

Colombe

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Part I: Michel

1838-1890

Chapter 5

A strong gale blew across the top of the ridge, nearly ripping off my shirt. I hadn't planned to linger here but the landscape took hold of me, so I climbed onto a rock to have a better look. The dark green mountain range stretched endlessly to the south. On the north side, where this icy wind came from, was a vast expanse that ended faraway in a glistening horizon. The clouds moved across the land making large dark spots on the blanket of green below. In the valleys and on the slopes I saw small clusters of houses, villages I'd heard of, but where I'd never been. And now that I had a good vantage point, and I saw this all together in the depths of the landscape, it dawned on me just how high this ridge was. My hands were crossed over my chest and I could feel my heart pounding. The sun briefly broke through the clouds, too short to warm my bones, but long enough to light up the shimmering line in the distance. At that moment I realized what I was looking at: the sea! That had to be it. I'd heard stories about the endless water, about fishermen and boats. And that it was dangerous; you could drown there.

The cold compelled me to come down from the rock and keep moving. I had passed the highest point on the ridge. The path now descended as steeply as the climb up to the top; I had to drive the sheep out in front of me. The stones on this narrow path were sharp. I remembered the clogs in the jute bag slung over my shoulder but still didn't feel like putting them on. Before long I saw the first houses. The smell of a wood fire had caught my attention. There were two huts spewing thick plumes of smoke and a man was leaning on a shovel watching. Then I understood that these were the *meilers*, the charcoal kilns that Julien had told me about. Several were active on the mountain and according to him, it would be possible to find some short-term work here. It was reassuring to see it with my own eyes, to know I'd arrived at the right place. I counted the houses I could see from my position on the slope. There were only three with windows and doors, and a roof on top. The other houses lay in ruins.

The man with the shovel coughed and spit on the grass. He was now walking around the largest meiler apparently poking the outside crust at shoulder height with his shovel. The smoke diminished and he looked up, in my direction. I immediately ducked. I didn't want to be seen yet. I stayed crouched between the bushes and searched the area with my eyes. The first structure that seemed suitable was a stone shelter not too far from me. Then I saw several other stone shelters on the slope. If I couldn't find a habitable

house right away, perhaps for a time I would sleep in one of these shepherd's huts. I tied my sheep together and took them to the closest one. It was big enough for the four of us and I could just stand upright. I drove the sheep outside and let them graze out back. With a bundle of branches I swept the ground clean of leaves and dust. I found a stiff piece of blanket that I hit against the back wall until it softened a bit. I would have to make do with that.

It was getting late; I had reached my destination and I was hungry. I ate some bread and cheese and slowly chewed a piece of jerky to make it last while I further examined my surroundings. The man tending the smoky mound was nowhere to be seen. The houses with roofs seemed to be inhabited, but I didn't see any movement. Somewhere a donkey hee-hawed; a nightingale began to sing.

I took a sip of water and wondered where I might find more the next day. Berthe had told me there was a river. Not so long ago she'd been here with Julien.

"Find the river and take a bath there!" she'd said.

I didn't blame her for subtly letting me know I was dirty and that most likely I smelled; she meant well. She'd packed food for my journey and had insisted I drink a bowl of milk before I set off.

"You take care of yourself and come see us once you've settled in there."

She blew her nose as I left the farmyard.

Thinking about Berthe made me go soft inside. I missed her friendly face. Julien was lucky to have a woman like her. Julien seemed lucky with everything in life. Yet, I wasn't jealous. I actually thought I was lucky to know Julien. I had three sheep – okay, they hadn't been paid for yet – but they were still mine. In a few years I would have a hundred sheep, a home of my own and maybe even a wife. Finding a wife seemed to be the biggest challenge. The girls in the village weren't the least bit interested in me and it seemed unlikely that any single young women lived in this hamlet with its handful of houses. It was a good possibility that there were only men here: lumberjacks and charcoal burners. But I wasn't in a rush. I still had a lot to attend to: find and rebuild a house, let the herd grow and, first of all, get my hands on some food for the coming days.

At night the notion of a wife returned. I could hear Berthe's voice in my head. She was gossiping about the children who lived in the village.

"Let's hope she survives," she said, referring to the seamstress' daughter. "Such a pale young thing. A first child: that often goes wrong."

Berthe knew what she was talking about; she had lost two of her five children.

A wife and children. It was something I'd never considered before. I'd been so preoccupied with work and life on the farm, and at home I was too busy ensuring there was food on the table and steering clear of my brothers. For the first time I imagined myself as a man with my own family. I had to laugh. How would that ever happen?

My mind wandered back to those girls. Two girls: Colombe and Amparo. Even if one of them died, there was still a girl left who would grow up to be a woman. And if they both survived, I could even choose.

The mere thought aroused me. It was fun to think about while at the same time inappropriate, but precisely because it felt like something forbidden, my desire grew.

I glanced at the sheep. There were shepherds who even admitted that sometimes they pleased themselves this way. The three ewes were lying next to me chewing on some grass I'd gathered. I turned away from them. My brother, Pierre, would have no qualms about doing such a thing. Exactly why I didn't indulge myself. I just imagined one of the three milkmaids from the farm. Then it went naturally.

I don't share my milkmaid fantasy with my wife. And the milkmaids also never knew that for all those years they gave me such comfort: they kept me warm and helped me get to sleep

Part 2: Colombe

1890-1895

Chapter 4

Once in a while, Amparo and I also argued. Mostly about trivial things. We'd grown up as sisters, but because our parents didn't live in the same house, quarrels were quickly resolved. If we were both sulking at home, we soon missed each other and sought contact again. I was usually the one who went to the bakery to patch things up and Amparo was instantly pleased and relieved to see me.

When we were sixteen, we got into a fight that lasted for days. Amparo kept insisting she would never marry. I once discussed this with my mother. Didn't Amparo understand you had to get married to have children? But she claimed she didn't want any children as well.

"That'll change," said my mother.

But it didn't. And the more I said that I did want children, and also a husband, the more often she repeated that she didn't want that. I noticed it irritated her whenever I raised the subject.

"What about us?" she asked. Then I sketched a image of two families like her parents and my parents – at that point only my mother – who live in each other's neighborhood, and have children who grow up together.

She shook her head.

"Not me," she said.

"Fine, don't get married," I said, "but we'll live close to each other and I'll visit you with my children . . ." I fantasized further.

She just shrugged her shoulders.

There was a complication I was afraid to bring up. The shepherd. Suppose he came to ask her. Would she then say no? Suppose she said yes, which I really couldn't imagine, then she would go and live on the mountain and we would see each other a lot less. Because I couldn't go visit her with my little ones, right?

And if she did say no, shouldn't I marry him then? The notion that he would marry one of us was stuck in my head and I couldn't shake it. Perhaps because I didn't dare to speak of it, the idea took on a life of its own, grew stronger, even down to the smallest details. I could already imagine marriage: sometimes with Amparo, her face like thunder behind a veil; sometimes with me adoringly looking up at my husband. More and more I ruled out the possibility it would be Amparo and instead saw myself getting married, in the village, surrounded by smiling people who would say: "We told you so! He came for one of them and chose the prettiest and the sweetest."

I was so naive. My fantasies got so strong they yearned to be spoken. And one day when I started with Amparo about the drawbacks of living in the hamlet on the mountain, she lost her temper.

"Just because they're gossiping about some story, doesn't mean you have to make it come true," she said. "You have free will; nothing obliges you to marry him." It was certainly clear that she'd never do that. Though sometimes I thought he would prefer to marry her. She was much stronger than me, much more suited to being a shepherd's wife.

"But maybe that's what I want," I argued.

"What? Have you lost your mind?" She jumped up and started pacing in the room.

“You can’t do that! That man is old! He’s crazy! He has been prowling around us since we were little girls!” She was furious and with each sentence she uttered, she slammed the table with the flat of her hand.

I stood up and went home. We didn’t see each other for an entire week. I didn’t dare to tell my mother what had led to our fight.

We made up, even though we didn’t really talk things through. I went to the bakery and kept Amparo company in the back-kitchen while she was kneading. She had her sleeves rolled up and was beating the dough as if her life depended on it. She picked up the glob and smashed it against the kneading block. I sat there rolling a string of dough between my hands. When she hadn’t said anything for a half-hour, I started to cry.

“Stop it now,” she said, “everything is okay.” She pulled me to my feet and gave me a kiss on each cheek, which she had refused to do when I arrived. I wrapped my arms around her neck and pulled her towards me. She tensed her back. I felt her shoulders and arms, the muscles in her neck. I’d wanted to pull her closer, feel her arms around me. I was conscious of her upper body, the warmth it gave off. I could smell her. It was the scent of wood fires and dough and something else, something from her. From Amparo. I felt her breasts against mine. They were harder and rounder than my tiny soft breasts, which reminded me of the flat sandwiches the bakery sold on Sundays. I didn’t want to let go, but she pulled away.

“Let’s have coffee,” she said. Brewing coffee on a weekday, just like that, was unusual. She ground the beans and tapped hot water from the reservoir of the wood stove.

The coffee tasted stronger than the coffee at home. Her mother joined us and I vowed to myself to never say anything about the shepherd again.

Even though he came to the village more often these days, my lips were sealed. Sometimes he visited his father who was sick and didn’t have long to live. As usual he first went to the shop run by Amparo’s father to get a shave. His beard wasn’t as long as it used to be, because now he came to town more often. On occasion, he also went to see my mother. Usually to mend something, but he also had a pair of trousers and a vest made, which he wore to his father’s funeral. “Not that many people turned up: his brothers and a few neighbors,” said my mother, who also attended.

I’d stayed home. Though I had wanted to go along. I always looked forward to seeing him. And I even had a yearning to feel his touch. After embracing Amparo, I thought more and more about getting married. I thought of my parents, of their embraces, the looks they exchanged, the brush of their hands. I missed my father, I missed seeing them together, I missed his arms. My body needed to be embraced and cherished. My skin longed to be caressed.
