

Translated with the help and corrections of

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Chapter 3 - Les Galeries Lafayette

(Lafayette Department Store)

Her adoptive parents had taken her into their home at Old Citadel Street, in Béziers. At the age of 4, Wanglen still did not speak. And this silence questioned all who met her. With her indifference to others and her quietness, the little girl hid deep inside herself. However, if you looked at her closely, with her round head, her red cheekbones, her straight, very black hair, and despite the absence of a smile, her eyes seemed to reveal a glimmer of vivacity like a secret buried in the deepest recesses of her soul.

At the St. Privat Clinic, they looked for deafness, intellectual disability, and abnormalities of the phonic organs, but all the tests were negative. All in all, Wanglen was doing well. She was not very receptive and expressed herself only by gestures and mimics. Her history was probably part of the reason for her silence.

On February 27, 2010, in Concepción, Chile, she was found in the early morning in the rubble of a terrible earthquake. That day, she had lost everything that tied her to the Chilean Andes: family, school and friends. The rescuers found her, safe and sound, and curiously calm, with a look of almost indifference to

the cataclysm. From now on, for her, nothing should exist anymore. A long sleep, with her eyes open to nothingness, had begun. Her memory was at rest forever. The little girl had become mute.

After a year of solitude in a Catholic orphanage, she was adopted by the Garcia family in Béziers, France.

A modest and brilliant family with original names. Father's name was Sanctifias. Mother's name was Oktiabrina. Both were grandchildren of Spanish Republicans¹. In order to keep the filiation to their ideals, each family had created their own children names. For him, it had been a rough anagram of antifascist: Sanctifias, and for her, born in October: Oktiabrina, the time of the Russian revolution. Sanctifias worked the noble trade as letter carrier for the Post Office, "the messenger of Men!" he said boldly. He especially liked to deliver the mail by hand and read the emotion on the recipient's face. Oktiabrina was a poet at home and a singer in the choir. She especially liked to vibrate and feel the contagious force of the choir that carried her along. They both shared a free spirit, and a philosophy open to the universe. For them, all elements of nature were linked almost equally. Starting with water, air, minerals, plants, animals and humans. Each one constituted the others in a chain that has been renewed since the beginning of time. Oktiabrina wrote poems where everything is intertwined, where outside

¹ People engaged in The Spanish civil war (1935)

is inside and inside outside, where before is after and after before. She sang of the rain, the rain that nourishes her garden and her plantations, while leaking down her face to her lips, which savour every drop, and continues its innocent course, trickling towards to the cat's clay bowl. "The garden and its vegetables, the bowl and the cat, and myself, we are the Water!" She would declare. She often tried to penetrate the inner world of beings and things: the softness and lightness of a feather, the sad laugh of a friend. She also believed in the invisible bonds that unite life and death over time, to return to life. Like a beautiful bird seen from her home in a ray of sunlight. It reminds her of the late painter Jean-Jacques Audubon who, in turn, will tell her about the light and colours coming in through the window of her living room. The Garcia's regularly recomposed the world. In order to know this world better, they had to know how to fly like an eagle, swim like a dolphin, work wood like a beaver, paint like a brush mounted on a feather, shine like a star. The human being had to embrace the elements of nature, to live in them, to act in them, to be informed like them. Their microcosm was thus classified into different categories: the patient, the attentive, the animated, the joyful, the tasty, the faithful, etc., whether it was a vegetable, a dog, a bracelet, a plate or an insect, or even a neighbour.

This philosophy made them happy, and they rejoiced in the good things that happened to each other. In order to avoid the daily routine and isolation

at home, they had promised each other, in turn, a surprise outing every month. One evening, it was the appearance of a big red moon, on a picnic at Sérignan beach; another evening, it was a night hike in the Caroux, equipped with a headlamp, to observe the sunrise, the moment when the upper edge of sun appears above the horizon, the brief passage from dawn to the sun blaze. At that moment, their fingers tenderly caressed each other and in unison, they felt the happiness rising and invading them in a divine silence.

The announcement of Wanglen's arrival had plunged them into a delicious expectation. Hope was stronger than all misfortunes. They had sought information about the Mapuche people. Neither the Incas, nor the Conquistadors, nor the dictatorship, nor the devastating modernity had succeeded in subduing this community in America. The couple felt proud of it. Only the frequent earthquakes in Chile had deeply wounded the Mapudungun². Oktiabrina had bought fabric to make outfits, skirts and blouses with great pleasure, and Sanctifias had made a bed, a chest of drawers and a small desk, painted and decorated with geometric patterns in the manner of pre-Columbian art. The couple had promised to keep this attachment to the Mapuche culture and Chilean history. They read poems by Pablo Neruda together and celebrated by singing with the musical band Quilapayun: "El pueblo unido jama sera...". The

² means "people of earth"

Garcias were happy to discover that the name Wanglen means Star in Mapudungun language. A little star from the earth people was entrusted to them.

They had been warned of the difficulties of adoption. But for them, it was a new promise where love and intelligence had to win. What they would bring would be beneficial. For them, the acquired would always be stronger than the innate since everything evolves here and now.

The universe offered to Wanglen in this area of old Béziers town was the one of simple and sincere love. The Old Citadel Street is a string of narrow alleys. It ends on a facade of a building without sparkle but adorned with a century-old and majestic wisteria. The power of time and natural beauty are combined here. The seclusion of the alley is followed by more spacious interiors, sometimes yellow and dark, decorated with perennial plants. The Garcia's building also has a unique feature: a huge patio where a small intramural garden of flowers and vegetables dominates, like a jewel under the sun.

The first days of Wanglen's arrival were difficult. Faced with the Garcia's joy and enthusiasm, there was the cruel exile in which Wanglen had condemned herself. The little star flickered faintly, ready to fade away. However, there was no lack of company: three dogs, five cats, most of them crippled or one-eyed, and often both at the same time. The little one seemed to be attracted to the one that had not barked for a long time. The child showed little interest in her surroundings. Wanglen did not like to go out

and hated crowds. The rare attachment she showed was to insects.

One day, while Wanglen was on the patio, she fell in excitement in front of a red butterfly that had just landed on a grass in absolute stillness. With its wings folded into one, she thought that the lepidopteran had come to rest nearby, perhaps to die with her. In the meantime, it was keeping her company. She advanced her hand as if to seize it, but the insect resumed its radiant flight. A very brief burst of laughter could be heard. The first since her arrival. Then, one evening later, in the garden, on the ground, she saw a fluorescent green light, fairly powerful, it was her first glow-worm. She bent down and dared to take it gently, but as soon as she lifted it, the insect switched off. She put it back down just as carefully and a moment later it resumed its glowing signal to the child's great joy. This time again, she was heard to laugh. Sanctifias decided to build an insect farm in an old aquarium, lining the bottom with potting soil, pebbles and grass. And then, the whole family went into the backcountry in search of insects. They brought back two crickets, a grasshopper, worms, a handful of ants and three cockroaches in matchboxes. Wanglen spent many hours marvelling at the live insects show. One thought one could hear whispers. "Was she talking to them? In what language?" asked Oktiabrina. The little girl was getting better and better.

As Christmas approached, they decided to try an outing in town, destination the Galeries Lafayette.

Paul Riquet Alleys were lit up in a joyful way, highlighting walkways, plane trees and the theatre near the Galeries Lafayette. This Haussmannian building was embellished with traditional nativity decorations associated with promotional posters. The windows were full of lights, garlands and fir trees dressed in multi-coloured balls. A splendid illuminated nativity scene housed figurines. Baby Jesus caught Wanglen's eye with magnetism. A long pause intrigued the couple. Then they decided to enter the store. Bustle discouraged them. They took the escalator that Wanglen had just discovered as a new game for young and old. But halfway up the escalator, the child's eyes froze. A figure dressed in red was waiting for her at the top of the stairs. The red snowy cap and white beard revolted her. She let out a huge scream that drowned out all the music and commercial announcements. A scream of pain escaped her. She tried to go back down escalator against the movement. And there again, she saw another creature, a look-alike, dressed all in red. No possible exit, she squeezed tightly between Sanctifias and Oktiabrina and her cry turned into words " Ayuda! Ayuda! Ayuda! Regresaron!³". Tears carved her face in horror. The bustle and crowd of the store stopped like a freeze frame. The escalator rushed them upstairs. With her face hidden under Oktiabrina's coat, Wanglen went down the side staircase and they left the store as quickly as possible.

³ Help! Help me! Help me! They are coming back!

On their way out, they were surprised to see a poor woman behaving strangely as well. She stammered to passers-by, "Claude! It's you! Claude!"

When they returned home, they asked their friend, Dr. Georges Antoine Viallard, for advice. An hour later, he came to visit. After a large moment of reflexion, he gave his own explanation.

The silence, the refusal to speak, to put words to reality, reinforced Wanglen's denial to begin a new life. Since the earthquake, she had definitely lost everything. So, as all had come to a halt so, the whole lot had to stop absolutely according to her. The light of her early life had been extinguished, and the world of darkness had taken its place. Today, at the Galeries Lafayette, her memory and speech had returned to her when she saw the Santa's who looked strangely like the firemen who, on that day of the earthquake, had separated her forever from her childhood and her roots.

But now, the little girl learns each word with happiness and pleasure, singing them. "Dragonfly, dragonfly, dragonfly," she says as if to honour the insect with this beautiful name.

She knows that words are the great book of life. And the little star fills its pages with happiness.

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