**The Bee’s Grandmother**

*By Sheila Skinner*

To the natives she was Abuela Abeja, even as a young woman, the appointed one was honored with that title. She kept bees, countless thousands of bees, as the Abuela Abeja before her had done since their long history began. . She was loved and feared, but not feared as the invaders that appeared over the centuries were. Nor later, the brutal, corrupt landowners and government officials who tried to change their simple lives.

What was feared were the powers she had inherited. The well-being of the bees that pollinated the plants and flowers and trees of their forest, ensuring it survived through the centuries, this was the sacred duty of the Abuela Abeja. Along with the responsibility of guarding the bees, had been handed down ancient rites and rituals for healing and darker magic. To her was entrusted the age-old knowledge of the forest, the plants, flowers and animals. Self- governed for milllenia by the just but harsh rules of Nature itself, she and her bees kept them safe and flourishing.

All the animals and birds of the forest too were protected, nurtured and often healed by her. The unique relationship she had with all living things, but especially the bees, was legendary. These legends of her powers, benign and terrifying, were told in their stories and woven into their songs these too were passed down the centuries. Her bees– no-one knew how many there were - more than the stars in the sky was the natives’ belief, lived among the countless caves and gorges of their forest. None were allowed to disturb them or collect their honey except the Abuela Abeja. And then only on special days, dictated by the season and the cycle of moon and stars on calendars illustrated in ancient cave drawings.

It was this relationship with her bees that had given the traditional name to the guardian of the forest. The honey, which in her hands had magical healing properties, was also one of their staple foods. Collected monthly in a ritual procession up to the Sacred Grotto, there the natives honored her and the bees themselves, according to their ancient laws.

She used her skills to help and heal, perfectly in tune with these laws. She also had the power and responsibility to challenge and overcome anything or anyone that threatened them. Left undisturbed, the forest sustained itself and nurtured the tribes that relied on it therefore on her, for their existence and continued well-being. They looked to her as their protector.

They knew and relished the ancient stories of the scattering, centuries before, of the first invaders. Plundering and razing all before them, they had surged unchecked far inland from their coastal camps, into these sacred forests. No crude machete, nor sling shot was match for them. The blow pipes took their toll but, outnumbered and outrun by their terrifying steeds, the native tribes had fallen, to slavery, or death.

Deep in her caves in the hidden Sacred Gorge, the Abuela Abeja who had lived in those terrible times had long foreseen the coming of these four- legged beasts. Crude cave drawings had predicted the terror and slaughter that would befall her children. To her, all the native tribes of her forest were her children, as to them she was their Abuela.

But not like the old, wrinkled, grandmothers that tended the huts and the animals. They rocked the babies to sleep and taught their daughters how to skin and cook for the pot. The skills of cleaning and stretching skins for clothing, using sinews and fine bones for joining and gathering. The best way to strip the fibrous fronds for weaving and shelters.

These abuelas told the old stories and sang the old songs so that they would stay in the hearts and minds of all.

They too had knowledge of the riches of their forest. Not those that the Conquistadores and others that followed were seeking. What mattered and what was passed on and treasured, was the knowledge and use of the myriad of healing medicinal plants and flowers. These grew and flourished in the valleys and gorges of their huge lush forest. Hidden from those that neither understood nor respected their use and their worth.

Generation after generation shared the names and locations of where they grew, when to harvest them, how to use them. All of which they learned from her. In turn, they kept the Abuela Abeja`s secrets. From among them, when time was taking its toll on her ancient body, Abuela Abeja would come down from her cave to prepare her successor. Honored by the tribe, the ceremony of the cleansing would mark the choice of the young girl – the Abejita . That young girl would leave with her, forsaking her family and tribal life, taken away to be taught and guided in the sacred duties . When Abuela Abeja’s mortal body lay in the Grotto de los Muertos, alongside the bleached bones of her forebears, Abejita would become the Abuela Abeja. She and the bees would continue with their sacred duties to nourish and protect the forest and its’ tribes.

The story of how, centuries before, they brought about the downfall of the first invaders was never to be lost to the tribes. Unprepared natives with their crude weapons were no match for these armed and mounted plunderers, who swept all before them. But this day as they rode on, suddenly, coming to a large clearing they halted. Stunned by the sight of a female, her comely naked body covered in huge bees, striding towards them, totally alone and fearless.

Believing this vision to be some kind of witchcraft, the soldiers reined in and wheeled their mounts, circling menacingly around her. Amongst a dozen stomping, steaming horses, glinting with harnesses, wild-eyed and heads tossing, she stood her ground.

Slowly she raised a bee-cloaked hand, holding a thin pipe to her mouth she blew. The piercing lilting notes rose, high, across the clearing. The noise and turmoil ceased, the soldiers and their mounts seemed frozen to the spot, mesmerized and unnerved by the sight and the sound. Then a different noise, a humming that grew to a deafening vibrating crescendo.

Suddenly the sky darkened, a shape-shifting wave, countless thousands of bees, appeared and hovered for a brief moment. Another long note on the pipe and the swarm broke over the mounted soldiers like a black tsunami. The air filled with the cries of the men and horses as they were covered, eyes, ears, noses, mouths, choked with these crawling, stinging devils.

Panic, total panic. The terrified horses bolted. Blinded and in agony, their riders swatting uselessly at their attackers, lost their stirrups and reins. Unseated, those on the ground were even easier targets and disappeared under a mound of bees. The loose horses ran, blindly. Colliding with each other they galloped, unchecked, across the clearing. The steep gorge awaited them. The drop and the broken necks were probably a merciful release. None survived. Neither horses nor men. All the time the Abuela Abeja stood, still and terrible, shimmering in her mantel of bees.

Again the pipe summoned the swarm, lifting skyward they hovered. Then, on her musical command, soared and billowed back towards their cave homes. Some, of course, had perished. These were collected by the bees that now lifted away from her naked body. Pairing up they carried their fallen comrades spiralling upward, following the swarm.

The ritual cutting of the special plants was no floral tribute to the Conquistadores. These she now layered over the dead, to speed the rotting of their swollen bodies and cleanse the sacred forest ground of their greed and corruption. Over the centuries others that followed, seeking to destroy and degrade, met similar fates. Few ever entered here, none ever left to tell the tale. Abuela Abeja protected her children and her forest. And so the centuries passed.

The simple cycle of caring for the bees continued. They in turn pollinated and spread the plants and flowers, nourishing trees and helping the forest. These then fed the birds that played their part too, spreading seeds for plants, berries and nuts for the smaller mammals to flourish. They, in line with Nature’s own laws, were the prey of the bigger carnivores, who themselves were hunted to provide food for the natives.

Nature’s simple, self-sustaining cycle rode the occasional disaster. When earthquakes, fierce storms, torrential floods struck, this brought the bees and all the animals of the forest to the Sacred Grotto. There, the tribes, her children, also gathered, safe in the knowledge that Abuela Abeja and her powers would protect them. For a short time, at least, the jaguars forgot who was hunter and who was prey and the natives walked and slept safely amongst them.

They said she talked to all the animals, if not vocally, then through music. Jaguars walked with her when she patrolled the darkest parts of the forest. Neither snake nor spider would harm her, she was blessed and was their guardian as well as their charge. Nothing was hunted for pleasure or sport, only for necessity and need. All was understood and the fine balance maintained undisturbed for centuries, but the world would not let them be.

Abuela Abeja always knew, through dreams and trance visions, what was happening in the far reaches of her land. Cave drawings show the arrival of the missionaries to the area.

In the early 1900’s strange boats found their way down the rivers and slowly those tribes that dwelt along their banks were touched by the world hitherto hidden from them. These men, in their strange draped clothes, spoke of other Gods. They could only question and condemn the natives’ own beliefs. But as the months passed they sought no rewards, stole no sacred ornaments, helped with the daily struggle to survive and so were tolerated. Accepted as strangers with different ways. But not for long.

With them had come a new invader, a disease that struck down young and old amongst the tribes. The white mans’ medicines, the little that they had, could not halt the decimation of the riverbank tribe. Abuela Abeja learned from her animals of the stench of rotting flesh and the flocks of carrion birds feasting on the dead, just a week’s walk from the gorges and grottoes of her forest. Here they lived, untroubled. But not, she knew, untouchable. . The story tells that she rode astride the jaguars and covered great distances, swapping mounts she travelled through the night. But in the time it took her to reach the river many more had died.

They say that the lightning strike that set ablaze the missionary building came out of a clear blue sky. As she raised her naked arm the bolt travelled down to her outstretched hand. The hand pointed at the metal cross on the apex of the missionary lodge. Trapped inside, hiding from the wrath of the tribe they had infected, they would have heard the crack, felt the shudder as the bolt struck and then the flames took hold. She stood with the remnants of the tribe behind her , watching, listening to the prayers and the screams, then the silence.

She stepped forward, took a burning stave and lit other fires, where, following their sacred rites, these consumed the innocent dead. This helped kill off the disease and save an epidemic that would have threatened her own tribe not so far away.

All this was told on the walls of the caves and the Abuela Abeja that followed knew that the outside world would always be a threat. As the decades passed, industry and greed grew on their continent. Man would find ways of exploiting anywhere that promised profit for plunder. Nowhere was safe. She had to be ever watchful. The stream of small, determined bands of explorers, geologists and surveyors grew so that even their distant, hidden land was considered fair game. Pitting their 20th century technology and equipment against her forest, their confidence and daring knew no bounds. They crept ever closer.

Abuela Abeja sensed with dread that her world was now under siege but what was it that they sought to rob them of? By the 1960’s still isolated in their hidden valley, she knew other territories were opening to outsiders. Using her jaguars, Abuela Abeja travelled far and wide and learned from other tribes and the forest animals too, that men and machines were tearing their lands apart. Licences had been sold to all kinds of mining and drilling companies, their Government had betrayed them.

At first those appointed to ensure that the forest and tribes were considered and left as undisturbed as possible, carried out their duties. But, when the tortured ground gave up its riches, greed, worse than the diseases of old infected them all.

Abuela Abeja had never seen or touched the black honey that bled from the holes they punctured across her forest. Her dreams told her that this was the treasure that men and machines would stop at nothing to find. In 1964 no Governor of an oil rich province was going to turn away from the wealth and power this promised.

What good were sacred grottoes and holy caves?. What difference cutting down a thousand ancient trees in a forest that stretched as far as the eye could see? Slowly the natural balance of their lives was being shifted. They looked to Abuela Abeja as they always did. She looked to her special powers. This she knew was what she had been chosen for. As her forebears had done, she would protect her bees, her children and her ancient lands.

Dressed modestly in soft skins, arriving at dawn, barefoot and strikingly beautiful she startled the guard at the Governor’s home. The high fences around the grounds had not stopped her, neither the savage loose guard dogs. She walked through them, they made no sound, lowering their hindquarters in submission. They sensed the presence of wild beasts just outside the perimeter. From there, the hidden, waiting jaguars watched them, despising their cowering, slinking body language. A few warning coughs and the dogs kept their silence and their distance.

Manolo de Silva knew that the wrath of the Governor would fall on his head to be disturbed this early, but her green yellow eyes seemed to bore into his and he let her in without a protest.

“Fetch him” was all she said and stood, awaiting the man she knew had the power to stop this madness, but could she persuade him? Don Rafael de la Medina thought he was sleep walking, he felt himself descending the familiar stairs of his beautiful mansion, as if in a trance. All he could see in that face were those green yellow eyes, the eyes of a jaguar. He followed as her tight coiled body moved, with effortless grace, to cross the tiled floor ahead of him. He felt himself weightless and helpless. “Come” was all she said

Manolo too stood as a statue. Reaching the door, she took the Governor’s hand and turned. “Do not be afraid for him, or yourself Manolito” she said “He will return safely, do not doubt it” “Your Abuela Abeja gives you her word” Manolo nodded. His own forebears had been forest dwellers hundreds of years ago. All the stories that he had heard as a child, came back to him. They had been dismissed and forbidden by the Jesuits at the Missionary School, but he knew better.

He knew about the Abuela Abeja and her bees. The song about the lightning bolt. Of how she travelled on the backs of huge jaguars, loping effortlessly mile after mile, covering the corners of her lands, where she dwelt with all of natures’ creatures. Healing with her magical plants and rituals, but with the rage and terror of a cornered jaguar brought down upon anyone who threatened her bees, her children or her Sacred Forest.

The Governor was unmarried and Consuela the housekeeper was still asleep. For now, at least, Manolo would be spared the explanation of his disappearance. He crossed himself, then fingered the jaguar tooth he wore at his waist, passed down from his great- grandfather who had sworn it had been gifted to him by an Abuela Abeja all those years ago. He’d never doubted its powers to protect him. He prayed that Don Rafael had such a token, he would need it.