

DOWN  
MEMORY LANE  
WITH MARGUERITE AND FAMILY

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## CHAPTER ONE

The lone figure peering out from behind the glass-pane shivered a little as she pulled her shawl more firmly round her shoulders. There were days when she wished for the sun, the sun of the islands. In the distance, she could see the sea. Seeing the sea always filled her with nostalgia, but was a reminder, too, of departures and farewells; of tales throughout history of those forced to leave their homes and cross turbulent seas to take up a new life in distant lands.

She especially thought of that day when they were pulling out from Little Bay in Montserrat. All eyes were fixed on the receding landscape. Dejection and despair could be read on all the faces. For many, it would be a voyage of no return. Many would never see their island home again. One old lady kept repeating: “History repeats itself,” as though she no longer had any control over her thoughts or her words; as though she herself were History. The volcano itself was History. It was only repeating itself, following the pattern it had set out several centuries before.

A sudden smile crossed Marguerite’s face, however, as she turned away from the window. She thought of her son, Jonathan, the only person she knew who had not been thoroughly traumatized by all that volcanic activity. He was excited, he said, to be

going out into the big, wide world. He had since joined the Navy and was sailing the seas. He had always said when he was little: “I want to be an explorer, like Christopher Columbus.”

If Christopher Columbus were to be sailing in Caribbean waters today, Marguerite asked herself, would he sail past the island of Montserrat as he had done on that Sunday morning in 1493, or would he drop anchor and go inland to see for himself the ravage that the Souffriere Hills volcano had wreaked on that little British Caribbean territory? Would he again think of the Montserrat mountain in Spain after which he had named the island, and would he implore the Black Madonna, whose shrine lies housed in that mountain, to intercede for the afflicted people of Montserrat?

The legend of the Black Madonna, as recounted by her grandmother, had always intrigued Marguerite. The statue, said to have been carved in black wood by St. Luke in 50 AD, was brought to Spain where it was hidden from the Moors in a cave. According to the legend, it was rediscovered in 880 AD by shepherds who saw a bright light and heard heavenly music which led them to the cave where the statue was hidden. All attempts to remove it proved fruitless, so it was decided that a shrine should be built on the spot where it was found. Thousands of pilgrims now climb that mountain to visit the shrine, and many miracles have been associated with the intercession of the Black Madonna, ‘La Moreneta’, as she is called in Spain.

And so it was that, whenever Marguerite’s soul was most ‘perplexed and weary’, her mind would turn to the Madonna and she would say to herself “Mother, tell me, what am I to do?” It was the thought of the Madonna that had helped her to cope with her trials and tribulations following Hurricane Hugo in 1989; it was

the Madonna who had helped her get through the dark days after the eruption of the volcano in 1995. She felt now that she was more than ever in need of the Madonna's help.

Settling down in Montpellier had not been easy, despite the fact that her in-laws had done everything to help them. But ever since the eruption of the volcano, her husband, George, had changed so much, it was incredible. Two tragedies following so closely on one another had got the better of him. After Hurricane Hugo, he had picked up the pieces and tried resolutely to carry on. He had even succeeded in rebuilding the house of his dreams. But after the eruption of the volcano, something seemed to have snapped within him and he was no longer himself. His irritability and fits of temper had a disastrous effect on the whole family. It seemed as though, after the horror of the hurricane and the vengeance of the volcano, they now had to deal with a frenzied father.

She would never forget that misty Sunday morning when they came to wake her. When the ringing of the door-bell finally pierced her consciousness bringing her out of her deep sleep, she got up and peered out from between the curtains. Two police-officers were standing on the doorstep. She immediately sensed that something awful had happened, and a chill of panic ran through her whole being. Slowly she descended the wooden stairs that led to the front door. The only thing she could remember the police-officer saying was that she and her husband were to get dressed and go with them.

When she saw the flames and heard the shouts, she didn't go any nearer but just stood there and stared; and the more intense the heat got, the colder her limbs became.

"The fire broke out in their room," the Police-officer was

saying. “The investigation has just begun, but we can’t rule out criminal activity, or even...”

Marguerite saw the police officer hesitate, and realized straightaway what he meant.

“Or even what? Finish you sentence, for God’s sake,” her husband snapped angrily.

“Or even suicide. Did your daughter or your son-in-law have any reason for wanting to die?”

“Wanting to die on the day after their wedding?” asked George, spluttering with rage.

The police-officer decided then to postpone the investigation. No corpse was handed over to them. It was impossible to find one. Underneath the hotel-room was a depot where a particularly inflammable solvent had been stocked.

In the hours that followed, Marguerite went round as though in a dream. The family-doctor had automatically prescribed sedatives for her, and she was not sure of anything. She said nothing, nothing to anyone. On the site, she couldn’t - all those firemen fighting the flames, and the policemen speaking so kindly to her afterwards. Then there was George. How lost and distraught he looked. Even in his fit of anger at the police-officer’s questioning she could detect the trembling in his voice like that of a small child.

Seeing George splutter with rage, was nothing new. What was new was the emotion she could detect in his voice even at the height of his anger. For the first time, she was seeing him a prey to deep emotion. She herself said nothing, could say nothing. But that was nothing new either. Even as a child playing in the sand, she would never protest when another child came along and took her spade away. She would just turn mournful eyes in her

mother's direction. The latter inevitably turned away, despairing of her daughter's inability to react.

Marguerite's thoughts went back to that day when George proposed to her. They had walked for hours while he talked to her about his future, of the great plans he had for ensuring that his project was going to make a difference in the lives of the people of the island they were to be going to. He held her hand as though he didn't want her to get away from him. So she had just said yes. He didn't hear her the first time and she had to say it again much louder. Her eyes were lowered. Then she felt his hands on her, and she closed her eyes tight as she would do as a child waking up from a nightmare.

She thought, too, of that day when George officially asked her father for her hand. She saw her father hesitate, sit up and look intently at his daughter's suitor. He asked George a few questions to which the latter replied without an ounce of hesitation, as if he were before a jury. Then her father turned to her and asked: "Is that what you really want?" She nodded, and he simply said: "Then, you have my blessing."

Marguerite sighed as she thought of all that. She had never known what she really wanted from life, or had never been able to express what she really wanted. She had taken after her father, a mild-natured man, who detested conflict of any sort. Her mother was different, a real go-getter. The attraction of opposites, Marguerite thought. It struck her then that her own daughter, Clementine, had decidedly taken after her grand-mother, who always knew what she wanted and always knew how to go about getting what she really wanted.

Had Clementine married Christophe just to get away from home? Had she decided to burn her bridges behind her? Those

were the thoughts that troubled Marguerite's bewildered brain for days. But she said nothing, nothing to anyone, concerning the words that Clementine had whispered in her ear towards the end of the wedding reception. Clementine had pulled her aside and said: "We're not going back to the hotel, Mummy. We're leaving, going far away from here."

In view of the terrible scene that had taken place a few days before the wedding, Marguerite's fears were to some extent justified. Clementine had always been strong-headed and a bit rebellious. As a kid, the story she liked hearing most was that of Mary Read, the famous (or infamous) female pirate of the Caribbean. Like Mary, she adored dressing up as a boy and said she wanted to tour the world as Mary had toured the seas, though not committing all the heinous acts of which Mary had been accused. She admired Mary's guts and her bravery. In addition, Mary was known to be both feminine and attractive.

Clementine, too, had guts. Even as a baby her father would say fondly of her: "This one has guts!" adding as she versed her waters on him the first time he took her into his arms: "A real virago!" George was secretly proud of his daughter, in fact he had even spoiled her. Clementine adored her Dad, too. But George had changed considerably over the years. Life had not been kind to him, he felt. He had become sour and subject to fits of anger. So that when Clementine started dating and seemed to be slipping out of his control, he became 'intolerable and intolerant' to use Clementine's expression, and the situation only worsened as the days went by. When Clementine finally announced that she was going to marry the son of the very man George detested most in the world, the latter's horror and deception knew no bounds. The scene that took place one evening a few days before the wedding was proof of that.

When Marguerite thought of that scene now, she asked herself what she could have done to ward off the dramatic consequences that she felt would result from such an outburst. Was there anything she could have done? Never before had George been so disagreeable in front of persons who were not members of his family.

On the occasion in question, the seamstress and two of Clementine's bridesmaids were in the upstairs bedroom where a last fitting of the wedding outfits was to be carried out. As Clementine laughingly surveyed herself in the mirror, declaring that she had never deemed it possible that she could give the appearance of being that pretty, her father appeared at the open door and observed the scene. When the seamstress asked him what it felt like to be giving his daughter away in a couple of days, Clementine quickly turned round saying rather cheekily that she was not an 'object' to be given away. Her father immediately got into a fit of anger, letting out all the spleen that had been building up in him for days. In a terrible voice, and with a terrible look in his eye, he said: "I suppose you think you're making a good escape now, eh? Well, I beg you to believe I am still a force to be reckoned with!" before leaving the room and slamming the door behind him. There was a deadly silence. No-one could think of anything to say to cover up that embarrassing situation. Clementine burst into tears and fled from the room. She was not at the dinner-table that evening, and no-one saw much of her the next day. No-one saw much of George after that either.

Despite all that, the wedding ceremony went off very well. It was held in the little village church just outside Montpellier where they lived. The villagers, even those who had not received an invitation to the wedding, stood waiting outside to cheer the bride

and groom as they walked out of the church. They had been there well before the arrival of the bride, observing and passing comment on the accoutrements of the wedding guests according to their likes and dislikes. Everyone had something to say.

The weather was particularly clement on that autumn day, and that was taken to be a good omen. The trees in the small, grass-covered square in front of the church had been decorated, and the strains of the 'Hawaiian Wedding Song' could be heard coming from the musical devices that had been previously installed in the square. That song, made famous when Elvis Presley sang it in his 1961 movie, 'Blue Hawaii', was a favourite of Clementine's. A local baritone, friend of the family, suddenly broke out in accompaniment, projecting the words into the air:

'This is the moment I've waited for/  
I can hear my heart singing  
Soon bells will be ringing...  
Now that we are one/Clouds won't hide the sun  
Blue skies of (Montpellier) smile on this our wedding day'

Everyone clapped delightedly, and when indeed the church-bells did begin to chime signalling the end of the church ceremony, and when the happy, smiling couple emerged, they were bombarded with rose petals and rice grains, kisses, and shouts of joy from the villagers bent on ensuring that the young couple was getting the best of send-offs into the future.

Marguerite smiled now as she thought of all that. Long days had gone by. The investigation had been completed and it was determined that the cause of the fire was probably a faulty fuse in

the room of the newly-weds. They were not in their room when the fire broke out, and had not therefore perished in the flames. But where were they now? No-one knew where they were, not even Marguerite herself, who took pains nonetheless to say nothing of the secret Clementine had whispered in her ear towards the end of the wedding-reception. She was a little ashamed of herself for thinking even for a moment that her daughter could have been in any way involved in arson.

The honour of the family was safe, but where were the newly-weds? George was sure that the fates had leagued up against him, as they had done all his life. It was, of course, a great relief for him to know that his daughter and her husband had not perished in the fire. It was only by the grace of God that they were not in their room as they were supposed to have been. After all, they had specially reserved that room for their wedding night.

Marguerite, too, could only see the hand of God in that. She kept humming to herself the hymn: 'God moves in a mysterious way/ His wonders to perform'. For, if George had not had made that terrible scene, Clementine and Christophe would perhaps not have been in such a hurry to get away. But where were they now?

The more Marguerite thought about it, the more she felt she had to go to Spain and visit the shrine of the Madonna. She did not quite know how to broach the subject to George however. George had gone from being surly and indifferent, always ready to fly into a rage over nothing, to a man completely withdrawn. He talked to no-one, never wanted to eat anything, but smoked cigarette after cigarette. He didn't bother to shave, either, didn't care how he looked, and seemed to be sinking into deep depression.

Striking up her courage, Marguerite went in search of George. She found him sitting in front of the television holding his head in his hands.

“George, dear, we need to get away from here for a bit, don’t you think? Cousin Susan has invited us to come and spend a day or two with her in Barcelona. Wouldn’t that be a good idea?”

George just stared at her for a while, as though he hadn’t quite understood her question, then to her great surprise he said gruffly: “Alright, when do we leave?”

Marguerite couldn’t believe her ears. That in itself was a miracle. They set out the very next day for Barcelona. Marguerite having spoken with her cousin, everything was arranged for a visit to the shrine of the Black Madonna.

As she drove up the Montserrat Mountain, Marguerite turned to her cousin and said:

“This reminds me of the hikes we used to make up to St. George’s Hill in Montserrat.

“Yes. The flagstaff at the summit of St. George’s Hill was a symbol of past struggles for that strategic spot on the island.”

“Whereas at the summit of this mountain is a shrine that has earned widespread fame over the centuries. Numerous miracles have been associated with the intercession of the Madonna, I’ve been told,” said Marguerite.

“Yes. So many pilgrims flocked to this mountain at one time that the Monastery had to be enlarged. Napoleon had it destroyed when he invaded Spain, but it had to be rebuilt because of the devotion there was to it. That devotion still exists today.”

“I’ve been told that this mountain also hosts the world’s oldest press. Is it true that the ‘Publicaciones de l’Abadie de Montserrate’ is the world’s oldest press?” asked Marguerite.

“I’ll have to check that out. But speaking of presses, have you read the book The Secret Life of Bees?” asked her cousin.

“No. Who is the author, and what is it about?”

“The author is Sue Monk Kidd, whose book was a New York Times best-seller in 2002. An important motif in her book is the Black Madonna who inspires spiritual strength to her female characters.”

“Now, I’ll have to check that out,” said Marguerite.

They had reached their destination and were soon scrambling out of the car. As they looked down on the Catalan plain, Marguerite again said: “I really do have the feeling of being in Montserrat and looking down on Plymouth from St. George’s Hill – as it was before the volcano, of course.”

She closed her eyes, as though to give even more scope to her imagination. Suddenly, she swung round, a strange look on her face.

“What’s wrong?” asked her cousin.

“I would swear to it, I heard someone call my name, and a voice that seemed to belong to the ages said: ‘Nil Desperandum!’”

“That could only be the voice of Saint George,” said George mockingly. “After all, he is one of the patron saints of the Catalan,” adding with a mischievous look in his eye: “We Georges turn up everywhere, you know.”

Marguerite could not hide her surprise. George was suddenly sounding like his old self.

“Oh, I didn’t know that St. George was one of the patron saints of the Catalan. I always thought he belonged exclusively to England,” was all she said in reply.

“I suppose,” said her cousin, “that St. George’s Hill got its name when the English triumphed over the French for ‘that strategic spot’ as you said. Wasn’t Montserrat in French hands for a while?”

“A very short while,” said George briefly.

They entered the Basilica by a side door. Marguerite’s face betrayed her emotion, and even George was not left unimpressed. The atmosphere there was filled with spiritual vibration. There were people with their heads bowed in prayer; others wept, but not sadly it seemed to Marguerite. It was as though their tears were tears of joy for some wish fulfilled, some desire granted. Others touched the hand of the Madonna and made the sign of the cross on themselves. Marguerite had never experienced anything like that before and, as was usual with her, she could not express what she felt. It was all very personal and emotional. As for George, anyone could see he looked as though a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

“Nil desperandum,” Marguerite said to herself. No, she would never despair – not any more. She was filled with new hope and courage.

When they returned to Montpellier after their two-day stay in Barcelona, they were refreshed in spirit, and though they were still concerned about the whereabouts of Clementine and her husband, everyone noticed the remarkable change that had come over both Marguerite and George.