

Vodka and Honey

Smirnoff is 10 weeks old. His greatest pleasure is to sit at the open window studying the vigorous activities surrounding an eight-foot tall Agave Yucca.

Smirnoff is a kitten. The Yucca is partly in flower, and the object of such profound scrutiny is the abundance of petite, modestly attired, industrious worker bees.

By now, Smirnoff's knowledge of this particular insect must be remarkably impressive. His body is taught and tense, his whiskers forward – pulsating and quivering with exhilaration – almost touching his peach pigmented nose. His exquisitely defined sage green oriental eyes linger, half closed, whilst a gentle sound reverberates from deep within his throat. His rounded blonde cheeks dance deliriously with each vibration, revealing flawless, ivory teeth. His ears are acutely tuned – like soft leathery radars – eliciting and amplifying the rhythm of each bee's personal symphony.

The bees toil on, oblivious to the excitement and pleasure that they arouse. The Yucca's pallid flower lacks radiance and colour, so its' nectar is sweet and strong. The riches donated by the Yucca are abundant and its' reward immeasurable.

The tiny worker bee is even younger than Smirnoff. At 21 days old, her short existence has already experienced an assortment of careers – from nursery nurse to builder – from maid to protector and guard. As lady-in-waiting to the Queen, she will have fed her, kept her clean and encouraged her with gentle strokes as she laid several thousand eggs.

The worker's instinct, inherited from her ancestors, is powerful and commanding. Her existence in her specialised community commands complete co-operation and

unselfish devotion. She was born with architectural and engineering skills, tactics in warfare, a proficiency in sanitation and a highly developed transport system. Within her community of 30,000 or more individuals, her duties are predetermined and never questioned.

Her first three days will have been spent cleaning and preparing a cell for her Queen. She will have nurtured and succoured the young larvae – although she will never lay eggs of her own. She will have tended to the Queen's handsome Drones, encouraging and supporting their life of luxury.

At only nine days old, she will have become an adept manufacturer of wax, a talented architect of a six-sided cell, and a skilled construction worker.

During the following week, she will have laboured relentlessly, helping her elder sisters by collecting their nectar to ripen for food, and their pollen to press into the cells for storage.

She will be able to determine one pollen from another without ever mixing them in error.

She will have collected from her sisters the gluey propolis gathered from sticky plant buds, and she will use the resinous substance to repair the hive.

She will be an administrator, a warehouse-keeper, a chemist and an undertaker.

Periodically, she will have spent time regulating the temperature within the hive, applying rapid movements for warmth and flapping her wings to ventilate and cool the air – often generating a draught powerful enough to blow out a candle.

At twenty days old, she will have become a vigilant defender of her community, guarding against outlaws, pirates and intruders. Having tended to the needy, obese and hair Drones when she was young, she may now be one of the workers specially selected to conduct their dismal execution.

The Drones will soon become a heavy burden on the hive's food store and, in the interest of the hive's efficiency and survival, she and other workers will drag the lazy and lethargic Drones from the hive to be left to die of hunger and cold.

She is now three weeks' old, and her time has at last arrived to fly under the warmth of the season's sun. This will be her first sight of daylight and she will feel dazed, hesitating momentarily before beginning her travels and toils.

Smirnoff will be totally unaware that the been may have travelled three or four miles, scouting for the thousands of suitable flowers from which to gather her day's quota of either nectar or pollen – she will not gather both on the same day. Each day she may have a different assignment – tomorrow she may be appointed a watercarrier and the next day a gatherer of propolis.

Smirnoff will not know that she can communicate to her sisters by dance and taste and smell to familiarise them with any new, exciting or abundant source of food.

However long or complicated her journey to the Yucca, she will take a direct 'beeline' course back to her hive.

She will return heavily laden to dispatch her riches and, without respite, she will set off again, eagerly and enthusiastically, to gather fresh supplies. At times, she will be so laden and tired that she will have to rest for a mere second or two on her return journey.

Her life, however, will be sorrowfully short. She will labour from sunrise to twilight each day, living only another three or four weeks before she dies from the exertion and strain, her wings worn away, or torn, and her body covered in untended wounds.

Like the Drone, Smirnoff will be spoiled and pampered. At three weeks old, he had already been thrown into the streets to die of hunger and cold.

His discovery of his new, safe surroundings and his expanding personal abilities is also exceedingly exhausting ... his chase of a butterfly – his cautious examination of an ant – his pursuit of a mosquito and, of course, his devoted and continuous admiration and conversations with a worker bee!

POLLY HEALY