

IN THE LABYRINTH

I found her in the labyrinth, a girl of thirteen, sitting on a single bed, in a dim room, door closed against those who might love her but could not understand her, or help her to understand herself. Her left hand gripped the neck of a guitar; her right arm draped over its belly, fingers slipping across the nylon strings. The guitar pressed back against her body, as if it listened to the pulsing of blood—blood saturated with pain and pumped out through every artery and vein before turning to rush back into her heart.

In silence I watched her, knowing if she spooked, she would retreat, perhaps forever beyond my reach. She played on, head down, as if concentrating on the placement her fingers as they moved from chord to chord. In truth, she knew someone stood there, in a shadowed corner; the knowledge could be seen in the further hunching of her shoulders.

A breath...then I emerged. Her fingers stumbled but stubbornly played on as I sat beside her on the bed. I could not reach out to touch her with a hand. She had already begun erecting the barriers that would thicken as the years passed. But words might yet find a way in.

I began to talk, gently, telling her that I knew her loneliness, her deepening sadness, and even her unspoken rage. I knew she feared there would never be more for her than this room and the darkness it held. As I talked on, her fingers stilled on the strings and her downturned head tilted slightly toward me.

The words to reach her came without conscious thought, as I had already lived all that she was living. But while I had walked away from this room decades ago, she had remained, trapped within its walls.

I spoke her name, the old name, and she lifted her head, at last, to look at me. “This won’t be your life forever,” I promised. “You’ll leave this room, this house, this town. You’ll begin the first of many new lives. You’ll find friends, have lovers. You’ll live in the east and in the west, and travel across the ocean. You’ll become an artisan of words.”

I rose then, opening my hand.” Come with me,” I said. “All of this will happen—has already happened—but now there’s a journey we must take together.”

She stood, not quite certain, a little afraid, but wanting to go with me. When she moved to lay her guitar aside, I stopped her. “Bring it. Don’t leave your music or your words behind. They’ll help us find our way.” She lifted the strap over her head and swung the guitar around to shelter her back. Then her hand grasped mine.

The walls disappeared, and we found ourselves on a dirt road, in an open plain, broken here and there by solitary trees. In the distance lay mountains, a warning that the journey would not be easy.

“Where are we going?” she asked as we began walking, stirring dirt into ankle-high clouds, momentary signs of our passing.

“To find a girl,” I replied. “A little girl with home-cut dark hair and deep blue eyes, who peers eagerly out from her father’s arms, itching to be released, to burst out into the world and discover...everything.”

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