

Brittany, France, in a future time. The lives of two women who have had losses, traveling at different times and seeking a better life in Mont St. Michel.

Journeying Home

By Barbara Kilde Carlier

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Barbara Kilde Carlier

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Chapter 1:

Nana

The old lady was dying. She was a lady, and she was old, and everyone called her the old lady, but it was with respect that they called her that. No one even knew her real name. Talla had heard it once or twice long ago. Silvia. She sometimes frightened Talla with her drooping mouth and darting eyes that peeped out from beneath lank gray hair. A fetid breath and a winter-apple wrinkled face drew the eyes, but what captured Talla's attention most were the hands. They were large and blue-veined, curled into a hard knot of knuckles and fingers, often too painful to use. This meant that Talla helped her to dress and eat. She was like a serving maid, but she didn't mind. The old lady was her grandmother, her Nana, and Talla loved her.

Her grandmother had become a legend in their small town near the sea, mainly because of her age. She said she was almost 90, but Talla didn't believe her. It was impossible. Nowadays, to reach 60 years old is considered a great achievement, but Nana told her that when she was young, there had been many who reached 90, and quite a few lived to 100 years old. Talla thought it was a tall tale. Her own mother had died at 40. Of course, that was during the Peaken epidemic, when many people had died, but it didn't change her reasoning. Could times have changed so much?

The old lady stayed in bed all day and ate very little. She said that the food smelled off and tasted funny.

In a whining voice, she said, "I'm not hungry. I don't like it."

"Look, one of your wedding spoons. Isn't it pretty? Here, let's try a mouthful."

There were only three spoons left now, with tiny roses etched on the handles. Her grandmother did seem to eat better when she used one of these spoons.

In the last few weeks, Talla had come to realize her grandmother was getting weaker. She brought in flowers from the far field to brighten up the room, putting them in a jam jar. She was glad of their scent, which helped to cover up the stifling still air. She was afraid to open the big window as Nana was always cold.

The whole town knew her grandmother wasn't getting out of bed, and everyone found errands that would take them past the house. The old lady (and this too had become legend) was known to have great wealth despite the tiny house and faded green shutters. In town, many people considered themselves part of her family, which meant they all hoped to have something when she died. You could see it in their eyes: a greedy shine as they passed.

Standing at the big window and peering through the sheer curtains, Talla saw two women standing in the front row of the crowd. One she recognized as Onnie, a distant cousin; the other woman she knew only by sight. Onnie gestured with her hands, and her arm twisted like a snake. Her mouth was open, and Talla could sense the deep loathing from her grim face. Talla couldn't understand this woman's hate for her and her grandmother. Maybe Onnie was jealous because Nana was a foreigner with a slight accent and had traveled extensively. When he was alive, she and her husband had roamed all over the earth, and, of course, most of the people in town, like Onnie, had never left home. A hulking figure arrived and whispered in her ear. Cousin Bil. He frightened her with his size and bulk.

The woman next to Onnie pointed a finger at the house. Talla took a step back; she'd been seen. Trembling, she turned her back to the scene outside the window and thought of her grandmother and her treasure.

Her grandmother's wealth was something special. In one small room that used to be a pantry, she kept neatly folded stacks of plastic sacks, relics from another era, now treasured because there were so few. There were hundreds of them in different sizes, some with reinforced handles, others with twisted plastic. Once in a while, Nana would take one or two out to show Talla. The colors shone: greens and golds, reds and blues. Many even had logos stamped on them. Talla remembered one red bag had "Foyles" on it and another gold one, "FNAC." She had no idea what the logos meant. Her grandmother said that when she was young, these sacks were free and given away in large quantities, so many that one could find them caught in the branches of trees. Today, plastic sacks don't even exist. Once in a while, an old bag floated in on the tide, usually torn, colors faded, completely unusable.

A few years ago, Talla had asked her why she had all these plastic sacks. Nana told her that at first, it had been just a habit to save them, but then she'd kept them because they meant something to her, each one a souvenir of a place or a person. They brought back memories of her youth. It was difficult for Talla even to think that once upon a time, Nana had been young.

One day, she heard her grandmother say, "Talla, please come here," in a quivering voice.

Talla hurried to the couch where Nana was lying and found her struggling to get up. Her face had a strange yellow tinge.

"Grandmother, please don't try to get up. You're not well." She gently pushed her down and straightened the bedcovers.

Nana grabbed her arm with sudden strength, and Talla looked into her eyes, very afraid.

"What is it? Do you feel ill? Can I get you something?" Alone with her grandmother, she felt powerless and too young.

"Talla, I must get up. I have something important to do; I have something to give you."

Nana struggled to her feet and, with Talla holding her up, shuffled to the back room. Looking around at her treasures, she sighed, turned to her granddaughter, and said, “I’m failing fast, and I don’t know how much longer I can hold on. You have been good to me and very patient. I want you to pick out the sacks you want, any number you want. However, I wouldn’t take too many. There is only danger in having too many.”

Talla looked at her in surprise. She felt privileged, but all she could say was, “Thank you.” At first, she couldn’t choose anything. She looked slowly around the room; she even tentatively touched one or two of the sacks. How could she decide?

Then Talla felt her grandmother beginning to sag, and her weight pulled hard on her arm and shoulder.

“Oh, grandmother, I’m sorry. I forgot how poorly you are. Let me take you back to bed.”

She led her back to the couch and helped her to get settled.

“Can I go back and choose my sacks?”

In a whisper, Nana replied, “Yes,” and closed her eyes. Her breathing was labored, and her forehead was slick with perspiration.

Talla returned to the sacks with excitement, and for a moment, she forgot about her grandmother, the townspeople who wished them harm, and her fear of being alone. She picked up one sack and then another. One little bag was covered in reds and pinks, swirls of roses; another was all white with a picture of a waterfall. It was pretty but without much color. There was a gorgeous one, mostly red, with a band of purple showing a man reading an open book and another book flying away like a bird. She liked that one; she could make out the word “Dialogue.” Another sack stood out with its red-and-black geometrical designs. And there was a lovely navy sack with big lettering “G A P” and a drawstring. She knew this was one she wanted. Eventually, she selected seven sacks. She would have taken more, but she remembered

what her grandmother had said about being greedy. Seven sacks were enough.

Talla didn't know what to do with them. She thought carefully, her bare feet gripping the smooth wooden floor. She knew she had to hide her treasure somewhere out of the house where no one could find it.

She ran out the back door and found her favorite tree, an old chestnut with spreading branches and a canopy of leaves. It had survived storms and men with axes. She climbed to the first thick branch and reached up to find the small hole where she had kept her childhood valuables. She hadn't put anything in there for years, not since she had passed her 20th name day. Thrusting her hand into the hole, she thought it seemed smaller than she remembered, but she carefully pushed the sacks into the hollow, jumped down, and ran back to the house.

Her grandmother was not doing well; her heavy breathing filled the room. Talla stepped over to the window and saw the gathering crowd outside the house, larger than before. Somehow, they knew, they knew it would soon be over, and the old lady would be gone. Their murmurings got louder. Talla closed her eyes and thought of her own short life. For years she had lived here with her grandmother, taking care of her. Now, it was all coming to an end. What would she do without her Nana? She didn't belong here even though she had lived in this town all her life. She was afraid. How could she manage? She had never done anything on her own.

Nana whispered behind her. "Talla, you must leave now."

"No, I can't leave you," Talla protested.

"You must. But before you go, take the jerry can and pour the contents all over the floor and into the storage room. Leave me a lighted candle, and then go quickly."

Talla wanted to protest, but Nana's face was set in stone, so she did as she was told, though she felt that things shouldn't be ending in

this fashion. She brought her grandmother the candle, lit it, and placed several matches nearby. Nana smiled at her and said, "Good girl."

Tears streamed down Talla's face as she bent to give Nana one last kiss. Then she ran, grabbing her backpack by the door, the sack Nana had told her to prepare, though she hadn't understood why at the time. She also grabbed her grandmother's cloak off its hook, a last-minute decision she never regretted. She climbed her tree after hiding her backpack behind a bush and sat hunched among the leaves in misery until a sudden howl erupted from the front of the house. Bright flames shot out of the windows. The fire crackled and popped. The crowd screamed and hollered, but there was nothing they could do. The house consumed itself slowly, and soon, a heavy stench filled the air.

Talla waited a long time in the tree, crying silently for her brave grandmother. After a while, the crowd gave up and trailed back to town, all their hopes dashed for gaining whatever treasure they thought Nana had hidden.

When she retrieved her plastic sacks from the hollow of the tree, Talla found a small silver triskell she had never seen before. She examined it, hesitated, then took it and slid to the ground. Her pocket felt strangely heavy; she put her hand in and found one of her grandmother's silver spoons. She must have absently put it there when she went in to look at the sacks in the pantry. Talla clutched it with such fervor that her knuckles turned white. It was something precious that had belonged to her grandmother. She kissed the spoon.

Talla was now alone. She had nowhere to go, but she recalled hearing her mother's sister lived somewhere to the east, at a place she could barely recall, someplace with a "mont" in its name. What was that's aunt's name? Soisic? Eleanor? She couldn't remember, but she thought it started with an 'E.' With so few clues to go on, finding her would be difficult. It could even be dangerous. It could take months. Most importantly, if Talla did find this aunt, would she be welcomed?

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Dry-eyed, Talla looked around one last time, whispered kenavo, goodbye, then turned to the east and started walking.

Chapter 2:

Elin

Elin bustled around the small kitchen. She wasn't a passionate cook, but when she set her mind to the task, she could conjure up an enjoyable meal. She liked to make a large quantity, to do it all at once, so as to have several meals prepared in advance.

She moved happily from the small counter where she chopped up her vegetables to the stovetop and then back to the counter. Only a tiny shadow weighed on her mind: she wondered how her mother was doing. She hadn't heard from her in years. Elin shook her head, telling herself there was nothing she could do about it now. She had left on such bad terms with her mother and her sister; maybe they had forgotten her. She recognized now that she had isolated herself from them and in a way, from life.

She finished making the stew, and now it just needed to simmer for a few hours. She took off her apron, hung it on its hook, put on her big wool sweater, and then went out the door and down the steps to the lane. Her walk wound up to the ramparts, to one of her favorite places to feel a storm's whipping wind or, like today, a brisk sea breeze.

She thought back to her arrival in Mikelmont; it seemed like yesterday. Elin had come a long way since that day when she had arrived bedraggled and heartbroken. She was happy and content with her life now, for she had found her place in the world.

Today was mild, but she was glad for the sweater. The sea was a shining mirror; it was high tide. The gulls swirled by in a cacophony of screeching noise as she leaned over the stone wall, her eyes following a small boat as it moved up to the horizon. The day was cloudless, with no dark shadow where the sea met the sky. It will be a night of stars, she thought with a shiver of joy. For weeks now, it had been cloudy

with rain. Tonight, she would go out from the upstairs room to study the stars. She had dabbled in astrology at one time, but now she was more interested in astronomy and the music of the spheres. She liked the phrase and murmured it to herself —“the music of the spheres”—magical words that seemed to bring up many possibilities, a promise of something good, of something marvelous.

It was too late to invite Jon to come and look at the stars with her. Too bad, as she had prepared her best stew. Next time, perhaps. Jon had excellent observational skills; he could pick out the constellations, even in a hazy sky. He also loved the printed word and read as much as he could, regardless of the text. There were so few books left in the world. At one time, there were many, but today they have become a luxury.

She had eight books in her room upstairs. Jon had read them all, and that was how they'd met. One winter's day, he had knocked on her door.

She opened the door after some hesitation and barked, "What do you want?"

"I am terribly sorry to bother you. My name is Jon. I live and work up at the Hall, and someone told me that you own some books." His voice was soft and polite.

"Yes, I do have a few books."

"Would you consider lending me one? I would appreciate it."

Elin was not sure of his sincerity, but he had honest-looking eyes. She was surprised at herself for answering, "Wait here."

She left him standing at the door as she returned to her armchair and picked out a book, *A Farewell to Arms*.

Elin took the book and handed it to Jon.

He said, "Thank you. I'll return it to you as soon as I read it, and that won't be long."

Jon disappeared down the stairs, and Elin shut her front door. She thought about the encounter for some time.

He'd come back for another book three days later. Jon had told her what he thought of the book, and they had exchanged a few words, still in the doorway. She was ashamed thinking of it now, but he had not taken her wariness personally.

Little by little, she thawed to his enthusiasm until one day, she invited him in, and they spent two hours talking about *The Great Gatsby* and the world it described, a world far removed from the one they were living in now.

It was so refreshing to have someone with whom she could discuss her books. Elin had read all eight many times over but had had no one to debate their merits. Jon had become a good friend, and he had shared his three books with her. He worked up in the Great Hall, in the large room that held the meager book collection. Occasionally, someone brought in books found in an attic or stuck in a forgotten corner, offering them to the library. Jon would repair them, if possible, read them, and then bring them to Elin so she could enjoy them as well.

Until it got dark, black enough to go out and study the stars, she would read *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, sitting in her comfortable armchair next to the warm and crackling fire.

At the loud knock on the door, Elin looked up and wondered who would be calling at this time of the day. She went to the door and asked through the thick wood, "Who is it?"

"It's me, Jon."

"Oh, just a minute," and she fiddled with the door handle and opened the door.

"I am sorry, Elin. I hope I'm not bothering you?" His face had a hopeful look, however. He smiled.

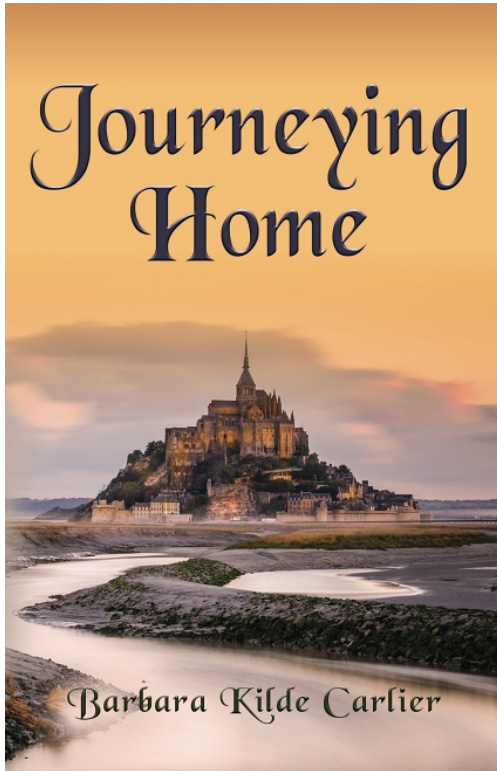
"No, no, not at all. I'm just surprised. What brings you here?"

“It's going to be a beautiful clear night, and I thought you might like to look at the stars later with me,” Jon replied. “We could go out on the ramparts.”

“You know, I was just thinking of that myself, but why don't you come in, and we can have a bite to eat first? I've made a lovely stew.”

“Why, thank you. It would be a great pleasure, especially since I smelled something very appetizing when you opened the door.” Jon said as he entered and made himself at home in one of the chairs by the fire.

Elin joined him, and they began to talk about which stars to look for later in the night sky.



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