THE LIFE STONE OF SINGING BIRD

(an excerpt from the novel)
MELODY STEVENSON

After all those years of talk, of flying rumors, of mean excuses, of lies, in the end it didn't matter whether or not Singing Bird was invisible. No one saw her.

She crouched in the shadows of the sycamores, steeped in the fragrant tea of the morning forest. The rising dampness of sodden mosses and mushrooms clung to her trunk, her throat. Centuries of layers of dead wet leaves sank beneath her moccasins and gave up their steamy histories, rising like a smokescreen to shield her.

Six of them shouldered a great wooden box. The dark procession of bending figures trickled past Singing Bird like rolling tears. No one saw her. No icy fingers warmed near her ragged breaths. No crumpled hearts unfurled. Their eyes were dead, their ears were dead, and their slow shifting shapes did not even awaken the air.

Singing Bird traced with one bent finger the long welted scar that still divided her ancient face. The point of the knife had been inserted there, just below her right eye, and had been dragged firmly, righteously, across cheekbone, nose, lips, so that a part of her smile would be left forever dangling.

"Daughter," Singing Bird moaned, and the word tasted like Great Sea water on her tongue. But her voice was swallowed by the moaning of the wind. No one heard her.

A girl child with yellow hair trailed behind the great box. From time to time she'd reach up and press a tender palm against a sharp corner, then stop to examine the round mark left in her flesh. She made soft sounds like raindrops falling on a lake. Singing Bird longed to draw the child near, to tell her of her mother, of her grandmother, of Lost Man, of the Life Stone. The child looked at the blackened,

outstretched arm of Singing Bird but saw only another branch of sycamore. She did not stop.

The soft dropping sounds of the child's chant fell into a rhythm with her footsteps. Singing Bird glided through the shadows to follow, her coral bracelets tinkling delicately in the mist like fairy cymbals. The child stopped once, abruptly, and hit the box with her fist. The words she cried out were not in English. Singing Bird's heart rose at the words, with wings that strained to break through her brittle breast. But Singing Bird pressed her heart back inside with both hands and reminded herself that the child couldn't know. She was too young and no one would have told her. Certainly not India. No, the sounds the child made were only a few more soft splashes of innocent grief on the many pools of sorrow. And the Life Stone was gone.

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A pavane, you call it. Very nice. I want to thank you for hearing me. For being my voice. I would thank you just for that, even if I didn't like what you'd written, but I do. Really. It's stately and dignified. Just right. Just about right.

A little slow, perhaps. A little sappy. But no matter. You have begun it! Whoever you are. You heard my prayer and I am more grateful than you'll ever know. And if you lose some of our readers along the way, so be it. It is to you I am indebted. Not to them.

But just to be on the safe side, let's try it this way: I'll scoop up all the stories and drop them like acorns at your feet. Then you can size and sort them at your leisure. Make some of them into meal if you like, or mush. Just be sure to leech out the bitterness first, or even the squirrels will nose them away.

Here. Let me first get you started and then I'll leave you alone. One shell you'd better crack right away is that one, over there in the shadows. You really should know, before you sink any more sympathy into that poor old woman, that she is my one true enemy. They call her Singing Bird and her story is ground into my own like dirt in a wound and will be just as hard to get out.

I don't know where to begin. At the ending I guess, where the edges are sanded, the hinges are hung, and all that's left for you to do is turn the knob and step inside. Then you can feel it all whole, in one piece.

I'm already dead then, completely.

The good thing about my being dead is that I can see in so many directions at once. I can see past, present, future, mothers and daughters and daughters and men who stayed and men who left, and the crying, laughing, colors, contradictions, all butted up together, all on one big screen without edges without endings vast as the plains as the sky limitless. I can see my mother, giving birth to me, my father, small, already old, kissing her hand quick before he catches me as I slip out, Boy Found watching all of it. I can see my mother's mother at her daughter's wedding, smiling victoriously, dry-eyed, while my mother's father, silent in the pew, weeps with fear and rage.

The other good thing--the only other good thing far as I can figure--is that now I can show it all to you. And you can make it real again.

I am the one in the great wooden box. I am India. But you must know that much already. Except that I'm not really there. There's no life in that box. No space. No color.

The man you see walking, the one behind the little girl, is, was my husband, Jesse. He is a good man, and strong in his own way, though you see him stooped there and dragging his feet through the mud. He loved me. That's the part I want you to see first. But not just yet.

The two men carrying the front of the coffin (both are wearing dark brown homespun coats, so that won't help you tell one from the other) are my sons, Brodie and Cam, the only two left of six. They are still boys, really, sixteen and eighteen, but they are tall like men, and dark like their father, and flawed, and proud. The other four are all gone, thanks to Singing Bird. She breathed a fever into Colin and Kiel, sent a snake after Jesse Jr., and Dwelly she changed into a little yellow bird, to keep her company I guess (since her own son refused to) up there in all that blue.

In the center are my brothers, Hugh and Henry, and the two men carrying the rear of the coffin are neighbors. The older man used to be friends with my father. His name is Stewey. He was the one my father punched at my mother's boarding house. That was long before I was born, but if it hadn't happened I might

not have been. Stewey and my father were still friends after that, or at least Stewey thought so. My father didn't forget much. Stewey turned out to be okay, though. He brought my mother a bouquet of blue lupine and a side of salted bison later on, after my father died. And he was the only one who put his arm around me at Dwelly's funeral. I don't forget much either.

Stewey's getting old now. He's really too old to be carrying so much. See, I knew it, he stumbled. Cold beads of sweat pop out on the thin, freckled skin of his forehead and he struggles to get that box back up on his bony shoulder. My husband runs to help. I knew he'd do that too. He smiles at Stewey and shoulders the burden himself. I'm glad he did that. It will make him feel better.

That little girl--the child that Singing Bird is itching to get her claws into--is my daughter, my baby. Seeing her like that, alone, bewildered, knowing that it is my death, my fault, that she must press her tender palm into the sharp corner of her mother's coffin in order to bring back some part of her living world, if only the painful part, cuts me, drags like a knife through my soul. It isn't fair. Singing Bird got off easy compared to me; only her face was disfigured. My soul is scarred and dangling and yet I am powerless still, in death as in life.

Worse, because now you are the only one who can hear me. You, who do not love me and whom I do not love. You are nothing but an artist. A seller of confidences. A keeper of pain. Worse, because now I will always hear my daughter's cries, always know that now she is deaf to my words of comfort. She thinks I have left her alone.

My daughter is blonde like I was, and pretty. Not that I am pretty now, though I could have been if I'd cared to be. Fact is, when you die you get your choice of resting in any of your living bodies, or none of them. The young and pretty one is not the one I chose. For a while there I preferred my old worn and comfortable body. The one I had just before that thing started growing in my lungs and eating up my breath. Men talked to me in that body, about the price of wheat and about their dried up wells. And they listened to me too. And their wives started giving me their softened eyes and their recipes for berry pudding and scalloped apples instead of the rustle of their stiff, starched skirts. But young and pretty was something I let go of with as much relief as regret. I gave up some power with the beauty I'll confess, but that power

was never one I could rest against. It opened doors I wanted shut, and it blinded the very people I most desperately needed to see me. But now, it appears that I've wiggled out of my flesh altogether, so none of that matters anymore.

My daughter is smarter than I was, but she is not, I must tell you, any wiser. I can see her future filled with reds and purples and blues and yellows, just as mine was. She will love richly and miserably. Her life will fill up and up until it overflows into death. And she will find the Life Stone of Singing Bird. Even though I've done every single thing I could think of since the day she was born to keep that from happening.

But before I drop any more acorns, I should probably warn you against believing everything you will see and hear from this point on because all of our visions are limited, even mine. Even yours. What I am trying to tell you is that your cynicism is appreciated. In fact it is required. Do not suspend your disbelief too far or you may, like me, like him, be lost forever.

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My own mother, Iris, married for love. That was why my grandfather wept. He knew how love weakened, consumed the self, muted the voice. He knew because, loving Isabella, he had been weakened, consumed. His own voice was now so muted that he could do nothing but weep quietly in his pew. With fear for his daughter. And rage.

My grandmother, however, did not believe for a moment that Iris married for love. That was why, during the wedding march, Isabella was able to smile the smile of one who knows better. Iris wanted to escape, that was all. Just as she had, at her age. It was history repeating itself. And although Isabella would sorely miss her first born daughter when she left, she understood her need to fly away, to leap onto the back of a well-heeled, well-muscled young man who would carry her far away, to a place where she could escape her childhood, her neighbor's expectations, the stultifying air of respectable captivity. Isn't that what Isabella had herself accomplished? And hadn't it turned out rather well? My grandfather had happened along at just the right moment. He was a rich, propertied young American traveling in

France, sent there by his parents to flaunt their wealth in the faces of the Europeans.

Henry had been crushing golden leaves with his heavy boots on a gloomy sidestreet in Paris when he saw her. It was twilight and he was wandering, lost in hard-won melancholy, savoring his romantic illusion of moving with neither will nor direction. Isabella was sixteen, panting and flushed from tearing down the broken sidewalk after her little brother. Her black curls were bouncing damp about her face and falling, falling like the Roman Empire, Henry thought, and instantly, forever for Henry, Isabella embodied the forbidden, the far-away, his first burning sip of Bordeaux wine, the perfume of the Seine, the purpose of his suffering, the object of his quest: his beloved.

Later, when Isabella was telling her girlfriends about it, she remembered Henry's strong, aquiline profile, and the gentleness of his gaze, and the tender quiver of his touch when he raised her fingers to his lips, but just then, to be frank, she saw only the trim cut of his waistcoat and the fine leather of his boots. She saw a man who was taller than she and who probably would not hurt her, and who just might be strong enough and needful enough to lift her out from under the suffocating blanket of tradition and pre-determined fates, and up into a world where mornings were fresh with possibilities, where the air, American air, was still new enough to breathe.

When Isabella ran home and told her mother that she was going to marry an American and sail away, her mother was not understanding. She locked her in her room, in fact, forcing an elopement, forcing Isabella to mourn her mother even while she lived, forcing Isabella to relive the tender moment of parting that should have but never did precede her journey, over and over again, until little lines of regret and bitterness settled around her mouth. I will never do that to my daughter, Isabella vowed. I will understand.

But Isabella did not understand; Iris really did marry for love. And Iris did not want to leave her home, her family. She loved Virginia, loved the plantation her father had given her mother as a wedding gift. She loved the smell of the sweet alyssum and she loved the long summer afternoons spent under the shade of the live oaks chatting with her sisters, and with the young men who came by with their fists full of violets. Those slender young men were pretty and pleasant and harmless.

Except Oren. He was different. His family came from New York and had only just relocated in Virginia to pacify his mother after her breakdown. He was slender and pretty like the others, but instead of lingering in the shade, instead of resting at her feet and fingering the satin of her hem, Oren was always in a hurry, as if there were something very important he had to do before it was too late. He'd sweep by and drop a bundle of books in her lap, usually muttering something like "You must read these" before he'd rush off again. The other young men would laugh when he left, or sometimes cluck over his intolerable manners, but Iris never laughed. The books felt heavy in her lap, foreboding. Sometimes she'd flip through a volume of Keats or Shakespeare and blush to imagine what Oren was trying to say. Other times she'd brush them like spiders off her skirts, roughly, angrily, without even glancing at the titles, so frightened was Iris that her future might be written within.

On one cold and sunny afternoon, too cold and too bright for pale sisters and earnest young suitors to accompany her outdoors, Iris sat alone in the lengthening shadows and shuddered. Oren. She felt him before she saw him, and when she saw him she looked away. How long he had been standing there, watching her, fitting his own long shadow into the shadows of the willows, she did not know. She closed her eyes as he approached, turned her face to the sun, focused on the orange and russet shapes that danced and flickered behind her eyelids, knowing what she would see if she looked at him, knowing what she would hear, knowing that that would be it. The end.

Oren stood still over her like that when he asked her. Without kneeling, without fingering her hem, without looking in her eyes even, for she kept them closed. Iris said she would. She would marry him. She would go with him. She would be his wife and she would love him forever. And when he left she wept, like her father, with fear and rage, because it was all true.

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When my mother gave me the Life Stone, years later, she wept again. But she was a different woman then. She walked with me far into the cornfields, where no one else could find us. She looked all around, suspicious, alert, though there was plainly

nothing to see but cornstalks, tall and green and boring as always and it irritated me, I remember, the way she was acting, as if even the lizards might be interested in what she had to say.

Iris was a different woman. She had long before made peace with her fear and her rage. She had learned to welcome and embrace them. Like old enemies who had done their best to destroy her and failed, she now invited them into her kitchen and poured them a cup of hot chamomile out of her copper kettle; she listened to their impotent boasts of future conquests with tolerance, pity, and a certain condescension.

Oren's death had been only the first step of many in the transformation of Iris. For a long time she blamed herself for his death. She thought (I can see now, though I never guessed it while I lived) that she had called for it, attracted it somehow, just by fearing it so compulsively. She imagined that the force of her premonition, the paralyzing weight of the dread she could not expel, the noise it made when it knocked around in her body, drew tragedy same as blood drew vultures.

Oren died of idealism, but an arrow in his temple was the more immediate cause. He had been reading Rousseau that morning, early, by the light of a kerosene lamp. He had awakened Iris to tell her about the Noble Savages they were bound to meet. His voice grew deep and rapturous, filling their small wagon with tales of purity and goodness, of serene, uncalculated love for the world and everything in it. Iris, already heavily pregnant and exhausted, kissed her husband on the arm because that was the part of him closest to her mouth, then turned over and went back to sleep. She dreamt, as he spoke, of a long narrow river, roaring with the rush of new rain, biting off chunks of earth as it sped past, swallowing every bank in its path, churning them into mud, carrying them away.

When she awoke, he was gone. She fried dough in fresh suet but could not eat. The wagon train prepared to move on. After a time she realized that she must climb back up on the wagon and drive the team herself, or she and Oren's unborn child would be left behind. She didn't cry or tell anyone of Oren's absence, fearing that the sounds of worry might make real their cause.

The caravan had stopped again, for supper and sleep, before Oren's old bay found her wagon. Oren was slumped over its neck, the arrow still lodged in his skull. My mother didn't scream, just tugged and tugged until she got it out, with small chips

of bone caught on the barbs. She stuffed the hem of her skirt into the hole, halfheartedly, knowing that she couldn't keep the life from leaking out, knowing that she had always known it would. She tried to lift him off the horse, but succeeded only in pulling him down into the dust, on top of her. That was when she cried, to have gotten dust all over him like that. And that was when the others came running. Three women caught a glimpse of Oren's bloodless, dusty face, then hurried their children away from the sight. Two others cried bitterly, dejectedly, for they were cold and filthy and nothing had turned out to be what they'd expected and this on top of everything else was more than they could bear. Four men hefted Oren into the back of my mother's wagon.

"Goddamned cut-throats," one of them said. "They're gonna pay, little missy, don't you worry." The wagon master told her that they'd have to wait until morning for the burial as the light was already shot.

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Singing Bird arose with the sun. As a small child she awoke always with a smile and wandered around camp chirping little morning tunes outside of each tipi until the tall people stirred. The Men Among Men were generally indulgent with their children, and viewed idiosyncratic behavior as evidence of a smiling god. They did not, therefore, chide Singing Bird for disturbing their rest, but tolerated her morning visits. At least at first.

The tall people did not know that the reason Singing Bird sang at the flaps of their tipis was because new days frightened her. Singing Bird never knew what might happen and wanted some company with her when it did. Sometimes the clouds would turn black and rumble and shoot great spears down at Singing Bird and her mother. Other times the chief, One On The Wind, would send all the boys away, and when they came back they were bleeding and different. Now and then the tall people would paint their faces and chant and dance and that was wonderful. But it could also happen that another tribe might come and steal away little children like herself and club their fathers to death.

She sang a special song for the chief, for he was powerful and good, and for this consideration he honored her with the name of Singing Bird. He called her his special child, and instructed her mother to stitch coral beads into all of her garments, and to paint golden orbs always on her cheeks. He instructed the people of the tribe to arise when they heard her, and to welcome her songs, for she was the guardian of the morning.

As the years passed she continued her morning ritual, and her people continued to tolerate it as instructed. But as her desperate need for companionship waned, so did her enthusiasm for the task. Her limbs lengthened, her voice deepened, and some of the boys who had come back bleeding and different glared at her as she passed. She wished she did not have to pass the tipis so early in the morning because sometimes those boys would hide in the darkness then jump out at her with a shriek. That made it difficult for her people to welcome her dawn arrival, and after a while they began to blame her for the disturbance, covertly, with frowns and sideways glances, rather than blaming the boys, now regarded as young braves and beyond reproach.

She cried to her mother to speak with Chief One On The Wind, but her mother continued to stitch coral beads into her garments and to paint golden orbs on her cheeks and she yanked her hair, as she braided it, every time Singing Bird spoke of the matter. Singing Bird knew better than to go to her father. Her father, Dark River, had more coups to his credit than any other man in camp, and felt acutely the responsibilities of his rank. The skin on his face was stretched tight, like scraped hide on war drums. There was no elasticity to it, no surplus. Singing Bird knew that any extra strain placed on that skin, as that made by laughing, or by worrying, or by scowling to understand, would make it split apart at its invisible seams.

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Well I suppose that might have been what her early years were like. At any rate your readers might like it and I know I've got my blind spots where Singing Bird and truth are connected. She's

still a problem for me, you know. I can't seem to find her. The ironic part is that while I was living, I couldn't get away from the woman. I saw her everywhere. But now that I finally have a chance to find out why she chose me, why she needed me to suffer with her for her sins, why she made me do the things she did, now she is as invisible to me as she used to be to everyone else.

This frightens me. This failure in my vision. It makes me wonder what else I cannot see. How can I know how much else I'm missing, hidden in the tall grasses, or in the shadows of the giant oaks, or in a crowd at a barn dance, if I don't even know it's there?

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I was eighteen years old and real close to being married off the day I walked into the cornfields with my mother. The oldest Bean boy (that was their name, can you imagine?) had been hanging around for months, kicking up dust, telling my mother that she looked mighty pretty, helping my father get rid of our rats. He was okay, really. He had a shy smile and I liked the way he stumbled over things--rakes, rocks, hogs--whenever he looked at me. But I didn't love the boy, and when I told my mother that she looked relieved. She told my father I guess, because I saw him put his arm around the Bean boy one sunny morning and say, in his Scottish brogue, "You air a fine lad, my son, but you'd best be fishing where they'll be taking the hook."

Then came the others. Plump, soft boys with overbites, big boys with dirty fingernails who sweated too much, rich boys whose fathers owned the General Store or the Tribune but who just could not kiss, and one by one, my father took them each aside while my mother watched from the porch and rubbed her hands up and down her muslin skirts.

One scorching midday, my father having just come in for supper, and we all of us just nibbling on our dry cornbread and staring out at the empty sky, we saw a huge herd of Longhorn go stomping right through our cornfields. My father saw it first; he ran for his shotgun and started shooting. Right away then we saw the cowboys wake up and start riding like their lives depended on it, which they did. After a while my father stopped shooting and the

cattle started to calm down and the cowboys were able to get them herded a bit, way out on the edge of our field, so far out that they looked more like a thundercloud gathering than a herd. Then two of the cowboys came galloping back to my father.

My father kept his shotgun lifted and I noticed that when they saw that double barrel aimed at their eyebrows, they took off their hats and kind of raised up their hands as they rode. The heavy-set one shouted "Sorry Mister" and they slowed their horses to almost a walk. When they reached my father's porch they explained that it had been a mistake, that they had been on the trail for weeks, and that all the men were so worn out that they must have drowsed off in the hot sun. They were powerful powerful sorry, the one man kept saying.

The other man, the one who didn't talk, was taller and skinnier and I noticed, a whole lot younger. He smiled at me while he dusted the corn silk off his thighs and asked me real quietly, while his friend was still apologizing and while my father was still spitting Celtic curses, if he could trouble me for a drink from our well.

I saw my mother roll her eyes before she retreated into the cabin. I stepped off the porch and felt the boy watching me walk. Then I heard his boots clunk down into the dust right behind me and I had to stop myself from turning around altogether. I pulled up the bucket and plunged the metal dipper deep; I filled it so full that the water ran down my arms when I handed it to him. He said something to me about my hair looking like sunshine, or maybe he didn't but I heard something like that and it made me glad I had taken my friend Callie's advice and rinsed it with lemon juice that very morning. The way that cowboy looked at me as he took the water, and this part I know for sure happened, made my hand shake so much that I guess my father saw it all the way from the porch because then he hollered at me not to be sloshing our good water all over the feet of those blamed itinerants.

I followed my mother around for days afterwards, recounting every little detail about that cowboy. His hair was dark and straight and greasy, like an Indian's. He wore a grimy blue handkerchief knotted around his throat. His skin was brown as fresh coffee and did she notice how that long, hard muscle in his right arm bunched up and pushed out from under his rolled sleeve when he lifted that metal cup to his lips? My mother's smile grew a little sadder with each telling, until one day she took me by the

hand, kissed my father good-bye, and walked with me far into the cornfields.

As I started to say before, Iris was acting strangely in that cornfield, wary and suspicious. I kept asking her what she was looking for, squinting her eyes to see farther, deeper into the stupid corn.

"Nothing," she said, but her glance kept darting around while she spoke. "I have something to give you," she said, unbuttoning the top buttons of her blouse and reaching deep inside. She pulled it up in her fist, and kept her closed fist before my eyes. "This," she started to say, but I interrupted her and pointed to Gonner's Cliff.

"There she is again," I said. My mother whirled to her left; her weepy eyes dried up real quick but she kept her fist clenched.

"Who is it?" she asked.

I didn't have any idea. But I saw her all the time, standing always far enough away to ignore, watching me.

"Is she an Indian," my mother asked me, "with long black braids?"

"More like gray," I told her.

"Her face is disfigured?"

"Really ugly," I said.

She turned back to me then. "I can't see her anymore," she said sadly, though I still can't understand why that would have made her sad. "It must be your turn now." Slowly she opened her fist, palm upward, to reveal a plain brown stone attached to a coarse steel chain. She unclasped the chain from around her neck. "Daughter," she said as she reclasped it around mine. "I am giving you the sacred stone. Wear it always, as I have."

I tried to appear excited, for her sake, but I hadn't eaten in hours and was suddenly anxious to get out of that buggy cornfield and into a plateful of black-eyed peas. "I just love it," I told her, and touched the brown stone for emphasis. Then suddenly, strangely, I began to tremble. My teeth chattered and I clutched at my own arms to stop the shaking. My mother pointed to the stone. It was glowing gold, and leaping like a tethered cat on my breast.