**STEPPING ON BEES**

By Cameron Mitchell

I never believed in miracles until I witnessed one in the summer of 1989. Back then, my granny was always going on about how the end times were upon us while my mother said we should focus on the miracles that were all around. They both claimed I’d see the truth for myself if I bothered paying attention. I didn’t believe either one of them, really. But then I met the boy.

I could tell he was a strange one from the start. Watching him from the window, I wondered what made him so different from the other kids I’d babysat. Far more delicate than the others, he was unnervingly quiet, barely speaking a word most of the time. All over his body, blue veins pressed up against the surface of his pale, almost translucent skin, visible in a way that seemed unnatural. And he bruised so easily. Thinking of all the ways the world might hurt him terrified me. The other children I’d watched were hearty and more substantial, always running around with endless excitement. They rushed up to me, placing both feet firmly on the ground, begging for more – more playtime, more snacks, more television, more stories to help them fall asleep. But that first day, and the second, the boy outside the window remained silent and immobile, like he was waiting for something to happen. If a strong enough wind blew around the corner of the house, I feared he might blow away. Children shouldn’t be so still. I didn’t know what to do with a child who just sat in the grass, frozen like a statue while staring out at nothing I could see. Every now and then, he tilted his head to the side or pushed his wispy blond hair back with one hand, but more minutes passed than I could count without him moving. I couldn’t imagine what he was waiting for.

He and his family were new to town. His mother must have heard that I occasionally watched neighbourhood kids, mostly in the summer. She asked my mother if I was available for a few hours during the day, only two or three days a week. She couldn’t offer to pay much, she said, but my rates turned out to be more than reasonable. Perhaps babysitters back where they came from were more expensive than ones in our small town. Maybe I should charge more, I joked with Mama – *city rates*. We laughed, but as soon as I met the boy, I saw there was nothing to laugh about. Even though I was only fifteen at the time, I could tell something was off.

And then the thing with the bees started. At first, I assumed it was an accident. I’d been sitting in the rocking chair on the back porch with my feet perched up on the railing, keeping an eye on him. Despite feeling a little unsettled in his presence, he was an easy assignment. I had plenty of time to read while he sat around doing nothing. He accepted a snack or a cup of water when offered but never asked for anything. Since he hadn’t budged in nearly an hour, I was mostly focused on my book, but then a sudden flurry of movement caught my attention. By the time I looked up, I realized I’d missed most of whatever had just happened. The boy had somehow gotten to the far end of the yard, out near the fence. He was sitting in the grass, leaning over like he was studying something closely. I put my book down, surprised he’d wandered so far without me noticing. Though he never called out and didn’t seem hurt or anything, I ran over anyway, taken aback by the sudden change in his routine.

“What happened? Are you okay?”

He looked up at me, smiling. It was the first time I’d seen his expression change. It spooked me, actually, but I took a deep breath and smiled back, relieved that he seemed alright. He turned away to examine his foot, which he held crossed over his leg.

“What happened?” I asked again.

“Bee sting,” he offered calmly.

“Oh! Let me see.” I walked around, bending down to take a look. The bottom of his foot was red and had already started swelling. “Does it hurt?”

“Not really.”

I stood back up, worried all of the sudden. What if he was allergic? Did I need to rush him to the hospital or get in touch with his doctor? Maybe I should call his mother? Glancing down, I saw he was gently rubbing the sole of his foot with his fingertips. “Have you ever been stung before?”

“No,” he answered without looking up.

“And you feel okay?”

“I feel okay,” he said.

But what if he wasn’t okay? I didn’t know how long it took for a severe allergic reaction to take hold. Just as I was about to rush inside to call his mom, I felt pressure around my ankle. The boy had grabbed me with one hand, gripping more firmly than I thought him capable. “Don’t worry,” he said, staring up at me with wide, unblinking eyes. “I’m fine.”

So I didn’t call anyone or go for help. It was just a bee sting, after all, and he did seem fine. Worried that his mother might think I’d been neglectful, I braced myself at their front door when I arrived to drop him off. It took her a while to answer, but when she did, I couldn’t get a good read of her mood. Her eyes were hidden by a large pair of sunglasses even though she was indoors. She also seemed a little wobbly on her feet, like she’d just woken up. Taking the boy’s hand, she yanked him in. I barely had a chance to mention the incident before she shut the door in my face, offering nothing but a shrug in response to my apology.

The boy seemed different the next time he came over. Before, darkness clouded his eyes, but when he looked up at me, smiling, a new spark of light gleamed, like he had found some sort of clarity. He raced through the house, reminding me of all the other kids I’d watched. I heard him open the back door and rush outside. By the time I reached the porch, he’d already run off into the yard. I gazed out at him, relieved to see him so full of energy. Then I noticed a pair of tiny sandals at the bottom step that he must have just kicked off. I wanted to call out to him, to tell him to be careful running around barefoot, but something stopped me. He looked so happy and normal. Maybe I was worried about disrupting his sudden transformation. So I sat in my chair, picked up my book, and pretended to read, all while keeping a close eye on him. If he noticed he was being watched, I feared he might revert to his old sullen self.

Walking around the yard, taking care with each slow and steady step, he seemed to be looking for something in the grass. This went on for a while, until he suddenly froze, staring down at the ground. I remembered hunting four-leafed clovers when I was his age; finding one was so exciting and felt like a real accomplishment. If that’s what he was doing, I should join him, I thought. But as I continued watching, he lifted his leg and stomped down. He then tumbled back into the grass, grabbing his foot. I should have known he wasn’t after lucky clovers.

I made it about halfway across the yard before stopping in my tracks. With his head bent back, the boy stared into the sky with such a rapturous look on his face I didn’t know what to think. A part of me wanted to go back to the porch and let him be. My presence felt too much like a violation of this private moment he was enjoying. I’m not sure how long I stood there, waiting for a sign. When he lowered his head again, I finally walked on, knowing I had to make sure he was okay.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Bee sting,” he answered without bothering to turn around.

I sighed. “You should keep your sandals on when you’re playing.”

He pulled his foot up closer to his face, examining the wound. I walked around to get a better look. “Does it hurt?”

“At first.”

“Want me to carry you back?”

“No,” he said, “I like it in the grass.”

I smiled. “I like it too, the way it feels cool against your skin.” I hesitated to leave him, but he did seem fine. “Sure you’re okay?”

“I’m okay.”

For a few moments, I watched as he gently rubbed the bottom of his swelling foot. As I made my way back to the porch, I worried I should be doing more. A few minutes later, when it was time to take him home, he hobbled a bit but seemed alright otherwise. Just as we reached his front door, he surprised me with a quick hug. Touched by his affection, I forgot to mention anything about the bee sting to his mother, who once again yanked her son inside before quickly shutting the door.

The next time it happened, I saw everything from the kitchen window. Barefoot, he walked around the yard, keeping his eyes trained on the grass. He moved in an odd pattern, pausing at times to squat down or backing up a few steps before quickly darting forward again; sometimes, he walked around in a circle, only to dash off to one side or the other unexpectedly. Actually, there was no discernible pattern in the way he followed his bees around, waiting for the right moment to pounce. That must have been what he was doing, I figured. Instead of going out to stop him, I simply observed. His was a careful process. A couple of times, he lifted his foot, but then something caused him to change his mind. His pursuit continued for a while, until he abruptly stopped again. This time, he lifted his foot even higher. Standing over the unsuspecting bee, he must have felt like a giant. I held my breath as he stomped down at last. There was no scream or yelp of pain as he tumbled back into the grass, pulling his foot up to study closely. I waited a few moments before going outside to check on him.

“Why do you do this?” I asked, taking a seat beside him.

“It feels good to scratch,” he answered.

“But doesn’t it hurt?”

“Not for long.”

I watched, mesmerized as he rubbed the bottom of his foot with his fingertips. Later, I imagined he would scratch harder, scraping his fingernails against the swollen, delicate skin. If he drew blood, would that stop him from scratching? Or would he go on, wallowing in the relief? I had a feeling the sight of blood would do little to deter him.

“What about the bees?” I heard myself asking.

“They die.” He turned to look at me, sighing. “Maybe it’s a good sacrifice?”

“Maybe we should pray on it.”

“We don’t pray at my house.”

“I’m not much for praying either,” I said, playfully nudging his shoulder. “But don’t tell my mama or granny.”

“I won’t,” he said, still going at his foot. At one point, he closed his eyes and leaned back, smiling with the sun on his face. He looked so happy despite the pain he must have felt. Never had I seen a child or anyone else react in such a way to getting stung by a bee. And I knew I never would again.

“Does your mother know you do this?” I asked.

“I don’t think so.”

“And your father?”

His body tensed up as he dropped his gaze down and started scratching his foot so hard I worried it would start bleeding. I grabbed his little hand and held it in mine. “It’s okay,” I said. “Here, lie back.” We both stretched out across the ground and gazed up at the sky. “It feels good, doesn’t it?”

He didn’t answer, and I didn’t push him. I pulled up a few blades of grass and dropped them over his chest. “I love the way the grass feels, the way it smells,” I said.

“Me too,” he offered in a quiet voice. After a few moments, he asked, “Are your parents nice?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer at first. My father had left us years earlier for a secretary working in his office. My mother liked to say he was such a cliché – that is, after she’d finished saying much more colourful things about him. For a while, he tried to stay involved in my life, promising that I would always be his little girl, but when he and the secretary moved to another town, he stopped trying so hard. And after a while, I stopped taking his calls when he bothered to ring us up. I didn’t know what to say to him, especially as I got older. Besides, he and the secretary had their own kid to worry about.

But I couldn’t explain all that to the boy. “I guess they’re okay,” I told him. “What about your parents?”

“They ain’t okay.”

“What do you mean?”

“They fight a lot,” he said in a low voice. “My dad yells at us all the time. And my mom sometimes falls down and doesn’t get back up.”

Before I could think of a way to respond, he leapt up and headed back to the porch, telling me it was time to go as he stepped into his sandals.

That evening, I moped around the house, wondering if I should seek advice about the boy and his strange habits. When my mother asked how things were going with him, I must have paused a moment too long. She could tell something was bothering me. “Honey,” she started. “Do you know why you never go to his house to babysit?”

Surprised by the question, I realized I’d never thought about it. Most of my other jobs took place at the child’s home, usually somewhere nearby. But I’d never even been inside the boy’s home. My mother explained that his parents didn’t get along, that the father had a drinking problem and there’d been an incident involving the police when they first moved in. There were things about the world I didn’t understand, she said, though she really should have given me more credit. Kids soak up everything, like a sponge.

She made me promise to tell her if anything ever happened that made me uncomfortable. And if I ever saw bruises or other marks on the boy, I was to let her know right away. I thought of mentioning the bee stings, but I felt protective of the boy, like I’d be breaking a promise if I told. Besides, I didn’t think Mama would understand. I’m not sure I completely understood, but I didn’t want to deny him the relief that came from scratching at an itchy sting. Though it was a small thing, it might have been all he had.

He continued stepping on bees but rarely did it more than once a week. Each new sting seemed to rejuvenate him, like he was feeding off the poison. It worried me, but I couldn’t help but notice how much he’d changed over the course of the summer. He was more playful than ever and much less tense. Our time together must have offered a break from whatever was going on at his house. I didn’t want to take that away from him, but perhaps it was a mistake to let the thing with the bees continue.

One day late in the summer, while looking for my book in the living room, I heard a faint humming sound coming from somewhere outside. It started low but quickly grew much louder, like something was closing in. I went to the kitchen window to make sure the boy was okay, but I didn’t see him anywhere. I ran outside, stopping when I found his clothes strewn across the porch steps. They were so small without him there to fill them, like a doll’s clothes. The buzzing got louder and louder until it was all I could hear. Unable to discern where the noise was coming from, I felt dizzy for a moment; just putting one foot in front of the other was difficult. But then I thought of the flowerbed at the side of the house and somehow knew that’s where I had to go. As I rounded the corner with the noise pounding in my head like a steady drum, I saw the shape of the boy lying on the ground, rolling back and forth over the bright flowers my mother had planted. So many bees covered him they were like a second skin; their black and yellow bodies twitched and vibrated as they crawled all over him. I couldn’t see anything of his soft, delicate skin beneath the bees, but I imagined him covered with so many stings and so much swelling that no one would ever recognize him again. I froze in place, putting a hand over my mouth as I watched the bees crawl inside his.

I’m not sure if I imagined it or not, but I could have sworn I heard a small burst of laughter escape his mouth, which remained wide-open to the invasion. As the bees flew in from every direction, I couldn’t help but wonder if they were there to deliver the peace he’d been after for so long or if they had arrived seeking vengeance for all he’d done. Either way, I don’t think it mattered to the boy since his days of suffering were over at last.

Overhead, another swarm appeared, and then another, filling the sky until everything turned black.