

the sound of
songs across
the water

a novel by
rob yardumian

one

AND SO HERE, FINALLY, washed up at last at the end of the world, Riley took a moment before ringing the bell. This dizzy dream, this headlong plan set to bloom, or die trying. Five days in the car east to west, to an address scrawled on a map, across the blue Pacific Ocean. To Los Angeles. To Will Taylor. To Will Fucking Taylor's fucking house. And so now, here at last, what would he find? On the porch, Riley rolled his shoulders, tapped the cassette in his pocket. The songs are good, he breathed. Let them carry.

The front door was graced with a pane of stained glass, the intricate pattern—a treble clef, cut fine in ruby, resting on a sharp black staff—defeating his attempts to peer inside. Riley straightened his hair in the reflection, stood as tall as he could. He should have shaved, washed his shirt, that motel back in Needles.

Next to the door was a small brass plaque that read *Casa de Melodia*, the thin black script flowing around the doorbell. He dug his nails sharply into the palms of his hands—five seconds, ten—then pushed the button with his thumb. Three notes chimed away inside.

Driving in, off highways at last, he'd craned his neck at the impossibly tall and skinny palms, shaggy heads bent inward, murmuring his arrival. And the sunlight. Slippery as satin, it introduced itself to everything—the waxed bumpers, the wrought-iron gates—shyly, by brushing up against, by furtively draping. The sun a kind of promiser, false-hearted. A hooker in an alley, a guy could pull a quarter from your ear. A fellow traveler, Riley felt, one hand out the window, cupped and warming, as if trapping all the courage in the sky.

The last time he'd seen Will, the morning after that lost night. December 8, 1980. A date you don't forget, obviously. Riley'd said goodbye, turned his collar up against the rain. Turned his back on everything. Locked his guitar away for a long, long time.

Now inside the porch—a turret, really, this Spanish thing out here—it was cool, shadowed, cushioned by a low collar of thick green hedge. Two metal chairs, a table of colorful tile, the mat at his feet reading, *Welcome... Now Go Away*. Smell of something sweet on the air.

The street hushed from this high perch, one nervy bird trilling out a single note, sharp and insistent. His hands still singing the gate's rough iron; that moment before jumping, perched, exposed, for the first time in years.

The door swung open, a slim woman leaning on the jamb in a white tank top and blue-checked pajama pants, bare feet crossed at the ankles. Short black hair, tawny skin. Something guarded in her sharp green eyes. "Thanks for coming out," she said. "Saturday and all."

"Um," Riley said. "Sure."

"Where's all your. You know." She waved a hand. "Stuff."

He gestured down the hill. "It's in the car."

"Aren't you going to need it?"

"Well, I thought... I wasn't..."

She shook her head once, quickly. Crossed her arms and muscles popped.

"Aren't you the board guy?"

Riley felt his face go dumb. "The bored guy?"

"You're not the board guy?"

Riley shook his head.

Her face began to close. "Then who are you?"

"I'm Riley," Riley said, smiling hard, hand out. "I'm a friend of Will's."

A black cat appeared, twirling around her ankles. The woman cleared her throat and Riley pulled his hand back. "Everyone's a friend of Will's," she said.

Riley trimmed the smile. "I've come a long way to see him."

"How far?"

The cat wandered out; Riley bent to scratch the top of its head. "Fifteen years," he said. "Three thousand miles."

"Uh huh," she said. "Does he know you're coming?"

"No. Not exactly."

The woman shrugged herself off the jamb, made as if to close the door.

"Will's in the studio. He's not going to be done for a while. Why don't you come back around dinner time." She peered out around him to the driveway. "How'd you get up here anyway?"

"I climbed the gate," Riley said. "Look, I got nowhere else to go."

Her voice dropped a tone. "You climbed the gate?"

"Yeah. Sorry."

“That’s...”

“I know. Sorry.” He waved an arm vaguely. “I was waiting for a sniper to take me out.”

Her gaze forced him to look down. “We gave him the weekend off,” she said finally, a hand on her hip. “Daughter’s wedding.”

“Ah,” Riley said, looking up again. “Fortunate for me.” Her face had paused only half-closed, a little softer around the mouth. He glanced around. “Do you put him rooftop or bushes?”

“We like the roof,” she said. “More range.”

“Right, right.” He eyed the landscaping. “Still, bushes...” He knelt, aimed an imaginary rifle. “Ground cover. Point blank.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Fish in a barrel.”

“Uh huh. Who are you again?”

He straightened up, stuck out his hand again. “Riley Oliver. I’m an old friend. And I need to see him. Please.”

She shut her eyes and shook her head again, quickly, almost a twitch. Then, eyes still closed, she opened her arm in invitation, toward the shadowed hall behind her.

“Thanks,” Riley said, dropping his hand again. The doorway beckoned, every step from here unknown.

She was the Keeper of the Key. He could see that much, left alone in the living room, folding himself into a small and agreeable shape. The room was spare and handsome: leather couch, hardwood floor, paintings on the walls. More than Will’s touch on hand, he’d wager.

And now Riley, dragging trouble in like muddy footprints. Trouble and spark and the band they used to be. Riley and Will, hammer and tongs, every little thing. *Just leave him.* All that *that* weighed between them, and the years that made it heavier. But too: the groove they'd shared, sharp and sweet, as Gaston Rose. That was rock and roll. He shook his head. This trip would stir up some ghosts, at least. One in particular.

He dug his nails in again, harder, then released: four tiny craters across the base of his palm. Deep enough to carry all the confidence he felt. On the walls around him metal trinkets nodded from niches. Careful, the word that came to mind. These are careful people. So much to lose.

She returned with two mugs, tags dangling. "Coasters," she commanded. Riley scrambled to the pile—vintage advertisements laminated into squares—and dealt two out onto the coffee table. She placed the mugs down and curled into the club chair, flexing her fingers.

Riley, on the couch, reached for his tea. "Ah," she snapped, and he snatched his hand back as if burned. "Let it steep. It's herbal."

Herbal, he thought. Right. He waved a hand. "This is a beautiful room," he tried.

"Yeah," she said, her eyes still wary. "You're going to sell me something, aren't you?"

Riley looked down. At the steam from the mug. At the mug. A photograph on it of Will and the woman, arm in arm. Will in a tuxedo, her in a wedding dress. Their younger eyes shining, smiles six miles wide and true. He glanced at her hand, and there was the ring, simple in silver. "I hope so," he said.

She shrugged, a grudging *could be worse*. "I'm Lena," she said.

"Riley," Riley said.

She smiled a little. "Right."

"Yeah," he said. "Next verse?"

She picked up her mug, swirled the tea bag. Her strength somehow gathered in her hands, her fingers. Nails of brilliant blue. "Hit me," she said, not looking up.

He took a sip, not expecting mint, the menthol spiraling up his sinuses.

"Will and I used to be in a band together," he began.

"Hang on." A note of disbelief. "I saw Wisdom Tree *sixteen* times."

"No, no," Riley protested. "This was before Wisdom Tree. I'm talking late seventies. Ancient history." He snuck a look at her. "Sixteen times?"

She shrugged. "I was a fan first."

"How long have you been married?"

"Seven years."

"Huh." He sipped his tea, glanced at her. She made a winding motion with her fingers. "Right," he nodded. "So, late seventies, we had this band back East. I was the singer and Will played guitar. We called ourselves..."

"Wait," she commanded again, her hand in the air. "I know you. You were in Gaston Rose."

Riley was astonished. "How did you know that?"

She stood, padded over to a bookcase against the wall. Riley watched her squat to the bottom shelf, thumb through a sheaf of magazine spines, select one. She brought it back to the table. It was a *Rolling Stone*. "You haven't seen this?" she asked.

"Seen what?" Riley asked.

She just chuckled. "Oh, man," she said. "You're going to trip." She flipped the magazine open, found the turned-down corner, spun it toward him. A large

photo covered both pages: Will Taylor sitting in a studio in front of an enormous sound board, a red Gretsch electric left-handed in his lap. Dressed in black and barefoot, he stared at the camera. His face was thinner, lined, his eyes intense and relaxed at the same time. He looked formidable. The headline read, "The Hard-Earned Wisdom of Will Taylor."

"Nice," Riley said. "Pretty guitar."

"Turn the page," Lena prompted.

The article continued, text winding around several photographs from Will's career. Riley scanned and stopped dead. A small photo in the corner showed Will playing guitar on a stage; next to him was Riley himself, singing, a long scarf around his neck and dangling to the floor. The caption read, "*Rosy Future: With Riley Oliver in Gaston Rose.*"

"No way," Riley whispered. "How'd they get this?"

"Will gave it to them. They were doing the interview and he mentioned that band. They thought it would be cute to run a picture." She bent in close. "It's a nice shot," she said.

"I remember that night," Riley said. "Someone gave me that scarf, said I'd look like Rod Stewart. I only had it on for a couple songs. It was about a million degrees in that club. But that was a good gig."

"Where was it?"

"Baltimore, maybe? D.C.? We didn't travel too far in those days." He looked up at her. "Can I have this?"

She smiled, pushed herself back up into her chair. "No," she said. "But you can order a back copy."

Riley returned to the photo. He traced it with a finger. "We were a good band," he said.

"So I've heard," Lena said carefully.

“Really?”

She nodded once.

“What did he say?”

“Good songs. Tight.” She looked him in the eye. “A hell of a singer.”

He felt his ears redden, warmth spreading from the top of his head.

“And that something bad happened one night in New York City.”

Riley winced, glanced away. That had come up quick. He studied the patterns in the carpet, the crimson and the cream. At least she didn’t know.

“Yeah,” he said.

“And he wondered if you were still singing.” she said.

He shook his head. “No,” he said, “not for a long time after that.” They fell silent. Riley turned the mug in his fingers. Studied the photo of the two of them. “But I heard those Wisdom Tree songs,” he offered. “*American Eden*, those records. Felt weird, you know?”

“I’d imagine it would.”

“Sometimes I’d try singing them, just to see *what if*.” He smiled. “I had to give up pretty quick.”

She granted him a small smile back. “Don’t feel bad. No one could sing like Gordy Ames.” She paused. “But what a dick.”

Riley burst out laughing. “Was he? I always thought.”

“Oh my God,” she said. “He tried to hit on me at our wedding.”

“Nice.”

She settled in and sipped, regarding him anew. “So. Riley. All these years. Help me understand. You were in the neighborhood?”

Riley pursed his lips, took a long breath, considered how to tell this. “I have some songs,” he finally said.

“And this is what?” she asked. “The Blues Brothers? You’re getting the

band back together?"

He had to laugh. "No. It's not that. I want to make a record."

Her eyebrows knitted. "You want to make a record? With us?"

He nodded.

"That's why you're here?" She was half smiling. "Do you know how busy we are? Guess who called yesterday?"

Riley shrugged.

"Polly Harvey. She's doing a track for a movie. Do you know what I told her? Can't squeeze you in. Better call Lanois." She counted on her fingers. "We turned down Nick Cave this summer. Yo La Tengo. Mazzy Star." She settled back on him. "We're saying no to PJ Harvey, Riley."

Eyes fixed on the carpet, Riley gave a tight smile. "That doesn't bode well for me."

"No, it doesn't. I'm sorry."

He glanced over at her curled in the big chair. "You've got cute feet," he said.

"I know," she said. "But that's not worth a quarter of a million dollars. That's not points on a Winter Fields record. Do you hear what I'm saying?"

"Winter Fields? You're doing them?"

"They'll be here next month."

"Man. I loved that first record."

"Thanks. We did that one, too."

His eyes fell back to the coffee table. The air in the living room was getting close—late morning, the day warming. The Keeper of the Key. "Can I see him at least?" he asked softly.

"Will? He'll take a break in a while. You can talk to him then." She stood, gathered the mugs, spoke over her shoulder on her way to the kitchen. "But

don't be thinking you're going to play good cop, bad cop on us, Riley. That ain't gonna fly." She turned the corner, her bottom winking in the thin pants.

"I'll go get my stuff," he called out.

Her head snapped back around the corner. "Your stuff?"

"Yeah," he said slowly. "I've got a bag. Maybe bring the guitar inside, out of the..."

"A bag?"

"Just a duffel. Some socks and things."

"Wait." She turned, put the empty mugs down behind her, came back arms akimbo. "Are you planning on *staying here?*"

He tried a little smile. "I was hoping to. Yeah."

"Man, this ain't the Holiday Inn. You can't just *check in.*"

A vision of Peugeot rose up. The trash, the smell. The hours and the miles he'd spent to make it here. The day he'd spent packing, dropping the key off with Jack. Just last week, but it felt like years. "I've got nowhere else to go," he tried.

"Uh huh. We have a word for that. It's called homeless."

Riley considered this. "I have a home," he said. "I'm just a little removed from it right now."

"Well," she said, "that's not my problem." Her hands jumped off her hips, fluttered around. "Just. Just sit there. OK?" She strode off, muttering, heels booming on the wood floor.

Riley sat, screwed to a perch. Breathe, he thought. On the couch the wispy sunlight searched and found him. Caressed the back of his hand. A whisper touch, a keeper of secrets. A comrade's wink.