The Cuckoo

Kirsty Evans

Chapter One

One day you will ask about me. The people you ask will avoid your gaze, and you'll wonder why they fidget, and why they steer the conversation to other subjects. If you persist with your questions they will lie. The stories they'll tell you won't tally with the other snippets you'll collect from the whispers that cease the instant you enter a room and the speculation that seeps up from the servants' quarters.

The people who would tell you the truth can't speak for themselves. For that I must blow the dust off old bones and string them together like marionettes. Put words in their mouths and flesh on their frames.

Like any story, mine must have a beginning. Does it begin with the day I was found on a bridge over the Seine, still mottled and wizened from the womb? I can't remember when I first heard the stories. I drank them in with the rich milk of the wet-nurses who came morning and evening to the orphanage nursery. Here, these milk-cows would herd together in a corner to suckle the infants – trading their milk for money, and swapping gossip for gossip. Most of them were regulars who drifted back to the orphanage when they'd had – and often lost – an infant of their own and had milk to spare. The pregnancies of Thérèse and Lucette always seemed to coincide, bringing them to the orphanage the month that I arrived and regularly afterwards to bicker over the details of the day I was found.

The month was April. That is one point they both agreed on. The day was forgotten, the bridge under dispute. Fleshy Lucette swore that it was a gentleman with a powdered wig and emerald satin breeches who found me, serene as an angel, at sunset on the Pont Royal. Sinewy Thérèse, less inclined to romance, was equally adamant that I was found bawling on the Pont Neuf by a fish-wife – wasn't it she herself who washed the oily stench of mackerel out of my wispy hair?

I'll never know if either of these stories really happened, but I believe there must be a splinter of truth in one of them. When I arrived at the orphanage as a nameless bundle, they had to create a name for me to distinguish me from the other bundles. The name the governors decided on, that the Matron entered on her ledger, and that the priest said when he sprinkled the holy water over me, was Avril du Pont.

That is one beginning.

You could argue that the story began earlier, when Gustave Lenoir first set foot in the wall-paper factory in the district of St Marcel. Perhaps it only really started later, when Cécile married Roger de Montfort.

Just as a story never has only one beginning, it never belongs to only one person. This one I share with Gitane. It's with her that I'll begin.

She came in December. I can be sure of that, because it was in the short space that falls before Christmas, but after my birthday. By birthday I mean December sixth. We celebrated our birthday then in honour of St Nicholas, because he was the patron saint of children, and we were given an apple each. So it was in St Nicholas' day apples that I measured my life. By that reckoning I was in my tenth year that winter, and the year was 1784.

The day was Sunday, and we were about to set off to church. We were lined up in two columns, graded by size, not by age. The smallest were around three and a half feet: that's to say, their heads met the level of the line carved into the refectory door which divided those of us old – or tall – enough to attend Holy Communion from the little ones who stayed behind. The only exception to this was Arnaud who, though older than me, was under three feet and would never grow any taller. The columns started with him and the five-year-old at his side. They ended with Paulette who had seen more St Nicholas Days at the orphanage than anyone else, save Matron herself. But Paulette, old though she was, was slow of wit; too simple to be sent into service or the factories, forges or farms that were the ultimate destination for the orphans who had passed their thirteenth St Nicholas Day. Two columns, stretching from the entrance hall to mid-way up the wormy wooden steps: a dwarf at one end, a simple giant at the other, and me, at four foot something, somewhere in the middle. That was the vision that greeted the woman when Mademoiselle Moineau opened the front door to her knock.

She came in without being bid, bringing a flurry of snow in with her. Ignoring Mademoiselle Moineau, she identified Matron as the person to address, and she did so abruptly.

'I run the inn on the rue Moufetard,' she began. It must have been cold because her words came out in a white fog, even indoors. 'Had a man die in one of our beds, owing two weeks' rent. I'd never have let him in, but my husband's got a tender heart.'

I'd never come across a tender heart before. The innkeeper made it sound like a dire affliction.

‘You expect gypsies to slink off without paying,’ she continued, ‘but it’s usually on their feet that they do it, not in a wooden box. As things are, I had to pay to get rid of the corpse.’

She took a deep breath and the snow caught on the shelf of her bosom slipped down to the stone floor.

‘What I got for selling his things won’t even cover a pauper’s burial. He did leave one article behind that’s of no value to anyone.’ The innkeeper reached behind her back then and dragged a little girl forward. She was like no girl I’d seen before, her skin quite brown from the sun, even in winter. Black curls struggled to break free from the green scarf that she wore on her head.

Matron looked at the child as though she were a specimen of some unspeakable thing, on display in a jar. ‘I do hope you are not proposing to leave her here.’

‘What else should I do with her? This is an orphanage, isn’t it?’

‘This institution is a refuge for the children of God. It is not a dumping-ground for strays. Or heathens,’ Matron added, after another suspicious look at the girl. ‘Can’t you put her to some use?’

‘There’s work enough,’ the woman admitted, ‘but I’ll not keep a gypsy brat to turn the milk sour and bewitch the men, simple fools that they are.’

‘There’s no room here. One hundred beds. One hundred mouths to feed. That’s all I’m given money for.’

The innkeeper shrugged. ‘Take her, leave her. It makes no odds to me.’ She let go of the girl’s hand and turned towards the door.

‘I insist you take this child with you,’ Matron called to her back.

The woman answered without turning around: 'You can leave her out in the snow, if that's what your conscience tells you to do. My conscience tells me to bring her here, and that's what I've done.' She stomped through the doorway, out of the orphanage, and out of the story.

That left the girl in both. She looked at Matron, and Matron looked at her. Finally, it was Matron who spoke: 'What are you called, child?'

'Gitane,' the girl answered.

'Gitane? *Gitane?*' Matron repeated in disbelief, being as it is the word for gypsy, and often uttered with contempt. 'What kind of name is that for a Christian child?'

Gitane didn't reply. There were a few rumblings from the ranks of children. Matron silenced them with a glance before she persisted: 'What is the name you were baptised with?'

'Baptised, Madame?'

'When the priest blessed you and brought you into the family of God.'

The girl looked blank, and Matron shot a meaningful look at Mademoiselle Moineau.

'Did your father – may God rest his soul – have any family? Brothers? Sisters? Aunts? Uncles?'

Gitane shook her head to each of these, and the fugitive curls bounced around her ears.

'Where are you from?'

The girl looked at her as though this were an odd question. 'I am from France.'

A giggle started then at the front of the columns and swept backwards, until it reached Paulette; there, it was promptly killed as she stabbed a stumpy forefinger between the shoulder blades of the children in front of her.

Matron hesitated a moment while she tried to decide if the child was making fun of her. She gave her the benefit of the doubt. ‘Which part of France is your home?’

‘All of it,’ Gitane answered. ‘The whole of France is our home, that is what Papa says. Used to say,’ she corrected herself.

‘The whole of France is your home,’ Matron repeated. ‘*Your* home. Perhaps, as you own the whole of the country, you are the Queen of France?’ Matron laughed then. It was a hard sound, without merriment, and unfamiliar enough to startle the ranks into a nervous echo. Paulette’s chuckle – heavy, dull and blunt, like the rest of her, – continued to thud around the hall when the others had died away.

I didn’t laugh. Gitane didn’t either – didn’t, in fact, appear to realise that she was being mocked.

Matron continued: ‘And if you were to stay here – if I allowed you to stay here – in this house of God? Then you would own that too?’

‘That’s right,’ Gitane agreed. She wasn’t to know that the orphans didn’t own anything, not even the hair on their heads, which was allowed to grow long before it was cut off and sold to wig-makers.

I don’t know what God would have said to this response, or Matron either, because at that moment the church bells chimed and reminded her of the day and the hour.

‘I don’t know if the child is insolent or stupid,’ Matron said to Mademoiselle Moineau. ‘Perhaps Father Gérard will know of a more suitable place for her. She can come with us to church, and he must judge her for himself.’ She turned to Gitane. ‘Go to the back of the line.’

Matron watched the girl as she took her place beside Paulette. The odd couple spoiled the symmetry of the ranks, and Matron frowned. Mademoiselle Moineau opened the door and we filed out into the street, two by two, like Noah's beasts.

What Matron said to Father Gérard, and Father Gérard said to Matron, I can't tell you; I stood in my place among the ranks after the service, by the gate, too far away to hear. There was much arm-waving and head-shaking. Finally, when my fingers were blue from the cold, there was a nod from Matron, followed by a nod from the priest. The two shepherded Gitane back through the gaping maw of the church.

Matron emerged first, after several minutes. Deep scratches of scarlet ran across her left cheek, and I wouldn't have been more surprised if the blood had been oozing from one of the stone gargoyles that leered down at us from the church. Father Gérard followed. He had Gitane by the wrists, and she struggled like a wild thing.

I admired her then, and feared her a little. With all that happened after, the admiration turned to love; but the fear never really went away.

It was the scratches that made Matron decide that a place should be found in the orphanage for this child, who clearly had a drop of devil's blood in her veins. She kept Gitane for the same reason that some people wear hair-shirts; as a futile sacrifice to prove their worthiness to God.

Mademoiselle Moineau, less sanctimonious and more superstitious, took to crossing herself when Gitane passed. She used a quick flutter of hand over chest, barely perceptible, to protect herself against whatever it was she imagined she saw in the girl.

Children are quick to copy bad behaviour, but the teasing and baiting didn't last for long. I doubt if any of them really believed she could make their arms wither away, with gypsy curses, or tie a knot in their tongues, just by wagging hers at them. But they weren’t brave enough to find out, and they soon left her alone.

I wasn’t her friend out of pity, nothing as noble as that. Gitane had things that I wanted.

She had seen the sea. She knew what peaches taste like. She had felt a father’s arms around her and heard his laughter in her ears.

They were small things, everyday things, but to me they were jewels, and I locked each one away in my imagination. The world I knew was small in size and narrow in outlook, bordered to the north and east by the Seine. The orphanage was in the district of St Marcel. This was before Paris was wrested from the hand of God, the saints banished, and the districts renamed. Then it was a warren of alleys and courtyards, where ramshackle tenements buckled under the weight of too many lives, and people didn’t have energy to waste on thinking, or wondering, or dreaming. Since I was delivered to St Marcel – whether by the fish-wife or the gentleman – I’d never been further south than the prison of Bicêtre, or further west than the rue St Jacques which separated me from the Luxembourg Palace and the district of St Germain beyond, where the great noble families lived in great noble houses.

It was my determination to see the wide boulevards and gilded carriages of St Germain that made us sneak out of the orphanage early one morning in autumn. The broken window pane that let the cold air into the dormitory also let Gitane and me out of it. But we didn’t make it to St Germain. Not that day. We’d only travelled a few streets when we found them.

I thought it was a doll when I saw it first, half hidden in a pile of rags under a flight of stairs in a dark courtyard. The skin was smooth and hard and grey like the wax faces of the dolls I'd seen in shops. Dark lashes stood out against the pallor, tiny, like ladybird legs. Gitane shrank back, but still I bent to pick it up. It wouldn't budge. I pushed the rags aside and saw that what held it fast was an arm, the same pale shade of grey, with torn fingernails and a sprinkling of fine hairs. This limb was as rigid as the arm of Our Lady in the church which clasps the baby Jesus to her marble chest. My scream came out as a gasp. This woman was no statue, and the thing she held wasn't a doll. I heard later that they never could prise that arm free, that they buried them like that, mother and child, with just the one shroud wrapped around them.

'She was one of ours. Can't have been more than seventeen, the poor poppet.'

Lucette's voice was the next thing I was conscious of. Gitane had gone for help while I stood frozen. Someone must have carried me back to the orphanage, where a fire had been lit in the nursery grate, and I knelt on the floor with my head on Lucette's coarse skirt. She stroked my cropped hair. Now and again I felt the soft foot of the infant at her breast, pressing gently on my head.

'I suppose she was making her way here? To leave the infant?' Lucette continued.

Thérèse pressed a baby against her bony shoulder, and it burped quietly in her ear. She laid it down in the long crib where four others flailed their arms and cooed.

'Tragic,' she said, looking down at the infants. 'It's the same story, played over, time and time again. That young girl left here as a babe all those years ago by some wretch as had no other choice. And then she goes and makes the same mistakes.'

One of the babies took advantage of the sympathy in her voice and wailed, stretching chubby arms towards her. She picked him up and settled back into her chair.

'They say Lenoir booted her out of the factory when she got big and couldn't hide her shame.'

That was the first time I heard the name Lenoir, as two syllables spat from the chapped lips of the milk-cow Thérèse. It would be two years before I would hear it again, before it would lead me to the district of St Germain, to the tall house by the river, and to a lonely girl called Cécile.