

'The Wasp'

"Careful, there's a wasp just by you. Don't move. I'll get it"...

If the Wasp had learnt one thing it was that people hated him. And to be truthful he was not so comfortable with himself either. Many times he had told himself that people were no good for him and that he should stay well away. But at the same time he found them irresistible.

Whenever he saw them eating together at a patio table or sitting on a picnic rug he would move in to annoy them. He knew it was dangerous but he just felt drawn to disrupt what was going on. Inevitably they would scatter and end up swatting at him, which drove him wild. Often he would get hit and battered and would retreat to nurse the fresh wounds that cut into old ones. He knew it was useless. He couldn't understand why he never took his own advice to steer clear. He just couldn't seem to help himself. "It's just what nasty wasps do, I guess," he reflected. He learnt not to wear his heart on his sleeve. He'd hidden it away, even from himself. He was absorbed with his bitterness, his sense of rejection and his need to maintain a menacing exterior. Sometimes he hung out with the other wasps. They would all compete with each other to prove who was the worst and they'd dare each other to buzz passing people. The Wasp was always the worst. The gang might have looked like friends but the Wasp didn't really like them. At least they accepted him. He would often retreat and skulk around on his own scavenging sweet things and rotten fruit and keeping others at a distance.

Now he sat lapping at the spent stick of an iced lolly. And as he did, he glanced at the nearby flower bed where a bee was settling on one of the flowers. As he watched, the bee busily gathered some nectar from the hollow centre of the flower and move on to the next. The bee was working hard but seemed happy and absorbed in his labours. The Wasp found the sight strangely appealing. 'How charming and rustic,' he thought. For a moment he felt envious of the bee's pleasure and sense of purpose. The bee was working quite close to him now and was bound to notice him at any second.

"So, who's slave are you?" he sneered, careful to communicate to the bee that he was a wasp and not to be messed with.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't see you there. What do you mean, 'slave'?"

"I mean why are you working so hard to get tiny drops of nectar when there are easy pickings just lying around? You bees are so stupid."

"But I couldn't carry that back," the bee replied looking at the lolly stick.

"You don't carry it. You don't see me carrying it, do you?" snarled the Wasp. "You eat it here, dummy."

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"You don't understand," said the bee politely. "This isn't for me, it's for the hive. I'm not eating this myself."

"So you really are someone's slave!" mocked the Wasp triumphantly. He was on fine form today.

"I certainly don't feel like a slave," laughed the bee. "I love the hive, or should I say my colony that lives in it. They are my family and I'm pleased that my contribution helps."

"So the truth is: you can't stand on your own six feet," concluded the Wasp, even though the word 'family' had chimed with a longing deep within his hidden heart. "Sounds like you're simply institutionalised."

"That's an odd way to see family," pondered the bee. "Is that how you see your family?"

The Wasp smarted. He hadn't given anything away had he? How come he had tried so hard to put this insect in his place and yet it was the bee who had innocently struck a penetrating blow? He tried to recover his composure.

"Ha!" he laughed a little too loudly. "I have no need for a family. I do what I want, when I want. No one tells me what to do. I call the shots in my life."

"No one tells me what to do either. I just do what I see needs doing," replied the bee, "but, don't you find your way a bit ... lonely?"

There! Despite the Wasp's best efforts the bee had him on the ropes now and it only needed one more blow to finish him off. How had he done it? Yes, it burned at the core of the Wasp's hidden but aching heart. Had he been rejected? Yes. Had he been hurt? Yes. Did he crave kindness and companionship from the deepest part of him? Yes. Was he lonely? Of course he was.

"No." It was all the fight he had left. He knew it was weak. All that now remained was for the bee to finish him off, and expose the pathetic pretender that he knew he was.

"That's good then," said the bee and turned back to his nectar gathering. 'Maybe he doesn't know how close he was to exposing me after all,' thought the Wasp. He decided to follow the bee and see the hive it had spoken of. It sounded like an interesting place.

Eventually, when he was fully laden with nectar, the bee made for home. The Wasp followed a few feet behind trying to look casual.

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"Welcome back, brother," shouted one of the bees on guard at the entrance to the hive. The hive looked simple and sturdy. It was made of wood, not like the papery affairs that the Wasp had seen some of his own species build.

"Who's that with you?" the guard asked.

"He's a friend I made in the gardens," replied the bee who then turned to the Wasp: "Would you like to come in? You'd be most welcome."
This bee seemed to be more knowing than he had first appeared, but he didn't seem to use his knowledge as a weapon.

The Wasp entered and paused just inside to take it all in. There were dozens of bees, maybe even hundreds. Many of them rushed to embrace the returning bee and to help him unload his haul of nectar. It was like a family. Everyone seemed very sociable and some made polite conversation with the Wasp. But most of the attention was around the bee for he was now dancing with delight and telling the others where he had found all his nectar. Soon the hive had all but emptied as a large party left to go after the new supply. The bee turned to the Wasp,

"Would you like to meet the Queen?" he smiled. The Wasp didn't know what to say, but if there was royalty in the hive it was an opportunity not to be missed. So he nodded in agreement. The bee led him into a cavern where a large majestic bee sat in front of a nursery of bee larvae. The bee ran to embrace her and the Queen returned the embrace. It seemed there was no standing on ceremony for this queen.

"This is a friend I made today, your majesty" announced the bee. The word friend felt good to the Wasp, if overly generous.

"What a charming bee," said the Queen. "Which colony are you from?" The Wasp was a little embarrassed at the unfortunate confusion:

"Your majesty, I'm sorry to say that I am not a bee but a wasp; a lone wasp."

"My friend," retorted the Queen kindly. "I can see quite clearly that you are not a wasp but a bee. Do you know for sure in your heart that you are a wasp or did someone persuade you that you were?"

The Wasp was dumfounded but thought that, in view of the company, he should take the question seriously:

"I am a wasp. Everyone knows it. Everyone treats me like a wasp."

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"So you've believed someone else?" Now the Wasp's head was spinning. How did he know for sure? How could he prove it?

"When was the first time you were called a wasp? Try and think back. When was it?" At last, this was a question he could answer. It was about the earliest memory he had, and the clearest. So he told them both the story:

"I remember that the sky had turned from blue to white and the ground had turned from grass to wood. I had flown by accident into another world. I'd instinctively turned to leave, but 'dunk!' I bounced against an invisible barrier. Stunned and surprised I found myself spiralling slowly downwards and out of control. I'd braced myself for a hard landing but instead plunged into a sticky sweet strawberry bath. What a relief. 'At least it was a soft landing,' I'd thought. But it had been a bit too sticky. I buzzed and blundered but couldn't get out. It was then that I heard the scream: "There's a wasp in the jam! Get it out. Get it out!" A child swatted at the jar I was in and I'd come tumbling out onto the red and white checked table cloth.

"It's going to sting me. Kill it. Aaahhh!"

"Where is it?" had asked another voice. "Don't touch it, dear. It'll sting you." I was terrified and stumbled to get away.

"There it is. Horrid wasp." Then down came the weapon. The rolled up magazine struck me so hard that it bounced me clean off the table top. I'd lay there stunned on the floor as the giant roll came towards me again. The last thing I'd seen was a face screwed up with distain and disgust. And then I'd been flicked out through the doorway and into the grass of the lawn.

"It's alright darling; the nasty wasp's gone now," was the last I heard. I had lain there until nightfall, dazed, wounded, traumatized."

It was all a long time ago now but the memory of that day was as clear and vivid as was the world around him and the feelings that went with it had not dimmed over time.

After a respectful pause the Queen asked him gently: "Can you see that you have believed a lie?"

"No, it's true I am a wasp. I was trying to hurt people. Why else would I have gone into their house and frightened them. They were only defending themselves against me. Honestly, I do that kind of thing all the time."

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"You weren't trying to hurt anyone. Can't you see now that it was just an honest mistake? You were a bee looking for flowers and just took a wrong turn. They probably had flowers on their table that attracted you."

For a second the Wasp felt stranded. Stranded between what he had believed and what might truly be:

"There were flowers on the table." He was caught between despair and hope, self-loathing and joy. Could it be he'd got it wrong? Had he believed a lie? But then all the inner voices flooded back in, all the screams and the echoes of the accusations: "Nasty Wasp".

"No, I know what I am." said the Wasp. "I am a wasp. I am bad."

"I'm sorry," said the Queen, "but I don't believe that. I believe there is good in you. Would you like to stay with us and see if you can find it?"

"I dearly do want to change," answered the Wasp. His guard was down now. He knew this was a safe place to show his feelings. "I long to be different, to be good. And I love what you have here."

"Then you must stay" said the Queen with a smile. "But you won't need to *try*. You will need to *be*. But understand; you may find that it's hard to get to an easy place." That sounded wise enough, but the Wasp couldn't fathom it.

In the days and weeks that followed the Wasp did his best to change. He helped by tending to the Queen's own larvae and when a bee came with news of fresh flower beds he joined in the chase to gather the nectar. He found all his new duties interesting and fulfilling, but although all the bees seemed to accept him he felt that there was something fundamentally different about him and he never quite felt that he fitted, no matter how hard he tried. Every now and then his waspish nature reared its ugly head as a reminder of how different he really was. It happened most often when there were people about. The most nectar-rich flowers were to be found in gardens, which was where the people often lay in wait for him. Although they never seemed to bother any of the real bees he knew that they were looking for an opportunity to attack him, so whenever he saw them he would launch an attack before they had a chance to go for him first. Sometimes he drove them off and sometimes he would get swatted and would skulk fuming back to the hive. Either way he felt ashamed of his behaviour in front of the kindly and well behaved bees. They all remained pleasant and generous towards him, but he felt sure that they would be talking about him disapprovingly behind his back.

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One day when the Wasp was tending her larvae, the Queen took the opportunity to ask him how he felt things were going.

"Quite well," replied the Wasp. "I like it here very much but I don't believe I'll ever really fit in.

"All the bees like you," the Queen reassured him. "What is it that bothers you?"

"I have tried very hard to be like you bees but I can't escape the fact that, when everything's said and done, I'm simply a nasty wasp."

"I did say that it's not about trying, but about being," the Queen reminded him. "You do realise that it's only you who thinks you don't fit in."

"But I can't change what I am," the Wasp countered sadly.

"Do I look like I fit in?" asked the Queen. The Wasp was suddenly taken aback. The Queen was much larger than the other bees and quite a different shape. "You see I'm different too," she continued. "And if you look carefully every bee is different. Each one is an individual but they are united in their commitment to each other and to the hive; and to the Beekeeper."

This was the first time that the Wasp had heard of the Beekeeper: "But you are all still bees," he objected.

"And you're not?" smiled the Queen. 'She just doesn't get it, does she?' thought the Wasp.

"I think it's about time you met him," she said mysteriously and retreated out of the chamber leaving the Wasp alone with his thoughts.

Before too long there came a rumbling, a vibration that shook the floor, but no Beekeeper. Then a crack appeared along the roof of the chamber and shaft of light penetrated through, but still no bee keeper. Finally, the Wasp felt the floor moving under him and suddenly the chamber was completely open to the sky. Dazzled from a moment the Wasp's eyes then focused on a giant figure shrouded in a veil. A voice came softly from within:

"So you are the newcomer to my hive." The Wasp was a little unsettled by this. Although the voice was not at all threatening, he had presumed that the hive was the collective property of the bees. "I'm so pleased to welcome you to my colony," continued the voice. "I'm always happy to make room for a new bee." This must be the Beekeeper that the Queen had spoken of. The Queen was large but the Beekeeper was a giant. Although the Wasp couldn't see its face clearly because of the veil, at least this giant was part of the same

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species as the bees who had befriended him. Feeling reassured the Wasp thought he should move on to clear the misunderstanding before things got complicated:

"You are very kind sir, but you should be aware that I am, in truth, not actually a bee at all, but a wasp." He suddenly felt vulnerable and ashamed as the word 'wasp' fell from his lips, and so to counter the effect he added, "But I am doing my very best to be bee-like."

"Is that so?" said the Beekeeper. "You'll find that trying won't get you very far; you just have to *be*." The Wasp felt exasperated hearing the Beekeeper speaking with the same voice as the Queen, but he tried not to show it.

"But I've always been a wasp and always will be. I don't think you bees really appreciate exactly what it's like to be a wasp," some exasperation crept out, as he answered.

"I am not a bee," said the Beekeeper firmly. "But there's nothing I don't know about bees. I built this hive, and all this is my garden. I gave you your Queen and I know every bee in this colony. I know that you are a bee whether you believe it or not."

Oh, how the Wasp wanted to believe the words of this shrouded stranger, they tugged at his very heart. But he knew what he was: "I'm sorry, but I know I'm a wasp, that I'm bad, but I do want to try to be like a bee if I can".

"How can I convince you that you are not bad?" asked the Beekeeper softly. "Maybe if you look into my eyes and know that I am true?" And with that he lifted the veil from his head and what the Wasp saw made him gasp. There before him stood a man. The one who had seemed so caring had tricked him. It was a man; his bitter enemy. The Wasp's blood boiled. Not only was he filled with fear and hatred, but now he felt mocked and humiliated too. And worse still, he was cornered. In wild desperation he attacked the man, flying directly at his face. He plunged his sting deep into the man's cheek and pumped in the poison. Immediately the Beekeeper's fingers closed around the Wasp's tiny body. The Wasp knew that he was just a pinch away from death.

"You are full of fear and anger," said the Beekeeper calmly. "But you've not gone this far before have you?"

The Wasp struggled to pull away but the Beekeeper held him firmly in place. It was then that he saw the Beekeeper's other hand bringing a knife up towards him. This must be the end. But instead the Beekeeper cut into his own flesh removing a chunk of his cheek around the Wasp's sting. As the Beekeeper placed him back gently on the floor of the hive the Wasp could see the blood flowing like a red tear down the cheek of his victim's face. All his anger had drained away with his poison and now he was in awe and amazement at the Beekeeper's actions.

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"Why did you wound yourself?" asked the wide-eyed Wasp.

"I couldn't let you pull away. It would have caused you fatal injury to loose your sting. I care about you too much to allow that," replied the Beekeeper as the blood dripped from his cheek onto his clothing.

The Wasp turned to look at the bloody kebab on his sting. He tried to shake it off but couldn't. As a wasp his sting should just slide out and be ready for another attack. But the sting was caught tight to the Beekeeper's flesh. It was as if he had the sting of a...

"You *are* a bee," the words of the Beekeeper at last started to penetrate. "But I couldn't let you prove me right, now could I? It would have cost you your life." He smiled.

The Wasp suddenly welled up with unfamiliar emotions; regret at having attacked this kindly man; guilt for his injury; a growing sense of joy at being the recipient of such kindness; excitement as it dawned that he may not be what he had thought, and fear that he may not be what he had thought. The Beekeeper saw his state and spoke through the storm:

"Let your feelings free, and the eyes of your heart will see that you are loved by me. Now allow yourself to be."

And in that moment there was revelation for the Wasp. He saw the Beekeeper as his loving protector. He saw the "Queen as his queen. He saw that the kindly bees were in fact his brothers and the hive was his home. He realised what it was to simply 'be', and to know it as enough. It had been his wrong belief that had separated him from this brotherhood and from where he belonged. The other bees flooded into the chamber to share his joy and the Bee truly knew he belonged.

From that day forward the Bee's world was turned upside down, or rather right ways up. He was now just a bee, with a few waspish habits. But they no longer defined him. He found his work with the colony came much easier now and he rarely picked fights with people. In fact, he often sought out the Beekeeper and delighted in offering him the honey of his labours. Now when he is tempted to revert to his old beliefs he just has look at his sting and the remains of the Beekeeper flesh remind him who he really is and who he belongs to.