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Arrival at Bedlam

by MaryPat Campbell

Packed into a carriage that stinks of sweat and urine, there's a man sitting either side of me. I am bound tightly in what they call a strait jacket which confines my movements and forcibly wraps my arms tight around my body. It's strangely comforting as I need to know where my edges are, where I end and the world begins, a way of holding onto myself, literally wrapping my arms about myself although it has been done to me and is not of my choosing.

'Where have you come from then?'

Man on my right says out of the corner of his mouth without looking at me. He is tall and has a rough beard and a dark blue uniform that looks like it has never been washed.

I didn't speak and remained silent.

'Cat got your tongue?'

Man on my left sniggers, also without looking at me. He is short and stout with a similar blue uniform and has dirty fidgety hands. How do I remember these details and not remember why I am in this carriage making its way to what turns out to be this place?

The horses clatter round a corner at speed and all three of us lurch to the left side in unison. Being in the middle with no arms to brace me I'm powerless to do otherwise. Suddenly the carriage jolts to a stop. The two men climb out on either side and for a few moments I am inside on my own.

I can hear loud voices outside on the cobbled courtyard.

‘What age is he? Will he fit with the male ward or should we isolate him? Will he be trouble and put up a fight?’ It slowly dawns on me that they are speaking about me.

‘He’s a quiet one, there’s no knowing which way he’ll bend.’

‘Let’s get him inside then, hand him over to Giles.’

They get me out of the carriage and lug me down the steps. It’s hard to keep my balance with my arms tied about me and nothing to defend myself with. I am marched along a cobbled pathway. I try to look around me but all I can see is the cobbled stones under my feet and from the feel of the air I sense a big open space and the smells of horse manure and small animals. We come to a large wooden door which creaks mightily as it opens and I am shunted inside, told to sit on a bench in the hallway and left there with Man on my Left, the short stout one. He hails various people who walk by and ignores me, which I am grateful for. I had already forgotten all that had happened and all that lay ahead, I lived only for the moment that wrapped me like the jacket wrapped me, in my own arms.

After what seems like hours, Man on my left stands up and announces that I will be taken to the male ward on the upper floor where Giles will ‘see to’ me. This time I walk behind Man on my left along a narrow hallway and up two flights of stone steps. At the top, I follow him the length of a corridor I’ve never seen the like of before, it stretches out ahead of us for what feels like miles with numerous small doors on one side which look not big enough for a fully grown man to step through. Occasional windows on the other side look out onto fields and barns with men and women working small plots of land. I don’t know whether to be frightened or intrigued.

My thoughts are interrupted by the noise I will eventually become familiar with all around me. It sounds like people harassing each other, shouting and bawling, and it grows louder as we approach some doorways and then fades as we pass them by. I am afraid to think about the creatures who might live behind these doors and feel numb and cold in this strange foreign place.

We come to an abrupt stop outside another large wooden door. Man on my left raps on it loudly and shouts something I can’t make out. Nothing happens. Man on my left grows impatient and raps louder and longer and this time the door is opened by a tall thin man with a shaved head and spectacles.

‘Here’s another one for you Giles, can you fit him in?’

Giles looks me up and down, and motions with his head for me to follow him. He gathers up a pillow and a blanket stacked on some shelves along the corridor as he walks ahead of me, and I follow him as he turns right down the longest row of beds I have ever seen. We come to one empty bed where Giles throws down the blanket and tells me this will be my bed. He looks at me with some curiosity and says he will come back later to loosen me from the strait jacket and mutters that he doesn't think I will need to wear it any longer. Giles places his hand on my shoulder for a single moment, not unkindly, and then disappears.