

- THE INCARNATIONS OF THE AMERICAS -

THE MUSIC OF DREAMS

“WHO IS THE MASTER THAT MAKES THE GRASS GREEN?”
--ZEN KOAN

Crosby

Sarah ran desperately after her yellow Labrador Crosby, her breath coming in short staccato bursts; her chest burning. Fatigue slowed her muscles, but she forced her brain to override the pain. Every time Sarah felt herself slacking, she managed to regain her pace, bolstered by the fear of what lay ahead of her.

Unless they made a drastic change in direction they'd soon reach the bridge.

If she didn't catch Crosby before he reached the bridge he'd be lost to her, maybe forever.

From the time she was a little girl her Father told her- no matter what happened, Sarah should never, ever, ever cross the bridge.

Not even to help Jesus himself.

As if to reinforce the taboo nature of such a trip; a gust of cold wind whipped across her face, causing her hair to snap back. If Crosby crossed the bridge Sarah would turn around with a broken heart and hope he managed to find his way back on his own.

Sarah weaved her way through the deep undergrowth and tried to figure out what was wrong with Crosby. One second they were playing fetch and then without any warning he turned and raced out of the clearing.

At first Sarah assumed Crosby was only chasing a rabbit and didn't pursue him. Instead, she stood by the tree line and yelled after him to come back.

But he didn't return.

After five minutes Sarah took a deep breath and plunged into the brush after her dog. It rained hard the day before so the ground was clumpy with mud. Crosby wasn't a thin dog and he left deep footprints in the earth, Sarah had no problem following his trail.

Even though she never stopped yelling his name, Sarah only saw Crosby a single time. Sarah was standing at the bottom of a steep rocky incline. She groaned as her eyes followed the paw prints leading straight up the slope. The thought of climbing up after Crosby was too much. Sarah was about to quit.

Then Crosby suddenly appeared out of the foliage at the top of the hill and started barking at her. She called plaintively to him- trying to get him to come back down the slope to her.

For a minute Sarah thought Crosby was going to come. But instead, he turned and disappeared again.

With a yell of frustration, Sarah barged up the hill after her dog like a soldier rushing a fortified position in a war movie. She thought un-girly-like thoughts about wringing Crosby's doggy neck when she got her hands on him. But the longer she ran, the less angry she was. Her anger was incrementally replaced with fear and sadness.

Crosby was her best friend, and she was going to lose him. The only people she had at home were her older brothers and they never wanted to sit still long enough to play anything- they always wanted to race off to be with their own friends. But not Crosby. Crosby would sit patiently with her no matter what she was doing- even if that meant putting up with having ribbons tied around his neck.

At a full run Sarah raced out into the small clearing that tapered at one end, leading straight for the long bridge that crossed the natural tear in the earth separating Sarah's home territory from what she thought of vaguely as the Great Beyond.

The Folken were coastal people, living on the edge of the great sea. The bridge led inland.

Nobody ever went inland.

Ever.

Sarah didn't allow herself to look up until she got to the beginning of the thin, flat black metal expanse. Sarah let a defeated sob escape her throat when the night black plating of the bridge appeared in her directly downward facing gaze.

She couldn't believe it. Crosby didn't stop.

Instead, was sitting on the far side of the bridge, wagging his tail merrily.

Almost like he was mocking her.

Through eyes distorted by tears Sarah looked at Crosby, her constant companion for the last four years. She asked herself if she was really going to walk away. Almost in a roar she could hear a lifetime's worth of warnings echoing in her ears- "Don't cross the bridge."

Sarah was afraid, struggling mightily between her fear and love for her dog. She tentatively decided to half cross the bridge when a high pitched whistle came from the direction of town. She stopped and listened, her heart sinking. The high pitched whistle continued and then tapered off. There could be no doubt- it was the one telling her to come home.

The whistle was taken very seriously by her Dad. When it went off she needed to be in the house ASAP or there would be no concert and a stack of chores waiting for her when she walked in.

Realizing how far away from home she was- she decided that she didn't have time to go after Crosby. She allowed herself this line of argument in order to avoid the issue of her fear at crossing the bridge.

"All right dog, that's it." Sarah yelled through her tears. "You can just stay on that side of the bridge then. I'm gonna go home and eat. You're gonna have to fend for yourself I guess. I'd like to see you try to catch something- you big fat yellow beast!"

Crosby just sat and looked at her, his tail still wagging with gusto.

Realizing the dog was calling her bluff; Sarah turned on her heels and started walking back towards home. Every few seconds she thought she heard Crosby on his way back to her, but every time she turned around he wasn't there.

It was hard to see where she was going through her tears, but Sarah still hurried as best she could.

Home

By the time Sarah's surroundings became familiar, she knew she was in trouble. Dusk had fallen firmly into darkness and despite her best efforts- she was still a good ten minutes from home. Not even adults ventured out into the wilderness after dark for fear of a whole host of things- not the least of which involved disappearing and death. Sarah was only 12 so she had no trouble imagining how pissed her Dad was going to be when she got home.

Thankfully, between her agonizing over her decision to leave Crosby at the bridge and her fear of the chewing out she was guaranteed to get when she got home, Sarah didn't have room in her head to let her imagination invent things in the wilderness to be afraid of. Her Dad at home was plenty real enough.

For 45 minutes she rushed through the underbrush, getting uncountable scratches on her legs. She rushed in order to minimize the amount of worried agony her Father went through. Eventually though, the front porch of her large stone farmhouse came into view.

Sarah was hot, sweaty, and tired in spite of the cold gusts of wind that guaranteed there was going to be rain during the night. To make matters worse she'd managed to get a rock in her shoe when she was half way home. Every few steps Sarah would consider stopping to get the rock out, but she never actually took the time to remove it. As a result, there was a noticeable limp in Sarah's stride by the time she made her way up the stairs to the front porch. She loped straight up the steps, only hesitating when her hand fell on the doorknob.

Instead of going straight in, Sarah decided to say a little prayer. She lowered her head and her left foot began tapping on the hard wood of the porch. What came out of her mouth weren't words. Instead, she hummed a melody for about 30 seconds.

The music coming from deep in the back of her throat was quite beautiful and very familiar. When she was finished she looked up and took a long, deep breath that briefly brought floating white stars in front of vision.

Every head in the room swung toward the door as it opened and Sarah was met with the frightened looks of her brothers and her Dad. Walking in, Sarah thought she was going to be able to be brave, but the moment she saw her Dad, all thoughts of being in trouble and getting home late flew out of her mind.

The only thing that mattered was Crosby and her Dad understanding that he'd run away, and that it wasn't her fault, that she loved her dog immensely and took care of him just the way she'd been told.

Sarah started sobbing again, tears once again covering her cheeks.

"Dad... Crosby... Gone..."

Her Dad's face which was held in an interesting combination of anger and relief- suddenly became overcome with concern.

"Wait, slow down honey. Tell me what happened."

In fits and starts Sarah told her Father Kyle and her three brothers Eddie, Aaron, and Tim what happened with Crosby. She told them about the chase, Crosby's running across the bridge, and her reluctant decision to not follow. The further into her tale she got, the more ashen-faced Kyle became.

When she was finished, Kyle just looked at her for a long second, he seemed to be searching his daughters face for signs of a lie. When he didn't see any he asked, "So Crosby just ran off and went straight to the bridge and stopped?"

“Yeah, it was almost like he was daring me to follow him across. But I didn’t go Daddy, I know you’ve told me a thousand times not to go across the bridge so I didn’t go.”

“I believe you honey.” He said, but still there were tears in his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Sarah asked; she hadn’t seen her Dad cry since the day her Mom died. Seeing him crying actually scared her a little.

“There’s nothing wrong sweetheart.” Kyle said. He reached over and tussled Sarah’s hair, an act that confirmed for her that something was wrong. Her Dad only tussled her hair when he was upset about something.

Changing the subject, Kyle said, “Now I want you to hurry up and get something to eat. The procession is going to be here before you know it.”

Sarah totally forgot it was a Concert night. She’d been looking forward to it for 2 weeks and until Crosby ran it was the only thing she’d really thought about. Just being reminded of the concert helped her put Crosby out of her mind. She realized she wasn’t going to be in trouble for being late, which was certainly something to be pleased about. Things were looking up a little bit, her Dad would know what to do about Crosby, he was the smartest man she’d ever met- he knew about all kinds of stuff, from music to farming to history to the best way to pull a fish out of the ocean.

The work of getting Sarah her food gave Kyle a moment to collect himself. He never would have expected his daughter’s tardiness was a result of her being in the opening stages of fulfilling the prophecy.

Truth was, if you would’ve asked him, Kyle would’ve told you there was no way his daughter was going to be the one who was called. Yet all the signs as he knew them were there.

Sarah would have to be taken to see Clarissa during the Concert.

Trying very hard to keep his voice even, Kyle said to Sarah, “I’m very proud of you for not going over the bridge, even to chase after Crosby. Maybe he’ll get tired of his little game and come back by the time we get back from the Concert.”

Kyle felt sure this wouldn’t happen, but he was trying to be optimistic. Sarah could tell her Dad didn’t mean what he was saying, but she appreciated the thought. Sarah’s brothers were just glad Sarah was so late because they too had come in ten minutes after they were supposed to. All of the drama caused Kyle to forget about their transgression completely.

“I thought Dad was going to blow a gasket.” Aaron told her under his breath when Sarah took her place at the dinner table and began scooping food into her mouth at a furious pace.

“Aaron.” Sarah said in a low, extremely menacing tone, “I’m going to rip you to pieces if you don’t screw off.”

All three siblings face’s registered the same shock at the same time.

“Did you just say screw off?” Eddie asked incredulously.

“I think she did!” Tim affirmed.

“Well good for you Sarah. We often think that Aaron should screw off. It’s nice to know that we have your concurring opinion on the matter.” Eddie, who was the oldest and Sarah’s favorite, congratulated her sincerely.

Sarah laughed.

Hearing the laughter, but not what caused it, Kyle said, "I don't know what you're doing to cheer Sarah up- but keep doing it."

"You hear that Aaron? Even Dad thinks you should screw off. And not just for a second either- he thinks you should keep doing it." Eddie chided.

Everyone at the table was nearly in hysterics with laughter, including Aaron. Kyle, who didn't know what was so funny merely looked bemused, which caused everyone to laugh even harder.

When a thin stream of half-drunk milk came out of Eddie's nose any remaining composure flew out the window. A wise man, Kyle took a long look at his children sitting at the table and laughing together, and took a mental photograph.

It would be the last he would ever take of his whole family.

The loud knocking at the front door startled everyone, choking off the kid's laughter. Everyone turned to the door, surprise quickly giving way to excitement.

"Oh, it's the procession." Aaron said- giving the explanation everyone had already come to on their own. "It's time for the Concert."

Neighbors

Kyle went to the door and opened it with a creak. Standing in front of them on the front porch was a tall man wearing a wide floppy rimmed hat and wide grin.

Bowing deeply, the man said, "Comes there one who seeks the true sound of God?"

Instead of responding Kyle began tapping his foot on the kitchen floor, and using his hands as drumsticks began to beat his thighs in a complicated rhythm. Sarah's father was a percussionist as were all three of her brothers.

Sarah was a singer.

It was part of the prophecy that the girl would be the only singer in her family. Still, Kyle never thought she could be the one; she wasn't very good. It's funny how parents can ignore the obvious when they don't want the obvious to be true.

"And how are you David?" Kyle asked his visitor once he was finished with his mini-drum solo.

"I can hear the rhythm in my soul." David replied.

The men's interaction was ritualized. The greeting was the same before every Concert, only the person, the names, and the means of expression changed. Throughout the Folken land this same ritual was being played out as nearly the entire population wound its way to the large amphitheatre in the center of town.

Once the formalities of ritual had been dispensed with, David asked Sarah, "What's wrong? Did your Dad try to sing a duet with you that was so off key on his part that he brought you to tears?"

"No, Crosby ran away."

"He'll come back." David assured her.

"I don't know- he crossed over the bridge." Sarah said, trying to think about the Concert and not what she was saying. Because of this, she didn't notice the peculiar look that came across David's face as he realized the implications of what Sarah just said. Unlike Kyle, David thought Sarah was the most likely of any girl in the village to be the one to fulfill the prophecy, even though he'd never told Kyle as much.

David looked over to Kyle who gave him a clear look to keep his mouth shut. He understood and merely reiterated his wishes that Sarah find her dog again.

Impatient with his sister and the dog that barked at anything that moved outside in the night, Aaron urged everyone to be on their way with a whining, "Let's go!"

The five members of the Throckmartin family followed David out to a group of about fifty people gathered in his yard and on the road. Kyle took his place at the front of the procession and began to lead the large group of people to his nearest neighbor to the east, about 250 yards away just as David had led them to Kyle's.

This was The Procession.

Bluegrass

No one really knew how the ritual of The Procession started. During every Concert the next date's starting families were chosen by a lottery during the set break of the final band of the evening. A large hat was passed around and the names were pulled from it by the previous week's "lucky" winners.

No one wanted to be picked because it meant walking to the neighbor's house in the dark with only one's family. By the second or third house there were enough people that the darkness lost its teeth and the procession became an opportunity to meet with neighbors and friends, but those first couple of houses were always filled with nerves and dread.

The fact nothing bad had ever happened to any family in the known history of The Procession didn't alleviate the fear family's felt toward being the first to travel alone in the dark.

The Folken believed darkness was like the world without music- empty, terrible, and without meaning. Music came from the sun- lack of music, like lack of sun- caused the world to be plunged into darkness. This was why all Concerts were held in the night. The day held its own melodies, but it was up to the Folken to create the music that filled the night and drove away the darkness.

Besides, you could see the light show much better in the dark.

Six houses later everyone in the western circuit of the procession were together and they turned toward the center of town. About a half mile away Sarah's group met up with the southwest portion of the procession at the bottom of a hill, doubling their number to a bit over 100.

In center of town was a large circle of ground. The grass was clipped short by the sheep that were led to graze during the day and surrounded by a loose perimeter of enormous trees of the type that looked like they could tell you amazing stories if only you were wise enough to hear what they were saying.

In the center of the circle was a round stage, big enough for up to twenty people to stand comfortably. The stage wasn't a bland utilitarian platform, it was a work of art in its own right. Every inch of its wooden sides were decorated with marvelously intricate designs reminiscent of a Tibetan mandala. The flat surface of the stage had a huge spiral carved into it that was covered during performances by a thick hand-woven carpet that was itself knit into an intricate design.

On Concert nights there were tents set up all around the perimeter of the concert field where water and food and all kinds of non-crucial items were traded.

It was the informal rule of the Concert (not enforced but closely followed by nearly everyone) that except for food and water, the items traded should have no practical purpose. So the people of Folken traded every kind of art medium from sculpture to jewelry to glass. There were tapestries, clever devices to carry your drink, all kinds of weird doodads, but no seed. No tools or farm equipment. No fish and no boat accessories. Business was to be done during the day in the bright summer sun or the dull rainy grey- but not in the emptiness of night.

For the Folken concerts weren't just about going and listening to music- the Concerts were about tapping into the vibrations that hold the universe together. The power that makes the planets revolve and the body heal. This force was known as the Groove. It manifested when a group of musicians were locked into one another and the music coming at your ears was so good the earth fell away and all there was, was SOUND.

The Folken called this God.

Kyle was fond of saying "there is no God in commerce."

Then he would pause, and admit, "Well, I suppose there is some kind of God in it, but certainly not one I would want to worship or even have over for supper."

Then all his children would laugh. It wasn't funny in itself anymore- they'd heard it far too many times. It was funny because they knew Kyle still thought it was the funniest thing in the world, even after telling the same joke three million times.

Eddie was the same way about the word "cheese." That word just killed him no matter how many times he heard it.

There were a number of different bands who took turns playing at a given Concert. Some bands were families, some were just friends, but they were all good.

Very, very, good.

Even though there were a number of different bands, they all played one kind of music.

Bluegrass.

That's what we call it anyway.

To the Folken, Bluegrass was the only true vehicle to God.

If there were preachers at Concerts, (there weren't) they would explain that the Folken found Bluegrass music to be the purest reflection of God that existed. His very voice channeled through the instruments of the performers. Listening to bluegrass music was like reading the Bible, listening to a hymn, and hearing a sermon given by a Saint, all at the same time.

The Folken didn't believe per se. They experienced. They were mystics. They really didn't try to talk very often about the abstract nature of their God. There was no need for the normal trappings of religion. The Folken just gathered together and played, no one felt the need to talk about it too formally.

There was only one truly formal aspect to the Concerts and it was adhered to with a fervent devotion. This was the Council of Musicians. Made up of all of the musicians who were considered "pros," the Council made decisions about new music and what songs could and couldn't be played.

Although no one in the world knew it except for her, Sarah was a heretic. She loved bluegrass, but she couldn't help thinking that there must be ways of playing music

that were totally different than Bluegrass. Music played in different time signatures, or music that focused on different instruments- or maybe music played in different keys.

Sometimes when she was walking off by herself Sarah found herself unconsciously humming music that didn't sound anything like the familiar runs of melody in the music the Folken played.

However, on this night her favorite group was playing, the Yonder Mountain String Band. Yonder was made up of four guys who played the fastest, most intense God in the entire town. When Yonder Mountain played Sarah felt like she could feel the vibration of the air and the trees and God and everything, channeled through the liquid fast picking of mandolin, bass, banjo, and guitar.

"Come on, we gotta get close." Sarah urged, pulling Kyle by the hand towards the rapidly filling circle.

"Sweetheart, there is someone we have to see before we can sit down and listen to the music."

"Because I came home late?" Sarah asked, suddenly frightened. "I said I was sorry Dad, I told you what happened to Crosby..."

"I know baby, you're not in trouble for being late, but the story you just told me might be very important. That's why we're going to see Clarissa."

Sarah didn't think she'd ever heard the name before. "Who?" She asked.

"You know, the Spook." Aaron told her.

Clarissa, aka- The Spook- was spoken about in the hushed tones reserved for only the most sinister of boogie men. Clarissa's was the house kids dared each other to run up and touch- and the dare no kid ever took.

"I have to go see the Spook? Why Daddy?" Her fear skyrocketed on this distressing news.

Kyle flashed Aaron an angry look. "I know that Clarissa is a little weird. But in a way it's her job to be weird. She is the Keeper of the Prophecies."

Although Sarah was a smart girl, this was the first time she'd ever heard the word 'prophecy.' This was not by accident, children weren't normally told about the prophecies until they turned 16. She asked, "What does that word mean?"

"A long time ago there was a different kind of civilization on this land. They had all kinds of technological machines we don't have anymore. They say that in my great grandfather's day some of the machines still worked, but that might be a lie. If you were to swim down to the bottom of the ravine that separates us from the rest of the land, you would find the remains of all kinds of these old machines."

The band started playing and Sarah didn't even so much as glance in the direction of the stage, this was very much out of character for her. Kyle's face wore a look of great importance.

Kyle continued, "The people who made the broken machines also left writings. Most of it was burned, all except the books about bluegrass music."

"What's that?"

"That's what they're playing right now. At least, that's what the old people called it."

Sarah nodded her head. Her Dad never failed to amaze her with the scope of his knowledge.

“We don’t know what a lot of it means, but there is one story in particular that we take very seriously.”

“The prophecy?” Sarah asked.

“Exactly.”

“What does it say?”

“Well I think we’ll leave it to Clarissa to tell you what it says; after all, she’s the expert.”

“She’s a loon is what she is.” said Aaron.

“Aaron Michael!” Kyle scolded. “Don’t you talk about Clarissa that way. In many way she’s as important as the music.”

Clearly there were things Aaron wanted to say in response, but he didn’t say them. Kyle nodded at this. He was proud his boy was wise enough to know the right time to have something out. For the moment Sarah was what was important.

“Sorry Dad.” Aaron said, nodding his head ever so slightly.

“You’re a good boy.” Kyle told him before turning back to Sarah.

“I don’t want to go see Clarissa. I want you to tell me the story.” Sarah whined.

“I’m sorry honey, but she’s the one to weave that yarn. Just as it is the musician’s job to play the Concert, it is Clarissa’s to tell the Prophecy. Now let’s hurry up and go see her so that you don’t miss all of Yonder Mountain, I know they’re your favorite.”

“Dad, do you think it would be okay if we talked to Clarissa after Yonder?”

Kyle hesitated for a moment and then agreed. He took his daughter’s hand and together they walked up close to the band. The same people tended to clump up toward the front when their favorite band was playing and so everyone knew Sarah and Kyle and made room for them.

Sarah took a long look at the band, concentrating mostly on their fingers as they skittered across the strings, the stage lit by a series of torches that fitted into holes notched into the stage itself. Then she closed her eyes and watched the music in her mind, the intricate interplay between the musicians appearing to her eyes like colors engaged in a frantic, beautiful dance. The ego known as Sarah disappeared and there was just music and consciousness.

Prophecy

Eventually the band quit playing and Sarah felt the ecstatic experience of the music begin to ebb away. As Yonder left the stage for the encore break Kyle took Sarah’s hand again and led her to the farthest point in the circle from the music.

Clarissa DuChamp sat in her usual place, cross legged on a thick mat woven out of some kind of hair that didn’t grow on any animal Sarah had ever seen. She was old, her hair was a wild mat of dreadlocks, beads, and multi-colored thread.

The most disturbing thing about Clarissa was her eyes. Think whatever you wanted about her, but there was one thing no one could deny. The woman was seeing a different world than anyone else. That world might have been caused by insanity, it might have been caused by God, but there was no denying that she lived on a different plane.

“Hello Kyle.” She said when Kyle walked up. “I haven’t seen you in quite a while. Not since Bonnie died.”

Kyle flinched at this.

Bonnie was Kyle's wife and Sarah's Mom. She caught a bad case of pneumonia and died eight years earlier, when Sarah was just four.

Bonnie was Clarissa's student.

It would be fair to say Bonnie and Kyle had about as good a relationship as two people reasonably could. They fought, sometimes bitterly, but mostly they didn't. They respected and loved one another. The only place where the couple disagreed completely was on Clarissa.

Kyle thought Clarissa was a lunatic and he hated the fact that Bonnie went to her and was filled with all kinds of crazy stories about the past and the future and the grand meaning of the universe.

Truth be told, Kyle was afraid of Clarissa. He was a bit afraid of the part of Bonnie that needed to learn about such arcane subjects too. It was hard enough to live in the present. They lived in a stable society and had enough of what was really necessary, but it took hard work to maintain and nothing came free.

Because Kyle disagreed so strongly about studying the prophecies, Clarissa was often the subject of their infrequent squabbles. Standing in front of her, Kyle remembered one particular occasion when their neighbor from three houses down died in his sleep and Bonnie tried to relate it to some phrase she remembered from Clarissa's reading of what she called, "The Books of the Past and Future."

The Books of the Past and the Future were the only things still remaining of the old world- and Clarissa was the only one who could read them.

At least that's what she claimed.

Clarissa had one of the books laying out on her blanket when Kyle and Sarah walked up to her on her mat, Kyle didn't notice it immediately, he only saw it after the old crone made her remark about Bonnie. There was a picture on the cover of the book.

It was a dog.

In the background was a bridge.

Kyle flinched again.

Sure, the dog was black and Crosby was yellow and the bridge was enormous and red while the bridge over the chasm was black, but still...

"You have come to hear the prophecy? You have finally realized the truth of my words?"

"Why don't you tell Clarissa what happened today." Kyle told Sarah. He wasn't sure he could be civil.

Sarah recounted her story again to the old woman sitting on her mat, her eyes fixed on the ground, she didn't so much as glance at the old woman. Clarissa didn't express any emotion as the little girl told her story, she just sat there listening, her face as blank as an empty sky. When Sarah finished there was a long uncomfortable silence.

"Sit down here in front of me child." Clarissa said finally. "You've told me a story and now I am going to tell you one."

Reluctantly Sarah sat down. Even more reluctantly, Kyle joined her. He knew he'd initiated this meeting, but it didn't mean he was happy about it.

After a few more seconds of silence Clarissa opened her book and showed the first picture to Sarah. It showed a little girl and a dog playing in a field. The caption underneath the picture said, "Jane loves her dog."

Clarissa pointed to the letters and said, “You see these symbols down here at the bottom of the page. They may just look like weirdly written numbers to you, but in truth this is writing, it reveals the meaning of the pictures to those who can read them. This first set of symbols here tells us that this is a book of future prophecy. It says that there will be a little girl with a dog.”

Clarissa paused to take a long look at Sarah in the dim light that carried over from the concert. After a moment she continued, “She will have yellow hair and bright eyes and she will be 12 years old when she is called. Of course, you are a bright girl and you probably already realized the book says this little girl will have a pet- you can tell as much from the accompanying picture. But you probably don’t know it also says she only has one parent, the other having died in an unspecified tragedy- just like your mother.”

Sarah could hardly believe what she was hearing. She stared down at the squiggles written under the picture, trying to glean this information from the page herself. She couldn’t of course; Sarah had never seen writing before in her life. They wrote down math, but writing and reading were banished generations earlier.

Except, of course, for the mysterious prophecies. They were allowed, but only one person was allowed to learn them at a time; one person and an apprentice. Clarissa had always wanted Bonnie to be her apprentice, but Bonnie’d always refused to make her training formal because she knew how much Kyle disliked her studies. She wasn’t going to quit entirely, but she was willing to hold back from what would put her next in line to take Clarissa’s spot on the mat.

Clarissa turned the page. The next picture was just of the black dog running across a field with the little girl small in the background. Again Clarissa pointed to the writing under the picture. It said, ‘Jane’s dog loves to run. He runs and runs.’”

“It says that this girl will have a pet. It isn’t specified what kind in the writing, but the picture clearly shows a dog. Still it wasn’t certain until now the pet would be a dog, it is just a testament to the accuracy of the prophecies that the correct animal is pictured.”

“Then why is it the wrong color?”

“Please girl, be reasonable, this book was written a hundred years ago, maybe longer, even I am uncertain. Recognize the vibration of the music when it meets your eyes. You don’t complain when a musician misses a single note in a marvelously fast breakdown do you? Even Jesus missed a note every once in a while.”

It should be clarified that the Jesus being referred to is Jesus Martinez, the Folken’s most legendary picker. It was said he could play twice as fast as his nearest rival. And he could sing too, a voice to call down the angels.

“I’m sorry, what else do the symbols say?” Sarah said, terrified the woman would stop telling her story.

“It says that this pet is going to run away. The girl will chase it but she will be unable to recover it. The prophecy says this girl is very special. She is chosen.”

“Chosen to do what?”

“To travel the worlds.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know there is a world beyond this place. The entire earth isn’t this small parcel of land we Folken live in. We are forgotten here, but that doesn’t mean the world outside doesn’t exist- it only means it pays no attention to us. The world, it seems, has

troubles of its own and cannot be bothered with us. You must leave this place, and you must go tomorrow. If you don't, I'm afraid the world will indeed remember us here and then the strangers will come and we will all be dead, roasted and burning for not listening to the signs when they came."

"What?" Sarah asked, shocked. She turned around to look at her Dad. He was looking straight at her with tears in his eyes.

He knew!

He knew what Clarissa was going to say, she could tell by the mixed look of sadness and regret on his face.

"Why Daddy?" She asked.

"Because sweetheart. As much as I hate this old woman, I have to admit now that I was wrong about her prophecies."

Clarissa ignored the insult and only nodded at his acceptance.

Kyle continued, "She has been talking about this particular prophecy for years. I've heard it recounted from nearly every one of our neighbors and I myself have heard it more than once." He sobbed. "I'm a fool for not seeing this coming; I should've realized how close the prophecy came to describing you. It's just... I didn't believe." He shook his head, scolding himself. "I shouldn't have let you get a pet until you were 13. This is my fault."

Clarissa leaned forward and patted Kyle with her wrinkled, corpse-like hand. She said, "Now Kyle, I know we've had our differences, but this is fate in action- the hands behind the world have caused this. There is nothing you could've done to prevent Sarah fulfilling the prophecy- even if you would've forbidden the girl any pets, she would've found herself one against your will and kept it hidden out in the barn or something. No Kyle, this was written long before our lives began, it is part of the beat of the earth."

Kyle just looked at Clarissa for a long minute. He could feel the wave of momentum coming from the world around him. He shook his head. "Baby, you're going to have to go. I know it's scary, but you'll be safe. There's no reason to be afraid. Destiny wouldn't send you out in the world just to get eaten by a wolf on the first night would it?"

Sarah was in a mild state of shock. She honestly didn't know what to say or do. In this trance like state she turned back to Clarissa, waiting to see what else she had to say.

"There is one more part of the prophecy that I have never read until now. I have kept it a secret." Clarissa said.

"Why?" Sarah demanded, becoming exasperated in her fear.

"Why else you silly girl? Because the text tells me I was supposed to keep it a secret." Clarissa retorted.

She turned the book back to the cover of the dog, the girl, and the bridge. The title was written across the middle of the picture, it said 'Jane and Her Dog.'

Tapping her fingers on the letters, Clarissa said, "It says the dog will run across the bridge and the girl won't be able to follow. It says there is a good chance, though no certainty, that the girl will be reunited with her dog- that they will be companions on their journey. This will be a good omen."

Hearing this was a relief for Sarah, it was a small consolation, but at that point she was willing to take what she could get.

Kyle couldn't be sure, but he thought there might've been a smile on the old crone's face when she added, "If however, the little girl cannot find her dog again; this will be a bad omen and the girl, I must lament, is probably doomed."

"If I don't find Crosby then I won't go." Sarah said. She didn't think she could bare to make the trip totally alone anyway.

"Failing to follow the rules of the prophecy will bring certain doom to your entire family. If you stay everyone you love- indeed, to our entire town will suffer unfathomable loss. If you don't leave you will be cursing us all to certain destruction."

Sarah started to cry.

"Is there anything else?" Kyle asked.

He wanted to get away and be with his daughter, to try to explain. To try to make it alright. Deep down inside it felt wrong, but there was something else, some weird intangible feeling, it prevented him from rebelling against what Clarissa was telling him.

"We must announce this to all the Folken." Seeing the family's obvious unhappiness she added, "You all need to relax. This isn't a bad thing. Don't you see? One of the great prophecies has been born out today. This is a day people will talk about for generations."

Clarissa smiled through her blackened and missing teeth.

"Come, we must take the stage and announce what has happened." She reached out to take Sarah's hand, but the girl instinctively pulled away.

Shrugging off the girl's rudeness Clarissa helped herself to her feet and shuffled off in the direction of the stage. As if in a dream, father and daughter followed the woman to the beautiful stage and mounted the steps carved in a spiral around its outer rim.

To Sarah's perception the preceding ten minutes felt like a lifetime- it couldn't be that everything in her entire life could be destroyed in such a small space of time. For the first time she began to seriously regret her decision not to cross the bridge and get her dog. If she would've just went across she could've grabbed Crosby and instead of being exiled, she would be crying at home and wishing she was at the concert. Judging by the alternative- being grounded sounded like a great deal.

But that wasn't what happened. Instead she was being forced out on her own, a little girl. If Crosby didn't show up again, she was going to die. The fact the nasty old woman was talking about it being a glorious day made Sarah want to punch her.

The reality of what was happening really hit Sarah when Clarissa waved Yonder Mountain to a stop in the middle of their third encore. The sudden end of the music made Sarah aware of how a part of herself had been listening to that music the entire time, using it to help herself maintain calm. When it stopped, she felt a profound sense of fear and loss in her heart.

She would never hear Yonder's music again.

Hearing the music cut off in the middle of a song felt like a metaphor for everything she was experiencing. The loss of harmony, of the familiar, of her childhood...

Trying to focus on the bright side Sarah told herself she could always listen to Yonder in her head, she'd heard every song they played a hundred times. But this wasn't the same and Sarah knew it. She wanted to cry, but held back, she wanted her Dad to see her be brave. She'd already broken down in front of him once today.

Meanwhile, Clarissa was waving her arms around and doing all she could to draw attention to herself. When she felt there were enough eyes focused in her direction, she recounted to the crowd the events of Sarah's day in her loud croaking voice.

At the end of her address she said, "And now, this little girl will go out into the broad outside and she will learn secrets none of us can even imagine. Not even I can claim to know what is out there, but Sarah will know. This little girl will have to show a kind of courage none of us will ever know. You should admire her. She should be your hero. She leaves because she has to, because if she doesn't we will all be killed- wiped out by the great ocean of the outside world. So Sarah must go- and answering the call to duty is what makes us people. It is what makes us great."

The crowd erupted from silence into great applause. The sudden wall of noise surprised Sarah and brought an involuntary smile to her face. For a brief second, the despair of her situation was attended by a small bit of pride.

After all, if all of the Folken agreed that she was doing a brave and noble thing- who was she to argue?

Clarissa continued, "In honor of this girl's sacrifice, I am going to call for something that has never happened before in our generation. The concert is ended now. Go home and dance with your families for this little girl. She will need all of our luck."

"I want them to play one more song." Sarah said.

"What?" Clarissa asked.

"I would appreciate it if Yonder would play one more song. You know, like for the road." She smiled at Clarissa who felt just the slightest pang of guilt over what she was doing.

The aptly titled "Rambler Anthem" was Sarah's favorite song and so she turned around to the band and asked them to play it.

"Sure we will Sarah." said Jeff the Mandolin player.

And play it they did. Sarah closed her eyes and listened. For a long time there was no people, no problems, there was only the music carrying her along through time.

But eventually the song ended, as all songs eventually must and Sarah opened her eyes again to see her Dad and the many familiar faces of her fellow Folken.

The concert was over. There was nothing to do but go home.

For the last time.