

Honey

by Ali Eteraz



The bear, the bear. My mother wanted the bear. She always wanted that bear. That bear that spent more time in her hand than the axe in my father's, than a remote control in mine, than the mouse in my brother's. It was a bear half-brown half clear. It was a bear half a foot tall with a little Buddha belly half the size of the brass Buddha we had put at the porch of the house to mislead people into thinking we were Buddhist or Hindu. So they wouldn't shoot us or leave Confederate flags at our door like they did some years back.

"This little bear is so sweet!" Ammi said squeezing the bear. Gold stuff flowed onto the curve of the steel spoon in little coagulating swirls. She jutted her neck forward, cinched back her hijab with one finger, and slipped that spoon of manna into her mouth. Then she turned to me, holding the face of the spoon at my head like she was a barber asking her client to check out his sideburns in the mirror, and raised her eyebrows. "Honey cures everything," she said. "That's what the Prophet said. There's even a chapter in the Quran called the Bee."

"I hate honey," I said and turned my head back to the screen, scratching one foot with the other under the hand-stitched blanket my grandmother had sent from Pakistan. It was not Superman on the TV, though I wished it were. It was Batman, and he was invincible enough.

"What did you say?"

I turned my head back to my mother, seeing her eyes big and wide; the eyes of surprise; the eyes that got like that when she thought I had said something blasphemous. Maybe when I was eight she might have forgiven outbursts like that, but now that I was fifteen she felt I was old enough to take religious seriously, to value and cherish it, despite my general crankiness, despite my bad mood, despite my illness. Her surprise turned into a scowl.

"I am sorry," I said. "I like the Prophet and I like the Quran. I just don't like honey."

She smiled. She was at ease again. She put the bear on top of the TV so I would be forced to look at it—then she blew a Quranic verse over it, and with a wink receded into the curtains or the walls or wherever else she materialized from. I watched the bear drool a line down from its mouth onto my screen, smudging Batman's face like it had been splattered by some of Poison Ivy's deadly spray.

Negotiating parental preferences wasn't that easy with my father. It wasn't that he was oppressive—it was more that he was silent. As quiet as the lumberjack axe he gripped in his hands while cutting trees down in our backyard. Willow oak and winged elm and loblolly pine and silver maple and whatever else grew in the woods behind our house in Mobile—he cut them all. I blamed myself for his murderous spree. Before I got stuck in bed he had used to walk around in those woods with my brother or me and we competed with each other to see who could hit the highest branch; how to bring down that one particular pine cone hanging seven branches high; what nickname we should attach to each tree and why. Now, he was tearing our little forest down one by one. I kept asking him why he kept felling those trees and he never answered. He just lowered his eyes and twirled his axe at his feet and he waited until I shut up and my mother stood up and reached for her bear and came back with a spoonful of honey. Honey that I refused.

My mother's advocacy of honey was endless, and over time it became more deceitful. One time she had my brother dress up as a bear—my brother came hopping and bopping and swinging a basket and singing some song that Winnie the Pooh sang about honey. It was a nice show—something to entertain me during commercials—but I refused his offering. Then a few weeks later it was my favorite aunt, flying in all the way from Alberta—we said Alberta because we didn't think there were any cities there—and she brought with her Canadian honey which she said was the greatest of all the honeys in the world and it was the greatest because it had been scooped out by the paw of a grizzly which was the strongest bear in the world. I laughed and told her that I wasn't eight or nine, which is what I had been when she visited last, and things like grizzlies didn't impress me anymore. And I refused her honey also. Then one day there came a strange man, an old man, in a black robe and a black turban that meant that he was a descendent of the Prophet, and he didn't bring honey, but he brought a glass of water that he held in his two cupped hands all the way from the front-door to the side of my smelly sofa. "It's not honey," Ammi said with a quiet smile. "It's the holy water from Mecca and they call it Zamzam and it comes from a spring dug up from the feet of the Prophet Ishmael." The old Ayatollah offered me that Zamzam and I was just about to take it when I smelled it, the smell of honey—coming out of that holy water. So I turned my head to the side and put my eyes to the glass and saw in there swirling little gold flecks that confirmed that the holiest water of Islam had been diluted. And I refused the holy water that had been infused with honey.

"I hate honey," I announced as if I was revealing my contempt for the first time. And I picked up the remote and changed the channel and watched re-runs. I preferred re-runs now, because my long period of stasis, my inability to move, had revealed to me that nothing in this world was new, that everything was recurrent and in repeat, and it was stupid to give something a new name and pretend that it was fresh or original or novel. Superheroes were just one example. They weren't new. They had always been around. Before they were superheroes we called them Prophets. And before that we called them gods.

The other thing my long period of immobility taught me was to use my nose to figure out who was in my vicinity, all without bothering to look or ask. My brother, just approaching his teenage days, had a smell that was faintly sweaty, with the rest of him largely dull to the nose. He was the hardest to identify. My father had the smell of bark and limb and root and amber. I didn't like smelling him because to me he smelled of tree blood. And then there was my mother. She smelled of honey. She dripped of honey. She was soaked in honey. She had started eating more and more of it, hoping that by some miracle that God allotted to mothers at the height of desperation, through some recreation of the miracle of pregnancy, that what she took into her mouth would somehow make its way into my stomach. Her, I could smell from many rooms away. And if I tried hard enough, sometimes I could even locate her precisely—wafting away as she rummaged through my old scrapbooks; or bursting like a pollen soaked marigold while going through my old yearbooks. She had become a sun of scent. Briefly, very briefly I wondered if perhaps she loved honey more than she loved me. If perhaps honey was what she would use to replace me when I was gone. After all, the name she had called me much of my life, was the same name she gave to honey. "My sweetness."

One day I woke up from my very brief intermezzos of sleep and I felt like some immense hand had torn away the petal that roofed our house and let in the collective scent of all the hickory and buckeye and slashpine and redcedar in the entirety of Alabama. And when my eyes were fully open and I looked at the sky above me, dotted with little silver stars, glinting like the ancient eyes of an ancient black god, I realized that I was actually outside the house. And I was moving.

"Where am I? Am I a goner? Is anyone there?" I shouted.

"You are fine," I heard my brother stick his head out into the bed of the truck from inside the cabin. "We are going to a hospital!"

"What about mother?"

"We won't tell your mother!" I heard my father shout into the wind. And just by hearing his

voice after all these months, just from realizing that he wasn't out there scalping trees, I felt relieved.
"Let her think we are taking you to a saint!"

I was too happy to feel tricked and let the truck carry me toward the Catholic Hospital on Airport Boulevard. My father said he picked the Catholics because they reminded him of the Shia. Both had clergies and both clergies liked to dress up. At the hospital I answered the questions the doctors posed to me and I held my brother's hand and locked eyes with my father when the needle hurt too much or the stuff in the bottle burnt too long or when tears were coming out of my eyes.

I don't remember how long I was in the hospital. I just remember that when I came out of it I wasn't on a stretcher. And I wasn't being wheeled around either. And when it was time to get in the truck, I didn't have to lie down in the bed of the truck either. I could sit up front. It was so shocking to be on my feet. As I entered the cabin I paused and looked in the bed of the truck and saw there the remnants of all the trees my father had cut and then sold to allow us to afford the treatment. They had been sacrificed for me, those trees.

It was something else to ride up front, with my brother and father a few feet from me, close enough for our skins to touch, for their scents to overwhelm me so thoroughly they made tears come to my eyes. We talked about what we had overcome. I made fun of my brother for dressing up like a bear and then we all sang that song that Winnie the Pooh sang. We were all laughs, the three of us, until we saw the Hemlock trees that lined the street to our mobile home sitting there stuck in the mud next to the creek. Then my brother and I shut up because we realized it was time to meet my mother and how the hell were we going to explain to her that we had violated the edicts of Allah and given in to western science and western medicine which was all built on usury and slavery and killing Muslims?

I shouldn't have worried though. My father was a smart man. In his months long abstention from speaking, with his withdrawal into himself, which in itself was something that a superhero Prophet might do, he had thought the whole thing out. He reached into the glove compartment and he pulled out a bear, a smaller bear than the one my mother loved, but the same sort of bear full of gold stuff, same all the way to his pointy red cone. "Tell her it was the honey," he said with a wink and put the bear in my hand. And then we all asked Allah to forgive us for lying to the person the Prophet said had Paradise under her feet.

And my brother said maybe it was her proximity to Paradise that made my mother love honey so. And my father said he was probably right. Paradise had many streams of honeyed milk.

