

Chambers Like a Hive

by Bruce Holland Rogers

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It's not clear how this began. He entered her life like smoke, becoming a little more solid, a little more real each time she saw him. She would find herself at a concert with him and not remember how she had come to be there. The first time this happened, he leaned toward her before the music started and said her name almost inaudibly, at the level of a whisper, as if someone overhearing could do her harm. This was her first hint of the nature of his spell.

As they waited in their velvet seats for the music to begin, he told her that in the country of his birth there was no border between the waking life and the life of dreams.

I wonder, she thought, if the dreams I've always thought of as light reflected from another world are only the light of *this* world, shining in another land? And she put the question to him.

He did not answer, but there were lights like candle flames in his black eyes.

The first chord sounded. She found she could not turn her head, could not free her gaze from his as the music rose and rushed over her like a wave.

Then, silence. For a long while she felt the quiet against her skin, a white resistance like cotton. She waited for applause, for the buzz of conversation, but no one in the seats around them even drew a breath. And all this while, his eyes were on her.

On the way from the concert, she would always hope to see someone she knew, someone she could call in the morning to confirm the existence of the hall, the music, the man she had been with. But this never happened.

She had a lot to learn. He told her that the night was a black lake shining with stars. Daylight was a white stone that the waters swallowed up.

She did not know if she should tell someone about him, if perhaps she should even ask for help. But what sort of help did she require?

Some nights she kept a vigil by the window, watching the clouds cross the moon, willing the coldness through the panes to keep her awake. On nights like those, he stayed away.

Only when she let her head fall, only when she grew light with sleep would he arrive with his gift of purple flowers and a word to wake her. They would walk through her house and he would discover for her all the hidden rooms with their painted-over windows. She had not known that they were there.

Are you the echo or the sound? she asked him. Where are you when you are not with me?

How completely he could shut her out when he refused to answer! How featureless he could make his face: a white slate.

One night, by gestures, he made her understand how many rooms there were beyond the ones that he had shown her. He took her hand and when she closed her eyes, she could see it: the maze of rooms and passageways that spiraled deep into the earth.

Ah, these are the secrets of my heart, she said.

No, he answered. These are the rooms of your house.

When he had gone, how could she not want to go there, to those cells and chambers clustered like a hive?

She did not wait for him. She pried the floorboards loose by day to find the passage, and as she worked she feared that without him she could not see the labyrinth beneath her bedroom. But when the

last board was loose and lifted, there it was, the corridor, lit with a string of hanging bulbs just like a mine.

Should she descend alone? And whose place was this if not hers?

A long time she knelt looking, feeling the exhalations of cool air.

When next he came he seemed somehow diminished. His shoulders sloped and there was a rattle to his breath. Music? she asked him, thinking of the velvet seats, the hush of anticipation. He shook his head, lay at her feet, grew small.

She closed her eyes but did not dream. What if I say his name aloud, she wondered, in some crowded place where none can fail to hear?

Now, she bides her time. Beneath her bed the labyrinth unfolds and grows. Though he showed her to it, he doesn't guess that it is growing, could not imagine that she anticipates new rooms before they appear.

What does she owe him for the revelation? Would she have known to find these rooms if he had never come?

Each time that he arrives now, his clothes fall in deeper, blacker folds. When the music rises like a flood above their heads, it is his eyes that cannot leave hers. She imagines that she sees in his eyes the region of his birth: a plain and distant mountains. Nearby, black towers of uncounted rooms, rising toward a starless night.

She has guessed his name. It is a syllable always ready to burst from her. She keeps her jaw clamped tight against it.

He will grow thinner, until one night only his cloak arrives, rumped at the foot of her bed. Still she will hold her tongue. She will take the cloak up, and she will put it on. She will never say his name.

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