

The flight of the barn owl

Marion was crying because of the lightning. I went over and jiggled the cardboard mobile Yvon had made in front of her little moonlike face (this was the only remedy that worked on such occasions - she had never liked anyone touching her, not even me). I wondered if she could remember that fateful storm that had brought her to me - to us - nearly three months before. I hoped she had been too young.

That day there had been talk but of one thing in the village – the gypsies were back. Even Father Pierre, whose deeper knowledge of matters spiritual and theological kept him from blaming last autumn's tragedy on their black magic, had been heard muttering, 'Let us pray that our Lord soon force these evildoers back to the fiery wastes!'

It was already quite late when there came a knock at the door. It was much too gentle and neat a knock to be Yvon's, who, relishing the tension in the air, was probably still out promoting violent thoughts among Gaston's regular clientele. As I opened it, the door half blew in on me, such was the energy exciting the wind that night. Outside stood a young woman, apparently trying to tidy the drenched black hair which clung to her soft face. I say 'young woman', though once I was over the impression created by the dark-red lips, large earrings and long, violet dress which battered at her slender body, I realised she could be no more than fifteen.

'Hello... good evening,' said I. The girl took a small breath and then nodded as if in apology. Since she said nothing I motioned to her to come in. 'Don't worry about getting the floor wet,' I said noticing her hesitation, 'there's a good fire; it'll soon dry out.' She looked around for a few moments and then headed straight for Marion's cot and gently lifted her out of it. After whispering something to the child she raised her voice slightly and her large green eyes to me: 'Thank you so much for looking after Estelle.'

'I'm sorry,' I began, a little flustered by this behaviour, 'I think you must have the wrong baby. Could you please put Marion back...'

'Your sister stole her from me... before the fire.' She seemed distracted now, staring down at Marion.

‘My sister,’ I now blurted out, ‘may she rest in peace, found her in the forest, saved her...’ but I broke off when I noticed how Marion clutched at the girl’s dress, and made no sound when she was kissed on the forehead. I think I then leant on a wall and must have slid down it to the floor.

‘Thank you so much,’ I vaguely remember her husky voice whispering once more before they left.

I can’t say how long I remained there in a little heap on the floor. The next thing I remember was Yvon shaking me. He must have understood what had happened, for he ran off crying out to detain the abductor. Once I was able to regain the reins of my actions I put on a fleece and followed the shouts to the church square. The whole village, it seemed, was assembled at the foot of the steeple, all staring upwards – like grotesque nocturnal sunflowers – at first I could not see at what. Then, thanks to a flash of lightning, I caught a sudden image of the girl in the violet dress standing aloft, one hand on the church bell to steady herself against the elements, the other pressing the little living bundle to her breast. I had the lingering impression that I could still see her, her defiant eyes and quivering lips all that way up there, even in the darkness that fell like a cloak, even long after the thunder had rolled over us and headed on out to the hills. There was a great commotion. Some men would have stormed the church and climbed the steeple, but Father Pierre, a flaming torch in one hand, blocked the door and forebode any such endeavour, bellowing incomprehensibly. A small group of people, I couldn’t make out their faces in the poor light, were trying to hold up a large sheet spread out below the steeple, but it would either buffet upwards, wrenching out of the well-intentioned folk’s hands, or it would promptly fill with water and require evacuation. Many of the villagers cried up to the girl now and then – alternating consoling entreaties to come down with threats of death and worse.

The next flash drew a wail from the crowd as it witnessed what many must have feared: the two figures plunging down towards them. The light was gone before the impact, but the wail became a groan as Father Pierre approached the spot with his lantern. I, too, would have run over with the rest of them but for my legs, which had been struck immobile even before I had fully grasped what had happened to my Marion. Then the cries of anguish turned to utterances of bewilderment and rage, for the bodies were not

there. All that remained of the two was a violet dress and the little white cloth Marion had been wearing, side by side in the water that covered the square.

‘They turned into moths and flew away!’ cried one man.

‘Not moths,’ contradicted an old woman. ‘Don’t you know what the Romani can turn into after dark? Barn owls!’

‘Yes, I saw them both become barn owls too just before the lightning finished!,’ said someone else.

‘Come, they won’t go far in this weather, there may yet be hope of finding them alive!’

As these conjectures gradually lead to a new plan of action, some men being sent off for more torches while the search parties were formed, I alone noticed the door of the church gently open and a slender, nude body, its arms holding a smaller, rounder one close to its chest, slip stealthily out and away.