

Gallimard Jeunesse

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Chapter 2 Tireless dancers

My name is Anne Collodi. I'm seventeen years old. I'm walking along with my hood up, not looking back. There's a chill in the air. As soon as you cross to this side, the temperature drops a few degrees and that's where it stays. The old man is the one I hitched a lift from this morning. In my right-hand jacket pocket I have a green beetle, which I'm pretty sure is dead. I keep it as a good-luck charm. Or rather as a way of warding off bad luck, which is all I'm going to need for the situation I'm in. I've put it in a matchbox.

I've just "passed" for the third time. I say "pass" as it's the word I think fits best. I realise it can be used for dying too. You say so and so has passed, meaning they're dead. My beetle has passed, for example. But that's not what I'm talking about. I don't die. I pass. From one world to another. Always by the same route, the one my sister took.

I've never liked the man she married. Mind you, he was very attractive: slim, cheerful, young-looking for a thirty something. I remember the very first time we met. It was spring, a year and a half ago. In Sainte-Etienne on Grand-Rue. I got out of the tram at Place du Peuple and ran into my sister and him. They were about to get on the tram but they ended up waiting for the next one while we chatted for a while.

'This is Jens,' said Gabrielle. I could see how proud she was to show me her handsome boyfriend and say his lovely foreign-sounding name. He gave me his hand to shake – a big hand, strong and gentle at the same time. I wondered why he didn't give me a kiss, I mean, I am Gabrielle's sister. We made the usual small talk – lovely weather, isn't it! where did you get that little top? – that kind of thing. And then the tram pulled up and they got on. She gave me a knowing smile through the window as if to say: "So, little sister, what do you think? He's quite a catch, isn't he?" I pulled a face in response and raised an eyebrow: "Yeah, big sister, he certainly is."

The three of us got together again the following week. Jens took us to a restaurant on Rue Saint-Jean, one of the best in the city, people say. It was all a bit lost on me. I must be too young; fancy food does nothing for me, I'm much happier having a three-cheese pizza with my girlfriends. But Jens had asked Gabrielle to invite whoever she chose, and she chose to ask me.

It started out well enough. Jens was maybe a bit overeager, doing the “I eat in in places like this all the time, I know all about tasting wine, I can joke around with the waiters” act, but it was bearable. He was quite affectionate towards me. He asked me what I did and laughed when I told him I sold chairs. I don’t know why people find it so funny. And then, just before dessert, this happened. Gabrielle got up to go to the bathroom. Jens watched her until she was out of sight; then, just when I expected him to turn back towards me, he didn’t. It would have been the most natural thing in the world to turn back to me, start chatting again and spare us the embarrassment of sitting there in silence, just the two of us. But he didn’t. He ignored me the whole time Gabrielle was gone. He behaved exactly like a person on their own in a room with nothing to do but look good.

It doesn’t seem like anything when you put it like that, but it was very strange. He was somewhere else, withdrawn into himself, unreachable, as if he was deep in an intense reverie. Eyes creased, lips pinched, he didn’t take his eyes off the spot in the far corner of the room where Gabrielle had disappeared from view. I felt terrible. I was stunned, speechless. I remember thinking: “There’s something wrong with this guy. Is he nuts, or what?”

As soon as Gabrielle reappeared, he went back to being his friendly, charming self again. The meal carried on smoothly after that, but I couldn’t get that image out of my head: Jens absent, transformed, staring at the spot where Gabrielle had disappeared, until she came back into view. The words “hunter” and “prey” lodged themselves in my head.

I tried to reason with myself: my sister had chosen this man and that must mean something. She was neither stupid nor shallow. Maybe he was tired that evening; that could explain his weird moment of absence. I probably had it all wrong. He was a nice guy.

But I was already convinced of the contrary. I was sure I’d seen inside his head, quite by accident. I’d been given a look into a corner of his brain that even Gabrielle knew nothing about. As if I’d gone inside his house, pushed open the door of a closed room, his bedroom perhaps, peered into an open drawer, seen something there that I shouldn’t have, and left without anyone knowing I’d been there.

I saw Jens again two or three times at our parents’ place in Saint-Just-sur-Loire, and at Gabrielle’s on Rue Guy-Colombet in Saint-Étienne. I studied him carefully, watching out for

any further sign of weirdness. He gave no hint of anything out of the ordinary. And then I had that nightmare, the one where he was harming her.

I can't say exactly what kind of harm. I couldn't see it in the dream, it was hidden. But I could see that she was crying. His face was contorted with hate. He was pulling her by the arm, violently, dragging her somewhere by force, or pulling her away from somewhere she shouldn't have been. And the spookiest thing about it was that he seemed disgusted by her. Yes, disgusted. I had the nightmare several times, and on each occasion, I woke up in a state of abject terror. To drag myself out of that black hole, I had to turn on all the lights in the room and listen to Keane's *She has no time* three times over.

So, I called Gabrielle and told her I had to talk to her urgently. That's the word I used, urgently. They hadn't lost any time, the wedding was scheduled for the autumn. My parents saw nothing wrong with him. Jens would be the perfect son-in-law: reliable, considerate, and, with his comfortable chemical engineer's salary, doing quite well for himself, which certainly didn't detract from things.

Gabrielle and I met up the next day in the café of the Méliès cinema. I had a Perrier and she had an espresso, I think. We sat facing one other. I thought Gabrielle looked prettier than ever, with her shock of thick red hair, her green eyes and fair skin. I'm darker, I take after my dad and my grandparents, on the Italian side. It was quite crowded, a little too much so for my liking. People had come to see the latest Coen Brothers film, as I remember. I waited until our drinks came and jumped straight in:

"I'm sorry Gabrielle, this may shock you, but I don't think you should marry Jens."

Shocked wasn't the word, she was stunned. I was younger by seven years and I wasn't supposed to be the one handing out advice. She hadn't suspected for one second that I had reservations about Jens. She was convinced I liked him, that I looked up to him. She may even have thought I was in love with him.

"What exactly do you mean by that?" she said coldly, moving nothing but her lips.

"I dreamt he was harming you. Several times."

She said nothing for a few seconds while this sank in.

"What do you mean, harming me?"

"I don't know. I can't see exactly. He's in a furious rage, he's pulling you by the arm and you're crying."

"Hitting me?"

"No, he's dragging you. Threatening you. I don't see him hit you."

I lowered my head. I didn't dare look at her after what I'd just said. She was silent again, as if she was thinking of the best way to answer.

"Anne, you had a nightmare. Everyone has them. You saw Jens treating me badly, but it was a dream. It doesn't mean he's *actually* going to do me any harm. That would be too obvious. I'm not a psychiatrist, but I'm sure the relationship between dreams and reality is much more complicated than that."

I was on the verge of tears. People turned to look at us. Gabrielle drew her chair closer and leant across the table towards me.

"Anne, what's going on with you?"

She took my hands in hers.

"Listen to me. Jens is the kindest, the most patient man I've ever met. You know me, you know how difficult and annoying I can be sometimes, he puts up with it all. I've never once heard him raise his voice. So, hitting me. . . And the other thing you have to understand is that I love this man. I've never loved anyone else like this. So, now you know."

I already knew I'd lost, that I'd been wrong to say anything. I gave up the idea of telling her about Jens's odd behaviour in the restaurant. But I can remember how our conversation ended.

"Do you feel any better? Have I put your mind at rest?"

"Yes, a little."

"So, I can get married then? With your permission?"

I forced myself to smile and said:

"Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

“Well, if things ever go wrong with Jens, will you let me know? I swear I won’t say, “I told you so.” Will you promise you’ll tell me?”

“I promise. Although I won’t ever tell you because nothing’s going to happen.”

Out on the street, we gave each other a kiss and as we parted she said:

“Now that you’ve got it off your chest, I’m sure you won’t have the nightmare anymore.”

But she was wrong. I had it that same night, and this time it was more violent than ever. I was petrified, but I resisted the urge to wake up. I forced myself to watch the scene to the end, to find out what was going on, to see where it went. But all I managed to see was that this time, the “bad guy” was no longer Jens. He was someone else, a complete stranger. He was tall and athletic looking, with something steely about him. This time even Keane didn’t help. I spent the whole night in a cold sweat.

The wedding took place on Saturday 22 September in the *Mairie* in Saint-Just. When my sister said yes in that tiny hall crammed with people feeling happy, I bit my lip and uttered a silent groan. Then we all left and headed for the *gîte* Jens and Gabrielle had rented up on Mont Pilat. We hooted our horns going through all the villages, as you do, that stupid thing that’s so annoying when the wedding has nothing to do with you, but you’re happy to do it when you’re involved.

The two families were very different. On our side there was the usual hodgepodge of cousins, aunts and uncles from all over the place. Our three remaining grandparents were there, even Nana Chiara in her wheelchair.

There was nothing like that on Jens’s side. The only family he had was his mother, but she was apparently unwell and “too weak to make the journey from Bordeaux”. So, he came with his friends, all men, about ten of them and they were all just like him. Same age or a bit younger, same air of prosperity, same expensive, chic, well-cut clothes. They all danced amazingly well. Slow-dancing, rock’n roll, waltz, tango, they could do them all. They were supple and energetic, they never seemed to tire, and they kept us all spinning round on the dance floor until we were dizzy. Occasionally, when I sat down to have a drink or chat with

my cousins, I'd stop and watch them, imagining they'd been hired for the occasion, paid to do it, professionals of some sort.

It was impossible to strike up a conversation with any of them. They'd go scurrying off straight away. I tried with the one who was closest to me in age, a really cute boy with messy hair and his white shirt unbuttoned down to the waist. I remember being struck by his perfect skin: it was smooth and golden, completely unblemished, without scars or marks of any kind. I can still see his smile too; it seemed more natural to me than the others', more real.

"You're a friend of Jens?"

"Jens?"

He hesitated for a moment, as if he'd never heard the name before, and then he stopped himself just in time:

"Oh yeah, sure! And you're Gabrielle's sister, right? Shall we dance?"

It was a rock'n roll number. I'm not very good at it usually but with him, I was on fire. He spun me around, had me doing jumps and slides. He'd catch me in his arms or with the tips of his fingers. I felt like a different girl, light and utterly at ease, with a natural sense of rhythm. By the end I felt dazed, while my cousins applauded, flabbergasted.

"What's your name?"

"My name? Oh, yeah. . . Bran. My name's Bran."

He was already asking another girl to dance.

We spoke again much later in the evening, on the terrace. We were playing a silly game with the cousins and everyone was laughing and joking. He was leaning with his back against a railing, hands in his pockets, away from the rest of his group, watching us with amusement. When everyone went back inside, I was the last to walk past him. He stopped me and said:

"Not too shaken up earlier?"

"No, it was fine."

It's funny, flirting. There's a precise moment when you know the other person is interested in you. Something gives them away: a look, a way of standing, an inflection of the voice. It was out there on the terrace of that *gîte*, when he asked me if I hadn't been too "shaken up"

that I knew he fancied me. It was obvious. And I was interested in him too. Except that I was just getting over a complicated relationship and I had no desire to jump back into the fray so soon.

He asked me my name. I told him it was Anne. He nodded and smiled.

"Anne, my sister Anne. . . It's pretty."

I liked the fact that he knew the story of Bluebeard; it's fairly unusual for a guy of his age.

After that we both went back and joined the others and carried on separately with the party. But every time our eyes met, during the games or the dances, there was a hint of regret in the air, something that said: "Shame. . ." He already knew there was no way we could go any further together, but it would be a whole year before I understood.

By the end of the night everyone over forty had left. Jens and Gabrielle had gone to spend the night in a secret location. I followed them out to the car park as they were leaving. My sister was carrying her wedding dress in one hand – she'd changed out of it for the dancing. Her shoes were hurting her feet and she'd taken them off and had them in the other hand. She was wearing the little pearl grey outfit that looked so good on her. The night was warm, you could hear a stream burbling, a dog barking at the neighbouring farm. Jens was already in the car, one elbow on the rolled-down window.

"Are you coming?" he said.

She said she'd be right there, gave me a kiss and took a few steps towards him. Then she stopped, turned back, and did something I wasn't expecting at all: she dropped everything, her bag, her dress, her shoes, ran towards me and put her arms round me. We both cried, worn out from the long day with all its emotions. It was five in the morning.

The next day, we couldn't get hold of her, either on her mobile or her landline. At the end of the afternoon we went back to the *gîte*. It was all closed up, clean, tidy and deserted, as if the party the night before had never happened. All that was left were the tyre marks on the gravel in the driveway and on the grass of the adjoining field where several cars had parked. My parents waited until the following morning, Monday, to notify the police. Our daughter has gone missing. Since when? Since yesterday morning, after the wedding party. Sorry sir,

it's far too early to launch a search, they're adults, they've probably gone on a little lovers' jaunt, come back in two days if you still don't have any news.

They went back two days later. Our daughter hasn't reappeared.

"Ok, have a seat, I'll take your statement."

My sister's gone missing. I'm trying to find my sister. That's how I put it to the old man who's given me a lift twice, and it's true. He's an odd character, with a hangdog look and grey hair almost down to his shoulders. But very kind. I asked him questions I'd never have dared ask before, really personal ones. It just came out, before I could stop to think about whether I should. And funnily enough he seemed quite happy to answer. I think he even liked it. I was about to ask him if he had children and if he had a favourite, when we arrived at the intersection.

Since I passed, I've started acting differently. I'm less concerned about what people think. It's as if I don't have much time left (time for what?) and I can't afford to waste any of it on trivialities. When I talk to someone I want to get straight to things that matter, the touchy spots. A lot of people don't understand and back off. The time I've spent over there has changed me. And if I were to stay there too long I wouldn't be able to turn round and come back. That's why I always come back after two days, to protect myself. And to sell my chairs.

The old man is a writer. I've told him I'll ask his help if I need it even though I hardly know him. But who else could I ask? The police are no good for this kind of thing, when it's no longer a terrestrial matter. And everyone else, my parents, my friends, would send me straight to some kind specialised institution. This man seems capable of understanding. Maybe he's one of those people the world is not enough for. I like that expression, I used to write it on all my notebooks back when I was in middle school. I'd even write it in the original English: "Those for whom the world is not enough." These days, the ordinary world would definitely be enough for me. More than enough.

The old man dropped me at the intersection and now I'm walking through the mist. This is the third time I've passed.

