

Ewout Storm van Leeuwen

**Blind Timo
and the baker's daughter**



novel

It is a love story.
About a boy, blind, but free as a bird.
And about the sweet, headstrong daughter of a
stubborn baker. She, too, was free.
With a dying girl of wealthy parents, whom they took
in their unconditional love and set her free.
It happened in a fishing village on the Côte d'Azur,
during the summer of 1957.
As long as no one interfered with them, everything
went well.

Has it really happened?
Has this love story stood out in the Akasha Chronicles
that much that a writer could pick it up?
Purity has her own ways to manifest. Like the story of
Romeo and Juliet and many more.
Pure, unconditional love is rare and seldom survives
unharmd.
This is the story of two weeks in the lives of three
twelve year old.

Blind Timo and the baker's daughter

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Preface

In a small Côte d'Azur village with a hotel, a beach and fishermen, a blind boy and Manon, the daughter of a gruff baker, hang out on the beach daily with the village children, from the age when they were toddlers. And yet they live still in a world of their own.

Timo, although deprived of eyesight, is gifted with insight.

He can tell intricate stories that captivate children as well as adults. That's how in the summer of 1957 they meet Sofie, a slowly dying girl of their age. He discovers what she lacks and shares with her his daily breakfast of fried "fruits de mer" he gets from the fishermen. Sofie recovers.

Timo "sees" with his hands and one day Manon permits him to "see" her ripening body. So does Sofie. They taste love and promise each other to marry the tree of them.

There is no proof this story did happen.

But purity has its own ways to stand out in the Akasha Chronicles and to reach the "fantasy" of writers who are acquainted with this purity and long for it. Because longing is a strong magnet.

I take part in this story, although just as a ghost writer.

Joshua Stiller

They were allowed to play on the beach early in the morning, if they first collected the washed-up garbage and leftover trash from the hotel guests in buckets handed out by the lifeguard.

When bathers from the hotel showed up, Timo, who usually stayed until the very end, also had to leave. The other children were already at school by then. Since he could not see, he was not allowed there. He was sorry, especially in the summer when he sat under the open windows listening to the nuns talk about history and distant lands. But his mother had no money for the school for the blind in Marseilles. Sometimes he would walk with Manon to school and stroll around afterwards. Being alone on the beach was a bit boring.

He lived with his mother in a drafty room in the barn of a farmhouse. It smelled of hay, mold, dust and occasionally of wood smoke, hot oil with garlic and onions, when his mother was cooking something on the old stove in the corner. Often she was not there, then he ate what was left over or not at all.

He had been born in this room, an old stable of a farm, she had told him. He didn't know much more about her. She never talked about her past. What a farm was he found out only later.

Space was as familiar as his own hands. With those, then, he had explored everything, ever since he could crawl. They slept in the same bed, which was as familiar as her body, which he loved to crawl against. If she was there.

When he could walk, there was the yard to explore. He could hear the farmer, as his mother called the male voice, talking somewhere now and then. He did not use this part of the yard, so it hardly changed in all these years.

In the summer and fall, it did not matter if there was no food: he could survive just fine on grapes, nuts and apples. Winters were terrible.

His mother spoke French with him, although she could also speak another language, but she didn't want to teach it to him.

'You were born here and therefore you are a Frenchman,' was her contention. 'Then you don't need another language.'

Secretly he was a little afraid of her and at the same time a little in love. She could be very distant, walking around inside cursing and grumbling in that foreign language and occasionally

throwing things. At other times she was affectionate and whispered sweet words to him when she got into bed next to him. Although they rarely washed and also wore their few clothes for a long time, he loved the smell of her body.

As he grew older, he wandered farther and farther from home. He mentally mapped his surroundings by shapes, smells, echoes and structures such as walls, nettles and thorn bushes, rocks and paths and later, asphalt roads and cobblestone paths. His feet were almost as sensitive to shapes and surfaces as his hands. Despite the calluses, because he always walked barefoot.

He had been given a wooden flute by Jacques, the antiquarian in the Rue de l'Eglise. He liked to come there and listen in his corner to the stories of the old boss, who had been a fisherman, sailor, merchant and soldier and had been to far-away lands. They only had to fight occasionally, Jacques told him chuckling, so he had had oceans of time to learn songs, listen to stories and trade.

Once he had seen Timo sniffing outside the open store door and had seen from his eyes that the boy was blind. He had invited him in. When he realized that the boy was looking with his fingers, he had given him several objects in his

hands and told him something about them. They kept playing that game. Thus Timo obtained very special knowledge of unusual objects, histories and countries.

On other days, Timo strolled from the beach to a secluded spot, high on the rocks above the village, to practice on his flute. Often Jean-Baptiste, the shepherd boy, would come by with his herd of goats and teach Timo tunes. Those songs, in turn, he had learned from the old shepherd whose flock he now herded.

With help from this and that, Timo had a more or less fixed program to get through the days. He had gotten to know the roads and paths in and around the village through Manon, the baker's girl, whom he had played with for as long as he could remember; in recent years he could also find his way on his own.

He had met Manon when she came to an age where she had to go to school. They played together only occasionally, but it became more frequent when she started telling him every day what she had learned at school. She taught him the letters and numbers by taking his hand and writing in the sand with it. As soon as she could read, she took books, which she then read from.

They were all kinds of books, which she found at school or at her grandmother's house. Timo liked fairy tales and travel stories best, he could dream away with them. Later Timo sometimes got books from Jacques, where he spent many of his dull mornings, waiting for Manon to come out of school. When it rained or the Mistral blew, they would sit on an old canapé at the back of the shop and Manon would read to him, whispering so as not to disturb Jacques. They had more quiet spots this way where she could read aloud.

Today began for him even before his mother got up to go to work at the hotel. That was only when there were many guests as there were now; she was only a substitute cleaner. On other days, especially in the winter, he still sometimes found her in bed in the afternoon when he came home for a while. She could hardly stand the cold.

'In Africa, it was always hot,' she used to say in apology.

Sometimes she stayed away for a night and a day.

Most of the time he didn't care. He lived in his own little world. When he was little he had to stay alone at night much more often in their dank quarters. Then, though, there was always

food in the house the next day, or a new piece of clothing for herself or for him.

Today all was well. His first course was to the fishermen, who unloaded their night's catch early in the morning and went to clean up in the shelter of a high cliff, where there was a stretch of beach that served as their harbor. It was too early then for the first buyers, and the fishermen huddled together in one of the largest boats, the one with a cabin, where they baked unsalable fish and other sea creatures on a wood-fired stove. Usually there was so much that Timo could feast on his breakfast for almost an entire day. Sometimes he would get fish scraps for his mother, from which she would prepare bouillabaisse with herbs and wild vegetables she sought along the road.

But today, after his fish breakfast, he walked down the Boulevard to the beach, where a few children were already playing. Manon wasn't up this early, or she was helping her father in the bakery.

The rare times it rained they schooled under a shelter where folded beach chairs were stored. It happened there one day that Timo told a story to Manon that he had caught under the windows

of the school. The other children fell silent and listened along, urging Timo to talk louder. One thing led to another; he didn't know when to stop.

This morning was like any other. Timo, not daring to go far into the sea, let the waves rock him in the shallowest part until Manon dived on him splashing and screaming as usual.

When the church bell struck, the children strolled to their belongings while chatting and fooling around and dressed in their school uniforms. So did Manon. By the next chime, Timo was alone on the beach.

A long day of waiting lay ahead of him. Waiting for Manon to get out of school, or his mother to cook.

He got dressed and headed for Jacques' carry-out.

The next morning he was walking past the bakery, on his way to the fishermen, when Manon, with whom he was secretly in love, came storming out of the store and stopped him. The smell of fresh bread wafting out through the open store door made his mouth water. She put a warm, crusty roll in his hand.

'From yesterday, I got to bake them in the oven

for a while when Daddy was done. I have a bag full,' she said proudly. 'And also...' With her mouth against his ear, she whispered: 'A few pastries that are too old.' Her moving lips against his ear aroused a bliss that made his legs go limp; his head reverberated and murmured. She smiled, tucked her arm under his and kissed him on the cheek. 'Keep walking,' she hissed, 'they can still see us.' She hopped up beside him on her long, thin legs, waving the bag of sandwiches. 'Are you going to the fishermen? Can I come with you?'

Like he could have said no. He had never said no to Manon. Nor to anyone else, for that matter.

His fingers knew her body from the times he had been allowed to bury her in the sand. He had felt her growing taller, with lean legs, the hard thumping of her knees, the bony curves of her feet at the bottom and springy curves at the top. He had counted her ribs, caressed her tiny ears, gently because of the pebbles in her earlobes, and always careful with her braids, that no sand got into them.

She smelled to eat this morning: of warm bread and a little of warm sweat. Would he smell good, too?

'How do you get up so early?' he managed to exclaim.

'I've been waiting for you.'

That, of course, was not an answer to his question. Or was it?

They walked on hand in hand. The road smelled of fresh asphalt, through which the thyme in the verges scented. He was light-headed heading with his girlfriend to the fishermen and a vigorous breakfast - he hadn't eaten anything after the fish breakfast the previous day. Then playing on the beach.

They heard the fishermen talking before they had even finished the steep exit around the cliff. It was newly paved; they could descend barefoot; it was too soon that the sun had made the road surface too hot.

The fishermen turned to them as he got into the boat and helped Manon with her full bag. The boat smelled strongly of the sea, salt, fish, tar, hot oil from the engine, a hint of diesel, but overpowering was the smell of frying fish in hot oil.

'So boy, did you bring your girlfriend?' barked old Bruno, the owner of the boat and father of three fishing sons, each with his own boat. 'You're one of the baker's on the Chemin des Usines, aren't you?'

Manon smiled shyly. Timo could sense that, because she held his hand and squeezed it when

she answered. 'Yes sir,' she whispered.

'Do you like fried fish?' called a man at the stove. 'Or do you only eat bread?'

She smiled, bent toward Timo and moved her lips against his ear for the second time, 'Am I the first girl to come here?'

It took a moment for her words to penetrate his drifting brain. 'Yes, I never heard another girl here.'

'Shall I give them some rolls? I have lots of them, an order that wasn't picked up yesterday.'

Oy, that wasn't nice. He knew the remote bakery didn't have many customers. An order that wasn't paid for cost money.

'Go ahead,' he whispered.

The men were surprised at first, delighted later that they all just got a still warm brioche. The children were given an enamel plate with fried fish and other sea creatures.

'Oh, how delicious,' sighed Manon, fussyly snacking from the pile. 'We only eat fish at home on Fridays.'

Timo, seeing her head blurred against the light sky, let her squirming fingers put tasty morsels in his mouth, even licked off her greasy fingers. He knew the men were watching and laughing at it, it made him feel great.

On the beach, children were already playing in the tepid waves. They hastily took off their clothes and ran to the water, Manon in her swimsuit and Timo in the cut-off shorts he used as swimming trunks. They splashed each other with water, threw a ball and screamed like crazy.

Panting and with shining eyes, the children gathered at the canopy with the beach chairs. Manon handed out pieces of the pastries and sat close to Timo so as not to miss a word when he started to tell.

In gentle words, he wove a magical land before their staring eyes. He didn't make it up, he walked in it himself, a land made of geography lessons, books and stories by Jacques. Manon put her sandy arm around his neck and let her head lean against his shoulder.

There was some commotion upstairs by the wall of the walkway. Listening, Timo fell silent. A little boy stood up and went to look.

'It's the lifeguard,' the kid whispered, back among the other kids. 'Shh, maybe he didn't see us. There are fancy people with him with a girl in a wheelchair.'

After listening for a moment, Timo, reassured, resumed his story. He was so into it that he stood up and, with a kind of pantomime, reinforced his

story. Manon held him by his ankle, not intending to let go of her boyfriend. The characters became so real before his mind's eye that he performed their dialogues in a twisted voice, made movements that running, arguing, frightened or fighting people make. At one point, an elephant came into play. With heavy strides he rocked between the children, holding one arm in front of him like a raised trunk, like the figurine at Jacques. Outside in the sunlight he squinted triumphantly.

Manon had followed him and put her arms around him.

'So beautiful,' she sighed. 'I knew the poor girl was a princess.'

Only when they started clapping did she see that several people had been standing around listening. Startled, she looked at the lifeguard. Had they stayed too long?

Fortunately, the lifeguard was friendly. It was not yet their normal time, but they had to leave now anyway; there were hotel guests who wanted to go on the beach. The children, still in the trance of Timo's story, put on their clothes and climbed the stairs to the Promenade in a timid manner.

'Hey storyteller, wait a minute!' called the lifeguard, who was from another place and did not

know their names.

Manon, who had not felt like putting her clothes on over the still damp swimsuit, stopped suspiciously, the bag her clothes were now in in one hand and Timo's hand in her other.

'What is it, little girl? I asked the boy to wait.'

'Timo can't see,' she said belligerently. 'I always show him the way.'

'Well, stay then,' hummed the lifeguard. 'Your name is Timo? Well, Timo, here are some people from the hotel who want to ask you something.'

'A lady and a girl in a wheelchair,' she whispered in his ear. 'She cried, just like me.'

A distinguished lady's voice asked: 'Boy, where did you learn to tell like that... Oh my God, you're blind!'

Timo felt terribly embarrassed.

'So what?' replied Manon. 'That may be why he can tell stories so well.'

'Yes, of course,' the lady said a little embarrassed.

'His name is Timo,' the lifeguard said.

'Timo, we just stood and listened when you were narrating. It was very beautiful. Sophie, my little daughter, had to cry about it, so beautiful.'

She swallowed audibly; Timo felt she was almost crying herself.

'Sophie is ill for a long time and cannot walk properly. She is not allowed to exert herself. Then she runs into breathlessness.'

'Mommy!' protested a girl's voice, barely audible.

'I explain sweetie, why you can't play with other children and why I want to ask Timo to come and tell you a story from time to time.'

'Oh mama! Really?'

It echoed so much desire that Timo was willing to do anything to make the girl happy.

'Do you want to, Timo?'

He nodded, too moved to say anything. There was another child there, who might be able to see, but could not play.

'Would you perhaps like to come to the hotel after school to tell Sophie a story?'

'Timo doesn't go to school, ma'am,' Manon replied. 'He can't see.'

'Oh, excuse me ... isn't there a school for the blind, then?'

'My mother can't afford that one, ma'am. It's all the way in Marseilles.' Timo had long ago learned not to be ashamed of their poverty.

'His mother works at the hotel, ma'am, but only when there are a lot of guests,' complemented Manon, who thought it was best for other people

to know that not everyone was well off. Things were better at her house than at Timo and his mother's, but the bakery brought in just enough for a meager living.

At that thought, she felt her swimsuit pinch. The legs pulled at her groin, not because they weren't roomy enough for her thin thighs, but because the bodice had become too short. She sighed. A new bathing suit would probably be too expensive. Then what was to be done when she actually grew breasts? They had already grown a little in the last month, she thought. The top of the swimsuit was just high enough to cover her nipples. If sand got between them they hurt. That wasn't the case before.

'Excuse me, ma'am? She hadn't been paying attention and hadn't heard the question.

'I asked what time you could take Timo. You do go to school, don't you?'

'Yes, ma'am. But Timo knows the way to the hotel by heart. He doesn't need me for that.'

'Oh, that's nice then. Timo, would you come to Sophie's tomorrow at eleven o'clock?'

Timo nodded, though he had no idea what he was saying yes to. 'Yes, ma'am,' he said shyly.

Hand in hand, they strolled toward home.

‘What shall we do? My dad is sleeping now, then it’s so boring in the house. Is your mom at work?’

Timo shook his head, with his mind still on the almost incomprehensible request of the distinguished lady to come and tell stories to that girl.

‘Is she home?’

‘Oh, no, I don’t think so ... maybe.’

‘Do you know something we can go do?’ she urged.

That was an unusual question. It was always Manon who had plans and made suggestions, which he was only too happy to accept. Except for playing on the beach, playing the flute with the shepherd boy and having breakfast with the fishermen, there wasn’t much for the blind Timo to adventure, he thought a little wryly.

‘I’m going to play the flute with Jean-Baptiste this afternoon.’

‘On your goat pasture?’

‘Hmhm.’

‘Can I come with you?’

‘Yes, but I’m not going until this afternoon.’