

FOR THE LOVE OF A BUMBLEBEE

Mary's mother died in 2010,
Mary's 60-year-old husband David died in 2012,
and Mary's 8-year-old grandson died in 2013.

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"Listening to the scanner, we'd often hear someone with the same voice as Bud's. Riding in the ambulance to Finley Hospital I heard that voice, and looked down to see a bumblebee on my rosary just as I'd finished praying it. I took it by the wings and put it out the window."

These were my mother's words, inscribed on simple notebook paper that she'd entrusted to my care years before she died.

Bud was my father and he died in the hospital the day after that ambulance ride.

When my mother gave me the papers, I'd stashed them in a cabinet. Six months after her death and more than twenty-five years after the accident that took my father's life, I came across those papers and read that sentence to my daughter over the phone. "I'd forgotten about that," I marveled, and Elizabeth reminded me of how we'd seen a bumblebee in my mother's house two days in a row while she lay dying. A bumblebee—in November.

Later that day, entering my mother's house, I was greeted by the sight of a fat bumblebee sitting in the middle of the kitchen floor. Without thinking, I squished it with a satisfying crunch beneath my shoe. I immediately felt uneasy, remembering how my mother had gently lifted the bee from her hand to put it out the ambulance's window.

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On the day I spotted the bee at my mother's house, I was contemplating yet another impending loss; the loss of what I'd come to consider my own private writing retreat. Soon, the table would be removed by the sibling who'd claimed it, and the house sold. Not only had I lost my mother, I was about to lose my creative space.

Would I also be losing the tenuous
hold I had on the creative muse
of my mother?

I'd been going to my mother's empty house once or twice a week all winter, using the table she'd sat at to work on her art as my writing desk. Whether it was the lack of an internet connection or the spirit of a very creative mother, I had many productive writing sessions within the walls of the home my mother had lived and created art in for almost forty-five years.

Occasionally, I'd take a break and wander through the nearly empty rooms, pausing at boxes and stooping down to rifle through what few possessions of my mother's that hadn't yet been claimed. I pulled out a notebook filled with her handwriting, and carted it home with me. I filled a trunk with her writings, designating myself the keeper of her words.

All winter and well into the spring, I drove to my mother's house for writing sessions.

The house became a sort of haven for me as I grieved the loss of my mother.

I had spent many hours as a teen working alongside Mom at that table or in her front porch workroom. We'd sit together painting, drawing, or writing.

Nothing dulled the sharp pain of losing my mother like writing about her. I wrote about many things during those days of grieving; a grieving that began with her diagnosis. I wrote about my mother's bravery in facing terminal cancer, her fight to live the fullest in her last days, the sharp pang of loss I experienced after her death and in subsequent months.

What I didn't write about were bumblebees. It felt slightly ridiculous to believe the bees were a sign from Mom.

"I feel like I'm supposed to write about the bumblebees," I told my husband one day. "But I don't want to."

"Then don't," came his simplistic answer.

I returned to my desk and sat down. Then I heard an unmistakable buzzing near my right ear. I tilted my head slightly to look down, and froze.

On my shoulder sat a bumblebee.

I hurried out the front door and quickly removed my sweatshirt, letting it drop to the porch floor.

"What's wrong? You ran out of the house so fast," my husband questioned from behind me.

"There was a bumblebee on my shoulder."

"Sure," he commented wryly.

I gingerly lifted the sweatshirt from the floor between pinched fingers, holding it out to my husband so he could see. His eyes widened. He looked at the bee, then my face, and back to the bee.

"No way."

We both shook our heads in disbelief.

"Guess you'll have to write about the bumblebee, after all," he said.

And so I did.