Beekeeping seems a simple pursuit. But with time and the right instructor, it can teach you a lot—about fear, about respect, and finally about the power of letting go.

A mysterious illness has been killing honeybees worldwide, including those in the hives built decades ago by the author’s grandfather.

My grandfather, my father’s father, is 88 years old, and as of last weekend is at death’s door. He was a teacher, and throughout my 31 years, I’ve learned more from him than I am even aware of. Just about the only thing I can learn from him now is how to let go of something you love, gracefully. His health has been steadily declining for several years, a situation that has, if only a little, lessened the impact of this inevitable final exam. But in some ways, he’s been setting me up all along, slowly teaching me how to let go, though it was only this spring that the lesson finally dawned on me.

It happened when I was out in a field on the family farm, digging a pit in which to burn the beehives that my grandfather built with his hands before I was even born. These were the same hives that he used to teach me everything I know about bees and much that I am learning about life; the same hives that for several human generations had been home to living, breathing honeybees. Those were the bees that died last year of colony collapse disorder (CCD). The
same bees that my grandfather taught me to keep safe.

CCD is the name for the largely mysterious syndrome that has been killing honeybees worldwide. At this point, some experts think the cause might be a virus. The virus alone, they believe, is not enough to kill a bee, let alone a whole hive. But when combined with other viruses, predators, pests, and bacteria, the virus appears to cause a breakdown of the immune system, and the insects become unable to fight off disease. Autopsies performed on infected bees have found almost every virus, bacteria, and pathogen known to affect bee health. The hives, frames, and wax that remain after the bees have disappeared contain toxic levels of any number of diseases. It’s troubling, and some of the world’s greatest entomological minds are still baffled.

This problem flies far beyond my little apiary, from which I collect a few gallons of honey each year. It goes past the apple trees and grapevines that my bees pollinate so I can collect fruit. It is a problem that has had an impact on every almond grower in California and every peach farmer in Georgia. Each year, honeybees are responsible for the pollination of produce valued at over $21 billion. That’s huge. So huge that companies like Häagen-Dazs (a major buyer of honeybee-pollinated crops) have begun giving grants to universities and laboratories as an incentive to getting the problem figured out. Recently, another Gourmet editor and I met with a Häagen-Dazs public-relations team because they had with them a very hot commodity: Diana Cox-Foster, professor of entomology from Penn State University and codirector of the team that has been leading up the research on CCD. They were there to sell us ice cream, but they were not all smiles. In fact, when I explained how I’d found my hive empty, no one smiled at all.

It sounds like you’ve had CCD,” said Cox-Foster. I asked her what I should do. Could I reuse my hives and frames with healthy bees? No. It was her strong recommendation to destroy the hives and start fresh. That meant: Burn them. You can’t just hide pollen-packed frames in the back corner of the barn; any new bees would surely find them and, along with them, any diseases hiding in the comb.

Reusing antique frames is a point of pride for many beekeepers. Over time, the wax becomes dark golden, even chocolate-colored. The frames I was using, the frames my grandfather used before me, had become practically black. They seemed rich with history and craftsmanship, both from the man who nailed them together and from the bees that built out the honeycomb, packing it with nectar. Each time I held a frame buzzing with bees to the sun, inspecting its contents and its inhabitants, I remembered learning from my grandfather. I remembered the first time he showed me the inside of the hive.

I was 13 when my grandfather had the first of a long series of strokes. It was a minor one, and only impaired him slightly. He could still be active, he could still take care of the bees. For the first time in my life, though, I realized that he wouldn’t always be here, and that when he did go, he would be taking with him everything he knew. I wanted to spend more time with him; I wanted to learn what he knew. I could keep that part of him with me always. So I asked if he wanted help with the bees. He chuckled and nodded. I was to show up the next morning wearing long pants and a long-sleeved shirt. So I did.

Throughout that long summer, and many that followed, we opened up hives and searched for queens together. He would point to a frame and explain what might be wrong and how to fix the problem. He would notice my nervousness and tell me to relax.

One steaming August day, he called early. “Come over, we’ve got a swarm,” he said. I arrived in jeans and a T-shirt. There, dangling from a branch 20 feet in the air, were thousands of humming bees. At the center of the ball of bees was their coveted queen, searching for a new home. My grandfather was ready for me. Propped against the tree were a ladder and a saw. My task was to remove the branch and carry it, along with the swarm, to a hive. “Go ahead and climb up there,” he said. I asked him for a veil to cover my head. “Oh, you won’t need that, just don’t be afraid.”

The sensation of fear that accompanied my ascent of the ladder was horrific. Within seconds, sweat had soaked my T-shirt. The saw was shaking in my hands. The branch was creaking from the weight of the bees and the weight of the
ladder. Thousands of bees, three feet from my face, buzzed around and landed on my arms. Their hum was all I could hear, as if I were in the center of a hive. “Just relax,” came the voice below. “Let go, let go of that fear and relax.” Minutes later, the swarm had been tucked into their new home, a hive built long ago by my grandfather. I had not been stung, not even once. I had started to learn to let go of my fear and to be at peace with the bees.

“They’ll follow the way you feel,” he’d tell me. “Take off your gloves.” He never wore gloves. They gave him a sense of overconfidence. If you know the bees can sting you, then you’ll be forced to relax and they won’t feel compelled to strike out at you. The bees will never fear you when you don’t fear them. “Take off your gloves and take a deep breath.” And so I did, and winced as I took two stingers in my flesh. But I tried it again the next time and was only stung once. Now, I have not been stung in years. The bees and I, we understand each other, no one is afraid anymore. When I held those frames, buzzing with life, in my bare hands, I could feel my grandfather’s strength and his control. The bees could feel it, too.

Learning to control my fear was the first lesson in letting go. But now I faced another. I had to burn the hives. I had to let go of something sentimental and hold on, only, to what was precious. I would be left with nothing but what I had learned. I thought about that as I dug into the earth to create a fire pit.

Beehives burn ferociously. Wax melts over wood and sets a flame that seems too great for its kindling. Pollen sizzles and honey boils. Years’ and years’ worth of thick-walled comb smokes and bubbles and melts away. The fire lasted for hours. It smoldered through the night and still smoked, faintly, in the next morning’s dew. It had been a difficult match to light, but somehow, that morning, as I tamped damp dirt over coals, I felt better. When I had approached the empty hives, I had felt the shame and guilt you feel when you’ve misplaced something precious that’s been entrusted to you by someone you love. Now that sense of loss was gone. I had been able to let go of it in the smoke of the burning honeycombs.

I immediately ordered two new colonies, new frames and hives and wax. I built the bees’ new homes and painted them white. I knew how to treat the colonies when they arrived. I did not need to consult a book or a beekeeper. I did not need to take a class. I have knowledge that I can hold on to. Something real I can keep. There is just one more thing now that I need to learn to let go of: a man who is dying.