



Marcella

Marcella Bianchi always enchanted Nils Fleming. He did not think of her as he would a girlfriend. She was six years older than he. He never wanted to hold her hand or take her to the cinema to watch the latest Audrey de Lejos movie. But from the first moment he saw her through the window of his classroom, walking through the courtyard separating upper from lower school, she fascinated him.

Whenever Nils Fleming heard his mother mention her former student, the first words from her mouth were, “Oh, that Marcella!” And his father, who also taught her in the lower school when she was 9 years old, would simply grip his forehead and say, “Marcella. That Marcella.”

Marcella still intrigued Nils as he followed her up the cobblestone streets of the village of Les Oiseaux. She sauntered in front of him, a bright blue satchel bouncing against her side and a small cage containing a small rabbit hung from her opposite shoulder. She walked by the flower shop and Ms. Orlande’s Emporium of Stunning Apparel. She did not pause at the

frozen custard stand, although he crossed his fingers that she might, but passed it and made her way through the wafting and warm smells of the bakery beside it. Nils stayed close behind her as she took a turn around a corner and quickened his pace so he wouldn't fall too far behind.

“Was she not a good student?” he'd asked his mother.

“Oh, no. She was very bright and completed her assignments on time.”

“Did she talk in class?” he'd asked his father.

“Only when I called on her.”

“Then what is it about her?”

“You could always tell that she never took anything seriously,” his mother interjected.

His father added, “And, well, her eyes are so large and her smile so, so...”

“So mischievous.” Nils' mother pursed her lips after saying it.

His father furrowed his brow. “Yes. Like she knew something you didn't, and that it was something you should know.”

Marcela came from the village of Occhi Grandi, a scattering of houses on the tree covered mountain above Les Oiseaux. His father repeated a well-known saying about them: “They eat unusual grasses and travel good distances.”

His mother scoffed, “That's what they say about their goats.”

Nils' father corrected himself reluctantly. “Ah. You're probably right.”

Occhi Grandi was known for its goat herding—you could see from Les Oiseaux the white and brown dots of their collective herd scattered across the mountain. The animals weren't the only ones associated with Ochi Grandi who liked to wander. Most of the villagers, too, were travelers, a not

unexpected phenomenon given that they spent their early lives above everything, taking in so many sights in the distance that they wanted to explore and sometimes, like Marcella, to settled down in.

Members of our family were strangers here, too, at one time, Nils said to himself, although he never said it out loud to his parents or his two older brothers who would use his remark as another reason to taunt him.

“That’s different,” Guy would likely say. “Everybody knows that.”

“The Fleming family has lived here at least a decade. Or ten years.” Nils’ brother Boris wasn’t very good with math. “Everybody knows that, too, Nils.”

Nils was certain that, if such a conversation were to take place, his parents would pretend they didn’t hear him, because the topic of when they arrived in Les Oiseaux was always a sensitive one.

Marcella finally stopped and Nils did, too, after ending his brief visit with his distracting thoughts. He paused well before he reached the abandoned shop with its broken window and shingles falling from its roof. Nils knew that building because he always passed it on the way home from school. What could Marcella possibly want at that place?

Marcella didn’t seem to notice him a half block to her right when she pulled a skeleton key from her pocket and opened the door to a flurry of paint chips settling to the ground. She went inside and shut the door behind her.

Nils took a few steps slowly until he reached the broad but very clouded and dirty window with its jagged bread from top to bottom right in the middle. He found a streak where the grime wasn’t so thick and peered inside. Marcella meandered around the deserted shop, empty except for a wooden display case with a glass front. She cradled her elbow in her hand

as she walked and tapped on the tip of her nose with one finger of the other. Nils' gaze crawled to the ceiling of ornate but rusted tin, followed the dark trail of a roof leak along the top of one wall, and lowered it to fix on a high forehead and very large eyes that stared back at him. Marcella lifted the corners of her mouth slightly pausing for a few moments before she disappeared behind the dark curtain of grime pasted to the window.

The door opened. "Aren't you Nils Fleming?"

"Yes."

"Then come in."

Slowly Nils stepped to the door and slipped inside to be greeted by a cloud of light dust and an unpleasant musty smell.

"I thought I saw you following me here. Is there something you wanted to talk to me about?" She scanned the ceiling without waiting for his answer.

"No. I. Just. Like your bird."

"Thank you." She didn't look his way. "This is my new candy shop. What do you think?"

He didn't respond for a few moments. "You're opening a candy shop?"

"I finished my post-academy studies in confection management and I'm ready to put that to use." Her voice trailed off, as if she'd just given a brief presentation that no longer interested her.

"I'm glad you have a plan." Nils could hardly hear himself talk his voice was so low.

"Upstairs is a small apartment where I'll live while I work here during the day. Nils," she said as if an idea had just sprung into her mind and she finally looked directly at him. "Would you be willing to help me? I could pay

you. Not much, but maybe two quarter francs for each afternoon you come by? Double that for several hours on Saturdays?”

Nils wasn't absolutely sure what to answer. He had other plans but the prospect of candy and money to pay for the next installments of the Adventures of Louis and Louise that he'd seen at the bookshop finally dislodged the answer he'd been holding between his slightly gapped front teeth. “I'd be happy to help you, Marcella.”

“Good. Pick up a broom and we'll start right away.” Marcella grabbed a mop and bucket from one corner for herself.

That afternoon when he arrived home, Nils thought it best not to mention to his family that he was helping Marcella. At dinner he announced he would be spending his afternoons and Saturdays at the small village library, which would have been true if he hadn't received Marcella's offer.

Nils came to the shop one Saturday morning and saw Marcella again tapping her nose and looking about. “Nils, I would like to name this Marcella's Candy Shop. What do you think?”

“Well, I...” How could he break it to her that so many people would associate the candy with her and might not come in? “I think you should name it something, well, more descriptive.”

“Maybe you're right. I know that people think of me as someone who thinks she knows more than they do.” Having worked with her for a while, Nils had come to believe that their view of her was somewhat accurate. “I know what to name it.” She reached for a paint brush and began to sketch a few words on the board resting on a table in the middle of the room.

The following week, after Nils returned from a visit to his grandparents in the country, he found the place to be even more

transformed. A sign hung above the door with a pair of smiling lips painted over the words, “Bouches Animés Candy Shop,” Inside, colorful paintings filled the walls and the wood of the display cases gleamed with oil. Behind the glass, white plates held candies of many colors, colors like none Nils had ever seen before.

“Would you like some ice custard? Today’s flavor is berry.” Marcella held out a small cup cradling a dome of milky white threaded with purple.

Nils took it and ran the cold goodness over his tongue. “It’s tangy.”

“That’s because it’s made of goat milk cream. I’m glad you like it.”

“It’s beautiful, Marcella. I never would have thought you could turn this into such a place.”

She opened the case from the back and pulled out a plate of blue candies. “Try these. They’re Himalayan snow candy.” Nils picked one up and placed it on his tongue. It disappeared rapidly, leaving behind a puff of cold air in his mouth and a vivid memory of a snowy landscape off a high peak, even though Nils had never climbed a mountain before.

Marcella tapped under his chin. “I always have to remind people to close their mouths when they taste these.”

“But how did you...?”

“The people of my town do not eat grasses, but we do travel distances. And as we’ve traveled through the years, all types of recipes for candy have returned to us. Many of these are created with very special products from a very special emporium.” Marcella closed the display case. “Now, I expect that you will continue to work on the weekends, except when you have to visit someone, and that you’ll help me with clean up then on a couple of days a week of your choosing. If you work for me faithfully, I can teach you how to make all of these. You’ll find that to be important someday.”

“I should be available those times.” Nils felt very pleased that he could continue to work with Marcella and the prospect that she’d teach him her secrets made him very happy.

“This is for you.” She handed him a piece of paper.

He turned it over but couldn’t read the very small printing. “What is it?”

“It’s a promissory note for your work these last four weeks. I should be able to make good on it by the end of the month.”

Nils stuffed the paper in his pocket, disappointed that he wouldn’t be able to visit the bookshop yet and buy what he wanted. His list of books had grown very long.

In spite of not yet being paid, Nils continued to work with Marcella. Almost immediately she introduced him to each of the many types of candy she made. Orange blossom drops from Siam. Cardamom nut clusters. Turkish delight. Dark chocolate candies shaped like tiny bowls that occasionally emitted puffs of smoke. A deep red sour cherry that darted around inside the mouth of anyone who tried to consume it.

Each candy left a memory. Of riding on an elephant. Navigating a frothy river. Sailing over a field of dandelions attached to a giant kite. But for a week, no one seemed interested in the shop and much of the candy went to waste. Then one day, a very small girl, a hat perched on her mounds of tight amber curls, came inside. She spent a long time surveying the different candies without speaking until she handed Marcella one coin. “A daffodil cream, please.”

Marcella smiled her usual half smile and placed two pieces of the golden candy into a small bag. “You’re Penelope Moraine, aren’t you? Please tell your mother I enjoyed studying art with her at her studio.”

“I will,” the girl said in a voice much like a new baby’s if it could talk. She took her candy and went on.

“I’ve never seen her before,” Nils said.

“She’s been looking in the window every afternoon for the last few days. I’m glad she finally got up the courage to come inside. I hope she’ll be back. Now, Nils, this is a good time for me to show you how to make the candy.”

Nils perked up, even as he wondered who he was making the candy for.

That afternoon Marcella showed him how to create the sugar dough, kneading it against the marble slab in the back of the shop. After showing Nils when it was the right consistency, she went to a cabinet and opened it to reveal shelves of small brown bottles. She studied the bottles before selecting one with a green label.

“This one is very special,” she told Nils. “It’s Irish clover essence.” She pulled out the dropper and counted to seven as each drop of essence splattered onto the dough. “Always seven and never more or less for any of these.” She returned the bottle to the cabinet, closed the door and locked it with the flick of her fingers over a small wooden panel.

“You should know, Nils,” she told him as she worked the essence into the dough which slowly turned from frosty and colorless to a bright green color. “That I purchase the essences from a small shop on the Rue des Reves on the outskirts of Paris.”

The bell on the front door sounded. Nils followed Marcella out into the main room of the shop. The girl had returned, but this time with a woman holding her hand and looking very stern. “My daughter tells me that you have candy that makes you hallucinate gardens. Is this true?”

“Bonjour, M. Krauss. I just told your daughter this morning how much I enjoyed your painting class. Would you like to try the daffodil cream?”

The little girl’s mother seemed reluctant, but finally held out her hand. “Penelope shared one piece of the candy with me, but I never expected...” She looked at the yellow candy resting in her palm, then popped it into her mouth. Her face lit up and she drew in an obvious breath through her nose. “I can smell the flowers. How do you do this, Marcella?”

“I use only the finest flavorings for my candy, M. Krauss.”

“I see. Well, I would like a dozen of these.”

“I’ll box them up.”

Not within days but within hours word had spread of Marcella’s wonderful candy and a trickle of villagers turned to a stream as they lined up through the door of the shop. Well before closing time, Marcella placed a sign on the door: “No more candy today. Please come back tomorrow.”

Over the following two weeks, business increased and, as much as Marcella made more of the candy than she’d made the day before, she still had to place the sign on the door, earlier and earlier in the day. She hired Nils every afternoon after school, and soon after that, gave a job to little Penelope, too, who proved to be quite efficient at making candy. Nils found that he had to work later and later, and often came home so tired that he immediately went to bed after supper and always turned down dessert. It didn’t take long before he had to admit to his parents where he went every day after school and every Saturday.

At first, Nils’ parents, once they found out where he went, tried to stop him from working there. “You have schoolwork that needs to be done, son,” his father told him.

“But I do finish my homework and I’m not falling behind.” Luckily Marcella gave him breaks to do his tasks when the crowds thinned or he’d never have time to finish.

“What does Marcella tell you?” His mother elevated one brow.

“She tells me how to make candy. That’s all.” And I think of her as a friend, he thought to himself, but didn’t say it.

The next afternoon, Nils was surprised to look up from placing a new batch of candy in the case and seeing his parents walk through the door of the shop. “Madame and Monsieur Merkel-Fleming. What candy would you like today?” Marcella did not acknowledge that they’d both been her teachers.

“We just came to...” Nils’ mother scanned the case, dazzled by the choices, it seemed. “What’s that?”

“Ah, Andean marzipan. It’s perfect for the open minded person.” She reached in and plucked several from the plate and handed one to each of Nils’ parents.

They studied the candies before reluctantly biting into them. Nils’ mother was first to react. “These are delicious and...what’s this? Who are these people with large eyes? And where am I? And will I fall?” She stared at something at Marcella’s feet, something only she could see.

“For a brief moment, you walked the forbidden portion of the Inca Trail with some of my relatives,” Marcella said. “It happens all the time.”

“They’re quite skilled at climbing. And very nice. One shared his drink with me.” Nils’ mother wrinkled her brow as she seemed to exit the memory. “The candy is delicious, but I’m not very fond of the hike, I have to admit.”

“I’m sure they were happy to have you along regardless.” Marcella closed the display case.

“Possibly,” Nils’ mother answered.

When Nils looked at his father, he seemed very pleased at wherever the candy took his imagination because he couldn’t stop laughing.

“Could I?” His mother pointed at a deep red candy. “Try that one.”

“Of course.” Marcella reached inside the case to fulfill Nils’ mother’s wishes.

From that point on, Nils’ family were regular customers and his parents no longer objected to his working there, though they did insist that he limit his hours so he still had time for school work and reading and hiking in the woods on Saturday mornings. Marcella then hired two others, a girl and a boy, to help her as well.

As time went on, Marcella’s shop became a fixture of the village of Les Oiseaux. Nils and Penelope grew up and continued to work at the shop, and fortunately Marcella finally made enough money to regularly pay them. They learned to make all matter of sweets, including iced custard, and in time, came up with their own ideas for different candies and sweets. Nils eventually finished school and was accepted into the program for the study of confectionery at the local university.

At the end of one day, Marcella and Nils finished cleaning up together after Penelope, in her last year of school, went home early to study for an exam the next day. As Marcella pulled the empty platters from the display cases, she told him, “Nils, it has always been a pleasure working with you.”

He looked up. “Thank you, Marcella.” She’d never said anything like that before. Instead of her mischievous smile, the corners of her mouth barely turned upward at all.

As he looked in her eyes, visions slowly appeared and drew him in. He found himself in a small boat on a churning sea, rising on a wave to meet a path on a cliff that took him through a forest of evergreens. He ran the path as soft as a pillow and at the end of the path, bounced toward the clouds that carried him for a while through the sky until he dropped down into the canopy of a rainforest surrounded by howling monkeys and brilliant red and blue parrots.

“Are you all right, Nils?”

Nils blinked and shook his head. “Oh, yes. I’m fine.”

“Good.” Marcella picked up the empty platter and took it away.

The next morning, Nils came into the shop and saw Penelope peering down at a card in her hand, one solitary tear rolling down her cheek.

“What is it?” Nils asked.

“It’s Marcella. She’s gone.”

“What?” Nils took the card from her.

“Nils and Penelope, it’s time for me to travel for a while, to have new adventures and open new candy shops and discover new confections. I’ll send you letters to share those. In the meantime, the shop belongs to both of you. Over the last year, I divided the apartment upstairs which was too large for me into two apartments with one shared kitchen. You’re both welcome to live there while you finish your studies. And please take care of the rabbit. Her name is Laurette.”

Nils wasn’t sure what to think and he wanted to cry himself. Instead he set aside his sadness and told Penelope, “It’s time to make the candy this afternoon. We promised everyone the lavender-lemon kisses.”

“I know,” Penelope wiped away the tear. “Everyone seems to be excited to try those.”

Nils put on the apron and went to the back room leaving Penelope to open the door to the line already forming. He thought of where Marcella might be travelling and what she might see. Just as he stepped into the back room, his eyes caught sight of something on a table. There, he found two small plates, each with one bright pink round on it. One had a small piece of paper with his name labeled on it and Penelope's on a paper in front of the other. When he picked up the pink candy and took a bite, he immediately found himself walking a path with a forest on one side and a stream beside it, breathing in the fresh air filled with the scent of flowers and woods. In front of him, he saw Marcella, walking briskly up the path, her blue satchel bouncing against her side.