

# Boy of Sand and Sky

By Laura Matthias Bendoly

The one child born in the village of Sommêt-les-Rochers that year was Gabriel deLuce, named for both the miracle of birth during a plague year and for the angel's breath that filled his lungs ten minutes after pronouncement of his death.

His mother knew immediately the child was special.

Unlike his broad-shouldered brothers, Gabriel was a spindly child with greenish skin like the bronze St. Christopher that stood in the village fountain. Gabriel's eyes were pale and wide like he was perpetually in shock. He was smart, though, and shrewd, knowing at age six every trapdoor on the village square and never finding himself seized in the vice grip of the baker whose leftovers he was prone to swipe from market.

Though he hiked and climbed like any boy raised among mountains, Gabriel was not a talker. It was established by age four that he was mute. Or mostly. He declared a few words on occasion that he found in the Bible. Usually complex words uttered suddenly and in a ferocious voice.

"Lamentation."

"Seraphim."

At ten, the boy made letters. Lads were needed in the scriptorium after the last of the adult scribes perished from plague. Relying only on imitation, Gabriel's writing was as fine as a bishop's. As the ink left his brush it glowed, spreading particles of light to the parchment edge.

His neighbor, Eric, who shared Gabriel's bench in the copy room stared at Gabriel's calligraphy. It appeared to have a halo, not just on the letters but all around the paper's edges, above, below and on all sides of his written passage.

"Let me see that!" Eric snatched Gabriel's work. His own page was neat but slanted like most novices'. A finished page of scripture, though worked on by fifteen individuals, should look like it was made by a single pair of hands. All the boys had learned just so much on the down stroke, a swish of the hand to the right, a flourish over the top. Too much ink on the curve of a P or too little on an I, one had to begin the page anew.

Gabriel lay his stylus aside. He watched how Eric raised and lowered his parchment and ran his hand along the edges trying to gather up its halo.

"How 'ya do that, Gabriel? Ya tryin' to make me look bad? It ain't real gold, that's for sure."

The rector shouted from the front of the copying room: "Why do I hear voices!"

Eric shoved the manuscript back at Gabriel. "He's doing it again, master. Glowing his pages. It ain't natural." The lad glared. "Nothin' natural about ya, witch-boy."

Gabriel slunk home faster than usual from the monastery. Not that the other boys beat him. But they followed him sometimes, calling names that stuck like meat gristle that you can't work down.

"What's wrong with you, Gabriel?" came a voice from a tree branch -- one of his classmates goading him from his hiding place. "Why ya' all green and bandy legged?"

Another voice answered. "'It's cuz he's from a bog. That's why he's green. His father weren't no plague victim. He were a bogman! Careful you don't touch him or you'll catch it."

"We should run 'im out of town."

Gabriel didn't believe the bogman stories but the threats of being chased from town were frightening. Didn't they see his gold touch only worked on scripture passages? What fear had they from that? Soon, however, Gabriel developed another supernatural skill. He woke hovering above his bed. His mother told him it would pass when he'd grown to full height. But he wondered: could he drift off the Earth, completely? Wind up adrift in the night sky?

Though his mother worried, she believed her son must have a mission like young David in the Bible. She stayed late after mass to look at Gabriel's letters with their swirls and arabesques. She never learned to write, herself. *He is blessed. Never mind that he was the child of violence.* Indeed, Gabriel was a child created when the plague was at its height and men took leave of their senses. *Great things will come. After all, he was delivered by angles.*

At his birth, the villagers had been kinder. Indeed, it was neighbors who wrapped Gabriel in linen and whispered prayers. But eventually they took her leave, hope having vanished from the birthing room.

Seeing the lad about the village in early spring his eleventh year, making faces at a cat, writing letters in the dirt, and, yes, setting parchments a-glow made folks cross themselves. He had too many gifts. Why should he be blessed when so many others in Sommêt had lost their entire families? Fortune at that extreme wasn't natural. He and his mother weren't to be trusted.

\*\*\*

Gabriel left the scribe's cellar at seven bells, his hands black with ink. Arriving at his cottage for the evening meal, he leaned over the basin to wash, scrubbing at his fingers with ash and soda. They pinked a little, but were hardly clean.

The two of them bent to their soup – cabbage and carrot -- which they ate nightly from winter stores.

The mother frowned. "Did you wash your hands?"

Gabriel lifted his spoon and nodded.

She indicated a large purple-black smear on his index finger, like a pirate's death mark. "You should ask the master what he uses. Bees' wax, perhaps."

Gabriel shrugged.

"Well, so you know, Denis and Luc are both installed at the village stable. Your brothers will make good at that apprenticeship. Do you think you'd like to join them? Learn to tend fine horses?"

*Does Mother wish me to leave scribe's work?* Unsure how to answer her, Gabriel held out his right hand.

She bent to look. "What is it, son?" She put down her spoon. "I don't see anything."

But on his ink-stained skin there *was* something. It took shape gradually, the smears merging into an elongated bell shape.

She gasped. "Is that . . . a horn?"

"Judgment's cornet," he whispered.

She closed her son's fingers and pushed his hand away. Gabriel hadn't spoken a word in years, and now 'Judgement's cornet?' How was she to manage him?

She cleared their bowls in agitation and put them in the wash bucket for later. Best to clear the hearth of the tenebrous feeling she got when hearing her boy's voice produce the words of a prophet.

"I'll get you to the monastery early tomorrow." She dried her hands. "If I speak to your master, he might let you work with the animals. There's fewer questions asked at a stable. Think about it, Gabriel. Stable work is peaceful. I've heard the names the other copyists call you. It's cruel what they say. They could roust a mob if they wanted."

Gabriel just moved his chair by the fire and took up his Bible. Though he knew what his mother said was right, he didn't want to consider threats from the villagers. It was such splendid work he did. Surely the other boys wouldn't harm him.

\*\*\*

"I don't know, Madam deLuce." The scribes' master clasped his hands the next day. "Without a father or uncle's guidance, I'm not sure he'll take to livestock. He's bookish as you know and so gifted with the stylus. I was thinking of finding him a place with the illuminators in Arles. They might not mind his ... gold . . . rays."

"But, Monsigneur." She called every member of the clergy by that title, never mind that it was reserved for cardinals. "Gabriel isn't normal. Casting halos is peculiar. And levitating in bed! He's more an angel than a boy! It's from being too in love with his work."

“Isn’t that a blessing, though? Few villagers are so devoted to a calling, especially if they toil in a stony field.”

“What I mean, sir, is he gets strange ideas from those pages. Mystic ideas. I think he...” She hesitated. “He believes himself a prophet.”

“A prophet?”

“Or a saint.”

“A young man’s excess.” The master smiled. “It is his age, madam. Adolescent boys all think they’re kings. Perhaps he wishes to impress a sweetheart. With that gold touch of his. Show it off, so to speak.”

“I suppose.” But she knew it wasn’t so. Gabriel had no interest in girls. He seemed to have no urges and almost no awareness of his body. He’d left the house completely naked last year in the thick of winter. Not once did he seem to feel cold or heat. As many as three days could pass for him without food or water and he had several times been burned on the cook pot but came away unmarked. Not once had Gabriel become sick, overslept, suffered boredom or melancholy. His brothers teased him for it, tried to tickle and torture him, but he didn’t seem to notice. Normal boys were incapable of causing him discomfort even though at fourteen and fifteen his brothers were big as mules.

At his mother’s insistence Gabriel took work alongside Dennis and Luc at the stable. He was sent to shovel manure but upended a cart of it in the water trough. Next, he fed the horses straw instead of hay, gave them holy water to drink, and tried to make the goat stable with the donkey, which resulted in a black-eyed doe and a bite taken from the rump of a horse. Without telling anyone, Gabriel spent the night with an old pony that he took for lonely. When his eldest brother, Luc, found him curled around the old mare, he carried the boy back to his cottage. “Find something else, Mother.”

Next, Gabriel tried carpentry. The village carpenter, Poulard, was replacing timbers in the vestry at the east arm of the church. Gabriel watched the work but didn’t feel called by it. Poulard seemed to spend ages doing exactly the same thing – stuffing a new wedge into a slot where a previous one had been. No invention. No variation. Why would anyone chose this profession? A carpenter was alone all day in a cold room with nothing to read or draw on.

His mother made him carry Poulard’s tool chest every day, just the same. “To get you accustomed to new materials. There’s got to be a trade that doesn’t glow or discomfort people. You’re going to have to work to find it. Be patient.”

Gabriel tried. For two weeks he sorted and cleaned Poulard’s chisels. They didn’t glow, nor did the timbers that went into the vestry.

When Poulard wasn’t looking, Gabriel snuck into the scriptorium and snatched discarded parchment from the scribes. No longer having ink or stylus, he entertained himself by folding the paper into birds. After four tries, he was good at it. He set his best bird on the prayer rail to admire and was just about to put a slightly better angle on the tail, when it peeped at him.

*Did you tweet!* Gabriel gaped.

It hopped a tiny step toward him and cocked its head. "The carpenter will swat you if you aren't careful!"

*You can talk?* He was astonished. *Is it because you're made from holy verses?"*

"Your hands bring life," the bird peeped. "Carpentry is not your calling. Your true profession will be shown to you by another. Listen for a call of urgent need."

When he mustered the courage, Gabriel plucked the paper bird up and hid it in his lunch pail. After that, voices seemed to come from everywhere. When he woke early, music came to Gabriel on the first sun rays, like harp strings or a finger circling a lead goblet. Were angels made of music? In illuminations they were composed of feathers and gold leaf with the skin of mortals. It was hard to say what matter made an angel. They all held human attributes. A flute, a bow, a lily, a standard, a sword. His namesake angel was a messenger, and he blew a horn. This, Gabriel believed, was the cornet that had appeared on his hand that day. The sound of the cornet was the noise we would all hear on Judgment Day. That made it the most sacred instrument. The one he most wished he could play if he ever lay eyes on one.

It was no surprise when Poulard told Gabriel he wasn't made for carpentry. He went back to the scibes' master. Asked to clean ink wells the following week, Gabriel set off with a set of glassware to the church well. He swirled clean water around the inside of each ink well to draw out clumps of pigment. But as he finished cleaning the sixth container, he knocked the finished clean ones down the well shaft.

He clenched his teeth. *Don't cry! What would Saint Paul do? Or Nicolas the Stylite?*

Gabriel reached for the rope. He had earlier drawn up water on this cord. What if he'd knocked the ink wells into this very pail and they were waiting for him at the bottom? It was unlikely, but why not check?

*Angels help me.*

He pulled.

Faster and faster, hand over hand. It was a long rope like the rigging on a schooner but with every pull the bucket felt lighter. So light, that at a point he stopped pulling, and Lord if the rope didn't glide upward by itself. As the final section slid miraculously through its pulley, the church bell began to toll. Not the slow tone of the hour but the carillon of a feast day.

The miller, working nearby with a pile of flour sacks, ran to see what was the matter, the carillon only being used on special Sundays or times of disaster.

"No fire, lad?" The miller looked about. "Why the bell peal?" He leaned over Gabriel. "Did someone poison the well?"

Gabriel shook his head vigorously and with trembling hands pointed to the bucket that was still rising on its own from the depths of the shaft. It crested the edge of the well and set itself in Gabriel's lap. At its center lay five unblemished ink wells, spotless and still stoppered.

Gabriel didn't tell his mother about what happened. He knew it was extraordinary. If she heard, she would tell him to leave the scriptorium altogether. Or go into hiding. She was losing sleep with

worry. Secrecy did little good in Sommêt. The miller was out in no time crowing about the mute boy's "flying pail."

A rock came through their cottage window late that night. Calligraphy covered the stone's flat surface: *Satan Flies through Sommêt in Your Bucket.*

\*\*\*

A few days afterward, Sommêt's chickens became lethargic. They were no ones special pets but they had been reliable layers. Quite suddenly they stopped producing eggs and the rooster wouldn't crow. They gathered on straw bales and sulked. No kicking dust, no pecking fleas. They'd become the bird equivalent of waterlogged worms.

Known, now, as a kind of wizard, Gabriel was called to help. "Bring those ink wells," the fowler muttered. "Their magic might cure 'em."

Perhaps the villagers were coming around. It was hard to tell. Neighbors wanted his help, now. But they also put three pews between themselves and his family at mass. What would a saint do? Help the neighbors despite their unfriendliness? Doing the right thing despite thrown rocks might be better than doing nothing.

Gabriel walked up to those hens and studied them. How did you discover what made a hen lethargic? He stroked the feathers of one and examined the wing of another. They smelled awful, but that wasn't unusual.

Holding up two fingers he motioned that he'd need two nights to think about the fowler's dilemma. On the second night he had a dream. In it an egg appeared in the bedroll of the stable-master's serving girl, a fourteen year old named Filene. He went to his brothers the next morning and led them to the unmade bed of their master's servant. He gestured for the lads to look through her bedding.

They did so.

Sixteen eggs lay nestled under Filene's pillow. Six of them had hatched and ten were still whole. The hens had been laying. Filene had simply gotten to them first.

"Yeah, I stole 'em." She lowered her head when they confronted her. "To raise 'em for my family. We's poor as rats in them hills. Nothing growing in all those rocks!"

Her employer let her take three chicks to raise but held back wages in punishment.

"Go on an' gloat!" Filene shouted at Gabriel as she packed up to leave.

And later she caught up to him on the footpath. "I'm done for in this village. No one will hire a me thanks to you. Whatchoo have to go proph-seeing for? It ain't Christian. An' I'm tellin' the constable when I sees him next to take a look at your mother's house. Yeah. She's got more linen there than I ever

saw any housewife put up on laundry day. She profited from the plague, I'll wager. Helped herself to empty houses."

It was horrible what Filene was saying and yet she could say what she pleased. Her voice functioned, though her words were lies. Gabriel ran from Filene into the woods, then wound his way back to St. Christopher's fountain. The saint was from the parable where an old man carries Christ across a river. Sommet's Christopher stood at the center of a wide, cool fountain and reached some seven feet in height. His gold/green skin was the same color as Gabriel's. While washing his hands in the water, something extraordinary happened. Christopher's reflection smiled and lifted his hand. Then he pointed his index finger at the lad and spoke: "Gabriel, do not fear the calling God has given you. You have a gift."

He stared at the reflection, astonished. He looked up at the bronze statue, still as death, but with a reflection as mobile as a dancer.

"Just as you see me, Gabriel," the reflection continued, "you will work mysteries."

Gabriel replied as best he could: *I will work mysteries? How?*

"You are special, lad. Your writing makes light and your dreams bring justice. You will now try your hand at healing."

Gabriel wanted to argue, to refuse. But a breeze came and stippled the fountain pool. When the water stilled the reflection had gone quiet. Gabriel ran home to ponder what to do. Was miraculous healing really a profession? Would it endanger his mother? Would the villagers cast them out? He had solved the problem with the hens. He was something of a finder of lost things. And yet, Filene's fury. The rock through the cottage window. There were slurs, still, in the copy room and cruel remarks to his mother at market. Embittered words could lead to worse. His mother still talked of riots over oil during the plague. How no one had light enough to sit vigil for the dying.

A week later an accident called Gabriel to Poulard the carpenter's house. It was the Sabbath. No one labored, so the boy was surprised to hear the neighbors shouting through the village about a work injury.

It happened at the rear of Poulard's cottage on a scaffold he built to repair the battlements. Sommêt was circled with medieval fortifications that had once been mighty, but crumbled under bombardment during battle with the Califate. Certain of the houses, including Poulard's, were set into the fortified wall. The rear of his house joined the cliff's sheer drop into the valley. A fall from this part of the village meant certain death.

*Had Poulard fallen from his window?*

Gabriel scampered through the village past the fountain, through a flock of sheep that were on the move to summer pasture, knocking into Guy the shepherd.

*Sorry!* he mouthed.

He arrived at the Poulards' to see the door ajar with three neighbor women wringing their hands. From deeper inside there came moaning.

Gabriel entered slowly, inquiring silently of the gathered faces.

“He was building a balcony,” his wife blubbered. “So we could have a view, of all things, from our table. I never needed a view! I see the square just fine from the door step. But Pierre thought we should look out over the crevasse.”

Gabriel made a gesture to approach the injured man.

“Don’t come near me, lad. I was seized by a . . . creature . . . while working on my ledge. He grabbed me by the collar and shook me ‘til my teeth cracked. See?”

Gabriel leaned in to look in the fellow’s mouth but he couldn’t find any injury. Some misshapen molars, but nothing that looked out of place.

The carpenter ranted on: “Down he cast me to the flagstones. I feared for my life! And then, Gabriel, he....he.... blew air in my mouth. When he left I tasted metal, like my lips were made of bronze. The noise from his mouth still rings like a trumpet. I might have died from shock, only my dear wife came shouting and the creature vanished.”

Gabriel trembled at these words. Could the account be true? The almond-size lump on Poulard’s forehead made it clear he had knocked himself a blow. But maybe there *had* been an angel in his home. Gabriel’s own life was the result of heaven’s intervention.

He gently touched the carpenter’s face. The old man was damp and agitated. Gabriel felt the pulse as he’d read you should do in a pamphlet from an itinerant apothecary. Poulard’s heart rate was high but not racing. He did have a mark on his neck. Just above one shoulder the skin was indented and red —what could be the imprint of a hand. Gabriel leaned his head in the direction of a tankard that lay on its side on the night table.

“No, lad. I haven’t been drinking.” Poulard wiped his face with the back of his hand. “Some soup at dawn and a tisane with honey. I haven’t lost my head from drink in fifteen years.”

Poulard’s wife, who approached from the kitchen, nodded. “C’est vrai. He prefers tea to ale. I fear...” She knit her hands together. “I fear he will have the *touch* (she whispered the word) . . . like you, son, from wrestling with angels. Do you think it possible that angels are invading? Will more of us be thrown about the house? Maybe my husband is being punished for toiling on the Lord’s day.”

Gabriel considered. All kinds of Bible men had visitation. They fell down, got knocked off horses and the like. He had just last month copied a page where Jacob fought with angels.

*“...he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched . . .”*

Still, miracles seemed to come in single events. Gabriel doubted that an entire legion of seraphs was taking over Sommêt. But he didn’t know how to explain this to the Poulards nor whether there’d be lasting injury to monsieur’s head and neck. With all these faces looking at him, he the unnatural boy, had become the authority. At age eleven. In a peasant jerkin. He tried to sit up straight and hold his shoulders square. St. Christopher had signaled him. Picked *him*, not one of his brothers, not the scribes’ master to make a difference. There had been meaning in the gold of his lettering and the music he heard at dawn. He was saved at birth to make miracles.

The neighbor women in the kitchen looked impatient. They would have an answer.

The stable girl, Filene, stepped through the door where she'd apparently been skulking. "Surely, he must have a cure. You was delivered by angels, Gabriel. You found those eggs in my bed. Can't you say how you know these things? It would be wicked to keep God's secrets to yourself."

The others nodded. Six or seven of them now. They closed in on Gabriel where he dithered in the Poulards' kitchen.

"It's true what Filene says," another said.

"You know things other folks don't."

Readin' and letterin' and how to glow a parchment."

"Withholding cures would be devilry, boy."

"Maybe he spies on us at night." The shepherd's wife shouldered her way forward. "So's to use our secrets against us!"

Madame Poulard put a hand on the woman's wrist, then looked calmly at Gabriel. "I believe in you, lad. I don't expect anything from your visions. But if the angels have advice, tell us how to help my husband. If he's in danger of losing *his* speech..." She patted her neck. "Oh, it's hot today. Filene, ladies, let the lad alone. There's nothing else for you to see today. I'll send news if there's a change with the mister. Bring him a cure, Gabriel, if you have one. If not, we're in God's good hands."

Gabriel trembled at those demanding faces. He rose to his feet, staggered, and charged for the door.

St. Christopher's fountain was just around the corner so he made quick for its serene shade and practically threw himself at the water as he approached. But on extending his hand to the surface, a tremor rippled through both arms. The statue of Christopher was alive again and staring at him. It shook its crinkly, jointed hair, but then looked up at the Christ child on its shoulder. Christ, Himself, spoke next. Not moving His lips but in the trembling of the air and the sound of water as it fell from the fountain to the basin below.

"Gabriel, you can heal the carpenter. Take a measure of water from this fountain. His wounds will be cured. Once you do this you will be a healer and will tend thousands like the Lady at Lourdes. Do you want that, Gabriel -- boy whom angels brought to life?"

*I don't know, Lord!* Tears streamed from Gabriel's eyes. This was his Savior speaking. Could he refuse? *I'll be called a sorcerer. A false prophet.*

"Play this for them if they doubt you." Suddenly floating on the water was a shiny instrument. A cornet. Like the one still marked on his hand. The very trumpet he'd seen the angels play in Judgment's illumination.

*Thank you, Lord.* He bowed his head. *But I don't know how to play.*

"It will show you. Keep it safe. Use my holy water for the sick but only when every mortal cure has failed. It will not work to make large ears small or fill a banker's chest."

*I understand. I will do this. But I fear I might be cast from the village.*

“You may be, but it is your calling. It is how you’ll join the angels. That’s what you wanted, isn’t it?”

It was what Gabriel had been waiting for, what dawn’s music had foretold and what the paper bird had sung about. He would join the illuminations. *Does it mean I will wander all my life?*

But the Savior was returning to bronze. The movement in St. Christopher’s hair solidified. Their proclamation was over.

Gabriel needed to think over what the Lord had said. He walked home slowly. Should he do this? Would accepting the calling make him a hero? The idea was both magnificent and terrible. If he accepted he’d have to leave his family. The church would name him a heretic. The priests already hated the village midwife, never mind that she had brought six villagers back from death during his lifetime. A philosopher in Toulouse was burned three years ago for using something called a telescope to look at heaven. Knowledge in a village was preferred in small amounts, and only when delivered by the clergy.

Gabriel considered his future deep into the night as his mother breathed peacefully in her sleep. He decided to become itinerant. A wandering mystic wasn’t as suspicious as a gifted child. A traveling healer wouldn’t have to demonstrate the making of cures. He’d carry supplies of St. Christopher’s water in plentiful supply.

Gabriel packed a small bag the next morning with the bronze cornet, a few apples, a pair of boots, and a traveling cloak. Then he returned to the Poulards with a vial of fountain water. After drinking it, the ringing in Monsieur’s ears left, the pain departed, but the hand print on his shoulder remained. When he asked if God meant for him to suffer, Gabriel shook his head.

*You’ve been touched*, he wrote on a piece of parchment. *Don’t worry, it doesn’t hurt*. It was several days before Poulard got those words read to him by the scriptorium master. The water from Gabriel’s vial cured his concussion, but he kept the hand print on his shoulder the rest of his life.

Filene was at the market square when Gabriel left the carpenter’s house. Her station had sunk dramatically. She was now the village hogwoman.

“I see you mute boy and I knows what youze doin’. Twisting that old couple with dream speakin’. You’re a spy and I liar, I say. You been spyin’ on me in bed. That’s how you knew about them eggs. I tole everyone what I think a’ your miracles. Snake oil’s what you’re sellin’. Snake oil and hexes. You’ll be run outta the villge! If not this’un, then the next!!”

She stared at Gabriel across the square as her hog blundered around her legs, rooting for forage. “I don’t care that you make cures! Youze a fraud and a . . . a . . . a sinner like the rest of us!” She screamed and yanked her hair. And then she struck the hog as hard as she could with her whip.

A crowd had gathered by that time. They stared at Filene.

“Get along, mad girl.”

“I’ve seen some fits in my day, but goodness!”

They shook their heads at the spectacle. Gabriel hoped this meant he had his neighbors' understanding, that he might visit Sommêt peacefully in the future and that his family would be left in peace. One day St. Christopher might help another villager.

*Perhaps Filene. I hope so. It would be awful to spend a lifetime tearing your hair.*

Gabriel said goodbye to the scribes' master and his mother at church. He plucked three words from deep in his heart, more than he had ever said at one time.

"I will heal."

With that, he pressed his cornet-marked hand into his mother's palm and smiled at his teacher.

"Since the church fathers may come for you," his master said, "take a new name. Don't keep deLuce. I know you're blessed by God but not all people will believe. People you've known all your life might turn on you. So don't be here when the next plague comes. Keep to the road where you'll be safest."

And so the silent scribe became the healer Brian duSable, a dusty mountain man who was in fact a child. He lived many years as a traveler, healing with a calf skin of holy water that never drained. He came back to Sommêt-les-Rochers to see his mother and to pray at St. Christopher's fountain. The statues never spoke to him again but he didn't need the voices any more. When he arrived in a town he blew the cornet which he wore on a cord. With the notes of that trumpet people knew hope was coming. Gabriel carried music through the mountains for the rest of his life, until he was an old man and one day died peacefully at the edge of a spring, his cornet held lovingly in his arms.