

This astonishing, immersive environmental documentary began life as a nature conservation video about one of Europe's last wild-beekeepers. The scene is an abandoned village in North Macedonia where Hatidze, a woman in her mid-50s, harvests honey sustainably the traditional way from wild hives. "Half for them, half for me," she chants, leaving enough for the bees.

Serendipitously for directors Tamara Kotevska and Ljubomir Stefanov (though not for Hatidze), the family from hell moves in next door mid-shoot, and this small-scale film takes on epic proportions, transforming into a parable about exploiting natural resources, or perhaps a microcosm of humans' suicidal destruction of the environment.

Hatidze first appears on a dangerous cliff edge wearing no protective mask, a cloud of bees swarming as she removes honeycomb from a hive in rocks. She is an incredible woman, a natural optimist living in poverty – she and her frail elderly mother are the last inhabitants of their village, with no electricity or running water. Her life might not be the one she would have chosen, but Hatidze lives it with gusto, licking the plate clean. Animals and small children trust her instinctively.

When an itinerant cow herder pitches up with his wife and seven rowdy children, Hatidze seems glad of the company. She even teaches Hussein beekeeping. Just don't take too much honey, she cautions. Her warnings go unheeded with terrible consequences. But Hussein isn't a villain; he's a man with debts and a family to feed. And what a family – a five-year-old hammering at rusty nails with a chunk of rock, the toddler tottering into frame as a bull rampages through the cow herd.

Honeyland really is a miraculous feat, shot over three years as if by invisible camera – not a single furtive glance is directed towards the film-makers. As for Hatidze, you could watch her for hours. In a heart-tugging scene with one of Hussein's sons, a favourite of hers, he asks why she didn't leave the village. "If I had a son like you, it would be different," she answers. They both look off wistfully, dreaming of another life, a world of harmony.

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