

The Forgotten Words

Xuan Vincent

translated by Rachel Daniels

1

The morning was drawing to an end, and the market had begun to empty out. A man emerged in the square and took to briskly reviewing the displays. A little later, he had not yet bought anything and seemed disappointed. It was a wave of nostalgia that had driven him to want to rediscover his childhood town in Perche¹, a several-hour drive from his current home. But he had recognized no one and had the unpleasant impression of merely crossing a scene in a postcard. He was getting ready to leave when a strange music startled him. Could it be...?

He seemed to recognize a ghost from his past. Fabien Vannereau saw himself a child again in this same spot, accompanied by his mother. She did not like the gypsies very much and instructed her son not to take pity on the fate of this violin player, who was poorly dressed but nevertheless wore a radiant smile. His arrival would always cause a crowd to gather, and at the end of the day his bowl was often full. It was said he was something of a sorcerer. The child had once, to his surprise, caught the man whispering strange words into the hollow of an old village woman's ear. But it was only from afar that he had heard the man's foreign melodies, at times so cheerful that even the most sensible young lady would have wanted to dance, and at others with such nostalgia that it was difficult to keep from crying.

The violinist had changed but little. His hair was indeed starting to turn white, but his appearance remained just as modest, and his wrinkled face sported the same bright smile. Fabien Vannereau, resting a few steps away, was grieved to see him playing for an audience consisting of only a small boy. The boy eventually went away without saying a word, leaving the musician's bowl practically empty. Yet the violinist continued his music, unperturbed.

"I really appreciate your music."

"These songs were played by my father, and before him by his father, and even before *him* by his ancestors. When the violin sings, I am happy; when it weeps, I am sad. Music, you see, is my whole life."

"I understand you. I am a novelist, and without writing, it seems that I am not really myself." After a moment of silence, he added, "I came here this morning to rediscover my

¹ Perche is an area in and former province of northern France located about two hours from Paris. It is a rich agricultural area famous for its Percheron horses. It is also known for its beautiful manors and castles, which date back to the Middle Ages.

hometown, and you are the only person I recognize. Your music has enchanted me. I don't know how to thank you..."

"The pleasure is mine, monsieur. I would like to offer you my words."

The novelist looked at the musician, puzzled.

"Writers are not the only ones who deliver messages. Music also speaks to someone who knows how to really listen to it. What words have the melodies you've heard inspired for you?"

Fabien Vannereau remained silent a moment. He did not have the musical ear, and expressing his feelings seemed to him a difficult and risky undertaking.

"Let your heart speak. Don't search on the side of reason, and the thoughts will come naturally."

The novelist closed his eyes and concentrated on the music that the violinist had performed since he'd come to the square.

Hope was his first word.

Cavalcade was the second.

Silence arrived a little later.

Freedom came to him next.

Treasure was his fifth word.

Tenderness was the sixth.

Love was his last word.

"You see, it is not so difficult... I am happy to offer you these words. Do not forget them; they could be a great help for you one day." The musician cleared his throat. "Naturally," he added, addressing the novelist with a big smile, "if you dropped a few coins in old Zsikajo's bowl, I would be grateful."

Unceremoniously, Fabien Vannereau responded by handing him a bill. "But how will these words serve me?"

"It is useless to want to understand everything, young man. Keep in mind these seven words. When it is time, they will come to you, and then they will make sense."

At these cryptic words, the novelist took leave of the old man, not knowing what to think of this encounter.

2

Days and then years passed. Fabien Vannereau ended up forgetting the violinist. His hair, in turn, began to grey. On the eve of his fortieth birthday, he had already written his tenth novel, having had a work published each year since he was thirty. What he didn't say was that he gave

away more of them than he sold. But writing was his passion, and he could not imagine himself living other than from his pen.

“I’m here! Is your story making progress?”

At these words, Fabien’s face darkened. The little girl had just asked him the most loathsome question, the one that put him ill at ease more than all others. His novel was not advancing, and it would without a doubt never see the light of day. It had been almost five years since his inspiration had left him, and he had contented himself with publishing works from his youth. The moment success had arrived, he had become an author who no longer wrote. This was his secret tragedy. He had even kept it hidden from his own daughter, so afraid of disappointing those who believed in his talent.

“Don’t worry, Papa. I’m certain your story will appeal to readers!”

The novelist pretended to believe her words. She was so cheerful, so lively, that he did not want to worry her needlessly. At almost twelve years old, Jessica was the spitting image of her mother, who had been taken suddenly by a swift and severe illness five years earlier. Since that day, he could no longer find the strength to write and spent the better part of his days walking along the riverfront. For his daughter, he made an effort not to sink into depression and to live from the sales of his former novels. Soon though, the bailiff was sure to come knocking at their door to seize their house...

His daughter had just departed for her godmother’s house, and he was left alone to face his somber thoughts. He could not stand to do more than pace circles in his office, and the desire came to him to walk on the towpath². There, at the edge of the water, he felt content. At times, it seemed to him that fragments of history were sketched out in his head. Yet to this day, he had still not managed to resume writing his last novel – it remained unfinished.

Hope.

This incongruous word, written in gold letters on the sidewalk and infinitely repeated on the avenue, pulled Fabien Vannereau from his thoughts. It was not the first time he had passed the area of these inscriptions, which had mysteriously appeared a week earlier at the beginning of spring. The first day, he had distractedly paid little attention to them. Who in the world had been able to put such backbreaking effort into incessantly repeating this word? But today he felt irresistibly attracted by these letters. An image imposed itself upon him: an old violinist with a radiant smile playing a frenzied music. Suddenly, the memory came back to him. It had been

² A towpath is a road or trail along the bank of a canal or river used for towing sailboats where the water was too narrow or when the wind was bad. After the Industrial Revolution, most towpaths became trails for pedestrians and bicyclists.

more than five years since this man had offered him words, seven in number if his memory was correct. *Hope*, he was certain of it now, was curiously the first. Without reflecting further, the novelist decided to follow the path of words – up to the very last.

3

Around him, a few passers-by threw curious glances at the letters painted on the ground, but only Fabien Vannereau had undertaken unwinding this mysterious Ariadne's thread³. Perhaps he would find the author? *Hope*. It was a very sweet word, which he was pleased at present to follow, almost as if it were the course of a rejuvenating river.

He followed the avenue just to the edge of the city. At this hour of the day, pedestrians were beginning to clutter the sidewalks, but the novelist, captivated by the seemingly endless inscriptions, paid them no attention.

At the entrance of a meadow, the words came to a halt and Fabien Vannereau stopped, bewildered. What was he doing here? It had been crazy to believe that they would lead him to their author! But the charm of this place kept him from turning back and retracing his footsteps: he found himself in an unknown gazebo covered with strange plants as tall as a man and topped with flowers of every hue. A path led to a rocky precipice in the middle of the meadow, and Fabien decided to take it. When he reached the top of the hill, the novelist rejoiced. A river, meandering sinuously, shimmered below. *Sometimes beauty appears in unexpected ways*, he thought dreamily. In this spring landscape bathed in light, he felt happy. In his carefree state, a sweet torpor took hold of him.

He was being pursued. He ran, but – turning – saw he would soon be joined by his enemies. Was he going to perish in this plain, far away from his beloved daughter? Facing his assailants, he muttered a curse under his breath – this was his last chance. Appearing suddenly as if by magic, a multitude of horses came towards him in a rumble of thunder. One of them, a gorgeous and immaculately white beast with vastly spread wings, stopped at the height of the bluff. To the amazement of his enemies, he leapt onto the animal's back and took flight, hovering for a moment before taking off towards the north.

A whinny startled him. Disoriented, Fabien Vannereau looked around the hill that he had just surpassed, several hundred feet above the ground. But his view from above had disappeared,

³ In Greek mythology, Ariadne was put in charge of the labyrinth of the Minotaur but fell in love at first sight with Theseus, who was to enter the maze and attempt to slay the beast. She thus provided him with a sword and a ball of thread so that he would be able to find his way out again.

just like his winged steed. In its place, a common horse with a grey coat was galloping in the meadow. He must have nodded off, and this animal had pulled him from his dream.

Cavalcade.

The word came back to him. It was – he was certain of it – the second of the seven words the musician had offered him in his hometown so many years ago. His last horseback rides dated far back to when he was still a whimsical adolescent, but Fabien Vannereau saw this as a sign. He whistled three times, as he had done in the past, and the beast came towards him. Soon, he found himself carried far from the gazebo. In departing, the novelist had wanted to return home. But the animal was doing as it pleased. It had shot off at a gallop that almost dismounted him and now continued on its way at full speed, heading even farther south. The rider finally gave up trying to steer the unruly beast. It would wind up getting tired eventually, and then it would be time to return home by some other mode of transportation.

The horse finally stopped in front of a château near the edge of a forest. The novelist dismounted. He was lost, exhausted by the long ride, and eager to ask for hospitality.

“You arrive quite late, monsieur. Do you have a pass?”

“No, I – I forgot it at home,” feigned the novelist.

“Well! Can you tell me, what does he who does nothing do?”

Facing this Cerberus⁴, a redheaded giant with a bushy beard, Fabien Vannereau did not know how to respond at first. Suddenly, the third word from the musician of his hometown forced itself upon him, and he kept quiet.

A few moments later, the man responded.

“You have answered correctly with silence. You can leave your horse at the entrance – he knows the way to the stable. Soon the Countess will have the pleasure of welcoming you in the salon. Before that, however, you must follow a formality. Please come with me.”

Intrigued, the novelist followed the guard’s footsteps. The man had him enter an antechamber cluttered with an unbelievable amount of costumes and masks of all sorts.

“Make your choice. Once you have donned your outfit, ring this bell. Only then can I introduce you into the salon of Diana. Do not forget to wear the required mask!”

After a moment of hesitation, the novelist put on the costume of Mandrake the Magician⁵, one of the characters who had marked his childhood.

⁴ Cerberus, in Greek mythology, is Hades’ three-headed hellhound. It has the tail of a serpent, the claws of a lion, and a mane made of snakes. Cerberus guards the gates to the Underworld, allowing the souls of the dead to enter but never to leave. Its three heads symbolize the past, present, and future.

⁵ Mandrake the Magician is a character from a comic strip by Lee Falk (and later Fred Fredericks) of the same title that was published from 1934 to 2002.

4

The salon was filled with men and women sitting around a great round table and clothed as if for a masquerade. There was a white clown, a Peter Pan, a Columbina⁶, a Tinker Bell, a Zorro, a Count Dracula, and many other characters. Wall frescoes of vibrant hues evoked scenes from mythology, including one of the huntress Diana⁷. A white marble balcony adorned with statuettes of nymphs overlooked the room. Lively discussions were well under way until suddenly a bell brought them to a cease. All eyes turned toward the red giant, who was accompanied by an unknown visitor.

“Mesdames and Messieurs, please welcome Mandrake.”

A seat was added for the newcomer, and Mandrake, the disguised Fabien Vannereau, was invited to come forward. Accustomed to a solitary life, he was not in the habit of socializing, and so his discourse was brief. Remembering the château guard’s recommendations, he took care not to reveal his true identity.

“Would you like some tea, monsieur?”

A charming maid, also masked, served him an English tea. The novelist did not notice the afternoon passing. He exchanged a few words with his neighbors, a willowy fairy and a D’Artagnan⁸, but mostly listened. He quickly realized that the talk here was mainly of literature. A number of the guests were clearly writers like him. At times, the chime of the butler’s bell would be heard when the debate wandered or became too animated. And from time to time, the name of the Countess was uttered. But at the moment of his departure, Fabien Vannereau still had not seen her.

“Will you return soon, Mandrake?”

“It’s possible, Fabiola. I had a very pleasant afternoon, and it would please me to come back.”

With these words, the novelist took leave of his fellow diners. Once in the entrance hall, he found Wilfried, the château guard. Here Wilfried handed him back his clothes and recommended him not to linger in order to keep the identities secret of those remaining in the salon.

⁶ Columbina is a stock character in the Italian Commedia dell’Arte. She is a clever and comic servant; the wife of Perriot, a sad clown stock character; and the mistress of Harlequin, another stock character.

⁷ Diana, in Roman mythology (the equivalent to Artemis in the Greek tradition), is the goddess of hunting and woodlands who has the ability to speak to and control animals. A perpetual virgin, she is nevertheless associated with the moon and childbirth – mothers-to-be prayed to her for an easy birthing experience.

⁸ D’Artagnan is the central character of Alexandre Dumas’ novel *Les Trois Mousquetaires* (or *The Three Musketeers*). He is the friend and fellow swordsman of the Three Musketeers, though he himself is not one of the three.

“How am I going to get home, Wilfried? I don’t know where I am or how to get back to my house.”

“It’s simple. Aladdin, the horse that brought you to the salon of Diana, will take you back to where you came from. To return to the château, blow three times into this silver whistle and soon Aladdin will arrive for you.”

The novelist left as Wilfried described, and shortly before nightfall he reached the gazebo where, several hours earlier, he had first seen this strange grey horse. Finding his way after that was a breeze. The inscriptions of *hope* led him to the edge of the city, and from there he made his way home.

5

More than once in the following days, Fabien Vannereau was tempted to return to the salon of Diana. It seemed to him that at that place he would finally know how to regain the inspiration that had abandoned him so long ago. His spirits felt it. Hitherto usually melancholic, he recovered the drive he’d had before the loss of his dear wife.

“And then, Jessica, who did I see? Count Dracula in the flesh!”

The young girl had immediately been thrilled by her father’s story. She would have gladly accompanied him to this mysterious château where people transformed into masked characters. But he told her that she was still very young and that she could better help his writing by getting good grades in school.

One morning, shortly after his daughter left for her godmother’s, the writer decided to return to the château of the Countess. He walked energetically to the inscriptions. The words *hope* still endured, and they led him to the gazebo without difficulty. There, he blew the silver whistle three times and waited a while. No horse came to meet him – he remained alone in the meadow. He had been a great fool to think to make the beast come back like this!

As he began to lose hope, a neigh made him jump. A grey horse, identical to the one that had brought him to the salon of Diana, made its appearance, advancing at a gentle trot. Fabien Vannereau called it softly by its name, and Aladdin – it was indeed him – approached the novelist. Fabien, like the last time, did not steer. The animal led him, after a long ride, to the château of the Countess.

“Welcome, Mandrake. Your costume awaits you. Do not forget to put it on before entering the salon.”

The novelist, dressed in the magician’s outfit, sat down next to the man referred to as D’Artagnan. This time, he saw the majority of the Countess’s guests arrive, all introduced by the

château guard. Put at ease by his companions, Fabien Vannereau started talking about his last novel, failing, however, to mention that he hadn't written in years. Some faces, all masked like his, were now familiar to him, and he participated readily in the literary debates of the day.

At one point, all eyes turned toward the balcony. Fabien Vannereau discovered a woman dressed in a long black dress that contrasted with the fairness of her hair, which she wore long down her back. Her face, a beautiful oval shape, was covered at the level of her eyes by a cat mask. It was difficult to guess her age, but she was undoubtedly a striking woman.

“Who is that person?” asked Fabien Vannereau.

“That you don't know shows you're still new. That's the Countess. She likes to come to the balcony from time to time. They say she's passionate about literature, but I've never seen her come down to talk with her guests.”

The Countess remained there for quite a while. Now and then, she would grab a spyglass and point it toward the group of authors, always gathered below around the great table. Later, when Fabien Vannereau looked her way, he noticed she had disappeared. The afternoon passed quickly, like the time before, and it was with regret that the writer decided to return home.

6

Fabien Vannereau acquired the habit of returning, whenever the mood struck him, to the salon of Diana. It no longer astonished him that each time he blew into the silver whistle three times – wherever he was – he would shortly see Aladdin the grey horse appear. And each time, the animal led him without fail to the château of the Countess.

In the course of the discussions, the novelist came to understand that he had managed to integrate himself into an exclusive circle without having been invited. All his fellow diners had received a card, signed by the Countess's own hand, inviting them to participate in the events of her salon.

Without his noticing, days and then weeks went by. He came to not let a day pass without visiting this place and to delay his hour of departure each time. There, he felt good – he was once again becoming the writer he had been several years before. He did not know what he was going to write, but his head was teeming with ideas.

One day, when the conversation had put him in especially good spirits, Mandrake was seen rambling about his writings.

“I love your stories, Mandrake. If only life could be so marvelous. I wish I could write stories like I did before, where everything ends happily... but my heart is no longer in it.”

Faced with such a confession and touched by this young woman's despair, Fabien Vannereau felt that he could no longer lie to her.

"I presented my novels as being recent works... But in reality, it has been years since I've written, Fabiola. I hope I haven't disappointed you."

"You could've simply told the truth. You're not the only one here to be deserted by inspiration."

"Since I've been coming to the salon of the Countess, I've regained the desire to write, but I don't yet know what I'm going to say. I encourage you to persevere – it's often in difficult moments that one writes the most beautiful pages!"

"I doubt it. A story that makes the reader sad – who would want to read it?"

The novelist did his best to cheer up the young woman, but in vain.

"I'd like to be able to talk to you, but not here. Be careful – the salon of Diana is not necessarily what you believe."

With these enigmatic words, Fabiola took leave of Fabien Vannereau. Her troubled glance several moments earlier, when she had mentioned the name of the Countess, had struck him. He wondered what painful secret she could be keeping from him.

7

Some time later, Fabien Vannereau recognized Fabiola near the entrance of the château grounds. She was dressed in the strict garments of a ticket clerk, a sharp contrast to the azure fairy costume he'd known her by, and she seemed to be waiting for someone. At his approach, the clear expression of the storyteller, which he discovered unmasked for the first time, lit up. Disregarding the rules – no one was to present themselves with an uncovered face to another of the Countess's guests – the young woman addressed him.

"Hello, Mandrake. I'm happy to see you. My words must've seemed strange to you the other day. If you'd like, I'll tell you why I can no longer write happy stories."

The two writers drew away from the gate of the Countess's grounds and sat themselves out of the guard's sight on a large tree stump.

"You see, before entering the salon of Diana, I was friends with a great poet, Santiago – it was he who introduced me to this place. But he made the mistake of becoming intoxicated while in the company of this inner circle of authors and wanting to stay with them forever. Since last winter, I haven't seen him, but I'm certain that he's here, a prisoner somewhere in the château. It's because of this that I lost the taste for writing pretty tales, and I always come back in the hope of rescuing my friend."

Fabien Vannereau, touched by the young woman's story, promised her that he would do everything he could to uncover some trace of her friend.

8

Over the following days the novelist attempted, while avoiding attracting the Countess's attention, to find clues that would lead him to the poet Santiago – but in vain. It seemed that he had disappeared into nothingness. Meanwhile, Fabien's attraction to the salon of Diana was ever growing. He was now quite often among the first to arrive and the last to leave the château. Only the thought of his daughter made him think to return home before nightfall.

“You are quite the early bird, Mandrake.”

At the sound of this unfamiliar feminine voice, Fabien Vannereau started. He had believed himself alone in the salon and was surprised to recognize the Countess.

“I did not mean to frighten you. I am very fond of your novels – you have the gift of making a great reader such as myself daydream. Could you write me a pretty love story? I will reserve a study for you here in the château and take care of making your work known. You can get settled here in complete tranquility after my guests depart.”

The writer, flattered, was going to acquiesce, when he chanced to see a concerned look from Fabiola, who had entered the room with the quietness of a cat. The Countess broke off and addressed a smile to the young woman.

“Ah, our good-natured fairy. What a pity your stories have become so dismal.”

The storyteller refrained from giving her a dark look and seated herself at the salon's great round table next to Fabien Vannereau. Shortly after, the Countess slipped away and was not seen again that afternoon. That day, time seemed to move slowly to the novelist, who longed to get to work and finally begin the novel he'd been hoping to write for years.

“I'm worried about you, Mandrake. Usually, the Countess never comes down from the balcony. I'm afraid this doesn't bode well for you. I don't want you to suffer the same fate as my friend.”

The novelist reassured her that he was not a novice and that he would be careful.

9

All around him was silent. From the window of the attic, he saw the château grounds and the surrounding woods below. The novelist was delighted at first – he thought that this place

would be favorable for finding inspiration. He positioned himself in front of the *escritoire*⁹, where a large number of blank pages were placed, and started scribbling the outline of a story. Little by little, to his great satisfaction, it began to take form.

“Your meal is served, Mandrake.”

Caught up in his writing, Fabien Vannereau had not heard any knocking. A thickset butler, masked like all the guests of the *château*, stood at the door holding a still steaming tray. Though it was appetizing, the writer swallowed his dinner in haste – he was eager to continue his story. This kept him up until the late hours of the night. Weary, he lay down on the bed next to his *escritoire* and soon fell asleep.

The next day, a ray of summer sun awoke him. His first thought was to reread the last lines of his novel, and then it would be time to make his way home. The moment he wanted to leave his room, the novelist was met with a closed door. Anxious, he took to pounding on it in the hope of being heard.

“Good morning, monsieur. As a security measure, your room has not yet been opened. Next time, use the bell on your bedside table, and I will arrive right away. But what can I do for you? Would you like to have your breakfast?”

“No, thank you – I’m in a hurry to get home.”

“You mustn’t think of that. Do not forget the contract – it stipulates that you are to write in the *château* until your text is published. Now don’t force me to lock your room for the rest of the day.”

“This is not how I understood the Countess’s words.”

The novelist’s protests were futile. The butler proved unyielding, and Fabien Vannereau resigned himself to get back to his *escritoire*. He could see only one way to return to his beloved daughter: finish his novel as quickly as possible.

10

Days passed. More than once, Fabien Vannereau dared to hope that one of the words from the violinist of the square in his hometown would come to his aid, but they offered him no help. His novel, however, written with the frantic energy of despair, advanced with great speed. Consumed by his text, the novelist remained in his office, seeing no one but the butler – whenever it was time to receive his next meal tray – and, more rarely, the Countess. She came to visit him on occasion to exchange a few words before repairing to another part of the *château*.

⁹ An *escritoire* is a small antique writing desk that has drawers and compartments with everything necessary for writing. Large amounts of this desk were produced in France in the 18th century.

One morning, the novelist heard the butler talking with a man he didn't know. He had a hard time catching what they were saying, but the man seemed furious. The conversation stopped abruptly, and Fabien Vannereau heard the heavy footsteps of the butler going down the staircase. Could it be as his friend Fabiola had thought – at that time not so long ago when he could still freely come and go from the château – that there were other authors kept prisoner here? Without further delay, Fabien Vannereau went out into the corridor. Since he had come to this floor, he had not so much as stepped one foot outside his room. This evening, the novelist barely recognized the place, and he realized that he was surrounded by a series of brown doors similar to his own. If the stranger were behind one of them, how would the novelist manage to find him? Not wanting to attract the butler's attention, he returned to his office empty-handed.

Several times during the following days, he thought he heard footsteps outside of his room. He was in the habit of shutting himself up in there. The noises were muffled by the heavy door, and silence would quickly fall again before he had time to locate them. Each time, Fabien Vannereau returned to his office without having come across a living soul. Still, the writer did not lose hope that he would eventually run into someone other than the butler or Countess.

“So, you signed the contract, too – have you been here long?”

This time, Fabien Vannereau had left his room as soon as he'd heard someone walking in the corridor. A man of great elegance and silver temples, no doubt attracted by the door he'd left wide open for once, addressed him thus. Shortly after, he invited Fabien to speak more easily in his room, which was in the middle of the floor. It contained the same basic furniture: an *escritoire*, a bed, a bedside table, and a small adjoining toilet room.

“My name is undoubtedly unfamiliar to you – I am Santiago. It would be impossible to tell you how long I've been here, writing this collection of poetry for the Countess. To tell you the truth, I'm dedicating it to my friend. She must believe me missing, although she is perhaps very close even now, only a few floors away from us.”

This pseudonym was not unfamiliar to him – Fabien Vannereau understood immediately that he was in the presence of the young storyteller Fabiola's friend. So the young woman's forebodings had been accurate: the Countess was holding other authors prisoner in the château attic, one of which was Santiago. The poet immediately inspired his confidence.

“I had stayed late that evening – the day I came to this floor – after having a lengthy discussion with the Countess. She had made me a shimmering gold contract, and it was in complete confidence that I signed that document after barely having read it.”

“That is more or less what happened to me,” responded Santiago.

The two men talked easily until late in the morning. Fabien Vannereau understood why Fabiola was so taken with this complicated poet, and in his presence, he began to hope to escape the château.

“Freedom.”

“Pardon? Are you talking to me, Mandrake?” asked Santiago.

This word, the fourth that he’d pronounced after hearing the musician’s songs in his hometown, had eluded him until now. Santiago’s words became muddled to him. To the surprise of the poet, the novelist rose abruptly and continued in a clear voice:

On my notebooks from school

On my desk and the trees

On the sand on the snow

I write your name

On all the pages read

On all the blank pages

Stone blood paper or ash

I write your name

“Are you okay, Mandrake?”

Fabien Vannereau paused a moment and looked at him – he seemed to be waiting for something. Suddenly, Santiago appeared to understand what was expected of him. He went out into the corridor and continued the poem in a strong voice:

On golden images

On the weapons of warriors

On the crowns of kings

I write your name

On the jungle and the desert

On nests on brooms

On the echo of my childhood

I write your name

One of the corridor doors opened, and a young woman appeared. Her face lit up when she saw the two men. Without hesitating, she continued the poem and then stopped. Soon, the corridor was filled with people, unknown to Fabien a few moments earlier. Each recited an excerpt of the poem.

“What’s all this mess?”

The youngest of the prisoners, a young man scarcely out of adolescence, addressed the final stanza to the butler as a way of response:

And by the power of a word

I begin my life again

I was born to know you

To name you

Freedom

Dismayed by this gathering, the servant attempted to go back downstairs in the hope of sounding the alarm. He was not fast enough – being one man in the face of the group, he was quickly seized by those closest to him and forced to hand over his keys.

Moments later, the small crowd had made its way outside of the château grounds and into a nearby clearing. The sun was at its zenith. Fabien Vannereau blew into his silver whistle three times, and Aladdin, the grey horse, soon appeared at a gentle trot. Santiago wanted to find his friend Fabiola. Surely she was going to arrive soon? But the novelist persuaded him not to wait – they needed to leave now, but there would be plenty of time to return in force and take action against the Countess. From the clearing, each person headed towards the destination that he had been longing to return to for the duration of his imprisonment. It had been weeks for some and even several years for those who had stayed the longest in the château of the Countess.

11

After several gloomy days, the morning promised to be radiant, and so the villagers came out in large numbers. A man with greying hair, accompanied by a charming brunette woman and a fifteen-year-old girl, emerged in the square and took to quickly reviewing the displays. A little later, he had not yet bought anything and seemed disappointed. It was a wave of nostalgia that had driven him to want to rediscover his childhood town in Perche, a several-hour drive from their current home. He was getting ready to leave when a melancholy music startled him. Could it be...?

Fabien Vannereau thought he had rediscovered a ghost from his past. But in place of the old Bohemian, he saw a young violinist whose thin face and, even more so, whose sparkling gaze reminded him of the old man. A middle-aged woman was his only audience. She eventually left, leaving the musician’s bowl full of copper coins. The violinist continued his music without losing the smile that lit up his face.

“I really appreciate your music.”

“These songs were played by my grandfather and all his ancestors before him. The violin is my whole life!”

“Would you happen to be related to the old Zsikajo?”

“Yes, I’m his grandson. Unfortunately, he died last winter... But before his passing, he gave me his violin. When I play, it’s almost as if he comes back to life.”

“I understand you, my boy. You play very well – like your grandfather. I would’ve wanted to thank him again for his music and the words he offered me...”

“My grandfather was something of a magician. I did not inherit his gift and am but a modest musician.”

“You are pleasant to me. Your grandfather, back when I was still young, gave me a wonderful gift. My story would be too long to tell you in full. His words led me to a château, where a countess locked me away. But I don’t blame him too much. During the month of my imprisonment, I found the inspiration to write new novels. And shortly after, during the Countess’s trial, I met a journalist who was moved by my story and who eventually became my wife. I still have three more words, and I offer them to you in good heart. Life has already satisfied me – you will certainly have more need of them than I will. Here they are – repeat them carefully after me so that you never forget them.”

Treasure was the first word uttered by the adolescent.

Tenderness was his second word.

Love was the last.

The young violinist, enchanted, offered the trio his most beautiful music, the same his grandfather had played that could make even the most timid young lady dance. Upon hearing this tune, the writer thought for an instant of Fabiola and her friend Santiago and finally of all the authors from the château of the Countess. Were they happy, too, in this moment? But soon, a slender hand grabbed his wrist. It was his wife inviting him to dance, followed by his daughter and several villagers. The square of the town, on this marketplace morning, took on an air of festivity such as he’d rarely seen before.