

Scan McMullen

Walk to the Full Moon

MEAT WAS BOUGHT AT A high price by the Middle Pleistocene hominids of the Iberian Peninsula. Large prey meant more meat, yet large prey was very dangerous. The pressure to hunt was unrelenting, for the hominids were almost entirely carnivorous, but the people lived well because their technology was the most advanced in the world.

It is unusual for a linguist to be called for in a murder investigation, especially an undergraduate linguist. Had my Uncle Arturo not been in charge, and had I not been staying at his house at the time, I would not have become involved at all. He told me little as he escorted me into the Puerto Real clinic and took me to a meeting room.

On a monitor screen was a girl in a walled garden. Crouching in a corner, she had a fearful, hunted look about her. I could see that she wore a blanket, that her skin was olive-brown, and that her features were bold and heavy, but not unattractive. Somehow, it took a while for me to notice the most remarkable thing about her: she had no forehead!

"Who -- I mean what is she?" I exclaimed.

"That's what a lot of people want to know," replied my uncle. "I think she is a feral girl with a deformed head. She was found this morning, on a farm a few kilometers north of here."

"Has she said anything?" I asked, then added, "Can she talk?"

"Carlos, why do you think I called you? This is a clinic where the staff are quite good at dealing with tourists who don't speak Spanish, but this girl's language stopped them cold."

"So she does speak?"

"She seems to use words, that is why you are here. Before you ask, she is locked in the walled garden at the center of the clinic because she can't stand being indoors. We need to communicate with her, but we also need discretion. Someone senior in the government is involved. DNA tests are being done."

I was about to commence my third year at university, studying linguistics. Being continually short of money, I would drive my wreck of a motor scooter down to Cádiz every summer, stay with my uncle, rent a board and go windsurfing. By now I owed Uncle Arturo for three such holidays, and this was the first favor he had asked in return. My mind worked quickly: love child of government minister, hit on the head, abandoned in the mountains, DNA tests being done to establish the parents' identities.

"There are better linguists than I," I said.

"But I know I can trust you. For now we need total discretion."

I shrugged. "Okay, what do I do?"

"She must be hungry. When a blackbird landed in the garden she caught it and ate it. Raw."

I swallowed. She sounded dangerous.

"Maybe you could help her build a fire, roast a joint of meat," my uncle suggested.

"Me?" I exclaimed. "Cook a roast? I've never even boiled an egg."

"Well then, time to learn." He laughed, without much mirth.

It turned out that I had three advantages over the clinic's staff and my uncle's police: long hair, a beard, and a calf-length coat. It made me look somehow reassuring to the girl, but days passed before I realized why.

I entered the garden with a bundle of wood and a leg of lamb. The girl's eyes followed me warily. I stopped five meters from her and sat down. I put a hand on my chest and said, "Carlos." She did not reply. I shrugged, then began to pile twigs together in front of me. The girl watched. I reached into a pocket, took out a cigarette lighter, and flicked it alight. The girl gasped and shrank back against the wall. To her it probably looked as if the flame was coming out of my fist. Calmly, I lit the twigs, slipped the lighter back into my pocket, and piled larger sticks onto the fire.

My original plan had been to roast the meat, then gain the girl's trust by offering her some. I placed the leg in the flames -- but almost immediately she scampered forward and snatched it out.

