow into my head.

 The legs of the shorts come down to his knees, so I pull one side up to access the fleshy part of his thigh. Except he’s the world’s skinniest kid, so it’s not very fleshy. But it’s what I have to work with. I pull off the safety cap.

 Then I pause, because I have this visceral reaction to sticking needles into someone’s flesh. Especially someone I love.

 An Epipen is not exactly a long exposed needle. You don’t see needles, and you don’t have to watch them pierce your child’s flesh. But I know they’re in there.

 In a distant, dreamy way, I can hear Tim shouting, “Do it!”

 I look down at Stanley, who can’t speak because his tongue is too swollen, but he’s *trying* to speak, and I know what he’s trying to say.

 I say it for him. I say, “Do it!” To myself. Out loud.

I punch the thing down, and it injects his thigh with epinephrine. I pull the needle out again, and the whole world holds still. I can feel the panic easing out of his tiny body.

 Nobody said being a daddy was going to be easy.

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We’re pacing around in the emergency room. Not in the waiting room. We have been admitted. Stanley is sitting up on a gurney and a doctor is checking his vitals. He seems more or less okay, but Epipen injections wear off, and more medical help could be needed.

 “We think he might have been stung by a bee,” Tim says to the doctor. Then, to me, “I’m going to text Isidro right now and tell him to take that hive out. Spray it or something.”

 “Couldn’t we call a pro and have them taken away? You know. Not killed?”

 “I think they need to die,” he says. “They almost killed our son.”

 “He hadn’t even gone outside yet this morning.”

 “What else could it be, Brian? Our house is totally scrubbed of anything he can’t have.”

 The ER doctor, whom I’ve been essentially ignoring, speaks to us. “He says he wasn’t stung. I’m not seeing anything like a bee sting on him. When a patient is allergic, the sting site is nearly impossible to miss. There would be a major reaction at the site.”

 “Huh,” Tim says. But he still has his cell phone in his hand, and I can see him itching to use it. He wants to take out a hit on those bees.

 “It’s a mystery,” I say.

Then I look up and see Chuckie leaning in the doorway of the ER room. He must have followed us here on his motorcycle. A nurse is trying to drag him out by the elbow and getting nowhere. She is a very small nurse. He is a very large Chuckie.

“Which might be one step closer to being solved,” I add.

I walk to where Chuckie leans, and drag him out into the waiting room. Not because I’m bigger and stronger, but because he has to obey me in this situation and he knows it.

“What did you guys have for breakfast?” I ask. Even though there’s nothing in our house that could harm Stanley.

“The oatmeal you told me to give him.”

“Anything else?”

He’s looking down at the hospital linoleum. Intensely. As if someone just told him the key secrets of life and the universe are written there.

“And half my Snickers bar,” he says.

“You gave Stanley half your Snickers bar,” I say. Very calm. Just reviewing. Just gathering up the facts.

“I might have. He really wanted it.”

“Your Snickers bar. Full of peanuts.”

“Snickers bars have peanuts?”

Then, in some strange twist of reality, I notice we’re down on the linoleum floor, with me on top, and with my hands around his neck. I’m yelling things, mostly along the lines of murder involving my beloved son, but I’m just listening to what I’m shouting. I don’t seem to be creating the words. It’s all happening without me.

A big orderly pulls me off my difficult nephew. Who, I suddenly decide, is not the most important thing.

I run back into the examining room.

“He had peanuts,” I say.

“That would explain a lot,” the doctor says.

“That’s impossible,” Tim says. “How is that possible?” Then he looks to the doorway, and Chuckie is there again. Rubbing his throat and watching. “Oh. Got it. Too bad I already texted Isidro and told him to kill the bees.”

“Call him off!” I shout. “Call him! Get him back!”

In a way I’m surprised at the level of my own panic. Then again, thousands of innocent lives are at stake.

Tim steps out of the room to make the call.

“Is he gonna be okay?” Chuckie asks the doctor.

“He should be fine. We’ll monitor him for a while. But the worst of it is over.”

I do something I did not expect myself to do. I approach Chuckie with no murder in my heart. He takes three steps back, just in case.

“I’m sorry I put my hands on you,” I say.

“You are?”

Not surprisingly, he seems surprised.

“I am. That’s never right. I was just so scared. Look, what you did was a terrible, terrible mistake. But it was a mistake. I know you never meant to hurt your little cousin.”

“Never!” he says.

“But you get it now, right? You give him nothing. You bring nothing into our house that hasn’t been approved as Stanley-safe. And you give him nothing Tim and I didn’t give to you to give him. We’re clear on that, right?”

“Very clear,” Chuckie says.

Strange though it may seem, this is actually a good moment between me and my troublesome nephew. We have broken new ground. We understand each other. As far as family goes, a person could do worse.

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In addition to the all-important rainbow, the Unitarian-Universalist fellowship has a place in their service during which any member of the congregation can get up in front of the group, light a votive candle, and announce… well, anything. A worry. A triumph. Anything of note that’s going on in their lives.

 I lean across Stanley to whisper in Tim’s ear. “Are you going to do this, or shall I?”

 “This is all you,” he says.

 He’s like that.

 I rise and walk to the front of the fellowship hall.

 The matches are those long fireplace matches that you use to light your woodstove. I light it from the chalice, and then set fire to the wick of my own personal symbol of having been alive this week.

 “We had a health scare with our son yesterday,” I say.

Everyone listens attentively.

My heart is pounding so hard I can hear it in my ears, and it’s making me dizzy. Because this is a small, rudimentary example of public speaking. And everybody knows public speaking is the most horrifying of all human experiences. I read a study once that said if you ask people to list their greatest fears, they list public speaking first, right before death. Granted, if said person were standing at the threshold, about to be thrust into the gaping maw of their own death, they might reverse that order and get up in front of a group. But in the safety of their living rooms, death comes second.

“I’m never going to say it was a good thing. Almost losing him. But it really did put me in touch with how much my husband and I adore him. And speaking of my husband, I want to thank you for welcoming us here. My little family. Because we’re not welcome everywhere we go. We were making so much progress on that as a world, and I’m not sure how we got to sliding backward. Well. Don’t get me started.”

I almost go sit down. But then it hits me what I forgot.

“Oh, and we had to move thousands of bees out of our yard. But we found a guy who does it… you know. Nonviolently. We didn’t kill anybody. Which feels important to me. Because when you start observing big communities of living things… I don’t know. It’s hard to put it into words, but it makes me understand the spiritual world better. Does that sound weird? That must’ve sounded weird.”

But I look into the faces, and they’re with me. And they don’t think I’m weird.

I go sit down, feeling surprisingly at home.

On Monday I’ll take Stanley into the city and we’ll walk around in St. Patrick’s. Because he likes those big cahedrals, and he asked nicely. And the bee one was too esoteric for a six-year-old. Also too chancy.

But that’s just a quick visit. If we are ever part of a congregation—which feels strangely possible—it will be here.

We choose the rainbow.