

# Obtaining Sophia

*by* Anah-Karelia Coates

My accordion's name is Sophia and she is from Italy.

She was born in fairytale fashion, the way my life in Madrid can sometimes be. A great and nurturing friend gathered money from many friends in our village, to buy me an accordion for my birthday.

It was supposed to be a secret and a surprise (as long as secrets and surprises can survive out here) but soon it came to be that I needed to be told (ordering one from eBay was seeming way too abstract and risky).

An instrument is the kind of thing one must test and feel. One's body becomes a kind of tuning fork involved in a courtship of call and response. Besides, accordions are by no means generic. They come in grandfather sizes that could swallow someone like me!

And so it was

that there happens to be a man in Los Alamos who has an accordion museum and who fixes accordions from all over the world..

My Special Ops girl drove me up over the mountains to Los Alamos and as we drove through the narrow passes in a car we barely trusted, with me nervous as a new father, we likened it to a quest.

We had directions to a six-sided house in a mysterious town where scientists had developed the first atomic bomb and where music might just save one life. And so, giggling and parking in a snow bank, we arrived.

We sat in a tiny room amidst ornate, archaic, gaudy and luscious accordions from the turn-of-the-century and all over the world. They glittered and purred and sealed themselves like jewelry boxes full of sound.

I felt like a dark Goldilocks, for the little old elegant man would go into another room and we'd hear him banging about while holding

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our breath and he'd come back each time with an accordion for me to try. My heart began to sink as none of them felt right (and somehow, I knew that Special Ops girl had been given orders that I couldn't leave without one).

Thank goodness the third time was the charm.

Sophia was 50 years old and descended from a family of accordion makers in Italy who had the first and most famous accordion factory in the world. They don't make her size anymore. She was purely medium with a buttery keyboard action and her case was the unassuming perfect old fashioned run-away-from-home looking suitcase.

The accordion man looked at me sideways and told me that I was only the second person he had ever met who preferred to play the accordion upside down. He said I might have trouble transposing if I ever wanted to learn proper. Being an ear girl my whole life, I simply winked, thanked him and hoped for the best.

### *On Playing and Composing*

Playing music holds for me both beginner's mind and deep trance. I like the edge of having to pay attention and letting go at the same time. When I compose songs by ear, I often feel that I am tapping into an Akashic library of songs that have always been stored there.

A friend recently told me that my music sounds like "Egyptian Bath House music".

I was introduced to the accordion by my musical partner of seven years, Ryder Cooley. She'd play the real accordion and I would play anything I could, including sometimes a little toy accordion from China. There was a picture of a pretty little Chinese girl on the cardboard box it came in and when I played it, I wanted to be just like her.

Keyboards come in handy when you aren't a real musician. They are so very visual and I can remember patterns without

understanding notes alphabetically. I have a slight affinity for playing, I think because my father is a pianist and songwriter and my grandfathers on both sides were concert pianists, and so keyboards run in the family blood.

For me, it is a Braille of trust that I'll hit that right key ever

I was recently thinking of the first song I ever wrote.

### Winter Garden

In my winter garden I must sleep  
Where all my lovers  
Come to fall from me  
They must fall from me  
One by one

One day a man might come to me  
And wish to build a house round me  
Where nothing falls but leaves outside  
And past can't climb the walls inside

In my winter garden I must sleep  
Where hawk and robin come to weep  
Breasts underwing filled with despair  
A song of sorrow in the air

I was 21 and wrote it on a dulcimer on a road trip to New Mexico. I was remembering it because I find myself in New Mexico 27 years later, writing songs and wondering because my songs now have no lyrics

and *Words have always been the bread crumbs that lead me back to me.*

I am telling myself that it must be OK . Music is a language, too; tonal poetry, arrangements of a sighing accordion whose boughs open in salmon as she sits heaving upon my chest,

For now, it seems,  
*Music is the bird eating the bread crumbs that lead me back to  
me.*

~ Anah-K

