

## ONCE UPON A STRANGERS' CITY

by Sophie Masson

*Appears here with the kind permission of the author.*

I AM WITH Mama and Papa in the new city, the city of strangers. It is far from home, and lonely though crowded with people. "We are like ghosts in the city of strangers," says my father, "and I do so long to return home."

My mother says, "Oh my heart, remember, they have made a prison of our home and we cannot return. We are here now in the city of strangers and we must do what we can to make it our own."

"But how can we?" cries Papa, "how can we, for we do not belong here and nobody wants us or even sees us at all in this city of strangers where we pass unnoticed as shadows!"

But just then I hushed them, for I heard it! The music! Ah, you could hear it from so far away, and we quickened our steps towards it, hurrying through the wide peaceful sunny streets where everyone is too busy to notice us or smile.

My Mama pulled at my Papa's arm: "Oh look, look, oh look!" We saw them there, on the stage, in the middle of the silent people. In the middle of this city of strangers in this new land where nobody knows us. The name of the band was *Asilo*, and there was a drummer with long black hair, and a guitarist with fingers flying, and a singer in a dress as blue as the sky.

Oh! how that singer sang, and danced, how her heels rang on the hard cold pavement of the strangers' city, and the guitar sang too, of loss and loneliness and longing and love. And the drummer's long black hair, long and black like my Papa's, swung and flashed as the beat grew hard and hot under his hands.

Mama was swaying, and clapping gently, with tears in her eyes. But my Papa, he stood as if made of stone. My Mama whispered, "It's good, it's good, but why does nobody clap, why does nobody stamp, why does nobody beat time?"

Beside me, beside us, the people of the city of strangers were listening, the sun flashing on their dark glasses, their bright clothes. They were smiling, they looked as if they liked the music, but why did they stay so still, like statues in a garden?

And now I thought of the city we had left behind, the old city far away but not long ago, where once upon a time we had been happy—a city with sunny squares like this one,

yet not like, for it was not a city of strangers but a place where people knew us. And the sadness and the fear that had stayed inside me for so long, that I had tried so hard to push back for the sake of my Mama and my Papa, suddenly rose like a bitter black wave that would surely drown me.

But then my Papa turned and saw my face. He looked at me and all at once something began in his mouth and his eyes and then his hands began to move and his feet, beating out the rhythm, hot, hard, in and out of the melody.

Bang, bang, bang, went his hands, clapping in delight and joy and aliveness, boom, boom, boom went his feet, stamping out disappointment and sadness and regret. Boom, boom, boom to the music of our exiled hearts, bang bang bang, proudly in that city of strangers where nobody knew us.

And some of those people looked away embarrassed; but many more others smiled, and the drummer called out, and then everyone was laughing, and clapping, and stamping around us, as the music grew hotter and wilder and freer.

In that sunny square, in that city of strangers, something new, something good and beautiful, began for us under my Papa's stamping feet, through my Mama's swaying hips, through the black bitterness in me that began to melt into golden sweetness, through the wild song of the band and the beating of thousands of hearts, strangers no longer.

We might be gone from the old city, but it lived still within us, and the new one grew in power and delight in our hearts as we danced.