

AMELIA Y LAS ABEJAS

(Amelia and the Bees)

SAMPLE

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[Chapters 1-7]

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1. ABELARDO

Abelardo says that Amelia's eyes were like bees. That the buzz of her eyelids almost sounded like the flutter of wings in the hives. That gazing into her eyes was like looking into the organized and fascinating world of bees, and that was why they were a mystery. Abelardo, who's a beekeeper, says all this, and that he loved her a lot.

A beekeeper is a person dedicated to the art of managing bees to make the most of their products. Abelardo squints and repeats *art*. Because keeping bees, he says, is nothing less than an art, and that's how the dictionary defines it.

Then he explains to me that when the sun shone in Amelia's eyes, her irises filled with light like the cells in a honeycomb.

That looking at honeycomb cells in the sunlight is like seeing gold, and that's what her eyes were like. Honey.

"Like yours, Elena", he adds with a laugh.

At other times, he grows sad and remembers Amelia in her final days. Even then, she would get up with a smile. Once, he found her secretly crying. And her tears, he says, were falling and they were bees.

Because bees, he now explains in a husky voice, are the tears of the god Ra falling to Earth, like Amelia's tears. And then he tells me that whole Ancient Egyptian story of the boat and the sun.

"Do you want to come up to the beehives, Elena?" he asks me.

But I don't want to. Bees frighten me. Even if they are the god Ra's tears, even if, as Abelardo says, bees are harmless, if you know how to handle them, if they don't feel threatened.

The only thing I know is that bees sting and make wax and honey.

Right, so now for the story of the god Ra.

2. THE LEGEND OF THE GOD RA

The god Ra carries the sun-disk resting on his head. From the first hour of the day, he travels across the sky in his golden barque. He rises from the dark, beyond the right bank of the river on the horizon, and creates the day as he moves towards the west. The god Ra has the head of a falcon and huge round eyes. He gazes beyond the bluish firmament that he himself is filling with light as the oarsmen direct the boat towards the other shore, the west, thrusting their long poles into the sky.

The blue and yellow cloth which hides his body hangs from the god Ra's shoulders, and golden bracelets coil around his arms. A heron croaks on board the barque, and Ra holds out the arm which holds a sceptre crowned with a fantastical beast. He points to the west where the imminent world of the dead awaits him: night. But it is too soon. The sun-disk on his head launches rays of light which pierce humans, the dry skin of crocodiles, adobe and limestone buildings. The earth receives his gold, and the waters multiply it. It is the Nile.

The god Ra grows old during his voyage through the air. The tireless oarsmen do not stop even for a second; already they bend towards their meeting with the shadows. The god exchanges his barque for another one so as to enter the subterranean world that is night. Shadows overwhelm everything; light dies and with it, the world. Hearts are extinguished and time stands still when the god Ra and his barque disappear beyond the left bank of the river, beyond the horizon.

Every night, the world dies. Nevertheless, the miracle happens again and, little by little, the sky begins to acquire a reddish tinge. It is the serpent's blood, the shadow wounded by the god Ra who now reappears triumphant in his barque on the horizon, filled with light.

The world is reborn, and the barque and the sun-disk advance towards their zenith on the new day. The god Ra is touched with emotion. He cries, and his tears fall to the ground and are transformed into bees capable of making honey.

The fruit of the gods.

Liquid of the sun.

3. EL ENEBRO

I take advantage of Abelardo's absence to poke around a bit. He's got lots of books. I take the odd one out of a bookshelf, but they don't really interest me. I put them back. There are lots about bees.

I focus on the photo on the cover of one of them. It's a honeycomb full of cells. I study the lattice made up of the hexagons which form the cells. They take up all the available space, leaving no gaps, wasting not a millimetre. It's strange that the bees build their cities in this way. Abelardo says it's the most perfect construction in nature, that the bees group together, secrete the wax and construct their combs as if guided by a superior, invisible will, and that their cities are a mystery. Abelardo, apart from being an apiarist, is also a philosopher.

"A bit of a philosopher," he says.

And he becomes sad, because he's thinking about Amelia.

Sometimes, Abelardo asks himself what force determined that the two of them, he and Amelia, could not live apart; if it was the same one that manages the hard-working life of the bees and orders them to do this or that so they'll survive the winter, and the harsh, dry summer. And what force ultimately decided to separate them, assuming that it really is a force, or a God, or an instinct or whatever, because all you're doing is changing the name of the mystery. And I think, well, it's love, Uncle; what's it going to be otherwise? Because Abelardo is my uncle.

And he answers: "But what is love?"

These sorts of conversations make me uncomfortable.

As I'm putting the book back on the shelf, a photo falls out. It's of a girl. It takes me a while to recognise her because she looks very young and very pretty.

It's Amelia.

I focus on her eyes, which are bees, and on her hair, which is curly, and on her deep, luminous, smile. She seems so certain nothing bad will happen to her that I burst into tears.

I put the book away before my uncle gets back, together with the photo. I go outside and sit at the entrance to the house to watch life pass by. But life in El Enebro is very boring.

A solitary bee approaches to sip the flowers in the big pots at the door to the house. Its buzzing fills the air, makes my heart pound. I want to run away, but I restrain myself. If I stay still, it won't sting me, I tell myself. I close my eyes and the light spreads across my eyelids.

And it's red and hot, and the bee is fluttering really close by. I shut my eyes tighter. The bee has moved far enough away that its buzzing is now just a vibration in my memory; the air moves and blows undisturbed by the insect.

I'm pleased, because I've been able to contain my fear.

It's strange, but when I shut my eyes tightly I see bees.

On my eyelids.

When I open them, the sun lands on my pupils and I remember that thing Abelardo says about the honey, and into my eyes, as if attracted by their nectar, comes the image of a boy.

It's a real boy. He's coming along the path and he's running towards me.

I smile at him.

4. THE BOY

I don't know anyone in El Enebro apart from my uncle. And a few of his friends, but they're all older. What I mean is, I don't know anyone my age. The person coming down the path looks a year older than me, maybe two, dark-haired, a thin face, and a scowl. He's wiry and carries what looks like an empty pack on his back. He stops in front of the house and asks gruffly:

"Is Abelardo here?"

Me, he's asking me, of course. I'm the only one here, but he's half-looking inside the house, along the shadowy line of the half-open door, as if he could decipher the enigma of Abelardo's existence in that gap.

"No, he's not; what do you want?"

He blushes. He shrugs and turns around without a word.

"Are you here for some honey?" I venture.

I have the feeling I've been a bit abrupt, and I want to fix things so he'll stay.

He stops and barely turns his head to say something I don't catch.

"I'm Elena," I say, "his niece."

Silence.

"My Uncle Abelardo says I look like Amelia."

He doesn't move, nor does he speak. I persevere:

"I'm going to be here a few days..."

The boy takes turns looking at my face and at the ground under his feet where the sun imprints a confusion of light. It's in this uneasy moment that he pauses a bit longer and shrugs his shoulders, without saying a word.

"What's your name?" I ask.

He blushes again. I don't know if he answers, because the bee from before (or maybe another one), accompanied by two or three more, appears from nowhere, buzzing among the flowers in the pots, so close to me that my muscles tense and I stop paying attention to the boy. I follow the bee's flight, its hairy, banded body, its four buzzing wings, the zigzag trajectory of its flight which changes abruptly, heading towards me. Its antennae, its oval eyes, the beat of its wings. I think about its sting, and I lose my self-control. I shout, wave my hands around and start to run inside the house.

Ashamed and grumpy, I watch the boy through the gap in the door, thinking he'll be laughing at me.

But he's very serious and looking at the bees.

Although he doesn't say it, I'm sure he's thinking that no, I don't look like Amelia; that she wouldn't have behaved like that, like an idiot, just because of a bee. And that's true, and it irritates me.

5. AMELIA

Abelardo says that when he met Amelia, he heard the piping of a virgin queen bee inside the hive. That the noise of the virgin queen sounds like an intermittent buzzing that ascends and descends through the air gaps, and contains anger and desire and the very essence of life. Because this sound is nothing less than a challenge to the other virgin queens to do battle, since there can only be one queen in each beehive. The most experienced beekeepers recognise this noise, but it's hard to differentiate it from the buzzing of the hive.

They were in an apiculture course, and both about seventeen, two years older than I am now.

"Let's see if anyone can hear it," the professor said to the class, asking them to be quiet. "Can you hear the noise of the virgin queens challenging each other?"

A hive contains female worker bees, the largest group, a few male drones which don't do anything, and a single queen bee which lays eggs in the cells, up to two thousand eggs a day, maybe more. All future bees in the hive are her offspring.

Abelardo says that at first, he couldn't hear anything. He couldn't pick it out. There were about ten students, all adolescents, and wearing hooded suits and gloves to avoid bee stings. He felt impatient because he was surrounded by nothing more than a dull, multiple buzzing, and then, through the flight of a few scattered bees he looked in the direction of the girl beside him and everything seemed to fall silent except for that sound, like that of a seagull or a cricket, and of her eyes, which seemed to be buzzing, and of her smile. It was Amelia.

He smiled too, and as they gazed into each other's eyes, they heard the battle cry of the virgin queens.

When they headed back to the classroom in the van, Abelardo made an effort to sit next to her. Amelia had long, curly hair the colour of amber – tawny, he tells me – and almost yellow or honey-coloured eyes. Like yours, Elena, adds Abelardo. The van rattled along, and they could smell lavender, juniper and rockrose in the hot, almost suffocating, air, and bursts of the fumes from the van's exhaust.

The van was old, like Professor Gerardo, who was driving with his elbow resting on the open window, no one sitting next to him, and whistling a song from back then.

Fancy that, says Abelardo. I can still hear that song now, and see Amelia's curls being lifted by the breeze, waving about like big flying insects, like the yellow, unkempt grass of the fields in summer.

"It's incredible," Abelardo said back then to Amelia.

His words emerged stirred by the air in the van and flew far away, and their wobbling made the two adolescents laugh.

"What's incredible?" she shouted, gathering up the locks of her hair that were trying to cover her eyes.

"The life of bees," he said. But he was thinking about something else.

Now, Abelardo confesses to me that what really seemed incredible to him wasn't the bees, no, it was that girl, Amelia, the person destined to become his queen.

"Although I'm not a drone," adds Abelardo, and he laughs.

6. DRONES

The drones in a hive spend their time eating honey, going out into the fields and, if anything, lazing among the pistils of flowers. They are the only ones in the bee colony who don't work, and the female worker bees allow this, while they collect nectar and pollen, clean the hive, keep watch, feed the larvae and construct their unique buildings. They allow them this laziness because the drones will have to mate with the virgin queen, and when that happens and summer ends, those that survive their nuptial flights are expelled and killed by the worker bees in what might be an act of justice, but a cruel one that serves to preserve the species. The bee colony doesn't need the greedy drones once the queen has been inseminated and the rigours of winter have arrived.

Nature is terrible and yet perfectly timed, says Abelardo.

I'm scared he'll go back to that spiel about who or what that superior force is that governs everything, but Abelardo has become pensive, maybe reconstructing his memories, and then carries on with his story.

Amelia was a beekeeper through and through. She was the first one to remove her gloves and dare to slide a movable frame out of a hive with her bare hands. Dozens of bees landed on her long, white fingers, beating their wings and humming, perhaps as fascinated as Abelardo himself was by that skin, and the fragrance that Amelia seemed to emit.

Not one bee stung her, though all of us could see the swarm of little, almost black insects piled on top of the comb cells, moving over the hexagons.

Professor Gerardo was smiling behind his net as he squeezed the bellows that blew clouds of smoke from the mouth of the metallic smoker into the hive. The smoke calms the bees, Abelardo explains to me.

Then he tells me how that noon, when they were already back in the building where they had their classes, he dared to approach Amelia. And when he was beside her, he could smell the smoke in her hair and the brilliant transparent film that seemed to surround her, and gave her a vague, almost phosphorescent, and yet unattainable, appearance. He smiled nervously.

"I'd like to show you something," he said.

She smiled as well.

"What?"

"This afternoon, in the forest. Will you come?"

“Fine,” she replied and smiled again.

Abelardo says that at that moment the noise of the virgin queen sounded again, and yet that wasn't possible, because the hives were kilometres away in the countryside; until he realised that what was buzzing in his ears was his own heart, perhaps her heart, and it was the call of love.

I blush slightly because I don't like to talk about mushy things like that, about love and all those things. Then Uncle Abelardo says to me as he gives me a light slap on the back of my neck:

“Love is the joy of the good, the wonder of the wise and the amazement of the incredulous.”

And I roll my eyes.

Then Abelardo talks to me about Plato, a Greek philosopher in the pre-Christian era who said that sentence about love and many other very wise things besides. Boring!

“The bees came down from Mount Hymettus and deposited honey in Plato's mouth when he was a child,” my uncle adds. “That's why he knew so much.”

I sigh half-heartedly and turn my head. Then, as if Abelardo's words have come true, I see a boy at the window. Some bees are flying close to his lips. I blink disbelievingly. But he's still there; moreover, it's the same boy who'd asked me earlier about Abelardo and stood stock still in front of me like an idiot, not daring to say a word.

Abelardo follows my gaze and sees the boy, who is talking now, or at least moving his lips, and the bees are buzzing around him. One of them lands on his mouth for an instant and I'm scared at the thought it will sting him, but it's just for a second. The bee flies off again and disappears along with the others, leaving the boy on his own in front of our window, and smiling.

“Ah,” says Abelardo, “there's Ambrosio.”

I laugh.

“Ambrosio! What a name.”

“Small town stuff, my child.”

This town, I think, and comment:

“He came when you were at the beehives.”

“Tell him to come in,” Abelardo orders me. “You'll see how he amazes you.”

“Come off it, Uncle,” I reply.

At that, he roars with laughter.

“You're a sceptic, Elena”

And he repeats the spiel about the incredulous that Plato used to say.

7. THE AMAZEMENT OF THE INCREDULOUS

I don't believe in the call of love. Abelardo likes to tell me all that stuff about the call of the virgin queen and Amelia just to make me blush, to make me think of them as favoured by love. But he knows that I know it isn't true, that it's impossible. It's not that I don't like boys. I did like one once, in my class, Lucas, but he was an idiot and that's that.

My parents have been separated ever since I can remember. And they have other partners, but they don't hear celestial music or roll their eyes, and they cope easily with spending nights apart. Sometimes, they even prefer it.

That love exists and it's out there, and goes from people to people, is true. But it's not all that extraordinary. What can Abelardo tell me that I don't already know.

I look out of the window again and see Ambrosio's face, which has tightened, emerging from that sort of ecstasy he fell into when the bees were around his mouth. And I think this boy is incapable of surprising me, as Abelardo says while suggesting so much more. I'll stake my life on it that he won't. Or better still, put my hand in a beehive, with no protection or anything.

The image of my hand with its little veins and clean nails and knuckles surrounded by bees, overwhelms my mind and terrifies me. I glance around nervously, as if someone might have heard my musing, and I correct myself: no, no, no, Ambrosio will never amaze me, but I'm not going to put my hand in anything, either.

"Come on, Elena," says my uncle impatiently as he slyly observes my self-absorption.

I run to the door.

"Ambrosio," I call out to him, "Abelardo is here now. Come in."

Ambrosio stands still, watching me. Then he comes inside and, head held high, walks past me towards Abelardo, not looking at me. He brushes me and I sense the air stirring, the rustle of his clothes, and a strange smell which I can't identify, but it's pleasant, strong yet sweet, intense.

"Hey, kid," says Abelardo.

He stands up and noisily slaps his thighs. Abelardo has big, hairy hands. He's big all over, and stoops a little when he walks, as if he were ashamed of being so big. A giant.

"I'll prepare the pollen for you right now."

He runs his fingers over the head of the boy, who is shorter than as he is, and disappears through the room at the back, leaving us on our own.

We exchange looks.

Me, squarely, and he, out of the corner of his eye.

I consider not saying anything, to force him to be the one who speaks. But Ambrosio doesn't say a word. I watch him. He taller than me and he has very dark eyes, almost black, I'd say, like the fur of Plato – Abelardo's cat – which now comes over to snuggle up to Ambrosio's feet. The boy crouches down and strokes the cat. I check out his back and his profile, which is Grecian, and his messy hair, which falls over his forehead as he bends over.

Plato miaows, and rams his cheek into Ambrosio's jeans. I notice Ambrosio's old runners and enormous feet. He runs his fingers over the cat's ears a few times and I sniff. Plato means more to him than I do. I start to become impatient and move my foot. I know he can see it because he twists his head slightly and looks at me sideways. He smiles to himself and that makes me grumpy.

"I don't like cats," I say.

He doesn't look at me as he adds:

"Or bees."

Then he turns his head and smiles. I freeze, because he looks like another person.

He has this huge, white smile which takes up his whole mouth. It creates dimples in his cheeks, and he looks completely different; and it unsettles me because his whole face lights up as if, suddenly, he were carrying a solar disk on top of his head. I never thought a smile could change a face in that way. Now, Ambrosio looks handsome, even if he isn't.

He stands up and walks over to a bag he left on the table.

"I brought you this," he says.

He blushes slightly. He rummages in the bag and removes something wrapped in thick white paper, like butcher's paper, which he immediately unfolds.

"Here. You have to put it in your mouth and squeeze out the honey."

Suddenly, he frowns as if he'd been hit by a painful thought, and he adds:

"Maybe you don't like honey either."

"Yes, I do," I reply quickly, and I think that my voice has sounded too sharp, and I'm embarrassed.

"It's a piece of honeycomb with cells full of honey. A real honeycomb, from wild bees."

He speaks slowly, as if we had all the time in the world.

I take the honeycomb he's offering me. It's warm.

“That’s because of the smoke,” he says. “It’s kept its warmth.”

I look at the golden hexagons which hold the honey.

“Put it in your mouth,” he says.

“But it’s got wax!” I protest.

He smiles.

“Try it.”

I close my eyes and raise the soft, yellow comb to my lips somewhat apprehensively. Its aroma hits me, the honey syrup, the slightly bitter darkness of the wax and what’s left of the smoke. It’s a jumble of aromas which anticipates the softness of the honeycomb in my mouth, its warm, gentle touch. I press my lips together and squeeze the wax. Out comes a stream of honey which fills the roof of my mouth. It’s an intense, sweet, delicious taste.

I open my eyes. Ambrosio smiles, and I can’t stop looking at his smile, the folds of those spreading lips – red, moist and ending in two tiny mountains – lips spreading like the wings of a seagull about to launch into flight. And he looks at me as well, a strange, deep stare, as if he were withdrawn and yet at the same time focused, on my own lips; and still smiling.