

## THE BOY WHO BECAME A MAN

*“Through the faith of another we have wings to fly,” Anon.*

She chanced upon the boy sitting in the long grass beside the river, his head bent low as he studied the book. Sheltered from the outside world by the gnarled trunk and spreading branches of the oak tree at his back. She sat and watched him for a while and although he seemed aware of her presence, he did not turn round to acknowledge her silent contemplation. The young boy looked so frail and alone, clad as he was in faded blue jeans and hand-me-down tee shirt. His bony arms still white in defiance against the mid summer sun. He could not be more than fourteen she decided, with an adolescence that was pushing his body awkwardly out of shape. She shrank back a little into the long grass as he glanced up at the river, blinking nervously and screwing up his eyes in concentration. Almost as if he were somehow able to watch her as she observed him. She leaned forward as he returned to his book, it somehow held his fascination more than the sluggishly flowing brown river.

Eventually however, curiosity got the better of her and she got to her feet, moving catlike in a wide arc that would take her up beside him. The boy winced as she neared him and for a brief moment she held back, he looked to be a frightened animal waiting in a trap for the coup de grâce. But instead there was a gently inquiring voice as she quietly asked him.

“What are you reading?”

The boy stared open mouthed at the girl who sat down next to him, never before had someone so beautiful come so close to him before. Long windswept brown hair tinged red against an olive complexion. The tie-dyed button through dress that hung loosely about her developing form shimmered in the late afternoon sun, she looked to be about sixteen and his soul shrank back inside his hurt as she smiled at him. There was a serene confidence to her smile as she asked the question again.

“What are you reading?”

The boy looked away feeling suddenly self conscious behind the black rimmed glasses. She was taunting him, they always asked questions and when he tried to answer they would all gather round and laugh. Aping his stutter and flicking their fingers into his twitching face which would screw up with a mixture of frustration and rage. But it was to no avail. His tongue seemed glued to the roof of his mouth, eventually one of the bigger kids would hit him in the solar plexus, and winded by the blow, he would double over as he tried to catch his breath. That was the sign the others were waiting for, and moving in on him they would rain an avalanche of blows down upon him. Under such a furious assault he would collapse bleeding to the ground, where they continued their relentless attack, kicking him in the ribs until he thought he would pass out.

It was no surprise then, that the boy had long ago resolved that speech was impossible, and so he had simply stopped talking. No one had told him to stop, but it was as if some strange palsy had seized hold of his tongue. Ridicule and Mockery had woven their sticky webs over his vocal chords, stopping up the power of speech and preventing his cry from ever finding voice.

“What are you reading?”

The boy blushed nervously and looked down at the ground, one hand reached up to rub his temple as if this action alone were capable of controlling the nervous fluttering.

“A-a-a T-t-t-t-T-ale o-of-f D-d-d,” he closed his eyes and after a moment tried once again to get the word out.

“D-d-d-d-despair,” he breathed an audible sigh of relief and stared downstream, waiting for the inevitable mocking laughter, or at the very least a snort of disdain.

But the girl didn't laugh as she too stared down at the river, a faint glimmer of understanding enlightening her features. There was despair in his voice and desperation in his eyes and in that instant she felt some weight shift inside her.

The first distant whisperings of motherhood an echo of the mother who had once cradled her to sleep. She had never known the rejection and humiliation felt by the young boy beside her. For she was a country girl who had been reared on animated family discussions around the fireside at night. Where everyone's opinion, no matter how seemingly insignificant was important, where she had been encouraged to speak her mind.

"A Tale of Despair?"

She frowned slightly, the boy didn't answer as if he were ashamed he'd ever spoken to her. The girl shook her head as if to clear some half remembered dream and spoke again.

"I haven't heard of such a book," she turned to regard him for a moment.

"Why don't you read to me out of this book?"

The boy felt as if his stomach had parted company with the rest of him and dropped away out of sight. His face turned bright red-how could she be so cruel?

Over the years there had been others who had asked him to read, chuckling with amusement as he stammered over every word and mimicking his halting speech. And whilst the boy was an avid reader and loved his books he had learned to keep his knowledge to himself. Shunning the society that had so degraded and scorned him, preferring instead to sit on the riverbank and watch the rest of the world pass him by. If he kept quiet enough no one would notice him and there was a certain security in the solitude of his misery.

"I-I-I-I-I c-c-c-an't," he finally managed to force the words out, the girl smiled shyly as she answered.

"Yes you can, why don't you try just for me?"

It took quite a bit of persuasion, but there was something in her gentle earnest inquiry that loosened his vocal cords and haltingly he began. The words came out in a staccato burst that was totally unintelligible. His features reddened even more and his eyelashes fluttered uncontrollably, but the girl didn't seem to notice, and more importantly she didn't laugh. His breathing became easier and although the stammer was still very noticeable, it was not nearly as bad as before. It was as if she had woven some magical spell over his tongue. Nervously he let his glance fall upon her as she lay back in the grass staring up at the billowing clouds overhead. Thinking she had lost interest he trailed away miserably, she glanced up at him as a bemused expression caressed her face.

"Is that the end of the book?"

"N-no."

"Then read some more," she smiled warmly, his eyes narrowed at that.

"Y-y-you d-d-don't m-m-m-mind?"

"Of course not," and with that she lay back and watched the castle taking shape as he continued to read out loud from his Tale of Despair. In time however, she got to her feet brushing grass from her dress as she prepared to leave.

"I have to go now," he looked up unblinkingly through the thick horn rimmed spectacles. Almost pleading with her to stay. She seemed to hearken to his silent scream and smiled.

"Perhaps you could read to me tomorrow."

"Y-yes," was all he could manage.

That night around the fireplace the young girl was unusually withdrawn, staring into the flickering flames as their tongues tickled the charred brickwork. It was her grandfather who managed to coax the

reason for her silence as she quietly replied to his casual questions.

“Today I met a boy who couldn’t speak,” the old man nodded sagely to himself.

“And did you listen to the boy who couldn’t speak?”

“Yes,” she looked up at him. The old wise old man nodded imperceptibly and reaching down beside his chair picked up an ancient leather bound book.

“It seems to me that your friend has been reading of Despair, why don’t you get him to read from this book?”

It was with a sense of renewed hope that the girl went to bed that night, clutching the book tightly in her arms till sleep finally claimed her and she drifted into a strange surreal world-of stammering little boys.

The boy too was quieter than normal that night, not even the prodding’s from his mother could entice speech from him. He slept fitfully all night wondering why the girl he’d met had asked him to read, no one had done that for many a long year. Few believed him capable of anything let alone the power of speech, and yet she had asked him to attempt the impossible. Why? Deep in his heart the boy doubted she would be down at the riverside that next morning, he’d had his share of vain promises made on the spur of the moment. He too fell into a restless sleep- where multitudes of children taunted his faltering speech.

But his doubts turned out to be unfulfilled, for that morning he found her at the water’s edge and this time she had a book clutched tightly in her arms.

“Why don’t you read from my book?”

“W-w-w-what i-is i-it c-c-called?”

“Tales of Courage,” she smiled as she handed him the ancient book. He took it reverently, fondling the well-worn cover and opening it up began to read.

Her book was not like his at all, it had a life all its own and words that had once been impossible to get his tongue around now flowed effortlessly from his innermost being. The boy however, was strangely unaware of that fact. He was caught up in the story unfolding before his eyes. It filled his heart with hope and courage, transporting him to a world where he didn’t have to run. And so it was over the next few weeks the two of them spent many hours together, sometimes reading from the Tales of Courage and at other times wandering through the sunlit valley.

She knew all the secret places where few people bothered to go, the pristine rock pools and waterfalls, the pretty little homesteads tucked away beneath overhanging cliff faces. And as they explored the wonders of nature his stammer began to disappear, almost as if the early morning mist had swept it away. He would chatter endlessly about all manner of subjects, and she would listen entranced as the power of speech filled his lungs.

But just as the bad times must come to an end so do the good, the day was drawing near when he would have to return to his home in the city. The thought saddened him and he became melancholy as they rounded a bend, that led to a rocky outcrop looking out over the river.

“You haven’t stammered once since you began reading from my Tales of Courage,” she paused on top of the crag, caught for a moment by the sight below her. The river turned sharply to the West here, as it threw itself over another cliff, and dashed itself to pieces onto the rocks below.

“It’s a better book than mine,” he ventured, she glanced back at him thoughtfully.

“Why don’t you take it back with you when you go home?”

“Could I?” His face lit up at the thought and he stared down at his own Tale of Despair, and without a moment’s hesitation offered it up to her.

“You could take mine if you want.”

She giggled mischievously and with a toss of her brown hair, now shining red with the sun indicated the waterfall below her.

“Why don’t you take your Despair and throw it in the river, it has only brought you harm.”

The boy needed no second urging and swinging his arm high and wide, he hurled the book over the edge. It sailed high in the air and hit the water with a faint plop! The Tales of Despair disappeared below the surface for a few minutes before the book surfaced at the outer extremities of the waterfall. They watched with glee as it was carried relentlessly over the edge and out of sight.

A look of curiosity crossed his face as he looked at his new book, he stared straight into her eyes without any hint of fear he had first felt when she approached and reached for his fear and shame.

“What is your name?”

She smiled shyly as she started back down towards him.

“My name is Faith,” she replied. “And what is yours?”

“Doubt,” he began hesitantly as strange awareness started spreading from deep within him until it filled his entire being.

“Do you think I should change my name to Courage?”

“Why not,” she smiled shyly. “After all, it is the book that has formed the words in your mouth.”

They parted company soon after that, he to his home and she to hers, but as she passed through the gate she spied her grandfather digging in the vegetable patch. He straightened up as she approached him. Faith fidgeted nervously as she tried to think of a way to tell him of what she’d just done for her new found friend.

“You gave away my book,” she nodded wordlessly and looked away as a lump crept to her throat, but he hastened to reassure her.

“It was given to me when I was a little boy, I too was bereft of the power of speech till a young woman gave that power to me,” he stared out into the shimmering horizon as his eyes misted over.

“I have waited many long years to repay your grandmother’s kindness, perhaps now the debt is repaid.”

It was some years later that Faith went down to the city to continue her schooling, and it so happened that she passed by a theatre that advertised the opening of a new play;

**‘TALES OF COURAGE.’**

Intrigued, she went in with the rest of the crowd gathered out the front, and as the lights went down, Faith was entranced by a young actor named Courage, playing the leading role in the production. The lines he recited that night were only for her, his face shone and his words rang out clear and strong as he played out his heart for her.

Through the faith of another-the boy had become a man.