



A Secret Lost in the Water

BY ROCH CARRIER

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After I started going to school my father scarcely talked any more. I was very intoxicated by the new game of spelling; my father had little skill for it (it was my mother who wrote our letters) and was convinced I was no longer interested in hearing him tell of his adventures during the long weeks when he was far away from the house.

One day, however, he said to me :

‘The time’s come to show you something.’

He asked me to follow him. I walked behind him, not talking, as we had got in the habit of doing. He stopped in the field before a clump of leafy bushes.

‘Those are called alders,’ he said.

‘I know.’

‘You have to learn how to choose,’ my father pointed out.

I didn’t understand. He touched each branch of the bush, one at a time, with religious care.

‘You have to choose one that’s very fine, a perfect one, like this.’

I looked; it seemed exactly like the others.

My father opened his pocket knife and cut the branch he’d selected with pious care. He stripped off the leaves and showed me the branch, which formed a perfect Y.

‘You see,’ he said, ‘the branch has two arms. Now take one in each hand. And squeeze them.’

I did as he asked and took in each hand one fork of the Y, which was thinner than a pencil.

‘Close your eyes,’ my father ordered, ‘ and squeeze a little harder....Don’t open your eyes! Do you feel anything?’

‘The branch is moving!’ I exclaimed, astonished.

Beneath my clenched fingers the alder was wriggling like a small, frightened snake. My father saw that I was about to drop it.

‘Hang on to it!’

‘The branch is squirming,’ I repeated. ‘And I hear something that sounds like a river!’

‘Open your eyes,’ my father ordered.

I was stunned, as though he’d awakened me while I was dreaming.

‘What does it mean?’ I asked my father.

‘It means that underneath us, right here, there’s a little fresh-water spring. If we dig, we could drink from it. I’ve just taught you how to find a spring. It’s something my own father taught me. It isn’t something you learn in school. And it isn’t useless : a man can get along without writing and arithmetic, but he can never get along without water.’

Much later, I discovered that my father was famous in the region because of what people called his ‘gift’ : before digging a well they always consulted him; they would watch him prospecting the fields or the hills, eyes

closed, hands clenched on the fork of an alder bough. Wherever my father stopped, they marked the ground; there they would dig; and from there water would gush forth.

Years passed; I went to other schools, saw other countries, I had children, I wrote some books and my poor father is lying in the earth where so many times he had found fresh water.

One day someone began to make a film about my village and its inhabitants, from whom I've stolen so many of the stories that I tell. With the film crew we went to see a farmer to capture the image of a sad man: his children didn't want to receive the inheritance he'd spent his whole life preparing for them — the finest farm in the area. While the technicians were getting cameras and microphones ready the farmer put his arm around my shoulders, saying :

'I knew your father well.'

'Ah! I know. Everybody in the village knows each other... No one feels like an outsider.'

'You know what's under your feet?'

'Hell?' I asked, laughing.

'Under you feet there's a well. Before I dug I called in specialists from the Department of Agriculture; they did research, they analyzed shovelfuls of dirt; and they made a report where they said there wasn't any water on my land. With the family, the animals, the crops, I need water. When I saw that those specialists hadn't found any I thought of your father and I asked him to come over. He didn't want to; I think he was pretty fed up with me because I 'd asked those specialists instead of him. But finally he came; he went and cut off a little branch, then he walked around for a while with his eyes shut; he stopped, he listened to something we couldn't hear and then he said to me : 'Dig right here, there's enough water to get your whole flock drunk and drown your specialists besides.' We dug and found water. Fine water that's never heard of pollution.

The film people were ready; they called to me to take my place.

'I'm gonna show you something,' said the farmer, keeping me back. 'You wait right here.'

He disappeared into a shack which he must have used to store things, then came back with a branch which he held out to me.

'I never throw nothing away; I kept the alder branch your father cut to find my water. I don't understand, it hasn't dried out.'

Moved as I touched the branch, kept out of I don't know what sense of piety—and which really wasn't dry—I had the feeling that my father was watching me over my shoulder; I closed my eyes and, standing above the spring my father had discovered, I waited for the branch to writhe, I hoped the sound of gushing water would rise to my ears.

The alder stayed motionless in my hands and the water beneath the earth refused to sing.

Somewhere along the roads I'd taken since the village of my childhood I had forgotten my father's knowledge.

'Don't feel sorry,' said the man, thinking no doubt of his farm and his childhood; 'nowadays fathers can't pass on anything to the next generation.'

And he took the alder branch from my hands.