

FOOTPRINTS

Spring had arrived.

The day was so mild that I came down from the attic earlier than usual. I went out on the beach with Mr. Blue and walked to the end of the bay. I was taking a little rest, sitting on a rock that faced the river, when suddenly I noticed some footprints in the sand.

Out of curiosity, I placed my own foot in one of the prints. I was surprised to observe that they were exactly the same size. And yet these were not my prints: I hadn't walked here for several days, and there had been time for the tide, which was very high, to obliterate my trail.

Mr. Blue was just as intrigued as I was. With his tail in the air like a question mark and his muzzle in the sand, the old cat sniffed at the

prints. They led directly to a little cave I already knew was there, which one entered by edging through a very narrow gap.

The cave was divided into two rooms. In the larger one, which must have been four meters wide and three meters high, I found the remains of a campfire. Mr. Blue, who got there before me, was nosing among the remains of a fire in the middle of the floor. On a sort of long, narrow shelf formed by a projection of the rock face sat a candle, a book, and a box of matches.

I went closer to look at the book: it was *The Arabian Nights*. I would have liked to pick it up and turn the pages, but something held me back. I had the feeling that to do so would be indiscreet. It was as if I were in some person's bedroom. I mean: in everything I could see there – the footprints, the objects, even in the air itself – there was a sense of somebody's soul. I didn't touch the book. I didn't touch anything, I didn't even visit the second room in the cave; I went back to the house.

I lived in an old frame house that stood all alone in the middle of the bay. It looked rather odd because it had been built in stages. Originally, it had been a simple cottage that my father had gradually transformed, adding a bedroom, a shed, and a second floor, as the family grew. The resulting house was a hodgepodge that boasted a number of styles and was topped by a number of roofs, whose slopes intersected. The weight of the snow and ice that accumulated there during the winter had weakened the roofing, making it susceptible to bad weather, and

during severe summer storms, the rain would sometimes drip into the attic and leak into one of the bedrooms upstairs.

After several years in Europe, I now almost always spent my summers in the old house. Every year, it became a little more dilapidated: it was falling into ruin faster than I could repair it. It was my childhood home. Many years before, it had been part of the village of Cap-Rouge. Then my father had it moved into the bay where there were no other people because he wanted peace and quiet. It had been loaded onto a flat-bottomed boat that was half raft and half barge, transported across the river, and set down in the middle of the bay. My father and some other men had stood on the beach, watching the house move along the river. As I remember it, I was on the boat myself, but perhaps that's something I've imagined, because I was very young at the time.

When I walked into the kitchen, I glanced, as usual, at the big electric Coca-Cola clock. It indicated a few minutes past noon. I fed the cat his fish, then I had a soft-boiled egg with toast, mild cheese, and a little honey. The house was huge: there were three stories and five bedrooms, but it was in the attic that I felt most at ease for working. Because of a nagging back problem, I wrote standing up, facing a dormer window that looked out on the river. I would place my writing pad on a breadbox that sat on a desk. (The breadbox came just to my elbows and it provided a convenient storage place for pens and paper.) When the words wouldn't come, I walked, pacing the attic.

That afternoon, I paced for longer than usual, but I was making

very little progress in my work. I couldn't take my mind off the book I'd seen in the cave, and I still had the feeling that I'd been indiscreet, that I'd even violated someone's privacy. Finally, I came down from the attic and went out to sit on the sun porch.

The sun porch on the second floor was my favorite room in the old house. It was long and narrow, with a dozen windows. Sunlight flooded it during the day and there was no better place to read, especially in the spring and the fall. The chairs were comfortable and you could rest your feet on the window ledge in front of you. There was a small bookcase at either end and, in one corner, a walnut writing desk that held papers and an old photograph album.

MARIKA

I was unable to write the way I wanted, either that day or the next. After two days, I decided to go back to the cave. Though it was only six p.m., the sun was sinking: in late April, the days are still not very long.

To keep Mr. Blue from coming with me, I gave him a big dish of cat food; I wanted to be alone. I took a flashlight and went out on the beach. The cave was on my right, at the very end of the bay, near a little sandy inlet. From the house to the inlet was no more than two kilometers, but just when you thought you'd arrived, you still had to cross a stretch of rocky scree that had fallen from the cliff and now extended to the middle of the sandbar.

Once past the scree, I started humming a tune to announce my arrival to anyone who might be in the cave. I hummed a song by Brassens, “Il n’y a pas d’amour heureux.” Whenever I feel like humming,

I don't know why but that old song is the one that always comes to mind. As I approached the cave, to make even more noise, I pretended to be looking for old Mr. Blue and I called him several times in a loud voice. I pricked up my ears and, hearing nothing, I went in, edging through the narrow gap.

There was no one inside, either in the big room or the small one, but I saw right away that *The Arabian Nights* had been moved. Even though I felt again that I was being indiscreet, that I was interfering in somebody's private life, this time I picked up the book. With a slight pang, I slowly turned the pages. On the flyleaf a name and an initial were written in blue ink: Marie K. I said it under my breath and from that moment, in my head and in my heart, the name "Marika" would reverberate forever.

A WELCOME NOTE

The book that I was writing in the attic, every day except Saturday and Sunday, was a love story. But I was having trouble defining the female character and my progress was very slow.

I paced, I looked out the window, I pondered anything at all, even old tennis matches I'd argued about with my brother. And, of course, I thought about Marika. One day when I couldn't work in any case, I decided to write to her. I went back to the kitchen to make myself a coffee, and on my way back to the attic, the words came rushing all together in my head, and almost in one go I wrote her this brief note:

Dear Marika,

Welcome. Old Mr. Blue and I hope your visit here will be a pleasant one, as much as our inhospitable shores allow. Try not to let the cold

and the damp bother you too much. Walk on the beach and the sandbar as much as you want: that's an excellent way to shake off your worries, as I've often discovered for myself.

I have lived alone for a long time and solitude is propitious for my work, but it warms my heart to know that you're at the other end of the bay. Now that you're there, everything seems possible, even the wildest, most secret dreams, the ones we never talk about, those that lurk beneath the surface of ourselves. I cannot help thinking that your presence is a kind of invitation to begin everything again, to start from scratch.

Though I don't yet know your face, you already live in my heart.

I reread the letter. Its inappropriate and overwrought tone irritated me, so I decided to keep it for myself and use it later in the story I was writing.

THE OAK WITHOUT A HEART

Every spring, I had an urgent need to see colors, and that year I was very lucky. Along with the opening of the first leaves, which were a very tender green, there arrived not only the snow geese and the Canada geese, but also flocks of grosbeaks that scattered shifting patches of black and yellow all around, as well as blackbirds, juncos, and several house finches; I spotted some swallows too, and even a pair of blackburnian warblers.

In early May, persistent heavy rain had finished off the last pile of snow that still stood between the shed and the cliff. The wind turned westerly, the temperature rose, and since I didn't want to miss the opening of the first buds, I started keeping an eye on the four young

birches huddled together in front of the house. There were a lot of trees around the old house: oaks, maples, a service tree, and several varieties of conifers, but birches have always been the ones I like best.

The oaks were most numerous, however. They were old and there was something special about them all. One of them, which I called “the oak without a heart,” was lower than the others and appeared fairly sound if you looked at it through a window; but if you approached it from the beach, you could see that it was ripped open from top to bottom and that the trunk was hollow: the old oak tree didn’t have a heart. Nevertheless, it was in no worse shape than the other oaks, which were all weakened by age to some extent. There were some dead branches, of course, but at the height of summer the old oak’s foliage was just as dense as that of its neighbors.

At the base of another oak, the one nearest the house, there was a hole five or six centimeters across – through which, one fine morning, I spied first the pointed muzzle and then the striped back of a chipmunk. Later on, I saw the whole family: an adult (most likely the mother) and three little ones.

Before venturing outside their burrows, the chipmunks waited till the grass was fairly high. They must have been looking out for cats. In fact, all sorts of stray cats prowled the neighborhood, especially when the moon was full. They were very brazen and sometimes went inside the house, entering through a hole in the screen of a small basement window. They would take up residence in the cellar or the shed, and they’d even go to the kitchen and tuck into old Mr. Blue’s cat food. Then one day they left the way they’d come, and I didn’t know if I

would see them again. All cats were my friends. I had a preference for those that came back every summer: there was Charade, who was more or less Siamese, deaf, and had one brown eye and one blue one; Vitamin, a white cat who often had kittens; and Samurai, a pugnacious big yellow tom who was always growling.

To my great sorrow, the cats seemed to take a vicious pleasure in persecuting squirrels and chipmunks. They'd light into all varieties of squirrels – the gray ones, the red ones, the black – but their favorite target was quite obviously the family of little chipmunks that lives at the foot of the oak tree nearest the house.

It was the mother chipmunk who was always the first one to stick her muzzle outside the burrow, then venture outside; a moment later, the three youngsters would follow suit. While the little ones looked for food around the oak, the mother, standing on her hind legs so she could see over the tall grass, would nervously turn her head this way and that, ready to sound the alarm at the slightest sound of danger. She had to be particularly wary of Vitamin, because the white cat's hunting instincts were highly developed, and she often hid close by, in the hollow trunk of the "oak without a heart."