Sandrine Collette

MADELAINE BEFORE THE DAWN

Translated from the French
by Alison Anderson

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Europa Editions
27 Union Square West, Suite 302
New York NY 10003
www.europaeditions.com
info@europaeditions.com

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C O N T E N T S

Qui es in caelis

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Prologue

The earth trembles to their heavy step. They are hurrying, with the almost hypnotic slowness of large bodies exhausted after a day's labor—now interrupted well ahead of time, when the boy came.

They are walking side by side, the man and the horse, both stinking of sweat that has dried on rough skin. The man wipes the dust that is turning gray on his brow, and the horse shakes its head to get rid of the flies. The boy is walking ahead, and turns around to wait for them. He doesn't say anything, but everything about his attitude shows his impatience. He wants them to hurry, for the man they call Eugène-le-Fort to be as quick as the wind. He wants the powerful horse to lunge forward and carry them on its back because up there, Aelis—or was it Ambre? he's not sure—told him again and again, in a leaden voice: *Go quick. Tell him it's serious.*

And the child ran fit to burst his lungs. At the edge of the river he hailed the ferrywoman with cries like roars, he fidgeted on the ferry, then set off at a run again the minute his foot felt the shore. He went through the woods, met a few men bent over their fields, who pointed the way with weary arms; he searched the edge of the dark forest for the sight of the imposing golden horse, and only stopped when he was standing by its hooves. There he delivered his urgent message and Eugène immediately set about unhitching the animal from its shafts, abandoning the tree trunk they were hauling in the middle of a clearing. The boy thought then that they would return the way the mistress

of the house had said—quickly, very quickly. And yet the two creatures following him are making their way with heavy steps, taking long, drowsy, endless strides, the weight of the day allowing nothing better for man and horse, that's just how it is. In his heart, however, Eugène is shouting that he's on his way, shouting for them to wait.

He doesn't know why the boy came, the boy gave no explanation, only that Aelis—or was it Ambre?—weeping, sent him with a forceful command, Go quick, woe is upon us. And the man Eugène with his long slow steps paced to the horse's, is heading toward that woe. Shaking, his first reaction had been to grab the boy by the shoulder. *My sons?* The boy looked at him, not understanding, and Eugène got a hold of himself, at this time of day his sons are working in the fields, on their land as tenant farmers—his sons are not at home.

On the shore of the river The Crone is waiting for them, the boy had warned her he'd be back before long. She had maneuvered the barge to a place where the horse could embark. Jéricho weighs eight hundred kilos and the small craft tilts when he steps on board, without hesitating; despite the fact that The Crone has been ferrying him across every morning and every evening for half the year the last eight years, she says, once again, as she turns to Eugène, Keep him still. Eugène doesn't reply, he never replies. The Crone's words are just routine. With a hand on the horse's neck he observes the old woman as she hauls the boat along the cable, fist over fist, all her nerves turning her face and scrawny arms blue with effort, and he thinks, too, as he has done every morning and every evening for half the year for eight years, that it's madness to leave the ferry to this woman. That she's too old for it. Everyone whispers about it. Everyone agrees that the cable will hold the ferry, come what may, but that she, The Crone, will end up dead, tugging the way she does with her muscles, with the veins drawing winding swollen paths across her gray temples, and those croaking

sounds she emits with each tug of her arms, one after the other, her palms scorched by the rope. Everyone talks about it and no one does a thing, that's the way it will be as long as there's no accident. It suits them for the old woman to run the ferry, since there's no bridge anymore. Eugène remembers the bridge. It was destroyed when he was ten or twelve years old, and they're keen, the folk of La Foye, not to rebuild it. He can't recall why: that's the way it is, is all—the way it is, and then to be protected from the world.

But it's taking so long, he thinks, clenching his fists to keep from grabbing the cable in The Crone's place. Such a little river.

And so he closes his eyes and since this is his habit, he tries to take some rest during the few minutes of the crossing. The weight of the day is crushing his back. Too much exhaustion, but that's normal. It's always like this. Every day. Exhaustion is life. And he tells himself that he no longer feels it, he's made it his own, in this huge body that other folk assume is protected from wretchedness and stumbling. Eugène stands in the middle of the ferry, his gaunt features drawn with fatigue, his shoulders tense, his hands as wide as a bear's paw, capable of seizing any tool or any work. Legs slightly apart, not to slip, not to worry Jéricho standing next to him. He is alone on the barge. He's always alone. No one wants to cross the Basilic. The long green river beneath his feet writhes through the land like the deadly little snake it is named after. But Eugène knows: the Basilic is not a river for snakes. Its near-emerald color does not come from the scales of reptiles hidden by the thousands in its recesses, as those who like to pretend they're afraid would assert. It is a river of rock and freshwater algae.

Eugène opens his eyes. The shore is approaching, he can feel it from the motion of the ferry. The boy is leaning forward, ready to spring, when The Crone grabs him by the arm and shoves him back. She's seen too many little boys drown from their impatience, slipping under the hull before anyone has

time to save them. She maneuvers the craft and soon they are brushing against the reeds. Jéricho is already stepping over the gunwale. The world that had briefly come to a halt continues on its way. Eugène places one hand on his heart, it is beating hard. It's impossible to see from here because of the forests; the farm is to the northeast, almost one league away. Too far to arrive quickly and too near to prepare himself for what he is about to find. For a few seconds he falters. He will either have to run, or to go away in the opposite direction; he feels incapable of either.

So he heads off behind the boy who, when he sees him on the path, runs far ahead to reach his own home; before long Eugène can no longer see him at all. They walk, the horse and the man, and fear drains his mind. He can think of nothing but the moment when he will arrive at the top of the rise, behind which stands the house—that hill which gave its name to the three little farms that are set there: The Rises. He wonders what is happening there, what it is he doesn't know yet. Aelis must be alive, if she sent the boy, but Aelis doesn't matter, what matters is all the rest, and the boy didn't talk about the rest, walled up in terrified silence as he was, and for that reason Eugène can do nothing but tremble.

And it is long, that league under a sun that does not want to set, and it is short, it is basically just as Eugène has imagined it: a slow and terrible walk toward the darkness, and until the end he hopes he is mistaken, that the boy is mistaken, that Aelis too is mistaken, he hopes that the day has not come, the day he has dreaded ever since Madelaine arrived. He prays for it to be no more than a dream, or a mistake.

Because when Eugène first finds himself far enough along to see the scene unfolding there, which means near his home, he doesn't understand; but the moment he can see the strange bodies and the dogs straining toward him, howling, enraged by violence and blood, he knows that nothing will ever be the

same. He knows that he will lose everything that day, that all he will have left will be his eyes to weep, he knows that the order of things has been shattered once again and that no one will be able to efface it or go back, it will erase in a few moments what he has spent half his life building, and his life no more than a wisp of straw. In a curious torpor he has time to gaze at the dust the wind has set spinning, and he himself is one of those specks of dust. Then he hears the women's cries when they see him coming, and this reality radiates all the way to him and he feels that now he must be quick.

One

I'm in the doorway next to Rose and we're listening to the dogs bark. Actually, we're not really listening to their howling; it's a faint noise from beyond, in the distance, but not very far, and it's been annoying the mongrels like this for days, four or five days, and we can't find that noise. It's not all the time, just now and then, at sunset, when the coming dark troubles our vision. There are shadows, furtive movements, maybe in our imagination, except that—

The dogs are howling.

We're in the habit of being vigilant. In the habit of listening. This world offers no promises or certainties, other than the fact we will die, too soon no doubt, our lives are short, brutal, exhausting. But like Eugène says, that's normal. It's the life our parents led, and their parents before them.

A world that doesn't change.

As for us in all that, at the end of the farthest lands, we're unchanging, like the ancient forests that surround us. We could be characters in the old tales the storytellers have been peddling forever, with one simple difference: here, the tales don't end well. Kings never come to abduct one of our shepherdesses, or if they do come, it's to rape her, not to make her a queen.

Well, anyway, here we are, and there's this thing in the air that annoys us every evening and we don't know what it is. So we keep watch. My hearing is better than Rose's. Rose has some years behind her. It's not so much the number of years as the number of sorrows: because the sorrows add up much

more quickly and are much stronger than the years. I'm not saying she's well and truly old, but she doesn't hear as well as she used to. Some afternoons she no longer hears the sound of my steps when I come in at the back of the house, over the wooden threshold that's so worn it no longer creaks. And I realize she sees me at the last minute, her gaze is startled. But she's impassive. Just that blue time-faded iris that is like a slap a bolt of lightning and then it recedes again beneath her heavy lids. Rose goes on chopping the vegetables or slicing the bread, I hear her murmur, Oh, it's you. Anyone other than me, and that's the point, would ignore the tiny pause in her gesture, the hesitation when I come in through the door that's always open and doesn't make a sound either: my presence has caught her off guard. She's scratching her ear. These damned wax plugs, she mutters. But I know it's not wax. It's age. We pretend, she and I, that nothing has happened. Rose mustn't get old. Old people don't last in this place, they're not wanted, they can't.

Rose lives alone in her little house. At one point she had two sons and they left. There are not many who have left the Hinterland but those two did, and they never came back. In the beginning they sent news, with tradesmen who came this far and would recite a message. The sons said it was better where they were, but they didn't suggest she join them. Rose was a little ruffled, and then she put it aside—anyway, she couldn't imagine leaving her little patch of earth. Little by little their messages stopped coming, that's the way men are, she said. Out of sight out of mind. She hasn't seen them in twenty years. I think it's sad, especially when I notice a handful of things still folded on the beds, and despite the years a little of their buried smell lingering deep in the fabric. Rose says you mustn't be sorrowful, we mustn't waste our strength on questions that are too big for us, words I can't retain. I'm nothing to her, nothing in the way of a blood relation, I'm here, that's all, she took me in

one day when I was little and dying of hunger on the road, and I stayed. That was eight years ago.

Her sons' absence settled in slowly, Rose is used to it, like when you lose a dog: the first few days you can still hear him, you think he'll suddenly be there by your feet with his sweet doggy face and his eyes straining while you're filling his bowl. After some time has gone by, a week or two or more, you stop listening for the sounds of his presence. And later still you forget there ever was a dog in the house. For Rose it's the same with her sons. It took longer than with an animal and yet it's the same thing, it began to blur in her memory, she stopped waiting for them. Rose gets angry if you put it to her like that but I think it happened gently. Except that absence is never gentle. It's just time. That's how it is. You may not agree, but time consumes everything, good things and bad. It's nibbled away at sorrow, it's nibbled away at absence.

But I'm here and I won't leave. The difference with Rose's sons is that they dreamt of traveling; with me, I ended my traveling here. When she's in a bad mood she reproaches me for staying, saying it's simply because she feeds me. There is truth in that. It's a miracle to eat every day and it's also because I love Rose that I'm here. And then this country, bitter and harsh, it speaks to me, it resonates, even if deep down we are its prisoners, a spit of land cut off from others by the river, and no one has fought us for it. We don't have the right to leave, there are rules. We belong to the Ambroisies. I go along with all of that. It's our world and it is wild, right down to the glow in the children's eyes when it's bread day and the stirring smell of baking dough floats above the village.

Anyway, it's been going on for too long, those dogs barking at nightfall, and Rose thinks it's coming from up there. From Eugène's place, or Léon's, she isn't sure, the farms are too close together. It's not nasty barking, we know those dogs. It's rather as if something were poking its way toward the dogs and

exciting them, we can't hear them growling from the back of their throats, the way they do when there's a real problem and their hackles are raised. But it's making Rose frown. She looks at me and says suddenly, astonished, A curious lad like you, and you didn't go nose around up there? I turn my head the other way, it means no. I don't want her to know that I did go up there and saw nothing. There's just that smell, only I must be mistaken, the smells in the barn mingle together, human, animal, and then the hay and earth. There's time enough, because I'm bound to figure out what's lurking around our nights, we can't allow things to happen without being sure what it is, whether it's a threat. The only sensation I have at the moment is contradictory: it's not dangerous but there is danger. It means no harm, otherwise the dogs' barking would be full of alarm and rage. If we left it at that, it would be out of laziness, and we're not lazy. As I said, we are vigilant. So there's something going on up there and I'm going to find out what it is.