

The Unseen Wood Carver

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(based on Psalm 139)

The big lie that had permeated the world was that you must have strings and a cross bar to make it easier for puppeteers to direct your path. No marionette was born with these chains, but it was a rite of passage to receive these guides as soon as you understood right from wrong. At an early age, stories about wayward marionettes destroying their lives when left to their own devices were commonplace and even encouraged.

Seraphine believed this lie with every fiber of her being. Everyone she knew had each chosen masters and were fitted with wires and a cross to bear. They were cared for and never had to worry about their purpose. She knew her time would be coming up very soon and with certainty she chose Master Puppeteer Lucias.

Years of darkness proceeded this decision. The wires dug into her wrists and ankles like needles and many times she just let her cross bar drag the ground because it became too heavy to carry on her back.

One night, when she was 15 years old, she made her way to the cedar chest beneath the theater stage. Her wooden joints creaked mournfully and a small tear escaped from her eye. She had been nursing a few deep scratches in the cherry wood she was carved from. This was not unusual and she kept telling herself to be proud of what she had faced but a voice inside her kept saying that this wasn't right. It couldn't be normal.

Just as Seraphine was about to crawl into the chest where the mess of other marionettes slept, out of the shadows walked a puppet without strings. But he wasn't a child. He was much older than she but he was not dragging his prison behind him. He simply walked without restraint.

"Who are you?" She whispered.

"I am Nael. I was watching you. You're not like the others."

"What do you mean?"

"You know there is more."

In the dusty backstage of the theater, Seraphine's heart skipped a beat. "Excuse me?"

"The Unseen Wood Carver. Seek Him. He offers freedom from your chains."

Master Puppeteer Lucias came around the corner just then. For a man who's name meant "light", he cast a lot of darkness over everything he touched. The menace in the room curled around Seraphine's sturdy wooden frame turning it to jelly. She fell to her knees and shut her eyes tightly. He grasped the cross bar in his spidery fingers and lifted her to a standing position.

"Goodbye, friend." He growled, making her wave to the Nael with a jerk of the wire attached to her right wrist.

In one swift motion, he opened the chest and swung her into the pile of marionettes leaving her hopelessly tangled in the dark. She then heard her Master shoing Nael out of the theater and things returned to quiet again as Lucias's heavy footsteps faded.

The next morning, Seraphine was dragged from her box where she hadn't slept a wink. Master Lucias made her play act scenes for hoards of ungrateful children and many of them reached out for her, getting sticky substances all over her polished cherry wood face.

The thought crossed her mind, "*Who made me?*" She couldn't shake the conversation she had, had with Nael the night before.

She had been taught that the puppets without a master were dangerous and not trustworthy. But Nael seemed different somehow. She wanted to hear more.

During breaks between shows, when Lucias had to make a meal or relieve himself, Seraphine tried to subtly ask around about Nael and “free” marionettes. Every puppet she spoke to either did not know or was shocked at her even mentioning it. She was about to give up when, right before the evening show, Nael’s familiar carved face and free wrists and ankles appeared.

“Seraphine.” He whispered.

“How do you know my name?”

“The Unseen Wood Carver has asked me to speak to you.”

Something settled in her soul when he said that title. It pulsed warmly and felt like hope.

“Who is this wood carver?”

“He is not merely a wood carver. He is The Wood Carver. He made you.” Nael grasped his free hands together. “He made us all.”

“Why did I not know this?” Seraphine glanced around to make sure they were not being watched. Any minute, they would be found out and she had no idea what Master Lucias would do then.

“You do not doubt my words?”

“Why should I?”

“Most do.”

There was a heavy silence between them. The quiet theater began to hum with the sound of evening guests. The other puppets began to stir at their spots back stage. In the dim light, nobody seemed to notice that Nael was a free marionette.

“How do I find Him?”

Out the back door of the theater she flew. Confused murmurs from her colleagues landed on her ears and disappeared as the door shut. The cross bar clattered across the gravel and snagged on brambles when she reached greenery. When she was in the shelter of the forest, she slowed down to take stock of where she was at.

Nael had been explicit with his directions and generous with his cautionary words.

“Why can’t you take me?” She had said right before he hurried her out the door.

“This is a journey you must take on your own. Besides, I must tell others.”

Her fingers ran across the bark of the trees. She was unsure what a cherry tree looked like but she knew what a trees looked like.

“Hello, friend.” She whispered, speaking to the tree. “When did He gather the pieces to craft me? Do you know?” A frog croaked in the distance as if in answer and Seraphine laughed for the first time in ages. “You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.” Repeating the words Nael had shared with her gave her hope to keep going. It was getting dark but thankfully she had become used to this since living in a dark theater most of her life. “Even the darkness is not dark to You. The night is as bright as the day, for the darkness is as light with You.”

When she finally made it out of the woods, the moon burst forth in all its glory and she gasped at its beauty. It was full and bright and glinted on top of the river before her. She entered the water. Each step brought her further under until she was walking on the bottom. *“If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost part of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me and Your right hand shall hold me.”*

Seraphine was basking so much in her freedom and her mission, the she didn’t notice as her cross bar floated over an especially rocky place under the water. As she climbed over a large rock, the cross bar got itself wedged under a heavy boulder and would not move. Seraphine struggled in vain. The golden sunshine spread it’s way over the surface of the water by the time she was making headway on removing the cross bar.

Along with this golden hope, the sound of a motor was gaining volume. A shadow appeared over her and all the fish that had been happily floating nearby scattered. Before she could think, a net floated down and engulfed her. She was pulled from where she was stuck and placed into another trap. She let herself go limp in the hopes that the fishermen would not notice her.

No such luck. They noticed her first and managed to locate Master Lucias's brand burned into her cross bar.

"We better return this one to her Master." The other fisherman said, standing behind the man that held her in his huge hands.

The droplets of water dripped off of her like the last remaining minutes of her freedom. She had let Nael's words get her hopes up but she should've known she couldn't live a different life. Nobody lived in freedom. Nobody had hand carved her.

Helpless, she sat in the back seat of the fisherman's pickup truck. They trundled up the road and had soon reached the theater. She realized she hadn't gone as far as she had thought which was even more discouraging.

When she was being pulled from the back seat and walked up to the front of the theater, fear crawled up her throat and sat like a lump. She could see Master Lucias behind the glass of the door and felt the menace.

Seraphine barely heard the exchange between the fisherman and Lucias. Her head was spinning and her upper lip quivered in panic.

"Thank you for returning what is mine to me." Lucias purred. The fisherman tipped his hat and headed on his way. "Where have you been?" Lucias growled and his grip tightened.

"She was coming to meet me." The voice felt familiar but Seraphine was certain she had never spoken to the man that had entered the theater. "Return to me what is mine." There was no threat in his voice but it was a command. Master Lucias did not argue but Seraphine could feel the anger and fear rolling off him. His whole body had stiffened and he held her out to the man reluctantly. When she was in the safety of the new man's arms, Lucias turned and left without a word.

"Before you were formed, I knew you." The wires and cross bar fell from her as if they had been barely attached.

"Who are you?" Seraphine breathed but she already knew.

"I am The Unseen Wood Carver."