

The Miracles

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‘The miracles, my miracles are here!’ Aunt Bella cried, hugging us tight and not letting go for a long time. Her welcoming scent went straight to my head.

Her belly was trembling. Mine too.

All body. That was what she was. Body and nothing else.

During this fierce embrace, I saw Ambrose keeping his eyes shut tight and knew that over the last few months only Dr Lemaître and possibly a nurse had touched him. He had either surrendered to our aunt’s affection or was pretending that he had. Here there were no rules. From the start, our aunt’s realm was new and confusing. It meant being touched lovingly and that was something neither he nor I had ever experienced.

She was an adventure. That much was clear.

Under her satin dress she was wearing neither corset nor whalebone. We felt her soft curves as she, without letting go, steered us into the house. Her scent was earthy, yet floral. Ambrose and I clung to her. I knew at once that she would never push us away, no matter how long this might last. To be like this, I thought. That proud bosom, those sturdy arms squeezing us, those soft buttocks, that long curly hair falling over our arms, her voice too, entwined with delight, was that a gift that had simply grown or did you have to do something to acquire it? The prospect of my gawkiness ever changing to her bountiful body seemed depressingly improbable. Could you just wait for something like this or did you need to pray for it and if so, to whom or what? How did you set it in motion? Were there doctors who could hasten the process? Was impatience a sin? How could I know for sure that the possibility existed of my ever becoming someone with her unmistakable pride and the strength she gave others? I would not have refused any sorcerer, no matter how suspect, if he had whispered the right words in my ear that day; I would have surrendered anything in exchange. My dazed prayer would be to lose the curse of my flat chest, big feet and general boniness. With this paucity, I thought, I will never amount to anything and can only remain a disappointment, a chrysalis that doesn’t conceal a butterfly.

Did she sense this?

She studied us and ran her fingers through our hair. It made me smoulder inside. In that instant, it was already inconceivable that Ambrose and I could never be embraced by her again. She immediately ensured that I would never be able to forget her. Hug me tight again, I begged wordlessly and she responded, squashing my cheek against one of her breasts. I gulped down my saliva. I belonged to her, in the hope that her frequent touch might make me like her. That flat body of mine could only be temporary. I had to be able to reveal myself, to blossom. I needed to become

the woman she so effortlessly was. Hidden behind that longing were other longings I hoped to admit, imagining that she would gradually mould me into the shape of a woman.

Our true mother. A female animal.

She sat us down on one of her bottle-green sofas, then lay down beside us, like a cat with her kittens. The maid was instructed to make tea with herbs from her garden. She looked us over one after the other in search of hidden afflictions, swollen glands or lack of sleep. After this examination, she informed us what we needed. Unbeknownst to us, we were suffering from a deficiency that seemed to be remedied by a cup of tea and a teaspoon of elderberry syrup.

This was how we entered her world.

I remember the feeling being there right from the start.

From that moment, there were two worlds.

One I longed to escape and one I wished I could stay in.

She had hung Ambrose's bedroom with herbs and dried flowers, and pointed out several of them, giving us their Latin names as well. There were quite a lot of yellow petals. *Impatiens noli-tangere*. Touch-me-not balsam, she said, seeking Ambrose's eyes. It would help cure his wound. Rest and patience were crucial. She would look after him and everything would get better, she promised. And through the open window she pointed out the sweet-smelling Hawthorn, *Crataegus oxyacantha*, under which Merlin and his sister Ganiada had made love, after which she, when her lover had sunk into a deep sleep on her lap, gently slipped out from under him, closed the hawthorn off from the world with a veil, then circled it nine times while speaking the magic words Merlin had taught her out of love. So that when the magician awoke, he thought himself shut up with her for eternity in a tower with no exit. I could already see Ambrose and me stretched out under the hawthorn, his head on my lap. Of course it was no coincidence that this was the tree under which Merlin and Ganiada disappeared into a dream, she continued, because Merlin's heart was tormented from wandering in the forest after a horrific battle, so many centuries of summers ago. Like a savage with a broken heart, he was eventually lured back out, but that heart still needed to be healed under the sweet benefaction of the hawthorn, which was known for the ability of its blossom to heal an ailing heart. All plants were living creatures with an active spirit. Everything had meaning.

For the wound on his hip, she had made a poultice of comfrey and yarrow to counter the stubborn infection. She sang sounds that formed a lullaby. I saw my brother growing calm.

She wrapped her hands around ours. In the middle of the garden and with her eyes closed, she muttered words in a language we didn't know and which she herself seemed to have invented. These were no games, she told us. Together we three had performed a ritual that was very different from praying or dozing off in a church while waiting for a priest to place a host on your tongue.

'We are all wounded on the inside. Everyone wants to be healed,' she whispered after blowing out the candles she had placed around us. 'And everyone needs rituals to bind us to the deeper power, without a schoolmaster, a priest or a windbag of a doctor getting in the way.' Her words and the ritual she gave us awoke a desire in me to find out where my wound might be.

Her neglected but elegant country home – full of rooms that seemed accessible or not depending on the nature of the season or the whims of the weather, with a single large kitchen where we often ate, and just below it, in the basement, a scullery for the staff – was an organism that lived to its own rhythm and merely tolerated human souls. It seemed to have been defiled by violence, with geriatric beds that creaked and sighed – according to our aunt because of the 'Dutch scum' they had been

subjected to, something she refused to go into detail about – with a vestibule full of clothes that evoked a longing for historical tragedies that ended with a bloodbath, with a dining room and two salons, each with its own completely different wallpaper, deep orange and intoxicating green, with a marble staircase that managed to wear out everyone, as if the steps were enchanted, and in the feeble heart of all this a certain Charles, who was always reclining on one of the countless sofas or chaise longues and whose role was initially a mystery to Ambrose and me.

In the daytime Aunt Bella was her extravagant self and it was Charles who remained silent. At night that changed. The moment we were in our beds and out of his sight, he considered himself liberated. Encouraged by our aunt, Charles produced monologue after monologue. She sighed with admiration at his eloquence. He liked to talk about orchids and beauty. The sun room in which he cultivated them was forbidden territory. The slightest breeze from the outside world could damage them all, as our aunt had told us. The volume of his voice betrayed passion, but possibly dismay as well. It made me creep out of the bedroom to eavesdrop in silence from the top of the stairs. Could beauty cause such a thing? Or was he aware that only he saw nature's ruthlessness in his plants and that he was doomed to never be able to convey this to her, no matter how deeply she seemed to admire his enthusiasm? Was he obsessed, doomed? Or was nothing he said sincere? Perhaps it was beyond me at the time. Perhaps the difference between truth and lies only mattered when someone thought you were mature enough. There, at the top of the stairs, secretly listening, I felt myself growing much faster than anywhere else. Glasses were filled. Aunt Bella spoke. She was talking about us. 'Now they are allowed to come, *tu comprends*? Now he allows it. And I know why ...' Charles' slightly higher voice hissed. 'Because you ...' I couldn't make out the rest. I thought of a cardinal, skin and bones, providing his queen with counsel. She laughed cheerfully. He laughed along, a nervous giggle that immediately stopped again. Shuffling noises were followed by the clink of glasses. She was talking about Ambrose, something about 'being badly treated'. 'The poor boy. And of course he hopes that I ...' A dull thud. As if something had fallen over. 'Do be careful, *ma chère*...' Then a silence fell and I felt a chill there on the stairs. Ambrose had dragged himself out of bed and hobbled over to me. He asked in a whisper what I was doing. I held a finger to my lips and pointed downstairs. At first it was as if someone was clearing their throat. But it soon became clear. She was saying a curse. Charles laughed for a moment. Always so dramatic, I heard him sigh. She asked to be left in peace and kept repeating her curse. Ambrose looked at me in fright and asked if that was her. Then he stumbled back to his room.

That night I couldn't sleep.

I got up and lit the oil lamp on the table, which immediately began to sputter. I turned the wheel to raise the wick and lit another match. The flame remained restless and cast fitful shadows on the wall fabric.

I had never experienced such silence. Noise persists longer in the city and nervousness had imbued our parental home. At night, Father paced the halls and his study, making it more and more difficult for me to sleep. Insomnia, in his eyes, was what distinguished a man from a boy. The child played without a care, the man held life in his hands, moulded the world as he saw fit and paid for that privilege with concerns and nocturnal thoughts that would give birth to acts the moment the day dawned. That kind of mental labour wasn't carried out on this estate and no one stayed awake worrying. Here, they kept the world at arm's length. Here, Charles was probably lying next to Aunt Bella in her sepulchral bed. Was the house haunted?

Hanging on the wall was a painting I stared at by full moon.

I could hardly believe my eyes and immediately felt a deep shame at what I was seeing.

A young woman was sitting in a garden nursing an infant and wearing nothing but a short cape that scarcely covered her hips. On the left an elegant looking soldier was staring at her shamelessly. But she was looking at me and conveying a message I couldn't quite grasp. Behind her were a bridge and several white buildings with dark clouds gathered overhead and a bolt of lightning visible as a jagged tear in the firmament.

On the duckweed-choked pond there was a boathouse with a small sagging jetty. All at once I heard chortling and groaning, leafy branches scraping and swishing. A creaking green giant was raising herself up out of the water. By the time she finally got up onto the grassy bank she had spotted me. I was frozen to the spot. My brazen observation seemed to enrage her and she began walking towards the house, towards me. She seemed to grow with each laborious step on the lawn. Her muddy smell reached me and I managed to take a step back. My heartbeat was thundering in my throat and ears. I looked again from behind the gossamer curtain. Peace had returned to the garden and the pond.

I had forgotten the weeping willow next to the mouldering boathouse. Maybe it wasn't a dream. I wanted to follow the outline of the pond past the decaying, permanently overshadowed boathouse. They had left me to sleep in. Aunt Bella and Ambrose were drinking tea close to the house in the shade of a few linden trees. It was almost noon. Aunt Bella waved hello. I waved in reply. Then she turned her gaze back to Ambrose. She seemed to have something important to tell him, perhaps about his wound. I saw him nodding. He didn't seem entirely at ease, but her smile dispelled my concern. It was about time she challenged his moodiness and sense of superiority. She wanted to heal him, I knew that, and everything was as it should be. I disappeared out of their field of vision and followed the erratic bank, which was boggy in places because of the heavy rain that had lashed the garden for days on end. Some places had grown spongy and sucked at my summer shoes. I held a parasol up in the air and jumped from one firm spot to the next, floating like a dragonfly (so I told myself), until a thorn bush blocked my path and I had to plunge deeper between the trees and undergrowth to get back to the bank. Once I had passed the thorn bush, the light seemed dimmed and I felt that I had come somewhere that was off limits to me. The clear water of the pond had turned sludgy and my aunt and brother's voices no longer reached me. I closed the parasol and held it out before me like a sword. No longer a dragonfly, I cautiously stepped deeper into the gloom. I was trying to see where the pond stopped and the forest behind the garden began, where the bank curved to the left so that I could turn back and follow the other side back to the light that had now disappeared. I kept following the bank, but saw no curve or bend. The pond narrowed to a murky stream with swampy banks but was still too wide to jump over. Each step increased the menace, darkened the clouds above and would ultimately awaken evil. I heard a voice inside my head telling me that I had to pay a price for my own foolish inquisitiveness. These accusatory words were so present that I screamed when I heard a real voice behind me.

It was Ambrose. He looked upset and said that he was having doubts about whether Aunt Bella was our true mother. Maybe we had been mistaken. I couldn't understand what he meant and asked him to explain. He shook his head. By this time we were already living in two worlds. We didn't need to ask to come here. Sometimes Alfons even took us to the railway station on Friday afternoon and stood there waiting for us on Sunday evening. What was suddenly troubling Ambrose so deeply? His eyes are ponds, I told myself, stare into that dark water. What I saw robbed me of my peace of mind. He no longer wanted to be anywhere, that was what it came down to. Unless it was alone with me in the library, surrounded by our own dreams, relying on our own stories, the world serving merely as the butt of our contempt. Here too, he sighed, all kinds of things were expected of him. Here too he was a disappointment, unable to live up to those expectations. Only with me could he be a magician. Or was it already too childish to put it in those terms? Only with me could he be himself.

That sounded better, he thought, more mature. I told him that here too, with her, he could be himself. No, that was impossible, he said. Why didn't I see that? Didn't we share everything? Just before he said that so emphatically, I felt very distant from him. He craved death, he said with sudden confidence. That longing for something completely different made him impatient with all the things that were expected of him here, the future they held up before us in which he, but I too, would play the role that had been fixed since our birth. Our aunt was no different, she too expected all kinds of things from him. I told him that he didn't crave death. That was impossible. If he did, I would share his craving. I didn't, so he didn't either. He shook his head again and didn't say anything else.

Meadowsweet (or *Filipendula ulmaria*) is one of the three herbs considered holy by the druids. The other two are *Mentha aquatica* en *Verbena officinalis*, water mint and simpler's joy, so she taught us. All three grew near her pond. She had Ambrose and I sniff the small, creamy white flowers. Whenever I'm near a pond or a stream in the summer and catch that sweet scent of almond and mothballs, I think of her. She told us about the magic qualities of a great many plants, but meadowsweet held a special place in her heart thanks to the plant's beneficial effects on human kidneys and waterways – hers sometimes troubled her – and the way it always popped up when she needed it. 'Because...' as she insisted while looking at us with her light-brown, inscrutable eyes, 'from the moment I began to have real difficulties passing water, I knew that it wouldn't be long before the true medicine revealed itself to me. It was during that early summer when I first suffered the ailment that this white lady appeared on the waterside in this garden...' For a moment her fingers caressed the air above the plants' stamens. 'Did you know, miracles, that this happens often? Plants know when they're needed and when it's better to keep their uses concealed? Taste it...' She picked two small flowers off the plant. Ambrose opened his mouth and began bravely chewing. I remember my hesitation, frightened as I was that the plant would have the opposite effect on me, suddenly giving me bladder problems I had never had before. But I too chewed and swallowed the flower. She pressed her lips against our foreheads. 'Perhaps you will now feel a sense of wellbeing, as if you have just been given a spoonful of honey... The great botanist Rembert Dodoens, someone who studied plants here centuries ago and wrote thick books about them, tells us that the leaves and flowers of this herb can delight the heart and move all our senses to ecstasy. But you knew that already, *chère fille*, because I saw how much you enjoyed the smell. You're just like a bee that knows that this flower doesn't share any nectar but remains irresistible...' All at once I felt recognised by the mysterious druids Aunt Bella like to talk about, whose spirits, as she so often told us, were still present around her beautiful pond and could only be seen by people who loved plants and adored their fragrances. 'Once, faraway in time, this must have been a *site*. One can still feel that power. Not everyone. But you, Ambrose? You too surely?' Aunt Bella wanted us to feel and know things spontaneously, even if she laid the words in our mouths when it came to perceiving and feeling hidden forces or knowledge. She met my brother's vague nod with a sigh, as if ascertaining once again that she had failed and he lacked the true consciousness.
