

Chapter 17

As soon as the old motor boat approached the quay, Vika jumped off and started piling up the hides haphazardly, while her husband Yapani, after properly mooring his boat, slowly took out the harpoons, the knives, the sealskin tent and the fish for the drying-house...

“Quicker, man, quicker...I’m looking forward to meeting Babik!” His wife spurred him, loading on her shoulders the skins that had to be tanned. She was a small and well-built young woman, with a large and rosy face.

“Of course...” Yapani replied and continued to work as slowly as before.

Vika walked ahead of him, trotting home with the heavy load, bending her back to support it, but with a really joyful heart. She thought to herself “I’m going to meet my little one, my cute fluffy one!”

When she arrived close to the wooden house that had outside walls made of earth, she called

“Babik! Babik!”

No answer came from the house and Vika rushed in like a gust of wind, placed her load in a corner and looked around. ..What she saw was a dirty floor full of rubbish, dirty dishes on the table, seal oil spread all over the bench, close to the lantern that was switched-off ...

“Babik, where are you?” She called again.

Lying down on a bed that hadn’t apparently been made for ages, was an old woman smoking a big cigar, who looked at her with liquid eyes and said in a rasping voice “He’s not here.”

“Not here? Do you mean my Babik’s not here?” Vika opened her large slanted eyes wide and her cheeks flushed “And where the hell have you sent him?”

The old woman made a vague gesture;

“He’s in the south.”

“In the south? My Babik? And why?!” Vika broke out.

“The Social Services came and took him away...It’s all written on the papers over there...” The old woman muttered, pointing to a creased piece of paper that had yellowed, that was partly lying on a shelf and partly hanging down from it, among salted herrings and chipped bowls.

“Why? I say, why?!” Vika broke out again, but the old woman shrugged her shoulders and didn’t give her more information. After all, she couldn’t obviously tell her young daughter-in-law that, when the people of the Social and Educational Department had come to the house, she hadn’t been able to tell them where her son and daughter-in-law had gone; nor could she say that, at that very moment, they had found Babik covered with dirt, playing in the rubbish behind the herring tinning factory; and that when they had come in, they had found her quietly smoking her cigar in bed, while the old man was at the drugstore, drinking and having fun with his

fellows, who were all drunk, so much so that they challenged one another to stupid fight games. Furthermore, how could she tell her daughter-in-law that, before Babik had been taken away by this skinny woman, this lady had also left a handful of money on the shelf...even if the money wasn't there anymore because it had been immediately spent at the drugstore, for cigars and candies for herself and beer for the old man? She definitely couldn't tell her all this; the young woman was already so noisily angry!

"Yapani...Babik's not here!" Vika cried, walking towards her husband as he came in, carrying his own load of hides.

"Not here?" Said the small man doubtfully.

"He's been taken away!" Vika screamed.

"Away?" Yapani repeated, scratching his head.

"Your mother says the Social Department came and took him away to the south!"

"She says they took him to the south..." Yapani made a mental note. He had a plain voice and was a quiet man. His thoughts moved around very slowly in his head.

"You ought to get your mother to tell us where they took him!" The wife furiously spurred him.

Yapani turned to the old woman, who was still smoking her cigar and staring at the ceiling, "Isn't Babik here anymore?"

"He's not here" the woman croaked without flinching.

"But I want him back, I want my Babik back now!" Vika sobbed. Yapani looked at his wife's tears in dismay. His father walked in with unsteady steps right then and Yapani announced with a plain voice "Vika's crying."

"I see." The man answered quietly.

"What are we supposed to do?" Yapani asked again, anxiously.

"Make her stop it." The old man muttered, walking to the shelf and pouring himself a drink.

"I want my Babik back and you, man, you have to go and get him back!" Vika screamed.

"Go and get him back?" Yapani's voice repeated after her, in panic.

"But I...I've got the caribou hides to spread out in the sun, I've got the engine to oil and the hooks to fix..." He listed in detail.

"Najugka vnjsavuse!" Vika mumbled. In their language, this meant more or less "No way. Tomorrow you'll be exactly where I am." And she ran outside holding the papers tight in her hand.

She ran past a long row of wooden huts of several different colours, heading straight for the big building with the *bureau* sign on top.

Left on his own, Yapani felt very relieved and went out with his hides followed by his old father. Together the two men started spreading the hides and together they stopped and stared at the sun. So pale, that it was not strong enough to illuminate the morning.

"You had a good hunt." The father said.

"A good hunt..." Yapani confirmed with satisfaction. "And good fishing too."

A rather tall man with an unmistakable Eskimo face, peeped out from the door of the nearby cottage, saw them and then came towards them exclaiming cheerfully “A good hunt, wasn’t it?”

“And good fishing too!” The old man added grimly. He’d never liked Akai, who was always so glossy and spruce. He found the flashing colour of his new house very disturbing to the eyes.

“My daughters work at the local handicraft store.” Akai informed them proudly.

“They work at the local handicraft’s.” Yapani agreed, carefully spreading out his hides.

“And my wife works at the factory with me.”

“At the factory.” Yapani made another mental note.

As he realized that his astonishing news had no effect at all, the man changed the subject.

“You and your wife were supposed to be missing...” He announced.

“Missing, really?” Yapani chuckled.

“And someone said you would never come back alive!” Akai continued.

Yapani laughed loudly and the old father joined him.

At that very moment, Vika appeared at the end of the lane and ran towards them waving some papers.

“They told me everything!” She announced, panting. “We’re leaving right now!”

“Leaving?” Yapani replied, astonished.

“Of course, leaving! In two and a half hours, we’re going to catch a coach to the place where airplanes take off. Come in, we’ve got to get ready!”

She rushed in the house and Yapani followed her, feeling very anxious.

“Where are they going?” Akai asked, his eyes shining with curiosity.

“Southwards.” Was the old man’s short reply, then he left too and joined the others in the house.

“Hurry up, come on, quick!” Vika recommended to her dazed husband and in the meantime, she went to and fro between the chest of drawers and the bed, piling up her good pullover, the heavy one with coloured lozenges, the sealskin trousers and the caribou boots; “We’d better look suitably well, we have to be tidy!” She panted. The old man started poking the flame, while Yapani stared at his wife, scratching his head.

“And now you, man, go and get your work done. And then come back here, I’m going to get you something to eat, and then wash you.” Vika commanded.

“You’re going to wash me?” Yapani said, puzzled.

“I’m going to wash you, to dry you up and I’m going to dress you with your good clothes.” Vika made fun of him, excited at the idea of a long journey southwards searching for Babik.

“And... what about the money?” Yapani objected.

“I’ve got the money and also the tickets, everything!” Vika answered briefly. “They gave me all we need at the Bureau. They dared not to refuse a mother, permission to see her child.” She added seriously. Then, even more excited, she added “Go now!”

Yapani didn't have to be told twice and rushed happily out. Shortly after, Vika heard him laughing with his father, who had followed him silently out in the yard.

"What are you laughing about, you silly man?" Vika muttered, cooking a rich fish soup under the goggling eyes of her mother-in-law, who was still lying in bed.

The fragrance of good fish and the smell of fat spread out through the house made the old woman raise her head and show some interest in the world around herself;

"I'm hungry." She said.

"I'm almost ready." Vika answered.

She prepared a big soup bowl for the old woman, then she went out to call the two men who came in very promptly slapping each other's backs. They were very happy to be together again, after all those months apart.

They were still slurping their soup, when Vika stood up, went outside and came back in rolling a broad tub that they normally used to pickle fish. She placed the tub next to the wall, scraped its bottom with a long knife, then filled it with water.

"And now come and get washed!" She said.

Yapani swallowed the remains of his soup, dreading that his wife could take his bowl away from him. His fear was actually well-founded, as Vika came towards him holding some soap and dragged him to the tub.

"Come and get washed!"

Yapani obeyed and let the woman's strong soapy hands mangle him, under the indifferent look of his mother, who had started smoking again. His father, who sat beside the table for another drink, scratched his belly and giggled "Yapani's letting her wash him!"

Vika was now like a crazy thunderstorm and Yapani knew that when his wife's mind was set on something, he'd better have no reaction. Therefore, he let her scratch him properly, dress him and put his shoes on and when he was clean, tidy, dressed up and with vermilion ears, he was allowed to go out into the yard and take a look at his hides.

Vika wore her good clothes, gathered up her black hair into a beautiful embroidered bonnet, packed some things for Babik, gathered the tickets and the papers and walked out, telling the old man

"We'll be back in one or two days."

"In one or two days." He repeated.

Vika and Yapani ran down the lane, while Vika spurred him

"Come on, hurry up...the Kabluna told me that our coach would be waiting for us in front of the co-op!"

When the sound of their steps was no longer to be heard in the quiet air, the old man slowly sat back down beside the table and poured himself another drink.

The old woman, lying still on her bed, kept her eyes closed and looked as though she was sleeping.

They remained like that for a while, then the old woman's rasping voice broke the silence.

"Are you still there?"

"I'm still here." The old man confirmed.

“Have you drained the whole bottle already?”

“Nearly.”

Another long silence, after which the woman burst out furiously

“We’re good for nothing!”

“Good for nothing?” The man moved about on the bench and felt awkward.

“Yes, good for nothing! We’re just a burden on Yapani’s shoulders!”

The old man scratched his head thoughtfully but didn’t answer.

“In the past, when old people realized they had become a burden to the young, they went away and waited for the big sleep.” The woman added. “And it was a good thing...for everyone!”

“But Yapani has never complained!” The old man replied whispering.

There was complete silence again, except for the woman’s slightly labored breathing.

And soon she started talking

“This house is a like a pigsty!”

“A pigsty?” The old man objected weakly.

“How could Babik be happy in such a pigsty?”

The man shrugged his shoulders, then poured himself another drink with his shaky hands and waited for his wife to go on talking. He didn’t have to wait too long.

“But after all, you don’t care if we’re living in a pigsty, do you?”

The old man would have liked to react and say it wasn’t true, that he missed his fluffy Babik too, that everyday he had to gulp down several drinks to forget his sadness...And yet, he knew he wasn’t any good at talking and above all, he knew nonetheless that his words wouldn’t have appeased the woman’s anger.

“I’m going out...” He said, and stood up.

“You’re going to the store again, aren’t you? To drink away your son’s sweat with your stupid mates!” The woman tackled him.

“I’m going to get some tobacco and candies for you and also some herrings for dinner...” He promised, to calm her down. He swiftly walked to the door, closed it softly behind his back and cheerfully walked towards the store.

Alone in the house, the woman started staring at the blackened rafted ceiling and thought “ And now I’m going to get up, clean the house and cook some dinner...”

And yet she didn’t move... “I’m too old, just too old and too tired for life!” She sighed.

When Vika and Yapani arrived at the small square, they saw the little coach waiting at the bus stop and slowed down, feeling nervous. At that very moment, a man wearing a peak hat came out of the bureau and walked towards them; he took Vika’s papers, examined them and said shortly

“Please get on.”

As soon as they had climbed up the steps, the coach left. Yapani’s stunned eyes watched from the window the landscape that was quickly passing by. He had arrived a few hours ago from the silent Arctic Lands, where time was marked by the slow pace of the polar seasons and now he was finding it quite difficult to adapt to all this mess. He leaned back exhausted and turned up his nose at the awkward smell of soap

that came from his own body. It was definitely less comfortable to him than his usual and reassuring smell of seal fat.

“I’m sure my little Babik is unwell.” Vika whispered with a crying voice, sitting upright beside him.

“Babik can’t be unwell!” He said, to make her feel better.

“And how can he be fine...he’s all alone, in the south, with people he doesn’t even know?!” Vika screamed. Yapani, who had already closed his eyes and was falling asleep, startled with fear, but couldn’t find an answer.

After all, also his heart was carrying the burden of the absence of his little round-faced Babik and of all the times he had happily danced holding him in his arms.

“I’m sure he’s fine. He must have grown up a lot...” He said, in a sleepy voice.

“Grown up?” Vika stared at him thoughtfully “You mean that the boots I’ve just bought for him at the store won’t fit him now?” She murmured doubtfully, unwinding the boots’ wrap that she’d been carefully hiding under her arm.

Yapani grabbed one of them and used his teeth to test the soles’ firmness.

“Good boots...” He stated, like a real expert would do.

“But do you think they’ll fit him?”

“They’ll be ok.”

Reassured, Vika began to look out of the window, dreaming about her little Babik running into her arms, with a bright smile on his round face.

Close to her, Yapani had already fallen asleep and now he was snoring peacefully.

Shortly later, the driver turned and parked next to an iron hangar. Then, he signalled them to get off.

“Wake up man, wake up!” Vika said, shaking Yapani as vigorously as she could.

Yapani opened his bewildered eyes and failing to understand where he was, he muttered something and let his wife pull and drag him to the take-off strip, where a small aeroplane was ready for them.

“Hurry up...hurry up!” Vika panted, while the driver handed Vika’s papers to the pilot. The two were told to get onboard and the plane immediately started rolling on the grassy strip, to slowly lift into the air and head southwards.

Vika gazed at Yapani, who was sitting beside her with a sweating face and vague eyes and she smiled at him.

Then, relieved, she leaned back and tried to sleep. They - the whites - were dealing with their issue now. They had filled-in the papers; they had made very precise resolutions over the phone; they would make Babik come out of the misty South by magic and run into her arms. From the window, she saw the bare mountains underneath them; then the mountains turned into immense lakes that were quickly replaced by water mirrors surrounded by birches, green prairies cut across by blue rivers, and thick forests.

“This place is nice. It’s huge...” She wondered.

“Huge...” Yapani confirmed, dozing beside her.

Chapter 18

It was night-time when Kateri, Luigi, Ernesto, Chiara and the children got off the coach that had driven them back home from the camping site. Armed with bags, bundles and wrappings, they entered the house with a sigh of relief from the backyard gate.

“It looks like we’re going to have plenty of leaves to rake!” Luigi smiled, watching the golden carpet of leaves that the wind had scattered all through the lanes.

“And also the gate is slightly rusted!” Kateri stated.

The two men withdrew themselves into the shack to replace their angling equipment, while Babik, Valentina and Matteo ran to the meadow to set the bowling green straight, as it had been heavily shattered by the moles’ tunnels and by the gophers’ holes. Kateri meanwhile started unpacking and Chiara walked to her room.

Behind the window, a couple of squirrels were going up and down the tree branches, looking extremely busy and from her room, Chiara could see a wagging tail or a gimlet pair of eyes.

“What will they have to deal with so urgently?” She wondered laughing and showing the two animals to Kateri, who was passing by her door carrying armfuls of washing.

“They are making provisions.” Kateri said “Winter’s approaching.”

“Winter?” Chiara felt a pang in her heart. “In our country it will be autumn very soon and the schools will start again, with new teachers, new mates, and new problems...”

Upon these words, they heard Asa’s joyful and excited barking

“Let me have a look...” Chiara said, leaving her room and walking past the bathroom, where Kateri was busy around the washing machine.

She went to the door and looked outside. There were two people, a man and a woman, wrapped up in very heavy clothes, standing by the gate, with Asa in front of them, who kept barking at the top of his lungs. Then, he dog rushed to the man, placed his forelegs on the victim’s chest and started to enthusiastically licking his face. On the street, leaning against a police van with folded arms, was a young man in his uniform having a lot of fun watching the scene.

As the man hugged and stroke Asa’s big head laughing loudly, the small woman moved a few steps forward, gazing at the garden where Babik had suddenly showed up with a little ball in his hand and a bowl in the other, followed as always by Valentina and Matteo.

“Babik!” The woman called running towards him, but the child didn’t approach her and looked embarrassed; she held him in her arms and the child tried to smile, then she turned round and showed him to the man, triumphantly. The man walked towards Babik too and smelled him carefully, stroking his face against the child’s.

“He’s grown up.” Vika said with sparkling eyes.

“Grown up.” Yapani agreed.

“He’s well dressed, and fluffy.” Vika continued, touching Babik’s green dungarees, that smelled as fresh washing.

“Well dressed.” Yapani agreed.

Kateri, who had just appeared on the door, recognized them and exclaimed “Babik’s parents!” And immediately she ran outside to welcome them in the Eskimo language.

When she realized that Kateri spoke their language, Vika blushed with joy and started talking to her excitedly, showing her a bundle of papers. Yapani stood aside, feeling slightly awkward.

Kateri took them into the dining room, where the couple took a seat on the sofa’s edge, still feeling ill at ease. Kateri then moved to the kitchen and prepared some drinks and cookies, while Vika looked around admiringly.

Chiara went back into her room, and continued to tidy her things away. However shortly after, she heard Valentina screaming in the next room

“That’s not true, I’m not crying!!!”

What followed was a confused murmuring that made Chiara walk into the girl’s room, for fear that the girl was fighting with Matteo. Valentina lay face downwards on the bed with her shoulders sobbing up and down.

“She’s crying because Babik’s leaving.” Matteo announced seriously.

As she saw Chiara, Valentina’s despair doubled “Matteo’s leaving and Babik’s leaving...And I...I’m going to be alone...” She cried desperately.

“How do you know that Babik’s leaving?” Chiara asked, sitting down beside her.

“Yes, he’s leaving, I’m sure he is! They’ve come here to take him away with them!”

Valentina went on crying.

In that precise moment Babik showed up on the door, smiling gently as usual, and looking confused. When he realized that Valentina was still crying, he moved a few steps forward dragging his feet and his big inlaid-leather boots. He gazed at her thoughtfully, then reached out a hand and put a little soapstone statue beside her. It portrayed a smiling she-bear sitting on its hind-paws.

“It’s so beautiful!” Chiara said, examining it with great attention “Did you get it from your mum?” Babik nodded and his round face smiled brightly; then he raised one foot to proudly show his boots.

“Did your mum bring these too?” The child nodded again.

Valentina sat up on her bed wiping away the tears with the back of her hand, looked at the statue and at the boots, and...began to cry again!

Babik’s face suddenly crumpled, he closed his eyes and burst into tears too. Then, dragging his feet again, he walked into the dining room, went close to Kateri and said something in her ear, with a very serious expression on his tiny face.

Kateri turned to Vika, who was watching with great attention. Her very dark eyes confided affection between Babik and the unknown woman. Kateri explained to her smiling “He’s telling me that my daughter Valentina’s crying...”

Vika’s face brightened and while Kateri went to see Valentina, she took Babik on her lap, smelled him and turned to Yapani saying “He smells of soap...”. The man’s face showed the utmost reluctance; “Soap...” He muttered. “Would you like to come home with us?” Vika asked the child.

Babik's face looked perplexed, which made Vika's heart ache painfully. Trying to keep smiling, she asked again "Would you rather stay here?"

Babik nodded.

"And...do you love mum and dad?"

He nodded solemnly again.

Vika held him tightly "My little darling." She said tenderly. Then she pushed him away, stood up determinately and said peremptorily to Yapani "Let's go, man!"

"Go?" The man marveled.

"Definitely. I want to go back home, right now. I've got so many things to do!" After saying this, she grabbed him by the arm and dragged him out. When she was at the door, she spoke quickly into Babik's ear and the bewildered child nodded again.

Kateri joined them when they were already by the gate.

"We're leaving." She informed Kateri firmly; "We're going to leave our little Babik with you for the long winter, as you suggested. So he'll have a chance to go to school." She wanted to smile, but couldn't. Dreading to see her own tears burst out of her eyes, she quickly turned to her husband and together they walked back to the police van.

"Whenever you feel like seeing him, please come over...or else let me know about it, and I'll bring him to you." Kateri promised.

"Of course..."

The couple now seemed very eager to leave. They waved goodbye and got into the van next to the policeman.

Standing by the door, Babik waved his little hand too, while the van did a U-turn and disappeared behind a bend.

"Is he staying with us?" Valentina asked, running to her mother.

"Yes, he's staying." Kateri answered

"I'm sooooo happy!!!!" The girl exalted. Then she took Matteo and Babik by the hand and the three of them played a cheerful ring a ring o' roses, supported by an enthusiastic barking Asa.

"You're just a little silly woman!" Yapani burst out in rage, as soon as the house had disappeared in the distance.

"You travel the world to get your child back and then you run away!"

"And you're nothing but a big stupid man!" Vika replied; "I'm not running away. I've just left him where he's going to be well. Babik's fat, Babik's happy, Babik's learning, Babik's got to stay there..." Her voice was trembling, and she stopped talking.

"We are his family, though!" Yapani stated.

"What family are we talking about?!" Vika attacked. "The two of us? Travelling all summer? You mother and father maybe? Babik needs good food, a clean and tidy bed, warm clothes. You heard the skinny woman's words, didn't you? Babik's got to go to school and learn the language of the white too." Vika explained with sparkling eyes.

“Meanwhile, I’m going to make a nice house for him, with beautiful clothes and many toys and when he comes back, I’ll make sure he’s as happy as possible and not ashamed of his mummy.”

“Ashamed of his mummy!?” Yapani’s answer was shocked.

“Of course...and of his daddy as well!”

“Your brain’s not working properly today, woman.” Yapani muttered confusedly, while Vika leaned her head back and closed her eyes, dreaming...

“As soon as I arrive, I’ll start painting the walls red, with the window of a nice bright green. Then I’m going to get curtains for the windows, like those of the skinny woman and shining vases on the shelf...and also copper plates on the walls...”

She opened her eyes and looked furtively at Yapani, who was lying still and frowning beside her.

“You, man, you don’t know yet...but you’re going to get washed many many times from now on!” She thought to herself smiling. Yapani looked at her, worried. He’d rather hear her shouting than see that sly expression on her face, like a cat’s, after having just eaten a mouse!

“What’s the matter with you?” He asked anxiously.

“Nothing.” She closed her eyes again, pretending to be asleep. Yet her brain was working on and on, dreaming of herself attending to customers at the co-op counter, wearing a beautiful light-coloured uniform. Or else she saw herself working at the Department’s handicraft store, carving sandstone statuettes like Akai’s daughters. She didn’t want to think of herself living in the Arctic Land snowstorms anymore! No more bad-smelling hides on her back. No more forced stops inside a tent in the icy night. No more of all this! Everything needed a change. She needed a change, a full change for her Babik!

Yapani, seeing her eyes closed, thought she had fallen asleep and reassured he shut his eyes too, taken by his own dreams.

“As soon as I get back to my land, I’ll have to oil the boat’s engine. Then I’ve got the hooks to fix and the tops of the tent to reinforce.” He thought, then took a deep breath and shut his eyes, but behind the lowered eyelids, he could revive himself on his powerful sleigh pulled by twelve dogs that started running like the wind whenever he cracked the whip. He ran and ran and ran towards the silent North, leaving the blinding snow, the howling wolves, pain, boredom and unhappiness behind him. He roused himself from sleep and then turned over.

“If only I had taken my Asa back home with me.” He regretted “He’s as strong as two dogs, my little one! But she didn’t want to take back anything, this devil of a woman! In the meantime the kid’s getting fatter and fatter, doing nothing all day and when he gets back, he’ll be a good-for-nothing...” He finally sighed.

Chapter 19

As soon as Babik's parents had left, Kateri withdrew to her office and made several phone calls to the Department, to inform them of what had just happened, to confirm that the child would stay with her for longer and to receive their orders.

An early darkness was rapidly putting an end to the daylight and soon they all gathered in the kitchen, ready for dinner, as the shadows wrapped up the house and the woods.

Kateri immediately informed Luigi about the visit of Babik's parents.

"And didn't you ask them to stay overnight?" He wondered.

The woman shook her head.

"It was all so quick..." She apologized. "And to be honest, at first Vika seemed very determined to assert her rights over Babik and almost accused me of having kidnapped him. Then, however, she suddenly changed her mind and asked me to let him stay a bit longer..."

Babik had realized that they were talking about him and was looking at Kateri with a very serious expression, holding his spoon up in mid-air.

"Come on, eat now..." She told him gently, stroking his head with tenderness. Babik took a deep breath and vigorously sank his spoon into the soup.

"How the devil did they get this far?" Ernesto asked.

"The Department placed a small airplane at their disposal." Luigi explained.

"A plane...for two people?"

"Of course. How could they have made it otherwise?"

"But do you have any idea of the cost of such a journey?" Ernesto objected.

"You know, our Government allocates several funds in favour of minorities and tries in many ways to satisfy the needs of the Eskimos who have decided to abandon their old traditional activities, as well as to help those who choose to go on with the tradition of their ancestors." Kateri said.

"And if Babik had followed his parents, would he have been able to go to school up there?" Chiara asked.

"We have travelling schools, with teachers who follow the Eskimos' caravans and organize classes for their children." Kateri explained.

"That sounds funny...a school on wheels!" Matteo commented.

Everybody smiled, but they were so tired after the long journey back from the camping site, that dinner ended almost in silence. After dinner the men then sat down in the dining room and watched the news on TV, whilst the children gathered in front of the kitchen television to watch a film. Shortly later, Kateri, who was tidying up the kitchen with Chiara, noticed that Babik was falling asleep with a thumb in his mouth, his head leaning on the shoulder of an unusually sweet and patient Valentina. She then turned to the girl and said

"It's bedtime..."

"All right, maman."

“Remember to brush your teeth and to say your prayers”

The three kids obediently walked into their room and for some time afterwards, everybody else could still hear their giggles and chats.

“What sensible behaviour we are having tonight!” Chiara noticed.

“Yes, they are. Valentina especially... the fear of losing Babik must have increased her sensibility.” Kateri confirmed thoughtfully. Chiara noticed that the woman’s face was really tired and drawn. The girl said

“I’d better go and make dad’s bed.”

She walked into the dining room and spread the blankets on the sofa, under a big ticking- pendulum clock that was cased into a resounding wooden box.

She thought to herself “How will dad be able to sleep with this horrible noise right over his head?”

The two brothers were now chatting quietly and Chiara withdrew to her room to read a book, waiting to be overcome by sleep.

Some minutes later, she heard Kateri switch off the lights. All noises ceased, which meant that her father, Luigi and Kateri were in bed. She decided to close her book and let her mind wander...

She thought about Babik, who was so far from his land and about his parents. It was so funny looking at them move with their heavy coloured pullovers. She thought about the strange, unusual things she was experiencing. Then she thought about herself, about her future over there, in her remote country, where the rising sun was already chasing away all nocturnal shadows. She suddenly felt lost. She stood up, went to the window and looked out. Her room’s lightning projected a long and clear rectangle on the grass. When it became visible, she heard a sudden rustle through the tree branches next to the window, and she thought

“I must have disturbed the squirrels’ sleep!”

She stayed still for another long minute with the elbows on the windowsill, breathing the night’s breeze and looking up to the sky, a cloud had just hidden the moon’s face. Suddenly she got the feeling that a human shape had appeared beyond the fence. She shivered and was about to move away from the window, when she heard a soft whistle coming from the dark. Chiara tried to listen carefully holding her breath, but she heard nothing more.

“It must have been some night bird...” She thought with relief.

But the whistle came again and again, stronger and closer and finally turned to a soft voice calling

“Chiara...”

Her heart pirouetted.

“Aigle Noir!”

Now the moon had freed itself from the cloud and shone freely on the lawn, enlightening Aigle Noir’s figure that was standing still beyond the fence.

“I’ve brought something for you...” He said

“He’s going to wake everybody in the house...” Chiara thought. Then however she answered

“Coming!” She ran out, tiptoed past the dining room’s door and tried to open the heavy birch door as silently as possible. The door slightly squeaked as she opened it; “They will certainly have heard this!” She thought with a scare and her heart beats were becoming so loud, that they seemed to invade the house, the garden and possibly the whole world. She walked out on to the veranda.

Hearing the sound of her steps, Asa moved away from his tree and walked towards her causing the chain to creak. Recognizing her, the dog started wagging his tail joyfully, while his eyes shone brightly in the dark. Chiara grabbed him by the collar and whispered “Be good Asa, sit down now...”

But the dog behaved as though it felt responsible for the imaginable consequences of that unusual night visit and followed her as far as the pulling on the chain would allow him, to check with his own eyes that which was going on out there.

“I’m here”, Aigle Noir said, suddenly appearing outside the gate. Chiara approached him in silence, while Asa gazed at the two adolescents with fluorescent eyes.

“I brought this for you.” The young man whispered, handing her a small parcel.

“What’s this?”

“Your amulet. If you wear this, the Great Spirit will be with you and protect you.”

“Have you come from Bella Bella’s village?” Chiara asked, surprised.

“Of course. I was afraid you would leave tomorrow morning...I was afraid to be too late to give this to you.” He apologized. “I missed the coach on my way back and I had to wait hours until I found a truck driver who would give me a lift. You know, not many people are willing to give a ride to a savage at night...” He said finally with a sad smile that enhanced the brightness of his teeth and eyes.

“It’s so kind of you and I...” Chiara had started saying when she was moved by Aigle Noir, who had quickly grabbed her hands and closed them inside his own. She felt pervaded by deep tenderness and instinctively leaned her head on Aigle Noir’s hands, closing her eyes. The young man hesitated for a long while before bending his head to stroke her hair with his cheek, in complete abandon. Then he brusquely startled, raised an arm in greeting and disappeared in the dark. Chiara crossed the garden with a dreamy look and walked back into the house, followed step by step by Asa, who stood upright by the door until he heard her lock the heavy door. Then he turned round and went back to sleep under his tree.

Chiara crossed the corridor, feeling her heart beat almost in her mouth; passing by the dining room she heard her father’s strong snore and felt she could breathe a bit better “They’re all sleeping.”

As she sneaked into her room, the pendulum clock powerfully struck the hour. Chiara sat down on her bed and looked at her watch: eleven o’clock.

“How long will he have to wait before someone gives him a lift back...” She thought sadly, imagining Aigle Noir walking along the desert road with his torn moccasins, in the silent night. “I can’t believe he did all this for me.!” She said to herself, upset.

She went to the window and shut it, then sat on her bed and unwrapped the parcel.

Inside, she found a little doll wearing a squaw dress. It had long dark plaits, a buckskin gown fringed with pearls and soft and skillfully manufactured moccasins. The ribbon it had around the waist bore the name *Clair de Lune*.

“That’s me!” Chiara murmured , full of joy.

She was on the point of replacing it, when she noticed that a carefully folded piece of paper had fallen onto the floor; Chiara picked it up, opened it out and read

*With the emptiness of hunger may I walk
 No food will ever fill it up
 With the emptiness of space may I walk
 Nothing will ever fulfill it
 With the emptiness of sadness may I walk
 Time will never stop it
 In a space of solitude may I walk
 No one will ever relieve it
 Forever lonely, forever sad
 May I walk
 Forever empty, forever broken
 May I walk
 With the grief of great beauty
 May I walk
 Now with God I’m walking
 With giant steps beyond the hills.
 I am a walking prayer
 Never alone, never crying, never empty
 Along the paths of ancient ages
 Along the trail of beauty
 May I walk*

Navajo Chant

Chiara read it over and over again, her eyes full of tears. Then she slipped the manuscript, that had been written in a nice and firm way, in between the pages of her book. She then lay down on her side and tried to get some sleep, but her mind kept wandering across the prairies and over the mountains where the men who had written those beautiful words had once lived in freedom.