

LISA GOLDSTEIN

DOWN THE FOOL'S ROAD

And then they were all around her, surrounding her, five or six or thirteen of them. Lights like candles were coming on against the dusk; the darkening street was set out before her like a banquet. "What?" Amanda said. "Who -- ?"

"Come on," one of them said, laughing. "Come follow us."

"Come on, come follow," they said. They fell about her like autumn leaves.

"But who are you?" she asked.

"Oh, you don't know us," said one.

"We assure you," said another.

"Don't know us."

"I have to get --" she said.

"-- to work," said one. "We know. We know. Come follow."

She worked at night, in a gleaming tower that shone like a beacon from a mile away. Phones jangled, printers whirred, fax machines chuckled softly to themselves. In the morning someone she had never met would come and collect the work she had done. "I can't just --" Amanda said.

"You can. Say yes."

"No, I need the money --"

"We'll give you countless riches," said one.

"Lemony gold," said another. "Silver like fishes' scales. Sapphires as blue as the skin of strangled men. Say yes."

"I don't believe you," she said.

"No, no, don't believe us. We're terrible liars."

"Dreadful."

"We're lying right now, in fact."

She laughed, a little despairingly. "Then why should I come with you?"

"No reason at all, really."

The men and women ringed about her, pressed in close. They were short, and dressed in rags and ribbons of green and brown and gold. Their faces were narrow and fetal, their ears pointed. Their eyes gleamed. She tried to back away but they surrounded her, their eyes as sharp as swords.

One or two of them smiled. Suddenly it was like the end of a magic trick, the watch restored to its rightful owner, the woman sawn in two made whole again. No one with a grin that wide could possibly mean her any harm. "All right," she said. "Yes."

And then they were running down the street with her in the middle, laughing for no reason she could give. Trees scattered their leaves around them. Dogs barked. Overhead the moon lay drowned in a great river of cloud.

They came to a doorway and darted inside. She must have passed this building a dozen times, a hundred, on her way to work, but she had never known what it was. Crowds of people moved through a room; dim tattered murals covered the distant walls. The light was the color of old coins. A man slipped in after them, carrying a furred umbrella against his chest like a regimental rifle.

"What is this place?" Amanda asked.

"Hush," one of them said.

One of the men nudged the woman next to him. "Look," he said. And, "Look," she said to the person next to her.

A woman was coming in through the door, sheathed like a knife in a dress of shot silk. A double strand of pearls grinned at her throat like a second set of teeth. "Who is she?"

"Hush."

The woman pushed forward into the room, walking on high stiletto heels, and stopped to talk to the man with the umbrella. They were both carrying drinks; the woman's was green as poison. Some of the tattered crowd Amanda had come with were holding drinks as well, but she couldn't see where they had gotten them.

"They're here," whispered a man next to her. And, "Here," echoed another.

Some of the wild band clambered up on one of the tables and started dancing in circles. More joined them, and then more; they spun faster and faster, laughing and singing. The woman with the pearls headed toward Amanda, her staccato heels clattering against the floor.

"They've brought you, then," the woman said. "Hello, Amanda."

"What do you mean?" Amanda said. "Who are you? How do you know my name?"

Two or three of the dancers spilled off the edge of the table. Then they all tumbled to the floor, laughing and cursing. A small man, his red hair curling upward like a flame, pushed his way out of the tangle and saw Amanda.

"Stars and narwhals!" he said to the woman next to him. "You were supposed to be keeping an eye on her!"

"I?" the woman said. "Who gave me the responsibility?"

"Well, look what you've gone and done," he said. "Who knows what they've been telling her? Come along," he said, going over to Amanda. "It's time to go."

"Go?" Amanda said. "But we just got here."

"We've got to go," the small man said. He grasped her by the hand and pulled her along behind him, out into the street.

The sky had grown darker while they were inside. The moon was higher and smaller, a white stone tossed up against the black sky. The band ran on ahead. She hurried after them until she was breathless, until trees and telephone poles, cracked walls and windowpanes, blurred around her. They passed streets she had never seen before, River Road, Forest Drive, Moon Crescent. Endless Street, Darkness Road, Way of the Dead. "Wait," she called out. "Wait!"

Terror gave her speed; she ran until she was safely in the midst of them again, surrounded by them. "Where are we?" she asked.

"Don't you know?" a woman asked. Her smile reached nearly to her ears.

"Who was that woman with the pearls?"

"Never you mind." The woman grasped her roughly by the shoulder. "Come along."

They turned down Fool's Road. There were trees all around them now, their branches clasping hands overhead in the darkness, their leaves whispering secrets. Ahead of them a light shone through the forest.

"Is this wise?" one of the little men asked. "Who knows what might happen there?"

"Hush," a woman said. "It's the best place, under the circumstances."

"Circumstance," someone said. "Circumscribe," said someone else, and "Circumvent" added another.

"Hush," the woman said again.

"Circumspect," someone whispered loudly, and several of them snickered.

They rounded a bend in the forest. A castle stood ahead of them, glowing like a ring of moon. The small band marched forward openly, not noticing, or not caring, how hopelessly out of place they looked in their red and russet fox's colors. As they came closer the walls of the castle loomed high above them; stars stood like sentinels on the battlements.

One of the woman knocked boldly at the door. "Come in, come in," a man said, opening the door to them. "We've been expecting you."

"Expecting us?" the woman who had knocked asked. "What does that mean?"

"Go on, go on," the red-haired man said, pushing her forward. "It means nothing. Go in."

They stepped into the entryway. The floor was patterned in black and silver tiles. The man who came to meet them wore livery of checkered black and silver squares; he seemed a moving, living part of the floor. "Welcome, welcome," he said. "The festivities are this way."

"Festivities," someone said, nodding. They followed him into the next room.

The room was huge, with a vaulted ceiling several stories high. A consort played in one corner; in another four or five jugglers tossed knives and burning brands. A group of people sat around a table by an open fireplace, eating a roasted pig. The band scattered, some to dance to the music, others to grab handfuls of food. An orange cat scuttled across the floor, its ears flat against its head, a cooked pigeon clutched in its mouth.

A small fat woman came over to Amanda. She was dressed in brown, with a high pointed brown hat nearly as tall as she was. "A riddle," she said. "You lie in her, she lies in me. Who am I?"

"What?" Amanda asked.

"Maleficent malachite moons!" someone shouted from across the room. He hurried over to them, still holding a haunch of pig in one hand. "What are you doing? Don't talk to her!"

"Who can I talk to, then?" Amanda said, annoyed. "You're always hurrying me away."

"Oh dear, oh dear," the man said fretfully. "This is worse than I thought. Come on, let's go."

"No," Amanda said.

"What? Trust me -- You don't want to stay here."

The man was right; she didn't want to stay. A cold dread had come over her, enveloping her. She wanted to run, to dance, to spin along the roads like

leaves. And yet the woman's words were important: she knew that somehow.

"Have you guessed the riddle yet?" the fat woman asked.

"No," Amanda said. The man tugged at her hand anxiously. "What's the answer?"

The woman laughed. "Come-- I don't tell you the answer," she said. "You tell me."

"I don't know," Amanda said.

"Let's go," the man said. Others in the hand joined them, crowded around her. "Let's go, let's go," they said.

"You don't want to know," a woman said.

"To know, to know," they echoed. "Let's go, let's go."

They pushed and prodded her toward the door. The woman with the pearl necklace and the man with the umbrella were coming into the room. "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear," said the man holding her hand. He looked around him uncertainly, caught between the newcomers and the small brown woman.

"What now?" a woman asked.

"Oh dear," the man said again.

"Upstairs," the woman said decisively. "Come on."

They moved toward the stairs, walking quickly and then running. Amanda looked back; the fat woman was watching them with level brown eyes.

The stairs curved upward, white as bone. They hurried on. A few did handstands up the stairs; one moved toward the banister as if to slide down it and was pulled back roughly by his companions.

They came to a landing and scurried off in several directions down the corridor. One pulled open a door and stood as if transfixed by what he saw. Amanda moved behind him, looking over his head.

There was a pedestal in the center of the room, and on the pedestal a purse made of silver rings that glistened like a waterfall. She jerked back as if the sight had hurt her. Someone had once had a purse like that, but who....

The next room held nothing but a scent, lemons and something more elusive, something sweet. Someone had once worn a scent like that....

In the third room a woman was singing a wordless melody like a lullaby. Someone had once sung a tune like that....

She turned and ran for the stairs. Four or five of the wild band stood there, blocking her way. "No no no no no," one said. "You can't go there."

She pulled away from them. "I'm not staying here," she said.

"No, of course not. Come follow, come follow."

They hurried toward the end of the corridor, some of them turning cartwheels along the way. A stained glass window stood at the end of the hall, showing a stately woman dressed in folds of reds and purples. A darker figure loomed behind her, a beast or a shadow. They hurtled through the window, shattering it into a thousand pieces, and fell outside.

She jumped after them. They landed together in the tangled branches of a tree, a rain of ruby and topaz glass pattering all around them. They looked at each other, wide-eyed, a gaggle of birds from no earthly bestiary, and then they laughed and plucked the branches from their clothing. Carefully they climbed to the forest floor, helping Amanda as they went.

And then they were all running away from the castle, darting among the boles of the trees, calling to one another as they ran. Their voices grew fainter, farther apart. "Wait!" someone shouted. "Stop! We're lost!"

They drew closer together, looking anxiously at the confusion of branches above them. An owl screeched in the distance. In the dim light Amanda saw that their clothes were fiddled with holes.

"This way," one said. "Toward the light."

"The light is the castle, you porridge."

"Toward the darkness, then."

"It's all darkness, except the castle."

They stood uncertainly. The owl's call sounded closer, and then the small brown woman appeared before them. To Amanda it seemed as if she had been transformed from the owl.

"I'll guide you out," she said. Her voice was soft and low. "But you must answer my riddle first."

They looked at Amanda as if awaiting her decision. She shook her head. She didn't know the answer; more, she didn't want to know. She felt the cold dread again, and took a step back, away from the woman.

"You'll stay here, then," the woman said. "In the darkness, forever."

"But I don't know --"

"You lie in her, she lies in me," the woman said again. "Who am I?"

Amanda shivered as the answer came to her. "No," she said, taking another step back. "No."

"Tell me," the woman said.

"Earth," Amanda whispered. "You're Earth. And she is -- she is--"

"Go on," the woman said. She sounded infinitely kind.

"She's my mother. I lay in her, before I was born. And now she -- She's going to die, isn't she?"

The brown woman nodded.

No one said anything for several seconds. "Come on, come follow," one of the small band said, but it was clear his heart wasn't in it.

Her mother. The woman who wore the purse, and smelled of lemons, and sang the wordless lullaby. The woman in the stained glass window, tall and regal as death. Her mother couldn't die. What would she do, how would she live, without her mother's ancient love and protection?

She wanted to run, to lose herself within the forest and never come out. Could she do that, could she stay in the darkness forever, as the brown woman had said? Or could she find the courage to face the thing she had been running from, running not just for a night but for the last several years, ever since that dreadful diagnosis?

She turned to the tattered band surrounding her. "Thank you," she said. "Thanks for songs and the laughter, the trees and the stars. For all the distractions. But I can't run any longer. I've got to go now."

"To work?" one of them said hopefully.

She laughed in spite of herself. "To visit my mother," she said.

And then it was morning, and she was walking up the sidewalk in front of her mother's apartment building, the small fat brown woman leading the way. As she approached she saw the man with the umbrella and the woman with the pearls coming out the door. "I'm too late, aren't I?" Amanda said.

"No," the brown woman said. "They haven't taken her yet -- you have one last chance. Go make it count."

"Thank you," Amanda said, and went to knock on her mother's door.