

From *Unlocking Time*

Sometimes I stop and look around, searching for Jesse, and each time I stop the dog stops, waiting patiently until I start walking again. Every now and then I call out above the stalls, 'Jesse!, Jesse!' but something tells me that she isn't going to hear me because the dog has everything under control and that if I follow him I'll find her.

We appear to be walking into the middle of a maze that is closing in on itself as we proceed. We take right-only turns, every time we reach a corner. All the time the passageways are getting narrower and narrower, and the stalls are getting smaller and more tightly packed together. The music I heard when I saw the dog first is fading in and out, so I am never sure if I'm getting closer to it or further away.

Just when I'm beginning to wonder if I have made a mistake in following the dog, I turn right one last time and find myself at a dead end. In front of me, at the end of a passageway that can't be any wider than the length of my guitar, stands a tall, narrow door. It looks like it has been cast from solid gold that even in the dim light of the passageway manages to cast a feint golden light along the ground, all the way to my feet. The passageway and the door brings our bizarre journey to an abrupt end. I can turn around and retrace my steps, or I can walk the short length of the passageway and open the door and see what's on the other side. The dog sits at the foot of the door and waits for me to decide. It's a no-brainer, really; I'm hardly *not* going to open the door, having come this far.

There's a small, round, golden knob, shiny and bright, at head-height, waiting to be grasped and turned. It just needs a hand to take it firmly and twist. I reach out and perform the simple task, yet it doesn't feel simple, it feels instead like the most important act I've ever performed. The door opens away from me, smoothly, on well-oiled hinges. As it swings open, the music I've been hearing on and off for the last fifteen minutes sweeps over me. There is no escape from it; it is everywhere.

I step into an enormous, circular space. Shaped like a Roman amphitheatre, it must be several times the size of the Manor United stadium, which is one of the biggest football stadiums in the world. From where I'm standing, at my elevated position at the back, I can see everything.

I understand at once that I have entered a mysterious, hidden place that does not belong to the world I know and love and sometimes hate. There is something

heavenly, or at the very least, extraordinarily peaceful, going on here, despite the music and the crowds, despite the singing and the dancing.

At every level, all the way down to the central area, are the most incredibly beautiful wooden stalls I have ever seen, and at each one, dozens of customers. There must be tens of thousands of people here.

Right in the centre, some distance from where I stand, a gigantic carousel revolves slowly on its axis, and it is from here that the music flows. The carousel is adorned with huge, brightly painted animals, probably carved from wood, though at this distance it's impossible to say for certain. I can see a life-sized elephant and giraffe, an extra-large moose and a bottle-nosed dolphin, a giant bumblebee and spider, a super-sized goose and swan, a huge frog giving an equally huge rat a piggyback.

I start to walk towards the carousel. There are people everywhere, crowding around stalls, having animated conversations, hugging each other, laughing, singing, even dancing. I have never seen so many people so happy. It's as if no one here has anything to worry about; no problems being carried on tired shoulders. I think of my mum and my dad, who seem happy in their own way, yet I have never seen them behave like this: light-hearted, free from anxiety, alive and happy and carefree.

As I get nearer to the carousel, the music becomes louder, and it's then that I see the five animals from Hughie's Café. They are on a raised stage in the centre of the carousel, and they are blowing trumpets and horns and Munro is banging a drum and to my amazement I see that it's Mister Miracle who is singing. For such a tiny animal, he can sure make a noise, and what a beautiful sound his voice makes. And now I see that there's someone, a girl, singing with him. I'm looking at her, sitting on Tigs' back, and I'm listening to her singing a song I've never heard her sing before, and her voice is miraculous, as is the voice of Mister Miracle.

'Jesse!' I call out to the girl, because yes, it's my missing sister. She sees me and waves, and the five animals nod their heads.

The sun is shining. A minute ago, back in the passageways, it was bucketing down. I know as I'm looking around me that none of this can be real. And yet ...

There are people talking and laughing, singing and dancing. There are children running around and playing games. There are colours all around me that I have never seen before, colours that don't exist in my world. There is a gigantic

carousel, and five animals I have met and talked to in Hughie's Café raising a musical storm.

Who wouldn't want to live in a world like this?

Jesse and I enjoy the most amazing day of our lives. At least it feels like we've been there for a whole day, but when Tigs announces to the crowd that the music is over until the same time next Saturday, and everyone begins to file back into the dozens of passageways that lead who knows where, and Jesse says, 'Will we go home?', I just know that all the time we've spent here is like the time you spend in a dream, the way a dream can seem to go on forever and yet it all takes place during five or ten minutes of sleep. Jesse takes hold of my hand, which feels nice but a little odd, for Jesse and I never hold hands, and the two of us follow the dog back through the crowd to the narrow golden door, back into the maze of passageways, and soon the sun goes in and the clouds reappear and when we turn the next corner it's raining. After a while, the dog stops and he lets us pet him, and he wags his tail before turning and heading back the way he came, leaving me and Jesse to continue on our way towards the main entrance. Somewhere along the way, we stop holding hands.

'I see you found your lost sister,' a stallholder calls to me.

'She wasn't lost,' I call back. 'She was exactly where she was meant to be.'