



Nobody's Boy

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1) Bad News

Rémi was abandoned as a baby. He didn't know this for the longest time—until the age of eight he always thought Mother Barberin was his mother. If he cried, she hugged him in comfort and he never went to bed without a goodnight kiss. During freezing cold winters when the snow piled up against the frosted windowpanes, she held his feet in her hands and sang to him until they were warm again. And in the summertime if they were unexpectedly caught in a thunderstorm when he took their cow Roussette to nibble the grass alongside the footpaths, Mother Barberin rushed to his rescue and let him hide under her warm woollen skirt. Because of all this—and the way she talked to him, looked at him and always found the right words when he was sad—Rémi didn't know any better. He believed she was his real mother. But at the age of eight he suddenly found out this wasn't true. It happened like this:

Rémi spent his childhood nearby Chavanon, one of the poorest villages in central France. It was dirt poor because that part of the country was sandy, dry and infertile. Hardly anything grew there: except for heather and gorse. You did see some trees, but never mighty oaks or tall chestnuts.

The small house where Rémi grew up was in a valley on the banks of a stream that emptied into the River Loire. Until the age of eight, no man lived with them. But Mother Barberin wasn't a widow. Her husband worked as a stonemason near Paris, which was a long way from Chavanon, so he never came home. However, occasionally when one of the other masons went home to visit family, he sent along news. Then they told Mother: 'Mr Barberin is doing well. He's working hard and he asked me to give you this money. Would you please count it?'

That was it. Except for this, Mother Barberin said little about her husband. Rémi didn't know if it was because she missed him or because she was rather happy he was so far away.

One November evening, just such a fellow arrived on their doorstep again. He looked very tired. Rémi had never seen such a dirty man—splattered with mud from head to toe. He'd apparently come a long way by foot.

'I have message for you,' he said. Simple words familiar to Rémi and his mother. Yet this time the tone was serious, as if he were foretelling a disaster. Mother Barberin went pale, clasped her hands together. 'Oh dear!' she cried. 'Has my husband had an accident?'

'Yes, he's had an accident. Don't despair, he's not dead. He's in the hospital, but he's been badly hurt and will never work again. I was in the bed next to him in the same ward for a while. When I was discharged, he asked me to let you know. I'm also supposed to tell you he can no longer send you money. He needs money now, for the lawsuit.'

'What do you mean, lawsuit?'

The man turned around. 'I have to be on my way now, I still have a long journey ahead.'

But Mother Barberin was determined to get the whole story. 'Stay for something to eat,' she insisted. 'The roads are bad and wolves have been spotted in the woods. Better to leave in the morning.'

The man was persuaded and during dinner he told her a scaffolding had collapsed, partly crushing Barberin beneath it. Because her husband had no place being there when it happened, his boss wasn't prepared to compensate him for his injuries.

'A terrible shame for Barberin,' said the man, drying his muddy trouser legs by the fire. 'There are clever people who know how to cash in on an accident like this. Such a terrible shame for Barberin . . .' his tone somehow suggesting he wished he'd been crippled himself for the compensation. 'Anyway,' he finally said, 'I strongly recommended he sue his boss.'

'Sue his boss?' Mother Barberin responded worried. 'But that costs a lot of money?'

'True, but if you win . . .'

When the man left the next day, Mother Barberin went to the parish priest to ask him to write to her husband. After all, she'd never learnt to write and neither had Rémi. She wanted to know if she should come to Paris or if there was anything else she could do to help. A few days later a message arrived saying she needn't come, but she should send money.

Weeks and months passed. Every now and then a message arrived from the city. Barberin was discharged from the hospital, but he was unable to work anymore. Now the tables were turned and Mother Barberin had to regularly send him money. She arranged for the little they earned selling vegetables from their garden to be brought to her husband.

Rémi and his mother became poorer and poorer. So terribly poor that one day Mother saw no other way but to sell their cow.

'No, Mother, not Roussette!' Rémi cried. After all, a cow in the barn meant milk for dipping your potatoes and butter for spreading on bread or frying pancakes. But that was not Rémi's only reason: Rémi was terribly fond of Roussette. They took special care of Roussette, and with her soft round eyes she always let him know what she liked or disliked. Suggesting 'selling their cow' had to be the worst thing anybody had ever said to Rémi.

'We have to, my son, Mother said. 'We don't have a choice . . .'

A merchant showed up who prodded and poked big healthy Roussette from all sides, repeatedly saying that everything about her was no good. Rémi didn't understand, because their cow was the best in the world. The merchant finally offered them a measly price for Roussette.

'Because I have such a good heart and want to help you,' he lied.

Mother Barberin hung her shoulders in defeat. 'So be it,' she sighed.

Roussette seemed to understand what was in store for her. She began wailing loudly and refused to come out of her stall.

'C'mon, sweetie,' Mother Barberin whispered while tugging on the unwilling cow's rope. 'Don't worry, it will be fine.'

Roussette gave in. The merchant fastened her behind his cart and rode away without looking back. Rémi watched them go, his hands pressed against the windowpanes. Tears filled his eyes. He was heartbroken.

From that fateful day on, they only ate a piece of bread without butter or cheese in the morning, and evenings potatoes with just salt. And they no longer ate pancakes or apple dumplings on Fridays, like they'd always done. Yet the worst of it all was the loss of a beloved member of the family.

But then one Friday, out of the blue, mother decided to surprise Rémi. A neighbour was kind enough to give her a cup of milk and another neighbour some butter. When Rémi arrived home at the end of the day, she was busy sprinkling flour into a large earthenware pot.

'Hey, flour!' Rémi said.

'Yes, and what do we make with flour?'

'Bread.'

'And what else?'

'Porridge.'

'And what else?'

Rémi knew it, but didn't dare say it.

'I don't know,' he timidly answered.

'Yes you do, you know perfectly well, but you're afraid to say it. Because Friday nights used to be very special, right?'

Rémi nodded.

'Look in the bread box.'

Rémi lifted the lid and saw milk, butter, eggs and three apples.

'Mother!' he exclaimed.

'Give me the eggs and milk,' she said as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

'While I make the batter, you can peel the apples.'

The batter was ready in no time and Rémi broke up wooden branches to kindle a fire. Smoke went up the chimney and the kitchen was filled with warmth and flickering light. Mother removed the frying pan from the hook and placed it over the flame. Then she dropped a piece of butter in the pan, which splattered as it melted.

A wonderful aroma filled Rémi's nostrils and the softly hissing butter sounded like music to Remy's ears.

Mother dipped the ladle into the pot and let the white creamy batter glide from the spoon into the pan. She hadn't even turned the pancake, when there was the thump of a cane against the outside door.

They turned around, startled. The door swung open with a bang and a man leaning on a stick came into the kitchen. His clothes were filthy and his face had a hard expression.

Mother grimaced for a split second and then gasped, putting her hand to her mouth.

'Jerome . . .' she stuttered. She quickly placed the hot pan on the ground.

The man barely looked at her, threw an icy glance at Rémi and then at the skillet.

'So, having a party without me?!' he said harshly.

Rémi shuddered. Who was this man?

There was a moment of silence. Mother then clutched Rémi by the wrist and gently pulled him towards the unexpected visitor.

'Rémi,' she said, her voice trembling, 'meet your father . . .'