The Upside Down River

Tomek's Journey

Also by Jean-Claude Mourlevat

The Upside Down River: Hannah's Journey
Jefferson

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For my father

PROLOGUE

This story takes place at a time before modern comforts had been invented. There were no video games, cars with airbags or supermarkets. People didn't even have mobile phones! But there were rainbows after a shower, apricot jam with almonds, impulsive midnight dips – all the things we still enjoy nowadays. Sadly, there was also heartbreak and hay fever, against which no effective remedy has yet been found.

In other words, this all took place . . . long ago.

CHAPTER ONE

Birds of Passage

Tomek's grocery was the last house in the village. It was a tiny, simple little shop with a sign above the window saying GROCER in blue letters. When you pushed open the door, a little bell gave a cheerful *ding-ding*, and Tomek would be standing behind the counter in his grey overalls, smiling. He was quite tall for a boy of his age and rather bony, and he had a faraway look in his eyes. There would be no point trying to list all of the items Tomek sold in his shop. An entire book wouldn't be enough, whereas a single word sums it up: 'everything'. Tomek sold 'everything'. That means useful, sensible things like fly-swatters and Father Partridrigeon's cure-all elixir, but of course there were also essential items such as rubber hot-water bottles and bear knives.

Since Tomek lived in his shop, or rather in the backroom of his shop, he never closed. Although there was a little sign hanging on the door, it always showed the side that said OPEN. That didn't mean there was a

continuous stream of customers. No. The villagers were respectful and took care not to bother him at all hours. But they knew that in an emergency, Tomek would willingly help them out, even in the middle of the night. And don't imagine that Tomek never left his grocery. Quite the opposite, he would often go out and stretch his legs or even take off for half a day. But then the shop would stay open and customers would go in and serve themselves. On his return, Tomek would find a note on the counter saying, '*Took a ball of sausage string, Aline*', together with the money, or, '*Came for my tobacco. Will pay tomorrow, Jack.*'

And so life was hunky-dory and things could have continued like that for years, and even centuries, without anything unusual happening.

Only, the thing is, Tomek had a secret. It wasn't anything bad, or even extraordinary, but it had crept up on him so slowly that he hadn't noticed. Exactly the way hair grows without your realising it: one day, you find it's too long, and there you are. So, one fine day, Tomek found that a thought had been growing and taking shape inside his head, and that thought was this: he was bored. Worse still, he was very bored. He had an urge to travel, to see the world.

From the little window at the back of his shop, he often used to gaze at the vast plain where the spring corn swayed gracefully, like the waves in the sea. And

only the *ding-ding* of the bell could tear him away from his daydreams. Other times, he would get up at dawn and go rambling along the footpaths that led deep into the countryside, through the delicate blue of the flax fields, and it was a wrench to have to go back home.

But most of all it was in autumn, when the birds of passage flew silently overhead, that Tomek felt the strongest impulse to leave. Tears came into his eyes as he watched the wild geese vanish over the horizon with a great beating of wings.

Sadly, you can't just take off and go travelling when you're called Tomek and are the owner of the only grocery in the village, the grocery that had been his father's before him and his grandfather's before *him*. What would people have thought? That he was abandoning them? That he wasn't happy among them? That he was no longer happy in the village? At any rate, they wouldn't have understood. It would have made them sad, and Tomek couldn't bear to hurt others. He resolved to stay and keep his secret to himself. I must be patient, he told himself. The boredom will eventually fade away as it came, slowly, with time, without my noticing.

Unfortunately, the exact opposite happened. In fact, an important event would soon reduce all Tomek's efforts to be reasonable to nothing.

It was a late summer's evening and Tomek had left his shop door open to enjoy the coolness of the night.

He was busy doing his accounts in his special ledger, by the light of an oil lamp, pensively chewing the end of his pencil, when a clear voice almost made him jump: 'Do you sell barley sugars?'

He looked up and saw the loveliest person you can imagine. She was a girl of around twelve, with very dark hair, wearing sandals and a dress in a pitiful state. A leather waterskin dangled from her belt. She had come in through the open door so silently that she could have been an apparition, and now she was gazing at Tomek with her sad, dark eyes: 'Do you sell barley sugars?'

Tomek did two things at the same time. The first was to answer: 'Yes, I sell barley sugars.'

And the second thing that Tomek did – Tomek, who had never in his life been the least interested in girls – was to fall head over heels in love with this little scrap of a girl. It was love at first sight.

He took a barley sugar from a jar and held it out to her. She put it in her dress pocket at once but didn't seem to want to leave. She stood there gazing at the shelves and rows of little drawers that filled an entire wall.

'What have you got in all those little drawers?'

'I've got . . . everything,' replied Tomek. 'I mean all the essentials—'

'Hat elastic?'

'Yes, of course.'

Tomek climbed up his stepladder and opened a drawer right at the top: 'Here you are.'

'And playing cards?'

He came back down and opened another drawer: 'Here.'

She hesitated, and then gave a shy smile. She was clearly enjoying this: 'And pictures . . . of a kangaroo?'

Tomek had to think for a few seconds, then he hurried over to a drawer to the left: 'There you are.'

This time, the girl's dark eyes lit up and shone. It was so delightful to see her happy that Tomek's heart began to pound.

'And desert sand? Sand that's still warm?'

Tomek mounted his stepladder once more and took from a drawer a small vial of orange sand. He came down and poured the sand onto his special ledger so that the girl could touch it. She caressed it with the back of her hand then walked the tips of her nimble fingers over it.

'It's lovely and warm.'

She had moved very close to the counter, and Tomek could feel the heat of her body. Rather than touching the warm sand, he would like to have put his hand on her golden arm. She probably guessed it, adding: 'It's as warm as my arm.'

And with her free hand, she took Tomek's hand and placed it on her arm. The reflections of the oil

lamp danced on her face. She left his hand there for a few seconds and then deftly moved away, twirled around then pointed at random to one of the three hundred small drawers: 'What about that one, what's in that one?'

'Oh, just thimbles,' replied Tomek, pouring the sand back into its vial through a funnel.

'And in that one?'

'Cowries . . . they're rare shells.'

'Oh,' said the girl, disappointed. 'What about that one?'

'Sequoia seeds. I can give you some as a present if you like. But don't sow them just anywhere because sequoias grow very tall.'

Tomek thought this would please her, but his words had the opposite effect. She became serious and thoughtful again. There was a renewed silence. Tomek didn't dare say anything more. A cat was standing on the threshold of the open door. It advanced gingerly, but Tomek chased it away with a sharp wave of his hand. He didn't want to be disturbed.

'So you have everything in your shop? Absolutely everything?' said the girl, looking up at him.

Tomek felt a little uncomfortable.

'Yes . . . I mean, all the essentials,' he replied with a touch of modesty.

'So,' said the timid little quavering voice, suddenly

filled with a wild hope, it seemed to Tomek, 'so perhaps you have water from the River Qjar?'

Tomek had no idea what this water was. Nor did he have any idea where this River Qjar might be. The girl realised, and a shadow clouded her gaze. She answered, without his having to ask: 'It's the water that stops people from ever dying, didn't you know?'

Tomek gently shook his head. No, he didn't know that.

'I need some,' said the girl.

Then she tapped the waterskin dangling from her belt and added: 'I'm going to find the river and put some water in here . . .'

Tomek wished she would tell him more, but she was already coming towards him and unfolding a handkerchief in which there were a few coins.

'How much do I owe you for the barley sugar?'

'One farthing,' Tomek heard himself mumble.

The girl put the coin down on the counter, turned again to look at the three hundred little drawers and flashed Tomek a parting smile.

'Goodbye.'

Then she left the shop.

'Goodbye,' stammered Tomek.

The oil lamp was growing dim. He went back and sat on his chair behind the counter. On his special ledger that was still open, lay the strange girl's coin and a few grains of orange sand.