

We Who Are About To...

Chapter Two

Mark Holloway



He sat in the room surrounded by people he felt he knew, and others whose only story was the one he had formulated in his head. His feelings of self-doubt started to take over and he considered for a moment if he had arrived in the wrong place.



He was Fin, a veteran of the winter beds programme not as a “customer” but as an overseer, a maker of cold bloods. He had come to terms with his place in the system although it troubled him most at night. It was in his dreams that he heard the sound, it lay underneath the white noise, and in the moment between sleep and consciousness he could hear the stories in his head. He did not turn away, he was not sickened or repulsed.

Fin had often thought about the “sleepers” as he walked the halls and corridors of the facility, he would make up stories about their lives and wonder how close theirs were to his. The Mothers, Fathers and children left behind, the disappointment of a childhood not gone to plan, these thoughts would linger around him and often fade only to reappear in his dreams.

And so he found himself in this room. This was the second meeting of the scouting party, Fin had not been present at the first and was glad that Prof and Captain were there, they gave him a point of familiarity and in this he felt safe. The room was one of many within a large complex, the building was old and had the feel of an institution, yet at the same time it was welcoming and warm. It reminded Fin of a childhood school trip of Duffel coats and welly boots, hospital corners and disinfectant. His mother had saved hard to pay to send him on this “Holiday” a 100 hrs of scrubbing floors and stitching hems, each penny tossed in a cardboard box, he thought of the war far away and the Iron lady.

The passageways and rooms of the complex held the essence of each and every occupant, the wind outside carrying the laughter of 1000 children.

The time came for the group to speak, they sat together round the fire and began to share a little about themselves. Fin was not looking forward to this..... his experience of sharing his profession usually ended in one of three ways:

- Type 1. Awkward silence
- Type 2. Nervous laughter
- Type 3. Looks of revulsion

He had grown used to this over the years and he offered excuses in his head for the people he told, seeking comfort in the understanding that most people’s experience of the winter beds was shaped by comedy shows or crime drama in which people “Like him” were thugs or corrupt. He used to say he worked as a mechanic to avoid the reaction but now he just accepted it.



In the room there was a collection of people and as they spoke he could see that the narrative he had created in the moment of meeting was not the extent of their story, he was heartened by the fact there were other first timers and imagined they must feel as he did. One by one they told their tales,

I am Kerr..... I am Esco,..... I am Ray.....

Fin had liked Ray from the very moment he had met him, he was a bubbly, upbeat man with an enthusiasm for people and Fin had naturally gravitated towards him and had found the chair next to his.

"I am Ray.....I have felt the winter beds" Fin listened to the words coming from this quiet man and felt a connection, an understanding. He understood the language of noise and smell, impact of just being inside a facility, shared space but experience separated by an invisible barrier of assumption, their stories written for them, their narrative decided.

I am Fin and I am a Winter Beds operative..... He waited for the group to react, the inevitable nervousness or sideways look, He lifted his head and saw faces looking back at him not judging but rather wanting to listen to his tale.

The ice broken, the day moved on and the group set about working on tasks. One of the group, Lea had recorded the story of the first meeting, this was shared, and with each line read, Fin felt closer to the rest. Lea finished the story by producing the prototype model for the living accommodation which she led the group in building, a paper house held strong by the sum of its parts, each word linking together to form its foundations, each fold redefining the structure until at last it stood on its own, fragile yet strong.



They were then asked to weave their own words into the music. The catalyst for this session was Jeb, like a magician giving up his secrets he offered an insight into his craft. Jeb seemed close to Kerr, brothers in beards Fin thought with a smile, and was then overcome with a pang of regret as he had never been able to grow one. Through the day Fin had shared some of his thoughts and feelings and in a quiet moment Ray spoke to him of healing and forgiveness. And as the day moved to night they shared food, music and laughter.

In his room that night Fin reflected on the day, his thoughts, his feelings, new friends made and experience shared, that night he slept.

The group awoke to a changed world outside, snow had fallen and had dusted an already magical landscape in a sugary white glory. Fin sat at his window and watched the others as they explored the world outside. Cold yet warmed by friendship, unknown yet familiar by connection.

They met for breakfast then set about finishing their part of the musical mosaic. In his search to find his voice Fin turned to Luna. She was a gifted weaver of sound, who read the words he had placed so carefully upon the page. She seen order and meaning in his prose, transforming them from one dimensional form to vibrant depth and colour. Fin was stunned by how this made him feel, like exhaling after the rain. It offered peace and understanding in a place he had not realised it was needed. "Thank you" he said, but felt this fell short of how he truly felt.

Esco had left to return to his base at the end of day one and had failed to return for breakfast, the snow which had earlier transfixed the crew had held him for a while in its grip, like nature had placed a force field around the complex, only allowing him passage following the completion of a test of his courage and resilience. The group were happy when he finally returned to them and in amazement they listened to his tale of the trials set before him and in that moment Fin could see a cohesiveness forming, slowly growing and spreading out like the roots of a tree.

When it was time to come together and listen to the fruits of their labour, Fin sat in awe at the final results. Like an eagle he hung in the air, as if to catch the up draft of the lyrics sung, each word brushing feather, holding him transfixed. A collector of stories, spoke to him and no longer would he need to put on his second skin, he could be open and free and put down the package he carried, the shame pit set aside left unused.

Time to say goodbye, the group gathered one last time, they spoke of the days just past and their hopes for the future, of a purpose shared and experience lived. Ray expressed his thoughts on the direction to take and asked to avoid too much planning. "The beauty is in the organic way we grow". And with a handshake and a hug they parted.

As Fin navigated his capsule north, he reflected on his time in the complex, of the people, no-one in charge and no-one being lead just a group with a common purpose. He thought about the stories they told, glimpses into their worlds and he smiled at the thought that he would be part of their newest chapter, and then thought of his own story and the ink still not dry on its newest pages. "That's what stays inside of me, not the stories they spread on the streets" he thought as his headlights pointed home.



To be continued....

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