Animal Acts
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No Bees for Bridgeport:  
A Fable from the Age of Daley

Lights up on Kestutis, a man.

And so, ladies and gentlemen, that concludes my talk on how I saved the honeybees. Are there any questions? Have I ever been stung? Well, yes. Quite badly, in fact. I was attacked by angry bees and stung repeatedly in and around my eyes. In fact, the eyes you see in my head right now aren’t really mine. My son donated them. Don’t worry. He’s alive and well. He’s home in Chicago, probably listening to the radio, waiting for my return so he can have his eyes back.

Maybe I better explain, let me take you back, way back. All the way back to the age of Daley the Second, over three summers ago.

K spins around to indicate a change of time.

Well, I’m fifty-five years old and I’m finally happy. Maybe it’s just some sort of delusion, but I don’t care. I’m fat, fifty-five, and finished. I can basically screw around now because all my masterpieces are done.

Don’t worry. You’ve never heard of them. Works of true genius are only discovered by later generations. I’m resigned to that. But even when they do discover my work, that’s not really immortality. Nothing lasts. Even Shakespeare will die when the planet self-destructs. Who cares? Immortality’s for suckers. The spiritually weak. It’s just the frightened trembling ego that

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craves it. See, in human consciousness, the ego is the last actor to leave the stage. What forces him off? Silence.

Silence.

I’ve had plenty of that. But now, the last actor has left the stage, leaving only an egoless, deep soul consciousness. That’s the real, essential self: the universal soul in relaxed, attentive concentration. And it’s that concentrated awareness that I direct toward my beehive.

Beekeepers, good ones, have a special kind of knowledge. A sense of ease that allows us to draw near the hive without arousing fear or anger. It might be a gift. But I think it’s something we develop over time. Lots of time. Did I mention that I was fifty-five? Oh, I said that. Right. Fat, fifty-five, and finished. Did I say that? Sorry. So when I become one with the hive, the hive tells me what to do. I’m no longer in charge. See, that’s what’s wrong with this world. Certain people trying to control everything. Like some of those hate mongers in the media. They really tick me off. That ain’t the way it oughta be. Love, that’s where it’s at.

Acceptance plus gratitude, that’s happiness. Let go. Live in the moment. You’ll find your desires melting away, along with whatever’s bothering you. Like my job. YOU DON’T FIRE ME, I FIRE YOU! I FIRE YOU! Stop adjusting reality to suit YOU. Bloom where you’re planted.

I’m planted on the South Side of Chicago, in the Bridgeport neighborhood. I live there with my wife and four-year-old son, Lukas. And I’ve got a beehive in my backyard. Did I tell you I was a beekeeper? I am. With my own hive.

The hive came in the mail as a build-it-yourself kit. It was hard to nail those frames together. Nails would keep splitting the flimsy wood. Shit. Give me the right-sized nails and clear instructions and I’ll do fine.

Those greedy thieves at the beekeeping supplies company want to send the new hobbyist the cheapest shit they can get away with, just to hold on to a few pennies. Such clever minds out there thinking up ways to screw me. That’s bad karma. After all, I’m just trying to get ahead.

Once I get my hive built, my buddy Chip and I make a special trip out to Indiana to pick up a young bee colony, a nucleus colony, or “nuc.” I figure the bees ought to be easier to handle than building that stupid hive was. After all, they’re part of nature, like me, so we’ll understand each other. Sticks and nails are not part of nature.

My buddy Chip is about the nicest guy in Chicago. He’s from California. He takes the frames, which are full of bees, out of the nuc and sets them gently into the hive. Soon the bees have settled into their home and are out foraging. Lukas is staying far away from the bees, but I’m trying to teach him to be less afraid.
Lukas and I love to get on YouTube and watch “Honey Land,” an old cartoon about bees. A boy and girl bee fall in love. When the girl bee is abducted by a spider, the boy bee comes to her rescue. He stings the spider repeatedly, but it is not enough, so he sounds an alarm, and a squad of fighter bees in military formation hone in on the hapless spider who, after all, is only trying to live his predatory life. The bees sting and sting and sting and sting till the spider runs away. The boy and girl bees are reunited, and there is happiness again in Honey Land.

But that cartoon lies. Really, boy bees—or drones—don’t even have a stinger. And a bee can sting only once, then she dies. She leaves her stinger in her victim, and as she pulls away she in effect disembowels herself. Some of her guts stay attached to the stinger. Those guts are her venom sack, a kind of natural syringe full of bee venom. Even when the bee is gone and off dying somewhere, the sack still pulsates, injecting venom through the hollow, barbed needle of the stinger.

Also, boy bees—or drones—don’t live happily ever after. A drone’s penis is ripped out of his body after mating, staying inside the female while he drops away and dies. So the cartoon distorts the truth, but it helps Lukas love the bees.

One of our neighbors loves the bees, too. He’s a kind old Chinese man. Every time I see him in his garden, he gives me a big, beaming smile and nods approvingly as he points to the hive. He knows those bees are pollinating his plants and they will bring him a bumper crop of weird Chinese vegetables.

The neighbors on the other side of my backyard are a little less enthusiastic.

“A BEEHIVE!?!?” That’s Angie, the renter on the bottom floor. She’s a lifer in our working-class neighborhood. Her dad was a cop in the machine days of Daley the First. She hates to think about life next door to our bees. I reassure her as delicately as I can, “These are Italian bees, very gentle. They almost never sting, only if you really hassle them.” Since she considers herself Italian, the ethnicity of the bees calms her down just a little. Vickie, the single mom who lives on the upper floor, doesn’t care for the bees, either. Vickie has a Lithuanian last name and can still name some of the starchy Lithuanian foods. She doesn’t like it when her Chinese or Mexican neighbors don’t speak English. “This is supposed to be America, isn’t it?” Vicki looks at the new hive very suspiciously and says, “I just don’t want my little Johnny to get stung.”

The kids of the neighborhood start coming up to me as I sit out on my front steps. “You have a BEEHIVE! If we get stung it’s going to be YOUR FAULT.” The neighbors on the block stop saying hello to us as they walk by.
My wife is disturbed. But I insist that everything is going to be okay. I enjoy watching my bees fly out from the hive. They generally head southwest, in the direction of the old stockyards. Maybe that’s where the nectar is.

One evening, after we’ve had the bees about a week, I get a phone call. It’s our alderman, Duke Ballser. “You got dose bees over dere. I wanna see you ’bout dat. At your convenience, of course. Be here tomorrow at one o’clock.”

I’m there on time.

“Sit down, Mr. Kestutis.”

“Actually it’s Mr. Nakas, Kestutis is my first name. It’s a Lithuanian name.”

“I know a Lugan name when I see it. I like Lugans. I even married one, ha ha ha. Dere used to be a lot of Lugans in Bridgeport.”

“Yes, I know. Halstead to Morgan was all Lithuanian at one time.”

“And dey’re good people too, Mr. Kestutis. Hardly no fights or nuttin’. You been over dere on Union tree years, right?”

“Almost four.”

“Don’t correct me, Mr. Kestutis. I see you been votin’. Dat’s good. Registered Democrat. Good . . . And I’m looking . . . You don’t pay a whole lot of property taxes over dere on Union. Dat’s a nice house you got, too. I had one of my guys take a picture. Dis your house? “

“Yes, sir.”

“Mr. Kestutis, let me ask you dis: You like it here in Bridgeport?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You need anyting done?”

“Like what?”

“Oh, you know, street light fixed, stop sign, zoning variance, building permit, extra parking permits, White Sox tickets, anyting along dose lines?”

“No, sir. I think I’m fine.”

“If you do you’ll let me know, all right?”

“All right.”

“All right! Shake, brudder. Oh. Dere’s one more ting I wanna get straight witchou. Okay? Dis is Bridgeport. We don’t like no bees over here. Understand? You wanna have bees or anyting like dat dere you go up over dere ta da Nort Side and live over dere.”

“I can’t afford that. And, with all due respect, Alderman, Mayor Daley is encour . . .”

“Don’t Mayor Daley me. I’ll Mayor Daley YOU. Not vice versa.”

“But the green initiative. ‘City in a Garden.’ There are hives on top of City Hall.”

“Dat’s got nothing to do do wit Bridgeport. I’m the alderman here. And folks is pissed, Mr. Kestutis, if you’ll pardon my language. I’m getting calls. All it
takes is for one kid to get stung and have an allergic reaction and then I got real trouble over here. What's da green initiative gonna do wid dat?"

“The city is zoned for bees. I got a right, Alderman.”

“Don’t treaten me, Mr. Kestutis. I’ve handled Lugans fatter than you. Bridgeport’s a nice neighborhood. But you know sometimes bad things happen here. And even to good citizens like yourself . . .”

“Alderman Ballser, you asked me if I needed anything. Can we have a neighborhood meeting with whoever’s complaining? Give me a chance to explain how wonderful bees are.”

“Neighborhood meeting? We never had nothing like dat dere . . .”

After a lot of haggling he agrees to a meeting the following week. Some beekeepers from other Chicago neighborhoods agree to come and talk about the joy of bees.

If only I knew someone with influence or “clout” in South Side politics! Then I bump into Arunas Rastkauskas walking his dog down Morgan. Arunas is from Vilnius, but he lives in Bridgeport now, working for the Lithuanian consulate in Chicago. I tell him all my bee troubles and about how I could use some “clout” and so on. He nods his head. “Tomorrow I vill be at reception vit Senatoras Durbinas.” Dick Durbin’s mom was Lithuanian, so Durbin likes us. Durbin even has a big round Lithuanian head. “If I get chance to talk vit him, maybe I vill mention this. But I cannot promise this . . .” Okay. I know. Forget it.

I can already hear the buzzing of the angry community residents as I approach Eleventh Ward headquarters. I open the door to the meeting room, and someone yells, “Dere’s da bee man! BOO!” Ballser raps his gavel.

“Dat’s enough. Mr. Kestutis lives over here too. I know you want we should get rid of dat beehive, but I made a promise he could talk to you. So please, just for dese few minutes, hear da man out. DEN we get rid of dat beehive. Go ahead, Mr. Kestutis.”

“It’s Mr. Nakas.”

“A Lugan is a Lugan. I told ya da floor is yours. Or don’tcha want it now?”

I get up in front of the hostile crowd. Of all my bee buddies, only young Chip has come.

“Thanks, neighbors. I really appreciate this chance to talk to you about the wonderful hobby of beekeeping.”

“IF DOSE BEES STING MY KIDS YER A DEAD MAN! I’LL COME OVER DERE AND KILL YA MYSELF!”

“I don’t think my bees will be stinging anybody. These are Italian bees. Are there any Italians out there?” A few hands go up. “Then I don’t need to tell you about your gentle disposition or the easy, relaxed ways of your rela-
tives. Italian bees are just the same. Gentle. And they only sting when you mess with them. Just wait till you see the way they pollinate all your flowers and vegetables. And when you taste my delicious Bridgeport honey, you'll want a hive of your own.”

“NO BEES IN BRIDGEPORT! NO BEES IN BRIDGEPORT! NO BEES IN BRIDGEPORT!” The crowd is starting to rise to its feet as Ballser bangs his gavel.

“All right, all right. Sit down. Is that it fer da pro-bee faction?”

My last friend, Chip, bounds to the front in his Californian, hemp-rope sandals. He looks at the crowd with his friendly, stoner eyes, puts his hand on his heart and declares, “Bees are really, really cool.” Chip sits down, certain that he has persuaded them.

“NO BEES! NO BEES! NO BEES!”

Again, Ballser pounds his gavel. “All right, all right! We’re just about trough wid da whole ting. I tink we all heard ya and we’re ready ta make up my mind.” Just then the door flies open and in comes Arunas Rastkaukas, followed by Senator Dick Durbin himself, who declares: “All rise for the mayor.” Hizzoner Mayor Richard Daley enters, walks to the front, and stands above Alderman Ballser.

“We’re gonna have bees in Bridgeport, and I don’t wanna hear no more about it. Dere’s too much at stake. I can’t afford no subterfuge from da peanut galley over dese so-called green initiatives I got workin’. Alderman Ballser, you’re a good man. Don’t change dat. So da bees stay. And I don’t wanna hear a peep outa any of you.” He points his finger into the crowd. “You owe me. Let me know, Alderman, if there’s anything at all I can do for you. See ya at da ball park.” He winks at Durbin and walks out. Durbin winks at Arunas and follows the mayor out. Arunas winks at me and walks out.

The crowd is silent, heads bowed. But with the big shots safely gone, they start to lowly boo and hiss. Ballser barks, “Dat’s enough. You heard da mayor. We’re votin’ for da bees.”

He raps his gavel, ends the meeting. Democracy wins again!

Something stinks as I round the corner onto Union. I get to my house and see broken eggshells on my stoop and sidewalk. Someone has thrown rotten eggs all over the house. One of our fine old windows is broken. Inside my wife is crying. There is a brick on the floor with a note attached: “For Da Bee Lover. Bzzz.”

My fists clench in pain and rage. It’s hard to pick up the phone with clenched fists, but I manage to make a call. Within an hour, a police cruiser arrives to watch the house around the clock.
But everything is not okay. Every time my wife, son, or I go into CVS or Freddie’s Italian Beef or Pancho Pistolas we hear people making buzzing sounds. None of the Bridgeport glaziers will fix the window, so we have to pay a North Side price for a new one. Little Stan, the eight-year-old up the block, manages to get stung while swinging at a bee with his baseball bat. I get in a shouting match with his dad, and our police guard has to step out of his cruiser to send the guy away. A petition to recall the mayor begins circulating in the neighborhood.

Then the phone rings. It’s the mayor. “Mr. Kestutis?”

“It’s Nakas.”

“Sure. I know dat. How are dose bees doin?”

“Okay, I guess.”

“How you doin?”

“Well, life has gotten a little tense down here.”

“Look, Mr. Kestutis, you support the green initiative, right?”

“Of course.”

“Well I have a wonderful idea, and I wanna call on a South Side guy like yourself. Dere’s a whole lot of wildflowers over dere on dat acreage where da stockyards used to be. How about you move your hive down dere. I can get da city to move it for ya. We’ll take some pictures of you keeping dose bees down dere like it’s a green initiative ting. And just tink, your neighbors will tank both of us for it.”

“Mr. Mayor, the whole point of this was to have a backyard hive. I thought you supported that.”

“Oh I do, I do, believe me. I support da backyard hive. It’s just dat, you know, da city is having a hard time economically speaking, and da police commissioner’s tellin’ me he ain’t got no more budget for a police guard over dere just so ya can have your little beehive.”

Out my window I see the police cruiser pulling away.

“So whadya say? Dis is your chance to be a green hero! And when we get dat hive out dere in da yards, we’ll take a lot of pictures with Durbin in dere and you and me and dat Lugan friend a yours, what’s his name?”

“Arunas.”

“Whatever. So it’s a deal. We’ll have someone over dere to move dat hive in about five minutes . . .”

Okay. I guess I’m licked. That’s life in the big city. It’s not so far to the stockyards. I can work my hive over dere. I mean, over there. I go back to the kitchen window to take one last look out at my hive. It’s sweet, really: bees buzzing around in the afternoon sun. Outside Lukas playing with his Tonka
dump truck, smashing it down onto his Power Rangers action figures. He's making explosion sounds. He bangs the big metal truck against the fence, then the concrete steps, then the beehive.

“NO! Lukas, NO!” He can't hear me, even though I am banging against the back window. He's so absorbed in his truck banging, he forgot he could disturb the bees. I better get my ass out there. I open the back door and see Lukas toss the truck at the hive. It lands on the metal hive cover with a huge crash. Oh shit. I fly down the back stairs as alarmed, enraged bees fly out of the hive to attack. They are already landing on his face as I pick him up. But I forgot how heavy he's getting, and as I swing him up to me, I slip, trip, and fall against the hive, knocking it over completely. The whole colony flies out and covers Lukas and me. They sting and sting and sting. The bees’ instincts tell them to go for the eyes, mouth, and face. The last thing I see before my eyes swell shut is the city bee-removal crew running toward us in their bee suits.

When I wake up I can't tell if my eyes are open or closed, but they hurt like nothing has ever hurt. I can't see. My body feels like it's on fire. I try to speak but my tongue is swollen inside my mouth. “Helloaagh . . .”

“Daddy?” It's Lukas.

“We're right here. We're all right here.” It's my wife, Ona. “You're in the hospital. Lukas almost died, but he's alive. Right now he can only see out of one eye, but the swelling in his face has gone way, way down.”

“Lukath . . . I'm tho thoarry.”

“Okay.”

“Am I blind?”

“You took a lot of bee stings in your eyes, ears, nose, throat. Also in your lips, tongue, neck, shoulder, Adam's apple . . .”

“All righth . . .”

“Your tits, underarms, belly button . . .”

“All righth, I get . . .”

“Your dick, your balls, your anus . . .”

“Okay! Okay! I got shtuaung aeveryhwheahre, okay, okay! Where're da bees?”

“That's the weird part. The bee-removal crew got so busy saving you that they didn't even start to move the bees till the ambulances left. When they got to the hive, the bees were gone.”

“Ghaone? Where?”

“Nobody knows. Someone said they saw a whole swarming mass flying southwest.”

“The stockyards!”
As Lukas and I begin to recover from our attack we hear glowing reports in the news of the success of the stockyard bees. The colony that left my hive took up residence in the hollowed-out insulation of an abandoned refrigerated rail car. That colony discovered the bounty of flowers growing where all of America’s meat was once slaughtered. Under that ground lie layers and layers of animal manure. But not just that. A lot of blood was spilled in those yards. And that seeped into the ground. In all the slaughter and butchery, a lot of animal parts got strewn around. Human parts, too, some say. The wildflowers growing there have a darkened, almost greasy brilliance. There’s nothing like it anywhere else.

Chicago Public Radio, WBEZ, starts to broadcast wonderful stories about the “miracle of the bees” on the South Side. When bee colonies get crowded, they make a new queen and split in two. Half of them take the old queen and swarm away to live in a new hive they have found. The old stockyards are full of potential hive sites: hollow trees, empty sheds, old buildings, abandoned cars and trucks. Soon these places are full of new hives. The increased pollination around the old yards makes the flowers even healthier and more plentiful. The city beekeepers have found ways of harvesting the wild honey, and the city is making a fortune selling its own “Bridgeport” brand of stockyard honey.

Pretty soon all the media outlets have picked up the story. Daley, Durbin, and even Alderman Ballser are getting their picture taken down at the “Bee Yards” almost every week. The beekeeping hobby craze is sweeping the country. Michelle Obama has even installed a hive in back of the White House and tends to it with her children and secret service detail. They look pretty funny in their beekeeping outfits. This makes good press and leads to a significant uptick in Obama’s popularity. It’s needed now more than ever since the financial crisis has created such turmoil. Mobs of bankers and financiers have started roaming the country, looting and pillaging abandoned, foreclosed properties for appliances and copper tubing. They say that if they can't get bonuses for their role in wrecking the economy, they will TAKE them. Reports come in that a good-sized army of vengeful, marauding financial industry brigands are headed toward south Chicago to wreak havoc on the president’s hometown.

Lukas and I keep getting better. But he’s changed. Even with one good eye he’s a much sadder boy. He doesn’t trust me anymore. Why should he? I keep hoping my blindness is temporary, so I haven’t yet learned Braille or any of that blind-person stuff. And I’ve gotten obsessed with restoring the sight in my son’s bad eye. We’ve traveled all over the Midwest and tried every kooky cure we could find. Finally we drove south to Kentucky for treatments by a
mystic healer at Cumberland Falls, under the famous but almost unknown “moonbow” that appears in the mists by the falls. What? You don’t know what a moonbow is? You’re kidding. That’s a rainbow you can only see at night, under the light of a full moon.

At Cumberland Falls you can see the one and only moonbow in the western hemisphere. The healer tapes Lukas’s good eye shut and puts him at the edge of the pool formed by the falls, facing the moonbow.

“Look, Daddy, a rainbow!”

“That’s a moonbow, Lukas, I’ve told you a hundredwhat?”

His mom is crying. Lukas’s good eye is still covered. He’s seeing out of the blind one! He can see! Why can’t I? The healer breaks his trance. He puts his hand on my shoulder and says: “Sometimes children respond better than old people.”

Once we’re home again, my old bee buddy Chip comes over to take away my empty hive. He’s going to fill it with a nuc of his own. We go into the backyard, and I lay my hands on it one last time.

_The sound of a police siren is heard._

“It’s a cop, coming down the alley!” Chip tells me. The cop turns on his loudspeaker.

“All able-bodied men report to Eleventh Ward headquarters.” The army of marauding financial experts is marching on the South Side. They’ve already looted Back of the Yards, and they’re marching toward Bridgeport.

“Get moving, bee man.”

“But I’m blind.”

“I thought you was cured.”

“No, just my son.”

“Den bring your son. He can do the seeing for the both of ya.”

Chip, Lukas, and I are among the last to arrive at the front lines, which have marched out from ward headquarters and are now smack dab in the middle of the stockyards.

“What do you see, Lukas?”

“All I can see is legs. I’m short, remember?”

“What do you see, Chip?”

“The money men are up ahead. They got copper tubes and chunks of metal. And they look like they’re gonna use them. There’s a fat man in front and he’s yelling his head off.”

It’s Rush Limbaugh himself, hectoring the ragged torn army to advance. But the defenders don’t seem to care about that so much anymore. Instead they focus on me. “Well look who’s here! Da bee man, come to defend Bridgeport with the rest of us. Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz.”
They’re buzzing their old harassing buzz. They still haven’t forgiven me. Even though I’m blind, I haven’t suffered enough for them. Their buzzing sound spreads through the ranks of the defenders. Meanwhile, the money terrorists are almost upon us.

The buzzing gets louder. But it’s not just my Bridgeport neighbors anymore. No. The bees have emerged from their hives en masse. Their flight pattern is showing us how angry they are.

But not at us. They descend on the marauders. Covering each one. And especially the fat man in front. We’re talking millions, maybe billions of bees, and they’re stinging more ferociously than ever.

But they’re only attacking the invaders. Why not us?

Is it because of the Bridgeporters’ angry buzzing sounds? Or maybe it’s because we’re South Siders, children of stockyards, just like them. Breathing the pungent air, we’ve ranged through the manure and beef tallow too. To this new breed of bee, we are kin. Unlike its gentle Italian ancestor, *Apis stockyardas* is a fighter. When you threaten her home and hive, you’re going to get stung and stung bad.

Some of the invaders die. Most limp away, the few still-sighted ones leading long lines of blinded financial experts and bankers. “Hey, bee man! Look what your bees did. Let’s hear it for da bee man! Hip-hip hooray!” They lift me, Lukas, and Chip on their shoulders and carry us downtown, buzzing all the way.

It’s a big day at the mayor’s office. Durbin, Ballser, and Arunas are all there as I am awarded the key to the city for having brought a new race of bees into being. Of course, I know I shouldn’t take credit for that, but what the hell. Even my old Chinese neighbor is here. He just points at me, smiles, and nods approvingly.

That wasn’t so long ago. Now the International Bee Society has invited me here to give the keynote. I’m both honored and humbled. After all, I’m not the engineer of all these advances in apiary culture, just a blind witness. But you know that. So thanks. And now, if you don’t mind, I have to get back to Chicago. There’s a little boy that needs his eyes back.

Please don’t fret about me. Living in the dark is not that bad. Anyway, I’m still hoping for a cure. New studies show that a treatment made from bee venom, propolis, and honey might cure damaged eyes. With any luck I’ll “BEE SEEING” you long after we’re dead! So thanks again, and goodnight!