

Part 2- The House

Stonehenge - mysterious and magical. I was there for sunset and slept nearby so I could see the sun rise. Clouded over... rained the rest of that day, but the dawn was golden. I have spent the last two weeks with the faceless woman of Wiltshire... We met at the Henge. She introduced herself just as the sun broke the horizon...something about the solstice...she was there to dance for her warm and humble star.

I came up the hill. Next thing you know, these blonde celtic curls tossed themselves in my face. Hair to her waist. "I'm a witch". Now how do you respond to that? She danced away just as suddenly...pulling her Indian cotton skirt from side to side and finally up for a brief moment, only to let it fall back down below her knees...'au naturel' of course. I caught my breath. She glided around the stones and stopped in front of me again...this time breathless. "Katherine".

"I'm Nexter."

"Strange name, Nexter."

"A. Nexter Niode. Pleased to meet you."

"A. Nexter Niode...are you a man of wealth and taste?" she laughed.

"Neither. I'm travelling. I play songs for change. That's about it."

"Your own songs? Are you a poet?"

"No. Other people's songs."

"You have no story to tell?"

I was painfully silent. The realization hurt. What story...teenage angst?

"Come with me." She skipped off down the hill. I hesitated. "C'mon!" She didn't look back. Had to go the opposite direction to get my stuff and my guitar...finally met her down at the road.

We got into this beat up old mini...barely had room to sit with all my stuff.

"So where are we going?"

" To the house. Make you some tea."

Sounds like Alice in fucking wonderland. But that's just how it starts.

After a good hour in the car I figured I should ask which direction we were going since it had clouded over and was starting to sprinkle.

" What direction? Are you going somewhere special Nexter?"

" I don't know. Is your place special?"

" Now don't be suspicious. I'm not going to kill you..." She cackled...yep, she's a witch. The attraction was enormous, but it was hard not to feel intimidated at the same time. She knew what she was doing and I was sure I had the wrong idea. Completely different than the schoolgirls back home. She 's much more...oh yeah that's right... she's a witch!

" Here we are". We were driving along a one way road till we came to a fork... yeah I eat my words every day ...a stone fence lined the way and it went on forever. We pulled up to an imposing iron gate...you couldn't help but notice the Letter... ancient script of some kind held aloft by tortuous metal.

" Just push it open for me would you Nexter?" I got out, opened the gate and came back somewhat damp. "That's a dear. We'll have to dry you right off."

She cackled again. Big smile. I felt like a trapped sardine.

Of course the " house" was an imposing stone manor. Wonderland...sure, but in total disrepair. We drove around a large circular path in front of the house. Off the path, to the right, I noticed a fenced area divided between chickens and rabbits. How quaint. To my left, in the center of the circumference there was a charred pile of wood...what was probably a recent bonfire. Half a dozen goats picked at the grass around it.

Up to the front... two guys came out to greet her. I'm thinking at this point " Oh yeah... I was warned about this kind of thing. I am such a genius."

No sooner did the thought enter my head than Katherine turned and looked at me. " Don't be foolish, Nexter. No harm will come to you here. These are a couple of my friends."

Hippies? Oh yeah. Wherever I was, it wasn't the England I thought I was going to see. Inside... cold and enormous. What good is a fireplace no matter how large in that kind of space? The kitchen was the place...and to the kitchen we went. A few guys, some women and children. And it was warm. Nobody even noticed me. Or so I thought. Two guys doing the dishes. One said to me, " Hey man...grab those dishes for me... bring them here. Thanks."

"Hey too bad you weren't here last night. You missed the show." said the other.
"Night of the Goat...twice a year."
" Yeah man, Night of the Goat."

The puzzled look on my face was amusing to them. Again, I found myself unable to respond. Before long we were having tea and toast. I'd say twelve or fifteen people in all. Turns out they come and go and Katherine is warmly referred to as "Mum." I'm the only one who calls her Katherine. Pretty friendly bunch and these last two weeks, things are going just fine.

She explained to me how she had inherited this place about five years ago...just after completing her university. I gather her father had died young...a publisher of scholarly texts and adventure books...from a lineage of 'men of fortune'... so she said. I sensed a deep sadness when she spoke of him.

n- Now I wait and wonder. When I play, sometimes inside, usually outside, someone will stop and listen for a few minutes... but everybody has something to do. After this last week and a half, I am not sure if my time here is finishing or just beginning. Evenings everyone hangs out in the smoking room... lots of grass here. But only in the smoking room.

Two of the guys are rock n rollers who play pubs all over the county. They stay here and bring in their band on Sundays...so far as I see, it is quite the revel. One is a painter-of-sorts when he isn't working on words...The other is guitar...a bit wicked with the humour. Already a few guys have come and gone... but they've been here before. It's like a second home. I am intrigued. Katherine has been away this week tending some family business.

n- Another week...In the evening it becomes cool and moist... the mist is so thick you can't see five steps in front of yourself. It veils the moon. Not even the wolf is interested. I've heard him many times before. Tonight I wonder where he is.

Very mystical place...

She and I.

Her bedroom is off in another wing but not that far from the guest rooms which are always full, it seems. The morning light streams in at dawn and we are early to rise. She can't wait for her tea and a smoke. Then we lie around for awhile.

She is both unpredictable and experienced but considerate...as patient as she is in answering my many questions, it is hard not to feel ignorant. In fact my ignorance has become overwhelming even to me. But for some reason I don't mind this...she explains things painstakingly.

She breathes magick. Her world is taboo... to shock me is easy and it just lights her up. I admit I had no idea my journey would swerve this direction...some fork in the road. Katherine senses that I am at a loss...and that's o.k. with her. Here and now...we enjoy.

A few days ago Katherine took me into the library. A large room with dark beams and arches holding up a cathedral ceiling. The sun lights the room through a stained glass window- the deep cobalt blue mosaic of a wayfarer. Hundreds and hundreds of books.

"Everything here from the beginning of time, Nexter. What do you want to read?"

" I wouldn't know where to start."

" It doesn't matter where you start. One good idea in this book here will lead you to many other sources. Why did you stop in England?"

" This is where my favorite music comes from. This is where my favorite poets come from. And I heard about the beer."

She cackled.

" And Stonehenge? Why did you stop there?"

" I had read about it being..."

"Aha. Let's start there." She walks away and comes back with an enormous tome. Bound in leather. Looked old.

" All on the Ancients. Start here. We'll talk about it... maybe tonight."

" Katherine?"

" Yes?"

" Why are you interested in my education?" I asked

" I'm not interested in your education Nexter. I'm interested in your innocence. "

I was puzzled but she saw my smile.

" Don't flatter yourself Nexter. You may have had a few girlfriends, but we all have a choice. You can either fuck like a rabbit or love like the gods. If you choose the latter, you have to acquaint yourself with their words and their deeds."

She was silent for a moment and looked right through me. "To love like no other and say 'yes' to the pain. That's what it is to be a witch."

I have to laugh. Somehow I missed in my "education" the idea that there might be an alternative reading of the great books...And what of all those hours in school? If I had only known the right questions to ask. But we wouldn't want that.

"We wouldn't want to fuck up Johnnie's little mind, now would we?"

Would they have just blinked? Or remained silent out of fear of reprisal?

n- My mind is bending around Rome. Katherine seems knowledgeable of history and literature. Apparently she and her father had lengthy dinner conversations on all this while she was growing up. Even if she is entirely wrong, her perspectives fascinate me. She must feel bound and gagged...maybe that is why she explains things so carefully to me...she knows I listen.

This day we sat on the hill...

" Rome... City of NO ...The travelers saying, "all roads lead to Rome."

" Yes. I know that one." I said proudly. She smiled and bit her lip.

" Before Rome, there were many other cultures, many other ways to see things...not only here in England but everywhere in Europe...For sixteen hundred years Rome has exported myth. Now Rome is everywhere."

She tapped her finger against her temple and gave me that look.

"You make it sound completely bad." I said.

"It's not about good and bad."

"What's it about?"

"It's about discrimination, Nexter."

"What do you mean?"

"They sold the myth back to the cultures they stole from but it came with a spell."

"...and that was?"

"Fear and doubt...fear what is unknown and doubt yourself."

"Holy shit." I muttered. The words rung true.

She ignored me and continued, "Finally those cultures lost every sense of what they had been, the spell had taken over. Only a few individuals kept the old ways alive. These people were counter the culture of their day. They were outside the accepted periphery...they were considered evil. Quite the myth did they fight and a high price did they pay."

"Tell me."

She smiled. "Conquering peoples seek to enslave, Nexter. Oppression by military means is expensive. Oppression by myth on the other hand is cheap. And oh so effective."

"uhhuh"

"Don't say, 'uhhuh'. Diction, Nexter, diction."

"Yes?"

"Yes. Myth is the world of Yes. It bends time and curves space. It can take you inside yourself to a place you might never go...yet it carries you forward in your life."

"So that can be both good and bad?"

"It can be either magick or servitude."

"I've read some of the myths..." I said..

"But whose eyes do you read through? What ears do you hear with?"

"Whatever I grew up with, I guess."

"Not exactly a vote of confidence Nexter."

"I hear you."

"That's why the world of Yes can be a dangerous place. The spell can become your world. You may kneel before the icon of NO...unknowingly. You want to say 'yes' and you hear yourself saying 'yes'..."

"...but you don't realize..." I interjected.

"You are free to be a slave to what you might," she shrugged.

"I'll be old before I get this figured out." I said despairingly.

"You can't figure it out, Nexter and it is not a question of age. The question has always been, 'Are you experienced?'"

"Sounds like..."

"Yes but that question is millenniums old."

"So, it is experience I say 'yes' to."

"Then you set free the magick of the myth," she said.

"Now that does sound dangerous." I laughed.

She smiled. "Try eating cake. Lots of cake. 'Please sir, can I have some more?' You know?"

I laughed, "Yes, yes, yes..."

"Finally you can eat no more." She paused. "That's when you pay the piper, so to speak." She fixed her eyes on mine and waited.

I nodded silently. "What is the price?"

" The price always seems higher than you are able to pay."

" Let me guess... you have to pay in pounds of flesh." I chuckled.

She nodded but didn't smile. " Close...if you ever get that far Nexter. So don't worry about it."

" But what if I do?"

" If you do you'll find it's too late to kneel before the Icon, but you will wish you could..."

" So there is no escape." I offered.

" The more magick, the more deliberate the forces that work on you."

" Sounds a little extreme, Katherine."

" Oh, it is extreme." she laughed knowingly.

" So there is no winning."

" You see! There you go. You define the whole of life as something to be won or lost! Where did you learn that?"

" Well it makes sense not to..."

" Win what? Lose what? You are the voice of inexperience!"

She was suddenly frustrated with me. She lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. Slowly she surveyed our surroundings- the green hills and countless fields, the various flocks and herds of this and that- and then fixed her eyes on the House, which sat alone at the bottom of the hill. Finally she said, "You have to be strong enough to stand apart..."

I was silent.

Katherine's tone of voice changed to one of sadness. "I've never known anybody that strong. I thought my father..." then she stopped short. "You have to become a marauder of sorts, Nexter," she said very quietly.

" A marauder..." I shook my head.

"Experience will teach you the language of magick."

Slowly she turned and looked at me. " We've gone too far today." She smiles. "Enough with words."

She laid back and pulled me over to her. "Let's bend some time...curve some space."

"A marauder I will be." I smiled.

I love it when she cackles.

I am bad. Months have gone by and the "night of the goat" fast approaches.

I have made friends with a few people and the two rockers who stay here and bring in the band for the weekly revel. Some others are friendly but aloof. They have known Katherine a long time. They see me as one of the few she has enjoyed. They ought to know that in the end, she'll want me to go.

n- Everyone has to contribute something if they stay. Last week I took a drive with Eddie and Chops. After a couple of hours darkness was upon us and it was raining heavily. They stopped on the side of the road I thought to take a look at some swine. Next thing I know we were loading a pig into the back of the truck.

On our return drive I asked what this was about.

"Well ya see, Nexter. Nobody really owns anything, do they?" A statement, no doubt, from rigorous study of his favourite...Orwell.

Chops continued," Ya see Nexter this is a corporate pig. Now if he was the property of a small farmer we'd let him be. But the Corporation...well they won't miss him.

"So you steal only from..."

"Shareholders."

Eddie then contributed," Yeah mate. But we're no worse than the buggers who run the companies.

They steal from the shareholders too... and not to pay rent.

"This is your rent?"

"Well we can't stay much longer without bringing something to the House."

"Oh."

"Hey Nexter. Thanks for the help mate. But Mum is the word."

" Yeah sure."

n- Next week is the " night of the goat". Nobody will tell me much about it especially Katherine. Apparently people come from all over to the House.

Two or three hundred in number. I arrived the day after the last 'Night'. So its six months...something to do with the solstice. Wrote a few letters home.

n- Katherine -"Most men are Rome Nexter. They want me because I am not. They possess but do not love. Their children are meant to shackle me. Alas...it is my time..." her voice trailed off. It's either weariness, disappointment, or resignation.

Perhaps all three.

This woman. I have to stop and think...reevaluate everything. It is not enough to see what's wrong with the world. When I look in the mirror I'm not sure I like what I see. My opinion of myself has begun to waver. To see the world through new eyes...even to sense a starting place... In time, I will have to leave. For now, I am in no rush.

n- Magick. Yes it is. Sometimes we walk alone across the meadows far enough away that the houseguests can't hear us. We really do get carried away. Hard not to notice how quiet the house becomes when we play upstairs day or night. I smile at the scratch marks from this she-wolf. I have grown accustomed to the ways of the maenad.

People are not sure about me at the House. She and I are good company. As Kat said, "Age is for Romans." Yet I am troubled. Maybe they see her enjoying me too much...and it is concern for her. But they are friendly enough to me.

" Night of the Goat"

...was three nights ago. Wild! It was cold but for the bonfire. Once it was lit it heated our surroundings. The pig and chickens roasted on the spit and the music played loud. Two policemen showed up only to change out of their uniforms and join in. The event I can-

not tell in all its detail, but it was of ancient days. The flames leapt high into the evening sky and bathed the dark stone of the house in a soft orange light.

No one stood still. It is the night of the revel!

Around and around the fire, whirling, twisting and dancing. Flashes of sparks as beams were hurled onto the pyre. Hysterics and shrieking cries above the reverberating drums... the front wall of the house even participated. The men cut and served the roast, offered wine to the thirsty, and sang.

Just after midnight the band started. Each tune played was for a comical initiation of some sort. Amongst friends we each play the fool so that amidst enemies the "folly" can be wise. Finally it was my turn but I did not know my calling.

Lui- We call upon Nexter.

Nexter," It is I."

Lui- The Mum has ordained that you shall play the six string electric."

The crowd about the fire cheers.

Lui shouts to the crowd," Play it Mean!"

"Hit me!" they shout.

They roar and the drums begin. Before long all are dancing waiting for the frenzy to take hold. It was the magick. The powers coursed...what seemed an eternity was only minutes...Roman time.

Kat swirled and leapt with the sisters. Wild eyes and erect nakedness silhouetted against the blaze that teased the cold darkness...too soon it ended.

" Yes It Is!" "

"Yes It Is!!!" came the reply.

" I am electric!"

"I am electric!!!" came the chorus.

Months pass before I feel the need to write anything. There seems no point in tracing the path of words thus far...who knows of what benefit they will be. I find myself deeply immersed in the strangest books.

Somehow, things are always sure to balance out with a physical test of some sort. I have redefined stamina, pleasure and pain. The house always goes quiet.

I stood in the library today, perusing some books in front of the fireplace where I had a small fire going. I was taken finally by the family emblem and stood and stared at it for the longest time. I did not hear her come in...

"Father used to stand there for hours...just like that."

"The dragon...what does it mean? And the little orb that just floats there..."

"The orb is the pearl over the abyss."

"And the dragon?"

She looks away and turns. "Maybe you will tell me someday, Nexter."

"I see he was a scotch drinker," I said, pointing to the collection of single malts that sat on what had been his desk.

"That he was." There was silence. Then she said, "I came home from school and found him hanging just above where you stood." She pointed to the family emblem. "Just there."

"Oh ...Jesus, I'm so sorry."

"He never recovered after my mother left. He never heard from her..."

I stood silent not knowing what to say.

"She went to the East. She gave us no explanation... ". Her voice trailed off. "Years went by and she never came."

"That must have hurt." I said.

" I was only a girl when she left...just beginning to feel the cycle of the moon. So with my new power I cursed her. My last words to her as she left, were not kind."

"She overlooked what was right in front of her. You've shown me how easy that is to do."

" Don't fall in love with me Nexter. I've seen your hands too many times. The life you will live when you leave here...I want no part in your story."

"What do you mean?"

" All I know is what I've seen."

I should not have pried but after hearing the story of her father I felt drawn to his desk...I was alone in the house a few days later, and took my time as I leafed through the journal that sat there unopened and waiting for a reader. I read a man's heart and it was full of pain. The last words on the last page were written as all the others, clear and legible...but they were his last words:

"Of destiny, I know naught."

Whew! Heavy.

Before the next "Night..." I have decided to move on. I have only a few weeks left with Kat, but she seemed glad that I had made up my mind. She knew before I had to say anything. She always knows before I say a thing. It's the witch.

n- Everyone in the House seems happy that my departure is imminent though I know they wish me well. It is Katherine they watch. The guys in the band are going West after this next "Night..." I pray they do not kneel. But everything will change here.

n- Goodbyes- "Nexter. My life is here. These are my brothers and sisters. I so want you to stay...we would have..." she looked down, "but that is not in our cards. You must go."

"I should have your address..."

" No."

I stood silent for a moment. " But I could never find this place..."

She interrupted. "You will meet potentates and legends. You will die a thousand deaths...",

"I hope that's metaphor..." I smiled but she did not.

"...and the fortune you seek will take its toll..."

I interjected to make her stop. "I won't forget you...ever, Katherine."

"Be strong, Nexter."

As always, I was puzzled by her words. We looked into each other's eyes for a timeless moment.

"Take this Nexter. Don't open it until you are far away." I took the small package. I saw the tears welling in her eyes. I bit my lip. We kissed and I turned and walked out through the gate into the mist.

She called after me, "Don't be a stranger..." Her voice hung in the moist air.
