



CAMILLE AND THE BABY STORK
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Camille has opened the door and is standing in the gap to prevent the heat from coming inside. Standing back in the shadows, she can't see who knocked so peremptorily, braving the scorching afternoon sun. No one shows up.

"Who's there? Don't you know that it is strictly inadvisable to go out before 8 p.m. without a compelling reason? What do you want?"

In response, she only gets a series of cracks, as if castanets were being played.

"Crack, crack, crack, crack!"

Camille takes a step back.

"It's not funny. You'd better go home and take shelter from the sun. Leave or I'll call Ecological Security!"

No sooner has she closed than the visitor knocks again, even louder. This time, overcoming her fear, she slams the door open again, hoping to surprise and intimidate the intruder. But, in front of her, there is only a stork who makes:

"Crack!"

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Camille lives in Bourcefranc, not far from what was the port of oyster farmers before red micro-algae decimated their beds and put them all out of business. Her house is a bit big for her and her companion, but she chose it that way in anticipation of the three children she wants to have. The old eucalyptus in the middle of the courtyard also contributed to her choice. It is one of the few trees in the village to have withstood the great drought of the 2030s, and the shade it casts on the house is almost a luxury. Today, the tree is still there but not the children, despite the efforts of the young couple.

This is the first time she sees a stork in the wild and so close. As a child, she saw them at the Palmyre zoo, but it was only through the wall of the air-conditioned dome where they were locked up. Plumage dirty and messy, the one now standing right outside her door looks in bad shape. In its eyes, Camille perceives a terrible concern. It makes her feel a knot in her stomach.

“What are you doing here? No one has seen storks around here for a long time. What can I do for you?”

“Crack. Crackcrack”. says the stork, turning its head back.

“You look exhausted. I'll start by giving you something to drink”.

As she prepares to fetch water, the stork steps back, snapping her beak:

“Clak. Clakclak.”

”Don't move, I'll be back.”

The bird turns its head to the right and to the left, cracking even louder:

“Crack, crack, crack ... Crack, crack, crack ... Crack, crack, crack”.

The first floor window of the neighboring house opens. A ruddy, bare-chested man appears there, vociferating.

“Are you done with this din, we can't even... But what is this bird? Are you crazy? Didn't you hear the Ecological Security warnings? They forbid approaching a wild bird. They can transmit very serious diseases. Wait, I'm going to make him clear off.”

The man disappears from the window. Knowing him, Camille understands that he will come back with his rifle. She rushes towards the stork, making great gestures.

“Go away, go away. He will shoot you.”

The stork flies away cracking furiously. Camille rushes inside to slip a long-sleeved blouse on, put a hat on, and grab a bottle of water. As the man reappears at her window sweeping the sky with his rifle, she mounts her old bicycle leaning on the eucalyptus.

“Wait for me! Ahoy, stork, wait for me.”

Camille pedals with all her might. The neighbor fires a shot. Fortunately, the stork is already much too far away.

“Come back! You are going too fast.” Camille shouts.

Suddenly, ceasing to flap its wings, the stork executes with the elegance of which only storks are capable, a great spiral in gliding flight to return above Camille, then it resumes flying as slowly as possible. It leads her to the edge of a wood of dead trees, to a grove of dried broom in the shade of which a young stork waits, sitting on the ground, her head bowed.

“Is this your child? It too looks exhausted. And how skinny it is!”

Camille pours water on his beak but the adult pushes her away with his wing and raises his head to the sky, slamming.

“You want me to pour water down your throat and then you give it back to him? All right.”

Between the stork and its young, the whole bottle is exhausted in no time.

“It did him good, but he's too weak to fly. He must eat. In addition we must remove him from there, otherwise he will be devoured by a fox or killed by an agent of Ecological Security.”

Camille immediately thinks of calling on Father Yvon. At the age of eighty, a former figure in Charentais cycling, the old man still runs his bicycle repair shop. Camille would never have wanted to entrust her bicycle to anyone else, for his mechanical skills, but above all to listen to him recount his hours spent at the beginning of the century observing wildlife in the marshes. Even before she has finished explaining where she was, Father Yvon is already driving his craftsman's van, bombarding her with questions about the stork and its baby.

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Arrived on site, he examines the bird.

“Storks don't come here to nest anymore because it's too dry and too hot. They go to the Normandy coast, Belgium and Holland. At this moment they are beginning to descend towards Africa. But even in

the north they struggle to find enough food for their offspring. This little one is exhausted. It must be sheltered and fed urgently. I have a fishing hut on Oléron, near the fortress. You can still fish there for glass eels, small crabs and shrimps. We will be able to feed it and it will be safe..”

Father Yvon then explains at length to the stork that they are going to grab its little one to take it away and take care of it, and that it will have to follow the car to find out where to meet it later.

“Do you really think it understands what you're telling it?” asks Camille.

“I don't know but if we don't tell it anything, for sure it won't understand what we're doing. It's always better to talk.

Father Yvon empties a wooden chest full of used tires and inner tubes to lock the stork in during the trip. Even very weakened, with its large legs and powerful wings, forcing it into the narrow box is no small feat. The parent refrains from attacking Camille and Father Yvon, but the youngster struggles furiously. Once the animal is locked up, they load Camille's bicycle.

“We go. Follow us.” says Father Yvon to the stork, waving to it to fly away.

At this moment, a car drives at high speed on the dirt path leading from the road to the broom. The stork flies over the lane that crosses the woods.

“The cops! What are they doing here? exclaims Father Yvon.”

“It's my neighbor! I bet he reported me to Ecological Security.” Camille says.

“Let me talk, I'll bamboozle them.”

The gendarmes are gendarmettes. A beefy brunette and a skinny little blonde. They are covered from head to toe with regulatory anti-sun radiation clothing which immediately earned the gendarmes the nickname "penguins". Camille and Father Yvon find it difficult to maintain the intimidated air that is appropriate when you are stopped. The beefy takes the case in hand.

“Father Yvon! What are you doing there, in the middle of the afternoon in the open fields? At your age, it's not reasonable to expose yourself like this.”

“Hello ladies. You're right, but it's for a compelling reason. I come to the aid of this client whose bike was broken down.”

“It broke down here, at the entrance to a wood, two hundred meters from the road!”

Camille comes to the rescue.

“My chain went off the rails last night while going shopping. Everything was stuck, so I went to hide my bike here and walked back. I have to visit my old mother in Bourcefranc tonight. This is why it is imperative.”

“We were told that you went after a stork.”

“A stork! said Father Yvon. Do you often see storks here? In my younger days, yes, there were a lot of them. But it's been at least twenty years since I've seen any. You were told a bad joke, believe me.”

Father Yvon is widely recognized as a living encyclopedia of turn-of-the-century ecology. Journalists often call on him when it comes to the flora and fauna of Charente-Maritime before the 2030s. Destabilized, the gendarmette nevertheless reacts professionally.

“Open the van door, please.”

Father Yvon complies, pointing with his outstretched arm, the bicycle leaning on the wooden box.

“There you go: a bike – repaired – and no stork!”

The gendarmettes consult each other.

“OK! Take the lady home and go back to your place. We are going to investigate to clear up this matter of stork.”

“I hope you punish the bad joker who wasted your time.” insists Camille.

As soon as the police car is far enough away, the two companions rush to check that the stork is fine and congratulate it for not having moved while the "penguin" inspected the van.

“Your mother lives in Bourcefranc?” asks Father Yvon.

“No way. Like many elderly people, she moved north a long time ago, near Calais.”

This time, they can indulge in the giggles they had contained in front of the gendarmettes.

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The little stork got back into shape quickly. To free herself in the morning, Camille asked her boss to change hours. Thus, in order to undeceive the suspicions of her neighbour who is spying on her hidden behind his shutters, she can leave at her usual time and go to Father Yvon's shop. He drops her off at the fishing hut with his van, which no one has paid attention to for so many years that they have seen it circulating in the region. There, comfortably installed in the shack, she fishes for her protege's food with the scales that Father Yvon taught her to use. Finally, Father Yvon takes her to work in the afternoon.

As soon as the baby stork hears the footsteps of its adoptive mother on the catwalk, it cracks its beak and flaps its wings frantically. Afterwards, it carefully monitors each rise in the net to try to grab the glass eels before Camille puts them in the bucket. Often the young woman teases it by waving them one by one in front of its beak or, like the fox in the fable, by putting them on a flat plate to test its skill. Back in Father Yvon's van, inexhaustible, she recounts with admiration the exploits of her prodigal baby stork.

Thanks to Camille's care and affection, the animal visibly regains strength. However, the craftsman gradually realizes that, in her enthusiasm, she forgets what is about to happen.

“You took good care of it. It is much better now. I believe it will soon be able to leave.”

“But its mother didn't come back. It can't go on its own.”

“We'll see. But don't forget that its life is in the wide open spaces of Africa or northern Europe. Not in an overheated shack, at the edge of a stifled sea or in sunburned swamps.”

Camille contents herself with muttering her disapproval but that evening, when her companion asks her about the stork, she bursts into tears. She feels like fate stands in her way every time she tries to live even slightly off her maternal instincts.

The events of the next day confirm Father Yvon's words. Camille is playing with the baby stork when she hears a thud on the roof. The bird immediately begins to click its beak. Its parent answers him and goes down on the pontoon. Motionless, the stork looks at Camille through the windowpane. For long seconds, it's as if the woman and the bird were talking to each other. As the baby-stork turns the shack upside down, resigned, Camille opens the door and steps back to let it meet its parent. They rub their beak for a few moments and fly away. Because of her tears, Camille loses sight of them very quickly.

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That evening, when she comes home from work, the neighbour is behind his shutter.

"You've been home late, for some time. he says to her."

"What do you care?" retorts Camille, furious. "I work overtime, imagine. Me, I don't live on allowances!"

He closes his shutter. She shouts to him:

"I saw the gendarmes the other day. They're looking for the author of an anonymous call who sent them explore the countryside for nothing."

The shutter opens again.

"And what did you tell them?"

"You will just have to ask them when they come to question you."

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The following days Camille no longer does anything, no longer speaks, no longer eats. Her companion and Father Yvon may well shake her up, nothing helps. The only thing she says is "Anyway, I will soon be too old."

She thus remains immured in what seems to be an insurmountable discouragement until the day when someone knocks vivaciously on

the door of the house. Coming out of her lethargy, she rushes... It's her doctor.

“Hello, Camille ... You look disappointed to see me. Were you expecting someone? Excuse my impromptu and early morning visit but I am starting my tour and I wanted to inform you myself urgently. I just got a message from the lab. Imagine that there was an error in your analyses. They double-checked and your last IVF worked: you're pregnant! »

While fainting, Camille sees the stork watching her from behind the window again. It seems to her that it is smiling.